

TRANSLATING CHILDREN'S BOOKS: THE CHALLENGES

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I have been translating children's books for several decades now. It began with a desire to translate some of Gijubhai's children's stories into English. While my sisters and I heard Gijubhai's stories from our aunts, older cousins and some of the teachers at Dakshinamurti Balmandir, this was mainly in the vacations when we visited Bhavnagar. We grew up outside Gujarat and studied in English medium schools, and probably did not actually read the printed stories. But the characters and the refrains in the stories became comfortingly familiar and stayed with us as we grew. They even created an almost secret society of family members and quoting lines from Gijubhai as a sort of family password when we met our cousins (*ringana laoo be chaar? Lyo ne bhai dus baar!*) created the bonds nurtured by the words of our grandfather.

It was only later, when I had completed my studies and had developed an interest in children's literature, that I acquired the set of *Gijubhaini Balvaarta* and read these. It was then that I found that it was not so much the stories, which were familiar as orally narrated tales, but the style and the nuances of the language that fascinated me. I have always been interested in language and have enjoyed playing with words, primarily in English which I was most comfortable with. In Gijubhai's stories I was delighted with the joyful flow of words, the clever use of words and rhyme. Almost subconsciously, as I read the Gujarati, my mind was transforming all this into English. Thus began my bilingual journey with Gijubhai's tales. I would, whenever I could, translate a story or two, more as a pleasurable exercise for myself, than anything else.

A decade or so went by. Then in the 1990s my friend Meena Raghunathan and I took on the editorship of Roller Coaster, the children's supplement of the Ahmedabad edition of the Indian Express. To populate the 8 pages every week with an interesting variety of meaningful reading matter for children was a challenge. This also meant that between the two of us, we had to write several of the columns ourselves. It was at then that I remembered my sporadic translations of Gijubhai's stories. We decided to have a feature called Tales From Grandfather, and every week we carried one story by Gijubhai, translated by me. It was perhaps the first time that these stories were widely circulated in English, to a generation of children who had perhaps not even heard of Gijubhai. For me it was indeed a roller coaster ride! Having a story translated and ready for publication each week (along with another full-time job and two young children) meant that the first draft was the last. The process was more intuitive than incisive, but I felt that it adequately captured the spirit of the narrative. With time, and more translations, I began to look more closely at the individual elements that went into the whole exercise.

Around the same time I submitted a translation (I called it Retelling) of one of Gijubhai's stories (itself based on a folk tale) to the children's book publishers Tulika Books. The story was published as a book *All Free*. That was in turn translated into many Indian languages. This link with Tulika also started my association with Tulika as a translator for their books. In this case I was translating from English to Gujarati; the opposite from the Gijubhai translations from Gujarati to English. This process led to many new learnings.

Some of the challenges and responses were shared by me at a discussion at a literature festival in 2019.

Here are some excerpts:

Q: What are the challenges you face while translating from one language to another?

A: This is a difficult question especially in current times when, even ‘politically correct’ terms can be misused and misinterpreted. Several years ago, this was a challenge I faced with stories in Gujarati by Gijubhai Badheka. Written over a hundred years ago the stories use terms which were commonly used then (colloquial terms for barber, waste picker, iron monger etc. which were indicative more of profession than of caste, but not considered derogatory as they may be today.) The animal tales gave the animals their commonly associated attributes (crafty jackal, stubborn mule, lazy bear etc.) which again today may be objectionable to some groups. While translating, I found that in trying to make the vocabulary ‘politically correct’, and in trying to avoid anthropomorphism, the folk tales lost their punch and special flavour. I still have not found the appropriate ‘middle path’.

Read more: [Classic children’s authors under the lens](#), [Nireekshak article](#)

We grew up on a mixed diet of Gijubhai’s stories and the popular English authors of the day, as well as classic fairy tales. Enid Blyton with Noddy and Golliwog, scones and English tea, and fairy tales with princesses and ogres, these were all part of our childhood reading. These provided the fare for fantasy (imagine having hair like Rapunzel!) and aspirations (dreams of going to a boarding school like Mallory Towers); they only fired our imagination, and led us to dream about such picnics and adventures.

Gijubhai’s stories were based on folk tales which had been passed down the ages, usually orally. Generally, folktales spoke of things that could not be spoken of, often violating ordinary decencies...but which were incidental to the stories. Each teller laced his or her stories with a unique brand of humour and drama and every family had their own favourite storytellers.

Gijubhai’s stories talked about caste names naturally and openly; and as children we only associated these with the characters in the story, rather than a social construct. I think we grew up with less prejudices, and more openness to diversity, and tolerance for differences.

The truth is that these distinctions and debates are adult creations. Children are children the world over — curious, accepting, and very discerning in their own way. While we ponder and pontificate over the hows, whys and whats of reading, they read, making their own judgements. And as long as we ensure that they want to read, and enjoy what they read we believe we are on the right track.

Q: How do translate the folk tales such as your grandfather’s which are rich in sing-song rhythms and cadences?

A: Text which is in rhyme and verse is a challenge. It is important to get the rhythm and beat in the translated language, while retaining that of the original.

[Beekan Sasli in Gujarati and *The Hare Scare* in English.](#)

Sound effects are important in picture books especially for younger children. It is a challenge, (but great fun!) to find the right vernacular ones for typically English words like Moo Moo, Rumble rumble, tickle tickle, tee hee, splat, splish-splish, pitter-patter, etc.

While there are challenges, Indian languages also offer wonderful opportunities!

