

The Translatability of Poetry: The Translator's Dilemma

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Abstract

This research paper revolves around the question related to the translatability of poetry which has long been a serious dilemma to translators, being so great yet tiring challenge to the translator due to the choice of rhyme, rhythm, diction, meter, and the other rhetorical devices, not to mention the differences of the cultures of the two languages. Significantly speaking, much has been written and discussed about this subject matter inasmuch as poetry has so far been universally accessible to mankind and is more elevated than prose. Thus, the paper aims at tracing the main problems which arouse during the actual process of translating poetry, trying to find the sound solutions in this regard which may serve the translator to approach the right equivalent needed for the translating process. However, the ingredients which contribute to exactly rendering poetry into the target language remain somehow relative due to the justifications which are thoroughly examined in this paper.

المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث مسألة تتعلق بإمكانية ترجمة الشعر التي تعد مشكلة صعبة بالنسبة للمترجمين، كونها تشكل تحديا كبيرا بل متعبا بالنسبة للمترجم لانه يواجه العديد من المشاكل المتنوعة والتي تتعلق باختيار القافية والايقاع والكلمات والوزن والادوات البلاغية الاخرى، ناهيك عن ذكر الاختلافات الحاصلة بين ثقافة الشعراء الذين يستخدمون اللغة المصدر وثقافة المترجمين الذين يستخدمون اللغة الهدف. وتكمن أهمية هذا في كون الشعر يعد ولحد هذه

اللحظة منفتحا عالميا للبشرية وانه يعد اكثر سموا من النثر. لذا يتتبع هذا البحث المشاكل الرئيسية التي تنجم اثناء العملية الفعلية لترجمة الشعر محاولا ايجاد الحلول الناجعة في هذا المجال والتي قد تفيد المترجم في الاقتراب من المكافئ الصحيح للعبارات التي يحتاجها في عملية الترجمة. ومن ناحية اخرى فان المقومات التي تسهم في ترجمة الشعر بشكل دقيق الى اللغة الهدف تبقى نسبية الى حد ما بسبب المبررات التي سيتم ذكرها في هذا البحث.

Many a definition has been proposed to the concept of translation. It is simply the communication of meaning of a source language into the target one. Many thinkers hold different approaches towards the practice of translation. Nevertheless, their main concern is the fidelity of the translated text. The approach selected should properly scrutinize the text intent in a sense that text type dominates what translation strategy being used. As such, some texts are hard to translate; others, easy.

The assumption of the impossibility of translating certain texts emanates from the fact that world languages represent different historically and collectively aggregated values, asymmetrical language systems and social conducts. This is more discernable of poetry since its language is metrical and manifesting rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance and other rhetorical devices.

To believe that poetry is the insightful innovation of human act, translation is a mutual act of creation; both are equally essential to humanism in that they materialize feeling inchoate in texts. The goal of poetry is the creation of a new reality which has its own peculiar qualities, which implies that only poets can translate poetry (Vicente Huidobro 1976). Having in mind the Chilean poet Huidobro's notion concerning the translatability of poetry, Daniel Balderston comments that the new 'creationist' poetry should be translatable and universal. A desire for universality in poetry is not unusual...but the intent to write poems that will be translatable is an anomaly in the history of poetics. We need only recall Frost's dictum that poetry is

'that which gets lost from verse and prose in translation.
(<https://periodicos.ufsc.br> > download)

Presumably, Huidobro's contention is true, which entails that the only eligible translation of poems is that one rendered by poet translators. However, the meagre number of poet translators disparages the accessibility and plausibility of the target poem. Alternatively, a highly qualified translator ought to be an ardent as far as poetry techniques and its aesthetic and evocative qualities per se are concerned. The poetic language manifests the correlation between the poem's underlying meaning and the categories of its textual synthesis. To illustrate, a lyric is the charm of poetic genre as it portrays the poet's own feelings, innermost thoughts, state of mind and perception, not to mention the source of inspiration and motivation. This genre of poetry has long been favored by Arab and English poets with discernable differences—intra-cultural and intercultural.

The question whether poetry can be translated or not is controversial still. To translate a poem from the source language into the target language is a challenge to the translator of poetry, for the poetry of both languages is characterized by particular features—shared and unshared. It may be suggested that the translator may not be able to render the same tone of a poem into the target language, and this is quite true, or he may not be able to exactly render meanings, connotations and the music of a poem into the target language. A translator may give the literal meaning of a source poem and fail to give its metaphorical meaning.

