Kolum Kritika

NOT LANGUAGE ALONE: TRANSLATION AND CULTURE

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Abstract
Rendering a literary work into another language requires more than plain proficiency in the original language of the piece. Culture and history are so meshed in language that translation requires the translator to delve into the context that went into the creation of the literary text. This paper is based on the work that went into the making of my translation into Tagalog of four plays coming from different countries and climes. The plays confronted me with four different cultural and historical contexts that required to be clarified to make the translations reasonably faithful to the original works.

Keywords
original, audience, transformation, nativized

About the Author
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RECREATING A FOREIGN CREATIVE TEXT INTO ANOTHER LANGUAGE—that of the translator—is a daunting experience for the translator. The fact that the foreign text has been the outcome of one man’s efforts at recreating in words an aspect of his interaction with people and events means that the words have undergone transformation from inert material items into living matter expressive of a specific experience. Such is the reason a translator would feel himself inhibited from replacing with strange new words what the author of the original text had molded into a repository of his unique vision.

Words have a history of having been created or invented to designate an object or signify a response. Each time of human use makes the word accrue to itself an added meaning, so that in the course of time, it assumes a meaning that is the sum-total of its history. A creative text is therefore a complex composite of verbalized sense and desirabilities coming not only from the author’s purely personal experience of the world but also from the experience of other persons on whom the words had resonated. Such a process is often not accessible to the translator who comes from another language and another culture. Herein lies the translator’s sense of inadequacy before the text he proposes to put in his own language. Herein lies the twinge in the wound opened by the accusation that the translator is a traitor.

But the translator has his task to do, given the blindness resulting from his being of another culture. Thus the daunting experience that he has to overcome. Thus the insufficiency of language alone. Thus the call to enter the problematic culture of the text he is translating.

In this paper, I will be referring to three literary works I have translated into Filipino. The first is an Elizabethan drama, *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare. The second is a Spanish play linguistically rooted in the province of Andalucia, *Bodas de Sangre* by Federico Garcia Lorca. And the third is a Philippine play in English, *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* by Nick Joaquin.

As a translator seeking to find the relationship between a foreign text and its culture, it is only proper that I introduce myself as a translator in order to clarify for my audience the circumstances whereby I render into my native language a chosen foreign text. My native language is Filipino, the National Language of the Philippines where the language of education is English as decreed by the American colonial government that took over the Philippines in 1898. The literary works I have named above are plays, so I will be talking about translating for the theater.

In my translation work on the three original texts, I have kept in mind that the lines in a play are intended to be spoken by actors. For this reason, I take care that the Filipino words into which I put the original language of the play can be comfortably enunciated by Filipino actors. Not only the words but also their grammatical and intonational arrangement has to be so fashioned as to make the dialogue conform to the culture of the actors and of the audience. This means that...
the audience is an all-important factor to consider in translating the dialogues of a foreign play being rendered into the language of the audience. The audience is being exposed to a “strange” experience, and this experience needs to be adjusted to the accustomed features of their culture.

The violence to which such requirements impose on the original text certainly alienates the translator’s text from the original. To compensate for the distance created between the original text and the translation, the translator has to invent a rough equivalent in his native language and culture so that the resulting translated text would convey the same point that the original text intended to communicate. The effect could be best described as “nativization” of the foreign text.

The rhetoric of Shakespeare’s language for the stage is of such Elizabethan eloquence that is hard to duplicate in translation. The richness in implication of words that at this stage in the growth of English as language for poetry makes of any attempt to find an equivalent pathetically futile. Nevertheless, the attempt has to be ventured for the power of his utterance is inseparable from the force of his ideas and sentiment. Cassio in persuading the voluble Casca to participate in the conspiracy he is raising against Caesar, rages:

And why should Caesar be a tyrant then?
Poor man, I know he would not be a wolf,
But that he sees the Romans are but sheep,
He were no lion, were not Romans hinds.
Those that with haste will make a mighty fire,
Begin it with weak straws. What trash is Rome?
What rubbish, and what offal? when it serves
For the base matter, to illuminate
So vile a thing as Caesar.

Kung gayon, anong karapatan ni Cesar na maging tirano?
Kawawang nilalang! Ang alam ko’y hindi siya magsasalolo
Kung hindi niya nakikitang parang tupa ang mga Romano.
Nagsisimula sa marupok na dayami ang sinumang
Nagmamadaling makapagpaningas ng malaking siga,
Imbing basura ang Roma, tira-tira kung ano,
Nakadidiring dumi, dahil nagsisilbing pamparikit
Ng nakariririmarim na tambak na tinawag na Cesar!

Shakespeare was using a still largely oral medium in addressing a popular audience that was heir to a culture in transition from its medieval religiosity to the flowering of the intellectual classicism of the Renaissance. The English of Julius Caesar is suffUSED with elements reflective of the merger of cultural
elements from the language of the medieval church and the rationalist consciousness of the Greco-Roman tradition that is the novel feature of the Renaissance. Any translator of Elizabethan literature has to be alert to the double character of the literary language that makes translation such a tricky task.

