



Translation and the Characteristics of Literary Text

Abdul Wahid Mohammed Muslat, PhD
Translation and World Literature, Iraqi writer's Union
Baghdad, Iraq

Abstract

The present paper discusses the universal characteristics of a literary text and how important it is for a translator to be well-aware of. Otherwise, he will not get access to a good translation without such knowledge. Thus the paper discusses the characteristics first and the process of translating a literary text, next. In the first part, five characteristics are almost briefly discussed, viz; the special language, the expressive function, the suggestive power, the form and the timelessness as well as the placelessness. By the special language is meant the literary one whether it is prose or verse. Being as such it has an expressive function mostly related to aesthetic scope. Added is the suggestive power which inspires readers with imaginary images. Besides the form plays a distinctive role in communication with others, for aesthetic, the difference between prose and verse. Lastly a treatment of time less ness as well as placelessness is made. In the second part, the paper highlights the process of translating necessary for this type of text. Some examples are given to show how the meaning of certain dictions may change with. Those examples are taken from Hamlet and Chaucer

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1. What is a literary text?

It includes all forms of literature whether written in prose or verse. They are: the short story, the novel, the drama, the essay and the critical text. The latter might be objected to by some men of letters as being a non-creative text. In reply to this objection, one can easily explain that the substance nourishing a creative literary text is normally derived from natural and social surroundings. In other words, a literary text can be viewed as a sort of parasite. The same can be said of a critical text as it almost largely draws on a literary text in developing its body. In some way or another, directly or indirectly, the substance made use of by a literary text, is also made use of by a critical text. Still, the latter might in its turn be a new substance for another fresh literary text. Thus the notion of being a parasite can equally be shared by both the literary text and the critical text as well.

Although all these kinds of literary texts apparently differ in form and content, yet they all have shared universal characteristics which distinguish them from other manners of writing. They are as follows:

1.1. Special Language

A literary text, whether verse or prose, has its own special language which clearly differs from everyday one. This special language has been the outcome of using words, syntactic structures and sentence patterns in a specific way that most likely creates emotional, mental, psychological, imaginary and even dream-like states which the ordinary language fails to achieve. Consequently, the special language is to form a sort of intuitive transmitting center that send out codes together with overt messages usually received by a recipient's private receptor. The transmitting centre, in a way or another, resembles a real T.V. transmitting one. If the receptor is of the black and white type, the message then shown on its screen will also be black and white. But if the receptor is of the colored type, the message

then will also be colored. In other words, the kind of message received is determined by the type of receiver the recipient has.

1.2. Expressive function :

Inevitably, any poet or writer is influenced by his own whole surroundings. This surroundings, that ever it may be, plays a dynamic role in formulating the writer's conceptions, attitudes and images. As a result it affects the method by which the attempts to produce the thoughts and impressions occurring to his mind, or to portray the sensations and feelings going on inside his soul. By a complicated process taking place inside the mind and heart, the writer will bring together all these elements, creating what might be described as "expressive function", mostly conditioned by the character the writer has been endowed with.

1.3. Suggestive power :

Quite often it so happens that we may read a creative text and admire it. This admiration seems to be due to our interpretation and understanding of the text by virtue of its suggestive power. This power, of course, is due to the pattern of sounds, the adoption of words and their unique arrangement in larger structures and lastly the internal rhythm. All these as well as others will add quite a lot to the whole apparent surface meaning. It is more likely that these elements will constitute the major part of the text's original message.

1.4. Form :

Generally speaking, the main purpose of a text is to excite the recipient whether emotionally or intellectually. This excitement may be partly due to the kind of style used by a writer in exploiting metaphors or inventing new images. A writer as such is regarded to be a creator. He attempts to make us see the world

from a different angle. In order to realize this target, he tries to make the form a convenient vehicle for anticipating this new image.

1.5. Timelessness and Placelessness

It is an uncontroversial question that masterpieces need not be restricted to either time or place. They quite often transcend them. The place referred to in them could be anywhere in the world, and the time referred to could be no less than immortality itself. They are timeless and placeless, because they are mainly concerned with essential values such as those people constantly take interest in at any time or place. Besides they particularly handle the human themes that always appeal to people wherever they live such as : love, death, suffering, happiness, torment and worry. (As'ad, 1989 : 16-17)

