

Dysfunction and Its Effect in Literary Translation

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ABSTRACT: As we acknowledge that the process of translation underwrites cultural exchanges across disciplines, we can no longer consider the act of translating and its results to be value-free. Rather, while the results express the reciprocal relationship between cultures, we are compelled to question how one culture becomes altered and transformed by its encounter with another. It is the aim of this article to illustrate, with the help of selective examples of translations of prose and poetry, how aspects of dysfunction in translating not only distort, but deny the world as we know it to be, hence beg the question “when is translation no longer translation but something else?”

RÉSUMÉ: Si nous reconnaissons que le processus de traduction supporte les échanges culturels entre disciplines, nous ne pouvons plus considérer les actes de traductions et leurs résultats comme étant exempt de toute valeur socioculturelle. Alors que le produit des traductions exprime plutôt une relation réciproque entre deux cultures, nous sommes poussés à nous interroger sur la façon que les cultures se modifient et se transforment lorsqu’elles se rencontrent. Le but de cet article est de démontrer, à l’aide d’exemples pertinents tirés d’œuvres de poésie et de prose, comment les aspects de dysfonctionnement de la traduction déforment, et nous refusent même le Monde que nous connaissons. Finalement, la question qui se pose est celle-ci: à quel point est-ce qu’une traduction devient quelque chose qui n’est plus une traduction? À quel point est-ce qu’elle devient autre chose?

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“‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’—but what is the thing
that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?”

(Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*, quoting Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*)

I shall begin with the simple observation that we can no longer consider translation to be value-free; that is, merely a technical procedure of specialized interest, nor can we evaluate it within such a narrow scope. Rather, we see translation responding to Walter Benjamin’s well-known concept of *Translatability* (71) and all it connotes. For example, in Benjamin’s terms, should a text “prove to be untranslatable, it is not because of any inherent difficulty, but because of the looseness with which meaning attaches itself to it” (81). I shall return to the idea of “untranslatability” later on in this article. For the moment let us consider the importance of a text’s “translatability,” for translation not only assures that the text lives on in more than its “original” form, but it demonstrates that a text is “translatable”—an important measure of its worth in that the very capacity to be translated is a sign of its aesthetic, semantic, cultural, and political significance (Brodzki 208). Moreover, as translation expresses the reciprocal relationship between cultures and languages, we are challenged to question whether and how each language or, in the case of my present focus, each culture is altered and transformed by its encounter with another. This is not an idle concern, for the cultural and economic power of languages is by no means equal, as we can see from the impact of English on our contemporary world. This inequality in the power of different languages, and by extension of the cultures to which they give expression, distorts the place of each; the less powerful languages must fight merely to survive.

If we address theoretical arguments to the practice of translation, as nebulous as the concept *theoretical* is, we find that theoretical analyses of the act of translation are not merely focused on analytical procedures in the interpretation of primary material, but embrace ways of thinking that are not easily pigeonholed. Since languages are human constructs and not pure mediators of reality (Moran 83), translation necessarily engages differing notions of reality, language, power, and gender within the source and target cultures. Here I would emphasize the support contemporary translators find in Derrida’s views on translation as an activity. I’m referring specifically to Derrida’s concept of “controllable plurivocality” (140), that is, his insistence on translation not being merely transcription, but productive writing (153). His discourse on how languages generate meaning¹ constitutes contemporary theory’s exploration of the topic and provides the translator with an *internal* justification for an interpretative method in translating (Rand 437), thus acknowledging that translation as a phenomenon is always transformative in some way. Importantly, the justification for this interpretative approach is that it legitimizes our abandonment of the

idea of a singular interpretation of meaning—hence the notion that interpretative reading can, for example, be viewed as *double-reading*. On the one hand, we have the simple determination of the meaning of the sentences read, which Derrida shares with common readers (Abrams 304), and, on the other, we have the active interpretation and dissemination of meaning together with the construction of it in the target language. This does not mean, however, that the danger of misrepresenting cultural identities, which is inherent in the act of translation, has somehow been eliminated. I choose to call translational misdeeds, whether they are accidental or intentional, *dysfunction* since their distortions and denials impair the target text's ability to represent the World as we know it.

