

Taking License: The Translator-cum-Censor

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Abstract: *Translation and censorship seem to enjoy a unique, yet subliminal bond. Many a time they play converse roles working for opposite ends. In fact they may be represented as two sides of the same coin, namely cultural interaction. One stands for the introduction of new things into a culture. The other stands for the protective mechanisms that safeguard the established norms of that culture by the suppression of those foreign unacceptable elements, norms, institutions, ideologies, etc...judged to be unacceptable in that culture.*

1. Translation and Censorship Bond

Translation and censorship have enjoyed a unique, yet subliminal bond. Many a time they play converse roles working for opposite ends. An observer might even conjecture to represent them as the two sides of the coin of cultural interaction. One stands for the introduction of new things into a culture. The other stands for the protective mechanisms that safeguard the various existing norms of that culture by the suppression of those foreign unacceptable elements, norms, institutions, ideologies, etc...judged to be unacceptable in that culture. This is usually seen as an act of defence against an act of violence - invasion - from the outside via translation, as Victor Hugo would like to suggest (cited in Lefevere, 1992b). Translators continually complain of working under the threat of the sword of censorship which is stipulated by the authority institutions and implemented by various administrative bodies of the establishment. Their power extends from the choice of the translated material to the admission (or suppression) of words, images, concepts, and references in the translated texts.

Parallel to this official external censorship imposed on the translator, we see the working of inner individual censorship practiced by the translator on his own. This should not be unexpected since the translator is a member of a specific culture/community, and thus shares with the other members of this community their set of cultural norms; values, institutions, convictions, ideologies, etc... The translator acts in a social

context and is part of that context as Hatim and Mason (1997) would like to put it. And it is inevitable that his work will be ideologically influenced, if not driven. In general, the ideological influence can be seen in the degrees of mediation, or the extent of the translator's intervention in the text, censorship being only one aspect of this mediation.

This inner censorship is based on the ideological convictions of the translator himself, which guide him through the whole translation activity, from the choice of the text and the process of translation, up to the later stages of revision and redrafting to suppress elements or parts of the source text in his translation. Seen in this light, translation is an ideological activity. Here, the translator is not consciously led by any explicit authoritarian statement or guideline about what he should (or should not) include in the translated text. Rather, he is led by his own judgment of the acceptable/appropriate and the unacceptable/inappropriate.

In this the translator draws on the cultural norms of his community and the general attitudes his community takes of its culture and the cultures of the others. Ethnocentric prestigious cultures which want to recreate the world into their own image will influence the translator to assimilate the foreign texts to his native cultural norms, suppressing all foreignisms because they are not good enough, or too rough or filthy, and are therefore not fit to enter his native language/culture (cf. Venuti's 1995 dichotomy between domesticating and foreignizing translation). Fitzgerald finds it "an amusement to take what liberties I like with these Persians who are not poets enough to frighten one from such excursions and who really want a little art to shape them" (cited in Lefevere, 1992b: 80).

In his translation of Richardson's *Pamela*, Antoine Prevost states that he has given the author's work a new face. Amongst other things, he has suppressed English customs where they appear shocking to other nations, or made them conform to customs prevalent in the rest of Europe. (ibid: 39).

It seemed to him

that those remainders of the old and uncouth British ways, which only habit prevents the British themselves from noticing, would dishonour a book in which manners should be noble and virtuous. (ibid)

Then he gives us the extent to which he has gone in his suppression precisely. He has reduced the seven original volumes – which would have been fourteen in the French translation – to only four (ibid).

Similarly in his *Candide* (1759), Voltaire left some lines of conversation in Italian. He did not translate them into French. The whole story was fictionally a translation from German! French was perhaps too noble to have these rude bits said in it. One sentence is an exclamation by a eunuch wishing he had testicles. Another is about a woman telling about intimate places in her anatomy to hide diamonds (O’Cuilleainain, 1999: 33-4).

2. Factors Influencing Censorship

2.1. Translators may suppress materials from the source texts in order to preserve a prestigious image that the source language/culture enjoys in the target culture. This is what we witness in the translation of classical Greek and Roman literatures into European languages. Classical civilization enjoys a special status in the minds of the Europeans. This prestige has to be preserved and thus any product from this civilization that may be introduced to other languages/cultures should conform to this perpetuated image. Thus we have translations of Greek classical works that left out some passages that were deemed inappropriate. Including them would supposedly tarnish that image even if the suppressed material refers to things normal and acceptable within the Greek culture itself (Lefevere, 1992b: 36).

