

The issue of quality in translation

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Resumen

A lo largo de la historia de la traducción, la "precisión", "corrección" y "fidelidad al texto original" han sido nociones esenciales a la hora de determinar la calidad de la traducción. A pesar de que la calidad es un factor crucial en la formación de los traductores, ya sea aplicada a cursos para estudiantes universitarios o posgraduados o aplicada a exámenes profesionales que permiten obtener certificados oficiales y que conducen al ejercicio de la profesión, resulta una noción difícil de definir. No hay una única definición del término *calidad* que pueda aplicarse de manera universal y que sea prescriptiva para cualquier tipo de texto. Este hecho tiene importantes implicaciones en la manera de abordar una traducción, tanto en el aula como en la vida profesional. La traducción es mucho más que mera reproducción. La reproducción es simplemente el último eslabón de una cadena de operaciones mentales, entre las que se encuentran el análisis, la interpretación, la comparación, la elección entre distintas posibilidades y la resolución de problemas. La dificultad de la traducción reside en encontrar el equilibrio entre los recursos comunicativos y las necesidades comunicativas. Por tanto, un aspecto fundamental de la calidad en la traducción es la equivalencia. El principal objetivo de una traducción es establecer una correspondencia entre el texto origen (TO) y el texto meta (TM), teniendo siempre muy presente las intenciones del autor del TO y, al mismo tiempo, realizando una traducción que cumpla con las expectativas de los receptores. En esta ponencia, nos vamos a centrar en la calidad de la traducción dentro del género literario, en especial dentro de los relatos breves o cuentos, para tratar de ilustrar los siguientes aspectos: el grado de equivalencia conseguido entre el TO y el TM; las dificultades concretas a las que se enfrenta el traductor; hasta qué punto la traducción satisface las expectativas en la lengua y cultura meta. A diferencia de lo que ocurre con la traducción de textos informativos, la traducción literaria es multifactorial, ya que conlleva interpretación y ésta depende de las suposiciones conceptuales y culturales del traductor. Los factores culturales requieren toma de decisiones en cuanto a estrategias de traducción y ejercen gran influencia sobre las elecciones que lleva a cabo el traductor.

Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century, as translation theory has become more systematic, embracing first linguistic, and then

cultural issues, the question of quality has been specifically addressed in several key works (see: Reiss 1971/2000; Lefevere 1992; Venuti 1995; House 1997; Hönig 1998).

Although quality is crucial for the training of translators, from undergraduate and postgraduate training courses to professional examinations awarding official diplomas and leading to the translation profession, it is a difficult notion to define. There is no monolithic definition of quality which can be applied universally or prescriptively to any text. This fact has vital implications for the use of translation in both the classroom and the professional world.

Translation theory has a good deal to say about translation quality, as well as about the notion of equivalence – the fundamental aspect of translation quality.

Different views of translation lead to different concepts of translation quality. But one thing is clear: the main task of translation is to establish correspondence between ST and TT, taking account of the ST author's intentions and at the same time trying to produce a translation in accordance with the TT reader's expectations (Wills, 1996: 41).

In this article we consider translation quality in the literary genre¹, in particular the short story. The examples are taken from various short stories by Anton Chekhov and their English translations². We try to show:

1. the degree of equivalence achieved between ST and TT;
2. particular difficulties facing the translator;
3. how well the translation achieves its purpose in the target language and culture.

Our approach is based both on the functionality of the TT in relation to its purpose in the target culture (macrotextual³ level) and on its correspondence with the ST (microtextual level).

Equivalence as the fundamental criterion of

translation quality: historical background

Throughout the history of translation, 'accuracy' 'correctness' and 'fidelity to the text' have been essential notions in defining quality of translation. Depending on what is understood by translation, these notions have been given different significance. "Despite much research over the past 50 years, Translation Studies (TS) has not developed into a homogeneous discipline, and there is no agreement on its central concepts. Different approaches exist side by side, each of which focuses on specific aspects, looks at the product or the process of translation from a specific angle, and uses or avoids specific terminology" (Schäffner, 1999:1).

