

THE ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN THE PROCESS OF LITERARY TRANSLATION: HOW MUCH CAN IT HELP?

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ABSTRACT

Translating literary works requires some knowledge more than the mere proficiency in both source and target languages, which is undoubtedly the primary necessity of this task. Socio-cultural issues ongoing within a literary text and the aura of the work are to be considered in addition to literary techniques and figurative language at work. Accordingly, the translator is attempting to convey all the emotion of the text thoroughly. Considering the connotation of words and their psychological associations, the reader feels more indulgence and affinity to the work. This research intends to find out how the difference in understanding the mother tongue and the literature of the second language affects the quality of its translation. Ninety percent of the students of English Literature in the University of Tabriz speak their local languages rather than Persian, which is the official language of Iran. Upon exposure to the literature of their mother tongue and the second language, the difference in their motivation level, comprehension of the source text, connection to the aura, a deeper transference of thoughts and emotions, precision of selected equivalents, personal satisfaction of the translator and the joy of translating is notable in their translations.

KEYWORDS: *Literary Translation, Mother Tongue, Second Language, Aura*

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INTRODUCTION

The nature of literary translation has always been a controversial issue among the translators and critics. Despite the fact that most of them agreed that literary translation is of a different type as mentioned by Katherine Reil, A.V. Federov, Otto Kode, J. B. Casagrande and Georges Mounin. (Kuhiwczak, & Littau, 2007), they could not verify a clear criteria to define these differences. The nature of a literary text is different from other text types. There is more to a literary text than figures of speech and literary devices. This is the same part that makes the definition of literature difficult, an inseparable abstract part of the work, its effect and the aesthetic side or what is called the aura of literature. Aura of literature is the same missing part of literary translation; the hidden joy of reading a novel, watching a play or listening to a poem recitation. Literary translation is not only the translation of forms, but it should also transfer the cultural concepts beside the aesthetic aspects of a literary work. The mastery in making this transference possible depends on various features that a good translator should possess. Beside the linguistic abilities, the translator should have enough familiarity with both cultures. Moreover, a deep indulgence in the culture of the target language is crucial for a translator to produce approximately the same effect for the target reader. In other words, a smaller cultural gap between the translator and the culture of the languages, leads to a more natural translation. As Peter France in Oxford

Guide to Literature in English Translation argues, a literary translation should lead to a work which is considered and read as literature. (2000)

Translation of any type is a matter of approximation. It emphasizes the impossibility of a thorough transference of meaning and other components of a literary text. It is because languages are different from one another semantically and syntactically. Moreover the cultural contexts of different literatures are not the same. This is why the critics believe that a successful literary translation is often unattainable. But does it mean that we stop translating literature? Should we sacrifice the knowledge of great literatures of different languages to the missing aspects of a work, be it aesthetic or cultural? The negative answer is deduced from the fact that critics consent literary criticism. Definitely, however, we should never quit finding better ways to achieve a work of literature in the target language and be able to create the closest possible emotions in the final translation and leave the approximate impressions on the target reader.

One of the first and crucial steps in translation is to find the closest natural equivalences in the target language. Often, dictionaries cannot offer the best contextual choice. This is the translator who should decide the contextual meaning of the word. It is expected that the bilingual translators whose mother tongue is different from the official language they learn and use, like what the students of English Literature experience in University of Tabriz, experience different levels of mastery in various aspects of translating the text. This will be analyzed in the discussion section of the present paper.

PROCEDURE

Ninety percent of the students of English Literature in University of Tabriz speak their vernacular language, Azeri, but they do not receive any schooling concerning the grammar or literature of their mother tongue. From age seven, instead, they study all lessons in Persian at school for twelve years. Although there are students who do not speak in their mother tongue in their daily lives, those who took part in this research speak in Azeri in their everyday life, with friends and family. There are rare students who are well familiar with the literature of their mother tongue; therefore they could not be separated for a distinct survey. In order to find out their different levels of language proficiency, cultural mastery and translation abilities concerning four different types of translation, English to and from Azeri, and English to and from Persian, fifty students were selected. All of these fifty students speak their mother tongue at home and with friends. These students after completing introductory courses and learning the principles and methods of translation had to pass two courses in literary translation during two semesters, which consisted of twenty workshops. Through these sessions they were exposed to literary texts from all these three languages, English, Persian and Azeri. At the end of these workshops they completed a questionnaire containing a series of questions in three categories; Proficiency in Azeri, Persian and English, mastery in cultural aspect of the work, ability in translation. In the discussion section of this paper the details of each category is mentioned.

The students were asked to rate their status in the related variants from one to five. Having collected the questionnaires, the numerical analysis of data was performed. The total number of each variant is calculated manually and the average of it is figured out. In order to make the numbers more tangible and to clarify the differences and comparisons the percentages were also calculated. Percentages are calculated for each variant in each category separately. Then, these percentages are compared to one another in each type of translation. Finally, in separate tables all the percentages were presented in order to analyze the data. In the following section through discussing the whole research the data is analyzed in order to come up with the findings of the research.

DISCUSSIONS AND ANALYSIS

The mastery of literary translation can be analyzed in different levels including language proficiency, knowledge of the source and target culture, motivation, loyalty and the ability to create a work of literature in the target language. Due to the literary aspects of the text, literary translation faces more problems and complexities than the other types of translation. It is not easy to produce the closest possible effect for the target reader and create almost the same atmosphere in the final work. Although this is mostly related to the emotive aspect of the language; it could be achieved to some extent by the choice of culturally appropriate context and authentic language experience for the reader. As mentioned earlier this paper attempts to designate the significance of the translator's mother tongue in the process of translation. Moreover, the results will be compared to the time when the same translator deals with her/his second language in translation.

