

## “Great literature remains untranslatable in the digital age,” Discuss

Technological advancement generally involves reaching a simple destination through a complex route. The simplicity of being able to leaf through the works of countless writers, from Kafka to Kawabata, perfectly translated in the blink of an eye by the newest technology, is the stuff of dreams for many a frustrated foreign literature aficionado. However, determining whether this is a possibility – never mind making it a reality – means answering a complicated question. The question is threefold: it comprises what exactly “great literature” entails, what it means for such literature to be translatable, and whether recent advances in machine translation help to mitigate the problems which translators currently face.

Before evaluating the translatability of great literature, one must first define literary greatness itself. This is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks of this paper; not due to scientific complexity or philosophical depth, but because what one civilisation – or indeed, one person - considers great literature may be entirely insignificant to another. Even so, one characteristic of great literature is clear purely from the definition of ‘great.’ The word is defined by Oxford English Dictionary as “of an extent, amount, or intensity considerably above average.” (OED, “great”) Hence, anything great is ‘more good than good’, and considerably more so than average. As the comparative form here indicates, ‘great’ implies a relational attribute, and it is also often used in statements of opinion as an alternative to ‘good + [intensifier].’ Great literature is therefore intrinsically great *in comparison* with something else: good literature, or average literature, for instance.

Taking it further, one could argue that there is necessarily an element of opinion to what constitutes great literature, owing to the connotations of the use of ‘great’ in opinion statements. This may seem unhelpful, given how difficult subjective and relative concepts are to pin down, but for an adjective of opinion (‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘great’) to be applied to an object in discourse, there must be a consensus that it applies. Bearing this in mind, we can describe great literature as the written works preferred over others in their genre to a considerable extent by a significant number of people.

As preference is still a vague and inherently subjective qualification, literary theorists have proposed and commented on definitions of greatness which include more specific qualifiers. Arthur Gibson claims in *What Is Literature?* that “great literature has an identity that is often contrary to traditional expectations.” (Gibson, 256) This complements our description of greatness as related to subjective preference; arguably, people prefer literature that brings something new to their understanding or experience.

Gibson also introduces the criterion of complexity; when discussing the problem of defining literature, he writes “One area involving the presence of complexity [...] is the presence of complexity in which original features emerge within great creative literature. I propose that such literary qualities include counter-intuitive use of indeterminacy.” (Gibson, 241) This excerpt contains several implicit observations about the qualities of “great creative literature”: such literature contains original features which are complex and involve using indeterminacy counter-intuitively. In other words, great (creative) literature introduces something new, whether that be a concept, a way of using language or an original interpretation of something else; it does so in a complex, intricate manner, and whilst playing with ambiguity creatively and remaining open to interpretation, These observations may apply more to certain literary genres than to others, but the criteria of creativity and originality are widely

applicable to different types of literature, whether they relate to using indeterminacy (as they may do in fiction) or not.

One final criterion is aesthetic value, mentioned in passing in R. Wellek and A. Warren's *Theory of literature*, in which "great books" are described as "books which, whatever their subject, are 'notable for literary form or expression.' Here the criterion is either aesthetic worth alone or aesthetic worth in combination with general intellectual distinction." (Wellek and Warren, 9) This shows once more that literary greatness is relative – a text can only have intellectual distinction *from* another, or from the rest of its genre – and that it is also partially determined by the stylistic, 'aesthetic' factors which shape how its argument or story is conveyed. In this way, form as well as content affects whether a text can be considered great literature. We now have a range of attributes to use in our definition: great literature can be defined as texts which are significantly preferred by consensus over others in their genre, are intricate and nuanced, offer some originality, and are aesthetically and stylistically appealing. This is of course not an objective answer to the question (there is no such thing) and it would be possible to dissect the terms used in the definition a great deal more. For the purpose of this essay, however, this is a sufficient definition.

