

# Loss of Stylistic effect in Literary Translation and the Extreme Notion of Impossibility of a Faithful Translation

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## الملخص:

يتناول هذا المقال مفهوم فقدان التأثير الأسلوبي في الترجمة الأدبية ومفهوم استحالة وفاء الترجمة للنص الأصلي. لا يقوم المترجم الأدبي بنقل النص من الناحية اللسانية فقط بل يقوم بنقل الإيحاءات الاجتماعية والثقافية كذلك. وقد يضطر المترجم إلى استعمال وسائل أسلوبية وجمالية مختلفة طبقا لما تتطلبه خصائص اللغة المنقول إليها. ولكل لغة معاييرها الأسلوبية والجمالية وعليه فعلى الترجمة أن تكون تقريبية وليس مماثلة للنص الأصلي.

**Key words:** Literary Translation, Stylistic Loss, Appropriateness, Translation Process, Adequacy, Equivalence

### **The Twofold character of Literary translation**

Speaking about the dual nature of the translation process, Levy (see Popovic, 1970, 79) states:

"A translation is not a monistic composition but an interpenetration and conglomerate of two structures. On the one hand, there are the semantic content and the formal contour of the original, on the other hand, the entire system of aesthetic features bound up with the language of the translation".

The causes of stylistic difficulties in literary translation emerge, in fact, from the twofold character of the work: the translator of a literary text is carrying out a double task; he is not only translating linguistic signs but also conveying their socio-cultural connotations. The translator's task, then, as Halliday (1970:4-5) explains "involves the difficult task of focussing attention simultaneously on the actual and potential, interpreting both discourse and the linguistic system that lies behind it in terms of the infinitely complex network of meaning potential that is what we call the culture"

Similarly Mona Baker (1992, 21) in speaking about non-equivalence at word level points out:

"the source language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture; the concept may be abstract or concrete; it may relate to a religious belief, a social custom or even a type of food. Such concepts are often referred to as culture specific".

All the indications referring to the twofold character of literary translation have been well described by Belcerzan (1970,5-7) in "la traduction art d'interpréter" where he distinguishes between the translation of a literary text and that of a non literary text:

« pour le traducteur de textes non artistiques les seuls systèmes de signes qui entrent en jeu sont les systèmes de la langue L1, langue de l'original et le système de la langue L2 de la traduction. Les décisions fondamentales concernant tel ou tel procédé transformateur ne sont prises que sur le plan linguistique [...]. En traduisant l'œuvre lyrique, le drame ou le roman, il faut non seulement franchir la frontière des langues naturelles L1 et L2 mais aussi se frayer simultanément un passage par la frontière des deux traditions littéraires T1 et T2. Ce double aspect de l'art de traduire semble être

la différence principale entre l'acte de traduire des œuvres artistiques et l'acte de traduire des œuvres non artistiques ».

The characteristics of literary translation and the complex tasks that it involves led to the extreme notion of the impossibility of a faithful translation held by most translation theorists. This extreme notion of achieving an adequate and faithful literary translation is, we believe, rather pessimistic and stems from a narrow definition of the process of translation itself.

The rendering of a literary text from one language to another involves, indeed, a confrontation of two different stylistic norms that belong to two different literary traditions. Despite this confrontation, some translation theorists assume, paradoxically enough, that a good translation is that which preserves the stylistic features of the original text without distorting the stylistic norm of the Language of the translation. "Quality in literary translation", writes Balbir (1963, 155), "means that experience by a reader of the translation which transports him to the atmosphere contained in the original through the medium of his own language without feeling that what he is reading is a translation and not an original work. To put **it in** other words", he goes on saying, "a translation should be a lively expression of the flexibility and richness of the language into which it is done without sacrificing the flow and style of the original".

Similarly, Fyzee (1963, 156), in listing three conditions under which a good translation is achieved, maintains that by "quality" in translation, he understands three things:

1. Faithfulness to the spirit of the original.
2. Faithfulness to the letter of the original
3. Gracefulness of the language employed for the translation.

