Conditions of Literary Translation in Korea

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Abstract

This paper explores the conditions and theoretical issues of literary translation, with specific reference to an "assessment project of English literary classics in translation." It consists of three parts: the internal and external conditions of literary translation in Korea, a brief report of the project and its findings with reference to the translations of Pride and Prejudice, *and lastly, some theoretical issues involved in such an assessment.*

Translation has been a significant factor in the formation of modern Korea. However, the conditions of translation and the general quality of translated texts still leaves much room for improvement. The practical purport of the project is to identify recommendable translations of English classic novels, but in the case of the 34 translated versions of Austen's text, no single recommendable text was to be found. Such a result shows that the quality issue is still crucial, at least in the context of Korean translation, in spite of the paradigm shift we are witnessing now in Translation Studies from an evaluative approach to a descriptive one. This paper ends by reflecting on the categories of evaluation and faithfulness in terms of their theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: Translation, English literature, Jane Austen, evaluation, faithfulness, readability, cultural transfer, Translation Studies, cultural turn

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I

I will begin by discussing two episodes in a short story by Bang Hyeon-seok, entitled "Jonjae-ui hyeongsik" (The Mode of Being),[1] which epitomize the difficulties of translating between two languages. In this story, two Koreans and a Vietnamese are working on the translation of a scenario, presumably dealing with the Vietnam War, from Korean into Vietnamese. One episode, in which the characters are involved in a long, difficult search for an appropriate phrase for "miso-ga beonjida" (a smile spreading over a face), exemplifies the difficulties caused by linguistic differences. The second episode is more related with cultural differences. The story they are working on describes a Vietnamese guerrilla soldier who is being playfully scolded for trying to eat more than his comrades. In Korean, the teasing phrase is "Ya, sutgarak sokdo jojeol jom hae," meaning "Hey, slow down the speed of your spoon!" The problem is that the guerrillas are being depicted as eating from a single communal rice bowl; the Vietnamese translator points out that during the war, guerrillas always ate from their own dishes, making the idea of "moving a spoon fast" rather foolish. They solve this problem by changing the phrase and the implied action.

"The Form of Being" also offers other observations, though touched on rather briefly, on the topic of translation, such as the low status of translation and translators, and the role, either positive or negative, of translation as a communication medium between countries or cultures. Thus this story provides a good starting point for considering the current environment for literary translation in Korea. I will emphasize the internal conditions expressed, for example, in Bang's story, i.e. the difficulty of producing a translation of high quality, rather than the external conditions of production, circulation, and reception of translated works, and the status or roles of translation and translators. Although this paper lacks space to address the latter issues, they are no less important. Indeed, the quality of trans-

1. Bang (2002, 188-239).

lations has much to do with external conditions.

Reading the story was not an altogether happy experience, seeing that it forced me to reflect upon the actual state of translation, literary and otherwise, in Korea. How many translators can afford, or are willing, to spend the amount of time required to produce quality work? And how many publishers seriously consider the importance and the amount of work that goes into a good translation? Though the situation has improved greatly over the years, the general attitude towards translation is still rather negative. There is no denying that many individual translators lack seriousness or competence, yet more fundamental barriers to good translations persist in other forms: duplicate or multiple translations, neglect on the part of editors, and low financial compensation—all of which contribute to the low status of the profession and its practitioners.

Under such conditions, the position of translated literature tends to be paradoxical, even schizophrenic. One might expect that such conditions would result in a low standing of translated texts, but that is not always the case. Individually, it seems as though translated texts may not be taken seriously, but in their entirety they are endowed with authority. In spite of diverse efforts to change this situation, "world literature" in Korea is still almost exclusively represented by Western literature, and knowledge of the great Western works is still regarded as a must for "men of culture." Western literary texts are an indispensable cultural capital in Korea. Publishers are encouraged to maintain their investments in Western works by repeatedly publishing them. But this is only part of the picture—the individual fate of any specific translation tells quite a different story. There are many translations of "major" literary classics, and each version is treated as one among many, with most readers failing to notice any differences between the works. Such circulation and reception conditions do not serve as a strong foundation for a thriving, responsible translation community. Certainly, translations and translators are not immune to Gresham's law: bad money tends to drive out good money.

Translation has been and still is an important factor in the forma-

tion of a modern Korean "literary language." While translation has enriched vocabulary, structure, and usage of the Korean literary language, it has also functioned as a destructive force. For example, note the growing misuse of the personal pronouns, *geu* (he) and *geunyeo* (she). Both words are, in part, inventions of translation. In the case of *geunyeo*,[2] Native speakers of Korean seldom or never use these words in conversation, but many literary translators use these pronouns in their dialogues, to the degree that some Korean creative writers now also use the form. Thus, a mechanical transfer has served to change or distort the language. As this case shows, introduction of new words derived from translation sometimes tends to increase the hierarchical division between literary and spoken language, which overlaps in part with other sociocultural divisions such as class and gender.

