

## TRANSLATING POETRY FROM FRENCH TO ENGLISH: THE CASE OF LEON DAMAS’ “HOQUET”

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### Abstract

Literary works are written in literary language which is charged with connotative meaning. No wonder it’s translation poses a lot of problems for translators. To be able to translate a literary work from one language to another, a translator must understand all the nuances and render the message in the target language without losing its meaning and it’s informative value. Translation implies the passage from one language to another, the meaning and intention of the original text. According to the interpretative method, translation is extracting the meaning and intention of a given text in a language (language A) and rendering the same meaning into another language (language B) in order to produce the same effect. Literature on the other hand is a written or oral work with aesthetic purpose. It is the totality of works of the mind as they are produced by word or writing, and are reflected in terms of content, form and expression. Poetry which is one of the genres of literary texts is a piece of writing in which the words are carefully chosen for the images and ideas they suggest, and in which the sounds of the words when read aloud often follow a particular rhythmic pattern. This article examines the peculiarities of literary translation with particular reference to poetic translation and how it can be translated. A translation of Leon Damas’ “Hoquet” into English was undertaken. At the end, it was discovered that different translation techniques were applied while the ethnographic and historical knowledge played important roles.

**Keywords:** Literary translation, literature, translation, poetic translation, poetry.

### Introduction

Every domain of translation presents its own challenges. Translation of literary texts differs from other types of translation due to its challenges and peculiarities. The form of a literary text is not a simple vector of ideas of notional content but the content can only be determined through the development of the message to the point that what the author wants to say matters as much as what is said.

The form of a literary text is determined by the specific logic intended by the writer. A close observation shows that the language of a literary text is overcharged, hyperbolic and filled with vivid metaphors, sound effects and new rhythms.

What really differentiates a literary text from other types is the peculiar use of language through the use of stylistic figures like proverbs, homonyms etc. That is why a literary language is connotative and ambiguous resulting in diverse interpretations by readers.

Barthes (147-155) makes a distinction

between an author and a writer. He describes an author as someone who works on his words and has an aesthetic concern while the writer sees language only as a means or an instrument of communication conveying meaning or a thought. In other words, the latter wishes to convey a message without any ambivalence or ambiguity. He says things directly while the former uses symbolic language to convey his message.

According to Israel Fortunato (31), “A literary work, unlike a pragmatic text does not convey concrete information with foreseeable consequences, rather a literary text conveys an experience, a world view, morals, universal and timeless truths and aesthetic values that leave their marks on the reader. A literary text can be said to give emotional rather than an intellection experience”.

For a literary text be well translated from the source language to the Target language as a work or art, the translator must begin to process its creation because his work entails recreating in another language, (TL) a work that

already existed in a given language (SL). This is not because the translator is free but because he does not have a choice but recreate new cultural values. In fact, a literary translator is forced to be creative in the use of language. His work ceases from being a linguistic operation but the perfect understanding of historical, cultural and social elements (Nwanjoku: 32).

Although literary writing may appear as everyday writing, words are charged with cultural and emotional elements. They willingly assume symbolic and metaphorical functions; they are interwoven, report to each other and are organised into networks. Quoting Israel (19) "Form and ideas complement each other and merge to give what Valery calls "une composition indissociable de son et de sens" (an inseparable composition of sound and meaning).

The interpretation of a literary work is not a simple mental activity but a quest involving affectivity and leading to an infinite number of hypothesis. A literary work requires the co-operation of the reader as a condition for actualising its content. Besides the understanding of the message and language proficiency, it requires other extra-linguistic competences like the ability to understand presuppositions, and idiosyncrasies, etc. Mounin (16) affirms the fact the translation, especially in the fields of theatre, cinema, etc., has non-linguistic aspects.

Indeed, too often, the literary work is considered untranslatable because it may not be possible to establish the exact duplicate of the original. But according to Israel, if we accept the fact that literary translation is impossible, we deny the very essence of the translating operation which is based on the differences of idioms and we also condemn ourselves by stating that the understanding of a foreign literary work is impossible if we do not understand the language (17).

In order to translate a literary text, Fortunato Israel invites us to appropriate the text to be translated. This appropriation, according to him, is not a choice but an imposition by the very nature of literary writing. According to him, to appropriate a text properly, it is necessary first of all to internalize the message that is always present, and then to assimilate the style and

aesthetic intention. In other words to understand the whole socio-cultural environment, then applying creativity to recreate another text that belongs to you, but in conformity with the target language that is not beyond the original.