It is true that every language is expressive of the culture of its speakers and provides the kind of music peculiar to it. At the same time, a language may be the source of those rhetorical representations which probably have no

corresponding equivalents in another language. It may be concluded therefore that the task of rendering poetry into the target language is a very difficult one. Albeit, poetry can only be translatable when the translator possesses those merits which make him eligible to translate a poem from the source language into the target language—they are the kind of merits related to his full understanding of both languages and the cultures of the texts in question, his full understanding of the rhetorical devices of both languages, and his awareness and understanding of literature in general and of poetry in particular, which are written in both languages.

This study contends that a very good translation of a poem requires a very good poet who is a master of the source and target languages, and that he should be quite aware of the literatures expressed by both languages—a poet able to write poetry in both languages mentioned already. To substantiate the notion that a translator of poetry should be a poet himself, Ivan Junqueira, a well-versed translator of poetry, believes that the translator of poetry should be a poet very well aware of all the ingredients of poetry in the target and source languages, and as he puts it in the following quote: Aside from the skepticism of some and the good will of others, the first thing required of a translator of poetry is to be a poet, as only then he will be able to overcome the technical challenges specific to this literary genre, such as those related to rhythm, syntactic-verbal structure, metrical and rhyme schemes, metalogic language, the play on images and metaphors, and all the other elements that make up poetic rhetoric.

(Ivan Junqueira, 2012)

To say that poetry cannot at all be translated on the grounds that it will lose a lot of its aesthetic values is supposed to be an idealistic statement.

Nevertheless, any language should enjoy its aesthetic values no matter whether all languages share them all or not. Standards of beauty vary from one language to another. Before considering whether a certain poem can be translated into another language or not, it should be noted that the main aims of poetry are summed up in the expressions "amusement" and "morality." Those two aims can only be eligible when accepted by the reader or the hearer as a concrete fact; first, the reader is to be amused; next, he is to find a significant meaning in what has already amused him. Of course, the reader of a translated poem is not necessarily aware of the source language, for what matters most for him is the amusement which he may get from the form and the content of the poem he reads or hears; that is, a poem can be accessible only when it is expressive, illustrative and declarative of all the ingredients of poetry expressed in the target language. It is worth mentioning therefore that when a poem is rendered into another language in the form of a poem having all the ingredients that make it appear as a significant poem with all its individuality will be as effective as any other poem written in the source language. The question to be asked in this respect is: To what extent does the target poem appear to be as impressive as any other poem written in the same language.

A poet who very well masters the source and target languages can render the concerned poem into the target language, giving it a form and content according to what he considers to be poetic in the target language. He is to identify himself with the kind of experience the poem exposes and to choose those aesthetic devices which he considers suitable to a poem made interesting to readers speaking the target language. Thus, translating a poem from one language into another language requires special awareness of the poetic technicalities employed in the poetry of both languages. Many and

various poems and masterpieces belonging to world literature have been translated into many languages. Many target poems gain plausibility and universality as well, such as *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, translated by the English poet and writer Edward FitzGerald (1809-1883) into English who used this title for a collection of Persian poems (*Rubaiyat of Omar*...<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). The English version of this collection can be taken as a viable example to illustrate a specimen of those brilliant translators such as Edward FitzGerald who manages to present it in such a way that it has become universally effective, impressive and influential. The plausibility of FitzGerald's translation is well expressed in its influence on world literature, cinema, music, television and other media. The following information shows the influence of the English version of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* on literature, cinema and music, and as follows:

Literature

Many authors have benefitted from *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* in that they have borrowed some verses from it to be titles of their literary works as is the case with other authors who have borrowed verses from Shakespeare's works. For instance, Eugene O'Neill's play's title *Ah, Wilderness!* is taken from one quatrain of this collection. Moreover, Agatha Christie has borrowed from it the expression *The Moving Finger* as a title for her story, as did Stephen King. Lan Wright borrows from it *Dawn's Left Hand* as the title of a science fiction story serialized in New York Science Fiction (January-March 1963). Those are few examples among many to illustrate the influence of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (*Rubaiyat of Omar*...<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>).

