

A poetic նարեթո

Robin Meyer adopts a resistant approach to translating the multilingual poetry of troubadour Sayat'-Nova

Almost every translation bears its challenges – finding the *mot juste*, the right turn of phrase, the idiom closest to that in the original. Yet translation goes beyond just transposing words, phrases and sentences into another language; the task of the translator, in the words of Walter Benjamin, is to transmit, to let echo the underlying intention of the original in the translation.¹ To be true to that task, we can neither just retell the original nor provide a literal translation.

These two extremes, as the poet John Dryden recognised in the 17th century, are best avoided in favour of giving the original thought “either the same turn if our tongue will bear it, or if not, to vary but the dress, not to alter or destroy the substance”.² In essence, he advises staying as true to the original as possible without doing violence to the target language. A perfectly sensible maxim, or is it? In certain fields of translation this is more easily said than done. Consider poetry or, to put the cherry on the cake, pre-modern poetry, or even *multilingual* pre-modern poetry.

I face this conundrum at the beginning of a long-term project: the translation into English of the Armenian poetry of Sayat'-Nova, an 18th-century troubadour who lived and composed in and around Tiflis (modern Tbilisi, Georgia). He is revered in the Caucasus as one of the greatest folk singers and composers, and his songs are well known and oft recited to this day in their original languages: Azeri, Georgian and Armenian.³ Despite his fame, no complete English translation of his largely romantic poetic songs is available in English. English versions of some poems can be found online; others have been partially translated by Sayat'-Nova scholar Charles Dowsett.



One of the reasons these pieces are so challenging – and perhaps why a published translation is as yet lacking – is their multilingual nature. The Armenian poems are written in the dialect of Tiflis, transfused with borrowings from Georgian, Azeri, Turkish and Farsi. These loanwords did not survive in Modern Eastern or Western Armenian, the varieties most commonly spoken in the Republic of Armenia and the international Armenian diaspora.

The task of translation thus brings with it the challenge of finding not only the origin of these loanwords, but also their precise meaning in 18th-century parlance. In poem 26, Sayat'-Nova uses the term նարեթո (/nɑɾɑtʰ/), best translated as ‘painting, artwork’. This word is derived from Farsi شاقن (/naqqɑːʃ/; ‘painter’), ultimately a borrowing from Arabic شاقن (naqqāš; ‘engraver, inscriber’). Both original terms designate occupations, but cannot do so in Armenian,

where only a product is possible in the context. A compound նաղաչքար (*/nɑvɑʃk'ɑr/*; 'painter, artist') is used later in the same poem.

Maintaining flair and diversity

In addition to these lexical issues, there is the matter of style and form. Armenian has, with very few exceptions, word-final stress and in verse, at least traditionally, uses metres based on the number of syllables rather than stress or syllable weight. Sayat'-Nova employs numerous different metres and stanza shapes, but end-rhymes are a unifying factor. In some poems the same rhyme occurs in all lines; elsewhere there is a rhyme per stanza or a more intricate pattern.

How then can the intricacies of the multilingual verses be translated into English without losing too much of the original flair and diversity, all while staying close to the unusual form but without going beyond what is acceptable and expected in English? I suggest we cannot – and need not.

Why abandon a form – syllable counting and continuous end-rhyme – that is unusual but not impossible in English? Why abandon multilingualism when English speakers, too, know other languages, even if they use them differently than the courtiers of 18th-century Georgia? A resistant translation, which breaks with the conventions of the target language, results in a text that feels distinctly unfamiliar and requires the reader's attention because it doesn't conform to their expectations.⁴

In the context of translating Sayat'-Nova's poetry, this means finding a way of rendering the various loanwords in such a way as to evoke the same effect as they would (or at least might) have had on contemporary listeners, and sticking as closely as possible to the poetic form employed.

Given the plethora of borrowings from different origins, this is not a straightforward task. Choosing neighbouring languages, such as French, Cymraeg and Gàidhlig, as analogues for Azeri, Turkish and Farsi would not achieve the desired goal, since few speakers of British English are sufficiently fluent in all of these languages.

