

Difficulties in Poetry Translation

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Some artistic characteristics of poetry distinguish it from other literary genres. This paper mainly discusses the difficulties in poetry translation, including those in translating linguistic features, poetic features, poetic spirit and cultural connotation, especially with examples of translating ancient Chinese poems into English.

Keywords: translation, poetry translation, difficulty

Poetry is defined as “writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language meaning, sound, and rhythm”. It is the art of employing words in such a manner as to produce an illusion on the senses: the art of doing by means of words what the painter does by means of colors. There is rhythm, metrical rhythm; emotion, sensuous emotion; an increasing use of figures of speech and a degree of disregard for conventional word order; imagination, and above all, an ability to see features in an object or a situation which another, not a poet, might miss. All these characteristics distinguish poetry from other literary genres and also give rise to the difficulties in translating a poem from one language into another.

Difficulty in Translating Linguistic Features

In most cases, the difficulties in poetry translation are caused by the linguistic differences between the source language and the target language, which are obvious obstacles in poetry translation. Barnstone (1993) pointed out that

because the words and grammar of each language differ from every other language, the transference of a poem from one language to another involves differing sound and prosody. And because there are no perfect word equivalents between languages, perfection in translation is inconceivable. (p. 265)

Barnstone (1993) revealed clearly that the linguistic differences, including semantic, phonic and syntactic ones, prevent “perfection in translation”. The reason is very simple. In translation, the source and the target are not equal, can never be equal, for meanings between languages only overlap partially, but never coincide; both the speech sounds and grammars of different languages seldom have identical features. That is to say, it is difficult to pursue the exact equivalence at lexical and syntactic levels in the target language.

Chinese poetry offers a good example to help make clearer how the linguistic differences result in the difficulty in its translation into English. In the aspect of speech sounds, the Chinese language is quite liable to adopt the reduplication to achieve the effect of emphasis and, thus, to bring out the beauty in sense. The first line in Li Qingzhao’s “Weary Song to a Slow Tune” illustrates this characteristic in Chinese poetry very well, where the reduplication of seven words is used, “Xun-xun mi-mi, Leng-leng qing-qing, Qi-qi can-can qi-qi”.

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From the romanization of the sounds, we can see clearly that three of them end with /i/. This sound in Chinese arouses easily the readers' cold, cheerless, deserted and lonely feelings and, of course, conveys clearly the poet's profound grief about the death of her beloved husband. While on the one hand, reduplicative words are OK for children in English, but in adult poetry, not any better than in any other genre, such as in adult speech or prose. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult for a translator to find the equivalents of these sounds in English, and even though one succeeded after great efforts, they could not possibly bring out the same effect on the readers of the target language.

As to the word meaning, there are abundant uses of puns in Chinese poetry, a delicate charm of the language. In the original Chinese lines by Li Shangyin, "the silkworm till its death spins silk from love-sick heart; the candle only when burnt has no tears to shed", the word "silk" has the identical pronunciation as the word "miss" in Chinese. Though not explicitly pronounced, the poet expresses his endless longing for his lover in this way and conveys his love-sickness to the readers ingeniously with the help of a single word. Of course, undoubtedly it is impossible to find a word with the same function in English.

Chinese grammar is fluid, not architectural, compared with English. For instance, it is of no consequence whether the subject is singular or plural. As Chinese does not require any indication of "number", the poets need not bother about such irrelevant details, while the English translators are not so lucky and have to make clear whether the subject is singular or plural because English nouns have inflections.

The sense of timelessness and universality is ... enhanced by the frequent omission of the subject of a verb... Sometimes even verbs are omitted in Chinese poetry, and lines can consist of a series of nouns shed of all the connecting links such conjunctions, verbs, and particles.... Another grammatical feature of the language of poetry, one that is closely connected with its syntax, is the fluidity of "part of speech." In Chinese prose, words already enjoy a high degree of freedom in this respect, and the same word can be used as noun, verb, adjective, etc. according to the context. This freedom is increased in poetry.

Undoubtedly this freedom results in difficulty in poetry translation since the translators are at a loss when they want to render the Chinese original into English, just as Raffle cites from A. C. Graham nicely said that "late T'ang poetry, which explores the Chinese language to the limit of its resources, can be damaged severely by the irrelevant precisions imposed by Indo-European person, number, and tense" (p. 45).

