

Stumbling Across a Language Barrier

Notes on the translation of a Korean short story into English

(from *A Moment's Grace: Stories from Korea in Transition*)

By John Holstein

“Translation is sin.” *Grant Showerman*

“...a good translation [can be] a work with intrinsic interest in its own right—...a true work of art...” *Maynard Mack*

Literary translation is regarded by some as a crime of vandalism, by others an act of creation. True to the nature of the translator, I offer a compromise. The translator does not destroy, but he does alter; and he does not create, but he is creative in the process of translation. To get a better idea of the various problems involved in this, share with me some of the issues of literary translation which I encountered in the translation of “River,” a short story by Sŏ Chŏng-in, which is included in this book.

The issues considered here range from technical problems, such as treatment of a verb affix, to basic principles, such as “improvement” on the original. For your reference and entertainment, relevant opinions of writers and critics, from Cicero in the first century B.C. to Tamplin in our times, are presented here in juxtaposition to my opinion. This is not intended as a “How to” guide offering the “right” way, but rather as a record of a few issues and problems and solutions—right or wrong—involved in translation of Korean literature.

I will narrate the story and discuss each issue as it presents itself in the story’s development. But let us begin with a synopsis of the story before we recount it in more detail. The story (written in 1968) begins with three men—an older college student, a tax man, and a former elementary school teacher in whose house the other two are renting rooms—engaged in idle conversation as they wait for their bus to leave the depot in Seoul. They are going to a small countryside village to attend the wedding of a relative of one of the three. During their ride down into the countryside, each character is partially developed through the

conversation, individual reverie, and non-events typical of a long-distance bus ride. When they arrive at their destination, a small village, the girl goes off into Seoul House, a humble place which serves food and wine—and probably herself—and the men go off to find the house outside the village where they are to attend the wedding.

The next we meet them is on their way back to the village. The two older men go to Seoul House for a drink, and the student goes off to the inn to sleep. At Seoul House the men are served and entertained by the young woman they met on the bus; after a while they send her to the inn to wake the student and bring him back to join them. She goes to his room at the inn, and...but let's save the good part for later.

Enhance the title?

“Not even a thoroughly prepared French reader, looking at the title of Stendhal’s novel [*Chartreuse de Parme*], gets all its implications in a single charge; if one thinks of reading a book as a progress not only horizontally from beginning to end, but vertically from the surface to the subtler implications of the text, it seems arguable that one might want to withhold some of one’s overflowing insights into the title till such later passages in the novel as might be expected to reinforce them.”—*Robert Adams*

The first translation issue is encountered even before we get into the story, in the title. The title of the original is the Chinese character for river. The question, “Why ‘river’?” comes to mind, but the answer does not come soon—in fact, I wonder if I ever did find the right answer. The author may have wanted to establish in the reader’s subconsciousness a feeling of flow, so that he could more effectively present the four people’s journey as one short stretch in the river of life, which goes on and on with varying bends and speeds but is basically the same ever-flowing river. If that was his reason, it was best to translate the title directly. So I entitled it “River.” The English title is not all that seductive, but then neither is the original title. Better not tamper. (The issue of “improving” on the original is discussed in greater detail later.)

Another question concerning the title is why the author used the Chinese logogram instead of its equivalent in the phonetic Korean script. Was this deliberate, or did he do it unconsciously, as a result of habit? If he did it deliberately, why? Did he think that the visual effect of the Chinese logogram (which includes an element denoting water) would better convey to the Korean reader the idea of river, of flow? If

so, would the English title, offering no more graphically than the Korean script, have to be padded somehow to say more than “river”?

I surveyed the titles of Mr. Sŏ's other short stories and found that more than half of them are in Chinese characters. Those that are not are in Korean words which cannot be or are ordinarily not written in Chinese. Looking further at the titles of other Korean authors' works, I found this to be common practice. The main reason is probably that Chinese characters were used much more often before the 1980s. In addition, when a Korean word derived from Chinese is representable in a Chinese character there are usually homonyms for that character, which might confuse the reader; a title stands alone and offers no context to help the reader to distinguish between homonyms. In English the word river has no homonym, so we do not have this problem. I concluded that the author had no special reason for putting the title in Chinese, other than that it was a convention at that time. So I entitled it simply “River.”

Which tense?

And now let's get into the story...

We are on the bus, waiting to leave the depot. The author uses a very prosaic conversation to introduce the three male characters. “It's snowing”—lengthy description of the grumpy one who says this—“Hmm... Sleet, anyway”—lengthy description of this dandy—“Sleet? Sure is!”—which introduces a description of the one sitting next to the young woman.

Description and the entire narrative are in the present tense, and I have to decide whether the translation should be in the same tense. If I am right about the author's intention in his choice of title—and his theme—it is best to go with the present tense, to convey the idea that this story is just one of many scenes in the river of life, which, no matter how it changes, is always there, always flowing. And the author might have decided to employ the present tense in order to better create a feeling of presence. Whatever the reason, there is certainly no problem in using the present tense in English.

The principle in this case: When following the original presents no problem to the reader's understanding or the literary quality of the English, do not tamper.

Rendering the effect of grammar elements

“[The translator’s] version must produce upon the English reader the effect which the original has produced upon himself.”—*J.A.K. Thomson, 1915*

The Korean verb *ju-da* (*-da* indicates the citation form of a verb) can also be used as a “processive” auxiliary (Martin). As an auxiliary it is affixed to verbs to express that the subject of the verb is helping to accomplish something. The scarf of the second character not only wraps around his neck, it “does the favor of” wrapping around his neck, connoting that it is helping to make the neck warm. (The verb used to describe what the scarf does for him, without the *ju-* auxiliary, is actually a compound verb of wrap (*kamssa*) and put into (*nŏt’a*); if we affix the auxiliary the result is *kam-ssa nŏh-ŏ-juda*.)

