

Translating “Swear & Curse Words” from Indonesian Literature into English

Erna Wiles

Universitas Triatma Mulya Stenden, Bali

erna.wiles@nhlstenden.com

Abstract

Translating swear and curse words in a literary work is very challenging. Not only does it depict a real life in the past, but it is also socio-culturally bound. Some words might have become archaic. To seek the best strategy, an analysis on the translation of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *BumiManusia* into “This Earth of Mankind” by Max Lane was performed. Strategies employed when a swear or curse words do not have the equivalence in the target language are as follows; 1) translate by using the literal form; 2) substitute the swear words from the target language with the closes features when context can help the readers understand the meaning and add and exclamation mark to deliver the emotive meaning; 3) add a lexical emphasis to preserve the emotive meaning; 4) use a completely different form of swear words but have the same meaning; 5) for swear and curse words using animal names can be replaced with any forms of swear and curse words but with the same meaning; and 6) swear words in a form of onomatopoeia can be retained as it is as long as the context allows.

Keywords: Translation, Swear & Curse Words

INTRODUCTION

The miner rushed towards us with a grin a mile long across his face. 'G'day, mate. In the arvo I just rooted some sheila in the dunny in my donga. A sandgroper. Bloody ripper!' It was only later, after getting my Ph.D in Australian English Applications at numerous pubs around the country, that I comprehended that this miner had had a stupendous afternoon having sexual intercourse with a Western Australian woman in the toilet of his room. (Knell, 2012)

The science of translation can be traced back in bi-lingual manuscripts about trading found in Assyria and Mesopotamia dated back in 3.000 BC and the oldest theory was written by Marcus Tullius Cicero dated 106-43 BC explaining the importance of *weighing words rather than counting them* (Kelly, 1979). Since then, the study of translation has developed and it seems as if that through the passing the time, translation studies always raise new issues, which are fascinating to learn. It seems as if translation theory is inexhaustible.

The definitions of translation vary. According to Anderson and Brislin (1976), translation denotes the transfer of thoughts and ideas, be it written or oral, whether the language is orthographic or sign language. Similarly, Wilss (1982) states that translation is a transfer process with the aim to transform a written source language text into an optimally equivalent target language text, which requires the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic understanding as well as an analytical processing of the source text. Slightly different, according to Nida and Taber (1982), translating is a process of reproducing in the receptor language the closes equivalent of a source language message, in terms of meaning and style. It can be said that translation incorporates transferring, transforming, reproducing the meaning and style of the source language into the target/receptor language with optimum but natural equivalence. Newmark (1996) however, emphasizes the need on the transferring of the meaning of a unit of language and the whole part from one language to the other.

The study of meaning falls under semantics – a branch of linguistics which mainly

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concerns with how the meaning is conveyed by the linguistics system such as morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, sentences (Umagandhi & Vinothini, 2017); even though the meaning intended to be communicated may also be conveyed via different types of means such as gestures, facial expressions, illustrations, signals, etcetera. Leech (1985, pp 9-20) classifies meaning into seven which are 1) conceptual meaning, also called denotative, designative, cognitive or descriptive meaning – the clear and logical meaning of words seen from its form and structure; 2) connotative meaning – the meaning that is implied, apart from what is described explicitly; 3) social or stylistic meaning – any information conveyed in a linguistic expression including pronunciation, variation about certain social characteristics; 4) affective or expressive meaning – the personal feelings expressed by the speakers; 5) reflected meaning – a phenomenon whereby a single word or phrase is associated with more than one sense of meaning; 6) collocative meaning – the association a word acquires on account of the meaning of words which tend to occur in its environment; and 7) thematic meaning – what was communicated by the way in which a speaker or writer organizes the message, in terms of ordering, focus and emphasis.

