

Views & Reviews

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Abstract

A book review calls for a number of points of information that most critics seem to accept. But when the subject of a review is a translation, there is a new angle of commentary that has shown the most diverse of opinions and positions that vary from the absence of mention of the fact that the work under review is a translation going through the passing comment about the fact that the book is a translation to the almost obsessive nitpicking about each and every aspect of every turn of phrase. But what constitutes a good translation review depends on a number of parameters attendant on its intended audience. This paper will attempt to outline a certain typology of criticism of translations and deliberate whether a methodology of reviewing translations can be established.

A book review requires and should disseminate information about a number of factors, a fact that most critics seem to accept. Starting from the book's place in the literature of its genre or period, the style of the author and the influences upon her, her performance in this book, a general book review also comments on the author and the author's other works if any, and gives information regarding the particular edition and so on and so forth.

While this brief check list is not exhaustive, it is indicative of a satisfactory review of any literary work. But when a translated work is under review, there is an added or maybe even a different angle, a completely new set of factors that have to be taken into account. However, we see a great deal of diversity in opinions and positions in reviews—this varies from the absence of the mention of the fact that the work under review is a translation, to reviews that contain a passing

comment about the fact that the book is a translation, to the almost obsessive nitpicking about each and every aspect of every turn of phrase. But what constitutes a good translation review depends on a number of parameters attendant on who is its intended audience based on which kind of publication it will come out in. This paper will attempt to outline a certain typology of criticism of translations and deliberate whether a methodology of reviewing translations can be established.

Sujit Mukherjee pointed out nearly a quarter of a century ago that there are four kinds of reviews of Indian literatures into English based on the reviewers' knowledge or lack of knowledge of the source language and their own literary, linguistic tradition. According to him, first there is the reviewer who 'reads the original so well and rates it so high that no translation can satisfy him' (Mukherjee 1994) and only reads translations to reassure himself that his reading is far superior to that of the translator's! The second kind reads translations only into his own language and wonders whether it is at all necessary to read translations into English! The third reads only English and is not competent in any other Indian or European language and can only comment on the quality of the English language in the translation, a reviewer for whom the translation performance is based on how well the English reads. And the last kind is one who is a translator himself who can only find fault with translations that are not his own! And of course, in his own inimitable style, Sujit Mukherjee accuses us scholars of belonging to this category (Mukherjee 1994: 58). So I wondered whether we could make a typology of reviews of translation now that would look at reviews from the different approaches that characterize reactions to translations at present. Having done reviews myself for *The Book Review (TBR)* and newspapers I thought it would be of interest to study some of the kinds of translation reviews in *TBR* and some of the newspapers to see what patterns they followed.¹

There seems to be three major kinds of reviews broadly speaking. The first is the kind that reviews the work as if it were the original, as if the fact that it was a translation had no impact upon its reception. They go on at length about the style, i.e. the choice of words

and turn of phrase etc. of the authors (as if they were reading it in the original), the plot and structure etc. but offer no insights into the translation product or process. The work under review is commented upon to expatiate on the tastes and views of the culture that produced such a work and many newspaper reviews fall into this category and only some from the *TBR*. This is what may be termed a ‘Literary Criticism’² approach reflecting what Edmond Cary said about literary translation—that it was a literary operation and not a linguistic one. In this category there is at best the name of the translator(s) in the bibliographical details given at the beginning. Or even if note is taken, the emphasis is still on the importance of the original as in this case of a review of Ramanujan’s work:

Ramanujan has set such high standards for translation in his own work that we are left to wonder at the quality of the translation of his writings translated by others. [...] Whatever the complications and the implications there, it is simply wonderful to have more of Ramanujan in English.

The choice to write about the past in Kannada, the language of their pasts, adds to the poignancy of trying to retrieve sensory memories, for languages hold sights, smells and tastes deep within themselves, guarding them jealously against the weapons of cultural equivalence. It is fitting that, I suppose, that we receive what is probably the last of Ramanujan’s writings in the language that this man ... first spoke.

[Interesting to note this in a review of the English translation!!]

