

Literary Translation

الترجمة الأدبية

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4th stage/ Morning & Evening classes

Lecture 5: Poetry Translation
Time: 10:30 – 3:30
Date: 06, Dec, 2022

Understanding Poetry

In order to understand poetry, it is necessary to know the "literal sense" as well as the symbolic or "the meaning" supposed to be understood by readers.

Many great efforts have been devoted to determine **what makes poetry distinctive from prose** which resulted in the development of poetics – the study of the aesthetics of poetry. Stating the difference between poem and prose, Cudden (1976, p. 672) asserts that:

"What makes a poem different from any other kind of composition is a sort of magic, the secret to which lies in the way the words lean upon each other, are linked and knitted by sense and rhythm, and a kind of tune whose beat and melody is different from that of prose."

Translating Poetry

Frost (1969, p. 9) calls poetry a memorable speech that is lost in translation for poetry is the expression of feelings experienced by a poet. Nair (1991, p.93) also believes that "poetry is an imaginative rendering of a poet's feelings and experiences." So, the first problem one encounters in attempting to translate poetry is **the importance of both its meaning and form**. Hence, the translator should make a decision whether to sacrifice the form for the meaning or vice versa. According to Nida & Taber (1964, p. 126):

"The conflict between the form and content becomes especially important where the form of the message is highly specialized."

In order for a translation to become a poem, the translator must also meet the expectations and sensibilities of the **poetic tradition of the target language**. Thus, the most successful translators of poetry are those who happen to be bilingual and bicultural and, above all, poets in the target language" (Rose, 1981, p. 136). As it is evident, translating poetry is a matter of relativity, i.e., all aesthetic aspects of the original poem cannot be transferred into the target language version.

There are different types of strategies which translators adopt for translating poetry. Lefevere (1975, p. 20) suggests that there are seven strategies for translating poetry as elaborated below:

1- Phonemic Translation

This type of translation which is more literal and faithful type of translation each phoneme is rendered to a phoneme in the target language. **This strategy is applied in languages which have similar phonemic systems** such as English and French, so it is very rare.

2- Literal Translation: Stanza Imitation

The translator presents a literal rendering of the original poem. In other words **the translator tries to be faithful to the original content and also reproduce something of the form.**

3- Metrical Translation

The translator in this strategy tries to give a literal verse rendering of the content of the original poem and at the same time **reproducing the metrical pattern of it.**

4- Translation of Poetry Prose

The translator is not forced to follow the rhyming pattern or structure of the original poem. His/ her only concern will be to **render the meaning of the poem in a fluent way.**

5- Rhymed Translation

In this strategy, **meaning is sacrificed for the formal beauty.** The translator tries to produce a text which is based on the norms and conventions of the target culture.

6- Blank Verse Translation

In free blank verse translation **the content is of primarily importance to the translator.** If a translator uses this strategy, there is no need to be concerned about formal features of such as rhyme, rhythm, etc.

7- Interpretation Approach: Imitation

Interpretation is the freest type of translation strategy for translating poetry. By applying this strategy, the translator extracts the main concepts of the original poem and recreates it based on his/ her style.

Poetry: Into Poetry or Into Prose

For Jakobson (1966, p. 238), poetry is untranslatable to be in definition, and that "only creative transposition is possible." Burnshaw (1995, p. 56) also agrees with Jacobson on the fact that the poetic effect of a certain arrangement of words in one language cannot be the same as the poetic effect of words in another language. The poet is able to see, hear and feel things that others cannot. The poet normally selects his/ her words with much attention to their sounds and their aesthetic effects as well as their significance. There is a harmony between the sense and the sound in the poetic word, thus the translator has to pay attention to the relation between each part and other constituent within the poem.

Despite the difficulties that accompany the translation of poetry, excellent and acceptable translations of masterpieces of world poetry have been presented by a number of translators for example the translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet (18) translated by Hasan Hijazi and Safaa Kholousy:

Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day
Thou art more lovely and more temperate

A prose version of the sonnet would be:

أبيوم من أيام الصيف أشبهك؟؟
إنك أكثر جمالا وأشد اعتدالا ..

