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The Challenges Inherent in Poetic Translation: Lexical, Semiotic, Syntactic, and Prosodic Challenges

Dr. Bonaventure Balla

Associate Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Norfolk State University, Norfolk, Virginia 23504, USA

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Corresponding Author: **Dr. Bonaventure Balla**

Abstract

The word “poetry” stems from the Greek verb “ποιέω” “poiein” which means “to create”, not in the sense of “making ex nihilo”, but by using the powerful and priceless resources of one’s imagination. This cursory etymological background undergirds the outstanding ability for the poet and poetry to conceive a unique art made up of special techniques, stylistic devices, and coin special words and constructions to express the ineffable by thinking outside the box. It follows that poetry can be conceived as a special genre that utilizes an eminently creative language to express a particular vision of the world to sublimate nature. That is precisely why scholars consider it a metalanguage, that is, a language formalized from and beyond the ordinary language

(“meta” means “beyond”, “above”, “on the other side”) used as a heuristic prop/stepping-stone for such formalization. Then, linguists subsequently formalize it as well. Therefore, poetry as a meta-language, is designed in such a way that it factually superimposes two types of language: The common language and, at a higher level, a formal language. All these considerations attest to the fact that poetry is such a highly sophisticated art that it becomes very challenging to translate. As a matter of fact, one can translate a prose text from one language to another. However, it can be very difficult to do likewise with a poetic text. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to reflect on the appropriate strategy or approach that can be utilized to translate poetry.

Keywords: Semiotic Approach, Translation, Metalanguage, Common Language

Introduction

The word “poetry” stems from the Greek verb “ποιέω” “poiein” which means “to create”, not in the sense of “making ex nihilo”, but by using the powerful and priceless resources of one’s imagination. This cursory etymological background undergirds the outstanding ability for the poet and poetry to conceive a unique art made up of special techniques, stylistic devices, and coin special words and constructions to express the ineffable by thinking outside the box. It follows that poetry can be conceived as a special genre that utilizes an eminently creative language to express a particular vision of the world to sublimate nature. That is precisely why scholars consider it a metalanguage, that is, a language formalized from and beyond the ordinary language (“meta” means “beyond”, “above”, “on the other side”) used as a heuristic prop/stepping-stone for such formalization. Then, linguists subsequently formalize it as well. Therefore, poetry as a meta-language, is designed in such a way that it factually superimposes two types of language: The common language and, at a higher level, a formal language. All these considerations concur to corroborate poetry as a highly sophisticated art, which makes it very challenging to translate. As a matter of fact, one can translate a prose text from one language to another. However, it can be very difficult to do likewise with a poetic text unless the author/poet is also the translator (case where inspiration is equated with composition). Nevertheless, even in the latter case, the translation still remains, in its inescapable, a difficult task. The very nature of poetry and, especially, its semiotic structure generates several challenges: Lexico-semantic, syntactic, suprasegmental, that is, prosodic (rhythmic and musical). Indeed, translating syntactic, prosodic features is exceptionally difficult, if not impossible. Consequently, the purpose of this diligent study is to reflect on the approach that can be utilized or applied to translate poetry from one language to another. For that specific purpose, we will adopt a semiotic approach and use English and French as a language and translation pair.

