

The Issues of Translation on Poetry and Holy Text

**To what extent does the English translation of subjective texts such as French poetry,
Navajo poetry, and The Qur'an obscure meaning and language?**

Extended Essay Subject: English Group 2

Word Count: 3718

Abstract

While objective texts such as essays and novels may be effectively translated with ease, doing so with subjective texts (whereby one's interpretation creates the text) becomes complex due to their nature. The question this paper assesses is: To what extent does the English translation of subjective texts such as French poetry, Navajo poetry, and The Qur'an obscure meaning and language? Answering this question serves the purpose of revealing the harms and benefits of translating subjective texts so that they can be weighed in determining the overall effect.

The scope of this paper was broadened to incorporate multiple perspectives. The subjective texts were divided into two types: poetry and holy text. The poetry section was then differentiated to examine a language similar to English (French) and one very different from it (Navajo), and the different impacts of translation thereof. For the French, a text by Charles Baudelaire is translated by William Aggeler, while Navajo Rex Lee Jim's poetry is discussed in an interview and article by Anthony K. Webster. For the holy text, the Arabic Qur'an was used, along with Marmaduke Pickthall's English translation. All texts were analyzed for similarities and differences through translation with intensive focus on meaning and language.

After thorough analysis, the researcher concluded with the fact that while some aspects of subjective texts are preserved (such as literary devices, thematic weight, and purpose), a majority of French poetry, Navajo poetry, and the Qur'an is obscured from its original meaning and language in a number of ways.

Word Count: 249

Table of Contents

I.	Abstract.....	2
II.	Table of Contents.....	3
III.	Introduction.....	4
IV.	Translating French Poetry.....	6
V.	Translating Navajo Poetry.....	10
VI.	Translating the Qur'an.....	13
VII.	Conclusion.....	16
VIII.	Bibliography.....	17

Introduction

Breakthroughs emerge from experimenting on the extremes. Take the nuclear bomb, for example. When the US dropped the atomic bomb on Japan, they weren't sure if it would work, but its impact nonetheless changed the world. While language may not be as devastating to the world in a literal sense, an incorrect translation of a meaningful text very well can be, whether to one individual or an entire society.

That is the idea of this essay: to measure the impact of translation with extremes. Extremes in this case represent texts that, more or less, should not be translated. That is because when they are translated, an entirely new text is created. To call itself a translation is already beginning controversy, as some may argue that these texts are in fact untranslatable.

Two types of texts that follow this description are poetry and holy text. Poetry and holy text are highly subjective texts in that one's interpretation of its language and meaning is critical to the understanding and knowledge of the text. In poetry, ambiguity and perspective allows every reader to conjure a different interpretation. When the poetry is translated, the work is no longer of the original author, but the understanding of a new author. Additionally, poetry in and of itself is a matter of self-expression, which by definition cannot be duplicated, for it is no longer poetic in nature. On the other hand, translating a holy text can be challenging when every detail of it is read in scrutiny. To miss a detail of it is to miss the purpose of it all, since religious dedication leaves no margin for error in the words of a prophet or an angelic figure.

While many novels, essays, and other texts have been inspected and verified in translation, poetry and holy texts are far less prominent due to difficulty. However, there is much

to learn from assessing the values and limitations of translation on extremes. For example, the true and full power of translation can be revealed from such experimentation. If it can be said that the so called “untranslatable” may be effectively translated, without losing significant amounts of meaning and language, then it can be said that just about anything can be effectively translated.

To analyze how translations protect or take away from the original text, three different subjective texts were chosen. The first two consist of poetry in familiar and absurd languages when compared to English, with the last being a holy text.

The familiar language that will be analyzed through translation is French poetry. While French differs from English syntactically, a number of cognates are shared between the two languages due to their history. One possibility that may occur through translation is that the different meanings and devices are preserved, as the languages at hand are not too far apart. In contrast, there is also the chance that slight differences result in a significant loss of meaning and language in the poem. However, indigenous languages like Navajo differ entirely from English, so comparing them will allow linguists to see the possibility of translating two independent languages. Naturally, much will be lost in the translation, due to the abundant amount of phrases, metaphors, or words running into constant translation barriers. However, the possibility that the original and its translated counterpart are similar in themes, message, and so on remains intact.

