

Translating Literary Prose

Translating literary prose is the translation of novels, novellas, short stories, folk tales, fairy tales, fables, essays, biography, autobiography, hagiography, works of criticism, science fiction etc. It is a type of literary creativeness where the written-work of one language is re-created in another. The translator of literary prose texts or fiction, the most translated genre worldwide.

Given the assumption that literary translation applies to all literary genres, it follows that what was said about poetry and drama translations is, by and large, applicable to prose translation in many respects.

Contrary to a widely-held belief that a novel's structure is simpler than that of a poem and, consequently, easier to translate, the language of literary prose often poses a real translation problem. It is an inherent idea that the translation of poetry is very problematic, yet we have to agree that the translators also have to face lots of difficulties when it comes to translating prose.

Prose represents ordinary speech or writing, without metrical structure. It indicates “words in their best order” (Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary, 1913). In other words, every text that is not verse is prose”. So, concerning the mentioned definition, one can say that translating ‘prosaic-ideas’ without accessories” do not follow any metrical composition.

Generally speaking, every text is unique and, at the same time, it is the translation of (ideas) in the non-verbal world . No text is entirely original because language itself, in its essence, is already a translation of thoughts. However, this argument can be turned around without losing any of its validity: all texts are original as every coding of ideas is distinctive as an invention and as such it constitutes a unique text.

The translation of literary prose depends on literary creativity because its existence depends on a message, entertainment and aesthetic function. This what constitute the literary creativeness.

However, when the source and target languages belong to different cultural groups, the first problem faced by the prose-translator is finding terms in his or her own language that express the highest level of faithfulness possible to the meaning of certain words. For example, there are some words that are related to typical fabrics, cookery specialties, or jobs; they also represent specific culture and the translators should be very careful in translating such words. They also find it difficult to render ambiguous puns. Similarly, the titles of stories and novels provide many examples of such ambiguities, which are hard or even impossible to translate.

Many people think that the translation of literary works is one of the highest forms of rendition because it is more than simply the translation of text. A literary translator must also be skilled enough to translate feelings, cultural nuances, humour and other delicate elements of a piece of work. In fact, the translators do not translate meanings but the messages. That is why, the text must be considered in its totality. Alternatively, Peter Newmark (1988) delineates translation as “rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the *author intended* the text” (p. 5). A further point is that there are examples in which the source text contains ‘facets’ that are advocated in an apt manner by Lawrence Venuti (1995): “...discursive variations, experimenting with archaism, slang, literary allusion and convention” (p. 310). Additionally, it is no less than potentially contradictory that the translator should be “visible” and make use of “foreignising” attributes simultaneously, as foreignising attributes, at any rate, were chiefly initiated into the *Target Text* (T.T) from the *Source Text* (S.T), not by the translator’s innovation.

Language has more than a communicative, or societal and connective purpose in literary-prose translation. The word works as the ‘key ingredient’ of literature, i.e. it has an arty function. A tricky course of action emerges between the start and the conclusion of an innovative work of translation, the ‘trans-expression’ of the life incarcerated in the framework of imagery of the work being translated. Hence, the problems in ‘prose-translation’ are within the area of art and they depend on its particular laws.

Prose narrative texts, in the same way as in poetry, are dominated by literary or stylistic devices. In modernist and postmodernist narratives in particular, language is often of utmost importance. Sometimes, the language of a modern novel incorporates features usually associated with poetry. Some modern novels like those of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, for example, draw upon the use of imagery, symbol and figurative language as much as proper poems do. In such novels, image, symbol and rhythm are often used as a source of cohesion and sound-sense connections, suggesting thereby some of the novel's major themes.

The use of literary and stylistic devices in such texts cannot be ignored by the literary translator who is looking for a plausible equivalence between the two texts. Moreover, the translator has to take into consideration the organic relationship between form and content, the parts and the total structure as well as the function of the stylistic and literary devices used in narrative texts.

