

Literary Text Translations: Problematic Aspects of Cultural Barriers

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The translator, in literary texts, is a reader first of all and has his own parameters of reading the message. Literary translation requires a more comprehensive approach to the text for a meaningful and convincing translation. This can be illustrated by:

فصرخ في غضب أشد:

_ نريد سلاحاً , لم تقترون علينا!

_ اليد قصيرة , وموقف الحكومة دقيق ... (السمان والخريف 6)

“What we need is weapons!” he’d shouted. “Why aren’t you people providing them?”

“Money’s tight and the government’s position is precarious.”

Allen managed to interpret and work out the meaning of the phrase *اليد قصيرة* and avoided the literally translation.

Literary translation is closely linked to the act of interpretation; interpretation in fact precedes the very act of translation. Schulte points out that: “Interpretation in itself is the act of translation, therefore, the concept of translation should be anchored in a very simple recognition; all acts of communication are acts of translation whether we try to explain an idea or whether we try to relate an exciting experience to another person.”³ Many of the words have an evident meaning, but the way they are strung in sequence in a literary text, especially in a rich or inventive one, confers on these words a well-defined type of meaning.

The literature on translation studies in recent decades reflects how translation scholars have found translation to be complex process. A source of problems of translation emerges from the area of literature. Literary works usually include some complex textual and contextual aspects which may not in translation be reduced to a centred and final

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1. Naguib Mahfouz, *Autumn Quail* (Cairo: Dar Massar, 1962).
 2. Roger Allen, *Autumn Quail* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1985).
 3. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.205.

understanding. Such problems are determined by cultural references (i.e. intertextuality), style, genre, semiotical signs, peculiar social and cultural experiences which demarcate its unique identity from other cultures. This can be illustrated by the following Arabic cultural specific expression: *حنين رجع بخفي* which can be translated in two different ways: 1- “He returned with the shoes of Hunayn”. This translation is literal with a loan word (Hunayn) borrowed from Arabic which needs a footnote to explain its meaning for the TL reader. 2- “He came back empty handed”. The equivalent effect is achieved using the target cultural expression (empty handed) which renders the same meaning of the SL text.

Literature also uses vocabularies which are associated with historical experience where people of a particular society can compose their cultural past in which they remember and participate in this experience when it is used in a context. These contextual specifics which are the foundation of any particular cultural environment will be accompanied by certain cultural connotations of the source culture. With regard to these contextual specifics of the SL culture which should demand equivalence in terms of relevance in the TL culture.

An example which illustrates this point is *داحس والغبراء*. This historical expression has occurred in an editorial based on Aljazeera TV. The text is highly argumentative in which the text producer is trying to tackle the Sudanese people’s status quo, their crises and differences caused by the recent civil war in Darfur province in the west of Sudan. The writer is arguing that humans sometimes have no choice but to face fate. He refers to the war that took place centuries ago between two tribes in the Arabian Peninsula over a horse racing bet. It was named after the two horses— *داحس والغبراء*.

To translate this historical expression into English the TL readers would require an extra explanation. The following words would make the TL reader understand what *داحس والغبراء* means: “the war of *داحس والغبراء* is the name of a war between two tribes over a horse race in the Arabian Peninsula a long time ago”. Although the TL translation might seem quite long, it covers the whole cultural gap and distance between both languages. Balasubramanian and Mohan point out that “While a translation is theoretically possible, it still may not relate at all to an audience if the reality being represented is not familiar to it.”⁴ Cultural literary works usually take their roots from habitual characteristics

4. Koushik Balasubramanian and R. D. Mohan, “Contextual vs Textual Specifics: the Limits of Translation,” in Pramod Talgeri and S. B. Verma, *Literature in Translation: From Cultural Transference to Metonymic Displacement* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1988), p.36.

within a specific cultural region. This particularly applies to works which have been produced in a specific period of historical development. However, a specific literary work which is produced for a cultural region may go beyond the era of its immediate historical context, transcends the time obstacles and become a classic which interacts with different minds with different cultural and historical backgrounds. These works range, for example, from the Holy Quran to T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* to Shakespeare's works. Such world classics have had their influence on the minds of different audiences across the ages.

In literary translation, the translator must attempt to produce a text which is aesthetically as well as linguistically similar to that in the SL. Although it is often possible to overcome the linguistic barrier between the TL and the SL, it is not so easy to overcome the barrier created by the differing literary traditions. An example that is very suitable here is that of Najeeb Mahfouz's novel *Autumn Quail*, which talks about a specific area in Cairo and the political life of its people. It is as follows:

فقال ابراهيم خيرات:

— ليكن عهد كعهد الطوفان ليظهر العالم ...

"I hope it'll be an age like the flood," Ibrahim Khairat said.

"Then the earth will be purified."

This example is full of allusion to a verse of the Quran, as follows:

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ فَلَبِثَ فِيهِمْ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ إِلَّا خَمْسِينَ عَامًا فَأَخَذَهُمُ الطُّوفَانُ وَهُمْ ظَالِمُونَ العنكبوت (4)

which was translated as "We (once) sent Noah to his people, and he tarried among them a thousand years less fifty: but the Deluge overwhelmed them while they (persisted in) sin"⁵

Mahfouz, when he alluded to the Quranic verse, wants to compare between two different eras and different people. The comparison is between Noah's people who were steeped in arrogance and the political people in Cairo. The English translation falls short of carrying the actual and aesthetic tone of the original or having at least a similar impact on the TL reader as that on the SL. It also fails to show the intention behind the comparison.

