

Translating Literary Text and its Pragmatics

Dr. SHAKIBUR RAHMAN KHAN
Assistant Professor of English
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Abstract:

Translation continues to be a potent source of dissemination of ideas and information cutting across the geographical boundaries and cultural barriers. Its recognition as an important academic exercise derives its sustenance from the monolithic universal characteristics manifested by mankind. This undercurrent of homogeneity constantly engenders an exploratory attitude among us that prompts to seek novel experiences in life brought through translated texts. But translating a text has its own share of challenges as any lapse on the part of a translator may cause misinterpretation leading to a chaotic and unpalatable situation in public domain. Keeping it in view, this paper attempts to explore different shades of challenges ranging from cultural to linguistic that a translator encounters while translating a text. A pragmatic approach has been adopted here to look into the nuances of translation and highlight certain measures that may help us overcome these challenges.

Key words: dissemination, universal characteristics, homogeneity, cultural barriers

1. AN OVERVIEW

Historically, the emergence of translation as an intellectual exercise began with cross-cultural dynamism practiced by mankind as one of its primordial attributes. The rapid pace of

advancement of different civilizations in the annals of history went on inducing interest among people to know about other homo-sapiens inhabiting distant lands, using different languages and practicing unfamiliar cultures. The expansion of industrialization in due course necessitated colonization that largely prompted inter-cultural migration under a variety of influential factors. In the last century, globalization gave a giant fillip to such migratory tendencies that contribute overtly or covertly to the relevance of translation studies. An overview of the academic journey of mankind since the beginning of civilizations clearly indicates that our urge to satisfy the quest of knowledge and better life has proved to be a potential motivational factor for deepening interest in and sincere inclination towards translation. The contribution of translation has been pretty significant in upgrading our standard of life today as people want to stand updated in terms of information which is not possible without reliance on translated texts.

Translation that technically involves two languages, the source language (text to be translated) and the target language (translated text) has undergone a metamorphosis from imitation to creation. It has turned out to be a creative act that has largely enriched the world literature through significant additions of perspectives and adaptive cultural inputs. The three major languages spoken around the globe are English, French and Arabic where first two languages flourished and literature in these achieved global acceptability and recognition, for the writers could transfer their literature into other languages of the world. But the point is not whether translation was done only for the heck of it rather the genuine desire to make its literature go beyond the confines of localized representations, was one of the aspects, the important thing being the hassles negotiated in the process of translation and its acceptability.

2. CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATION

Dante, the famous writer says “Nothing that the Muses had touched can be carried over to another tongue without losing its savour and harmony”. Towing the same line, Nabokov considers translation as an act of profanation of the dead. These strong remarks of eminent writers hint at the challenges translation poses before a translator. Undoubtedly, every language has a definite history of growth and development and its association with the cultural roots cannot be dislodged because language and culture cannot be seen in isolation from each other. The first basic issue that the challenge of translation raises is the knowledge of the translator of the language and culture of a particular country whose literature is to be translated. For example, if a German or Russian short story is to be translated into English, the translator must be aware of the two languages and their cultural background. Secondly, much would depend on the skill and expertise of the translator because the global reader banks on the translated version of the work. The authenticity of translation cannot be ascertained as there is a school of thought that insists that translated version of a work is only an abandoned child of a legitimate mother that misses out the local colour and the habitation. Whatever we have read about the writers who write in the three above quoted languages are believed to be the reproductions of the essence and the spirit and one has barely any choice other than to accept it. The names of *Homi Bhabha*, *Gayatri Spivak*, *Chakraborty*, *Julia Kristeva*, *Constance Garnett* and *Walter Brogan* are in circulation for translating authors like *Derrida*, *Foucault*, *Tolstoy*, *Dostoevsky*, *Chekov* and *Gorki*. If ‘deconstruction’ has become a common phrase today it is largely because of the translator’s efforts or else the works like *Of Grammatology*, *Of Phenomenology*, *Structure, Sign and Play* would have ended up as charades of the world literature but the question again is whether these translations have been accepted the way they are translated or is there something that

the world readership missed out? May be yes, or may be no, since the majority of those who read Derrida or Dante do not know the original language, and therefore, their translated versions are deemed reliable.

