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CONFLICTING METAPHORS - THE TRANSLATOR'S TORMENT

1. Introduction. The difficulties in translating poetry that have been frequently discussed are well summed up in the words of a practicing translator (Živojinović, 1981/273): "Translating a poem means solving a mathematical equation with innumerable unknowns." Aside from the painstaking work in decoding the poetry and encoding it by using the rules, of a different language code the task requires a poetic competence, largely intuitive, and a good measure of creativity. In spite of the acknowledged universality of poetic discourse the task becomes the more formidable the greater the distance - linguistic, cultural or temporal - between the original and the language of the translation.

Since in translation of poetry it is not enough to transmit the message of the discourse but also its form, compromises have to be made so that in the process of transfer both content and form will suffer. In this process it is most difficult to reproduce the microstructure of a poem (Bierwisch, 1970/92), and from "exotic" languages and cultures, among them also temporally distant cultures, sometimes "only little more than the subject matter can be conveyed" (Wrenn, 1967/79), since even their thought pattern is different.

Skaldic poetry which is incorporated in the prose text of many sagas belongs to this "exotic" type, but because of its function in the entire saga text it exhibits some facilitating qualities for the translation. In the first place it is firmly

set into the narration, foregrounding certain scenes, messages, emotions. Its function is also mostly ornamental, while the prose context often explains the poetid expression.

The skalds whose verse are quoted in the sagas are normally the main characters in the text, and they are showing their skill at important places and moments. The skill is apparent in the form of the verse, for which reason it is important that the translator reproduce his abilities as a poet, and not just of any poet, but those of a competent skald. The translation must thus combine qualities that would be recognized as a poetic standard by its readers, but also the poetic techniques of the distinct poetic art of the skalds.

In order to convey the poetic message in a new linguistic and cultural code the translator's strategy has to combine innovation from skaldic with repetition of the accepted poetic rules. Restrictions on the innovations derive both from the linguistic and from the poetic and cultural context of the translation.

The present discussion of strategies in translation of skaldic verse will focus on figurative expressions. The imagery is part of a given poetic code, but also derivative from the more general cultural background of the particular poetic tradition. For this reason the first impulse of the translator will be to look for a complementary poetic genre in the tradition of the language of translation, which could serve as a source of poetic form.

As a practical example we shall consider the translation of skaldic poetry into a fairly remote code, i.e. Serbo-Croatian

(further SC), comparing it occasionally with English and German. Since there is no medieval or other traditional poetry in SC that corresponds to the Norse court poetry, the poetic genre whose style and ethos intuitively appear closest to skaldic poetry is the Yugoslav folk epic. The themes resemble those in skaldic poetry (battle, courage, friendship, fidelity) and the conventional imagery is also physiognomic and stereotyped.

2. Skaldic imagery consists of "involved metaphors".

(Salus, 1973/13) of which the kennings show a variety of complex types. Of all the discussions on the nature of metaphor it seems most relevant with regard to translation to bear in mind that the metaphor is a figure of the discourse (Ricoeur, 1975). Its function of bringing forward an idea by connecting apparently unconnected images can best be observed within the sentence and the discourse. In translation, moreover, the imagery has to be related to the linguistic and cultural context of the new code. Because the emotional effect that it is supposed to bring about will depend on this context.

3. Some conflicting metaphoric patterns derive from the major source of skaldic imagery, the mythology, which in comparison with Classical or Christian mythology has a relatively limited cultural dispersion. But since mythologies share a number of universal features it is reasonable to look for equivalents in the mythology of the culture to which the language of translation belongs. The transfer cannot be total or else the identity of the original mythology and culture would be destroyed.

Little of the Slavic mythology survives in the poetic tradition. One of the few figures whose image has been more or less preserved is the god of thunder Perun, whose attributes have passed in Christian imagery to Elijah. The epithet of both Perun

and Elijah is gromovnik, i.e. "master of thunder", and since this can aptly evoke Thor's image the epithet can be used for the Nordic god too. The connection in the recipient's mind will be easily made between the two familiar figures and Thor.

Similar attributes as metaphorical expressions for other deities are missing. A female supernatural figure often used as a metaphoric expression for "maiden" is vila, and it could serve as a translation equivalent for "goddess" or "valkyrie", with however the danger of being too associative with the Slavic folklore. Therefore the borrowed name valkira can be used, which does form a part of the recipient's poetic experience. The difficulty, however, is the connotation the word acquired in SC, which suggests a belligerent or quarrelsome woman.

Names of the various deities, with the exception of Thor and Odin, are entirely unknown and therefore have to be interpreted in the translation. The frequent figures used for men and women where the head word is the name of a deity often needs considerable interpreting. In the first stage the name can be interpreted by the general term, e.g. vín-Gefn as "wine-goddess", hringa-Hlín as "ring-goddess" and sverd-Rögnir as "sword-god". But this kind of figure would probably not create the correct response since it would be understood in the literal meaning. A contracted simile e.g. "wine-goddess-like woman" (žena poput boginje vina) comes nearer to the intended image.