Cinema

Many films are based on *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* such as the film *Omar Khayyam*, also known as *The Loves of Omar Khayyam* which was released in 1957. Besides, *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* was quoted in the films *Back to the Future* and *12 Monkeys* (Ibid).

Music

Granville Bantock, a British composer, produced a choral setting of FitzGerlad's version of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* during the years 1906-1909. Alan Hovhaness, the Armenian-American composer, set many of the quatrains to music. Some verses of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* have also influenced Arabic music, for the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum recorded a song entitled "Rubaiyat Al-Khayyam" in 1950, being successfully translated in the Arabic language by Ahmed Ramy, a well-informed Egyptian poet and translator. The song was warmly received by audiences (Ibid).

A translator of poetry should be talented enough to render a source poem into a target one and vice versa, otherwise inexperienced translator may distort the form and content of the poem he translates. It could be suggested that the translator is a poet himself such as Alexander Pope (1688-1744), an eighteenth-century English poet, who successfully rendered Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, two epics written in Latin, into English, and Nazik Al-Malaika (1923-2007), an Iraqi renowned poetess who brilliantly translated Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" into Arabic. But the question is: How many of those translators are poets?

An experienced poet translator of the two languages may render the source poem more beautiful into the target language, as explicated by Safaa Khaloosi

(1982: 27), who quotes the translation of the Arabic poem "Jameel and Buthayna" into English which has been made by Professor R. A. Nicholson (1868-1945) who employs the English aesthetic values necessary to render the form and content of the poem into one that may or may not be accepted as good poetry in English:

النص العربي لأبيات من قصيدة جميل وبثينة:

ألا ليت ريعان الشباب جديد	ودهرا تولى يا بئين يعود
فغننى كما نكون وانتم	قريب واذا ما تبذلين زهيد
ألا ليت شعري هل ابين ليلة	بوادي القرى؟ اني اذن لسعيد
وهل القين فردا بثينة مرة	تجود لنا من ودنا ونجود
علقت الهوى فيها وليدا فلم يزل	الى اليوم ينمو حبها ويزيد
وافنيت عمري بانتظاري وعدّها	وابليت فيها الدهر وهو جديد
فلا انا مردود بما جئت طالبا	ولا حبها فيما يبديبيد

The English Translation:

Oh, might it flower anew that youthful prime
 And restore to us Buthayna, the bygone time
 And might we again be blest as we want to be
 When the folk was nigh and grudged what thou gavest me
 Shall I meet Buthayan alone again,
 Each of us full of love as a cloud of rain?
 East in her net was I when a lad, and till
 This day my love is growing and waxing still
 I have spent my lifetime, waiting for her to speak,

And the bloom of my youth is faded from off my cheek,
But I will not suffer that she my suit deny,
My love remains undying though all things die.

Commentary

1. The second line "And restore to us Buthayna, the bygone time" should be: "And Restore to us, O Buthayna, the bygone time," because the Arabic lines consists a vocative whose right equivalent is "O Buthayna." Thus, the meaning of the line loses something of the original.
2. The English version of the poem gains some more meaning when the translator adds the image of "rain": "Shall I meet Buthayan alone again,/Each of us full of love as a cloud of rain?" Here, the translator aims to rhyme the word "rain" with the word "again," which at the same time makes the English version lose something of the original meaning, for "rain" here metaphorically stands for "amiability," and there is no mention of the image of "rain" in the Arabic version. To add, there is no relationship between "rain" and "amiability." What matters most is that the poem should amuse the reader by its form and content.
3. The translator uses the form of the heroic couplet which is defined as being two lines rhyming together and having one complete idea, each should consist of ten syllables with alternate weak and strong stresses. But, the translator does not follow this principle, for the number of syllables within the lines varies from ten to fourteen, and the lines now begin with a weak stress; now, a strong one and vice versa, whereas the lines of the heroic couplet should start with five pairs of successive weak and strong syllables.

According to B. J. Epstein (2009), poetry cannot be translated, for poets preserve the language and one cannot learn language from translation: “the beauties of poetry cannot be preserved in any language except that in which it was originally written, we learn the language.” Epstein’s view is, to a certain extent, true since the translator cannot exactly find the right equivalents for the originals—culture, sentiments, rhetorical devices, poetic diction, tone and meter. She believes that a translated poem can by no means be equal to the original in all its particular aspects. Even though the translator is a poet in both languages, his translation, more or less, cannot exactly approach the original. Jes Gearing (2009) writes in the same vein: “Poetic language is certainly considered the most difficult language to translate....Literary translation requires a specific vernacular and skill.” This is not to deny the fact that great literatures have been successfully rendered in many target languages. The degree of success, of course, varies from one translator to another due to the disparagements between their eligibility to render a source poem into a target one.