(حسن حجازي)

A poetic version would be:

منذا يقارن حسنك بصيف قد تجلى ..
وفتون سحرك قد بدت في ناظري أسمى و أغلى ..

(صفاء خلوصي)

Both translators have attempted to preserve form and content as far as possible in order to transfer all the aesthetic aspects of the source text to the target text. Only one of them has attempted to transfer poetry into poetry.

On the other hand, there are some scholars who don't accept the impossibility of poetry translation. For example Dryden (cited in Frost, 1969, p. 72) emphasizes that poetry is translatable but the one who should translate it must be a poet. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (cited in Robinson, 2010, p. 58) also says that poetry is translatable, like everything else. He argues that translating from one language into another is a mathematical task, and the translation of a lyrical poem is quite parallel to a mathematical problem. An illustration to a parallel poetic translation is Emily Dickinson's "Hope" and its translation by Abdul Sahib Mahdi:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers –	الأمل ؟ شئٌ بأجنحةٍ يطير
That perches in the soul –	وعلى الروح يحطُّ
And sings the tune without the words –	لحنه من غير ألفاظٍ يدورُ
And never stops – at all –	وهو لا يَصُمْتُ قَطَّ
And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –	لحنه يأتي برغمِ الريحِ عَذْباً
And sore must be the storm –	وهي ريحٌ تحملُ الموتَ غَضُوبٌ
That could abash the little Bird	إن أخافتُ طائراً يحملُ حُباً
That kept so many warm –	وهو دفءٌ تتمناه القلوب
I've heard it in the chilliest land –	في إشتدادِ البردِ يطرقُ سمعنا
And on the strangest Sea –	وكذا في لجةِ البحرِ البعيد
Yet – never – in Extremity,	دون أن يطلب شيئاً ثمنا
It asked a crumb – of me.	رغم ما يلقاه من عسر شديد

Another poem by Emily translated also into poetry by Hadeel Al-Tameemi:

"I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –	شعورُ الانشقاق في ذهني
As if my Brain has split –	كأنه مخي الذي انشطرَا
I tried to match it Seam by Seam –	عبثًا أجرجُرُ لم الشملِ في المكسور
But could not make it fit.	ولكن لا صلاح لما انكسرا

Generally speaking, it is not justifiable to stop oneself from poetry translation, since poetry is the means of expression of one nation's feelings and attitudes towards world affairs.

Poetry and Culture

According to Rose (1981) "the translator of poetry must be fluent in and sensitive to the source language; he/ she must know the source language's cultural matrices, its etymologies, syntax, and grammar, as well as its poetic tradition. He/ she must culturally and politically identify himself wholeheartedly with the original poet. He/ she must penetrate the exteriority of the original text and lose himself in its intertextuality.

When the cultures are the same, the translator will not face any problem in translation but when the cultures are different the translator has to transfer the cultural concept "literally", supported by an explanatory note or tries to find an equivalent concept that reflects the same effect on the target language readers as that found on the source language reader. Hence, for the Sonnet of Shakespeare, mentioned earlier, the reader will be confused to read that the poet compares his lover's beauty to a summer's day since in English culture "summer" is a very lovely season of the year unlike in Arabic culture where it reflects hotness and uncomfortable temperatures of the year. And here

comes the translator's role in choosing a suitable substitution that is equivalent to the original word:

منذا يقارن حسنك بالربيع .. فحسنك أجمل و اعدل

Accordingly, it is either transferred into "ربيع" or it stays as "صيف" and the translator here resorts to use a footnote to explain it.

To sum up, and as Khalida Hamid (2014, p. 522) states, translating poetry is not to express what is to be conveyed but to find the intended effect that leads to produce the echo of the original, i.e., to preserve the emotions, the invisible message of the poet and the uniqueness of the style in order to obtain the same effect in the target language as that found in the source language.

Some related definitions:

Sonnet: السوناتا الشعرية
قصيدة تتألف من أربعة عشر بيتا تتبع غالبا وزنا خماسي التفاعل من مقطع قصير يتبعه مقطع طويل نمط قافية ثابت.
يدعى ناظم السوناتا ب sonneteer.
قافية: rhyme
ترتيب القافية: rhyme scheme
إيقاع: rhythm
الوزن الشعري: meter
شعر: poetry
نثر: prose

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