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Repetitiveness in Gita Translations

an essay by [Mani Rao](#)

The Bhagavad Gita is a part of the ancient Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata*, and a Hindu revelatory text. When it was revealed/recorded is anybody's guess. Astronomical evidence in the *Mahabharata* apparently points to circa 3000 BCE, while there is the view that it was written between the 5th and 2nd century BCE. The legend of its authorship is daunting—the “author” is Sage Vyasa, but writing the *Mahabharata* was not a task any mortal could accomplish, however sagacious, so the intelligent god Ganesha must have been the scribe. Ganesha insisted that Vyasa dictate without pause; Vyasa demanded that Ganesha must understand before he transcribed. As if these antecedents are not weighty enough, the 700 stanzas of the Gita are considered a revelation directly from Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, or God. A heavy tradition. And since the first translation of the Gita into English (1789: Charles Wilkins), hundreds of subsequent translations have created a tradition which every new Gita translator inherits, and attempts to take forward. A highly translated text may, arguably, set a translator free from literalness, and open up the space surrounding the text for new positions and perspectives. However, the status of Gita as holy text acts as a counter-force, steadies and stays the hand of every re-translator. Adherence to and departure from the Gita involve decisions about reverence, ambition, and freedom. In my view, every Gita translation tries to refresh the available material with a slight variation, but it remains too structurally restrained to adequately translate the semantic demands of the original, and too stylistically restrained to convey the delights of Gita's language. I demonstrate this with a textual analysis of two verses from well-known translations. But first, I construct what Gideon Toury calls “expectancy norms.”

The Gita's opening scene has two armies arrayed in a battlefield, waiting for a signal to begin the war. Warrior Arjuna is immobilized by doubt, so Krishna gives him a pep talk. The Gita is more a speech than a dialogue, for Arjuna's interjections punctuate Krishna's orations infrequently. The purpose of Krishna's speech is to resolve Arjuna's moral dilemma; therefore, comprehensibility is vital. Repetitions and switchbacks make the difficult conceptual terrain negotiable. A metrical composition, each of the stanzas is a couplet and/or a quatrain with 32 syllables; most of the half-lines have 8 syllables. Its meter is called “anuštubh,” a meter most identified with *vāc*, or speech.^[1] The meter is blank verse with no end rhymes, and full of internal symmetries: assonances, a lightly alliterative touch and words and constructions that resonate each other. These devices are not convoluted, ornate or display-oriented; they are integral to communication. When the Gita is sung or chanted, it is mostly to celebrate or memorize or remember the meaning. The phonemic value of the Gita is not a thing in itself. The Gita is not a *mantra* although it may be used as one. It is from these observations that I draw my expectancy norms. First, a translation must follow the rhythm of natural speech. Second, it must be communicative. Third, language must be alive, textured, and encourage the meaning. These expectations form the framework as I compare two verses from a handful of *Gita* translations:

1896. Sir Edwin Arnold. *The Song Celestial*.

1944. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*.

1962. Juan Mascaro. *The Bhagavad Gita: Translated from the Sanskrit with an introduction*.

1972. A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. *Bhagavad Gita As It Is*.

1999. Ashok Kumar Malhotra. *Transcreation of the Bhagavad Gita*.

2007. Graham M Schweig. *Bhagavad Gita: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song*.

Selections range from one of the early translations in 1896 to a recent translation within the last year, from prose to poetry to hybrid, and from translation with no footnotes or commentary, to translation with commentary, transliteration and a dictionary of synonyms. Prabhavananda-Isherwood and Malhotra highlight readability or coherence as a parameter, while Mascaro and Schweig also aim for cadence. Bhaktivedanta provides a lengthy commentary which I do not consider part of the translation.

The Gita presents concepts which do not have an exact correspondence in English. These include the incarnation of “Brahman” on earth, the immortality, indestructibility and reincarnation of “ātman,” the idea of “karma” across a continuum of lives and the balanced dyad of love and war. “Brahman,” often translated in English as “God,” is un-personified and neuter gender. Surveying how translators approach “ātman” helps to reveal the available options and variations. “Atman” is mostly translated as “soul” or “self.” Most consider “soul” as a more abstract concept, and “self” means different things for different people. Neither word communicates precisely. Sometimes when Krishna says “ātman,” he simply means “yourself” or “oneself,” and sometimes he means more; therefore, settling on either “soul” or “self” creates obscurity. Arnold and Mascaro translate “ātman” as “soul” regardless of what it refers to in the original. Thus, 6.12 in Arnold and Mascaro is about how to purify the soul, which is contrary to Gita’s teaching about the soul’s perpetual purity.

