



The Prisoner and the Jailer: A Case Study on Drama Translation

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Abstract

This paper is an inquiry into the translation strategies that Nayla Naguib used in rendering the famous Egyptian drama "The Jailer and the Prisoner" into English. While translation strategies are often employed to maintain an acceptable level of faithfulness to the target text, the present translator seems to have applied some translation strategies: deletion, substitution, and addition in such a way that distorted the meaning of the original text and brought about false impressions about the original text. The paper shows that the inclusions of such strategies by the translator has added less clarity to the expressions in question and concealed the cultural element to a high degree. The paper concludes by asserting the importance of context and pragmatic situation in bringing about better understanding of the text and appropriate use of strategies.

Keywords: pragmatic; cultural elements; translation strategies; faithfulness

1. Introduction

Drama translation has long been ignored in the Arab world, perhaps because of the prevalent conventional beliefs that posit drama on the borderline between prose and poetry. However, it is an ineluctable fact that drama represents a trove of treasure of any human culture, and thus, it is rudimentary for both dramatists and translators alike to shed more light on the paramount importance of this genre.

Drama translation has been roughly defined as the attempt of a translator to render or recreate a text in a socially accepted style (Wellwarth 1981). It should be noted, however, that drama is either written to be performed on the stage, or to be read by people. This dual character of drama makes it hard to understand. In both cases, the form of the drama will be different. For example, if the drama is designed for the stage, most words could turn into tones, gestures or facial expressions. However, if it is written for the reader, then it has to be detailed so that it could be grasped. In either case, the translator has to handle both forms and produce a well-translated text especially when cultural elements of the source language are involved.

According to Törnqvist (1991) a translator of a drama can choose one of three strategies while handling any dramatic text. The first is that he can translate literally, where the ethnic significance of the original is not explained and is therefore not understood by the recipient. The second strategy is that the translator can add an informative note. The third is that he can incorporate this information directly into the text. He recommends that the translator use the second strategy while the third remains advice for the director.

Aaltonen (2000: 7) believes that there are three strategies that might be used to translate literature into the repertoire of the receptor. These strategies are, first, a certain piece of literature may be translated in its entirety. Second, a piece of literature may be translated only partially with various types of attention. Third, a literary work may be based on some idea or theme translated from the source text. Aaltonen (Ibid) also adds that adaptation can be perceived as either rebellion against fixed modes of lack of interest, or alterity is either disguised or not highlighted of secondary importance or adjustments are justified either for the sake of art or for the sake of the community. Contrary to what Aaltonen believes in, Paz (1992:154) seems to believe that regardless of the strategy that a translator resorts to 'translation is a creation and thus constitutes a unique text.'

On the other hand, Törnqvist (1991:185) believes that 'while adjustment should be banned in translation proper-when this occurs we speak of adaptation-it may well be accepted in production.' Adjustment to the original text of a drama could occur in the following cases:

a. When the environment is different between that of the text and that of the receptors.

b. When there are many problems related to ethnic differences between the world of the drama text and the world of the recipient.

Drama translation is distinct from theatre translation. While the latter genre is usually performed, drama does not usually take its way to the stage. One example on drama genre is what is called *closet drama*. This type of drama is mainly intended to be read rather than dramatized. However, we cannot indeed completely separate drama from theatre as the two types of literature live in a symbiotic relationship (Aaltonen 2000).

Bassnett (1990) discusses two types of drama translation that appeared in the nineteenth century. The first is called commercial translation, where the eventual performance is crucial. The second type is aesthetic translation which was intended for classical texts for the reader

Törnqvist (1991) comments on the relationship between the playwright and the translator. He says that a playwright may insist on certain key words that are so essential for understanding the play in question. The translator, on the other hand, may ignore such key words based on the eluding belief that stylistic variation is preferable to a monotonous style of writing.

The translator here has to be aware of the language of the generation or people he is translating for, as every generation prefers a certain language. Törnqvist (1991) believes that most plays are deficiently translated. There is only a limited body of them that has been admirably translated. One example is the dramatization of *Romeo and Juliet* in the form of gestures and silence in Bulgarian.