It is a commonplace that all types of translations involve some loss or addition of information. My concern here, however, does not involve the inevitable, the unavoidable, but rather the *avoidable* losses or additions. As regards the latter, we for instance come upon translators adhering to a methodology which in the current theoretical discourse has been termed *naturalizing* (Alexis D9)²; that is, producing a translated work that reads as if it had been written in its target language. As a particularly objectionable example of naturalizing I would like to cite a recent re-translation of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, specifically volume II, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, which now in James Grieve's translation carries "gor blimey"-isms, and has a French provincial woman saying: "Ooh, young master don't look so good! You should look at yourself, you should ... you're like death warmed up!" Such a translation looks and sounds so conspicuously British (Alexis D8-9) that the uninitiated reader might think Proust was English. For those who know better, Proustian prose mediates memories, the correlations of his sensations and ideas, leading to depths only reached by the greatest fiction (Alexis D8). Proust has properly been admired for the formal beauty of his French, something which will be lost on readers who find themselves in the "Upstairs/Downstairs" world of British working-class television comedy. Grieve's translation is an example of cultural *dislocation*—or more accurately—*cultural appropriation*, which might serve marketing and publishing interests in its target culture, but in actuality does more than a disservice to its readers. Such a translation devalues the original, for it distorts the original text. In the process, a much admired French canonical text deemed to have significant aesthetic value is trivialized in another culture to the latter's ultimate loss. If we carry the thought further, we will see that this act of *cultural appropriation* involves practices of knowledge and power. Just as the early Christian Church provided instruction on the articles of faith to converts while excluding the uninitiated (Moran 2), the popularized translations of canonical texts target uninitiated readers and exclude (by means of marketing, aesthetic choices of cover designs, and so on) knowledgeable readers.

Lawrence Venuti writes about translation's power to construct or unravel foreign cultural identities and the potential source of scandal inherent in the

practice (67). Among examples that immediately come to mind is Jostein Gaarder's *Sophies Verden*. In her translation, appropriately titled *Sophie's World*, Paulette Möller adopted the expressed agenda of making the book more suitable for American tastes. The dysfunctional aspects here, then, are deliberate as the translator blots out Norwegian cultural identity by replacing most of the Norwegian cultural links with specifically American examples. Although we may agree that participants in different cultures to some degree at least share a common experience of everyday life, one that constitutes a common ground of experience—in other words a *transworld* identity of a sort—to replace specific cultural references with ones alien to the original text and its context can be seen as the creation of a textual *aporia*, a textual site where the writing deconstructs itself. In the process the translator who brought it about also eliminates the basis for cultural reciprocity that translation is supposed to make manifest. More importantly, the ethnocentric changes in this American English translation also result in countering Gaarder's seminal argument that we create civilization and culture through asking questions and finding answers (Immonen B5). Beyond that, we know that the way any civilization renews itself is through contact with the geographically and linguistically foreign. Here, then, the scandal Venuti is talking about is the exclusion of values that do not serve domestic agendas, hence the translator's decision to aim for a particular kind of intelligibility turns out to be ideological and political. In Benjamin's terms, the loss affects the *aura* of the original, a hard to define (indeed barely explicable) feature of a work, which we yet sense to be specific to the nationality of the literature we read (Benjamin 194).

Venuti also speaks about the importance of *cultural and temporal coherence* (68) in translated texts. An example of a failure to maintain this coherence is Irma Margareta Martin's 1997 translation of Eeva Joenpelto's novel *Rikas ja Kunniallinen* [*Rich & Respected*], published by the Finnish-American Translators Association. The choice of linguistic styles in this work has the effect of extending the protagonist's time-span to an impossible half millennium: sometimes the translator uses archaic highbrow, some would say Shakespearean, English exemplified by phrases such as "without further ado," at other times she switches to contemporary American usages such as "I've had it up to here." If we consider the two quoted examples as markers of the translation's stylistic range, we can see that the cultural and temporal coherences are lost as the novel's translation takes place between two languages (English English and American English) as well as the two cultures, each of which has its own identity and time-frame. The *dysfunction* in this case can be attributed to the translator's ignoring of the text's own stylistic, cultural, and historical limits; the result is that the target text menaces its own semantic reliability. Moreover, the lack of temporal coherence disrupts the cultural memory of the work.

