

Beyond Literal Translation

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Professional translators endeavor to translate as literally or as closely as they can. Indeed, Ordurari (2008) states that one should bear in mind that a good translation should fulfill the same function in the target language as the original did in the source language. Practice and experience has however proven that literal translation is not always possible since the product may be meaningless or unacceptable for the target language. According to Wikipedia, literal translation which is also known in everyday language as direct translation denotes the rendering of text from one language to another word for word rather than conveying the sense of the original. Wikipedia further asserts that as a bad practice, literal translation implies that it is probably full of errors since the translator has made no effort to convey, for example, correct idioms or shades of meaning. There is also the risk of translationese defined by Newmark (1991) as literal translation that makes little sense or is unnatural. This leads the translator to a level where he or she must proceed by reformulations and/ or modifications to the translation so as to make "sense" and be "natural". The aspect of reformulations and modifications inevitably introduces the contentious practice of "free" translation where translators do not bother about remaining "faithful" to the original Source Language. This essay looks at the options that translators have once they realize that literal translation is no longer possible.

2.0 TRANSLATING NON-LITERALLY

Newmark (1991) defines the act of translating as transferring the meaning of a stretch or a unit of language, the whole or a part of a text, from one language to

another. Wikipedia defines translation as the communication of the meaning of a source-language text by means of an equivalent target-language text. Lederer (1998) defines translation as making that, which is "énoncé" (utterance) in one language to be "énoncé" in another language while retaining the semantic and expressive equivalence of the two "utterances". In these definitions, emphasis is placed on the two primary aspects of all good translations: meaning and equivalence. Newmark further advises translators to translate by sentences wherever they can and to make sure that they have accounted for (which means ensuring that each word is taken into consideration during translation) each word in the source language text. He however rightly observes that there is a tendency by translators to under translate, to normalize by generalizing, to understate, in all translation, and particularly in literary translation. He adds that in non-literary translation, the translators are so intent on reproducing all the facts that they do not hesitate to expand the passage.

This tendency to under translate, normalize by generalizing or understate is regarded by some as the result of a translator's choice to translate freely, or in a way that he or she considers as rendering the original text as dictated by the target language limitations that may manifest themselves. Under-translation obviously leaves out certain aspects of an original whereas generalizations deprive it of contextual and stylistic texture. The absence of the originality that such a text consequently displays is, as it should be, blamed on the translator. It has been said that a translation should not read like a translation yet in some instances, target language readers are able to detect and tell that a certain text is not an original but a translation. This is mostly observed with machine translations or in work submitted by inexperienced translation students. Wikipedia gives an interesting example of the literal translation of the [Italian](#) sentence, "*So che questo non va bene*" ("I know that this is not good"), which produces "Know(I) that this not goes(it) well," which has English *words* and Italian *grammar*.

.A reader with a certain level of linguistic competence in the target language can easily recognize such a translation mainly after establishing obvious correspondences (lexical or syntactical) between the two languages. Indeed, Bruno de Bessé (2001: 50) observes that perfect bilingualism is almost

impossible and that one will always find mother tongue structures in a written or a spoken speech.

The ambition to produce a translation that reads like an original may lead a translator to modify his or her own translation and by so doing, move further away from the original text. The good translator however strives to come up with a good translation and the fear of being discovered (that he or she is a translator and not the original author) is only secondary.

The aspect of expanding a passage in non-literary translation or contracting it in literary translation (where the translation is normally shorter than the original) poses a serious problem in translation since there are no rules to be followed and individual translators choose different ways of handling this situation. This is compounded further by the translator's intention to render "what the author intended to "mean" say".

Translators have been classified into two main groups: those who "lean" towards the original text in the Source Language and those who "lean" towards the translation itself in the target language. It is argued that the first ones strive to remain faithful to the writer and to the source language whereas the others strive to satisfy in every way possible the reader of the translation. All these factors leave the translator with the liberty to translate in a way he or she considers best. A professional translator will naturally follow the advice of translating literally as long as they can but they will not hesitate to take advantage of the liberty that they enjoy once they realize that, to use Vinay's and Darbelnet's (1958) words, "the translation violates the target language."

