Mechanisms of Linguistic Behavior
THE GOVERNOR GENERAL’S LITERARY TRANSLATION AWARDS: TOWARD A TRANSLATION EVALUATION GRID

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Abstract: The quality assessment of literary translations, and especially of the winners of the Governor General’s Literary Translation Award (French to English), is discussed. The author, who has served as a jury member for the GG’s Literary Translation Award in 2006 and 2008, undertakes to establish a translation evaluation grid consisting of the concepts of literary value, quality and accuracy, and 12 questions intended to establish the quality of a literary translation, of winners of the GG’s in particular, and then of any literary translation, in general. Works by Rodriguez, Meschonnic, Plassard and Mossop, among others, are used as premises on which the evaluation grid is built.

Keywords: literary translation, the Governor General’s Literary Translation Awards, quality assessment of literary translations

My work as a jury member for the Governor General’s Literary Translation Awards (French to English) began in 2006. I was again chosen to serve on the jury in 2008. Based on practical and theoretical premises, my hypothesis regarding the evaluation of literary translations is that one can undertake such an evaluation in fairly objective terms, else how can consensus, such as that required for selecting the best translation among the annual entries for the Governor General’s Literary Translation Awards, be reached. Literary Translation was added as a category of the awards (which are known in the Canadian literary world as the GG’s) and which are thus described on the Canada Council for the Arts Website:

The Governor General’s Literary Awards, Canada’s most prestigious literary awards, are given annually to the best English-language and the best French-language books. They are awarded in each of the seven categories: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama, children’s literature (text), children’s literature (illustration), and translation.

The Canada Council for the Arts funds, administers and promotes the Governor General’s Literary Awards. The value of each award is $25,000.

With the prospect of a high reward, the impetus to produce a winning translation is strong. But what about judging the awards. Are evaluations made objectively or subjectively, and what makes a winning translation? Simply put, can an evaluation grid be applied
to literary translations in such a way that they can be analysed and evaluated as objectively as possible? If not, then how could 3 very different specialists choose the same translation as the best? In this paper, I first describe the equation  \( \text{accuracy + literary value = quality} \), then present the theoretical premises of my work. Following that, I present and comment on the 12 questions I use to evaluate literary translations in general and the entries in the GG’s competition in particular, and finally, I draw some conclusions regarding the possibility of evaluating literary translations.

1. **Accuracy + Literary Value = Quality.** The Canada Council for the Arts, which oversees the GG’s competition, insists that a quality assessment juror is to focus on the literary value of the translations, then the accuracy of the translations, and finally the quality of the translations. Mossop (2007) describes accuracy as the most important implied need of a translation, and also defines accuracy as the translation of the message of the text; but accuracy must also be defined as the equivalent translation of the level(s) of language, not only the message(s) of the text but also the meanings of that text, the connotations of the source-text, and so on (see Wilson 2009). Secondly, literary value, as described by Kant (2004; see also 2005) and his disciples, is defined as the aesthetic pleasure derived from deciphering a literary text. This aesthetic pleasure is paramount in literary translation, as a translation must contain literary value and present an equivalent of the literary figures and effects found in the source-text. And finally, quality is described as “the totality of characteristics of an entity that bear on its ability to satisfy stated and implied needs” (ISO 8402).

2. **Toward a Thesis.** Although Mossop deals strictly with technical translation, he poses the right question with regard to literary translation as well, when he notes:

> It is probably wishful thinking to imagine that a translation can be both extremely readable and extremely accurate. At the higher levels of precision, a degree of readability is inevitably sacrificed, while at the higher levels of reader-friendliness, accuracy must suffer (2007: 127).

This division raises the age-old question of free translation vs. literal translation, which I describe as demonstrating fluency and flow (freedom) in the target language vs. faithfulness to the source-text. Indeed, too much faithfulness in translating a phrase can sometimes produce a barely legible text, too literal a translation, and too much freedom can sometimes produce a target text that barely holds any resemblance at all to its source-text. Yet, I have dealt with expertly executed target texts that present at once a very high level of both faithfulness and freedom. One should note, however, that literary translation, perhaps more than any other kind of translation, should be opaque, and should not be too literal, if one accepts the definition of a calque as: “a word or phrase borrowed from another language by literal, word-for-word or root-for-root translation” (see Wikipedia). In most cases, translations that are too literal are to be avoided, at least in literary translation, as they must be faithful to the original text, yet fluent in the target language. In my experience, faithful-
ness to the source-text and freedom and fluidity in the target language are not mutually exclusive, and a balance must be established and maintained between the two objectives.

Plassard (2007:233) notes that a translation is said to be “successful” if it can replace the original text, and if it “makes a text”. Therefore, the target text has to be fluent, while still remaining faithful enough to the source-text to be able to replace it. Plassard also notes a number of factors that a translation must maintain. For her, a translation must also fulfill the requirements of coherence (the internal logic of the translation), cohesion (the linguistic quality of a text ensured by grammatical and lexical elements that link the words of a sentence together and each sentence to the next), the content or information of the original text, acceptability and priority given to the genre (in the target-text being both equivalent to the source-text and constituting a new text). Wilson (2009) notes that the target-text must present a linguistic and conceptual equivalent of its source-text, as the text is composed of words (vocabulary) strung together (syntax), while those words also evoke, in the mind of the target-text reader, connotations, images, axiological information, levels of language, meaning(s) and a message equivalent to those presented in the source-text.

