Strategies for translating poetry

Various scholars have emphasised the fact that poetry is a special kind of language that requires particular translation strategies. The following could be implemented (Bassnett-McGuire 1980: 81–2):

1. Phonemic translation: attempts to recreate the sounds of the SL in the TL, transferring the meaning at the same time.

2. Literal translation: involves word-for-word translation.

3. Metrical translation: reproduces the original meter into the TL. This strategy is not always successful since each language has its own metrical structure.

4. Verse-to-prose translation: producing the TL as prose instead of the ST which is a poem. This method has some weaknesses, the biggest of which is the loss of the beauty of the original poem, or the beauty of the poetic shape.

5. Rhymed translation emphasises transferring the rhyme of the original poem to TL. The result will be appropriate phonetically but tends to be semantically inappropriate.

6. Free verse translation. With this method the translator may be able to achieve the accurate equivalents in the TL at the expense of the literary value.

It has become clear that poetry is a difficult genre because it is a condensed form of language that is rich with meaning. In addition, poetry applies imagery and the use of figures of speech, especially metaphor, which makes poetry even more challenging for the translator. The following procedures for translating metaphors could be used (Newmark 1988b: 88–95):

1. Reproducing the same image in the TL.

2. Replacing the image in the SL with a standard TL image.

3. Translating metaphors as similes.

4. Translating metaphors (or similes) as similes plus sense.

5. Conversion of metaphor into sense (explanation).

6. Deletion.

7. Translating the same metaphor, but combined with sense.

Exercise: Identify the strategies used in translating the following poem.

English Original SL	Arabic translation
When You Are Old and Grey By *William Butler Yeats* When you are old and grey and full of sleep, And nodding by the fire, take down this book, And slowly read, and dream of the soft look Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep; How many loved your moments of glad grace, And loved your beauty with love false or true, But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you, And loved the sorrows of your changing face;	**عندما تكبر ويشتعل رأسك شيبا** *بقلم وليم بوتلر بيتس* عندما تكبر ويشتعل رأسك شيبا تترنح نعسا أمام النار خذ هذا الكتاب أقرا ببطء وتذكر كم رأت عيونك؟ كم أحبَّكَ من ناس وأحبوا صُحبتك كم أحبوا جمالكَ وكم كان صادقاً أم كاذباً ذلك الحُب ولكن هنالكَ شخصٌ واحد أحبَ روح الحاج فيك وأحبَ حزنَ وجهكَ المتغير

Example: 4 lines from: 'The Deserted Village' a poem (430 lines) by OLIVER GOLDSMITH

> Near yonder thorn, that lifts its head on high, [219]
> Where once the sign-post caught the passing eye,[220]
> Low lies that house where nut-brown draughts inspired,[221]
> Where grey-beard mirth and smiling toil retired,[222]

The Deserted Village is a poem by Oliver Goldsmith published in 1770. It is a work of social commentary, and condemns rural depopulation and the pursuit of excessive wealth.

The poem is written in heroic couplets, and describes the decline of a village and the emigration of many of its residents to America. In the poem, Goldsmith criticizes rural depopulation, the moral corruption found in towns, consumerism, enclosure, landscape gardening, avarice, and the pursuit of wealth from international trade. The poem employs, in the words of one critic, "deliberately precise obscurity", and does not reveal the reason why the village has been deserted. The poem was very popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also provoked critical responses, including from other poets such as George Crabbe. References to the poem, and particularly its ominous "Ill fares the land" warning, have appeared in a number of other contexts.

The poem has 430 lines, divided into heroic couplets. This form features an "AABBCC..." rhyme scheme, with ten-syllable lines written in iambic pentameter. It is an example of georgic and pastoral poetry. The poem is also an example of Augustan verse. In its use of a balanced account of Auburn in its inhabited and deserted states, and in its employment of an authorly persona within the poem, it conforms to contemporary neoclassical conventions.

٤ ابيات من قصيدة بعنوان "**القرية المهجورة**" للشاعر أوليفر غولدسميث والتي تقع في ٤٣٠ بيتا

ترجمة د شادية بنجر

وبقرب قتاد شمخت فَعَلت راسها ترفعا

حيث اللوحة التي كانت تلفت الأنظار تطلعا

يرقد حطام مبنى كان يرومه الناس تجمعا

ويأتي شيبا وشبابا يزيدون المكان تفعما

Normally, a poet composes his poem while paying attention to word sounds, rhythms, rhymes, stanzaic patterns, visual layout (graphology) and word choice. This selection has great effects on the meaning of the text. Such characteristic literary and linguistic features often defy translation due to the basic differences between different languages. Translation theorists and practitioners have differed about the best method/strategy to use in the translation of poetry. In his *Translating Poetry, Seven Strategies and a Blueprint* (1975) André Lefevere catalogues seven kinds of strategies employed by English translators of Catullus' "Poem 64". These strategies include phonemic, literal, metrical, prosaic, rhymed, blank verse and interpretative translation" (qtd. in Bassnett-McGuire, 1980: 81-82). Lefevere finds these strategies restrictive, distortive, unrepresentative or harmful as each and every one of them tries to emphasize certain aspect/s at the expense of the poem as a whole. Highlighting the difficulties involved in translating several literary devices or stylistic features such as alliteration, allusion, metaphor, parody, pun, rhyme, meter, poetic diction, style, register, jargon, dialect, typography etc., Lefevere argues that in such cases translation loss is inevitable (Lefevere 1992: 16).

