“Great literature remains untranslatable in the digital age.” Discuss.

Literature can be defined as ‘written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). However, the view of what is distinguished as ‘great literature’ can largely depend on the person and the time period in which the written work is being read. Literature can be described as an ‘amorphous concept’ (Green, 2016) as the way it is perceived is reliant on societal norms of the time and the culture. For example, Brave New World by Aldous Huxley was poorly received in 1932 (due to its scandalous portrayal of the future of humanity) yet now it is considered as one of the ‘most celebrated and influential works of the 20th century’ (Quercia, 2010). What is thought of as great literature is also dependent on the language that the reader speaks, their cultural norms, and what is made available to them; for example, Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du mal (1857) could be viewed as the best French literature (Sens Critique, 2018); Eliot’s Middlemarch (1874), the best of British literature (Ciabattari, 2015); and García Márquez’s Cien Años de Soledad (1967), the best of Spanish literature (GoodReads, 2018). All of these books are strikingly different and it’s not just the language: Cien Años de Soledad explores magic-realist whilst Les Fleurs du mal is poetry exploring decadence and eroticism, and Middlemarch explores society in a provincial town. These diverse books are all classified as great literature, yet are so fundamentally different in their construction and content – making it difficult to choose a specific book or genre as being the perfect example of ‘great literature’.

There is little doubt that the world of translation has changed as a result of the ‘digital age’ (‘when most information is in a digital form’ (Cambridge, 2018)). The arrival of the internet and its usage in translation has created a rise in automatic (or ‘artificially intelligent’) online translation services, crowd-sourced translations, and translation apps which have all contributed to the rapidly changing public attitude towards translation. Students learning languages can now use internet dictionaries such as Linguee.com (DeepL GmbH, 2018) offering instantaneous translation of the word or idiom. This could create an overreliance on quick translation or an expectation that translation is easy simply because a computer can do it. However, successful translation of texts from the source language to the target language needs more than just a word-for-word translation. As one website aptly puts it:

‘Translation is not about words. It’s about what the words are about.’ (Hendzel, 2012).

Indeed, if one translates solely the words, the nuances of the language are lost and the double or multiple meanings of words understandable only by context glossed over – creating a translation that is not accurate. For example, *prier* in French can mean to pray or to beg and it is context which allows for the right word to be used in translating. Linguee offers the example of *Les religieuses prient* and *je l’ai prié* (*the nuns pray and I begged him*) to show the difference that context has on the meaning of the word.

Translation software such as Google Translate and Bing Translator both offer literal translations of texts although they have improved by developing ‘complex algorithms to deliver more accurate translations, and take into account colloquial language and idioms’ (Transparent Language, 2015). Despite this, Transparent Language has highlighted that
while Google Translate can handle basic translation, translations with complex grammar, poetic language, and specific audiences (requiring formal or informal registers) are not appropriately translated, with many grammatical errors present.

Take the different translations of one of Francis Ponge’s poems: *Les Mûres* (Blackberries). The line:

‘Certains fruits sont formés d’une agglomération de sphères qu’une goutte d’encre remplit.’

is translated by Beverley Brahic as:

‘Certain fruits are composed of an agglomeration of spheres plumped with a drop of ink.’

(Brahic, 2008)

and translated by both *Google Translate* and *Bing Translator* as:

‘Some fruits are formed of/from an agglomeration of spheres that a drop of ink fills.’

This shows that where Brahic translated ‘remplit’ as plumped – using the context of blackberries in order to translate more poetically – the translation software translated the section exactly word-for-word. This is again shown through the choice of ‘composed’ rather than ‘formed’ that causes Brahic’s translation to be read as a poem. The sentence structure of the English translation by the machine translators is strange and does not flow the way that Brahic’s translation does. This displays that translation has not been improved by automatic/AI technology as they cannot cope with the grammatical and syntax differences of different languages.