Translators have also to guarantee that they are either translating the whole drama or just an idea of it. In this case, the translator is employing a number of strategies such as deletion, addition or substitution. In all these cases, she or he has to keep in mind the primary goal of translation, is it linguistically- oriented where the care has to be paid to constructing an empirical science. If, on the other hand, she/he is paying attention to the aesthetic aspect of the drama, then the focus has to be on cultural and the political values.

2. Theoretical Basis

In light of the varied aspects of the dramatic text that translators should consider when translating, the authors are tempted here to treat the theatre text as a literary piece of work to be performed on the stage in which the translator's focus is on the faithful rendering of the original text. This view holds that the dramatic text is the raw material with which the translator must begin. This does not imply that the translator has to give a free reign to his intuition in translating a play text as a mere piece of literary text. As a play text, a translator has to consider the paralinguistic features, gestures, and environment that surround the speech act or the utterance. These extra-linguistic elements serve the function of the text of which the translator should think deeply to make the necessary modifications such that the equivalent function of the source language text can be rendered into the target language properly.

3. Data of the Study

The present study is based on the translation of a short drama called *The Prisoners and the Jailor*, written by an Egyptian playwright called Mohammad Enani, 1994. The drama was translated later into English by Nayla Naguib, an Egyptian translator. The translation seems to suffer from a number of drawbacks, which will be the topic of the whole paper. The drama was written in a form of Arabic called the Egyptian Arabic Dialect. Both the writer and the translator are Egyptians but the writers of this paper are speakers of another form of Arabic, namely, Jordanian Arabic Dialect. We do not believe that the diversity between the two varieties of Arabic could cause any differences in the rendition or comprehension of the dramatic text.

Furthermore, we do agree with Findlay (2000: 44) that translating from a source language dialect into the standard target language is mistaken at all, simply because we do not feel that we are "betraying the integrity of that text in any substantive way. For any play translation will by definition experience a degree of acculturation for the distinctive qualities and demands of one's target medium."

Some of the strategies the translator employs include deletion, addition, and substitution. Unfortunately, these strategies are employed inappropriately making the translation look deficient. Following will be a discussion of each one of these strategies.

4. Discussion and Analysis

The first strategy that the translator used is deletion. According to Baker (1992), this strategy should be employed only if the meaning conveyed by a particular item or expression is essential to the development of the text. The translator here seems oblivious to the fact that dialogue is so essential an element in the language of a play, and that it unfolds gradually in terms of space and time. There are cases where omission is tolerable, especially when the omitted item does not harm the meaning of the utterance, and others where it is intolerable, especially when it significantly harms the meaning. On page fourteen, for example, the present translator deleted the adjective *faj?a*) 'suddenly' from the phrase (*faj?a sami?a*) which stands for 'suddenly he heard'. This type of deletion is of less importance since it does not distort the meaning of the utterance.

At times omission is intolerable because it deprives the reader of some useful information. on page nine, at the commencement of the drama, the original text talks about a *complete scene of Cairo* but the adjective 'complete' was dropped from the Arabic version. This deletion weakens the connection between the explanatory details following the

phrase. In other words, the lengthy detailed description of the city of Cairo right after this phrase is in expression of "complete" scene of Cairo.

In another context and specifically on page fifteen the translator deleted the whole phrase (hatindam ya Kamal) 'Oh, Kamal! You will be sorry'. There is no real reason that justifies the deletion of this clause as the following clauses are closely associated with the succeeding clauses and the whole scene of the play. This omitted portion summarizes the position of whole scene of the drama and significant events that follow. This is a breach to the loyal rendition of the text.

Again, on page seventy-five the translator dropped a very important segment of the dialogue uttered by the jailer in response to the prisoner's utterance that reads: "Did you want me to confess that I killed sallouma out of weakness". The missing segment *alashaan uwwitak* "out of your strength" is the jailer's response to the foregoing question. This missing portion clearly disrupts the logical sequence of the events in the play and makes it hard to relate the ensuing segment "It is impossible to reason with you today", uttered by the jailer, with the preceding segment uttered by the prisoner as indicated above.

