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Complications in Translation of Poetry: What Makes Poetry Untranslatable?

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There is no ideal mode of translation of poetry. Douglas Robinson sums up translation as being an “intelligent activity, requiring problem solving”(p51) This applies most fittingly to the translation of poetry, Poetry, being a cover term encompassing all imaginative literature, whether prose, drama or verse. Imaginative literature is distinct from scientific literature and the various works of literary art deviate in various degrees from the scientific literature. Translation of poetry has always been looked upon with suspicion. Of the various notions regarding verse translation, very few confer a respectable status upon it. Translation of poetry is essentially “a compromise between the original text and the present interest and capacities of a given writer”, says Charles Tomlinson (p.xi). Poetry is notoriously untranslatable for some. The Italian adage “traduttore- traditore” has done much harm to the reputation of the translator and the translated work as it blatantly declares that the translator is a traitor. The general attitude towards translations, too, is not very warm. Robert Frost once said that what is lost in translation is poetry. Translation in verse appears impossible to Victor Hugo. For Heine it is equivalent to straw-plaiting sunbeams. Dr. Johnson and Voltaire too reflect the same ideas.

Translation of verse is more complex than translation of prose because verse is cryptic. The basic reason why verse defies translation is that though it is possible to transfer the structural entity of a poem into another language, it is physically impossible to transfer its sensuous entity. A poem is a complex of words, emotions and meanings. What we often fail to acknowledge is that it is rooted in the sound system of the language to a similar extent. Each poem is a unique experience defined against the coordinated of sound, meaning and the underlying emotions. These three axes define the unique matrix against which a poem exists within the span of time and space of a language and culture. These variables are themselves made complex by the subtleties of expression which complicate the task of the translator.

In this paper we will examine the hindrance offered by these variables during the spatial translocation of a poem to a different reference scale, i.e. a different language.

Translation is the closest a text can approach the original and this is what we should expect from a translation, because total conversion or transcript of the original is an impossible feat. The task is complicated by the differences in the language systems. The language system works through sounds, words and structures integrated into an organic whole. It is a system for organizing sounds, making and arranging words and deciphering meanings; and it is arbitrary and distinctive, which accounts for most of the problems of the translator.

To get to the root of the problems in translation of poetry, we need to understand the basics of poetry. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren list the methods used in analyzing the various strata of the work of art as:

1. The sound stratum, euphony, rhythm, and metre; 2. The units of meaning which determine the formal linguistic structure of a work of literature, its style and the discipline of stylistics investigating it systematically; 3. Image and metaphor, the most centrally poetic of all stylistic devices which need special discussion also because they almost imperceptibly shade off into; 4. The specific 'world' of poetry in symbol and system of symbols which we call poetic 'myth'.... (p158)

To begin with, a word in poetry has got a meaning value as well as a sound value, not merely an appeal to the mind and understanding but also an appeal to the ear (as it is heard) – even an appeal to the tongue and the palate (as it is spoken); and in poetry the two values, the semantic and the sonic, the logical and the sensuous, are so closely integrated into each other as to be inseparable. We cannot recreate the sonic effects of alliteration, rhyme and onomatopoeia in translation because out of the choices available for a single idea, not one will fill our mouth exactly as the original word or idea.

Each work of art derives its meaning from a system of sounds. The phonetic stratum is an integral part of the aesthetics of literature. Each language has its own set of phonemes. Thus, a word substituted for another word in another language, even if it is the perfect equivalent, is a different collocation of sounds and consequently, a different sensuous entity. The being of poetry is so firmly attached to its sensuous matrix that it withers as soon as it is wrenched off.

The notional content can be transferred without the loss of a single atom. However, transfer of the sensual content is impossible. No translation can weave the magical spell of the original, nor ever hope to, because it works with different sounds – sounds capable of capturing the logical and notional entity of the poem but not the sensual entity which proceeds from euphony, rhythm, rhyme, metre and sound effects of alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia.

“It were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet”. (Shelley71) David Daiches says that sound and sense come together as an organic whole, as the seed grows into a flower, and they cannot be put together mechanically. This is the reason why translations fall short at the level of sound and choice of diction. Even within the same language, one cannot substitute an equivalent for the word that exists in the original composition because they do not correspond in the number of syllables and the natural rhyme and rhythm of the words.