Since translation can be seen as the most intimate act of reading, it can also be an arena of subconscious choices. With this in mind I would like to shift my

focus somewhat, to dysfunctional choices in translation that are subconsciously rather than intentionally chosen. Although the former are often subtler and less powerful than deliberately made choices, they can be seen to signal an ongoing ideological shift. The recently published translation of the Finnish classic, Väinö Linna's *Täällä Pohjan Tähtien Alla* [*Under the North Star*, trans. Richard Impola 2001] from which I have chosen one example, includes a curious change in the comment uttered by Otto Kivivuori, a somewhat rough male character, to his shy bride, Anna: "Kun sinä sitä varjelet niin kun pikkulapsen silmää" (24). A literal rendering of the comment might read: "You protect it as if it were a toddler's eye." The published translation by Richard Impola reads: "Seeing that you guard it like you would a jewel." The departure of this translation from the original might be termed *dehistoricization* or *cultural dislocation* or both. Viewing the choice within contemporary mores, I suspect that a study of current translations of familiar similes, especially if they are to indicate the *worth* of something, might reveal that the comparisons involving human components no longer serve to convey value as clearly and recognizably as do comparisons drawn from the material world. However, in this particular example something emotionally close and very human gets exchanged for something as cold and distant as "a jewel," an idea that would be distinctly foreign idea to Linna's rough male character in the Finnish landscape of the 1880s. We see that the published choice finds itself in the cross-fire of two *new historicist* views: one that suggests that all history is contemporary history, and the other that warns the translator to be wary of what historians term "anachronism," i.e. "the failure to appreciate the unique social, cultural, and intellectual frameworks of previous eras" (Moran 143).

Translational dysfunction can appear not only in the semantic, but also in the stylistic choices a translator makes. The recent volume of poetry by the Finnish poet, Aila Meriluoto, contains a section of her translations of Emily Dickinson's poems. Dickinson's preponderant use of dashes, idiosyncrasies of punctuation, and unusual and frequent capitalizations, are inventions that not only stand out as her poetry's most persistent and deliberate aspects (Stonum 23) but notably extend the dimensions of her language. Meriluoto's Finnish translations, on the other hand, with the exception of a few dashes, unquestioningly standardize Dickinson's punctuation and capitalizations. The results become a testimony to the more than superficial importance of stylistics. While Dickinson in the original alters the reader's habitual perceptions as her dashes work to slow down the act of reading and draw his or her attention to the poet's lexical choices and figural language, their deletion in the Finnish translations makes the poems appear almost synoptic. It is as if the reader is compelled to rush through the lines to capture the achieved, condensed "message." Furthermore the unusual capitalization in the original works to emphasize certain word choices; by comparison the lack of capitalization in the translations flattens the words, and hence the ideas for which they stand. A brief comparison between Dickinson's

original, presented immediately below, and, below that, the Finnish translation, together with my re-translation back into English, gives us an idea of the semantic losses accrued in the process.

Each was to each The Sealed Church,
Permitted to commune this – time –
Lest we too awkward show
At Supper of the Lamb.

The Hours slid fast – as Hours will,
Clutched tight, by greedy hands –
so faces on two Decks, look back,
Bound to opposing lands –
(152-53)

Suljetut kirkot kumpikin
näin liittoon sallittiin,
jotta ei kömpelyytemme
pilaisi Ehtoollista

Niin tunniti lipui tiheinä
kuin käten rutistamat –
niin kasvot kohti toisiaan
kun laivat sivuuttavat. (109)

Closed churches both
were thus allowed to unite
so that our awkwardness
not spoil the Sacrament

Thus hours densely glided by
as if squeezed by hands –
so face to face
when ships each other pass.