Many translators have left out parts from the works of the well-known Roman poet Catullus because of this. One particular poem stands as a good example. This is poem 32, which was avoided by many translators because it does not match the image of classical Roman literature. The poem is an invitation to a prostitute to prepare for an amorous rendezvous, using some frank, so-called four-letter words (*ibid*).

2.2. Being an inner and individual type of censorship, this act of suppression varies in strictness and range from one translator to another. Each applies his own set of value judgments on the text he translates and decides how he deals with it accordingly. But, aren’t these individual values derived from the community values? Why, then, should there be any noticeable difference between this and that translator as far as their range of censorship is concerned? It is obvious that factors of time and context, sometimes factors of deep personal convictions and worldviews, and a multitude of other factors enter into the picture to create this wide difference which we see between one translator from another.

In the translation of Aristophanes’s *Lysistrat*, one translator, Benjamin Rogers, leaves one line of the poem out. It is the line that translates to “we

have to make do with Kleisthenes”, because it refers to a well-known homosexual in Athens whose favours the men would have to seek if their women continue their sexual strike (ibid: 27). This is a totally individual decision. Probably he felt that what the line was about was beyond anything that he or his reader would take. That this was a personal decision becomes abundantly clear from the fact that other translators of the same poem did not act identically. Another translator did not shy from translating the aforementioned line. However, he left it without a footnote to clarify the reference to this man, who he was, or what those men wanted from him, probably in observance of the rules of decency that he believed in (ibid.).

2.3. The taboos that cultures impose may be found in various aspects of the life of the community. They are not restricted to one dimension of this life: religion, sex, magic, death, etc... Individual translators do not treat these taboos the same way or give them the same weight. While they may be very strict in obeying some taboos they show more leniency in the case of others. The context, the topic, or the readers of the text he is translating may influence his decision as to which taboos he may ignore and which he should observe, and consequently which parts of the text he should suppress and which parts he may let free.

In a book entitled *The Language Instinct* by Stephen Pinker, and translated into Arabic in 2000, the translator, an academic, does not hesitate to translate this sentence exemplifying the English grammatical construction used to indicate hypothetical results into Arabic: *If my grandmother had testicles, she would have been my grandfather*. But he suppresses passages containing some blasphemous material. A good example is the famous response of Larry, the black boy whom Labov interviewed about why God cannot be black in colour. This passage is left in the original English without translation. The translator states in a footnote that the untranslated message contains blasphemous material, which makes it unsuitable for translation. Nothing is offered to tell the reader, or give him a hint of, what it is about. (Pinker, 2000: 38).

2.4. This inner censorship also changes with the years. Cultures change and so do their norms, beliefs, manners, morals, and taboos. This consequently influences the acceptable and the unacceptable. Thus, when a text is translated more than once over an extended period of time, the change of attitude among successive generations of translators is clearly noticeable. The different translations show this in the extent of the censorship applied to the text and the kind of the censored material.

Lefevere (ibid) provides us with an interesting chronology of the various translations of Catullus's 32 poem.

This poem, which was avoided by some translators as mentioned earlier, was subsequently translated into English many times. The first of these translations was published in 1913. The translation, claimed to be a faithful one by its publishers, was really nothing but a rephrasing of the poem, and not an accurate one at that. Parts of the poem are left without translation. Why was the translator so selective in his translation? Why did he choose to rephrase, rather than translate, certain passages? Obviously, because he did not find those passages acceptable to himself or the reader. At that time, really faithful translation of that poem would have been banned ideologically. In a subsequent translation of this poem, the translator who avoids translating any of the plain and precise, though obviously offending and therefore taboo words, provides vague replacements to them in footnotes. The suppression is not total but the main text is satisfactory as far as the moral (ideological) values of the translator are concerned. At a later stage, the translations are more daring. Now, the translators do not shy from including the 'offending' material from the translated text – i.e. they do not relegate it to a footnote. However, they try to tune it down so as to be acceptable. A line like "Novem continuas fututiones", translated literally as "*Nine continuous f..ks*", is not left out by the translator, which is what his predecessors did. Rather, we have translations like "*nine times to feel the pulse of love*" by one translator, or "*nine long bouts of love*", by another, or "*nine hugs without stop*" by a third, all conforming to their own individual cultural norms and values.

Nevertheless, when we look at a new translation of this poem, published in 1974, we recognize the signs of the changing times. The translator, now, is of a rather different, and less strict, ideological persuasion. He is less shy and quite precise in his translation of the above line. What could be said in Latin could also be said in English or – for that matter – in French (ibid: 103).

