



**Difficulties of Translating Figurative Language:
Tamara Shaker's Sleeping Pain
as a Pattern**

**Asst. Lect. Mohammed Nihad Nafea Al-Sammarraie
Al Turath University College**

Abstract

The study tackles the problematic process of conveying ideas in literary contexts, especially figurative literary works, from one language to another through translation. Languages chosen are Arabic, as a source language, and English as a target language.

The paper presents the concept of translation, then it presents the idea of figurative expressions. It goes further to link those two concepts together through a literary genre that is common in source language and new, if available in the first place, in the target language.

The researcher employs both the new genre and simple forward personal translations of the excerpts chosen from source text as a subject of discussion in this paper.

المستخلص

تعالج الدراسة عمليات ايصال الافكار، الموجودة في الاعمال الادبية، المثيرة للمشاكل، خاصة الاعمال الادبية البلاغية، من لغة الى اخرى باستخدام الترجمة. اللغات المختارة هي العربية، بوصفها لغة النص المصدر، والانجليزية لكونها لغة النص الهدف.

تقدم الورقة مبدأ الترجمة، بعد ذلك تقدم فكرة التعابير البلاغية. وتصنيف الورقة ربط هذين المبدأين معاً عبر صنف ادبي شائع في اللغة المصدر، وجديد، ان كان موجوداً في بادئ الامر في اللغة الهدف.

يسخر الباحث كل من الصنف الادبي الجديد وترجمات شخصية بسيطة ومباشرة للنصوص المختارة من النص المصدر بوصفها موضوعاً للمناقشة في هذه الورقة.

1. Introduction

Translation is the science that is specialized in receiving the source text from one language and rendering it into a target text in another language.¹ Like many other sciences, translation has some points where translators face difficulties in conveying the idea of the source text to the target text in a clear understandable way. Such difficulties are of many reasons. Figurative Language is considered to be the main reason of such difficulty. Languages differ in the amount and the way of using and employing the figurative expressions in general, and especially in literary texts.

Figurative Language is defined as a group of expressions that emphasize a certain idea or a feeling.² Such emphasis is achieved through the author's consciousness and his ability to use certain language's vocabulary then employing the same vocabulary to serve a certain type of figurative expressions. Besides, the reader's consciousness of the author's ethnic, religious, political, geographical, cultural and lingual backgrounds; or, at least, the public reading targeted by the source text, add to the difficulties.

Bringing the two terms together suggests the existence of difficulties in understanding the figurative expressions. The first difficulty the translator faces in his attempt to convey the idea fully and with his/her attempts of avoiding the reader's unconsciousness of the author's background; whereas the second difficulty is faced by the reader when reading the target text and trying to parallel the figurative expressions in the target text with relatively similar ones from his/her language.

What adds to the difficulties in this paper is the source text, Tamara Shaker's *Sleeping Pain* (2015), used in this study as a pattern is the text chosen uses a literary genre that is common in Arabic literature, that is "خواطر" or "Reflections," which is not common in the target text language, English. Reflections, as defined in Arabic literary world, is a literary genre similar in its content to the story, letter and prose poems. It is written in both prose and blank verse.³

2. Difficulties of Translating Figurative Language

Figurative language is common in literary contexts in every lingual system. Some figurative expressions are similar in several languages and are of common use which make them easy to be understood, especially when translating from the source text into the target text. Whereas, other expressions are of unique usage that is related to the cultural and traditional background of the language used and translating them may not convey the meaning and the idea fully.