Translating connotative meaning is no easy matter. Connotative meaning can be classified into different aspects (Hervey & Higgins, 1992, p 103 - 107), such as 1) attitudinal – an overall meaning of an expression which consists of some widespread attitude to the referent; 2) associative part of the overall meaning of an expression which consists of stereotypical expectation or wrongly associated with the referent of the expression; 3) affective – an emotive effect worked on the addressee by the choice of expression, and which forms part of its overall meaning; 4) reflective – the meaning given to an expression over and above its literal meaning by the fact that its form is reminiscent of the completely different meaning of a homonymic or near-homonymic expression; 5) collocative – is given to an expression over and above its literal meaning by the meaning of some other expression with which it collocates to form a commonly-used phrase; and 6) allusive – present when an expression evokes some associated saying or quotation in such a way that the meaning of that saying or quotation becomes part of the overall meaning of the expression.

Aside from the afore-mentioned aspects, Beiruti (2013) present more types of connotative meaning i.e. sound, etymological, and referential connotation. phonoaesthetic effects, (phonoaesthetics is the study of the expressive properties of sound (Crystal, 1995)), are very often used in literary work in the form of rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia as they can evoke certain shades of emotive meaning. That is why phonoaesthetic connotation is very often used in literary work. Etymological connotation, referred to the necessity to have careful attention to the origin of words and their meaning, is also widely used in literary work. Observant interpretation is needed as the meaning of words may have changed considerably from the original meaning over the time, even though some may still have shades of its original signification. Aside from the cognitive meaning, a referent word may also contain connotations. Some referential meanings are culture specific. What is accepted in one culture may be a taboo in another.

Correspondently, (Leech, 1985) also reiterates that connotative meaning is relatively unstable – depending pretty much on culture, historical periods and individual's experience; as is it considered to be indeterminate or open ended – depending on the speaker or writer's knowledge and beliefs; and may belong to the characteristic referent, real or imaginary identified by the speaker or writer. For this reason, knowledge about the social and cultural system which lies behind both source and target languages is clearly needed. For that reason, analysing a word, even one that seems very simple, becomes no easy matter. A word is part of the surface structure and becomes a study of grammar. The word is a spelling out of the concept, and the concept is in the basic structure and becomes the study of semantics. In addition, each language has a unique concept forming meaning, which is different from other

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languages. However, Larson (1998) confidently stated that anything that can be said in one language could be said in another. This includes swear words and curse words.

This study aims to seek ways how to translate swear and curse words from an Indonesian literary work with Javanese socio-cultural background and some Javanese expression into English. The fact that the literary work depicts the life of a society living in the past, in which it contains not only culturally laden words but also archaic words, contributes to the difficulties in the translation process, especially when the translator also needs to translate swear and curse words. Swear and curse words in one language are semantically built differently in other languages. An analysis was conducted on one of the tetralogy, written by the well-known Pramoedya Ananta Toer titled "*BumiManusia*" (Toer, 2002) and its translation by Max Lane titled "This Earth of Mankind" (Toer & Lane, 1996). "*BumiManusia*" tells a life and love story of *Minke*, the only Dutch-educated young Javanese, the son of a regent, who was fighting over feudalism and challenging Dutch colonialism in Java. Acclaimed widely that the translation can replicate the original message at its best way, Max Lane has tried best to "cast in a linguistic form that will facilitate the readers' enjoyment and easy reading of the novel, while remaining faithful to the author's text" (Toer & Lane, 1996, p 12). It is also claimed, however, that some linguistic phenomena, especially those of Javanese, are not all reproducible, in regard to "the play between languages and levels of language". Other than that, since the novel also depicts the life of Dutch people, a number of Dutch words are phonographically adapted into Javanese and Indonesian language system, including swear and curse words, making the translation difficulties threefold.

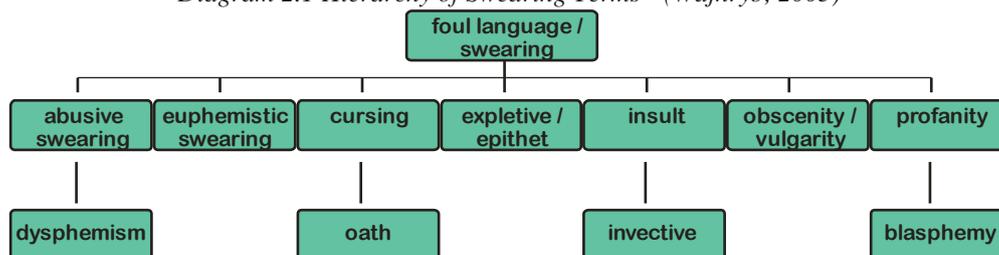
Citing a number of researchers, (Goddard, 2015) provides evidence that swear and curse words fall under different fields of study in linguistics i.e. pragmatics (Culpeper, 2011), sociolinguistics (Holmes & Stube, 2015), social history (McEnery, 2004), descriptive linguistics (Goddard, 2015), psycholinguistics (Jay, 2000), and philosophy of language (Croom, 2014).