After establishing what constitutes great literature, the next question to pose is whether it *remains* untranslatable. This would imply that it was once untranslatable and may still be so. The extent to which it is still untranslatable depends on the extent to which the factors which once rendered it untranslatable still apply in current circumstances; therefore, we must determine what these factors are. Once again, this question has no definite answer, but it is only necessary to describe the most important factors of untranslatability in order to discuss whether they still hinder translation in the digital age.

Possibly the most obvious difficulty of translation is that the source language and target language (henceforth SL and TL) will inevitably have morphological and syntactical differences which make certain SL constructions harder to render idiomatically into the TL. The magnitude of this problem increases when the language pair is more distantly related, but it can be a significant problem even in the case of fairly closely-related languages, for instance English and French. One example of a problematic morphological difference between these languages concerns each of their inflectional morphology. In French, a speaker may use an 'epistemic conditional' to imply that they have no knowledge of the action described by the verb, a possibility which does not exist in English ('they would arrive soon' is never equivalent to 'they are thought to be arriving soon') and so requires more thought when being translated, especially when specifying degrees of uncertainty. (Armstrong, 55) Similar problems arise from syntactical discrepancies; for instance, French noun phrases (e.g. "sa réaction m'a étonné") can be translated more idiomatically into English with less nominalisation (in this case, "I was amazed by how he reacted"). (Armstrong, 119)

Such instances of linguistic mismatch must be treated with care, but they are only the beginning of the difficulty of translation. Perhaps a harder problem to deal with is that of translating in a culturally and ideologically sensitive way, an obstacle which cannot be overcome by linguistic proficiency alone. There are several ways to translate culturally-specific references. For example, here is an English translation of an excerpt from *A night in Casablanca* (originally Arabic):

"His wife was pretty, and he used to buy her glasses, pottery, sweets and rabbits slaughtered and live [...] But she used to hit him or beat her cheeks and thighs [as some women do when they mourn their dead]." (Albakry, 6)

Here, the custom of buying ceramics and rabbits for a beloved wife is literally translated, with no explanation to make it more succinct and preserve the sense of a foreign cultural practice. An explanation is added in parentheses later in the excerpt, when the translator believes that it is necessary. Another approach would be to find a word or phrase in the TL culture which is near-equivalent to that used in the SL, as the translator of the Bible into Inuit did in the famous example involving the translation of 'lamb' as 'seal': an example of dynamic equivalence. (Snell-Hornby, 25) However, there are no fixed rules for determining which approach is the most appropriate in every situation.

Cultural sensitivity also encompasses awareness of important ideological subtext in foreign language texts, which are influenced by or even react against the culture of the SL. In another Arabic example, Ghada al-Samman's *Beirut* uses reversed syntax to emphasise her (unusually) female perspective; she refers to "every woman and every man", when Arabic convention would always refer to men first. (Abdulla, 5) Awareness of this explicit rejection of male-centric language is needed to produce a comprehensive English translation of the text. Translatability thus extends far beyond technical accuracy; it concerns the extent to which a translation can represent the subtlest connotations, cultural references and ideological implications of a source. This is why, in modern translation studies, a much greater emphasis is placed on dynamic equivalence than on formal equivalence. Instead of seeking to reproduce every word in the source literally, modern translations adapt to different categories of texts and 'negotiate' between the source and target languages. (Bassnett and Lefevere, 4) Due to the significance of culture in translation, Bassnett and Lefevere even claim that "language only has a tangential impact on translation." (24)

If a translatable text is one whose linguistic and cultural intricacies can be fully represented, the statement "Great literature remains untranslatable in the digital age," implies that the developments brought about by the 'digital age' do not make it any easier to represent the intricacies of great literature in translation. To complete our discussion of this statement, let us briefly examine the technological advancements there have been in translation over the past few years, and finally, whether these advancements make great literature any more translatable.

