

SOME PROBLEMATICS OF BECOMING A GOOD LITERARY TRANSLATOR

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Abstract

Literary translation transcends the boundaries of a mere translation discipline and assumes the profound responsibility of preserving narratives that serve as foundational elements of human civilization. Combining the skills of translation with the artistry of creative writing, literary translation surpasses the conventional expectations of a translator. A literary translator bears the weighty task of not only conveying the message and meaning of a translated work but also encapsulating its aesthetic essence. This scholarly article delves into an exploration of five primary challenges encountered in the realm of literary translation, alongside an examination of fidelity as the fundamental principle governing the translation of literary works. It is crucial to acknowledge that the notion of an ideal and flawless literary translation, and consequently an ideal literary translator, remains elusive. Rather, the pinnacle of literary translation lies in the production of a translation that progressively approximates the intended meaning and form of the original work.

Keywords:

Fidelity, message/meaning and form, skill and arts

Abstrak

Penerjemahan sastra lebih dari sekadar satu cabang dalam penerjemahan ; ia adalah sebuah kanal untuk mewariskan cerita yang merupakan salah satu sokoguru peradaban. Penerjemahan sastra menggabungkan keterampilan menerjemahkan dan seni menulis kreatif. Bidang ini, karenanya, menuntut lebih dari seorang penerjemah. Penerjemah sastra mesti mampu menyampaikan pesan/makna karya yang diterjemahkan sekaligus bentuk yang indah dari karya tersebut. Ada lima tantangan utama dalam penerjemahan sastra yang dibahas di artikel ini, dan satu prinsip utama dalam menerjemahkan karya sastra, yaitu kebersetiaan. Pada akhirnya, dapat dinyatakan bahwa penerjemahan sastra, dan karenanya juga penerjemah sastra, yang ideal dan sempurna itu tidak ada. Penerjemahan sastra paling banter menghasilkan karya terjemahan yang semakin mendekati makna/pesan dan bentuk dari karya asli.

Kata kunci:

kebersetiaan, makna/pesan dan bentuk, keterampilan dan seni

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the world of translation, literary translation or translation of literary works is often compared to, or contrasted with, technical or non-literary translation. This simple categorization, although inherently problematic, seems to be helpful for translation learners. At least we now know that a translator cannot translate all texts that are offered to them. They have to choose texts that are appropriate for their abilities and talents (Loffredo and Perteghella 2021). This categorization, however, is also problematic, among other things, because it leaves several questions unanswered: what is meant by 'literature', or more simply, is there such a thing as literary language?

In literary translation, for simplicity's sake, the source text (ST) that is translated into the target text (TT) is literary or fictional text. Traditionally, this refers to works of prose, poetry, and drama. Nowadays, non-fiction creative works such as travel writing, memoirs, or testimonies can also be classified as literary works. So can be works that are not traditionally in written form, such as oral literature, “*pantun*” (Malay poetry), film, and the like. As suggested by Venuti (2018), for instance, the understanding and scope of literature, therefore, has expanded and covers almost all works that are narrative and contain human stories.

Translating literary works in such a broad sense certainly involves unique and different problems than technical translation. If in technical texts, successful translation is measured by how accurate and precise the translation can convey the message of the source text, in literary translation, the message alone is not enough. In literary works, there is something called 'form', which is also no less important than 'message' or 'meaning'. Poetry, for example, pays close attention to form in terms of rhyme, meter, and the like (Shreve 2019) and this form requires attention and special treatments from the translator.

Thus, if in the so-called traditional literary works there are those terms like 'meaning' or 'message' and 'form', in modern literary works,

too, both are still considered important. The degree of importance can vary between genres and even between certain literary works. The question then is, is there a general strategy to maintain the dignity of 'meaning' and 'form' in the translation of modern literary works? (Loffredo and Perteghella 2021).

