Lexical and semantics problems in religious texts translation from a critical review of Vietnamese and English translations of Majjhima Nikaya

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Abstract

Translation of Buddha's discourses (suttas) is one of the most challenging, yet under-researched, area in Translation Studies. Problems of semantics, syntactics, and lexicography, to name but a few, are areas of inquiry in the field of Buddhist texts translation studies, making it a truly interdisciplinary field of research. This paper looks into and compares the Vietnamese and English versions of the Pali Majjhima Nikaya (Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha), focusing on lexical and semantic aspects. The study found that, just like translated works in any other language, the two current translations of the suttas are still not satisfactory for readers - both monastic and lay people. The current Vietnamese translations of the suttas in Majjhima Nikaya are heavily influenced by the Chinese language Mahayana suttas in terms of semantics and lexicology, and the English version are influenced by the Bible translation tradition in grammar and syntax.

Key words: *Vietnamese/English translations of Majjhima Nikaya; Semantic/lexicographic problems in religious translation.*

1. Introduction

Theravada Buddhism considers the collections of sacred writings in Pali, commonly known as Tipitaka, to be the holy scriptures that represent the original form of the Buddha's teaching. Numerous versions of Theravada Tipitaka in different languages have appeared in different parts of the world via a collection of interpretative or commentarial works. In the early Indian dialects, there are relatively few difficulties in the representing meanings from the original Pali and the hybrid Sanskrit in which the teachings of the Buddha were preserved. Apart from a couple of phonological varieties, no significant issues concerning meaning difference appear to emerge. However, when such original Pali collections are translated into languages of a different family or to languages that developed from totally different regional and/or cultural contexts, unexpected issues relating to an exact rendering of the original text meaning emerge. This would unavoidably happen to those who are similarly acquainted with Pali language and English language in checking renderings from the previous to the latter. The same situation happens to those endeavoring to translate Buddhist sacred scriptures to languages like Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese. This paper aims to investigate issues in the English and Vietnamese translations of the original *Majjhima Nikaya* from Pali, in the fields of semantics and lexicography, by looking at problems of translated equivalence of Vietnamese and English to their Pali counterparts.

2. Translation, religious translation and religious texts

Any definition of translation reflects a specific perspective and attitude to translation theory and is therefore the basis and starting point of relative translation studies. Nida and Taber (1969) state that "Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style."

In Nida's terms, the phrase "religious texts" may be understood in two quite different senses: 1) texts that discuss historical or present-day religious beliefs and practices of a believing community and 2) texts that are crucial in giving rise to a believing community. (Nida, 1994, p.195).

2.1 Principles of translation- Asian and Western

As Nida (2013) states, the results of any accurate translating reveal the following basic principles:

1. *Language consists of a systematically organized set of oral-aural symbols.*
2. *Associations between symbols and referents are essentially arbitrary.*
3. *The segmentation of experience by speech symbols is essentially arbitrary.*
4. *No two languages exhibit identical systems of organizing symbols into meaningful expressions.*

These basic principles of translation reflect the truth that no translation in a receptor language can be the exact equivalent of the model in the source language. That is to say, "all types of translation involve (1) loss of information, (2) addition of information, and/or (3) skewing of information." (Nida, 2013, p.13).

Nida's principles of translation, though mentioned in most translation books as the norms for religious translation, particularly for Bible translation in Western countries, can indeed be used for both secular and nonsecular translation. In China and most Asian countries, specific systems of translation rules were applied to Buddhist text translation, including Kumarajjiva's system and Xuan Zhang's system. The translation principles of Kumarajiva are summarized by Dankova (2006, p.60) as "1) Emphasis on polished/refined language, 2) Use of additions and omissions (when necessary) and 3) Correcting terms". The translation style of Xuan Zhuang, as observed by Thich Phuoc Son (2013, p.191), can be summarized in the method of *"Ngũ Chủng Bất Phiên"* (Five categories to be left without translation), which includes the following cases: 1) When the original is secret, such as incantations, 2) When a word is ambiguous, 3) When there are no equivalents in the vocabulary of the target language, 4) When there are already existing and widely accepted transliterations, and 5) When there are no stylistic equivalents".

