

On the Translatability of Poetry

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This paper discusses some reasons for the translatability of poetry since throughout the history of translation many theorists and scholars advocate that poetry is translatable. The “common core” shared by people speaking different languages, the theoretical basis to define translation correctly, and historical facts of poetry translation all lend support to the point that translation of poetry is possible.

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Introduction

Poetry is a very special literary genre. There is rhythm, metrical rhythm; there is emotion, sensuous emotion; there is an increased use of figures of speech and a degree of disregard for conventional word order; there is imagination, and above all, there is an ability to see features in an object or a situation, which another, not a poet, might miss. When poetry involves such unique artistic features, so much time seems to have been devoted to the investigation of the translation of poetry that it has become an unresolved problem in the history of translation and aroused many scholars' interest in it. Some people do not think that poetry is translatable and wrote directly, or by implication, unfriendly words on the possibility of poetry translation. It is true that some wonderful and subtle effect of poetry can be achieved only by one language, because this kind of effect is connected with and created by some linguistic, poetic, and cultural features of this language alone, but it never means poetry is untranslatable. Translation of poetry is possible and can be done well.

Advocators of Poetry Translatability

We can find many advocates of the translatability of poetry, including Mao Dun, Cheng Fangwu, Xu Yuanchong, Leonardo Bruni Aretino, and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Cheng Fangwu said (1984) that

poetry translation is not impossible. According to my own experience, poems that seem difficult to translate at the first sight can all be rendered in another language after careful deliberation. The translation depends upon the translator's ability and efforts. What has been created by one language can always be translated into another tongue in one way or another. (p. 384)

Leonardo Bruni Aretino, an influential Italian theorist of translation in the Middle Ages, held that any language was endowed with the ability to be translated effectively. The view that the differences in languages are an insurmountable barrier in translation is only an excuse for one's lack of ability. Wilhelm von Humboldt, the German linguist and philosopher, put forward the dialectical relationship between untranslatability and translatability. He pointed out that different languages could be translated into each other in spite of their

differences in the linguistic structure. In other words, the differences in the linguistic structure can be overcome by the potential translatability among languages.

Reasons for Poetry Translatability

“Common Core” Among All Nations as the Objective Basis

The fundamental objective basis for the poetry translatability is the “common core” among all nations of different languages. According to the theory of Marxism, man’s consciousness reflects his social being. As everyone knows, all nations share the same physical world and nature without regard to the languages they speak. At the same time, people of different nations have the same physical organs for the same physical faculties of five senses. That is to say, all human beings can perceive the same physical world in the roughly same way and harbor the roughly same emotions or feelings, such as joy, anger, pain, and happiness. Therefore, emotions or feelings that can be expressed in one language can also be expressed in other languages, though in different ways. We are conscious of the social life in the roughly same way, which is reflected in the artistic conceptions of the literary works, so we can recognize these conceptions and reproduce them in any languages. Liu Zhongde (1995), in his *Ten Lectures on Literary Translating*, gave a detailed explanation of this point.

For instance, they all have the thinking powers to reason logically and the feelings to express joy or sorrow, love or hatred, and possess the same nature, world and universe no matter what race they may be. In other words, all human beings are endowed by nature with the same mind which has the same function so that they can commune with one other. As a consequence, poetry, a product of the mind, is understandable, enjoyable, and translatable. (p. 128)

We cannot deny that poets speaking different languages may share and express the same, or at least similar feelings by means of poetry. Thus, it is possible to translate poems from one language into another.

Theoretic Basis to Define Translation Correctly

The possibility of poetry translation depends on the correct understanding and precise definition of translation as well. Some detractors of the poetry translatability hold that poetry is untranslatable on the basis that exact equivalence cannot be found due to some unique features connected with and created by poetry as a particular literary genre. Poetry cannot be translated fully, or absolutely. In other words, transformation of the poetry of one language into other languages without the slightest loss or change is impossible. It has to be pointed out that the translation meant by these detractors is what is called “absolute translation”. Without any doubt this requirement of linguistic and cultural equivalence is overcritical. In this sense, no translation is possible, because every language and the culture of every nation in this world have their own features and these features are definitely different and distinctive. No language and culture will ever find exact equivalence in another language and culture, and then there will be no translation at all. We cannot ignore the fact that in the translation of one language into another there will always be some changes, and sometimes, these changes result in the loss of the original to some extent. But can we jump to the conclusion that poetry is untranslatable, only because something is lost in the translation? Of course, we cannot, as long as this translation has preserved most of the contents, the spirit, and the flavor of the original and has conveyed all these to the readers of the target language. As a matter of fact, even in intra-lingual translation, such as in the translation from classical Chinese into contemporary Chinese, something of the original will be lost inevitably. This loss should be permissible in translation and the translatability of poetry cannot be denied because of some inevitable and permissible loss.