Methodology and heuristic materials

Translation is a technique, an art, and a literary genre. As a technique, it refers to an intellectual activity by which the expert renders a message from a source language to a target language for the native speakers of the target language who do not understand the source language. This activity should be very meticulous, done in a such a way that the spirit and letter of the message can be preserved flawlessly. The word "translation" itself stems from the Latin "translatio, translationis" composed of the prefix "trans" which means "across", "beyond", "on the other side" and the root "latus": "side". In light of this cursory etymological breakdown, we can consider that "translation" is an epistemic area, technique and activity involving the connection between two sides, two languages by means of which an expert organizes linguistic materials by creating a "linguistic bridge" by moving them from one side (one language) to the other (the other language) through the creation of that "linguistic bridge". So doing, the expert makes these materials explicitly and coherently accessible by and for both sides (both languages). In other words, translation may be conceived as a process, a technique, or an exercise through which the translator renders a specific text from a source language (SL) to a target language (TL). As such, it surmises at least two texts written in two different languages and, also and more importantly, a good knowledge of both languages by the translator: The source language (SL) and the target language (TL). For the sake of flawlessness and efficiency, the translator should ideally be a native speaker of the target language. Apart from a modicum of exceptional cases, empirical verification has systematically proven that the best translations to the target language are those done by the native speakers of this target language. Moreover, the translation should not "smell" the source language, that is, "betray and distort" it. In other words, it is not supposed to be done in such an awkward way that one can 'see' the source language throughout (servile imitation from the source language leading to inappropriate verbatim translation). This flaw known as hyper-literalism or a-symbolia is but a very narrow translation of a text or a message by excluding any form of creativity. De facto, in a good translation, hyper-literalism, or literalism, apart from very few cases, should generally be avoided because it often leads to silliness. It follows that in a good translation the most important guideline is to be truthful to the spirit and the letter of the source language by vouching for the most accurate rendition possible to generate a real masterpiece. At that stage, translation becomes an art. With respect to accuracy, experts use a metaphor to characterize the ideal translation. They consider that it is an ideal wife, that is, a lady endowed with two major assets: Outstanding beauty and flawless faithfulness (or truthfulness). The first asset refers to the external aspect of translation, i. e: The style, the language (the letter) that the expert uses to render the message. This beauty eminently impacts the spirit of the text in so far as it does confer upon it a tremendous amount of power. Regarding the flawless faithfulness, it designates the internal aspect of the message, the spirit, or just the meaning of the message surmised to be rendered from the source language to the target language. The meaning should not be distorted or betrayed whatsoever. That is why every single time the expert translates, he/she should strive to take into account the following factors or criteria (and used them equally) in both languages: The audience, the style, the

socio-historical context, the semantic field, cultural context, the level of language. Let us conceptualize it this way: A translation is good if and only if an expert **E** renders a passage **P** from a source language **SL** to a target language **TL** by invariably and diligently taking into account several factors in both languages such as: An audience **A**; a style **ST**, a sociohistorical context **SHC**, a cultural context **CC**, a level of language **L**, the truthfulness to the spirit **TR**. The aforementioned considerations can be summarized in the following chart.

Source Language	Target Language
French	English
Audience, style, sociohist, cultural cont, level of language	Audience, style, sociohist, cultural cont, level of language
Scholars, technical, 19 th century, English, formal	Scholars, technical, 19 th century, English, formal
Students, humor, 20 th century, English, slang/colloquial	Students, humor, 20 th century, English, slang/colloquial

These canons generally apply to the translation of prose text. Regarding the translation of poetry, it is different and intrinsically challenging because of its very nature. Mallarme defines poetry as "l'au-delà magiquement reproduit par certaines dispositions spéciales de la parole", which means "supra-reality magically reproduced by special provisions of the spoken word." This definition highlights the outstanding power of the word and specifically its numinous, divine ability inherently associated with poetry to create or recreate. On the other hand, it stresses the particular universe of poetry as well, for poetry is a particular vision of the universe that the artist creates or re-creates because it might already exist independently of him/her. The artist expresses such a vision into a very special language. Poetry is - *stricto sensu*- a meta-language, that is, a "language beyond a language". The Greek prefix "meta" means "beyond", "above", "on the other side", and illuminates how poetry uses a language formalized on the basis of another language, which causes it to become eminently sophisticated. By virtue of such sophistication, it undergirds three major postulations: A specialized vocabulary (lexical and semiotic complexity), morpho-syntactic complexity; and supra-segmental features. It is possible to translate the specialized vocabulary as long as the translator has a strong command of its technicalities. It is, however, difficult to translate the morpho-syntactic complexity. With respect to supra-segmental features, they are factually impossible to translate unless the poem has cognates. Let us examine these three postulations sequentially.