2.2 Translation procedures, strategies and methods

As proposed by Nida (1964), translating involves the two procedures:

I. *Technical procedures:*
   A. analysis of the source and target languages;
   B. a thorough study of the source language text before making attempts translate it;
   C. Making judgments of the semantic and syntactic approximations.

II. *Organizational procedures:*
   constant reevaluation of the attempt made; contrasting it with the existing available translations of the same text done by other translators, and checking the text's communicative effectiveness by asking the target language readers to evaluate its accuracy and effectiveness and studying their reactions

(Nida, 1964, p.241-247)

As for technical procedures, two translators, Horner and Minh Chau, used similar steps in the procedure: "analysis of the source and target languages; a thorough study of the source language text before making attempts translate it; and making judgments of the semantic and syntactic approximations." (Horner, 1954, pp.x-xvii, Minh Chau, 1983, p.7). For the organizational procedures, in Horner's work, the last step "checking the text's communicative effectiveness by asking the target language readers to evaluate its accuracy and effectiveness and studying their reactions" was not reported. For Minh Chau's translation, as he recalled in personal communication with the researcher in 2000, the step "checking the text's communicative effectiveness by asking the target language readers to evaluate its accuracy and effectiveness and studying their reactions", could not be made because of certain human resources and social restrictions at the time the translation was released.

Newmark (1998) mentions the difference between translation methods and translation procedures. According to Newmark, "translation methods relate to whole texts, translation procedures are used for sentences and the smaller units of language" (p.81). He also reports further methods of translation, which were found in the analysis of the English and Vietnamese translations.

Different procedures, as per Newmark's series of translation methods, for the Vietnamese and/or English translation of *Majjhima Nikaya* include:

- *Transference:* transferring a Source Language (SL) word to a Target Language (TL) text. It includes transliteration.
- *Naturalization:* adapting the SL word first to the normal pronunciation, then to the normal morphology of the TL.
- *Cultural equivalent:* replacing a cultural word in the SL with a TL one. However, they are not accurate.
- *Functional equivalent:* requires the use of a culture-neutral word.
- *Descriptive equivalent:* the meaning of the Cultural-Bound Terms (CBT) is explained in several words.
- *Componential analysis:* comparing an SL word with a TL word which has a similar meaning but is not an obvious one-to-one equivalent, by demonstrating first their common and then their differing sense components.
- *Synonymy:* "near TL equivalent."
- *Through-translation:* literal translation of common collocations, names of organizations and components of compounds. It can also be called: calque or loan translation
- *Shifts or transpositions:* change in the grammar from SL to TL, for instance, (i) change from singular to plural, (ii) the change required when a specific SL structure does not exist in the TL, (iii) change of an SL verb to a TL word, change of an SL noun group to a TL noun and so forth.
- *Modulation:* the translator reproduces the message of the original text in the TL text in conformity with the current norms of the TL, since the SL and the TL may appear dissimilar in terms of perspective.
- *Recognized translation:* the translator "normally uses the official or the generally accepted translation of any institutional term."
- *Compensation:* loss of meaning in one part of a sentence is compensated in another part.
- *Paraphrase:* the meaning of the CBT is explained. Here the explanation is much more detailed than that of descriptive equivalent.

- *Couplets:* the translator combines two different procedures.
- *Notes:* additional information in a translation.

(Newmark, 1998, p. 81-93)

2.3 Equivalence in translation

Postan (2019) understands the term "equivalence" in the context of translation as "When a word or phrase means exactly the same thing in both languages." Equivalence is further divided by Nida and Taber into two smaller categories: formal equivalence or formal correspondence (Nida and Taber, 1982, pp.158-159), and dynamic equivalence. Formal equivalence "focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content", unlike dynamic equivalence which is based upon "the principle of equivalent effect" (Nida and Taber, 1982, pp.158-159). A popular example of formal equivalence can be found in the translation of the Pali word deva as god/ goddess in English, and *chư Thiên* in Vietnamese. Unlike the English notion of god/goddess, or Vietnamese notion of Thiên, who seem to be perceived as doing only good things, deva are depicted and perceived as being capable of doing good as well as bad things to people, since there are many types of deva mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures.

