“Lost in Translation”: A Study of the History of Sri Lankan Literature

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the history of Sri Lankan literature from the ancient texts of the precolonial era to the English translations of postcolonial literature in the modern era. Sri Lanka’s book history is a cultural record of texts that contains “cultural heritage and incorporates everything that has survived” (Chodorow, 2006); however, Tamil language works are written with specific words, ideas, and concepts that are unique to Sri Lankan culture and are “lost in translation” when conveyed in English.

Keywords

book history, translation
INTRODUCTION

The phrase “lost in translation” refers to when the translation of a word or phrase does not convey its true or complete meaning due to various factors. This is a common problem when translating non-Western texts for North American and British readership, especially those written in non-Roman scripts. Literature and texts are tangible symbols, containing signified cultural meaning, and they represent varying aspects of an existing international ethnic, social, or linguistic culture or group. Chodorow (2006) likens it to a cultural record of sorts, which he defines as an object that “contains cultural heritage and incorporates everything that has survived” (pg. 373). In particular, those written in South Asian indigenous languages such as Tamil, Sanskrit, Urdu, Sinhalese are written with specific words, ideas, and concepts that are unique to specific culture[s] and cannot be properly conveyed in English translations. This paper will specifically take a look at the history of English translations of Sri Lankan language texts from the cultural writings of ancient times to postcolonial literature in the modern era.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

The traditional white Western reader of post-colonial translations of South Asian texts may view South Asia as a “monolithic India,” but the reader needs to understand that South Asia as a continent consists of multiple countries, each with hundreds of unique languages and dialects that are influenced by factors such as indigenous cultures, religions, and colonization. The countries that make up South Asia include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and territories such as British Indian Ocean Territory, Myanmar, and Tibet Autonomous Region. For the purposes of this paper, the primary focus will be on Sri Lanka and its languages. Sinhalese and Tamil are Sri Lanka’s two official languages, the former dating back to the 2nd or 3rd century BCE following the arrival of Buddhism in the country while the latter has examples of early inscriptions dating back to 500 BCE. However, the country also hosts a variety of modern minority languages that have been influenced by the languages of other neighbouring countries, Arab settlers, and European colonialism. These languages include Creole Malay, an oral creole language mixing Sinhalese, Tamil, and the Malay language that dates back to contact between Sri Lankans and Malays during the 13th century (De Silva Jayasuriya, 2002, p. 43); Pali, a liturgical written language found in Buddhist and Hindu scriptures and secular inscriptions; Vedda, an endangered oral language primarily used by the indigenous Vedda people in the village of Dambana; and Telugu, a native Indian language spoken by nomadic Sri Lankan Romani communities. This also includes formerly spoken and extinct languages, which have either undergone language death, have no more native speakers, or no spoken descendant. Examples include Arwi, a declining written register of the Tamil...
language utilizing an Arabic alphabet that is now only used by the more traditional Sri Lankan Moor\textsuperscript{9} families; Portuguese Creole, a dying creole language mostly spoken by Portuguese Burghers\textsuperscript{10} who live in towns along the east coast; Dutch Creole, another lingua franca which is estimated to have only a few Dutch Burgher\textsuperscript{11} and Sri Lankan Kaffir\textsuperscript{12} native speakers left in towns like Batticaloa and Trincomalee; and Rodiya, a Sinhalese dialect only spoken by members of the Rodiya community, who are a segregated untouchable caste\textsuperscript{13}. The paper will specifically focus on the Tamil language which is one of the longest surviving classical languages in the world, dating as far back as 40,000 BCE.

**THE TAMIL LANGUAGE**

Tamil is a Dravidian language\textsuperscript{14} and it is spoken as an official language in countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius, and even South Africa. This also extends to diasporic Tamil populations in North America, Europe, and Oceania. According to South Asian legend, the personification of Tamil was initially created by Shiva, one of the principal deities of Hinduism, and his son Murugan, the ancient Hindu god of war and the guardian deity of the Tamil language brought it to the people through Agastya the sage. Tamil is considered to be the most ancient of non-Sanskrit Indian writing systems and its history can be traced through three distinct periods according to scholars: Old Tamil (5\textsuperscript{th} century BC to 8\textsuperscript{th} century CE), Middle Tamil (circa 8\textsuperscript{th} century to 13\textsuperscript{th} century), and Modern Tamil. As a language, modern Tamil has various distinct dialects, all differentiated by changes in phonology and sound from Old Tamil. These dialects can be divided into three regional categories: Negombo Tamil, used by bilingual Sinhalese and Tamil fisherman; Batticaloa Tamil, the most literary influenced dialect, with vocabulary unique to the Malayalam language; and Jaffna Tamil, the oldest dialect that retains much of the vocabulary found in Old Tamil literature. These dialects are also used by other ethnic groups such as the Sinhalese, the Veddas, and the Moors and they have all been influenced through centuries of literature and multicultural contact. The result of this contact includes loanwords\textsuperscript{15} from various European colonial powers to create a unique vocabulary that is distinct from mainland Indian Tamil, which some Sri Lankan Tamil speakers consider another language altogether. Certain dialects of Tamil have been influenced by other non-European languages such as Sinhalese and Malay. One exclusively spoken by Sri Lankan Tamil Moors is strongly influenced by the Arab traders who settled in Sri Lanka around the 8\textsuperscript{th} century.

