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The Translation of Literary Works and Cross-Cultural Understanding*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to point out that although the task of translating literary works is difficult and in some cases almost impossible, it is worth trying since the reading of literature of different cultures can bring about cross-cultural understanding.

I am sure all of us have been exposed to more than one culture and have encountered more than one incident of cross-cultural misunderstanding. Some of these misunderstandings can be very amusing, but others can cause heartache and the breaking of valuable relationships. In extreme cases, cross-cultural misunderstanding may have been the cause of international warfare.

I would like to record several incidents which may very well serve as examples of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

When Sir John Bowring came to negotiate the famous Bowring's Treaty with Siam in 1855, he observed that "in general the Thai people are polite and considerate. But I am a bit disturbed by the behavior of those gentlemen in the yellow robes. They walk along the streets begging for food, and are very impolite to the people who offer food to them. They merely walk away without a word of thanks." (Bowring 1856).

Obviously, the misunderstanding was caused by Sir John Bowring's own ignorance of Buddhist customs in Thailand. He was unaware of how Buddhist monks are supposed to behave, and did not understand that the people who offered food to the monks never expected any thanks from them. Their food offering was part of their merit-making.

The second incident took place in England a few years ago, when a Thai student had her first encounter with her English host family. After a few greeting and welcoming remarks, her hostess asked, "On what day of the week would you like to have your bath?" (Sukwiwat, 1981).

Coming from a country where one can take a bath any time of the day and any day of the week--a country where traditional poets devote long passages to metaphorical descriptions of the hero delicately and leisurely taking a bath before he goes out "to love" or" to war"--the girl was naturally dumbfounded. Her English hostess's question was unintelligible to her.

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The third incident happened quite recently. John Brown, an Englishman living in my neighbourhood, had been disturbed by loud noises next door. His neighbour was building a new house. One day he came storming into my house to deliver his grievances.

"Don't they know it's Sunday? Can't you tell them to stop working?"

To which I replied, "Sorry John, in Thailand we don't keep Sunday holy."

I am quite sure he must have appreciated my honest answer.

I do not claim that literature can remedy all these misunderstandings, nor do I claim that literature is the only means to achieve cross-cultural understanding. Other cultures can be understood from many different sources, such as history, sociology or political science textbooks. Guidebooks and travelogues can also provide a capsuled knowledge of different cultures. Given this, we should question why there has always been an attempt to translate literature of one language and culture into another?

Prince Prem Purachatra, one of our highly esteemed scholars, writers and translators, once said that, "a soul of a people is so often revealed in their literature: their poetry, drama, folktales, novels and short stories." A comment recently made by an American friend of mine seems to echo Prince Purachatra's sentiment. He said that although he had read a great deal about Thailand, he did not feel that he really touched the soul or the spirit of the country until he read some of the Thai short stories and poems I had given him. I am sure many feel the same way when reading foreign literature.

It might be concluded that although we can obtain facts and figures about other cultures from many different sources, it is only through literature that we can get to the heart and soul of those cultures. It is this matter of touching the heart and the soul that brings about cross-cultural understanding. Hence, an urgent need for the translation of literary works.

The problems involved, however, in the undertaking of this task are manifold. In translating literary works the "culture" virtually has to be translated as well as the "language." Values, beliefs and customs of one culture have to be interpreted and made legible to another. In addition, literary forms and styles, the use of figurative language and different nuances have to be taken into account. Most important of all is the tone used in the original text. If the tone is misinterpreted, the translation will naturally become a total failure.

A few examples may suffice to illustrate my point. However, these examples are confined only to the problems that exist in translating Thai literary works into English. Here it may be observed that linguistic and cultural problems are intermingled, and virtually inseparable.

A salient example of this is one which deals with the Thai "term of address." In Thailand everyone seems to be related to everyone else. We are all members of an extended family. People walking along the streets or browsing around shops and stores will find themselves being addressed by vendors or salesgirls according to their own estimate of the others' age, calling the others sister, brother, uncle, auntie, grandma or grandpa. It seems that to call someone just by name is impolite or disrespectful.

They have to be made related somehow. So Thai short stories or novels abound with characters addressing each other as sister, brother, uncle, aunt, grandma or grandpa without actually being related. If a translator tries to keep the authenticity of the Thai version, readers of other cultures may very easily be misled.

Problems also occur when characters really are related. In Thai culture, the relationship between two people is clearly defined and the term of address will have to be used properly according to that relationship. For example, there is one word for a "male-younger-brother on the maternal side" and another word for a "male-younger-brother on the paternal side." It would be quite impossible for a translator to find the English equivalents to these Thai words which indicate such fine distinctions of relationship.

In addition to terms of address which indicate relationship there are also terms of address which indicate sex and age that are sometimes used as terms of endearment. The various uses of terms of address would be unintelligible and meaningless in English, but they are quite meaningful in Thai.

Another significant lingual-cultural problem is the translation of Thai pronouns into English. Thailand is a hierarchy-conscious society, so pronouns have to be used according to the relationship and social status of a person. One set of pronouns is used between a boss and an employee, and another is used between older and younger people, not to mention the pronouns that are specifically used to address members of the royal family. In translation, this sense of hierarchial use of pronouns is completely lost for the simple reason that in English there is only a limited set of pronouns which is good for everyone at every occasion.

Translators also find that certain features of the Thai language pose problems when they have to be rendered into English. Thai language is richly endowed with words that deal with senses, feelings and emotions. There is a long list of words which expresses the "feeling of the heart." These words have different shades of meaning and cannot very well find their equivalents in English. The same can be said of words which express senses. Take the word "smell," for example. There are many different words in the Thai vocabulary which denote different kinds of "unpleasant smell," and another long list of words which denote "pleasant smell." Since these nuances of the word "smell" do not exist in English, the feeling behind the word being translated is often lost.

From the foregoing examples, it can be concluded that the translation of literary works from one language to another is not an easy task to undertake. But since it appears that literature can definitely serve as a means to cross-cultural understanding, it should certainly be worth the effort. Perhaps the translator should adopt the attitude that after all, "translation is like a young woman: if she is faithful, she is not beautiful, and if she is beautiful, she is not faithful." Ultimately, it is the task of a translator to strike a compromise between the accuracy and the beauty of the translation.

The Author

Nitaya Masavisut received her B.A. degree in English Language and Literature from Wellesley College in the States and her M.A. in English and Literature from the University of Michigan. After having spent several years working as a teacher and administrator at the Ministry of Education and the Civil Service Commission, she joined the Liberal Arts Faculty, Thammasat University where she taught English and American Literature until her early retirement in 1988. She has been involved in many literary activities such as writing articles and academic papers on Modern Thai Literature, compiling and editing an anthology of Thai literary works and serving as a member of several literary award committees.

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