In general, each language has its own peculiarities, its own lexical system woven into the physical and socio-cultural context of its speakers/users. That may be the reasons for the Italian aphorism "Traduttore, traditore" which means that all translations are unfaithful because they betray the thought of the original text and are difficult and sometimes impossible to establish equivalence or lexical correspondences while translating them.

The vocabulary of a language forms the system that is peculiar to that language. There are therefore all the chances that the vocabularies of two languages may not be the same. In order words, no word for word or literal translation is possible. In fact, the translation of literary texts requires compulsory bilingualism and biculturalism. To preserve all the peculiarities of the literary text in translation, the translator must integrate himself in them and have a very good understanding of the original language and its author to detect the message and that of the target language to be able to render correctly the message.

Translating literary text is always more difficult than the translation of other types of text because literary texts have specific values called the aesthetic and expressive values. The aesthetic function emphasizes the beauty of words (diction), figurative language, metaphors, etc. On the other hand the expressive function puts forwards the writer's thought or process of thought, emotion, etc. A translator faced with this sort of text must try to transfer these specific values into the target language.

### **Nature of Poetic Translation**

Poetry is difficult to translate from one language into another because of its nature of emphasising linguistic form rather than using language purely for its content. According to Poetry.org, poetry is an ancient Greek word  $\rho\omicron\iota\epsilon\omega$  (poieo) which means I create (<http://www.poetry.org/hwatis.htm>). Nwanjoku (47) describes poetry as a composition in verses

characterised by economy of words and images that possesses emotive tone. Poetry uses condensed or compressed form of language to convey emotions or ideas to the reader's or listener's mind or ear; it uses devices such as assonance and repetition to achieve musical or incantatory effects. Poems frequently rely on their effect on imagery, word association, and the musical qualities of the language used. The interactive layering of all these effects to generate meaning is what makes poetry.

American dictionary online defines poetry as a piece of writing in which the words are carefully chosen for the images and ideas they suggest, and in which the sounds of the words when read aloud often follow a particular rhythmic pattern. While Poetry.org defines poetry as an art form in which human language is used for its aesthetic qualities in addition to, or instead of, its notional and semantic content. It consists largely of oral or literary works in which language is used in a manner that is felt by its user and audience to differ from ordinary prose.

The most important thing in poetry is the connotations and the "baggage" (the weight of words) that words carry. The shades and nuances of meaning in a poem can be difficult to interpret and can cause different readers to perceive a particular piece of poetry differently.

Poetry differs most of the time from prose in that the language used is meant to convey meaning in a more expansive and less condensed way, frequently using more complete logical or narrative structures than poetry does. Poetry is often created from the need to escape the logical, as well as expressing feelings and other expressions in a tight, condensed manner.

### **Methods of Translating Poetry**

According to Nwanjoku (47), a poem is a composition in verse that is characterised by the economy of words and images possessing an emotive tone. It is very difficult to translate the content and the form into another language at the same time because no two languages have the same syntactic structure.

Nida (161) explained that translating a poem means composing another one. « traduire un poème c'est composer un autre poème ». The translator of a poem is forced to compose a new

poem that must elicit the same reaction from the readers of the target language.

The uniqueness of poetic texts lies in the fact that the author, unlike other authors, emphasizes the text itself. He does not present information in a direct, transparent manner, but uses special means that have been created throughout history or even creates his own. The author of a poetic text wants to move the reader and creates a transvestite language, embellished with great evocative power.

The ability to chat in a foreign tongue does not create a poet. Nor does knowledge of the language of the original text qualify a translator to be a poet. Poetry as a genre of literature is special compared with other forms of literary works. In a poem, the beauty is not only in the choice of words and figurative language but also with the formation of rhyme, rhythm, metre and specific structures and expression that may not conform to daily language usage.

Lots of methods have been proposed in translating a poetic text. Nwanjoku (41) citing Lefevere proposed seven methods in order to translate poems. These are: phonemic translation, literal, metrical, verse-to-prose, rhyme, free verse translation and interpretation.

**Phonemic translation:** This recreates the sounds of the source language in the target language while trying to transfer the meaning. Here a paraphrase of the content of the poem is done. The result may sound awkward and sometimes may not convey the original meaning and may sometimes leave some parts of the original meaning.

**Literal translation:** This is a word for word translation. This method may not be able to transfer the original meaning. The phrase and sentence may fall apart without making any sense.

