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UNTRANSLATABILITY: LINGUISTIC BARRIERS IN TRANSLATING IDIOMS, PROVERBS AND CULTURE-SPECIFIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract:

Translation is more than the mechanical act of converting words from one language to another; it is the cultural, emotional and intellectual negotiation of meaning. Especially idioms, proverbs and culture-bound terms carry cultural history and social values that often do not exist in the target language. This creates linguistic and cultural gaps known as untranslatability. This paper examines the concept of untranslatability and the challenges faced while translating idioms, proverbs and culturally loaded expressions with focused examples from English–Hindi and English–Marathi language pairs. It further discusses existing translation strategies and argues that complete equivalence is often impossible; translators must act as cultural mediators who balance meaning, flavour and readability.

Keywords: *untranslatability, idioms, kinship, foreignization.*

Introduction:

Translation plays a crucial role in communication across cultures, yet it is one of the most complex linguistic tasks. A translator is expected to retain the semantics, style, emotional tone, and cultural resonance of the original text. However, not all linguistic elements can be perfectly transferred across languages. When an expression cannot be rendered fully in another language without distortion or loss, it becomes untranslatable. Idioms, proverbs and culture-specific expressions are the strongest examples of such challenges. As Catford states, untranslatability occurs when "the target language lacks relevant situational features for the source text" (94). In multilingual societies like India, the issue becomes even more significant because languages differ not only in vocabulary, but in worldview, cultural history and social values.

Translation is more than the mechanical shifting of words between languages; it is a delicate negotiation of culture, meaning, ideology and expression. When a translator brings a text from one linguistic world into another, they are not merely converting vocabulary but transferring history, emotions, humour and cultural memory. Certain expressions like idioms, proverbs and culturally rooted terms carry cultural and social meanings that do not exist in equal forms in the target language. This phenomenon creates what scholars call "untranslatability," a point where a term, phrase or expression cannot be rendered fully without loss, distortion, or major reinterpretation. Because languages evolve within distinct cultural contexts, shared experiences and worldviews, certain expressions resist direct transfer. In multilingual societies such as India, where languages differ widely in structure and cultural frameworks, untranslatability becomes particularly visible. English, Hindi and Marathi provide clear examples of cultural and semantic gaps that complicate translation and challenge the idea that languages can be perfectly equivalent.

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The concept of untranslatability has long been discussed in translation studies. According to J. C. Catford, untranslatability occurs when "the target language lacks relevant situational features" required to carry the meaning of the source language (94). Untranslatability can be linguistic, where no lexical or grammatical equivalent exists or cultural, where meaning depends on cultural knowledge unfamiliar to readers of the target language. A famous example of linguistic untranslatability is the German word Schadenfreude, which has no single-word English equivalent and must be explained as "pleasure taken in someone else's misfortune." Cultural untranslatability can be seen in Indian words like "जुगाड़" or "जुगाड" in Marathi, which describe an innovative, improvised solution using limited resources. English can only express this idea with lengthy explanation, but even that loses the compact creativity and cultural tone of the original word. Therefore, untranslatability emerges not because languages are weak, but because they are shaped by distinct cultural imaginations.

Idioms offer one of the strongest examples of untranslatability. An idiom is a fixed expression whose meaning cannot be understood literally from the words that compose it. When translated literally, idioms often sound absurd, meaningless, or incorrect. For example, the English idiom "kick the bucket," meaning "to die," becomes meaningless in Hindi if translated word for word as "बाल्टी को लात मारना." To convey the meaning, the translator must simply write "मर जाना." Similarly, the Hindi idiom "खिसियानी बिल्ली खंभा नोचे" literally means "the embarrassed cat scratches the pole," which makes little sense in English. The intended meaning is that frustrated or insecure people overreact. The closest English equivalent might be "A guilty mind is always suspicious" or "Frustrated people show unnecessary anger," but the visual humour and sarcasm of a cat scratching remain lost. The same challenge appears in English–Marathi translation. The Marathi saying "आंधळा मागतो एक डोळा, देव देतो दोन" literally means "A blind man asks for one eye; God gives two." The idea is that sometimes one receives more than expected. English has no identical expression, so translators usually substitute something weak like "Ask and you shall receive." The meaning may survive, but the cultural flavour, poetic imagery and emotional impact disappear.

Proverbs present an even deeper challenge than idioms because proverbs are cultural capsules. They carry folk wisdom, rural knowledge, religious beliefs and collective experience. They are not just linguistic expressions but social philosophies. When a proverb is translated across cultures, the translator must preserve meaning, tone, metaphor, conciseness and moral value. For instance, the English proverb "Once bitten, twice shy" has a Hindi equivalent: "दूध का जला छाछ भी फूँक कर पीता है।" While the meanings align, the imagery changes dramatically. The Hindi version uses references to milk and buttermilk, rooted in Indian culinary and rural culture, while the English version expresses the same idea more generally. Another English proverb, "A stitch in time saves nine," has no direct Hindi equivalent. Translators sometimes paraphrase it as "समय पर किया गया काम नुकसान से बचाता है," which conveys the idea but lacks poetic sharpness. Proverbs also resist literal translation in Marathi. The Marathi saying "घरचा वाघ, बाहेर मात्र वाघ्या" might be translated as "Tiger at home, coward outside." The closest English version is "Lion at home, mouse abroad." While the intended meaning survives, the rhythm, humour and social tone of the Marathi original do not.

