

## Literary translation and its indefinable nature

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### Abstract

The act of translating a text from one language into another language is an age old activity. So far, many linguists, translators and translation theorists have tried to form a define that act, but, there is no authentic description has been drawn so far. The researcher intends to define the indefinable nature of the act of rendering a literary text from one language into another.

**Keywords:** literary translation, SL (Source language), TL (Target language).

### Introduction

Generally, translating or rendering a literary text from one language to another language is called literary translation. The practice of translating a literary text from one language to another language has existed there even before the existence of the terms nation, country, region and etc., But, it hasn't been precisely defined or categorized.

To prove his hypothesis, the researcher is going to take into account only four definitions on the act of translating literary texts which have been proposed by linguists, translators and theorists. The researcher supplies suitable examples from the select English translated versions of 'Tirukkural' to enumerate the features of those definitions.

This Paper divides into three sections. The first section serves as an introduction. The second one deals with the four definitions which have been drawn on literary translation. In this section, the researcher takes into account the descriptions of Vladimir Nabokov, Theo Hermans, Tony Barnstone and Robert Weschler on literary translation. He enumerates those definitions by quoting suitable examples from the various English translated versions of 'Tirukkural'. The final section serves as the conclusion. The researcher sums up his ideas in that section.

### Definitions on Literary Translation

Vladimir Nabokov is a well-known Russian and American novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist and translator. He wrote his first nine novels in Russian. He was universally acclaimed only after he had begun to write in English. 'Lolita' is his most famous novel and considered as his master piece in English. This novel was ranked as fourth in the list of the 'Modern Library 100 Best Novels'. Nabokov (2007:134), in his essay, 'Problems of Translation: Onegin in English', describes that the translator of a literary text has to be conscious of doing one thing that is to reproduce the whole literary text 'with absolute exactitude'. He condemns the literal rendering as 'tautological since anything but that is not truly a translation but an imitation, an adaptation or a parody'. Here, Nabokov's perception on literary translation is something obscure. Though, he says that the translator has to be conscious of translating or reproducing the whole literary text with the intention to render them exactly, in the TL, he leaves the word 'exactitude' or exactness in an abrupt manner. We cannot be sure that the exactness in rendering means

whether the content or the form or the emotional content that the literary work deal with or the purpose to which the original has been produced. He further says that the literal translation of a literary text into another language or TL is a condemnable one and calls that literal rendering as a mere 'parody' of the original. His perception on literary translation gives a vague picture. It gives an idea over the rendering of a literary text from one language to another language.

The sixth couplet in the Third section of the first canto is as follows:

"Ceyarkariya ceyvar periyar ciriya  
Ceyarkariya ceykal tar"

It means that whomsoever it may be achieve great things or carry out tough jobs will be considered as great people. The one who never do such great or tough jobs will considered as mean and not considered as great

G.U. Pope (2008:11) [8], in his translated version of 'Tirukkural', the book entitled 'The Sacred Kural' translated the above couplet as follows:

'Things hard in the doing will great men do;  
Things hard in the doing the mean eschew.'

The same couplet has been rendered by Rev. W.H. Drew combindley with Rev. John Lazarus as follows:

"The great will do those things which is difficult to be done;  
but the mean cannot do them"

Both the above renderings, for the most, reflect exactly the content of the original, but, in form, they differ from one another. G.U. Pope has rendered the content in the couplet format, but, both Rev. W.H. Drew and Rev. John Lazarus have rendered their own version in the prose format.

According to Nabokov's perception, the translators of the above translated versions have tried their level best to render the couplet into English. They have rendered the content, in the words of Nabokov, 'with absolute exactitude', but the format that have been chosen by them are different and distinct from one another. There remains a big question that which one of them will be considered as a good or an exact rendering, whether G.U. Pope' or Drew and Lazarus'.

The same couplet is rendered by Dr. S.M. Diaz (2000:82) as follows:

“Those who accomplish rare things are considered great;  
While those who cannot, remain small”.

