

Borne Confused? Transnational Challenges of Translation: Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused*

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in post-colonial and transnational translation. This interest stems on the one hand from the increasing cultural contacts in a globalizing world and on the other from the emphatic focus on representation of the Other in post-colonial theory. On the basis of such changes it can be assumed that translations change, too. If earlier there has been interest in translating the Other as 'exotic', it can be argued that attention is now paid more to the intricacies of intercultural dialogue.

In my article, I look at the Finnish translation of one book, namely Tanuja Desai Hidier's youth novel *Born confused* (2002) translated as *Sopivasti sekaisin* (2004).¹ I consider the strategies that the original and the translation use for making connections between the familiar and the strange. I also look at the ways in which intercultural dialogue is expressed in the novel and how this comes through in the translation. My main point is to look at what is borne across in translation: confusion or understanding?

1 The challenges of transnational translation

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in post-colonial and transnational translation (see e.g. Niranjana 1992; Dingwaney & Maier 1995; Robinson 1997; Venuti 1998; Bassnett & Trivedi 1998; Simon & St. Pierre 2000; Cronin 2004; Bandia 2008). This interest stems, firstly, from the increasing and intensifying cultural contacts in our globalizing world and, secondly, from the emphatic focus on the questions of alterity and representation of the Other in post-colonial theory. Where all translation can be seen as instigated by difference, or in Walter Benjamin's (2004, 19) terms *foreignness* – whether linguistic, cultural, geographical, or historical –, this preliminary difference is further heightened by historically contextual relations of power in the case of transnational and post-colonial translation. For example James Clifford (1997, 182; emphasis added) sees such cross-cultural translation as anything but neutral:

Cross-cultural translation is never entirely neutral; it is enmeshed in **relations of power**. One enters the translation process from a specific location, from which one only partly escapes. In successful translation, the access to something alien – another language, culture, or code – is substantial. Something different is brought over, made available for understanding, appreciation, consumption.

In the aftermath of such new orientations it can be assumed that these emerging theories and practices have transformational effects also on translating and translations. If earlier there has been (and continues to be; see Sengupta 1994, 172) interest in translating the Other as *exotic*, it can be argued that attention in translation is now paid more to multicultural contextuality and the intricacies of intercultural dialogue. Although I will

not be discussing the ethical aspects in more detail here, it can be said that this change has not taken place accidentally or involuntarily but through a serious engagement with the ethical and political dimensions of (post-colonial) translation (see Sengupta 1994, 172; Bassnett & Trivedi 1998, 17; Spivak 2004, 397; Bandia 2008, 230). Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (1998, 17) refer specifically to an “increasing awareness of the unequal power relations involved in the transfer of texts across cultures”, and it is in this spirit of awareness that my analysis is conducted.

In my article, I look at the Finnish translation of one book, namely Tanuja Desai Hidier’s transcultural youth novel *Born confused* published in 2002 and translated into Finnish by Sirpa Kähkönen² as *Sopivasti sekaisin* in 2004. It is one of the few youth novels in Finnish translation that come outside of the European – or more emphatically – Anglo-American cultural context. Therefore, it is an especially interesting case to study.³

First, I consider the **translation strategies** which the original and the translation use for making connections between the familiar and the strange, to manage the problems of non-equivalence (see Baker 1992, 20–43). Secondly, I will also look at the ways in which **intercultural dialogue** is expressed in the novel and how this comes through in the translation. Finally, my main point is to look at what is borne across in translation: **confusion or understanding**? Here, I am not looking for mistakes in the translation nor am I trying to evaluate it in terms of quality assessment. Instead, I will be discussing comparatively the strategies of intercultural dialogue adopted in both the original and the translation.

Born Confused is an Indo-American transcultural youth novel in which the main character is Dimple Lala, a seventeen-year-old girl preparing for her eighteenth birthday. She has been born in the United States where her Indian parents had in their youth moved to study and, consequently, stayed on. These two cultures, American and Indian, provide also the main settings for the book through comparing and contrasting Dimple and her American friend Gwyn. I will not try to summarize the plot of this massive novel – 500 pages in the original and 567 in translation – except to say that it is a novel of coming-of-age in a transnational environment of intercultural contacts.