**The metrical method:** This emphasizes the reproduction of the verification of the original text into the TL. Since each language has its own specific stress and pronunciation system, this may result in inappropriate translation in terms of meaning and structure. It favours a part of the poem at the expense of the totality of the poem.

**Verse to prose:** This method emphasizes the transfer of the meaning of the

original poem into target language (TL). However, its structure is deformed. Physically the result may be appropriate but semantically inadequate or inappropriate.

**Free verse translation:** This method may enable the translator get accurate equivalents in the TL with a sound literary value, while the rhyme and meter tend to be ignored. This result may be physically different but semantically the same.

**Interpretation method:** The last method proposed by Lefevere is interpretation, and there are two types: version and imitation. A version of a poem in the TL will semantically be exactly the same with the original but totally different structurally. Whereas an imitation is a different poem but the title, topic and starting point are the same as the original.

Poetic texts develop from the language, another semantic system where there is a new equivalence of elements: The usual links of words are broken and a different order is established that removes the prohibitions specific to the language system and its logic. Each element does not have an independent reality but is found in a particular content that makes it possible to build an autonomous whole where everything becomes significant, where everything intervenes to build the meanings: the arrangement of words, the meter, the verse, the rhyme used, the choice of certain words with certain connotations, etc. All this make a poetic text semantically rich. Sometimes, this richness can produce effects of opacity, vagueness, which give rise to different interpretations. It is this semantic and stylistic richness that sometimes lead to denial of the possibility of translating poetic texts because it may be impossible to recreate the same richness in another language. Fortunator Israel has resolved this question of fidelity to the meaning in a way in the interpretative method because the method does not seek to establish an equivalent of forms but an identity of meaning and effect produced on the recipient.

Etkind cited in Albir (1990) in his essay on poetic translation titled *Un art en crise. Essai de poetique de la traduction poetique* (1982) defends the possibility of poetic translation, conceiving it as a 'recreation' that must preserve

the form of a poem and whose laws are defined both by the original text and by the aesthetic norms of the target literature. Etkind says that a poem is an organism in which each element has a vital importance: rhythm, rhymes, verses, syntactic composition, phonetic and musical organization coexist and fusion into a system. Creative talent, inspiration, a certain predisposition of mind and a taste for writing are characteristics peculiar to authors of poetic texts and must also exist in the poetic translator if he wants to achieve results that are similar to those of the original with his own translation. This is why the translator of poetic texts must have a talent of a poet.

### **Translation of Leon Damas' "Hoquet" to English Language**

Leon Gontran Damas was born during the colonial era in Cayenne, French Guyana by a mulatto father of African European origin and a mixed mother of Amerindians and African origin but was raised by his adopted mother who privileged a European upbringing. The bourgeois attitude and attempt by his parents at assimilation influenced him later in the conception of Negritude (Jones 1988).

In translating "Hoquet", there is the need to understand what pushed Damas to write his poems the way he did. "Hoquet" is one of his numerous poems in the collections "Pigments" which were reflections on his life experiences as a young man living in the colonial era.

Pigments was the first collection of his poems published in 1937 and was said to be the source of Negritude movement which he said inspired *Cesaire's Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. According to Racine Daniel, the collection had influence beyond literary production and has been translated into several African languages and English language.

### **Methodology Applied**

According to Etkind, a translator must recreate a poem that must preserve the form and whose laws are defined both by the original text and by the aesthetic norms of the target literature. In translating "Hoquet" (Hiccups), combinations of methods were used to arrive at the present translation.

The initial step began with the reading

of the poem and the bringing into fore the lingual complexity of the poem. The literal or word for word translation did not always represent the meaning of the text rightly, but in some cases the

word for word was apt as it was able to convey the meaning. However, the form (structure) of the poem was almost conserved to bring the reader nearer to Leon-Gontran Damas' poem.

## HOQUET

### Pour Vashti, et Mercer Cook

Et j'ai beau avaler sept gorgées d'eau  
trois à quatre fois par vingt-quatre heures  
me revient mon enface  
dans un hoquet secouant  
mon instinct  
tel le flic le voyou

Désastre  
parlez-moi du désastre  
parlez-m'en

Ma mère voulant d'un fils très bonnes manières à table  
Les mains sur la table  
le pain ne se coupe pas  
le pain se rompt  
le pain ne se gaspille pas  
le pain de Dieu  
le pain de la sueur du front de votre Père  
le pain du pain  
Un os se mange avec mesure et discrétion  
un estomac doit être sociable  
et tout estomac sociable  
se passe de rots  
une fourchette n'est pas un cure-dents  
défense de se moucher  
au su  
au vu de tout le monde  
et puis tenez-vous droit  
un nez bien élevé  
ne balaye pas l'assiette