**PRE-COLONIAL LITERATURE**

Tamil literature is not as voluminously discussed as its Sinhala counterpart, but it consists of a rich history that dates back to as early as the Sangam period\textsuperscript{16} from 200 BCE.
Legend has it that Murugan had sparked a new wave of Tamil literary works during this time period through the first Avvaiyar. She was believed to be a famous court poet and one of the earliest female writers of Sri Lankan Tamil literature for the Tamil monarchy during the Sangam period and was considering retirement when a disguised Murugan made her realize that there was still much to learn and do. This in turn inspired her to write Tamil literature for children that is still taught in Tamil classes today, and eventually the great Tamil chieftain Athiyaman gave an eternal nellikani fruit to the Avvaiyar so that she and the Tamil heritage and language could live forever. Early Tamil literature during the Sangam period consisted of fragmented Tamil inscriptions, usually in the form of prose or verse, have existed since prior to 250 CE and this included classical Eelam Tamil poetry and verses written in praise of Hindu deities which were later featured in temples built in the 11th century (Veluppillai, 1979, p. 2). The body of classical literature from this period includes a collection of over two thousand poems by 473 Tamil male and female poets from various professions and classes of society, created between 600 BCE to 300 CE, but perhaps the earliest example of extant work of Tamil literature and linguistics from the Sangam period is the Tholkāppiyam, a work on ancient Tamil alphabet, language analysis, and grammar compositions divided into three volumes (Sundarabalu, 2014). The dating and authorship of the work is uncertain and is a much-debated topic with various scholars estimating that it may have been produced anywhere from as early as the 3rd century BCE to as late as the 5th century CE. Modern scholars now prefer to date the Tholkāppiyam in its various parts and layers due to it being a collective work as opposed to dating it as a single entity. Before delving into the history of Sri Lankan Tamil literature, it should be noted that Sri Lankan Tamil scholars classify the language into two separate aspects: spoken Tamil and literary Tamil and it is necessary to do so because of stylistic variations of the written language itself (Veluppillai, 1979, p. 2).

Following the Sangam period was the medieval phase of Tamil literature, which began in the courts of the indigenous Jaffna Kingdom in northern Sri Lanka in 1215 BCE. Various forms of literature flourished during the reign of the Aryacakravarti kings during the early 15th century with the development of medical science texts, mathematics texts, and astrology manuscripts under Jeyaveera Cinkaiariyan’s rule until 1410. Even the king himself contributed to the collection of written texts by compiling the histories, traditions and legends of the Koneswaram temple in the city of Trincomalee into a chronicle in verse called Dakshina Kailasa Puranam — Sthala Puranam of Koneswaram, which he wrote in 1380. Following this period of creation, Tamil language academies, created specifically for spreading and promoting of Tamil language from the Sangam period, were established during Singai Pararasasegaram’s rule and began to collect and preserve ancient manuscripts in the Saraswathi Mahal library, which also hosted classical makakavya that had been translated to Tamil from other languages such as Sanskrit,
one of India’s more traditional languages. Other literary works of historical importance that were compiled included religious and government documents as well as origin records of the cities of Batticaloa and Trincomalee. In fact, much of the literature from the medieval era had survived not only through oral tradition, but through the unearthing and preservation of rock and copper plate inscriptions and ola books before the arrival of European colonizers. Even these early texts embody what Buckland (1991) refers to as the concept of “information-as-knowledge” and “information-as-thing”, which states that there is historical knowledge and social information inherently attached to physical objects, no matter how mundane they may seem to be. Various translations of ancient Tamil works can be dated back to Sri Lanka’s first colonial period and there are several academic libraries focusing on digitization processes so that patrons will have continued access to such high-demand, fragile materials (Nakata et al., 2013, p. 224). Even today, there is a growing international demand for knowledge regarding non-white cultures such as First Nations and South Asian communities, which has also led to “concern to safeguard and protect” this knowledge through resource collections that are dedicated to translating these works (Nakata et al., 2013, p. 224). This is crucial given that these ancient texts are some of the most sensitive objects in special collections because the organic material is susceptible to deterioration due to light, humidity, pests, pollutants, and even physical force. However, well-intentioned translations of Tamil literature collections into European languages often lose crucial cultural information due to colonial perspectives.