2.5. The audience, or the readership, may also influence the amount of license taken by the translator to suppress material from the source text. If the translation is directed to a small circle of professionals or interested people, the translator may not be as strict in applying his ideological scissors or sword as he would usually be when the text is addressed to a wider, more general audience. When Boccaccio's Decameron was fully translated for the first time in 1886 the bawdy tales and references were

not left out. This translation was printed for a very small society by private subscription (O’Cuilleainain, 1999: 35).

When one looks at translated anatomy texts, for example, one can readily observe that the translator has momentarily abandoned his taboos and black word-list. Words and expressions naming body organs and functions that are unlikely to be encountered in a more general text abound in the translation of such scientific (specialized). Even here, one may hasten to say, a distinction is made between pairs of synonymous words along a respectability rangè, and the more formal, and perhaps ‘neutral’ and less annoying, is used in such uncensored texts. However, this choice is not dictated by ideological terms and taboos; rather, it is the result of a purely stylistic decision. It is not specifically a translation phenomenon either. This stylistic choice is practiced by the writer of a text too.

Translations of particular Arab or oriental texts into English by such orientalist as the famous Richard Burton provide another clear case of a translator who did not exercise the ideological standards of his times in his translation. The Victorian age was not known for its moral leniency. Nevertheless, Burton’s translations were taboo-free, in that it is obvious that the man did not apply the moral codes of his society in his translations of such books as the *Perfumed Garden*, for example. There is no doubt that the limited readership played a role in this leniency. Such books were always published in special editions, with restricted distribution (Qabbani, 1988: 92). Of course, another possible reason for this is the preservation by the translator of the ‘exotic’ nature of such texts in agreement with the persisting image of the culture that produced them.

3. How is Suppression Carried out?

3.1. Translators have access to various methods and techniques for the suppression of unacceptable/inappropriate material from the source text . In extreme cases the unacceptable/inappropriate source material is simply omitted or left out in the translation. Words, expressions, phrases, sentences, or even larger linguistic units or language chunks referring to images and concepts seen by the translator as offensive are left out. These may be words of explicit reference to sexual acts or organs, body functions and excretion, swear words, expressions considered defaming to sacred or religious deities, or containing taboo matter of any type.

This is what we have noticed in some of the early translation of Catullus’s poem 32 when the word *futuiones* was left out completely in

the translated text. So was the reference to Kleisthenes in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (Lefevere, 1992a). Lefevere (ibid) finds another interesting example of this in Carlyle's omitting from his translation of Labeed's *mu'allaqah* (one of the long Arabic pre-Islamic poems) the word *دمن* meaning 'feces'. Probably he found it too filthy for the Victorian taste.

Occasionally a translator may add an apologetic note in place of the suppressed text stating the reason(s) which prompted him to do that. An illustrative example of this is the commentary that Antoine Galland added in his French translation of the Arabic *One Thousand and One Nights* about a certain passage in the source text which he felt to be too frank for his readers' taste: cf.

Modesty doesn't permit me to tell all that took place between these women and their black slaves. Suffice it to say that Shah Zaman saw enough to make him realize that his brother's position was no better than his. (Cited in Qabbani 1988: 54)

The total suppression – omission -- of the annoying source material is widely spread in screen subtitling, especially when the translator sees it as unimportant or unessential. Incidentally, the suppression in screen subtitles may not be so successful sometimes since the message on the screen is relayed in two modes: the written mode -- i.e. the censored subtitles- and the spoken mode -- the original dialogue. There is bound to be someone among the audience who will recognize the discrepancy between the two modes. There are even worse instances of suppression failure on the screen. Sometimes the linguistic message is accompanied by another message through the visionary channel, and the audience may perceive the message via this channel even if it were suppressed in the first.

3.2. Omitting material from the source text but mentioning it in a footnote is a second technique used by translators for censorship. The footnote is felt to be a less dangerous place to put the material in. It is no longer part of the text. And it offers the translator a chance -- or a leeway -- to clear his conscious from the guilt of infidelity. The footnote may contain the material in the source language with some explanatory or apologetic remark. Alternatively the translator may find it quite sufficient to only mention in the footnote that the text contains some unacceptable material -- without including this offending material -- that was replaced, like what

one of the translators of Catullus's 32 poem did. This is also what the translator of Pinker's book did with Larry's statement (Pinker, 2000: 38).

3.3. However, the most common technique used by translators for the suppression of unacceptable material is the use of evasive tactics – i.e. the replacement of the source material with an acceptable – less harmful – equivalent or semi-equivalent, since it is quite difficult to talk about equivalence here. The softening of the text, as this method may be called, is carried out through the use of words and expressions that may have close or remote implication of the original. We have seen above the plain word used to refer to the act of love in poem 32 was replaced in different translation by a variety of words.