Should this element be included expressly in the translation? The principle here is concerned with what ultimate effect this element has on the reader of the original. Ideally, that is what must be conveyed to the reader of the translation. The verb by itself expresses only the idea that the scarf is wrapped around the man’s neck. I could have added the word snugly after tucking to convey the effect of *ju-da*, but the word tuck—with the connotation of security and warmth it gives—seems sufficient.

His dapper appearance suits his voice, white scarf circling his neck and tucking down into his brown leather jacket, sideburns trimmed sharp and clean...

Shall we rearrange, just a bit?

“...a proper literary translation does not simply convey to us the elements of the original... but conveys them to us in something of the same order and structure of relatedness as the original. One might as well have puzzles which begin with the answer or jokes which begin with the punch line, as translations...which diffuse explanations long before the problems to which they represent triumphant solution have made themselves felt...In short, there is often an artistic question whether a translation or edition is being prepared for a first reader or a rereader—and, the translator being generally the latter, it is an extra act of the imagination for him to put himself in the position of the former.”—*Robert Adams*

Conversation continues among the three, and then one of them takes up a conversation with the young woman sitting next to him. The author uses three very effective devices to convey the sense of anonymity among the passengers on a public bus, thus reinforcing the feeling of presence which he initiated with the use of the present tense.

One device is the omission of names, which would help the reader hang a tag on each character for easy identification. Instead, the author describes them in such terms as “the one in the brown jacket,” or “the one in the window seat,” which do not facilitate reference.

Another device is unidentified dialog. Something is said, and then the reader must figure out through general context and linguistic hints in the ensuing paragraph(s) who actually said it. At times, in fact, the hints are not there at all.

At one point in their pre-departure conversation, one asks his companion where he went into the army. It seems impossible to know who is asking and who is being asked, even after reading the next very long paragraph and then seeing the questioned one answer peevishly (“A small town, okay?”). But the one who asked the question prefaced it with *hyǒng* (elder brother), which would ordinarily be a good hint for finding out who asked the question. It is not that easy, though. For one thing, no relationships have been established by this point in the story. Another obfuscating element is the wide range of relationships which *hyǒng* can signify. In Korean, common nouns which denote a person’s age and rank and sex—something like the Western common nouns such as father and aunt, which designate a person’s place in a family—are used to or about a person more frequently than the name of the person. A younger brother would almost never call his elder brother by his name; he would address him with *hyǒng*. This word is also used in an informal setting, to address someone who is not an elder brother but within the age range of an elder brother. A freshman in college, for instance, could use *hyǒng* to address someone senior to him in his department or extracurricular activity. If one suffixes the word with the honorific *nim* or *ssi*, it can be extended in an attempt to establish a closer relationship between two males who have just met—even when the one being addressed this way is obviously younger.

In this story, should the translation of the question about where the man went into the army somehow convey the “elder brother” relationship? If so, which relationship—blood or social—should it express? The principle involved here is that the reader of the translation should know no more and no less than the reader of the original. So the translator must determine how much the reader of the original is able to

know at this point with the evidence available. Up to this point in the story, there was little if any evidence as to the identity of either the questioner or the one questioned.

A survey was conducted of ten native speakers of Korean to find out how much the reader of the original would know about the relationship. The question in the original (*hyŏng-ŭn ōdisŏ ipdae hasiŏsso?* “Elder brother, where was it you went into basic?”) was shown to the surveyed, and the surveyed were asked to guess both (1) the general age of the questioner and (2) the relationship between the questioner and the one questioned.

In broad terms, the Korean inflection of a verb includes elements which show two dimensions of a relationship. One element (presence or absence of the honorific *si*) will express the attitude of the speaker toward the person spoken to or about; the final element (the presence or absence of a formality marker such as *yo*) expresses the attitude of the speaker toward the person he is talking to. The “sentence-final endings...differ according to six types of social relationship between the person speaking and the person spoken to.... FORMAL, POLITE, INTIMATE, FAMILIAR, AUTHORITATIVE, and PLAIN styles” (Martin). In the question’s verb (*ipdae hasiŏsso*), the honorific *si* is present but *o* is a marker which does not show formality or politeness. This combination of register markers should tell the reader of the original generally the speaker’s attitude about the relationship the two have—and the translation of the question should thus show this.

The survey, however, revealed that only four of the ten surveyed were able to define the relationship between the two. I suspected that I may have deprived the reader of sufficient contextual information by not letting him read the story up to the point of the question, so I asked three of the surveyed to read the story from the beginning. One changed his answer to the correct answer, and the others changed their answers to incorrect answers. So the original, after all, did not indicate to the reader that the two characters’ relationship was.

The third device the author used to induce the feeling of presence on the bus is the way the conversation jumps abruptly from one pair of interlocutors to another. In the example below, conversation starts off with the man and woman in back and switches with no transition (at “So where...?”) to the two in front.

“How far you going, Miss?” he asks the girl. After all, there’s no reason to let things get you down. You have to get your mind off it.

“I’m going to Kunha-ri.” What a blush she can flash—even considering he’s a stranger—all the way to her scalp, every blossoming capillary.

“So where did you go for basic training?” The one in the jacket asks his companion. He is miffed...

There is a potential problem with this combination of very effective devices the author uses to make the reader feel he is on a long-distance bus: it is difficult for the reader to follow along comfortably. (In fact, in trying to help me figure out who said what, my Korean informants had a couple of heated discussions among themselves.) The reader has to backtrack too often. Many authors, of course, do not concern themselves primarily with the reader’s comfort—ultimately, effect is the author’s primary consideration, and the reader is expected to cooperate in achieving the intended effect by putting in a little effort. By moving a few sentences around and adding a few hints the translator could make it much easier for his reader, and the reader might enjoy the story more with less annoying backtracking.