II

Regarding the current state of literary translation in Korea, data from an ongoing project[3] on "assessment of translations of major British and American literary works" may provide some clues. This project, on which I am working as an organizer with involving 43 other members of Scholars for English Studies in Korea (SESK), began in August 2002. Its goal is to establish an annotated bibliography of post-1945 Korean translations of 36 texts, ranging from *The Canterbury Tales* to *The Catcher in the Rye*. The texts are primarily novels, but the list includes some poetry and plays. Its practical objective is to identify

2. In its subjunctive mode, *geunyeo* sounds the same with the word *geunyeon*, which means "bitch." If only for this reason, it would not be possible for this word to become a part of everyday oral vocabulary.
3. This paper was first presented at the 2003 English Language and Literature Association of Korea (ELLAK, Hanguk Yeongeo Yeongmun Hakhoe) Annual Convention in Onyang in 23 January 2003. The present time implied here refers to that date, with the exception of the numerical data for *Pride and Prejudice*, which has been updated to match the final report submitted in January 2004.

recommendable translations for different categories of usage—e.g., for general readers, as school textbooks,[4] or as texts that stand as literary works on their own. Discrimination criteria have been narrowed into the frequency of blatant mistranslations and the degree of readability. This decision reflects our intention to avoid playing the role of an arbitrary judge who disregards the difficulties inherent to quality translations. In this sense, the project is foundational: the goal is not a full-scale criticism, but to create a proper environment for such criticism.

The data collected so far serve as proof of the need of this kind of work. To date, 1,400 translations have been identified; many works have 20 to 50 versions, with some having more than 100.[5] While these statistics could be taken as signs of affluence, they are better viewed as symptoms of the poverty that marks translation conditions. For example, we have identified 36 Korean versions of *Pride and Prejudice* published since 1945. Most of them are duplicate publications (by different publishers) and pirated translations (with few, if any, revisions). After eliminating these redundancies, we found eight basic translations, two of them functioning as "source texts" for later pirated versions or retranslations. This may not be news for many, but the extent of irresponsible translation and publishing is surely an issue for contemplation.

According to members of the research team, three texts including two "source texts" are of considerably higher quality than the other five,[6] but they still leave much to be desired. In this and other assess-

4. Interlingual translation is an integral part of education, especially in the study of English literature in Korea. Students do read translated versions of literary works, whether or not they are asked. Furthermore, research on the Korean language involves the translation processes, overt and otherwise. The question of translation therefore should be of central concern in English Studies in Korea.
5. According to the final report, the total number of the identified translations is 1,808, with *Hamlet* and *Wuthering Heights* among the most frequently translated works, each having more than 160 translations.
6. Measured in terms of the number of mistranslations, another version (Si-sa-young-o-sa, 1993) might be considered the best. However, since it is an abridged edition, it is excluded from consideration.

ments, the first principle is to respect the individual translator's choice of objectives and strategies for each text, and to refrain from applying any given set of external norms. Thus, our procedure has been to identify the objectives and strategies being used, then to determine how consistent and successful are the performances of the strategies. In the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, we find two translation strategies used, that are loosely associated with the "direct" and "indirect" translations suggested by Ernst-August Gutt.[7] As is more often than not the case with translations of classical works, the dominant strategy identified in these versions of *Pride and Prejudice* is "direct translation": the translators try to be faithful to the content and form of the original to the maximum degree possible. Only one version was a clear example of "indirect translation," in which the translator is freer in his use of elaboration and summarizing. In direct translations, faithfulness and readability are basic assessment criteria: in indirect translations, it is necessary to consider the adequacy or relevancy of changes made from the original.[8]

The project members found it difficult to identify recommendable translations of *Pride and Prejudice*, primarily due to the number of mistranslations they found.[9] Even the two "best" versions had up to an average of four errors per page. On page 1, for example, Mrs. Bennet wants to tell her husband something that she has just heard, and he is quite reticent in his reaction:

> "Do not you want to know who has taken it [Netherfield Park]?" cried his wife [Mrs. Bennet] impatiently.

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7. Gutt (1990, 122); cited in Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997, 41-42, 76-77).
8. A version (published by Hwimun in 1983) includes radical changes and long additions. Readers are not given any information about this strategy, either in the main text or in the translator's postscript. The transformed parts lack relevancy and change the tone and atmosphere into one that resembles a Korean novel, *Taepyeong cheonha* (Worlds in Peace) by Chae Man-sik, more than Austen's. The directly translated parts are also problematic.
9. Also, the lack of proper translations was due to an abundance of unreadable sentences that make no sense in Korean. Such unreadability usually comes from grammatical and/or lexical errors.

