

STRUCTURAL EQUIVALENCE AND LITERARY TRANSLATION: A NOTE

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THERE IS NO GAINSAYING THAT THE GREATNESS of a great poet in any language is locked up in his or her own language. A Bendre (Kannada) is no Bendre in English, a Keats no Keats in Kannada, a Tagore (Bangla) no Tagore in Tamil, a Joyce no Joyce in Angami. . . .

A number of facts about language and some about literary language confirm this sad truth: a) Denotatively equivalent words may, and often do, differ in connotation and resonance; b) The feedback to meaning contrived by sounds typically has no cross-linguistic equivalent. The sound value, the alliterative beauty of a phrase like “the clatter of rattling cutlery” is impossible to render in other languages.¹ c) The iconicity of literary utterances with poetic intensity and what is called “structural equivalence” are often sharply at odds with each other.

This note illustrates the latter of the hurdles for faithful literary translation. An axiom of interlinguistic translation is “structural equivalence.” That is, one translates not word for word, but structure for structure, looking for a level in the target language to match that in the source language. “Avalu huDugi” (Kannada) is rendered as “she is a girl,” and not as “she (is) girl” because “a girl” rather than “girl” is structurally equivalent to “huDugi” in the above Kannada sentence.

I will take a much-discussed Joycean sentence from his short story “Araby”, recapitulate its iconicity as has been so brilliantly set forth in David Hirsch (1978), and then show that its “structurally equivalent” translations in different languages lose some literary meanings because of their differences with English as to linguistic structure. The sentence is

Gazing up into the darkness, I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity.

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The sentence illustrates in a classic manner the truism that the thesis that content is a function of form is more strictly true of literary utterances than of everyday utterances.

No other arrangement of the sentence can convey the same content. “Joyce’s sentence” as Hirsch (1978) points out “acquires part of its meaning by resonating against various unwritten [perhaps not untried] alternatives”: For example, if it were

I gazed up into the darkness. I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity.

the ongoing process that “gazing up into the darkness” conveys is lost. “It is not that the sensitive young boy (of the short story) gazed up into the sky, but that in the act of gazing up, something important happened to him.” Some translations of the sentence are given below:

imimi bi miriakti yingbid pongibi am sung
ingrst cadib n benlibi mi
midiwn iv isabu jjirim

darkness in the midst of looking at
vanity mocked at pushed man
like I myself saw (Manipuri)

iruLil alntu parkkaiyil
akampan va ttinal taLLiapaTTu
eLLinakaiyaDapaTTa viLangaga
ennai nan kaN Den

darkness-in deep-having see when vanity-by pushed-having ridiculed-having creature I me I saw (Tamil)

upar andhakar men dekhte huwe
maine apne apko mithyabhiman
dwara calit aur uphasit
jiv ke rup men dekha

above darkness in looking I self vanity driven and derived creature form in saw
(Hindi)

iruttu kaNNum neTTirikum
 mbol nen swayam ahambavattal
 valiczhakka paTTa puccikkya paTTa
 iivi avi kaNapaTTu :

darkness-in-eye fixing when I self conceit-by pushed mocked creature as saw
(Malayalam)

anigatt manz vuchit vuch me
panun pan akh ziv hyu eas
nast ThaThi karan chu

Darkness in looked-when saw I self a creature as whom vanity ridiculed
(Kashmiri)

The linear order of Joyce's clauses is important. "The syntax of Joyce's sentence," to quote Hirsch,

is characterized by stunning symmetry and counterpoint. A subordinate clause begins the sentence and a subordinate clause ends it. Linking these subordinate clauses is an independent clause modifying both. Each subordinate clause contains five words. The operative word in the initial clause is the first word in the clause (gazing) and the operative word in the third clause is the last (vanity). These happen also to be the first and the last words of the whole sentence. The sentence begins in a note of perception (gazing) and ends on a note of real or imagined self-knowledge (vanity). Moreover while the beginning of the sentence describes a voluntary movement upward ("gazing up"), the concluding clause describes an involuntary attraction downward ("driven and derided by vanity"). The contrapuntal perfection of the sentence is augmented by Joyce's starting it with a word denoting a physical activity (gazing) and ending it with a word denoting a moral condition (vanity). (82-85)

All this is lost in left-branching languages – Manipuri, Tamil, Hindi and Malayalam. Being a right-branching language, Kashmiri does capture the symmetry made for by the fact that the initial clause depicts a voluntary movement upward and the final clause describes an involuntary attraction downward. But since it is non-verb-initial in subjectless clauses, the word for "gazing" does not come initially, thus losing the contrapuntal opposition of the sentence-initial perception and the sentence-final self-knowledge that characterizes the English original. Further, the independent middle clause placed in the English original between the two subordinate clauses "helps to locate the speaker squarely between the darkness above and the emptiness below." This is lost too in SOV languages but is captured in a SVO language like Kashmiri.

To perorate, quite a few literary meanings are lost in literary translation because the source and the receptor languages are structured the way they are.

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NOTE

1. Any number of examples can be adduced here. Look at this exchange:

A: How is your servant maid?

B: She is good as servant maids go.

(After a month)

A: How's your servant maid now?

B: She went as servant maids go!

The creative play on the verb "go" is impossible to reproduce in other languages so that a translation of the exchange into any language has to be per force vapid. These insurmountable barriers notwithstanding one agrees with Goethe's pronouncement that "translation is impossible but essential."

WORK CITED

Hirsch, David (1978). "Linguistic Structure and Literary Meaning." *Journal of Literary Semantics*, Vol. 2, No. 1.