At this point, the translator finds a way of reformulating the intended meaning or modifying it as may be dictated by the purpose of the translation. Newmark (1991) states that the decision whether or not to reformulate the meaning or to square it with the facts of the matter depends on the purpose of the translation.

The question that arises here is to what extent the translator should go in reformulating and modifying a text or in squaring meaning with the facts.

It is not uncommon to note cases where translators over-translate or under-translate while in an attempt to reformulate or modify the target language text. Over translation occurs when the translator adds an element of meaning (word, sentence, paragraph, punctuation mark, etc) in the translation, which is not in the source language text. We can cite the example given by Lederer (1998:126, analysis of French translations of John Steinbeck's, *Cannery Row*) of the translation from English to French of the word *Safeway* (an American supermarket chain) by *Monoprix* (a French supermarket chain) which gives the false information to the reader of the translation that the latter exists in the USA. Furthermore, the omission of such information enabling the target text reader to know that the specific reference is a supermarket chain also results in under-translation. During revision of a translation, parallel reading of the translation and the original is important as it helps ensure that no word, sentence or paragraph has been overlooked or forgotten and also to ensure that every punctuation mark, figure or word in the original has been accounted for (not necessarily translated) in the translation (Newmark, 1991). In the same way, a parallel reading becomes necessary to ensure that no word, sentence or paragraph has been added to the translation without justification. This is because overlooking, forgetting or failing to account for a word, figure and punctuation mark is just as misleading as including unjustifiable additions in the translation. By justification I mean, for example, that just as it is possible and important to account for a word of the original that the translator opts to omit, it is equally possible and important to account for any additions included in the translation.

Non-literal translation also results from the translator's decision to translate what he or she thinks the writer wants to say and not what this writer actually writes or says. The danger that this practice poses is that it is possible to interpret the author in more than one way since this is dependent on individual translators.

Lederer (Op. cit.) gives several different French translations of the following English passage "...*(he starts screaming) he didn't marry a woman who would ignore her house and children*":

Translator 1: Ils ne se sont pas mariés pour vivre avec une femme qui néglige ses enfants et sa maison.

Translator 2 : ils n'ont pas épousé une femme qui se fiche de sa maison et de ses enfants.

Translator 3 : en se mariant, il ne croyait pas qu'un jour sa femme négligerait foyer et enfants.

Translator 4 : il n'a que faire d'une femme qui laisse tomber sa maison et ses enfants.

Translator 5 : il ne s'est pas marié pour avoir une femme qui néglige sa maison et ses enfants.

The surest way of avoiding more than one interpretation of the writer's intended meaning is by referring oneself to what the writer actually wrote. The translator is not an original writer and hence he or she should have no interest in proceeding while translating like the writer while presumably looking for the latter's "intended" meaning. It is interesting to note that an author who has a complete mastery of two languages and who has written a text in one of these languages will most probably "rewrite" the text in the second language during self-translation. By "re-writing" I mean that the author will not feel obliged to stick to the rules of translation when he or she knows both the intention and the meaning carried by the text. He or she may, for example, avoid the use of a bilingual dictionary and the result in this case then is a text written in two languages and not one that is translated into another language. We can refer to the example given by the Chinese language author, Gao injian.

