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## Lost and Found in Translation: Readers as Translators

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**Abstract.** In this cosmopolitan era where the distance between different ethnicities and races has collapsed, we find a new form of literature which employs code-switching, examples being diaspora literature. An important notion to consider with regards to bilingual literature is to see what effect it has on the readers because, in this context, the readers become the translators. By leaning on linguistic and sociolinguistic theories about codeswitching as well new findings in translation studies, this study intends to investigate what is lost and found during reading texts like *Meatless Days* by Sara Suleri and *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie when the readers become the translators. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and a thematic analysis was carried out on the qualitative data which found that readers translated code-switching along themes of legitimacy, identity and resistance to western knowledge. It was determined that when readers become translators, they have an unprecedented amount of power to interpret texts.

**Keywords.** Code-switching, Translation, Power, Cultural Conflict, Identity, Resistance

### 1. Introduction

In this new era where distance between people and nations has been minimised, a new concept of cosmopolitanism has arrived wherein an individual begins to view themselves as a part of the world, viewing them as a global citizen who is in a circle of belonging that transcends limited bonds of kinship and nationhood. However, it is hard for the human mind to conceptualise a global world, thus it is through literature that we can imagine such a world. Goethe linked his concept of world literature to his own relationships with international authors; he saw world literature as a dynamic process of literary exchange, discourse and traffic through

translations (Fritz, 1949). An example of world literature is diaspora literature written in English which is also an example of bilingualism in literature.

The use of code-switching in novels is an interesting narrative feature because it allows for bilingual readers to act as translators and excludes monolingual readers at the same time. As it has been established, the focus in translation studies has changed from “how to teach translation?” and “how can translation be studied?” to evaluating the text by seeing it as embedded in a network of both the source and target cultural signs (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). When we take this into consideration, we can see that translation is not a formulaic activity which occurs in a vacuum and in fact there are many stakeholders which have an impact on the process of translation, making it more dynamic. In light of this view, this study attempts to decipher what would be gained—or lost—in translation if the readers acted as translators.

## **2. Literature Review**

Bilingualism in text is not an oft researched topic; code-switching in spoken context has now been studied extensively and it is better understood at the conversational and grammatical level, however written code-switching is not as well documented. Recently, interest in written code-switching has been revitalised and it is being researched however this research is limited to specific periods, such as the classical period, where large bodies of work have been found. Linguistically, it has been found that there is a large overlap between how code-switching functions in texts as well as in spoken contexts (Gardner-Chloros & Weston, 2015). Similarly, other works have been produced which study code-switching in a specific field of linguistics known as bilingual studies. In addition, there have also been some interesting findings in translation studies with relation to power and ideology. My assertions are based on the discoveries which have occurred in these two, disparate fields.

The work of Callahan (2004) is example of studies done on written code-switching, her work pays attention to a group of thirty written works, including novels, short stories and poems. This study formulated a grammatical system according to the Matrix Language Framework wherein three possibilities of bilingualism can exist; a matrix language—the main language—with an embedded language, islands of matrix language, and lastly islands of embedded language. This study shows us the ways in which two languages can be used in texts grammatically, thusly novels or short stories which utilise code-switching largely use these three configurations. In order to further understand the function of code-switching in texts we need to reference another study by Bhatt and Bolonyai (2011).

Bhatt and Bolonyai (2011) conducted an empirical study to give us a socio-linguistic framework which helps to explain how code-switching functions in conversations. They have found five principles which guide conversational code-switching; faith, power, solidarity, face, and perspective; these are basically the answer to the question, “why do people code-switch?” While this study was technically on conversational code-switching, this study is still important because these principles can be applied to written code-switching as well. This is due to the fact that these principles are all based on the overarching value of optimization, thus an author will rely on these five principles when conducting code-switching in writing in order to optimise their texts.

Lazarte (2021) investigated the reasons why code-switching occurs in a pedagogical setting. They found that instructors chose to code-switch for multiple reasons which are as follows; comprehension, a lack of vocabulary, inadvertently slipping into another language, the use of multilingualism or just out of pure boredom of using one language. The study also found four types of code-switching that occurs; inter-sentential, intra-sentential, tag-switching as well

as intra-word switching and of the four, intra-sentential code-switching is the most common type to occur. It was also discovered that instructors used code-switching for the benefit of their students in order for them to fully understand the lesson (Lazarte, 2021). While this study focused on code-switching in a pedagogical context, the results of the study can be extrapolated and applied more widely.

Previously, we considered the grammatical and linguistic functions of code-switching, however because novels are a reflection of society, a sociological perspective of code-switching is also important to consider. It can be argued that the theorization of code-switching relies on the theorization of identity, thus code-switching can be identified as an element where identity is localised. This reliance has only come to the forefront due to the escalating contact between different groups due to globalisation. In essence, groups are now more aware of their language or dialect as an expression of their ethnic or national identities. This metalinguistic awareness is therefore the foundation of the sociolinguistics exploration of code-switching (Hall & Niple, 2015).

If we see the history of sociolinguistics, we can see that the assumptions about code-switching change with each generation. The earliest concept of code-switching relies on the concept of “speech communities” which refer to tightly bound communities and how their practice of switching codes or languages is reflective of their concept of local versus non-local identity. Here we find the concept of “we-code”, which is more affective and symbolic of home, and “they-code”, which represents social hierarchical distance, as reflections of identities (Gumperz, 1982). In the 1980’s language and political economy intersected and Gal (1988) notes that in these analyses code-switching was proven to be sociologically meaningful and ideologically motivated.