The following are excerpts from Tamara Shakir's *Sleeping Pain* (2015) with a forward simplified translation, alongside a discussion of the proposed difficulties:

كأن تستطيع أن تعانق نملة
وتقطع بمقص جذع النخلة

وتراقص وتحمل بيدك فيلاً
وتقدر ان تمشي فوق الجمر طويلاً
وتنتظر الشمس تشرق بديراً
وتأمل ان تموء الخيل وتطلق القطّة صهيلاً (10) ⁴

and its translation:

As if you could hug an ant
And cut with scissors a palm-tree trunk
And dance with and carry an elephant with your own hand
And can walk over coal for a long time
And wait for the sun to rise as a full moon
And hope that horses would purr and a cat would neigh

In the previous text, exaggeration, paradox and metaphor are employed in both the source and target text. In the source text, the figurative language is clear and direct and the meaning related to the imagery is almost balanced when compared to that of the target text. The exaggeration lies in the first four lines with the images of hugging an ant, cutting a tree-trunk with scissors, carrying an elephant by hand and walking on coals; the paradox of sunshine and full moon in the first line; and finally, the metaphor of cats and horses; all convey almost equal meaning in both source and target text. The readers of both the source and target texts can understand the meaning conveyed almost to the same degree especially that images conveyed are relatively similar in different communities and the scope of difference is almost unrecognizable.

The same thing goes for the following three excerpts that share the same idea. The source text reads: "كفيلة بجعل قلبي يتراقص فرحاً \ انانية انا اعترف لك بذلك" (11) which is translated into the target text as "Enough to make my heart dance happily / I am selfish and I admit it for you," and:

كان قلبي يرقص بك فرحاً
وكانت إشارات القدر تخبرني
بانك ستقاطع غفوتي وتهشم احلامي معك (17)

and its translation is:

My heart was dancing happily because of you
And fate signs were telling me
That you will disrupt my sleep and smash my dreams with you

and "ما عاد قلبي يرقص عندما يذكرك.. \ لكنك ستبقى في القلب وجعاً غافياً" (21) which is translated into "My heart is not dancing anymore when it recalls you.. / But you will remain, in the heart, a sleeping pain." The three texts and their translations include a personification of the "heart ... dancing"

(17) and convey its meaning fully, which also goes for the other two personifications in the second and third texts "fate signs were telling" (17) and "sleeping pain" (21). All are clear and can be comprehended easily by the reader. They are common expressions and of wide use and spread in different cultures and traditions.

The following source text and its translation include a simile and exaggeration. The image is easy and can be delivered to the reader easily in both source and target text. "كيف كرماد سجارة" (12) which is translated into "How like a cigar ashes you scattered.. / I loved you more than me, as if the world were you" includes the idea of comparing someone to the scattering ashes of a cigar which easily reflects the idea of instability and shake. The image is conveyed easily due to the fact that millions of people know how fragile cigar ashes are, and how the most delicate breeze could easily destroy and scatter them around. It is a commonly known fact. Moreover, the idea of exaggeration in love contexts is also common and it is well known for many readers. Thus, it would not be hard for such readers to understand the image conveyed whether it is presented in source or in target texts.

Another personification is apparent in "وجدت الامل ينظر لي بحسرة" (18) which is translated as "I found hope looking at me with grief" when hope is given the abilities of looking and regretting. The meaning is clear for many readers of both source and target texts.

The following text and its translation include a personification that might be harder for target text readers to understand, the figurative context is clear to the source text readers yet it might cause some hardship or loss in understanding the whole image in the target text.

لم تمتنع لها اشتريت بالوناً زهياً

طوقته بحنان اصابعها الصغيرة، اختلق منها، ازعجته لمساتها
ما ان افلتت يدها سهواً حتى طار بعيداً عنها
أراد حريره نسي انها هي من نفخته تناسى لهفتها، (15)

and its translation:

She did not listen to her, she bought a rosy balloon

She surrounded it with the kindness of her little fingers, it suffocated because of her, her touches disturbed it

As soon as she released her hands by accident, it flew away from her

It wanted its freedom, forgot that she is the one who filled it out, it forgot her yearning

The balloon is personified when it is given the features of suffocation, disturb, and the need of freedom. It might sound as an easy image on first reading, yet it is not an image of usual occurrence that is why it might be hard to be comprehend for certain readers other than those of the source text.

