

Teaching Literary Translation to Master Students of English Literature: Nature of the Task and its Challenges.

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Abstract:

The present paper brings into scrutiny the task of teaching literary translation to master students of English literature. It attempts, first, to demonstrate the promising objectives of the task. Then, to expose some of the potential multi-dimensional challenges to be encountered by the teacher. The study is descriptive and qualitative; it leans on examples from personal experience in teaching literary translation module at the department of English language at Boumerdes University. The study concludes that for the task to be fruitful, various conditions are to be met, the most important of them, is to include translation in the first year *Licence* curriculum with more load hours, and to teach literary translation through workshops with limited number of students.

Key Words: Literary translation; Translation Teaching; Translation errors; Translation training curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

As the name suggests, literary translation is the translation of any text of a literary and creative character, from fiction novels, plays, short stories, literary articles to poetry. It is not to claim here that such a definition is a clear cut, taking into account that what makes a text a literary one is its salient aesthetic and expressive functions, thus advertising materials for examples can arguably be of a literary nature!

In order to achieve a better understanding of the nature of the task, one has to put it in dichotomy with the translation of other texts from a non-creative nature, (technical, scientific and legal). I.e. all texts that are quasi exclusively bond by the conveyance of objective facts, which are possible to re-express within a different linguistic and cognitive setting. The literary translator's main concern, however, is not to render factual ideas and references, but to attempt

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to interpret the texts thoughts, artistic and emotional values in another linguistic, social and cultural context. Consequently, In order to fulfill such a task, a competent literary translator must have, along with a perfect proficiency of both SL and TL, other indispensable skills, like an in-depth literary and cultural knowledge “to be able to create and convey the image created by the author, (which) may be different in the original and receiving cultures”. (Aksyonova & Akhtambaev, 2014, p.335).

One may notice here the recurrence of the verb “to interpret “rather than to “reproduce”. In fact, the subjective and creative nature of literary artworks, has led many translation scholars, to challenge the possibility and the feasibility of its reproduction in a different setting. It is commonly acceptable, then, to deem the process as “a recreation of the text guided by the way the translator understands what it says” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 387). In the same direction, literary translation, for Susan Bassnett, is bound to reflect the translator’s own creative interpretation of the SL” (Bassnett, 2002, p.86). Subjectivity then being intrinsically present in the process of translating makes it difficult to rationalize, codify and eventually to teach.

The role of a literary translation instructor extends beyond equipping students with the necessary tools and techniques to overcome cross-linguistic complexities in terms of structure and meaning. It also involves inspiring and encouraging students to tap into their creative potential and think outside the box. “ This implies engaging students in stimulating activities, in which they are encouraged to exercise their freedom as creative personalities by solving a variety of translation tasks associated with conveying the artistic value of the original to the TT reader ”. (Naydan et al, 2019, p. 29).

My main interest in the in present essay is to investigate, first, the importance of teaching literary translation for English literature student, its reality in the department of English language in Boumerdes, as well as the main challenges faced by the students. I consider also to shine a bright light on some of frequent types of errors in students’ translation products.

2. The Relevance of the teaching of Literary Translation

Teaching translation of literary texts to English literature students generally serves two overlapping functions: the first one is to approach the translation process as an end. The objective here is to assist the students in the use of the appropriate strategies and techniques, along with their language and literary competence, to produce an equivalence in the target language. The second one is a pedagogical function, otherwise called “pedagogic translation”, which constitutes an efficient support for language knowledge, in the way of

harnessing language skills. Teaching literary translation, then, can be mostly used as a support for literary knowledge, which perfectly fits with the overall objectives of the literature-training curriculum.