Most Indian languages have a rich vocabulary that communicates the nuances of taste, sounds, textures and food. These add a special flavour to the translation.

We also have specific words for the whole gamut of family relationships---grandmother/grandfather, uncles/aunts, siblings and all. Use of the vernacular words for these helps to make the characters more relatable.

Indian languages are also rich in Sound Symbolism, or 'words that sound like what they mean' or those that mimic the sound they represent in the world outside language. There is a wide range in Indian languages.

Words that capture the subtleties of flavours: *toorū, tamtam*.

Words that are difficult to capture in English *chhmmm. Ma mane chhmmm vadu.*

Chhabaak!

Movement—*tabdaak tabdaak* rather than the sedate clip clop or gallop.

How to translate the word 'spirit' to capture the nuance of temperament.

Mijaaj rather than *swabhav*.

Clumsy *Thaanthi*

As a translator working in both directions Gujarati>>English and English>>Gujarati there is a constant enrichment of my own vocabulary as I look for the best word, rather than the literal translation of the word, to most faithfully communicate the spirit and nuance of the sentence.

I tried to articulate some of the other challenges in an exchange with Tulika publishers.

Q: What points do you keep in mind when translating?

A: That it need not be a literal translation, but that the rhythm, flow and sense of the original is retained. That both the original and the translated text run smoothly when read aloud. That I enjoy the process.

Q: What are the challenges in translating children's picture books?

A: As the picture books have few words, it is important to get the right words that capture the essence of the original words. As pictures are equally important (or more) the text needs to support and supplement the visuals. Often the first drafts have only text. One may need to tweak the text after the pictures and lay out are set.

Occasionally the text is not very inspiring and the translation becomes a bit forced. I always request to see the text before I commit to the assignment. I personally try to avoid taking on those where the text does not easily and joyfully flow around in my head.

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Q: There are some internal assumptions and biases that a language has which are evident in its words. For example, some languages have only (what is considered today) offensive or politically incorrect words that are traditionally expressed in a certain way — especially with respect to caste and gender. The alternative or the ‘correct’ word is archaic which cannot be used since it beats the purpose of talking about complex issues to children in a relatable manner. How do you tide over this?

A: This is a difficult one especially in current times when, even ‘politically correct’ terms can be misused and misinterpreted. Several years ago, this was a challenge I faced with stories in Gujarati by my grandfather Gijubhai Badheka. Written over a hundred years ago the stories use terms which were commonly used then (colloquial terms for barber, waste picker, iron monger etc. which were indicative of caste, but not considered derogatory.) The animal tales gave the animals their commonly associated attributes (crafty jackal, stubborn mule, lazy bear etc.) While translating, I found that in trying to make the vocabulary politically correct, and in trying to avoid anthropomorphism, the folk tales lost their punch and special flavour. I still have not found the appropriate ‘middle path’.

Q: Continuing the same thread, the concept of gender is steeped in some languages. How do you approach translations to both gendered and non-gendered languages? For example, the word for ‘human’ in Hindi is ‘maanav’ which by default references the male gender. This is an actual problem we faced.

A: Some languages like Gujarati also have the third gender (it). Sometimes this takes care of the issue. However one still needs to be sensitive in this area.

Q: How far will you bend the rules to ensure that a translation carries the spirit of the original?

A: Not sure what rules. I would try to stay with the basic construct, flow and intent of the original. Often the way a sentence is constructed in English does not work in the translated language. Following the same structure in translation becomes a challenge especially in bilingual books where both language text is on the same page. I try to go with a construction that flows neatly rather than stick to the original. A recent example is the title *I’m Going to the Zoo* which sounded very stilted in Gujarati when rendered in the same order. I tried *Zoo Jovaa Chaali Hun (Zoo Dekhne Chali Main)*.

A good translation or translator is able to take liberties in a creative way, without seeming to have taken liberties.

Q: When translating common everyday words, how much English—in the target language—is too much English? For example, words like ‘sorry’, ‘thank you’, ‘time’, ‘gift’ in the target language. Some people think that when the correct word in the target language is used, it creates a distance between the text and the reader. Do you agree? Why or why not?

A: Given the exposure of most children today to English words (through a variety of mass media and social media) it is inevitable that commonly-used English words flow more comfortably than a literal or literary translation. In Gujarati for instance, even the daily vernacular newspapers have a liberal sprinkling of 'Gujlish', and many words have become a part of the daily-use language. Most of the younger generation of parents do not even know the 'proper' Gujarati words for many commonly-used terms. I feel that rather than becoming pedantic, the translation should reflect the current usage so that the story is enjoyed, rather than becoming a textbook lesson.

Q: Do you consciously try to introduce new vocabulary in each translation, while keeping most of the text familiar?

A: The introduction of new vocabulary is not so much a conscious act, as an outcome of organic evolution while working on the text. In exploring the most appropriate words to communicate the original text, there is always the possibility of new words fitting in.

An interesting challenge was in finding an appropriate Gujarati term for the English word Clumsy, and other related words like Butterfingers, Awkward, Messy etc. The literal translations did not work for the text. I finally used a colloquial term *thanthi* that did not appear in any dictionary, but was used in a number of families to denote exactly what the story meant to.

Q: Finally, what makes a good translation?

A: A good translation needs to carry the meaning and the tone of the original text, while creatively using the vocabulary and nuances of the language into which it is translated. It should be culturally and linguistically appropriate to the target audience (in this case, children at different age levels).

A translation should not sound like one. Reading it as a stand-alone text should come naturally to the reader, and only the translator should be the one to compare versions.