The difficulties in translating the excerpts above are all culture-related. Some can barely cause difficulties even a simplified translation conveys the idea almost perfectly, others may be harder to be translated. It can be said that cultures are not totally different, still, at one point or another, they share some conceptions that result in that ideas are used in both languages can easily be comprehended and a simple forward translation can do the job of conveying the meaning.

Variant degrees of difficulty in understanding such a figurative language may appear between source and target texts due to lexical differences. Such variation and difficulties result from the richness, complexity and extended use of figurative language in one text over the other, alongside the cultural and tradition-related elements. It may be the result of the difficulty of conveying the meaning fully as a result of the lexical variations such as the difficulty of finding a perfect synonymous word in target text for its equivalent in source text.

Lyons (1968) states "two or more lexical items which have the same meaning if they can replace each other without any change in the meaning of the context," and that is what a synonym is. Moreover, in the case of this study, languages employed, i.e. Arabic and English, Arabic is richer than English when it comes to lexical items. As a result, Arabic has a richer set of synonyms due to the variety of dialects.⁵

It might be a quick shift from one idea to the other, such as in the following series of similes that seem, on first reading, unrelated but when viewed as a group for exaggeration reasons, it would sound related. Moreover, some semantic features such as presupposition that would lead to such difficulty. The text reads:

كقهوة باردة ومسمار ممطح الطرف
كقطعة وحيدة شاردة وقصيدة بلا شغف
كقطعة حديد مرمية على الرصيف أصابها التلف
كنص شاعر كتبه مراراً ومراراً لُسي عندما انحذف
ككتاب على رف مكتبة مغطى بالتراب
كطائر مجروح لا يراه أحد في يوم الضيلب
كوردة ذابلة الأوراق متساقطة الأوراق مهملة في مزهريّة (36)

and its translation:

Like a cold coffee and a nail with a flattened-head
Like a stray runaway cat and a passionless poem
Like a damaged piece of metal on a sidewalk
Like a poet's context that was rewritten again & again & forgotten when deleted
Like a book on a bookshelf, covered with dust

Like a wounded bird, no one sees in a foggy day
Like a flower with withered leaves neglected in vase

The "coffee," "nail," "cat," "poem," "piece of metal," "poet's context," "book," "wounded bird" and "flower" are related individually by no means, yet when all are read as a whole group of similes that function to create exaggeration, its meaning is fully conveyed. This extended use of figurative language may be recurrent in one language and rare in the other.

The ideas of similes may relate to one culture and not the other; take the idea of coffee: in Arab world coffee and tea as well, are undisputedly hot drinks and being described cold suggests the passage of time or the idea of neglect, whereas in the western world it is normal to see iced coffee and tea. The presupposition of coffee is hot in the Middle East connotes to the idea of passage of time and negligence and its lack for non-middle eastern readers makes the idea incomplete. It is a matter of culture and tradition which in turn results in difficulty in understanding the target text by some readers.

In some cases, figurative expressions are translated yet, at certain points, they do not convey the exact required meaning and a need for alteration or search for alternative synonymous words or expressions is required. In the following text, personification and metaphor are employed in the second and eighth lines yet translating the phrase "على اطراف أصابعه" (20) in the third line is a bit problematic. Although, the term is used in source text language, Arabic, and it is of common use, it is not used that frequently in target text language which could lead to a difficulty in understanding. Below it is literally translated into "tiptoes" that might not convey the same effective meaning as its equivalent in source text language.

والبعض منهم كظلِكَ يتبعك، برسانله واتصالاته يحاصرك..
بغير اسمه لا ينبض هاتقك، بجنة ودنيا وردية معه يومك..
وعندما يدرك انه علقك تجده ينسحب على أطراف اقدامه
لا تعلم ما السبب لم جاء؟ لم عنه ابعذك؟
فتكره نفسك وتلوم مراراً ومراراً قلبك..
تتمنى ان تساله ما الذي غيرك؟ .. وكرامتك حينها تمتعك..
فتنوي نسيانه ويراك تعيش مرتاحاً بوجدتك..
فيعود بطرق الأبواب بندمه يحاول ان يخذلك..

and the translation is:

And some people follow you like your shadow, and they surround you with their
messages and calls..
Your phone beats only with their names. They delude you a heaven and a rosy life
with them..
And when they realize that they made you cling to them, they withdraw on their
tiptoes

You do not know the reason why they came? And why they distanced you from them?
 So you hate yourself and blame your heart again and again..
 You wish to ask them what changed you? .. Then your dignity prevents you at that time..
 So you intend to forget them and they see you living at ease in your loneliness..
 So they come back knocking on the doors with their regret trying to trick you..

