








## The Lecture Contains:

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## Introduction

We have already discussed how translation or carrying across the meaning/message of one text into another can occur within a language system. What happens if the transference is from one semiotic system like a novel to another semiotic system like film? This is also called translation within the cultural matrix of translation studies, but not much attention has been paid to it by theorists maybe because this sort of intersemiotic translation was traditionally thought of as adaptation. The thin line dividing adaptation from translation again becomes a thorny issue here. However, it remains a fact that we are familiar with the idea of translation from one medium to another, like the epics or episodes in epics being ‘reborn’ as dance or music. It is also a fact that we have very rarely thought of Wagner’s opera *The Ring of the Niebelungs* as a translation of the Nordic legend of the Niebelungs. It has been traditionally thought of as a composition based on those legends. Similar is the case of Meera bhajans that draw from stories of Krishna or the case of most of Indian classical dance and music that borrow from the epics and puranas. However, the most obvious example of intersemiotic translation is that of from the print medium to celluloid – novel/short story/play to film. This is an area that has been worked upon, but not by many in the field of translation studies.

Intersemiotic translation or the translation from one medium of art to another has traditionally been thought of as adaptation and not as translation.

The translation from one medium to another will have all the attendant questions usually faced by a translator between two languages. But with change in medium come other issues like the suitability of certain conventions of one medium to the other. What is effective in written language might not be amenable to the visual language of cinema. Literature affords scope to elaborate on the intensely private thoughts of an individual. How do you convey the thought processes through the medium of cinema where visuals are perhaps more important than words? This sort of dilemma will present itself before any translator between two mediums of art.

## Fiction to Film

Let us consider the most common form of intersemiotic translation which is that of a literary work into film. All the yardsticks that we apply to interlingual translation are applicable here too – equivalence, translation strategy, faithfulness to the original etc. There are also added dimensions like the natural changes that would accompany the transformation of material from one medium to another.

A film based on a novel or short story can be made in different ways. If you wish to be faithful to the original then the best ‘translation strategy’ would be what can be called the equivalent of the ‘word-for-word’ strategy in print. The film can be a frame by frame representation of the literary work. However, the problem is that the reception of the two media are governed by different temporal frameworks. A novel of 500 pages can be read in one day or one month, depending upon the reader’s capabilities. But a film based on the novel has to be compressed into two or three hours. This means that the director is forced to edit the novel, eliminating details that are not amenable to visual medium. The director will also be guided by personal preferences in the choice of material selected. If a novel will by default get shortened when it is converted to film, a short story will have to be ‘lengthened’ or padded up when it undergoes a similar transformation. These additions and deletions are part of the process of translation from fiction to film.

The story of a novel when adapted to the film version will have to be told in two-three hours. This means that the novel will have to be reduced drastically.

Take the case of the film version of a lengthy novel like Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. It is a novel that is close to a thousand pages, and the bewildering array of characters and incidents is difficult to reproduce in a film. However the film is very close, perhaps the closest that any cinematic form could come, to the humungous text. It is about four hours long and is ‘faithful’ to the original, in that the director has not attempted to present his interpretation of the text. In fact, so successful was the cinematic version that those who have seen the film cannot conceive of the central characters Scarlett and Rhett other than as Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, the actors who played these roles on screen. However, the director had to remove certain characters or make modifications in the film to make it appealing to the viewer.

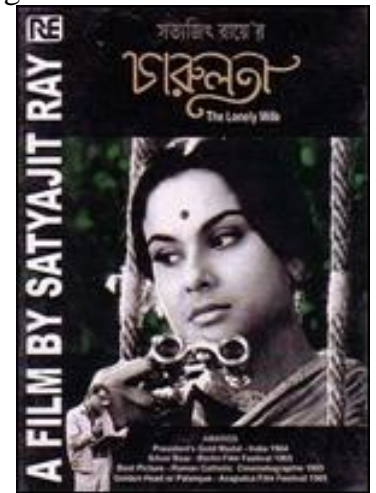
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**The Director's Story**

It has to be stated that cases of faithful translations into film are rare. This is because a film based on a literary work is usually projected through the director's creative thought process, and ends up being her interpretation of the work. This might result in a completely different work of art altogether. Moreover, the visual medium gives scope to the director's imagination to conceptualize the words of the author in a different way. An example is David Lean's film *Doctor Zhivago* based on Boris Pasternak's novel of the same name. The film is a 'faithful' translation, but Lean has exploited the advantages of the visual medium to the maximum. The vast and desolate expanse of snow that forms the backdrop as Zhivago is led away from Lara, becomes an excellent symbol of his hopelessness and sorrow. Similarly, the haunting melody that accompanies the presence of Lara along with the images of spring and hope, convey the essence of that character very effectively. Lean has used the cinematic medium efficiently to express Pasternak's linguistic images.