3. Translation of Pali texts
3.1 Translation of Pali texts in Vietnam

It is not easy to trace back the history of translating Buddhist texts from Pali into Sino-Vietnamese (Chữ Hán), since there is no record preserved to date. As Le (2016, p.4) reports, the Buddhist text written in Sino-Vietnamese verse under the name *Đạt na Thái tử hạnh* was related to the *Vessantara Jataka* 547. This work can be seen as a starting point of the translation of the Pali canon into Vietnam. There is no further trace of such translated works from Pali in the Buddhist literature in Vietnam after that text. In the 1930s, Vietnamese began to move to Cambodia to work and began to embrace Theravada Buddhism, at which point Pali texts started to be translated into Vietnamese, especially the *Abhidhammapitaka (Luận tạng- A Tỳ Đàm)* by Mahathero Santakicco Tịnh Sự, with the full set of Vietnamese translation of *Abhidhammapitaka* released in 1990. The Most Venerable Thích Minh Châu, translator of the Vietnamese version of Pali Suttapitaka (Tạng Kinh), after completing his PhD in Sri Lanka and India in the 1950s, has devoted his time translating the Pali *Suttapitaka* into Vietnamese, first with the *Digha Nikaya (Trường bộ Kinh)*, then *Majjhima Nikaya (Trung bộ Kinh)*. The earliest Vietnamese translation of *Majjhima Nikaya* was published in 1972 by Van Hanh University Press. The official translation work for the Pali sutta collections, *Digha Nikaya (Trường bộ Kinh)*, was in 1991, *Samyutta Nikaya (Tương Ưng bộ Kinh)* in 1993, *Anguttara Nikaya (Tăng Chi bộ Kinh)* in 1996, and *Khuddaka Nikaya (Tiểu bộ Kinh)* in 1999. Thich Minh Chau's set of translation was later published online under the name *Đại tạng kinh Việt Nam (Vietnamese Great Pitaka)* together with other Vietnamese translations from the Chinese Tipitaka (full text available at <https://thuvienhoasen.org/a31409/dai-tang-kinh-tieng-viet-nam-truyen-va-bac-truyen>). In 2010, a new edition under the name *Đại tạng Kinh Việt Nam Nam truyền* was reserved purely for Thich Minh Chau's translations of *Pali Tipitaka*.

3.2 Translation of Pali texts by the Pali Text Society

Not much information about the Pali Text Society (PTS) translation activities can be found on their website www.palitext.com. From the information available, The Society was founded in 1881 by T.W. Rhys Davids "to foster and promote the study of Pāli texts". It publishes Pāli texts in Roman characters, translations in English and ancillary works including dictionaries, a concordance, books for students of Pāli and a journal. Most of the classical texts and commentaries have now been edited and many works translated into English. The English version of *Majjhima Nikaya* [The Middle-Length Sayings] in three volumes was produced by I.B. Horner in 1954, and reprinted in 2007.

3.3 English and Vietnamese translation of Majjhima Nikaya

As stated in 3.1 and 3.2 above, the English version of *Majjhima Nikaya* [The Middle-Length Sayings] was made by I.B.Horner in 1954, reprinted in 2007 by the Pali Text Society, both editions were in three volumes. Other available English translations of *Majjhima Nikaya* were *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* by Bhikkhu Ñanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi in 1995, and *A selected Anthology of 82 Suttas from the Majjhima Nikaya* by Bhikkhu Thanissaro in 1998. This research only focuses on the contents of the 1955 English version of *Majjhima Nikaya* produced by Horner.

The Vietnamese translation of *Majjhima Nikaya* was done by Most Venerable Thich Minh Chau. The first edition of the translated version was released by Van Hanh University Press in 1973, the second edition in 1986, both editions are in three volumes. The online edition of *Majjhima Nikaya* (available online at www.daitangkinhvietnam.org/taxonomy/term/106) was released in 2010. No other official translations of *Majjihima Nikaya* from Pali have been found in Vietnam so far.