Culture-specific expressions are the strongest form of untranslatability because they depend on cultural memory rather than vocabulary. Indian languages, for example, include words that reflect religion, festivals, food, rituals, kinship systems and social behaviour.

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These cannot be replaced with single words in English. Words like *prasad, rangoli, karva chauth, saptapadi, haldi kumkum,* or Marathi terms like उपवास, ओतीव, हरभरा represent cultural experiences rather than vocabulary. Translating prasad as "sweet offering made to God" is factually correct but emotionally lifeless, because the emotional connection between devotion and food has no direct equivalent in Western culture. Kinship terminology is another major example. Hindi and Marathi contain precise kinship terms such as "मामा," "काका," "मौसी," "आत्या," indicating exact familial relationships. English collapses all of them into "uncle" and "aunt," causing cultural flattening and the loss of relational meaning. When translating personal narratives, folklore or family-based literature, this lack of equivalence affects the emotional authenticity of the text.

Mythological references demonstrate cultural untranslatability even further. Expressions such as "कृष्ण की माखन चोरी," "रामराज्य," or Marathi references to Sant Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar cannot be translated without explanation. Literal translation breaks mythical significance, while paraphrasing lengthens the text and weakens emotional impact. This supports Susan Bassnett's argument that "language is the heart of culture" (23), meaning that one cannot extract words from the cultural roots that give them meaning. Therefore, the translator must often decide between fidelity to cultural identity and readability for foreign audiences.

Real-world examples reveal how untranslatability affects interpretation. When Hindi idioms such as "नक्की डाव खेळना" are translated literally into English as "play a certain trick," the meaning becomes vague and humourless. A reader unfamiliar with the cultural intention behind "clever deception" misses the emotional tone. Similarly, English metaphors like "Every cloud has a silver lining" must be paraphrased in Marathi as "प्रत्येक गोष्टीत काहीतरी चांगलं असतं," which conveys meaning but loses poetic resonance. Even straightforward proverbs fail in literal translation. The Hindi saying "घर की मुर्गी दाल बराबर" literally means "The chicken at home is equal to lentils," which sounds strange to English readers. Its intended meaning people do not value what they already have, is loosely captured by the English phrase "Familiarity breeds contempt," but the humorous food-based imagery is gone.

These examples show that equivalence is often impossible. When an idiom or proverb is removed from its cultural soil, it loses its emotional nutrients. Jacques Derrida notes that "translation is always a form of transformation" (181), suggesting that perfect reproduction is a myth. Instead, translators must make creative choices. Eugene Nida's theory of "dynamic equivalence" argues that the translator's task is not to reproduce the exact words but to produce the same effect on the target reader (Nida 159). Yet achieving this balance is extremely complex. Translators must choose between domestication, where the text becomes familiar to the target audience and foreignization, where cultural flavour is preserved even if unfamiliar to readers. Lawrence Venuti supports foreignization, arguing that translations should reveal the cultural identity of the original rather than hide it under linguistic domestication. However, for some audiences such as children, beginners or casual readers domesticated translations are easier to understand.

To deal with untranslatability, translators adopt different strategies. Paraphrasing is the most common, where the translator explains meaning instead of offering a literal translation. This preserves sense but weakens rhythm and brevity. Cultural substitution replaces a proverb or idiom with an equivalent expression in the target language. Borrowing or transliteration keeps the original word, assuming readers can understand it from context or footnotes. Borrowing has helped many Indian words enter

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English dictionaries, such as "*karma*," "*yoga*," "*saree*," "*raga*," and "*chai*." Translators sometimes use footnotes to keep cultural authenticity while adding brief explanations. Each method has benefits and drawbacks, depending on the purpose of translation, audience, and genre.

A key finding is that untranslatability does not mean complete failure. Rather, it highlights the depth of linguistic diversity. It proves that translation is not only mechanical but interpretive and cultural. Literal translations of idioms and proverbs often produce confusion or absurdity, showing that languages combine history, humour and shared memory in unique ways. English, Hindi and Marathi examples demonstrate that even when the meaning can be transferred, emotional tone, imagery, rhythm and metaphorical richness often change. Therefore, the translator becomes a cultural mediator who balances fidelity and creativity, meaning and readability, brevity and clarity.

In conclusion, untranslatability shows that language is inseparable from culture. Idioms, proverbs and culture-specific expressions resist direct translation because they carry history, symbolism and social meaning that do not exist in equal form in other languages. While translators attempt to reproduce meaning through paraphrasing, cultural substitution, borrowing and explanation, complete equivalence remains impossible. Instead of seeing untranslatability as a limitation, we may view it as proof of cultural richness. Each language contains unique ways of understanding life, society, humour and emotion. Translation therefore becomes a bridge, not to make cultures identical, but to help them meet in the middle. Through this process, the translator becomes not just a converter of words, but a negotiator of cultures.

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