

Translations of the Buddha's Words into Thai: Exploring Challenges in their Linguistic and Cultural Dimension

In 2007-2008, while teaching Sanskrit in Thailand, I heard private criticisms about the translations of the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures, the Pāli canon, into Thai being hardly intelligible. Moreover, when discussing some observations about the translation practice of students, who were monks and traditionally trained in Pāli, another criticism was raised about the Pāli education in Thailand. An important point of the criticism was that the traditional monastic Pāli training and examination system supported a slavish clinging to fixed translation patterns.

The “liturgical” language Pāli is a Middle Indo-Aryan and thus Indo-European language. It is inflectional (e.g. with eight nominal cases), while Thai is isolating and consists mostly of monosyllabic words that are unalterable in form. The stereotypical use of these translation patterns creates an unnatural sounding “interim language” in the translation classroom which can be distinguished from native Thai by the presence of certain markers. These markers provide information about the grammatical structure (e.g. case, tense, number) of the Pāli source language.

Is there a tendency to adhere to the grammatical structure of the Pāli source text due to the traditional education of translators? If so, is this the (only) cause of some translations from Pāli into Thai being poorly intelligible? What are the actual factors that make existing translations into Thai less or more intelligible? The answer to these research questions have been sought by choosing one “Sutta” or discourse of the Pāli canon as a case study and analyzing and comparing nine different translations of this Sutta (Mahālisutta, DN 6) into Thai.

In my presentation, I will go into detail about various challenges of translating the Pāli canon into Thai, such as differences in the grammatical structures of source and target languages, treatment of technical terms and proper names, or the application of a cultural filter, e.g. the use of the royal register for the Buddha and his revered disciples.

Obviously, the cultural dimension of this topic, sometimes interwoven with the linguistic one, cannot be neglected nor overlooked, especially since the criticism mentioned above would never be heard in public. In addition, it seems unlikely that a Thai scholar would undertake this research due to the sacredness involved with the subject.

In order to dig deeper into the cultural dimension of this study, the comparative text study is complemented by interviews with persons involved with translating or editing the Pāli scriptures, with teachers of Pāli and with several Thai students in different subject areas. Moreover, some students and scholars have been given the task of translating a part of the above mentioned Sutta into Thai, or of altering a given Thai translation in different ways as an experiment. These methods aim at further exploring possibilities and limitations in the linguistic and cultural dimension and leave space for speculations about what kind of translations from Pāli to Thai might be seen in Thailand in the nearer future.