

Translation as Spiritual Community

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Yehuda Amichai once said, “poems should be robust enough to speak through or despite translation, just as the Bible survives many translations.” Amichai’s poems indeed survive many translations, even retranslations from English versions. The power of emotions and ideas expressed in the original does survive even if literary devices are lost.

The original text indeed loses something in translation regardless of the quality of the translation. When two languages involved are as different as Hebrew and Japanese, the act of translation becomes even harder. Problems which arise in the process of translation are not only those concerning how to convert one language into another, but also how to transpose a conception from one culture to another, entirely different culture. And sometimes one cannot do the latter simply because the gulf between the two cultures is too vast.

DEGREE OF FREEDOM

How much freedom should translators be granted in their work? This is an old issue. A heated debate took place on the matter, as expected, at the International Conference For Translators of Hebrew Literature held in Jerusalem in 1994. Hillel Halkin, a distinguished translator of Hebrew literature into English, made his position clear by stating that translators have absolute freedom in their work and the translated text is something other than the original, independent from it. He will even make the grave decision, if necessary, of crossing out a couple of lines of the original text.

To this rather provocative remark, Gabriella Avigur-Rotem, an Israeli novelist, reacted very strongly. She said, “As a writer, I felt that

I'm a schnitzel that you'd be serving up, and I don't want to be changed by your sauce or to be cooked up by you." (Halter)

Halkin thinks it his inescapable duty to make the translated text readable and natural. In the case of the works of dead authors, Halkin's attitude might pass, since the original authors are not here to strike back. However, there are always authors, alive or dead, like Avigur-Rotem who refuse to be "cooked up" by translators. To them Halkin's attitude is a crime.

I would like to quote, as an example, a passage from two different English translations of S. Y. Agnon's Simple Story (sipur pashut) to show how different they can be.

The first is Hillel Halkin's translation:

"The rain fell noiselessly. Through a curtain of mist so thick that he could not see his own self, the image of Blume appeared as brightly before him as it had on the day she had stroked his head in her room after walking out and returning." (Agnon, 1985)

The second is Robert Alter's version:

"Silently, silently the rain fell. A veil is cast over all the world, and you don't even see yourself. But Blume's image rises up before you as on the day she stroked your head when you entered her room and she fled and came back." (Alter, 1994)

The second translation is a "rather literal translation" as opposed to "Hillel Halkin's fluent, idiomatic version." (Alter, 1994)

What Alter is trying to do here is to capture and retain the original style and mood as much as possible. I would just like to draw attention to the first line of this passage. The original Hebrew sentence, "d'mumim d'mumim yardu hag'shmim," with the repetition of the same word, which also produces a nice onomatopoeic effect, is created in Alter's version. It proves that a literal translation, in some cases, obviously surpasses a fluent, idiomatic one.

Halkin no doubt has greater liberty than Alter: he exercises his power over the original text and almost creates a new text rather than a translation, as he himself declared he would do. Alter, on the other hand,

is trying to be faithful to the original. The difference between those two translations lies NOT in the difference of degrees of freedom exercised by the two translators, but in the difference of the levels on which they work.

TRANSLATION AS SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

Yehuda Amichai writes in one of his poems:

All the generations before me contributed me
Little by little so I will emerge here in Jerusalem
All at once like a prayer house or philanthropy.
That compels. My name is the name of my contributors.
That compels me. (Amichai, 1994)

In the translators' conference mentioned earlier, Amichai said much the same thing as this poem: human beings "are a kind of genetic, biological translation of the generations that preceded them. Culturally, everything we do is based on what has been done before us, so we translate that heritage into our present cultural currency."

Acute consciousness of taking part in and creating history, hence keeping tradition, does not arise from an easy conservative attitude of "We just have to do as our grandparents and parents did." This is mere blind tradition. Such an attitude is bound to be stagnant and lifeless. When, on the other hand, there is a sense of history, which is "a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal" as T. S. Eliot writes in his famous essay, "Tradition and The Individual Talent," lifeless stagnation is impossible. It is impossible because this extremely paradoxical sense of history compels one to be alert, in the sense that one is never allowed to rest in just one time zone, either in the past or in the present.

One is compelled to shift from the past to the present, and from the present to the past. Such oscillation is very uncomfortable: in fact, it never permits one to be happily settled in a single state. It also requires one's awareness of each motion one is consciously and subconsciously making. Keeping this awareness in such instability is demanded if one is to have this extraordinary sense of history. It is a sense that transcends time, but remains simultaneously within time: the latter factor is important for the

full recognition of the Here and Now, without which it is unlikely for us to have any perspective on history.