Add to that the lack of rhyme and rhythms in the target text that can be easily noticed in source text.

Sometimes, figurative expressions express untraditional similes and this is the case in the following text:

بأنك ستقاطع غفوتي وتهشم احلامي معك
 كما قاطعتني وانت تجيب تارة على هاتفك..
 وتارة تنادي النادل ليجلب لك قهوتك،،،
 وستنساني كما نسيت السلسلة على الطاولة
 وانت ترتدي معطفك...
 وإنني سأبكي رجماً على خيبتني منك
 كما امطرت حينها وستغرقني قسوتك... (17)

and its translation is as follows:

That you will disrupt my nap and smash my dreams with you
 Like when you interrupted me when you, once, were answering your phone..
 And once again, you were calling the waiter to bring you your coffee,,,
 And you will forget me like when you forgot the necklace on the table
 While wearing your raincoat...
 And I will cry in pain for my disappointment because of you
 Like when it was raining at that time, and your cruelty will drown me

Comparing disrupting a nap and forgetting someone to the calling of a waiter or forgetting a necklace, in the target text, may relate to the idea of conceit which is related to the field of semantics in Linguistics. Daniel Rothbart (1984) states "the benchmark of a metaphoric expression is the implicit transfer of semantic features across incongruous semantic fields. This transfer results in a conceptual variation of meaning."⁶ Conceit requires deep understanding of the similes, unlike the simplicity of the understanding process of the source text which is achieved through the effectiveness of the word "قاطعتني" that extends to include all the following unusual similes as if the source text were written as:

بأنك ستقاطع غفوتي وتهشم احلامي معك
 كما قاطعتني وانت تجيب تارة على هاتفك..
 وتارة تنادي النادل ليجلب لك قهوتك،،،
 وستنساني كما نسيت السلسلة على الطاولة
 وانت ترتدي معطفك...
 وإنني سأبكي رجماً على خيبتني منك
 كما امطرت حينها وستغرقني قسوتك... (17)

و[قاطعتني] نارة [حينما كنت] تنادي النادل لي جلب لك قهوتك،،،
 وستنساني كما نسيت السلسلة على الطاولة
 وأنت ترتدي معطفك...
 وإنني سأبكي وجعاً على خيبتني منك
 كما امطرت حينها وستغرقني قسوتك... (17)

which its translation is as follows:

That you will disrupt my nap and smash my dreams with you
 Like when you interrupted me when you, once, were answering your phone..
 And [you will interrupt me] once again, you were calling for the waiter to bring
 you your coffee,,,
 And you will forget me like when you forgot the necklace on the table
 While wearing your raincoat...
 And I will cry in pain for my disappointment because of you
 Like when it was raining at that time, and your cruelty will drown me

In other cases, the understanding of figurative expressions is related to the use of one language over the other. The following text includes an exaggeration. This exaggeration can only be understood by source text language speakers, those who know that Arabic consists of twenty-eight letters. It may cause some ambiguity for target text language speakers who have only twenty-six letters. This two-letter difference results in a difficulty in understanding the figurative expression, if not ruining its whole meaning. Same thing goes in terms of syntactic features when the source text words "ضم" and "كسر" which are two accentuating marks used in Arabic grammar that are used for nouns, verbs, adjectives ... etc. to express variety of grammatical forms. The first adds a light /o/ and the latter adds a light /i/ sounds to variety of parts of speech. The source texts read:

