

If I certainly lose in translation, what I may gain?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the losses that occur in the process of translation, especially in literary translation, but it also addresses the possibilities of translation gain that can emerge independently and unstoppably based on the work of Derrida of deconstruction. Thus, if most of the translation theorists complain about how much original features of the source text are damaged, few of them talk about the birth of a new text, a new self-contained narrative that fights for its independence.

Keywords: Translation, Loss, Derrida, Deconstruction, Gain

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1. The Necessity of Translation Loss

No translator would deny that there is a certain moment that is painful for him during the translation process; this ultimate moment of complete knowledge is when he realizes that loss will inevitably occur in his translation, then when he doubts his abilities as a translator for failing to achieve his main task to which he has dedicated himself from the very beginning: producing as much cultural equivalence as possible.

This pain increases especially if what he is translating is dear to his heart and from his mother tongue, as Jun expressed by saying that: “Translation is well-known, but its gains and losses are only known to the translators.” (Jun, 2020, p. 172) Therefore, whenever the translator tries to explain to the target reader the huge and inevitable losses that occur during translation, especially literary one, he often fails. This failure is reinforced if the reader is ignorant of the original language of the text, because no matter how much the translator compares what is original and what is translated, the recipient will not fully understand the comparison.

It is not only the translator who feels pain and can observe the damage, for the text itself is obviously injured. Khatibi published his book “La Blessure du Nom Propre” (The Wound of The Proper Name) which was translated into Arabic as “The Wounded Arabic Name”; a weird translation that no nobody can easily accept, thus by reshaping the title of the original, the translator is shifting the old meaning that the author may have intended. By replacing “Proper” by “Arabic”, the reader would expect something totally different making the original lost. Now, the “proper name” is really wounded after it lost its meaning and was distorted, and maybe indeed bleeding after this treacherous shot. Actually, translation cannot be likened to a quick shot for sure. It is a complex process that requires time, and more importantly: decisions and choices, decisions a translator can make on the basis of his personal grasp and motivations. Yet, my aim here is not to discuss the ideological agendas behind translation, but rather to only shed light on the major elements that are lost in the translation process.

If we take the above example of the translation of Khatibi’s book, we can obviously notice the damage and the serious shift; however, the translator could change that as he has multiple choices and alternatives, that is to say “La Blessure du Nom Propre” requires a simple equivalent: The Wound of The Proper Name. Yet, the problem is when the translator does not have a direct translation, that is the real tragedy! It is when the translator lacks choices and thus resorts to one option, which is to change the form or to alter the meaning.

The loss becomes more intense if the original text is a literary one, for literature is open to multiple interpretations, and one faces obstacles as the language is connotative. And also, the task of translating a literary text becomes more like a nightmare- this is of course if the translator’s intention and concern is to remain faithful to the original text- when the form is as important as the meaning, therefore, the translator finds himself in a weak

position whether to sacrifice the form over the content or vice versa. That is why the loss happens badly if the text is poetry, for poetry can never be translated as the same as the original.

Texts and genres in general, include words, expressions and cultural nuances that are exclusive to one culture and do not have equivalents in another language. These cultural specificities do not exist in other languages, and whenever we try to translate these words, we cannot grasp their original meaning, thus some parts are always untranslatable and lost in translation.

Untranslatability in the work of deconstruction is caused by the limit of language, because meaning first is not fixed since words are shaped by their relationships with other words (the concept of *différance*), and thus meaning can change depending on the context; and second, it is always deferred, since texts carry within themselves traces of other texts i.e. every signifying element “is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element” (Davis, 2001, p. 15) therefore, and since texts always include traces of other texts, our attempt becomes more likely to be a translation of translation instead of translating the original since there is no original in the first place to begin with.

This barrier of language which hinders total translation is also “precisely what makes translation possible in the first place, since this limit ensures that meaning can never be absolute, close off, or shut down.” (Baker & Saldanha, 2020, p. 139) This “plurivocality” of the text that dictates that part of the meaning is deconstructed and lost because for Derrida translation can never be total or one hundred percent precise.

