The Folktale of Translation:
Making Sense of an 'Alien' Culture

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1. Introduction

Folktales are an interesting case of similar mind/thought operating throughout the world. Be it in the west, east, north or south, similar tales have been told of miracles happening to poor but honest and hard-working individuals; greed and ingratitude ending up in misery, animals talking and giving clues to good fortune; dreams which guide or foretell; siblings in dispute; farmers and stories of their harvest; fishermen and tales of the sea; kings and queens; princes and princesses.

Many of the stories are familiar and one can usually tell what the outcome is. However, the interesting part is not so much in the story but in the way it is told in different societies and cultures.

The task for the translator seeking to transfer a tale across cultures is to find a means of re-presenting it in a different language which is acceptable to the new hearers but does not misrepresent the content or the spirit of the original. It will be shown that worldwide the folktale (and especially the fable) share a common essential syntax and differ only in their morphology. In other words, the number of event types they contain is limited and the order in which they occur relatively fixed, while the cast of characters, though also limited, is more flexible in the choice of actors to play the parts. This constitutes an enormous and probably unique bonus for the translator: a genre whose rhetorical conventions are close to universal.

2. The traditional folktale

Folktales are a major and universal component of the oral traditions of human societies. They typically take the form of narratives, have (until recent creations) no known author and, until the invention of writing, were told from memory by storytellers or bards, often professionals, who had the additional role of passing them on to subsequent generations of storytellers.

In terms of content, such tales encompass a vast range of genres - fairytales, legends, fables, tall tales, and humorous anecdotes – all of which are linked by their use of a limited set of "motifs" (traditional elements) and prototypical "plots" (tale types). For this reason, the structure of the folktale not only makes it easier for the storyteller to remember but also provides a template for the transfer of existing tales from one community to another, across time and space, and facilitates the creation

of new tales by manipulating the membership of the cast or shifting the location of the story.

A rough distinction might be made between long and short tales. Long folktales tend to have human protagonists, heroes and antiheroes who are often Princes, Princesses, Heroes, Witches, Fairies, Elves, Gnomes and even Gods, Devils, and Angels. In these tales, if animals appear at all, they tend to play minor rather than major roles. The long folktale is exemplified by such tales as the *The Sleeping Beauty and Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* or *Beowulf* and *The Iliad*.

In contrast, the major role-players in the short folktale, are normally talking animals: real animals and birds such as lions, rabbits, bears, eagles, owls or mythical beasts such as dragons, and even talking inanimate objects, rocks, trees, lakes, rivers, or the forces of nature: often the wind. Humans, if any, play the minor supporting roles. Examples of the short animal dominated tale can be seen in the archetypical fables of Aesop and, more recently, the *Brer Rabbit* stories.

Naturally, the balance between "long" and "short", human and animal and major and minor can shift from tale to tale. There are, for example, "long" fables such as *Narnia* and, in some instances, the "animals" turn out to actually be human: more often than not, handsome princes who have been turned into loathsome toads or ugly beasts by some malevolent witch or sorcerer.

3. The fable

Many short folktales are fables: a subset ("subgenre") of the folktale, with predominantly animal characters and, most importantly, a didactic purpose. Although many tales contain "lessons" of an ethical nature, it is normally implicit rather than explicit. The reader (more correctly, "hearer") is not told the "moral" but is expected to infer it.

The fable, in contrast, is defined by its explicitness. It contains exemplars of good and bad behaviour and attitudes or provides sage advice on how to deal with challenging situations. This is frequently done by direct teaching or, if indirectly, through irony or satire. In the Western Tradition (though less so elsewhere), the fable is brought to a close by the unique epigram: a short, pithy saying which encapsulates the "message" and drives home the "lesson" in a memorable way, some of which (Aesop's "sour grapes", "dog in the manger", "cry wolf", and "wolf in sheep's clothing" for example) have become part of the language.

