

# Training for the Translation of Korean Literature: Theory and Practice

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*Our aim is to study the issue of literary translation training in ordinary situations but also (and mainly) when it is carried into the B language of the translator (in our case from Korean to French). In Korea, we try to overcome the lack of French translators able to produce literary translations by themselves by training Korean translators working into their B language (from Korean to French). The Ewha Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation (GSTI) and some other institutes like the Korean Literary Translation Institute (KLTI) offer training programs which take into account the specific situation of the Korean literature, expressed in a language of limited extension.*

*At first we address a common question: can literary translation be taught? If the answer is positive, a second question arises: what kind of training would be pertaining for literary translation, an activity which belongs to art and technique altogether? The purpose of this paper is to address both questions with regard to the specific situation of Korean literature.*

*The first part of this paper is devoted to theoretical aspects of our study (definition of key notions, with an emphasis on the Interpretative Theory of Translation) and practical aspects as well (general survey of the present training program of translators).*

*In the second part, we analyze the different steps of the translation process, from understanding to reformulation in the light of the Interpretative Theory of Translation.*

*Our conclusion is that, by using an efficient training program, we are able to train qualified translators as long as we can rely on the help of not only the teaching institutions but also the government.*

**Keywords :** Literary translation, translation training, literary translation training program, translation into B language, promotion of Korean literature

## 1. Can literary translation be taught?

Is it possible to teach literary translation? What would be taught in such a training program? How would the instruction be handled? Is there a theoretical basis for training in literary translation? What is the objective of the training? The purpose of this paper is to suggest answers to questions like these that may be raised, particularly with regard to special problems associated with a training program when the texts in question are Korean literature.

Both in Korea and abroad there are capable literary translators who have not received special training in translation. Under the circumstances, one naturally asks whether training is still necessary for literary translation or whether such training would even be effective. Upon examining the background of these literary translators who have no special training, one finds that they are mostly those who aspired to be writers or who admit turning to translation because of their interest in writing. In other words, the crux of literary translation is, above all, writing in the target language. Are we to conclude, then, that instruction in literary translation simply means writing? That is, training in re-expression? This also raises the question of whether re-expression itself can be taught. A discussion of re-expression, that is, writing, takes us right into the realm of writing skill, namely, art.

One of the important aspects of translation work is the ability to comprehend and analyze the text accurately, to have the technique necessary for such comprehension. We hear that Flaubert, Joyce, Proust, and other writers who have left us works as precious as jewels struggled a great deal and continued to rewrite and improve their sentences until they were finished. What this tells us is that writing is a kind of skill, which can be improved by learning and practice. That is why they say literary translation falls somewhere between craft and art. In other words, though it is possible to improve one's abilities and performance through practice, the final product as re-expression should be literary and artistic, as much as literature is art.

For a more detailed study, let us look at the courses taught in the Translation Department in the Graduate School for Interpretation and Translation at Ewha Women's University, one of two institutions of advanced studies in Korea specializing in literary translation. Let us also look at the curriculum of the Literary Translation Academy of the Korea Literature Translation Institute.

Offered in the Translation Department in the Graduate School for Interpretation and Translation at Ewha Women's University are not only courses

designed to nurture professional translators—such as Professional Translation BA; Professional Translation AB; Technical Translation BA; Technical Translation AB; Media Translation I and II; Literary Translation BA; Literary Translation AB; and Translation Practice and Evaluation—but also courses like Practical Translation I and II; Theme Seminars; Advanced French; Advanced Korean; Sight translation; Composition; Discussion and consecutive interpretation I, II, III. According to the most recent curricular revision, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year begin on-site practice courses, in which future interpreters and translators are sent out to a work environment to receive on-the-job-training, facilitating their adaptation to their future careers. Particularly to be noted among these courses are Theme Seminars, Discussion, and Composition, whose focus is on strengthening insights into the culture, history, and politics of the language in question. The advanced courses for Korean and foreign languages, given continuously through the first and second years, are designed to strengthen the language skills of students who are already at a certain advanced level of competence. Moreover, to enable utilization of both interpretation and translation skills in real time work situations, interpretation classes are assigned practical translation work and translation classes are assigned practical interpreting work. Moreover, in the case of sentence parsing or sight translation, which is common to both classes, instruction is aimed at enhancing the ability to convey the translation by speedy comprehension and grasp of a given text. What distinguishes these courses from the curriculum of translation schools in other countries is the emphasis on translation in the AB direction with a foreign language as the target language (This is because the reality in Korea is that most translation into foreign languages, whether literary or otherwise, is done by Koreans). What distinguishes the Ewha University translation program from other Korean interpretation and translation institutes or graduate schools is that the department of interpretation and translation recruits its candidates separately and the entire curriculum operates under a principle of separation in order to facilitate seamless transition to employment after graduation.