The third and final text chosen is the Islamic holy text, *The Qur'an*. Through analyzing differences between the Arabic and English-translated version, one may observe changes in personal meaning and translation controversies in the text. This includes mistranslations, or slight word alterations that go a far way in terms of interpretation, as well as cultural customs

held to the Arabic text in relation to the English text. Even with these differences, though, the purpose of both versions may be consistent throughout.

In short, this investigation reveals that while some aspects of subjective texts are preserved through English translation, a majority of French poetry, Navajo poetry, and the Qur'an is clearly obscured from its original meaning and language.

Translating French Poetry

Poetry is often declared very difficult to fully translate, but of the few languages where it comes close, French is one of them. As mentioned in the introduction, the obvious reason that translation is more possible is because of the history and interconnectivity of the two. But is having a similar lexicon enough to translate a complex, meaningful poem?

“Comparative Stylistics of French and English: a methodology for translation” by Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet examines the translatability between French and English and discusses the methodology to translate a given text.

First, Vinay and Darbelnet explain the nature and foundations of translation. They begin by introducing the lexical aspect of their study and its corresponding theories. Vinay and Darbelnet write, “An utterance consists of signs. Signs originate from the vocabulary and are modified by the grammar, intonation, etc. Together they give the utterance a global meaning, here called message, which is the reason for the utterance,” (12). To get from signs to meaning, one must pay attention to two things: the signifier and the signified (13).

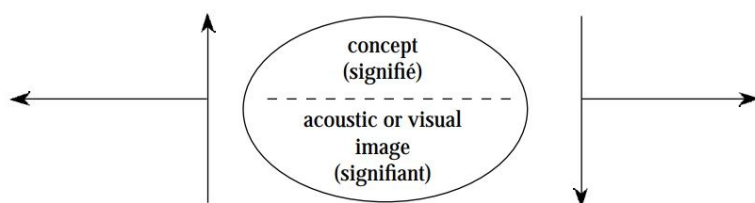


Figure 1.1. *The dual nature of the linguistic sign*

(Vinay and Darbelnet 13)

The signifier (signifiant) in this case represents the linguistic part (French or English), or anything used to convey the message (12). This could entail rhetorical devices, word choice, sentence structure, and so on. The signified (signifié) is its conceptual representation and together the two form what is the sign (12). Translation issues, however, occur when two similar signifiers represent different concepts. Vinay and Darbelnet exemplify this with the comparison of English “bread” to French “pain” (also bread), where the English “has neither the same appearance nor the same importance as French bread,” giving it a completely different connotation (13).

To see this occur in a text, one may look at Charles Baudelaire’s collection of French Poetry in “Les Fleurs du Mal,” or “The Flowers of Evil.” In this text, Baudelaire writes about a variety of controversial themes at the time through a beautiful medium- the French language. Though a majority of the book deals with society and eroticism, one 14-line, 3 sentence poem titled “Correspondances” by Charles Baudelaire (1857), translated “Correspondences” by William Aggeler (1954), touches upon the beauty of the natural world. However, through translating the original French of Baudelaire into Aggeler’s English version, it is evident that while the linguistic morphology preserves some aspects, it also obscures meaning and language in the process.

To begin, a positive aspect of translating “Correspondances” by Charles Baudelaire is the preservation of thematic weight. One theme Baudelaire heavily emphasizes is the aestheticism and complexity of nature, which remains seen in the original and translation. One explanation for this is the lexiconic similarity between French and English. The opening words of Baudelaire’s poem read “La Nature est un temple,” while Aggeler’s translation starts, “Nature is a temple,” (25). This simple four word translation goes a long way to introduce the poem, corresponding nature with the beautiful design and complexities you see in a temple. Since the words “nature” and “temple” are in both languages, representing the same thing, it is easy for William Aggeler to get the simile across. In this scenario, the “signifié” allows the reader to imagine the same image of nature being compared to a religious or ancient temple in their mind.

One literary device that is preserved through translation is the use of sensory details, as its familiarity is universal. After three lines of descriptive imagery, Baudelaire claims that in nature “Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent,” (25). Aggeler, on the other hand, translates this line as “Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond,” (25). While the translation itself is not perfect (the reflexive tense “se répondent” entails more collaboration than the English, and the second and third items of the list were switched to preserve a soft-ending intonation), the senses of smell, sight, and sound remain consistent. Due to cultural similarity, The fragrance of perfumes is luxurious and appetizing for both the French and English, and so its translation is able to preserve the same delightedness Baudelaire receives from said natural aroma. With the familiarity of nature in the United States and France, such as the sounds of chirping birds and the colors of shining leaves, the English translation is able to give the same effect to readers in both countries. By utilizing a universal device such as sensory details,

Baudelaire's message of the beautiful phenomena which occurs in nature is able to be preserved through Aggeler's translation.

