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Fiction Literary Translation: A Practical Implication for  
the Enhancement of Traditional Translation Methods

Abstract

This paper intends to explore the nature of literary fiction translation and to discuss the feasibility of application on the basis of translation theoretical considerations. The applicability of the approach to translation of fiction is examined in two aspects: theory basis and translation practice. The theoretical frame has considerably promoted understanding and mastery of the nature and skill of translation, relying on Vladimir Nabokov's experience and perspectives which put forward a significant contribution to the study of fiction translation. The practical side, on the other hand, displays the use of some technical methods to prove how difficult fiction translation is, sampling Claire Durivaux translating Agatha Christie's *Endless Night*<sup>1</sup>.

**Introduction:**

We live in area of international exchanges which constantly enrich our everyday life experience. It seems evident that translation itself represents not only the current trend, but also far more than that, it becomes vital for any society. Information, on television, radio, as well as the explosion of internet web sites, constantly arrives from everywhere. We have to capture, understand, and present it in an appropriate form to the target audiences, listeners and readers. The

process gradually becomes so habitual that we hardly think how crucial the matter and result of translation is. And most of all the methodology chosen by the translator to achieve an accurate parallel between the original and the translated text in order to transmit the true written or spoken idea from another language and culture. Speaking about literature we realize that it is due to the genius of the translators that we can appreciate those masterpieces from all over the world, despite the fact that we cannot manage to read in original texts the world's greatest writers like Shakespeare, Byron, Rousseau, Tolstoy, Joyce, Faulkner... And it is obvious that among the deficiencies of translating fiction a number of contextual problems may account for the ineffectiveness of translating literature. The problems include the literary text itself; the translator may choose a text without referring to its nature and if he does so, other factors may run counter in the faithfulness of remaking the original text.

So, what are these factors? And, what should be done to enhance the traditional methods in translation of fiction?

Theoretical Part:

The translator contributes to the building of the bridge towards the original work: s/he works at what leads to the understanding of the text and its original message by the reader from another culture with another mentality, speaking another language. In this respect, the translator Roger Munier wrote:

**We could never transfer a text; to translate means to re-make, but differently the same text, and for doing this – having found unconsciously the same personal relations with writing which have produced the original text, - we have to capture it on one's own account life for the writer that translator is.<sup>2</sup>**

This point of view has been noticed by another writer and translator, Vladimir Nabokov<sup>3</sup>, an emigrant from Russia, first presented the existence of the superposition of languages, to such an extent that the reader is never really sure if he is reading an original version of the author or its translation.

If we say that the reader of the translated text should find in it all the talent of the author, which means that the translator must have as much talent as the author himself to be able to create the equivalent but in translated text. We need to notice then that the translator in his case must know perfectly both nations, both languages and both cultures in order to achieve his target and to ensure no loss of any simple detail from the original. The nuances and finesse of the author must be maintained. It was Nabokov himself who represented such an example of quality: he wrote, "I switched to English after convincing myself on the strength of my translation of *Despair* that I could use as wistful stand-by for Russian".<sup>4</sup>

Thus, when translating his own works, the words worried Nabokov very much. He understood that there was linguistically an impassable barrier between the author and the translator, the author's quality doesn't naturally exist, and the reader should experience the work of the author. Vladimir Nabokov was aware of this when he stated:

**When I translate myself, I can permit much more liberty than when it is someone else. I can afford myself this liberty because I am not only a translator but also an author of the book.**<sup>5</sup>

Many writers, philosophers and thinkers, such Hamann, Proust, Valéry, Pasternak or Marina Tsvetaëva, considered that translation signifies the "passage" of the text between languages. And also around this first "passage", a whole succession of other "passages"

involved in the act of writing, and covertly the act of life and death. In reality, the quality of translation distinguishes whether the work will live or will be forgotten as soon as it enters the scene of so many examples of this genre. Therefore, the "passage" chosen by the translator is crucial because of its being the first step to destination: the new text in another language than original, which is at the same time the native language for the future readers.

