

Does Poetry Lose or Gain in Translation?

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The article has been written on the author's research experience as a Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program winner in collaboration with the US poet-translators of the East Carolina University and George Mason University.

Abstract

Literary translation, especially poetry translation has been debated over by scholars engaged in this field throughout the history. The author has focused on the problems arising in poetry translation from Azerbaijani into English, i.e. between languages with quite different literary patterns belonging to different language families. The poetical examples provided in this article have been translated from Azerbaijani language into English, and present the real scene of the existing problems of poetry translation such as idiomatic phrases in the original for which the authors could not find any corresponding idiom in the language of translation.

The author emphasizes the necessity of cooperation between a mother tongue translator of the original language and a mother tongue translator of the target language in order to make the translated poetical samples sound like a poem to the native speaker's ears.

The conclusion is that literary samples best present the culture, art and lifestyle of the people, so more poetical samples should be translated from the Azerbaijani literature into other languages to enable the Azerbaijani literary world to integrate the world literature and be a part of it.

Keywords: rhythm, rhyme, syllabic verse, free verse, aruz verse form, literary pattern

1. Introduction: Overview on the Background of Translation

There is no human society without some form of culture. "Culture" in this sense, is a basic aspect of human existence, a set of ways of living specific to a group of human beings and usually passed by them from generation to generation. Historically peoples performed their dances, composed their songs, created epic poems in their own languages, all of which contributed to establishing patterns specific to each culture (Burton, 2010, p. 3).

Listening to the best songs and poems of their neighbours, the peoples were incited to sing and recite them in their own languages and make their meanings accessible to their own nations. Hence the history of translation has begun from the ancient times, meeting the interests of the different peoples in their respective history, culture, tradition, art, and so on. In our early ages when we learnt to read we began to recite poems by G.G.Byron, P.B.Shelley and W.Shakespeare. We heard about the heroes of the novels by E. Hemingway, J. London, Th. Dreiser and many other worldwide writers in our native language from our parents and loved them like heroes of the fictions of our mother tongue. Translators made it possible for the readers from different cultures to read these authors' works in their native languages and appreciate them. Translation from one language into another having quite diverse grammatical structure and literary patterns causes big challenges for the translator in terms of fidelity to the original on one hand, presenting the translation material to the target language audience smooth as a native text on the other. All of us, we are aware that even the profound knowledge of a language other than the mother tongue does not enable a person to make an adequate translation. Nevertheless the language is the source of every text or speech and it is the final product of the translator's performance. It is also undeniable fact that during the last centuries there has always been a more or less intense interaction between countries' cultures, languages and literatures. But nowadays this interaction takes place in an accelerated rhythm, in which translation, the translator and the interpreter play an outstanding role because they assume the responsibility of the cross-cultural contact that they are establishing (Durusoy, 2005, p. 51).

Translation has enabled the peoples belonging to different cultures, lifestyle, customs and traditions to come together and know one another more profoundly. When we compare the required translation skills for the two branches of literature, prose and poetry, undoubtedly, there is no space for debate since translating poetry is much more challenging than translating prose. According to Tytler “The union of just and delicate sentiments with simplicity of expression, is more rarely found in poetical composition than in prose; because the enthusiasm of poetry prompts rather to what is brilliant than what is just, and is always led to clothe its conceptions in that species of figurative language which is very opposite to simplicity” (Everyman's Library, 2007, p. 180).

2. Poetry Translation: Crossing Points, Differing Views

Robert Frost, defines poetry as “The figure a poem makes: it begins in delight and ends in wisdom. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.” He believed that poetry is what gets lost in translation (Robert Frost quotes, n.d.). Many critics asserted that in translating poems “translators betray them, inevitably turning the translation into something which at best may approximate, but which invariably distorts, the original” (*English Teaching FORUM*, n.d.).

What makes poetry translation much more difficult from other types of translation is that translator has the responsibility of not only grasping the meaning of the original, but also feeling it as he/she has experienced it on one hand, transferring the same feelings to the target language by exploring its literary and stylistic devices for the audience to sound like a poem as it is in their native language on the other. “Let that care be with them who deal in matters of fact or matters of faith; but whosoever aims at it in poetry, as he attempts what is not required, so shall he never perform what he attempts; for it is not his business alone to translate language into language, but to poesy into poesy; and poesy is of so subtle a spirit, that in pouring out of one language into another, it will all evaporate and if a new spirit is not added in the transfusion, there will remain nothing but a caput niortuum” (Dryden, 1913).