4. Origin and development

Although Westerners are likely to assume that the first fables were those of the Greek storyteller Aesop (6th century BCE) – including the well known *The Hare and the Tortoise, The Fox and the Grapes, The Lion and the Mouse* or *The Crow and the Pitcher* – there is strong evidence to suggest that the fable has its origins in India around 6th century BCE.

Hundreds of fables were composed in India during the first millennium BC, often as side stories within epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, with the first written collection, the *Bidpai*, dating back to around 300 CE

In medieval Europe, the fable flourished with a number of collections being circulated such as those in the late 12th century of Marie de France (see Martin, M.L. 1984) and reached their zenith of popularity in 17th-century France in the works of Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695) whose hero, Reynard the Fox, not only became the archetype for all animal tricksters in the Western tradition but whose name is now the standard French term for "fox": *le renard*.

The appearance of children's literature and the notion of the "bedtime story" in the 19th century further popularised the fable as a vehicle for inculcating "correct" rules of behaviour in the young. The best known is the Grimm Brothers' 1812 *Children's and Household Tales*, better known today as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

In the last century too the fable continued to assert its continuing popularity through world famous publications including Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902) and George Orwell's political satire *Animal Farm* (1945) and, in this through cartoon films such as *Bambi* (1942) and, even more recently, *Antz* (1998) and *Shrek* (2001).

The folktale (including the fable) has even found its way into IT, both as authoring software and computer games and in the field of academic studies of the relationship between fiction and social interaction (see Arvidsson 2005 on this).

5. Universality

It is by no means an overstatement to say that fables are a universal cultural constant which is present in virtually all human societies. This is surely inevitable because:

...there are universal dilemmas or problems of human existence. Every country and every organisation in that country faces dilemmas:

- In relationships with people
- In relationship to time
- In relationship between people and the natural environment

While nations differ markedly in **how** they approach these dilemmas, they do not differ in needing to make some kind of response. People everywhere are as one in having to face up to the same challenges of existence.

Trompenaars F & Hampden-Turner C 2001.182 (original emphases)

World wide, human societies have had to deal with these challenges and have had to find ways of ensuring that their young acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required for coping with them when they become adults. The long folktale preserves and passes on the traditional story of the community. The short folktale (and especially the fable) has the role of socialising children in order to enable them to take their place as active members of society.

Fables and folktales are stories born of the life and the imagination of ordinary simple folks in the villages. They are usually the farmers, the wood-cutters, firewood-collectors, fishermen and the like. Many of these stories described how people in traditional societies deal with and explain ordinary events as well as extra-ordinary happenings in their lives. Often, the stories are a reflection of their own hopes and desires as they live their difficult lives.

Scholars in the field of traditional literature believe that folktales develop and spread from one country to another through travelers, merchants, scholars, missionaries, prisoners of wars and the like, orally. This explains the slight variations between one story from one place and that of another place, since there is no one book or source which contains the original folktales.

6. Structure

Folktales and fables tend to share many common structural features and this is far from surprising given that:

> Social interaction, or meaningful communication, presupposes common ways of processing information among the people interacting…The mutual dependence of the actors is due to the fact that together they constitute a connected system of meanings: a shared definition of a situation by a group… An absolute condition for meaningful interaction… is the existence of mutual expectations.

> Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997. 20.

The power of the folktale lies in its appeal to this "connected system of meanings: a shared definition of a situation" and "the existence of mutual expectations."

The first attempts to describe the structure of the folktale can be found in the pioneering work of Vladimir Propp (1895-1970): *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp 1968).

Propp took a sample of 100 Russian folktales and analysed them in terms of a closed set of seven character types and 31 actions ("narratemes": the smallest meaningful narrative unit) and their legitimate combinations. On the basis of this, he was able to reduce the complex variations realised in actual tales to a relatively simple model.