Derrida gives an example of the incompleteness of meaning in his work “Des Tours de babel” (The Towers of Babel) when the “towers” evoke the image of human attempts to reach a universal understanding or to construct a unified language:

“And they said one to another. Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad up on the face of the whole earth.” [Genesis 11: 3-4] (Trowitzsch & Son, 1903, p. 15).

Such attempt would eventually fail when God intervened and confused their language by destroying the tower:

“But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language;

and this they begin to do: now and nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.” [Genesis 11: 5-6-7-8] Trowitzsch & Son, 1903, p. 16).

And this is how God destroyed the tower after the people of Shinar craved unity and univocality, however “Such a closed structure” that people of Shinar intended “would dominate meaning, imposing an unequivocal relation between signifier and signified” (Davis, 2001, p. 10) making translation impossible! Hence, the incompleteness of the architectural structure of the tower stands for the incompleteness of meaning, making it unfinished and always in need of complementation (context in this sense).

Derrida reflects on the nature of translation as something that is never fully faithful or complete. The title itself is a symbol of linguistic fragmentation and the confusion of languages: (Des Tours) and not (Un Tour), suggesting that translation is always caught in a state of *différance*, reflecting the inherent instability of meaning and the impossibility of total understanding between different languages and cultures.

In short, no translation can perfectly preserve the full depth of the original because every language shapes meaning in its own specific way as Derrida expressed by the “inadequation of one tongue to another” (Derrida, 1985, p. 165). So, the translation inevitably involves some transformation or change in the way the text is understood (the impossibility of perfect translation).

Actually, for Derrida translation can be perfect “relevant” if it does respect the quantitative equivalence principle, that is to say that the translation must be quantitatively equivalent to the original apart from any addition, explication, or analysis i.e. if the original sentence has subject-verb-object, so should the target sentence. However, word-for-word translation is not always accurate, especially if the text is literary, thus, “anything is translatable if the translator is not limited in terms of quantity” (Kruger, 2004, p. 19) which is obviously impossible. A relevant translation, according to Derrida, is therefore “a translation whose economy [...] is the best possible, the most appropriating and the most appropriate possible” (Derrida, 1999, p. 369). However, it is impossible to make a perfect one-to-one equivalent of meaning, and there is always something lost or changed in the process or as Kruger said: “It simply implies that it is impossible to produce the plurality of the source text in a translation while obeying the law of quantity.” (Kruger, 2004, p. 19) We cannot in this sense transcribe all the meanings of a ST upon a TT, unless we break the “law of economy” which will not be a “relevant” translation in the end.

This “law of economy” (Derrida, 1999, p. 369) has two main aspects: first, a quantitative aspect that dictates the word count in the ST be the same as in the TT, and

second, a “property” aspect that requires the usage of the most appropriate, best possible translation of any word. Herein lies the imperfectness of translation: in order for the translator to provide “the most right, appropriate... translation” (Derrida, 1999, pp. 177-179) the translator has to either add alternative meanings of words in parenthesis or provide explanatory notes on his translation strategy. For example: if a source text talks about psychoanalysis and mentions Freud in the corpus, some translators that wishes to translate this passage, instead of translating ‘Freud’ as Freud, they can go with ‘The inventor of psychoanalysis’ and thus the translation loses economy in the process. If the translator does this, it again obviously violates the law of economy which demands a “one-word-by-one-word” rendition.