In contrast, translating Baudelaire's French into English also gives Aggeler the potential to obscure its original language and meaning. For one, the meaning in Baudelaire's poem is obscured by its translation. In the second line of Baudelaire's "Correspondances," he writes, "Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles," (25). While this would translate literally to "Leaving sometimes confused words," Aggeler writes it as, "Sometimes give voice to confused words," (25). This decision, to add implicit assumptions (the giving of a voice), not only gives the translation new linguistic features, but obscures meaning by failing to replicate Baudelaire's intent that nature is not a giver, but a letter. By this, he meant that nature did not force upon its witnesses to see its beauty, but made itself readily available in case of the curious thinker. Additionally, the language of the text is obscured by mistranslated words. Baudelaire gives in his poem, "Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants," though Aggeler translates it as, "There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children," (25). Baudelaire describes the previously mentioned perfumes to expound upon a sweet, elegant tone through the poem. Aggeler's translation of "des chairs" into "flesh," however, fails to carry out this tone. "Des chairs," in this sense, represents the soft, smooth skin of a child. "Flesh," on the other hand, connotes a more disturbing tone associated with the English word, therefore throwing the reader off in the language of the poem.

To conclude this section, French poetry reveals that there are both gains and losses through translating a text into English. By understanding the reasons that the two languages differ, syntactically, systematically, and so on, one is able to scope into the specific changes that

translation inflicts upon a text, and thereby examine the impacts of those changes. By understanding the basic theories of translation, such as the signified and signifier, mistranslation becomes a more common and noticeable entity in the text. Applying Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet's paper to the French and English versions of the poem "Correspondances" found in Charles Baudelaire's "Les Fleurs du Mal," one sees multiple components of the text both preserved and obscured. Preserved are the themes of the poem such as the beauty of nature, and the universal literary devices that describe nature such as sensory details. Meanwhile, language and meaning are obscured in the poem by mistranslation and translator assumption, respectively.

Translating Navajo Poetry

Though English partially resembles French, to Navajo it is completely different. Navajo, an indigenous Native American tribe, developed in a world separate from Europeans. In result, the language put together is entirely unique, since many of the impacts on the English language would be too far to affect Navajo. Due to this, nearly every aspect of the two languages applies only to themselves. So how does one compare the two?

In short, not very easily. Anthony K. Webster, in a journal article titled "The art of failure in translating a Navajo poem," attempts to explain the difficulty of English translation with Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim. He discovers, however, that it is not possible because when the languages are so different, every minimal conversion suffers multiple consequences. In a simple, yet superbly complex poem by Rex Lee Jim found in his manuscript "Spirit echoes Spirit," Anthony K. Webster reveals some of the translation factors that are held responsible for

obscuring the meaning and language of the original poem, namely the phonosonic nexus and polysemous vocabulary (7; 12).

To start with, English and Navajo each have an individual sound system (phonosonic nexus). Some sounds are more common in English, while others are only in Navajo. Some vowels are not stressed in Navajo, while they may be heavily stressed in English. The very act of translating omits this preservation because English words simply do not voice the same as their Navajo counterparts. Changing these sounds deeply obscures meaning behind the poem for multiple reasons. One, these poems are meant to be sung (Webster 7). Anthony K. Webster patiently explains all the vowels in the poem, like the nasal /n/, voiceless /s/, and so on (24). That is because the sounds connect the poem to the spirituality and culture. Even if the English translation resembled the exact same words as the Navajo, its physical phonetics and delivery would not have the same effect as the original. Vibrations from Navajo pronunciations give the poem tranquility, for example, which loses significant meaning through translation.