Many of Propp's character types - the hero, the villain, the (magical) helper, the false hero – and actions (Holbek 1986:335) – trickery, mediation, struggle, victory, rescue – appear in the fables we are studying. However, Propp's analytical techniques are most successful when applied to long and complex human-oriented tales and are over-sophisticated for the short animal-oriented fable with its smaller cast of actors, reduced series of actions, and brief duration.

In an alternative approach (Paulme 1976), which appears to offer a more suitable model, seven types of African folktales are identified and classified in terms of their

narrative morphology and syntax: the choices of act available and the chain of sequences in which they can occur.

The seven types consist of combinations of situations of *lack* and *normality* which apply to the (usually two) main characters whose reciprocal relationships shift and constitute the story as it unfolds.

However, once again, the model is over-sophisticated for our needs, since the Malay and Korean fables display a very simple structure in which the two obligatory main characters are frequently joined by an optional Fixer (cf. Propp's "helper") who tends to be detached from personal involvement and remains in a neutral "normal" position throughout,. The main protagonists (we may label them "X" and "Y" thus avoiding such notions as "hero" and "antihero") fill normal or bad situational slots, typically reciprocating each other's position e.g. if, at the beginning of the story, X is in a bad situation (B), Y will be in a normal one (N).

The fables demonstrate very clearly a pattern which can be simply stated in terms of Game Theory (M S Smith 2003): X wins and Y loses; X loses and Y wins; X and Y both win; X and Y both lose. Not surprisingly, the win-lose or lose-win type tends to predominate, the win-win or lose-lose stories being far less common. Presumably this is because even though the moral - co-operate or die – certainly teaches the need for consensus, it does not find expression in exciting memorable stories. £

In short, the common, simple basis of the fable facilitates understanding and the creation of new tales and this view finds support in the existence of software which can create original tales based on the underlying model (e.g. the *Proppian Folktale Outline Generator* and the *Proppian fairy tale generator*).

For the translator, then, the potential problems will be found in the paradigmatic choices which fill the syntagmatic slots in the chain of the narrative as it unfolds. The actions will, in other words, be common and unproblematic but the actual characters who perform these actions and whose interaction constitutes the story, may well differ from culture to culture.

7. Animal symbolism

Most significant in this, since the main characters of the fable are, universally, anthropomorphic animals, is the issue of animal symbolism. If we accept some form of the reduced model suggested above, (two obligatory and one optional role players), we need to identify the main players - the active agent, the victim, the fixer – and ask what animals are typically assigned these roles.

Worldwide, there is a remarkable consensus on the allocation of "good" and "bad" roles to particular animals (see *animal symbolism* and the *Beast Fable Society*).

Positive virtues are typically symbolised by gentle creatures who are themselves good and display diligence, intelligence and quick wittedness: fish are associated with knowledge, birds with prophetic knowledge, horses, cattle, and pigs represent fertility. In the fables they are typically the victims of the bad characters.

The **Owl** is, however, a curious anomaly: in Europe, wise; in India, stupid; in SE Asia, a bird of ill-omen (*Burung Hantu*: "Ghost Bird" in Malay).

Evil is, in contrast, typically symbolised by large and aggressive animals who typically display stupidity, greed and ingratitude and are the perpetrators of the harm done to the victims.

However, particularly where "evil" animals are concerned, the consensus appears to break down and focus on the general characteristics of the animal – large and aggressive - with the selection of a particular creature varying from culture to culture.

For example, the **Wolf** in Europe is the wicked, devious animal of choice: like the Fox only worse. In the Native American and Indian traditions however, the wolf symbolises loyalty, success, perseverance, stability, interdependence, intuition, thought, and learning, and acts as a guide and teacher.

In East and Southeast Asia, the functional equivalent of the negative western wolf is the **Tiger** who symbolises strength, ferocity, power, anger and both the creator and the destroyer. European Werewolves are transformed in the Malay world into Were Tigers (*Hantu Belian* in Malay) and the European wolf that eats and impersonates Little Red Ridinghood's Grandma is replaced in Asia by a tiger.

