Changes to Poetic Images in Translation

Nibras A. M. Al-Omar

Department of English Language & Translation , Zarqa University

PO Box: 132222-Zarqa 13132, Jordan.

E-mail: nibrasmahmoud@yahoo.ca

Abstract

It is an oversimplification to state that any poetic image can be literally rendered into another language since there may be changes involved in the translation process. For the translator, it is a matter of import to distinguish between motivated and non-motivated changes. The former being inevitable and the latter are due to insufficient interpretation of the Source Text. The present article investigates those changes by highlighting factors that cause them. The main determinants of such changes are discerned as language, culture and personal aspects.The present study, hence, aims at designing appropriate strategies for translating poetic images. These strategies, however, must not be adopted haphazardly by the translator. They must be careful in resorting to each strategy as much as it effectuates certain criteria dictated by the nature of text, the Source Text and the Target Text reader.

Keywords: Poetic image, Translator, Translation strategies, Motivated and non-motivated changes

1. What The Poetic Image Is

The use of some individual words by the poet may become the most effective in a poem. These 'key' words can be described as imagery, which cover every concrete object , action and feeling in a poem and , also, the use of metaphors and similes(Peck and Coyle 1984:37). Producing images, the poet shows not only their imagination but also their passion, thinking, understanding , etc. Imagery is not a decorative ornament. It provides ideas in a poem, but those ideas are realized and find expression largely through the poet's use of imagery.

Imagery complicates and makes an idea more forceful. Observe, for instance, the following lines by Sidney (as quoted in Peck and Coyle 1984:38)

With low sad steps, O moon thou

Climb'st the skies

How silently, and with how wan a face!

The lines say that the moon is sad. The movement of the moon is compared to the laboured ascent of the stairs and the moon has a "wan" face like an unhappy person. This image makes the idea vivid by creating a very forceful sense of unhappiness by associating sad things from various areas of life with the moon.

1.1 Image in Western Rhetoric

Only in the 20th century that the term 'Image' acquired the sense in question. It is described as the vestigial representative of sensation (Richards 1924:91-92). For Pound (1954:i4), it is an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. Image is not an equation of mathematics, not something about a, b, c having something to do with sea, cliffs, night or having something to do with mood (Pound as cited by Gentzler 1993:21). Actually, Pound uses the term 'image' to refer to a complete imagist poem which reveals itself instantaneously as does a painting to the spectator.

On the other hand, the sense of image is often restricted to metaphors and similes. Lewis (1947:40), for instance, contends that there are no categories which an image conforms to beyond metaphor, simile, classical epithet or personification. Cox and Dyson (1965:182-3), however, regard this sense as fairly narrow and propose that an image is basically associated with anything descriptive and evocative in poetry. Imagery is generally an integral part of poetry. Such an inevitability is due to the inadequacy of plain language for what the poet wishes to convey.

1.2 Image in Arabic Rhetoric

Early views of image set form and content apart. Al-Jahiz (1965:132) sees the image as a skillful scheming of words to present the meaning of a picture. Following al-Jahiz, Ibn Jafar (1962:19) emphasizes the importance of 'picturing and formulating' with a view to recognizing good and/ or bad verse. Ibn Seeda (1978:159-60) also believes that image is in its form.

But 'image', as a technical term, namely, involving form and content, was first dealt with by al-Jurjani(1969:445) who considers it as a representation and an analogy to what we know since our minds depend on what is visual. That is why people differ as for their 'images'. Hence, an image is the distance between one meaning and another. It seems that the emotional aspect of imagery is overlooked by early Arab rhetoricians.

Among the modern Arab critics is Nafi(1983:53) who views image as a criterion for the good poet who formulates meanings into words and pictures them. Isma'eel (1968:139) suggests that an image should simply be derived from the poet's imagination, then, it is the linguistic means by which the poet may convey their emotions and ideas to the readers. There is a modern philosophy to the poetic image , he adds, which is characterized by dynamism since the modern reader looks not only for its meaning but for the so called " meaning of meaning " as well (Isma'eel 1968:139).

