

Translating Suttas from Pāli to English: Some Reflections

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It is useful to study words in order to understand the sentences, but, like roots and stems, isolated words are mere abstractions devised by grammarians for the analysis of language. Thus, the analysis and the learning of any language should be based on the study of sentences, that is, of the language as it is actually found in use. It is the sentences which are the natural units of discourse and which are the minimum units having precise, fully articulated meaning. For the purposes of study we have to assign approximate meanings to words and list these in vocabularies, but these generalized meanings of words are extremely vague, whereas sentences have exact meanings. In translation one may find close equivalents for sentences, whilst it is often impossible to give close equivalents for words.

In this paper, an attempt shall be made to show that meanings of words change with the passage of time as well as environment. So do place names. In the case of proper names, the original name needs to be used and the new equivalent should, of course, be given in the explanatory note. Words such as ‘Gijjhakūṭa’ have been unnecessarily translated. Such words must be retained as they are as proper names also have their sound associations. Hence ‘Gijjhakūṭa’ is much more than ‘Vulture’s Peak’. Similarly, technical words which do not have their equivalents in a language, particularly, the European languages. The fact that languages such as English originated in a different kind of socio-religious and philosophical milieu, it is not easy to find equivalent words in English for many technical words in Pāli. In such cases, the original word must be retained and the meaning in the context ought to be given in the note. Thus, words such as ‘āsava’, ‘dhamma’ need to be retained in their original form. Interestingly, the problems do not end here. It has been suggested by some scholars that there are quite a few words in Pāli which are impossible to explain or understand. They can only be experienced. Hence, a word such as ‘vipassanā’ can only be understood by practising it. Of course, translator’s own background and feelings come into play while giving meanings to words. It is no doubt that objections are raised against the biased translations by people with colonial or communal backgrounds. The person to whom the task of translation is offered must be an expert not only in the subject of Buddhism, but above all, both the languages: the one from which he/she is translating as well the language to which he/she is translating.

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In Pāli, the general classification of speech is done in four parts: noun (*nāma*), verb (*ākhyāta*), prefix (*upasagga*), and indeclinables (*nipāta*). Pronouns and adjectives are included in the category of nouns. Adjectives are treated as nouns because they are declined as nouns. Conjunctions, prepositions, adverbs, and all other indeclinables are included in the category of indeclinables.

The uninflected form of a Pāli word, without an ending, is called the stem. In dictionaries and vocabularies nouns are usually listed in their stem forms, less often in the form of the nominative singular. Verbs, however, are usually given under the form of the third person singular of the present tense (indicative active). The prefixes, of which there are about twenty, are regarded as a separate part of speech in Pāli. The various verbs, consisting of prefix+root, have all to be learned separately as regards meanings. Although the separate prefixes and roots can be assigned meanings, usually rather broad and vague ones, the meaning of a prefix+root cannot usually be accounted for adequately as simply the product of the two separate meanings. A good many roots are used also without prefixes, but prefixed forms are very much more frequent in Pāli. A number of verbs have two or three prefixes to their roots.

In Pāli all the words are derived from a limited number of roots i.e., all words are analyzable into roots plus suffixes. A root is an element, not further analyzable at the grammatical levels, having a very vague and general meaning. A root does not exist in its pure state except in dictionaries and grammar books. An infinite number of stems (*li×ga*) may be derived from any root by the addition of suffixes and by certain changes to the root itself, for instance by lengthening the vowel, substituting a compound vowel, inserting a nasal, reduplicating the root or contracting a semi-vowel+*a* into the vowel corresponding in place of the semivowel. Each verb has a variety of stems for its different parts (tense, participles etc.), all bearing the same meaning except for the grammatical distinctions of tense. After this derivation of the word stems by the addition of suffixes (*paccaya*) to roots, inflectional endings (*vibhatti*) are added to form actual words (*pada*) as they occur in sentences. Words may be classified as verbs, nouns, prefixes, and indeclinables (*nipāta*). Indeclinable words are those that do not take any inflections (for instance, *evaṃ*).

There are three genders of nouns and adjectives: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Pronouns are not regarded as a separate class of words but as a kind of noun, although their inflections do not entirely coincide with those of nouns. As a rule ‘substantive’ nouns have only one gender each, whereas ‘adjectives’ and pronouns have all three genders according to the nouns with which they ‘agree’ as attribute-words: the inflections of adjectives are the same as those of nouns of the corresponding gender, hence they are not regarded as a separate class of words. In the vocabulary given along with each verse, the abbreviations nom., acc., ins., dat., abl., gen., loc., and voc. are used to designate the cases described above; and sg. and pl. are used for singular and plural. In the case of verbs, the root (*dhātu*) is given with the preceding sign √, and 1.sg., 2.sg., 3.sg., 1.pl., 2.pl., and 3.pl. mean first person singular, second person singular, third person singular, first person plural, second person plural, and third person plural respectively. Various forms of the verb such as gerund, gerundive, infinitive, aorist, optative/potential, imperative, passive, active, intensive, desiderative, causative, indicative, imperfect, perfect, future are indicated. It may be interesting to note that only one gerundive (*ajjitāya*) has been used in the entire text.