Specialized vocabulary (lexicon (semantic and semiotic complexity))/inspiration in adequation with composition

It is possible to translate poetry if the inspiration of the translator is equated with that of the author of the text to be translated. The most obvious and pertinent case is where the translator is also the author; hence the equation:

$$\text{Tr (P)} \rightarrow \text{Insp (Trstor)} = \text{Insp (Auth)}$$

- * Where "Tr (P)" stands for "Translation of poetry";
- * "->" stands for "can be re-written";
- * "Insp (Trstor)" stands for "Inspiration of the translator";
- * "Insp (Auth)" stands for "Inspiration of the author";

A specialized vocabulary can be translated as long as the translator has a strong command of its technicalities and/or is both the translator and poet. This case scenario refers to a situation where inspiration is equated with composition, which means the person who wrote the poem is the translator as well. It was also corroborated by one of the main leading figures of the Pleiade Literary Movement, Joachim Du Bellay in *Defense and Illustration of the French Language*. He was both a poet and translator. He was against and for translation. He was against translation of poetry, but considered that it was possible only if the translator was also the poet. Still, he tolerated translation because he believed it could disseminate the knowledge of other cultures and traditions.

The following poem was written and translated by the same person. Therefore, in it the poet's inspiration vies with his composition. It follows that the linguistic materials he used to compose his poem turns out to be endowed with the same power as what was required to inspire it ab initio.

O TRANSLATION MUSE

Teach me how to weave golden words
 Redeemed by dignified * **Saint Jérôme!**
 Assuage my translation dome
 Nurtured by bridges and fords!
 Soothe my dried-up soul
 Losing divine inspiration!
 Aloofness and shabby rendition
 Tend to compromise my lofty goal.
 Instill in me the glorious page
 Of your flowery language!
 Neaten lore in my humble cage!

Mysterious and beguiling Muse,
 Uplift my texts and language pieces!
 Sift them into sublime masterpieces
 Enrapturing the experts needing their use!

* **Saint Jérôme:** Was the celebrated Father of Translators
 This is the French translation by the same person:

O MUSE DE LA TRADUCTION

Dispense-moi l'art de tisser les mots dorés
 Réajusté par le digne * Saint-Jérôme !
 Mets l'ordre dans les linéaments de mon travail
 Entretenu par les textes et les intertextes !
 Balsamise mon âme tarie
 En perte d'inspiration divine !
 Ecart et traduction peu flatteuse
 Tendent à compromettre mon noble objectif.
 Communique-moi donc cette flamme ineffable
 Qui me prédispose à parler phébus !
 Organise le savoir dans mon travail neuronal

Mystérieuse et Splendide Muse,
 Enhardis mes textes et conjoins mes gloses !
 Transforme-les en sublimes chefs d'oeuvre
 Dont se délecteront les experts!

* **Saint Jérôme était** the Saint Patron des Traducteurs
 In this task, translation was possible, but it had a few restrictions as well. For example, it was impossible to

reproduce the prosodic features by translating the rhyme scheme for lack of cognates:

Soothe my dried-up **soul** -> 'soul' meaning 'âme' in French cannot rhyme with 'goal' meaning 'objectif' or 'but' -> no possible rhyme scheme with 'âme' and 'objectif' from:

'Tend to compromise my lofty *goal*.' Likewise whereas 'Muse' and 'use' rhyme in English, they do not rhyme in French in this particular case:

'Mystérieuse et Splendide **Muse**'

-----'

Dont se délecteront les **experts**' in:

"Mysterious and beguiling Muse,

Uplift my texts and language pieces!

Sift them into sublime masterpieces

Enrapturing the experts needing their use."

The other restriction was the impossibility to reproduce the rhythm because In French certain formulae require the use of many words to express their semic or semantic nucleus, one formula/many words to express an entire semantic nucleus, which is not the case in English. This asymmetrical structure of both languages/texts leads to a symmetrical rhythm in both languages/texts as well. The following is an example:

In English the poet used: 'Assuage my translation dome' = one semantic nucleus composed of four (4) words.

