

Some Problems in the Translation of Sanskrit Poetry

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An exact translation is possible only within the context of mathematics and the exact sciences.§ “ Two and two make four,” “ *Deux et deux font quatre*” : that is exact. Outside this area, even in the simplest situations, a translation can be only approximate. “ Be good,” “ *Sois sage.*” ‘*Sois*’ fails to cover the area of ‘be’; we need ‘*soyez*’ at least in addition. ‘*Sage*’ covers an area quite different in outline from that of ‘good’. The most that we can say is that in a given situation—say, when warning a small daughter not to throw food on the floor—the second phrase, if rendered in the same tone of exasperation or patience, will produce the same effect on a French daughter that the first will produce on an American. To produce the same effect is generally the goal of translation and I shall discuss the difficulties of achieving it before coming to a case where it is not enough.

To produce the same effect becomes more difficult as we move from expository to emotional speech, as we move from prose to poetry, and as we choose to deal with pairs of languages that differ in structure and in cultural heritage. It follows that Sanskrit poetry is not easily translated into English. The problems that one encounters are illustrated in a volume now editing in the Harvard Oriental Series.† It is a translation of two of India’s most influential works of literary criticism, *Ānanda-vardhana’s The Light of Suggestion*

§ This essay is reproduced, with minor editorial corrections and by permission of the author and publisher from *The Harvard Advocate*, vol. 111, No. 4 (Summer 1982), Special Translation Issue, pp.125–131 [Editor’ s note].

† This volume has since been published: *The Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*. Translated by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan. Edited with an Introduction by Daniel H. H. Ingalls. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1990. Harvard Oriental Series, volume 49. [Editor’s note]

(*Dhvanyāloka*), written toward the middle of the ninth century, and *Abhinava-gupta's The Eye (Locana)*, a commentary on the former work written a century and a half later. Both works adduce a large number of Sanskrit and Prakrit poems as examples to bear out their literary theories. They explicate the poems in great detail and analyze the causes of the beauty that they find in them.

The Light of Suggestion and *The Eye* furnish the translator with both more help and more problems than he will find in other Sanskrit literary works. More help because one is shown exactly how a Sanskrit critic, in an age and environment close to that of the poet, understood each poem that is quoted. More problems because, the poems being quoted for their aesthetic flavor, one must try to capture the same flavor in English; and yet, if one departs more than a small distance from the literal sense of the words, the prose explication by the critics will be rendered unintelligible to the reader.

An example will make my meaning clear. Among the linguistic traits that distinguish Sanskrit from English is its ability to form enormous noun and adjective compounds. This trait comes up for discussion by *Ānanda* and *Abhinava*. Previous critics had associated the trait with a “ quality” of poetry which they called “ strength” and which they opposed to a quality called “ sweetness,” which was to be achieved by an inflected, non-compound structure. *Ānanda*, although he objects to this opposition as oversimplifying the matter, gives us an example where compound structure is clearly productive of strength. The example is taken from a play, *The Binding of the Braid (Veṅī-samhāra)*, which deals with the oath of Bhīma (his name means “ the Terrible”) to break the thighs of Suyodhana and drink the blood from Duḥśāsana’s breast, these being the warriors who had insulted his queen, Draupadī. They had dragged her through the Kuru court by the hair. After this insult Draupadī has left her hair hanging in a braid, which she will not bind on her crown until she has been avenged. The play treats this plot of vengeance with a rhetoric of violence worthy of Lucan and such as we have preserved for us in no other Sanskrit play.