Most regrettably, Meriluoto's translation eliminates the unique presentational style that the author gave the original. Here the translator seems to have been unaware of an immensely powerful factor, especially in the translation of canonical texts, namely what is known as the *legacy*. In Dickinson's case this includes, among other features and devices, her frequent use of the poetic metre of hymnology, a crucial device given the contextual importance of metre, which empirical studies have found it to be "a prime physical and emotional constituent of poetic meaning" (Fussell 3).

Possibly the legacy upon which the largest number of limitations rest is the Biblical legacy of individual faiths (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, etc.). It imposes a theological system of beliefs on some of the common allusions we find in literature, but is especially important in devotional texts, requiring of readers what Venuti terms "an historical consciousness" (84). The devotional verse from which Linna's title *Under the North Star* derives is this:

Täällä Pohjantähden alla,
on nyt kotomaamme;
mutta tähtein tuolla puolen
toisen kodon saamme.³

In a literal translation (in which the rhyme-scheme is admittedly lost) it reads thus:

Here, under the North Star
our homeland is now.
But on the other side of the sky
we are given a new home.

A published English translation of the Finnish original reads:

Here beneath the northern star
our homeland do we make.
But beyond the heavens are
the new homes we shall take.⁴

The Biblical legacy the latter version ignores is no less than the theological argument on which Lutheranism stands, namely that it is by the Grace of God we are given “a new home in Heaven,” rather than its being there for our taking. Further, the flippancy apparent in the last two lines ignores the Durkheimian claim that knowledge of the sacred in texts is instantly recognizable (Young 3), and hence should be equally recognizable in translations.

As a final example I’d like to look at Benjamin’s concept of *untranslatability*, according to which the contributing factor often lies in translators ignoring the conventions by which a work can either be read or listened to—in short, the conventions by which semantic content can be carried over into another idiom. Or as the following examples show, what can happen when the conventions of the American English language and its cultural assumptions encounter the modes, values, and strategies of the Finnish language.

I have chosen my example from David Mamet’s play *Oleanna* principally because by now Mamet’s work, and this play in particular, is familiar to many, and because it consists mainly of a dialogue between John, a university professor, and Carol, his female student, a limitation in cast size which benefits the following short analysis since it avoids the confusion that several characters might cause. From the outset, in this play we are confronted with a mode of American speech based on simple sentences and excessive repetitions. The speech often typical of Mamet’s choices is supposed to relate to the unequal power positions of the two characters, positions which change during the course of the play.

Right from the beginning there are cultural conventions and factors that cannot easily be carried over into idiomatic Finnish and made believable for the play’s Finnish audiences. For instance, in the course of the play, Carol challenges John to explain words and phrases he employs in both his teaching and writing—words and phrases by which Mamet structures John’s language making

it coercive and dominating, which diminishes human contact. I've chosen the following few lines of the dialogue as a random example:

Carol: No, no, no. I'm doing what I'm told. It's difficult for me. It's difficult ...

John: ... but ...

Carol: I don't ... lots of language ...

John: ... please ...

Carol: The language, the "things" that you say ...

(Mamet 1993a 6)

The vast differences in linguistic literacy between a university student and a professor that are presented in the beginning of the play cannot be convincingly replicated in Finnish language culture. The reasons are many, among them the relatively young history of Finnish *kirjakieli*, or written language. From its inception this language was expected to be understood by every literate person, among them most certainly those who have reached the level of literacy required of a university student. In addition, professors are commonly accorded a position of authority. The reason for the first occurrence of linguistic combat between the characters in the original play thus becomes an unfamiliar and a distancing obstruction when the play is staged in a Finnish translation that closely follows the original. The numerous staccato exchanges which don't allow either character to proceed and finish a word, not to mention a sentence, the utterances which leap ahead at breathless speed, anticipating objections and refusals, ultimately allow only some words to stand out and be recognized, while much of the rest is lost both to the verbal opponents and presumably to the audience.