The phrase “spirit of the original” is a staple shibboleth in standard discussions on translation. In keeping with my effort to render the Filipino version of Cassio’s speech in language that approximates the manner of a native speaker, I resisted the temptation to yield to the “spirit of the original” by a conscious effort to duplicate Shakespeare’s rhetoric and opted instead for the clarity of a “nativized” rendition. Here, Shakespeare had to give way to the demand of the culture of the audience.

In the translation of Bodas de Sangre, I entered a Spanish village in the province of Andalusia, and found myself embroiled in the speech, culture, values and mores of a rural community. The narrative is about a love triangle resolved by a bloody duel between an offended bridegroom and the former lover who had stolen his bride on her wedding day. Federico Garcia Lorca is a modernist poet and playwright deeply rooted in the folkloric world of his native Andalusia. His play has three acts, with seven scenes its language a mix of the idiomatic prose of the province, flamenco songs and free verse in the modern style. In the third act, surreal staging shows a forest into which three woodsmen walk in, talking about the fleeing lovers and the certainty of their death in the hands of their pursuers. A young woodsman wearing a white face appears as the Moon, the symbol of love, and death appears as a Beggar-Woman wrapped in a dark green cloak. This is Garcia Lorca’s visualization of the doom of the trio of lovers whom passion and lust has driven to their inevitable fate. Garcia Lorca has labeled Bodas de Sangre as a “tragedy,” and indeed the play has the magnitude of the tragedies of the Greek theater. An entire community suffered a grievous loss – the Bridegroom’s mother who loses the heirs she expected her son to bring forth, the pregnant wife and the son of the impulsive lover lose their means of support, and the aging father of the bride loses the son-in-law who would take over his farm lands and continue to tend them.

Portrait of an Artist as Filipino laments the death of a city and the culture that it brought forth and the family that embodied the virtues and the values of that culture. Nick Joaquin takes his audience that he presumes had begun to forget Intramuros and what the district symbolized in the history of the Filipino people. The irony behind Joaquin’s play is that it was written in English and for that reason could reach only an audience of Filipinos belonging to a minor segment of the population when the message in its very heart intends to stir up the general populace to keep faith in the nation in the process of being born in the 19th century and needing nurture in the years after it was declared an independent republic in 1946. It was nurture that motivated my translation of the play into Filipino.
The play was titled after a work of art, a painting, by a fictive revolutionary painter named Lorenzo Marasigan that serves as the fulcrum for the narrative of the drama. The work of art was made for the painter’s two daughters who had been driven by fear of poverty to reprove their reclusive parent for his failure to advance his family’s economic condition through his art and reputation as an active participant in his time in the making of the Filipino nation at the turn of the century. The Marasigan sisters have a boarder in their house, a hustler of a piano-player in a vaudeville theater, and he has found an American who would want to purchase the painting for two thousand dollars. The sale would bring a substantial amount to the boarder as commission. The sisters, bound by guilt and loyalty to their father, do not want to sell for the painting was made specifically for them and after it was turned over to them, the father attempted suicide. The painting, showing Lorenzo as a young man carrying the old man Lorenzo out of the burning city of Troy, was the famous painter’s message to the youth of the land—they are duty-bound by their country’s history to carry on the nationalist heritage their elders had labored to create.

Nick Joaquin, unique in his generation of Filipino writers in English, stood out as an assiduous advocate for the culture of the Philippine past. Translating the play is thus an immersion in the ilustrado culture of the late 19th century Philippines. Joaquin’s English bears the languor of Spanish rhetoric that in congenial Filipino translation for the theater, much of its stilted character will be lost. The Filipino version of Portrait has made the historical relevance and cultural values of Joaquin’s narrative accessible to a general audience hitherto barred by the playwright’s elevated way with the English language.

In this exploration of the relationship between translation and culture, it should become obvious that the translator’s work is not on language alone. It begins with a foray into the culture of the literary work and the language itself of the translator, with the end of establishing a bridge, no matter how tenuous, between the culture the original text implies and the culture of the translated work.

The language of the Filipino’s schooling being in English has habituated us to assume that translation is a simple matter of replacing language that is not ours with words from our native tongue. Take the sentence “The staple food of the common Filipino is rice and fish.” We can replace the key words of the statement and come up with “Kanin at isda ang madalas na pagkain ng Filipino.” If the sole purpose behind the translation is communication, the English words are adequate enough. Note, however, what has been lost. The culture represented by the meal of rice and fish, which implies centuries of social tradition and economic need that had molded the eating habits of Filipinos of the lower class, does not figure in the English rendition. Images of the earthen pot, soot-covered from constant exposure to an open fire in the traditional native stove consisting of three adobe slabs positioned to form a triangle, these have ceased to figure for English-
speaking middle-class housewives preparing a meal using an electricity-run stove. Translation when done by a simple replacement of words may communicate, but it fails to deliver the full weight of the words of the original statement. It may deliver meaning, but the culture behind the words will always be left out.