According to (Jay, 2000), swear word is linguistic forms normally used to express one's emotional state for instance anger, surprise, pain and frustration. Swearing is intended to convey connotative or emotional meaning (Jay & Danks, 1977). Further, Jay and Janschewitz, (2008) states that swearing is the use of taboo to communicate the information about those feelings to listeners. Cursing, on the other hand, can be defined as expressions that a) are related to everything that is taboo or stigmatized in the culture, b) must not be interpreted literally, and c) can be used to express deep and strong emotions and attitudes (Andersson & Trudgill, 1992). Cursing signifies the use of offensive speech intended to wish harm on a person (Jay, 2000). It is emotionally powerful, offensive. Cursing can be a harmful expression intended as an insult. Cursing allows the utterer to express his strong emotions and thus impact the speakers emotionally. Luckily, these impacts are not always negatively as in name calling and sexual harassment but can also be in a positive manner such as in a joking and sexual enticement. As Goddard (2015) states, swear words and curse words can also be used as a social and conversational means to express excitement and positive feelings of which very often uttered as expressions of solidarity and familiarity.

Goddard (2015) tries to seek evidence on the difference between swear words and curse (also called cuss) word; even though Allan and Burridge (1991) use the terms interchangeably as stylistic variants. Firstly, swear words are much used in Australia, whereas both swear and cuss words are used in American English. Secondly, analysis using Natural Semantic Metalanguage shows that both words carry different social attitude. Swear words connote "it is bad if someone says these words", whereas cuss words connote "if someone says these words, something can happen to someone because of it" (Goddard, 2015, p. 194). Thirdly, the conceptualization related to the context-of-use of both types is different – swear word is uttered when someone "feels something bad in one moment", whereas curse word is expressed when someone "feels something bad towards someone else" (Goddard, 2015, p. 194).

Pinker (2008) classifies swear words into five, 1) dysphemistic swear word –uttered to release anger or frustration; 2) abusive swear word – intended to abuse, intimidate or insult others; 3) idiomatic swear word –specific use of swearing uttered without really referring to any specific issues; 4) emphatic swear word – functions to emphasize something; and 5) cathartic swear word –spelled when something bad or unwanted condition happens. For easy understanding purposes, Wajnryb (2005) created a hierarchy of swearing terms as follows.

Diagram 2.1 Hierarchy of Swearing Terms - (Wajnryb, 2005)



Wajnryb (2005, p. 17) further explains that abusive swear words are directed towards others (You f*cker!); derogatory in tone (“This is a sh*tty piece of work”); involve metaphoric curses (“Go to hell!”); or denigrate through name-calling (“You bastard”). Curse words, on the other hand, involve aspects like invoking the aid of a higher being, more ritualistic in nature, articulated deliberately, future-oriented, built on an understanding that the impact may be delayed and, different from swear words, it might not involve the use of foul language. Wajnryb (2005, p. 25-38) concluded that based on its purposes swearing can be classified into 1) cathartic swearing 2) abusive swearing and 3) social swearing. Catharsis is the process of releasing strong or latent emotions, usually for events that affect oneself, for example when stumbling; aggression is to attack, and social connections is to maintain social relationships.

Similarly, according to (Goddard, 2015) in certain languages, swear and curse words can also function as exclamations which can be categorized into four i.e. 1) cognitive trigger, reaction, 2) expressive, 3) impulsive and 4) word utterance. Cognitive trigger is a component based on semantic primes, know and think – “I know something happened a moment before”. The reaction is a feel component modelling the speaker’s bad feeling response and its intensity – “I feel something because of it”. Expressive impulsive is the urge to say something – “I want to say something bad now because of this” (expressive) – “I want to say it in one moment” (impulsive). The word utterance is the speaker’s performative utterance of a particular word – “Because of this. I say this word”.

