# ASSESSING THE ROLE OF STYLE IN LITERARY TRANSLATION

N. Berrin Aksoy
Atılım University, Turkey

***Abstract**: Literary translation and its characteristics have been a point of attraction in literary and academic circles for so many years. It has been generally accepted that since style is the most distinguishing element of a literary text, its recreation in translation is of utmost importance. Hence, in order to understand the hows and whys of literary translation, a sound and definite description of what a literary text is, is needed as a first step. A source text of literature does not have the same qualities as those of its translated version since the translation carries in itself the shadows of both the source and the target linguistic and literary elements. In order to overcome the challenges of literary translation then, it is a prerequisite for the translator to be a very good reader of literature in order to fully grasp all the literary, stylistic and cultural qualities of the source text, with all its intended meanings and effects.*

***Keywords**: style, literary translation, literary text, translated text*

## I. General Remarks

The purpose of this paper is to discuss that translating literature is different from translating other types of texts, and to argue that literary translation poses a challenge for the translator due to the characteristics of a literary text. The main challenge is the metaphorical, figurative meanings, words and intentional ambiguities which comprise the unique style of a literary text. Doubtlessly, a literary text is produced to create a certain effect on the reader through the artistic use of language which is an indispensable part of the style. The translator, in his/her two roles as the source text reader and the target text sender or producer, has to solve the characteristics of the style so as to grasp the meaning created by it. Only then, he/she can set out his/her role as target text sender/producer to recreate the source text in the target language. Of course, all kinds of translation deserve utmost effort, but recreating the spirit and all the artistic qualities and effects of a text in a foreign language involves a higher amount of attention and care while finding equivalences. As Koster has put it:

> A translation is a strange phenomenon, because it is always two things: on the one hand the status of the translation is that of an independent text, once produced, a translation, in its cultural environment, functions in a way similar to that of any other text in that environment; on the other hand it is status is that of a derivative text: translation is a representation, or a reconstruction, or a reproduction of another text.



BDD-A27706 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:28 UTC)

> This double, hybrid status has long been acknowledged as one of the characteristic features of a translation.
>
> (Koster 26)

It is important to draw attention to Koster here because his definition of a translation as a representation is very much related to the style in terms of literary translation. The hybrid status of a translation is true for literary translation as well; a literary text in translation has that duplicity or hybridity in itself in the sense that the style and its effects have been recreated in terms of and in relation to the original text, its style, and its effects. Hence it is both a new text in a foreign environment and at the same time a derivative of the source entity, a reproduction or a version. Then, one may ask, what is the actual subject of the translator? The actual subject of the translator is the *origo*, the centre (27), which is the style in literary translation.

## II. The Qualities of a Literary Text

Literary translation in recent years has become the focus of debates on literature and arts. In order to understand the process and nature of literary translation, we may as well begin with defining a literary text. First of all, a literary text must be taken up against the background of literary translation since a literary text involves only one producer, that is, its author. It is a direct product in a familiar and natural environment with artistic and experimental incongruities. The translated text, on the other hand, is an indirect product; the original author's shadow is embedded in the recreated version, and it is hybrid in the sense that it involves two literary traditions and linguistic systems, as well as incongruities in opposition to both.

It is a fact that the hybrid quality of the translated text of literature has fascinated scholars and theorists, and debates over its possibilities and potentialities have become a never-ending issue in scholarly circles. The main point in these discussions is, however, that despite literary translation's hybrid quality, it involves an effort of creativity on the level of style and content as opposed to the translation of non-literary texts. According to el-Shiyab, literary translation is problematic because it involves what is intended behind the surface of the texts such as metaphorical and figurative meanings which comprise the style of the text (205). Similar to el-Shiyab, Jean Boase-Beier emphasises the importance of style in literary translation in these words: "whenever translation is concerned with how something is said as well as what is said, it involves the translation of style" (1).