Freud is a proper name, and so we have the choice whether to keep it as it is or to use ‘The inventor of ‘psychoanalysis’ instead; there is a big problem however, when the term is not a proper noun. My initial project of research, as a dissertation, is about collecting Moroccan folktales, especially Amazigh ones, and translating them into English, of course with an analysis at the end. Yet, what I am trying to focus on here is only the first section of translation to provide a vivid example of what does Derrida means by this loss that happens due to violating the law of economy. Actually, there was a tale that talks about the manipulation of two men that pretended to be kind of wizards that have a transcendental ability to heal people. The story goes on as they tricked a poor woman that was hoping to get better because she was ill in exchange of food (the woman did not know that they were only beggars), therefore, she trusted their power of healing. I will not mention all the details; however, the essential thing is that in the end the woman recovered from her sickness using "النية" despite the conspiracy of the two men.

Now, the title of the tale was "النية" itself, and I really had difficulty in finding one simple equivalent in English, why? Simply because the concept of "النية" does not exist in all language or other cultures. Let me first try to explain-if I can manage-what do we mean by this concept. As a term, "النية" would literally means: intentionality or intention; however, as a concept it means something different even within its language that is uttered with. "النية" in the context of the tale and in other contexts is linked to spirituality and belief, it is when you ‘trust’ God that he will always be by your side and you trust that he will always protect you from any danger, thus, your intention from the very beginning is that you are ‘certain’ that God will not betray you, but it is not certainty at the same time because you do not know the consequences! So it is kind of believing that, no matter what the result is, maybe it is for the better. Thus, when the poor lady put her faith in God, and **intended** from the beginning that God will not betray her, she was indeed healed not by the beggars, rather by her intentions that come from inside.

The concept itself is fused with trust, naivety, good intentions and good versus evil, which makes it hard to explain and to translate, and I believe this is classical in tales and stories, when the bad guys try to harm the hero for example, and the hero without even knowing about the conspiracy nor trying to do something to fight it, he eventually wins. Is

it what we call nowadays: trust the process? But which process are we referring to? I really cannot be definite.

In all cases, when I tried to translate "النبة" into English-and bear in mind that it was a title- I could not find an exact equivalent or even a closer one, I was stuck. Then I contacted professor Schulthies¹- an American professor that speaks Darija and is familiar with the Moroccan context. After deep thought, professor suggested that -maybe-I can use the following expression, since it was impossible to use one term or equivalent such as trust only, which is Divine Trust. Let me confess that was relieving to find a solution of a research problem, even if it was not satisfying. And we concluded that "النبة" can be Divine Trust or Spiritual Trust even though it was not the exact meaning of the original concept.

The law of economy was obviously violated here, first we broke the "quantitative" aspect where one term shifted to become two terms, and second the "property" aspect that altered the meaning by only adding an explanation to it instead of translating it, and in these very simple steps we lost the original.

Therefore, we cannot render the same features of the original to the TT without something of the original being lost. Derrida calls this "the insolvent debt" (Derrida, 1999, p. 366) that the translator owes the original. It is the unpayable debt, the unfulfilled oath that the translator failed to pay. Derrida talks about the story of "The Merchant of Venice" where the merchant failed to pay the amount of money that he owed the Jew, and thus ending in exchanging a pound of his flesh instead. Derrida in a way is liking this exchange to the very act of translation. Both the translator and the merchant made a deal, an oath, a promise, a pretend to which they failed to accomplish, which cost them loss. The merchant lost pound of his own flesh and the translator bears the loss of the original, in both this exchange there is no total winning, you always lose something. The merchant here carries the loss with him, it is part of his skin, it is marked on him, it is on his body, it will be always there as a reminder of how much he has lost.

Derrida therefore expressed a very strong argument in the same publication "what is a relevant translation?" when he concluded that translation is actually possible if we bear the loss that can occur. Thus, to let the translation happen, one must sacrifice some aspects of the original that must be missing. The translation then becomes more like a ship, so when the captain feels the need to throw whatever it may take to survive from drowning, he gets rid of the unnecessary- even necessary- stuff if that was what it takes to be out the perdition and death. Then, in the midst of victory and celebrations-especially if the victory is great and its reputation is resounding- the captain is silent and alone all the time, hiding within himself the enormity of what was lost throughout his journey, living in state of confusion between either telling what had happened on the journey and being honest how much he had lost bearing people's blame and criticism, or even worse: their lack of understanding; or keeping silent and holding the ember of the secret alone in his grip. Captain, the success he has today, stands behind ruins.

