Good Translation: Art, Craft, or Science?

by Mahmoud Ordudari
University of Esfahan, Iran

Abstract

Throughout history, translation has made inter-linguistic communication between peoples possible. Theoretically, one can consider translation a science; practically, it seems rational to consider it an art. However, regardless of whether one considers translation as a science, art, or craft, one should bear in mind that a good translation should fulfill the same function in the TL as the original did in the SL.

1. Introduction

uman beings, throughout history, have made an effort to take advantage of various methods of communication with the intention of utilizing the knowledge of other nations and endeavoring to preserve this knowledge for the coming generations. As the most effective methods of communication, language has been employed to satisfy the very need of communication. The predicament that may emerge as an obstacle in the way of communication seems to be the fact of dissimilarity of languages throughout the world. In today's world, communication between different nations with different languages is feasible through translation.

2. What is translation?

What is translation? Webster's New World dictionary defines "to translate" as follows:

1. to move from one place or condition to another; transfer; specif., a) Theol. to convey directly to heaven without death, b) Eccles. to transfer (a bishop) from one see to another; also, to move (a saint's body or remains) from one place of interment to another;
2. to put into the words of a different language;
3. to change into another medium or form to translate ideas into action;
4. to put into different words; rephrase or paraphrase in explanation;
5. to transmit (a telegraphic message) again by means of an automatic relay (as is cited by Yazdunpanuh, 2000:1)

regarded as a science, art, or craft, a good translation should play the same role in the TL as the original did in the SL.

Lewis (1958:265) writes that "translate" is formed from the Latin "trans+latus", which means "carried across". Foster (1958:1) considers translation as the act of transferring through which the content of a text is transferred from the SL into the TL. Not taking culture into consideration, Catford (1965: 20) points out that, "translation is the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language. In this definition, the most important thing is equivalent textual material; nonetheless, it is unclear in terms of the type of equivalence. For Levy (1967:148), "translation is a process of communication whose objective is to import the knowledge of the original to the foreign reader?" Echoing the similar viewpoint, Savory (1968:37) believes that translation is made possible by an equivalent of the idea that lies behind its different verbal expressions.

Translation, whose beginning can be traced back to the Tower of Babel (Finlay, 1971:17), is defined as "a bilingual mediated process of communication which ordinarily aims at the production of a TL text that is functionally equivalent to a SL text" (Reiss, 1971:161). Furthermore, regarding the definition of translation, Brislin (1976: 1) notes:

> The general term referring to the transfer of thoughts and ideas from one language (source) to another (target), whether the languages are in written or oral form; whether the languages have established orthographies or do not have such standardization or whether one or both languages is based on signs, as with sign languages of the deaf.

In a similar position, Pinhhuck (1977: 38) defines translation as "a process of finding a TL equivalent for an SL utterance." Moreover, Wilss (1982: 3) points out:

> Translation is a transfer process, which aims at the transformation of a written SL text into an optimally equivalent TL text, and which requires the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic understanding and analytical processing of the SL.

Nida (1984:83) points out: "translation consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style." Likewise, translation, as Bell (1991:8) asserts, involves the transfer of meaning from a text in one language into a text in another language.

Spivak (1992), considering translation as "the most intimate act of reading" (p.398), writes that, "unless the translator has earned the right to become an intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text" (p.400). In general, what seems to be understood as translation, as Bassnett (1994) writes, includes rendering an SL text to a TL text "so as to ensure that 1) the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar, and 2) the structure of the SL will be preserved as

closely as possible but not so closely that the TL structures will be seriously distorted" (p.2).

Considering the translator as a learner, Robinson (1997:49) puts forward that "translation is an intelligent activity involving complex processes of conscious and unconscious learning". He maintains that, "translation is an intelligent activity, requiring creative problem-solving in novel, textual, social, and cultural conditions" (p.51).

Hatim and Mason (1997:1) consider translation as "an act of communication which attempts to relay, across cultural and linguistic boundaries, another act of communication." In most cases, according to Houbert (1998:1), "translation is to be understood as the process whereby a message expressed in a specific source language is linguistically transformed in order to be understood by readers of the target language". From a different view point, Nogueira (1998:1) asserts that, "translation is a service business". Moreover, Hatim and Mason (1990:1) affirm that, "translation is a useful case for examining the whole issue of the role of language in social life."

Translation can also be taken into consideration as "the process of establishing equivalence between the source language texts and target language texts" (Sa'edi, 2004:242), which aims at passing on "an understanding to people in their own language and create the same impact as the original text" (Galibert, 2004:1).

Etymologically, "translation is a "carrying across" or "bringing across": the Latin translatio derives from transferre (trans, "across" + ferre, "to carry" or "to bring")" (*Translation*, 2005:1). Additionally, Kaur (2005:1) defines translation basically as "a problem-solving task"; however, Sugimoto (2005:1) points out:

> Simply speaking, translation is the exchange of one set of clothes for another set of clothes that will cover the same meaning or thought. However, when we think of translation culture, first we must understand its background and give some thought to the age in which it was born.