Boase-Beier underlines the hybrid quality of the translation while drawing attention to the importance of recreating the style of the original text in a new linguistic medium and stylistic form. She goes on to say:

> beyond what might be considered the purely referential meaning or context of a text, it is the style that enables it to express attitude and implied meanings, to fulfill particular functions, and to have effects on its readers.
>
> (Boase-Beier, *Stylistic Approaches to Translation* 4)



BDD-A27706 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:28 UTC)

Consequently, the nature of literary translation is closely connected to the act of recreating the style of the literary source text. Then, it may be a good idea to dwell upon the qualities of a literary text in order to establish a framework for literary translation. A literary text is the product of an author in a given society, culture and linguistic medium with a unitary relation among all these elements. The function of these combined elements is to fulfill an aesthetic as well as an affective function and aim at creating and motivating emotive and imaginative responses in a multi-facetious setting. Language is the cement of all the literary texts with ambiguous and multiplicity of meanings. Hence, a literary text is characterised by the individual and personal style of the author.

A literary text is an aesthetic product with implied meanings. A literary text is written in a way that a translator is sometimes incapable of handling (El-Shiyab 208). A literary text is composed of literary, linguistic and cultural norms and conventions of its environment, and as mentioned earlier, a distinctive and differentiating style of its own which is created by the author. In its broad sense, style in a literary text refers to the individual way a language is used in a particular genre, period, school of writing, or some combination of these (Leech, Short 11). Style, stylistic variations and specific use of language in a literary text is the core quality that gives a text its literariness. Through stylistic devices such as metaphors, images, collocations, repetitions, foregrounding etc. a text gains its literary quality. Stylistic elements of defamiliarization (*ostreonei*) or foregrounding are the most important qualities of literary texts. Jakobson in the 1960s introduced the poetic function of literary text and further developed the idea that the use of certain linguistic elements draws attention to the style of a text. To Jakobson, the poetic function of language is the most important function as it focuses on the message itself. The linguistic devices in a piece of literary text initiate the reader to probe into the linguistic and artistic effects of the text. In relation with the interaction of the reader and the literary text, it is probable that the reader may find it difficult to capture the aesthetic quality or to overcome the *ostreonei*, thus making a challenge for translation purposes for translator (qtd. from "Literariness").

Similar to the above views about literary texts, translation studies scholar Theo Hermans argues that foregrounding of language, the interdependence of different levels of linguistic organization, the separation from the practical context of utterance, and the perception of texts as both aesthetic objects and intertextual or self-reference construct are the characteristics of a literary text (Hermans, "Literary Translation" 79). To clarify this point with an example, the last paragraph of James Joyce's "The Dead" may be taken up:

> Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flicking existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling.
> A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part



BDD-A27706 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:28 UTC)

> of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end upon all the living and the dead.
>
> (Joyce 200-201)

The passage is actually Gabriel's interior monologue although narrated in the 3rd person. The adjective 'generous' is both physical, in terms of quantity of tears, and psychological, in terms of sincerity of emotions. The ambiguity or juxtaposition of both connotations is left to the reader to give meaning to. For the translator, meanwhile, the adjective 'generous' poses a challenge in terms of the ambiguity of meaning and the shifting plurality of the point of view of the narrator and the character. It is difficult to know for sure whose view is reflected in this adjective. As John Paul Riquelme writes about Joyce:

> (…) the kind of intense activity that such a style encourages from the reader as it captures the multiple, shifting perspectives of the character's thinking in its relations to the narrator's language is typical of Joyce…
>
> (Riquelme 127)

The above passage from "The Dead" and the interpretation of Riquelme clearly reveal the obscurity of style, with its ambiguous connotations, and the challenges the reader/translator is faced with in the process of translation or recreation of the same ambiguities and stylistic peculiarities in the target linguistic and literary system.

Thus, it may well be said that while trying to explain the nature of literary translation with all its aspects, exploring and defining the qualities of a literary text is the first and foremost step. Almost all the scholars agree that the utmost feature of a literary text is its aesthetic quality and function which is summed up in the following manner by Bednarova-Gibova:

> Clearly, the most important feature of a literary work of art is that it is a bearer of an aesthetic function. Literary text comes into existence as a subjectively transformed reflection of the objective reality in tune with the aesthetic–emotional intent of the author.
>
> (Bednarova-Gibova 4)

Linguistically, literary texts are defined by Katharina Reiss whose text typology is the most widely used in Translation Studies and in academic circles. Reiss makes a differentiation between literary and poetic texts according to their aesthetic value. Non-literary texts, on the other hand, are defined according to their informative value and knowledge of the real world content. According to Reiss (2004) texts can be classified as:

1. Informative
2. Expressive
3. Operative



BDD-A27706 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:28 UTC)

in terms of their functional and communicative value. Informative texts involve communication of content, expressive texts involve communication of artistically organized content and operative texts involve communication of content with a persuasive character.