The fundamental characteristic of a translation is that it is a text that is doubly bound: on the one hand, to its ST and, on the other hand, to the recipient's communicative conditions. This double binding is the basis of the equivalence relation.

Types of equivalence were suggested in order to specify the relationship between SL-text and TL-text, e.g.: Nida's 'formal equivalence' and 'dynamic equivalence' (Nida 1964), Newmark's 'semantic translation' and 'communicative translation' (Newmark 1981), House's 'overt' and 'covert' translation (House 1997).

In the 1960s E. Nida moved the focus from the text to the effect on the audience with his concepts of 'dynamic equivalence' and 'equivalent effect'. He makes a distinction between formal equivalence, which focuses attention on the message itself in both form and content, and dynamic equivalence, where "the relationship between receptor and message should be substantially the same as that which existed between the original receptors and the message" (Nida, 1964: 159).

The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of functionalist approaches to translation (Reiss 1971/2000, House 1977; 1997). The functionalists argue that different text types require different translation strategies in order to preserve the original ST function. According to them quality is measured in terms of how well a

translation fulfils the required function in the target culture.

The 1990s saw the rise of text-linguistic and pragmatic approaches to translation (Nord 1991; Hönig 1998; Venuti 1995, 1998). Venuti (1995: 1-5) argues that publishers, reviewers and readers judge the quality of a translation in terms of its 'fluency', which results from the choice between the two translation strategies of 'domestication' and 'foreignisation'. He defines domestication as an "ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values" which minimises the foreignness of the ST and produces a fluent translation which reads as an original text, a feature regarded as a sign of quality of the translation (Venuti, 1995: 20).

Communication by means of translation is more demanding than monolingual communication, because in translation it is difficult to balance communicative resources with communicative needs. For this reason the problem of equivalence is the conceptual basis of TS. It is the fundamental criterion of translation quality.

To quote Catford (1965:21) "...the central problem of translation practice is that of finding TL equivalents. A central task of translation theory is therefore that of defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence."

Text-Linguistic approaches to translation

Text has always been a central concern of TS and in this respect it has in many ways anticipated the development of Text Linguistics (see Komissarov 1988).

The theory of translation studies the relationship between two languages not in isolation but in texts (originals and their translations), and all the data which this theory embraces are obtained from a comparative analysis of these texts.

Text Linguistics defines the text as the basic unit of communication and therefore, as the primary object of research.

For TS this means that the text itself is considered to be the unit of translation.

We are not translating words and syntactic structures but texts, in a situation and in a culture fulfilling some communicative purpose, and the task of the translator is to preserve the *meaning* across two different languages and cultures, in other words to create a pragmatically and semantically adequate translation.

The basic assumption of the text-linguistic approach to translation is that SL text and TL text do not only differ in their sentence structures, which are determined by the respective linguistic systems, but also in regularities beyond sentence boundaries. In other words, text norms need to be added to the norms of the linguistic systems (see Neubert and Shreve 1992).

Based on different regularities, texts are categorised as text-types or genres (see Swales 1990). The specific requirements imposed by the particular genre affect both the translation process and the end product. Since a translator deals with texts of a particular genre, TS attempts to discover text type-specific translation regularities.

Due to cultural differences, the material from one and the same genre may have different linguistic features in different languages. Non-correspondence of linguistic features within genres directly influences the choice made by the translator.

As every culture and language has a unique history, division and analysis of the world, there are "semantic zeros" in every language in relation to others. Cultural discrepancies create a serious problem for a translator: the problem of "untranslatability in translation". Pragmatic meaning overrides semantic meaning in such cases, and we can consider a translation a primarily pragmatic reconstruction of its original.

A translator should be aware of the importance of the socio-cultural environment and the world-view of the target culture as

determining factors in the process of selecting appropriate TL units to convey a particular message (see Nida 1964).