The principle here too is that the translator must determine how much more he, the non-native reader, had to work than the native reader, and then render to the reader of the English translation what the native reader of the original experienced. And another principle is involved: to rearrange would preclude strict correspondence with the original. Moreover, it might after all defeat the author’s purpose in using these devices—to give a feeling of presence on a long-distance bus.

But how much does any reader actually concern himself with who is saying what? How, indeed, do readers read? Is the reader actually annoyed at not knowing who is speaking, or at disjointed conversation? That depends on the nature and the function of the dialog. Thinking back to the first time I read the story, I did not concern myself about who was speaking, because I was involved more in the general flow. And I realize that it was only when I began to read the story with the idea of translating it that I consciously concerned myself with who was who.

After all, I did make one or two concessions in this respect to facilitate the reader’s task in following the story. These concessions, though, did not interfere with the author’s basic purpose of establishing the sense of scattered bits of conversation and anonymity one experiences on a long-distance bus.

Still, the doubt nags. Were even these one or two minor adjustments necessary? Maybe the reader did not need them. And, even if necessary, did they make it easier for the reader of the translation than it was for the reader of the original? If so, these adjustments should not have been made.

Monetary values

“...the nonspecialist reader would be well advised not to worry about [the values of different currencies in fourteenth-century Europe], because the names of coins and currency mean nothing anyway, except in terms of purchasing power...”—*Barbara Tuchman, 1978*

As our friends are waiting for their bus to leave the depot a man with sunglasses gets on the bus and causes each of the companions in turn to muse on his personal association with sunglasses. Here is the reverie of one of them.

Those sunglasses, does he need them? The draft dodger feels better now with something substantial to occupy his mind. Could be just for looks. With most, these things are just an accessory, a luxury. Luxury? A lot of nerve to call those cheap hundred-won variety store things a luxury. After all, he himself has settled for a used pair for a thousand won after considering a new pair for two thousand. Right here in his pocket now, ready to pull out and hang on his nose just as soon as there's a little more glare from the snow to justify it.

How is the translator to convey the value of a hundred won or a thousand won in terms the reader can understand? Should he not translate the amount in terms of dollars? The principle here: precise value is not important; only relative value is required for the reader to get the author's point.

In a literary work, even if it is important for the reader to know precise value, the translator should not give the amount in dollars; it will reduce the reader's feeling of Korean presence, and it will at any rate be American English (discussed later in more detail). Rather plant one or more clues somewhere in the passage to convey a practical sense of the item's value. Instead of leaving the first amount at 100 won, I added the phrase *variety store*, expecting the reader to use personal experience in establishing a fairly

precise value, and then extend this formula to calculate a precise value of 1,000 won. (In the initial translation I used “dime store,” neglecting to consider whether this was not an Americanism which a British or Australian reader would be unable to relate to. In the umpteenth revision “variety store” presented itself as a term internationally acceptable—its important features intuited fully by an Australian I tested, though the term is not used in Australia—and it even possesses a Korean flavor.)

Even contractions can serve the translator.

“There are some long passages of...dialog in *The Sound and the Fury*, where a reader cannot be sure whether Caddy or Quentin Compson is speaking; that confusion (sometimes +Mo+mentary, sometimes extended, occasionally permanent) is part of the author’s main intent. But Japanese, by requiring that male and female speakers use quite different inflectional forms, forces the narrative voice to commit itself unequivocally, publicly, in advance.”—*Robert Adams*

In the original story, there is often no clear distinction between the author’s narrative and a character’s private thoughts. The author’s purpose in this, of course, is to help the reader enter the mind of the character and thus provide for more effective character development.

Narration and thoughts are conventionally blended in English without marking the thoughts with quotation marks. But in this story there is a much more gradual and subtle transition from event to thought, and, before the reader knows it (but more often without the reader’s knowing it), the one having the thought has sneaked into the narration and taken it over. So I thought that contractions would help render the same effect—I rendered narration of events without contractions, and reverie with contractions.

Let us look at the thoughts of another companion when he sees the man with the sunglasses. His thoughts begin with “He remembers...” Note that I did not make a contraction of “it is” in the preceding sentence.

To the one in the window seat it is a blind man in back of those sunglasses. He remembers that fantasy he worked himself into once, him blind, dark glasses and all, eking out a living as a masseur. A war injury, and he’s in the hospital, eyes under layers of bandages. His girl comes to find him, searching through all the chaos of a war hospital. Of course the smallest thing prevents their reunion. He leaves the hospital in his dark

glasses. Soon he's wandering the residential streets at night, tapping his way with his cane, announcing his progress with that eerie whistle of the blind masseur. A window opens above him. A woman's voice summons, a voice he's heard before.

Looking back over the years, it is highly questionable whether the switch from not using contractions to using contractions is of any help in indicating the change from speech to reflection. A key word, like "remembers" in the transitional (second) sentence may be much more effective.

Rendering onomatopoeia

"In first-rate poetry the sound exists, not for its own sake, not for mere decoration, but as a medium of meaning."—*Laurence Perrine*

The principle involved here is that English cannot express many of the sounds and images which Korean onomatopoeia (and phonetic intensives) express, because these sounds and images in Korean culture do not exist in an English speaking culture. Moreover, only a person whose genes and experience are of the Korean culture can accurately associate a Korean onomatopoeia with its corresponding sound. One conclusion of those who hold this theory is that it is useless to try to render Korean onomatopoeia in English.

