

## Linguistic and Cultural Issues in Literary Translation

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Translation is an act of establishing relationship between two languages and two cultures. *Lotman* (1972) aptly says: "No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre the structure of nature language." (211 - 32) So units of translation are not just a word, a sentence, or a page, or even a text, but they cover the whole gamut of language and culture in which that text is created. *Basnett* uses an interesting analogy, "language is the heart within the body of culture and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life energy. In the same way that the surgeon operates on the heart cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator cannot separate the language from the culture" (57 - 89)

*Zefzaf* is well known in the *East*, particularly in *North Africa*. Owing to the special cultural ties with North Africa, some of his work has been translated into French, but in general, little is known about him in the western language. In the process of translation, we always come across a statement that the translator should be equally proficient in two languages - the source and the target. What do we mean by the word 'proficiency' in language? This proficiency means that the translator should know all the aspects of both the languages, i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. At the same time, he should be well versed with the skill of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Here, the role of linguistic becomes significant. It has a lot to offer to the discipline of translation. *Shveitser* believes that 'translation could be the object of linguistic study.' *Catford* in his book, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* says, "...Clearly, then, any theory of translation must draw upon a theory of language a general linguistic theory" (186). Linguistics and for translation are interrelated. A translator can use the finding of linguistics for translation. Similarly, a linguist, too, can develop theory of translation. Some definitions of linguistics are:

Linguistics is the scientific inquiry into human language, into its structure and uses and into the relationship between them (*Finnegan and Besnier* 1989)

Linguistics is the science of language (*Crystal* 1987)

Linguistics is the scientific study of the system/principles underlying human languages (Verma and Krishnaswamy 1989)

Linguistics is concerned with how language actually works and not with how it ought to work. It is descriptive in nature and not prescriptive.

## 1. Linguistic Issues

### 1.1 Narrative style

Realism and attention to details in simple stark style characterize most of the *Zefzaf's* stories and this aspect does not pose problems to the translator, particularly challenging from the translation point of view is handling the extensive use of free direct speech switch to indirect speech.

The translation of literary style of this kind has to pay particular attention to certain linguistic uses. For example, proximal deictic adverbs and demonstratives such as invite the inference of a speaking subjectivity. Other features like the use of third person pronouns and past tense suggest the presence of another voice. *Zefzaf* replays some of the subjective impression of his nameless character through the consciousness of that character, and, at the same time by using the letter features, manage to maintain the narrator's perspective. Here is another example that illustrates this interaction between the two perspectives:

He picks up radish roots, takes a drink and looks from behind the window at the vases of flowers and the couple of doves flying together in return to their place over the roof. Maybe they have a nest there. Every couple above or under the earth builds some kind of nest for themselves. But it might get destroyed before they leave each other or after their deaths. Every nest is destined to be destroyed and people fight with all possible means to destroy their nests. But he is not positive what the two doves have on the roof, a nest, a hen, a cock or nothing. Whatever is hidden, no one else can know when it is hidden walls or barriers (*see Brinton 1995:173-175*)

The initial narrator's stance is indicated by the use of the third person pronoun in the first two descriptive lines in the following italic part. This presence is dominated by the character's perspective, at least in terms of the explicit features of narration. The passage, then, can be understood as expressing the narrator's subject consciousness. However, the experience is not just narrated but all so mediated by the narrator's didactic and intrusive presence. As typical in this style, the author in many parts of the story portrays the subjectivity of his character from the vantage perspective of the reporting narrator and, through process of empathy, identifies himself with the character.

### 1.2 Semantic Prosody

Another of sensitive area in the translation of the story is semantic of discourse prosody. This aura of meaning is acquired by a lexical item "Through its repeated association with other items in the language" (*Baker 2000: Stubbs 2001*) or "A feature which extends over more than one unit in a

linear string” (2001: 65) The pivotal word nest/s in the translated story for example occurs 27 times and interacts with a number of different collocates mainly positive such as the adjective ‘happy’ and the verb ‘build’ or ‘rebuild’. By looking at the textual environment of this word, however, we find that the author skilfully conveys a negative attitude towards its content by infusing it with irony and casting doubt on its rationally pleasant connotations.

## 2. Cultural Issues

A literary translation is a device of art used to release the text from its “dependence on prior cultural knowledge” (*Herzfeld* 2003: 110). However, it is not an easy task to transplant a text steeped in one culture into another. Particularly, demanding from the translator’s point of view is the use of culturally specific metaphors and allusions.

### 2.1 Metaphors

*Zefzaf’s* use of metaphors is sparing and the few used pose no significant problems in translation. The italic noun phrase at the end of the following quotation might not be crystal clear but it is connotative and, therefore, was literally translated:

Always he sits there in the same place smoking, drinking, and trying to remember many things that might take him back to the naked childhood.

Other than that, *Zefzaf’s* metaphorical language seems to be affected by the western idiom. No more is this point well illustrated than in the following italicized simile from the ending of the story:

In a moment, he fell off his chair near the window bumping his head against the wall. The sky remained bright while he was grunting like a hog in a sky.

Such transparent similes pose no problems in understanding to the western reader.

### 2.2 Allusions

The occurrence of allusions, however, is more challenging. Not only does the translator of *Zefzaf* have to cope with the usual linguistic difficulties, but he also has to handle different references and allusion. In some of its parts, the text of this story is interspersed with diverse references: Quranic, historical and cultural. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

How many strange things the human body carries without our being aware of them! There are two angels, for example, one on the right shoulder recording the good deeds and the other on the left recording the bad deeds. The human body may also be inhabited by devils and in this body, there is also a spirit whose essence we cannot know since it is from a command of the lord.

In this excerpt, there is more than one allusion. The reference to demons possessing human bodies is almost a universal superstitious belief shared in many cultures and is in no need of explanation. The other two references to the angels, and the spirit, however, are more Islamic in their

nature and the English reader needs to be made aware of their scriptural origins. These references and others similar in nature are part of the prior cultural knowledge taken for granted by the author writing for a predominantly Muslim Arab audience. To give the closest approximation of the source language, therefore, it was necessary to opt for “glossing” or using explanatory foot notes. Here is another example with an historical reference that also requires the use of a footnote.

These cultural and historical allusions give a certain density to the language and need to be explicated in the translation to bring forth the richness of the text for the new readers. Excessive dependence on footnotes, however, can be rather intrusive, and therefore, their uses were minimized as much as possible. Sometimes, explanatory notes were either deemed unnecessary or integrated into the body of the text instead of footnotes. The following excerpt from the translated short story is a case in point:

His wife was pretty, and he used to buy her glasses, poetry, sweets and rabbits slaughtered and live. And sometimes he even preferred her to his two young children. But she used to hit him or beat her cheeks and thighs.

The cultural reference to a husband buying pottery and rabbits slaughtered and live as gifts to his wife are indicators of the local culture. Keeping this reference adds a foreignizing fidelity and gives the original flavour of a different culture. For this reason, the reference does not need a footnote since it is clear from the contextual surroundings. The second reference is to the custom of some women in the Middle East who beat their cheeks and thighs as an ultimate sign of sadness when they are mourning their dead. The bracketed note was inserted in the text to ensure that the significance of this lamenting act on the part of the wife is not lost to the western reader.

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