2 Translation strategies

Cross-cultural translation is the more difficult the more removed the respective cultures are culturally and linguistically from each other. To overcome this difficulty, the translator uses various strategies in translating. In her book *In other words* Mona Baker (1992) outlines seven translation strategies.⁴ Here I discuss only one of Baker’s (1992, 34) strategies to illustrate the translation of *Born confused*, namely “translation using a loan word or loan word plus explanation”.

In analyses, translation strategies can be positioned on a continuum of cultural transpositioning. This term, developed by Sándor G. J. Hervej and Ian Higgins in their book *Thinking translation* (1992, 28), encompasses five different degrees of adaptation

of the source text on a scale from exotic (dominated by the source language) to cultural transplantation (dominated by the target language): exoticism, cultural borrowing, calque,⁵ communicative translation, and cultural transplantation (Hervey & Higgins 1992, 28–34). On this scale, Baker’s loan word strategy would correspond with **cultural borrowing**. Of interest here are the ways in which **both** *Born confused* and *Sopivasti sekaisin* engage with loan words/cultural borrowings. Cultural borrowings are, after all, “words that fill gaps in the recipient language’s store of words because they stand for objects or concepts new to the language’s culture” (Myers-Scotton 2006, 212). While the Finnish translation is an **interlanguage** translation of the original, the original, too, can be argued to engage in **intralanguage** translation in its strategies of representation.

2.1 Loan words

One of the common features of transcultural writing is the use of special vocabularies and terminologies of the respective cultures. In many of such works, these terms are also italicized to point out that they belong to another language or culture than the one in which they are introduced (Dickins, Hervey & Higgins 2002, 32). This has a foreignizing and even exoticizing function for “something foreign is by definition exotic” (ibid.).

Desai Hidier’s book, too, uses quite a lot of Indian words for religion, cultural phenomena, food and cooking, clothes and dressing, exclamations, and so on. In a word, it uses intralanguage translation strategies. What is noticeable in the novel, then, is that it does **not** italicize these terms but mainly incorporates them as such in the text. This seems to suggest that its position in relation to the cultures of both United States and India is not domestication or foreignization but that of equality.

There are, however, a few instances where such loan words **are** in Italics but their function can be seen more as emphasis rather than markers of cultural difference (cf. Levenston 1992, 94). Furthermore, there are differences between the original and the translation in their use of Italics. Consider the following example which includes one of the very few instances of such use of Italics in the original (Example 1):

Example 1:

that was the *pista on my kulfī*, the *keshar in my lassi* (BC 140; emphases added)

se oli **pistaasi minun kulfissani**, **keshar minun lassissani** (SS 165; emphasis added)

Here we can see an instance where the original uses Italics but in Finnish they are not used. This might be a simple oversight in the printing but it can also be interpreted as a strategic choice: italics are not used here because they are not used elsewhere – the expression itself is regarded emphatic enough. Here, the common practice of italicizing foreign words is applied in the original, but the section also plays with that usage in a more general way in the words by Dimple’s mother’s friend Radha:

In any case, we've got to hit the road, *Jack*. But thank you once more – this has been bloody *fantastic*. Seeing you two again, and meeting you at last, Dimple – that was the *pista* on my *kulfi*, the *keshar* in my *lassi* (BC 140; Italics original)

In the next case, the situation is reverse; the original does not use Italics but the translation does (Example 2):

Example 2:

she could have chosen a black boy, **a kala boy** (BC 377; emphasis added)

Kavitation olisi voinut esimerkiksi valita mustan pojan, **kala-pojan** (SS 427; emphasis added)

In this case the reason is evidently linguistic: the word *kala* has the meaning *fish* in Finnish, so it is differentiated from the Indian (for example Hindi) term denoting *black*.