*manopubbāṅgamā dhammā manoseṭṭhā manomayā,
manasā ce paduṭṭhena bhāsati vā karoti vā*

tato naṃ dukkhamanveti cakkam va vahato padam [1]

Translation

Mental phenomena (are) preceded by mind, (have) mind as a master, (are) produced by mind. If (one) either speaks or acts with a corrupted mind, then suffering follows him, like the wheel (following) the foot of the bearer (i.e., ox). [1]

Vocabulary

manopubbaṅgamā: *mana* [ntr.] = mind. In cpds. *mana* becomes *mano*. *pubbam* [adv.] = before. *gama* [adj. derived from √gam (to go)] = having gone. *pubbaṅgama* [adj.] = having gone before i.e., preceded. *mano+pubbam+gama* = *manopubbaṅgama* [adj. euphonic sandhi] = mind-preceded, preceded by mind. *manopubbaṅgamā* [masc. nom. pl.] = preceded by mind.

dhammā: *dhamma* [masc.] = mental phenomenon. The word *dhamma* has many meanings and here it is used in the sense of ‘mental phenomenon.’ *dhammā* [nom. pl.] = mental phenomena.

manoseṭṭhā: *mana* [ntr.] = mind. In cpds. *mana* becomes *mano*. *seṭṭha* [adj.] = excellent, best. *mano+seṭṭha* = *manoseṭṭha* [adj.] = (one who has) mind as the best i.e., mind as a master. *manoseṭṭhā* [masc. nom. pl.] = (those who have) mind as a master.

manomayā: *mana* [ntr.] = mind. In cpds. *mana* becomes *mano*. *maya* [adj.] = arising in, produced by. *mano+maya* = *manomaya* [adj.] = (which is) produced by mind. *manomayā* [masc. nom. pl.] = (which are) produced by mind.

manasā: *mana* [ntr.] = mind. *manasā* [ins. sg.] = by mind.

ce [encl.] = if.

paduṭṭhena: *du*—*ha* [adj. pp. of √dus (to become bad)] = spoilt, wicked, malignant, corrupt. *pa* [indec. strengthening pfx. often used to emphasize the intensity of an action] + *paduṭṭha* = *paduṭṭha* [adj.] = (totally) corrupted. *paduṭṭhena* [ntr. ins. sg.] = with (totally) corrupted.

bhāsatī: *bhāsatī* [3. sg. pr. indic. act. of √bhās (to speak)] = speaks. *bhāsatī* is m.c. for *bhāsatī*.

vā [indec. encl.] = or. When repeated: *vā... vā* = either... or.

karoti [3. sg. pr. indic. act. of √kar (to do, to make)] = does.

tato [abl. sg. of pron. base *ta* (it) but used here as an indec. adv.] = thereupon, thereafter, hence, then.

naṃ [masc. acc. sg. of demonstr. pron. *ta* (that)]= him, that one.

dukkhamanveti: *dukkha* [ntr.] = suffering. *dukkhaṃ* [nom. sg.] = suffering. *anveti* [3. sg. pr. indic. act. derived from *anu* (pfx. meaning ‘along, following, to’)+*vi* (to go)] = follows. *dukkhaṃ+anveti* = *dukkhamanveti*.

cakkaṃ: *cakka* [ntr.] = wheel. *cakkaṃ* [nom. sg.] = wheel.

va [indec. encl.] = like.

vahato: *vahanta* [adj. ppr. of *√vah* (to carry, lead, bring)] = bearer. *vahato* [masc. gen. sg.] = of bearer.

padaṃ: *pada* [ntr.] = foot. *padaṃ* [acc. sg.] = foot.

Changing Pāli words into either modern words or largely Sanskrit-based words is unacceptable. E.g. *Tipiṭaka* should remain *Tipiṭaka* instead of being used as *Tripitaka*. Further, there is a need to realize that Pāli is a language now in its own right and hence has its own grammar. Thus, words such as Theravādin which are Sanskrit-based ought not be used in preference to, say, Theravādi.

Meaning of words change with the passage of time as well as environment. Place names particularly change. In the case of proper names, the original name needs to be used and the new equivalent should, of course, be given in the explanatory note.

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Should verse be translated in verse form or prose?

Organizations such as Numata Center, Fagu Shan, and Pali Text Society have not only massive resources at their disposal, they also have well-trained experts available to them world-widely.

One good way of doing a translation would be giving its morphological translation. Give an example of a gāthā from the Dhammapada.

The person to whom the task of translation is offered must be an expert not only in the subject of Buddhism, but above all, both the languages: the one from which he/she is translating as well the language in which he/she is translating.

New issues with words, especially proper names, which may begin with a capital letter. Indian scripts do not have capital letters. Moreover, the style of punctuation etc is also different.

Translation should reflect the aspirations of the target community?

Then there are the questions of the translation being done by competent individuals or by a team/group of competent scholars.

Time limit for the translation of a text or text is also of great importance as with the passage of time meanings of words/terms change and hence gaps between different portions of a text give birth to various kinds of issues.

Longer sentences and compound words: how are they to be translated? Do we use equivalent single sentences and compound words or do we break them up into smaller sentences and words?

Then there is the problem of different editions. Which edition ought to be used?

Transliteration: what kind of equivalent characters does one have? E.g. Gurumukhi does not have half-letters.

Small and capital letters, a challenge when translating into a European language or vice versa.