

OVERT AND COVERT OBSTACLES OF TRANSLATION

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To think that you can be a translator just because you know two languages is actually equal to the idea that you can play the piano just because you've got two hands.

Peter Trent, mayor of West mount, Canada

The article deals with the problem of literal, literary and poetic methods of translation, gives different examples of translating poetry. The author observes questions of intercultural communication and machine translation revealing some overt and covert obstacles the translator encounters in his creative work.

“Language is the subject. It is the written form with which I’ve managed to keep the wolf away from the door and, in diaries to keep my sanity. In spite of this, I consider the written word inferior to the spoken, and much of the frustration experienced by novelists is the awareness that whatever we manage to capture in even the most transcendent passages falls far short of the richness of life. Dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell, and touch,” – these are the words by Gloria Naylor in her article “A Question of Language” [1:474].

I’m not going to enter the debate here about whether it is language that shapes reality or vice versa. That battle is doomed to be waged whenever we seek intermittent reprieve from the chicken and egg dispute. I will simply take the position that the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns “meaning”. And building from the meanings of what we hear, we order reality. Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power. Thus, the importance of a written word imposes the specific responsibility on a translator, since, as we know, according to physical parameters of translation process, translation is divided into written translation (or simply *translation*) and oral (or *interpretation*). Translators should be in a state of permanent educational agitation taking in and putting in action language material [2:11].

There can be no argument that the translator should achieve a close relationship between the theory and practice of translation. For one thing, the choice of the principles of translation may not be purely intuitive because the translator necessarily takes into account such matters as the aim of the translation, the temporal and geographic gap between the creation of the source text and possible readers of the target text, the cultural gap between the original author and the reader of the translation, the kind of reader the target text is intended for, etc. Each aspect provides a problem for consideration and solution in the course of translating. One of the eternal problems is the choice of the method of translation.

To distinguish between such methods of translation as *literal*, *literary* and *poetic* Kazakova T.A. examines the way of translating literature [3:6-7]. Literal translation is obviously used when there is a need to observe the rules of the source language and text and to present them in their integrity to the target culture. It is a reasonable approach when we translate for philological purposes, e.g., ancient epic texts or very unusual texts remote from the target culture. It is quite legitimate when translating most technical texts. Yet even such scholarly texts as those from the field of linguistics may not always be translated literally. There exists such a communicative conflict when the Russian linguistic term «*номинация*» was literally translated as “*nomination*”. It required some time and bilingual discussion before both the Russian scholar and the audience came to a sort of consensus using the term of “*naming*”, which, in its turn, usually corresponds to the Russian «*именование*» and does not fully coincide with the Russian term «*номинация*». Literal translation is definitely, not the best method to translate most literally works for the wider public. All attempts to pursue this approach inevitably come up against the obvious fact that the literally functions of words do not coincide in the source and target languages. Apart from polysemy, words compatible and comparable in meaning evoke different, if not incompatible, aesthetic and emotional associations and thus have quite different associative force in the source and target languages.

This question is closely connected with sociocultural aspect of translation. Anyone who has tried to translate ideas from one language to another knows that conveying the same meaning is not always easy. Sometimes the results of a bungled translation can be amusing. For example, the American manufactures of Pet milk unknowingly introduced their product in French-speaking markets without realizing that the word *PET* in French means “*to break wind*”. Likewise, the English-speaking representatives of a U.S. soft drink manufacturer naively drew laughs from Mexican customers when they offered free samples of *FRESCA SODA POP*. In Mexican slang the word *FRESCA* means “*lesbian*” [4:219-221].

Miram G. and Gon A. in their book “Professional Translation” cite the following ‘masterpieces’ of translation [5:5]:

– *Georgian palace in Scotland* is translated as «*грузинский дворец в Шотландии*» («*дворец в георгианском стиле*»);

– *Caucasian Smith* is translated as «*лицо кавказской национальности по фамилии Смит*» («*человек белой расы по фамилии Смит*»).