Such an author may even feel that a certain expression is better formulated, pronounced or brought out in one language than in another. Most bilingual or multilingual speakers (and to some extent, writers and journalists) addressing an

audience with similar linguistic traits choose to say certain things in the "other language" since they believe that it comes out better. Gao Xingjian, a French national of Chinese extraction prefers writing his novels in Chinese arguing that, despite his French being good, it would take him a lot of time to write in this European language (Dutrait, 2001:44). Xingjian encourages his translators not to fear the original and to move away from the text if the words sound better in French. As an example, Xingjian's translators, Liliane and Noël Dutrait observe that a word by word analysis of their translation of this author's novel, *La Montagne de l'âme*, would reveal some passages which have been eliminated or modified. They give the example of certain repetitions which are very good in Chinese but not in French. Confirming that a word by word translation of *La Montagne de l'âme* could reveal clauses which are left out or modified, these translators admit that theirs is not a literal translation only that they have the consent of the original author with whom they are constantly in touch. The observations made by these translators are instructive especially when one takes into consideration the fact that Noel Dutrait won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2000 for his exemplary achievements in the field of translation.

Some translators will, for various reasons, seek to meet an author whose work they intend to translate so as to get further information or clarification on this work. However, under normal circumstances, the author's assumption is that the reader (the translator included) should be able to read and understand the text, without having to seek further information or clarification from other sources that may include the author himself or herself (except when the original contains an error that must be corrected with the author's approval). An author does not need to write with the translator in mind. He or she does not need to worry about the translatability of the text or of a certain formulation of the original since this may have a negative or an unwarranted impact on the source language text. It is therefore only wise to leave any translating problem to be sorted out by the translator.

It has been argued that translators should ensure that the reader of the translation reacts to it just like the source language reader reacts to the original. This is why Ordudari (2008) insists on the importance of ensuring that a good translation serves the same purpose as the original text only that it's in a different language. On the surface, this appears like a common sense requirement of a translation by anybody including the reader. However, reality as may be presented by the original could make it difficult if not impossible. Some jokes, for example, are not universal and what would make a reader in one language and culture laugh may fail to do the same to a reader in another language and culture. Hatim and Mason (1997) observe that translation is an act of communication which attempts to relay, across cultural and linguistic boundaries, another act of communication. It may then mean that the translator must create a scenario similar to the one in the original and with this "creativity" the translator digresses from their primary duty, which is, translating. This explains why, for instance, the excellent translation of comical works like *Tintin* and *Asterisk* has been very well appreciated by readers across cultural and linguistic boundaries. In her article "*Is translation a Rewriting of an Original Text?*", Tomoko (2009) argues that the translator is a rewriter of the original text as he or she engages in the act of cultural and ideological transportation and distorts the source text to accommodate it

Another argument states that translators should write as the source language author would have written if he or she had been a native or had a complete command of the target language. We can cite the example of conference interpreters (these are oral translators) who have been known to silently comment to the people whose speech they interpret thus: "I did not say what you said but what you would have said in my language." It is for this reason that literal translation of proverbs and sayings may be meaningless in the target language given that these normally transmit cultural wisdom.

In translation, writing what an author would have written has however been known to be difficult since a translator is not an original writer and will never be one. It is also important to note that individual writers (and a translator is a writer of sorts) use individual language in their work and nobody, will be able to use another individual's language like himself or herself even if the two were to be put in similar circumstances writing about the same topic. This is because individuals differ in their choice of words and style even when talking or writing about the same thing (an event, a situation, an object and even an idea). In reference to the example given above on conference interpreters, one should probably ask them if they are sure to have used exactly the same words, with the same intonation, tone and rhythm as the person they are interpreting. The answer to this question is obvious and it partly explains why no two translators give an exactly similar translation of the same text or speech.

Asked whether they feel transparent in their translation or whether they consider it their own novel, Xingjian's translators, Liliane and Noel offer a very interesting answer: "obviously in public, one must consider himself transparent and not try to take the author's place. But deep inside, we are happy and proud to have written something based on our own sensitivity and culture which will inevitably be reflected in the translation." Most importantly, these translators are quick to add that they endeavor to stay close to the original whenever its possible and to give total respect to the reader to whom they would not want to give a novel that reads like a translation. Understandably, they equate this to walking a tight rope: their product must not read like a translation nor should it portray them as the authors.

