



On translating a literary form of poetry: Some theoretical perspectives

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.4.315](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.4.315)



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Article info

Article Received: 04/11/2025

Article Accepted: 06/12/2025

Published online: 12/12/2025

Abstract

The very practice of translation of any form of a literary text in itself, from any language into any language, has been a challenging task. When one attempts to translate the form of poetry in particular, one cannot remain free from facing various challenges relatively. The translation of poetry, as the Source Language Text into the Target Language Text, turns out to be more intricate and challenging as the activity of translation is not only an activity to translate semantically but also that of involving the formal aspects as well of the Source Language Text. Looking at translation from this perspective, nobody can deny the fact that translation also involves the translation of the form of the text itself, along with its interpretative aspects.

This research paper attempts to explore the theoretical background and examine whether various theories on poetry translation can help a s/he translator retain the poem's aesthetic and structural integrity beyond the boundary shaping the understanding of poetic translation. It is attempted here to survey various concepts like fidelity, translatability, untranslatability, equivalence etc. very briefly emphasizing the creativity and interpretation of the translator by focussing on some ancient as well as contemporary theorists like Roman Jakobson, John Dryden, James S. Holmes, André Lefevere, Susan Bassnett etc. It is argued to suggest that the translation of poetry cannot be considered only a technical exercise but also the requirement of theoretical knowledge, aesthetic sensitivity along with the deep insights into human emotions.

Keywords: Poetry Translation, Equivalence, Un-/translatability, Poetic Form, Translation Theory, Translational Creativity

Introduction

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This research paper attempts to explore the theoretical background and examine whether various theories on poetry translation can help a s/he translator retain the poem's aesthetic and structural integrity beyond the boundary shaping the understanding of poetic translation. It is attempted here to survey various concepts like fidelity, translatability, untranslatability, equivalence etc. very briefly emphasizing the creativity and interpretation of the translator by focussing on some ancient as well as contemporary theorists like Roman Jakobson, John Dryden, James S. Holmes, André Lefevere, Susan Bassnett etc., It is argued to suggest that the translation of poetry cannot be considered only a technical exercise but also the requirement of theoretical knowledge, aesthetic sensitivity along with the deep insights into human emotions. In order to understand how significant is the translation of poetry, one must first know what the poetry is, what the theory of poetry translation is and how both of them are mutually interdependent.

What is Poetry?

Etymologically, the term 'poetry' has come from the Greek word *poesis* which means 'to make' in verse or prose and hence the poet is the "maker". The terms 'poem', 'poetry', 'poetic' and 'poetics' have been frequented in various senses in critical writing. The poet is gifted with the capacity to choose words. Coleridge states that poetry is "the best words in the best order" (Coleridge 1835: 84). Commonly 'poem' means

"any composition in verse". Verse refers to a set of a type of technical conventions to regulate a composition by line-length to make the line part of the expressive form. We need the term 'poetry' for a complete set of verse for "we have no other word, parallel to, say, NOVEL in PROSE" (Childs and Fowler 2006: 181).

Poetry has been considered the universal "language of the imagination and the passions" which "the heart holds with nature itself" (Hazlitt 1985: 59). May be indirectly but emotional expression in a specific use of the language is an essential element of poetry. Wordsworth believes that each good poem "has a purpose" because "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" originating from recollection in "tranquility" (Wordsworth 2002: 165). Poetry is not only an "art of imitation" but also "of all human learnings the most ancient and of most fatherly antiquity" (Sidney 2002: 9/27). Therefore, impossible it is to anticipate the world without poetry for "Man is a poetical animal" (Hazlitt 1985: 60).

Poetry is a comprehensive term with metrical composition. *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (2006) defines it as "the art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasure by beautiful imaginative or elevated thoughts" (p. 1478). Edgar Allan Poe and John Cudden consider poetry the most estimable form of imitation, a work of verse, which may be in rhyme or may be blank verse or a combination of the two. On the other hand, some theorists believe that poetry can be sometimes composed without mechanically correct but uninspiring verse. This characteristic of poetry, blurring the distinction between prose and verse, reminds one of the pre-twentieth-century ideas of poetry as "a metaphysical quality, an intangible, romantic, virtue" (Childs and Fowler 2006: 181). Sidney as well, along with the line of Aristotle, comments that "it is not rhyming and versing that maketh poesy. One may be a poet without versing" (Sidney 2002: 29). The poem results out of certain

necessity. In a poem, inevitable is its form which is “noble”. Form is the vessel with the meaning in it. The poem needs both the meaning and the form as an association of soul and body. If one breaks the vessel, the liquid leaks out. Sidney analyzes verse to be poetic or prosaic and the prose may be poetic or not. Thus, this discussion about the poetry as a form leads one to a significant question i.e. Is poetry translatable? Like a prose?