4. Translation strategies/ procedures used in English version and Vietnamese version of MN

The translation strategies by Newmark, as stated in 2.2, involve *1) Transference:* which includes transliteration*, 2) Naturalization, 3) Cultural equivalent/ Functional equivalent/ Descriptive equivalent, 4) Componential analysis, 5) Synonymy, 6) Through-translation, 7) Shifts or transpositions, 8) Modulation, 9) Recognized translation, 10) Compensation, 11) Paraphrase, 12) Couplets,* and *13) Notes.*

The English translation of *Majjhima Nikaya* (MN) was produced by I.B. Horner, a Cambridge-trained linguist and researcher. Her translation was, to some extent, influenced by the procedures and approaches Western/European translators used for their translation. The strategies commonly found throughout her three volumes of MN translation are Word-for-word translation and Faithful translation. Word-for-word translation strategy can be found as tools to translate common terms in Pali like *assasā* (inhalation), *passasā* (exhalation), *gacchati* (walk, move), *pathavi* (earth), *apo* (water), *tejo* (fire), *vayo* (wind), to name but a few.

The Faithful translation strategy can be seen throughout the three volumes of the English and Vietnamese translation. As explained by Newmark (1998, p.46), Faithful translation "attempts to reproduce the precise contextual meaning of the original within the constraints of the TL grammatical structures, … preserves the degree of grammatical and lexical 'abnormality' (deviation from SL norms) in the translation and attempts to be completely faithful to the intentions and the text-realisation of the SL writer." The English translation for the verses in MN 131 are given below as an example.

"Atītaṁ nānvāgameyya,
The past should not be followed after
nappaṭikaṅkhe anāgataṁ;
The future not desired
Yadatītaṁ pahīnaṁ taṁ,
What is past is got rid of
appattañca anāgataṁ
The future has not come

(Horner's translation of Majjihima Nikaya,
vol.3, p.233)

The Vietnamese translation, produced by Most Venerable Thich Minh Chau, a Mahayana monk who spent time for his PhD in Theology in India, was completed using similar strategies: Word-for-word translation, and Faithful translation. Word-for-word translation strategy can be found in the translation of the terms in Pali like *assasā* (hít vào- inhalation), *passasā* (thở ra - exhalation), *gacchati* (đi, di chuyển - walk, move), *pathavi* (đất), *apo* (nước), *tejo* (lửa), *vayo* (gió).

Faithful translation strategy was also adopted by Minh Chau as the regular strategy for his translation. An example of Faithful translation is given below, with the same Pali verse taken from MN 131:

"Atītaṁ nānvāgameyya,
Quá khứ không truy tìm
nappaṭikaṅkhe anāgataṁ;
Tương lai không ước vọng
Yadatītaṁ pahīnaṁ taṁ,
Quá khứ đã đoạn tận
appattañca anāgataṁ
Tương lai lại chưa đến

(Minh Chau's translation of Majjhima Nikaya,
vol.3, p.336)

The examples of translation strategies used by Horner and Minh Chau, from the researcher's viewpoint, show that there is not much difference in translation strategies choice between the two translators even though they come from two totally different academic backgrounds. Since MN was classified as a "sacred text" in Theravada Buddhism, the translators, either of secular background (Horner) or of monastic background (Thich Minh Chau), would rarely (or never) intend to change or distort the meanings of the words in the original Pali version by any means.

As the researcher moved further into the content of the two translations and used the semantic and grammar contents of the 152 *suttas* (texts) as primary data for an analysis, he could identify differences in translation style and translation procedures in Horner and Thich Minh Chau. To give some examples as illustration, Horner frequently uses procedures, including Transference for words like Bhikkhu, Dhamma and Deva, *Descriptive equivalent* and *Through translation* to explain the meaning of Cultural-Bound Terms (CBT) in several words so as to clarify the meaning of the original names in Pali. Names of places are explained. For example, *Devadaha* (MN 101) is given as "a market town of the Sakyans", and *Kammasaddhamma* as "a market town of the Kurus".

