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ICCS 2022 Post-Conference Commentary

Befriending the Other Through Translation in Multicultural Contexts

By Suwanna Satha-Anand

SYNOPSIS

Multicultural societies need more precise translation of complex concepts and words to facilitate deeper understanding among diverse populations and strengthen social cohesion. Words and their meanings matter, and they provide important insights to welcoming the 'other' into our fold.

COMMENTARY

When Confucius alluded to the joy of “befriending the other” in *The Analects*, it is reasonable to believe that he and his disciples were engaging in inter-cultural communication among diverse dialect groups before the Warring States period in what is present-day China:

*“Is it not a joy to have friends coming from afar?” Confucius, *The Analects*, (1:1)*

Before they could recognize what was unfamiliar as a potential source of insight and joy, however, they needed to have the capacity to “understand” what, at first, could sound or look strange, or even outlandish.

At the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) held from 6-8 September 2022 in Singapore, this theme was included in a particular session on “Languages, Identity, and Belonging.”

Thus, the act of translation by adept translators is to grasp at the essence of other identities, an important means of building “bridges” to learn from and “befriend the

other.” When translation is seen in this light, it adds an interesting dimension to the exploration of nurturing inclusive societies.

Translation can start with transferring of messages from one language into another, but that is only the beginning. Once the messages are embedded in the host language, it can manifest in different dimensions, ultimately leading to the self-transformation of the host.

Influential contemporary French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s reflections on translation show the active agency of the act of translation in the formation and transformation of the self. His thoughts identify three aspects of the transformative power of translation and its relevance for discussing social cohesion, which will be discussed at length below.

Translation as an Invitation to Deeper Understanding

One of the key issues of building welcoming multicultural communities is the ability to learn from what is from “afar”. Isn’t this an admission of one’s own limited worldview and experience, and a yearning to reach out to other horizons of possibility? In ancient times, cultural integration among major political powers was made possible by the translation of key canonical texts, both religious and secular, from outside civilizations into the language of the host.

This was not only about the transference of messages from one language into another, but also about the colossal impact on learning about and from others in the self-forming and self-transforming processes of these host civilizations. Outstanding examples of this are St. Jerome’s translation of the Bible from Greek into Latin; the T’ang Dynasty’s massive translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Chinese; the translation of the Latin Bible into vernacular European languages in the 16th century; and the translation and adaptation of the great Indian epic, *Ramayana*, into the local languages of Southeast Asia in the past centuries.

In many cases, especially when artistic, creative, and/or abstract qualities are the marks of a text, “literal” translation often fails to achieve the task at hand. Interpretation will be required, in which the translator must venture into a search for the best possible meaning(s) to make a transference of messages possible. This act of interpretation requires active agency on the part of the translator, and in this process of finding the most appropriate terms, he or she begins to better understand the other and to discover the nuances and horizons of possible meanings and worldviews in his or her own language.

Translation Welcomes Others’ Experiences into Our Own World

When *philosophy* (love of knowledge) is translated into Thai, it is translated as *Praty-ya* (ปรัชญา), a Sanskrit term indicating “insight, or wisdom.” This has generated many debates and discussions about whether the Thai intellectual landscape even has something that is comparable to the Greek understanding of *philos* and *sophia*. Although “love” is a missing element in the Thai translation, it is arguable that after its translation, the idea that insight via deep reflection and reasoning as an admirable

intellectual pursuit became welcomed and embedded in the Thai intellectual community.

This is distinguished from the Pali term *panya* (ปัญญา), meaning “wisdom”, which is mostly used in Buddhist philosophy. I would propose that the translation of *panya* has also created an occasion for Thai philosophic quests to understand “wisdom” in non-Buddhistic contexts. From these examples, translation has allowed for the Thai mind to become curious and open to new possibilities not limited to traditional Buddhist discourse.

A translator of language and culture need not be a professional ‘translator’ per se but can be those who can transform the odd from afar into the familiar of the near. Once the stranger has become familiar, we can learn more about what lies beyond our recognizable world.

Translation Creates an Opportunity for Transformation

When the English phrase *human rights* is translated into Thai as *sithi-manusaya-chon* (สิทธิมนุษยชน), it introduces to the Thai language new concepts and possibilities for understanding the relationship between citizens and the state, including the ideas of human equality, dignity, and the protection of individuals from the abuse of state power. This translation has generated debates and discussions on whether there is a concept of human rights in Theravada Buddhism in Thailand.

Many scholars give a positive answer, but some others do not. These attempts may be seen as a welcome or unwelcome gesture in co-opting a “foreign” idea and practice into Thai soil. More importantly, however, is that the translation of this concept into Thai has created a challenging occasion for possible transformation of Thais’ understanding of their own state-and-citizen relationship.

People Matter, Words Matter

Social cohesion is a live possibility when we have friends from afar, are hospitable to visitors and strangers, and are open to the possibility of being mutually transformed as our languages inspire another. Translation is a good place to learn about this process, and thus, translators of language and culture are crucial.

While we usually render the term “translation” as a simple transfer of messages from one language into another, it can also occur in a highly complex rendering of religious texts or legal codes into another language. Some messages are easier to translate while some are more difficult; still others are notoriously impossible, like the translation of word-play puns, poems, and spiritual contemplations. When translation involves transferring critical concepts and values from one culture to another – like democracy, equality, human rights, *Karma*, or *Nirvana* – the impact of these translations on social cohesion is pertinent.

Words matter, and in a world where Google Translate can be accessed at a fingertip, we can build stronger societies when translation is not merely a tool to communicate to the head, but to the heart.

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