We see, then, that Mamet's dialogue works somewhat like close-up shots on film in which the linguistic gesture rather than the meaning dominates. That, in turn, leads to the linguistic hierarchization of instances where speech's darting ahead has eliminated modifying aspects of the dialogue. In their absence, the leaps from one highly charged word to another allow no time for reflexion and lead to a disastrous end. The fact that Mamet's original play employs a culturally specific mode of speech foreign to the Finnish mode of speech, whose rhythms and patterns do not consist of fragmented and truncated words and constant interruptions of one speech by another, presents an unfamiliar kind of translation problem. In Benjamin's terms, the American original literarily translated into Finnish incorporates "a looseness of meaning" to the extent that the shocking ending in the play seems to Finnish audiences insufficiently credible. It leaves the audiences intellectually and emotionally unengaged. Here we have an example where the relationship between cultures is merely fractionally reciprocal; under these circumstances, I suggest, Mamet's play lacks translatability into Finnish in particular.⁵

We may also say that Mamet's play in its idiosyncratic use of language encounters a specifically translational problem; namely that of finding categories of thought which fit better the complex of observable facts such as modes of speech within Finnish culture. Here the inequality in the power of languages needs to be examined from a less often observed point of view, namely, how the power is diffused and effected. These are factors that become crucial parts of the play. Appropriately Bella Brodzki deserves to have the concluding thought: We are prompted to recognize "that the difficulty of translation derives no less from the violent and volatile inequality between languages than from the inherent nonequivalence of languages" (218).

In summing up, we know that in the act of translating cultural literacy articulates the world beyond words. We know furthermore that aspects of *dysfunction*, if not recognized as such, serve to misrepresent cultures, in terms both of their achievements and nature. *Naturalization* between two major cultures such as the English and French has, in relative terms, probably only a minimal effect. There are always enough knowledgeable people to evaluate the results and make their criticism known; in the case of smaller cultures, however, where the practice is not merely a random happening but an ongoing phenomenon, the long-term and cumulative effects of translation dysfunction can be serious. To take the matter a step further, where translation becomes merely a tool in enriching the target culture's literary riches, we ought to ask whether we are dealing with "translation" as it ought to be or as a process that lacks reciprocity and serves the best interests of something else. Seen from a long-term perspective, *naturalization* on the whole serves the best interest of the homogenization of cultures, hence the impoverishment of both the source and target cultures. Importantly, it is absorbed into the latter's fiction about itself, rather than serving as a challenge to it. At its worst, the absence of observable contrasts between cultures and their literary expression destroys self-scrutiny and fosters unquestioning acceptance of whatever is easily comprehensible and familiar. Where translation in its purpose is skewed to such an extent we might question whether the nature of translation (the preservation of a work's literary excellence in its target language) is in the practice of *naturalization* once again deliberately set against itself, made to change at a cost to its diversity and excellence. I think Umberto Eco expressed the conundrum best in the following summary: "That words, sentences, and texts usually convey more than their literal sense is a commonly accepted phenomenon, but the problems are: how many secondary senses can be conveyed by a linguistic expression, and which ones a translation should preserve at all costs." (9)

NOTES

1. Here I would like to refer particularly to Jacques Derrida's *The Ear of the Other; Otobiography, transference, translation*.
2. See, for example, James S. Holmes in his posthumously published collection of articles titled *Translated! Papers on literary translation and translation studies*.
3. "Kotomaamme" is normally attributed to Juhana Fredrik Granlund, though it has also been claimed that Jaakko Juteini co-authored the poem. The poem itself is often treated as a children's song, though in hymn metre. For further discussion, see <http://fi.wikisource.org/wiki/Koto-maamme>.
4. This stanza appears on page 55 of the "Post Script" by Kathleen Osgood Dana that the editor of the *Journal of Finnish Studies* has appended to Susan Vickberg's review of *Under the North Star*, Richard Impola's translation of Väinö Linna's *Täällä Pohjan Tähden Alla*. I have chosen to cite this particular translation of the verse in "Kotomaamme" simply because it allows me to make the theoretical point that concerns me here.
5. For further discussion of this point, see Leppihalme.

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