Even leaving behind geography and looking at the languages spoken most commonly in England besides English, we arrive at an impasse, since the intersection of speakers of Polish, Panjabi and Urdu – the

most common second languages according to a 2013 ONS report – is similarly limited. In trying to find a language analogue, perhaps a reductive approach is the only viable solution: all loans could be rendered as French words or phrases. This loses some detail but maintains the 'othering' strategy.

A radical strategy

An alternative approach is 'materilingual estrangement'. This involves setting the text differently using typographical means to assure comprehensibility but impede reading flow. We might simply set text in *italics* or **bold**, or go a step further and have it *ᲑᲗᲟᲛᲓᲙ*, turned *nbzıqɛ-qomɔ* or set in an unusual *script*. For the translation of Sayat'-Nova's poems, I choose to render Turkish loans as mirrored, Azeri loans as upside-down, and Farsi loans in Fraktur font.

The bilingual and materilingual translation strategies give us very different, but equally interesting, results. Poem 26 consists of five quatrains with 16 syllables per verse (see the first two stanzas, right). For both translations I had to increase the syllable count to 20, but maintained the rhyme scheme.

These approaches are unusual, perhaps even radical in part, and will not be to everyone's taste. They do, however, allow us to come as close to the original and its intended effects as translation will allow. For a genre such as this – pre-modern romantic court poetry or song – the maintenance of both form and linguistic variety would appear to be the best way of conveying the original in translation. This illustrates that, as translators of less usual material, we have to be bold on occasion.

Notes

- 1 Benjamin, W (1991 [1923]) 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers'. In Rexroth, T (ed), *Walter Benjamin Kleine Prosa, Baudelaire-Übertragungen, Gesammelte Schriften IV.1*, Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 16
- 2 Dryden, J (1680) *Ovid's Epistles, translated by several hands*, London: Printed for Iacob Tonson
- 3 The Azeri poems are most numerous but least studied; there are also six poems in (fairly poor) Russian.
- 4 See Venuti, L (1995) *The Translator's Invisibility*, London: Routledge; and Tsikoudis, E (2019) 'Empowering Words'. In *The Linguist*, 58,4

Poem 26 (first two stanzas)

Թամամ աշխար պըտուտ էկա, չը թողի Հաբաշ, նազանի.

Զը տեսա քու դիդարի պես՝ դուն դիփունեն բաշ, նազանի.

Թե խամ հաքնիս, թե զար հաքնիս, կու շինիս դումաշ, նազանի.

Էնդու համա քու տեսնողըն ասում է վա՛շ, վա՛շ, նազանի:

Դուն պատվական շավակիր իս, էրնեկ քու առնողին ըի.

Ով կու գըթնե՛ ան շի քաշի, վա՛յ քու կորցընողին ըի.

Ափսուս, վուր շուտով մեռիլ է, լուսըն քու ծընողին ըի.

Ապրիլ էր, մեկ էլ էր բերի քիզի պես նաղաշ, նազանի:

Bilingual

The world en entier I've been around, did not even miss Africa, ma chérie.

Yet I did not see the likes of your visage – you're le sommet of all, ma chérie.

You can dress en loques, you can dress en lin – for you will make it de soie, ma chérie.

And thus it is that whoever does behold you keeps saying 'Woe! Woe!', ma chérie.

You are an exquisite joyau – let there be a blessing for the one who holds you.

Whoever finds you does not sigh 'Ahh...' – let there be woe for the one who loses you.

It is a shame she died so young – let there be light for the one who gave birth to you.

For had she lived longer, she would have borne yet another œuvre d'art, ma chérie.

Materilingual

The ցիտն Երկունքս իմ Երկունքս, did not even miss Africa, *my darling*.

Yet I did not see the likes of your **face** – you're the յթծ յլո՞վ of all, *my darling*.

You can dress **in rags**, you can dress յլո՞նի նի – you will make it շլլկ, *my darling*.

You are an exquisite յեմեյ – let there be a blessing for the one who holds you.

Whoever finds you does not sigh 'Ahh...' – let there be woe for the one who loses you.

It is a shame she died so young – let there be light for the one who gave birth to you.

For had she lived longer, she would have borne yet another **masterpiece**, *my darling*.