The sub approach to this is one where due note is taken of the fact that the work is translated and lip service is paid to it:

‘The National Book Trust of India must be thanked for bringing it out in English...’³

'The translation in question ... is absolutely apt and entirely in tune with the overall spirit of the play.'

These may sound like positive judgments but in most cases the terminology used is varied and nuanced such as 'reads like the original, transparent, clear, sensitive, vivid, faultless, immaculate, accessible' and so on. But the public at large is left wondering in what way these adjectives qualify the given work as there is not a single example or even explanation for these comments. In most of these cases, it is my belief that the reviewers did not know the original language and had based their comments on the English versions and how far they liked the English style of the translation.

The second point of view is at the other end of spectrum which is what I would call the 'Comparative Stylistics' kind. The critic goes at the translation hammer and tongs and then with a fine tooth comb picks out every case of mistranslation or missed translation and all but dismisses the translation as not worth being published! 'The altered title is virtually untranslatable for it draws upon a range of meanings that the English term *Relationships* does not come close to capturing. The translation is otherwise extremely smooth and competent.'

For example, in another case, the reviewer tears apart the translation by raising objections from the editorial oversight of not mentioning previous translations of the same text, to the bad literal translation that misses the ideological angle. He criticizes the lack of adequate attention to context and lack of research on the translators' part, to omissions that are *not* harmless, the lack of annotations and notes and so on, only to conclude in the same breath that 'all said and done, the translators have done a commendable job in retrieving one of the iconic Indian novels from relative obscurity and placing it centre stage.'

This brings to mind what André Gide condemned when he said, 'In general, I deplore that spitefulness that tries to discredit a translation (perhaps excellent in other regards) because here and there

slight mistranslations have slipped in ... It is always easy to alert the public against very obvious errors, often mere trifles. The fundamental virtues are the hardest to appreciate and point out.' (O'Brien 1959: 90)

Talking mainly of loss in translation is a pessimistic point of view and it is obvious that languages represent the culture that first spoke it to talk of the world surrounding them. So there are necessarily differences in environment, food, dress, social customs and so on that get reflected in the language used by a particular culture. Having said that, there are however some universal common factors such as life, death, emotions, that can be found in all languages and can therefore be translated.

The linguists among us could cite Roman Jakobson: 'All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language. Whenever there is deficiency, terminology may be qualified and amplified by loanwords or loan-translations, neologisms or semantic shifts, and finally by circumlocution' (Jakobson 1959: 234). And the reviewer could thus perhaps analyse what the gains were in the translation rather than just citing the losses. Because this negative approach stems from the concept that translations of literary works are impossible and always result in loss, so what we have here is a literary work and therefore this translation is impossibly lost! This kind of review is normally written by those who know both the source language and target language, with the sole exception I found of one review of my translation of Toru Dutt done by a Bangladeshi professor of English who argued vehemently about certain choices in two or three examples because he was comparing them to the translation done by his student whose version he far preferred, though he admits that he does not understand a word of French, but his student's version read more poetically and felicitously than did mine! (*The Daily Star* 23rd July 2005).

The third major kind of approach is what I term the 'Translation Studies' approach, one wherein the reviewer looks at the

work not simply as a literary work, nor from the point of view of linguistics or stylistics, but as a translated product that constitutes the necessary corpus for cultural and ideological analyses, and thus highlights the implications of the choice of the work that has been translated, the why, the wherefore and the how, and to look at the politics of the whole process and product.

As one reviewer has put it, ‘In any event, the more translations there are that bring the wealth of Indian literatures into English the better. There is no other way to counter the absurd proposition that India’s best writing lies in English’ [!] or as another has put it, ‘As a nation, we have, so far, paid a woefully inadequate amount of attention to literary history... This translation [...] renders just such a service by presenting an otherwise inaccessible text, recovered from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris...’ (*The Statesman* 6th March 2005).

The subsidiary approach which falls under this category includes reviews where the reviewers state what they believe to be a ‘translational approach’:

‘Not all cultural nuances translate smoothly into English; this is not necessarily a flaw in the text, for these moments of awkwardness reminds us of the ‘translatedness’ of these plays, underscoring the cultural differences that remain an irreducible feature of Indian writing.’

