Problems of Literary-Artistic Translation

Diler Singh, Associate Lecturer, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Jaypee University of Information Technology, Waknaghat, Solan, H.P. India
Dr. Dipali Sharma Bhandari, Asst Professor, Department of English, NSCBM Govt PG College Hamirpur (HP), India

Abstract: Broadly speaking, translation is finding expressions in another language preserving the semantic and stylistic equivalence, matching grammatical structures and cultural contexts. Put simply, translation can be considered as the replacement of the elements of the source text with the cultural context and grammatical and semantic conventions of the target language so as to transfer the impact of the source text on the mind of a reader who, being unilingual, has no way of experiencing it in the original form. Alexander Fraser Tytler’s three basic principles of translation propose that a translation should be accurate, faithful, graceful and creative. Expanded, they cover all aspects of literary translation. A good translation preserves the spirit and sense of the original in the strength of the structure, force of expression, mastery of language and the qualities of imagination and discernment. These principles define what the final product of translation must be like and, by extension, what the duties of a translator are. However, strict adherence to these principles seems a hard task to attain. In the modern scenario the problems of translation most specifically, literary translation have increased multifold. The present paper attempts to examine the problems a translator has to encounter in his work.

I. Problems of Literary-Artistic Translation

The unification of human emotion can be exacted through translated literature as it familiarizes people with the culture and traditions across the world. This engages us with the problems of literary-artistic translation. All translation poses problems which the translator has to resolve satisfactorily in order to produce a good translation. While a literal translation has to grapple with the problems of lexical or structural ambiguity, lexical holes, lexical mismatches and problems arising from language barriers alone; translation of literature has to deal with stylistic features, content, culture and meaning as well. The problems of literal translation are mostly lexical because the emphasis is on the ‘word’ as a unit of translation and the translation follows the bottom-to-top pattern (word-to-text). In case of literary translation, however, the problems are both cultural and semantic, since the text is often more important than the words constituting it and in most cases more important than the word in isolation. The translation process, too, follows the top-to-bottom pattern of hierarchy (text-to-word).

Paul Valery’s analogy compares language to the two legs that can be used either for walking or dancing. The instrumental use of legs for walking which is simple, straightforward and has a singular movement represents the referential use of language; that is, the language of science, history or everyday discourse. The use of the same legs for dancing is complex and involves infinite variations of movements within a limited space; this is akin to the use of language in a literary or poetic framework.

The factors determining the process of translation depends on the nature of the original text or more specifically, the use of language in the source text. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren feel it is fairly easy to distinguish between the language of science and the language of literature. “The ideal scientific language is denotative”, they clarify, “It aims at one-to-one correspondence between sign and referent. The sign is completely arbitrary; hence equivalent signs can replace it. The sign is also transparent; that is, without drawing attention to itself, it directs us unequivocally to its referent” (Theory of Literature 22-23). Scientific language tends towards such a system of signs as mathematical or symbolic logic. Its ideal is such a universal language as the characteristic universal is…” say Wellek and Warren. (Theory of Literature 23) This is why scientific-technical translation becomes easy once the signs and their respective referents have been determined in the languages concerned. Literary translation or the translation of works where the literary use of language has been affected is somewhat more complex than scientific technical translation. For one, the literary use of language implies that ambiguities will inadvertently creep in. As Rene Wellek and her co-author feel, literary language is highly connotative. It abounds in ambiguities and “is full of homonyms, arbitrary or irrational categories such as grammatical gender; it is permeated with historical accidents, memories, and associations...moreover, literary language is far from merely referential. It has its expressive side…” (Theory of Literature 23)

According to David Daiches, “science says things explicitly, directly, simply, in “notational” language; poetry express itself paradoxically, ironically, indirectly, obliquely in language which, far from having a one-for-one
correspondence with what it denotes, creates its own meaning as it moves”(Critical Approaches to Literature 166). This means that the sign-referent relationship is different in literary language. Here the sign is not transparent, but translucent and when the diffused light falls on the referent through it, a completely different picture is revealed. In other words, the one to one sign-referent correspondence of the scientific language is replaced by multiple correspondences between the sign, the referent and the resultant meanings that emerge out of the situation. “There is a further important distinction between literary and scientific language”, opine Wellek and Warren, “in the former, the sign itself, the sound symbolism of the word is stressed. All kinds of techniques have been invented to draw attention to it, such as meter, alliteration, and patterns of sound.”(Theory of Literature 22-23)