But why does a writer use onomatopoeia in the first place? He uses onomatopoeia (1) to trigger a memory, a replay of the sound, in the reader, which (2) evokes a sense of presence, which in turn contributes to (3) conveying and then enhancing the author's point. The author's purpose, unless he is one of those tiresome verbal acrobats who describe for the sake of description, is not the sound or the image in itself. Nevertheless, a major element in literature is style, and, as in any of the arts, the meaning's vehicle of conveyance itself should be enjoyable. "...by combining onomatopoeia with other devices that help convey meaning, the poet can achieve subtle and beautiful effects whose recognition is one of the keenest pleasures in reading poetry." Perrine speaks here of poetry, but a well written story is poetry in the format of prose.

So the translator wants to both convey meaning and provide an aesthetic experience. The theory presented at the beginning of this section claims that the wide divergence between the Korean culture and

English speaking cultures prevents this. I believe that the translator can almost always render the meaning which the onomatopoeia in the original conveys to its reader. But can he render its aesthetic experience? In most cases the translator can provide his reader with one that is equivalent if not identical to that which the reader of the original work experiences. The translator and his reader already have the general context of the original, and the translator can exploit this with deft use of his devices; his reader will consciously or unconsciously associate the context and the translator's enhancement of it with what he has heard or seen or felt in a similar context in his own experience (in applied linguistics, "schema").

The original uses *kkung* to express the snort the driver of the bus makes when he finally gets on and sees there are only a few passengers. This onomatopoeia (1) causes the reader to recall his own experience of a snort of dissatisfaction, thus (2) evoking an image of the driver, and thereby (3) helping him feel what the bus driver feels. To achieve the same effect in my reader, I could have used the English "Hmph!" But I thought that "Hmph!" would indicate more indignation than I sensed in the original.

I used "snort," and supported this noun with an enhanced context (by adding "sour look") to elicit a response from my reader similar to that which the author got from his reader.

The driver gets into his seat and twists around for a look in back. The sour look he puts on the passengers says there aren't enough of them, and he turns back around with a disgruntled snort.

Snort is not all that "subtle and beautiful," but then neither is *kkung*.

But this concept doesn't exist in English!

"...it is words and their associations which are untranslatable, not ideas; there is no idea... which cannot be adequately produced as idea in English words."—Sidney Lanier, 1897

The bus driver is here. Now all we need is the bus girl. "Bus girl"?

The rear door opens and the bus girl backs on.

"Well, you think we might get this thing going today?" asks the smart dresser.

“We’ll be off in just a second,” she says automatically, not even bothering to look at him. She hangs up her cheap plastic mirror, sweeps the steps, counts her tickets, takes out...

“Just a second, huh? So what are we doing still here?”

“We’ll be off in just a second.”

“What are you, a broken record or something?”

This passage introduces another major issue in literary translation. In the original the man asked the girl, “Where do you think this is anyway, a Chinese restaurant?” instead of “What are you, a broken record...?” In a Chinese restaurant in Korea you can ask the busy waiters twenty times, “Where’s my noodles?” and you will get the same automatic response twenty times: “Coming right up!” An English-speaking audience would not be able to appreciate this metaphor, which is alien to their culture.

I searched for weeks to find a substitute which would be familiar to the reader from a Western culture. Then one day I mentioned the problem to an old friend, and in the blink of an eye he suggested the broken record metaphor. (That is when I began to realize that the one who translates is not necessarily the one who should be translating.) A critic of this translation, however, did not go along with this idea of the broken record. He is of another school, which says that the original must be maintained at all costs—including facile understanding, if it comes to that.

The bus girl is another example of a concept alien to Americans, and probably most other Westerners. (Now the concept is alien also to a lot of younger urban Koreans, because automatic doors and coin receptacles and card readers have taken the bus girl’s place.) In the exchange above we see that she is young, and in the narration which I embedded in the exchange we get some idea of her duties: “She hangs up her cheap plastic mirror, sweeps the steps, counts her tickets...” In the continuation of the conversation, below, we find that she can be saucy. And in a later bit of dialog (“It’s all thanks to this young conductress’s skilled navigation”) is a clue that she helps the driver in some way with other traffic.

The principle: Concepts alien to the reader of the translation can be conveyed by other metaphors recognizable to the reader, enhancement of the original’s context with the addition of elements (which must not interfere with the tone or flow of the story), and other devices which a creative or lucky translator will eventually happen upon.

Speech register: Korean inflections into English words

“...[A]ny work of literature read in translation...cannot escape the linguistic characteristics of the language into which it is turned: the grammatical, syntactical, lexical, and phonetic boundaries which constitute collectively the individuality or ‘genius’ of that language.”—*Maynard Mack*

The repartee between the bus girl and our traveler continues.

“What are you, a broken record or something?”

Now she looks around at him. “And what would a broken record be doing on a bus?”

“Little girl,” he chuckles, “You’ve got the brains of a little bear.”

“Me a bear? Then what are you, sir?”

“Me? Your uncle, honey,” with a wink and a wag of his finger. “Better be a good girl.”

The inflection of Korean verbs shows not only tense but also the relationship between interlocutors. One or more register elements combine with time and aspect and mood elements to determine a verb’s inflection. In addition to inflection, words can denote register (e.g., *pap* for neutral register and *chinji* for formal or polite). The language also has a delightful way of showing all the subtle aspects of a relationship between two people; it can combine one, two, or three of its several levels of register to precisely indicate the most complex attitude of one speaker toward his relationship with the listener. An honorific element, for example, can combine with an informal element to denote an older house maid’s intimacy with her master’s younger son. In my boardinghouse years ago, the landlady used to ask me “*Chinji chapsusiössö?*” using the polite *chinji* and *chapsu* with the intimate *össö*.