An adequate translation is both an accurate rendering of the ST and one which fulfils its role in the target culture. An adequate translation is the replacement of a text in the SL by a pragmatically and semantically equivalent text in the TL.

The study of the translation process

Literary works, particularly classics, have been and continue to be translated. The act of translation becomes more refined in the process. Readers are thereby given new opportunities to enjoy literary works previously found only in older (sometimes outdated) translations. Since literary translation serves as a bridge in cultural exchange, it is essential for the translator to render adequately the speech, the thoughts, the words and the expressions with a national flavour, so that readers of the translation receive as far as possible a true impression of the original.

When translating, a translator repeatedly refers to the original and his/her translation, in order to check the equivalence of his/her version to the original. S/he constantly has to decide what elements of equivalence s/he may discard in order to produce an adequate translation.

In contrast to purely informative texts, translations of literary texts have a number of specific features which arise from the need to render the author's individual use of language and his/her unique style.

The literary merits of the original and its translation are defined by the criteria of aesthetics and literary criticism, which are beyond the scope of TS.

Establishing the criteria for translation quality assessment (TQA) is very important for describing the translation process. It is only the

final product of the process that will be assessed, but this assessment reveals both the translator's level of qualification and his/her ability to execute translation tasks.

An assessment of degree of equivalence between TT and ST must take account of both the potential equivalence which is possible between SL units and TL units and the actual degree of closeness of the version chosen by the translator to the original text. It entails a thorough analysis of the original text and the translation at the macrotextual level (analysis within the framework of the whole text with regard to context, function, pragmatic consideration and style) and at the microtextual level (breaking a translation problem down into its various layers – lexical, morphological, phraseological and syntactic, i.e. into lower-level text components, which are critical in terms of translation procedure).

Such analysis helps us to discover the degree of equivalence achieved in terms of various segments of the original.

Analysis of correspondences between TT and ST

In assessing the quality of a translation we compare the TT to the ST in order to see whether the TT is an accurate and faithful reproduction of the ST, and to discover how Chekhov's vivid images are translated into English, how his style, aesthetic characteristics and artistic techniques are reproduced in another language and in another culture.

Using the examples below, we now consider the degree of equivalence achieved by the translator at all levels of the ST and TT.

In order to produce an equivalent effect on the TT reader when describing a particular situation, it is often necessary to add information not explicitly given in the ST. This information is usually known to the ST readership but not to TT readers. The translator's task is not only to reproduce the reality of the original,

but to provide additional information.

Example 1:

Russian: So mnoi **konchil kurs** tozhe nekto Ryabovskii.

English: There was a Ryabovsky with me in the final year **at the university**.

(The Grasshopper)

Example 2:

Russian: Artist iz dramaticheskogo teatra, bol'shoi, davno priznanniy talant, izyashchniy, umnyy i skromnyy chelovek i otlichnyy chtets, **uchivshii** Ol'gu Ivanovnu **chitat'**.

English: One was an actor, whose great histrionic gifts had long won general recognition, an eloquent, intelligent, and modest man, famous for his public readings, who **gave** Olga **lessons in elocution**.

(The Grasshopper)

Example 3:

Russian: Uzhe on mog s'est' tseluyu portsiyu **selyanki** na skovorodke.

English: Once again he was capable of eating a whole portion of **the Moscow speciality of sour cabbage and meat** served in a frying pan...

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

Example 4:

Russian: I uznal eshchyo Gurov, chto eyo zovut Annoi Sergeevnoi...

English: Gurov also found out that her name **and patronymic** was Anna Sergeyevna.

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

As we see from the examples, the translator views the ST through the target culture.

In Example 1, **konchil kurs** means *completed [his] course*; the translator adds **at the university**, which is implicit in the Russian

but needs to be made explicit in English.

In Example 2, **uchivshii ...chitat'** means *taught... to read*; the translator adds *elocution [gave lessons in elocution]*, because the original is not referring to elementary reading skills, but to the skill of reading to an audience.