Translation does not give judgment as it is committed to representing the text without a critical opinion on it. Here, the objective therefore is to locate the text of both the source language and the target language and suggest the inadequacy of the translated text, for example, the translation of certain passages from Arabic or Urdu or Hindi into English particularly those which talk of the local society and some of the words that have cultural bearings to suggest the kind of gap translation leaves and how language is inalienable from culture. In the course of doing this we can come across a host of references drawn from a variety of sources to highlight the point that no translation has ever been complete in the sense that it only manages to reproduce the facts while the local colour or spirit remains the casualty. But still the translation is considered to be a creative effort for the kind of proximity it creates with the source language. The world literature would have remained a bundle of undeciphered codes or unintelligible corpus of literature without translation. We would probe and examine such critical issues to determine the efficacy of translation or the translator's skill to transmit one from another. We would come across a variety of references from many languages to stress the limitations and practical challenges involved in the act of translation.

What ails translation most is the sense of local colour and the colloquial expressions that exist in all established languages of the world. Not much has been done in this specific area as generally there is a tendency to overlook the fundamental concerns of translation as a significant activity duly acknowledged by the reading globe. Since the issue is crucially relevant to the study of literature as translation has been debated and deliberated across the globe that generally comes within the ambit of comparative literature, it would

indeed be an interesting area of research. The contention that translation is impossible given the cultural and linguistic hazards we would contest the thesis based on the findings of the research proposed. The literary significance stands stated and the revaluation of the contentious issue would provide an insight into the critical areas of the research. The translation as it has been observed so far has given a new fillip to the rise of comparative literature and therefore translation can also be seen in terms of the comparative study of the two cultures as represented by the respective texts. Our objective will be to analyze the seemingly apparent complications but deep down they hole out a whole lot of complexities that need to be resolved. The research indeed is a significant area of knowledge and understanding with regard to unearthing the possibilities of translation as a creative and constructive activity.

George Steiner writes -

“The translator is the mailman of human thought and sentiment. He examines some of the difficulties involved in accurately translating works of literature.”

Translation, according to Newmark, (1988: 5) is rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text. Thus it can be said that the translator is the mailman of human thought as he is delivering to us information and literature that we otherwise may not have had access to. As a means of communication, translation is used for multilingual notices, for tourists, official documents, textbooks and instructions. It has been instrumental in transmitting culture, allowing us to sample their ideas, literature and ideologies, and perhaps even adapting to some of them. Translation has also preserved certain languages, (such as Latin), historical events, and classic works of literature (Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Homer) as well as permitting us to learn foreign languages.

George Steiner points to a very important dimension of translation as a language to be used for traveling, documentation, transmitting culture which is why it becomes

extremely important in the context of preserving the variety of writings deduced from a variety of sources. Even for traveling purposes it would still be important to find translation managing a kind of bare minimum communication at least to drive the point home that the source language somehow is transferred in terms of its communicative aspect to get across the messages to the ones seeking them. Another bottleneck that a translator is up against is the limitation of finding alternatives in the target language.

George Steiner further remarks

‘However accurately translating works of literature can accumulate a lot of problems. These include problems with language, such as interpreting grammar, punctuation, words, figurative language and irony, as well as problems with cultural (and sub-cultural) differences, such as dialect, idioms and cultural focus’. These are not the only problems that a translator encounters, there are, in fact, many more’.

What George Steiner points out is basically the element of accuracy in translations that is presented as a translated version of a particular text or dialect or idioms or cultural focus. These are the issues a translator is to be particularly concerned about. The translation of idioms or dialects is much more problematic given the fact that they cannot be given to the readers the way they exist in the source language. What further mounts the agony of the translator is the sense of a cultural limitation imposed through the very nature of the words used in a particular context which the translation cannot do justice with. Usually, suggesting the sense is deemed as translation in most of the cases when it comes to representing them in the target language. George Steiner attacks and suspects the element of accuracy in translation which indeed is a pragmatic challenge while dealing with the text in the target language.