Similar is the case with Satyajit Ray's cinematic representations of various Tagore stories. The most famous among them are *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World) and *Charulata*. *Charulata* is the cinematic adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Nashtanirh* (Broken Nest). It deals with the boredom and frustration of a young wife whose intellectual husband has no time for her. She is attracted to her husband's young cousin and is caught up in a moral dilemma. Obviously this internal conflict is the hardest to portray through cinema. But Ray has captured the essence of the bored Charulata through the famous scene where she runs from one window of her palatial mansion to the other with her opera glasses. For this rich housewife, life is what happens on the street outside which she can observe only from the isolation of her position behind the window blind. Ray has given a visual interpretation to Tagore's imagination here.

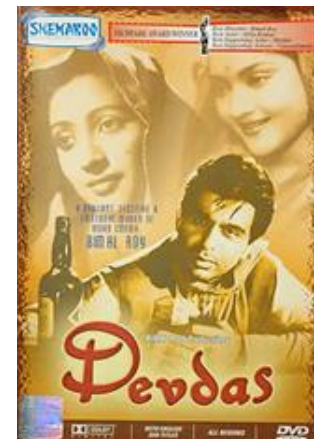
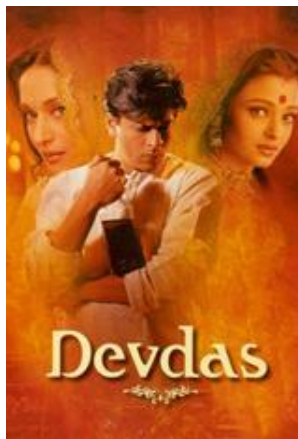


However, in both the cases given above, the film agrees with the text it has borrowed from, and therefore can be called a faithful translation. There are instances where the director can adapt a story from a culturally alien context and transform it completely so that it looks to be a new story altogether. Shakespeare has perhaps been the most interpreted author like this. One good example is Vishal Bharadwaj's *Omkara* which was an interpretation of *Othello*. *Othello the Moor* became *Omkara the gang leader* in rural Uttar Pradesh and *Iago* became the malcontent 'Langda' Tyagi. The intricacies of political power games in the Indian context was so successfully incorporated into the basic storyline that the film became convincingly Indian. The only connection with Shakespeare was the essential story.

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### Differing Versions

The director can also come up with a completely different twist to the tale. The famous director Alfred Hitchcock was known for this, a popular example being the movie *Rebecca* made on the novel by Daphne du Maurier. In the novel, the hero Maximilian de Winter actually commits a murder, while this is not so in the film. This detail has a major role to play in the story. There are plenty of other examples like this from the field of adaptation.



Another popular form of adaptation is what is called the spoof or parody of a popular text. Saratchandra Chatterjee's *Devdas* has been made into a film in most of the Indian languages, but the recent Hindi movie *DevD* was a spoof on the novel/film. *DevD* was not a tragedy and the hero was not the typical jilted lover that Saratchandra's hero was. The film was Anurag Kashyap's interpretation of the character of the traditional Devdas, and he becomes a narcissistic, chauvinist hero in the modern version. Perhaps the most subversive was the portrait of Chandramukhi who is the prostitute with the golden heart in Saratchandra. In *DevD*, she is Chanda, a schoolgirl who is forced into the business because of a sex racket and eventually Dev finds his partner in her. While the original is a tearful tragedy, the Anurag Kashyap version ends on a positive note with Dev deciding to spend the rest of his life with Chanda.

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**Translation into other forms**

These forms of adaptation into other art forms are not perhaps so popular or obvious in the public perception. But a careful observation reveals that most of our classical dance and music forms are ‘translations’ from epics and puranas. This is especially true of our classical dance forms. Kathakali, the dance drama of Kerala, has a strictly defined script to which it is performed. The traditional stories of

Our classical music and dance are actually intersemiotic rewritings or translations, as they reinterpret the puranas and other religious texts in their own way .

Kathakali have been invariably drawn from either the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* – like Nalacharitam (the story of Nala), Duryodhanavadham (the slaying of Duryodhana), Keechakavadham (the slaying of Keechaka) etc. An excerpt from the epic is transformed to suit the format the Kathakali performance. The script is in verse form which is sung to the accompaniment of instruments, and offers ample scope for dramatic interpretation. Although Kathakali adaptations are never subversive, the stories are selected and edited in such a way that they are dramatic enough to suit the new medium..