Others like Abbas (1955:19) and Abu Deeb (1979:19) tackle the poetic image from the psychological point of view since an image may look like a vision in a dream. But, besides the psychological and mental aspects, the poetic image is a linguistic form drawn from the concrete world. Moreover, it represents the poet's feelings towards reality so as to enliven the readers' sentiments and imagination, hence, achieving the required artistic pleasure and effect.

2. Factors Crucial To Poetic Image Translation

Very few literary translation practitioners and theorists may claim that they are not familiar with Jakobson's (1959:151) "Poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible". For many, the statement seems discouraging enough to ring the knell of poetry translation!

The idea of the poem as an organic whole where form and content are interwoven makes the impossibility of its translation all the more transparent. The dilemma of the translator arises from their hard-to-make a choice between form or content since they are inseparable in the 'organic whole'. Besides, the highly complicated structure of poetry enables it to communicate more information through symbols than prose may provide (Ilke 1970:135). Images can be reproduced literally in the Target Text (TT) but there are factors which influence their translation.

The language specificity of the image concerned has made many investigators deny the possibility of poetic translation (Ilke 1970:136).Also, there is culture specificity, i.e, when the poetic image is incorporated into a complex fabric of specific literary and aesthetic translations , for instance, the notion of beauty is viewed in a unique way in each culture. An Arab poet, Ali Bin al-Jahm (1980:141) of the late Abbasid period famously utilized the maha's eyes[literally denoting eyes of wild cow!] to describe the beauty of women's eyes in Baghdad, the line goes as follows:

عيون المها بين الرصافة والجسر   جلبن الهوى من حيث ادري ولاأدري

Language is viewed as the heart within the body of culture, and a surgeon cannot ignore the body when operating on the heart (Bassnett 1980:114). Therefore, culture-specific elements

cannot be ignored by the translator. They may cause serious problems for them. Thus, they may be left out altogether, destroyed by explication or replaced by worn out, banal images in the TT. Ilk (1970:137) acknowledges the translators' right to changes, in the form of substitutions and compensations , but he stresses the vital importance of distinguishing between motivated and non-motivated ones (see 3. below). It seems that the former are inevitable while the latter are attributed not only to linguistic and cultural factors but also to personal ones which are neglected by Ilke(1970).

Since the translators are human beings, there should be professional and psychological factors which influence the translated text. According to Wong and Shen(1999:11-13), those factors include the personal competence and the personal attitude.

2.1 Personal Competence

It is argued that the translator's competence must account for the SL interpretation and the TL representation (Wong and Shen 1999:11).The SL interpretation means understanding both the linguistic and cultural elements in the ST. As for TL representation, the translator must be able to produce an effective and acceptable translation in the TL. For example, they are expected to be aware of the TL literary genres and functions of rhetoric devices.

2.2 Personal Attitudes

Given the same personal competence, different translators may produce different translations due to their dissimilar aesthetic, strategic or professional attitudes. Some translators may prove their allegiance to the SL aesthetic values by using archaisms or even modern expressions. Others may have other preferences such as the SL writer's style or their own. Another group may follow the predominant strategic orientations of the time. There will always be a choice between one part or the other of these pairs : literalism vs. freedom, writer-oriented vs. reader-oriented, foreignization vs. domestication, etc. despite the fact that no single strategy has prevailed at a time.

Professionally, a translator may simply lack the sense of responsibility towards their work. The consequences are mistranslations. Wong and Shen(1999:13) argue that such "irresponsibility" is due to the unfair academic and social status, low pay or tight deadlines. Translation, then, must be seen as an ethical process in order to guarantee an elevated quality.

It seems that the discussion has turned a full circle! The translator has the license to make motivated and non-motivated changes in the poetic texts. This does not mean , however, that the translator is absolutely free to follow any strategy. The criteria for an appropriate strategy may be summed up in faithfulness, sufficiency and intelligibility. But how much of those have been weighed in translating poetic images? The next two sections attempt to illustrate some facts about the translators' practices in this respect.

