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**Translating Dialects: A Study of Comprehension Challenges in *Penneti Kathalu***

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**Abstract**

Translation serves as a vehicle for transmission of information produced in the source language to the target language. However, effective translation relies on the effective and unambiguous comprehension of the source text, which requires the translator to have mastery over both the source and the target language. Further, languages usually have regional and sub-regional dialects. These dialects have their authentic and unique lexis (vocabulary), idioms, syntactical structures, and cultural nuances. In addition, literary texts written in linguistic dialects further amplify the uniqueness and authenticity, and thus present comprehension challenges to the translator and thereby questions the translator's mastery over the source language. On the other hand, there has been an increased application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) based translation and Neural Machine Translation (NMT) in translation.

This article looks into the comprehension challenges encountered by the translator with regard to vocabulary in the translation of *Penneti Kathalu*. It also looks into the reliability of AI based translation and NMT in dealing with these comprehension challenges.

**Keywords:** Dialect, Artificial Intelligence, Neural Machine Translation, Comprehension, Translation

### **Introduction to *Penneti Kathalu***

P. Ramakrishna Reddy's *Penneti Kathalu*, first published in 1989 and reprinted in 2006, is a collection of twenty-five short stories. This collection is a notable contribution to Telugu literature, and it paints a factual and authentic picture of the life of people living in Rayalaseema region, especially Anantapur, Kurnool and Kadapa districts. The short stories are popular among the Telugu readers for their original depiction of the landscape and regional culture. The descriptions in these short stories showcase the reality of life and struggles of people in the region. Above all, *Penneti Kathalu* vividly describes the relationship of the people of this region with the river Penna. These stories revolve around the lives of people directly or indirectly influenced and affected by the river. The major themes include: challenges faced by the problems due to the uncertainty of the river; agricultural practices adopted in this region; socio-economic challenges faced by the people; the socio-cultural activities of the people.

### **Importance of Lexis and Dialect in Translation**

These short stories are written in a dialect of Telugu that is endemic to the region which has distinct lexis (vocabulary), idioms, collocations, and style. Some of these words and idioms are not in use now. As a result, they pose a potential challenge in comprehension, thereby the 'message' of the text as 'intended' by the author is not conveyed in translation. Describing the importance of understanding while analysing a text in his seminal work *A Textbook of Translation*, Newmark says "In reading, you search for intention of the text, you cannot isolate this from understanding it, they go together" (1981: 12). Newmark further observes the importance of understanding the lexis of the text as "the chief difficulties in translating are lexical, not grammatical, i.e., words, collocations, and fixed phrases and idioms. These include neologisms and 'unfindable' words". (ibid: 32) It can be understood that the message of the text as intended and conveyed by the source author through a particular word, idiom, or collocation can be translated and conveyed to the reader of the target text only through proper understanding of the words, which will eventually lead to holistic comprehension of the text. While translating literary texts written in dialects, it is only with proper understanding of the meaning, usage, collocation and cultural relevance of a word used by the author in the source text that the translator can arrive at an appropriate equivalent. Newmark stresses the importance of translating the dialect: "As a translator, your main job is to decide on the functions of the dialect. Usually, this will be: (a) to show a slang use of language; (b) to stress social class contrasts; and more rarely (c) to indicate local cultural features. (ibid: 195)

**Methodology:**

The present study employs an empirical and quantitative approach. Textual analysis of the short stories is done to identify the words that pose comprehension challenges. Following this, a Google form has been prepared to obtain data with fifty participants who mother tongue is Telugu to know their familiarity and understanding of these words. The data thus obtained is analysed to ascertain the unfamiliarity of these words leading to comprehension challenges. The same collection of words is also submitted to Google translate and Gemini to test the reliability of AI based translation tools and NMT in literary translation.

**Google Form**

Twenty-five (25) dialectical words are selected for Google form to collect data about the participants' familiarity and understanding of these words. The Google form has two sections. Section-1 collects data related to participants' profile, and Section-2 has twenty-five questions. The responses are obtained in a multiple-choice form with three options for each word: (1) I know the meaning of the word, (2) I know the word but I do not know the meaning, (3) I have never heard the word. Two points are awarded for knowing the meaning of each word, so the maximum score can be 50. Table-1 below presents the words selected for the Google form for this study.

