Misreading & Mistranslation

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According to Reiβ (2000:106), reading a text sets in motion an act of interpretation. As far as translation is concerned, a reading of a source text will effect an interpretive act, of whatever nature, and this interpretive act will be shaped in other letters, structure and expressive form. And since translation consists , at its most basic level, of 'understanding and making others understand', a misinterpretation / a misreading by the translator will distort the source message 1 and cause, in some form or another, a communication breakdown between the source writer and the target reader.

According to Iser (1989: 100), the inexhaustibility of the potentialities of the text is implicitly acknowledged by the reader's taking of decision. By taking a decision, the reader implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility; the inexhaustibility is what obliges the reader to make a decision. A decision – on filling the gaps of the text – reached by the reader, however, may lead to a misreading.2

Within the rubrics of Richard's critical theory a misreading can be effected by the taking of irrelevant elements from the reader's past experiences which Richards typifies as 'stock responses'. Richards diagnoses stock responses to be one of the formidable difficulties or categories of misreading in Practical Criticism (Ahmed, 31). He views

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1 and the target message sometimes especially when discordant element fiercely surface up a text.
2 "The translator is, after all, first a reader and then a writer and in the process of reading he or she must take a position" (Bassanet – MacGuire, 78), my italics.

misreading as the possibility of "the taking of a sentence in such a way that the equivalence relations [i.e. selection and combination, being the two fundamental axes of language according to Jacobson] of one or more of its parts to the rest of the language lapse and thereby, if such taking were to continue, harm would be done to language – due regard, however , being given in applying this criterion to the necessity for change in language activity with change in the situations to be met , and in general , to the health of the language" (Richards 1960 : 252 cited in Ahmed : 48).

Different from the ST reading, translation is quintessentially an act of interlingual communication and reading necessitated by the language barrier. The translator summons himself or is summoned up, under a feeling of some responsibility and human nobility, to mediate between or link a reader to his author. Effective mediation or linking demands extra capacities that other bilinguals fail to attain. The translator is consequently a 'privileged' reader. This privilegeness is not uninitiated for "unlike the ordinary ST or TT reader, the translator reads in order to produce, decodes in order to re – encode. In other words, the translator uses as input to the translation process information which would normally be the output and therefore the end of, the reading process. Consequently, processing is likely to be more thorough, more deliberate than that of the ordinary reader; and interpretation of one portion of the text will benefit from evidence forthcoming from the processing of later sections of the text" (Hatim & Mason, 1990: 224) (see also MacGuire,80).

A translator is assumed to be a problem – reducer, for things , to use Wittgenstein's words , have 'blurred edges' , and "thus he will have to go beyond the average reader of the original who may miss subtleties and precise meanings and be content with a general idea or just a "feel" of what he is reading" (Shamaa , 1978 : 24). But contrary to Shamaa (ibid.) calling for a more comprehension competence maintaining that "the less the translator understands his material the greater his difficulties in translating", I would argue that a solid shred of evidence might be accumulating that perfect translations are weeded out not less for perfect understanding of SL than for perfect expressing in TL (kindly see Stansfield et al's & Bastin's remarks on expression above). Moreover, "the fundamental epistemological and linguistic problems implicit in interlingual translation are fundamental just because they are already implicit in all intralingual discourse" (Steiner, 1975 : 414).

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Whenever we translate a text, we find ourselves pulled by two equal forces: an inward or centripetal force, one the result of which we become completely infatuated with the text, and an outward or centrifugal, one with which we try to take our attractions of the text to their 'furthest' ends. In contrast to Ahmed (7) , the figure below which illustrates the point made above can generate a priceless treasure of ideas depending on the position of the reader – translator in relation to the ST , ideas such as dynamism , newness , innovation, originality and continuity and their opposite ideas of lethargy, sameness , uninnovation , and discontinuity. The struggle of forces is relative to the competencies of the translator. A competent translator is always able to free himself up for a non – centric interpretation and translation, an incompetent translator, by contrast, is an easy hunt. As far as I can see it, a misreading / misinterpretation / mistranslation is often one that is so close to the centre, i.e. the text:
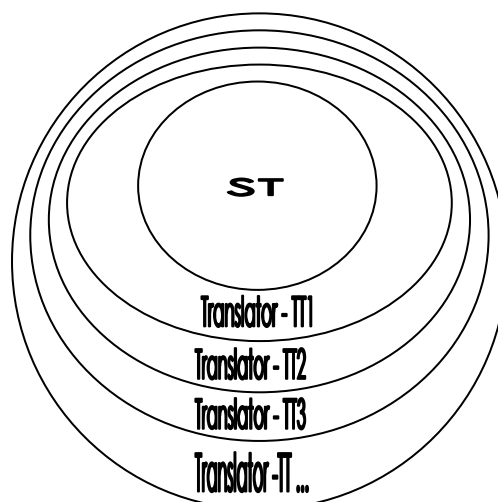
Studying the average reader, Jurí Lotman (1970, 1972 cited in Bassanet– McGuire: 77) decides four essential positions of the addressee, the reader:
Where the reader focuses on the content as matter, i.e. picks out the prose argument or poetic paraphrase.
Where the reader grasps the complexity of the structure of a work in which the various levels interact.
Where the reader deliberately extrapolates one level of the work for a specific purpose.
Where the reader discovers elements not basic to the genesis of the text and uses the text for his own purposes.

