

WORLD LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION: HOW STORIES TRAVEL ACROSS LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

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Abstract

Literary translation allows stories, poems, plays, and other forms of cultural expression to circulate beyond the language in which they were originally produced. Translation, however, involves more than replacing words between languages. Literary texts contain stylistic choices, cultural references, rhythm, metaphor, historical associations, and voices that may not have direct equivalents. This article examines translation as an interpretive and communicative practice, focusing on equivalence, cultural context, style, and the translator's role. It also considers how translated literature contributes to world literature by connecting readers across linguistic boundaries. The discussion emphasizes that every translation involves choices shaped by the target audience, literary conventions, and historical context. Understanding these choices can help students read translated literature more critically and appreciate the relationship between language and culture.

Keywords

literary translation, world literature, translation studies, culture, equivalence, literature

Introduction

Literature crosses linguistic boundaries largely through translation. Readers can encounter novels, poems, plays, and essays written in languages they do not speak because translators make these works accessible to new audiences. Translation has consequently played a major role in the formation of world literature.

Yet literary translation is not a mechanical process. Literary texts depend on sound, rhythm, metaphor, word choice, cultural references, and narrative voice. A translator must interpret these features and determine how they can be represented for readers in another language.

This article examines literary translation as both a linguistic and cultural practice. It considers equivalence, style, cultural references, translator choices, and the educational value of translated literature.

Equivalence and Interpretation

Translation theory has long discussed the question of equivalence. A translated sentence can communicate the general proposition of an original while changing its stylistic or pragmatic effects. Literal correspondence between individual words does not necessarily produce equivalent literary meaning.

Nida (1964) distinguished between formal and dynamic approaches to equivalence, emphasizing the response of the target reader. Later translation scholars have developed more complex models that recognize the role of purpose, genre, culture, and literary conventions.

In literary translation, the translator must therefore make decisions at several levels. Vocabulary, syntax, sound patterns, figurative language, and narrative voice may each require different strategies.

Culture-Specific Expressions

Cultural references present particular challenges. A literary work may refer to food, customs, historical events, institutions, social practices, or beliefs that are unfamiliar to target readers. Translators can retain the original reference, explain it, replace it with a more familiar expression, or use contextual clues to support interpretation.

There is no single strategy that is appropriate for every text. The choice depends on genre, audience, purpose, and the translator's interpretation of the work. A children's text may require more explicit explanation than a scholarly edition, while a poetic translation may prioritize rhythm or imagery.

These decisions demonstrate that translation participates in cultural communication. The translator helps determine how a culture is represented to readers who encounter it through another language.

Style and Literary Voice

Literary style creates additional difficulties because meaning is expressed through the relationship between content and form. An author may use repetition, unusual syntax, dialect, archaism, humor, or deliberate ambiguity. A translation that communicates only the basic plot may therefore lose important aspects of the original.

Translators often attempt to reproduce stylistic effects rather than individual forms. If a character speaks in a particular social dialect, the translator may select a corresponding variety in the target language. Such choices can be controversial because dialects carry different social meanings across languages.

The translator's work can consequently be viewed as interpretive. Readers of a translation encounter both the author's literary construction and the translator's decisions about how that construction can function in a new linguistic environment.

Translation and World Literature

Translated works contribute to the movement of literary forms across borders. A novel may influence writers in another country, introduce new narrative techniques, or become part of a national literary curriculum through translation. World literature is

therefore shaped by processes of selection and circulation as well as by literary production itself.

Damrosch (2003) describes world literature in relation to circulation beyond its original cultural context. Translation is central to this circulation because it allows works to enter new systems of reading and interpretation.

At the same time, not every literary work travels equally. Publishing markets, educational institutions, translators, and cultural interests influence which works become widely available. Translation can therefore increase literary exchange while also reflecting broader structures of cultural circulation.

Translation in Literature Education

Translated literature provides valuable opportunities for language and literature students. Students can compare an original passage with its translation when they know both languages, or compare different translations of the same work. Such activities reveal how lexical, stylistic, and cultural decisions influence interpretation.

Students can also examine what is difficult to translate. Metaphor, humor, dialect, wordplay, and culturally specific references provide concrete examples of the relationship between language and meaning.

This approach encourages students to see translation as a form of reading and interpretation rather than simple substitution. It also develops cultural awareness and respect for linguistic diversity.

Conclusion

Literary translation enables texts to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries, but the process necessarily involves interpretation. Translators make choices concerning equivalence, style, cultural references, rhythm, and audience. These choices influence how readers encounter literary works in new languages.

Translation should therefore be understood as a creative and analytical practice. It contributes to world literature by allowing texts to circulate while also demonstrating that literary meaning is closely connected to linguistic form and cultural context.

For literature education, translated texts offer a productive way to explore language, culture, and interpretation together. Comparing translations and discussing translator choices can help students understand both the possibilities and limitations of cross-linguistic literary communication.

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