1. పంపిణీ పంపిణీ పంపిణీ	6. పంపిణీ	11. పంపిణీ	16. పంపిణీ	21. పంపిణీ పంపిణీ
2. పంపిణీ	7. పంపిణీ పంపిణీ	12. పంపిణీ పంపిణీ	17. పంపిణీ పంపిణీ	22. పంపిణీ
3. పంపిణీ పంపిణీ	8. పంపిణీ	13. పంపిణీ	18. పంపిణీ	23. పంపిణీ పంపిణీ - పంపిణీ పంపిణీ
4. పంపిణీ పంపిణీ	9. పంపిణీ	14. పంపిణీ	19. పంపిణీ పంపిణీ	24. పంపిణీ

5. □□□□□□	10. □□□□□□	15. □□□□□ □□□□□□□□	20. □□□□	25. □□□□□ □□ □□□□□
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Table-1: List of words used in Google form

### Participants' Profile:

Data is obtained from fifty Telugu-speaking participants from the four districts of Rayalaseema – Anantapur, Kurnool, Kadapa Tirupati, and other Telugu speaking districts on voluntary basis. The following details related to the participants are collected in the Google form:

- Name of the participants
- Age of the participants in five groups: <20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, and 51 and above
- Native district: Anantapur, Kurnool, Kadapa, Tirupati, and Other.
- Number of years of residence in Rayalaseema in four groups: <5, 6-10, 11-20, 21 and above
- Habitation background in three categories: Rural, Urban, and Semi-urban

### Administration of Google Form

The Google form link is circulated on WhatsApp with clear instructions to the participants about the purpose of the study to keep them informed, and ensure integrity. They are also instructed to not consult any online help such as Google translate, or any other internet-based resources while answering. The google form link was open for accepting responses for one day.

### Analysis of the Google form Data

The observations of the obtained data are as follows:

- 8, 5, 33, 4 participants from 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51 and above categories have responded to the Google form.
- Off the fifty participants that gave their responses, 33, 8, 3, 0, and 7 are from Anantapur, Kurnool, Kadapa, Tirupati and Other districts respectively.
- Off the fifty participants that responded to the Google form, only 5 people have resided in Rayalaseema for less than 5 years. 6 participants have responded that they have resided in Rayalaseema between 11-20 years. The remaining 39 participants have responded that they have resided in Rayalaseema for more than 21 years.

- d. Of the total respondents, 14, 16 and 20 are from Urban, Semi-urban and Rural habitations respectively.
- e. The highest and lowest scores are 46 and 4 respectively. While the highest score is recorded by a participant who belongs to Rural background and has resided more than 21 years. Meanwhile, 9 of the top-10 scorers are from Rural and Semi-urban background.
- f. The average score, median and range are recorded as 23.08, 22, and 4-46 respectively.
- g. The average scores across age groups are: 16.5 (21-30), 20 (31-40), 23.3 (41-50) and 31 (51 and above)
- h. The average scores across the residence periods are: 20.4 (less than 5 years), 20 (11-20 years), 23.9 (21 years and more)

### Google Translate and Gemini

The words mentioned in table-1 are then translated using Google translate and Gemini to test the reliability for comprehension. Each correct response is awarded two points as done in the Google form. Google Translate could give correct responses to only two (02) of the given twenty-five words. Gemini could give correct responses to four (04) of the twenty-five words. The scores secured by Google Translate and Gemini are 4 and 8 respectively. The following table-2 presents the responses given by Google Translate and Gemini and the corresponding scores.