Translation, as Adewuni (2000:1) puts forward, "is a reality despite the complications and doubt attached to it based on the nature of the elements involved, the languages, the cultures, and the translator."

Observing translation as a form of cross-cultural communication, Tianmin (2000:1) asserts that "translation is simultaneous decontextualization and recontextualization, hence is productive rather than reproductive . . . . Translation is never innocent."

2.2. What is good Translation?

Various scholars have recommended an assortment of factors that a fine translation should take into consideration. For example, the French scholar,

Dolet (1509-1546), suggests that, in order to produce an adequate translation, a translator should "avoid the tendency to translate word for word", since word for word translation, as Dolet (1509-1546) explains, "misinterprets the original content and spoils the beauty of its form" (cited in Miremadi, 1993:74). Furthermore, Tytler (1790) substantiates that in a good translation "the style and way of the exposition should be the same as in the original" (cited in Miremadi, 1991:93).

Showeman (1916, as cited in Miremadi, 1991:34) considers translation as "a sin"; however, regarding translation as a necessity, Philimore (1919:4) considers it food for the development of a young language. Regarding the ideal in translation, Souter (1920:7) claims that, "our ideal in translation is to produce on the minds of our readers as nearly as possible the same effect as was produced by the original on its readers."

Nevertheless, Belloc (1931:22) believes that a good translation must possess the potential of being evaluated "like a first-class native thing". He maintains that translation must "consciously attempt the spirit of the original at the expense of the letter" (p.153).

Concerning the importance of an adequate translation, Bates (1943:7) claims that, "nothing moves without translation . . . . No change in thought or in technology spreads without the help of translation." Nevertheless, not all kinds of translations can lay claim to such importance. Edwards (1957:13) points out that, "we expect approximate truth in a translation . . . What we want to have is the truest possible feel of the original." Knox (1957:5) echoes the same viewpoint when he points out that translation should be "read with the same interest and enjoyment which a reading of the original would have afforded." Therefore, it seems that both Edwards (1957) and Knox (1957) believe in 'equivalent effect' as a criterion of a good translation.

In the view of Foster (1958:6), the only good translation is one "which fulfils the same purpose in the new language as the original did in the language in which it was written." A good or true translation, as Nabokov (1964: viii-ix) claims, is literal translation: "rendering as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original"; thus, he concludes that, "only this [literal translation] is true translation."

Word for word translation does not seem to be considered as a good one by Nida (1964), since such renderings, "generally make for a doubtful translation" (p.14). Regarding correctness of a translation Nida (1971:185) points out:

> Ultimately, however, the correctness of a translation must be determined not in terms of the corresponding sets of words, but on the basis of the extent to which the corresponding sets of semantic components are accurately represented in the restructuring. This is essential if the resulting form of the message in the receptor language is to represent the closest natural equivalent of the source-language text.

As Burton (1973:13) indicates, one type of translation, namely the literal translation, "is a lie; it is a fake and fraud"--rather than considered a good translation. However, in today's world we are fundamentally dependent on translation, even though it emerges in its literal form; since, as Chute (1978, as cited in Miremadi, 1391:21) points out, "without translation, our world would narrow mercilessly."

Echoing the similar idea of Nabokov (1964), Newmark (1988a) points out that, "Literal translation is the first step in translation, and a good translator abandons a literal version only when it is plainly inexact or . . . badly written. A bad translator will always do his best to avoid translating word for word" (p.76).

Miremadi (1991) quotes Eastman to state that, "almost all translations are bad" (p.33). Furthermore, Newmark (1991:34) affirms what he calls Nida's (1975) "classical definition of translation as 'the reproduction of the closest natural equivalent of the source language message,'" and maintains that, "in fact, this type of translation is distinguished by its elegance and concision, its attention to a natural word order, to the deployment of clauses and phrases more frequently used than their formal equivalents in the source language, to the occasional unobtrusive distribution of the meaning of important 'untranslatable' words (e.g. 'privacy', *éclat*, *sauber*, *casanier*, etc.) over two or three target language words or a clause: a good translation is deft, neat, closely shadowing its original". Nonetheless, Abdulla (1994:70) holds that a successful translation is one that attempts to preserve "the appropriate stylistic resources of the target language."

Furthermore, a good translation, as McNamara (2002) notes, "must use the same register" (p.6). In this respect Warren (2004:1) points out:

> The translated text has long occupied a relatively low status within the academic culture, due to its seemingly derivative and secondary nature. Lacking the 'originality' still valued by many teachers and students of literature, translations generally only gain firm purchase in literary history when they somehow manage to surpass their source and to function as 'autonomous' expressions. And yet translation is ubiquitous in medieval writing practices, literary and non-literary alike.

2.3. Is Translation art, craft or science?

Is translation a scientific study or artistic endeavor, researchable theory or technical craft, a branch of linguistics or of literature? Being utilized as a means to act as a bridge between two cultures, translation seems to be a complicated and multi-faceted activity or phenomenon.