Bhaktivedanta translates ātman as “self.” Prabhavanda-Isherwood retain the Sanskrit terms. Malhotra is wide-ranging; a footnote explains that he will use a range of words – “consciousness,” “inner self,” “divine self,” “divine spark” – depending on the nuance. Schweig translates “ātman” as “[self]” – the parenthesis functions like quotation marks, and indicating that “self” is a placeholder, a term rather than a word. The appendix explains “self” as the best way to encompass all the meanings “soul, body, mind or heart.” While Arnold, Schweig and Malhotra refer to ātman as “it,” Prabhavananda-Isherwood, Mascaro and Bhaktivedanta personify ātman with the masculine pronoun “he” – gaining a personality but losing a gender. Schweig’s use of the neuter gender matches both source text and contemporary neutral language. On the whole, we are looking at a lack of one-to-one correspondence, often called untranslatability.

The verses I select for the textual analysis are from Chapter 2, which functions as a summary of the Gita. Translating Chapter 2 involves fundamental conceptual decisions. Krishna begins his teaching with 2.11, and the first three words bring up a tricky question—how to address Krishna. 2.11 introduces the concept of the soul’s immortality and the transience of life and death. 2.16 introduces the concept of divine reality and truth vs. corporeal unreality and delusion. I take the translation of words from Winthrop Sargeant’s *Bhagavad Gita*. Before looking at the textual analysis, syntactic differences between English and Sanskrit may be noted. Word order is interchangeable in Sanskrit—a shift in the word order during translation would not contribute to loss of meaning.

Bhagavad Gita 2.11

śrībhagavān uvāca

*aśocyān anvaśocas tvam prajñāvādāṃś ca bhāṣase
gatāsūn agatāsūṃś ca nānuśocanti paṇḍitāḥ*

śrībhagavān uvāca—Sri Bhagavan said; aśocyān—not to be mourned; anvaśocas—have mourned; tvam—you; prajñāvādāṃś—wisdom words; ca—and; bhāṣase—you speak; gatā—gone; āsūn—breath; agatā—not gone; āsūṃś--breath; ca—and; na—not;

anuśocanti—they mourn; paṇḍitāḥ—the wise (masc). [२]

The Sanskrit repeats the word for “mourn” in different forms, and pairs the “dead” and the living relative to breath that has gone and not gone—“gatāsūn” and “agatāsūn.” The living and the dead are similar, the presence of the prefix “a” makes all the difference. The tone is somewhat mocking.

Arnold

Krishna.
Thou grievest where no grief should be! thou speak'st
Words lacking wisdom! for the wise in heart
Mourn not for those that live, nor those that die.

Arnold's line has ten syllables, and uses the style of his era—e.g., “mourn not” rather than “do not mourn.” He follows the same order of ideas as the original until the first half of the verse, and then needs to flip the order for the second part of the verse. The Sanskrit verse says Arjuna's words sound wise but really are not, and although mouthing words of wisdom, Arjuna grieves for that which isn't worth grieving for. Arnold loses the innuendo of the original in his translation. He translates the last word in the verse, “punditah,” as one those who are “wise in heart,” locating wisdom in the heart.

Prabhavanda/Isherwood

SRI KRISHNA

Your words are wise, Arjuna, but your sorrow is for nothing. The truly wise mourn neither for the living nor for the dead.

Prabhavananda and Isherwood follow the format of a play script, with dialogue, and place the speaker's name at the center of the line. Arjuna's name is brought into the first line, emphasizing the address. Punditah has been translated as “the truly wise,” this brings out the contrast to Arjuna, who is only apparently wise. The prose has a rhythm to it, and includes the neither-nor pairing of living-dead. Literalisms are avoided, and “those who cannot be lamented” is summed up as its outcome, “for nothing.” In the original, the word for “living” is the opposite of “dead,” or “gone,” and this play is missing in the English translation. Literally, the words mean: “those in whom breath/life has gone,” and “those in whom breath/life has not gone.” The person is unaffected, immortal; only the breath is gone, or not gone—this comes from the concept of immortality. While Arnold too does not entirely catch the meaning, his translation comes close; “live” and “die” are the actions by those who live and die. By contrast, Prabhavanda/Isherwood's nouns “living” and “dead” have a finality to them which is far from the original.