That is why translation is like a successful and comfortable play, but no one knows what is happening in the backstage.

For Derrida as explained by Baker “each language or culture has a *singular* way of meaning due to its particular set of differential relations, and this singularity precludes perfect translatability” (Baker & Saldanha, 2020, p. 141) that is why it is impossible to render the same meaning in translating a text because this text is independent in one way or another, therefore its features of independency are absent in another language or culture, so loss happens. Actually, if we look closely at these ideas, we can see that they are making sense in one way or another, because if a text were totally translatable, “it would simply and purely repeat what already exists, it would have no singularity and thus no identity” (Davis, 2001, p. 22). A text identity cannot be repeated twice even during perfect translation for identity cannot be duplicated, otherwise it would not be called identity. This process of “saving the idiom” (Derrida, 1985, p. 165) is what preserves the singularity of a text.

However, if one meaning does not exist; how do I know which meaning to translate? and if I am concerned about not betraying the author’s intention in translation, what if I am betraying him by getting him wrong in the first place since literature is about interpretations and ambiguities are more common since language is connotative as I mentioned earlier?

Thus, a translator may then stop worrying about perfect translation since it is ‘impossible’, and start observing what things do emerge in parallel, and instead of focusing on how to shadow the damage that will inevitably in an obvious way occur, he may begin to observe and analyze this side damage, and since he cannot hinder or cover the loss, he can make gain out of it.

2. Translation Gain

If the work of deconstruction focuses on how impossible and imperfect a translation can be, it also sheds light on the necessity of translation in relation to the “survival” of the original, that is to say and in order for the ST to survive and live, it needs translation. In fact, the survival of the ST is relying on the very act of translation.

We discussed earlier how a text can never be totally translatable since each text has its own identity that defines it, but the same text cannot be also totally untranslatable, because if so this text “would bear no relation to any meaningful system: fully self-contained”, and so it “dies immediately” (Davis, 2001, p. 22). Here lies the importance of translation in keeping the original alive, I mean and without a translated version of a text, we would not have heard of this text in the first place.

Derrida famously critiques the idea of “presence” in Western philosophy. Thus, the concept of an original text being fully present after translation is problematic, since in the

work of deconstruction, meaning is never fully pure or present, it is always deferred, in change, and subject to context. Hence in translation, the original text does not survive in its pure and original form, rather it is always altered, meaning that it is not simply replicated or preserved but re-interpreted, re-contextualized in some way. Thus, if the meaning is always “deferred”, the survival of the original text happens through the “traces” that we mentioned earlier. The original text leaves traces, but these traces that we translate are never an exact copy of the original meaning; therefore, what survives is not the original in its full presence, but an echo of it. Much like catching a vibration of an earthquake only.

Whether a text survives totally or partly does not matter as long as it just survives and lives since there is nothing original in the first place: the origin of the myth is only a myth or as Derrida says: “In this sense it would be the myth of the origin of the myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation and so on.” (Derrida, 1985, p. 165)

Therefore, the original must be merciful and accept the opportunity presented to it by the translator to survive in another environment. Even Derrida initiated his article by saying “Then must the Jew be merciful” (Derrida, 1999, p. 365), that is to say, even if the unbroken deal was violated and the merchant failed to pay his debt, the Jew in this case needs to be merciful. This mercy is represented with implicit torture which a pound of flesh near to the heart, maybe as a reminder of the necessity of the loss or again “the insolvent debt” that is always unpayable. The translator carries this failure, this ordeal, this anguish with him all the time, that is why the ST must be merciful and tolerant and accept this chance that the translator offers.

