



## A SHORT CRITIQUE OF ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF SANSKRIT TERMS AT LEXICAL LEVEL

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### ABSTRACT

The moment we think of translation, several considerations come into our cognition. Translation is not just lexical transfer from one language to another rather it is the phenomenon of transferring semantic, pragmatic and more so of cultural equivalents from one language to another. The objective of this short commentary is to support a belief that Sanskrit terms are often semantically untransferrable in English at lexical level for five reasons. They are semantic change, fear of distorting original sense, lack of appropriate interpretation, lack of familiarity with Sanskrit culture, and linguistic relativity.

**Keywords:** *Language, Translation, Semantic, Pragmatic, Sanskrit, English.*

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## DISCUSSION

Before we discuss five reasons of un-transferability of Sanskrit terms in English, we need to understand few pertinent linguistic facts. To start with, we need to understand seven major types of meaning. They are **referential meaning** (also called denotative meaning, descriptive meaning, conceptual meaning, or primary meaning), **connotative meaning** (also called associative meaning or secondary meaning evoked through expression), **social meaning** (also called stylistic meaning evoked through expression about certain social characteristics), **affective meaning** (also called emotive meaning), **reflected meaning** (associated with another sense of the same expression), **collocative meaning** (conveyed upon word combinations), and **thematic meaning** (organized in terms of emphasis, focus, ordering, and themes (Leech, 1981). Of the seven types of meaning, Sanskrit terms, more often than not, carry connotative or philosophical meaning which is a blend of Social and affective meaning. Added to that, a word does not have its meaning in isolation. A word acquires its meaning when it occurs in context. According to Leech (1974: 40-41) connotative meaning is the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above it is purely conceptual content. Understanding a purely conceptual content of Sanskrit for a non-native of Sanskrit is not only difficult but sometimes also impossible. Giving a brief account of the five major causes of lexical untranslatability from Sanskrit to English, it is desirable to present them under five thematic categories as follows:

### SEMANTIC CHANGE

Like everything in this world undergoes changes, similarly language also undergoes change. And, when language change takes place it does not happen only at lexical or word level, it happens more importantly at semantic level which becomes a subject of study for a linguist. To be more precise, most of the content words used in olden days had slightly different meanings from the meanings that we decipher today. This is why and where a linguist feels the necessity of studying a language from two different perspectives. One is synchronic and the other is diachronic. Synchronic approach in linguistics

is when you describe a language of a particular time without comparing it with its previous and latter stages. On the other hand, diachronic approach is when you make comparative study of a language across the time. For instance, the word 'girle' meant both boys and girls in old and middle English; whereas, in modern English, the word 'girle' has undergone both phonological and semantic changes by omitting the last vowel sound 'e' restricting the meaning of the word for 'female' only in modern English. Similarly, the Sanskrit word *pravin* in Olden days was used for someone skilled in playing the musical instrument called Vina but now in Modern Sanskrit and Hindi, it is used for anybody skilled in anything.

Along with semantic change, a perceivable change in human's size, shape, and cognition was predicted and has come true. For instance, life span of human in Treata Yug was 10000 year which reduced to 1000 years in Dwapar Yug and further it reduced to 100 years in Kaliyug. Similarly, one can see declining change in human cognition in decoding Sanskrit text. Human of today is not having transcendental state of mind what our predecessors had about 500 years ago. In those days, people were highly eager to seek higher consciousness, In those days, the tradition of knowledge was oral because there was no written communication. Therefore, mughals destroyed our Vedic culture by slaughtering our Sanskrit scholars who were walking encyclopedia of all the Vedas and Granthas. On the other hand, Britishers destroyed our culture by imposing their Western format of English education. Similarly, other Europeans used conspiracy theories to destroy our Vedic fabric of thinking.

### FEAR OF DISTORTING ORIGINAL SENSE

Understanding Sanskrit terms and concepts is not an easy task, nor should we think of making it easy by distorting its original fabric. Although, there are ways like circumlocution, adaptation, paraphrase, or calque a translator can try to decode and translate a Sanskrit term in English, the result is often comical (Jordon, 2016). As Sanskrit is not merely a language rather a language of divinity and a tool for enlightenment and introspection, breaking it into pieces for the sake of translation often causes loss of intentionality of the Source text.