This article aims to explore the underlying principle and fundamental challenges in the realm of literary translation, proposing a highly pragmatic approach. Primarily, it will delve into the distinctiveness of literary translation as a field and the specific hurdles it poses for translators. The paramount principle in translating literary works lies in the fidelity to the source text, encompassing not only its semantic dimensions but also its aesthetic and formal elements. Furthermore, this discussion will encompass five core issues that demand comprehension and resolution from literary translators. Ultimately, it endeavors to instill an understanding that the notion of an ideal and flawless literary translation is elusive, given the intricate interplay of language and culture inherent in the translator's task of recreating a literary work. Nevertheless, within this paradigm, the concept of a "good" or "optimal" literary translation remains valid, denoting a translation that upholds the integrity of the original text and affords readers of the translated work an experience akin to that of readers of the original literary manuscript.

2. WHY LITERARY TRANSLATION?

Literary works, whether in traditional or modern sense, play a central role in the formation and preservation of human civilization. According to sociological and anthropological studies, humans are bound by stories, specifically myths. And, literature serves as the vessel or container of these stories or myths (Barthes, 2017). Stories or myths unite humans and create a sense of collectiveness and solidarity that allows for the development of civilization from generation to generation. Without stories or myths, humans, both on a personal and collective

scale, would not experience the learning and refinement of civilization. Only through collective effort and the passage of time has human civilization reached its current level.

In this context, literary translators play a critical role. A literary translator is not merely a language or message converter. A literary translator is actively and creatively involved in the cultural translation of literary works. As stated by Landers (2017), a translation practitioner and academic, literary translators are the only group of translators who consistently involved in the creative process of writing and re-writing stories using languages.

As a result, literary translations are expected and considered to have equivalent or at least comparable literary content to the original work. Ideally, a literary translator is also a writer, or at the very least, well-versed in literature and enjoys reading literary works, both in the source and target languages. Koesalah S. Toer, the younger brother of the prominent Indonesian writer Pramoedya A. Toer, once stated that as a cultural translator, a translator needs to be proficient in both the source and target languages. Specifically, a literary translator must also have a good understanding of many other factors such as history, tradition, societal situation, ideology, and others. Without understanding these factors, the result of a literary translation may feel dry and riddled with mistakes. If that's the case, it becomes difficult to consider the translator as being part of the creative process of the literary work (Toer 2017).

Translating literary works, or becoming a literary translator, is not an easy task. If technical translation is already challenging, literary translation is even more complicated. Regarding the challenges faced by literary translators, Mikhail Rudnitzky, a Russian translation expert, gives us an anecdote: translating [literary works] is a process similar to someone who has to describe a beautiful house. Unfortunately, the house is in another country, and there are no similar buildings in their own country. The architecture, building materials, construction

techniques, and so on are unfamiliar in their own country. Even the landscape surrounding the beautiful house is unknown in their country. So, how does a literary translator work? (Rudnitzsky 2018).

In the realm of comparative literature, the role of literary translation is of utmost importance, although it is not without its fair share of critique. The ideal approach suggests that individuals who truly aspire to comprehend and explore a nation's literary treasures should acquire proficiency in the language of that particular nation. This linguistic competence enables them to fully appreciate the nuances of its literary works, akin to native readers (de Zepetnek 1998). Nevertheless, the ability to attain fluency in multiple languages is a rare talent possessed by only a select few. Consequently, many scholars engaged in comparative literature heavily rely on translations of the literary works they aim to study. In order to facilitate competent analyses, it is presupposed that these literary translations exhibit objectively high quality.

The absence of literary translation endeavors would deprive countless individuals of the opportunity to engage with and appreciate literary works in their entirety, encompassing their rich content, values, and capacities. Language barriers would hinder their access to such cultural and artistic expressions. Non-English-speaking readers will not be able to appreciate Shakespeare, Kurt Vonnegut, Ernest Hemingway, Salman Rusdhie, and many more writers. Non-Indonesian readers would not be able to enjoy the beauty of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Umar Kayam, Eka Kurniawan, and many other Indonesian writers. Thus, literary translation serves as a pivotal means to overcome these barriers and fulfils several significant functions within this context.