Here is the stanza which *Ānanda* chooses:

cañcad-bhuja-bhramita-caṇḍa-gadābhighāta-

*sañcūrṇitoru-yugalasya Suyodhanasya
styānāvabaddha-ghana-sonita-sona-pāṇir
uttarṁsayiṣyati kucāṁs tava devī Bhīmaḥ*

A literal prose rendering would be:

*In despite of the by-my-whirling-arm-held-brutal-
club-stroke-crushed-thigh-pair-possessor Suyodhana,
I, Bhīma, a congealing-adhering-thick-blood-reddened-
hand-possessor will deck the hair of you, my lady.*

What is a translator to do with such a stanza? To adhere to the original structure will drive his reader to confusion or laughter, an effect of which one must be ashamed, for in the Sanskrit the stanza is not confusing or comical; it is clear and passionate. One can of course attain these ends by such means as we would normally use in English to produce a feeling of strength and passion. But if the translator departs too far from the literal, the comments of the critic—and these are what have prompted our whole effort in this work of translation—will make no sense. What the translator must do is find a satisfactory compromise.

In the Harvard Oriental Series edition the stanza is translated thus:

*The brutal war-club whirling in my arms
will crush both thighs of this Suyodhana,
so that he whose name is truly Bhīma
may deck your hair, my lady, with his hands
new-reddened in that fresh-congealing blood.*

The translation is followed by [Abhinava's](#) explication and criticism:

With this “brutal,” that is, cruel, war-club which will be wielded by my “whirling” arms, that is, arms circling with great speed; with this war-club both thighs will be simultaneously “*sañcūrṇita*,” that is, completely crushed so that the man cannot stand up again. I shall so despise Suyodhana, whose thighs are in this condition, that I will become one whose hands are “reddened,” crimson, with the blood that is “thick,” that is, does not run off because it comes from a deep wound and is not the thin liquid of a superficial cut, and

which will stick to my hands because it is “ congealing” ..., there not having been time enough for it fully to dry. It is for just this reason that I shall be “ Bhīma,” that is, one who strikes terror into the hearts of cowards. “ Your” hair: of you, to whom so many insults were given—” my lady” shows how little deserving she was—I shall deck the hair, that is, I shall change it from its braided state and give it as it were a coronet of red flowers with bits of blood falling from my hands. Here we have an implied figure of poetic fancy (*utprekṣā*). By using the vocative “ my lady,” which reminds us that a noblewoman was humiliated by Suyodhana, the author has applied a stimulus to the relish of anger. Accordingly [in spite of the reference to a normally amorous act, the decking of a beloved’s hair], one cannot suspect any suggestion of the relish of love. There is both despite of Suyodhana and an absence of effort to strike him again with the war-dub because his thighs will have been completely crushed with the one blow. The use of the word “ congealing” suggests Bhīma’s impatience to wash away the grievance of Draupadī before the blood even dries. From the long compound, flowing in an uninterrupted stream and allowing the hearer no pause in all its course, there results an apprehension of the whole representation of the broken-thighed Suyodhana. This serves to intensify the impression of Bhīma’s violence.

The genius of Abhinava as a critic appears in last two sentences here. It is the unity of a representation furnished by a compound that gives it its strength. The whole scene is before our eyes as soon as we understand the words at all. We are not allowed to dilute the effect by relishing it bit by bit. It hits the aesthetic sense not like pebbles but like a rock. The Romans achieved somewhat the same effect by abandoning normal word order, so that an adjective, say, given as the initial word of a line or strophe, will not find its noun, and so be intelligible, until the last word.

I admit that all our effort here does not quite give the reader the effect of the original. We have in our translation of the stanza no “ uninterrupted stream that allows no pause in all its course.” But given the compromising translation—we do use two unusual compounds in

the last line—and the critic’s comment, the reader is in a position at least to understand, if not fully to relish, what appealed to the reader of the Sanskrit verse.

A comparable problem, though one that is not peculiar to the translation of Sanskrit, is that of giving English the effect of the particular meter of the original. English meter is accentual. Sanskrit meter, like that of Greek and Latin, is quantitative. There have been in English of course many imitations of quantitative verse, even a few successful ones, like Milton’s wonderful rendering of the Fifth Ode of Horace. But even Milton would have had to make large compromises in translating Sanskrit. Take the following stanza, included by one edition in the text of our Ānanda. Beside the Sanskrit text I furnish the metrical scheme.