Even choosing the right words during translation won't guarantee that nonnative speakers will use an unfamiliar language correctly. For example, Japanese insurance companies warn their policy-holders who are visiting the United States to avoid their cultural tendency to say “*excuse me*” or “*I am sorry*” if they are involved in a traffic accident. In Japan, apologizing is a traditional way to express goodwill and maintain social harmony, even if the person offering the apology is not at fault. But in the United States an apology can be taken as an admission of guilt, and result in Japanese tourist being held accountable for accidents in which they may not be responsible [4:219-221].

Difficult as it may be, translation is only a small part of the differences in communication between members of different cultures. Differences in the way language is used and the very worldview that a language creates make communicating across cultures a challenging task.

According to Kazakova T.A. the term “*literary translation*” is somewhat vague [3: 8-10]. In Russian, it is usually opposed to the term «*информативный, или документальный перевод*» and describes translation as aiming predominantly at the target language rules rather than the source language ones. The Russian term «*литературный перевод*» would be fitting to define the method in general. This method is definitely a necessary and important instrument for different cultural traditions to communicate and should apply to translating social and political writing or fiction, while the term “*poetic translation*” as a variety of literary translation is associated with translating poetry and presupposes some inevitable liberties in the choice of the target language substitutes for the source language elements. However, we should differentiate between the ideas and principles of *literary* and *poetic* methods of translation.

What is poetry? Here are three definitions of poetry, all framed by poets themselves:

– Alfred Austin: “Poetry is Transfiguration, the transfiguration of the Actual or the Real into the Ideal, at a lofty elevation, through the medium of melodious or nobly sounding verse”;

– Lascelles Abercrombie: “The art of poetry is simply the art of electrifying language with extraordinary meaning”;

– Grant Allen: “A poem consists of all the purest and most beautiful elements in the poet's nature, crystallized into the aptest and most exquisite language, and adorned with all the outer embellishment of musical cadence or dainty rhyme”.

The term *poetic translation* may be considered to apply to a particular type of translating in which not only linguistic and literary rules but also creative competition and imagery matter. On the hand, by *literary translation* we normally mean just that the target language rules are observed in preference to the source language rules in slavish copy. *Poetic translation* involves an unpredictable area of transformations in the probable projection of the source text onto the target language through the perception of the translator. Some transformations of this kind are not determined by interlinguistic relationship but by cultural or even personal preferences on the part of the translator. Thus, in poetic translation the source text acquires probable rather than causal character. Multiple probabilities are a particular feature of poetic translation, while another important feature is irreversibility. From this point of view, poetic translation is what sometimes described as “*artistic translation*”. The translation of 66th sonnet by W.Shakespeare made by S.Marshak can be considered a brilliant example of such kind of ‘artistic poetry’:

c.f. *And strength by limping sway disabled...*

И мощь в плену у немощи беззубой...

The attribute “*limping*” («*хромой*») is replaced with the attribute «*беззубый*». These two attributes are equal here because they both show physical disability of a person. There's no formal accuracy of translation but the inner character of figurativeness is kept.

The translation of the poem “Farewell! If Ever Fondest Prayer” by George Byron is made by the pupil of the eleventh grade of Sumy classical gymnasia Kozlovs'ka Olga in attempt to come nearer to the problem of artistic translation, c.f.:

*Farewell! If ever fondest prayer
For other's weal avail'd on high,
Mine will not all be lost in air,
But waft thy name beyond the sky.
'T were vain to speak, to weep, to sigh:
Oh! more than tears of blood can tell,
When wrung from guilt's expiring eye,
Are in that word – Farewell! – Farewell!
These lips are mute, these eyes are dry;
But in my breast and in my brain,
Awake the pangs that pass not by,
The thought that ne'er shall sleep again.
My soul nor deigns nor dares complain,
Though grief and passion there rebel;*