And finally a word must be put in for the sensitivity and skill with which the novel has been adapted into English from its Bangla original. The translators have not allowed the translation process to obscure the ambience of the Bangla countryside... Rather than attempt a word for word “accurate” correspondence between the Bangla original and the English adaptation, the translators have used their discretion and left several key words untranslated. This has kept the regional flavour of the narrative...’

It is surprising how often we find remarks of this kind in translation reviews. But in the examples that I saw at least the readers were spared some usual cliché or quotation showing off the reviewer's reading. But let us pay attention to the reviewers' views on what constitutes a good translation, what is the benchmark for retaining the 'ambience of the original'—a term of predilection for most reviewers which is how far the 'original flavour or ambience' has been preserved or recreated! The closer to the original, the better, according to these reviewers. As in the example quoted just now, they would laud the translation if words are left untranslated. In other words a 'non translation' equals a good translation however antithetical that may sound! And then there are translations that always obscure the original ambience. Or the fact that awkwardness is welcome as it reflects the translation process that the product has undergone. We can take issue with these statements but at least it has been made clear to us what the personal viewpoints and propositions of the reviewers themselves are.

Of course, there is the fourth category of reviews that are found in the translated works themselves under the 'Translator's Notes' which we shall not analyse at this juncture but which could be a very good point of entry for most reviewers.

Let us move away from this typology of reviews to a possible methodology of reviewing translated works.

But what constitutes a good translation review depends on a number of parameters determined by its intended audience. These include the nature and type of publication in which it will appear, therefore the kind of readers that it should address, and of course constraints of time and space. Therefore where, when and whom it addresses will have an impact on the nature of the review. In academically-oriented publications the audience is normally very different from those of a newspaper's book column.

We shall first look at a very different kind of review that we have not considered so far and which is becoming more and more

necessary as university departments, especially in English Studies, prescribe Indian literatures in English translation as well as suggest further reading lists for their students. And mention must be made of even foreign language departments that have introduced such courses.

The critic here is an indispensable tool for deciding on which texts could be prescribed and why. The review will be similar in many ways to any other kind of review of translations. But what is primordial here is the special focus on the translator's work, the product and the process that went into producing that product. This informed commentary will help those who will not know all the languages in question, especially as in our country, the various languages that find place in curricula may not and for the most part are not the languages that the university departments' teachers are familiar with. The critic's contribution will lie in underlining that particular language and literature's contribution. It must perforce be a judgment about the choice of the author, the text, and the points that have been retained, lost, modulated in the passage to another language. Examples have to be given to justify the judgment passed. These include not just the negatives but also the positives as all these are important points for the future teacher of these texts. The reviews should first of course include literary considerations of the original and its position in the source literature before tackling translation issues.

The translational challenges could include among others common difficulties in translating proper nouns, be they of places or persons; culturally loaded words or deliberately archaic terms or neologisms in the language of the author. How far the sonority especially in poetry or lyrical passages has been rendered is also of great interest to teachers of literature. If more than one translation exists, as is sometimes the case, say of Mahasweta Devi, comparing two translations is a very useful measure to show the politics at play. Quoting the same passage in translation from each of these versions will also make manifest the choice that the departments have to apply and what their political stance is. The 'Translator's Notes' are also a great point of entry to understand and appreciate the final product.

They could well be the point of entry to start the section on transformations that inevitably arise in translations.

The critic is therefore expected to be familiar with the original literary system and the translated one to be in a position to form a well founded judgment. She has the advantage of knowing both the original and the translated literary contexts and can hence situate the original clearly in the receiving culture. Maybe in Comparative Literature departments abroad there would be no need to situate the language or the author of other western language areas, but in the specific case of non western texts, their needs would be similar to departments here, and the general background of the language, literature, the author and the specific book have all to be explained and located so that teachers teaching these texts do not do disservice to the literary work in question. This is relevant information of use to both the teachers and later on to the students who read these texts in translation, along with other texts from other linguistic traditions, so that each work retains its cultural moorings and its importance is shown in its respective context. The critic should be aware of the politics of choice and justify it accordingly in this instance of academic choice as the authors chosen will go on to 'represent' their language and culture and speak for their people.