<i>madana-mukhara-kapotam unmayūram</i>	<i>uuuuuuu-u-u- -</i>
<i>pravirala-vāmana-vṛkṣa-samniवेशam</i>	<i>uuuu-uu-u-u- -</i>
<i>vanam idam avagāhamāna-bhīmam</i>	<i>uuuuuuu-u-u- -</i>
<i>vyasanam ivopari dāruṇatvam eti</i>	<i>uuuu-uu-u-u- -</i>

A literal prose version would be:

With intoxication-voluble doves, with rising peacocks, containing few and dwarfed trees, this forest, dangerous to enter, leads like vice to dire misery.

This is not great poetry, but it attains a striking effect, as the commentator notes, by its use of *aupacchandāsika* meter. There is a contrast between the happily tripping short syllables of the line openings and the heavy cadences, which is nicely parallel to the contrast between the beauties of the forest (and of vice) as it first calls to the traveler and the heavy disaster which awaits him if he yields to the temptation and enters. Now one cannot lighten English verse to the degree of producing seven consecutive light syllables. But one can weight it and thereby achieve a contrast, at least, comparable to that of the Sanskrit.

*With its enraptured doves and eager peacocks
this wasteland of sparse dwarfed trees
is like human vice: tempting to enter,
it bodes dire consequence.*

Here again, the exact effect being impossible in English, one is forced to compromise.

Many verses from *The Light of Suggestion* and *The Eye* demand of the translator less alteration of structure than the examples just given. But before giving examples I must say something of the basic theories of criticism which Ānanda and Abhinava have set forth, by which they judge the poetry that they quote, and in light of which one must modulate one's English versions.

Like almost all Sanskrit critics Ānanda and Abhinava regard the ultimate aim of literature as the production of aesthetic relish (*rasa*). Literature may also give information or instruction, but that is incidental. Instruction is primary only in the sciences (*śāstra*), not in literature (*sāhitya*). The exact nature of aesthetic relish and the means used in its production come in for much learned discussion and I shall here greatly simplify the outcome.

The term *rasa*, which basically means taste, was first used in a technical sense by actors and playwrights. Every play has its special taste or aesthetic flavor: comedy, love, tragedy, heroism, and so on. The old Sanskrit theatre spoke of eight such *rasas*, to which the later theatre added a ninth. These different types of *rasa* were distinguished by the basic emotion or state of the soul on which they were built: laughter, sexual excitement, sorrow, masterful energy, and so on. And yet, the relish was recognized to be clearly distinct from the emotion. The emotion belonged to the character portrayed on the stage, the relish to the audience. To produce a given relish one had to furnish not only the emotion and the character in which it seemed to reside, but also certain stimulating factors of environment, gesture, and the like.

The extension of this dramatic nomenclature to Sanskrit literature as a whole was in large part the work of our ninth century critic Ānandavardhana. Every poem, whether lyrical, religious, or epic, every tale in prose or in mixed prose and verse, must have its predominant relish. An elaborate body of prescriptions arose regulating the combination of subordinate relishes with the predominant one. In addition, Ānanda formulated the doctrine that these *rasas* must be suggested, that they could not be directly expressed. This suggestion (*dhvani*) of a relish, he claims, is the essence of beauty throughout the whole of literature. Hence the title of his work, *The Light of Suggestion*, for his criticism was intended to cast a light by which poets would be enabled to achieve and readers would be enabled to appreciate this most essential element of poetry.

Our critics analyse suggestion in all its aspects, the lower forms—those which do not produce *rasa* well as the higher. Suggestion may be generated by the words themselves of a poem, or by their meanings. It may arise from the poem taken as a whole, from a single stanza or sentence or word, or even from a single morpheme. A suffix denoting the plural or emphasizing the second person may be suggestive. Figures of speech may be suggestive, or in turn they may be suggested. The manner of this criticism will appear from art example.

