



## Translation Of Select Tamil Dialects Into English: Problems And Possibilities

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

The languages Tamil and English are linguistically and culturally distinct. Tamil is a Dravidian language, while English is a Germanic language. Each has its own unique features and characteristics. Both languages are diglossic in nature, with standard and nonstandard, spoken and written, formal and informal forms. In general, depending on the context, a speaker of a language adapts their style accordingly. Similarly, different forms of language are used in speech and writing. In literary works, in addition to the regular style, colloquial and dialectal styles are also employed. In recent times, writers have increasingly used their respective community dialects in their works. Dialects generally vary socially and regionally. The purpose of using dialect in a novel is to document the style and accent of the language as part of history. This paper examines the challenges of translating three major Tamil dialects—the Tamil Brahmin dialect, the coastal Tamil Muslim dialect, and the Tamil Dalit dialect—with examples. It also suggests techniques and solutions for translating these dialects from Tamil to English.

**Keywords:** Source language, Target language, social dialect, regional dialect, translation,

In contemporary Tamil fiction, writers employ various styles, including literary, spoken, colloquial, and dialectal forms. The use of Tamil dialects in novels dates back to the 1960s, with writers like Putumaippittan and Jeyakanthan. Since then, a variety of dialects have been incorporated into Tamil literature. In later periods, authors such as Bama, Perumal Murugan, Iyamam, and Thoppil Mohamed Meeran have followed this trend, using their respective community dialects in their works.

Modern Tamil fiction features a wide range of spoken languages. Neela Padmanaban, for instance, incorporates Trivandrum Tamil in his novel *Pallikontapuram*. Thi. Ja. has employed the Brahmin dialect in several of his novels, Thoppil Mohamed Meeran uses the coastal Tamil Muslim dialect, and Iyamam incorporates the Dalit dialect in his works. Through these dialects, readers are given a vivid sense of how Tamil is spoken by different groups and how the language has evolved over time.

When it comes to translation, dialectal forms are difficult to convey, even with glossaries. The primary challenge lies in understanding the actual meaning, which may have undergone both diachronic (historical) and synchronic (contemporary) changes. The translator must grasp the cultural and social nuances behind the dialects, which are more than just representations of real speech. Additionally, identifying the specific community that uses the dialect is crucial for accurate translation.

Translating from Tamil to another Dravidian language, or even to other Indian languages or foreign languages like English, presents further challenges. One of the difficulties encountered when translating Tamil into English is the use of kinship terms. In Tamil, different regions and castes use distinct terms for

grandparents, such as *thatha patti*, *appa appattha*, *appuchi ammuchi*, *naanaa naani*, and so on. Translating these terms requires specific techniques to convey their meaning accurately. Lesek, in *Dialect in Translation* (pp. 42-43), suggests rules for identifying dialect markers and solutions for translating dialectal terms."

In translating a dialect, the first step is to identify the relevant dialect or accent in the text. Dialect markers are helpful in identifying issues within a sentence. These markers can be categorized into four forms:

- i) **Phonetics or Phonology**: This involves the use of spelling conventions in English and their corresponding pronunciations.
- ii) **Morphology**: This refers to nonstandard words and the use of honorifics.
- iii) **Lexis**: This includes dialectal vocabulary and terms of address.
- iv) **Syntax**: This covers nonstandard syntactic structures.

These dialect markers help identify nonstandard speech in the source language (SL). Dialect translation, therefore, involves analyzing these nonstandard varieties of a language. Berezowski suggests four categories of operations for dialect translation:

- a) **Compensation**: This involves rendering the source language (SL) dialects into the target language (TL) standard dialects.
- b) **Shift**: This involves using equivalent TL dialects by adjusting their positions in the text according to the syntactic structure of the original.
- c) **Gain or Loss**: This refers to an increase or decrease in the overall meaning relative to the SL text.
- d) **Amplification/Diminution**: This involves selecting more or less marked forms of nonstandard speech in the original.

By following these strategies, dialectal markers are identified in the selected novels discussed in this paper. The major division of dialects is social and regional. Social dialects reflect the perception of dialect differences, often referred to as group-exclusive usage. A key feature of group-exclusive dialect forms is that speakers from other groups do not use these forms. Similarly, regional variations differ from one region to another. Below are examples of both regional and social dialects, along with the techniques used by translators to render them in English.

ஆனாலும் அவன் மனம் கரைக்காரர்கள் கொத்துக்காரர்கள் என்ன சொல்வார்களோ என்ற கவலையில் ஆழ்ந்தது. (1)

At the same time, he was anxious about what the elders of the village, the *Karaikkaarar* and *Kothukkaarar*, would say.