In her *Translation Studies* (1980) Bassnett-McGuire concurs with Lefevere and attributes the deficiencies of these translation methods to "an overemphasis of one or more element of the poem at the expense of the whole", which results in "unbalanced" translation". She also identifies other translation problems and pitfalls which occur when translating from a period remote in time or from a distant culture.

One of these problems is the historical stylistic dimension, i.e., the language and style of the period in which the original work was written. Here, the translator is faced with the difficult decision as to whether to use current language expressions or to try to find the appropriate equivalents in the target language that can recapture the stylistic features of the old source text. She cautions against the use of the second method which she believes often makes the translation further removed from the original.

Commenting on a translation of an old text in which the translator tried to keep the formal features of the original, and on another translation in which the translator deviated from the linguistic and formal features of the text, she observes: "The closer the translation came to trying to recreate linguistic and formal structures of the original, the further removed it became in terms of function. Meanwhile huge deviations of form and language managed to come closer to the original intention". Although she approves of some translation methods such as the use of insertions and additions to clarify archaic or obscure texts, the modernization of the text to accommodate for the needs of contemporary readership, a necessary deviation from the form and language of the original, a good *interpretation* of the original and an appropriate *shaping* of that interpretation, her ultimate conclusion is that "the variations in method do serve to emphasize the point that there is no single *right* way of translating a poem just as there is no single right way of writing one either".

The translator of poetry is also faced with the difficult choice between verse or prose translations. In his article "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" published in 1959, Roman Jakobson asserted that "poetry by definition is untranslatable", though he suggested various alternatives to deal with this issue, including approximation and annotation. Poets as important as Dante and Robert Frost also saw that poetry is untranslatable, though others such as Fitzgerald and Pound believed in freedom in translation.

In Eugene Nida's "dynamic" vs. "formal" translation formula, the first method is preferable to the second in translating poetry; the first being directed to the receptor message while the second is directed toward the source message. For Nida, the translator may use prose to translate poetry, but he warns that some poems suffer a great deal when translated into prose. For example, a lyric poem translated as prose is not an adequate equivalent of the original as it loses much of its emotional intensity.

Ideally, the translator should reproduce both form and content of the original artifact, but since form and content can rarely be reproduced in the translated version,

form is usually sacrificed for the sake of the content. In other words, meaning or content is given priority over form or style and equivalence of response is preferable to the literalness of form. This preference of method stems from Nida's belief that the purposes of the translation and the receptor of the message or the targeted audience should be given priority. This being the case, Nida expects some degree of adaptation of the original to the target language and culture. He further recognizes that responding to the linguistic and cultural needs of the receptor, adapting the form of the original to suit the requirements of the target language and attempting to a achieve a sense of naturalness entail changes in language, form and even content. Consequently, the translator is expected to provide numerous footnotes in order to make the text comprehensible and close to the original.

Stressing the equal importance of both content and form, Peter Newmark (1988:163-169) argues that "semantic" translation is more appropriate than "communicative" translation for poetry translation. For him, communicative translation attempts to produce on the reader an effect as close as possible to that produced on the reader of the original reader so that readers of the translated text may not find difficulties in understanding the message of the original text.

Semantic translation, by contrast, attempts to reproduce the precise contextual meaning of the original by paying special attention to the aesthetic values and expressive meaning of the source text such as sounds, metaphor, figurative, language, diction style, etc. In his opinion, the semantic method fits the translation of poetry. Highlighting the impossibility of ever achieving a good poetry translation that pays equal attention to both form and content, Newmark observes:

> The more important the words and their order in the original, the more closely the original should be translated. Since the genre where words and their order are most important in poetry, you would expect the translation of poetry to be the closest form of translation. Far from it. This is not possible since the language of poetry includes so many additional factors—the kind of poetic form, meter, connotations, rhythm, sound, including rhyme, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, wordplay, which are missing or not so important in other types of writing. Nevertheless, poetry translation is always worth attempting, and I think the best poetry translations are miracles of closeness.

As the above discussion has demonstrated, it is difficult to render a poem in the target language without some loss. Generally speaking, a prose translation of a poem

does not have the same effect or even the same meaning of a verse translation in the target language, let alone in the same language.

Every translation whether in prose or in verse is an approximation of the original; it comes very close to the source text but it cannot be the same. In Arabic, most translations of English poetry are rendered into prose perhaps because a prose translation can capture the meaning of the original poem more than a verse version due to the restrictions imposed on the translator in terms of sound, rhyme, meter, figurative language, etc.