#### Practical Part:

Among all the possible methods of translation we would like to mention the most typical used in the present translation. It will design a little bit more clearly the approaches and choices of the translator. Because none of the translator chooses one and only method for translation, we have to underline the most typical tendencies and ways of Claire Durivaux's work. During her translation, the writer had to tackle the work from different points of view. Thus our task is to discuss the most typical relations of the translation with the original text.

#### Transposition:

There is a large amount of transpositions used by Claire Durivaux in her translation. They can be recognized in such examples of changing of the grammatical categories as follows:

"I was startled by how ill he looked, much worse than when I had seen him a year ago. He greeted both Ellie and myself very warmly".  
(Book 1: 64)

"Il avait tellement changé depuis notre dernière rencontre que j'eus du mal à lui cacher mon étonnement. Il se montra heureux de nous revoir" (book 2:78)

Within the evident changing of the focalisation, the grammatical transposition takes place in the second part of the phrase ("I had seen

him” becomes “notre dernière rencontre”), rendering the tone rather official and dry, that had not be so. The interest that it can also provoke lies in the changing of the point of view: the focalisation takes place and the narration changes and looses the part if information: the emotive “how ill he looked” becomes “mostly neutral: “il avait tellement changé”, the intensifier “how” being changed into “tellement”.

Let us consider another example:

“It was, I think, the day after that. We were in Athens. Suddenly, ...” (book1:68)

“Le lendemain, nous gravissions les marches de l’Acropole lorsqu’une...” (book2:83)

The transposition makes the succession of simple sentences become one complex due to the modulation. The noun ‘le lendemain) making for the underlining for the number of events that are presented in the form of short reflections of the narrator, will become the entry of a simple constitution of given facts. We feel no sudden event with the simple ‘lorsque’, nor do we understand the following changing by the reduction of three sentences into one complex which makes enough compositional changing and grammatical transpositions to consider that the translator was faithful. The translator is always here, she is present through these multiple changes, and we hear her point of view. Here again the focalisation plays its role: instead of generalised “it was”, the translator chooses to pass by the character’s actions, making the description situations active: “nous gravissions”, thus changing the narration from static into the dynamic one.

Modulation:

“There isn’t any curse, I shouted. It’s all nonsense. Forget it” (book1:68)

“Aucune malediction ne plane sur le champ du Gitan! Mettez-vous bien ça dans la tête et n’y pensez plus” (book2 :82)

The English expression ‘forget it’ has much more strongly connotation than the French ‘ne pensez plus’, thus the translation has lost this abrupt character of the utterance, more over the whole composition of the phrase has been modulated to such an extent that we see an explication instead of short exclamations. Thus the modulation did not embellish the phrase or the tone.

The metonymic modulations, as follows, are interesting:

“But she had turned away and ...” (book1:13)

“La vieille femme, m’ayant tourné le dos” (book2:17)

Here, the phrasal verb “turned away” is translated by the adverbial syntagme “ayant tourné le dos”. The impossibility to translate a phrasal verb by the equivalent of the same grammatical rate in French, made the method of modulation able to preserve the sense of the original enunciation.

There is another example:

“It was pure chance that had brought me to the neighbourhood of Gypsy’s Acre that day.” (book2; 14)

“C’est le hasard qui avait guidé mes pas vers le ‘champ de Gitan’.”

The “pure chance” becomes “le hasard”, thus modulating a form but not completely the sense of the phrase. There we find also the changing of the order: the part being translated into the whole like “neighbourhood” into the definite article “le” and the concretisation occurred.

#### Adaptation:

The evident use of adaptation is made during translation of the verbs and sayings, that we have already seen earlier, like:

“Pauvre petite fille riche! J’en découvre des choses sur votre compte!” (book2:174)

Completely ‘adapted’ and, in fact, taken away was the following phrase:

“A goose is walking over your grave. That’s the real saying, isn’t it? Said Ellie.” (book1:146)

The lost that creates the absence of this passage in the first translation is evident. It is the first time in the narration when the hint, the prediction of the death, signs the beginning of the serious aggravation of the things. The development of the plot line in the narration that leads to the climax is marked by this intensifying by using the proverb.

