



From Gujarati to English: Historical Context and Processes of Writing and Translation in The Story of My Experiments with Truth

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the historical context and the processes of writing and translation that shaped the English version of Mahatma Gandhi's *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, originally written in Gujarati as *Satya Na Prayogo Athva Atmakatha*. Set in the mid-1920s, after the suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement and Gandhi's early release from prison, the period of political calm allowed Gandhi to focus on constructive work and personal reflection. Urged by close associates, he began serializing his spiritual and moral experiments weekly in *Navajivan* from November 1925 to February 1929. Written from memory without outlines or revisions in the modern sense, the Gujarati text emerged as an organic, honest, and conversational narrative intertwined with ashram life. Simultaneously, Mahadev Desai translated each chapter for *Young India*, with Gandhi personally reviewing and approving every line, making the English version an authorized text prepared under direct authorial guidance. Using Peter Newmark's framework, the paper analyzes Desai's method as a balanced combination of faithful and semantic translation, with communicative elements, preserving Gandhi's tone and intention while ensuring clarity, elegance, and accessibility for global readers. Subtle differences between the two versions—such as smoother phrasing and softened cultural idioms in English—are highlighted through Tridip Suhrud's *Critical Edition*. The study shows how these historical, compositional, and translational factors explain the enduring power of the English text as both faithful to the original and adapted for a wider audience.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, autobiography, translation process, Mahadev Desai, historical context, faithful translation, semantic translation, Gujarati literature, English translation, Peter Newmark, Tridip Suhrud, Sabarmati Ashram, Non-Cooperation Movement



Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (original Gujarati title: *Satya Na Prayogo Athva Atmakatha*) is one of the most widely read and influential books of the twentieth century. Written between 1925 and 1929, it tells the story of Gandhi's life from childhood to the year 1921. The book does not focus on major political events but on his personal "experiments with truth"—moral, spiritual, and practical efforts to live by truth, non-violence, and self-discipline. It has sold millions of copies, been translated into many languages, and remains a classic in spiritual and moral literature.

The English version, translated by Mahadev Desai, holds special importance. Gandhi wrote the original in Gujarati, his mother tongue, because he believed his inner voice (*atmanaad*) spoke most clearly in it. At the same time, he wanted the message of truth and *satyagraha* to reach English-speaking Indians, people abroad, and the global audience. English was the main language of administration, education, and international communication under British rule. Desai translated each chapter almost immediately, and Gandhi personally checked and approved every line. This close collaboration made the English text not just a translation but an authorized version guided by the author himself.

The book appeared in a unique historical moment. After the Non-Cooperation Movement ended suddenly in 1922 due to violence at Chauri Chaura, Gandhi was arrested, imprisoned, and released early in 1924 because of illness. From 1924 to 1925, India entered a quieter phase. Gandhi stepped back from active politics and turned to "constructive work"—promoting khadi, fighting untouchability, improving Hindu-Muslim relations, and building self-reliance through ashrams. This period of calm and inner reflection gave him space to write. Close associates, especially Swami Anand, editor of *Navajivan*, urged him to share the inner spiritual journey behind his public actions. They felt the world knew Gandhi only as a leader and needed to understand the moral experiments that shaped his philosophy.

Gandhi began writing in late 1925 after a moral crisis at Sabarmati Ashram. The chapters came out weekly in *Navajivan* (Gujarati) from 29 November 1925 to 3 February 1929, and in *Young India* (English) starting 3 December 1925. The writing and translation happened side by side—a rare and powerful process in literary history.



This research paper examines the historical context of the mid-1920s, the simple and spiritual process Gandhi used to write the Gujarati original, the parallel process of translation into English, and the translation methods followed by Mahadev Desai. Using Peter Newmark's framework, the paper shows how Desai combined faithful and semantic translation with communicative elements to keep Gandhi's honest voice while making the English clear, elegant, and readable for a wider world. These background factors explain why the English version is both true to the original and slightly different—smoother and more accessible globally.

By studying these elements, we gain a deeper appreciation of the English text as a living document shaped by history, personal discipline, and careful translation choices. This foundation prepares us for closer analysis of language, style, and themes in later chapters.

Historical Context

In the early 1920s, India was under British colonial rule. The Government of India Act of 1919 gave some reforms, but people were unhappy because of high prices, the Rowlatt Act of 1919, and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Gandhi started the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920. Millions boycotted British schools, courts, and cloth. The movement stopped suddenly in February 1922 after violence at Chauri Chaura. Gandhi was arrested in March 1922, sentenced to six years, but released early in February 1924 because of illness.

After his release, Gandhi moved away from big politics. He focused on “constructive work” like promoting khadi (hand-spun cloth), fighting untouchability, improving Hindu-Muslim relations, and building self-reliance through ashrams. This quiet period from 1924 to 1925 gave him time for personal reflection. Friends like Swami Anand, editor of Navajivan, asked him to write his life story. They felt people saw Gandhi only as a political leader and needed to know his inner spiritual journey.