In Reiss' typology and above-mentioned definitions, the focus is the aesthetic and stylistic content of a literary text. Then, the primary undertaking of a translator who sets out to translate a literary text should be to recreate the aesthetic and stylistic content of the original text.

At the other end of the pendulum in literary translation is the translated literary text. In Koster's definition, it is not the *origo*, or the centre. There is no unitary relation between the translator and the translated text as that between the author and his/her original text. Then, the translation assessment is done on three levels: the linguistic medium, culture, and the audience. At this point, Koster (26) reaffirms duplicity in literary translation, which does not exist in the *origo*, or the source text.

Theo Hermans sees the hybrid quality of translation as a positive value which contributes to the target culture and audience:

> We recognize what is happening, for instance, when translation is described by means of such metaphors as building bridges, as ferrying or carrying across, as transmission, transference, 'Uber-setzung' 'trans-latio'. Further, similar metaphors could effortlessly extend the series. All convey the enabling which translation brings about is to be achieved by a product, a finished translation, which is deemed to offer the user a reliable image of its parent text because it bears a close and pertinent resemblance to that which itself remains beyond reach. This is where we encounter the metaphors of translation as likeness, replica, duplicate, copy, portrait…
>
> (Hermans, "Paradoxes and Aporias" 10)

Hermans in the above quotation underlines the hybrid nature of a translated text or translation in terms of its 'enabling' quality. This quality enables the translated text to have a function as a translation in the target culture. In that context, Hermans and Koster both see the hybridity of translation as its unique and forceful characteristics. A translation enables the source text to live forever in the target linguistic and cultural system by means of creating an image of the source text.

## III. Translating Literary Texts

Literary translation involves the translation of style, argues Jean Boise-Beier in her article "Stylistic and Translation." Ideally, the translator has to consider his/her choices and make decisions in the process of translation to approximate the form, content and above all, the style of the original text. The literary flavor in the original should guide the translator in finding equivalences and parallel usages of concepts and words in his/her own linguistic system. The individual style of the author and its effects, created meanings, impressions and connotations are the main and challenging elements of a literary text for its translator. For that reason, above all the translator has to be an avid reader of literature with a profound knowledge of literary genres, traditions and the readers' expectations accordingly.



BDD-A27706 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:28 UTC)

To give an example in order to clarify the above point, James Joyce may again be taken up. It has been universally agreed that Joyce is a difficult author for translation. Fomenko in her article evaluates Joyce's style as such:

> His idiostyle serves as a medium for his epiphanic model that cumulates meaning across textual boundaries. His literary aesthetic is based on perceptions, on the sequence of perceptions, physical and mental, on the mental on the way they appear to the mind as discontinuous elements arranged according to a character's particular relation to reality and to a syntax in accordance with his experience. This poetic, creative logic, may lead to a profound misunderstanding of the author's aim for the translator as a reader.
>
> (Fomenko 1)

The translator must be able to identify Joyce's idiostyle and its characteristics with all its artistic and aesthetic nuances. In order to overcome such a challenge, the translator must be a good reader of Joyce and must be well acquainted with his style.

Literary translation, then, deals with establishing equivalences not only between lexis, syntax and concepts but also between styles, conventions and cultural terms and values. Another important dimension is the temporality of a literary text. Especially in poetry translation, a poem belonging to 18$^{th}$ century or earlier poses a problem to the translator in terms of how to establish cross-temporality, whether to use old or contemporary elements, or how far and how much to retain the middle way. The unique quality of a poem which is a product of abstract elements such as sound, rhythm, musicality behind its linguistic construction makes it all the more problematic in translation. According to Robert Frost, poetry is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation (qtd. in Ketkar).