Ian Brinton’s translation is different to the previous two translations:

‘certain fruits made up of separate spheres and each containing a black drop within’

(Brinton, 2015)

Brinton’s method of translation compares to the concept of domestication – making the text more familiar to the reader of the target text. Domestication involves translating the text in a way that reflects the characterised writing style of the target language and links to creating an invisibility of the translator (a concept that Lawrence Venuti explained in *The Translator’s Invisibility* – 1995/2008). This is an explanation of the way that ‘translators tend to translate ‘fluently’ into English, to produce an idiomatic and ‘readable’ translation’ (Munday, 2016). This could be a way of translating texts that allow them to be assimilated easily into different cultures. This is the opposite of foreignization which retains ‘foreign’ aspects of the source text such as its structure and syntax as well as language choice. Foreignization is designed to remind the reader that they’re reading a translation of a text, and that it is not the same as reading an original text. From the aforementioned translations, Brahic’s most closely resembles foreignization due to the choice of keeping ‘agglomeration’ as a part of the translation – it is a word seldom used in English and therefore adds an element of ‘foreign’ or something different to the norm of British poetry. Automatic web-translators, however, don’t use this concept of domestication or foreignization creating fluidity (or lack of) in the translation. Therefore, human translators,
are better suited to translating texts that require a decision to be made between foreignization and domestication approaches.

The fact that there are so many different methods of translation – creating and invisibility of the translator or purposefully creating a more disjointed or ‘unnatural’ translation – shows that, whilst a text may be untranslatable in the sense that the original craftsmanship and use of stylistic and literary features are lost through transposing the text to a different language, there are possibilities in translating. Therefore, to imply that literature as a whole is untranslatable as there are words that cannot have their ‘sense expressed in another language’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2018) is incorrect; the opinion that all works of great literature are ‘untranslatable’ is a generalisation and doesn’t take into account the different methods and views on the ‘best’ ways to translate.

However, as the examples before have begun to illustrate, Google Translate and Bing Translator are ineffective and inaccurate methods of translating literary texts – in particular, lesser known texts. It is interesting to see how these online translators cope with texts that have perhaps been more demanded – using the function of crowdsourcing and perhaps locating translations available on the internet.

For example, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 is a famous and often quoted sonnet and when put into the web translators, a more comprehensible translation emerges. The lines used were:

‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,’ (Shakespeare, Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? (Sonnet 18), n.d.)

Google Translate and Bing Translator both translate this as:

‘Dois-je te comparer à un jour d’été?
Tu es plus belle et plus tempérée.
Les vents violents secouent les bourgeois chéris de mai,’

This clear translation which is still very accurate to the text could be due to crowdsourcing (where multilinguals correct Google or Bing translators when there are errors). While it may seem that the translators are improving their translations and becoming more adept at translating language, it could simply be because of this crowd sourcing and not improvements made to artificial intelligence. However, whilst the sentence structure and the word choice all seem to make sense and link surprisingly clearly to the source text, one of the French translations of this sonnet is as follows:
‘Vais-je te comparer à ce clair jour d’été?
Tu es plus modérée, tu es plus adorable.

Un vent brutal abat les chers bourgeons de mai.’ (Shakespeare, Poème XVIII, 1609)

This translation is, again, more poetic and whilst keeping elements of the original translation, change words and phrasing in order to make a more understandable translation for French readers. One interesting point about the human translation of this text is the choice of ‘abat’ taking the place of ‘shake’ which means to cut down or to fell. The choice of this word could be a stylistic feature that the translator chose in order to convey the feeling of violence that is insinuated in the original text. However, it could also reaffirm the idea that great literature cannot be translated due to translators changing the meaning of sentences or perhaps making them more dramatic than necessary.

The handling of prose text may prove to be more challenging to Google Translate and Bing Translator. The example used is a short section of ‘Cien Años de Soledad’.