To be more specific, one can fix multiple goals and competences to reach in teaching literary translation. The following list comprises a set of goals elaborated by Elaine Showater (in Washbourne, 2013, p. 50)

1. How to recognize subtle and complex differences in language use
2. How to read figurative language and distinguish between literal and metaphorical meaning.
3. How to seek out further knowledge about the literary work, its author, its content, or its interpretation.
4. How to detect the cultural assumptions underlying writings from a different time or society and, in the process to become aware of one's own cultural assumptions.
5. How to think creatively within and beyond literary studies.
6. How to create literary texts of one's own, whether imaginative or critical.
7. How to read closely, with attention to detailed use of diction, syntax, metaphor, and style...

The aforementioned list underscores the crucial significance of teaching literary texts, as it highlights the high stakes involved that go far beyond enhancing the students' language proficiency and skills, to assist them to sharpen their literary, aesthetic and cultural sensitivity, as well as to boost their knowledge of all literary domain (genres, themes, authors...). Moreover, and more importantly, literary translation, through creative solving exercises is most likely to represent an efficient practical means to help the student working on their critical and creative thinking and writing, or as Landers puts it:

"Only literary translation lets one consistently share in the creative process. Here alone does the translator experience the aesthetic joys of working with great literature, of recreating in a new language a work that could otherwise remain beyond reach" .(Landers, 1999, p. 4)

3. Conditions and reality of teaching literary translation in Boumerdes

Surprisingly, teaching literary translation as a separate module is not very common in Algerian foreign languages departments, and not even in translation institutes. It is usually introduced as part of translation theories, like the theory of equivalence, in which chunks of literary texts are used as examples. Even at *master* level the specialty is quasi inexistent.

In the last five years, we started to witness a growing interest in translation in general in the teaching of foreign languages. In the department of English language at UMBB, translation had been taught only in second year

licence, as an initiation to the practice. Starting 2015, it was also introduced to third year *licence*. In 2016, Literature training curriculum went through a major update, in which literary translation was introduced for the first time. As a result, the literature students started to receive 3 years of translation training, after it was only limited to one year.

Such data can be positively interpreted in terms of promoting the practice. On the other hand, and by going back to literature training curriculum, literary translation module, has a teaching load of 45 hours including semesters 1 and 2, which makes one hour and half session per week. Time allocation looks decent at the first sight, taking into consideration that it is extended to both semesters. The main impediment here comes from another technical factor, related to the disproportionate number of students who have access to *master one*, actually, it can reach up to 150 students. As a teacher, I face real trouble managing the tutorials, as it is impossible to teach, guide and assess such a big number of students in a 1h30 of time a week. It is obvious that such an issue deeply affects the quality of the task.

4. Challenges faced by the students

Most of the problems faced by the students when handling a literary text in translation are of multi-dimensional nature, considering the fact, as mentioned before, that such texts convey different functions, and are deeply rooted in the structural, lexical-semantic, cultural and aesthetic systems of source text. All these systems bestow the author with the needed ingredients to create a work of a unique artistic style.

The distinctive style of an author is mainly highlighted in the use of tropes, figures of speech and all sorts of schemes. The preservation of such devices is the main impediment in the way of the students in their translation quests, considering here that such problems tend to aggravate when it comes to translation from and into distant languages such as English and Arabic.

As the course specification aims to introduce students to literary translation, I tend to steer clear of assigning texts that are rich in literary devices, such as poetry. Nevertheless, it is not a rare occurrence that they stumble upon a salient aesthetic manifestation, in which they need to go far beyond the word for word translation to create an equivalence in the target language.