Meschonnic (1999) presents a detailed description of what a good translation should do and contain. That description notes that a good translation does what the source-text does, not only in fulfilling the social function of representation (literature), but also in its semiotic and semantic functioning (88). Meschonnic (87) describes the [literary] translator as being trained to erase every trace of the text’s origin as a translation, as the literary translator seeks to create a natural sounding text. He then underlines the translator’s faithfulness, which for him is first and foremost their faithfulness to the dualism of form and meaning, with its mythical effects, the political primacy of language, in the instrumentalism of the sign, and style conceived as different from ordinary language (89). Thus, literary translations must, as literature, represent and present equivalent words, syntax and constructions that promote that representation.

Rodriguez (2007) claims that her research demonstrates that a single model cannot be used to assess the quality of literary translations. Yet, her study demonstrates precisely that it can, and her model for such an evaluation seems strongly convincing and indeed useful. Her model takes into account reductions (losses) and additions (supplementation or gains), and also uses Vinay & Darbelnet’s (1977) seven translation procedures for measuring the quality of the literary translation that she examined. I rely heavily on her model in creating my evaluation grid, and I also draw from Kant’s theory of aesthetics (see also Jauss 1978) to measure the literary value of the literary translations that I evaluate. This study is both possible, as it has been done before, and predictable, as Rodriguez’ work demonstrates its effectiveness through the in-depth study that she presents, while it has not yet been used in many other contexts. My work is also original, as it contains an element of aesthetics to measure literary value, and as an evaluation grid has not yet been applied to an in-depth examination of winners of the GG’s translation award.

3. JURORS AS QUALITY ASSESSORS. In the quality assessment of the entries in the GG’s competition, which include all the literary translations published in Canada during the year preceding each competition, the jurors are the authority. There are several inherent
difficulties for the jury. First, what constitutes a natural sounding text may differ from one juror to the next, or between a given translator and a juror. In order to make that point less of an issue, there are three jurors for each category, and they are skilled literary translators and/or literary translation critics. Next, the jury members must have a grasp of different literary styles and a feel for both the target and source languages and for language use in both cultures. Meschonnic (1999), among others, holds that translators of novels must also be novelists themselves. Therefore, quality assessment should be executed by quality assessors. Finally, the jurors must have a firm grasp of the analysis, interpretation and reformulation of novels, and they are usually comparing a given translation to an ideal translation of the same source text in their minds (see Mossop 2007).

4. Questions for evaluating literary translations. An element of the tool that I developed for evaluating literary translations consists of 12 questions which, when applied in order and graded from 1 to 10, produce effective results. I used an earlier form of these questions in evaluating the GG’s entries. I am grateful to the editors of LACUS Forum 36 for the adjustments made to the grid.

1. How accurate is the translation and what is its literary value?
2. Does it read well, and not like a stilted translation?
3. Has the translator successfully tapped into the original author’s voice?
4. Does the translation demonstrate the required “rhythm, rhyme and harmony” (from the song “Drift Away”) of the original?
5. Does the translated text conjure up the same images in the reader’s mind’s eye as the source text?
6. Has the translator made the translation “sing”? (From “Alors la traduction chantera”, Henri Meschonnic, 1986.)
7. Has the translator captured the spirit and not just the letter of the original text?
8. Does the translation constitute a new work in the target language? (Not just was the translation executed recently, but are its ideas, style, etc. new?)
9. Does the translation constitute a worthy addition to the target language’s library of literature in translation?
10. How skilled is the translator, and how good are the translator’s techniques?
11. What is the level of reader interest in the translation? (At this point the evaluator is the Über reader.)
12. What is the level of difficulty of translating the source text? (when comparing two or more literary translations and their source texts to each other).

Questions 1 through 3 are concerned with the passage of the source-text into the target-text, and with the kind of equivalence the target-text establishes between itself and the source-text (partial vs. full equivalence, linguistic vs. linguistic and conceptual, etc.), and therefore with whether the translation makes a text” (Plassard 2007). Questions 4 through 7 focus on the spirit and the letter of the source-text and whether the style and revivification of the spirit of the source-text have been captured and achieved. Questions 8 and 9 focus on how
well the target-text replaces the original text. Questions 10 and 12 focus on the translator's skills and the level of quality achieved in their literary translation, and question 11 deals with the reader's reception of the translation. Question 5 is a very important consideration in any translation, and subsumes questions 1-3, 6 and, to some extent, 10. Taken together, the questions evaluate the translation as a target-text that must stand on its own, while presenting as full an equivalence of the source text as possible.

5. CONCLUSION. Contrary to Rodriguez (2007), who believes that she has proved that a number of literary translations cannot be evaluated in a similar fashion, my research and experience with the GG's has shown that indeed they can be, and a large part of the proof is that such an evaluation is actually done yearly in selecting winners of the GG's. That is a somewhat simplistic response, however, as just because it exists is not always the indicator that a uniform evaluation of literary translations is possible. Nonetheless, literary translations can be evaluated in terms of the linguistic elements they contain, and in terms of the reductions, additions and mistakes they contain (see Rodriguez 2007), in an effort to present a target text equivalent to the source text. Literary value, or the aesthetic value of a literary work, can be assessed in terms of quality, and in literary translation this value can be described as the level of quality of the finished product, which is the translation. It also becomes increasingly difficult to present equivalent images, concepts and connotations as those elements become more culturally bound and hence, more difficult to translate, and for that reason, equivalence is a dynamic concept, but it is also possible, as it is done and can be described.

The value of the GG's in the literary culture of Canada cannot be overlooked. The winners are very well compensated (currently at $25,000 per book per year) and the value of seeking the highest quality in the creation of literary translations within Canada’s literary culture must be preserved. Finally, the celebration of Canada’s bilingual nature and linguistic duality, and witnessing the two solitudes communicate through highly skilled literary translators is both an honour and a pleasure, akin to being invited to a gala evening at Rideau Hall, the official residence of Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean.

REFERENCES


WEBSITES