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Though Bassanet – McGuire judges position (1) as completely inadequate, I can see a sort of formal misreading when translators misread formal features of the different literary genres rendering poetry into prose or misconstruing dramatic features , etc. Position (2) is ideal for the average reader and translator.(3) and (4) with deliberateness , however, may lead to misreading. In position (3) particularly , Bassanet – McGuire refers to Ben Belitt's translation of Neruda's Fulgor y muerte de Joaquin Murieta statement about the rights of the reader to expect "an American sound not present in the inflection of Neruda". By stressing the action , the 'cowboys and Indians myth' element , the dialectic and political line of the play are both destroyed (ibid.).

Position (4) ensues when the cultural system is distanced in time and place, "on the semantic level alone, as the meaning of words alters, so the reader/translator will be unable to avoid finding himself in Lotman's fourth position without detailed etymological research" (ibid.). McGuire's example here is Shakespeare's Gloucester calling Regan a 'naughty lady' after being bound, tormented and about to have his eyes gouged. A considerable shift in the weight of the adjective is not to be misread by the reader/translator.

Misreading is normal and expected; It can be checked and corrected 1 . Misreadings may turn out because of carelessness and stereotypy. According to Traugott & Pratt (1990:341) "readers often tend to read carelessly and stereotypically , that is , they often notice only a few features of the language they read without paying attention to what particular variety has been chosen , or to how it is represented". As a matter of fact misreadings are not only limited to variety; it includes all macro and micro components of a text.

As example of misreadings – and consequently mistranslations – due to carelessness and stereotypy, I can cite the following from Ali (1989: 32 & 37) and the reader can go for a good body of examples all throughout the work:

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1 Even good readers are likely to make quite conspicuous misreadings, but they will not self – correct "unless the misreading makes a difference to meaning. This is the way fluent readers read " (Smith , 1978 : 34).

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1. Wordsworth's lines below are part of a poem(s) written while in Germany but paying homage to England. The translator misread the small river 'Dove' for 'doves', the birds!
She dwelt among the untrodden ways
     Besides the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
     And very few to love
(Wordsworth: 683)

سكنت في دروب غير مطروقة
قرب منابع الماء التي يردها الحمام
غادة لم يكن ثمة ما تمدحه
و كان هناك أشياء قليلة تحبها:
(رزوق : ٢٣)

2. The translator below misread the past perfect construction and turned it into the continuous ' (was) weakening '. Of course, the weakening of daylight here is of great significance for the Psychological build - up of character.

He looked at the window and saw the daylight had grown weaker (Joyce: 24)

و شخص ببصره إلى النافذة، و رأى ضوء النهار يخفت (البطوطي: ٣٠)

3. Again the translator here misrelated the specific (some men feared being at a certain time and place) by the general (those who fear being out of land in a small boat anywhere and anytime).

He thought of how some men feared being out of land in a small boat (Hemingway: 53)

و فكر في أولئك الذين يخشون أن يركبوا الزوارق و ينطلقوا من الشاطىء أبعد من مدى النظر(بعلبكي: ٦١)

Misreadings in translation are often caused by a translator's presuppositions about the reality of the source language community1. These presuppositions are usually culturally - derived and deserve the special attention of the translator (Ping, 1999: 133). Philosophically, a

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presupposition refers to a logically necessary condition which must be satisfied for a particular state of affairs to be possible, e.g. the uniformity of nature is a presupposition of the rationality of inductive reasoning; memory is a presupposition of our having a concept of the past. Kant's ethical theory of the 'categorical imperative' is an account of the presuppositions of a particularly rigorous form of protestant morality (Bullock & Stallybrass, 1977: 495).

Presuppositions may be defined as the "underlying assumptions, beliefs, and ideas that are culturally rooted, widespread, but rarely if ever described or defined because they seem so basic and obvious as not to require verbal formulation. For instance, truth in the Bible is presupposed to be essentially about moral behaviour rather than an abstract definition of reality or being; likewise, wisdom is seen as the ability to decide moral and human issues with justice, rather than the intellectual capacity to formulate philosophical questions and create cogent systems. The symbol of light and darkness are not related in the Bible to knowledge and ignorance, but to deliverance from or enslavement to evil. And 'to know' the Lord , sin , or deliverance , is not to 'know about' then but to experience them (Nida and Reyburn , 1981 : 14 – 16).