Mack says a translation “cannot escape the characteristics” of its own language. But then, do we really need it to? The translator can use a combination of several aspects of the collective “individuality or genius” of the language to express most of what other languages express. The same intricate combinations of social attitudes which Korean expresses through verb inflection can be expressed in English through words.

In the translation the bus girl in this repartee shows respect by saying “sir,” a Korean equivalent of which was not in the original. (The girl’s sauciness is rendered in the content of her speech.) In the original the inflection of the verb spoken by the one who addressed her—a male who is also older—expresses a mix of non-respect (not *disrespect*) and friendly informality; in the translation he expresses the attitude of non-respect with words I added—“honey” and “be a good girl now”—and friendly informality with “uncle” and a phrase I added, “a wink and a wag of his finger.”

In a previous conversation between this same man and the young woman he is sitting next to, previous to this, the verb inflection was a combination of a formal-honorific element (*si*) with an informal non-respect element (*o*). In the original his inflection of the verb connotes to her that he renders her due respect but is not going to let that interfere with the casual friendliness he feels toward her. (She would not be able to speak the same way to him, since he is a male and older than she.)

The translator can handle this register mix with both local attention and global distribution. Locally the translator can omit such words as subject pronouns and auxiliary verbs to show informality and familiarity; he can use the more colloquial of two candidate synonyms (“Sure are”). He can add an honorific title (“young lady”) to show due respect. He can render the register of one verb’s inflection also by global distribution, planting preparative words or phrases at strategic points prior to the occurrence of the inflection, sometimes even from the very beginning of the story.

Shall we “improve” on the original?

“...it is the first grand duty of an interpreter to give his author entire and unmaimed.”—

The Preface to The Iliad, by Alexander Pope, 1715

“A translator is to be like his author; it is not his business to excel him.”—*Samuel*

Johnson, 1779

The bus finally arrives at a small town and the three, along with the young woman, get off the bus. The two older men strike up a playful sophistic analysis about why the others on the bus did not get off too.

Our friends, a few others too, get off the bus. The sodden yellow clay road stretches on into the distance. The bus takes off after it.

“Now why didn’t they get off too?”

“They probably have no business here.”

“Ah, but do consider. It just may be they have something to attend to farther on.”

“I do believe you may have something there. Which would mean, of course, it is not that we had no business back at that last stop—Sofa Rock was it, or Couch Rock...?”

According to my reading (and my consultants’) the humor is not funny, and the conversation is, as a consequence, annoying. Did the author intend this? Maybe he created this conversation to realistically indicate something about the poverty of common people’s sense of humor. Or maybe the author was simply attempting some comic relief. If this explanation—a failed attempt at some comic relief—is correct, would it not make the story better if I just left out this annoying little wart?

Such a temptation to “improve” on the original strikes often. Who knows whether the temptation might originate in the translator’s conscious or unconscious fear that he may be held accountable for the author’s shortcomings, directly or indirectly? Or he might simply want nothing to mar the work. Or he might have Adams’ attitude: “...it is not only legitimate but inevitable that [the translator] will select those qualities for emphasis which appeal to his own taste and the taste of his readers, while minimizing those which make the original seem...ludicrous or contemptible.”

A basic principle is involved here. Modification of the original is justifiable only when the translation’s reader will not be able to understand what the reader of the original is able to. An example of this would be the Chinese restaurant metaphor previously mentioned. Adjustment is one thing, “improvement” another. The translator, no matter how much literary prowess he might presume himself to have, ought not tamper with the original any more than is necessary for understanding. Even the literary quality of the English rendering, which I consider to be of ultimate importance, does not warrant willful tampering. If the translator were to be allowed to modify according to his tastes, no writer could feel secure from the idiosyncratic values and tastes of the translator.

Does the translator have the same liberty as the reader?

“...[P]oems exist to be interpreted and...they subsume their interpretations giving up new substance to different times and people... We might adapt E.H. Carr’s idea that ‘when we

take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it' to the question of translation."—*Ronald Tamplin*

Maybe there was a special reason for including the humor passage that my Korean informants and I thought the story would do better without. Should I have tried to read something into them, and present my conclusion to the reader? Here a rather frustrating situation presents itself. Poets and fiction writers will often decline clarification of elements in their works; they will leave clarification to the reader, coincidentally giving a greater depth or breadth of meaning to these elements and endowing them with more value than the author intended. But what is the translator to do in this case? One of his primary responsibilities is accuracy in conveying the author's intentions. Is the translator allowed to take—and convey to his reader—this liberty which the author gives to the reader of the original? That would deprive the reader of *his* liberty, it would risk inaccurate rendering of the author's intended meaning if he had one, and it would violate the author's right to pregnant ambiguity.

Is this English or “American”?

“Regional dialects are notoriously inseparable from the character of the regions and social circumstances in which they grow up. Not long ago an adventurous translator tried to render into American slang some of the sonnets of G.G. Belli, the nineteenth-century Italian poet who wrote his greatest work in the popular dialect of a lower-class district of Rome... But it was only a limited success... There is no reason why such a scene couldn't be made comprehensible in any dialect the translator wanted to use, but no organic reason why he should use a dialect at all... Above all, it is difficult to deform usage in a second tongue to correspond with deformations in a first tongue, without giving the impression of intolerable artifice.”—*Robert Adams*

In “River” some of the dialog is quite coarse. If the audience of the translation were limited to Americans, such dialog would be easy enough to translate. In my first attempt at translation of a Korean short story I used American slang. (See “Loess Valley” in this volume; the problem has since been dealt with.) This

ranked an Irish critic, who rightly objected that an English translation belongs to all native speakers of the language. The translator into English must be careful to avoid the idioms of any one English dialect.