*White herons circle against dark clouds
that paint the sky with their wet lustre.
Winds carry the small rain.
The peacocks, friends of the clouds, cry out with joy.
Let all this be: my heart is hard;
I am Rāma and can bear it.
But Vaidehī, how will she live?
Alas, my queen, alas, be brave!*

The stanza evokes the relish of love in its sub-variety of love-in-separation, a variety which comes close to the relish of tragedy. Rāma perceives the beauties of the monsoon, a time when lovers long to be together. One may point to the skill with which the stimulants of sight, touch, and hearing are combined in the first half of the stanza. In the second half, Rāma contrasts his case with that of his wife, Vaidehī (= Sītā), who has been carried off Rāvaṇa. The poetry recreates Rāma's grief through suggestions that inspire something similar in the reader.

Abhinava finds numerous suggestions in the stanza:

... and so the sky is painful to look at (as it reminds Rāma of his love). All the directions are also hard to bear. The use of the plural in “winds” shows that they blow from all directions; and by releasing their small drops of water it is suggested that they blow very softly [and thus linger over one's body and make one all the more love-sick]. Then, perhaps, Rāma should enter a cave and hide the sight from his eyes. With this in mind, the poet says that the clouds have friends, among whom are the peacocks who utter sweet sounds in their joy and so become reminders of the unbearable sight of the clouds. On their own as well, these sounds are quite unbearable. In this way Rāma, whose emotion of love has been aroused by stimulating factors, knowing that these sources of emotion will

pain Sītā, since love is based on mutual feeling, from here on in the stanza conjures up his beloved in his heart. First he reports on himself: “ Let this be... still I am Rāma.” The word “ hard-hearted” gives scope to the particular suggestion that is achieved by the word “ Rāma.” Without “ hard-hearted” the word “ Rāma” might suggest no more than that the speaker was born in the family of Daśaratha, or that he had married Sītā. As it is, “ Rāma of hard heart” suggests his fortitude in banishment from his kingdom and his other innumerable heroic qualities, which could not all be conveyed by a denotative, non-suggestive, use of words. Even if these qualities could be denotatively conveyed one by one, they would not be apprehended in a single act of cognition and would not give rise to a striking and beautiful aesthetic experience. As it is, these qualities are suggested and so do become the source of a strikingly beautiful aesthetic pleasure.... “ I am Rāma” : that is, I am the self-same person who has undergone so many sorrows. “ How will she live?” that is, what will she do? Or, the meaning can be taken as “ her very life will be impossible.” In this way by a succession of memory, name (Vaidehī), and speculation (“ how will she live?”), he has conjured up his beloved from his heart into being present before him. To her, as her heart is about to break, he says with agitation. “ Alas, my queen, alas, be brave!”

What is difficult in such passages is to render the verse in such words that the comment following will be clear to the English reader. If you bracket each word of the verse with its Sanskrit equivalent and then repeat the Sanskrit equivalents in prose, you will not have translated; you will merely have given the reader a crossword puzzle.

The relish we have seen of love-in-separation is one that covers a very wide area. It arises not only from situations where lovers or husband and wife have been separated by war or duty or some other turn of fate. It arises in cases of early love before the partners have had a chance to implement their emotion. It is found in lovers’ quarrels. Most important, it is

found in those cases where the man has been false to the woman and she rejects his efforts at reconciliation. Such a woman is called by the critics a *mānini*, a woman of pride. What chiefly appealed to them in her situation, I think, was the tension between her pride (“ I will not forgive”) and her natural inclination (“ I want him back”). A good example is quoted by Ānanda from an unknown author:

*Go away; nor try to wipe
my miserable eyes.
God must have meant them for weeping only,
not for sight;
for they grew drunk on seeing you
and failed to show
what your heart was like.*

The stanza is easy to translate, but the comment of the critic needs explanation. Ānanda quotes the stanza as an example of the suggestiveness of the smallest possible part of speech, the suffix of the second person singular active imperative in the verbs 'go' and 'wipe.' In normal Sanskrit or Prakrit the polite form would be used, which would be in the impersonal passive, i.e. "let it be departed (by you)." The direct confrontation of "go away" is far stronger in Sanskrit than in English.