> "You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."
> This was invitation enough.[10]

Here the word "invitation" means an invitation for her to continue speaking. But with one exception, the translators either reversed the subject and object associated with the word "invitation," or made the association ambiguous.[11] They read as if Mr. Bennet is being invited by Mrs. Bennet to be interested in the news, with "This" interpreted as referring to Mrs. Bennet's previous words, not Mr. Bennet's lukewarm reply to them. In the subsequent dialogue, Mrs. Bennet describes Bingley as "a young man of large fortune from the north of England." Four of the translations make no mention of "England," thus changing the description, or at least decreasing the amount of conveyed information.

Even the word "Pride" in the title is problematic. The novelist played with the various shades of meaning of this keyword. However, Korean speakers use distinct words for different kinds of "pride," including *oman, jaman, jabusim, jajonsim* and *jageungsim*. Some translations stick to a single word, and therefore fail to reflect the diverse and occasionally contradictory connotations of the English noun. In translation, preserving the unity of a keyword is important, but this preservation must be balanced with a respect for contextual meaning.

Of course, we must be wary of making hasty generalizations from this limited data, since the situation may be very different in other works. But English novels in Korea, especially popular ones, tend to have less satisfactory translations than other literary forms.[12]

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10. Austen (1966, 1).
11. Only one version (published by Kum Sung in 1987) seems to convey the original meaning to a certain degree. It translates the sentence in question as meaning "In order to hear the story, these words were enough."
12. The case may be the same for translated fiction from European languages, German for example. Research on the translation of *Demian and Die Leiden des jungen Werthers presents* results that are very similar to ours. See Song (1986, 56-73); cited in Kim H. (1998, 256).

In contrast, Shakespeare's four core tragedies seem to have fared much better with over 50 translations each.[13] This might be due to, as Susan Bassnett has noted, the widespread erroneous notion that "a novel is somehow a simpler structure . . . and is consequently easier to translate."[14] This comment points to the relative poverty of studies on problems associated with translating prose literature.[15]

III

As noted, the project is just an initial step toward a more complete critique of translation in Korea. This, of course, still implies some form of evaluation, such as faithfulness to the original text or the above-mentioned question of mistranslation. However, the dominant Translation Studies paradigm has shifted from "how to translate" to "what translation does"—in other words, from an evaluative or normative approach to a descriptive one. Numerous critiques have been offered against the idea of faithfulness and its ideological function. Our project seems to go against these trends, so we must ask the question of whether we are persisting in a job that has already been judged to be obsolete, or if its ambition is still justifiable, and, if so, in what sense.

In contemplating these questions, I can point to some "obvious" facts: that the co-existence of translated versions of varying quality demands comparative evaluation, or that most translated texts themselves aim at "faithful" translation. If a normative approach is one that measures diverse texts based on different strategies according to a single set of rules, then our intent cannot be described as normative. Still, in a case such as *Pride and Prejudice*, a purely descriptive analysis of translation without any critical evaluation would be quite

13. Seo (1996, 155-176); Jo (2001, 48-68).
14. Bassnett (1991, 109).
15. Though the focus here is on products, how readers "use" unsatisfactory products is another matter worthy of analysis.

meaningless, given the rampant plagiarism and number of unreliable translations.

Does this mean that evaluation is only useful and necessary under "backward" conditions as those referred to above? The linguistic and cultural differences between Korea and either Great Britain or the U.S. is greater than those among the various European nations, where blatant mistranslations might be relatively rare. Still, inasmuch as translation is a decision-making process, a series of consecutive situations imposing on the translator the task of choosing among alternative possibilities, those decisions can and must serve as matters of critical debate. Putting evaluation on the shelf would be disrespectful towards individual translators' labor. As with any serious textual effort, translations are worthy of engagement and critical assessment by readers and critics.

In Translation Studies, we are currently witnessing numerous challenges to the idea of binary opposition, be they post-structuralist, feminist, postcolonial, or other. Even terms that were previously considered basic (e.g., "original") are being deconstructed in favor of such new translation conceptualizations as cannibalism (postcolonialism) and infidelity (feminism). These challenges often come with a wholesale denunciation of evaluative moments as distinguished from descriptive ones. However, is it not a basic post-structuralist tenet that such opposition (based as it is on a fact-value dichotomy) fails because even the simplest "factual" statement is grounded in a value judgment?[16] Evaluation and value do not easily fade away with gestures of denied validity.