Furthermore, in literary usage, words are used not merely for their primary meaning; they carry a secondary meaning or the contextual meaning as well. Meaning is a matter of the interpretation, which in turn is a matter of choice, context and usage. The fact that meaning in literary language differs according the usage points to the truth that literary language and consequentially literary translation is context and culture-bound, unlike scientific-technical language translation.

In literature the basic problem in translation arise in its nebulous origins. Literature is product of an emotion, a moment and the author’s confrontation with them. It is the product of individual genius, imagination and vision. The roots of literature nourish themselves on the psychology of the artist, which colors his vision. All of these are highly individualistic and non transferable traits. It therefore becomes very difficult for the translator to visualize the author’s intent and relive the experience and emotions of the author at the instant of creation. This factor, which renders an exact translation impossible, complicates the task of translation. The translator has to guard against an involuntary diffusion of his own vision and personality into the translation. Since literature is subjective, the translation would be subjective too but this is the least desired element in a translation.

The translator has to face the problem of choosing his affiliations to faithfulness. He has to choose his priorities from among the form, registral features, meaning, sense, emotions and images while deciding upon a faithful recreation. Literature is multidimensional and multilayered. Ordinary language admits to a limited range of interpretability but poetic language is marked by the superficial primary sense diverging out to various secondary meanings arising due to imagery, witticism, conceits, puns and symbolic nuances. Poetic language is suggestive and allegorical too. It is not the words but their association that make literature. Poetic language often carries a mythic tint which can be traced to the social, cultural and in some cases personal context. While translating them, the translator has to remodel the context to facilitate understanding by the target language audience. Language is a culture bound phenomenon. It exists in the cultural and historical perspective of the users and has a whole tradition associated with it. A rendition of culture specific words, religious customs and ceremonies, poetic fancies, mythological allusions, archetypal images and philosophical contexts therefore become problematic. The peculiarities of a nation’s mental makeup, too, unwittingly influence the work of translator.

Problems in translation of literature arise because it cannot be dealt with at the single level. Strict adherence to all the basic principle of translation at the same time is a herculean task. The translator has to erase his identity from a product of his own workmanship which is an onerous task in itself. At the same time he has to infuse his work with the spirit and soul of the original. He has to delve in the psychology of the poet and relive the experience and emotion of the author at the instant of creation. He has to reproduce faithfully the form and registral features besides capturing the effusive quality so characteristic of a literary work and weaving it into an equally mesmerizing pattern in the target language. He has to preserve all the niceties of the language of the original while ensuring that the secondary meaning is adequately expressed. A perfect matching at all these levels is quite difficult to attain. Add to this the cultural and historical perspectives, orientation of the target language audience and the problems involved in a convincing rendition of cultural specific words, religious customs and ceremonies, poetic fancies, mythological allusions, archetypal images and philosophical contexts therefore become problematic. The peculiarities of a nation’s mental makeup, too, unwittingly influence the work of translator.

The differences between two languages can be listed as under:

1. SL(source language) has grammatical categories absent in TL(target language) or vice versa
2. SL has vocabulary absent in TL or vice versa
3. SL uses its grammatical classes and vocabulary in different combinations and patterns than TL

The problems of translation can be accredited mainly to the difference in structures and organization of the languages concerned and to the difference in the cultures which use these languages. These two in interface give rise to ambiguities which complicates the task of translation. The main sources of ambiguity in translation are the lexical and structural distinctions between the languages concerned, lexical holes, cultural gaps and multiword units like idioms and collocations. These factors collectively or in isolation give rise to complications in the process of translation.