**EUROPEAN COLONIAL PRINTING AND TRANSLATIONS**

During the Portuguese colonial period in 1578, Roman Catholic missionaries were able to publish a prayer book in old Tamil script that was named *Thambiran Vanakkam* (தமிழைக் கவன்றாக்கம்) or *Doctrina Christiana en Lingua Malauar Tamul* in Portuguese. The text was published by Henrique Henriques, a Portuguese Jesuit priest and missionary who was widely considered to be the first European Tamil scholar, mastering the early written Tamil script in order to translate religious doctrine for the local populations. He had published several other religious texts in Tamil and while the Tamil-English dictionary he had compiled never made it to print, it became a reference text that was widely used by other Europeans at the time. His efforts in the production and distribution of these texts led to Tamil becoming the first non-European language to be printed on a printing press instead of using Latin script, earning him the nickname “The Father of the Tamil Press”. The Tamil language had become known to him and other Portuguese missionaries through a writing scheme known as Lingua Malauar Tamul, adapted from a dialect of Tamil known as Malayam-Tamil prior to the 1820s. This writing scheme was also used by the British during their colonial rule and was known as Malabar language.
Sri Lankan Tamil literature was largely written in various Tamil dialects during all three periods of European colonialism, but it was not until British colonial rule that printed works began introducing English language and terms as a way of influencing the language. In fact, English is now Sri Lanka’s main foreign language and is widely used for official and commercial purposes. This period in history showed early attempts at translating Sri Lankan texts for Western readership, primarily through European Christian missionaries and Anglican, American Ceylon, and Methodist missionaries from North America. The first printed bilingual dictionary translating from Tamil to English can be attributed to Johann Philip Fabricius and Johann Christian Breithaupt, two German Christian missionaries and Tamil scholars who published the *Tamil and English Lexicon* in 1779 (Kolappan, 2015). Miron Winslow, an American reverend and congregationalist missionary then produced *A Comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary of High and Low Tamil* in 1862, around the same time that George Uglow Pope, a Canadian Anglican missionary had published his own attempt. Winslow had stated in his introduction that he had been inspired by the hundreds of new words and dialects that he came across while meeting people during his missionary work in what was then known as Ceylon (2015). In 1874, a British based attempt at English translations of South Asian words in various languages were compiled in the Raj-era dictionary *Hobson-Jobson*, although none of the compilers for any of these dictionaries ever acknowledged that there are words in the English language that are influenced by or directly borrowed from the Tamil language (Rockwell, 2003, p. 596).

These attempts at translations later evolved from dictionary compilations to phrases and short literature. Peter Percival, a British missionary, linguist, and educator published his attempts at translating exclusively Sri Lankan Tamil proverbs to English in 1874. In the text’s preface, Percival states that “the collection [could be] useful to those who are in any way connected with the interesting people who speak that language” and he meant for the examples he translated to be “concise and forcible expression [in order] to aid in the study of the language, and occasional allusions to national, social, and religious usages may suggest heads of valuable enquiry” (1874, pg. iii). However, the majority of these translations, from early dictionaries all the way to Sri Lankan novels just prior to independence can be viewed as transliteral, a shoe-horned attempt at assigning words to phrases, cultural slang and idioms, and concepts that do not exist in the English language. Holmström gives an example of this when she examined key passages in the English translation of colonial era text *The Dark Room*, which was originally published in Great Britain in 1938. She states that the translation does not match the author’s modern prose and narrative style and that the translator is only able to closely match some of the Tamil characters’ speech styles (Holmström, 2007, p. 73). It is important to acknowledge that the text contains a wide spectrum of Tamil speaking characters ranging from urban to rural, working class and upper caste professional, and monolingual and bilingual; these factors play a key role in how the
author distinguishes the linguistic style of each character, through various intersections within Tamil culture (p. 73). An urban professional is not going to speak the same way that working class rural individual would and thus require different translations for specific slang and social and class references, but it is often lost when trying to convey these cultural nuances in colonial “official English” (p. 77) and Holmström attributes this to the translator’s inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to match the author’s vocabulary. Part of the issue with English translation has to do with “cultural marking,” which refers to culturally specific ideas and concepts within a text that identify the text as being from a specific culture (Rockwell, 2003, p. 597). This context is significant in understanding words and phrases in a specific language or dialect and without these specific cultural references, it often gets lost when translating Sri Lankan languages and dialects into English. The English language is often used as what Rockwell refers to as a “framing device,” evaluating the “foreignness” of each scene in a text in order to compare it to “people and things that are seen to be more at home in the English medium”, which in turn creates a dissonance between English and Tamil (2003, p. 598). From this perspective, it leads the translator to view the text as part of an “alien and exotic culture” (p. 597).