Here, Diaz uses the word ‘rare things’ instead of difficult things. It means that, according to Diaz, person who have done unusual thing (not the difficult thing) is considered as great. Diaz’s rendering is slightly differs from the original and also the rendering of G.U. Pope. Though, Diaz’s rendering is in the couplet format, it varies on the basis of content. Though it deviates from the original, on the content level, we can’t mark it as bad rendering, as per the description of the Nobokov’s. But, it fulfills, Nobokov’s perception exactly at the form level. The question remains whether Diaz’s rendering is exact one or not. The above renderings are differ from one another at the content level and also in the format. The translators have tried their level best to render the couplet into English, in Nobokov’s term ‘exactitude’.

Theo Hermans is a professor of Dutch and Comparative Literature at University College London (UCL). Apart from University College London, he is also involved with Translation Research Summer School (TRSS) and also with the International Association for Translation and Intercultural Studies (IATIS). He is the editor of the book series called ‘Translation Theories Explored’ for St Jerome publication (Manchester). His well-known works are ‘Translation in Systems’ (1999) and ‘The Conference of The Tongues’ (2007). He also edited the books like, ‘The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation’ (1985), ‘The Flemish Movement: A Documentary History’ (1992) and ‘Translating Others’ (2006). He (2014:77), in his well-known essay, ‘Literary Translation’, says that the term ‘Literary Translation’ represents ‘a distinctive kind of translating because it is concerned with a distinctive kind of text. The theory of text types, which seeks to classify texts according to their functions and features, duly places literary texts in a class of their own. The fact however those text typologies do not agree on what to contrast literary texts with other types of texts - technical, pragmatic, ordinary? – suggests that what distinguishes literary from other texts may not be entirely obvious. And if there is no agreement on what makes literature distinctive, it may be equally hard to decide on what grounds literary translation should be awarded its own niche’. Here, Theo Herman’s definition on Literary Translation is totally obscure. He describes that the literary texts are different text types in their nature and their features are hard to enumerate. So, it is quite difficult to define exactly what literary translation is and the features which have been confined to the act of rendering a literary text from SL to TL. He even doesn’t distinguish the reason for why literary translation differs from other translations. He simply says that literary translation is ‘a distinctive kind of translating’, because the act of translating literary text is ‘concerned with a distinctive kind of text’. Here, Theo Herman describes the indeterminacy of literary translation.

The seventeenth chapter of ‘Tirukkural’, entitled ‘Alukkarami’ (in transliteration), or ‘Avoid Envy’, insists people not to envy on others. In this chapter, the third couplet describes that one who envies other will not prosper. The transliteration of that couplet is as follows:

‘Aranaakkam vendathan enbhan pirnnakham  
Penathu alukkarup pan’

Yogi Shuddhananda Bharati (2008:34) translates the above couplet into English as follows:

‘Who envies others’ good fortune  
Can’t prosper in virtue of his own’

The same couplet has been rendered by P.S. Sundaram (1990:35) as follows: <sup>[13]</sup>

‘He is unmindful of virtue and weal  
Who envies another’s wealth’

Here, the original version of ‘Tirukkural’ deals with the common thing that of not envying others. The above two translations have been rendered from the same couplet, but, they differ in meaning. Yogi Shudhananda Bharati says that one who envies other will prosper in fortune. P.S. Sundaram says that one who envies other will be unmindful or conscious of wealth and fortune. Both the renderings are not exact at the level of content and also at the level of expressing the ideas. In the first couplet, Yogi says the reason (envying others) in the first line and the consequence (not prospering in wealth) in the second line, but, Sundaram in his rendering, in the first line depicts the consequence (unmindful to virtue and wealth) and the reason in the second line. Theo Herman’s perception over literary translation is also like that of the above renderings. As it is quite impossible to judge the exactness between the above two renderings, it is quite impossible to categorize the features that the above renderings endowed with.