We must admit that it is not just and fair to put the blame on the translators' insufficient ability for all the imperfections in the poetry translation because they must have already racked their brains about the best and most proper linguistic equivalence in English. It is the linguistic differences among various languages that deprive the translators of the absolute success in the translation from one language into any other ones. All languages have unique linguistic features in speech sounds, in word meaning and in grammar, which produce tremendous difficulties in fulfilling a perfect translation of poetry.

Difficulty in Translating Poetic Features

Poetry is always subject to some strict rules in its form, rhyme, meter and rhythm, which distinguish it from other literary genres. In most cases, different languages have very different rhythms, rhymes and tones, so it is very difficult to fully render prosodic features of poetry in one language into that in other languages that share little in common.

Chinese jueju and lvshi are of unique poetic forms, with the close confinement of four or eight lines, each of which contains five or seven characters with a strict tonal pattern and rhyming scheme. Lvshi also enjoys

antithesis, another unique and regular feature, where there are two or more of what we call antithetical phrases, or parallel couplets.

In addition, the classical language of the Chinese poets is rhythmical almost to an excess, though not inherently musical. Prosody is based on changes in pitch as well as in accent. All tones are divided into two classes, the even tone and the inflected tone. In a parallel couplet not only must the content, the parts of speech, the mythological and historic-geographical allusions, be all separately matched and balanced, but most of the tones must also be reciprocally. Even tones are conjoined with inflected ones, and vice versa.

Besides, a great part of the beauty in poetry comes from its musical quality, so prosody, including the tone, the rhythm and the rhyme, etc. exerts a profound influence on the poetry. Raffel (1988) remarked that

the tonal qualities of the Chinese language naturally have had a major effect on Chinese poetry. The resulting tone invariably decides the verse movements, which are predominantly musical. This innate musical quality of the language is the basis for the remarkable sense of tone color and musical nuance developed by traditional poets, and may explain why there is so much exquisite lyricism in traditional Chinese verse. (p. 33)

Most English poems, on the other hand, do not follow such strict rules and usually have different meters and different feet. Similarly, in the phonetic system of English language, there is no classification of even tone and inflected tone. Poetry demands refinement in language, freshness in artistic conception and distinctiveness in style. In other words, it calls for beauty in form, sound and meaning. It will be a great failure if only the meaning is conveyed without rendering the charm of form and sound. From the above contrast, we can get that the poetic features of the Chinese language determine the difficulty in translating the poetry in one language into any other language.

Difficulty in Translating Poetic Spirit and Cultural Connotation

The poetic spirit or flavour is responsible for the most difficult part in poetry translation, which is connected with the linguistic features of the language and rooted deeply in the language itself. Each language enjoys its own flavour, then when translated into another language, the flavour is changed and the spirit of the original lost.

Yet the greatest difficulty comes from the trouble in finding the cultural equivalence among languages because there are sharply contrasting cultural differences, including differences in various local environments, social customs, cultural backgrounds, aesthetic, history and religion, etc. in different nations. Each language has something unique that belongs only to the nation and people using this language, the most charming part of the language, but at the same time, also the greatest obstacle in the understanding among various nations and the most complex problem in translating, especially in translating poetry. One of the examples to illustrate how the cultural differences affect poetry translation is the “candle” in the line having been cited “the silkworm till its death spins silk from love-sick heart; the candle only when burnt has no tears to shed”. In traditional Chinese culture, the “candle” can be considered as a symbol of intense love-sickness between lovers because when the candle burns, it sheds “tears” until it becomes ashes. This cultural connotation of the candle may be unique in Chinese, although candles are used in many countries.

Such cultural gaps will impossibly arouse any association in the minds of speakers of another language if they are in the dark about all the cultural background and inevitably bring about difficulties in fulfilling a satisfactory and successful translation.

Conclusion

To sum up, some wonderful and subtle effect of a poem can be achieved only by one language because this kind of effect is solely created by and closely connected with the linguistic features of the language itself alone. As a particular literary genre, poetry has its own poetic features and spirit, which add difficulties to the translating of poetry. And more importantly, the different cultural connotations also become a great obstacle in rendering poetry from one language into another. But just as Willis Barnstone (1993) pointed out, “Although it is impossible to reproduce the same sound and meaning in intra- and inter-lingual translation, I think what is the most interesting to translate and most susceptible of success is the impossible or, even better, the untranslatable” (p. 49). It is true that the linguistic features, poetic features and spirit and cultural connotation connected with one language are extremely difficult to be conveyed in the poetry translation from one language into another exactly, while in practice, what appears to be on the surface difficult offers the best possibilities of an interesting success and the joy and success only go to translators with exceptional ability and painstaking effort.

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