However, poetry translation is not so hopeless an endeavour after all. Iain Halliday elaborates on Frost's view made on literary translation in a 1964 interview:

> Simple, aphoristic, extremely effective and often pulled out of the literary pundit's bag of tricks for the purpose of criticising the inferior art of translation, I am equally sure, however, that fewer of us know Frost's next sentence from the same context – equally aphoristic, equally quotable, but much less well known because it constitutes a decidedly uncomfortable consideration for literary scholars: "It (poetry) is also what is lost in interpretation."
>
> (Halliday 81-82)

Halliday criticizes the negative and pessimistic approaches to poetry translation, and defends the act by stating that it has always been an attraction for the literary translator to recreate the poem in another linguistic and cultural medium in order to enable the foreign reader to share a similar experience as that of the source reader. Whether the translator chooses to be faithful or free in the act of translation the main purpose for his/her attempt is, in Hermans' words, to enable the target audience to have an access to the feelings, sensations, aesthetic value and poetical devices created by that poem which, unless translated, might not be shared. Ketkar writes that Andre Lefevere is of the same opinion with Theo Hermans:



BDD-A27706 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:28 UTC)

> (…) the manipulation of foreign work in the service of certain aims that are felt worthy of pursuit in the native culture, according to Andre Lefevere, is very important and plays a vital part in the evolutions of literatures, not only by introducing new texts, authors and devices, but also by introducing them in a certain way, as part of a wider design to try to influence that evolution.
>
> (qtd.in Ketkar 3)

According to Lefevere, in the above explanation cited by Ketkar, translation becomes refraction with the intention of introducing foreign elements into the native system. In this descriptive, culturally-oriented and systems-based approach to literary translation, Lefevere argues that the study of literary translation should begin with a study of the translated text rather than the process of translation, its role, function and reception in the culture in which it is translated as well as the role of culture in influencing; hence, the process of decision making that is translation, which is fundamentally descriptive in its orientation (Ketkar 3).

The concept of system which is adopted by Translation Studies theorists such as Toury, Lefevere, Hermans owes a great deal to the Russian formalists, who describe literature as a system in the realm of other social systems and give great attention to "literariness" of a text and formal characteristics that give it its literary quality. Hence, in order to explore these characteristics, the style of the original text should be totally explored and studied in order to establish the "literariness" that has to be transferred to a foreign system. Hence, literary translation is taken up by Translation Studies scholars in a broad sense, as a sub-system in the native literature as well as in the target literature, which is closely linked to other systems of social, economic and cultural orientation.

## IV. The Role of the Literary Translator

All these approaches to literary translation, whether linguistically or culturally oriented, necessitate to evaluate the position and the task of the literary translator. It has been accepted that the translator is above all a mediator between the two sets of linguistic and cultural systems which require simultaneous considerations in terms of the process and product of translation. Depending on his/her approach or assignments, the translator performs a task which has been so far defined as invisible or "absent", Traditionally, the translator is regarded as inferior and secondary compared to the original author, and his/her work or product as derivative, copied or subordinate (Guzman 17). From a linguistic perspective, the role of the translator is that of a problem-solver and that meaning transfer is his/her most clearly defined task. On the other hand, other schools' perspectives on translation challenge the mere problem-solver image of the translator: they see the translator as a neutral mediator whose task is to be the faithful messenger of a finished message. According to Venuti, linguistics addresses the issue of translatability by analyzing specific translation problems and describing the methods that translators have developed to solve them. The linguistic view, then, sees translation as a possibility and as a communicative act; the translator is the person who actualizes it by developing strategies to overcome linguistic barriers and ensure the transference of communicative value.

On the other hand, apart from the linguistic and communicative description of a translator's role as a problem-solver, descriptive Translation Studies proponents of the early



BDD-A27706 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:28 UTC)

phase move forward from regarding translation as a linguistic and communicative act and pay attention to the qualities of the literary text apart from its linguistic, aesthetic/emotional expressions. According to Edwin Gentzler, categories of expression characteristic of literary texts include not just aesthetic/emotional ones, but variability, ambiguity, disequilibrium, as well as conventional resolution, and even irrationality (e.g. stream of consciousness texts) (85-86). Hence, in different social contexts and time periods, the interpretation of stylistic features may change for the translator. So, as Miko underlines, the literary translator must also be aware of the evolutionary and social aspect of style other than its linguistic features (qtd. in Gentzler 86).