“Babel” lives and continues to live through this process of imperfect translation and non-final interpretation, “Babel: first a proper name, granted. But when we say ‘Babel’ today, do we know what are we naming? Do we know whom?” (Derrida, 1985, p. 165). “Babel” here have multiple interpretations, is it only a proper name? Is it “confusion”? Do we refer to the limit of human ambition or to the symbol of multiplicity of languages? Or maybe it symbolizes the divine intervention and the collapse of unified singular understanding of the world? It is due to this “undecidability” that makes the story survives over times and places and continues to influence our understanding even though the original event is no longer directly accessible to us. It is the lasting impact that the story has on us as the text continue to evolve across generations.

The survival of the story of Babel as a “legacy” (Derrida, 1985, p. 165) is of which the myth of tower, not only as Biblical story, is interpreted across time. The survival of the text is the way the story continues to shape and influence our ideas even as it takes different role, far beyond its initial religious context.

This is one gain that we benefit from the very act of translation: the original lives on and survives through times and places. Now, many people can view translation as a passive act, that is to say, translation just as a repetition process, which means we only copy or

repeat what the ST says without contributing to the field of knowledge. Translation in this sense, and if we follow this hypothesis, becomes the shelter of *shelterless* researchers that have no idea what to do nor what to add to the field. However, without his knowledge-the translator, the translated text emerges as a new product that no one has produced before. Translation here becomes no more a copy nor a repetition, it is a new text that evolves and becomes the original that needs another translation itself.

Derrida says that “the translation espouses the original” (Derrida, 1985, p. 190-191) and with this amalgamation, the original which is weak and fragmented-I mean incomplete, joins translation which is imperfect giving birth to a new text which Derrida compared to a child. With this “marriage” (Derrida, 1985, p. 191) contract, translation creates a new text that did not exist before, and this text/child will also produce another text that is not similar to the original. Derrida explains:

It is what I have called the translation contract: hymen or marriage contract with the promise to produce a child whose seed will give rise to history and growth. A marriage contract in the form of a seminar. Benjamin says as much, in the translation the original becomes larger; it grows rather than reproduces itself and I will add: like a child, its own, no doubt, but with the power to speak on its own which makes of a child something other than a product subjected to the law of reproduction (Derrida, 1985, p. 190-191).

This marriage personification links two things as a “symbolon” (Derrida, 1985, p. 188-189) which is “originally a physical object, intended as a material indication of identification or agreement. What may have begun as a private practice as a reminder of *xenia* or ritualized friendship” (Hopper & Millett, 2016), i.e. it is a token split in two and shared between people, each one keeps one half. When brought together, they signify a bound or unity.

Thus, translation in this sense is the “symbolon” that joins the original and the translated all together. It is not producing the same original, instead, translation is creative, it does not reflect fixed meanings, rather it invents new ones “It essentially commits neither to communicate nor to represent nor to keep an already signed commitment, but rather to draw up the contract and to give birth to the pad” (Hopper & Millett, 2016, p. 188)

Let me provide vivid example of this. If we go back to the first example of Khatibi’s book “La Blessure du nom propre” that we mentioned was translated into Arabic as “الاسم الجريح العربي.” Now, let us translate this Arabic translation into French again: الاسم العربي الجريح would become for example “La Blessure du Arabe Nom”, and again let us translate this into Arabic, “La Blessure du Arabe Nom” becomes: جرح الاسم العربي. Then I put this latter format of the Arabic translation into AI, جرح الاسم العربي becomes “Le Nom Arabe est

blessé” and this one would be again and so on in an unstoppable chain of creation. We can see that each time we translate the sentence we produce a new sentence, that is if translated again, will also create a new sentence itself, thus, the original is translated and then the translated becomes original. Therefore, “The Wound of the Proper Name” becomes in the end “The Arabic name is injured/hurt” and so by translating and retranslating we can not go back to find the same original that we started with as it keeps changing and altering itself. And so, we can never catch the original in its pure form-in its essence, we only jump on its shadow or its trail that it leaves behind.

