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Translation Shifts in English-Tamil Translation: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of "shifts in translation," referring to English-to-Tamil translation examples. This particular study will explore various types of shifts, their functions, and significance, drawing on key theoretical perspectives of shifts demonstrated by different translation studies scholars. Applying a qualitative comparative approach, the study examines English expressions and their Tamil translations to identify different translation shifts that can be applied in English-Tamil translation. The findings of the study highlight that due to the extensive grammatical, semantic, and cultural variations between the English and Tamil languages, translation between these two languages requires extensive translation shifts for a successful translation between these two languages. The conclusion demonstrates that translation shifts are an effective tool to enable successful communication. Therefore, understanding and being familiar with translation shifts are significant for both translation theory and practice.

Keywords: *Translation, Shifts, Translation Studies, Communication, English, Tamil,*

In translation studies, the term 'shift' refers to the changes that happen when translating one text from one language to another. These changes mainly happen because of language and cultural changes. These changes are already among languages and cultures. Hence, in translation, these shifts occur when we attempt to deal with such differences in real practice, because they belong to real language practices rather than to theoretical knowledge of translation and languages, and they naturally happen during the translation process. For example, the English sentence "He lost his temper" cannot be translated word-for-word as "*Avaṅ veppattai ilantāṅ*" instead, it may be translated as "*Avaṅ kōpamaṭaintāṅ*" or "*Avaṅ porumaiyai ilantāṅ*". These examples indicate a shift in expression. Because of inequalities between language and culture, these kinds of shifts happen, and there is no fixed or standard way for translation.

Further, translation also remains invariant. This invariant indicates that the core elements of meaning or function of the source text are preserved in translation, even though there are some differences in translation. "Shifts" and "invariant" are connected. As translation studies learners and practitioners, we

Should be aware of shifts and invariants. Invariants can exist before translation as a condition to preserve something for translation, and/or this invariant can be used as a tool to analyze translation. Studying shifts and invariance in translation practice will help to compare both source and translation languages while understanding translation practices dynamically in real cultural and linguistic situations.

When an invariant is taken into consideration before a translation, a translator should follow the rules. These rules could be positive or negative. From a negative point of view, shifts are considered mistakes that should be avoided in translation. Any shift that deviates from the original meaning or structure is considered an error or a wrong shift. For example, when translating the English phrase 'She is under the weather' into Tamil as '*Avaḷ vāṇilaiyil irukkiṛāḷ*,' it would be a wrong shift. Therefore, the translation would be '*Avaḷ cukayīṇamuṟru irukkiṛāḷ*.' Accordingly, the first translation would be seen as a negative shift in translation.

On the other hand, to sound natural and meaningful, positive shifts are carried out in the translated language.



These shifts are not errors but are significant, which allows the same effect to be achieved in the translation language. For instance, the English sentence like, *It's raining* can be translated into Tamil as *Maḷai peykiratu*. Here, the structure of the sentence is changed rather than translating the sentences word-for-word into Tamil as *'Atu peykiratu* or *'atu maḷai peykiratu*. This shift is known as a positive shift. This kind of shift will improve the clarity and naturalness of the translation. Positive shifts also include a change of word class or a change of the point of view. For example, when translating the English sentence like 'I decided to go' into Tamil, it will be *'Nāṇ pōka muṭivu ceytēṇ.*' Here, the English verb *'decided'* becomes a noun in Tamil as *'Muṭivu*.

The Tamil language often expresses more formality through noun-verb construction than a conjugated verb in sentences. This is a word-class positive shift in translation. When considering a positive shift in the point of view, the English sentence, *'Do not forget*, can be translated into Tamil in a positive expression as *'Niṇaivil vaittukkoḷ.*' (*Keep in mind*) instead of a negative command like, *'Marantu viṭātē* (*don't forget*). Tamil often prefers a positive point of view, and it feels like a more encouraging expression while keeping the main idea. In such a case, shifts are not errors but a significant tool that helps translators to deal with different languages, preserving the core idea.

When identifying invariants after translation, shifts are studied through existing translations instead of fixing rules before the process of translation. This approach examines the translation process as well as the final product. Here, shifts are identified by comparing the source text and translated text, finding what has changed, remained, and is missing.

Further, since the translation process happens in the translator's mind, it is difficult to observe the process directly and physically. Therefore, Kada (1968) classifies shifts into two categories, obligatory shift and optional shift, based on general knowledge of language differences. Accordingly, obligatory shifts happen because languages are different and cannot match exactly.