حتى لو تنسج لي من الثمانية والعشرين حرفاً
 غزلاً يجعلني فوق بساط الاحلام أطير... (65)

and

ضم وكسر روحي وعقلي وقلبي سلبت معناها (71)

and their translations:

Even if you weave me with the twenty-eight letters
 Ode poems that make me fly over the carpet of dreams
 and
 accentuate my soul and my mind and my heart that ravished its meaning

Whereas, in other cases, it is bound by geographical and natural phenomena that are reflected in literary works. The following example expresses the idea of Spring and Autumn, Fall, relating autumn to April which is a month related to the mid of spring. The flowers used in the Arabic text has a different symbolic use than that in the target text. Jasmines, especially white jasmines, symbolize love in Arabic Literature while roses are the symbol of love in western literary works. In other words, the couplet suggests the idea of end of life, love and happiness depending on the symbolic meaning of the seasons and flowers used. It reads:

حين تغيب يمانق الخريف ازهار نيسان.
ويموت الياسمين ويشيع الندى زهر الاقحوان (63)

And the translation is:

When you are absent, autumn hugs the flowers of April.

And jasmine flowers die, and the dew mourns the chrysanthemum flowers

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is unquestionable that translation plays an important role in rendering texts and content between variety of languages, yet sometimes this role cannot be fulfilled at its best. A translator is bound by the contents of the source text that is, itself, is bound by one or more of several elements including cultural, lingual, ethnic ... etc.

Figurative Language is one of these boundaries and it is bound by them as well. It results in difficulties in conveying the meaning fully. These difficulties exist and are problematic for several individuals. This results in the burdening translators with the need to either alter the target text and losing stylistic features in order to convey full meaning, or to lose effectiveness of meaning while maintaining relatively similar style.

Furthermore, most of these difficulties are transient and are doomed to come to an end. This is the result of the transcultural relations that result, by time, in mutual understanding between different cultures, and eventually in understanding ideas conveyed through figurative language. In the future, this would make it easier for translators to translate figurative language without favoring one element over the other.

Thus, it can be said that translating figurative language is a matter of relativeness depending on the consciousness of both the author, on the one hand, and his/her readers, on the other.

NOTES

¹ "Translation," *Merriam- Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition, (Massachusetts: Britannica, 2003), n.p.

² "Figures of Speech," *Microsoft Student*, (Redmond, Washington: Microsoft Corporation, 2008), 1.

³ "خواطر" *Babylon Arabic-English Dictionary*, (Israel: Babylon, 1997), n.p.

⁴ All references to the volume *Sleeping Pain* are taken from Tamara Shaker, *Sleeping Pain*, (Baghdad: Dar Sotour, 2016). References go by page number.

⁵ Sarah Faiq Ali, *Synonymy in English and Arabic: A Contrastive Study*, (Mosul: University of Mosul, 2007), 10; John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 448.

⁶ Daniel Rothbart, "The Semantics of Metaphor and the Structure of Science," *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 51, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 595.

⁷ Basil Abdulal, "Symbolism of Flowers in Contemporary Arabic Literature," *AL-QUDS AL-ARABI*, (London: Al Quds Al Arabi, 2015), n.p.

English References

[1]"Figures of Speech." *Microsoft Student*. Redmond, Washington: Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

[2]"Reflections." *Babylon Arabic-English Dictionary*, (Israel: Babylon, 1997), n.p.

[3]"Translation." *Merriam- Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition. Massachusetts: Britannica, 2003.

[4]Ali, Sarah Faiq. *Synonymy in English and Arabic: A Contrastive Study*. Mosul: University of Mosul, 2007.

[5]Lyons, John. *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

[6]Rothbart, Daniel Rothbart. "The Semantics of Metaphor and the Structure of Science." *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 51. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984.

المصادر العربية

باسل عبدالعال. رمزية الزهور في الشعر العربي المعاصر. "القدس العربي". لندن: القدس العربي، 2015.

تمارا شاكر. وجمع غاف. بغداد: دار سطور، 2016.