

Literary Translation 2/1

The Translation of Poetry

1. Introduction

The translation of poetry may be defined as relaying (communicating or passing on) poetry into another language. Poetry is regarded here as a genre of literary texts. Features of poetry can be sound-based, syntactic or structural or pragmatic in nature. Some are syntactic or structural, such as the parallel verb—adjective—noun syntax and high-rise—fall tones. Others are more pragmatic in nature, such as ambiguity and multiple meaning, or image and metaphor. Poetry may deviate from prose norms of syntax or collocation. Moreover, poems often combine many of these features in a restricted space, making them potentially the ‘most complex of all linguistic structures’, with a ‘special relationship between form and meaning’ (Holmes 1988: 9, Boase-Beier 2009). The communicative effect of poetry is as made up of more than denotative meaning. It is a communicative purpose that is emotive or spiritual, say, rather than just informative or transactional. No one of these aspects, however, is enough to define a message as a poem, and each may also occur in other genres (literary prose, say, or advertisements), though the more aspects it has, the more ‘poetic’ it is likely to seem. In practice, however, communicators usually agree quickly which genre is operating. Important here are ‘metatextual’ features whose main role is to define genre, such as framing signals announcing the genre (e.g. the word *Poems* on a book cover), or a special tone of voice when speaking or graphic layout when writing.

2. Translating poetry

The aim behind translating poetry usually is to publicize a poet or poets. Translators of poetry are mainly concerned to interpret the layers of meaning of a source poem, to pass on this interpretation reliably, and/or to ‘create a poem in the target language which is readable and enjoyable as an independent, literary text. However, the translation of poetry involves challenges.

The translation of poetry is one of the most challenging and demanding tasks in literary translation due to the importance of both form and content. It has been a topic of debate within the field of translation studies and literary translation for a long time. Yet, a great deal of discussions focused on the theoretical aspect of the very possibility of poetry translation. According to Robert Frost, American poet and critic, “Poetry is what gets lost in translation”. Jakobson shares the same view as he stated that “everything is translatable except poetry because it is the very form, the very phonetic quality of a poem in a language which makes a poem”. Such statements are brief accounts of traditional ideas of the untranslatability of poetry because there is no one-to-one equivalent when comparing two

languages. Poetry is thought to be untranslatable in both linguistic and cultural respects. Even if the translators possess a profound knowledge in the source language, they would not be able to create a replica of the original text.

What should be preserved when translating poetry are the emotions, the invisible message of the poet, the uniqueness of the style in order to reach the same effect in the target language as it is in the source. When talking about the translation of poetry there are some problems encountered during this process. The essential problem here is that a word has more qualities than just its denotation. For one, a word has a sound, an attribute which has great importance in poetry (though we should not underestimate its significance in prose, as well). Also, a word consists of various connotations, meanings which only rarely cross over from language to language. Add to this the nature of literature itself as writers and poets load the language; they often choose words because of their rich variety of meanings and allusions. The problem of all translators – words don't have literal equivalents in different languages that is why there is Italian has a saying, “traduttore-traditore” (translator-betrayer). To say “translator-traitor” in English would be unduly dramatic!

The concepts of translatability and untranslatability have an old history and Catford is considered one of the prominent scholars who has elaborated on the concept of untranslatability (Niknasab & Pishbin, 2011, p. 1-22). There are essentially two approaches to translatability of poetry: the universalist one and the monadist one. Supporters of the former approach claim that the existence of linguistic universals ensures translatability. Monadists claim that each community perceives and interprets reality in its own particular way and this jeopardizes translatability

3. The Translatability of the Poetry

Translation of poetry was, and still is by some, believed as impossibility for any unfaithful elements would have been taken as failure, be it content or form. The arguments include linguistic elements and cultural elements. Most importantly the myth of untranslatability looks upon poetry as beauty itself which is untouchable for once it is touched it is destroyed. But as translation of poetry has never been stagnant (not advancing or developing) though sometimes vigorous and sometimes not, there is strong evidence in both translation history and present day practice that poetic translation, a literary form as distinguished from fiction, drama, and prose, is translatable.

Poetry itself serves a purpose, be it an allusive matter, and aesthetics can be reproduced in another language and culture if accommodation (adjustment) is made. It would be highly likely that the target readers would obtain rather similar if not the same aesthetic pleasure reading the translation as would the source readers reading the original poem. And this is the only criterion in evaluating and assessing what is a successful piece of translation. Of course, there are other functions of poetry like informative, didactic, cognitive, practical and even entertainment functions. The aesthetic function stays at the top of the list, though.

In other words, if a translation fails to perform the aesthetic function it is not a good translation, no matter how well the form is preserved. A word-for-word translation may be judged faithful in form, but it is failure in terms of the performance of functions. As aesthetics of one people influences them with different elements from that of another, accommodation in translation is of urgent necessity. Often loss or addition is made to achieve that end and sometimes only some elements are preserved while other elements are neglected. This is inevitable or there will be no translation, which means if one fears any loss or addition, one should learn to read the original always instead of reading the translated version. To translate is not to say the *same* thing in another tongue, but to make manifest a *different* thing. This may sound close to what we used to call "the impossibility of translation".