The extent to which a translator may go once he or she realizes that literal translation of an original text is impossible varies from one translator to another just the same way reasons for reformulating or modifying a text that one is translating vary. Translators agree that reformulation and modification of a text during translation should depend on the purpose of translation and it is therefore

possible to tell if these changes are justified or not. The decision to translate literally or not may also depend on the nature of the text. Thus IT (information technology) texts require direct translation whereas works of fiction call for more effort in the interpretation of meaning. I have said earlier that a parallel reading of the translation and the original is the most obvious way of checking if there are any omissions, additions and alterations in the translation and if this is done with any justification or is a result of an error due to ignorance or carelessness, to use Newmark's words. Indeed, the ideal situation would be to ask more than one translator to provide copies of their translation for the purposes of comparison.

Papadima (2001: 47) describes the comparison of translations as a very useful exercise since it enables us to take conscience of the choices made by different individuals translating the same text. She further notes that this allows everyone to track translators steps, their theoretical approach if it exists and more importantly, to put an end to "the best translation" or "the sole translation" myth. A translator may be reprimanded for creating ambiguity or falsification of meaning and for violating target language usage for no apparent reason, features which are attributed to 'translationese' by Newmark.

I have sought to study a few examples of translations through a parallel reading of them and their original as a way of understanding what techniques translators opt for once they realize that they can no longer translate literally. I have also tried to avail my own back-translation where I consider it necessary for the purpose of comparison with the original. These examples are in French and in the Kenyan languages (English, Kiswahili and Kikuyu) that I practice.

The translation of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's play, "*Ngaahika Ndeenda*" in English by "*I will marry when I want*" fails to give the reader of the translation the information that these words are and can only be produced by a woman yet this is an obvious literal translation. The translation problem here is attributable to the fact that in English it is possible for both man and woman to make this statement. In

Kikuyu, a man speaking would say "Ngahikania ndeenda" which will have the same translation in English as what a woman would say (Ngaahika ndeenda). This may appear to be more of a cultural phenomenon than a linguistic one. In English culture, a woman can marry a man and vice versa whereas in Kikuyu culture, it is the man who marries the woman and not the other way round. The kikuyu verb *kuhikania* is unidirectional whereas its English equivalent *to marry* is bidimensional.

Another Ngugi wa Thiong'o's book, "*Matigari ma Njirungi*" is translated in English as "Matigari". The literal translation would have been "The remains of Njirungi." Both "Matigari" and "Njirungi" are nouns. Hence the choice of "Matigari" as the title of this book's English version cannot be considered as a literal translation of the original title in Kikuyu.

A manual accompanying a cooker whose instructions are written in French and translated in English contain the following introductory note:

Cher Client,

Vous Venez d'acquérir une de nos cuisinières et nous vous remercions de votre choix.

Celle-ci a été soigneusement conçue, fabriquée et testée pour votre plus grande satisfaction.

Pour être à même de l'utiliser dans les meilleures conditions et pour obtenir ce que vous êtes en droit d'en attendre, nous vous conseillons de lire très attentivement cette "Notice d'utilisation".

Les instructions et les conseils qu'elle contient vous aideront efficacement à découvrir toutes les qualités de votre nouvel appareil.

Cette cuisinière devra être destinée seulement à l'utilisation pour laquelle elle a été conçue, c'est-à-dire la cuisson des aliments.

Toute autre utilisation doit être retenue incorrecte et dangereuse.

Nous déclinons toute responsabilité en cas de dommages occasionnés par l'utilisation incorrecte, erronée ou irrationnelle de l'appareil.

English

Dear Customer,

We thank you very much for choosing our products.

The instructions and advice included in this booklet are given to safeguard your safety and to use this appliance correctly.

Be so kind as to keep this booklet. It will be useful to clear any doubt concerning its operation.

This appliance must be only assigned to the use for which it has been realized, that is for cooking food.

Any other use has to be considered incorrect and therefore dangerous.