The sort of adaptation we find in the following example:

“My tastes, now that I hadn’t got to restrain in any way, were very much those of a Victorian squire!” (book1:149)

“De mon côté, puisque je pouvais m’offrir tout ce qui me tentait, mes goûts étaient devenus ceux d’un lord de l’époque de la reine Victoria.” (book2 :176)

Here, the sort of clarification of the term ‘a Victorian squire’, and the time period of the historical epoch helps our translation to deal with the transposing of the reality. The English history’s reality has been presented explicitly being the best way in itself to tackle the question. Here also, the mark of transformation by changing of the word order, or the sentence structure, and focalisation takes place.

#### Equivalence:

The simplest example of the equivalence in Claire Durivaux’s translation can be presented by the translation of the proverbs and sayings that are used in the original.

Thus the following proverb(s) have found their translation:

“There is a saying by some great writer or other that **no man is a hero to his valet**. Perhaps everyone ought to have a valet. It must be so hard otherwise, always **living up to people’s good opinion of one**” (book1:51)

Is translated as:

“Je crois que c’est un grand écrivain qui a dit **aucun home n’est un héros pour son valet**. Tout le monde devrait peut-être avoir un domestique. Il me semble impossible de s’efforcer sans cesse de donner le change. ” (book2 :62)

The given above example is the literal translation, the word-by-word translation of the English proverb about a valet. It can be referred to as the most direct equivalent found for the translated text. The translation approaches to the second saying could be named the idiomatic equivalent. As it is mostly characteristic to the oral speech, the intervention of the equivalent orally marked, is usual. In any case, it renders the sense and it is all it has to be involved in / with.

The very interesting example gives a proof of the words of A. Berman about the power of the interchanges, or interconnections of languages: both languages having the same sayings with the same meanings.

Besides, the onomatopoeic exclamation of the original has not been translated: it has been adopted by omitting the word and rendering the mood of the phrase by its exclamation:

“Tcha! He spoke angrily. I wish I’d been told **wore** about that” (book1:168)

“Si seulement, j’avais été au courant!” (book2:199)



The intentional reduction of the phrases into one exclamation sentence that takes all attention on its own could be justified by the translator when it makes the sense of the original text clear enough.

### Conclusion

To facilitate the translation of fiction, one may sort out the problems facing the reader because the use of any technique is predetermined by the nature of the would-be reader or listener. To do so the translator is either himself a writer, the one who translates his own fiction as it is idiosyncratic carrying some internal impulses that cannot be easily conceived and it needs a profound exegesis, or another writer translated by someone else; this is because both of them handle the attributes used in fiction.

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<sup>1</sup> - Christie, Agatha : *La Nuit qui ne finit pas*. Traduction de l'Anglais de Claire Durivaux. Edition Libraires des Champs-Élysées. 1969.

<sup>2</sup> - Quoted in/ Palimpsestes n° 09, pp: 23-24. Earlier quoted in « les Poètes traduisent les poètes » (*Autour de la littérature II*) Paris, 1984, p05. [http : //www. Palimpsestes. Com](http://www.Palimpsestes.Com).

<sup>3</sup> - Vladimir Vladimirovitch Nabokov (1899-1977), a multilingual writer who wrote in Russian, French and English. One of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's master prose stylists was born in St. Petersburg. He studied French and Russian literature at Trinity College, Cambridge, then lived in Berlin and Paris, where he launched a brilliant literary career. In 1940 he moved to the United States, and achieved renown as a novelist, poet, critic, and translator (his poems in Russian were translated into English by himself). He taught literature at Wellesley, Stanford, Cornell, and Harvard. In 1961 he moved to Montreal, Switzerland, where he died in 1977.

<sup>4</sup> - An interview published in *Playboy*, on January 1964, and repeated in *Strong Opinions*, New York: Vintage International, 1990, pp: 88-89.

<sup>5</sup> - Dommergues, P. « Entretien avec Vladimir Nabokov », in/ *Les Langues Modernes*, n° 01 (January -February 1968), p : 101.