In French the translator used: 'Mets l'ordre dans les linéaments de mon travail' = one semantic nucleus composed of eight (8) words. Consequently, this asymmetrical structure creates dissymmetrical order that nullifies any possibility of 'translating the rhythm'. Additionally, some syllables are stressed in French, which might not be the case in English; hence the impossibility of 'translating the rhythm', conceived as the return of a stressed syllable at regular intervals. Moreover, there are cases where the rhythm is psychological (romantic poetry in French), instead of conventional/canonical, or physical/metrical. This adds up more complexities in the translation of the rhythm and, by the same token, more translation challenges regarding that rhythm. All these intricacies can clearly lead to the impossibility of translating it. However, notwithstanding this restriction, the overall meaning of the source language was successfully translated into the target language. Finally, it is noteworthy that the poem is an acrostichus in its English version (an acrostichus is a poetic genre in which each line of the poem starts with each letter of its title), but it is impossible to render its formalism as an acrostichus into French because of the lexico-semantic, syntactical, and prosodic limitations/restrictions created by poetry.

-Morpho-syntactic features

The morpho-syntactic features involve the forms of words ('morphé' in Greek means 'form') and syntax ('sun' in Greek refers to 'combination', 'set', 'together; and 'taxis': 'arrangement', 'order', 'organization'), that is, the order or structure of words as they are presented in specific sentences. We will choose the poem "Correspondances" by Charles Baudelaire to examine whether it is possible to translate the morpho-syntactic features of a poem.

Correspondances

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
 Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;

L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
— Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

— *Charles Baudelaire*

This poem was translated by many translators, but none of them could factually express its quiddity, ontological status, that is its real 'soul'. This was, sometimes, partly due to their linguistic weaknesses but, for the most part, to the exceptionally challenging aspect of the poetic translation of that particular passage. Its poetic translation does have several limitations that include morpho-syntactic features, and others. This is the translation done by Wallace Fowlie.

Correspondences

Nature is a temple where living pillars
At times allow confused words to come forth.
There man passes through forests of symbols
Which observe him with familiar eyes.

Like long echoes which in a distance are mingled
In a dark and profound unison
Vast as night is and light,
Perfumes, colors and sounds answer one another.

There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,
Sweet as oboes, green as prairies
-And others, corrupt, rich and triumphant,

Having the expansion of infinite things
Like amber, musk, myrrh and incense,
Which sing of the transports of the mind and the
senses.

Wallace Fowlie, *Flowers of Evil* (New York: Dover Publications, 1964)

The first stanza provides a typical example of the challenge one faces when it is necessary to poetically render the syntactical structure of a line or even a stanza. Indeed in French we have:

"Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles.
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

In English we have a different syntactical structure: 'At times allow confused words to come forth'. The rules of grammar and syntax do not allow translation to place the modifier 'at times' after the verb but before it, which also underscores the emphasis put on the process of 'coming

forth'. Additionally, 'confused words' is a verbum pro verbo translation. This expression does not literally mean "confused words". On the contrary, it suggests the layers of meaning, the polysemy encrypted (that needs to be decrypted) by the prolific and polysemic language of nature, that is, its abstruse semes or symbols, its mysteries and esoteric signs. The third stanza involves a syntactic rupture as well contrasting with the English version: "there man passes through forests of symbols" to render: "L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles." The adverb 'y(there)' is pre-positioned in French whereas it should be pre-positioned in French and post-positioned in English. Unfortunately, it is also pre-positioned in English, which is wrong and confusing ('There man passes...'). Nevertheless, its difficult use highlights the syntactic complexity and challenges that the translators must expect whenever they aspire to translate poetry from French into English or vice versa. Regarding the image "forêts de symboles", it should not be translated literally (forests of symbols) because it suggests the notion or idea of multitude, profusion tinged with mystery and hermetism. Therefore, it should be rendered by a construction like "a cornucopia of symbols", or "a plethora/myriad of symbols", not "forests of symbols" as such.

The second stanza also reveals syntactic and morphological complexities:

In a dark and profound unison
Vast as night is and light,
Perfumes, colors and sounds answer one another.