The manufacturer declines any liability for damages caused by wrong, incorrect or irrational use of the appliances.

Save for the last 3 sentences, one would conclude that this message to the customer is actually written in two languages and that it is not that one is a translation of the other. The first sentence in French translated in English (literally, since this is possible here) should read: "You have just acquired one of our cookers and we thank you for your choice". Its translation in English is quite a different story "We thank you very much for choosing our products". There is an obvious omission of some elements of the first sentence of the original and additional information is offered.

The second sentence translates literally to: "This one has been carefully conceived, manufactured and tested for your greatest satisfaction". The translation given in the manual however, does not, just like for the first sentence give this information.

The third sentence translates literally to: "To be able to use it in the best conditions and to obtain what you have a right to expect of it, we advise you to read this "Notice of Usage" very carefully. Nothing in the English version tells us this. I don't think that the sentence "Be so kind as to keep this booklet" tells us as much.

Translated literally, the fourth sentence would be: "The instructions and pieces of advice that it (user's manual) contains will effectively help you to discover all the qualities of your new appliance". The information given in "It will be useful to clear any doubt concerning its operation" is definitely not the translation of this sentence.

The next two sentences are curiously, literal translations except for the addition of the word "therefore" (*donc* in French), which is missing in the original French version.

Lastly, the final paragraph is also a literal translation except for the translation of "*Nous déclinons*" (We decline) by "the manufacturer declines" and that of "*en cas de*" (in case of) by "for". The replacement of "we" by "manufacturer" in this case may be justified since the latter term can easily be defined in legal language compared to the "we" just in case a customer whose appliance gets damaged in one way or another opts to sue for compensation. It is however obvious that "in case of damages" has different semantic value compared to "for damages". An observation of the first sentences of the English translation of this notice makes one conclude that French-speaking customers are treated differently. This has no justification since the purpose of the notice is to enable efficient use of the appliance by owners regardless of their geographical or linguistic provenance. One can only hope that this apparent preferential treatment of one group of customers is not as a result of the translators' wrong choice of method or intention to translate freely!

A toothbrush comes with the following message (in English and translated in French) for its potential buyers and consequent users:

English: Dentists and hygienists recommend replacing your toothbrush every 3 months.

French: *Les dentistes et autres professionnels de la santé dentaire vous recommandent de changer votre brosse à dents tous les 3 mois.*

V-shaped bristles: They gently penetrate deeper and clean in-between teeth.

French: *Les poils disposés en forme de V pénétrant délicatement entre les dents pour mieux les nettoyer.*

Big head: it provides a broader brushing surface to help make tooth-cleaning fast and effective.

French: *la large tête offre une surface de brossage plus grande et permet un nettoyage rapide et efficace des dents.*

Angled handle: it is designed for control and maneuverability when you are brushing.

French: *Une manche spécialement conçue pour assurer une prise en main optimale durant le brossage.*

The translation in French succeeds in giving the reader as much information as contained in the original. However, the translation of "hygienists" is a clear falsification of the actual meaning since its back-translation, "other dental health professionals" does not mean "hygienists". The reformulation of the translation for "V-shaped bristles" is excellent although the one for "Angled handle" is insufficient. Another missed point is the translation of "deeper" by "*délicatement*" and the one for control and maneuverability" which leaves out an important nuance: "being able to manipulate the movement of toothbrush as one may wish". The inclusion of the adverb "*mieux*", though an addition, helps bring out the message in a more forceful way.

The instructions on the label of a brand of instant coffee read:

Preparation: use one teaspoon per cup.

Add hot but not boiling water. Add sugar and milk to taste. Close lid tightly after use.

Kiswahili: *Jinsi ya kutayarisha.*

Tumia kijiko kimoja kwa kila kikombe. Ongeza maji ya moto, na sio yanayochemka. Ongeza sukari na maziwa kiasi unachopenda. Funika mkebe sawa sawa baada ya kutumia.