What's more, Rex Lee Jim elaborates the importance of sound in poems through a metaphor. He says, "but before that for me / saad means sound / sound that communicates... if you live way out in the country / you can even get to know the sound of vehicles / by hearing it you know who's coming..." (Webster 16). In this, he means that the message a poem carries is delivered by the sound of the poem, as if you already know what to expect the poem to be saying just by its tone. When the sound changes, then the meaning of the poem is not able to be interpreted how it was initially intended to be.

náhookqs
nidi
náhookqs

(26)

**even big dipper turns,
 turns,
 turns on earth. (Jim nd, p. 4)**

(32)

On top of that, the meaning and language of this poem are obscured by its polysemous (multiple meaning) vocabulary, or “punning” (Webster 54). The language is obscured by complicating the single word syntax that is possible to write in Navajo, but not in English. That is because the word “nahookos,” which both begins and ends the three word poem, can mean “a slender stiff or thin rigid object, falling or flying through the air, or a slender solid object revolves,” (28). It can also be translated as “north... turn... Big Dipper,” (28). Since “nahookos” can represent both a verb and noun, the turning and the Big Dipper, the Navajo poem, which reads literally as “nahookos / even / nahookos,” is able to cleverly get across Jim’s theme of continuity. The purpose behind using this pun to start and end the short poem is to put together a loop. This loop can be read forward or backward, showing the motion in the way something such as the Big Dipper moves in the sky. The English translation, however, can only get this theme across by turning 3 words into 8. The words are used to repeat the key verb through the three stages, “...big dipper turns, turns, turns on earth,” (Webster 36). Here, a full spin is symbolized by the structure of the poem. To visualize it, one could see it like a lunar cycle. Waxing, full, then waning. Like the revolution of the Big Dipper.

Furthermore, the translation obscures meaning by leaving out the possible meaning of “north.” North is significant here because it is an allusion to Navajo philosophy. Anthony K. Webster mentions the cardinal directions in association with the “Diné philosophy,” that divides life into 4 sections: East, South, West, and last, North (42). North is juxtaposed with death, but

also reflection, assurance, and a new beginning (42). It can even be seen as the birth (of a new cycle). Another theme Rex Lee Jim is revealing here is the cycle which we as humans undergo: we make mistakes, learn, and try again (or make more mistakes), very similar to “nahookos, nidi, nahookos.” Since this philosophy would not be seen other than by chance in the English translation, meaning is obscured by leaving out a crucial interpretation of the poem’s theme.

To summarize, while it is possible to translate Navajo poetry into English, ramifications to the language and meaning are inevitable. Meaning is obscured by altering the sounds of the poem, which guide the message and tone of the piece. When the same sounds are not able to be replicated, and rarely can they be replicated, an intent different than the original author’s is carried out. Meaning is also obscured by the attempted translation of untranslatable words such as “nahookos,” which can mean an array of things. In effect, each different meaning can provide a new perspective on the theme. However, once translated into English, the theme is narrowed down into a single perspective, as there is no longer the presence of a polysemous vocabulary. Finally, language is also obscured through translation due to the fact that English is unable to preserve the syntax of the original piece. This causes the poem to be read differently, failing to give the simple, yet complex effect of the original piece.

Translating The Qur’an

Lastly, apart from poetry, another subjective text type is the holy text. The Qur’an, for instance, is subjective because, like poetry, each reader is allowed a different interpretation of the text. In result, each translation becomes not a new version of the text, but an independent interpretation of it. A separate work altogether. To this interpretation, there are both benefits and

losses to be had. On one side, the purpose of the text is preserved from a general view, but on the other, its personal meaning and language used to communicate meaning are by then obscured.

The main purpose of a holy text is religious affiliation. *The Qur'an* and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's English translation "The Meanings of the Glorious Qur'an" reveal that translation does not obscure this purpose. For example, "Al-Fāṭiḥah," is the first sūrah of Al-Qur'an, which unveils submission, lordship, and guidance from Allah. The Qur'an reads, in transliteration, "Alhamdu lillahi," "Maliki yawmi alddeeni," and "Ihdina alssirata mustaqeema," where Pickthall translates these into "Praise be to Allah," "Owner of the Day of Judgement," and "Show us the straight path," (Haman; Pickthall 2). By being able to relatively restate the words of the Qur'an, the purpose of Islam is not lost in translation. One understands in both texts the basic message that all power and praise is due to Allah and guidance is reliant upon Him. Someone reading the English text is no less pious than someone who is able to read the original Arabic. This is beneficial because it allows people outside of the Arabic-speaking world to affiliate themselves with Islam, while even allowing others to acknowledge the religion's purpose.