The playfulness of language in postmodern novel and the employment of ambiguity, irony, play on words, pastiche and many other culture-specific literary devices pose further problems for the translator, especially when combined with the problem of intercultural transference. Some works, like those of Samuel Beckett and Thomas Pynchon are difficult to comprehend even by the native reader, and some others such as those of Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth and John Fowles are replete with four-letter

words and obscene language and consequently form yet more problems for the translator. Even more, most Western postmodern novels employ metafiction and combine multiple and cultural elements including subjects and genres still deemed unfit for literature in many other literatures and cultures.

Furthermore, novels and short stories often contain dialects and neologisms which form a real difficulty for the translator. Here, the translator has to choose the most appropriate dialect into which he can render the source text and to decide on which type of translation to be used: literal, functional, formal, ideational, etc.

For an Arab translator, the translation of dialect becomes all the more difficult as he is faced with the problem of choosing a dialect among the various dialects of the Arabic language. A translator is originally required to reproduce the stylistic features of the original as much as possible for these constitute an essential component of the meaning. If the translator changes the style or the language, this may result in distorting the original message of the source text.

Looking at Arabic prose translations of English language literature, we find that in translating dialect, translators choose either to ignore dialect altogether and instead render it in formal /standard language or to translate it by using equivalent dialect in the target language. Obviously, the first choice, though easier and perhaps more convenient, is not the appropriate choice, for it would result in the loss of a great part of the meaning. However, there is no equivalent single way of translating dialect, especially when the target language, like Arabic, has more than one geographic, regional or socioeconomic dialect.

A good case in point is the translation of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* by Ihsan Abbas, a renowned Arabic language and literature scholar in the Arab world. Here, the translator uses equivalent dialect in the Arabic version. However, he opts for the Egyptian dialect rather than any other Arab dialect perhaps because this dialect is the most widespread and consequently the most intelligible dialect for the general Arab readership. As the translator's native dialect is not Egyptian but Palestinian, the translation version may not always sound quite authentic and therefore not quite equivalent or faithful.

Strategies

Again the translation of prose also swings between literal and free, faithful and beautiful, exact and natural translation, depending on whether the bias was to be in favour of the author or the reader, the source or target language of the text . However, the “dynamic *equivalent* translation” is very important and the translators (particularly prose-translators) should have a lucid idea about this phenomenon. The translation theorists view dynamic equivalence as a translation code; according to this very code, a translator looks for rendering the meaning of the original in such a

way that the T.L readers will definitely enjoy the text as is done usually by the source text readers. Both Eugene A. Nida and C. Taber (1982: 200) argue that:

Frequently, the form of the original text is changed; but as long as the change follows the rules of back transformation in the source language, of contextual consistency in the transfer, and of transformation in the receptor language, the message is preserved and the translation is faithful.

It is evidently mentioned by them that the dynamic equivalence in translation is far more than mere correct communication of information. Nida says that the definition of a dynamic *equivalent* translation is to describe it as “the *closest natural* equivalent to the source-language message”. This definition includes three essential terms, namely

1. *Equivalent*, which refers to the source-language message,
2. *Natural*, which refers to the receptor language, and
3. *Closest*, which “binds the two orientations together on the basis of the highest degree of speculation”.

Natural indicates three areas of the communication process: a natural description should fit the total receptor language and culture, the context of the specific message, and the receptor-language audience. Therefore, the translation should bear no clear trace of a foreign origin. The following diagram shows that the translator is both recipient and emitter:

Writer - ST -Recipient - = Translator TT - Recipient

Jacques Derrida (2004) suggests that “the question ‘what is translation’ implies, as if synonymously, ‘what should the best possible translation be’”. As translation is the performative nature of cultural communication, a ‘simile’, deserves to be mentioned since it “compares the relationship between a target (new) text and its antecedent to the relationship between honey and the flowers from which it is produced” (Petrarch, 1985). However, there is normally no full equivalence through translation while messages may possibly serve as satisfactory analyses of code units or messages. Accordingly, translation as a series of operations of which the starting point and the end product are ‘significations’ and function within a given culture.