*I only know we loved in vain –
I only feel - Farewell! – Farewell!*

ПРОБАЧ

*Пробач! Як можуть до небес
Людські молитви долітати,
Мій подих першим же доніс
Про тебе звістку – гріх зітхати!
Немає сенсу грати драму,
Тож витри сльози й не плач,
В очах твоїх я бачу рани,
Завмерло в них – пробач! – пробач!
Німіють губи, гаснуть очі,
Гризуть сумління муки й думки
Прокинулись. Тепер щоночі
Від них немає порятунку!
Не скаржиться моя душа
На море туги й каплю вдач.
Ми закохалися дарма,
Одне скажу – пробач! – пробач!*

There is always some debatable polarity in any poetic translation. On the one hand, it has to preserve the authenticity of the original, that is to say, its *foreignness* in the target language, while on the other part, it must be meaningful to the target culture in both form and idiom and thus acquire *naturalness*.

One of the best terms of naming this quality is proposed by Fyodorov A.V. – «*полноценность перевода*» (“*translation of full value*”) [6]. The task might seem impossible due to the nature of the conflict between two cultures and languages, and to the subjective character of the translating instrument (*errare humanum est*). From this point of view, any translation is inevitably a failure. But there are always victories and achievements in seeking a way to transform a foreign picture of the world into something both new and comprehensible for the target culture. In this respect, the ultimate task of translation is achievable, to a certain degree. According to Kazakova T.A. this needle-narrow pass between the impossible and the achievable represents the core of poetic translation [3:10]. We may consider it from the point of view of functions rather than constants. The most important function of poetic translation is that of *intercultural communication*.

Formulated in basic terms, the intercultural task of poetic translation may be as follows: to translate a work from a language to another language means to lose as little as possible of its original cultural authenticity while preserving as much as possible of its intercultural value. In the other words, the aim is to reconstruct the *imagery* of the source text as a system into the target culture by means of the target language and literary traditions. New readers should make efforts to appreciate a foreign system of imagery but the difficulty must not dominate the translated text lest it should become dull and alien to the target culture – so that the text in the target language should make sense and bring aesthetic and emotional pleasure to the target reader.

Compare the results of my students’ translation versions of the lines from a famous poem written in the 18th century, “*Essay on Criticism*”, by Alexander Pope:

*True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
'T is not enough no harshness gives offense,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar:
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw
The line too labors, and the words move slow;
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.*

Translation version by Tatyana Karpenko:

*Письмо майстерне легко не надбати,
Потрібно вправи, як у танцях, мати.
Відсутність грубості того не відкрива –
Луною з серця будуть хай слова.
І пестять нас рядки, як вітер став тихіше,*

*Гладенькі ріки линуть спокійніше,
Але, як хвилі буйні лиш навалять, –
Слова різкі та гучні нехай вдарять.
Коли Аякс несе тягар камінний,
Рядок напружений та ще й повільний.
Не так Каміла блискавична скачить,
Летить над збіжжям – істини не бачить.*

Translation version by Olga Trishchenko:

*Произведение пера – не подарок судьбы,
Ему тоже нам нужно учиться,
И подобно танцору, сквозь робость свою
К вершине искусства стремиться.
Просто буква – ничто. Жёсткость? – тоже сойдёт.
Каждый звук отражает значение.
И так мягок и нежен словесный поток,
Будто бы ветерка дуновенье.
Но оно всё усиленной с каждой строкой
Волны бурные бьются о берег.
И тогда хриплый стих, будто мощный прибой,
Разбивается шумной волною.
Если мы, будто Аякс, хотим горы свернуть,
То работа подобна застою.
Это вовсе не так, как Камилла в начале
Берётся за что-то простое
И летит над полями суровых хлебов,
Раскрывая слегка основное.*

Translation version by Natasha Dzyuba:

*Слова не случаю подвластны, а искусству.
Так танца мастерство позволит двигаться легко,
А жёсткость слов не совершит обиды.
Так слова звук – лишь эхо смысла,
Подобно дуновению Зефира, смягчающему плавный бег потока -
Так плавно речь течёт.
Когда же волны бьются яростно о берег –
Так груб и хрипл стих.
Когда Аякс тяжёлой ношей обременён, -
Слова медлительны. Когда ж Камилла,
Чей быстр нрав, слова поспешно говорит,
То смысл глубинный речи ускользает.*

One of translation-suicide aspects is machine and computer-aided translation.

