Patience: A Project in Translation

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Patience: A Project in Translation

Donna St. Louis
Student Summer Scholars, 2009
Abstract

Translation seems to be a simple process: a translator with a strong command of two languages renders a phrase from Language A into Language B for the purpose of wider communication. Given her intimacy with both languages, it should be a relatively easy task to transport meaning from one language to another. Yet a superficial transformation of language is not enough to create a successful translation; rather, a translator must seek to grasp and communicate the literary heart of a piece, as well as convert the complexities of its linguistic skeleton.

I explored translation’s double nature by translating a French novel, *La femme patiente*, into English. After examining the work from a literary point of view, it was apparent that the author, Alain Gagnol, had constructed a prose style meant to underline the unique qualities of his protagonist. Clearly, it was my duty as a translator to maintain Gagnol’s French style in the English in order to preserve its literary integrity. But how?

One question in particular that appeared repeatedly addresses a translator’s fidelity to the source text. How far may a translator stray from the original text while remaining “faithful”? How does maintaining the original author’s literary style contribute to fidelity?

The other side of translation is a linguistic component, which includes a question of how to find adequate equivalents for seemingly untranslatable words and phrases. If a concept exists and can be expressed effectively in one language, but not in another, how does the translator adapt? It is clear that deep intimacy with the target language and its culture is necessary for a translator in order for her work to be successful.
Patience: A Project in Translation

Translation is, at its heart, both a literary and linguistic pursuit. In his 1942 essay, “The Problem of Translating,” Professor Hans W. L. Freudenthal asserted that “[t]he most important duty of the literary scholar is to understand the linguistic masterpiece and to arrive at an indisputable interpretation of it. Nothing but thorough study gives the foundation necessary for a penetrating comprehension of the material” (62). It is not enough to transform the linguistic surface of a work, rendering words and phrases in Language A into Language B based on roughly equivalent senses attached to them; developing a good translation requires a translator to acquaint herself intimately with the source text as a literary piece. She must wrap herself in the text and unravel it, examine every thread, and determine how each colors the whole. She should discover how the text functions as a literary work in order to rebuild it in her chosen target language.

To rebuild it demands a second skill. Alongside a literary understanding, the translator also needs an intimate familiarity with the source language. “No word,” Professor Freudenthal continues, “can be dealt with isolated and detached from the context in which it stands” (63). Language is fluid, and meaning is variable. Semantic nuances or cultural connotations attached to words often prevent full accuracy of translation, and a language-to-language dictionary cannot possibly hope to cover every shade of meaning inherent in an expression. A diligent translator realizes that an intuitive grasp of the source language is indispensable in order to rebuild her chosen work.

I experienced the dual nature of translation this summer as I translated La femme patiente, a novel by Alain Gagnol, into English. I learned first-hand that the responsibility of the
translator goes far beyond word-for-word or sense-for-sense translation, and involves a deeper interaction with the piece and its language.

*La femme patiente* belongs to the “hard-boiled crime fiction” genre and relates the story of Camille, a simple, single-minded, rather crude and chauvinistic character whose primary focus is seducing women. He comes home one afternoon to find a woman leaning against the gate in front of his house; she is filthy, taciturn, and determined not to leave. Camille’s initial attempts to drive her away fail; even when he drags her bodily from his gate, she resumes her post. When, on the third day of her vigil, she collapses outside, Camille feels obligated to bring her inside, and he grudgingly lets her sleep on his kitchen floor. Unwilling to put her back on the street himself, for fear of what his neighbors might see, Camille allows this woman, Claire, to stay, but treats her harshly in the vain hope that she will leave herself. She never does.

Claire witnesses – and receives – Camille’s careless and cavalier actions toward women firsthand, but as Camille grows more accustomed to Claire’s presence, he feels inexplicably drawn only to her. At first, when he treats her as little more than a maid and a bedmate, his cruel treatment and indifferent attitude continue, but both gradually fade when he realizes that Claire plans to stay and slowly, he opens his life to her. Once Camille begins to view Claire as more than a baffling amusement, and once Claire fixes her place in his life, she destroys it with a single, efficient act. She stays only until the poisonous effects of her action permeate Camille’s life, only until he realizes her culpability. Then she leaves.