For example, the English language uses articles such as 'a,' 'an,' and 'the' with words, but the Tamil language does not have these articles. Therefore, when translating words like *"The table,"* the Tamil

language simply translates the word as *"Mēcai"*, which is an unavoidable change in translation.

On the other hand, optional shifts are chosen by the translator for style or cultural reasons. For example, *"He passed away"* would be translated into Tamil as *"Avar kālamāṇār. (He passed away)"*, *"Avar maṛaintār. (He disappeared)"*, or *"Avar iraiyaṭi cērntār. (He went to the Lord.)"*

Another significant scholar, Popović (1970), focuses on literary translation and shift. He focuses on the shift as a *"shift of expression."* He argues that we cannot compare words alone. Hence, we must look at the whole system of expressions, including tone, style, and literary effects. He divides shifts into two types: constituent shifts and individual shifts.

Due to the differences between language, culture, and literary styles, constitutive shifts are unavoidable. However, this shift is unavoidable in a translation process; individual shifts depend on the translator's personal style and choices. For example, *"He died,"* as *"Avaṇ irantāṇ (He died),"* *"Avar akāla maraṇam aṭaintār (He died untimely)"*, *"Avar uyir nīttār"*, and *"Avar iraiyaṭi cērntār,"* reflect the translator's stylistic performances. He also talks about generic shifts, where the translation changes the genre. For example, a formal text may become more narrative in Tamil, which changes its literary type. For example, a simple English sentence like *"He passed away"* can be translated into Tamil as *"Avar ivvulakai viṭtu nīnki, tēvalōkattil ilaippāriṇār. (He left this world and rested in heaven,"* or *"Avar tuyil nīttār. (He departed to his eternal rest)* according to the translator's choices.

In addition, Toury introduces a different approach, such as *"adequate translation,"* as a theoretical model. From his point of view, shifts are seen as deviations from this ideal. He argues that translations are influenced by norms. In his argument, he ignores obligatory shifts, which are unavoidable, and prioritizes optional shifts, which emphasize the translator's choices. For example, *"He passed away"* is *"Avar iyaṛkai eytiṇār, uyir nīttār, akāla maraṇamaṭaintār."* in Tamil, instead of directly translating it as *"Avar irantār."* This highlights a cultural norm of politeness.

Moreover, Ven-Lenuven (1984, 1989, 1990) provides a detailed method of shifts, namely micro-level shift and macro-level shift. At the micro-level, she analyses small units of text by identifying common meanings.

She further indicates that usually shifts occur when there are differences between languages. She classifies shifts into three types: modulation, modification, and mutation. Modulation demonstrates a slight change in the meaning of the translation. For example, the English sentence 'I remember it well' would be translated into Tamil as 'Atai nāṇ marakkavillai.'

(I did not forget it), changing the perspective slightly without changing the meaning of the source language. The second type of modification happens when both the source and translated languages differ from the common meaning. For example, 'as white as snow' would be translated as 'Pāl pōṇṇa veṇmai' (as white as milk) because the word 'snow' is not a native word among Tamils. In this example, the word 'snow' is modified with the word 'milk', which is mostly familiar to the Tamil community. On the other hand, mutation occurs when there is zero equivalence. For example, an English idiom like 'it's raining cats and dogs' can be translated into Tamil as "Kāṇa maḷai peykīratu." because there is no equivalent idiom in the Tamil language. English applies animals to describe intensity, which have zero similarity in the Tamil language. At the micro level, these shifts make changes in the overall meaning, tone, and expressive style of a particular text. Most importantly, her method of approach helps to understand the translator's strategy.

In addition, J.C. Catford (1965) in "A Linguistic Theory of Translation" explains shifts in translation using a linguistic model. He emphasizes differences between formal correspondence and textual equivalence. According to him, formal correspondence refers to similar structures between two languages at a general level, while textual equivalence refers to what actually works in a particular translation. For example, the English phrase "good health" may literally correspond to the Tamil as "Cīranta ārōkkiyam" but in a real sentence like "She is in good health," it would be translated as "Avaḷ nalamāka'irukkīrāl.", which is a shift in translation. According to Catford, a translation shift happens when there is a departure from formal correspondence.

Catford discusses two main types of shifts, namely level shifts and category shifts. A level shift happens when something expressed through grammar in one language is expressed through vocabulary in another language. Tenses or aspects in one language may be translated using separate words in another language. For example, the English sentence 'He used

to go' can be translated into Tamil as 'Avaṇ vaḷakkamāka pōvāṇ'. In this example, the phrase 'used to' is shifted with the adverb in Tamil 'Vaḷakkamāka (usually/regularly)'. Meanwhile, Catford classifies category shifts into four types: structural shift, class shift, unit/rank shift, and intra-system shifts.

