

Applicability of Google Translate in Sinhalese Diglossic Contexts

Jayamal de Silva¹

Diglossia is the co-occurrence of two different varieties of a language, for distinct functions, throughout a speech community. Sinhalese is one of the languages which depict this phenomenon, with standard written Sinhalese and spoken Sinhalese as the two varieties. Nevertheless, the necessity of employing both varieties occur in certain contexts, for example, in the translation of prose work into Sinhalese, in which narrative is generally translated into standard written Sinhalese and dialogues are translated into spoken Sinhalese, unless the necessity of foreignizing or classicizing occurs. The aim of this study has been to examine the response of Google Translate in the translation of prose work from English into Sinhalese, in which the diglossic nature of Sinhalese language should be taken into consideration. Accordingly, the study is based on Sinhalese translations of selected parts of English prose texts, produced by Google Translate. The selected parts of source texts consisted of both narratives and dialogues, and pertained to different social and cultural backgrounds. The Sinhalese translations were compared with relevant source texts and an analysis was conducted in order to determine their appropriateness. The findings of this study indicate that the diglossic nature of Sinhalese language is not given consideration in Google Translate and both written and spoken varieties are employed inconsistently in producing a translation. This inconsistently is identified to occur in both sentence level and paragraph level, with a blend of morphological and syntactic attributes of standard written Sinhalese and spoken Sinhalese. Incompatibility with diglossic languages can be adjudged a significant weakness of Google Translate, which stands parallel to the failure of producing natural output consistently. Developing the option for the user to select the required variety is identified as the measure to solve this issue.

Keywords: dialogues; Google Translate; narrative; prose translation; Sinhalese diglossia

¹ Department of Linguistics, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, jayamals@kln.ac.lk