Tony Barnstone is the professor of English at Whittier College, USA. He is a renowned poet, translator of Chinese poetry, literary prose and also an editor of literary text books. Some of his well-known poems are, ‘Tongue of War: From Pearl Harbor to Nagasaaki’, ‘The Golem of Los Angeles’, ‘Sad Jazz: Sonnets’ and ‘Impure: Poems by Tony Barnstone’. His translated works are as follows: ‘Chinese Erotic Poetry’, ‘The Anchor Book of Chinese Poetry’, ‘Out of Howling Storm: The New Chinese Poetry’, ‘Laughing Lost in the Mountains: Poems of Wang Wei’ and ‘The Art of Writing: Teachings of Chinese Masters’. He also edited the text books - ‘Literatures of Asia Africa and Latin America’, ‘Literatures of Asia’ and ‘Literatures of the Middle East’. He received many awards like ‘John Ciardi Prize’ and ‘Benjamin Saltman Award’ and also received many fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the California Arts Council. In his essay, ‘The Poem Behind The Poem: Literary Translation as American Poetry’, Barnstone (2004:01) <sup>[2]</sup> describes the translation of Chinese poems in American English, American translators of Chinese Poems and also the American Literature on the whole. According to him, the act of translating Chinese poems in English teaches him ‘how to write poetry in English’. He further says that those translators of Chinese poems, while translating, will ‘find new ways of writing American poems’. He further says that the translated text ‘is the child of parent authors from different cultures, and however assiduously the translator attempts to remove his or her name from the family tree, the genetic traces will be found in the offspring. What the translator brings to the equation can never be reduced to zero. Translators bring their linguistic patterns, cultural predispositions, and aesthetic biases to the creative act, not merely holding up a mirror to something old, but also giving the original text new life in strange environment’. According to Tony Barnstone (2004:02) <sup>[2]</sup>,

while translating a literary text, the translator has to make an ‘attempt to translate that gestalt’, the total effect, ‘which a machine isn’t sensitive enough to detect, much less reconstruct’. Barnstone (2004:11) [2] concludes his essay, by saying that many American translators made an attempt to render the Chinese poems into English. According to Barnstone (2004:11) [2] those translations cannot be defined as good translations or exact renderings, but the act of translating will render to those translators which ‘reveal to the imaginations of American poets unforeseen continents’. Here, Barnstone describes the translated literary text as a child of the original author. Though, it has been rendered into another language, we can find the ‘genetic traces’ in the offspring. It means, though the text has been translated into another language, we can still find the traces of the language that it has been originally written and the literary tradition that the original text has belonged to. On translating a literary text, Barnstone says that it is the ‘gestalt’ of the literary text that the translator has to concentrate with, not the form or the theme individually. He gives equal importance both to the form and also to the content. According to Barnstone, both form and content are inseparable and in this unique combination of form and content, the effect that the literary text produces is indispensable on its readers. So, while translating the literary text, Barnstone insists that the translator has to concentrate on rendering the ‘gestalt’ of the literary text. For example, in ‘Tirukkural’, the couplet format and the didactic content are inseparable and they produce a total effect on the author. The fifth couplet in the fourth section of the first canto of Tirukkural, Tiruvalluvar the author of the original text explains what virtue is. Tiruvalluvar depicts that having no wrath, envy, lust and harsh speech is virtuous. The couplet goes on like this:

‘Alukkaru avavekkuli innacol nankum  
Ilukka iyanaratu aram’.

The same couplet has translated into English, by the different translators as follows:

G.U. Pope (1992:07) has rendered the couplet as follows:  
‘Tis virtue when, his footsteps sliding not through envy,  
wrath,  
Lust, evil speech – these four, man onwards moves in ordered  
path’.

W.H. Drew and John Lazarus (2010:09) translated the same couplet as follows:

‘That conduct is virtue which is free from these four things:  
malice, desire, anger and bitter speech’.

In the above translations, the translators have tried for the most to bring the content. G.U. Pope, in his rendering, defines that man who doesn’t prefer to have envy, wrath, lust and also doesn’t speak evil speech, will be considered to live in an ‘ordered path’ and also will be considered as virtuous. Though, in the original, it is only described what virtue is. Here, in his rendering G.U. Pope describes the qualities of the virtuous people. In original, it is only the features of the character virtue is being defined, but, in G.U. Pope’s renderings, though he has made it in the couplet format, the