First, a structural shift changes the sentence structure of the translated language. For example, A simple sentence in the English language, like "I have a car". In this sentence, 'I' (subject), 'have' (helping verb), and 'a car' (object). In Tamil, this sentence can be shifted as 'Enṇiṭam oru Kār uḷḷatu'. In this example, the intended meaning of the helping verb "have" is not directly expressed in Tamil by a direct equivalent. Instead, 'I' the subject, shifts as 'Enṇiṭam' instead of a direct equivalent such as 'naan' while replacing the helping verb 'have' by 'Uḷḷatu' (there is).

This translation shows a clear change in sentence pattern while preserving the source meaning. Such a change is named as a "structural shift" by J.C.Catford because the grammatical structure in the translated language is varied from the source language; meanwhile, the message remains the same.

On the other hand, class shifts the meaning, but the part of speech will change during the translation process because languages do not use the same word classes to express meanings. Therefore, translators often shift from one class to another to make the sentence natural. For example, "He decided to leave" can be translated into Tamil as "Avaṇ veliyēra muṭivu eṭuttāṇ.". Here, the verb "decided" is translated using the noun "Muṭivu" (decision) along with a supporting verb. As per Catford, this shift is called the class shift. Here, the meaning remains the same while the grammar remains unchanged.

Third, a unit/rank shift occurs when the number of linguistic units increases or decreases in a particular translation process. In this unit shift, a word becomes a clause/phrase in the translation language. Meanwhile, a clause/phrase becomes a word in the translation language. Here, the translator deliberately reduces or increases the linguistic units as per the need to make the sentence sound natural in the translation language. For example, the English word "vegetarian" can be translated as "Caiva unavu unṇavar", which is a clause. Here, a simple word becomes a clause showing a clear unit shift. Further, Tamil uses suffixes instead of standard prepositions. Therefore, an English phrase often collapses into a single Tamil word.

For example,

In the garden: *Pūṅkāvil*

With a knife: *Kattiyāl*

Sister and Me: *Akkāvum nāṇum*

Furthermore, as per the shift theory, some English nouns should be compensated with a detailed phrase/sentence. The English word "somnambulist" is the best example of this shift. This word "somnambulist" refers to a person who has a habit of walking in sleep. This particular word does not have an exact equivalent in the Tamil language. Therefore, this word should be compensated with a phrase or sentence in the Tamil language. Accordingly, the translation of this word would be "Tūkkattil naṭakkum nōy uḷḷavar."

The fourth one is an intra-system shift. This shift occurs where both the source language and the translated language have a common grammatical system but different forms of usage within the system. In this regard, even though both the English language and Tamil language have singular and plural forms, a translator selects a non-corresponding form in the Tamil language to make the sentence read naturally. For example, "We bought some furniture", in this sentence, the word "furniture" is uncountable and in the singular form. When we translate this sentence into Tamil, the translation will be "Nāṅkaḷ cila taḷapāṅkaḷai vāṅkiṇōm." In this example, English uses a singular collective noun, whereas Tamil often uses the plural form "Kaḷ" to refer to the individual items. At the same time, both languages have tense systems, but they use the "slots" differently to express habitual actions. A sentence that is written in the simple present tense in the English language can become future tense in the Tamil language. For example, "The sun rises in the east" becomes "Cūriyaṅ kiḷakkil utikkum." Here, the verb 'utikkum' conveys future meaning, but as a usual action.

Even though Catford's work is significant in applying linguistic theory to real translation practices in a systematic approach, some translation studies scholars like Jemy Munday criticized Catford's linguistic approach in relation to translation theory. He mainly criticized that Catford's examples are more artificial than real and that they are randomly taken rather than real translation practices. Moreover, he mainly focused on linguistic structure, and that

approach is not enough for contextual analysis because translation is based more on communication than on strict linguistic matches. Catford also emphasized the functional value of a translation, which depends on the translator's personal judgment.

In conclusion, because of the distinction between languages and cultures, shifts are an unavoidable part of the translation process; these shifts are natural in any translation process. Shifts are meaningful adjustments that help to achieve clarity, naturalness, and communicative effectiveness; they are not simply errors. Different scholars provide different perspectives to understand these shifts as discussed above. Knowledge of shifts allows us to understand translation as a collective activity shaped by language and culture. Therefore, shifts in translation are not an error or weakness but powerful tools to make effective communication across languages and cultures.

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