In such cases, structural and semantic disparities between English and Arabic make it so difficult to maintain an approximate aesthetic value when coming across some types of homonyms, word plays, and assonances, considering the arbitrary relation between the word and its significance, which

is rarely possible to reproduce in another distant language. Other devices appear to be less problematic in translation, but in reality, it is not the case. Let us take the example of repetition, which is a technique in which the author reuses the same word or phrase in the same utterance to create an expressive effect. However, the tolerance of such technique between Arabic and English is not alike. Repetition can sound very expressive in an Arabic text; actually, it represents a salient trait in the literary style of some Arabic authors like, Taha Hussein. Let us consider the following example taken from his book "*El Ayam*": (حسين، 1992)

" لا يذكر لهذا اليوم اسما، ولا يستطيع أن يضعه حيث وضعه الله من الشهر والسنة، بل لا يستطيع أن يذكر من هذا اليوم وقتا بعينه، وإنما يقرب ذلك تقريبا"

The author emotionally recounts his young days when he was barely aware of the passing of time and that since he was afflicted by the loss of sight. One cannot but observe the recurrent repetition in the highlighted words, which represent a stylistic peculiarity of Taha Hussein. In their quest to translate such chunk of text, students can be successful to maintain the meaning, but any endeavor to duplicate the same repetitive words, may lead to the questioning of the target text cohesion, since English language by nature is more concise and straightforward.

Other hindrances come from the existing disparities between the cultural and literary values between Arabic and English. In fact, a literary work is a creative activity that induces an aesthetic interaction with its recipient by referring to a common contextual background (Iser, 1972). The transfer of the text to another linguistic system means to shove it into a different social reality, where the world's perception is not the same. For Edward Sapir, such difference is not exclusive to distant language as he states:

"No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached" (Sapir, 1929, p. 209).

These nuances in social and cultural traits have an imposing impact on the target reader's aesthetic response to the text, i.e. rhetorical means can be accepted by the target text readers as long they are in accordance with their aesthetic values. Other culture-bound images, metaphors, idioms and symbols may seem unfamiliar and unpalatable, especially if their connotations are activated only within the source culture and environment like history, traditions, religion, geography, fauna and flora. A metaphor, charged with cultural references, that sounds so expressive and captivating in source language, may be dull and meaningless, if attempted to be literally translated. The degree of hardship in dealing with such issues depends mostly on the translator's knowledge and sensitivity in both SL and TL languages and

cultures, his awareness of different techniques and strategies provided by the translation theories. Such requirements are rarely met by the *master one* literature students whose training in translation in terms of theory and practice is far from being enough.

Literary terminology also represents another imposing hindrance for the students. Literary critical texts are different in nature from the creative ones. Following Roman Jakobson's text function stratification (Jakobson, 1960), a critical text favors the "referential function" of language in which the message is of a paramount priority. Here, the translator's first concern is not the conveyance of tropes and figures of speech as it is with finding the most accurate equivalent terms in the target language. The situation becomes more intense when translating between English and Arabic, which literary and systems' functioning is far from similar. For instance, In the context of literary translation, certain terms and concepts may not have a direct correlation to Arabic literary traditions. This often leads to a translator being confronted with a challenging decision: either they may be forced to choose from a range of Arabic words that lack a precise equivalence to the original term, or they may need to employ a more elaborate explanation or circumlocution to convey the intended meaning. The complexity of this task may leave the translator feeling uncertain about which option to select. For example:

Allegory: الأليكوريا، المجاز، القصة الرمزية

Lyrical poetry: شعر وجداني، شعر ذاتي، الليريك

Poetics: الشعرية، البوطيقا، فن الشعر

Another related hindrance is the lack of conformity between different Arabic literary glossaries regarding western literary terminology. The students often struggle to choose among various imputes in Arabic corresponding to one term in English.

5. Examples of Recurrent Errors Made by the Students

Even the most skilled translators are liable to errors when rendering a text to another language, let alone foreign languages students who lack practice. In fact, in my experience as a teacher, I have observed countless amount of errors made by the students either in class activities or in their exam copies. Most of these errors come as a result to lack of proficiency of English language in terms of writing skill (Cohesion and coherence) or even in language system (Grammar, vocabulary, spelling...etc.), or/and errors due to students inability to reach equivalence of literary, cultural traits of the ST.

Following Christine Nord's typology (Nord, 1997, p.75), I will attempt to illustrate with examples the recurrent errors made by the students in literary

translation.