On Translating a Form: Is Poetry Translatable?

The present study aims to examine whether poetry can be translated retaining meaning and form both examining theoretical aspects of poetry. Frequent efforts to translate poetry do not guarantee the fact how to translate poetry. As many opinions are available as many critics are. Holmes states that the first recommends translating poetry into “prose”, the second into “verse” and the third urges to translate “By all means into verse, into the form of the original” (Holmes 1978: 94).

Every attempt of translation is mingled with certain challenges and problems. The translation of poetry rather than prose, due to its content and form, invites more challenges evoking interpretation and response in the audience. Since the translation of prose has been considered easier compared to poetry without any rules and bylaws but just out of the belief of the practicing translators, Susan Bassnett argues in *Translation Studies* that “. . . there is a large body of work debating the issues that surround the translation of poetry” being more difficult compared to prose “far less time has been spent studying the specific problems of translating literary prose” as prose translation is very easy. (Bassnett 2002: 114) Understanding of poetry before translating it is based on two-fold approach related to “meaning” (inclusive of connotative) and “form”.

An attempt to determine what makes poetry different from prose results into the development of poetics—the study of the aesthetics of poetry. In poetry, words are

interlocked in sense and rhythm. Even Northrop Frye defines poetry as “a verbal structure of rhythm and imagery designed to produce imaginative response” in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Frye 1957: 237). Some forms of poetry are meticulously specific to cultures and genres that respond to the features of language used by the poet to write. This makes translation activity hard to retain form and content both. Since Cicero, the world of translation has witnessed the debate whether translation should be target-oriented or source-oriented. Faithfulness, reliability, fidelity, acceptability and adequacy are important features of good translation. The process of poetry translation, narrating an old story, has almost been divided into two camps: translatability and untranslatability.

A camp of certain critics accepts that it is impossible to translate poetry. W. H. Auden, John Dryden, Catford, Popovic, Nida, Hatim and Mason, Miremedi, Mao Dun, Richmond Lattimore, Robert Lowell, Paul Selver, Boswell, Nabokov, John Ciardi, Roman Jakobson, Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Theo Hermans, Pablo, House, Connolly, Landers, Dante, Bateson, Turco, Robinson, Frost, Widdowson, Al-Jahedh, Lazim and others state that the poem cannot be translated completely. Due to complexity of poetic form, untranslatability is more evident in poetry. The absence of lexical or syntactical substitutes results into the presence of linguistic untranslatability where the linguistic elements of the original cannot be replaced by the adequate structural or semantic terms in translation (Bassnett 2002: 39) whereas the cultural untranslatability appears due to the absence in the TL culture of a relevant situational feature for the SL text.

James Holmes argues that poetry always attempts to resist its translation as poetic form and its contents are inseparable which makes challenging to find equivalence and reproduction of the text as a translated text. Since the structure of the poetry is so dense, the slight change in its structure may cause either the semantic or the aesthetic loss. **While**

defining the poetry in general, not in relation to Translation Studies, Roman Jakobson argues that "Poetry is the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination" (Jakobson 1960: 358). What Jakobson means refers to finding equivalence even while composing the poem creatively, in its original, not in its translation. This gesture of Jakobson justifies even the creation of a poem rather than a prose is challenging and complicated. One may anticipate then, how difficult may be the translation of a poem! When Cleanth Brooks says that "Poetry is the language of paradox", what he means is to suggest that any poetry may express truth through contradictions or an unexpected juxtaposition of ideas. (Brooks 1947: 3). To Brooks, great poetry perhaps does not simplify but rather complexify the views on the reality of life. Attempting to translate the same such great poetry will inevitably invite challenges.

Even George Steiner mentions very clearly that "The poetic mode resists the transfer of its energies into another language" (Steiner 1975: 270). Arguing along the same lines, Nida states, "The conflict between form and content becomes especially important where the form of the message is highly specialized" as it is in case of poetry (Nida & Taber 1974: 126). Nida further argues that poetry invites "attention upon formal elements". Content is not "sacrificed" but "constricted into certain formal models". Therefore, Nida argues that "Only rarely can one reproduce both content and form in a translation, and hence in general the form is usually sacrificed for the sake of the content" (Nida 2012: 142). Hence, the challenge for the translator is to sacrifice "form" for the "meaning" or vice versa. These critics believe that poetry is untranslatable as "content" and "form" both cannot be translated. The translation of poetry involves the loss of either of the two. Roman Jakobson argues that poetry is by nature difficult to translate as "Poetry by definition is untranslatable" and

even if one attempts to translate it, "Only creative transposition is possible" (Jakobson 1959: 238).