### LACK OF APPROPRIATE INTERPRETATION

Sanskrit literature under the influence of conspiracy theories of Westerners has witnessed underinterpretation, overinterpretation, or misinterpretation of Indic texts in abundance. The good example is of *purusharth*. You will find different interpretations of *purusharth* in the writings of different Indian scholars like K. J. Shah, Daya Krishna, Hiriyanna, Bhattacharya, Sundara Rajan, Talghatti, etc. Similarly, you will find different interpretations of *purusharth* by foreign or western scholars like Karl H. Potter, Hiltebeitel, Abraham Maslow, and many others. For some, *purusharth* is three aims of life especially for those who follow Sankhya School, for some four aims of life, for some *purusharth* is ideal of life, for some *purusharth* is attitude, for some it is passionate concern and for some in recent years it simply implies manhood. So when we have differences in our opinions or interpretations of any Sanskrit terms or concepts then shortcomings or flaws or demerits in English interpretation by Westerners is a commonplace.

### LACK OF FAMILIARITY WITH SANSKRIT CULTURE

Apart from understanding Beaugrande's (1981) textuality or texture of Sanskrit text, one also needs to understand the underlying disposition or intentionality or transcendental connotation of Sanskrit text and of Sanskrit authors. Whoever thinks of translating Sanskrit terms need to immerse themselves in Vedic culture and be conversant with the rituals and practices of native Sanskritists because semantic transference needs cultural transference as well. Western interpretation of our tradition and scripture will never come closer to our hearts because they are completely biased. The purpose of their coming to India was to dominate us, subjugate us, and to control us and to destroy our culture, our education, our religion. When they started reading our scripture, they forgot the fact that to read and understand any scripture, they have to be well conversant with the practices of that society. If you are not conversant with the practices of different rituals, you cannot have right understanding of creation and techniques to realize the ultimate goal of life they cannot translate Sanskrit terms with intended meanings. Westerners

failed to understand our philosophical concepts of life because they don't have any understanding about our ways of approaching reality. They misinterpreted our Vedic texts either out of ignorance or with vested interest or with their conspiracy theories. Their misinterpretation and mistranslation not only affected our basic code of ethics but also influenced and perverted the mindset of our own fellow Indians.

### LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY

The hypothesis of linguistic relativity of Sapir and Whorf cited in Carnes (1965) also backs the belief of untranslatability of an expression from one language to another. The hypothesis believes that people of different languages think differently. In other words, people of the world have developed different ways of viewing the world. In this context, it is apt to quote the connotation of an English word 'winter' which is considered cruel and difficult in Western countries as one must have read in English literature in the works of Shelley "If winter comes can spring be far behind". But the same 'winter' in Indian literature and scripture has pleasant connotation as you read a verse in Tulsi's Ram Charit Manas: "Grismanusah Rama Van Gavan | Panth Katha Khar Attaya Pawan || Sisir Sukhad Prabhu Janar Uchhah | Thus the hypothesis of linguistic relativity affirms the fact that if a certain word is not available in your language, your perception of reality will be different as one who uses a specific word in their language to describe that reality. In the same vein, Sanskrit which has been deemed as '*Devbhasha*: Language of God' carries its denotative meaning as 'perfected'. And this perfection is so high in Sanskrit or the fear of distortion of spoken Sanskrit is so high that even minor mistakes in pronunciation can destroy the unique character of Sanskrit as language of divinity. Even today the tradition of chants of vedic hymns and mantras require strict obediences of the sounds. Sanskrit terms are too sacred to be translated. Even if they get translated into English, they may not produce the same connotative effect in English.

To sum up, I discard western philosophies of life because western theories talk of what is desired in life but not what is desirable. No matter be it westerners or anyone, if one wants to read, write, analyse, interpret, or translate Sanskrit text, terms, or



concepts in other languages, one needs to be first of all conversant with practices of Vedic society and culture. One should learn Sanskrit through Sanskrit, one should dive into the ocean of divinity and once one reaches the transcendental state of Vedic minds, only then one will be eligible to translate and interpret Sanskrit in English or other languages. So, when we think of transferring any lexical concept from Sanskrit to English Literature, we need to understand underlying philosophical meaning of the concepts. Thus, transferring a Sanskrit lexeme to English will not be plausible unless one understands and imbibes textuality or texture and intentionality of Sanskrit lexemes. For this, one has to get into the skin of Sanskrit scholars and Sanskrit rituals.

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