The **Fixer** appears to be a special case, played by a range of animals with shared characteristics: a playful, clowning, humorous, prankster who symbolises duality and the ability to present both sides of an issue. In the Native American tradition he is the **Coyote**; in the Malay, the **Mousedeer**; in the **Korean**, the **Rabbit**.

11. Korean and Malay Fables

For Korean society, folktales are a way of imparting good values and guidelines to the young for living a noble and honest life. The most obvious teaching is that good deeds will bring about good fortune, bad ones will receive retribution. Equally, family relationship between siblings, between husbands and wives, between parents and children are highly valued. The characteristics of being loving, filial, loyal and respectful are inculcated from a very young age, and stories encouraging these abound in the Korean society.

In the Malay society, although similar sentiments are valued and desired, the tales are nevertheless varied, some tend to lean toward the macabre and retributions are sometimes without mercy. There are no particular stories that Malay people are fond of (unlike the Koreans who refer to their folktales as stories to grow by).

The very well known ones that have been made into films are those of the ungrateful son who in the end is cursed by his mother (and turned to stone), the mother who has a deathwish (and is swallowed by a haunted cave) because her young children did not think of her when they finished her favourite fish roe, and the stories of a dim-witted man who misunderstands every instructions from his wife (for some reason this man called Pak Pandir is well known to all in Malay society).

In spite of their differences in form and in purpose, much is shared by Korean and Malay folktales: the same animals as aggressors and victims and the same kind of animals as fixer. Further, there is an underlying current of animism and shamanism in both traditions overlaid by the more recent influence of Buddhism and Confucianism and of Islam respectively.

The influence of Islam (from the 15th century), brings King Solomon (*Nabi Sulaiman*: the "Prophet Solomon") into the Malay folktale as a revered king with the magical ability of speaking with animals.

12. Translating Folktales and Fables

Before even starting, the translator must make a strategic decision on whether the translation should be oriented towards the source or the receiving culture.

If the first, the process will be one of overt translation or foreignisation in which the product mimics the conventions of the source culture.

If the second, the process will be one of covert translation or nativisation in which the product adopts the analogous conventions of the receiving culture (see Toury 1995: 56ff and Holmes 1988:25 on this).

In a discussion of this issue, a Taiwanese translator ponders the functional equivalence of tiger and wolf in her rendering into English of the traditional Chinese tale *Tiger Grand Aunt* which shared its most significant features with the European *Little Red Ridinghood*:

> After crossing the Pacific Ocean, the Tiger Grand Aunt is changed into a big bad wolf. Does this mean the translator is not faithful to the original text? What are the reasons and the results of the change? How do we explain the change through translation studies?
>
> Hung-Shu Chen 1997. 1

Quoting Bell (1991: ch 1), Halliday (in Steiner and Yallop 2001: 13) asserts that for a translator, translation theory is the study of how things *ought* to be (i.e. what constitutes a good translation and what can help to achieve a better or more effective product), whereas to the linguist, translation theory is the study of how things *are* (i.e. the nature of the translation process and the relation between texts in translation).

It is not my intention to take sides and ally myself with either the linguist/theorist or the translator/practitioner, since I am both a linguist and a practitioner, and also a translator educator.

For me, Halliday's observation on the translator's orientation is extremely relevant. The translator (as translator) tends not engage in overt theorising. If (s)he theorises at all, it is not at the abstract level of language as a system or of culture as a system. It is at the pragmatic level of seeking ways to improve translation by engaging with

language as text and recognising that different texts realise different registers and different registers are realised as different texts.

Such is the case in the translation of folktales. They are a special kind of text marked by and realised as a special kind of register: even a "genre" (or at least a subgenre) in their own right with a structure which carries over across cultures and geographical boundaries, as has been shown in earlier sections of this paper.

This has profound implications for the notion of equivalence between the "original source text" and the "translated target text".