Before the ninth century Sanskrit criticism and analysis of poetry had been chiefly concerned with figures of speech. Figures were divided into those of sound and those of sense, much as our classical rhetoric distinguished the *figurae verborum* from the *figurae sententiarum*. The Sanskrit word for all such figures is *alaṅkāra*, "ornament." Ānanda and Abhinava continue to be interested in the "ornaments," but they put them in their place, so to speak. Just as a physical ornament such as a bracelet or necklace is useful only if it heightens or emphasizes the beauty of the person who wears it, so also with the ornaments of poetry. The soul of poetry is its aesthetic relish. To this relish the figures of speech must be subordinated. They must appear to arise naturally. For this reason Ānanda disparages the elaborate alliterations that had been popular with earlier poets, especially the *yamaka*. The *yamaka* is the return of a set of phonemes in the same order but with different meaning, as in Kālidāsa's

drumavatīm avatīrya vanasthalīm

descending (avatīrya) to the well-treed (drumavatīm) woodland.

It is much the same trick that the Spanish poet Argensola used in his echoing sonnets,
e.g.

Después que al mundo el rey divino vino.

Ānanda objects to it precisely because it is a trick. It catches the hearer's attention by its cleverness and thereby prevents his mind from feeling and contemplating the *rasa* which should be the true aim of the poem.

The same objection to the overelaborate figures of sense. As an example of what to avoid Abhinava quotes the lines

*Opening by the stroke of her beauty
The Eyelash doorpanels of my eyes,
the princess entered the chamber
of my heart.*

On the other hand, a metaphor properly subordinated may be seen in a stanza quoted from the anthology of Amaru:

*In anger she has bound him
tightly in the noose of her soft arms
and in the evening leads him to the bedroom.
There before her attendant friends
she points to the signs of his deceit and conjures him
never, never to do such a thing again.
O lucky lover! As he hides his transgression with laugh,
she weeps and strikes him.*

The stanza belongs to a type of Sanskrit verse which depicts a man's delight in an outburst of jealousy from his mistress, for jealousy shows the intensity of her love. " Her friends," says [Abhinava](#), " have been telling her all along that her lover is faithful. Well, let them just look now . . . 'Never do such a thing again': what she means is shown by the word 'deceit; for example nail marks left by a rival, to which she points with her finger." Of the metaphor [Abhinava](#) has

this to say: “ Were one to continue the metaphor of the woman’s creeper-like arms acting as a noose for binding, the woman would become a huntress, the bedroom would become a prison or a cage, and so on, all of which would be most inappropriate.” Accordingly the poet has dropped the metaphor before it becomes obvious.

Not only figures of speech; everything must be subordinated to the *rasa*. The *rasa* of a poem or stanza must always be predominant. But now an embarrassing fact comes to the attention of the critics. Occasionally, and in what are admitted to be verses of the highest rank, a *rasa* itself seems to be subordinated. An example is:

*Why do you laugh? You will not get away again
now that I have caught you.
Pitiless man, what is this strange love of travel
that drove you from me?
So speak your enemies' wives,
clinging to the necks of their husbands in their dreams,
only to weep aloud when they awake
to the empty circle of their arms.*

The verse belongs to a much used type of panegyric. A king is praised by innuendo, what is expressly stated being the utter misery of his enemies. We have here a relish of tragedy, though that is not the chief aim of the stanza.

Abhinava begins by explaining the verse.

As the appearance of a dream is similar to what one has experienced, a wife here sees her husband laughing in her dream. “ You will not get away again,” that is, now that I know your unfaithful nature I will not free you from the noose of my arms. This explains the “ empty circle of their arms” later in the verse. It is only natural to scold a lover who is never received back. So she says, “ Pitiless man,” etc.... “ Dreams” : the plural shows that this happens again and again.