In Example 3, **selyanka** is *a Russian sour cabbage and meat dish*; the translator adds **the Moscow speciality**, to show that the story's main character is back home in Moscow, with his favourite food and all the familiar things of his normal life around him.

In Example 4, the translator adds **and patronymic**, since this is an essential component of personal names in Russian; it is a person's second name, based on the first name of his/her father.

Any translation, particularly literary translation, always entails interpretation, which is based on the translator's conceptual and cultural presuppositions. Differences in the cultural presuppositions between the SL and TL readers usually necessitate the use of a *cultural filter*. The translator provides supplementary translation in order to produce the same associations in the TT reader as the original text produced in the ST reader.

When translating idiomatic expressions a translator achieves equivalence more successfully if there are analogous idiomatic expressions in the TL which have the same meaning.

Example 1:

Russian:...I vdrug – zdravstvuite, pobedila dobra molodtsa! Moi Dymov **vrezalsya po samye ushi**.

English: And suddenly – what do you think? – I had made a conquest of the strapping young fellow! Dymov **fell head over ears in love** with me.

(The Grasshopper)

Example 2:

Russian: ...i v odin prekrasnyi vecher vdrug – bats! – sdela

predlozhenie...**kak sneg na golovu...**

English:...and one fine evening – bang! – he proposed to me! **Like a bolt from the blue.**

(The Grasshopper)

Where no such analogous idiomatic expressions exist in TL, the translator is obliged to render the idea by means of a phrase of his/her own invention. The translator produces an explanatory translation in order to create a pragmatically adequate idea and/or text in the other language.

Example:

Russian: Molodye suprugy byli shchastlivy, i zhizn' ikh **tekla kak po maslu**. Literally: ..their life flowed as if on oil (i.e. easily, without problems).

English: The young people were happy, and there seemed to be **nothing to disturb the even tenor of their life.**

In this case a translation is primarily a pragmatic reconstruction of the original, i.e. the pragmatic meaning overrides the semantic meaning. Translation tends to be dynamically, rather than formally, equivalent.

A translator may paraphrase an idea in order to produce an equivalent communicative effect on the TT reader. (see Munday 2001; Nida 1998).

Example :

Russian: Ona mnogo chitala, ne pisala v pis'makh **ѣ**, nazyvala muzha ne **Dmitriem**, a **Dimitriem**.

English: She was a great reader, preferred **the new "advanced" spelling**, called her husband by the more formal **"Dimitry"** and not the familiar **"Dmitry"**;

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

Such changes do not distort the author's intention or the overall integrity of the text; on the contrary, they can be considered the best translation solution. A literal rendering of the above example

would have confused the TT reader, who could not be expected to know that it refers to the character ъ ("hard sign") in the Cyrillic alphabet which was partially dropped (viz. in word-final position) as a result of a spelling reform in Russia.

All translating, more especially in the literary genre, involves varying degrees of paraphrase. As Nida correctly states (1998: 128): "The real problem is not one of translation versus paraphrase, but of correct versus incorrect paraphrase."

In the following example, the translator has combined two strategies to render an image: supplementation and explanation:

Russian: ...i kogda Gurov okhladeval k nim, to krasota ikh vzbuzhdal v nyom nenavist', i kruzheva na ikh bel'ye kazalis' emu togda pokhozhimi na **cheshuyu**.

English: ...and when Gurov lost interest in them, their beauty merely aroused hatred in him and the lace trimmings on their negligés looked to him then like the **scales of a snake**.

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

The translator made choices in two stages. *Scales*, which is the only possible translation for the Russian *cheshuya*, is a polysemantic word. He was first obliged to add something so that *scales* would be properly understood as a skin covering; he then had to choose between fish-scales and snake-scales (both of which are possible renderings of *cheshuya*); his choice in favour of *snake* is prompted by the earlier reference to hatred. By adding *snake*, he explains to the reader the emotional content of the main character's feelings.

Preservation of the author's style is an essential consideration in selecting lexical correspondences in TL. In preserving the flavour of the original, the translator often resorts to idiomatic formulation.