Here, we realize, another paradox is at work.

This paradox is seen clearly in traditional arts in almost any country. Japan is no exception: in traditional arts, such as Kabuki or Noh, to name but two, mastery of traditional techniques and styles through long, painstaking training is imperative and essential. The training is so thorough that there is absolutely no place for an individual personality to assert itself. However, just when the individuality of an artist appears to be totally annihilated, something extraordinary occurs. When an artist becomes conscious of what he/she is going through, a suppressed individuality, dormant for a long time, starts burgeoning. This miracle happens, needless to say, only when the artist has full consciousness of what he/she is doing. Hence Eliot's words: "It [tradition] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great efforts." (Eliot, 1972)

Tradition, then, can be called an act of transfer. It is to transfer things of the past to the context of the present: it is to re-create the past in the present. The act of transfer always involves a distance either in time or in place, or both. It is an act of **crossing/passing** over this distance. When **crossing/passing** over, an artist, on the one hand, transcends time and stands somewhere between the two time poles or above them, but, on the other hand, he/she is forming a bridge down there over a chasm(gap). Such double acts, performed simultaneously, demand a continuous state of psychological tension. It is a tension which makes an artist feel almost ripped apart into two.

This, then, brings us back to the discussion of translation. The act of translation is to transfer a text from one language to another, crossing/passing over a distance in time and space. Whether the transfer is vertical, meaning crossing/passing over a gulf of time, or horizontal, meaning crossing/passing over that of space, the core of the action is the same. Crossing/Passing over a vast gulf requires courage. Translation is a battlefield, especially on a practical level as demonstrated later. It is, however, at the same time a multi-layered reciprocal relationship between the original text and the translator. There is, in this relationship, even a touch of communion, if I may use a religious term.

In a spiritual community, or communion, unifying the original text with the translator, the translator endeavours to get as close to the original as possible despite the distance between them. The translator's work, in fact, is twofold: first and foremost, the translator is an active reader of the original work and second, the translator is a re-creator in another language of the original in response to the stimulation and inspiration roused by it. In other words, there always ought to be the utmost fidelity to the original text: this fidelity is not a blind one but that which allows healthy reciprocity between the original text and the translator. Unless the reciprocity works on spiritual as well as intellectual levels, what I call a community between the original text and the translator is hardly possible.

An American Japanologist who teaches Japanese literature in a Japanese university and who at the same time is a poet as well as a distinguished translator of Japanese literature into English, once wrote that when she had first learned, as a graduate student in the U. S., about honkadori [elaborate adaptation from a famous, often ancient poem: a poetical technique used in Japanese traditional waka or haiku poems], she was struck by a community of voices encompassing poets of several centuries apart. She was impressed by the fact that a newer poem is a kind of response to the older original one (honka) and the reader thus witnesses the performance of a miraculous dialogue transcending the time span of many centuries. Honkadori is not translation, but I find its core spirit quite similar to that of the act of translation.

The ideal relationship between the original text and the translator, in my view, is a community in this sense. And the community consists of dialogues between the two. A dialogue, by definition, takes place between two different people and we have to recognize the presence of the Other. However, a prerequisite for recognition of the Other is a distance, which compels one to be solitary. As a result, the final decision as to which word to choose and which style to choose is the translator's. A translator has to take a fateful leap. And there is, alas, no way to know which leap is right and which is wrong.

THE AGONY OF A TRANSLATOR

Amos Oz once demanded the Hebrew phrase 'kos te' be translated literally as 'a glass of tea' rather than the more idiomatic English expression 'a cup of tea.'

Though this episode might seem insignificant, it in fact reveals a fairly important aspect of translation.

A world which is evoked by an expression 'a cup of tea' is decidedly different from what the author Oz meant to create by 'a glass of tea.' He insisted on keeping 'a glass' because a country where people drink tea out of glasses, not cups, has its own culture nurtured by its own history, customs, geographical characteristics and climate. And this culture certainly forms a basis for literary works. Hence Oz's determined refusal of 'a cup of tea' despite the fact that 'a glass of tea' sounds odd to some readers.

In the actual process of translation, you are often forced to make decisions. This is no easy task since there are cases where you simply cannot find an answer no matter how hard and how long you ponder the problem. Here are a couple of examples from my own experience of translating Amos Oz's *Kufsa shkhorah* (Black Box in English) into Japanese.

As a symbolic example of a clash between two different languages, I would like to draw attention to just one Hebrew word in *Black Box*: *im'chem*. This small word gave me a big headache and finally defeated me.