If words are replaced by words, then only ugly empty shell can be received as its consequence. (Joshi79). Poetry is a magical web of meanings and imagery. Imagery is a function of words and their associated meanings, which go beyond the phonetic structure and sound patterns. Translation tries to catch the soul of poetry. Poetry being multidimensional and multilayered in meanings and implications, evades capture. Poetic language is marked by imagery, witticisms, conceits, symbolic nuances and multiple meanings. The poet's vision runs through the entire gamut of his works, often lending a mythical tint to his works. Allegory and suggestiveness are also integral to the structure of the poem.

Image, metaphor, symbol and myth form the central poetic structure of a literary work. Wellek and Warren say, “when, Instead of prose-paraphrasing, we identify the 'meaning' of a poem with its whole complex of structures, we then encounter, as central poetic structure, the sequence

represented by the four terms...”(p186) This, according to them, represents the convergence of two lines, one, the sensuous particularity (the sensuous and aesthetic continuum) which brings poetry closer to music and painting and separates it from philosophy and science; and ‘figuration’ or ‘tropology’ – the ‘oblique’ discourse which speaks in metonyms and metaphors, partially comparing worlds, précising its themes by giving them translations into other idioms.

“Metaphor is a device for expanding meaning, for saying several things at once, for producing ambivalence...metaphorical expression can help to achieve richness and subtlety of expression...”(Daiches167). Imagery, too lends a particular colour to the text and meaning. Recurring images give “a characteristic tone and a whole set of echoing meanings”(Daiches 168) to a play or poem or literary work.

Poetic language is rich in allusions, symbolism, metaphors, images and carries a sub-text visible on closer inspection, like designs in an artistic motif where a flower suddenly turns into the feather of a dancing peacock or the borders of a fish turn out to be leafy creepers. In poetry the sub-text or the secondary text is as important as the visible or primary text. At times the primary text carries within it a sub text. The primary or the obvious sense of a context is often not the the important one. The implications of any given text cannot be claimed to be entirely rigid or unambiguous. Any text is capable of a plurality of possible interpretations, a variety of legitimate and admissible senses. This is what Gunther Kandler calls the “range of interpretability” (p293-94). Whenever a text carries different moods, the ideal translation according to him will be the one that “allows of exactly the same breadth of interpretation (and even misinterpretation) as the original (p293-94).

It is difficult to transpose the magical web of poetry onto a different language. It is like trying to capture a rainbow in monochrome. Since the ‘sign’ does not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence with the meaning in poetic language, multiple meanings can be inferred: more so because the sign and the referent may not always be agreed upon conventionally. In poetry the sign is not ‘transparent’ like everyday language where it unequivocally directs you to the meaning (or image) beyond. It is like looking through ground glass where you first look at the glass and then at the object (or the meaning) beyond. The medium carries the message and is as important as the message. Literary language points inwards, it draws attention to itself, which means that the form is equally important as the content.

In poetry the sign and the referent, the image and its significance, the symbol and its meaning, the metaphor and the myth are all determined by the poet’s personal preference rather than convention or the commonly recognized associations. In Wordsworth’s ‘The Daffodils’, the line ‘fluttering and dancing in the breeze’ carries multiple significance. ‘Fluttering’ refers to the upper part and ‘dancing’ to the whole plant. The order of the keywords in the line signifies progression from part to the whole.

Catford regards translation as the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL) (Catford20). The TL translation equivalents he talks of may be typified as formal equivalents and cultural equivalents. The formal equivalents represent the most common things, items and universal feelings. There is no difficulty in translating these terms, it is the cultural equivalents that pose problems in translation. The primary consideration for equivalence is culture since language is a product of

culture. The interaction between languages is an attempt to integrate cultures. JB Casagrande opines: “in effect one does not translate LANGUAGES, one translates CULTURES...”(p338)

To quote Catford once more, “the language we speak forces us to select and group elements of our experience of the world in ways it dictates. It provides a kind of grids, through which we see the world” (Catford21). Since these grids may not necessarily coincide for different cultures, we come across lexical holes. The lexical holes, or the cultural gaps, demand explanation and elucidation at the cost of brevity.

Problems in translation of verse arise because it cannot be dealt with at a single level. A strict adherence to all the principles of translation at the same time is a Herculean task. The translator has to infuse his work with the soul of the original while reproducing the form and registral features. He has to capture the effusive quality characteristic of the work and weave it into an equally mesmerizing pattern in the target language. He has to preserve the niceties of the language of the original along with the secondary meaning arising out of imagery, witticisms, conceits, puns and symbolic nuances. Add to this the cultural and historical perspectives, orientation of the TL audience and the confusion in translating culture specific words, customs, ceremonies, poetic fancies, mythological allusions, archetypal images and philosophical concepts grow exponentially.

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