‘—Un momento—dijo—. Ahora vamos a presenciar una prueba irrefutable del infinito poder de Dios.
El muchacho que había ayudado a misa le llevó una taza de chocolate espresso y humeante que él se tomó sin respirar. Luego se limpió los labios con un pañuelo que sacó de la manga, extendió los brazo y cerró los ojos.’
(Márquez, Cien años de soledad, 2014)

The extract translated by Google Translate and Bing Translator has different translations for both (for ease of comparison the differences in translation have been italicised):

‘“One moment,’ he said. Now we are going to witness an irrefutable proof of the infinite power of God.

The boy who had helped mass brought him a cup of espresso and steaming chocolate that he took without breathing. Then he wiped his lips with a handkerchief that he took out of his sleeve, extended his arms and closed his eyes.”’ (Google, 2018)

' — a moment, he said. Now we are going to witness a unassailed proof of the infinite power of God.

The boy who had helped mass took a cup of espresso and smoky chocolate that he took without breathing. Then he wiped his lips with a handkerchief he drew out of his sleeve, stretched out his arms and closed his eyes.’ (Microsoft, 2018)

Whilst Google Translate and Bing Translator had translated the sections of verse in similar ways before – which could have implied they used the same algorithms or sources of
vocabulary, when faced with prose they both took different routes of translating the text. Even the differences in the translation through automatic search engine helps to emphasise the point that translation is complicated and there often are multiple translations available for one word. For example: ‘sacó de’ was translated as ‘took out’ or ‘drew out’. However, whilst the translations still make some sense, there are issues in the translation of it due to a lack of understanding of context: ‘una taza de chocolate espresso y humeante’ is wrongly translated by both as they take the literal meanings of the words rather than trying to figure out the more metaphorical and descriptive possibilities. A published translation of this section is:

“Just a moment,” he said. “Now we shall witness an undeniable proof of the infinite power of God”

The boy who had helped him with the mass brought him a cup of thick and steaming chocolate. Which he drank without pausing to breathe. Then he wiped his lips with a handkerchief that he drew from his sleeve, extended his arms, and closed his eyes.’

(Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude (trans by Gregory Rabassa), 2014)

It is interesting to notice that due to Rabassa taking a foreignization translation approach, Google Translate and Bing Translator’s translations seem remarkably similar to his. Nevertheless, Rabassa’s translation has a clarity afforded to it and, despite closely following the Spanish, adds words in order to make the English seem more natural and fluent – something that the automatic translators have yet to do.

One of the main issues that has been raised by comparing automatic translators with human translators is that the automatic translators cannot comprehend the context of the word choice nor of the underlying emotive connotations that there might be. Will AI and online translation ever be able to incorporate feelings and double entendre from complex, ambiguous writing? Certainly, online translation and artificial intelligence have made great progress since the early 2000s and will continue to do so. Maybe in the future, automatic translations will become much better at translating – perhaps almost translating like a multilingual human and be able to pick up on the subtleties and nuances of every language. It will be fascinating to track this progress.

However, automatic translation servers are not the only advancement in translation as a result of the digital age. It has allowed for globalisation and a sense of interconnectedness to increase much more rapidly than it would have done without the internet. Translation services have taken to basing themselves online, boasting their translations as being ‘fast’, ‘affordable’, and ‘professional’. These services are, as a whole, not aimed at literature, however, in the future there might be changes made in how translators of literature go about getting employed and how they market their skills.

Another issue that may cause a text to be ‘untranslatable’ is a lack of context or cultural or subject-specific knowledge on the source text that a translator is trying to translate. With the internet, it is much easier to gain access to information about different
sources of information and even to talk to people across the world to easily and comfortably find out more concerning the topic of the literature. Therefore, this could mean that literature is becoming ‘translatable’ rather than ‘remaining untranslatable’.

‘Great Literature remains untranslatable in the digital age’. This statement could be proved right or wrong depending on how an individual views the word choice and the connotations with the words. However, a view could be that literature is not untranslatable, it is simply modified from the source text to the target text. Right now, there is much to improve in terms of instantaneous translation, but the digital age is still developing around us now, and it is exciting to see where artificial intelligence and automatic translation services will take the world of translation in the future.

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