There is no point therefore in skipping a segment from the original text, which will create a gap in communicating the author's messages and hence disrupt the spontaneous flow of thoughts. This actually is an intolerable omission because it conceals a significant piece in the dialogue, which is the jailer's response to the prisoner's question.

The second strategy that the translator resorted to is substitution. On page fifteen of the original play the playwright said (*yazoumu mithli-l-lnimri*) that is 'He produced a sound similar to that of a tiger'. The translator replaced the word 'tiger' by the word 'lion'. There is no reason whatsoever for this type of replacement. This substitution is intolerable because in the Arabic culture the two words stand for two different animals. Tigers are known as more cunning and steadfast than lions. According to Ibn Manzur (2003), in the Arab traditions Arab ancient kings used to disguise in a tiger's skin before sentencing someone to death. When someone therefore assumes the identity of a tiger, others conceive of him as sly and malicious. Even the root of *namr*, "tiger" according to Arab traditions signifies "disguise" because of the varied colors on his skin. It should suffice to mention that the stripes on its skin help conceal a tiger in an ambush.

Undoubtedly, the writer of the original text intends to describe the prisoner as wicked and sly by comparing it to a tiger rather than to a lion. When the jailer therefore appears on the stage looking for the prisoner, the latter has been hiding in an ambush before he pounces upon him and ties him up to a chair, then nails him down without even paying attention to the consequences of such an action. Such imprudent action is something attributed to tigers, which are swift to attack their preys without ever thinking of giving up on the chase, no matter what. It is this prisoner's evil premeditated action what prompted the source text author to liken the prisoner to a tiger than to a lion. Conversely, lions are more prudent and less cunning than tigers and may give up on the chase by virtue of any distraction.

In light of this explanation, the translator seems to have failed to grasp the writer's intention of likening the prisoner to a tiger. The replacement of "tiger" by "lion" gives the impression that the prisoner is virtuous and prudent, which is actually contrary to his true nature.

On page twenty two we read this clause (*Hosniyya kanit shakl-w-bass*). The clause was rendered as 'Hosniyya was only a pretty face'. We do not agree with this type of translation because the translator rendered the word (*shakl*) as 'pretty face'. In Arabic, this word stands for the whole appearance, not only for 'face'. However, the word *shakl* implies that her conduct does not please her husband. That is, her moral conduct is not identical with her outer look. The word *shakl*, "appearance" implies more than the outer look of Hosniyya. It implies that she is a woman with no morality, which is the propositional meaning that the translator fails to communicate.

On the same page we recognize an Arabic clause that reads (*fas milfiu-daab*), which means 'a piece of salt that dissolved (in water)'. The translator rendered this clause as 'She cleared out, disappeared, vanished into thin air'. The last verbal phrase in the latter translation is not as exact as the Arabic clause might suggest "the man disappeared as if he were a piece of salt that dissolved in water and thus you cannot see it". But of course cannot 'vanish in thin air' by all means.

Similarly, on page forty-five the translator rendered the original text "*yadrib kaffan bikaff*" as "he gestures irritably", which is by no means an adequate translation of the original text. The literal meaning of the translated idiomatic expression is *awma'a bighadab*, "he pointed with rage and not "he struck his hands together" which may indicate the jailer's emotional anger over failing to find the prisoner as he searches for him. Although "he gestures irritably" is an expression of disapproval, rage and grief, it is not the fit for the Arabic expression "*yadrib kaffan bikaff*" since "striking hands together" implies more information implied in the source text. "In semantic analysis, it is therefore suggested that the substitution in question is right if it serves to identify the same constituent without introducing contradictory or additional features not already implied in the original text" (Nida 1975:140). Other cultures may display such non-verbal sign, but the implications are not identical. In the Greek culture, for example, the meaning of "striking hands together" is a manifestation of giving a pledge, which runs contrary to a joyful clapping of hands known to the Western culture (Louw 2006). In light of this illustration, the significance of the expression "*yadrib kaffan bikaff*" in the Egyptian tradition should not be rendered into English by an expression that falls short of the playwright's straightforward intention, or the translation will skew the true underlying significance of the text by ignoring the value of such non-verbal sign as communicating specific messages.

