



Linguistic and Cultural Challenges in Translating Tamil Theonyms into English

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ABSTRACT

Theonyms, or divine names, often encapsulate deep cultural, historical, and religious significance. In Tamil, a language rich in literary and spiritual traditions, theonyms serve as repositories of complex metaphors, attributes, and mythological references. Translating these theonyms into English presents unique challenges, ranging from preserving semantic depth to conveying cultural symbolism. This study explores the linguistic, phonetic, and cultural dimensions of this translation process, providing illustrative examples and proposing methodologies to maintain fidelity and resonance in the target language.

Key words: Linguistic, semantic, translation, Theonyms, metaphors, phonetic

Tamil, one of the world's oldest languages, is renowned for its literary heritage and spiritual texts. Theonyms in Tamil, derived from ancient scriptures like the Sangam literature, Saiva Agamas, and Vaishnavite hymns, are imbued with meanings that transcend linguistic boundaries. Translating these names into English involves more than linguistic conversion; it requires an appreciation of cultural and theological contexts, because Tamil, an oriental language and English, an occidental language are linguistically and culturally far apart. As such, in Tamil, the name *Arunachala* (அருணாச்சலா), meaning "Red Mountain", refers to a sacred hill worshipped as a manifestation of Lord Shiva and its literal translation in English is devoid of its spiritual and cultural significance. The term 'theonym', as defined in linguistic studies, refers to names or epithets of deities and it serves as a platform to study cultural and religious identities (Shulman, 2016; Zvelebil, 1974). As such, this article explores the cultural and historical connotations embedded in Tamil theonyms during translation. Further it investigates the limitations of existing translation strategies in capturing the nuances of Tamil theonyms. Besides, this article proposes solutions to overcome the identified challenges in translating Tamil theonyms into English.

Translation of proper names often poses great deal of trouble for the translators. All proper names consist of intensely conventionalized signals which are arbitrarily selected and hence meaning can never be wholly separated from the expressed form (Hema, 105). It is very much applicable to the names of Gods and Goddesses. In Tamil Literature, as in Greek, there are individual Gods and Goddesses for each profession, field of art and element. Tamil theonyms often embody attributes of Deities. For example, *Sivam* (சிவம்) signifies "auspiciousness" and refers to Lord Shiva's benevolent nature. Similarly, *Murugan* (முருகன்) is associated with youth, valour, and wisdom. Some mythological references like the names of *Vishnu* (விஷ்ணு) or *Perumal* (பெருமாள்) evoke stories from Tamil epics and scriptures. For instance, *Kothanda Raman* (ககாதண்ட ராமன்) highlights Lord Rama's bow, an emblem of his warrior aspect. Theonymic terms like *Parabrahmam* (பெரெரிமம்), derived from the Sanskrit words *para* meaning 'supreme', 'beyond' or 'transcendent' and *Brahmam* refers to the 'ultimate reality', 'the absolute', or 'the universal consciousness'. It denotes the supreme consciousness or ultimate reality, a concept central to

Advaita Vedanta, a Hindu tradition of textual exegesis and philosophy. The term *Parabrahmam* is a profound and complex concept in Indian philosophy and spirituality, particularly in the Vedanta tradition. It represents the highest, unmanifested, and formless aspect of the divine, beyond all attributes and dualities. Theonyms often serve as cultural signifiers, reflecting the theological nuances and regional adaptations of divine attributes (Dehejia, 1988).

Some of the challenges in translating theonyms are semantic complexity, phonetic representation and cultural symbolism. Tamil theonyms often carry layered meanings. Translating *Arulalan* (அருளாளன்), meaning “Bestower of Grace”, into English might omit its connotations of divine mercy and unconditional love. Similarly, *Jeyalakshmi* (ஜெயலட்சுமி),- ‘Jeya’ meaning ‘victory’ and ‘Lakshmi’ referring to the ‘Goddess of Wealth’ has an optimistic emphasis that only the SL readers can understand. Thus, the addition of descriptive phrase as in ‘Jeyalakshmi, the Goddess of Success’ make it intelligible to the TL readers (Hema, 108). English lacks equivalent sounds for many Tamil phonemes. For instance, the Tamil name *Karuppasamy* (கருப்சாமி) is often anglicized inaccurately, losing the tonal richness and cultural essence of the original. Theonyms like *Perumal* (பெருமாள்) and *Nataraja* (நடராஜன்) carry deep cultural symbolism. While *Perumal* signifies Lord Vishnu’s majesty, *Nataraja* refers to Shiva’s cosmic dance. A literal translation of *Nataraja* as “King of Dance” risks trivializing its profound metaphysical implications. Thus, Tamil theonyms are polysemous and carry multiple meanings and this leads to semantic loss or misinterpretation in English translation.

One of the methodologies employed by a translator in translating theonyms are contextual annotations. In linguistics, contextual annotation refers to the practice of adding explanatory notes or metadata to a text or term to clarify its meaning within a specific cultural, historical, or situational context. This approach is especially useful when translating or interpreting terms that carry layered or culturally specific meanings, which might not be clear to the target audience. In the context of translating Tamil theonyms into English, contextual annotation might involve providing cultural background. For example, the Tamil theonym *Murugan*, with an annotation ‘God of valour’ could explain that *Murugan* is the deity of youth, war, and wisdom in Tamil culture and is often depicted with a spear and a peacock. Translating *Thillai Nataraja* (தில்லை நடராஜன்) as “The Dancing Shiva of Chidambaram” captures the deity’s cosmic dance and its association with the sacred town of Chidambaram. However, an annotation can further explain the metaphysical significance of the Ananda Tandava (Dance of Bliss).

Thus it is concluded that translating Tamil theonyms into English is a multidimensional challenge requiring sensitivity to linguistic, phonetic, and cultural nuances. Many Tamil theonyms are polysemous, leading to semantic loss or misrepresentation in English translations. Theonyms rooted in Sanskrit loanwords often add another layer of complexity due to overlapping cultural connotations. By adopting a hybrid approach that combines transliteration, contextualization, and adaptation, translators can honour the richness of Tamil theonyms while making them accessible to English-speaking audiences. This research underscores the importance of preserving the cultural integrity of divine names, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

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