3. Motivated and Non-Motivated Changes of Poetic Images in Translation

It has been suggested that the appropriate strategy for the translator is to achieve faithfulness, sufficiency and intelligibility. This needs to be put into more concrete terms. Some appropriate strategies can be put forward and followed consistently by the translator in

accordance with the problems they may encounter in their work.

Strategy ONE: It involves rendering SL image into its TL equivalent.

Strategy TWO: It is the principle for the translator to reproduce the SL image in the TL

Strategy THREE: This one is applicable when the SL image seems weird to the reader, the translator should transfer it and show its figurative meaning between brackets or in footnotes. But in this case the translation will be in prose instead of verse.

Adopting any of these strategies should not be seen as an "either or" choice, they rather complement each other.

3.1 Motivated Changes

The motivated changes in translation are understood by the present writer as justifiable. Strategy ONE as proposed above is seen to be applicable here. The translator is to view images as not mere words out of context. They should firstly determine the function of an SL image and, then, find a TL system that will adequately render that function (Bassnett 1981:119).The notion of equivalence as sameness is, hence, discarded. For instance, observe quatrain 32 of Gray's elegy:

No farther seek his merits to disclose,

Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,

(They are alike in trembling hope repose)

The bosom of his father and his God

The last line shows the Christian idea of the "dread abode" is the bosom of his father and his God. The Iraqi poetess Nazik al-Malaika renders the image into what can be described a TL functional equivalent, as follows

مأمل الخافق الذي ضمه الله الى عدله فأغمض عينا

The TT does not seem overtly Islamic. But for a TL Muslim reader, the idea of embracing by God's justice looks more familiar. The correlation between justice and sleep is borrowed from a well-known incident in the history of Islam when Caliph Omar Bin al-Khatab was found asleep in the open with nobody to guard him. Being amazed, the passer-by said" Thou hast been just, and so thou hast felt secure and slept"(see Asfour, 2000:24 and 2009:177). Moreover, al-Malaika has evidently spared her TT reader the shock of rendering "Father" literally into Arabic which is alien to the Islamic culture, i.e,

"ألأب"

3.2 Non-motivated Changes

Adopting one of the aforesaid strategies may not always prove fruitful for the translator.For instance, the following line from the pre-Islam poet Zuhair Bin Abi Sulma's poem :

على كل حال من سحيل ومبرم   يمينا لنعم السيدان وجدتما

It is rendered into English by Arberry (1957:115) as follows

A solemn oath I swear – you have proved yourselves fine masters,

In all matters , be the thread single or twisted double.

The translator has followed strategy TWO by trying to reproduce the same image in the TT. Unfortunately, he fails to nail the sense intended in the original. The image in the TT looks functionally irrelevant. The two underlined words above are figuratively used by the poet to refer to weak and strong things respectively. The image in the TT, however, looks odd due to the SL cultural specificity.The translator could have added an explanation (strategy THREE).

Similarly, Cassio pleads Desdemona in Shakespeare's Othello (lll.3):

 "That policy may either last so long

 Or feed upon such nice and waterish diet".

These two lines are translated by Jamal (1983:80) into Arabic as:

ولكن هذه السياسة اما ان يطول اجلها

أو تتغذى بغذاء سائل

The literal translation of the English image "nice and waterish diet" as underlined in the TT has caused an unfortunate loss of the sense intended, namely, "based on untenable but attractive excuses". The translation could have better be as follows,

تتغذى على اعذار جذابة وواهية،

where part of the image "feed upon" and the sense of the line as a whole are successfully retained.

In her attempt to reproduce in the TL as faithful an image as possible, a translator has missed the homographic word(underlined below) in the following Arabic line and rendered it into "glory" instead of "bone"!