In short, literary translation assumes a pivotal position in facilitating the exchange of cultures through its ability to render foreign literature accessible. By surmounting language barriers, it paves the way for intercultural dialogue and engenders a profound appreciation of diverse societies, as well as promotes greater mutual understanding

among nations. Furthermore, it contributes to the augmentation of literary traditions, allowing for the enrichment and expansion of creative endeavors. In this manner, literary translation serves as an indispensable conduit between languages and cultures, effectively fostering the global dissemination of ideas, narratives, and artistic manifestations (Warwai 2014).

3. PRINCIPLES IN LITERARY TRANSLATION: FIDELITY

As a skill, and especially as an art, the process of literary translation has both objective and subjective aspects. The first aspect can be understood as a set of principles (basics) that must be minimally adhered to and executed by a literary translator when performing his/her work. This is the SOP (standard) level of literary translators. And at this level, we will discuss further.

The subjective aspect, on the other hand, refers to the translator's choices or preferences that make the process and results of translation feel distinctive, unique, and, to a certain extent, personal. No literary translator is uniform, no matter what literary work is translated. The translation of George Orwell's classic work *1984* by Barus Siregar (1953) is different from the translation of the same work by Landung Simatupang (2014). Where the differences lie requires observation and separate presentation (Siregar 1953, Simatupang 2014). Included in the subjective aspect are the choices of diction, structure, and aesthetic presentation of the translation, which of course still prioritize fidelity to the source text. Thus, it can be said that this subjective aspect—although open and possible—must always be subject to the principal guidelines that make up the objective aspect of literary translation (Bassnett & Lefevere 2018).

One of the fundamental, objective principles in literary translation is, as suggested, fidelity. Milan Kundera, a Czechoslovakian-born author who is now a French citizen, as also quoted by Anton Kurnia in the book *The Art of Literary Translation*, expressed that fidelity is the

first thing to be considered by a translator, especially a literary translator (Kurnia 2017). Fidelity is an attitude that needs to be internalized by the translator towards the source text. Fidelity means following and adhering to the source text, making it the main guide and reference, considering it as the highest (and minimal) standard, and not succumbing to the temptation to create their own work which, although considered more aesthetic, for example, actually distances itself from the source text. This attitude then manifests in the choices made when translating (Katan 2018). An example of tension in literary translation that, at least theoretically, can be resolved by adhering to the basic objective principles of fidelity is related to the issue of "form" versus "message" or "meaning" (Sukmawati 2021).

Many people liken or analogize translation to a bridge. The bridge is built to deliver goods from one end to the other. Only through the bridge can goods be sent from one party to another at the other end properly. A good translator will be able to deliver the requested goods safely and without any deficiency (Sukmawati 2021). The recipient will receive the same goods as sent without anything missing. However, this analogy needs to be slightly revised when used to explain the process of literary translation. Literary texts not only prioritize their content or substance. Literary texts also pay great attention to their form or, let's say, packaging. Thus, a successful literary translator is one whose translation process produces a translated product that is narratively, semantically, and thematically aligned with the source text, but which also aesthetically and formally corresponds, or is proportional, to the source text.

Translating a short story, poem, or song from one language to another thus requires attention to the conveyed message or meaning of the work, the accuracy of the translation results, and, as much as possible, in the conveyance of the aesthetic form of the literary work into the target language. That is the ideal.

Anton Kurnia seems to be one of the literary translators of Indonesian literature who agrees with this belief. He said, "Although 'form' can be sacrificed for the sake of message transfer, literary text translators need to work hard to translate the expressions or words chosen by the source text writer to express certain connotations that he/she wants and with the right nuances." (2022, 17).

However, this ideal condition is very difficult, if not impossible, to realize. Languages are like highly contextualized, nuanced, culturally rich, and so on. No two languages are exactly the same; no one language can accommodate all human experience as another language or vice versa. Even language itself is something that is constantly moving, constantly changing, never stopping; likewise, the human experience it expresses. Thus, fidelity to the source text, as defined above, is a guideline that needs to be embraced and attempted to be fulfilled as much as possible. And yet, this needs to be accompanied by the awareness that the ideal result will always be elusive or slip away from translator's grasp (Munday 2016). The many efforts of translating and revising Christian Bible, which could be seen as a work of literature in its broad sense, provides a clear example of how achieving the ideal translation is impossible, but the one which ever closer to the ideal is something worthy to seek.

4. FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS OF LITERARY TRANSLATION

There are two fundamentals human consciousnesses related to language. The first consciousness is that language is the most important means of human communication, without which we are unable to interact with each other meaningfully. Without language, as we know it today, there would be no civilization, and we may not be any more "civilized" than animals and other creatures (Derrida, 2017).

The second consciousness is that language is something slippery and not solid, as post-structuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida have argued (Derrida, 2017; Tyson, 2015, p. 167). To illustrate this, we

can consider a simple sentence like "The tree is taller now." At first glance, the sentence may seem clear on its own. However, upon closer examination, questions may arise in our minds, such as (1) What kind of tree is it? (2) Which tree is it taller than? (3) How many centimeters taller is it compared to its height a year ago? (4) Why did the tree become taller? And so on. There are many ambiguities and uncertainties in this simple sentence. What is being conveyed here is that language contains a lot of potential for ambiguity.

When these two consciousnesses intersect and operate in the world of translation, it is reasonable for translators to feel uncomfortable, insecure, or uncertain. Especially since translation, as we know, involves at least two languages (the source language and the target language, respectively). This problem becomes even more complex at this level. Despite those natures of language that creates insecurity (as well as vigilance), at a more practical level, there are at least five fundamental linguistic problems that challenge the ability and skill of a literary translator.

The first issue concerns the structure which is not always the same between the source language and the target language. Indo-European languages, for example, are more open to long sentence structures, with various subordinate clauses and their derivatives. Nevertheless, as readers, we are still able to capture and understand their messages well. This may be because in these languages, there are cases of conjugation and declination, respectively applicable for verbs and nouns in the languages, that explain how each part of a sentence function in the overall meaning. On the contrary, Indonesian language is usually simpler and shorter. Another difference is that English uses more active sentences, while Indonesian uses more passive ones. This, of course, creates its own problems (Tyson 2019, 92).

Included in the realm of language systems, another important aspect to consider is the existence of language variations, encompassing dialects, sociolects, idiolects, slangs, and other forms. These variations

are not confined solely to distinct languages but are also prevalent within the same language. To illustrate this, the Javanese language exemplifies dialectal differences observed between speakers residing in Central Java and East Java, which can be further subdivided into distinct variants. Similarly, American English showcases regional variations, such as the distinguishable accents of New England, New York, and the Southern regions. These significant phenomena should be duly acknowledged and taken into account when undertaking the translation of literary works.

In Dewi's doctoral dissertation (2019), she investigates the inherent difficulties of translating the African American English (AAE) dialect found in Mark Twain's novel "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." This research focuses on the analysis of three distinct Indonesian translations of the literary work, scrutinizing the utilization of various translation techniques, such as neutralization, colloquialization, speech labelling, spelling variations, omission, fictional variation, compensation, and addition. Unfortunately, as Dewi concludes, these translated versions do not effectively convey the functional aspects of the AAE dialect as depicted in the source novel. The translators' exploration of the Indonesian language, as the target language, is deemed insufficient in presenting an equivalent that authentically captures the distinct characteristics of the AAE dialect while also being linguistically acceptable in Indonesian. Consequently, this study sheds light on the challenges encountered by literary translators in achieving successful translations, specifically influenced by linguistic factors.

The second problem is the issue of the context in which a literary text or manuscript is produced or written by its author. This context is then interpreted by, first, the translator and subsequently by the reader. A literary text never arises from a vacuum. There must be a context, whether it is a social, cultural, political, or ideological context that underlies its birth and is 'contained' within it. This needs to be examined by literary translators in order to produce informed and

accurate translations. Also, to ensure that the translation results have 'closeness' with the correct context, not just a matter of language transfer. With the current development of information technology, searching for and understanding the context of a literary work has become a job that is not too difficult compared to the previous era. We can simply search on Google and find a lot of contextual information about a work that we can read and learn (Munday 2016, 62).