The literary qualities of Gagnol’s work are interesting to explore. The piece is a balanced two-part whole whose two halves, although starkly opposite in tone, are nonetheless stitched together seamlessly. Gagnol takes his time developing Camille and Claire’s relationship and smoothly draws out Camille’s change of character, as well as his and Claire’s subsequent
role reversal. Camille remains, however, almost naively single-minded, a quality reflected by Gagnol’s prose style. He has written it in first person, from Camille’s perspective, in a flat, unassuming style. Gagnol’s short, crisp sentences and simple, repetitive vocabulary jointly lend Camille a monotonous literary voice that matches his personality. Consider the first few lines of the translated manuscript:

The girl’s pressed against the gate. She’s dirty. Even from where I’m standing, on the sidewalk across the street, I can see that her hair is filthy. I cross the street, she lifts her head; I can’t go inside because she’s right in front of the gate door. “Could you move over?” I ask her. She raises her eyes toward me. She has short hair and black streaks on her cheeks. She doesn’t move, hardly breathes. She’s content to stay there and block my path. “Don’t I know you?” I say (Gagnol 1).

Camille is an inelegant character and Gagnol’s is an inelegant style. These lines underscore Camille’s simplicity by illustrating a tendency to focus on one idea at a time, which leads to a straightforward sequence of action: he sees the girl; he notices she is dirty; he moves, she moves; he can’t go inside; he addresses her. The book continues in this fashion, following Camille’s unremarkable train of thought.

A literary inspiration for Gagnol was Albert Camus, author of the classic French work, *L’étranger* (The Stranger). Like Gagnol, Camus uses the first-person voice within short, crisp sentences to emphasize the nature of his protagonist, Meursault. Camus’ prose, like Gagnol’s is flat and monotonous. A crucial difference, however, is the deception of the former. Camus purposefully structures the text to project the image of Meursault’s simplicity, but the reader soon discovers that Meursault is not dim, but eerily detached and emotionally indifferent. As Matthew Ward said on the first page of his translator’s note, “[t]he simplicity of the text is merely apparent and everywhere paradoxical.” Although each uses it differently, both Camus and Gagnol adopt a flat, crisp prose style that reflects the mindset of their characters.
An analysis of Gagnol’s work clearly reveals that his prose style is a crucial literary trait, and to ignore it while translating would detract from the work’s literary integrity. A translator, then, should seek to maintain this style in order to preserve the role it plays within the piece. Language, however, is not a transparent system, and characteristics of one language are not necessarily transferable to another. Fortunately, the structures of French and English are similar enough to permit a recreation in English of Gagnol’s French prose, which, although possible, is not straightforward.

A question now arises: what is the obligation of the translator to Gagnol’s text? Although comprehension of and deference to the original’s literary qualities is paramount, the translator must also strive to develop a translation that flows naturally, as though it were originally composed in the target language, which is English. A reader of an early draft (who knows French) has advised me not to worry about being faithful to the original, but instead, to “be faithful to the variety of English you decide to go with.” A good point, I have decided. But how much liberty is allowed? How far may the translator stray from the original, for the sake of maintaining smooth English, without slipping into unfaithfulness? Furthermore, to what degree can the French style not be reproduced successfully in English, and the translator must adapt?

The solution is compromise. It is imperative both that Gagnol’s style be maintained, and that the translation flows like natural English, so, as my reader suggested, the best course has been to create a smooth English style inspired by Gagnol’s French; in other words, to create a style that shares Gagnol’s distinctive crisp tone, but is natural in English. For example, piecing together some of Gagnol’s shorter, repetitive sentences produces smoother English while retaining the overall style and tone.
Just as some of the elements of Gagnol’s style do not transfer well to English prose, so some linguistic aspects of the French language do not convert well to the English language. As previously mentioned, a translator must recognize the fact that understanding the nuances and context of the source language is essential to success. A translator will inevitably encounter a word or phrase that seems impossible to translate due to a lack of “adequate equivalents for certain fundamental notions,” in Professor Freudenthal’s words (63). An example from La femme patiente is the ever-frustrating term “un bal”. A French-English dictionary will call it a “dance”, but this is not at all an appropriate translation for the context. When Camille discovers Claire in front of his house, he vaguely recognizes her from un bal they both attended in a neighboring village. In French culture, it is common for towns or villages to hold informal social gatherings in their salles des fêtes – party or banquet halls. Here people can meet and mingle, dance, share drinks – in short, socialize in an informal setting that is open to everyone. It does not share the sense of a “dance” in English, since this word often suggests a formal ball (or at least an event where dancing is the focus), nor is the word “party” entirely accurate. At this point, I have tentatively chosen to translate bal as “party”, but I look forward to researching this cultural event in my search for an adequate translation.

Translating La femme patiente into English proved to be an excellent introduction to the field of translation studies and a perfect example of the dual literary and linguistic nature of translation in practice. I plan to continue revising the text over the current academic year with the goal of publication in mind, and to use this project to deepen my understanding of the French language and culture.
Bibliography