Prochazba (see Flida, 1964, 161) expresses the same necessity in terms of the requirements made of a translator who must: "understand the original thematically and stylistically, overcome the differences between the two structures and must reconstruct the stylistic features of the original in the translation". It is true, however, that theoretical principles of this

kind are significant only in so far as they serve as theoretical guidelines in the translation process. Indeed, owing to the fact that it is

very difficult, if not downright impossible, to find a word or expression in the TL that is identical in both sense and communicative value to a word or expression in the SL, reproducing the style of the SL text and respecting the Literary norms of the TL seems to be an acrobatic achievement very unlikely to be reached.

In his article "Impossibilities of Translation", Werner (1961, 69) deals with this problem which leads any translator to despair of "achieving a completely faithful rendering of the original". Like Nida, he relates the cause to basic differences between languages. "Although the system of form and meaning in language A may be similar to that in Language B it is never identical to it" (ibid, 69).

Indeed, there are very rare cases where a message can be rendered by a simple conversion of codes, that is, by mere replacement of SL words and structures by TL words and structures. Although there are instances where some parallelism can be noticed between two languages sharing some similar words and structures, it would be misleading to believe in complete sameness between them. To prove the validity of this assumption it would be, perhaps, interesting to show how French and English, though being two languages sharing some identical words and structures, remain, however, two Languages that are different in essence.

French and English share some similar words which have different meanings, hence the question of "faux amis" (false friends) such as "achever" (meaning to finish)

and achieve (meaning to accomplish"); 'actuellement' (meaning now ) and 'actually' (meaning in fact ), 'passer un examen' (meaning to attend an exam) and 'to pass an exam' (meaning "to succeed it"), etc.

Another difference between French and English lies in the fact that French is more abstract ' than English. English is more characterized by its concrete aspect which it attains through its verbs and particles that give more or less a precise shape to the action.

### **Faithfulness or appropriateness in translation**

Translation is no a word for word rendering of a message from a source language (SL) to a target language (TL). If this is what is meant by translation, why do translation theorists, then, speak of "textual" translation or "blind" translation and view them as non

successful translations?. We believe that since a literary translation is a rendering of a literary message characterised by some socio-cultural connotations from SL to TL, the issue becomes, therefore, not a question of faithfulness but rather of appropriateness. What is meant by appropriateness is the ability of the translator to render a literary work from SL to TL using the appropriate linguistic and literary items which would transfer the message with equivalent connotative and denotative items. The translator's task in literary translation becomes, therefore, understanding and feeling the message of the author and then taking liberty to find the most appropriate semantic items for appropriate rendition. Hence, what is meant by appropriateness is a translation which conveys a tone on the TL reader similar to that conveyed on the SL reader.

Nevertheless, this question of "appropriateness" in literary translation to which we are referring could be efficient only in so far as it lies on two essential and important factors:

1. The translator's knowledge of the SL and the TL linguistic systems,
2. The translator's knowledge of the literary traditions and rhetorical aspects of both SL and TL.

This means that the translator' of a literary text can be a good translator only in so far as he can successfully "cross" from one language to another using the "correct bridges" i.e. the rhetorical aspects and literary traditions proper to every language. To make these observations more accurate and precise, we may refer to a difference between the literary tradition in the English language and the Arabic language when speaking about the most common literary concept in literature which is "beauty".

"Beauty" in an English literary text can easily be personified and compared to a woman as it is noticeable, for instance, from the following extract taken from a poem written by W.B.Yeats (1974:38)

I thought of your beauty, and this arrow,  
Made out of a wild thought, is in my marrow.  
There's no man may Look her, no man,  
As when newly grown to be a woman,

Tall and noble but with face and bosom

Delicate in colour as apple blossom.

This beauty's kinder, yet for a reason'

I could weep that the old is out of season

Whereas “beauty” can be personified and easily compared to a woman in an English Literary text, the word “الجمال” in an Arabic literary text is usually associated to words denoting light such as “النور”, “الضياء”, “القمر”, “اليدر” as we may see from the following examples:

خود تضيء ظلام البيت صورتها كما يضيء ظلام الحندس القمر

(عمر ابن أبي ربيعة)

غراء كالقمر المشهور حين بدت لا بل بدا مثلها حين استوى القمر

(بشار بن برد)

Many examples can be given on the differences between the two literary traditions and how concepts and “things” are viewed from one culture to another. The question, therefore, is how can we speak of a faithful literary rendition when we are dealing with two different cultures and two different ways of feeling and expressing “things”?

