



Understanding the Untranslatable

A diachronic study of subtitles in Indian (Marathi language) Cinema

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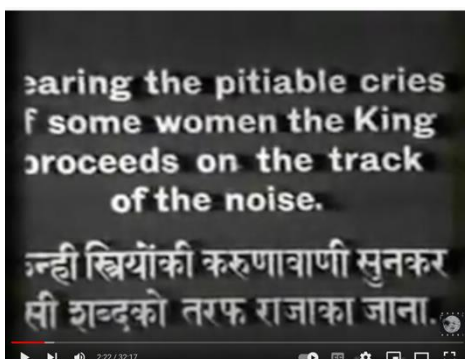
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This paper presents an overview of the “Untranslatable” in subtitling. The “untranslatable” in any translated genre is an omnipresent and has been explored over the centuries right from the myriad translations of the Bible all the way to the CAT (computer aided translations) forms of the current industry. In the field of cinema and specifically of intercultural and interlingual mobility of audio-visual documents, subtitling is an act of transmission that carries the weight of this mobility. I would therefore like to look into the notion of untranslatable with respect to this domain. My experience with subtitling Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati and Konkani films in English or French has helped me understand that the “untranslatable” in Indian regional cinema is a child of many parents.

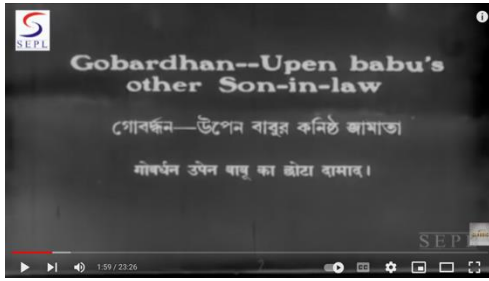
“Meaning” in cinema is a multi-layered entity. It is an amalgam of the spoken, the audible and the visual. In the process of subtitling, one is often hard put to transmit this *amalgam* and is forced to make a choice to prioritise one of its composite elements. The “untranslatable” in this case finds its origin in a multiplicity of factors such as the inherent multilingualism in Indian cinema, the gestural codes connected to sociocultural specificities, dialectic variations, differences in audio-visual conditioning of the primary viewer (Indian) and the secondary viewer (non-Indian), etc.

In order to better understand the nature, the causes and impact of the “untranslatable” it is important to look at its presence and its evolution over a certain period of time, that spans at least a few decades. For the purpose of this paper, we will look at subtitles of films from the 1930s to the 2000s.



It is evident that, in India, right from the era of silent films and intertitles, a multilingual treatment was integrated into the viewing process. This was due to factors such as the linguistic diversity of the public but also others such as the colonial presence, financial and sociocultural patronage by the British patrons and/or English-speaking communities such as the Parsis. The first Indian silent films were shown in Mumbai in 1912-13.

The viewers being from various linguistic backgrounds, the intertitle plates right from the very first films of the



Intertitle frame from “Jamaibabu” by Kalipada Das

Indian subcontinent were often bilingual as seen in Phalke’s Raja Harishchandra, 1913. One of the few surviving Bengali language films “Jamaibabu” by Kalipada Das, 1931 has an example of trilingual intertitle plates. The content transmitted via these intertitles was of a purely informative nature required for the narrative to advance in the film and was in no way equipped to help or improve sociocultural understanding

of the film. A cursory study of the intertitles of about 6 silent films¹ brings out clearly the fact that there was no clear policy or uniform treatment that was followed regarding the content, the format or even the positioning of intertitles. Some films had intertitles in one language, some in two and some in a maximum of three languages on the same plate. Hence one might easily infer that before the arrival of the talkies, Indian cinema was not segregated by language².

After the arrival of the talkies, the characters spoke a single language. However, it did not take long for film makers such as Phalke to use the newly developed dubbing technology to make films in more than one language. This though was possible only for rich production companies who could afford these new processes.

Therefore, if we consider the language-oriented transition of Indian cinema it began with a multilingual access in the era of Silent cinema, became unilingual for a short patch when the talkies arrived on the scene and then had to wait a decade or so before the subtitling techniques gave bilingual access to cinema and became rampantly used to export cinema from one language-specific audience to another.

The Marathi film *Sant Tukaram* was the very first to be invited to participate in an international film festival³. The Venice Biennale of 1937. This is the point at which the story of subtitling began. In this paper we will look at films subtitled over some decades and observe the evolution of this technique in order to identify the *untranslatable* which is the subject of this paper.

In order to conform to the need for uniformity of corpus, I have chosen to look at films from a single regional language, Marathi, the language of the state of Maharashtra and that of Mumbai, the birthplace of cinema in India.

The table below shows a list of iconic films from 8 decades of Marathi cinema, beginning with Sant Tukaram, the first ever Indian film to be invited to an international festival and ending with Elizabeth Ekadashi, an extraordinary multi-awarded masterpiece.