Mascaro

Thy tears are for those beyond tears; and are thy words of wisdom? The wise grieve not for those who live; and they grieve not for those who die – for life and death shall pass away.

Today's reader-critic is more open to Arnold's use of “thou” because he is writing in 1896. When Mascaro uses “thy” and “thou,” it comes across as anachronistic. Krishna speaks like an Elizabethan: “are thy words of wisdom?” Perhaps the language also pitches the relationship between Arjuna and Krishna as love—God, and devotee, beloved to each other. The conversion of the statement into a question —“are thy words of wisdom?” helps capture the mildly chastising tone of the original. Although Mascaro tries to convey the idea that there is no need to feel sorry for “those beyond tears” because they do not need the tears, the combination of words makes no sense—it is as if the objects of Arjuna's sympathy have transcended their own tears, rather than them not needing Arjuna's tears. Mascaro achieves some rhythm by repeating “not for,” instead of translating as “do not grieve for,” and this double-negative is not in the original—but it is a shift that helps the meaning. It is towards the end of the verse that Mascaro nails the content, that the person does not ‘pass’, it is life and death that are transient. Mascaro's translation is quaint and awkward, but conveys the meaning.

Bhaktivedanta

The Blessed Lord said: While speaking learned words, you are mourning for what is not worthy of grief. Those who are wise lament neither for the living nor the dead.

“Blessed” and “Lord” resonate with the language of Christianity (and this is also ironic for Bhaktivedanta’s position as the founder of Isckon). “Not worthy of grief” overly reduces the status of those who should not be grieved for, it is as if the people who must not be grieved for deserve to be treated indifferently, rather than that the grief itself is irrelevant. Bhaktivedanta’s purport attached to the translation discusses the jibe in Krishna’s words, but the translation itself does not capture it. “While speaking” suggests simultaneity, as if Arjuna was half-lamenting and half-speaking; the accurate construction would have been “you speak...but.” The translation does not convey the main idea of the passage of life and death.

Malhotra

(2.10)...., Krishna said to him:

(2:11) Do you think you are being wise by grieving for those who do not deserve grieving. The wise do not mourn the living or the dead.

Malhotra takes the address, “Krishna said” into the previous verse 2.10, adds indicators or interjections not in the original. He adds the interrogative to catch the tone of voice of the original, and conveys Krishna’s mocking tone. Malhotra drops the detail about Arjuna having just spoken profoundly, because it is rather obvious that Arjuna has been speaking, and because the jibe is a response that implies Arjuna’s pomposity/profundity. Malhotra catches the tone but misses the idea of the passage of life and death.

Schweig

The Beloved Lord said:

You have grieved for that
which is not worthy of grief
and yet you speak words
of profound knowledge.

The learned grieve
neither for those
who have passed on,
nor for those
who have not departed.*

*Footnote: Krishna’s teachings commence with this verse.

Schweig’s indentation visually conveys the quatrain structure. But the first stanza is really prose broken up into four parts, while the second stanza makes better use of the poetic line to create a binary rhythm. The beginnings of both stanzas nicely play off of each other: “you have grieved for that” vs. “the learned grieve.” Their contrast is achieved in the inversion that follows immediately, when the word “neither” is in the successive line rather than in the same line as “grieve.” The footnote is unnecessary. Schweig addresses Krishna with deference, but adds the idea of love with “Beloved,” which brings in the presence of the devotee-author-translator. The translation focuses attention on the idea of “gone” or “passed on.” Schweig translates “*anvaśocas*” into past tense, which follows the original but is unnecessary detail, adding nothing to the sense, and taking away from the possibility of “you grieve for that.” Schweig could quite easily have dropped the word “departed” in the second stanza as it would have been implied, but he does not do that, it is obvious he is being faithful to the letter. He pays attention to the word “*prajnya*” (knowledge), but ends up with a clumsy construction in English, “words of profound knowledge.” Schweig captures the invariant core of the Gita verse, but does not succeed in natural speech rhythms.