If it is very difficult to translate poetry, Arnold and Helaine Belloc suggest that poetry can be translated into prose with its poetic essence. Robert Frost says that due to poetry deeply tied to language, it is difficult to translate as "Poetry is what gets lost in translation" (Frost 1959: 54). But Theodore Savoy in his book *The Art of Translation* (1968) mentions that poetry cannot be translated into a form other than poetry because a prose translation of poetry cannot convey the effect which verse produces and therefore the translator has to translate "Poesie into Poesie" or else in the process of translation, it "will all evaporate" (Robinson 1997: 173).

Prof. H. G. Widdowson and an Arabic critic Al-Jahedh believe that due to poetic meters and music, poetry is untranslatable. If in case translated, its meter and tone will be distorted with the pleasure disappeared. It is the form that contains the poetic effect. The reproduction of the components of the form of the original poem depends on the nature of the TL. While sharing the experience of translating Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Longfellow writes on his decision of translating into the blank verse. Longfellow writes:

"The only merit my book has is that it is exactly what Dante says, and not what the translator imagines he might have said if he had been an Englishman. In other words, while making it rhythmic, I have endeavoured to make it also as literal as a prose translation.... In translating Dante, something must be relinquished. Shall it be the beautiful rhyme that blossoms all along the line like a honeysuckle on the hedge? It must be, in order to retain something more precious than rhyme, namely, fidelity, truth, – the life of the hedge itself.... The business of a translator is to report what the author says, not to

explain what he means; that is the work of the commentator. What an author says and how he says it, that is the problem of the translator." (Longfellow 1964: 65)

Levy stresses the translator's intuitive decision promising a maximum of effect with a minimum of effort pragmatically. This results into a new creation because poetry is "untranslatable" and "only creative transposition is possible" (Jakobson 2004: 118). In the process of translation, "the form of a linguistic unit cannot be changed without a corresponding change in meaning" and "this meaning cannot be expressed in any other way" (House 1997: 48). No part of a poem has a detached or constant meaning. Therefore, a poem has to be interpreted in its totality by the translator's extra textual knowledge that plays "a major role in the success of translation" (Kim 2006: 285). Landers argues that poetry translation suffers from the art of failure (Landers 2000: 97) because the task of translation itself is tasteless like a stewed strawberry.

On the other hand, scholars like Cheng Fangwu, Bian Zhilin, Gu Zhengkum, Liu Bannong and Liu Zhongde accept that it is not impossible to translate poetry. Moreover, poetry cannot only be translated but also preserved, illustrated and illuminated if good job is done. Of course, certain original poetic touches of colour cannot be transferred but "they must be arranged" making the translation "even more luminous than the original". Thus a good translation discovers the "dynamics" of poetry, if not necessarily its "mechanics". (Kopp 1998, online). The activity of translation undresses a literary work and renders the author naked with his/her shortcomings unveiling all masks. Liu Zhongde, a Chinese translator and theorist, comments that "it is possible, but quite difficult, to translate poems satisfactory and successful" (Zhongde 1991: 128).

Untranslatability, according to Dryden, demands a bilingual translator. "No man"

Dryden says "is capable of translating poetry who . . . is not a master both of his author's language and of his own" (Dryden 1992: 20). Dryden further argues that poetic translation is difficult since the literal translation which is often known as metaphrase can't preserve the poetic effect in it. Dryden says, "The translator who would follow the original too closely is like a slave; yet he who would vary from it too much is like a deserter." (Dryden 1680: 221)

Even bilingualism cannot help translate the 'feel' of the language. Therefore, scholars like Ezra Pound (1929, 1950) and Fitzgerald (1878) demanding freedom in translating poetry considering the live Dog better than the dead Lion. On the other hand, critics like Goethe, Nabokov, Longfellow, Walter Benjamin, Martindale, Schlierermacher and others support literal or rigorously faithful translation. Though it is difficult to translate poetry, its translation is required for a global readership.

Strategies of Translating Poetry

Translating poetry is a matter of relativity. All aspects of the SL text cannot be transferred into the TL text. Masterpieces of the world have been translated excellently probing that though the translation of poetry is difficult, it cannot be impossible. Researchers and practicing translators opine that translators of especially poetry should possess some degree of artistic genius. The translator has to tactfully follow suitable strategies while translating a poem.

Lefevere (1990) refers to seven strategies whereas James Holmes (1988) enlists four basic strategies for translating the formal properties of a poem. Abbasi and Manafi Anari (2007) subdivide the literal translation into seven categories. The translator can translate form exactly only when the SL and the TL share similar formal conventions. Nida mentions that since "no two languages are identical . . . in . . . meaning", it is impossible to have "absolute correspondence between languages". Hence, "no fully exact translations" are possible (Nida

1964: 156) because “no language can be translated without fundamental loss” (Steiner 1975: 242). Since a verse form cannot exist outside a given language, the form of no verse can be retained in translation. The translator therefore has to search for an equivalent form in the TL on the basis of the function of the form in the SL text.