This is true of most classical performing arts like Yakshagana and to some extent, folk forms like Pandvani, Thullal etc. The fact is that traditional Indian art forms, be it classical or folk, have their roots in the religious mythical lore of the country. This applies to all our classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Odissi etc and for the two schools of Indian classical music, the Hindustani and Carnatic. It is said that our classical forms of dance, theatre and music evolved from the folk forms which in turn derived their raw material from the common fount of bhakti or devotion of the masses. It is not coincidental that our classical dance and music are largely devotional in nature even today. Each art form developed its own distinguishing feature, depending on the socio-cultural context of its origin – in short, each utilized a particular translation strategy in accordance with the target culture, to achieve equivalence.

K. M. Sherrif, in his article “Toward a Theory of Rewriting: Drawing from the Indian Practice” argues that these art forms are inter-semiotic rewritings, an aspect which has not been addressed adequately enough by translation theorists. He points to another aspect of such rewritings which is that of the socio-political factor. While translation studies has focused on the socio-political implications of literary rewritings like Bhakti poetry, similar attention has not been paid to the non-aesthetic implications of a rewrite like Kathakali. Mentioning the “aesthetic and socio-political distance that separates the rewriting of Ramayana by poets like Ezhuthachan or Tulsidas” from a performing art like Kathakali, he notes: “The stark contrast between the devotional fervour of Ezhuthachan’s verses and the stylized mudras of Kathakali with their alienating effect, stares one in the face” (*Translation Today*). Sherrif is pointing to the

different rewriting/translation strategies and also their purpose of these art forms.

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**Modern forms**

Sherrif cites a modern example of cultural rewriting which is that of the kathaprasangam in Kerala. It is a secular version of the devotional *Harikatha* where the performer recites a story from the puranas or epics as a prose narrative with songs in between.

Kathaprasangam as an art form evolved from this, but was a hugely popular secular form in Kerala, its range of influence comparable to the television today. Two of the most popular *kathaprasangam* artists were Kedamangalam Sadanandan and Sambasivan, both of them Communist sympathizers. Their performances were a huge impetus to the cultural agenda of Communism and succeeded in sensitizing their listeners to the ideals of socialism and egalitarianism preached by the leftist ideology.

The transference of classics from the realm of high culture to that of popular culture was made possible by art forms like kathaprasangam. These translations thus helped to make the classics accessible to the lay person.

Sambasivan who was to become legendary in his rendition of kathaprasangams, turned to world literature for inspiration. His version of Maxim Gorky's *Mother* was hugely popular and openly Communist. But he also had other literary masterpieces like Shakespeare's *Othello* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. It is not an exaggeration to say that these became household names to people who barely knew English. The popular art form of kathaprasangam had effected a translation at all levels – cultural and linguistic. Besides, by bringing the classics to the masses, Sambasivan was fulfilling another important mission of rewrites or retellings. As Sherrif points out: “What one tends to forget is that most non-professional readers in any culture have had access to a large body of the ‘world literature’, including the classics, only through rewritings: retellings of stories, reviews, critical articles, encyclopedias and other books for reference” (*Translation Today*).

Kathaprasangam is but one example of the numerous folk forms in India, which reach out to the common man and establish contact with him/her. The cultural rewriting or intersemiotic translation that is implicit in these forms is not always noticed or studied.

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**Conclusion**

What we have discussed are but a few forms of intersemiotic translation. There are plenty of others like myth to painting (Raja Ravi Varma's paintings), fiction to graphic format (novels to comic books), short story to play (W. W. Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw* or Saki's *The Open Window*), fiction to television serial (BBC productions of Sherlock Holmes stories) etc. The process becomes loaded with non-aesthetic reasons when the translation occurs from an art form of high culture to one of low culture. It is undeniable that the move to bring down an inaccessible work to the common reader is an act of literary/aesthetic egalitarianism. On the other hand, we can attribute economic motives of profit to it, if the translation is into the currently popular film or television serial format. It is evident that unlike linguistic translation, intersemiotic translation is fraught with numerous issues that defy simplistic solutions. For instance, the immensely popular television serials of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* helped in popularizing the myths among the common viewers, many of whom might not have access to Sanskrit or scholarly texts. However, it cannot be denied that they were made with an eye on the profits that they were sure to bring in. It cannot also be denied that in retrospect, these serials might have helped in promoting regressive communal politics in a society that was showing inclinations towards right-wing ideology. A comprehensive assessment of the 'translation' effected by the television serials will have to evaluate it as a cultural product placed in its socio-political context. This is what the cultural turn in translation studies is attempting to do.

The translation from fiction to film is motivated by profit motive also, a fact that has to be taken into consideration when this act of translation is analyzed.

**Assignments**

1. Which are the various way in which one art form can be translated into another?
2. Give an example of intersemiotic translation, and analyse the cultural politics of this process.

**Reference**

Sherrif, K. M. "Towards a Theory of Rewriting: Drawing from the Indian Practice". *Translation Today*.  
<http://www.anukriti.net/tt5/article8/page1.asp>