Example :

Russian: "Esli ona zdes' bez muzha i bez znakomykh, - soobrazhal Gurov, - to bylo by ne lishnee **poznakomit'sya** s nei."

English: "If she is here without her husband and without any friends", thought Gurov, "it wouldn't be a bad idea **to strike up** an acquaintance with her."

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

The Russian verb *poznakomit'sya* means to meet or make acquaintance with someone; in keeping with the overall flavour of the original text, the translator has preferred the more colloquial phrasal verb *to strike up*.

Some of Chekhov's characters use colloquialisms. It is often impossible to find for such Russian words a corresponding word of the same category in English.

Example :

Russian: Ya sama ne znayu, chto delayu. Prostye lyudi govoryat: **nechisty poputal**. I ya mogu teper' pro sebya skazat', chto menya **poputal nechisty**.

English: "I don't know myself what I am doing. The common people say **"the devil led her astray"**. I too can now say about myself that **the devil has led me astray"**.

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

In place of the common Russian word **nechisty** (which means the unclean one, or evil spirit), we find the literary word **devil**. The translator does not always succeed in conveying the spirit of expressions which have a national flavour; it depends, however, on the individual translator, and may vary between different translations of the same text. Here is another example of colloquial language with national flavour being rendered by means of explanation using literary lexis.

Example :

Russian: Esli ona ne **razbrosaetsya, vyidet** bol'shoi **tolk**.

English: She **would make a great name** for herself, provided she did not **try to do several things at once**.

(The Grasshopper)

Instead of the common/colloquial **tolk** (=sense), the translator uses the explanatory formulation **make a name for oneself**; for **razbrosat'sya** (= to dissipate one's energies), we find **try to do several things at once**.

Individual translators can adjust the ST to the TT in different ways, but what appears to be common among translators is the ability to compensate for interlingual and intercultural differences (see Wilss 1996).

In order to re-create the overall atmosphere of the original, it is important that the general tenor of the speech coincides in both languages. The translator constantly faces the problem of how to say a particular word or phrase in TL, or of why this particular word or phrase cannot be expressed in TL by means of a one-to-one correspondence. The translator successfully employs the method of compensation in the following example:

Example :

Russian: Eto tol'ko prinyato govorit', chto zdes' skuchno. Obyvatel' zhivyot u sebya gde-nibud' v **Beleve ili Zhizdre** - i emu ne skuchno, a priedet syuda: "Akh skuchno, akh pyl'!" Podumaesh, chto on iz Grenady priekhal!

English: That's what one usually hears people saying here. A man may be living in **Belev** and **Zhizdra** **or some other God-forsaken hole** and he isn't bored, but the moment he comes here all you hear from him is "Oh, it's so boring! Oh, the dust!" You'd think he'd come from Granada!

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

The transliteration of the names of the towns **Belev** and **Zhizdra** by themselves means nothing to a TT reader. In order to show that the author uses them to represent an image of extreme boredom in provincial Russian towns, the translator adds **some other God-forsaken hole**, and thus compensates for the unfamiliarity of the

reference.

The translator uses the method of compensation, and conveys the right nuance, whenever possible, within the limits allowed by English. As Komissarov rightly states (1990: 185) "Translation being transmission of ideas rather than a primitive word-for-word substitution, tricky word-combinations and other language-specific features, have to be compensated by means of unexpected linguistic counterparts to make up for what initially seems to be lost."

As the above examples show, the translator skilfully employs a series of strategies (supplementation, explanation, compensation, paraphrase) in order to preserve the overall tone of the genre – the short story.

Some lexical mismatches

Translation equivalence cannot be fully achieved. No translation is perfect. Though we often think that a translation is as good as the original. In a very general sense it is so, but when it comes to the detailed comparative analysis of the meaning in SL text and in TL text we discover mismatches on various levels of the text.