*கொத்துக்காரர்கள்* (*Kothukkarar*) and *கரைக்காரர்கள்* (*Karaikkaarar*) are regional Dalit dialectal terms used in the novel *கோவேறு கழுதைகள்* (*Kōvērukaḷuṭaikaḷ*), written by Imayam and translated as *Beasts of Burden* by Lakshmi Holmstrom. The author frequently uses these terms throughout the novel. Regional terms are particularly unique and may be unfamiliar to people from other regions. *Kothukkarar* and *Karaikkaarar* are archaic terms, likely unknown even to the younger generation of the region. The term *கரைக்காரர்கள்* (*Karaikkaarar*) refers to "the people who have been living in the region for generations," while the second term, *கொத்துக்காரர்கள்* (*Kothukkarar*), refers to "the settlers from outside."

In translating these terms, the translator has used the method of transliteration. When these terms first appear in the text, they are explained in a footnote: *Karaikkaarar*—original inhabitants, *Kothukkarar*—settlers from elsewhere. Since these terms are unique and lack a direct one-to-one correspondence in the target language (TL), the translator has provided composite terms to make them accessible to TL readers. Using footnotes is one technique in translation to address such challenges.

The next example is from the Brahmin dialect used in the novel *மரப்பசு* (*Marappacu*), written by Thi. Ja. and translated as *Wooden Cow* by Lakshmi Kanna.

கண்டுவை அத்வைத சாகரம் என்பார்கள் தர்ப்பை நுனி போன்ற புத்தி என்பார்கள் (21).

Kandu was considered as expensive as Advaita. His brain was as sharp as the blade of dry Kusa grass (13).

The word *Advaita* is a combination of two Sanskrit words, 'aa' and 'davaita'. 'Aa' means "none," and 'Davaita' means "duality or dualism." Advaita refers to "the doctrine of oneness of the individual soul and the Supreme God," the ultimate reality advocated by Adi Shankaracharya. In this context, Kandu is a Vedic scholar who studies Advaita philosophy and is well-versed in religious knowledge. Here, the term *Advaita* is transliterated into the target language (TL). The dialect marker from the source language (SL) is diminished or lost, and due to this, TL readers may not fully grasp the meaning of the SL word.

The word *சாகரம்* (*saharam*) means "one who has deep knowledge like the ocean." Together, *Advaita* and *saharam* denote "a person who has profound knowledge of religious texts and discourses." In Tamil, the author uses a metaphor, while in the TL, the translator uses a simile, translating the phrase as "Kandu was considered to be as expensive as Advaita" (Wooden 13). The word "expensive" is a near equivalent to the term *saharam*.

The second term is a cultural one, reproduced as a simile in the TL. The term *தர்ப்பை* (*tharpai*) is translated with dynamic equivalence as "Kusa grass." In Hinduism, *Kusa grass* is considered important as a "purifying agent" and is used in ceremonies like *homa* (fire rituals), *pooja* (worship), and *yojana* (sacrifices). The edge of the grass is very thin and sharp, resembling the shape of a blade, which is why Kandu's

knowledge is aptly compared to *Kusa grass*. In the TL, the translator uses a simile as in the SL: “His brain was as sharp as the blade of dry Kusa grass.”

The following is an analysis of the Muslim dialect in reference to Thoppil Mohamed Meeran’s *Oru Kadalora Kiramathin Kathai*, translated as *The Story of a Seaside Village* by M. Vijayalakshmi.

மோதீனுடைய வாப்பா இறந்து முப்பது நாட்களாயின வாப்பாவுக்கு கத்தம் பாத்திஹா ஓதலியா. (151)

Thirty days had passed after Modin's father's death. When is the **Khatam Fatiha**? (130)

*Katham Fatiha* is an Arabic term. *Kattam* means “reciting the Quran completely,” and *Fatiha* refers to “a kind of prayer.” The Quran is the holy book of Muslims, organized into one hundred and fourteen chapters, each containing verses revealed by Allah. Muslims believe that it is the literal word of God. Sometimes, Muslims pray for the salvation and redemption of the deceased by reciting the Quran. This is a rite followed by many Muslim families.

In this context, the translator has transliterated the SL term கத்தம் பாத்திஹா (*kattam pāttihā*) as *Khatam Fatiha*. Since it cannot be explained in full detail, it is left as a transliteration. From the context, TL readers can infer that *Khatam Fatiha* is a post-death ritual performed by the grieving family. The TL expressions “Thirty days had passed” and “Modin’s father’s death” provide additional context to help readers understand the meaning of the SL transliterated term.

By analyzing these dialects, one can see the difficulties faced by the translator. The cultural and religious specifics present challenges in conveying the meaning to TL readers. Thus, the paper concludes that gain and loss, as well as amplification and diminution, are inevitable aspects of translation.

### Summation

This paper has addressed several important aspects of translating dialects from Tamil into English. Firstly, it discusses the dialectal and colloquial styles used in selected literary texts by different Tamil writers. It then analyzes the strategies employed to translate these dialects, followed by an explanation of the translation challenges, supported by examples.

In translating dialectal novels, the translator’s role is crucial. The translator must consider the intent of the text, the reader, and the setting. These factors help the translator navigate the issues effectively. By analyzing three different novels, the researcher has explained both the problems and solutions involved in translating dialects from Tamil into English.

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