He then turns to the problem of the *rasa*. Clearly the stanza has both the flavor of as it tells of the widowed ladies of the enemy and flavor of heroism as it implies the victory of the

king who is being praised. What has in effect happened is that the first *rasa* has been turned into an *alaṅkāra* (ornament, figure of speech). Abhinava says,

In the stanza the greatness of the king is beautified by our relishing the flavor of tragedy, the basic emotion of which is the sorrow stimulated in the wives of the enemy by seeing the dream. The main purport of this sentence is not baldly stated, as for example, “ You have killed your enemies.” Rather, the purport of the sentence is beautified and the beauty is due to the expression of compassion. Just as an object, such a face, can be embellished by another object, such as the moon, for it appears with greater beauty by having the moon as its simile, so also a fact, or a particular emotional situation, can be embellished by a *rasa* used as a subordinate element. So what objection can there be to our using a *rasa*, like any other object, as an ornament (*alaṅkāra*)?... The matter is made more tasteful by the *rasa*. This is obvious.

The English reader may not find it so obvious. He may even find that a compassion for the widowed ladies lives on in his apprehension more vividly than any admiration for the king’s heroism. Here we meet the problem of the different sensibilities of two different ages or cultures. The translator has no magic by which to effect a sudden change in his readers’ sensibilities; nor would he wish to have it. The most he may hope for is that the reader by long acquaintance will come to understand the foreign response and will not let it interfere with his enjoyment of the foreign literature as a whole.

Given our critics’ doctrine that the flavor of a poem must only be suggested it follows that they find fault with a poem if it gives its suggestion away by directly stating the suggested fact. Such direct statement lowers the poem to secondary rank.

*“ That’s where my aged mother sleeps, and there
sleeps daddy, the oldest man you’ve ever met.
Here sleeps the slave-girl worn out by her chores,
and here sleep I, who must be guilty
to deserve these few days absence of my lord.”
By ruse of such statements such as these the youthful wife
informed the traveler of her intent.*

The last two lines the stanza from achieving erotic relish. On the other hand, the following stanza is found to be unexceptionable.

*Don't block my way; move on, you fool.
You are utterly shameless!
I cannot stay from my chores;
I have to take care of an empty house.*

An “ empty house” is the conventional rendezvous of village lovers in Sanskrit poetry. Abhinava spells out the suggestion. “ You are inexperienced to show your feelings where other people are present. But there is an empty house that could serve as a rendezvous. That is where we should go.”

Professor Masson has objected to the critical principle that all relish should be suggested, and I agree with his objection if the principle is to be applied to literature other than Sanskrit and Prakrit. I think of Western verses:

*O wally, wally, gin love be bonnie
A little time while it is new!
But when 'tis auld it waxeth cauld
And fades awa' like mornin' dew.*

Or

*Odi et amo. Quare id faciam fortasse requiris;
Nescio sed fieri sentio et excrucior.‡*

No one in his right mind would relegate these verses to a secondary rank of poetry. But Sanskrit poetry almost never speaks directly about the emotions in this fashion. It

‡ [Editorial note: the following is N.S. Gill's translation of the Latin poet, Catullus:

*I hate and I love. Why do I do it, perchance you might ask?
I don't know, but I feel it happening to me and I'm burning up.*

You may check out Gill's analysis of the artistry of this verse at

http://romanhistorybooksandmore.freeservers.com/l_nsgill3.htm]

portrays the symptoms of love and hatred, it describes the gestures of a new love and a love grown old. It leaves the reader to make the direct statement to himself in silence. Given the body of literature on which Ānanda and Abhinava formed their theories, their insistence that relish of emotion and the emotions themselves should be no more than suggested seems to me not unreasonable.

Here there arises a problem that has often vexed me. I have said that generally the goal of translation should be to achieve the same effect as the original. But what is one to do when the whole beauty of the original depends on suggestions that are strange to English, on an allusiveness that is even unintelligible without annotation? The case is different from that of poems in compound structure or in *aupacchandāsika* meter which I adduced at the beginning of this paper. In those cases the inimitable, or only partly imitable, trait was an ornament of the verse, not its soul. Here the difficulty is more serious.