Completing the comprehension steps, the students in my literary translation workshops, continue the process of translation by finding the equivalences for the units of translation. It should be mentioned that the method is free translation rather than a literal one. The unit of translation, therefore, can vary from a phoneme to a whole page or even longer (Munday, 2008). The first projects they were assigned is to translate short stories and poems from English to Persian, which they assumed would be the easiest. Through practical work, though, it proved not to be so. The inability to find the contextually proper equivalents in Persian was their first and foremost problem, followed by the claim that they were strongly capable of producing an authentic match in Azeri. This was the inspiring force behind this paper. I intended to find out the relation between translating from and to the mother tongue and the cultural, literal and emotive gap in literary translation.

Regardless of other deficiencies, we naturally comprehend the denotative and connotative meaning of the words, expressions and idioms of our mother tongue. Moreover, understanding the emotion of the text makes the production of a natural text in target language more probable. There is no problem in translating from another language to our mother tongue on semantic level. While translating from the mother tongue to through practical translation, it is noted that finding equivalences is only one of the steps of translation. As mentioned earlier, in order to find out that in what parts of a literary translation they prefer translating from and to their mother tongue and in what parts they prefer translating from or to Persian.

The first category of questions addresses the language proficiency of the students concerning the accuracy of their comprehension, their knowledge of vocabulary in all these three languages, their mastery on grammatical structures and recognizing and understanding the expressions and idioms and mastership of the culture of the target and source languages (Table 1). The second category concerns their ability in transferring the meaning they have comprehended, creating the closest atmosphere in the target text (table 2). And finally, the third category concerns the degree of loyalty to the source language, rate of satisfaction and feeling responsible to translate more texts of the same language (Table 3).

According to table 1 the students possess almost the same ability in understanding these three languages. Concerning English and Persian they have received enough schooling, they have learnt the grammar and they are exposed to the literature of these languages at school and in university. Although they have not been educated in their mother tongue, they have almost the same level of understanding the texts as they do in Persian and English. The second variant in the table concerns the ability of the translators in recreating the structure of the sentences and paragraphs in a way that the target text appears to produce almost the same impression on the reader.

Despite the fact that their comprehension power in all these languages are almost at the same level, their capability concerning the structure of their mother tongue is significantly lower than the other two languages. It means that they use their mother tongue in their daily lives, but since they are not familiar with the written literature of their mother tongue and they are not conscious of the formal form of the language, it turns to be a shortcoming for them on the level of translating literary text. Literary translation requires more than the informal mastery of the mother tongue.

The third variant, which regards the equivalents of units of translation, however, indicates different results. They are highly skillful in creating the natural equivalents in Azeri comparing to Persian and English. It shows that experiencing a language in real life, broad range of real situations to understand meaning and the opportunity to use language authentically have a positive effect in the process of translation.

As mentioned earlier, the cultural aspect of the text and the emotive side of language is the crucial part of a literary translation. If the translator can convey these two facets of a literary text, s/he will create a literary text in the target language that can create a similar effect. The fourth and fifth variants that relate to the cultural knowledge of the translator and his/her ability in transferring the emotion of the text respectively, signifies that when translation from and to the mother tongue the students have less problems in recognizing the cultural messages of the text and recreating them in the target language properly. Due to their authentic experience of different emotional, social and cultural moments, they are more successful in conveying these moments in the process of translation. This confirms the idea that translating from the mother tongue results in a literary text closer to the source text, concerning the cultural and emotive sides of the work. This in its own turn reduces the gaps of literary translation.

In the last two variants of table 1, an enormous decline of the satisfaction of the students regarding their translation from their mother tongue is surprising. Fifty percent of the students feel satisfied with the final result of their translation whereas they are highly capable of transferring the sense of the text and their mastery in finding equivalents. The first point is that they do not possess a competing mastery in the structure of their mother tongue, which naturally reduces the quality of their translation. Second, their multilayered and unfathomable comprehension of the source text and the depth of the meaning they intend to transfer to the surface structure of their mother tongue do not accord with their language skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of literary translation in transferring the literature of a culture on one hand, and the shortcomings of a literary translation on the other hand, require translation studies to find solutions to achieve better results. Focusing on the mother tongue of the translators and exposing them to different types of translation from and to three languages, Azeri, Persian and English, I finally reach the point that when a translator translates from her/his mother tongue owns a considerable ability in comprehending the cultural and emotive aspects of a text as well as its linguistic side. But, this is not enough to create the closest natural literary text in the target language. There is a need to receive schooling in the grammar of the mother tongue and mastery of the literature of it. The student-translators who took part in this research were bilinguals and they are not educated in their mother tongues grammar or literature. Therefore, an ideal literary translation can be achieved by a native translator who has received enough schooling in her/his mother tongue, is educated in the literature of the language.

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APPENDICES

Table 1: Language Proficiency

	English to Persian	English to Azeri	Persian to English	Azeri to English
Source language Proficiency	75%	75%	73.2%	78.8%
Structure	62.8%	52.6%	57.8%	46.6%
Equivalents	67.7%	86.8%	75.8%	72%

Table 2: Literary Aspects

	English to Persian	English to Azeri	Persian to English	Azeri to English
Cultural awareness	71%	97.4%	80.2%	94.4%
Emotions	63.8%	95.2%	61.4%	96.4%

Table 3: Translation Issues

	English to Persian	English to Azeri	Persian to English	Azeri to English
Satisfaction	67.4%	73%	60.6%	56%
Loyalty	65%	70.4%	74.4%	73.8%