3. PRAGMATIC ASPECTS

The challenges of translation may better be illustrated through the following passage of Hindi.

jkts”oj viuh I;kjh fcfV;k dh “kknh ds fj”rs ds fy, yM+ds okys ds ?kj tkus ds fy, fudykA vius ?kj dh pkS[kV ikj djrs gh xyh esa ,d dkyh feYyh dks viuk jkLrk dkVrs ns[kdj lglk fBBd x;kA viuh ;k=k ml fnu LFkfxr dj nhA vxyk fnu cq/kokj Fkk ftl fnu mlds firr dk nsgkar gqvK FkkA xq:okj dks nf{k.k fn”kk dh ;k=k oftZr FkhA “kqdzokj dks mls irk pyk fd ml yM+ds dh “kknh dgha vkSj r; gks x;h A jkts”oj ijEijkxr ekU;rkvksa dh pDdh esa igys Hkh dbZ ckj ihl pqdk FkkA bu ekU;rkvksa dk cks> >syrs&>syrs mlds cky vle; id pqds FksA csVh dh c<+rh mez mlds psgjs ij >qjhZ;kj vkeaf=r dj jgh FkhA

“Rajeshwar came out to go to the house of a probable bridegroom for the negotiation of marriage of his lovely daughter. As soon as he crossed the door of his house, he jerkily stopped to see a black cat going across the street he had to pass through.. He decided not to go on that day. Next day was Wednesday on which he had lost his father. On Thursday, journey towards the South was unfateful. On Friday, he came to know that the marriage of that boy was settled somewhere else. Rajeshwar had already suffered a lot following the traditional beliefs. His hair had turned white prematurely under the burden of such beliefs. The growing age of his daughter was inviting wrinkles on his face.”

(Translated by Adil Hussain)

This English translation cannot be understood properly by a reader who does not have the socio-cultural background of Hindi-speaking belt of India. As for instance, a reader must have the idea of the fact that crossing the path by a black cat is ominous. Further, one should know about the problems a father faces in marriage negotiation of his daughter. The idea of belief system practiced in such society is a prerequisite for derivation of meanings of such passages. At lexico-semantic level, the literal translation of a boy suitable for marriage, and, turning of black hair into white, etc. pose challenge for a translator where

word after word translation fails to produce the desired meaning. At syntactic level, the translation of idioms and proverbs which are conventionally culture-specific coinages is equally challenging, as a translator has to use his creativity in order to realize equivalent constructions in the target language. This example clearly illustrates the challenges of translation.

This confirms the apprehension of Robert Frost who once remarked that “*The text is lost in translation*” which is not very erroneous. While translating the literary texts, any translator experiences certain hindrances that impede the process of translation and at times, s/he has to rely more on the commonsense than on the text as it demands to be represented. Another issue that calls for attention is the style of the author, his narrative and use of words that are basically esoteric in nature which is more problematic in the translation of poems. Though Md. Albakry of Arizona University finds the grammatical part more challenging while attempting the translation of the Moroccan writer Md. Zafaf’s stories *A Night in Casablanca and the story translated as Nests*. What Md. Albakry finds difficult is the grammar of language, syntax, the idiosyncrasy of each language and the complexities they abound in.

Here is another example of a translated passage from the Urdu novel *Shikast Ki Awaaz* by Abdus Samad, a renowned Urdu story writer.

“That was a fabulous orchard, absorbed in the self. I kept moving forward only to be encountered by a forest, all routes closed except the one, so I took the same route, the forest turned dense...An abrupt blindness enveloped me, I was scared and I took long strides forward and felt like being chased by someone. I kept running and the footsteps drew closer, he was very close to me and possibly would have been there almost, then a tree appeared and I climbed the tree driven by fear, when I looked down only to find a black animal was staring me seething with anger. His fire imbued red eyes were emblem of anger, long yellowish teeth popped out, I cried in consternation and my eyes too opened up. Master was glued

to the story of his dream, he spoke only after he went quiet, a dream is dream, and it could be real or fictitious too.”

