



Exploring the classical world

Homer - lost in translation?

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Hello. My name is Naoko Yamagata. In this part of the audio CD I would like to discuss some issues associated with studying literature through translated texts. I am taking the opening lines of the *Odyssey* as my example and we'll look at them in three different English translations. The purpose of this exercise is to compare different approaches taken by the translators and think about the various factors that they have to consider when translating their original text into another language. What happens in the process of translation? How should we use and appreciate different translations?

It would be useful to begin our investigation by looking at the original text. Let us get back to the first five lines of the *Odyssey*. The first step of understanding and translating a text in a foreign language - you take every word as it comes in its order and decide what each one means.

Words often have more than one meaning so you have to decide which meaning of the word applies to the given passage. For example, the very first word of the Greek original 'andra' in poetry can be translated as 'a man' or 'the man' so, as you will see later, the translators have made their own choices in interpreting that word in this context.

Also very few words are likely to have their exact equivalent in another language for each word has a range of meanings which makes up a particular atmosphere that a word creates in that language. This is called connotation and that is not likely to be exactly replicated in another language, no matter how carefully you choose a word, which can mean the same thing in certain contexts. For example, coming back to 'andra', the first word of the *Odyssey*, the equivalence of the word 'andra' and 'man' is not as exact and simple as one may first think. While 'a man' in English means a male person, 'man' on its own has traditionally been used in the sense of mankind. The Greek 'andra' on the other hand only means a male person and never means mankind in general. For 'man' in the sense of mankind and for a person both male and female, Greeks use another word, 'anthropos'. The word 'andra' has an unambiguously masculine feel to it which contrasts with the asexual 'anthropos' which occurs later in the passage at line three in the sense of 'people'. This subtle contrast is not as marked in the English pair of 'the man' and 'men' as in some translations. Translators have to look at each word's range of meanings, both the original and the one in the target language to try to find the best match possible.

But, even if we have looked up all the words in the original in a dictionary and understood their individual meanings, there is the question of word order or syntax, how the words are related to one another. The word order in Greek is very different from English and so the word for word translation, as you see here, does not make much sense. If you take it as an English sentence, words are far too jumbled up to be clear. For example, in line three, what are we to make of 'Of many men he saw cities and minds he got to know'. Obviously if you are the translator, you have to put the translated words in the order which makes them intelligible as English, so that you can communicate the meaning of the sentence to your readers, rather like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle.

But even if you have done that, will that convey to us all that the original text would have communicated to the ancient Greek audience or readership more than 2,500 years ago? The answer is clearly no, as you will have gathered from your reading of the five lines of the *Odyssey* with Chris in the first part of the CD. For one thing, as you have seen, Homer's works are in six-footed verse called hexameter. It goes 'andra moi ennepe mousa plutropon hos mala polla' and so on in the pattern based on the long and short syllables. It would be

difficult to fit English, which relies on the rhythm based on stressed and unstressed syllables, into that pattern and, even if you somehow managed to do so, the effect will not be the same as Greek originals, for you are likely to find them strange and unconventional, rather than natural as Homer should have been to ancient Greek audiences. From that point of view, translations in more familiar English poetic styles could be more effective in re-creating the poetic effect that Homer had on his original audience and that is certainly a choice some of Homer's translators have made.

That, incidentally touches on another matter which affects our reading of translated texts, not just poetry but any written text, generally, that is the matter of reception, how the original work is received by the audience or reader at the time it is first produced, and how its translations are received by later readers. The difference between hearing the poems, as the ancient audience did, and reading them which most of us do, goes without saying, but can we say that ancient Greek readers who read Homer in their native language, had the same experience as we have by reading Homer in translation? If not, why not?

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I don't think those of us who read Homer in translation have exactly the same reading experience as the ancient Greek readers did for various reasons. We might argue that the excitement that we feel when reading the story of Odysseus is common to anyone reading it in any language and that is true, to a certain extent, but modern readers' response to the *Odyssey* and the ancient Greeks' cannot be exactly the same, because our background knowledge and cultural expectations we bring to our reading experience are not the same as those of ancient Greek audiences and readers. The best illustration of this is the way we view the gods as characters in Homeric poems. For the Greeks Zeus, Athena, Muse and so on, were all living gods and goddesses who possessed a real power which caused storms or inspired poets to compose songs. For many modern readers they may only be strange names whose functions and attributes are just as obscure as their names. The poet, as he opens his poem, asks the Muse to sing and he and his original audience must have been filled with the awe of the divinely inspired poetry, coming down from the goddess through the poet. Readers of much later ages are not likely to share such thrills and awe they would have felt. This will be the case, not only with translations, but with original texts too for that matter. The texts do not have the same religious or cultural significance for readers today as they did for the ancient Greeks. So the translators have another brief. They have to try to translate anything peculiar to the culture of the original into something intelligible in the culture of the target readers. Sometimes they might have to attach notes to explain whatever is obscure and difficult to translate.

So to summarise what we have found so far, translators have to translate not just individual words, but also to consider the syntax and writing styles, and the needs and background knowledge of their readers, a rather complex job in fact.

So let us now turn to some actual examples and see what the translators have done to meet these challenges. First let us listen to the first five lines of Homer's *Odyssey*, translated by Richmond Lattimore.

Leighton Pugh

Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven far journeys, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel.

Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of, many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea, struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions.

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What was your first impression of this translation? Does the text flow naturally? How does this compare with the original in terms of rhythm?

Lattimore's style is a sort of free verse with six beat lines which tries to capture something of Homer's rhythm, but what about the actual expressions? Do you follow the meaning of each word and phrase easily or are there any expressions that you find strange or unclear?

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First of all, the phrase, 'Tell me Muse'. Who is this Muse? And who is this author who appears to be on speaking terms with this Muse? You might already know that the Muse is one of the patron goddesses of poetry but to those who don't, it does call for some explanation. So this translation seems to expect the reader to know a bit about Greek mythology and the relationship between poets and the Muse who inspires them. In fact it is a common Greek poetic convention to address a Muse or Muses at the beginning of a poem for inspiration, a convention which might have originated from Homer, but that is a matter of our background knowledge. We cannot expect the translator to convey that much information through translation alone.

As you compare Lattimore with a word for word translation, you will also notice that the one word 'polutropon' in line one, is replaced by three words, 'of many ways'. What does this mean? The original word is an epithet for Odysseus which literally means 'turning many ways' so from that it can mean 'much travelled', 'versatile' or even 'shifty' and Odysseus' character in the Odyssey is all of those things.

So Lattimore's 'of many ways' manages to hint at the rich connotation of the original 'polutropon' but the effect is not quite as obvious to us. We have to gather it from the wider context of the poem which is about to unfold. This is undoubtedly one of those occasions on which our reception of the translation differs from the experience of ancient Greek readers.

We can go on scrutinising every word like this and no doubt you will have many more queries but my overall impression of Lattimore's translation is that it is a fair and honest translation which does not deliberately miss out any word which is there, nor add any which is not there, but everything is accounted for. I think that we can follow the meaning of the text with little difficulty provided we have a bit of background knowledge, such as who the Muse is and something about the story of the Trojan War.

Lattimore was a classical scholar and his translation appears to try to meet the needs of those who want to study Homer through translation or to use it as an aid to studying the Greek original. His verse may not exactly replicate the Homeric hexameter but, to me, he seems to have succeeded in striking a fine balance between the meaning and the form. His translation is quite literal, matching the line-by-line progression of the verse. That makes his translation very useful as a textbook for studying Homer.