These differing literary traditions create stylistic difficulties, which may lead to the concept of untranslatability problem. This is through misunderstanding the concept of

5. Abdullah Ali Yusuf, *The Translation of the Meanings of the Holy Quran* (Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1983).

equivalence, which does not mean sameness and identity, but rather approximation of the SL in the TL. Winter quoted in Barnstone, (1993), for instance, states, “The system of form and meaning in language A may be similar to that in language B, but never identical with it.”⁶ So to produce exact equivalence is probably impossible.

In discussing the translation equivalence of literary texts, Widdowson (1975) Quoted in Lotfipour-Saedi, 1988, states that ...an understanding of what literature communicates necessarily involves an understanding of how it communicates: what and how are not distinct. It is for this reason that literary works cannot be satisfactorily paraphrased or explained by any single interpretation.⁷

The translator must have not only a good command of two or more languages but also a good command of the literary language, a point which is stressed by Savory “the existence of possible alternatives between which the translator must make his own choice is the essence of his art.”⁸

Wellwarth (1988) Quoted in Talgeri, 1988 argues that in a literary translation “What is required is the recreation of a situation or cohesive semantic block in the new language in terms of the cultural setting of that language.”⁹ This means that what a literary work requires is not merely the transference of morphological words or a step-by-step transference of semantic values, it is rather the recreation of a situation in terms of the TL cultural setting. This can be illustrated by an example from Autumn Quail as follows:

”و قررت التحريات أنها تزوجت ثلاث مرات لا مرة واحدة. الأولى لم تستغرق الا أشهراً اذ كتب كتابها على قريب لوالدها وقبل أن تتم الدخلة وضع لهم طمعه في مالها ونفعيته المفسوحة فحمله أبوها على تطليقها“.

This is translated as follows:

“He decided to make a few of the usual enquiries, which established that she had been married three times, not just once. The first had only lasted for a month. She had been betrothed to a relative of her father’s, and before the marriage was consummated, they had realized that he was after her money and was just taking advantage of her in a disgraceful fashion. Her father had forced him to divorce her.”

6. Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation, History, Theory, Practice* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1993), p.16

7. Kazem Lotfipour Saedi, *Components of Translation Equivalence*, in Pramod Talgeri and S. B. Verma, *Literature in Translation. From Cultural Transference to Metonymic Displacement* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1988), p.127.

8. Theodore Horace Savory, *The Art of Translation* (London: Cape, 1968), p.28.

9. George E. Wellwarth, “The Problem of Cultural Recontextualisation in Literary Translation,” in Pramod Talgeri and S. B. Verma (eds.), *Literature in Translation: From Cultural Transference to Metonymic Displacement* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1988), p.32.

Although the English translation catches the literal meaning of the original quite properly, it does not sound to the English readers as the original does to the Arab ones. That is, the translation does not activate the same scene that the original activates in Arab minds. This is due to the concepts of *الدخلة* and *كتب كتابها*. According to Arab culture and religion the concept *كتب كتابها* means that “the girl is legally married by Islamic contract” which was mistranslated in English as “betrothed” which means “to have promised to marry someone”. Also the concept of *الدخلة* is purely Arab and Muslim culture. The concept means that both the man and woman meet each other in a room as a married couple in the wedding night for the first time. The English translation “the marriage was consummated” falls short of providing the target reader with the same scene as the Arabic does because marriage is officially started when the Islamic marriage contract is agreed and signed. To overcome the culture setting, a translator has to translate the original and then supply the required missing information either by a footnote or between parentheses.

As Hatim and Mason (1990) point out, texts are generally characterized by their multifunctionality. Literary texts are multifunctional and, among their various functions, there is their potential to allow space for diverse readings. It is the individual reader who activates his ability to interpret the text according to his/her own view. In a way, what differentiates literary language from other kinds of language is its capacity to suggest.¹⁰ This can be illustrated by a proverb from Autumn Quail as follows:

— تكون في فمك وتقسم لغيرك ...

this was translated as follows:

“It’s right there in your hands, and then someone else gets it.”

The syntactic and semantic translation of the ST was achieved but not the functional one. The phrase “the luck of the draw” that almost achieves the communicative function of the original, given that “the luck of the draw” is not a proverb and therefore does not translate the text type of the original.

Beaugrande states that all attempts to isolate something specific in literature remain unsatisfactory. He says “Literature can only be defined with a functional description of what happens when people produce or respond to it.”¹¹ In his view, the role and intention of the author do not carry much weight as theoretical entities, except in so far as they relate to a reader’s responses.

10. Basil Hatim and Ian Mason, *Discourse and the Translator* (London: Longman, 1990).

11. Robert de Beaugrande, *Critical Discourse: A Survey of Literary Theorists* (New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1988), p.8.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the preceding discussion of different approaches to the process of translation, it can be seen that the trend in the discipline of Translation Studies has moved from the more traditional approach, based on purely linguistic criteria for transfer of meaning at the level of individual signs, to an approach which takes as its priority the intended function of the target text within the target culture and which considers the text as a (target) culture-based phenomenon. A wider set of criteria for decision-making and evaluation have evolved, the basis of which is that in order for a TT to achieve its intended function, decisions and choices made during the translation process have to take into account the probable intentions of the SL message producer, as these have been identified by the translator, drawing on linguistic and sociocultural competence and world knowledge in order to do so through analysis of ST structure, content and style. The more we know about the cultural context from which the communication emerges and into which we seek to relate the intended message, the better we will be able to mediate the author's intended meaning. There must be understanding of the cultural context from which the source message was communicated in order to make it relevant within the context of the receptor. It is similarly essential that translators, affected by their own language and culture, understand the effects of that perspective on the entire process of translating.

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