Summary of comparison 2.11

If the passage of life and death is considered the invariant core of the meaning, Arnold, Malhotra, Prabhavanda/Isherwood and

Bhaktivedanta miss it, Schweig and Mascaro catch it. All translators interpret “punditah” (priest, scholar) as “wise,” Schweig integrates knowledge into the idea with “learned.” Arnold’s translation reads like spoken verse and his shifts do not result in misrepresentation, Malhotra’s is the least literal and the most natural but not striking, Prabhavanda’s is natural, Bhaktivedanta’s is unweildy and uncompensated by accuracy, Mascaro’s translation is a little quaint, Schweig’s is more clear but restrained by fidelity to the letter and structure for structure’s sake. Nobody comes close to showing the living and the dead as a closely related set.

Bhagavad Gita 2.16

*nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ
ubhayor api dr̥ṣṭo. antas tv anayos tattvadarśibhiḥ*

na—not; asataḥ—of the nonexistent/of the nonreal; vidyate—it is found; bhāvas—being, coming to be, becoming, na—not; abhāvah—not being, not existing, not becoming; vidyate—it is found; sataḥ—of the real/true/existent; ubhayoh—of both; api—indeed, surely, also, even; dr̥ṣṭah—seen, perceived, discerned; antas—certainty, conclusion, end; tu—indeed, but; anayoh—of these two; tattva—truth, reality, thatness; darśibhiḥ—by the seers/perceivers/discerners/knowers.

The symmetry of this verse cannot be missed. The sound pairs of “nāsato” “sataḥ” and “bhāvo” “nābhāvo” are not just the rhythm, but the message that contrasts truth with delusion. The first part of the verse is complex—what “is” and what “is not” could refer to anything—living/non-living, animate/inanimate, fact/lie. From the materialist perspective, the physical world “is” and the “spiritual” world is conjecture, and the translation could be understood as a confirmation of materialism. Besides, it seems unsurprising for that which is non-existent to be non-existent. To convey this message adequately in English, one has to turn to etymology—“truth” in Sanskrit is derived from the verb “to be.”

Arnold

(Lives in the life undying!) That which is
Can never cease to be; that which is not
Will not exist. To see this truth of both
Is theirs who part essence from accident,
Substance from shadow.

Arnold translates lines 1 and 2 to the letter, except for inverting the order. Lines 3 and 4 are unintelligible. Perhaps Arnold means: “to see the truth of both is *their role*, who part essence from...” Arnold also revises the message, introducing “substance” and “shadow,” and “accident” is incomprehensible. Arnold’s seer separates substance from shadow, whereas in the original no such distinction is made, the seer sees the truth of both.

Prabhavananda/Isherwood

That which is non-existent can never come into being, and that which is can never cease to be. Those who have known the inmost Reality know also the nature of is and is not.

Prabhavananda and Isherwood translate “asataḥ” and “sataḥ” as non-existent and “that which is” – which does not help communicate. The translation of “tattva” into “inmost Reality” is acceptable although incomprehensible to the general reader. The capital R reality suggests a different reality, *the* reality. Lines 3 and 4 of the original do not say much, except that seers can tell the difference. “Darśitah” is a noun, and has no tense, but the present tense would be most apt; the change from those who know to those who “have known” refers to a past accomplishment which may no longer be applicable.

Mascaro

The unreal never is: the Real never is not. This truth indeed has been seen by those who can see the true.

Mascaro follows the negatives in the original, and succumbs to the esoteric capital R real to communicate an other reality. The

insertion of “indeed” follows the Sanskrit to the letter. Sanskrit uses emphatic interjections such as “indeed,” abundantly, they act primarily as fillers. When carried over into the English, “indeed” seems stilted. The second line is obscure—what else would those who see the true see, but the truth? And what is the difference between “truth” and “the true,” except that the latter is grand?

Bhaktivedanta

Those who are seers of the truth have concluded that of the nonexistent there is no endurance, and of the existent there is no cessation. This seers have concluded by studying the nature of both.

Bhaktivedanta’s elaboration on the process undergone by seers gives an impression of a group of seers examining the real and coming up with a collective ‘conclusion.’ It also seems as though there are two kinds of seers – seers of untruth, and seers of truth. Bhaktivedanta presents the message as the conclusion of seers, rather than the gift of divine vision. The nouns “cessation” and “endurance” are difficult to understand—Bhaktivedanta has this construction because he begins the line with “of the.”

Malhotra

The nonexistent never comes into being and the existent does not ever cease to be. The sages who clearly distinguish this fact are the discerners of truth.