2. Translating a literary text :

Recognizing these characteristics in a literary text will enable the translator to be at least partly qualified to fulfill his task with much more accuracy. Moreover, the remaining rate of accuracy can only be achieved if the translator himself has had the fundamental literary qualifications. If so, he can transform to the target text nearly most of the syntactic, stylistic and aesthetic elements originally found in the source text, in a way which creates that desirable artistic correspondence, or rather the most acceptable equivalents. So it appears that the process of literary translation can never be just an automatic one narrowly restricted to merely finding words and sentences in the target language that correspond to those in the source language. If this is true in the case of a non-literary text, it is untrue in the case of a literary one. The fact is that a literary text is more likely to bear an extra message usually concealed behind the apparent and surface linguistic structures. Quite often such a message takes shape by the interaction of certain words and syntactic structure with each other in part or in whole, rather than by these apart. Also it is worth remembering that translation is

always concerned with the matter of co-existing cultures. Truly there are always distinctive differences between them in respect of folklore, mythology and symbolism of which the cleverest or the most qualified translator should be well-informed. Once again, being only aware of them is insufficient. He has indeed to recognize some historical or social facts about such culture distinction in order to be on a safer side when interpreting the text as properly as possible. Consequently, he had rather, whenever possible, acquaint himself with almost every piece of information related to the etymology or semantic development over decades and centuries; especially when translating older literary text. A relevant good example illustrating the semantic and conceptual differences due to historical stages, is found in Hamlet when the hero (Hamlet) addressing Ophelia like this: Get thee to nunnery. (Shakespeare, Hamlet, III. i, 1947; 1089).

According to Jabbra Ibrahim Jabbra's translation, this request or order by Hamlet means the Ophelia must become a nun. Yet, in his foot-note on page 96 of Arabic translation of the play he comments saying, " At the age of Shakespeare the word -nunnery- had another connotation : namely, -brothel- " (Jabbra, 1986; 96). What maintains this is the notion given by the critic Dover Wilson cited in the book "What is happens in Hamlet?" (Wilfred, 1979; 84), who sees that "nunnery" meant brothel "in Elizabethan vernacular". As regards this point the Russian translator Nickollai Bannikove says, "any translator taking his work seriously ought to make an idea of the language in which the literary text had been written." (Bannikov, 1977; 156).

In special cases a translator involved in literary work is advised to read and comprehend old texts so that he may re-live the same old atmosphere. He will, of course, encounter, *tete-a-tete*, a number of problems concerning spelling, sounds, meanings and syntax. But what makes such problems all that easy is the fact that some modern writers of the target language have intra-lingually translated them. As an example, let us take these two lines from Chaucer :

When that a prille with his shoures soote

The draughte of March hath preceed to the roote (Cowling, 1953; 1)

and then compare them with Nevil Coghill's translation into modern English verse :

When the sweet showers of April fall and shoot

Down through the drought of March to pierce the root.

(coghill, 1954; 25)

Another example of such an intra- lingual translation had been achieved by the famous Japanese novelist Junichero Tanizaki who translated the greatest classical Japanese novel , “ A Tale of Genji ” by lady Mourasaki. Before being translated into modern Japanese, this novel had previously been translated into English by the well-known English translator Arthur Waley. Before the date of translating it into English, the contemporary Japanese readers knew almost nothing about it. Thus, when the English version became available, the Japanese continued for a long time reading it, until the time Tanizaki intralingually translated it. (Mohammed, 1986;102).

In addition, a translator may come across certain symbols in older literature. He may, subsequently, get shocked as he discovers that these symbols stand for something of which he is almost entirely unconscious, the best thing for him to do is to consult various reliable sources and reference books on this matter. It often happens that a translator may find such symbols and myths frequently employed in modern poetry and prose. Unless he gets at home with them, he will face a difficulty. Although the stress is laid here upon the point that a translator must know the other foreign language as best as possible, yet the fact remains that his excellent mastery of his own mother tongue comes in the first place. It is, indeed, the solid base upon which he entirely depends in implementing a successful literary translation. In this connection, Bannikov says, "Only a perfect command of your native tongue and a deep creative knowledge of it can, in my opinion, guarantee success in this field. In

my work as a translator I ascribe an utmost importance to my knowledge of Russian language. "(Bannikov, 1977; 154-155).

Dr. Samiyah As'ad says, " It is a pity that a translator's meager knowledge of his mother tongue forms the weakest point in his work. Practicing translation presupposes a translator whose knowledge of it ought to be almost comprehensive .Why? It is simply because the mother tongue is his own musical instrument on which he plays his symphony. "(As'ad, 1989; 24). Lastly Bilnisky says, "It is teasing to read good books badly translated." (cited in Kashkeen, 1977; 171).

About the author

Emeritus Professor Abdul Wahid Mohammed Muslat (Ph.D) has served in the University of Baghdad , at the College of Languages and other College for forty one years . He was an ex Head of the Dept. of English of the College of Languages during the years 2004 – 2007 , then an ex-Dean of the same college during the years 2007 – 2009 . His specialty is Linguistics and Translation.

He is the author and the translator of more than 25 books. Presently he is the head of the Translation and World Literature at the Iraqi writer's Union

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