Translation is not an activity which occurs in a vacuum; the translator, editor and patron are all people who are involved in the process; thus, translation is an action which is full of conflict and power struggles. In particular, there is a lot of conflict between different cultures in translation which leads to cultural appropriation and exchange of power. Cutter (2005) expresses a mostly ambivalent view which takes into consideration both the negative and positive aspects of translation, seeing this activity as “transcoding ethnicity” and “renovating the hegemonic tongue.” She sees the act of translation as continual negotiation and renegotiation and an ongoing conflict. This shows how translation is a violent act and the thing lost during this violence is cultural capital.

Other researchers have also explored the link between translation and conflict, like Monica Baker (2006) who sees the world as a conflict-ridden space where the act of translation can be used for legitimisation and justification. Translators therefore have a central role to play as they can mediate and control all power relations by undermining or emphasizing a narrative. Parker (2003) also notes that translation is not merely transcribing words from one language to another but in fact it is an act of interpretation and narration; the act of choosing a text, choosing how to translate a word means that translation is more like creation. Therefore, translations are more like creations rather than simple discoveries of texts, thus the translator as the creator can do as he sees fit.

### **3. Methodology**

The main impetus of the study is to see what effect bilingualism has when the readers take on the role of translators. In order to determine the answer to this question, a research methodology was designed which incorporates the use of semi-structured interviews so that detailed, qualitative data could be extrapolated. Accordingly, five individuals were interviewed

with questions that were tailored to their responses and they were asked about diaspora literature such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* and Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*. By utilizing this methodology, it was hoped that the readers would also be more involved in the analysis. Furthermore, in order to perform a meaningful examination, thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data. This allowed for patterns to be found in the data-set which demonstrated the main ways through which readers interact with bilingual text.

#### **4. Discussion**

During this study it was found that as readers took on the role of translators, they revelled in the ability and agency to decide to interpret the text as they wished. This led to the readers interacting with the text at a deeper level as they derived a new set of meanings from the bilingual text which fit their translation, as such they were not solely limited by the narration. When conducting the analysis a few common threads were found in how the readers interpreted or translated the text in diaspora novels.

##### **4.1. Legitimacy of Language**

One of the ways code-switching in novels was found to impact readers was to make them feel as if their language was legitimate. Because English is known as the global language, residents of Pakistan often feel the pressure to learn English at the expense of their native tongue—there is a feeling of not being faithful to both languages (Nordquist, 2020). However, while reading diaspora novels, readers get the sense that their language is a legitimate existence. This is especially true for Rushdie's (1981) novel as he often uses a word in Hindi or Urdu and would then translate it in English for monolingual speakers, such as in *Midnight's Children* when he writes, "A cook? . . . A khansama merely?" By reading the word "khansama" separately from the word "cook" readers can translate the native word as they like—it perhaps has implications of a lowly, dirty position—which adds to the legitimacy of their language as it is on an equal position to English.

##### **4.2. Identity**

Another common interpretative thread found during the analysis was readers translating terms to fit into their cultural contexts of identity. Gender roles and familial roles are often entrenched within cultural contexts and the differing ways in which languages refer to a person can impact how that person's identity is contextualised. This is shown in Sara Suleri's (1991) novel, *Meatless Days* where she refers to the grandmother as "Dadi"; the identity of grandmothers in Pakistan would be different than the west. This was demonstrated by the readers who translated this term by describing it in various ways, attaching such adjectives as; brusque, God-fearing and shrivelled. In addition, Suleri (1991) also says in the same sentence, "[her] father spoke . . . and when papa talked," which again gives us the notion of two identities. Here the readers as the translators have the power to translate these two identities in their cultural contexts which adds another layer of meaning and significance to the narrative.

##### **4.3. Resistance**

For readers, the notion of resistance was also a common theme which came up when reading diaspora novels. In both *Midnight's Children* and *Meatless Days* cultural terms are littered throughout the narrative and when reading these native terms, the readers have the choice to translate them as they wish, thus emphasizing aspects of culture which would have otherwise been lost. This is particularly seen in Suleri's (1991) novel because she emphasises

food—an aspect of culture—in her narrative. An example of this is when an “ordinary potato” is called “allu ka bhurta,” which is a traditional Pakistani dish. Readers translate this term very differently, often describing it as a spicy, soft potato dish and by doing so they are taking ownership of their own culture. In this example, there is also resistance to Western categorisation of knowledge; “allu ka bhurta” is not mashed potatoes, it is something completely different, according to readers which means that they are rejecting western knowledge and creating their own, cultural knowledge.

## 5. Conclusion

As we have seen in the above discussion, translation as a formulaic activity is a notion which has long since been abandoned and in fact, we now recognize the power translators hold in their hands because they can manipulate the meaning of a work through their translation. When we connect this idea to the use of code-switching in texts, such as when diaspora writers mix English with Urdu or Hindi, we put the readers into the role of translators, giving them the power to translate bilingual elements in texts. This of course, means that readers now have an unprecedented amount of power—they can interact with the text at a deeper level which was previously seen to be withheld from them. It is perhaps due to this those readers have greater engagement with diaspora texts which incorporate code-switching.

In addition, it is important to note that while this study did not focus on post-colonialism theory—as our aim was to determine the effect of readers taking on the role of translators—the themes we found in our analysis are startlingly similar to themes found in post-colonial discourse. Specifically, the theme of resistance and identity are those which have been outlined by various post-colonial writers. This is perhaps due to the fact that the works investigated in this study are written by diaspora writers; often writers of Indian or Pakistani descent who write about characters in India and Pakistan cannot separate their narration from post-colonial discourse. As such the prominence of post-colonial themes when readers translate code-switching in texts was something to be noted in the study.

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