Catford (1965) argues that linguistic untranslatability is due to the difference in the Source Language (SL) and the Target Language (TL), whereas cultural untranslatability is due to the absence in the TL of relevant situational features.

Those who stick to untranslatability are but two kinds of people. Some strictly believe the holiness of the original text and others the absoluteness of the unity of meaning and form in a certain language. And they, idealistically, do not allow any addition or loss of meaning in the transferring process as in translation, which is actually inevitable and is a rule rather than an exception.

4. Challenges and Procedures

Reading a source poem can involve recognizing and interpreting a highly complex set of meanings and poetic features. These may even be intentionally obscure—with modernist verse, for example. When translating it is crucial to stay true to a source poem's style (its 'perceived distinctive manner of expression', because style encodes the source writer's attitude towards the content. However, stylistic loyalty is rarely straightforward.

With poetic form, Holmes sees translators as choosing between three main approaches (1988: 25–7):

1. **Mimetic:** replicating the original form. This implies openness to the source culture's foreignness. However, the form may carry different weight in the receptor culture.
2. **Analogical:** using a target form with a similar cultural function to the source form. This implies a belief that receptor-culture poetics has universal value
3. **Organic:** choosing a form that best suits the translator's 'own authenticity' of response to the source. This stresses the impossibility of recreating the source form—content link.

According to Holmes (1988: 54), finding close correspondence between source and target is easier with 'a poem that leans very close to prose', but the more complex the poem, the bigger the compromises that translators have to make. This may mean that sub-genres of poetry differ in difficulty: narrative verse, say, may give the translator more room for manoeuvre than the more compressed lyric verse. Some translators, particularly into languages with a strong free-verse tradition, advocate free-verse translations of fixed-form (rhyme and/or rhythm-based) source poems, often on analogical or organic grounds. Others argue that this could risk losing crucial stylistic effects.

Similarly, attitudes towards ST rhyme range from abandonment to re-creation (users 1998), with partial preservation (replacing full by half-rhyme, say) as a compromise. Key arguments for abandonment are:

- a. Rhyme may have negative associations (e.g., old-fashioned or trite) for receptor-genre readers.
- b. Finding rhyme-words is difficult, especially when the receptor language has less flexible word order and/or a greater variety of word-endings than the source.
- c. Seeking rhyme leads to unacceptable semantic shifts—such as having 'to add images that destroy the poem's integrity'

Those who advocate recreating a source poem's rhyme scheme, whether mimetically or analogically, admit that this requires technical skill, but argue that rhyme is an integral part of the poem's meaning: 'if one disapproves of rhyme in poetry, one should not translate poems that rhyme'.

Moreover, though seeking rhymes may give radical shifts in surface wording, the underlying images can be preserved.

Source poets may deliberately use 'marked' language varieties: language that, relative to the standard variety, is distinctively archaic or modern, informal or formal, regional, specific to poetry or typical of other genres, or simply idiosyncratic. Alternatively, language varieties that might have seemed unmarked to the poet may appear nonstandard to most modern readers. Translators then face a choice between:

- replicating the source variety. This may not always replicate its effect, however: archaisms, for example, may seem original and exciting to modern Serbo-Croat readers but hackneyed to modern English readers.
- finding an analogy. This, however, may not exactly replicate the source variety's associations.
- shifting to another marked variety, whether along the same axis e.g., from archaic to hyper-modern or a different axis (e.g., from regional to informal). This almost always changes the variety's associations.
- shifting to standard language. This avoids the risks of the other approaches, but also removes the source variety's effect. When the source poem is 'multi-voiced'—when changes of variety mark out different protagonists or different ideological viewpoints—it removes this structuring effect.

Finally, source-culture-specific associations, references to other works, and the poem's place within its wider poetic culture may be hard to recreate or. Hence published translations often supply this information via an introduction and/or translator's Notes.

Translators read and reread the source poem, target versions, working notes, etc. whilst writing and rewriting versions and notes: after a first reading run-through, there is no evidence of separate reading and writing phases. Translators tend to refer to the source poem at all stages: exclusively TT-oriented runs-through are rare. Translators are also concerned to reconstruct the poet's intent (about the real-world inspiration for the poem, say), asking the poet where possible. When choosing translation solutions, however, they do not necessarily see this as overruling their direct experience of the text as a reader.

Translators spend most time tackling problems of lexis: words and fixed expressions. They are also strongly concerned with underlying poetic image: exploring the source poem's use of imagery, and attempting to recreate this in the translation. Less translating time is typically spent on sound (rhyme, rhythm, assonance, etc.), unless translators are trying to recreate formal rhyme and rhythm.