characteristics of a virtuous man has been discussed. On the other hand, W.H. Drew and John Lazarus, though, have rendered the content correctly, have failed to retain the form. Robert Weschler’s ‘Performing without a Stage: The Art of Literary Translation’, serves as an introduction to the art of literary translation to the readers of the foreign literary texts, particularly drama and poetry. It provides information over the changes which have occurred throughout ages in the art of translating literary texts and also enumerates the various problems which have been faced by the translators who have rendered literary texts from different languages into English. This book serves as a guide to the translators, writers, editors, critics and also literature students. Weschler (1998:04) [15], in this book, says that the act of translating a literary text is ‘an odd art’. The act requires the translator to sit ‘at a desk, writing literature that is not his, that has someone else’s name on it, that has already been written’. Yet, it is considered as an art. Then what makes it so odd is ‘that physically a translator does exactly the same thing as a writer. If an actor did the same thing as a playwright, a dancer did the same thing as a composer, or a singer did the same thing as a songwriter, no one would think much of what they do either. The translator’s problem is that he is a performer without a stage, a performer who, when all his work is done, has something that looks just like the original, just like a play or a song or a composition, nothing but ink on a page’. He further says, ‘like musician, a literary translator takes someone else’s composition and performs it in his own special way’. According to the description of Robert Weschler, the translator of a literary text has to rewrite what one has been written already. The literary translator has to do the same sort of work that a dancer did the same thing as a composer or the ‘singer did the same thing as a song writer’. So, the act of translating literary text is something like that of an imitative art. But, at the same time, Weschler says that the translator can also enjoy the freedom that he can translate or render the written text ‘in his own special way’.

The eighth chapter of the first book in ‘Tirukkural’ is on ‘Love’. The third couplet of this chapter enumerates the importance of leading the life overwhelmed with love. The transliteration of the above couplet goes on like this:

‘Anpodu iyaintha valakkenba aaruyirkku  
Enpotu iyaintha thodarpu’

Dr. S.M. Diaz (2000:139) translated the above couplet as follows:

‘There can be life only when the body has soul in it:  
Even so, life without affection is no life at all’

Yogi Suddhananda Bharathi (2008:17) translated the couplet as

‘Soul is encased in frame of bone  
To taste the life of love alone’

G.U. Pope (2008:20) rendered it as follows:

‘Of precious soul with body’s flesh and bone,  
The union yields one fruit, the life of love alone’.

W.H. Drew and John Lazarus (2008:20) rendered it in the prose format

‘They say that the union of soul and body in man is the fruit of the union of love and virtue (in a former birth)

J. Narayanasamy (2008:26) translated the couplet as follows:

‘The body encore of bones is activated by life;  
Kindness is motivated by love of the deserving’

P.S. Sundaram (1990:26) rendered it as follows:

‘The soul, it is said, is enclosed in bones  
That human love may be’.

According to the original couplet, the life of a human being is covered with the body which is of bones and skin. The life is useful when it leads the life which is inextricably combined with love. In the above translations, all the translators, except W.H. Drew and John Lazarus, render the couplet in the couplet format, but, their renderings differ slightly from one another. For G.U. Pope, the combination of the soul and bone will yield one ‘fruit’ that the life encompassed with love. Dr. S.M. Diaz describes that the human beings will have soul or otherwise their life shouldn’t considered as life and even that life is without affection then it is not life at all. Yogi Shuddhananda Bharathi says that the soul in encased in bones and it is only purpose of being so is to taste love in this life. J. Narayanasamy says that this body which is of bones is activated by soul. Like that kindness in the human heart is activated by love.

### Conclusion

From the above descriptions on literary translation, we cannot get any clear picture of the act of translating a literary text from one language into another language. Here, the researcher takes into account only four descriptions which have been drawn on the act of translating a literary text. Among which Vladimir Nabokov’s description is the first one. According to that description, literary translation must be the exact rendering of the original. The second one is the description of Theo Hermans, in which he advocates that literary translation must be endowed with different qualities as it is dealt with the rendering of the different type of texts. The third one is the description of Theo Hermans’ in which he advocates the rendering of the total effect of the poem into TL. The fourth one is the description of Robert Weschler’s which describes the rendered literary text equally excellent with the original as because the literary translator has to do the same act of writing a text which has been done before by the original writer. Thus the above descriptions on literary translation are subjective, they share the perceptions of those scholars. They fail to describe the exact nature of the act of translating a literary text from one language into another language. This shows the indefinable nature of literary translation.

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