Et puis et puis  
et puis au nom du Père  
du Fils  
du Saint-Esprit  
à la fin de chaque repas

Et puis et puis  
et puis désastre  
parlez-moi du désastre

parlez-m'en

Ma mère voulant d'un fils mémorandum

Si votre leçon d'histoire n'est pas sue  
vous n'irez pas à la messe  
dimanche  
avec vos effets des dimanches

Cet enfant sera la honte de notre nom  
cet enfant sera notre nom de Dieu  
Taisez-vous  
Vous ai-je ou non dit qu'il vous fallait parler français  
le français de France  
le français du Français  
le français français

Désastre!  
parlez-moi du désastre  
parlez-m'en

Ma mère voulant d'un fils  
fils de sa mère

Vous n'avez pas salué voisine  
Encore vos chaussures de sales  
Et que je vous y reprenne dans la rue  
Sur l'herbe ou la Savane  
à l'ombre du Monument aux Morts  
à jouer  
à vous ébattre avec Untel  
avec Untel qui n'a pas reçu le baptême

Désastre  
Parlez-moi du désastre  
Parlez-m'en

Ma mère voulant d'un fils très do  
très ré  
très mi  
très fa  
très sol  
très la  
très si  
très do  
ré-mi-fa  
sol-la-si  
do

Il m'est revenu que vous n'etiez encore pas  
à votre leçon de vi-o-lon  
Un banjo  
vous dites un banjo  
comment dites-vous  
un banjo  
vous dites bien  
un banjo  
non monsieur  
vous saurez qu'on ne souffre chez nous  
ni ban  
ni jo  
ni gui  
ni tare  
les 'mulâtres' ne font pas ça  
laissez donc ça aux 'nègres'

(Léon-Gontran Damas, Pigments, 1937)

## **HICCUPS**

### **For Vashti and Mercer Cook**

And I tried to gulp lots of water  
Three or four times in 24 hours  
My childhood instinct  
in rousing Hiccups  
Like the black cop

Disaster!  
Tell me about disaster  
Tell me

My mother wanting a son with good table manners  
Hands on the table  
You don't cut bread  
You break bread  
You don't waste bread  
God's bread  
Bread of sweat from your father's brow  
Bread of bread  
A bone is eaten carefully and discretely  
A stomach must be sociable  
and all sociable stomachs cannot do  
without belching  
A fork is not a toothpick  
Don't wipe your nose  
In the sight of everyone  
Be straight, a straight nose  
does not wipe the plate

And then and then  
and then in the name of the Father  
and of the Son  
and of the Holy Spirit

and at the end of each meal  
and then and then  
and then disaster  
tell me about disaster  
tell me

My mother wants a memorandum son  
if you don't learn history lesson  
you will not go to Sunday mass  
with your Sunday outfit  
this child will bring shame to our name  
this child will be the name of our God  
shut up  
have I not told you to be speaking French?  
The French of France  
The French of the French  
The French French

Disaster!  
Tell me about disaster  
Tell me  
My mother wants a son  
Mummy's son  
You did not greet our neighbour  
Your dirty shoes again  
Don't let me catch you on the street  
Under the trees or at the savane  
Under the shadow of the monument of the Dead  
Playing and fighting with such a someone  
Someone who hasn't received baptism

Disaster!  
Tell me about disaster  
Tell me  
My mother wants a child very do  
Very re  
Very mi  
Very fa  
Very sol  
Very la  
Very si  
Very do Re-mi-fa  
Sol-la-si-do  
I realized you were not yet at your vi-o-lin lesson

A banjo  
You say a banjo  
What did you call it?  
A banjo  
You mean a banjo  
No sir  
You will know we don't allow it in our house  
No ban  
Nor jo  
Nor gui  
Nor tar  
Mullatoes don't do that  
It is for the negroes

Nor gui  
Nor tar  
Nulattoes don't do that  
It is for the Negros

### Conclusion

Translating poetry is not a mean task. Going through various methods proposed and translating 'Hiccups', it has been discovered that following methods strictly may not yield the desired result. However, this study confirms the difficulty in the translation of poetry and affirms the fact that a translator who ventures into poetry

must have bias for poetry without which he may not be able to do justice to the work. A poetic translator is therefore called upon to recreate a new poem that at the same time convey the meaning and provoke the same emotion as the original text in the mind of the target language readers.

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