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There is no ideal mode of translation. Douglas Robinson sums up translation as an “intelligent activity, requiring problem solving” (Becoming a Translator: An Accelerated course 51). This applies most fittingly to the translation of poetry, ‘poetry’ being the cover-term encompassing all imaginative literature—whether prose, drama or verse. Imaginative literature is distinct from scientific literature and various works of literary art deviate in different degrees from the scientific literature. Of the various notions regarding translation, very few confer a respectable status upon it. Translation of poetry is essentially “a compromise between the original texts and the present interests and capacities of a given writer” (The Oxford book of Verse in English Translation xi) says Charles Tomlinson. The Italian adage “Traduttore – Traditore” has done much harm to the reputation of the translator and the translated works by declaring that the translator is a traitor. Robert Frost once said that what is lost in translation is poetry.

Should the translator imitate the obscurity or ambiguity of the original in order to be faithful? Is he justified in adding something to the original text by way of explanation? To this the only answer can be that the translator must exercise his judgment and assume the role of an original in such a case. As a general rule nothing of real moment should be omitted and the additions must be as innocuous as possible, none should obstruct the continuity of the poem. Copying the style of the original and keeping the spirit and sense intact involves creative activity of the highest caliber.

The responsibilities of a translator are far too many. He has to appease the author, the critic and the reader at the same time. His product has to be artistic, faithful and yet: original. Too often, the translators are not given due credit. This leads to a deterioration of quality in their subsequent works. Zlatko Gorjan feels that the translator’s elan, the element so much needed in artistic creation is killed if the work of translators is not appreciated or understood; and indirectly the quality of their translations is ruined (Quality in Translation: Proceedings of the III Congress of the International Federation of Translators 253). Lila Ray feels that even intelligent appreciation of translations is often found lacking (Quality in Translation: Proceedings of the III Congress of the International Federation of Translators 164). Translators often face a general disinterest and apathy on the part of the critics. Dr. Prabhakar Machwe feels that there should be a class of special critics for translations (Quality in Translation: Proceedings of the III Congress of the International Federation of Translators 159).

The lack of interest on the part of the critic proceeds from the mediocre translations, which originates from the translator’s lack of motivation. Translators have to brave the critical onslaught from the critic, the author (if he lives) and the reader. They are paid paltry sums since the publisher has to reckon with marketing, royalties and other costs. Lila Ray feels that there is a want of “better recognition and adequate remuneration” (Quality in Translation: Proceedings of the III Congress of the International Federation of Translators 164). Prof. Ervino Pocar lists the two serious mistakes that the publishers commit – they pay very little and allow very little time. There are a few translators who command high prices for their services but their number is very small. Smaller remunerations mean that the translator will look for alternative sources of income or hurry from one assignment to the next. In either case he will not devote his whole hearted effort to the task at hand and ultimately the quality of the translation will suffer. Financial security relieves allows the translator to work freely; putting in his best efforts towards his work. The resulting product can be expected to be of a better quality.

It is very unworthy of art that translation is given the status of copying or cheap imitation. It remains to be understood that translation, like any original writing, is an act of creation; it is only made more difficult by the various parameters which the translator has to attain. An original work is like a stream gushing down a slope, understated simulating its course to the last degree. It is much more cumbersome, and the translator must exercise his judgment and assume the role of an original in such a case. As a general rule nothing of real moment should be omitted and the additions must be as innocuous as possible, none should obstruct the continuity of the poem. Copying the style of the original and keeping the spirit and sense intact involves creative activity of the highest caliber.

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Translation, the most thriving literary activity today has contributed enormously towards the unification of the country. It deserves credit for integrating the populace universally: better than any religion, philosophy or metaphysics. Literature is a matter of human emotion and its delights cannot and should not be restricted by social, cultural or geographical boundaries. The community has not yet reached out to explore the possibility of a world literature or the world emotion. The emotion is universal whereas the language is regional. Ideally, language should be as universal as the emotion itself, but physical constraints make the realization of this ideal impossible. Translation as an agent of homogenization of emotions tries to attain universalization of human emotions to a considerable extent. The importance of translation as an effective means of communication on the literary scene is thus established beyond doubt.

References