### **Loss of Stylistic Effect and the Notion of Adequacy in Translation**

From these indications, it becomes clear that the stylistic effect of a SL literary text cannot be integrally transferred into the TL because of the divergence between the stylistic norm of the SL and that of the TL. The negative aspect of this indication lies in the fact that it often Leads to the extreme notion of the non existence of an adequate translation.

Etienne Dolet, one of the first writers to formulate a theory of translation, sets forth five principles for the translator in a short outline of translation principles entitled "La manière de bien traduire d'une langue à une autre" (How to Translate Well from One Language to Another). Three of these five principles (see Bassnett Mc Guire, 1980, 54) are:

- 1- The translator must fully understand the sense and meaning of the original author, although he is at liberty to clarify obscurities.
- 2- The translator should avoid word-for-word renderings.
- 3- The translator should choose and order words appropriately to produce the correct tone.

By stressing on the author's competence in clarifying obscurities, in "avoiding word—for—word renderings, and in choosing and ordering words appropriately to produce the correct, Dolet implicitly recognized that no work of Literature can be translated adequately, i.e, without some degree of change or loss. What is implied by Dolet is explicitly formulated by James Howell who compares poetry to a luxurious Turkish carpet and compares a translation of a poem to a luxurious Turkish carpet turned over (see Parsons, 1980, 15-24)). Babler (1970, 195) also considers adequacy in translation as an impossibility and states: "we are willing to admit that absolute adequacy on the part of a translation is quite impossible". Similarly, R. Jakobson maintains that poetry is by definition untranslatable. only creative transposition is possible (see Steiner, 1975, 261).

This extreme notion of the impossibility of an adequate translation stems, we believe, from a narrow definition of adequacy in translation which in turn derives from a misunderstanding of the concept of equivalence in the translation process. Because of the linguistic and stylistic disparities between languages, equivalence does not and cannot mean sameness and identity. It is rather an approximate rendering of the form and the content of the original text. Adequacy in translation should not, therefore, be assessed in terms of the sameness between the stylistic effect of the original text and that of the rendition. It should rather be assessed in terms of the relative closeness between them.

This indication may be taken into consideration even more in literary translation. Literary translation is not and can never be an exact science. Every literature has its own stylistic peculiarities and its own linguistic norms which, when translated, cannot be rendered without some degree of change and loss. Surely, the translator has to admit that he cannot achieve an integral transfer of the SL stylistic effect to the TL version. Nevertheless, this consideration should not

lead to the extreme notion of the non existence of an adequate translation. Loss of stylistic effect which is unavoidable in the process of literary translation, contrary to what is commonly believed, should not be considered as a proof of the non existence of an adequate translation. It should rather be viewed as a result imposed by the very nature of the translation process. In other words, any translation is bound to involve some Loss of stylistic effect because of its very nature, i.e, because of the fact that it involves a confrontation of two different Linguistic systems and two different stylistic norms. From these observations it can be said, ironically enough, that one who would expect a translation to be an exact and complete rendering of the stylistic effect of the SL version is, in fact, denying the very essence of translation.

If translation involves some acute problems, this should not hamper its production. Therefore, loss of stylistic effect in literary translation should not lead to the extreme belief of the non existence of an adequate translation. Such belief would indeed deny the existence of an activity necessary to the establishment of contact between communities speaking different languages.

The question of an impossibility of an adequate translation could be significant only in so far as it suggests a notion of untranslatability to be taken into account and solved by an approximate rendition. Because of the disparity between the stylistic norm of the SL and that of the TL, what is important in the rendition of the stylistic effect of the original text is that the translator tries to make his TL version produce an effect on the IL reader as close as possible to the one produced by the original work on the SL reader. In other words, what the translator should aim at is not identity which is impossible but an approximation.

We may conclude that, contrary to what is commonly believed by some translation theorist, the question of faithfulness and unfaithfulness is not and should not be a central issue in literary translation. The question of appropriateness is more relevant when we deal with the translation of literary texts. We believe that the translator of a literary text can be successful only if he turns from a passive reader to a clever receptor (Meschonnic 1970).



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