Ping (op.cit.: 139 , 141) states two reasons why cultural presuppositions merit attention by translators and teachers of foreign languages. First , a correct interpretation of the source message relies on an understanding of the relevant features of the source culture. In many cases , however , the presuppositions a translator harbours about the source culture may be based upon the realities of his or her own culture. If the source and target cultures differ significantly with respect to the issue at hand , the source message may be wrongly deciphered. This is especially true where linguistic ambiguities are involved. Second, the communicative errors given rise to by cultural presuppositions are usually more covert and harder to detect than grammatical errors and may therefore cause serious misunderstanding in the target reader. For instance , a westerner who meets up with a Chinese acquaintance in the street who has only a superficial knowledge of English may be puzzled or even made uncomfortable by the Chinese greeting "Where are you going?" perhaps even thinking that the inquirer is prying into his or her private life (ibid.). Notice also how cultural presuppositions have been projected on the translation of the following quotations from Arabic:

" أصوم و أفطر على بصلة " (Ziqaaq Al-Midaq, p.26).

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 Misread Translation: "I am willing to go on a diet and have just an onion for breakfast." (Midaq Alley, p. 25).
Better Translation: "Am I going to break my fast with nothing better than an onion? ".
Explanation: The translator, a westerner, has misread the Islamic fast and the ironic tone of the proverb and charged it with the western product (dieting).

2. (Ziqaaq , p.10) فقال المعلم كرشة وهو يتخذ مجلسه المعتاد وراء صندوق
"الماركات"

 Misread Translation: "The café owner took his usual seat behind the till and replied. " (Midaq Alley, p.7)
Better Translation: " While he was taking his usual seat behind the till , Master Kirsha said…."
Explanation: Café owners in the Egyptian scene, in this case Master Kirsha, and cafes are an integral part of alleys and are completely different from counterparts in Europe or America. As such , it would have been better for the translator to reserve the title and name(Master Kirsha) ; they are very suggestive.

3. (Ziqaaq , p.11) "و قلبي بحب آل البيت عامر"

 Misread Translation: "my heart still loves the people of the house of Amir" (p.8).
Better Translation: my heart is full with the love of the Prophet's family.
Explanation: A presupposition that the Arabic surface form"عامر "
is a proper noun leading and consequently rendered as
"Amir".This is coupled by another cultural misreading of " آل البيت "
, the Prophet's Mohammed family.
(examples are cited in Shamaa , op. cit. : 20 – 23)

Misreading, misinterpretation and mistranslation cannot be claimed to be of a certain limit; they may sweep a whole text, and hence we may have what I would like a cohesively –   mistranslated text. The main reason behind this is a hampered process of 'spreading activation', to use de Beaugrande's term (Brown & Yule, op.cit.: 260). Note in the following, for instance, how translators were unable to mark a difference in the first place and spread activation of the successive references to King Hamlet's

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ghost which has been variously and expressly employed by Shakespeare. To reflect the mystery and conflicting Elizabethan attitudes to spirits and superstitions , Shakespeare deliberately tended to use a variety of references of nouns and pronouns (see Ali , 1989 : 7 – 12) :

Shakespeare	Text	Mutraan	Jabra	Al – Khumairi	Jamal
this thing	A1.S1.21	ذلك الطيف	ذلك الشيء	الشبح	ذلك الطيف
this apparition	A1.S1.27	الطيف	الطيف	الشبح	الطيف
it	A1.S1.29	الخيال	إنــــه	شيء	الطيف
it	A1.S1.40	ذا	يجيء (هو)	الشبح	ذا
image	A1.S1.81	مثاله	خياله	Nothing	طيفه
Portentous figure	A1.S1.109	الهيئة الغريبة	الطيف المليء بالمعاني	الشبح	الشكل الغريب
illusion	A1.S1.127	الوهم	الخيال	الشبح	الخيال

Activation, however, may sometimes be hampered when a certain area of reality is more subdivided or sliced into smaller units by one language than by another as such 'semantic anisomorphism' or 'lexical incongruence'. Arabic, for instance, has a variety of love expressions, signifying ten degrees of man – woman passionate relationship, English on the other hand has a very limited resource . The result of such situation is a misreading that is against the translator's will:

و لكنه الحب الذي كان مبعث نكبته، لقد هام الشاب بفتاة من أسرة عريقة، هام بها هيامــــــا جنونيا، و بادلته الفتاة الغرام، فأحبته حب عبادة و تناقل الناس أخبار حبهما العذري الرائع كما يتناقلون الأقاصيص، و أصبح العاشقان بطلين من أبطال الهوى.

But love was the cause of his downfall! He fell in love with a girl of a noble family, loved her with a wild passion, and the girl in turn loved him adoringly. People spoke about their pure and splendid passion as if it were one of the classic love stories, and the two lovers became heroes of love.
(Cited in Shamaa, op.cit.: 69)

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