Time Line	Film and time code	Frame time	Words OL	Words SL	Subtitle Analysis	Herein lies the “untranslatable”
1930	Saint Tukaram 30:15-30:25	10	15	10	a. Rampant use of calques Mangalai	1. to avoid translating a notion that would require massive paraphrasing or pre-initiated audience.

¹ Shri Pundalik, Tome 1912, *Shree Krishna Janma*, D G Phalke 1918, *Behula* by J F Madan 1921, *Shiraz* by F Osten 1928, *Marthanda Verma*, P V Rao 1933, *Jamaibabu*, K Das 1931.

² Roychoudhary A, Sands of time, Part I: Forgotten Stars of Silent Cinema in India, Outlook 12th December 2021

³ Chabria S, *Light of Asia Indian Cinema 1912-1934*, Niyogy Books, 2013

					b. Extensive literal translation <i>Tatastha te dhayana</i>	2. connotative meanings philosophical content of dialogues
1940	Saint Dnyaneshwar 00:37-00:44	7 secs	12	12	a. Amalgam of calque Sanyasi b. literal translation purification c. Historical information: father's failure in abstinence making children "impure fruit of sinful contact"	1. lack of exact equivalence, need for paraphrasing 2. Religious purification may be understood by inference 3. Complete hole in the narrative
1950	Shyamchi Aai 00:51- 00:54	4 secs	9	5	a. All the above b. Ellipse used to avoid repetition and to deal with the verbose nature of the script	1. Lack of equivalences and lack of translating skill 2. Inefficient compaction of sentences leading to lack of continuity and non-sense.
1960	Jagachya Pathivar 00:00-00:06	4 secs	7	6	a. Metaphors containing mythological references b. Insults referencing demonic cults	1. Lack of exact equivalences or the knowledge thereof leading to a choice of unnecessary intensification to replace demonic reference leading to mis-translation.
1970	Simhasan 00:05-00:10	6 secs	14	13	a. References to specific political scandals of the moment b. Years associated with a particular political party's regime are counted off rapidly	1. Literal translations that do not transmit any meaning or the importance of the event to the scenario. 2. Numbers in numerical format appear on screen rapidly with no context leading to non-sense.
1980	Umbartha 21:04-21:10	6 secs	17	18	a. Highly urbanised language, interspersed with English terms and expressions b. Hypocrisy of affluent educated class wherein the matriarch works for women's rights outside the home and regularly suppresses all such ideas inside the home comes through in the form of a series of editing cuts showing the relative positioning and seated and standing positions of the various characters concerned.	1. lack of mechanism to show multilingual dialogue as English is not considered a foreign language, leading to lack of sociocultural aspect of the transmission. 2. Sociocultural codes and norms being dissimilar, meaning situated in the non-verbal that is intuitively conveyed to an initiated or Indian audience remains uncommunicated.
1990	Shubhamangal Savadhan 03:02-03:04	3 secs	10	8	a. Metaphorical references to customs and rites associated with the first pregnancy of a young married girl b. Power dynamics between three categories of individuals: people related by blood, by marriage and by service (loyal family retainer) are understood only due to use of relational epithets such as "bai" that denotes the difference between Aunt and elderly maidservant who is also addressed as Aunt.	1. Literal translations leading to complete misleading and incomprehension. Culinary traditions related to feminine body states and associated social processes remain untransmitted. 2. Inability to show these dynamics in the subtitles leads to at best, a lowering of the impact of the scenario and at worst, complete incomprehension.
2000	Shwaas 6:44-6:49	5 secs	28	19	a. Deep seated association of language and sociocultural	1. The universality of the choices and preferences

					conditioning is evident in the assumption of preferences of the child, his reactions to universal children's favourites such as chocolate, etc.	allows the ellipsis of a certain number of elements from the subtitle in order to facilitate spatiotemporal comprehension. The ratio of number of words to seconds is very high, reduction of number of words in SL is possible due to transparency of the sociocultural context, but loss of nuance and humour is equally evident.
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I have selected an iconic film from each decade and have observed an average frame from each film. The elements studied are of two types; those associated with the spatiotemporal aspect and those associated with the lingua-cultural aspect.

Elements studied under the spatiotemporal aspect:

1. Frame time in seconds
2. Number of words spoken enunciated in the given frame duration in the original language (OL)
3. Number of words seen in the corresponding subtitle in Subtitle Language (SL)

Elements studied under the lingua-cultural aspect:

1. Analysis of subtitles
2. Source/Root/Reason behind the "untranslatable"

So essentially from this table it seems evident that the untranslatable stems from a variety of factors such as the verbal, the non-verbal, the sociocultural conditioning visually transmitted to the first-language/original culture viewer and environmental elements such as visual and audible metareferences familiar to the initiated viewer. The first two factors are an issue for all viewers of the subtitled film, irrespective of their cultural initiation to the original environment of the film. However, the two latter factors act as distancers to a culturally distant public or the uninitiated viewer as they are unable to interpret the visual and audible clues due to unfamiliarity with the original culture of the film.