In an English-speaking community this third type of swearing is usually followed by positive adjectives such as ‘bloody beauty’, ‘fuckin fantastic’ or in the form of expletives infixation for example ‘absofuckinglutely’, ‘infuckingcredible’, ‘fanbloodytastic’ and so on. According to (Ghassempur, 2009) this type of curse is not considered dirty, can be used to narrow and/or eliminate the gap in social level differences, as a marker of solidarity; and according to (Crystal, 1995) it can be used to identify someone’s membership in a group, and even express love-terms of endearment. The severity and the impact caused by swearing is very relative and multi-dimensional (Jay & Danks, 1977). For example, ‘It’s Britney, bitch’, expressed in a friendly tone by Britney Spears every time she opens the concert, is always greeted with boisterous cheers because it is considered as an affectionate call to her fans; however if a woman is banging on the door of her friend’s house and screaming “Open the door. It’s Britney, bitch!” Her friend will definitely be scared, angry or offended.

The lexical form, how to pronounce, the purpose of saying curse, how often a person

uses curse, the attitude of a group of speaking communities towards the use of swearing and cursing, the magnitude of the impact, etc. are greatly influenced by national, regional or dialectical and socio-cultural factors. A reference that can be used to form a curse lexicon in one group may not be used in other groups. Some languages use animal-derived lexicon, for example dog as in Indonesian “*Anjing!*”, Javanese “*Asu!*”, and Balinese “*Cicing!*”, Sex-related lexicon in English such as ‘Fuck!’, ‘Prick!’, ‘Cock sucker!’, human wastes in Indonesian “*Tahi!*”, Javanese “*Tai!*” and English “*Tard!*”, body parts for instance eyes as in Javanese “*Matamu!*”, knee “*Dengkulmu!*”, and face “*Dapurmu!*”; and even kinship as in Javanese “*Mbahmu!*”.

The aforementioned characteristics may potentially cause difficulties in the translation process. Swears and curses in one language may not be derogatory at all in another language. The connotative meaning of the swearing in one language may shift in another language. Swears and curses in one language may have a mild social impact when said, while in another the impact can be devastating and not worth saying. A curse or a swear word that can be used as a joke and serve as a bonding tie in a group of people who speak one language, but can be very offensive in another, and so forth. One other difficulty when translating swear and curse words in literary work is the fact that the words might have become archaic, not been widely used anymore. Swear and curse words are trendy; they evolve over the time for instance *bedebah*–bastard, *jahanam* - hell in Indonesian language is not used anymore in modern day.

It has become a common knowledge that swearing, and cursing are nothing new. They may have existed since the first time human being acquire verbal language. Mohr (2013) presents the evidence that the word *verpa*– an erect or circumcised penis was used as a swear word in the ancient Rome in the 8th century. Swear and curse words also existed in biblical times – in the Middle Ages (5th-15th Centuries), referring to the sanctions on cursing with a reference to God; the use of religious taboos “*By God’s bones!*” and references on sex and excrement. In the Renaissance (14th-17th century) there was the increase use of curse words in potty humour. In the Victorian era (18th and 19th centuries), the subtlety of curse word turned them into euphemism. Over the years, in the modern day, swear and curse words become more culturally acceptable, treated more as a joke even though they are still “bad” words.

Learning the history of swear and curse words is one of the important aspects in the world of translation especially when the translating literature work depicting the past life and the translation is intended to be for modern readers. Questions raised, among others are 1) Is there an equivalence between the old expression and the modern one? 2) what if there is no equivalence? 3) What strategy can be employed when the equivalence does not exist?

Baker (2018, pp 91-134) proposes at least 8 strategies which can be applied for non-equivalent word level, they are 1) translation by a more general word or superordinate, 2) translation by a more neutral or less expressive word, 3) translation by cultural substitution, 4) translation by using a loan word or a loan word plus explanation, 5) translation by paraphrase using a related word, 6) translation by paraphrase using an unrelated word, 7) translation by omission, and 8) translation by illustration.