The curriculum can be divided into two main groups: courses to train professional translating skills; and courses strengthening language, sophistication, and writing skills. The language courses at a translation institute are different from the creative writing courses of ordinary colleges in that the students cannot independently choose the content of their writing—they are restricted by the content of what is given in the source language and by the style of the original writer, which must be conveyed. In other words, while under constraints to preserve the flavor of the source language content as fully as possible, what is written in the target language should come across

as natural sentences in that language. As such, these courses are fully teachable.

*Plus cruciale encore est l'exploration des voies de l'écriture elle-même et la mise en évidence que le maniement du verbe, loin d'être un acte purement intuitif plongeant ses racines dans l'insondable, est aussi un savoir-faire qui se construit selon des règles bien définies. Ainsi, l'existence d'une interaction entre lecture et rédaction porte la marque subtile des lectures passées et des savoirs qu'elles ont déposés au fond de la mémoire.*

*(Even more crucial is the way writing itself, and the handling words—far from being a purely intuitive act plunging from above, with roots in the unfathomable—is also a skill that develops according to well-defined rules. Thus the interaction between the writing and the reader carries the subtle marks of past readings and the knowledge of these readings stored deep in memory.)*  
(Wuilmart, 1991 : 35)

Learning re-expression does not proceed merely as a practice of writing but is reinforced by the surfacing of knowledge accumulated through reading, etc.

Graduates who have completed the above training courses and passed final exams are all employed or work as free lance translators. Some of those in literary translation are employed by publishing houses specializing in literary translation and work as literary translators. In other words, it is possible to teach literary translation—the training proceeds by means of the courses discussed above.

Since establishing the Literary Translation Academy in 2007, the Korea Literature Translation Institute has been offering courses on translating Korean literature to students from a variety of foreign countries with different languages as well as to students from Korea. The once-weekly course, lasting 2 hours, consists of cultural explorations, meetings with writers, surveys of Korean literature, translation of short films, seminars on culture, and meetings with translators as well as practice sessions on literary translation. The students chosen are the top scorers on translation tests, and the faculty—both from Korea and from abroad—consists of professional translators or professors of graduate programs in interpretation and translation or in literature. Students translate the same short story during the first semester and different short stories in the second semester.

Now let us examine how training for literature is conducted.

## 2. On-site survey of training

### 2.1. The goal of training (the pursuit of translated sentences that are creative and autonomous)

The literary translation courses taught by the faculty of professional translators is similar to general courses on translation and proceed with text selection and analysis, the study of a lesson topic and lesson materials, review in class of proposals, and retranslation by students. Literary translation proper—characterized by the multiple levels of meaning in the literary text, its cross referencing and overlap across many fields, collection of data related to the writer as well as the text itself, and an effort to recreate the writing style in the course of re-expression—does not proceed until completion of two courses; one comparing, in depth, the mother tongue and a foreign language and one familiarizing the student with the methodology of translation. Both of these courses are for one year and conducted in the mother tongue and a foreign language. As for text selection, the first semester focuses on the variety of literary genres and modes of literary translation. In the second semester, effort is focused on translating a selected short story, grasping and handling the underlying meanings, and studying the style of writing. Time is also set aside for evaluating translation practices to enable individual students to complete their chosen work prior to graduation. These completed works are then subject to evaluation by a 3-person panel comprised of experts from outside.

What distinguishes general translation classes from literary translation courses is selection of text and reinforcement of re-expression. Generally, if professional translation is defined as accurate understanding of the text and rewriting what has been so understood using natural and clear expressions, the translation of literature is a more difficult task inasmuch as equivalents must be found to convey literary meaning, which is produced by the combination of form and content.

