

Sikhism and the Translation Controversy: A Research Proposal (Sample)

Esty Thomas

Every year the world grows more connected and people get farther and farther away from their ancestors' languages and traditions. Religions, however, tend to be more tenacious than other tradition, and this raises an interesting problem: what to do when the adherents of a religion no longer speak the language of the scriptures? For most major religions, this has ceased to be a problem because their scriptures have been translated into all necessary languages. But Sikhism is not exactly a major religion, and as a growing number of adherents grow up speaking languages other than Punjabi, they must collectively address the question of what to do with their scriptures. Dusenbery (1992) provides an excellent overview of the controversy, which lies in part on the fact that Indian philosophy, which informs Sikhism, often considers the phonetics of a word to be just as powerful as its semantics (Coward, 1991). This is the basis for mantras, which are bits of language that when recited are thought to evoke spiritual transformation (Gonda, 1963). The implication of the Indian philosophical view, of course, is that translation of scripture is tantamount to neutering its power. So what should Sikhism do? I think that translation of the general scripture would be reasonable and worthwhile, although it would need to be extensively annotated, but the translation of mantras is not reasonable nor worthwhile.

In my paper, I will examine the solutions that two different religions have had for the problem of adherents no longer speaking the scriptural language. Christianity's approach has been to translate everything in sight; however, there was considerable controversy over the early English translations of the Bible. A notable and relevant instance of changing the approach to language in Christianity is the relatively recent council Vatican II, which permitted the use of the vernacular language in Catholic Mass, which up until then has been in Latin, which of course almost nobody spoke anymore (Tierney, 1965). Judaism's approach to the problem of scriptures in dead languages is to keep their holy books in Hebrew, at least for liturgical purposes, and to teach all their children Hebrew (Musaph-Andriese, 1981). Both solutions are with merit, as they have obviously worked to some extent, but each has issues. Christianity, for example, must deal with potential translation errors.

I will also look at the special case presented by mantras, the words that are intended to be spiritually transformative through focused, meditative repetition. It seems unlikely that most mantras found on the Indian sub-continent could ever be elegantly and usefully translated into, say, English. It does not seem like it would be impossible, however, to surround an untranslated mantra with sufficient commentary that its power could carry through the language barrier when recited as originally written.

Although challenges face any translation, the task is especially sensitive when connected to the holy words around which many base their lives. Despite this, successful translations of most of the world's holy books has been carried out (although not always used). There is no reason I see that the same could not apply to Sikhism, so long as attention is paid to particularly language-sensitive, meaning-rich pieces of text. I hope to be able to develop this argument further based on my research.