The grammatical structures of Pali and English are quite different, since Pali possesses many grammatical cases and noun genders, while in English such grammar items are seldom found. To reach a "language compromise" for the best possible translation, Horner uses *Shifts or transpositions* to change the grammar structure from SL to TL to keep the original structure in Pali as close as possible. In Horner's three volumes of MN translation, the popular sentence *Evaṃ me suttaṃ* that begins a discourse is translated as "Thus have I heard", an example of transposition. Other popular strategies used by Horner are *synonymy*, i.e, to find out the "near TL equivalent" and put it into the translation, and *notes*, giving additional information. The most common form of notes in Horner's translation is footnotes, which appear at the end of almost every page of the translation.

Thich Minh Chau, in contrast, makes different choices in translation procedures and techniques for his translation. With words like *Bhikkhu, Upasaka and Upasika*, Minh Chau uses transliteration and naturalization to convey the meaning of these terms, with transliterated words *Tỷ Kheo/Tỷ Khiêu/Bí Sô, Ưu Bà Tắc, Ưu Bà Di*. These transliterations are not direct transliteration from Pali or Sanskrit, but "double transliteration" from their Chinese counterparts of 比丘, 優婆塞, 優婆夷 and are therefore totally distinct from their original Pali pronunciation when read aloud in Vietnamese. He also uses *Functional equivalent* and *Descriptive equivalent* as useful translation tools to convey the meaning of abstract terms like *citta* (translated as "Tâm") and *cetasika* (Tâm sở").

5. Problems arising in translation of religious texts

Thich Minh Chau (2000, personal communication) and Horner (1954), in their comments and prefaces of their translations of *Majjhima Nikaya*, report that religious translators (including themselves) confronted with translation issues commonly engage in strategies including tracking down the specific lexical counterparts in the target language (TL), understanding the cultural aspects implications of the message in the source language (SL), passing on the expected semantic message in the SL to TL, and identifying the most fitting system for effectively passing on these viewpoints in the objective language (TL). These strategies are discussed below.

5.1 Problems of equivalence in translation

As stated earlier, a major problem in translation is ensuring that the translation is equivalent to the original language. There are, however, different kinds of equivalence that have somewhat different effects and implications. While the problems vary somewhat in importance and are most serious when languages and cultures are maximally different, all the problems exist to some degree within cultures. It is worth looking at problems of Vocabulary equivalence, Experiential equivalence and Conceptual equivalence.

5.1.1 Vocabulary equivalence and dictionary meaning

The type of equivalence most commonly found is related to vocabulary, with the words used in two or more translations of the same genre. For example, the common Pali term *Dhamma* could be translated rather directly into Vietnamese as "Pháp" (Chinese equivalence 法), but rather less easily than with English, where there is no simple equivalent term, with "religious truth" being the closest in meaning. It is worth noting that while it might seem that vocabulary problems might be resolved with a good dictionary, which many translators consider to be a valuable resource, the solutions are actually not so simple. The dictionary, in the researcher's experience with religious translation, is often not the language of the common people.

A second aspect of the problem of vocabulary equivalence in relation to dictionary usage is that most words in the dictionary are defined in several ways or by several terms by different lexicologists. Therefore, it is not easy to know which of the terms to select for the translation, even in cases where the translators are monks with relevant academic and religious propagation experience. The problem is to choose lexis with the obvious meaning or that reflect the important nuances of the original term. It is difficult to find an equivalence for Pali terms such as *dukkha* and *asava* in both English and Vietnamese, with *dukkha* translated as "suffering" and *asava* as "canker". As Horner (1954) reports, the term *asava* may have totally different meanings, and should be translated into English as "canker", "fault", or "regression" in various contexts. These translated words reflect the meaning in context, but do not keep the original meaning of "discharge". Therefore, these translations do not reflect the true and exact meaning of the original Pali terms, since in Pali there are some uncommon philosophical words, which cannot be translated into other languages, especially into English (Rao, 2017). The Vietnamese translation of *dukkha* (as *"khổ"*) and *asava* (as *"lậu hoặc"*), in reality, are Sino-Vietnamese phonetic transcriptions of Chinese words 苦 and 漏 惑, with the original meaning of the latter in Chinese irrelevant to the present meaning in Vietnamese.