The American poet, critic and translator Ezra Pound, whose experience in poetry translations goes far beyond theory, believes that much depends on the translator. “He can show where the treasure lies, he can guide the reader in choice of what tongue is to be studied...” He calls this as an “interpretive translator” of poetry. In parallel, he offers “[an]other sort” of translation, “where the translator is definitely making a new poem” (Pound, 1969, 2007, p. 33).

Thus there are two types of poetry translation, one which directly renders the thought of the author, and the second, which is based on the original, but transfuses some new spirit. Admittedly, if the translator succeeds in rendering both the form and the content, the translation is considered to be the most successful one (Charents, 2007). It goes without saying that translating poetry is a creative task and not all skillful translators can be involved in this process. Dryden's view on this issue is interesting and logical: “providing a good translation of a poem is harder than writing a new poem, in which one is always free to change direction. Although the thought of a poem may not be its main poetic constituent, the translator has the responsibility to be as faithful to it as the conflicting interests of rhythm and sound permit; certainly he is not free, except in “imitations” to follow his will” (Dryden, 1680, 2007, p. 22).

According to Benjamin Franklin “...the task of the translator is to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language.” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 22)

A translator will often meet with idiomatic phrases in the original author, to which no corresponding idiom can be found in the language of the translation. As a literal translation of such phrases cannot be tolerated, the only resource is to express the sense in plain and easy language (Tytler, 2000, p. 147).

3. Azerbaijani Poetry and Its Translatability

Azerbaijan belongs to those countries whose culture and literature are little known in Europe up to this day. The outstanding Azerbaijani writer-translator Mirze Ibrahimov describes the richness of Azerbaijani poetry with great enthusiasm: “Azerbaijani poets left us romantic descriptions of the landscape, finding beauty even in the desolate plains and steppes that may appear dead and bleak to strange eyes, even in the winds-cold and cruel in winter, and parching and hot in summer. The scenery in Azerbaijan is full of contrasts and is amazingly varied” (Ibrahimov, 1960, p. 23).

Hence, Azerbaijani poetry rich with words expressing national color, phrases such as metaphors, idioms, metonymies and other stylistic devices has had specific difficulties in translation into other languages. The cultural connotations belonging to this language are not easily translated without sacrificing some of their real meaning.

As a consequence of the Persian empire's influence in the region for hundreds of years and the even earlier presence of indigenous Persian-related languages (largely displaced by Oghuz Turkic by the 11th century), the language adopted countless Persian (and so also Arabic) words and sounds that were used especially in its literary form. Through the seventeenth century, in fact, the regions' literature, particularly in the classical forms, was written primarily in Persian. Today, after nearly 200 years of Russian influence, and legislated efforts to purify the Azerbaijani language made by the current government within the framework of its ethnic nation building concepts, many Persian words have slipped back south. Nevertheless, contemporary Azerbaijani retains far more vocabulary and phonetics in common with Persian than does its fraternal twin, modern Turkish (Mandaville & Naghiyeva, 2011).

Azerbaijani verse characterized with its rhyme and rhythm mainly requires three components: meter, division and rhyme.

- Verses written in the syllabic form. It is a verse form based on the equal number of syllables in a line. This verse form has been used in the poetical samples of some peoples (Turkish, Russian, French, and Italian etc.) and is being used now (Adilli, 2014, p. 21).
- Verses written in Aruz form (Arabic in origin, aruz means "meter". The poetic line is based on the repetition of long and short vowels.) It is a verse form based on succession of short and long syllables accurately combination of which creates wonderful reciting rhythm in all lines (Adilli, 2014, p. 47).
- Verses written in free form. In a free verse nonmetrical, nonrhyming lines closely follow the natural rhythms of speech. A regular pattern of sound or rhythm may emerge in free-verse lines, but the poet does not adhere to a metrical plan in their composition (Glossary of Poetic Terms, n.d.).

Taking into account all these specific peculiarities a poetry translator has to make a choice in translating Azerbaijani poems particularly with the syllabic verse form into English:

- To transfer the whole meaning of the poem into the target language and sacrifice a portion of the rhyme and rhythm.
- To transfer the poem fully into the target language, and sacrifice a portion of each of the components.
- To grasp the meaning of the poem and recreate it in the target language.

According to the view of Liza Katz, what makes translations like originals may be found in meter, rhyme or any aspect of sound, even though, paradoxically, poetry is an art that is inseparable from the qualities of language, especially sound" (Katz, 2003).