أعينهم تنبش في ذهنهم   عن عظمة أخرى لجوع جديد

Their eyes dig in the graveyard of their minds

Looking for some new glory (Khouri and Algar 1974:123)

How outrageous! How can such errors be justified? The negligence of the context of

may have led to such error. Moreover, the change of the image of Arabic جوع and تنبش

تنبش في ذهنهم

into "dig in the graveyard of their minds" where " graveyard" is out of place , is entirely non-motivated a choice since it serves neither the ST function and effect nor the TT linguistic or cultural requirements.

4. Conclusions

The discussion of the motivated and non-motivated changes of poetic images in translation has all the more proved the intricate task of the translator. There are factors that influence the translator's decision as to which translation strategy to follow. The translator's criteria of the appropriate strategy, in certain cases, are faithfulness, sufficiency and intelligibility. These criteria, however, may not be available in one strategy. It is imperative to a literary translator to systematically apprehend these facts and design a powerful strategy for translating poetic images. Their aim should always be an effective and a functionally-relevant TT.

Acknowledgement

References

Abbas, I. (1955). *Fan Al-Shir*. Beirut: Dar Beirut.

Abu Deeb, K. (1979). *Jadaliyat Al-Khafa wa Al-tajali*. Beirut: Dar Al-ilm Lilmalayeen.

Arberry, A. (1950). *Modern Arabic Poetry*. London: CUP.

Asfour, M. (2000). The Translation of Poetry: An example of Nazik Al-Malaika. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies,* 1(1), 7-32.

Asfour, M. (2009). *Dirasaat filTarjama wa Naqdiha*. Beirut: Arab Foundation for Studies & Publishing.

Bassnett, S. (1980). *Translation Studies*. London: Methuen. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203427460

Cox, C. B., & Dyson A. E. (1965). *The Practical Criticism of Poetry*. London: Edward Arnold.

Gentzler, E. (1993). *Contemporary Translation Theories*. London: Routledge.

Ibn Jafar, Q. (1962). *Naqd Al-shir*.(ed. by K. Mustafa). Cairo: Al-khanji Publishing House.

Ibn Seeda, Abu H. (1978). .*Al-Mukhasas*. Beirut: Dar Al-fikr (Vols 3 & 4).

Ilk, B. (1970). On Translating Images. In Holmes, J. (ed.), *The Nature of Translation*. Mouton: Slorak Academy of Science.

Ismaeel, I. (1968). *Al-adab wa Finuniha: Dirasat wa Naqad*. Abdeen: Dar Al-fikr Al-arabi

Al-Jahiz, Abu O. (1965). *Al-haywan*.(ed. by A. Harun) Cairo:Al-halabi Press.

Al-Jahm, A. Bin. (1980). *Diwan Bin al-jahm*. (ed. by Khalil Murad) Riyadh: Ministry of Education Press.

Jakobson, R. (1959). On Linguistic Aspects of Translation. In Brower, R. (Ed.), *On Translation*. Miss: Harvard University.

http://dx.doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674731615.c18

Jamal,G (tr.) (1983). *Utayl y W. Shakespeare.* Baghdad: Dar Al-Huriya.

al-Jurjani, A. (1959). *Dala'el Al-Ija'az.* (ed. by M. Khafaji). Cairo:Cairo Press.

Khouri, M., & Algar, H. (1974). *Modern Arabic Poetry.* Berkeley: UCP.

Lewis, C. D. (1947). *The Poetic Image.* London: Cox & Wyman.

Nafi, A. (1983). *Al-sura fi Shi'r Bashar Bin Burd.* Amman: Dar Al-fikr.

Peck, J., & Coyle, M. (1984). *Literary Terms and Criticism.* London: Macmillan.

Pound, E. (1954). A few Don'ts by an Imagiste. In Elliot, T. S. (ed.), *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound.* London: Faber & Faber.

Richards, I. A. (1924). *Principles of Literary Criticism* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203278901

Shakespeare, W. (1966). *Othello*. Massachusettes:Blaisdell.

Wong, D., & Shen, D. (1999). Factors Influencing The Process Of Translating. *Meta*.!, 1-14.