2.2 Loan words and explanations

Another feature often combined with the use of italicized loan words is **explanation**, or gloss (cf. Nida 2003, 159). An unfamiliar word that is given in Italics can be explained right after the word (maybe in brackets). Sometimes even footnotes or a glossary may be provided (either by the author, translator, or publisher/editor). Although Desai Hidier does not generally use Italics for cultural borrowings, there are explanations in the text like in the previous example. In the following example, the explanation is more detailed and even contains another explanation (Example 3):

Example 3:

Inside, padded carefully between layers of tissue, was an unbelievably resounding *salvar khamees*, **one of those Indian outfits consisting of loose-fitting pants with a long top and scarf, or dupatta** (BC 85; emphasis added)

Paketissa oli monen silkkipaperikerroksen välissä uskomattoman raikuvanvärinen *salvar khamees*, **intialaisasu, johon kuuluu löysät housut, pitkä yläosa ja huivi eli dupatta** (SS 103; emphasis added)

Such explanations most often give the impression of being addressed to an outsider who does not have knowledge of a given cultural phenomenon. This may be a character in the book or it may be the implied reader as in the previous example where Dimple gives the explanation in an internal monologue. Like Italics, explanations have on the one hand a foreignizing function and on the other hand a pedagogical, familiarizing function.

Another case of this is in the next example but this time the explanation in the translation is more extensive (Example 4):

Example 4:

Delhi Bellies, a special punch invented just for Desicreate. [...] All **punch** is an Indian speciality [...]. The word comes from *panch*, which means *five* in Hindi, because it used to have five ingredients (BC 193; emphasis added)

Delhivelliä, ihan tätä Desi-tapahtumaa varten kehitettyä boolia. [...] **Booli** ylipäättään on intialainen erikoisuus [...]. **Sitä kutsutaan joissain kielissä punssiksi**, joka tulee sanasta *panch*, joka puolestaan tarkoittaa *viittä* hindin kielessä; intialaisessa punssissa oli tavallisesti viisi ainesosaa (SS 223; emphases added)

Here the translator has used another word – *booli* – to express the explanation as Finnish does not carry the same connotations for *punch* as English. Thus the added expression: “Sitä kutsutaan joissain kielissä punssiksi” [In some languages this is called punch]. Furthermore, this is one case where both texts use Italics to single out linguistic examples.

3 Transcultural competence

Many multicultural texts are also multilingual, they carry within them more than an occasional expression in an other language, or languages. Example 4 in the previous section was already an indication of such a feature in Desai Hidier’s book, when the explanation of *punch* was given through Hindi. There are also many instances in the novel where non-English phrases are not translated but are given as such, as cultural borrowings.

3.1 Untranslated phrases

On the level of vocabulary, the novel is not excessively using distinctly non-English words. It does, however, occasionally turn to untranslated words and phrases from Indian languages. The following is an example of such non-translation of a non-English phrase (Example 5):

Example 5:

Ketli sunder chhokri chhe (BC 86, SS 104; emphasis added)
[ketli (‘how much’ > ‘such a’) sunder (‘beautiful’) chhokri (‘girl’), chhe ‘is’]
[ketli (‘paljonko’ > ‘niin’) sunder (‘kaunis’) chhokri (‘tyttö’), chhe ‘on’]

This Gujarati phrase is not translated nor explained, and it is up to the linguistic competence of the reader whether he or she can understand it. For the sizeable Indo-American community, or NRIs (non-resident Indians), this may function as a marker of inclusion but for the reader not familiar with modern Indo-Aryan languages of India it signals exclusion, even if one is able to deduce the tone of the phrase or even guess at the meaning (although even the co-textual material is not of much help in this).

The next example of multilingual competence shows a feature common in modern urban Indian context, Hinglish and its variants (Example 6):

Example 6:

Ye kya model hai! one of the **Dominican** hip-hop boys declared. [...] A Dominican boy fluent in Hindi? (BC 159; emphases added)

Ye kya model hai! yksi **lattari**pojista ilmoitti minulle yllättäen. [...] Lattari-poika, joka puhui sujuvasti hindiä? (SS 186; emphases added)

Hinglish is the appellation for a version of Hindi which uses English words and phrases within it. There are terms for also Punglish for Punjabi English, Tamlish for Tamil English and so on. The word *model* within the Hindi phrase denotes the Indo-English community but here the familiar word also invites the non-Hindi reader at least to the periphery of that community; more so when later in the text there is an indication of the meaning of the phrase, “You are a model”. This feature is common in multilingual contexts but in translation studies this feature of hybridity has been developed only lately (see Wolf 2000; Wiersema 2004; Batchelor 2008).