The idea of computer use in translation appeared almost simultaneously with computers. Already in 1949 only five years after the first powerful computer had been put in operation in the USA mathematician and philosopher W. Weaver suggested the use of computers to model the process of translation.

The pioneers of the new research area were mathematicians and programmers and the first stage of computer translation development was characteristic of the so-called “encoding-decoding” approach. This approach, which still remains one of the basic methods of translation automation is usually called *the direct or icon method*. Direct or icon method of machine translation is based on establishing a direct relationship between the source and target dictionary entries [7:151]. The target entries are regarded as regular counterparts (icon copies) of the source ones. According to the direct translation method the source and target texts are presumed to be similar both in their form and conceptual content.

The idea of machine translation is not bad in itself but the results are sometimes unpredictable and amusing. Once the word “*mill*” taken from the technical article was translated as «мельница» («прокатный стан») and the word “*bench*” – as «скамейка» («испытательный стенд»).

There is quite a lot of fun dealing with the problem of machine translation, e.g.:

The electronic brain got an assignment to interpret the proverb: “Out of sight, out of mind”. The explanation was “Idiot – invisible man”.

An electronic machine translated from English into Russian the sentence: “The spirit was strong but the flesh was weak” as «Водка держится, а мясо протухло».

“Finnish people” – «конченые люди», “let’s have a party” – «давайте организуем партию», “bad influence” – «плохая простуда», “phone seller” – «позвони продавцу».

Sometimes the students follow the way of the least resistance using machine translation, c.f.:

In this area, harm is caused by an affirmative but negligent act. In other words, the individual fails to exercise reasonable care and caution while performing a certain act. For example, a department store delivery man comes to your home to deliver a large package. While carrying it through the front door, he misjudged the distance and breaks the glass in the door. Since his act lacks the reasonable care that can be expected under the circumstances, he is liable for the broken pane. Another circumstances which can result in liability for negligence is the “misplaced sponge” situation.

В этой области вред вызван подтверждающим, но небрежным действием. Другими словами, индивидуальные сбои, чтобы осуществить разумную заботу и предостережение при исполнении некоторого действия. Например, доставка универмага укомплектовывает рабочей силой спутник к вашему дому, чтобы доставить большому пакету. При переносе этого сквозь передняя дверь он неправильно оценивает расстояние и прерывает передачу стекло в двери. Другие обстоятельства, которые могут приводить к задолженности за небрежность, - «неуместная губка» местоположение.

Such way of translation kills the intellectual history of the discipline, trivializes its subject, blocks access to cognition for both the teacher and the student.

The vitality of translation lies in its ability to show the actual, imagined, and possible lives of speakers, readers, writes. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience, it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.

This brief review of the problems that the translator encounters when dealing with the overt and covert obstacles involved in the creative process of trying to counterpoise the means of expression in two languages makes it obvious that these problems are still innumerable. For some this is grounds for proclaiming the fundamental untranslatability – especially of subtle and intricate literary texts – and calling on people to read them in the original. Nevertheless, a great amount of data has been accumulated in both the theory and practice of all kinds of translation.

In conclusion I would like to quote some words from *Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993* by Toni Morrison: “Be it grand or slender, burrowing, blasting or refusing to sanctify; whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet, the choice word or the chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction. Word-work is sublime because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference – the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we *do* language. That may be the measure of our lives” [8:766].

Paraphrasing these charming words we can say: we *do* translate; that may be the measure of our lives.

РЕЗЮМЕ

Стаття розглядає проблеми дослівного або буквального, літературного та поетичного перекладу. Автор торкається питань інтеркультурного перекладу, наводячи приклади перекладальних курйозів.

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