Other typical metaphoric expressions used for man, woman, weapons, ship, gold or blood also do not have immediate equivalents in SC poetical imagery.

A typical example is the group of words similar in meaning

to auðveitir - "gold-giver" (ðavalac zлата/blaga) which is too associative of modern technical jargon (e.g. ðavalac krvi - "blood donor"). The explanatory relative clause construction ("the one who gives gold") is stylistically inappropriate in a compact discourse of the skaldic type, so that the usual expressions for king or emperor (i.e. kralj "king", or "emperor, tsar, sultan"), or the figure "the crown" (kruna), accompanied by stereotyped attributes such as "bright", "wise", "honourable" and "mighty" will probably be better suited. The attributes used here show the conflicting concepts of the sovereign's characteristics in Norse and SC.

Some of the kennings for a man or warrior, such as mótrunnr or gunnar runni "battle tree", in translation as bojno stablo do not suggest the reference to man unless it is not explicitly stated in the context. The usual expression used for man is junak ("brave man") or sokol ("hawk"). In the same manner women are not generally associated with gold or ornaments, at least not as directly as the metaphors porna spöng "pinned brooch" (brooch-pin wearer ²) or auðs lág "golden log" (golden maytree) suggest. This holds good also for the association of women with linen. They are connected with the production and other treatment of cloth, but their attire is poetically of little relevance in SC. The nearest that the metaphorical expressions for women come to the skaldic image are the less frequent figure nenošeno zlato, "gold not worn", connoting the woman's moral qualities, and the frequent zlatna jabuka "golden apple". The tree imagery also occurs but stereotyped as zelen bor "green pine tree" for man, and vita jela/breza "slender fir/birch tree" for woman. But with such elements the possibility of innovation in the field of imagery is greater.

Strange are also the images for the sword, e.g. benlogi "woundflame", gunnsproti "battle-stick", or mundadar hriðar hyrr "fire swordstorm"; also for gold e.g. orma beðr "serpentbed", ormdag "snakeday" (snakelight), flodhyrr "seaflame", and unnar hestr "sea-horse" (sea-stallion) for ship, orms dög "spear's flood" for blood.

Such a common image as unnar hestr rendered in SC as morski konj would suggest an animal of which there are several kinds with a name of similar structure, e.g. nilski konj = hippopotamus", morski pas = "shark" etc. all part of the common vocabulary. A marked term, and at the same time more poetic, such as pastuh (stallion") can be introduced as an innovating image, particularly in a syntactically modified form: pastuh mora: noun head + noun/genitive modifier, instead of the more usual adjective modifier (morski) + noun head (pastuh).

The compressed skaldic figures are difficult to reproduce in SC for several reasons. One is that much of the imagery has to be "explained", since the allusions are not as suggestive in translation as they must have been to the skald's audience. The other reason is incompatibility of linguistic structure. Compounding, which is so well suited for this type of compressed image, is not such a favoured word formational strategy in SC as it is in the Germanic languages. Therefore it is relatively rare as a poetic device, at least in traditional poetry. It is reminiscent of technical jargons experimental in modern poetry, so excessive innovation in this area might prove to be stylistically out of tune.

The less economic but preferable linguistic structure is noun phrase + modifier in preor postposition. A very much used poetic figure is the simile which tolerates every kind of

innovative imagery. The result of the use of such structures in translation is an increase in comprehensibility, but a decrease in economy of expression. Since the metaphor, as said earlier, depends on the discourse rather than on the word itself, economy in translation can be achieved in other parts of the discourse. If the metaphoric expression unnar hestr translated morski pastuh is felt to be very awkward or obscure, the interpretation may have to reach for the unmarked, common word "ship" (brod, lađa), and the image of the horse can then be supplied through attribution (as in the examples for "king") or predication. It can be said that "the ship was rearing" (brod se propinje). The polysemous verb propinjati se is the intersection between the image of a ship and a horse.

4. Degrees of interpretation. The figures used in skaldic poetry vary in their complexity and in salience. They can be analyzed and translated on a scale from surface to deep level, where one end is the metaphoric expression and the other the sense of the expression. Translation can be employed on any of the levels, depending on the obscurity of the figure for the recipient of the translation, and on the linguistic and poetic rules of the new code.

If for example the word stål in the original is used to refer to "weapon" or "sword" the surface form can be directly translated as SC čelik, English steel or German Stahl, probably producing the same effect as the original. On the other hand, it can be interpreted and translated at the denotating level, i.e. as SC mač, English sword, German Schwert. The choice will depend on the suitability of the word with respect to meter and alliteration as evaluated by the translator.