3.1 From Theory to Practice

When first translated a poem in syllabic verse form by Samad Vurghun, a well-known Azerbaijani poet we preferred to maintain all components- meaning, rhythm and rhyme of the poem:

Though my hair goes grey,
 My beating heart has much to say.
 I have my pen and forever
 It will make me much braver.
 My love, my land will tell never
 What's happened, aren't you young yet?
 Early you got so old, poet!

The original of this poem is very melodic. And the beauty of this poem lies on the fact that it has a very simple and musical language. Azerbaijani readers are delighted by listening to and reading this poem for its being easily understandable and pouring into their souls as a nice music sample. Translating it from Azerbaijani into English, I tried to maintain the meaning on one hand, and make it sound as beautiful as in the original by keeping the rhyming scheme on the other. But when our American collaborators read the translation, it didn't impress them and didn't please their literary taste as a poem. Why?

Firstly, the research with the American experts on poetry translation confirms the fact that it is impossible to transfer a poem from one language into another formally without sacrifices since each language has different literary patterns. For the sake of rhyme the meaning of one line of verse had been squeezed, and undoubtedly, it didn't sound like a poem to the native speakers' ears.

Secondly, we should also take it into account that not all poems of a language are suitable for translation. Poems rich in national colours should not be translated into another language. Although they are excellent poems in the original language, they lose their meaning when they are translated into the target language.

Here is another a poem entitled “Azerbaijan” by the well-known Azerbaijani poet Hokuma Bulliri translated into English:

My native home, my motherland,
For your favour all we stand,
On your breast we built a nest grand,
Take my love and warm embrace,
Azerbaijan! My holy place.

The original of this poem is full of national colour and excitement and makes deep impression on everybody who reads it in Azerbaijani language. Unfortunately, the same words cannot be said of its English translation, an opinion that has been confirmed by the American collaborators.

Thirdly, the audience for whom the translation samples are considered should also be taken into account. The syllabic verse form was widely used by the American poets in the past. However, the most popular form of poetry for them is free verse at the moment.

During the research period in the US given to me by Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program we also translated some poems by a well-known Azerbaijani poet Bakhtiyar Vahabzade jointly with the American collaborators. Different from the above-mentioned poetical samples, poems by B. Vahabzade didn't cause many problems while translating. His poetry is universally understood because of their philosophical depth in form and content.

One of his poems translated into English is “Don't Shut the Windows”. This poem originally has syllabic verse form. The poem has been translated into English using free verse form jointly with our American collaborator Peter Mackuk. We think the American readers enjoy this poem as its original meaning has completely been maintained. Throughout the poem the poet challenges everybody not to stay unmoved, to go ahead and make differences in their lives:

Today I wish to see tomorrow
Lighten my soul and cheer my heart.
Don't shut, my love, don't shut the window.
Let this new air refresh the world. (Naghiyeva, 2009)

And poet's longing for fresh air renews the readers' world.

Another poem that we believe that impresses the American readers is “To my Married Daughter” by the poet in English translation. The poem is beautiful not only for its poetical form, rhyme, and rhythm, but also for its meaning, since it reflects the changes taking place in the life and behavior of poet's daughter after marriage specific for Azerbaijani culture. One can easily guess the father's concerns and happiness about these changes in the life of his daughter:

You've changed
But I don't complain.
In fact, I am glad
You love and be loved in return.
My troubles seem selfish.
Protect your love

Wherever you go, dear daughter,

My house is here as an addition
To the love of your own love's house. (Naghiyeva, 2009)

The title of the original poem is “To my Daughter”. Taking the cultural factors into account the word “married” has been added to the title to make the reasons of these changes understandable to our English-speaking readers.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, notwithstanding the fact that Azerbaijani poetry partially loses national color in translation from Azerbaijani into English, poems of Azerbaijani origin gain rather than lose by being introduced to English speaking peoples.

Also, there should be a cooperation between a mother tongue speaker of the original language and a mother tongue speaker of the target language when translating the poetical samples from Azerbaijani into English. A. F. Tytler thinks that the translation must not only be faithful to the source text, but also must also reflect the style of the original and be read easily as the source text. He suggested that only poets should translate poetry (Tytler, 2000, p. 8).

John Dryden writes about this “No man is capable of translating poetry besides a genius to that art”. He also adds that the translator of poetry must be the master of both of his author’s language and of his own (Dryden, 1680, 2007, p. 6).

As literary samples best present the culture, the art, and the lifestyle of the people, we need to translate more poetical samples from the Azerbaijani literature to enable our literary world to integrate the world literature and be a part of it. To say it with Lisa Katz’s words: “Something is gained, rather than lost, in translated poetry” (Katz, 2003).

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