This quotation serves also an example of the translation incorporating a cultural shortcut. The term *Dominican* is turned into a general term *lattari* [i.e. *Latino*] and its Caribbean specificity is lost; this is also an example of Mona Baker’s (1992, 26) category of translation by a superordinate. Even though Dimple of the novel is not herself very aware of the make-up of the Indian diaspora, the translation obscures the contextual underpinnings even more.⁶ Rather than being a feature of one translator, this point illustrates a more common cultural ‘blindness’ in the Finnish context (and in other contexts as well): different people are lumped together under convenient labels.

3.2 Transliterations

One special feature in multilingual texts amalgamating elements of languages with different scripts is **transliteration**. There are texts that use two or more scripts but more often such passages are transliterated. Here I will consider two examples and how they problematize the texts. Already in Example 3 there was the term *salvar khameez*:

Example 7:

resounding **salvar khamees** (BC 85; emphasis added)

raikuvanvärinen **salvar khamees** (SS 103; emphasis added)

In a way, one could take *salvar khamees* already as an English word as it has become quite a familiar one in many contexts just like *sari*. However, the form in which it is given, *salvar khamees*, is not a very common one. The name of the garment is conventionally transliterated in English as *salwar kameez*. The same applies to the Finnish context. It is difficult to say what might be behind this unorthodox usage. It may well be an idiosyncrasy or maybe it tries to capture some unspecified linguistic feature of speech.

Another example of unexpected transliteration is when Dimple’s father addresses her as follows (Example 8):

Example 8:

Baapray, beta (BC 86, SS 104; emphasis added)

This expression, meaning approximately “Oh my God, my daughter,” one encounters more often in the form: [*Baap re, beti.*] Here the issue is not even only about transliteration as there seems to be confusion about the gender suffix: *beta* should stand for “my son” whereas “my daughter” would be *beti*.

For a reader familiar with the transliteration conventions, such uncommon usage may cause problems. Otherwise, the transliterated forms are relatively similar to the more common ones, so there is no great risk of misunderstanding.

4 Intercultural dialogue

Apart from the more detailed, linguistic elements of the text, there are also more extensive textual features that bring out the intricacies of **intercultural dialogue**. Dimple’s best friend is a white American girl Gwen. At one point Dimple makes a comparison between the two (Example 9):

Example 9:

And if I was her reverse twin – the negative to her positive – that made me? The **Indian nightmare**? The American scream? (*BC* 12; emphasis added)

Ja jos minä olin hänen käänteinen kaksosensa – negatiivi hänen positiivilleen – mikä minä siis olin? **Intialainen painajainen**? Amerikkalainen mustelma? (*SS* 23; emphasis added)

Desai Hidier’s novel is not only a novel of coming-of-age but also an inquiry into cross-cultural identity. Here Dimple is contrasting her own position as an Indian-American to the ‘pure’ American experience: ‘American *dream*’ is placed face to face with ‘Indian *nightmare*’.

While questions of cultural identity are frequent in cross-cultural and diasporic communities, the influence they have extends to the host culture (or cultures) as well. Thus, when Dimple begins to find her Indianness, also Gwyn becomes interested in her cultural identity to the extent that she wants to become an Indian (Example 10):

Example 10:

being Indian isn’t just skin deep. [...] I can’t change my color. **But I can change everything else** (*BC* 278; emphasis added)

intialaisuus ei liity pelkästään ihonväriin. [...] Mä en voi muuttaa väriäni. Mutta **kaiken muun mä voin muuttaa** (*SS* 316; emphasis added)

The concept of identity as a construction – and as a hybrid construction as such – is common in a postmodern, post-colonial context. It can be a part of one’s life by necessity or by choice. Gwyn’s active and excessive – even fashionable – search for a new identity is an extreme example of this questioning, although in the end it is not realised in its full force.

5 What is borne across in translation: confusion or understanding?

In post-colonial translation theory, emphasis is on contextual specificity. If we as scholars, translators and readers do not focus on that, there is the possibility of creating intercultural confusion instead of understanding. We need to be reminded of the importance of remaining alert to the cultural specificities in writing, translating and reading. How does Desai Hidier's book, then, serve in this role?

Contemporary post-colonial transcultural fiction often deals with identity questions connected to the issues of tradition and modernity, problems of ethnocentricity and xenophobia, rewriting of history and identity, impossibility of return, and processes of cultural translation, unlearning and relearning. In this questioning, they tend not to offer simple solutions to these issues but confront the problematics in more complex ways. One example of this is Desai Hidier's book. I would like to conclude by briefly considering the title of the book. It is an indication of the perplexing nature of cultural hybridity.