Our approach in this article is positive – not critical. We try to show how translation works and succeeds, and not where it fails. We try to show, as far as the scope of this article permits, the strategies and, in our view, very successful decisions employed by the translator. But the entire picture of TQA would be incomplete without drawing attention to some lexical mismatches.

Example 1:

- Russian:*
- Vy davno izvolili priekhat' v Yaltu?
 - Dnei pyat'.
 - A ya uzhe **dotyagivayu** zdes' vtoruyu nedelyu.
- English:*
- " Have you been long in Yalta?"
 - " About five days."
 - " And I am just **finishing** my second week here."

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

In this example the English verb "finish" clearly loses the nuance of Russian *dotyagivat'* which means to stay in a place for a certain period. In addition it is very personalised: "finish" does not express the boredom of the Russian verb in this context of dull Russian provincial life.

Example 2:

Russian: V dekabre na prazdnikakh on sobralsya v dorogu i skazal zhene, chto uezhaet v Peterburg **khlopotat'** za odnogo molodogo cheloveka.

English: In December, during the Christmas holidays, he packed his things, told his wife that he was going to Petersburg **to get a job for** a young man he knew.

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

The English **to get a job for somebody** is not precise enough. It does not convey the whole meaning of the Russian **khlopotat'** which expresses some obligation to help somebody, which is lost in translation. In Russian **khlopotat'** means more than just **get someone a job**. It involves making contacts, making efforts, going to great lengths on someone's behalf.

Literary works are written to be read. Classics in particular are read with undiminishing interest in all times. Old, outdated translations often do not satisfy modern readers. Modern readers need modern, up-to-date translations, which is why literary works continue to be translated. Sometimes several translations of one and the same book co-exist simultaneously but they all are defined by the personality of the translator producing his/her unique version through his/her vision and understanding of the original.

The following example of lexical mismatch is directly connected with the time factor.

Example 3:

Russian: "Chto-to v nei est' **zhalkoe** vsyo-taki", - podumal on i stal zasypat'.

English: "There's something **pathetic** about her all the same, he thought as he fell asleep.

(The Lady with the Lapdog)

A better rendering for today's reader might be **sad, doleful**, or **melancholic**, rather than **pathetic**, which has more recently acquired a derogatory connotation in English.

Selection of a good translation for a particular language unit (word, phrase, etc.) depends on an overall consideration of all elements, such as the aesthetic characteristics of the original and the linguistic means available in the TL. In differentiating what is primary from what is secondary, the translator is constantly making choices in order to minimise loss of the original content and style.

Conclusion

In conclusion we may say that this article does not claim to address all the issues of translation quality. In many respects the question of what constitutes an adequate translation remains unsolved in both theory and practice.

By contrast with translation of informative texts, literary translation is multifactoral. It entails interpretation which is based on the translator's conceptual and cultural presuppositions. S/he reads and interprets the ST as an individual by resorting to his/her own linguistic and cognitive abilities and transcodes it into the TT so that it is acceptable to the target readership. Cultural factors necessitate decision-making on translation strategies.

Using a whole set of competencies - translational, socio-cultural, cross-cultural and communicative (linguistic and pragmatic) – the translator is constantly making choices in order to recreate the spirit of the original and to achieve the maximum degree of equivalence between the ST and the TT and to produce semantically and pragmatically adequate translation, which is the

fundamental criterion of translation quality.

Notes

1. Any piece of language might be categorised as primarily belonging to a particular genre. A genre is a recognisable communicative event characterised and shaped by a set of communicative purpose(s). Genre has been approached from different angles: literary, folkloristic, sociological and psychological. The genres of *belles lettres* are the following: novels, plays, short stories, novellas, essays, poems, ballads, epigrams etc. (see Swales 1990).
2. The version of translation analysed in this article belongs to D. Magarshack, whose translation of A. Chekhov's short stories was first published in 1964 i.e. about 70 years later since the publication of A. Chekhov's short stories between 1885-1899.
3. Macrotextual approach is less oriented towards a direct comparison of TT with the ST.

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