There seems to be only one place where the translator adds a text that is not part of the original Arabic text. That appears on page sixty-nine when she comes up with the clause (God knows that I am innocent) uttered by the jailer. We do not see a reason that justifies the attribution of this portion to the jailer when it does not exist in the original Arabic text. As one may see it, this addition might hint at the translator's sympathy with the jailer's character, who spoke at length to the prisoner to prove his innocence and the unfaithfulness of Hosniya.

Although translator at times provides explanations in the form of footnotes in order to give the reader a full grasp of the meaning, there is no point whatsoever for the translator in the present study to add (Allah knows that I am innocent). This sort of addition is intolerable as it does give the impression that the translator interferes to rewrite the original text according to his personal whim, on the one hand, and breaches the quality of faithfulness in the rendition of the original text by adding bits of information that are not part of the original text on the other. Given the fact that this expression signifies a means of defending oneself regardless of what the hearer may think, the reader might assume that the translator is consoling the jailer by twisting the text to serve some unknown reason in his psyche.

More importantly, the translator seems to skew the target language culture by failing to reflect the intended message. The translator seems to rely on false beliefs that the reader could understand her easily when she translates some cultural expressions that are at odds with the values of English-speaking people. Following are some points that illustrate this distorted cross-cultural translation.

On page forty, the original text reads that "al jarimah tat'allak bishsharaf" *the crime was related to one's honor* (i.e. killing one's wife or siblings due to sexual betrayal). However, the translator is rendered as such (----- this is a crime of passion) and the penalty for crimes of passion is not severe. Speakers of the TL will not be able to understand this type of betrayal, which is a highly controversial issue in the Muslim world. Not complying with their religious teachings, Muslims or Arabs usually kill a woman or female sibling who commits sexual betrayal. Therefore, the Arabic expression *dgarimat sharaf* is not equal to a 'crime of passion' at all, as the matter is related to a deeply rooted and controversial issue of female sexual betrayal, rather than a passionate desire of sexual desire.

Another point is related to the Arabic expression *Ya Xabar ?iswid*, which means 'What a terrible piece of news'. This expression does not express or reveal the cultural meaning *What a day----*, as the translator did. This phrase is so common in Egyptian Arabic. Egyptians usually say *Ya Xabar ?iswid*, meaning *What a terrible piece of news*, when the situation or news is bad. On the other hand, they say *Ya Xabar Ibyadh*, meaning *What a good piece of news*, when the situation is good and pleasing. In the present text at hand, the former meaning is intended rather than the latter.

A further expression that is worth mentioning is *Ya Satir*. This Arabic expression literally means '*Oh you who hides me from being exposed*'. On page thirteen, the playwright used the same expression but the translator rendered it as 'My God'. This rendition does not reveal the exact cultural meaning expressed above. In all Arab countries, the expression is commonly used to express one's wish that (God) Allah may hide or cover what a person does not like to be disclosed or that Allah bring good news to him and his family.

To get to the gist of the matter, it would have been so interesting to get to the facts from the horse's mouth and find out about the reasons for doing so from the translator herself. However, this job remains an onerous one for the difficulty of interviewing the translator, especially if there is currently little information available about her address on the net.

5. Conclusion

Translating texts of any genre, including plays, requires thorough reading of the original text probably more than one time. Translators have to pay much attention to what they translate for the fear that any change, deletion or substitution may distort or blur the original meanings of the text. In the case of the present work, we have to admit that the translator exerted a great deal of appreciated efforts, but he fell into a number of flaws that have to be considered in probably further editions of the same play. This actually justifies the words of Tatu (2011:196) that say

"Drama translators must always be aware of the fact that the eventual accomplishment of dramatic meaning originates in the perfect understanding of a complex set of textual codes and indicators which interrelate with a pragmatic and situational contexts as well as with an oral communication: grammatical and semantic pauses, iterative structures, deliberate flouting of lexical norms, and so on.

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