In the second line we have "In a dark and profound unison". The semantic nucleus of the lexeme "unison" shows that it is uncountable, which does not allow the use of the indefinite article 'a' applying to 'dark' and 'profound'. Regarding "Vast as night is and light", it creates syntactic rupture (lack of parallelism of construction) tinged with semantic confusion and the use of the conjunction 'as' is flawed. The appropriate rendition needs to be "Vast like night and broad daylight". The last line attests to one more syntactic and semantic error: "Perfumes, colors and sounds answer one another." The use of expression 'answer one another' is erroneous. One cannot expect perfumes, colors and sounds to answer one another, unless employed metaphorically. Still, even though used metaphorically, the whole expression sounds inappropriate. The underlying idea is the correspondences between sensory modalities: Olfactory, visual, auditory known as 'synesthesia' revealed by the Sweden mystic and philosopher Swenborg and subsequently adopted by/ passed down onto symbolist poets and Baudelaire. Consequently the canonical translation is: "Perfumes, colors, and sounds **correspond**."

- Supra-segmental or prosodic features

Supra-segmental features also known as prosodic features (rhythm, music, rhyme scheme) cannot be translated. We have addressed this issue in the poem titled "O Muse de la traduction". Prosodic features can be translated only and only if we deal with passages having cognates in English and French, that is, in very rare cases. It is also noteworthy that it is quasi-impossible to translate the rhythm. This quasi-impossibility is exacerbated by the fact that English words and rhythm are different from those of French. A

stressed syllable in French might not necessarily be stressed in English and vice versa. Additionally, a short sentence in English can be very long when translated into French. French tends to be verbose (often trying to add more words to 'express specificity, accuracy, little nuance') whereas English tends to be short, concise, or pithy. It thus becomes almost impossible to translate or even to reproduce the notion of rhythm. For instance a word like '**shifting cultivation**' is composed of two (2) words, but in French it will be translated by '**agriculture extensive sur brûlis avec jachère**', that is, six(6) words. In these conditions, reproducing or translating the rhythm becomes factually impossible.

Conclusion

In light of the analysis that we have diligently conducted, we become cognizant that poetry is a highly sophisticated genre. That is why it is difficult to translate it. However, the major challenges inherent in poetic translation are intrinsically semiotic, semantic, syntactic, and prosodic. Nevertheless, it is possible to circumvent some of these challenges, especially, the semiotic and semantic. When the poet is concomitantly the translator and poet, his/her level of inspiration can synergize with that of his/her composition. Then he/she becomes endowed with the ability to translate the text efficiently and effectively by overcoming the semantic and semiotic hurdles. If the translator has a strong command of the linguistic materials and its technicalities, it becomes possible for them to do a successful translation work as well. Still, when translating poetry one can face quasi-unsurmountable difficulties if one deals with suprasegmental features (prosody). At that stage, translation can become impossible except in the stringent case of texts having cognates (texts from neo-Latin languages and romance languages). Nevertheless, translation in general is an eminently enriching and sophisticated exercise and art because it enables the translator to broaden their horizons by consistently sharpening their intellectual faculties as if the whole process were under the aegis of a *natura naturans*. In the final analysis, a salient fact must be stressed here: When poetry is translated, it is no longer-*stricto sensu*- poetry. It is just a translation of poetry no matter how refined it is because by transforming the linguistic structure of a source language into that of a target language for the purpose of rendering it intelligible to its speakers, one intrinsically removes- in the process- its very poetic essence, that is, its rhythm, imagery, and semiology, its 'poetic soul'. The text translated into the target language can still be quite understandable, but it will no longer have its initial poetic soul with all its ineffable subtleties and intangible poetic qualities, and ramifications. Consequently, it will be a different text, with a different style, and a different 'linguistic aura'. That precisely justifies the aposterioristic rationale that Du Bellay used when he referred to his predisposition not to translate poetry presented as follows:

"La traduction reste insuffisante à former notre littérature nationale parce que les vrais moyens du style, de l'éloquence et de la poésie sont INTRADUISIBLES. " This means: "Translation does not suffice to teach our national literature because the real means inherent in style, eloquence and poetry are UNTRANSLATABLE." Therefore, translation of poetry is possible, but it does have serious limitations and restrictions as well. When it is done, it is no longer a poetic

text, it is henceforth relegated into the realms of a sheer translation regardless of its beautiful aspect.

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