DISCUSSION

Analysis on the translation of *Bumi Manusia* generates results and new strategies, which are as follows.

In certain cases, swear and curse words can be analysed easily as they have their equivalence, as in these examples below.

[1]

“*Tutupmulut!*” bentak Nyai dalam Belanda dengan suara berat dan kukuh. “*Ia tamuku.*” (p. 65)

‘*Shut up!*’ shouted Nyai loudly in Dutch. ‘He’s my guest.’ (p. 27)

[2]

Kursimulaibergoyang-goyangsedikit. Keparat! (p. 182)

The chair began to rock a little. **Damn!** (p. 88)

Swear and curse words which do not have their equivalence were translated by using a) their literal meaning, for instance '*kurang ajar*' – insolence, impudence, '*sialdangkal*' – shallow misfortune, '*persetan*' – to the devil, '*gila*' – crazy, including swear and curse word with animals as references, for instance '*monyet*' – monkey dan '*buaya*' – crocodile; including non-literal word, for instance '*sambar geledeg*' – thundering damnation, great balls of fire; b) the substitutes/other swear or curse words containing similar meanings '*bedebah*' – trash, '*mursal*' – renegade or c) not being translated at all and used as it is for instance '*prek*'. Those strategies can be applied when the context helps convey the meaning. The use of the exclamation mark (!) is highly suggested as it will also help the reader grasp the connotative meaning that it is either a swear or curse word. To add the emotive meaning, an emphasis in the translated version can be done by adding additional word, for instance '*sambar geledeg*', which literally mean 'struck by the thunder' but is actually equivalent with 'go to hell' dan 'rot in hell', is translated into 'thundering damnation' and 'great balls of fire'.

[3a]

Mengapa harusakulakukan untuk orang lain? Sambar geledek! (p. 180)

Why did I have to do so for others? **Thundering damnation!** (p. 86)

[3b]

Dan kau, si Gendut berkulit langsung cerah bermata sipit – sambar geledek! (p. 232)

And you, Fatso, with clear, **langsung** skin and slight slanted eyes – **great balls of fire!** (p. 115)

The advantage of this method is that all cultural elements can be transported from the source language into the target language. The target language readers will also get new knowledge on how the source language speaking community is cursing. Unfortunately, this method also has weaknesses. Sometimes the translated swear and curse words are felt to be less striking and less natural, as in the example below.

[4]

Sialdangkal! Mengapa kau sampai hati mewariskan adat semacam ini? (p. 181)

Shallow misfortune! How could you bring yourself to leave such customs as an inheritance? (p. 87)

To solve this issue, the translator should find the swear and curse words from the target language which can be used for the same situation from source language. Indeed, as a result it is most likely that the swear and curse words used in the target language is completely different from those from the source language, however, it is guaranteed that the emotive meaning is maintained perfectly. The detailed steps are 1) find the meaning of the swear and curse words in the source language, 2) learn the existing context, 3) find the reasons why the author of the source language use the swear and curse words, and 4) find the equivalence in the target language.

For instance, "*Sialdangkal!*", as explained in the Kamus Pusat Bahasa (2008: p. 1298), it means 'very unfortunate' and used to express a speaker's stance against the listener. In English

the curses used to express the same thing are “Damn (you)!” , “Screw (you)!” , “Darn!” , “Sucks!” , “Fuck (you)!” and so on. “*Sialdangkal!*” will feel more natural if translated into one of them. Here is the proof.

Sialdangkal! *Mengapa kau sampai hatimewariskan adat semacam ini?*
.....! How could you bring yourself to leave such customs as an inheritance?

Damn (you)!

Screw (you)!

Shucks!

Fuck (you)!

Below are other examples.

[5]

Kurangajar! *Sumpahku.* (p. 179)

.....! I swore. (p. 86)

Son of a bitch

Silly bugger

Rat bag

Screw you

[6]

Persetan semuanya, kalau perlu aku pun bisa tinggalkan sekolah ini. (p. 318)

..... with all this; If need be, I can leave this school. (p. 161)

Fuck

To hell

Damn it

God damn it

Screw you

[7]

“Telenga **gila!**” gerutu Jean Marais, “lagaknya seperti masih kompeni.” (p. 278)

‘Telenga’s.....!’ frowned Jean Marais, ‘he thinks he’s still in the army.’ (p. 140)

nut

fool

A more precise translation for [7], is actually as follows.