In figures where one element is explicit and the other

is metaphoric as in brúna himin for "forehead" a direct translation "sky of eyebrows" (welkin of her eyebrows) can be suggestive in an appropriate manner. In SC the phrase nebo obrva is both syntactically and phonetically awkward, so modification can solve the difficulty. "Sky above the eyebrows" (nebo nad obrvama) retains the imagery marking the locality and thus facilitating the reception.

When both members of a complex metaphor are poetic, figurative expressions as in lauka brim "leek-surf" for "ale" are usually interpreted in the translation to uncover the sense of the two elements, i.e. "herb-sea" or further "herb-water" (SC more/voda od trave /bilja). This image, particularly with the deeper interpretation "herb/grass-water" suggests tea made of herbs. The term for an alcoholic drink flavoured by various herbs ("herb-brand") is denoted by a derivative noun of trava ("grass"), i.e. travarica, which again does not lead to the intended sense.

More complex figures display an increasing number of levels of interpretation. Thus "sword" expressed by hjalutuggadr brynju hrynfishkr, literally translated gives something like "boss-hilt-finned corslet's clanging fish", (or "clanging corselet-fish"). The allusions to the sword are ample since the image includes part of the sword (hilt) and its shape (long like a fish). It might nevertheless be too demanding a task for a reader from a different culture trying to decipher the figure. Besides its slight obscurity the phrase is too long and clumsy to fit into verse, both in English, and even more so in SC where little compounding is possible. The most grammatical translation would be oklopna riba kvrgavog balčaka što zvekeće (brynju fiskr uggadr hjalt hryn), with a variety of modifiers (adjective oklopna,

adjectival and nominal genitive kyrgavog balçaks, relative clause sto zvekece) of which the last one, a relative clause, has ambiguous reference (to fish and to hilt). Some economizing by poetic compression can be done by nominalizing the verb and compounding it with the noun "fish" to get a rare type of (nonproductive) compound zveket-riba, thus innovating by suspending the restrictions on a type of word formation. The result is a one to one equivalent of hrynfiskr.

Since such an outcome is rarely functional in verse, modifications have to be introduced. Thus in the English translation hiltfinned clanging swordfish the surface level is translated with some interpretation at the "deep" level and some omission. The "deep" element "sword" is introduced and the descriptive detail "boss" omitted. The German translation on the other hand, reaches right down to the "deep" level and modifies it by the interpreting adjective "long", i.e. Langschwert. All other figurative elements are discarded, the connection between fish and sword remaining solely in the translator's mind, with no hint being apparent to the reader.

A similarly very much involved image is flóða samlagar kindar linnseyðandi for "gold". It translates approximately as "the wood devouring offspring of the rivers' communion/matrimony". This figure differs from the previous one in that in its surface form it is entirely obscure in spite of its extended, or as it could be termed "strong", more explicit structure, free of compounds.

Its structure and process of interpretation is represented by the following formula:

$$\left\{ \left[\left(\text{flóða samlagar} \right) \text{ kindar} \right] \left[\left(\text{linns eyðandi} \right) \right] \right\} \Rightarrow$$

{[(river's communion's) offspring's] [(wood devourer)]} ⇒
{[the sea's offspring's] [fire]} ⇒
{the wave's fire or the wave-fire} ⇒
gold

Neither of the intermediate figures here is transparent enough, so the operation has to be carried out until the basic sense-conveying word is reached. In order to retain some of the original imagery single elements from the more superficial levels have to be introduced. In the English version it reads:

This gold this treasure gilded
On redds of serpents' seabed

Redds suggests the fire image and seabed the waves or the sea. The additional element serpent is not part of this particular figure, although otherwise a common element in metaphorical expressions for gold. The German translation reads:

Bussgelds hell Gold

with only hell being faintly reminiscent of the fire image. The word Bussgeld alludes to the entire discourse and is explanatory outside the reach of the skald's present image. The possible figures in SC will most likely have to resort to maximal interpretation with a sprinkling of the skald's imagery, e.g.

ognien zlato ("fire-gold")

ogani zlata ("fire of gold")

hujica ognien zlata ("flood of fire gold").

Translation is often defined as an interpretation of the original discourse, when it functions in a similar way as the paraphrase of a discourse does. It is sometimes said that when poetic discourse is paraphrased it is in fact translated into "ordinary language". In the present text I tried to distinguish between translation and interpretation restricting the former term

to a paraphrase of the original text in another language code, the latter term being understood to combine a semantic analysis of the poetic text, and its interpretation through an explanatory paraphrase in the other linguistic code. The analysis has to be performed by taking account of the entire discourse as well as of the cultural context of the original, whereas the interpretation has to do the same with the linguistic and cultural context of the new recipient's language. The mechanism performing this complex operation is the translator's (bilingual) linguistic and poetic competence.

Notes

1. The examples of skaldic imagery are taken from the verse in Gunnlaugs saga orms tungu, ed. Magnus Finnbogason (1957)
2. Comparison is made with the English translation of Gwyn Jones (1961) and the German translation by Felix Niedner (1940).

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