ON POETRY TRANSLATION:
THE IMPOSSIBLE, THE DIFFICULT, AND THE SUBTLE

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Poetry translation has been of special interest to both translation scholars and linguists, either taken as a focus of investigation (e.g., Suryawinata & Haryanto 2003; Hariyanto 2009) or mentioned in passing in scholarly discussion (e.g., Sitoresmi & Maisinur 2005; Hoed 2007). However, to the best of my knowledge, as yet there is no discussion of poetry translation viewed from the perspective of linguistic iconicity. This paper intends to uncover linguistic iconicity pertaining to poetry, as suggested by Perrine & Arps’s *Sound and Sense* (1984), an introductory textbook to English poetry. While everyday speech—as seen from the Saussurean paradigm—is mostly arbitrary (i.e., there is no logical connection between form and meaning), poetic language tends to be iconic (i.e., the form tends to suggest meaning).

The iconicity of poetic language shows up, among other things, in rhyme, alliteration, and the use of sound symbolism at the phonological level; and in parallelism at the syntactic and semantic levels. If a poem is strongly iconic, then the translation will become very difficult, if not impossible. According to the poet-linguist Roman Jakobson (1959), poetry is by definition untranslatable. The well-known Italian saying *traduttore tradittore* goes along with this line of reasoning: the translator is a betrayer. Is it true that poetry translation is betrayal? This paper, taking a rigorous structural approach, investigates poetry translation and finds out three translation categories: (a) the impossible translation, (b) the difficult translation, and (c) the subtle translation.

**The Impossible Translation.** Among strongly iconic poems are poems for the eyes. An example of these is John Hollander’s “Swan and Shadow,” written in 1969. Topographically, the poem presents itself in the form of a swimming swan and its shadow.

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Dusk
Above the
water hang the
loud
files
Here
O so
grey
then
What
When
Where
In us
No Upon us As at the very edges
of where we take shape in the dark air
this object bares its image awakening
ripples of recognition that will
brush darkness up into light
even after this bird this hour both drift by atop the perfect sad instant now
already passing out of light
toward yet-untroubled reflection
this image bears its object darkening
into memorial shades Scattered bits of
light
No of water Or something across
soon
Yet by then a swan will have
gone
Yet out of mind into what
vast
pale
hush
of a
place
past
sudden dark as
if a swan
sang
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From the topography above, it is obvious that “Swan and Shadow” is a strongly iconic poem. The question is: is it possible to translate this English poem into Indonesian? To answer this question, let’s “deconstruct” the swan—only the swan, but not its shadow—into a regular text:

(1) Dusk. Above the water hang the loud files. Here. O so gray then. What? A pale signal will appear. When? Soon before its shadow fades. Where? Here in this pool of opened eye. In us. No. Upon us. As at the very edges of where we take shape in the dark air, this object bares its image awakening—ripples of recognition that will brush darkness up into light ...

Below is an Indonesian translation (by the writer) of the “deconstructed” poem:


Setting the iconicity aside, it is clear that the “deconstructed” poem is translatable into Indonesian. However, if the Indonesian version is put back into the “swan topography”, the result is not an elegant swan, but a horrible water-bird.

Thus, the poem is translatable linguistically, but not topographically. This is probably due to the fact that many monosyllabic words in the English original are replaced by bisyllabic or trisyllabic words in the Indonesian translation.

The Difficult Translation. Works of great poets are always appealing to translators. In Indonesian literature, Chairil Anwar (1922-1949) has remained influential on the development of modern Indonesian poetry. Is was no surprise therefore that Burton Raffel (1993), an American expert in Indonesian literature, translated all Chairil’s literary works into English, producing the book The Voice of the Night. A close examination of the English translations in this book reminds us of the Jakobsonian postulate, which suggests that poetry translation is indeed very difficult, if not impossible. Consider several lines of the well-known poem “Dipo Negoro”, together with their English translation.

(3) Ini barisan tak bergenderang berpalu
Kepercayaan tanda menyerbu
Sekali berarti
Sudah itu mati

Maju

Bagimu Negeri
Menyediakan api
These soldiers don’t attack because drums summon them
But because faith drives them on
To mean something, once
Then die
Forward!
Your country has built you
A fire

Notice that so much is missing in the English translation: the rhymes and poetic equivalence (length of lines) pairing the “couplets” in the original, and hence the rhythm and also the “spirit” giving sparks to these lines. The translation problem here, besides owing to arbitrariness pertaining to words as linguistic signs, is also due to differences in syntax. English is a subject-prominent language, as made obvious in the translation, whereas in Indonesian subject may remain vague, as shown in the original poem. Briefly, this is an example of very difficult translation—the translated version conveys only the “message” of the original poem, but fails to preserve its literary quality.

The Subtle Translation. Among many attempts in poetry translation, some turn out to be quite successful. The poem “Huesca” by John Conford was translated by Chairil Anwar into Indonesian with the same title, well preserved both in terms of meaning and form—as can be seen in the following first two stanzas, taken from the four stanzas of the original and the translation.

Heart of the heartless world
Jiwa dunia yang hilang jiwa
Dear heart, the thought of you
Jiwa sayang, kenangan padamu
Is the pain at my side
Adalah derita di sisiku
The shadow that chills my view
Bayangan yang bikin tinjauan beku
The wind rises in the evening
Angin bangkit ketika senja
Reminds the autumn is near
‘Ngingatkan musim gugur kan tiba
I am afraid to lose you
Aku cemas kehilangan kau
I am afraid of my fear
Aku cemas pada kecemasanku

A close look at the original poem and its rendition into Indonesian reveals that this is indeed an excellent translation, as characterized (a) by preserving the equivalence in lexical choice, in poetic message, and in style; and (b) by preserving parallelism at the syntactic and semantic levels. In other words, the literary quality of the original is well preserved in the translation: a good poem in English is “recreated” into a good poem in Indonesian.

In English literature, the well-known example of successful poetry translation is The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam. The anonymous translation was first published in 1859, and became popular several years later as it was discovered by D. G. Rossetti and other literary scholars in 19th century England. The translator, Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1883), then became so occupied with this work that he revised it again and again. The Dover Edition (1990) includes the complete sets of the first and fifth editions, noting that this work is not really a translation proper but rather a free adaptation of the rubaiyat (quatrain) by Omar Khayam (1048-1122), a notable Persian poet. Fitzgerald was accordingly considered as “creating what was essentially a new work of English poetry”. Among the famous quatrains in the English translation is the following:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise now!

This poem—its hedonistic content aside—sounds perfectly English, with no trace of translation. Hence English readers no longer think of what the original Persian poem sounds like. Just as
Chairil’s “Huesca” is well accepted as a “new member” of Indonesian poetry, Fitzgerald’s *Rubaiyat* is also well accepted as a “new member” of English poetry. At this point, the concern is beyond preserving the poetic quality of the original; but how successful the translation is in entering the poetic genre of the target language (TL). Of course, very few translated poems achieve this goal; and when they do, they are examples of subtle poetry translation.

To summarize, highly iconic poems are impossible to translate; poems in general are very difficult to translate; and when subtle translation occurs, making the translated versions new members of TL literature, there are two possible reasons: (a) the translator is a great poet, or (b) the translator is both a poet and a “great betrayer”.