Born Confused already designates this questioning as 'confusion'. This is the case also with the Finnish translation in which *sekaisin* also means 'to be confused'. Furthermore, the original title is a playful reference to a common and ironic phrase denoting hybrid South Asian diaspora in the form of an alphabetized litany: "American Born Confused Desi" in which *desi* ('land') means someone from India (or often generally South Asia). The question of **true** cultural identity is one of the most debated issues in diasporic contexts, and it is also an important theme in the novel. Thus, the title foregrounds the underlying position of hybrid South Asian diasporic subject.

The translation, however, makes a subtle detour from the original as it combines the word *sekaisin* with the adverb *sopivasti*, i.e. 'suitably'. Here the allusion is to the practice of arranged marriage and to suitable boys and girls to be married – another theme taken up in the novel (see *BC* 112–113; *SS* 134–135). What the translated title does, in contrast with the original, is to foreground not so much the **diasporic** but the **traditional** position of young Indian women. In this, it caters to the Finnish readership a more exoticizing image of the Indian diaspora – even though elsewhere it resists such tendencies. Then again, book titles are often used as marketing instruments in a much more blatant manner than the books themselves.⁷

To conclude, I would like to consider a version of the full ABC from which the original title is derived. The first generation emigrants coined the phrase "American Born Confused Desi" as an ironic comment on the second generation, this full list again plays with stereotypical images of the Indian diaspora in the United States – first in English and lastly in a desperate, bracketed Finnish rendition (Example 11):

Example 11:

American Born Confused Desi Emigrated From Gujarat House In Jersey Keeping Lotsa Motels Named Omkarnath Patel Quickly Reaching Success Through Underhanded Vicious Ways Xenophobic Yet Zestful (*BC* 108, *SS* 129)

[Amerikassa syntynyt, hämmentynyt, eteläaasialaista syntyperää oleva, Gujaratista muuttanut henkilö joka omistaa talon New Jerseyssä, johtaa useita motelleja, nimeltään Omkarnath Patel, saavuttaa nopeasti menestystä salakähmäisin, turmeltunein keinoin, muukalaisvihamielinen mutta intomielinen] (*SS* 129)

Here, the translator has chosen to present the original formulation as such but also **represent** it in Finnish in square brackets. This is understandable in the face of the ominous task of rendering the whole list alphabetically into Finnish. It would have demanded the adoption of several strategies

In my reading, the various features of the novel and its translation seem to suggest that they both engage with cultural translation in earnest. For example, there is a marked difference with some existing practices (such as italicization) of representing the Other. In this, both texts incorporate hybridity as a textual strategy. Cultural expressions are not organized excessively hierarchically but assume a more equal status. However, the final criteria of the success of a translation are not found in the text but in its reading. The question remains, are the readers of either the original or the translation willing and able to allow textual hybridity combining explication and understanding with some degree of uncertainty, incompleteness, and confusion?

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¹ References to these will be given in the text, preceded by *BC* (*Born confused*) and *SS* (*Sopivasti sekaisin*).

² Kähkönen is herself a prize-winning writer of youth fiction, a novelist, and an accomplished translator.

³ The emergence of transcultural youth novel translations coincides with the more general interest in translations of transcultural and post-colonial literature, as I have argued elsewhere (Kuortti 2005).

⁴ The seven strategies Baker (1992, 23–43) distinguishes are: 1 Translation by a more general word or superordinate, 2 Translation by a more neutral/less expressive word, 3 Translation by cultural substitution, 4 Translation using a loan word or loan word plus explanation, 5 Translation by paraphrase using a related word, 6 Translation by paraphrase using unrelated words, 7 Translation by illustration.

⁵ Calque is defined as “an expression that consists of TL words and respects TL syntax, but is unidiomatic in the TL because it is modelled on the structure of a SL expression” (Hervey & Higgins 1992, 33).

⁶ Desai Hidier is also a musician and has released a record *When we were twins: Songs based on the novel Born confused by Tanuja Desai Hidier* (Purple Bat Productions CD 881484141423); samples of the hybrid songs are available at <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/desaihidier>.

⁷ Also book covers are commonly used in this manner but in this case the covers look alike.