CONCLUSION

It was not until the latter half of the 1800s that the Sri Lankan Tamil population was able to publish their own translated works, using written manuscripts and printed texts to respond to European colonialism. The poet Muttukumara Kavirajar was one of the earliest Sri Lankan Tamils to use Tamil literature to protest Christian missionary activities. This time period also brought forth native Sri Lankan scholars who were central in reviving and reforming dormant and declining native traditions and dialects due to four hundred years of colonial rule by preserving them through the modern printing press. One of the scholars at the forefront of this movement was Arumuka Navalar. He was an editor of old Tamil texts and sought to publish original ola books, but he was known for being the first Tamil editor to use punctuation marks in addition to “splitting” complex sandhi forms for better reading comprehension (Zvelebil, 1992, p. 157). Visvanatha Kanakasabhai Pillai, a lawyer, historian, and Dravidologist of Sri Lankan Tamil descent became the first Tamil person to compile and create a Tamil to English dictionary, titled A Tamil-English Dictionary in 1870 and it is a text that is still in print today. What was noteworthy about the text at the time was that even amongst contemporary works, the dictionary had listed a variety of English equivalents to the point where “a person with limited knowledge of Tamil would be able to understand the meaning of a word quickly” (Kolappan, 2015). While there is still a struggle to assign English equivalents to indescribable Tamil words, phrases, and concepts, the integration of native Tamil speakers as printers and translators has been integral to the continued translation of Tamil literature to English, leading to fewer translation issues as well.
as increased efforts to control the loss of cultural and societal references and context within the text, due to bilingual native Tamil speakers being educated in both English and Tamil.
NOTES

1 Particular form of a language particular to a specific region or social group
2 Native language of the Sinhalese people, the largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka
3 Language developed through mixing of different languages, transitioning from a simplified communication between two or more language groups into a stable native language
4 Indigenous ethnic group inhabiting Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, and southern Thailand
5 Minority indigenous group who are accorded indigenous status by the Sri Lankan government; possibly the earliest inhabitants of Sri Lanka prior to the arrival of the Sinhalese people from India
6 Speakers who have been exposed to the language from birth
7 Modern form of language that evolved from a historical language (i.e., Old Tamil versus modern Tamil)
8 Variety of language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting; often used formally
9 Predominantly Muslim minority ethnic group whose Arab ancestors settled in Sri Lanka from the 8th century
10 Eurasian ethnic group descended from mestiços, people of mixed Portuguese and Sri Lankan descent
11 Eurasian ethnic group descended from Dutch men, Portuguese Burghers, and Native Sri Lankan women
12 Ethnic group partially descended from 16th century Portuguese traders and Bantu slaves brought over by Arab traders and European colonists; name is an obsolete English term used to designate native individuals from the African Great Lakes and Southern African coasts. Although not offensive in the Sri Lankan context, it is used as a racial slur in South Africa.
13 Sri Lankan hierarchal division of society into strata influenced by the caste systems of South India, dating back to ancient Sri Lanka
14 One of the world’s primary language families dating back to 2nd century BCE; spoken in South India and other parts of South and Southeast Asia (i.e., southern Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, southwest Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore)
15 Word adopted from one language and incorporated into another without translation
16 Classical era of Sri Lankan Tamil literature, circa 1st and 2nd century CE
17 The three female poets of Tamil historical legend who were granted the title of Avvaiyar or ‘respectable women’
18 Gooseberry
19 Native Tamil name for Sri Lanka as a homeland (இலங்கை)
20 102 of these poets remained anonymous
21 Name is derived from the root words used in verse 136: As per rule “previous consonant changes”/Toll + kappiam/Tol + kappiam (Tholkāppiyam, n.d.)
22 Dynasty that ruled the Jaffna Kingdom from 1262 to 1450 before being ousted by the Portuguese
23 Genre of Indian epic poetry in classical Sanskrit literature featuring ornate and elaborate descriptions of scenery, romance, and battles
24 Books or manuscripts made of ‘olas’ or strips taken from the young leaves of the Talipot or Palmyra palm. A cord is passed through a hole pierced at the end of each ola to secure the leaves between two lacquered boards, forming a book. The writing is done with an iron stylus and the incisions in the leaf are made more easily visible by rubbing in a mixture of charcoal and oil (Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library, n.d.)
25 Name given to Sri Lanka when it was a British crown colony from 1815 to Sri Lanka’s independence in 1948
26 Processes undergone by the form of a word or morphological formative under the influence of an adjacent one; prominent in Indian languages (e.g., Tamil, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Pali, etc.)
27 Person studying Davidian languages, literature, and culture; a superset of Tamil studies
REFERENCES