The translator's role on the faithful X free axis has been discussed by Popovic in his seminal essay "The Concept 'Shift of Expression' in Translation Analysis" (1970). Popovic proposes a definition of what he means by the shift of expression which affords the translator a degree of freedom and justification in his decisions:

> Each individual method of translation is determined by the presence or absence of shifts in the various layers of the translation. All that appears as new with respect to the original, or fails to appear where it might have been expected, may be interpreted as a shift.
>
> (qtd. in Gentzler 86)

Another important approach to the status of the literary translator is developed by L. Venuti. From a postcolonial angle, he discusses translation's role in the power relations in culture and acknowledges (like Lefevere) that translations are manipulative powers in the establishment and acculturation of national literatures, as well as constructing images of other cultures (qtd. in Bassnet, 47). Venuti acknowledges the role of the translator as agent and underlines that he/she must be concerned with how to translate without "wreak[ing] violence on the source text and its culture" (qtd. in Bassnett 47). Venuti suggests that the translator should be respectful to the foreign/source text and try not to domesticate its otherness (306). According to Bassnett, his advice for the translator is to inscribe signs of the original's foreignness in the translation itself (qtd.in Bassnett 47) in order to enrich the target language and culture and to introduce new styles, concepts and ways of expressions.

Discussions about the hows and whats of literary translation abound in academic circles at an unprecedented speed, especially with the advent of the twenty-first century, and have become an object of study in higher education institutions all over the world. Whatever propositions or ideas are put forward, literary translation is essentially regarded as "the afterlife of a text, ensuring its existence in another time and place effectively saving that text from extinction" (Bassnett 13). This quote from Bassnett, which actually understates the hybridity of a literary text and which echoes W. Benjamin's ideas about translation, clearly illuminates the indispensable role and immense power of literary translation in cultural, linguistic and social interaction among societies and peoples.



BDD-A27706 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:28 UTC)

**WORKS CITED**

Bassnett, Susan. *Translation.* London and New York: Routledge, 2014.

Bednarova-Gibova, K. "Linguistic & Translatological Aspects of Literary Text Reviewed." 1-10. Accessed 3 Aug. 2016 <https://www.academia.edu/3592005/Linguistic_and_Translatological_Aspects_of_Literary_Text_Reviewed>.

Boase-Beier, J. "Stylistics and Translation." 1-23 Accessed 2 Aug. 2016 <https://www.academia.edu/382300/Stylistics_and_Translation>.

Boase-Beier, J. *Stylistic Approaches to Translation*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 2006.

El-Shiyab. "The Difficulty of Translating Literary Texts." *Babel*, 45.3 (1999): 205 – 216.

Fomenka, Elena. "Is James Joyce Lost in Translation?" Aug. 2001, pp. 1-8, Accessed 4 Aug. 2016 <www.ff.unipo.sk/jak/8_2011/fomenko.pdf>.

Gentzler, Edwin. *Contemporary Translation Theories*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Guzmán, María Costanza. *Gregory Rabassa's Latin American Literature: A Translator's Visible Legacy*. Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2010.

Halliday, Iain. "Two Gatsbys: Translation Theory as an Aid to Understanding." *RSA Journal* 10 (1999): 81-82.

Hermans, Theo. "Literary Translation". *A Companion to Translation Studies*. Ed. P. Kuhiwczak and K. Littau, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2007. 77-91.

Hermans, Theo. "Paradoxes and Aporias in Translaton and Translation Studies." *Translation Studies: Perspectives on an Emerging Discipline*. Ed. Alessandra Riccardi, 2002. 10-23.

Joyce, James. "The Dead." *Dubliners*. Triad/Partner Books, 1977. 160 -201.

Ketkar, Sachin. "Literary Translation: Recent Theoretical Developments." Accessed 4 Aug. 2016 <http://www.translationdirectory.com/article301.htm>.

Koster, Cees. "Textual Presence of the Translatior." *Translation Studies: Perspectives on an Emerging Discipline*. Ed. Alessandra Riccardi. Cambridge University Press, 2002. 24–37.

Leech, Geoffrey, and Mick Short. *Style in Fiction*. 2nd ed. Britain: Pearson, Longman, 2007.

"Literariness". *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Accessed 2 Aug. 2016 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literariness>.

Popovic, Anton. "The Concept 'Shift of Expression' in Translation Analysis." *The Nature of Translation: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Literary Translation.* Ed. James Holmes. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1970. 78-87.

Reiss, Katharina. "Type, Kind and Individuality of Text: Decision Making in Translation." *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. Oxon: Routledge, 2004. 168-179

Riquelme, John-Paul. "Stephen Hero, Dubliners and a Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man: Styles of Realism and Fantasy." *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*. Ed. Derek Attridge. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.



BDD-A27706 © 2017 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:28 UTC)