S. No.	Selected Word	Google Translate Response	Score	Gemini Response	Score
1	गच्छाचोरिन्दा वृक्ष	Gachchagorinda tree	0	<i>Caesalpinia crista</i> (or a similar prickly shrub/climber)	2
2	पहिले	First	2	Initially, at first	2
3	सूटो सल्लो	Take off the skirt	0	To get married, to perform a wedding	0
4	गुह्यमृग	Born	0	A mushroom that grows on anthills	0
5	गोन्ना	Gone	0	Songs (often folk songs or rhymes)	0

6	□□□□□□	Ignite	0	To give birth	0
7	□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□	Walking with a limp	0	To walk swaying from side to side (like walking on stilts or being unsteady)	0
8	□□□□□□	Fury	2	Fierce, intense, strong	2
9	□□□□□□□	Pullika	0	A small, thin stick or twig	0
10	□□□□□□	Setala	0	Mischief, naughtiness, playful pranks	0
11	□□□□	Jamb	0	Pride, arrogance, boastfulness	2
12	□□□□□□□□□□□□	Grassy	0	Like a haystack, in a messy or dishevelled way	0
13	□□□□□	Sin	0	Sin, wrongdoing, evil deed	0
14	□□□□□□□□□□	Don't be shy	0	Late afternoon or early evening (when the sun starts to decline significantly)	0
15	□□□□□ □□□□□□□□	It rained	0	It rained heavily	0
16	□□□□	Kasala	0	Brooms	0
17	□□□□□□□□□□	Jumping jacks	0	Death throes, the struggles before death	0

18	□□□□□□	Sittha	0	A game played with small stones or seeds (similar to Jacks or Knucklebones)	0
19	□□□□□ □□□□□	Coming up	0	To bring something up, to raise something (physically or as a topic)	0
20	□□□□	Maddy	0	Later, afterwards	0
21	□□□□□□□□	To be upset	0	To become ash, to be reduced to ashes	0
22	□□□□	Rontha	0	Complaint, grievance, sorrowful tale	0
23	□□□□□□□	Salad	0	Chatting, conversing, talking informally	0
24	□□□□□□	Paitala	0	The loose end of a sari (worn over the shoulder and sometimes used to cover the head)	0
25	□□□□□□□ □□□□□	Loss of saliva	0	To go to the fields (often for defecation in rural contexts)	0

Table-2: Google Translate and Gemini responses and scores

### Findings and Implications of the Data

The analysis of the data suggests the following inferences:

- a. Participants in the higher age group i.e., 51 years above have scored significantly higher scores than the younger age groups. This suggests that they have more lexical knowledge of the Rayalaseema dialect, and hence they can comprehend the short stories better than the other age groups.

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- b. Another finding is that participants with the longer residence period in the Rayalaseema region i.e., 21 years and more have scored better than the other residence period. This suggests residence period in a geographical region has direct relevance to lexical knowledge and comprehension.
  - c. Google Translate scored only 4 points, whereas Gemini scored 8 points. The scores of Google translate and Gemini are not only low but also significantly lower than the average score of fifty participants at 23.08, suggesting that AI based translation and NMT cannot provide right equivalents for dialectical words.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of the study suggest that the dialectical richness with its authentic lexis, idioms and collocations give rise to comprehension barriers in the translation of *Penneti Kathalu* at multiple levels. First, it affects the translator's ability to understand the specific words and their collocations leading to semantic opacity, which hinders comprehension. Second, it results in the translator's failure to interpret the cultural references resulting in contextual dissonance. Third, if the translator is unable to grasp the implied message conveyed in the source text through the creative use of the words by the author, it results in pragmatic misalignment. These aspect manifest into untranslatability. Newmark, while explaining the translation process, confers higher degree of importance to comprehension in visualising the objects and events at the referential level; Newmark also observes the need of translation of dialect words as "the translation of isolated dialect words depends on both the cognitive and pragmatic purposes for which they are used". (1981: 182) The translator has to be aware of these pragmatic purposes of the dialect when he/she can understand the source text clearly. Further, the findings of the study also underscore the limitations of the use of AI based machine translation and NMT applications for the translation of literary texts as these applications lack contextual knowledge, and as a result failed to provide right equivalents. This will not communicate the intended message or ensure readability to the target reader. Newmark's communicative translation holds relevance in this context as it prioritises the reader and context.

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<https://gemini.google.com/app/9f39859872322a82?hl=en-IN>