It is the word with which the female protagonist of this novel signed her last letter to her second husband. There is no single word in English or in Japanese that corresponds to this. It can be translated as 'your mother' but this is by no means accurate. This 'your' in Hebrew is a plural, masculine (or mixed gender) possessive pronoun, the meaning of which is all lost in the English equivalent 'your mother' since the English 'your' is ambiguous in terms of gender and number. This word, in the final analysis, means that (1) "I am **your** [of the two men, her previous husband and the present one] mother," (2) "I am **your** [of all men on the earth] mother," (3) "I am **your** [of the whole human race struggling in the universe] mother," revealing in a subtle way a megalomaniac, or

fantasizing, aspect of this woman who appears to personify the archetypal Great Mother.

Nicholas de Lange, who has translated most of Amos Oz's books into English, solved this problem in this case by using 'Mother' with a capital M, cleverly connoting the double and triple meanings hidden in this word as well as one of the many sides of the personality of the woman.

In translating this word into Japanese, I encountered a Japanese-specific problem. The Japanese language does not have gender and it does not even have single/plural forms in a strict sense. To convey the complex, symbolic significance of the word *im'chem* in this context was out of the question. Yet, to keep the bold effect of the original Hebrew word was essential, partly because it was a signature, which is normally just a name, and also partly because a uniquely pretentious as well as mysterious element of the woman's style must not be lost.

My answer was somewhat similar to the English version but greatly inferior due to the nature of the Japanese language. Consequently, the symbolic significance of this protagonist's signature was half, if not entirely, lost, to my great distress and dissatisfaction. You feel, in such a case, powerless and useless despite the fact that your failure is not entirely caused by your own incompetence. It is, perhaps, at such times that one feels most intensely the translator's fate—the fate of being trapped between two languages and consequently between two cultures where there is no way out.

The next example is of a clash between two cultures. It involves a translation of a passage from the Bible quoted by one of the characters in *Black Box*. The English translation of the passage is quite faithful to the original : "Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For since I spoke against him, I do earnestly remember him still: **therefore bowels are troubled for him**"(Jeremiah, 31:20. My bold). Though I am fully aware that the authorized translation of the Bible rouse fierce debates in any country, I just want to touch upon this passage as a case in point. The Japanese translation for those words in bold did not convince me because the translated words are totally devoid of the important nuances and the typically strong way of expressing human emotions in the cultural environment within which the Bible, meaning here the Old Testament, was written.

If 'my bowels' ('meyī' in Hebrew which literally means intestine) are translated into 'my mind,' it loses the physicalness, the stark realism, which is an essential characteristic of the style of the Bible. This loss seriously weakens the effect of this quotation by the character at this point, if I were to use here the authorized Japanese translation of the Bible. The character worries, or pretends to worry, about his stepson, expressing his feelings by quoting this passage. His worries are so fierce that he feels, as it were, as if his guts are wrenched.

Here comes the usual dilemma of a translator: should the original be respected or should it be 'neutralized' or 'localized' so as to make it sound more natural in accordance with the nature of the translated language in its own cultural setting?

My decision in this instance, and in most instances, is the former. Too much localization, sacrificing the characteristics of the original and valuing the readability as well as naturalness of the translated text, does ruin the whole thing. The gut-wrenching, coarse, brutally powerful aspect of the original Hebrew language is, as far as I can see, the core around which Oz's characters and stories are formed. If you omit or ignore this fact, the outcome will be something like a stuffed creature, without flesh, blood, smell, voices, the sound of breathing, or the heart beats—all of which comprise the life of a literary work. The efforts to retain them as much as possible, I believe, is the way not to betray the author.

The process of translation is a battlefield between two clashing cultures: the farther apart the two cultures are, the fiercer the battle is. When you try too hard to remain faithful to the original, you sacrifice the readability of the translated text. But, on the other hand, when you give priority to readability, you are bound to sacrifice the essential quality of the original. In the end, I must admit, there is no ready-made answer to this question.

In the final event, whether a translation is good or not depends solely on the translator's sense of balance. Translators who are trapped between two languages and two cultures are, no doubt, bound to encounter the same problems all over again in each book they deal with. So long as we go through this battle with full awareness each time, we will have a chance of doing a good job.

We must, however, bear in mind that translation is possible in a spiritual community/communion between the original text and the translator. The communication therein is sometimes tense and sometimes elevating: it is never static. Every moment is a testing ground for the translator. Every moment can be either agony or bliss.

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