On screen, the English 'make love' or its more direct 'four-letter' equivalents are usually replaced in Arabic by such euphemisms, again of varying degrees of directness ranging from *يلاطف*, *يحب*, *يعاشر*, *يحابس* to *يمارس الجنس*.

يتضاجع. The English 'son of a bitch' is another instance of such softening on screen Arabic subtitling. The translations given to it range from: *ابن*

ابن الفاعلة to *الكلب*. In some cases the relation between the original and the replacement is very difficult to establish. A translator working on the subtitling of a Western felt that words indicating alcoholic beverages should not be translated into Arabic. As a result, we find John Wayne in a bar asking for a glass of *عصير* !

Replacement, sometimes, may not be effected through using a related word to that which appears in the source text as a method of softening to render the text more acceptable and less harmful to the taste of the reader in the target culture, as the above example shows. Rather, in some texts, unacceptable words and expressions are replaced by others that carry no semantic affinity whatsoever to them. These, however, do constitute the equivalent, or the ideological counterpart, to the replaced words in the target culture. This state of affairs occurs typically in the translation of political texts. The term 'terrorist' and its Arabic replacement in the translated text *فدائي* , *انتحاري* , *استشهادي* , *جهادي* ; or 'terrorism' and its replacement by *جهاد* ' or anyone of the other words and expressions systematically used in the Arabic translations of the literature on terrorism, are not semantically related in any way. However, they are equivalent in that they represent two different ways a specific action is considered or seen in the two cultures. Translators adopting this technique

are not forced to do so by any official orders from some government body. They do it because they are applying their own rules of censorship. One may look up any Arab newspaper and probably encounter the semantic equivalent sometimes – i.e. إرهابي إرهاب in our example. In such cases, the translator had decided, for any imaginable reason, not to use the more ideologically appropriate replacement. One can even detect some difference in the consistency in which such replacement is applied in different types of discourse: the difference between translated military communiqués issued by resistance organizations and newspaper articles.

3.4. Suppression of material could also be imposed by writing only the first letter of the unacceptable word or expression. This follows a long-standing tradition in literary writing where the writer or the publisher omits the taboo words leaving the first letter to indicate what the omitted word is (1). Many a translator revert to this technique to get rid of words and expressions which they do not find acceptable. We frequently encounter in the dialogue of translated novels, for example, an excited response of this sort: " ...—حـ" standing for 'shit', or 'merde' or 'sheis' which is most probably written in full in the source text.

However, one technique of censorship used by individual translators stands as being unique. This involves the decision to retain the offensive material in the translated text in its original language. This 'surface' suppression – if one may borrow a term from syntax – reflects both the desire of the translator to keep out of the text any material that he does not find acceptable and his concern over fidelity in translation. The reader will either ignore the message, or he will not find it too offensive, because foreign words and expressions are always less so, and by doing this nobody can accuse the translator of infidelity either.

As mentioned above, the translator of Pinker's *The Language Instinct* leaves a certain passage that contains blasphemy in the original English and states in a footnote that he does not feel the need to translate it. This is because of its unacceptability and because the point that it presents could be seen from other passages (Pinker, 2000: 38). In another instance, the translator of the same work leaves the phrase *Clinton's erection* without translation. This comes in the context of a discussion of the allophonic variation between [l] and [r] in Japanese, which results in some embarrassing situations sometimes when carried over to English when spoken by the Japanese. In a sentence that the translator adds to the text, he tells us what the intended phrase – *Clinton's election* – is, and says that he has no comment on what is actually said (Pinker, 2000: 219).

In all the above instances the individual translators were not following strict orders or guidelines as to what to suppress and what to let pass. Nor were they told what methods should be used for this suppression: cf. (i) ignoring/suppressing offensive source text ; (ii) softening the offensive source text by keeping it but in a marginal place – such as a footnote or an endnote; (iii) using evasive techniques that are deemed to make the translated text acceptable through the use of euphemisms, distant synonyms or vague implications; etc. In all such cases, the translator seems to act upon his own judgment, which is in turn based on his values which commonly stem from the general norms and the values of the culture of his community. However, the extent of the translator's belief in, and application of, these norms plays not a trivial role in the molding of the final translated text. The final cut does not only depend on the presence of the scissors, but also on how sharp each tailor makes his own scissors.

Notes

1. This is the technique used by *IJAES* editors in “censoring/editing” some swear words in this paper.
2. [Editor's note]: Occasionally an editor may resort to softening ‘unacceptable/inappropriate’ material for fear of criticism and opposition by his readers.

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