One way in which coarse or very casual speech can be expressed is with reduction. In the story one of our friends gets the attention of a villager he does not know with the vocative of address, “Uncle.” The Korean for uncle, *ajōssi*, is reduced in the original work to *assi*. I tried to render this reduction, not because I was concerned about word-for-word equivalence, but because the reduction helps to convey the register of speech and general tone of the dialog. Since in English we usually do not address as “Uncle” one who is not an uncle, I added “Excuse me” and relocated the reduction to “excuse.”

Our friends are now outside the village, trying to find out how to get to the house where the wedding is being celebrated.

The three come back out onto the road. Along comes an older gentleman who looks like nothing can happen around the place without his knowing about it.

Pak approaches him. “Scuse me there, but you wouldn’t know of a marriage going on around here? Kim family?”

Technically, the reduction of “excuse” may have worked to render casual speech, but now I wonder if “Scuse me” might not also be an Americanism.

This tells us that one who translates into English has more to learn about his language than one who translates into another European language. The translator of English must be familiar with the whole world’s major dialects of English so that he knows what is palatable to the general English reader.

Extensive reading of British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, and South African literature would accomplish this; for reference, language usage books (such as *Oxford’s Modern American Usage*) from these countries are helpful. Even with this knowledge, the translator would do well to ask the speaker of another dialect to check questionable dialog.

We encounter another aspect of this issue with this village man in the rendering of his slow Ch’ungch’ōng Province dialect. Shall I render it in an American’s southern drawl? There you go again! To avoid another Americanism, how about a Cornwall accent, or an Irish brogue? None of these would do,

because a rendering in any English dialect would yank the reader out of whatever Korean presence the translation has managed to establish.

If one or another English dialect is out, we can at least give the man's speech some rustic flavor by employing phrases that convey a general sense of rusticity.

Pak approaches him. "Scuse me, but you wouldn't know of a marriage going on around here? The name's Kim?"

The man clears his throat with an impressive harrumph, chews his cud with the serious deliberation the question deserves, and drawls, "Well then...You wouldn't be talking about old man Kim Cha-bang's over in Rocky Hollow, would you now?"

"Yes, yes, that's it. Stony Hollow, whatever."

"Just like I said. Now you just head straight on up this way for a few *li*, and you'll see a little village of about fifty houses. That's Stony Hollow right there."

These phrases and patterns were added in the translation (after it was published): "chews his cud," "drawls," "old man," "you just," "straight on up." I asked a British friend to read this passage and tell me whether the man was speaking in dialect or not. He guessed correctly. Then I asked which of the passage's linguistic elements, if any, made him feel that the man was speaking a dialect. He selected only three of those listed above: chews his cud, drawls, and straight on up. The others had no effect. (He also remarked that I might replace the word house with dwelling, which a rustic in Cornwall would be more likely to use; but I felt that dwelling to Americans has an academic tone to it.)

The translator can't do it by himself

"[We must have] teamwork in translating such violently different languages as English and Japanese."—*K.I. Ishikawa, 1955*

At some points the translator may become so involved in his English that he loses contact with the original and unconsciously adds an element or a flavor of his own which the author never intended.

Arriving back in town from the wedding, the three men are looking for a place to stay. They approach the outer gate of what appears to be an inn...

It is as dead as when they saw it earlier. What could have driven all the customers off?

They throw open the courtyard gate, expecting a grateful welcome. Nothing. No one is there. The yard is dark, all the darker because there is no electricity in this remote village at night. They bang on an inner door, shouting for some attention.

“How about a drink here!”

“Come and earn your keep!”

“You got guests here!”

A door way down at the far end of what seems to be a long row of doors creaks open, and a head pops out. “What do you want there?”

“Sell us something to drink. We’ll even pay you for it.”

“Ha ha! Not here, though. Try next door.”

“What are you selling here then?”

“Rooms. This is an inn.”

“Well, I’ll be...! But what about the sign we saw earlier?”

“What sign?”

“So what’s an inn doing without a sign?”

In the translation of this dialog, the owner of the inn enjoys a repartee with the three men. I was mortified to find, however, with a recent reading of the original, that the owner’s replies were not clever but quite prosaic. I had let my imagination run off with me. This probably happened around the fifth or sixth revision, when I was completely engrossed in the literary quality of the English. At this point the translator feels such intimacy with the story that he may take his memory of the details for granted and, with each revision for style, stray a bit more from what was intended in the original.

This spotlights the importance of teamwork in a translation. Periodic checks of the developing translation by a native speaker of the original’s language (preferably a different one each time) will ensure some objectivity and pull the translator back to his senses when his involvement in English style waylays him.

Korean’s “exclusive” system of modifiers

“It were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible, that you might discover the formal principle of its color and odor, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet.”—*Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1820(?)

One hackneyed contention of pop sociologists and high school military drill teachers and others who do not know English is that English is not as well equipped with adverbs and adjectives of perception as Korean is. The example used often is Korean’s standard system of color description, a systematic yin-yang vowel harmony system, in which *a* and *o* express bright colors and *ɔ* and *u* express dark and obscure colors (*ũ* and *i* are neutral and can be used either way). The principles of this color system are generally applicable to other Korean phonetic intensives and onomatopoeia.

The fact is that English does have a system for its onomatopoeia (for sounds) and phonetic intensives (for visual and other meaning). “An initial *gl*-...frequently accompanies the idea of light, usually unmoving, as in glare, gleam, glint, glow, glisten... Short *-i*- often goes with the idea of smallness... some [consonants] are fairly mellifluous...” (Perrine). In English, as in Korean, we can convey colors with similes—like “willow yellow” (coined by a Korean student in my college class)—and metaphors, as in the cliché “pearly white teeth.”