Until a recent breakthrough, the dominant model of machine translation was statistical machine translation (SMT). The principle behind SMT systems is to 'train' the software on large bilingual corpora which can be used to create a contextual glossary, from which the translation of each word or phraseme (generally the latter, since phrase-based translation is more widely used by translation engines) is generated. The starting point is the probability  $P(t_n|s)$  that the translation of a string  $s$  in the SL can be translated as any string in a list  $\{t_1, t_2 \dots t_n\}$  in the TL (Brown et al., 2). The algorithm is then modified to account for sentence length, mutual information between pairs of phrasemes and the effect of the expected frequency of phraseme occurrence. Once the algorithm has judged a certain set of values of  $t_n$  to be the most appropriate, the likeliest syntax of the sentence into which the values are arranged is determined statistically using corpus data in the TL. (6)

Until November 2016, this was the system used by Google Translate, but a new technology has been more recently introduced which shows promising results in comparison with SMT systems. Artificial neural networks (ANNs) have found uses in many disciplines and help to design computational models which process language in a more 'human' way. The structure mimics that of a human neural network through which signals are transferred. Each neuron  $j$  can be represented as a weight vector  $w_{j1}, w_{j2} \dots w_{jn}$  (all other properties of  $j$  are indexed with the letter  $j$ ). The output value, after the signal has passed through all the layers of the network, would be generated by a transfer function whose range is within a certain interval. (Leardi, 200) In the case of machine translation, the signal would be

the SL input, and one layer could compute a context-independent translation while the next could introduce context, for example. Through a brain-like structure and by representing linguistic units as numeric vectors as opposed to (one-dimensional) strings (Toral and Sánchez-Cartagena, 1), an ANN could recognise patterns in natural languages much like the human brain does.

Research has shown this method to be more effective at producing fluent, accurate translations than SMT, which suggests that if it were routinely used in translations of all kinds, it could contribute to overcoming some of the difficulties of translation. A study carried out jointly by researchers at the University of Groningen and Prompsit Language Engineering compared the fluency, monotony and lexical and syntactical errors of ANN and SMT methods, translating between 9 different language pairs. It found that for all language pairs apart from Romanian to English and Russian to English (notably, all pairs with English as SL), the BLEU scores for the texts translated by ANNs were better than those of the SMT-translated texts, meaning that the ANN translations were closer to those provided by the reference text translated by a human. (Toral and Sánchez-Cartagena, 4) On average, the perplexity scores of the ANN translations were 10.45% lower, making them considerably more fluent in general, with the only exception being the English to Finnish translation. (5) Moreover, ANN systems were more likely to reorder the words in a sentence while translating it, which resulted in translations more similar to the reference texts. (6)

This progress in machine translation appears very promising, with one caveat: comparatively little research has focused on translating literary texts (particularly fiction), since there is more commercial demand for machine translation to be used on writing which must be distributed in bulk to a global audience – manuals, for example. What little research there is on literary fiction has yielded less stellar results. For instance, in one French study, the translation of a short story from English to French required 25 hours of post-editing to be judged “acceptable” by readers responding to a survey, and even then, some cultural references were missed (e.g. the river Charles in Boston was translated as “rivière” when ‘fleuve’ would have been more accurate). (Besacier, 7) This is only one study, and it was carried out using SMT, which is no longer the latest technology. More research is therefore needed using ANNs and literary texts, to gain a better understanding of whether the newest methods make great literature more translatable.

Until more research is done, a principally empirically-based conclusion will be hard to reach, but that is not the only way to conclude. For great literature not to *remain* untranslatable in the digital age, new technology will have to be *better* at translating great literature than pre-digital methods, in order to change this untranslatability. As a good translation represents the linguistic and cultural details and sense of the source as fully as possible, and great literature is widely-preferred, complex, original and aesthetically valuable, translating great literature simply entails even more precision than other translation, so that those traits which make it great are rendered precisely into the TL. Although machine translation is constantly improving in accuracy and style, it is not yet better than, or even equal to, human translators. Pre-digital, human translations remain a benchmark for machine translations and are used to judge their quality. For these reasons, great literature shall remain untranslatable until it is accepted that machine translation surpasses pre-digital methods in precision, linguistic accuracy and cultural awareness. (2468 words)

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