A very good example of the excellent translation is the epic *Beowulf* which has been translated from old English into modern English by Frances B. Grummere (1855-1919). It has so far been very influential among world literatures, for the translator has taken into account all the old aesthetic values concerning the form and content of the poem and all the cultural representations of the fictional community contained in it. John Espy, a critic, comments that Grummere’s *Beowulf* “remains the most successful attempt to render in modern English something similar to the alliterative pattern of the original” (Francis Barton Gummer...<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>).

Those who opine about the possibility of poetry translation contend that the feasibility of such translation is to render the power and weight of verse

graspable to the native's ears with most fidelity; the goal of verse translation is not only the pursuit of equivalency of the form, but it is also the pursuit of the content of the text and the imagery which it projects. Yet, due to the intricacies of poetics in terms of meter, rhythm etc., form is inevitable in the translation of poetry where form and content are inextricably intermingled. As for an Arabic poem, a poet possibly creates the sense of a topic through intuitive phonological choices as is the example with "Jameel and Buthayna."

Conclusion

It is widely believed that the translation of literary texts is not actually possible, if not impossible. The translation of poetry is a much tougher challenge to translators since it is quite difficult to map a single word perfectly onto a word in another language. Therefore, a literary translator should not only communicate the meaning, but also the beauty of expressions; he should be a poet familiarized with the style and diction of the target language. A successful translation of poetry is to render both form and content of the poem with a focus on its syntax, imagery, along with the ambience of the original culture. In a word, a poem should be rendered into a poem in another language, which is to be characterized by those poetic ingredients that make it appear an interesting one in the target language. Thus the target poem should show a sense of poeticalness. The examples cited in this study are vivid ones to support the claim that poetry is translatable provided that the target poem should preserve, to a great extent, form and content accessible in the target language. As a corollary, the literary translator should be equipped with profound knowledge needed to interpret, appreciate and then translate. To conclude, the main obstacles that encounter a translator can be summed up as: the nuances of word meaning, the form of a poem, the difference between the poetic, grammatical and cultural elements of the two languages, not to mention ideas, behavior and context whatsoever.

It is made clear then that poetry is too difficult to translate. However, poetry can be translated on the condition that the translator should be a bilingual and bicultural poet, a poet very well aware of the poetic ingredients such as rhetorical devices, tone, meter and the like, together with the culture of the two languages, so that he can, to a great extent, render the source poem into the target one with accessible elements of creativity. It is preferable then that a poet translator well-informed in both languages with their poetry and culture should render poetry into the target language. A good poet of this category can produce very good versions of poems in the target language that are effective, impressive, influential and successful as shown in the examples related to the versions of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and *Beowulf*. On the other hand, a defective poetic translation lacks in some of the essentials of the poeticism of the source poem as is the example with the poem "Jameel and Buthayna," which has been translated by a bilingual scholar, not a poet.

Any poem has its own peculiarity as far as its language, rhetoric, culture and all the other ingredients that make critic call a poem a poem, and therefore translating poetry into another language which, to a greater or lesser extent, share those elements can by no means be an easy task. In consequence, the poem translated by a bilingual and bicultural poet is better than that which is translated by a non-poet translator as far as form, content, rhyme, rhythm and all the other poetic devices are concerned.

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- [6] Rubaiyat of Omar...<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>. Retrieved on May 4th. 2017. Edward FitzGerald (1809-1883) "was an English poet and writer, best known as the poet of the first and most famous English translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. The writing of his name as both FitzGerald and Fitzgerald is seen. The use here of FitzGerald conforms with his publications, anthologies such as Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse* and other reference books" (Edward FitzGerald,Poet...<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). Umm

Kulthum was an internationally famous Egyptian singer, songwriter, and....She was given the honorific title Kawkab Al-Sharq (Planet of the East) (Ibid). It was the Egyptian poet, songwriter and translator Ahmed Rami who translated the quatrains of Omar Khayyam. He also produced translations of several of Shakespeare's plays (Ahmed Rami (poet)-...<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>. Retrieved on May 4th. 2017.

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