With phonetic intensives, as with onomatopoeia, enhanced or simply well-rendered context is often enough to compensate for the absence of a single appropriate phrase, because the reader will use memory of personal experience. In the following example, the Korean adverb (*hũikkũmũre-hake*) that is used to describe the light in the courtyard somehow seems to me more powerful in itself than the English equivalent in this case. But I also feel that the English adverb combined with the context render the equivalent in both meaning and feeling to me and my reader as Westerners as the Korean does to its readers as Koreans.

The courtyard shows dimly in the surrounding darkness. Through the window of a room off in the pitch black of the far side of the yard filters a lantern’s light. The door opens and out comes the lantern.

Linguistic correspondence and literary style: Must we make a choice?

“Nor will you as faithful translator render word for word.”—*Horace*, 20(?) B.C.

“I did not translate them as an interpreter but as an orator...not...word for word, but I preserved the general style and force of the language.”—*Cicero*, 46 B.C.

“The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase.”—*Vladimir Nabokov*, 1955

The student gets settled in his room, and his companions are drinking at Seoul House.

“You think you turned you into someone?”

“You think I turned me into no one?”

“It’s money makes you, it’s none that breaks you.”

“EX-actly!”

The teacher is stretched out on the warm floor, propping himself on an elbow. Lee is still sitting up. They are at a table spread with snacks and drink, with the girl between them at the end of the table keeping them entertained and their glasses filled. The teacher exclaims to the ceiling again, “EX-actly!”

The first three lines of the new scene are extemporized verse sung in a traditional song form unlike any song form I have heard in the West.

This awkward first-publication translation of the song raises another issue in literary translation, the perennial tug-of-war between exact linguistic correspondence with the original and the literary quality of the translation. When the original’s language has no equivalent in English some will sacrifice literary style of the English for linguistic conformity to the original, and others will go the other way.

A song is a good example of what this issue entails. The elements of a song, besides melody, are idea content, evocative lexicals, and metered rhythm (and sometimes rhyme). Of course, the translator wants to render all of these with complete fidelity to the original. To accomplish this would require that all the song’s elements in the original language fit together the same way in the target language. It is impossible to do this, because each word in a song is selected not only for its expressiveness but also for its function

in maintaining the song's meter; syllabic structure and stress on the words in the song's original language will never be identical to that of the target language, much less combine identically.

I am interested in close linguistic correspondence not only for the abstract ideal of fidelity but also because I want to introduce to my reader interesting cultural features of the original. For example, if in my translation the person who asked the question about induction into the army were to address the other as "elder brother," the translation would be more linguistically faithful to the original. And if I were somehow to show, in addition, that the person was not his real brother, the translation would inform the reader of one convention used in direct address in Korean society. But it would be awkward English, and awkward English does not make for good literature.

In literature, both ideas and style are essential. Often, though, elements not essential to sufficient understanding of the idea, such as "elder brother," will be hung on the idea. On the rare occasion that this element does not have an equivalent in English and we can not render it with other devices, we must sacrifice it in the interest of the literary quality of the English. When push comes to shove, strict linguistic correspondence must give way.

If the translator accepts this principle he has to attend to another consideration. How does he determine what in the original can and should be saved and what must be sacrificed—what is essential, and what is dispensable? I have read translations in which what I regarded as minor but essential elements were regarded as extraneous, and discarded in the interest of style.

Here is my sixth and most recent revision of the song above.

"Did you make yourself a beauty?"

"Did I make myself a beast?"

"Nope, it's money that makes you..."

"And none that breaks you!"

This attempt is some improvement over the clumsy initial attempt. Interestingly, the images of beauty and beast, the phrasal arrangement, and the meter correspond with the original. If, before submitting it for that first publication, I had let the last revision of the translation cool a while and then returned to it for one more try I would have come up with something better. And this means that the translator must, at

the same time he is prepared *in extremis* to sacrifice strict fidelity for style, try and try again, and then again, for the achievement of both. In the end he may not achieve an ideal blend, but his efforts will usually result in something better than the product of a radical bias toward style.

Ambiguous ambiguity

“...the translator on his own responsibility may be required to make up his author’s mind on points that he never so much as contemplated.”—*Robert Adams*

We have already discussed the issue of how to treat ambiguity, but the subject is still kicking. Rendering intended ambiguity is difficult enough, but what does one do with the other kind?

While the men are having their drink the student is encouraging the innkeeper’s middle-school nephew to keep on studying hard; the boy leaves, and the college student falls into that hypnogogic state between waking and sleep, where he continues in the conventional pitch about studying hard. Gradually his monolog turns to himself, also tops in middle school, but now losing the financial and academic struggle to complete his education.

What you do is get that diploma, and it’s all easy street from there... No. Not anymore. You know now. Diploma or not, it makes no difference now, because succeed or not, success this way could never mean what it used to mean. Poverty has sapped it of everything it could have been. Damn, so much squandered, gone for good!

He has been turning fitfully in his sleep and finally, eyes still shut, sits up, struggles to squirm out of both vest and coat at once. He gives up and sinks back down. Now he is snoring away, deep and fast asleep.

At about this point his two companions ask the wine house girl to fetch the student for a drink. She leaves the wine house for the inn. Here now is the end of the story (with some deleted).

She gets a surprise outside. The yard is white, utterly still in the falling snow. She slips into her sandals, descends into the white softness. She throws her head back, this wine-house girl, lifts her face to the heavens swirling with those icy black fluffs. She glories in

the cold tingle they yield settling on her skin, and opens her mouth to drink in as much as possible.