Malhotra’s translation is close to Prabhavanda’s and Isherwood’s, using the same inversion of order, and dipping into the common stock of words most translators use—“existent” and “nonexistent”—blurry words. Malhotra expands on the less important part of the verse, the part about the seers, calls them “sages,” locates them in the past and alienates his readers by placing the possibility of truth and knowledge far out of their reach.

Schweig

Of the impermanent
one finds no being;
one finds no nonbeing
of the permanent.
Indeed, the certainty
of both of these
has been perceived
by seers of the truth.

Schweig does a refreshing translation with “impermanent” and “permanent,” much more communicative than “real” or “existing.” Schweig has structural restraints, and the insubstantial lines 3 and 4 expand into the superfluous “certainty of both of these,” when all that needs to be said is seers know this to be true. Schweig positions the seers’ perception in the past tense, implies there may be two kinds of seers, and includes “indeed.”

Summary of comparison 2.16:

Mascaro’s translation is the most poetic, but as incomprehensible as the rest of the translators except for Schweig. Schweig’s translation communicates, but is structurally constrained.

Conclusion

Arnold writes metrical poetry, and Schweig’s text looks like poetry. The lack of meter would put Schweig’s text in the category of “free verse,” but there are no poetic aspects of sound/rhythm/resonance or space. In Sanskrit, compounding words can help fit the line into the beat; attempting to follow a structure in English results in either obscure density or looseness. Arnold and Schweig are constrained by their structures. Mascaro’s text is poetic but quaint and obscure. Malhotra communicates but is prosaic. Prabhavanda and Isherwood use a natural speech, but with the standard obscurities. Bhaktivedanta’s translation is obscure and works only when assisted by lengthy

commentary, which raises questions about the place of translations within the activity of disseminating the Gita message. All translate stanza by stanza, do not tap the meaningful language-play of the original, and do not harness the potentialities of sound/resonance and space of the language translated into.

What distinguishes one translation from another, then, is the lineage of the translator, the credentials of the Sanskritist or religious leader, and the packaging for which the title is one clue. Arnold has the time and place of a Western initiate into Eastern mysteries – “Bhagavad” (literally, God’s) becomes “celestial,” which contrasts with the Hindu idea of Krishna as the earthly incarnation of Vishnu. Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood’s title, “*The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*,” is literal, but changes the Sanskrit structure of “God’s Song” into the more flowing structure of “The Song of God,” reminiscent of “Song of Songs.” The use of the double title echoes the collaboration, each translator as cultural representative. Mascaro’s title, “*The Bhagavad Gita: Translated from the Sanskrit with an introduction*,” indicates that this book provides “more” than a translation. Bhativedanta’s title, “*Bhagavad Gita As It Is*,” repositions other translations as distortions, and sets itself up as authentic. Malhotra’s “*Transcreation of the Bhagavad Gita*” could reflect that Malhotra defines translation as an endeavor in literalness. Schweig’s title “*Bhagavad Gita: The Beloved Lord’s Secret Love Song*” has a devotional tone. The word “secret” in the title emphasizes the point that this text comes directly from “The Beloved Lord,” and that the book is an intimate record; this detail generates both trust (because the translator has received secret communication from Krishna), and mistrust (because he calls a secret what has been common knowledge for centuries). The “look” of each book is different too. Malhotra’s looks like a study guide, which was its intention. Schweig’s comes with an extensive translator’s note, thus targeting a more sophisticated reader. Bhaktivedanta’s book is part of Isckon’s religious program. At the textual level, however, the differences are not marked. Understanding the Gita continues to involve a translation as well as a commentary for help with the more difficult parts. All translations focus on translating the meaning, not the poem, so the only way for a reader to appreciate Gita’s poetry is to study Sanskrit.

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[1] Pratibha M Pingle, “Vāc and Metres” In *The concept of Vac in the Vedic Literature*. “One of the reasons for this common

identification of Anustubh and speech may be that the language has thirty two consonants and the Anustubh has thirty two syllables (179).

“By its identification with speech, the Anustubh metre is elevated to the position of Vāc itself. So it was further thought that if one starts with the Anustubh verse and ends with the Anustubh verse, he, as if, starts with speech and ends with speech” (180). [\[Back\]](#)

[2] Winthrop Sargeant, *The Bhagavad Gitā* (Albany: SUNY, 1994). [\[Back\]](#)

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