‘.....Telenga!’ frowned Jean Marais, ‘he thinks he’s still in the army.’

Loony

Loopy

Stupid

Fuckhead

Shithead

Dickhead

A translator should be more careful when translating swear and curse words with animal names as reference, as according to Allan and Burridge (2006), often two languages use the same animal name but to refer to different things. ‘Rat’ is used to curse unfaithful men (a man who has been deceitful or disloyal), whereas in Indonesian ‘*tikusclurut*’ refers to people who like to undermine the wealth of others. It just so happens that ‘*monyet*’– monkey when used as a swear word has the same meaning as monkey, so it can be used as is.

[8]

“*Siapakah kowe ijindatang kemari, monyet!*” (p. 64)

‘Who gave you permission to come here, **monkey!**’ (p. 27)

It is not the case with *'buaya'*– crocodile or the phrase *'buaya darat'*. In Indonesian the words and phrases are used to describe villains or bullies who likes to flirt with women. The equivalence should be *beanjing* - mongrel, *cur* or *babi* - swine, which is used to refer to people who are evil and disgusting 'mongrel, cur or swine denotes a 'vicious, nasty fellow, held in contempt (comparable with cat and bitch of women)' (Allan & Burridge, 2006).

The literal translation does contain traits what crocodiles have, that it is wild, meat-eaters, and like to fool people; but the meaning of 'villain' is not transported. For this reason, it should be translated with another swear or curse words, which is not an animal, but contains the meaning of 'villain' which is 'crook'. [9a]

“*Buaya!*” *desisnya geram.* (p. 184)

‘**Crocodile!**’ he hissed angrily. (p. 89)

Suggested:

‘**Crook!**’ he hissed angrily.

[9b]

Semuda itu! Makin tinggi sekolah makin jadi buaya bangkong! (p. 184)

As young as that! The higher your schooling, the more you turn into a **crocodile!** (p. 89)

Suggested:

As young as that! The higher your schooling, the more you turn into a **crook!**

The same strategy can be applied to swear and curse words which do not have any equivalence with the target language. As in Kamus Pusat Bahasa (2008, p. 156) *bedebah* means *celaka* in Indonesian and means 'unfortunate' in English, whereas *mursal* means *nglakoni patrap sing ora apik* (Sudaryanto, 2001) or doing/having a bad deed.

[10]

“*Bedebah!*” *kutuk Nyai.* (p. 65)

‘**Trash!**’ Nyai cursed. (p. 28)

Suggested:

‘.....!’ Nyai cursed.

Scumbag

Son of a bitch

[11]

“*Dengar, kau anak mursal!*” *perintahnya sebagai pembesar baru yang lagi naik semangat.* (p. 186)

‘Listen, you, **renegade!**’ he ordered, like newly-important official whose spirits were now aroused. (p. 90)

Suggested:

‘Listen, you,!’ he ordered, like newly important official whose spirits were now

aroused.

bastard
jerk
scumbag

Swear or curse word in a form of onomatopoeia can be left as it is, so that it will add new knowledge for target language readers. For example, the following sentence.

[12]

Prek *persetan! Bukan urusanku.* (p. 220)

To the devil with it all! Nothing to do with me. (p. 109)

Prek, to the devil with it all! Nothing to do with me.

CONCLUSION

In summary, when translating a swear or curse word, the first thing to do is look for its equivalent. If the equivalence is not found, seek the actual meaning of swear or curse, learn the context that surrounds it, translate the entire sentence into the target language, omit the existing swear or curse words, or substitute it with another curse from the target language that matches the context of the swearword in the source language. Additional lexicon can be added to emphasize the meaning. An exclamation mark can also be used to add the emotive meaning of the swear or curse words. Should there be no other alternatives, the translator can also translate the swear word literally with the notes all the meanings in source language, including the emotive and cultural meanings are conveyed. Swear words in a form of an onomatopoeia can be used as it is.

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