According to Benjamin (1923), the twentieth century has been called the age of 'reproduction' or, as Jumplet (1923) points out 'the age of translation' (as cited in Newmark, 1988a:1); however, the constant debate as to whether translation is an art or science has a long history. Some scholars may argue

that translation is a process of creative thinking; consequently, it is subjective and cannot be systematized by laws.

In spite of the fact that translation currently plays a crucial role in the world's affair, it has always been considered as second-hand art. In this regard, Belloc (1931:6) believes that translation, "has never been granted the dignity of the original work, and has suffered too much on the general judgment of letters."

As Savory (1957:49) claim, "it would almost be true to say that there are no universally accepted principles of translation, because the only people qualified to formulate them have never agreed among themselves"; therefore, he does not tend to consider translation as a science.

According to Kelly (1979:51), Hieronymus (also known as St. Jerome, 4th century A.D) as well as others followed Cicero's 9106-43 B.C) claim constantly that translation was a branch of oratory, and Holmes (1979a:23), specifying two branches of translation studies, namely pure and applied, points out that the aim of pure translation studies is to describe the phenomenon of translation and to investigate all related aspects of it; however, applied translation studies focus on the application of translation theories to such aspects of translation as translation practice, the teaching and learning of translation. He believes that all factions of translation are interrelated and their relationship is dialectical; however, Toury (1995:7) puts forward that the relationship between pure and applied translation studies is unidirectional-- theoretical studies serve as a nurturing source for the applied studies. Furthermore, Toury (1982:7) believes that translation, as a cognitive science, has to reach beyond linguistics, and calls it "interdisciplinary"; consequently, it seems that he considers translation a science. This science seems to be warmly welcomed by some scholars in the form of 'word for word.' For instance, Norton (1984:59) quotes Horace (65-8 B.C) to state that, "it is the duty of a faithful interpreter to translate what he undertakes word for word."

Nevertheless, Chukovskii (1984:93) does not take translation into consideration as a science when he confirms that, "translation is not only an art, but a high art." Moreover, Newmark (1988a), referring to translation as "a craft" (p.7), believes that literal translation is, "the basic translation procedure, both in communicative and semantic translation, in that translation starts from there," and he goes as far as to claim that literal translation above the word level is, "the only correct procedure if the SL and TL meanings correspond" (1988b:70).

Some scholars consider translation a science. Though the most salient features of a field of science are precision and predictability, Berkeley (1991:83) notes that some sciences, principally those dealing with the humanities, do not attain a one hundred percent predictability level. Miremadi (1991:39) writes that, "whether translation is considered an art or a science, it is, in its modern sense, a by-product of a long history of trials and errors, developments, improvements and innovations." Furthermore, Long (1996:10) believes that the desire for creating a science of translation seems to be a mere wishful

thinking. A similar idea is echoed by Zaixi (1997:339), who writes that "Translation is a process, an operation, an act of transferring. It is mainly a skill, a technology that can be acquired. In the meantime, it often involves using language in a creative manner so that it is also an art. However it is by no means a science." On the contrary, he maintains that, "the subject which takes translation as its object of study must be treated as a science, because it is a system of knowledge, about translation, aiming to expose the objective laws about the process of translation" (p.340).

However, Baker (1998:4) points out that translation is a separate academic discipline which, "like any young discipline, … needs to draw on the findings and theories of the other related disciplines in order to develop and formulate its own methods." Nevertheless, distinguishing between science and translation, Karra (2000:1) writes that "my colleagues never understood why I chose the world of translation over science."

However, Gabr (2001:2) considers translation both a craft and a science when he writes that "translation being a craft on the one hand, requires training, i.e. practice under supervision, and being a science on the other hand, has to be based on language theories". However, claiming a literary translation to be a device of art, Herzfeld (2003:110) writes that literary translation used to release the text from its "dependence on prior cultural knowledge."

Nonetheless Azizinezhad (2004:3) points out:

> Translation has a lot in common with arts as well as sciences. It sometimes becomes highly dependent on the idiosyncrasies and intuition of the translator. Like composers and painters, translators often find their own moods and personalities reflected in their work. The major factor that prevents translation from being considered an art is that, unlike translators who have to solve a range of different problems, the defining factor of an artist's work is esthetics.

Translation is an art, not a science; like most arts, it is a lot more complicated than it looks. (*Translation,* 2005:2)

> Many newcomers to translation wrongly believe it is an exact science, and mistakenly assume that a firmly defined one-to-one correlation exists between the words and phrases in different languages which make translations fixed, much like cryptography . . . . There is also debate as to whether translation is an art or a craft. Literary translators, such as Gregory Rabassa in "If This Be Treason" argue convincingly that translation is an art, though he acknowledges that it is teachable. Other translators, mostly professionals working on technical, business, or legal documents, approach their task as a craft, one that can not only be taught but is subject to linguistic analysis and benefits from academic study. Most translators will agree that the truth lies somewhere between and depends on the text. (*Translation,* 2005: 2)

3. Conclusion

Translation studies can be regarded as a science. However, if we take the product of translation into account, it seems rational to think of it as a craft or art. Whether translation is regarded as a science, art, or craft, it seems significant to note that a good translation should play the same role in the TL as the original did in the SL.

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