Opposition to the evaluative (identified with the normative) approach is often accompanied by critique against the idea of faithfulness to the original—a criterion commonly associated with the normative approach. Presumably the problem with this idea is that it presupposes one correct meaning and one definite text. If "faithfulness" in fact does just that, there is no need to defend it. The mean-

16. Terry Eagleton's deconstruction of this dichotomy is a famous example (1996, 1-14).

ing of any word or phrase is dependent upon its context and the structure of the text that contains it. Translation, even "direct" translation, is *one* reading and *one* enacting of that reading in another language. Painful search for better words (as reflected in "The Form of Being") is necessary in the absence of a single "correct" solution. Finding better expressions and appreciating their adequacy is an interpretive and creative act. However, the indeterminacy of reading and translation should not be considered as being equal to an unprincipled relativism that says, "anything goes." According to Popovic, translators work with something called the "invariant core" of meaning.[17] To be "faithful" is, above all, to recognize and successfully preserve this core. Conceptualized this way, faithfulness can be a useful working tool that allows for multiple possibilities of solutions.

In fact, in any discourse on specific instances of translation, it is almost impossible to avoid using such terms as "accurate," "correct," "adequate," or "close." Another term that is frequently mentioned when discussing translations is "responsibility." Even translation scholars who oppose rigid categories (e.g., right or wrong) seem to presuppose very high standards for translators and their products. Target-oriented André Lefevere, who views translation as a mode of rewriting, argues that translators "should already know the languages and the cultures into and out of which they want to translate; how else can they produce meaningful work?"[18] In his guidebook on literary translation, he assumes these competencies as elementary credentials for translators, and therefore unworthy of further elaboration. However, such competencies and their realizations are not something to be taken for granted, at least for translations from English to Korean or vice versa.[19]

Faithfulness is also challenged on the basis of its ideological implications—i.e., the dominance of the source text over the target

17. Bassnett (1991, 26).
18. Lefevere (1992, 12).
19. According to Spivak (and others), English translations from the periphery have not fared well (2000, 397-416).

text, and the associated position of the cultural core over the periphery. In this sense, faithfulness is an undemocratic and hierarchical ideal. I agree with the arguments that cultural transfer occurs in the context of unequal power relationships, and that uncritical "faithful" reproductions of metropolitan products can contribute to the maintenance and enlargement of those relationships. Still, the function of faithfulness should not be viewed as predetermined; it is as context-dependent as any other thing, and works differently in different contexts. In this regard, it may be relevant to consider Spivak's polemical plea for literalness in translation.[20] Reflecting on her own English translations from Bengali of poems and a short story by a woman writer named Mahasweta Devi, she says that translators should "surrender to the [original] text"[21] in order to prevent the singularity and differences of Third World texts from being subjected to neo-colonialist recuperation. In her hands, literalness and surrender serve as useful resistant strategies to Orientalism working in translation.[22]

Is this also true for the opposite situation—translating First World texts into Third World languages—that is our primary concern here? I see differences and similarities. As mentioned above, faithfulness can be politically dangerous, and its linguistic dangers have already been touched on at the beginning of this paper—for example, the misuse of personal pronouns in Korean translations and writings. Having said that, I still believe that "literal" and "faithful" translations have the potential of becoming a force of resistance against internal and external hierarchies of the linguistic community. First, they have the potential to decrease the gap between those who have an access to the "original" language/texts and those who do not. In Korea, "unfaithful" translations have contributed to this gap, which stands in the way of democratic dialogue between scholars of English and lay

20. I would like to add that this does not demand complete acceptance of her translation practices.
21. Spivak (2000, 400).
22. A professional who has been translating Japanese texts into English makes the same plea based on self-critical reflections of his past practices (Koschmann 2001, 309).

readers. Further, the existence of broader audience can encourage English studies in Korea to become more self-reflective or meaningful. Second, the singularity of First World texts preserved by "literal" translation can function as a reminder that what is being read is, above everything else, a "foreign" text.[23] This obvious fact tends to become lost under the weight of internalized Western universalism that makes all things European/North American appear normal and natural.

Behind the construction of Korea's "world literature" canon lies Western cultural hegemony, implemented either directly or through mediation (i.e., during Korea's colonial period).[24] This constitutes another condition of literary translation in Korea, one that is no less important than those I have discussed so far. We need to ask what is being translated, in what context, and why. The importance of these questions and their implications are what the cultural emphasis in Translation Studies is trying to remind us of. Asking these questions can lead us toward a new, relatively collective effort to translate specific kinds of texts.

Finally, I will end my presentation by naming two recent examples, and I hope this shall somewhat balance what may seem like a bleak picture of Korea's current translation conditions. For one, diverse translations of Marxist texts appeared in the 1980s that have had impact on social and intellectual movements. Another example is an increasing number of translations of women's texts, reflecting the progress of feminism in Korea.

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23. This is not to say that "foreignizing" is the only way to resist universalism; rewriting Western texts is another possible strategy and the products might be called "translations" in a broad sense. However, the primary concern here has been translation in its narrow sense.
24. Except for the final usage of the word, "Korea" is shorthand for "South Korea." The North Korean canon of world literature is very different, though the divergence between South and North has been decreasing. Kim Y. (2001, 9-36).

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