The third fundamental problem is cultural differences. Language is one part of culture. Therefore, the work of translation cannot ignore efforts to transfer culture. However, culture is not uniform or diverse. In the world of translation, in relation to cultural problems, the usual strategies used can be classified into domestication and foreignization. In domestication, the choice is more inclined towards the target language and reader, so that terms are sought for their nearest equivalents in that target language. The word 'mas' in Indonesian will be translated into 'bro' in English, as an example (Venuti 2018, 26).

The foreignization strategy, on the other hand, is more inclined to maintain certain terms in the source language and thus needs to be explained by the translator in the form of a glossary or footnotes. The translation of Pramoedya A. Toer's classic work, the *Buru Quartet*, by Max Lane, is an example of this strategy. Words such as 'Raden Mas', 'Nyai', 'Mevrouw', and so on are maintained for certain reasons (Lane 2005).

The fourth issue relates to aesthetic matters, in which literary translators must exert every effort to translate the language's feeling, word rhythm, aesthetics, and style of the author into the target language. The translator must be creative and faithful at the same time. A literary translator should ideally also be a writer or someone who reads a lot of literature and has sufficient sensitivity (Prastiwi 2017). Several instances concerning the difficulties encountered in translating literary works due to aesthetic factors revolve around the translation of idioms, similes, metaphors, and other forms of figurative language.

Certain elements among those mentioned exhibit a distinctiveness that is exclusive to specific languages, necessitating literary translators to engage more deeply with the cultural fabric of the target language in order to uncover appropriate correspondences. Translating the English phrase "Love as soft as snow" into Indonesian poses its own set of challenges due to the unfamiliarity of the concept of "snow" in the Indonesian lexicon, let alone its usage to depict the quality of an individual's affection. Consequently, literary translators must embark on further exploration within the target language, specifically Indonesian, in search of commonly employed expressions that effectively convey the notion of tender or delicate love. It is plausible that they might propose employing a term such as "Love as soft as cotton" ("Cintanya selembut kapas") as a viable substitute.

Furthermore, the fifth or final fundamental issue is diction or word choice. In choosing diction, literary translators are required to search for words with the appropriate meaning and rhyme or sound that also harmonizes with the source text. They cannot arbitrarily translate based solely on meaning. The author's diction, word choice, expressions, and writing style must be considered and preserved as much as possible (Prastiwi 2017). This is the tension that the literary translator must face.

In the translation process, to sum up, it is crucial for the translator to maintain the original text's meaning and style while also adapting it to the target language's cultural and linguistic norms. The translator must make deliberate and informed choices regarding the text's form and content while adhering to ethical and professional standards (Prastiwi 2017).

5. CONCLUSION: WHAT MAKES A GOOD LITERARY TRANSLATOR?

After understanding the nature and problems of literary translation well enough, we may ask: who can be a literary translator? If language is something fluid, easy to shrink or expand in meanings,

and constantly changing; if culture is contextual and diverse, with some even being highly specific and unique, who can produce accurate translations, carry the message or meaning of the source literary text well while being faithful to its form or structure?

If we are looking for an ideal literary translator, I am quite sure: we will not find them. It's that simple. However, if we are looking for a good literary translator, here is a summary of their criteria. A literary translator is someone who must love language/words, be creative, and have good literary sensitivity, willing and able to delve into knowledge of both the source and target languages. On the other hand, a literary translator must be willing and able to work in solitude. There is no literary work born in chaos and commotion. A literary translator also needs to avoid internal chaos and turmoil (Santosa 2017).

In conclusion, being a literary translator requires a combination of language proficiency, creativity, literary sensitivity, and discipline. The ideal literary translator may not exist, but a good literary translator is someone who strives to balance the challenges of conveying the meaning and form of a literary text faithfully while also adapting it to the target language's cultural and linguistic norms.

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