For me, achieving equivalence has to mean achieving equivalent at the level of register and, as folktales and fables seem to share very similar structures across cultures, this kind of equivalence is not hard to achieve, given the intended audience and the purpose of the texts.

To illustrate this, two stories (Korean and Malaysian) are chosen: both have been translated into English from the Malay version. The Korean one is about a traveller and a tiger, the Malay one is about a buffalo and a crocodile.

The remarkable resilience and continuity of the folktale can be seen in an almost identical version of this particular tale which collected from a traditional Malay storyteller by the famous British linguist (W. W. Skeat) more than a century ago during an ethnographic expedition in Malaya.

1. The beginning of a tale

The beginning of a tale is universal in character. The narrator usually begins with the formulaic "Once upon a time, there was a ..." or a variation of it thus setting up the "mutual expectation" (Trompenaars op cit) that what is to follow is a folk tale.

An instance of this can be found In the Korean folktale (translated into Malay from the Korean by Korean students of Malay in Korea) about a traveller and a tiger and begins with (lit.):

> One day, a traveller was walking along a path at the foot of a hill....

Which the students translated as

> *Pada suatu hari ada seorang pengembara yang sedang berjalan di sebuah jalan denai di kaki gunung.*

The Malay version of the tale begins:

> *Pada suatu hari Sang Kerbau sedang asyik memakan rumput yang hampir dengan sebuah sungai*

> One fine day a buffalo, Sang Kerbau, was busy eating grass near a river.

2. The characters

The Malay translator has no problem recognising and understanding all the animal characters in the Korean folktales, since the animal symbolism is almost identical. Even in the human characters, there are equivalents: the farmer, the wood-cutter, the arrogant wealthy brother, the greedy neighbour.

In the two stories in the examples, the three key players are:

- The slow-witted and ungrateful character played by the tiger in the Korean tale and the crocodile in the Malay,
- The victim played by the traveller in the Korean tale and the buffalo in the Malay.
- The fixer, the judge, or mediator is played by the rabbit in the Korean tale and the mouse deer in the Malay.

3. The plot

In terms of plot, there are a great many similarities between Malay and Korean tales and for the translator, the question to resolve is whether to add and embellish according to the target language and culture convention or to retain the foreignness of the source story.

The common pattern for the plot is: someone is in trouble, he asks for help, a bargain is struck and a condition is agreed upon. However, as soon as he is free from his difficulties, not only does he forget his promises but he becomes ungrateful and even takes advantage of his saviour. Finally, a counsel is found in the form of a nonchalant and clever little character who solves the dispute and gives the parties concerned what is due to them and goes on his way unperturbed.

This is essentially the plot in the examples of Malay and Korean stories.

The exchanges

What is interesting to the translator are the exchanges between the characters which constitute major moves in the development of the story. It is here that the translator's own knowledge of target language and culture can be put to effective use. Some examples from both stories are given to show the remarkable similarities.

Pleading for help:

Korean: "Ah Sir, please don't leave me here. Please save a stupid tiger..."

("Ah Tuan! Tolonglah jangan tinggalkan saya di sini. Tolonglah selamatkan harimau yang bodoh ini..)

Malay: "Oh, please help me, Sang Kerbau!"

("Oh tolonglah aku, Sang Kerbau!")

Striking a bargain and making promises:

Korean: Then he said, "Alright tiger, I will help you, but you must promise not to harm me!" The tiger quickly said. "Yes. Yes, I promise!"

(Baiklah harimau, aku akan tolong engkau, tetapi engkau mesti berjanji tidak mempengapakan aku!". Harimau itu menjawab, "Ya. Ya, aku berjanji!")

Malay: "All right," said the buffalo, "but promise me that you will not harm me once you're free". "Yes, I promise. Now please help me!" said the crocodile.

("Baiklah," kata kerbau, "tapi berjanjilah kepada aku yang engkau tidak akan mempengapakan aku bila engkau lepas". "Ya, aku berjanji. Sekarang tolonglah aku!")