Some would say that this process is predictable since the translation was incorrect in the first place, that is why I will provide a random example away from Khatibi’s publication. Let me imagine a paragraph in Arabic and then translate it to English. For example, and let us suppose the following paragraph:

Original Arabic:

ذهبت إلى السوق صباحاً لشراء بعض الفواكه والخضروات. الجو كان لطيفاً، والتقيت بصديقي هناك. تمشينا على طول الشارع معا في طريق عودتنا إلى المنزل ونحن نتبادل أطراف الحديث. كانت صدفة رائعة أنني التقيت به، يا له من يوم رائع!

English Translation:

I went to the market this morning to buy some fruits and vegetables. The weather was nice, and I met my friend there. We walked along the street together on our way home, chatting. It was a wonderful coincidence that I met him. What a wonderful day!²

Now let us translate this back into Arabic, and to avoid subjectivity, I shall not translate it this time by my own, rather I will adopt two methods: the first one is to use AI, and the second method is to take two translations done by two of my colleagues and then to see if the three results will correspond the original Arabic text.

Back-translated Arabic:

I put the English translation into AI, the result is the following:

ذهبتُ إلى السوق هذا الصباح لشراء بعض الفواكه والخضراوات. كان الطقس جميلاً، وهناك التقيتُ بصديقي. مشينا معاً في الشارع في طريق عودتنا إلى المنزل، وتحدثنا. كانت مصادفة رائعة أن التقيتُ به. يا له من يوم رائع

The first colleague translated as follows:

ذهب صباح اليوم إلى السوق من أجل شراء الفواكه والخضروات. بالإضافة إلى الطقس الجميل، التقيت بواحد من اصدقائي في عين المكان. مشينا معا وتحدثنا في طريق العودة إلى المنزل. كانت صدفة جميلة أننا التقينا. يا له من يوم رائع

The second colleague came with this result:

ذهبت اليوم إلى المتجر لشراء بعض الخضروات والفواكه. وقد كان الجو جميلاً. شاءت الأقدار أن ألتقي صديقاً لي هناك، وقد عدنا إلى المنزل مشياً على الأقدام؛ مستمتعين بالحديث إلى بعضنا البعض طول الطريق. كان لقائي به صدفة، صدفة رائعة. صراحة كان يوماً في غاية الروعة!

Now let us compare the translation to the original:

. original: صباحاً

. Back translated: هذا الصباح / اليوم / صباح اليوم

. original: الجو كان لطيفاً

. Back translated: كان الطقس جميلاً/ وقد كان الجو جميلاً/ بالإضافة إلى الطقس الجميل

. original: والتقيت بصديقي هناك

. Back translated: التقيت بواحد من اصدقائي في عين المكان / شاءت الأقدار أن ألتقي صديقاً لي هناك

And other examples that are obviously clear in the texts. Now, the meaning is preserved in a way, but each time a different translator introduces new words to the original and the back-translation loses the original flavor and some of the author's stylistic and semantic choices

When you translate a paragraph from Arabic to English, you are going through a process of interpretation. Since language do not map one-to-one, some expressions, idioms, cultural references, or even sentence structure might change to make sense in English. Then, when you translate that English version back into Arabic, you are essentially translating a translation, not returning to the original. That is to say, the translation might still make sense in Arabic, but it is unlikely to be identical to the original.

In trying to translate any word, the translator needs to accept that he will inevitably introduce new nuances to it and through the translating text, the translation becomes an original itself. In this way the original has now become the translation and the translation in is now an original because it is a new text.

This is how a new text is born enjoying its own independency. Actually, it is through the process of translation that we know the hidden and the other faces of the original, what the original did not say? We know the original through translation, and thus we make it free, we liberate the original from being final and we open it to multiple possibilities.

Notes

1. Becky Schulthies is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Brigham Young University. Her research interests include language sociality, plant-human semiotics, and cross-cultural ethnographic collaborations.

2. Translation mine.

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