One obstacle in the process of re-expression is that—because they are used to word-for-word substitution in their undergraduate foreign language courses—students often try to solve a problem by looking for correspondences in a dictionary. This is due to a general deficiency in linguistic knowledge but also from failure to adequately understand nonlinguistic factors such as world view, encyclopedic knowledge, cultural implications, and textual subtleties. In Korea and abroad, foreign language courses resort to translations primarily

geared toward confirming content comprehension or emphasizing the use of customary expressions. In other words, accustomed to translation regimes that depend on direct equivalency of words or phrases, students frequently feel resistance to seeking a more appropriate expression, more natural and creative, in the target language. In particular, laboring under the compulsion to match the word count, students often come up with awkward translations in the target language. In college literature courses that emphasize comprehension of particular passages, using rigid literal transcription paragraph-by-paragraph, even re-expressions which do not make sense without reference to the source text are acceptable. But in professional translation, extra-linguistic elements are an important consideration and the translation should take into account the context, environment, culture, and other factors; it should sound natural and come across clearly by itself without reliance on the source text, transmitting the emotional charge of the original. If a translation is done with focus only on the meaning of individual words, it often results in a distortion of the overall meaning of the original text or makes it somehow less rich.

For example, the novel *Bonjour Tristesse* by Françoise Sagan is translated in Korean as “Goodbye, Sorrows.” Before reading it, the reader expects it to end happily. But its actual ending is—as is well known—the heroine’s first experience of sorrow. The Korean translation is the result of the translator doing a literal translation of *bonjour* without regard to the overall context of the word. Ironically, in spite of the title, this novel became a best seller and the title is going to stick—it will survive retranslations of the book as a whole.

In the same vein, according to a recent evaluation, by the English Literature Society, of Korean translations of American and British novels, questions have been raised regarding the ethics of translators and publishing houses. There is serious concern about the philosophy of translation as espoused by translators, mostly in academia, and their linguistic capabilities.

The goal of a training program for professional translation is to make the students creatively seek equivalent expressions that preserve the vital relationship between content and form so that the translated text can stand on its own as an independent work of art. The well-known theorist Cary states this as follows:

*La traduction littéraire relève de la littérature, la traduction poétique de la poésie, le doublage du cinéma et ainsi de suite, sans que, pour autant, le linguiste puisse se désintéresser d'aucun de ces genres. L'étude linguistique reste toujours un préalable, jamais une explication exhaustive de la nature profonde de l'opération.*

*(Literary translation, the poetic translation of poetry, the dubbing of cinema, and so forth, enhances literature without causing the linguist to lose interest in the power of these genres. The study of linguistics remains always a prerequisite, never an exhaustive explication of the profound nature of the operation.)* (Cary, 1985 : 86-87)

Let us now survey theories that relate to an educational program for literary translation.

## 2.2. Theories of literary translation

As discussed above, in literary translation linguistic expression and meaning are inseparably intertwined; and these relationships in one language cannot be preserved and recreated exactly when conveyed in the medium of another language. This is because each language goes about linking the *signifiant* with the *signifié* in an arbitrary fashion. Even between cognate or related languages, the coincidence of meaning between similar words is a rare occurrence.

Particularly, in the case of poetry, where the interplay between language and meaning reaches its maximum dramatic intensity—and sound effects and echoes, subjective percepts and emotions, and connotations and denotations of words combine with dizzying complexity—translation of the meaning on a cognitive level alone is only half of the work.

Since it is impossible to recreate an identical form (due to the inherent differences between languages) our translation instruction proceeds on a theory of translation aimed at recreation through stylistic equivalents, taking into account the unique interconnectedness of linguistic form and content in a particular language. This is the only way to transmit, to the readers of the target language, the emotional impact the text makes on its readers in the source language.

The theory of re-expression by means of equivalents, and not word-for-word substitutions, goes through an intermediate phase—what may be called a linguistic liberation process—as work moves from understanding of the source text to its re-expression in the target language.

*Le modèle interprétatif met l'accent non pas sur la langue mais sur le texte en tant qu'ensemble discursif et objet de la communication. Dans cette perspective, la forme est moins à reproduire qu'à interpréter comme partie intégrante du sens*

global dont le transfert constitue la raison d'être de l'opération. À la différence de la méthode contrastive, pareille démarche se fonde non pas sur la mise en relation des idiomes mais sur leur dissociation par le biais de la déverbalisation qui n'est autre que le dégageant des valeurs notionnelles et formelles de leur enveloppe concrète en vue de leur réexpression dans un autre idiome. Étape décisive qui entraîne la libération des moyens verbaux et permet de traduire en tenant compte non plus des structures linguistiques initiales mais des valeurs qui leur sont assignées, du contexte situationnel et des ressources de la langue d'arrivée.

