

**Losing Gems as You Translate:
Some Experiences of a Burmese Translator**
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When I was an 8th grader at high school I thought of translating a piece of Greek mythology into Burmese for the school magazine. The story I had in mind was from our English reading text and it tells of Ulysses returning from the Trojan War and being captured by Cyclops. Ulysses had told the Cyclops his name was No Man. One night he managed to blind the one-eyed giant with a burning log. When the monster screamed for help, the neighbors came to his cave door inquiring “Who is hurting you?” He answered “No Man is hurting me” and the neighbors cursed him and went home. It was the Cyclops’ answer that undid me. We have no equivalent in Burmese for the English word *no*, either for the opposite of *yes* or for phrases like *no money*, *no food*, *no home*, *no man*.

When someone asks, “Are you coming?” I must say in Burmese “I’m not coming” or just “not coming,” but not “no,” as you do in English. We can make the verb negative, but never the noun. So for the English “no food” we have to say “do not have any food.” When the great poet translator Min Thuwun was translating *King Lear*, he had to have recourse to Pāli for Cordelia’s famous answer to her royal father “*Nothing*, my lord.”

Then there are other very simple words (basic core vocabulary) for which we have no equivalents: *parent*, *brother*, *sister*, *cousin*, *arm*, *leg*, *lap*. It is very difficult for a Burmese to understand what a single-parent child is. Of course, we can say in a round-about way and this is what we do. When an English speaker says, “He’s my brother,” we are left wondering whether the brother in question is the older or the younger. If the relation is a cousin, we want to know whether it is a he or a she, the older or the younger.

The Burmese have one word for the upper arm and another for the forearm, but no separate word for *arm*. We have one word for the thigh, one word for the knee, words for calf and shin, another word for the feet. When an English speaker says, “She has beautiful legs,” a Burmese may wonder: “What kind of feet has she got?” For the English “The child is on her lap” we say it is on her thigh.

Burmese has only the verb to *be* and lacks *have*. I came to notice this feature of our language when I was reading the famous Japanese Zen guru Dr. D.T. Suzuki, who had been a teacher of English in his younger days. Recounting his teaching experiences he said there was no Japanese word to translate *has* in “A dog has four feet.” Only then did I realize how the same is true of my mother tongue. For the English “I have a book” the Burmese will say “In me is a book.” The same is the case in Russian, which I happen to know a little. У меня есть книга. The same thing happens in Pāli, another Indo-European language and the sacred language of the Buddhists, where it is *Putthako me atthi* [A book in me there is].

Except for the negative prefix which always goes with the verb we have virtually no prefixes. We usually replace a verb complex to get the English sense. For “un-American” we either say “American-not-like” or “American-go-against.” For “pre-war” we must say “war-not-happen-time” or “war-welcome-time,” and for “postwar” we have “war-finish-time” or “war after.”

The notion of singular/plural, past/present, active/passive contrasts is unknown to Burmese, as it is to some of our neighbors. Someone has said Mao Zedong’s politico-

economical thinking may have been quite different had he read foreign writings in the original. Unfortunately he read translations, which among other things had Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* as *Wealth of Nation* in Chinese. When our ex-prime minister U Nu translated Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, he called it in Burmese *The Commentary on the Strength of (a) Friend*.

When the Unesco asked the world's governments to celebrate the International Book Year, the Burmese authorities had a translation competition to have the best translation of the Year's motto: Books for all. The prize-winning translation was "The book is man's friend." The majority of our people are Buddhists, who take refuge in the Three Gems, the Buddha, the Dhamma or his teaching, and the Sangha or the Community of monks. But the Burmese word for the third is *monk* and the collective idea is lost.

There are no relative pronouns in Burmese. Pali texts with relative clauses are usually broken up into simple sentences.

He who sees my teaching sees me. (original Pali)

Someone sees my teaching. That one sees me. (Burmese translation)

The nearest Burmese word to the relative pronoun is the participle and the modern Burmese translator often takes advantage of this to translate the English relative clauses:

People who live in glass houses should not throw stones. (English)

People living in glass houses should not throw stones. (Burmese translation)

The trick works for short sentences but as the sentences get longer, the translator has only to break up the sentences. And Burmese normally uses clauses where English uses nouns. The latest *Time* on my table [August 23, 2004] has the sentence

Conservationists are taking new steps to save the world's shrinking population of big cats. [p. 3]

The Burmese translation will be something like this:

Tigers and lions in the world are becoming fewer and fewer. People working to protect the environment are trying to save these tigers and lions.

The order of words in Burmese is Subject x Complete/Object x Verb, and this poses a problem too. Later on in the same article the *Time* author says

It was India that pioneered the use of sanctuaries to save big cats.

We can only say in Burmese as

The country pioneering to build safe places for tigers was India.

Finally, there are two trends of translation in Burma: one school that began with religious translations from Pali tends to explain, so makes additions to the text, and the other just tries to retell the substance of the original. In the hands of the former school Robert Frost's

Whose woods these are I think I know

His house is in the village though

becomes

What beautiful woods these are! Who is the fortunate owner of these lovely trees?
I think and I know now. That's the man living in the village. He has a nice house.

The latter school will just render the two lines into
The owner of the woods lives in the village.
And that is all.