The translator must have the mastery of TL more importantly than that of the SL. The Target Language text has to as much as possible have most of the elements of the Source Language text. Since it is always not possible to produce the same syntactic structure of one language into another, the translator needs to use some techniques to solve the problem of communication between two languages. Exact equivalents must not be searched for as translation does not mean to translate words only but conceptions and structure of which words are only the constructing materials.

Language has energy but the charm of poetry lies in emotions. The emotional intensity of the SL has to be rendered into TL. According to Ezra Pound, three kinds of poetry namely “melopoeia”, “phanopoeia” and “logopoeia” exist. This “melopoeia”, the musical quality, cannot be translated even by “divine accident” but be appreciated by the foreigner with the sensitive ear. Pound believes that “phanopoeia” which means the visual imagery in poetry, is the easiest to translate wholly. Again, “logopoeia” “the dance of the intellect among words” is untranslatable but it can be paraphrased (Pound 1934: 37).

On the basis of discussions and findings of the present study, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Translation in general and that of poetry in particular appears difficult but not impossible, if translation strategies are thoughtfully employed. With partial semantic and stylistic loss, it is by no means totally impossible to translate poetry. An excellently skilled translator with a poetic taste may achieve

this end with the necessary literary features and devices of the SL text kept intact. An adoption of a suitable strategy can help the translator translate meaningfully.

Given the importance of a text’s formal aspects, poetry presents special challenges to translators in addition to its content which cannot be separated from form. The language-bound content makes the translation of poetry more difficult than other types. In the translation of poetry, the “creation of a new independent poem” (Newmark 1988: 70) has to be emphasized as it is poetry born anew and nothing at all happens. Therefore, to create a good translation, the translator of the poem must be fluent, sensitive and culturally knowledgeable to SL attempting the spirit of the original so as he can know what to put in and leave out. Good translation has to be “transparent” because its basic duty is to bridge gaps between elements and forces that constitute respective cultures and societies.

The identification of the translator with the original poet allows the pure language “to shine upon the original” fully (Benjamin 2004: 21). Moreover, s/he must lose her/himself in the intertextuality of a poem. The translator has to moderately believe in “no gains” and “no losses” policy. The task of the translator is to make the translated author appear equally charming by his use of literary language. Actually languages differ in what they have to convey, not in what they can convey. The cultural words with the local colour of the SL text have to be preserved. If possible, the religious and social allusions need not be deleted to maintain coherence of the TL text but rather be translated not to impair the meaning of the SL text with the readers of the TL text in mind.

Ultimately, it is the style that defines the relationship between the form and the content of the poem (Cassirer 1986, Boase-Beir 2011, Beauground 1988 and Connally 1991). Style and content are like the human body and soul and

therefore they cannot be separated. The style corresponds to the intention of the author. The style is determined by choice of words, use of technical terms, the type of tone etc. and hence it is personal and therefore different from writer to writer. The rightly captured style of the translated text leads it closer to the original. The desired literariness of the work can be lost if the style is not captured clearly. However, "Style is translatable". Shiyab and Lynch point out "if and only if the translator possesses the theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and the ability to carefully appreciate the tone and spirit of the original work" (Shiyab and Lynch 2006: 264).

Xu Yuanchong, a Chinese translator, comments that translation should be "beautiful, in meaning, in sound and in form" which, according to him, are "three beauties" of any poem (Yuanchong 1984: 52). In pragmatic terms, while translating Gujarāti poetry into English, the order of priority could be meaning, form and sound. But the act of translation has to strike balance between fidelity to the SL text and freedom to rewrite a TL text.

Conclusion

Thus, to conclude the discussion about whether poetry is translatable thoroughly or not, one can always argue that translating poetry is always a problematic task. The translation of poetry embeds cultural, ideological and linguistic stratagem making the activity more troublesome and challenging. Andre Lefevere says, "No translation of a poem can reproduce the whole network of relations that constitutes the original" (Lefevere 1992: 109). It can be concluded on the basis of arguments made that though the translation of poetry is difficult, however it is not impossible provided one remains careful, cautious, honest and vigilant while translating poetry especially. Since the translation of a poem is a matter of relativity, when one translates, one translates a poem in relation to some context. The translator while tactfully following the suitable strategies

can inevitably translate a poem, otherwise translation critics like Lefevere and James Holmes may not have listed different strategies for poetry translation if the translation of poetry is quite impossible. Translation is not only a mechanical process but also an interpretative, transformative, linguistic, co-authorial, inventive, retentive, creative, co-creative, sensitive and artistic process involving a translator to preserve the formal aspects of a poem along with the thematic ones striking the balance.

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Biodata

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