Challenges in Translating Literary Prose

Translation is a challenging activity and there are few difficulties that emerge throughout the translation process since every language portrays the world in diverse way and has its own grammar structure, grammar rules and syntax variance.

The difficulty in translation just lies in the fact that both the content and the style are already existent in the original and as a result, you will have to do your best to reproduce them as they are in quite a different language.

The most particular problems that the translators face include- illegible text, missing references, several constructions of grammar, dialect terms and neologisms, irrationally vague terminology, inexplicable acronyms and abbreviations, untranslatability, intentional misnaming, particular cultural references etc. Nonetheless, there are some theorists who think that 'literal translation' is not possible. They present three main reasons supporting their stance:

1. Because a particular word in one language often contains meanings that involve several words in another language. For example, the English word 'wall' might be rendered into German as *Wand* (inside wall) or as *Mauer* (exterior wall),
2. Because grammatical particles (verb tenses, singular/dual/plural, case markers etc.) are not available in every language, and
3. Because idioms of one language and culture may be utterly perplexing to speakers from another language and culture.

As Edward Sapir claims, human beings are at the mercy of the language that has become the medium of expression for their society and culture; language habits of the group of people determine experience generally and every disjointed structure signifies a separate authenticity. The translators encounter the complexities of differences between cultures; the subject of 'cultural difference' is very problematic. So Sapir (1956) argues that:

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

Conversely, 'equivalence' consists of many countenances; for instance, it is an essential condition for translation, an obstruction to advancement in Translation Studies, or helpful category for analysing translations. The domain of equivalence covers linguistic units such as morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, idioms and proverbs. Catford (1965) opines [say what your opinion is about] that the central problem of translation practice is that of finding T.L (target language) equivalents. A central task of translation theory is therefore that of defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence.

Unfortunately, many prose-translators fail to understand that a literary text is a combination of a complex set of systems that exist in a dialectical relationship with other sets outside its boundaries; this kind of failure has regularly led them to concentrate on particular parts of a text at the cost of others. It seems to be easier for

the (careless) prose-translator to consider *content* as *separable* from *form*. In this connection, a suitable example shows what may happen when a translator emphasises content at the expense of the entire *structure*.

Actually, the sentence does not consist only of a statement but aims at something beyond what it actually says. Within a literary text, sentences always indicate something that is to come and their particular content foreshadows the structure. There may be a loss of element if the translator handles sentences for their definite content only.

Let us consider another significant example; the prose-translators find it very difficult to translate proper names. 'Babel' is first a proper name, granted. But when we say 'Babel' today, do we know what we are naming? Do we know whom? If we consider the survival of a text that is a legacy, the narrative or the myth of the tower of Babel, it does not constitute just one figure among others. It would not be the only structure hollowing itself out like that, but it would do so in its own way like a proper name or idiom. Voltaire showed his astonishment: "I do not know why it is said in *Genesis* that Babel signifies confusion, for *Ba* signifies father in the oriental tongues, and *Bel* signifies God..." (Cited in Derrida, 1985: 166). Voltaire's irony suggests that "Babel means: it is not only a proper name, the reference to a pure signifier to a single being.

Dialect and other Language Variations

For example, Egyptian translator, Mohammad Ibrahim Zaki, translated the dialect in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* by using standard Arabic. One of the main drawbacks of this kind of translation is the loss of the real identity and the characteristic features of the speakers. A dialect may create a certain feeling or notion about the characters and the theme/s for the readers of the original text that is not quite possible to get across to readers of the translated text if the dialect is translated by standard language. A similar example to the above mentioned one is Lama Wannus's translation of D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. In her translation of this novel, the Midlands dialect is rendered through standard Arabic. In the original, dialect is part of characterization; it suggests the identity, the true nature and the cultural and social background of the speaker. Consequently, this kind of translation technique will be unsuccessful and possibly even confusing if readers don't understand what is meant or implied by the choice of dialect.



This document was created with the Win2PDF "print to PDF" printer available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>

This version of Win2PDF 10 is for evaluation and non-commercial use only.

This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.

<http://www.win2pdf.com/purchase/>