(The interpretation model does not have language itself as its object, but places emphasis on the entirety of the utterance and its mutual communicability. From this perspective, the goal is not reproduction per se; rather, the interpretation must achieve autonomy of context and the transformation of this contextual autonomy is precisely the raison d'être of the translation act. On the other hand, a different comparative approach is to emphasize non-linguistic processes rather the methodology of interpretation; in order to highlight re-expression in the target language, this approach conveys specific intellectual and formal sensibilities primarily in view of their re-expression in another idiom. Given the great importance of non-linguistic processes, departing from the source language via this process of re-expression does not privilege the original linguistic structure, rather it applies resources suited to the situational context of the target language.) (Israël, 2000 : 256)

This fact becomes more compelling if we read what a literary translator has written to explain this theoretical backdrop using a more concrete example. Jean Giono, the renowned French writer who translated Melville's *Moby Dick*, gives in his introduction the following testimony regarding his translation experience:

*Levant les yeux de la page, il m'a souvent semblé que Moby Dick soufflait là-bas devant, au-delà de l'écume des oliviers, dans le bouillonnement des grands chênes.*  
[...]

*Nous [Giono et Lucien Jacques] nous sommes obstinés à essayer d'en reproduire les profondeurs, les gouffres, les abîmes et les sommets, les éboulis, les forêts, les vallons noirs, les précipices ...*

*(Lifting my eyes from the page, it has often seemed to me that Moby Dick was blowing over there, beyond the foam of the olive trees in the spray of great oaks.*  
[...])

*We [Giono and Lucien Jacques] ourselves have been obstinately assaying to reproduce the deep: the whirlpools, the abysses and the peaks, the cave-ins, the forests, the dark valleys, the precipices ...* (Giono, 1974 : 35)

That is, instead of struggling to give a literal translation of the expressions in the source language, he follows a regime of recreating the non-linguistic meaning that impacted his emotions upon reading the original text—the linguistic expressions Melville might have employed if he had described the scene in French.

If the translation is literal, not only does it become impossible to preserve the form of the passage in the source language, but the outcome of the translation process degrades into the creation of a meta-language; it cannot exist as an independent literary work. The goal of translations done in professional translation schools—whose aim is to understand the functions of language and produce a text in the target language that is equivalent in both meaning and form—is to communicate with readers through publication in the target language.

According to F. Israël, Professor at the Paris School of Interpretation and Translation, education for re-expression through a professional instruction program should not only stress writing, but must go through the following steps:

1. Recognizing characteristics in the linguistic form of the source text and grasping the style and other features of form;
2. Enabling students to understand the process of expression, and the resulting text, as a coherent whole and guiding them to arrive at clear and natural expressions;
3. Evaluation by professors to suggest improvements without ignoring the student's creative proposals, inculcating the joy of writing, and encouraging mutual editing and suggestions among students.

In critiquing assignments, the professor encourages the student's creative suggestions while cautioning, at the same time, against possible departures from the intentions and effects of the original; the professor suggests a number of possibilities rather than establishing a single model answer. Students frequently correct each other's work during the translation class, and this has the merit of catching many of the common errors at the student level, each learning from the mistakes of others. The professor does not only point out awkward expressions or erroneous translations but analyzes the causes of such mistakes and leads the

students to identify the problems on their own. Discussion during class locates the problem: whether the errors originate from lack of knowledge in a field, lack of linguistic capability, or deficiency in re-expression skills.

As a translation study tool, which often leads to improvements, students are particularly encouraged to bring the passages discussed with the professor to the attention of fellow students during study hours. During these study hours, which are as integral to the program as time spent in the classroom, texts are selected, individual translations are made, the results exchanged, and improvements suggested.

Finally, re-expression gains in importance when it is for literary translation and the target is a foreign language.

### ***2.3. Education for literary translation with a foreign language as target***

In general, the curriculum of a school for interpretation and translation has classes for interpretation or translation into a foreign language, but in the case of literary translation the realities of Korea present some unique characteristics. To convey its culture and literature abroad, Korea needs translators whose mother tongue is a foreign language; but since these are few and far between in reality, with minor differences among languages, it is chiefly Korean translators who do the work by teaming up with a foreign editor.