The translation of poetry is popularly seen as 'creative'. If we see creative problem-solving as involving solutions which are both novel and appropriate relative to the source text, re-creative translators seem to consider semantically novel solutions only reluctantly and gradually. For example, if the source poem plays on an idiom's literal and figurative senses, translators first seek solutions that keep all relevant elements. If this fails, they consider solutions that reproduce at least some of the elements. Only if testing against co-text shows this to be inappropriate do translators consider semantically novel solutions, i.e. solutions with no ST motivation— though even here, loyalty to underlying intent satisfies the appropriateness criterion. If novelty is defined less strictly as any departure from ST structures, however, then any 'adaptive shift' may be seen as creative: transferring rhymes to other words than those which bear the rhyme in the ST, for example. Re-creative translators, however, distinguish quite sharply between semantic novelty (undertaken reluctantly if at all) and adaptive shifts (undertaken as a matter of course).

With aesthetics as the guiding principle William Wordsworth's *Lucy* is translated as below:

Lucy

*She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love.
A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.
She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and oh,
The difference to me!*

Analysis:

The Lucy poems are a series of five poems composed by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) between 1798 and 1801. All but one were first published during 1800 in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, a collaboration between Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge that was both Wordsworth's first major publication and a milestone in the early English Romantic movement. In the series, Wordsworth sought to write unaffected English verse infused with abstract ideals of beauty, nature, love, longing and death.

The poem was written during a short period while the poet lived in Germany. Although they individually deal with a variety of themes, as a series they focus on the poet's longing for the company of his friend Coleridge, who had travelled with him to Germany but took up residence separately in the university town of Göttingen.

Wordsworth examines the poet's unrequited love for the idealised character of Lucy, an English girl who has died young. The idea of her death weighs heavily on the poet throughout the series, imbuing it with a melancholic, elegiac tone. Whether Lucy was based on a real woman or was a figment of the poet's imagination has long been a matter of debate among scholars. Generally reticent about the poems, Wordsworth never revealed the details of her origin or identity. Some scholars speculate that Lucy is based on his sister Dorothy, while others see her as a fictitious or hybrid character. Most critics agree that she is essentially a literary device upon whom he could project, meditate and reflect.

Wordsworth structured the poems so that they are not about any one person who has died; instead they were written about a figure representing the poet's lost inspiration. Lucy is Wordsworth's inspiration, and the poems as a whole are, according to Wordsworth biographer Kenneth Johnston, "invocations to a Muse feared to be dead".

"She dwelt among the untrodden ways" presents Lucy as having lived in solitude near the source of the River Dove. According to literary critic Geoffrey Durrant, the poem charts her "growth, perfection, and death". To convey the dignified, unaffected naturalness of his subject, Wordsworth uses simple language, mostly words of one syllable. In the opening quatrain, he describes the isolated and untouched area where Lucy lived, as well as her innocence and beauty, which he compares to that of a hidden flower in the second.^[53] The poem begins in a descriptive rather than narrative manner.

"لوسي"

مكثت لوسي في أماكن غير مقبولة.

قرب نبيع اليمام.
تلك البكر التي لم تحب ولم تهمل إلا القليل:

اختفى نصف خفية عن العين!..
ذاك الحجر المطحلب ، البنفسجي اللون...
جميل كذاك النجم الذي يشع في السماء
في ليلة ظلماء..
مكثت في مكان مجهول.
لم يعرفه إلا القليل.
ولكن ، آه كم بدت لي مختلفة!
عندما انقطعت في قبرها عن الحياة.

أنهت القيلولة شرابي المختوم.
لم أعد أعاني من مخاوف البشر
وبدت لي كشيء لا يشعر
ذاك شعور السنوات الدنيوية.

لا قوة و لا حركة تحوزها الآن
فهي لا تسمع و لا ترى..
ملتفة حول بعضها في وجهة الأرض النهارية.
مع الصخور والأحجار والأشجار

Here is another translation:

عيش على قارعة الطرق المنسية
جنب ينابيع الحمام النديه
عذراء لم يمتدحها بشرا
غير معشوقه

وردة من البنفسج قرب صخرة طحليبه
مخفية من اعين البشر
جميلة لامعه مثل نجمة
ساطعه

عاشت مجهولة مرمية
عندما ماتت لوسي
في قبرها ترقد
يا ويلي كم هذا مؤسف

And a third one:

عند طُرُق غير مطروقة
بجوار ينابيع الحَمَامِ..
خادمة لا تمتدحها الخليفة
ويحبها قليل من الأنام.

زهرة خبأتها عن الأنظار..
صخرةً يعلوها الطُّحْبُ
جميلة كنجم ضوءه نهار
يلمع (إذا كان وحده) وسط السُّحْبِ.

مغمورة ..عاشت هي
فما إن زال انغماس لوسي..
طواها الردى،،، واحسرتي
فقد كان لها أثر في نفسي.



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