A clear proof of this foregone conclusion can be seen in the discussion of the differences between a verse and a prose translation of Thomas Gray's poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". The translation that offers itself as a poem in the target language", i.e. Nazik Al-Malaika's verse version, departs greatly from the original and is, therefore, "unfaithful", whereas the prose version rendered sticks fairly closely to the original and is therefore more "faithful". By the same token, a prose translation of the same poem seems to reinforce this conclusion. Comparing the prose translations with the verse version, shows that the prose version gives a more accurate meaning than that given by the poetry version. Nevertheless, the outcome of this good prose translations of Gray's masterpiece is not a poem in the target language but an approximated prose version of the original poem.

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

by Thomas Gray

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
　　The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
　　And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
　　And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
　　And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
　　The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wand'ring near her secret bow'r,
　　Molest her ancient solitary reign.

رثاء مكتوب في ساحة كنيسة ريفية / مرثية في باحة كنيسة ريفية

للشاعر توماس غري

حظر التجوال يقرع ناقوس يوم الفراق
رياح القطيع المنخفضة ببطء فوق اليرقة،
الحرث إلى المنزل يشق طريقه المرهق،
ويترك العالم للظلام ولي.

الآن يتلاشى المشهد اللامع على الأفق،
وكل الهواء يحمله سكون مهيب،
باستثناء المكان الذي تسير فيه الخنفساء رحلتها الطنانة،
والرنين النعاس يهدئ الطيات البعيدة:

ما عدا ذلك من برج اللبلاب المغطى باللبلاب
تشكو البومة الكآبة للقمر
مثل، تتجول بالقرب من عبقها السري،
التحرش بعهدها القديم الانفرادي.

Below is Nazik Al-Malaika's verse version:

في المساء الحزين والجرس المحزون ينعي النهار للأجواء
و القطيع المكدود ينساب في المرج بطيء الخطى كئيب الثغاء
و الفتى الحارس الموءود إلى المأوى يجر الخطى من الإعياء
تاركا هذه المجالي الحزينات لقلبي أنا و للظلماء

سوف يخبو النور الملألىء في الأفق بعيدا على امتداد السهوب
و الفضاء الممتد يغمره الليل فلا شيء غير صمت رهيب
ليس إلا حفيف أجنحة الأطيار في جوها الدجي الكئيب
و دوي الأجراس ينشر فوق المرج وهم الكرى و صمت الغيوب

ليس إلا قمرية يرسل الشكوى إلى البدر قلبها المغبون
عشها قنة تسلقها الزهر و أخفته في الظلال الغصون

تتشكى للذيـن مـروا بدنيـاها فلم تدر مـا عسـى سيكـون
عكروا العزلـة القديمـة و الصـمت فدوى هتافـها المـحـزون

Here is another translation of the same poem:

جرس المساء ينعى النهار الراحل،

والقطيع الثاغي يتهادى بطيئاً فوق المراعي،

والفلاح يحث طريقه المتعب إلى الدار،

ويترك العالم للظلام... ولي.

ها هي بقايا الضوء تتزايل في الأفق،

والسكون العميق يسود الهواء،

إلا من طنين الخنفساء في طيرانها،

ورنين الجرس الناعس يهدهد الحظائر البعيدة.

إلا هذا البرج البعيد المتدثر باللبلاب،

حيث تشكو البومة البائسة إلى القمر

ممن يتجول قرب مخبئها،

فيزعج ملكها القديم المنعزل.

Additionally, we notice a growing trend on the part of many Arab poetry translators to use free verse form instead of the rhymed traditional/classical Arabic poetry in their rendering of the original poem into the Arabic language. This tendency seems to have emerged as a result of the restrictions imposed on the translator's freedom

by the metrical and rhymed forms of traditional Arabic poetry, especially the "qasida" form which requires a largely consistent meter and an invariably regular rhyme scheme throughout the whole poem. The restrictions of meter and rhyme scheme seem to be the main cause of the departure of many translators worldwide from traditional poetry forms to the more recent forms of free verse and the prose poem which have been in vogue since the turn of the twentieth century. Naturally, the limitations of the traditional forms would compel the translators to resort to various strategies such as omission, addition, insertion, paraphrase, adaptation, elaboration, substitution, change of figurative language and literary devices and various alterations in language and diction. As in the case of prose translations, a free verse translation form may help the translator find more accurate equivalents than those afforded by a rhymed, metrical translation.

In poetry, form is as essential to preserve as contents. If the form is not preserved then neither is the poetry. Susan Bassnett-McGuire says: "The degree to which the translator reproduces the form, metre, rhythm, tone, register, etc. of the SOURCE LANGUAGE text, will be as much determined by the TARGET LANGUAGE system and will also depend on the function of the translation. One of the more difficult things to translate is poetry. It is essential to maintain the flavor of the original text."

Based on the above discussion, it is assumed that although the translation of literary texts in general, and of poetry in particular, seems a far-fetched challenge and, in rare cases, only possible with partial semantic and stylistic loss, it is by no means totally impossible. Evidence shows that a skilled translator with poetic taste can achieve this end with the necessary literary features and devices of the source text kept intact.