5.1.2 Experiential equivalence and conceptual equivalence

There are two other notable equivalence problems, those of experiential equivalence and conceptual equivalence.

By experiential equivalence we mean that in order for translations to be successful from one culture to another, they must utilize terms referring to real things and real experiences which are familiar in both cultures, if not exactly equally familiar. Werner and Campbell (1970) call this "cultural translation" as distinguished from linguistic translation. If two cultures differ so greatly in the nature of their objects, their social arrangements, their overall ways of life, or that objects or experiences which are familiar to members of one culture are unfamiliar to members of another, it will be difficult to achieve equivalence in the meaning of f linguistic statements, no matter how carefully the translation is done from the standpoint of the language involved. Horner, a Cambridge-trained scholar and linguist, being a Westerner, would have produced a translation heavily influenced by Christianity ideology, with words like *gods, hell,* and *paradise*. However, with her extensive experience as a Pali scholar and research fellow, her translations of Pali scriptures remain neutral and language-oriented, and there are no clear traces of Christian ideological influences in her works. Minh Chau, though he tried his best to make the best possible translation of the Pali Nikaya Collection, was still influenced by his traditional Mahayana Dhamma practice, and could not avoid the frame and bounds of Mahayana suttas when choosing possible terms for his translation.

In terms of conceptual equivalence, there are terms in Buddhism that are quite abstract since they are of philosophical terms and should be understood differently in various contexts. Horner (1954) gives as a typical example the translation of *Dhamma*, which may mean "the natural state or conditions of beings and things, what supports them, the law of their being", or *Dhamma* may mean "truth", with the derived meaning of religious truth. Instead of using different meanings for different contexts for translation, Thich Minh Chau applies a different way: choosing the best possible meaning out of the contexts, using the existing *Madhyagama*, the Chinese equivalent of *Majjihima* as a reference for the translation, and thus he translates the term Dhamma as "Pháp", actually a phonetic rendering of the Chinese word 法. In the *Majjihima Nikaya* series, the word *"Dukkha"* is translated into Vietnamese just as "Khổ", but it means both "suffering" and "stress".

It also conveys the meaning of "unsatisfactoriness" (Sự không hài lòng) - basically "getting what one does not want" and "not getting what one does want". In Vietnamese, such an acceptable but short equivalent for "unsatisfactoriness" is impossible. Therefore, the translation cannot involve all the meaningful aspect of the word as it is meant in Pali.

6. Suggestions and implications

This paper, within a time and length limit, can only touch on some parts of the translation process, procedures and strategies in the religious field, especially the vocabulary equivalence and cultural influence on translation. More research on cultural influence on translators' decisions about vocabulary and translation style for religious texts should be done. It is advisable that Buddhist text translators in any country should have sufficient language knowledge, good translation skills, and more importantly, a proper attitude towards the work of translation since translation of religious texts, especially texts from Pali, is a work that requires the contribution of many people in many aspects. As Nida (1964, p.50) advises, translation is not only an art but is also a science, so the translator must use his intuition and competence in all its types to combine them with his mastery of the mother language and target language to produce as accurate a translation as is possible. For translation strategies and procedures, specific to the religious register as mentioned in 2.2 above, to help them effectively translate religious texts, translators should adopt *Word-for-word translation* to preserve the SL word order as to keep the original text structure in the translation, *Faithful translation* to produce the precise contextual meanings of the original within the constraints of the TL grammatical structures, and *Semantic translation* to take account of the aesthetic value of the SL text. They should employ a thorough study of the source language text before making any attempt to translate it, constantly reevaluate the attempts made, and survey the target language readers to evaluate the translation's accuracy and effectiveness.

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