

Consistency worries for Shashi Tharoor concerning “It reads like a translation”

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Abstract. I raise a worry that Shashi Tharoor’s criticism that “much of Narayan’s prose reads like a translation” is inconsistent with his criticism “the ABC of bad writing – archaisms, banalities and clichés – abounded” because these things tend to be worded in a way that exploits local linguistic features, such as alliteration, making translation difficult. I also flag another inconsistency worry, but earlier in this paper.

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“Archaisms, banalities, and clichés:

A recipe for success in my schooldays”

Shashi Tharoor, one of the severest critics of novelist and short story writer R.K. Narayan, tells us:

Indeed, much of Narayan’s prose reads like a translation. (2001)

But a few sentences before, he tells us:

...the ABC of bad writing – archaisms, banalities, and clichés – abounded, as if the author learned them in a school textbook and was unaware that they have been hollowed by repetition. (2001)

This is a worrying combination, I think. But why?

Worry 1: faux translation. Tharoor’s “the ABC of bad writing – archaisms, banalities, and clichés” itself sounds like something from school, even from one of Narayan’s

school stories. (I assume a carefully-laid trap!¹) The schoolmaster at the front says, “Today class, you are to write a fiction for me. But you must avoid the ABCs of bad writing. A for archaisms, B for banalities, and C for clichés.” Tharoor might object that he made this ABC abbreviation up. But it still sounds as if from school. And that gives rise to a parallel worry: writing can sometimes sound as if from translation when it is not. (If Tharoor is suggesting a practice of writing in one language and then translating, or unacknowledged borrowing from non-English writers nearby, more evidence is needed.²) Anyway, the main worry I wish to flag is not this one, rather the one below.

Worry 2: untranslatable expressions. The expressions or sayings which pupils had to learn in school but which are hollowed by repetition often depend on “local” linguistic features to be more memorable and so are difficult or impossible to translate, well at least so as to have corresponding features. For example, they depend on alliteration. If Narayan is relying on a lot of them, how can it be that much of his writing sounds like translation? This is the opening of one of Narayan’s stories (one which I am not sure I would recommend):

It was not a very impressive or high-class dog; it was one of those commonplace dogs one sees everywhere – colour of white and dust, tail mutilated at a young age by God knows whom, born in the street, and bred on the leavings and garbage of the marketplace. (1984: 39)

“God knows whom” and “born and bred” are both made use of, the latter featuring alliteration. I think Tharoor will struggle to justify both criticisms quoted from him: the heavy use of well-worn expressions³ learnt in school and the charge of often reading like a translation.

¹ “I can do this style as well. What’s the big deal?”?

² Narayan is probably influenced by Chekhov; but I suspect, directly or indirectly, almost everyone who writes short fictions on everyday life is.

³ I suspect this reply is known: “But well-worn is well-worn.”

(I personally do not experience Narayan as reading like a translation – he relies upon the sounds of English – but I have considered how he might come across like that at points to highly sensitive critics, both in this paper and in an earlier paper. I suspect the heavy use of sayings partly reflects the earlier education system and how some gatekeepers to English literature allow one in if one shows that one has learnt one's lessons.)

References

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