(Translated by Mahtab Alam)

The Urdu version of the passage will again bring into focus the gap between Urdu and English at various linguistic levels projecting the challenges of a translator. The lack of exact equivalent terms and structures of sentences compel a translator to rely on his/her creative potential that turns the process of translation into transcreation. Abdus Samad, the novelist, was satisfied with this translated version but the translator felt that at times he had to shift the perspective or twist the expression that was much different from the original version in the source language. The names of certain trees, flowers, the local versions of the names were clubbed as ‘flowers of different hues’ which the alien readers might think to have been said exactly the same by the writer of the source language. The problem with every writer of any language is the use of colloquial expressions and idioms that demand a higher degree of competence on the part of a translator. It is the bilingual competence of the translator which finally determines the percentage of the representation of the text and the extent to which justice is done with the text. We do not know whether *Julia Kristeva* was perfectly satisfied while translating Foucault or *Gayatri Spivak* was fairly comfortable translating Jacques Derrida or the Russian writers as translated by *Richard Povear and Lorissa Volokhonsky*, the acclaimed pair of translators of the Russian literature that include the works of *Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace, The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories, Fedor Dostoevsky’s* all major novels and two collection of Short stories , *Nikolai Gogol’s The Master and the Margrite*, so, translation they believe is superior if not perfect. *Nirmal Verma* had translated some of the writers of Hungary like *Karel Capek, Jiri Fried, Joseph Skoversky, Milan Kundera, Homi Bhabha, Indu Mazaldan* including Nobel Prize winner *ImreKertesz*. It is a fact that most of the celebrated texts have

been translated into many languages that amply justifies the wide recognition translation as an academic exercise receives in spite of certain intractable intricacies involved in it.

4. CONCLUSION

Language that is truly entrusted with the task of manifestation of cultural attributes, aspirations and sensibilities of mankind, appears to be ill-equipped to transmit these features exactly in the process of translation. But this limitation of translation is reasonably compensated by the creativity of a translator who may succeed in serving a translated text before the readers that turns out to be even more fascinating than the original text. Gabriel Garcia Marquez rightly said that the English translation of his *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was certainly richer than its original in linguistic and semiotic qualities. It will not be out of context to state that the translated version of *Gitanjali* by Rabindra Nath Tagore received the Nobel Prize which reaffirms the literary sublimity and richness of a translated text. A translator needs to strike a balance between free translation and literal translation through application of his/her common-sense, linguistic flourish and fertile imagination, that is to say, the creative potential that may stand befitting the taste and sensibility of the target language socio-cultural convictions.

REFERENCES

1. Brinton, Laurel. (1995) Non-anaphoric reflexives in free indirect style: expressing the subjectivity of the non-speaker. In Stein Dieter and Wright Susan (eds.) (1995). Subjectivity and subjectivisation: Linguistic Perspectives. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York. Pp.173-194.

2. Dawood, N. J. (Trans). (1956, 2000).The Koran.Penguin classics. London, New York.
3. Herzfeld, Michael. (2003) The unspeakable in pursuit of the ineffable: Representations of untranslatability in ethnographic discourse. In Paula G. Rubel and Abraham Rosman Translating culture: Perspectives on translation and anthropology. Berg: Oxford. New York.
4. Marquez, Gabriel Garcia, trans.(1970) Gregory Rabassa, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, New York, Harper & Row
5. Said, Edward. (2002) Impossible Histories: Why the many Islams cannot be simplified. July 2002 issue of Harper's Magazine.
6. Stubbs, Michael. (2001) Words and Phrases: Corpus studies of lexical semantics. Blackwell Publishers Inc. Massachusetts.