A night like this, wouldn't it be just perfect for a new bride! "Snow the first night, riches thereafter." And happiness. The girl blinks once, twice. Swarming snowflakes, there, not there, there again. She tries to imagine her face as a bride, but somehow can't... Anyway, all brides would have the same look, wouldn't they? Of happiness, hope, maybe apprehension, why not all together? She looks down into the fresh whiteness of the yard, locks her knees and shuffles off, stride by long stride, laying a set of tracks. The falling snow gathers on her hair.

Then the girl leaves off her ski walk and heads to the outer gate. She opens it a crack and slips through, quiet as a cat.

The snow is deep out on the road, too. Her steps are mute, the whole world still. She looks down at the snow-capped slippers kicking out from beneath her long skirt and feels she could just keep walking like this for a hundred *li*.

When she comes up to the inn next door, though, she stops, works her fingers in through the brushwood side gate and flicks open the catch. Cotton pods of snow float down from the sky and settle, white on white. There is a light in one of the two guest rooms. A slight hesitation, then she goes over and steps up onto the porch. She peeks in through the hole someone's finger has left in the paper of the lattice door. A man is lying there in the faint glimmer of the lamp. She retreats to the darkened room next to his, puts her face close to the door...

"Little boy," she whispers. "You in there, honey?"

No answer. She pushes on the door, rattling it softly. Still no answer. She goes back to the guest room, listens, and slides the door open.

He is on his side, curled up like a shrimp, uncovered except for his arms and legs he has stuck under the cover to escape the cold. The girl takes a closer look at his face. Yes, it's him, the one on the bus. College student! She takes him by the shoulders and rolls him gently over on his back. He frowns—tie must be too tight. Look at you, not even getting out of your clothes before you go to bed! Poor thing. Now she is big sister and mom, takes

off his tie, pulls back the cover he has dragged with him and slips off his trousers, his shirt, then straightens his mat.

He squirms, about to wake up. Then he slips right back under the mat she has just readied for him to lie on. Behave yourself now! She pulls his arms and legs back out, raises him to her breast and maneuvers him gently onto the mat.

She covers him, then slips the pillow neatly under his head.

She sits back, and looks. Her eyes rest on his face.

College student...

The lantern sputters. The girl stands, picks up his scattered clothes, and hangs each, one by one, on its own nail in the wall.

She goes to the lantern, bows over it, puts it out with a gentle puff.

Outside in the courtyard, soft white stillness. The snow deepens, erasing her steps.

The last two sentences of this story were especially difficult to translate. I did not know for certain whether the girl stayed in the room or left it. Since an accurate translation requires the translator first to be accurate in his interpretation, I had discussions with several Koreans on whether the girl stayed or left. They disagreed among themselves.

If the readers of the original do not know, does the translator have to know? Should his readers know more than the readers of the original? I decided to render it just as ambiguously as I had found it in the original. Later, in the preparation of this paper (after the first publication of the translation), I surveyed sixteen Koreans and one American with native-speaker ability in Korean. Twelve, including university students, a university English professor, and a professional writer, said she stayed; four, including two not yet in college, one college student, and the American, said she left; and one college student could not commit himself.

This survey confirmed the fact that the original passage is ambiguous, and that it should be translated that way.

Now, for the conclusion to our deliberation on how to render the last two sentences, the author himself will tell us. Before that, though, please read the passage again and make your own guess as to whether the girl stayed or left.

Recently the author was contacted and asked whether the girl stayed in the room or left. “What a question! Anyone can see she left!”

So we will have to work a little harder for our conclusion. The author had not intended ambiguity—he thought “anyone can see” that she left. But three quarters of those surveyed did not see it.

Some basic principles are involved here. One is that the translator should present his reader no more and no less than the author gave his reader. Another is that the translator must not “improve” on the original. And the last is that the writer’s message must be conveyed. We will disregard the third principle because it applies only when the author has actually conveyed his message. Adhering to the first two principles would require that I deliberately mislead the reader in my conclusion in order to effect a similar ratio of misreadings among the audience of my translation. To follow this reasoning to its logical ludicrous conclusion I would have to conduct a survey on every potentially ambiguous point in the original story, whether I felt I understood it correctly or not, to determine the ratio of different interpretations among readers of the original; and then, of course, I would have to conduct an identical survey among readers of a draft of the translation to determine whether my rendering of the passage was successful in achieving the same ratio. (With an imagination like this, maybe I should switch from translating to writing.)

So here, finally, patient reader, is the conclusive conclusion. Most of the readers of the passage in the original interpreted the passage differently from how the author intended. I detected nothing in their explanations or the explanations of those who interpreted correctly that would indicate that the author had presented information which would lead the reader to interpret one way instead of the other. Generally, the clues on which some based their interpretation were the basis for the opposite interpretation. This tells me that the author had not actually presented any misleading pieces of information—the totality was neutrally ambiguous.

And this, in turn, tells me that the original’s readers must have read their own experience and values into the information which the author presented them. We can probably count on the reader of the translation to do the same, given the same neutral ambiguity. And so the ambiguous rendering—as opposed to a deliberately misleading one—should be provided the reader of the translation.

Would this be perfectly obvious to you without all the false conclusions it took us to get to this point? It very well might be, unless of course you are a translator.

And finally...

I was going to end this article by comparing the translator to an artist, who alters life in a creative way and thus gives joy by truly rendering the facets and thus the spirit of his object. But the translator, contrary to what some think, does not have such freedom. No writer in his right mind would entrust his creation to a translator who has the hubris of a creator.

So it is the destiny of the translator to grope and stumble, sometimes bungle, altering as little as humanly possible as creatively as humanly possible, in his attempt “to render truly the facets and thus the spirit” of another’s creation.