Classes proceed for a semester in this manner: the Korean student tries to accurately understand a text and create re-expressions that sound natural in a foreign language, whereupon the Korean professor suggests improvements by comparing the source text with the target product with the foreign editor stepping in to improve the expressions. This is how it is done at the Korean Literature Translation Institute, particularly in its Department of French and Korean. The merit of this method is that the entire process of translation gets laid out like an exploded view of parts in an anatomy class with the completion of the final version as the goal. The students learn to appreciate the translation and editing process by watching the interaction between the Korean and foreign professors as they identify meanings, recreate them through non-linguistic processes, and complete the re-expressions.

One important caveat is that selection of texts for translation should be made after careful consideration of genre and content, ease or difficulty of style, length,

and other factors. Students with elementary skills would be discouraged if the text is too Korean and the style too idiomatic or full of slang.

## **3. Suggestions for future education**

As part of the curriculum for professional translation, literary translation should be based on fundamental linguistic competence and supported by basic knowledge in the humanities, social sciences, philosophy, and the like that are necessary for understanding literature. However, except in classes at professional translation schools, one runs into difficulties when proposing or teaching a method that seeks creative sentences and compositions for literary translation. It is a frequent complaint among educators that the habit of literal translation—which arises from the beginning language students' practice of simply substituting with words found in dictionary definitions—impacts negatively on future professionally-oriented literary translation.

Although free foreign travel, general accessibility to language instruction, and advances in information and communication technology all provide an educational environment that facilitates foreign language acquisition, there does not seem to be noticeable improvement in the level of linguistic sophistication among the candidates for admission to the schools for interpretation and translation. What this suggests is that people with linguistic expertise may specialize in other areas in order to get jobs, or that the current curriculum in universities does not sufficiently encourage specialization in language study. What one needs for literary translation is not language adequate for ordinary communication purposes, but expressions that are complex, multi-faceted, and elevated, which can be acquired only through quality reading.

Often pointed out is the deficiency not only in linguistic competence, but also in common sense or general cultural knowledge. In other words, translation simply cannot proceed properly without basic nonlinguistic elements (intellectual ability, general knowledge, familiarity with subject matter, and the like). For translation student candidates, emphasis must be placed not only on the liberal arts programs of colleges, but also on the acquisition of broad-based knowledge and exposure to multiple global cultural experiences.

Since Korean literature is written in Korean, a minority language, it cannot contribute to the global community unless it is translated. Inasmuch as translation is done mostly by Koreans with foreign languages as the target, the urgency

of their training has long been pointed out. But there is practically no policy in place to aid such training through educational programs and institutions. The fact is that in 2007 the Translation Academy was just launched, and Ewha Women's University is still the only university with a School for Interpretation and Translation who has a training program for four languages (English, French, Chinese and Japanese). For qualifying literary translators, the Ewha program is the only one that administers examinations to certify competence in literary translation. Without government assistance, it is not possible for the one or two graduates to come out of the current system to meet the high demand for literary translation. So every fall, we are regularly attacked by the press. Invariably, they ask why we don't train and produce more talented translators. A professional literary translator takes a decade or more to mature, and college education has no room for it, preoccupied as it is with English exams for employment or preparations for civil service exams at various levels. This situation is not likely to change until KLTU offer the translators a consistent training program.

#### 4. Conclusion

We asked whether literary translation can be taught. Considering the few points we made in our paper, we feel the answer is "yes": we actually teach how to choose a text to be translated, how to understand it, and how to embark in the translation process. Some additional language skill courses and teaching how to broaden one's thematic knowledge of the world will definitely help.

We also described the training jointly offered by GSTU and KLTU. We reached the conclusion that the act of translating literature is close to the act of writing literature. From the very moment the meaning is clear, the trainees actually see the image or scene expressed before rewriting it.

Berman, Cary, Delisle, Giono and Israël tell us that the translation of a literary text must produce a fully independent and poetic text; the translator must not describe the text but rewrite it as if he were the first writer. Training courses for future literary translators consist in helping them to understand the text, and to rewrite an equivalent one in the target language.

In the future, we expect to improve our research by examining the role played respectively by the teachers, the Korean students and the francophone ones inside our study groups as far as the transfer of cultural elements is concerned. We could also focus our study on the rewriting process in literary translation.

Moreover it would be of interest to conduct a comparative study of writing and rewriting.

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