There is a transposition of "preparation", a noun, by "*jinsi ya kutayarisha*" whose back-translation would be "how to prepare". A literal translation, "*utayarishaji*" would give the same meaning as the original, just as the more common "*kutayarisha*" would. "The Teaspoon" may not have an exact equivalent in Kiswahili but the translation "*kijiko kidogo*" is sufficient since teaspoon, table spoon and any other spoons are referred to as "*kijiko*" in this language and the context would enable the reader to tell which spoon this is about. The translation of "Add sugar and milk to taste" by "*ongeza sukari na maziwa kiasi unachopenda*", back-translates literally as: "Add the amount of sugar and milk as you like". The translator modified "to taste" and replaced it with, "as you like".

Another brand of coffee is described as follows:

A selection of the world's finest coffee beans is used to create this unique blend. These beans have been expertly roasted to offer you the richer aroma and smoother taste.

Kiswahili:

Kahawa hii ya kipekee imetengenezwa kutokana na buni za kahawa bora zaidi ulimwenguni. Buni ambazo zimechanwa kitaalamu ili kukupa kahawa bora, yenye wingi wa harufu na ladha nzuri.

The word "selection" has neither been translated nor accounted for. The translation of "richer aroma" by "*wingi wa harufu*" is the one stretch on this label which would make a native reader know that this is a translation since it does not

sound natural. The translation of "smoother taste" by "*ladha nzuri*" though a reformulation would pass as acceptable because it makes sense and is natural.

A packet of wheat flour comes with the advice: "Human food, store in a cool dry place away from any contamination". In Kiswahili, this is translated as "*Chakula cha binadamu, weka mahali pakavu mbali na madhara yoyote*". This back-translates literally as: "Human food, keep in a dry place away from any harm". The word "cool" has either been forgotten or overlooked and "contamination" generalized to "harm", which makes meaning deduced from the translation quite different from the original's.

The label of a rodenticide reads:

"Keep out of reach of children" and this is translated in Kiswahili by "*weka mbali na watoto*". The literal back-translation is: "Keep far from children". Now, "out of reach" does not mean being "far from". It would be wiser to use a simple reformulation in Kiswahili that would bring out the idea of "out of reach."

3.0 CONCLUSION

The notion of being faithful to the author and to the source language has been emphasized in translation although some translators opt to be more concerned with the reader of the translation as well as with the target language. The translator, as the name implies, works to translate from one language to another and he or she must therefore reserve the "faithfulness" to the languages. Being faithful to an author should come as a consequence of being faithful to the language of the source text. Being unfaithful to the author can only mean betraying him or her by translating in a way that is out of line with the original. A translator can only avoid this "betrayal" by remaining "faithful" to the source language as he or she understands it. It would be impossible to try to be faithful to the author's convictions and intentions when one does not know them. The translator only knows those "convictions and intentions" as can be deduced from

the text. It is impossible to access other convictions and intentions not implied by the text and the failure to access them is not a betrayal since the writer never availed them in his or her original.

The extent to which a translator may go in reformulating or modifying an original that he or she is translating depends, as stated earlier, on the purpose of the translation. The translator could in some instances, again for the purposes of the translation, decide to be creative. This creativity however must be guided by the intention of the author, and the type of material being translated. Most translators agree with this and hence there is a consensus amongst them that literary translators should resort to creativity when literal translation fails to render the meaning as contained in the original. Furthermore, there is creativity in original literary texts and their translation may need some creativity too.

However, in the case of non-literary translation, translators are free to modify or reformulate a word, a sentence or a paragraph that does not make sense if translated literally. The examples used here are but a few illustrations of how modifications and reformulations can be used and with what success or failure.

Experience in translation has taught all translators that strict literal translation is not always possible. I would not therefore pretend to be an advocate of such a procedure although I strongly believe that what translators do once they can no longer translate literally should be subjected to some form of self-regulation otherwise their "work" ceases to be a translation.

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