5.1 Pragmatic Translation Errors

These kind of errors usually occur due to the students' failure to grasp the multiple levels of meaning of an utterance. This usually goes back to two reasons: the first is that they do not give importance to read of the whole text, which significantly limits the process of understanding and interpretation. The second one is due to their morbid tendency to abide by the literal translation, instead of investigating other alternatives that fit the most with contextual meaning. Let us consider the following example:

وهناك الآلاف من الناس لم يعرفوا هذه الصَّلَاة، ولم يحسوا هذا الإحساس الديني في الاتصال بالطبيعة في خلوة الحقول.

According to the example, the underlined word (الآلاف) or (thousands) is intended to be understood as a hyperbole, which is an over-statement, used to create an exaggerated impact. However, it came in a very peculiar style, since thousands is not that a big number of people, if we understand it in relation to the contextual meaning. It has been observed that many students have opted for the word for word translation: "there are thousands of people", which gave the impression that we are referring to concrete statistics, instead of considering more pragmatic alternative, say : (so many people, great number of people. Etc.)

5.2 Cultural Translation Errors

Cultural nuances between English and Arabic makes it so frequent for the students to make inadequate decisions whether to reproduce the cultural specific words or expressions, or to adapt them. A perfect example of such case are idioms or conventional metaphors, which refers to all metaphors that are commonly used within a specific culture, as shown in the following example:

كانت لي سيارة كبيرة، أرتنى النجوم في الظهر.

The underlined expression is obviously a conventional metaphor. In the Arab culture, when something annoys you too much, we say, "it shows me the stars at noon". However, in English culture such a metaphor is not of a conventional nature. In such cases the translator should find a more dynamic equivalent conventional metaphor to replace the original like (drove me off the wall, drove me crazy...).

There are two recurrent errors students tend to make in translation, they either translate the metaphor literally, so to remove its idiomatic aspect, or to replace it with a literal meaning to say for example (it annoyed me too much). In both cases, the translation fails at preserving an approximate effect of the original.

5.3 Linguistic Translation Errors

In my experience, this is the most frequent type of errors. It happens when the focus of student is put on imitating the SL structure rather than attempting to extract the meaning. One consequence to such tendency is “language interference”. Such phenomenon can be manifest at different ways, for example, in Arabic the use of connectors like (ولقد) (و)... is very common, that it is even acceptable to use them at the beginning of new paragraphs, which is not the case of English where is more suitable to use concise and short sentences. Therefore, it has been so common to see an overuse of such connectors in the student’s translations since they have reproduced them literally from the Arabic text.

5.4 Text-specific Translation Errors

Such errors occur due to the no respect of the stylistic properties of the text. Language register is one common aspect of the shortcomings of the students’ translations in this sense. For example, when translating an Arabic word or expression using informal language in the source text, like in the text titled “شعار الكسالى” many students translated كسالى with slugs, which is mainly an American informal word that can mean “lazy”. In fact, most errors of such type go back to students’ lack of experience with English literary texts, which entails the inability to find the appropriate alternatives that correspond to the source text’s language register.

6. CONCLUSION

The teaching of literary translation for English master students is a very ambitious endeavor indeed, since it implies a variety of objectives and goals, most importantly, it assists the students to broaden their knowledge and harness their competence in terms of literary and creative writings. However, such goals come with great challenges that can easily turn such a task into a non-feasible one. As a teacher, I firmly believe that translation should be introduced to students as early as possible in their academic journey. Beginning with *licence* 1, students can gain a solid foundation in the principles, strategies and techniques of translation, providing them with enough time to practice and sharpen their skills. This early introduction can also familiarize them with the necessary theoretical concepts, such as equivalence and cultural adaptation that underlie successful translation. Furthermore, conducting workshops with a limited number of students is an ideal pedagogical approach, as it allows the teacher to closely monitor and guide the students and help them attain translation proficiency

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