This point can also find theoretic support in Eugene A. Nida's theory of functional equivalence. According to Nida (1997), "A number of different translations can in fact represent varying degree of equivalence" ranging from "minimal equivalence" to "maximal equivalence":

A minimal, realistic definition of functional equivalence could be stated as "The readers of a translated text should be able to comprehend it to the point that they can conceive of how the original readers of the text must have understood and appreciated it." ... A maximal, ideal definition could be stated as "The readers of a translated text should be able to understand and appreciate it in essentially the same manner as the original readers did." (p. 118)

From Nida's theory, we can see easily that there is no absolutely equivalent translation in this world. But just as "nothing is perfect", no translation can be exactly the same as the original. If we judge, think, and talk about translation on the basis of the "minimal and realistic" definition, instead of the "maximal and ideal" one, translation is still possible. So, is the translation of poetry.

Historical Facts to Justify Poetry Translatability

The translatability of poetry has already been justified by quantities of historical facts, too. For some people, so-called "literal translation" is on the face of it literally impossible, because linguistic equivalents are by definition nonexistent, but good translation can be and frequently has been achieved. Shelley is a case in point. Though mentioned as an advocator of the untranslatability of poetry very often, Shelley himself proved a superior and abundant translator of classical poetry. He rendered the Homeric Hymns, a play by Euripides, scenes from Pedro Calderon de la Barca's *El Magico prodigioso*, and poems by Bion, Moschus, Virgil, Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Calderon and Goethe into English. Some of his translations have become his own poems and an important part of English literary tradition. Then, if poetry were untranslatable, how could people from different countries speaking different languages enjoy the poems composed by well-known poets in the world, such as William Shakespeare, John Milton, Percy Bysshe, Shelley, and Lord Byron from England, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Walt Whitman from the United States of America, Victor-Marie Hugo from France, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe from Germany, Aleksander Sergeevich Pushkin from Russia and Rabindranath Tagore from India? As everyone knows, the translations of the poems created by these household names can be found in bookstores all over the world and a great number of them are well-done.

Take the Chinese poems written by poets of the Tang Dynasty for example. Due to the rich tradition of its tonal and rhyming sounds, Chinese poetry should, perhaps theoretically, be the least translatable of the poetry in the world. However, quite a lot of them have been successfully translated, some of which have been cited by Liu Zhongde (1995) in his *Ten Lectures on Literary Translation*:

There were versions in various languages. According to the English Version of the 100 Four-Lined Tang Poems compiled and annotated by Lv Shuxiang, more than fifty poets were selected, inclusive of the most famous two, Li Bai and Du Fu. Their translators amount to eight including English Oriental scholar Herbert Allen Giles and British consul W. J. B. Fletcher. Besides, a considerable number of modern Chinese men of letters translated their classical poems into English and had them published as *An English Version of Tang Poems* by Cai Tinggan, *An English Version of Classical Poems* by Weng Xianliang, *A New Translation of Three Hundred Tang Poems* by Xu Yuanchong, Lu Peixuan and Wu Juntao, *Selected Poems and Essays of the Tang and Song Dynasties* by Mr. Yang Xianyi and his wife. So far as the contemporary poems are concerned, we can also find lots of them translated either from a foreign language into Chinese or from Chinese into a foreign language. (p. 129)

Even Willis Barnstone (1993) admitted that in practice Chinese poetry

is the most, and in our century, with the possible exception of poetry from Spanish, has been the most read foreign poetry in English translation and has had the most decisive influence on our poets from Amy Lowell, William Carlos

Williams, and Ezra Pound to James Wright and Robert Creeley. (p. 49)

Conclusion

We human beings create according to our needs. Translation is no exception. There are various languages in this world and when there is the need for communication among nations, there will be the need for translation, including the translation of poetry. The conclusion that poetry is translatable can find support in the fact that there exist emotions in common among various nations and they all share a cultural “common core”. Poetry translation is possible if translation is talked about on the basis of the “minimal, realistic” definition instead of the “maximal, ideal” one. A lot of successful practice in poetry translation also lends support to the conclusion that poetry is translatable. Willis Barnstone (1993) once pointed out that “although it is impossible to reproduce the same sound and meaning in intra- and inter-lingual translation, I think what is the most interesting to translate and most susceptible of success is the impossible or, even better, the untranslatable” (p. 49). Yes, what is the most interesting and also the most charming and rewarding to translate poetry is the untranslatable.

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