Complaining of the injustice:

Korean: "I feel so deceived, after saving you, I am now your victim..."

("Aku rasa sungguh teraniaya, setelah menyelamatkan kamu, aku pulak jadi mangsa kau").

Malay: "I helped free Sang Bedal and now he wants to eat me up!"

(Aku telah menolong melepaskan Sang Bedal dan sekarang dia hendak makan aku pulak!")

Giving counsel:

Korean: "I really can't make decisions just like that, I have to be crystal clear about what happened...hmm, is this the hole you fell into?"

("Saya tidak boleh membuat keputusan begitu sahaja kerana saya belum jelas apa yang sebenarnya berlaku...hmm, inikah lubang di mana kamu jatuh?")

Malay: "I must really go into the question thoroughly before I answer it; let us go back together to the trap."

(Aku mesti pertimbangkan persoalann ini dengan mendalam sebelum aku menjawanya; mari kita pergi semula ke tempat perangkap itu.")

The ending

In both tales, the bad one gets what he deserves. The tiger ends up back in the hole; and the crocodile back under the tree trunk. Although for the Malay traditional folktales, it is not often clear what the moral of the story is (since the story teller's purpose is just to entertain), in most Korean tales, there is a moral lesson to be inferred, though it does not usually end in an epigram in the way it does in Aesop.

A pertinent question to be considered is to what extent the notion of equivalence should be entertained, i.e. can an adaptation or a paraphrase be considered equivalent to source texts? Yallop (2001: 231) observes that judgement about similarity, identity, equivalence across cultural and linguistic boundaries can be a problematic issue. The issue is explored using a text that appears to "stretch translation to, or, beyond its limits": in Nancy Sheppard's translation into the Australian Aborigine language *Pitjanjatjara* Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* becomes "Alitji in the Dreamtime" and, among many other things, the white rabbit is replaced by a white kangaroo.

The translation is judged to be ingenious, despite discrepancies between the translated text and the source text, and the replacement of equivalence by correspondence. The point made by Yallop, with which I agree, is that 'equivalence can be judged with the help of reference to almost universal objects, procedures and structures' (2001: 241).

In the introduction to his collection of Malay folktales, Skeat (1901) discusses the dilemma of "equivalence": being too literal can lead to an unreadable text but conforming to Western conventions can lead to a loss of the "quaintness" of the original. His solution is to keep closely to the original by retaining some of the Malay expressions but avoiding what he calls the "'luxuriance of Oriental phraseology".

13. Conclusion

Universality of structures of a text, and universality of societal values in different human communities cease to make the other culture 'alien'. In fact, for as long as cultural values refer to honesty, integrity, the sense of gratitude and generosity, they unite peoples in different parts of the world. Translating texts of this nature, especially folktales and fables, makes it clear that equivalence of *expression* is not as important as equivalence of *intention*.

Folktales and fables are told and written to entertain and at the same time to impart values (when told to the young). A successful translation will be one which makes principled choices between the available words and stylistic conventions to re-present the story in a way which is deemed to be natural, acceptable and appropriate to the receiving culture.

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External links

Aesop's fables: http://www.umass.edu/aesop/

Animal Symbolism: list of animals and their characteristics http://animals.raconter.net

Beast Fable Society: academic society focused on fables and related genres:
http://beastfablesociety.org/

The Dragon-Tyrant: dragon fable: http://www.nickbostrom.com/fable/dragon.html

Fables: collection and guide to fables and fairytales: http://lefavole.org.en

Folklinks: folk and fairytale sites: http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folklinks.html

Folklore and Mythology: electronic texts:
http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html

Imaginexus: collection of interconnected editable stories:
http://www.communitywiki.org.odd/Imaginexus/

Proppian Folktale Outline Generator:
http://www.stonedragonpress.com.wicca_201/vladimir_propp/oral_tradition_00_a.html

Proppian fairy tale generator:
http://www.brown.edu/Courses/FR0133/Fairytale_Generator/gen.html

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