Gandhi agreed in late 1925 after a moral crisis at Sabarmati Ashram. He chose to write in Gujarati because his inner voice spoke best in his mother tongue. At the same time, he wanted the book to reach English-speaking Indians and people abroad. English was the language of power and global communication under British rule. Many Indian leaders wrote or were translated into English. Gandhi's journals—Navajivan in Gujarati and Young India in



English—were published together for the same reason. The book was therefore planned in both languages from the start.

Process of Writing the Gujarati Original

Gandhi did not write like modern authors who plan, draft, revise, and edit many times. His method was simple, weekly, and spiritual. He wrote from memory without diaries, notes, or old papers. He trusted his inner voice (atmanaad) to guide him. He wrote one chapter every week, usually early in the morning at Sabarmati Ashram, sometimes by hand and sometimes by dictation.

The writing started on 29 November 1925 in Navajivan. All 166 chapters came out weekly until 3 February 1929. The book covers Gandhi's life only up to 1921 because later events were too recent and not yet complete in his view. There was no fixed outline. Chapters came as memories arose, sometimes jumping in time to focus on a moral lesson.

The tone is simple, honest, and conversational. Gandhi shares his childhood fears, mistakes in marriage, experiments with food and brahmacharya, doubts, and spiritual growth with full openness. The writing became one more “experiment with truth.” He wrote while living the principles he described—fasting, praying, teaching, and working for the nation. Readers responded to each chapter while he wrote the next ones. This made the book feel alive and dialogic.

Scholars like Tridip Suhrud note that the process was organic and non-linear. The Gujarati text feels intimate, rooted in Gujarati culture, religion, and daily speech.

Process of Translation into English

The English translation happened at the same time as the writing. This is very rare in literature. Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's trusted secretary since 1917, translated each Gujarati chapter soon after it was finished. The English versions appeared weekly in Young India starting 3 December 1925, just days after the Gujarati began.

Gandhi read and approved every line himself. This made the English text an authorized version under his direct guidance. Desai was like Gandhi's literary partner—they shared language, values, and deep understanding.

Most chapters were translated by Desai. Some later chapters (XXIX to XLIII of Part V) were done by Pyarelal Nayyar because Desai was busy with other work in 1928–29.



The book came out in two volumes from Navajivan Publishing House: Volume I (Parts I–III) in 1927 and Volume II (Parts IV–V) in 1929. The English title became *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. This order puts “Autobiography” first, unlike the Gujarati where “Experiments with Truth” comes first. This small change makes it feel more like a life story for English readers.

A revised edition came in 1940. Desai and V.S. Srinivasa Sastri improved punctuation, style, and smoothness without changing facts. This edition became the standard one used today.

Tridip Suhrud’s *Critical Edition* (2018) shows small differences. The Gujarati is more intimate and rich in local idioms, proverbs, rhymes, and images. Some cultural flavor is softened or lost in English for smoothness and clarity. Still, the English version carries Gandhi’s authentic voice because of his close supervision.

Methods of Translation

Mahadev Desai used a balanced approach. Using Peter Newmark’s framework, his method combines faithful translation and semantic translation, with some communicative elements.

In faithful translation, the translator keeps the exact contextual meaning, author’s intention, tone, and message as much as possible within target language rules. Desai stayed loyal to Gandhi’s simple, honest, self-critical tone and spiritual lessons. He preserved the moral core without adding or changing facts.

Semantic translation allows more flexibility for style and beauty in the target language. Desai made English clear, elegant, and natural. He adjusted sentences, removed awkward literal parts, and smoothed the flow. For example, some Gujarati proverbs or rhymes become simple English sentences. This makes the text readable for global readers without losing meaning.

There are also touches of communicative translation, which aims for the same effect on target readers as the original had on source readers. Desai wanted Gandhi’s message of truth and non-violence to touch English readers deeply. He made the language dignified and modern.

Desai avoided word-for-word or purely literal methods, which would sound clumsy. He also avoided free or highly idiomatic translation, which would change Gandhi’s voice too much. Suhrud calls the English version “authorised and outstanding” but notes the Gujarati remains more culturally rooted.



This balanced method worked because the goal was to share Gandhi's experiments widely. A too-literal translation would be hard to read; a too-free one would lose authenticity. Gandhi's approval ensured the English text carried full authority.

Conclusion

The historical context of the mid-1920s—after Non-Cooperation, imprisonment, and a turn to constructive work—gave Gandhi space to write. The weekly, memory-based process made the book honest and spiritual. The parallel translation by Desai, with Gandhi's supervision, made it reach the world quickly. The faithful-semantic method kept the soul of the original while making it clear and powerful in English.

Together, these elements explain why the English version has lasted nearly a century. It is both the same book as the Gujarati and slightly different—smoother and more global. This background helps us appreciate the English text fully and prepares for deeper study of its language and themes.

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