This type of academic reviewing requires to show that the text is not just based on a previous translated work and is an 'original' translation, it also has to highlight whether it has come through a filter-language, that is, done from another translated language, which was the 'source text' for this version. This systematic kind of analysis will facilitate the recommendation or rejection of a particular text for academic study.

This brings us to the next kind of review in what we shall assume to be a well-known journal of academic kind either entirely devoted to reviewing like *The Book Review*, *Biblio*, to name but two in India or in literary or Translation Studies journals. The audience here is well informed, and likely to read with interest a review that does not stick to the merely mundane. In that case what a critic must

look out for is, and we can take the help of E. O. Simpson here, who said that ‘The first part of the translation critic’s work … is a sort of two-column “good” and “bad” inventory reflecting the exactitude, or otherwise, with which the message has been rendered’ (Simpson 1975: 256). It is of course to be expected that most competent translators arrive at correct translations with due attention being paid to the domains of grammar and idiomatic usage. So when the word ‘message’ is used, it is to be understood as that ‘which is charged with information as to possible context and situation.’ It is not just meaning. Let us for example, cite the oft quoted sentences, ‘Give me your money’ and ‘Your money or your life’ which have the same meaning but would point to very different situations and contexts.

The second step of the analysis should show the reasons for the ‘bad’ translations i.e. mistranslations or missed translations like wrong tone, use of false associations of words, *faux amis* (false friends), and suggest a correct rendering if possible. But the most important point in my view is to show, as Gide had suggested, why it is a ‘good’ translation. In most cases we have seen the former column is well carried out, but it is the latter that finds rare mention. We can assume that the major part of any translation is likely to have been done competently, so there should be a short listing of striking examples of the translator’s skill and a discussion of the skill involved. Especially instances where the personal solutions arrived at by the translator to overcome specific difficulties should be highlighted. How literal or literary the overall effect is can be gauged so as to arrive at general conclusions about that translation.

While the general newspaper kind of translation would not be able to entertain such a review, there are however some points that need to be considered and that must figure in a translation review. To this end, I took the help of a translation review that seemed ideal to me done by Sujit Mukherjee of Tagore’s *One Hundred and One: Poems by Rabindranath Tagore*, which I thought could be used as a template for a methodological approach to reviewing translations (Mukherjee 1994: 59-62). The points that are essential are:

1. The name(s) of the translator(s), if more than one, then all of them, must be mentioned without fail.
2. The date of the original work should figure along with the date of the translation.
3. The translation policy followed by the translator(s). The Translator's Notes, if any, are 'conventional combat weapons' in translated works as he says and the critic can see whether the translator has achieved his or her result based on the translation approach s/he had adopted.
4. Lack of any mention of a translation policy should also be pointed out.
5. The editorial policy of the publishing house: whether this is a first translation, a self translation, or a re-translation should be made clear.
6. The presence or lack of a preface or introduction to the author, work, literature in that language. Therefore reasons for the choice of author and work. As well as the inclusion or exclusion of certain elements for translation.
7. Explanation of certain features in the translation that stand out, such as unusual expressions in the target language for what is a common idiomatic phrase in the original.
8. And finally, what are the positive points in the translated work that deserve mention.

This list though not exhaustive is really an initial inventory of what good translation reviews should include by way of rendering service to and acknowledging the fact of the wonderful work most translators do to make an otherwise inaccessible text in the source language accessible to readers in their respective languages.

Notes

1. The examples are mainly taken from issues of *The Book Review* of 2006. Others are based on reviews of my translation of Toru Dutt's novel in French. Names of reviewers have not been provided here as this paper is not meant to target any individual reviewer but look

at different reviews as representative samples of some general tendencies in reviewing translated works.

2. See Felix Douma's old article in *Meta* for a very interesting treatment of translation reviews as part of literary criticism. He also looks at Beckett's translations as an interesting case study.
3. 'Biography of a City' by Madhavi Apte, a review of *Prarambh: A Novel* by Gangadhar Gadgil in *The Book Review*, vol. XXX, no, 12, p. 28.

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