From the lingua-cultural aspect, it is also visible that most choices that have resulted in an "untranslatable" in the previous decades are ethnocentric choices, with little or no regard for the needs of the secondary or uninitiated viewer. However, as we come towards the end of nineties, we see a decided shift towards ellipses pertaining to cultural information. There is a decided shift towards anthropocentric choices where it is assumed that cultural distances have lessened and therefore comprehension is possible without any bridging measures. In the early years of Indian cinema travelling to festivals one observes that the same English language subtitles used for Primary viewers, that is Indian viewers belonging to varied linguistic backgrounds but sharing a common historical and cultural ethos are circulated for secondary or foreign audiences. But in the latter part of the century more and more films start circulating in foreign film festivals, film makers start preparing for a foreign audience in advance and subtitles created for films are more anthropocentric, less culturally embedded in original ethos. There is more

use of equivalences and ellipses to make the subs accessible rather than the rampant use of calques to safeguard authenticity. There is more attention to transmission of cultural nuance through explicatory structures wherever possible. These latter subtitles are now used for primary Indian audiences as well and they seem to go down well with cross regional audiences also because the nature of the Indian viewer too has changed. Increase in urbanisation, a shift away from traditional lifestyles, increased anglicisation of professional and cultural domains resulting in the creation of an Anglo “elite” tribe, leading to a reduction in shared sensitivity to and or experiential knowledge of cultural ethos are some of the reasons that seem to explain this trend. A shift towards choices that would assume international cultural initiation: a fallacy that is the first mentioned in Barna’s miscommunication studies in intercultural communication⁴.

From the perspective of the spatiotemporal aspect, there is certainly an increase in speed of dialogue delivery (more words per second enunciated) in the latter part of the century. This could be attributed to massive industrialisation and the presence of mechanical and electronic sound in the environment, the increase in the movement and rapidity of circulation due to modern travel modes, a generic increase in the speed at which life is lived. Along with this the increased value attributed to qualities like exuberance, excess, extroverted behaviour, packing more into less time and space, visibility, etc. A third aspect is also the evolution of editing techniques with faster and shorter cuts, quicker changes, and montage trends that brought in machine gun cuts etc.

All of this is portrayed in the immense increase in words per second seen in the frames: From a ten second frame containing spoken 15 words that are transmitted via a subtitle of 10 words in 1936... to a 4 second frame containing 27 words transmitted via a subtitle of 14 words.

So now what we are looking at is not just the untranslatable but also the untranslated which is a result of all these above.

It is just as clear, that the “untranslatable” is not limited to a fixed set of elements. It keeps changing with the changing parameters associated with technical aspects of film making, capacities and propensities of the primary and secondary viewers as well as lingua-cultural evolution of the source society.

Another huge contributor to the “untranslatable” in Indian film subtitling is the Songs that are an integral part of the film narrative. They are not decorative pieces or background music but intrinsic to understanding the basic narrative, moving it along, bridging editing gaps or providing psychological explanations, etc. A complete lack of attention to optimal transmission of songs in cinema is another source of “untranslatable”.

All of this reflection about the untranslatable in Indian cinema subtitles is of course part of a larger reflection upon loss in subtitling and this brings us to the current scenario which is probably one of the direst in history. Today, apart from a few film makers who are extremely insistent about the impact of subtitles about the transmission of their works on the international stage, most get their films subbed in English locally. These then

⁴ Barna, LaRay M, *Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication* in Bennett, M. *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication*, 1998.

go “Around the world in 80 festivals” and are subbed again on arrival locally most of the time using software that work off the English subtitles. So, they are subbed from the original language towards English by a human who hopefully has an expertise in both languages. However, all further versions of the subtitles in the various languages, are often supervised by an “expert” who has no access to the original language and is only capable of enhancing the document in the target language. So once again, multiple layers of transmission lead to multiple layers of loss.

The impact on cinematic transmission and understanding is multi-fold. The access to all kinds of sociocultural information via global media and multiple sharing platforms, there is a generic assumption of knowledge about the “other”. This is mostly in vicarious form except for those who actually travel and share life experiences. However, it seems to bring a false sense of closeness and understanding on a superficial level. Nuance and subtleties are however completely opaque. But contrary to the 1930’s when a viewer of Saint Tukaram at the Venice Biennale was aware that he was missing something as he could not understand the calqued Indian words of the subtitles, the viewers of today are totally unaware of loss in transmission.

We began this study by observing the language-specific evolution of cinema in India in the first half of the 20th century as cinema used language first in the form of intertitles, then uniquely as audible dialogue and finally in both audible and visible form with the arrival of subtitling technology in the 1930s. We then proceeded to establish an observation grid with a certain number of criteria pertinent to spatiotemporal and sociocultural elements embedded in the film. The observations and inferences drawn on the basis of this study led us to understand the ways in which changes in speed of speech and quantum of non-linguistic information inserted into a frame have had an impact on the transmissivity of subtitles and intercultural understanding of the audio-visual document.

Key Words: intertitles, cinema, untranslatable, subtitles, ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism, spatiotemporal elements, lingua-cultural loss, history of Indian cinema, evolution of subtitles

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