At the same time, the English translation of the Qur'an obscures its meaning to a specific audience: Muslims. The meaning pointed out here is not that in the text, but of the text. To specify, a Muslim handling this holy text must follow a number of rules. One has to ensure the body has been cleansed through wudu (a cleaning ritual), the Qur'an is held securely with both hands, it is placed in a secure and sanitary location, no other books lie atop of it, it is closed properly after reading, and many more ("Etiquettes of the Qur'an"). The reason for all these rules is the personal meaning that followers of Islam hold dear to the Qur'an. The English translation,

however, is no longer the words of Allah, as the Qur'an says multiple times "Thus we have revealed it as a Lecture in Arabic," (Pickthall 209). Replacing the original Arabic with westernized English, the meaning diminishes because it is not considered to be the same text. Readers of this Qur'an do not feel the same connection as before with the holy text, causing the rules stated to no longer be applicable.

To end, what is further obscured is the language through which the message of Islam is delivered in. One of the most, if not the most, heavily discussed lines of the Qur'an resides in sūrah Al-Nisa, or "The Women." Transliterated from the Qur'an, it says, "nushūzahunna fa-izūhunna w-ahjurūhunna fi-l-maḍāji w-aḍribūhunna," (Haman). Marmaduke Pickthall, however, translates this line to be saying, "[from whom ye fear rebellion,] admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them," (76). This line advises a course of action for the husband in the case of an unsettlement in marriage. It says, first, to "admonish" (scold) them of their wrongdoing, then refuse to sleep with them in the house, and most interestingly, to then "scourge" them (whip relentlessly) if all else failed. The controversy behind this is that many anti-Islamic speakers use this verse to prove that Islam is a religion of oppression, violence, and patriarchy. However, Laleh Bakhtiar opposes this claim by stating that it is a matter of mistranslation (Macfarquhar). "Daraba," the Arabic word under scrutiny here, spans "six pages of definitions" according to Bakhtiar, offering interpretations not limited to "scourge," but also "beat, strike...make an example of, spank...tap," and what she believes it to mean, "to go away," (Macfarquhar). Refusing to believe Islam is a religion of the previously said things, Bakhtiar arrived to the conclusion that the final action of the husband was divorce, a much healthier resolution than Pickthall's interpretation of severe punishment. These two very contrasting

interpretations of a single verse in the Qur'an reveal just how much of an impact one misunderstood word can have on millions of people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while some aspects of subjective texts (such as literary devices, thematic weight, and purpose) are preserved through English translation, a majority of French poetry, Navajo poetry, and the Qur'an is obscured from its original meaning and language. When translating French poetry, attempts to make the text unambiguous lead to faulty assumptions at the hands of the translator. In addition, some words in French do not have the same connotation as their literal English translation, which has an effect on the poem's tone. Next, since Navajo is far from English linguistically and phonetically, it is near impossible to preserve all meaning and language. Words have multiple meanings and cannot be replicated syntactically in English, on top of the fact that pronunciation differences affect the poem's meaning. And finally, translating the Qur'an into English causes not only the meaning of the text to vary among readers, but its meaning to the individual reader as well.

Bibliography

Baudelaire, Charles, and William Aggeler. *The Flowers of Evil = Les Fleurs Du Mal*.

Digireads.com, 2015.

“Etiquettes of Reading and Handling the Qur'an Al-Kareem.” *Conditions of Handling Quran*,

As-Sunnah Foundation of America,

www.sunnah.org/sources/ulumquran/conditions_of_handling_quran.htm.

Haman, Abdullah K. *Kitab Namaaz* . Abdullah Khan Maktab Haman.

Macfarquhar, Neil. “Verse in Koran on Beating Wife Gets a New Translation.” *The New York*

Times, The New York Times, 25 Mar. 2007,

www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/world/americas/25iht-koran.4.5017346.html.

Pickthall, Marmaduke William. *The Meanings of the Glorious Qurān*. Adam Publishers &

Distributors, 2008.

Vinay, Jean-Paul, and Jean Darbelnet. *Comparative Stylistics of French and English:*

Methodology for Translation. J. Benjamins, 1995.

Webster, Anthony K. “The Art of Failure in Translating a Navajo Poem.” *Journal De La Société*

Des Américanistes, vol. 102, no. 1, 2016.