

Translator as Narrator: Aspects of Narratology in Translation

Berrin AKSOY¹

¹Prof. Dr., Department of English Translation and Interpretation, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Atılım University, Turkey, berrin.aksoy@atilim.edu.tr, ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0001-5716-1962

Abstract

This study examines Genette's narratology concepts to highlight the important relationship between translation and narratology utilizing comparative analysis of original and translated texts. The translator's task requires an awareness of the need to study a literary text within the framework of narrative theories, gaining insight into the intricate and complex narratological qualities that define its literariness, which should also be recreated in the target language. Drawing inspiration from Russian formalism and structuralism of the early to mid-twentieth century, translation studies scholars have highlighted the importance of narrative concepts in literary texts when discussing how to recreate literariness in the target language. Once again, this study underscores that translation is a multidisciplinary act essential to literary and linguistic studies.

Keywords: literary translation, narratology, narrative, narration

1. Introduction

This paper explores how the relationship between translation and narratology theories can be evaluated in light of Genette's theory of narratology. To this end, Genette's central concepts of narratology will be discussed under three headings: order, duration, mood, and voice (point of view). Their applicability in translation, as revealed in the translator's decision-making process, will be examined through analyses of specific passages from literary texts and their translations into Turkish. Indeed, translation scholars such as Theo Hermans and Jeremy Munday have highlighted the intersection of translation studies and narratology, pointing out that "when we read the translated narrative, the original narrator's voice is not the only one which comes to us" (Hermans, 1996, p. 23). By stating this, he emphasizes the translator's reproduction of the narrative structure using "paratextual intervention for the benefit of the implied reader of the translated text; when self-reflexive references to the medium of communication itself are involved; when 'contextual overdetermination' leaves no other option" (p. 23). The reworking of the narrative structure is related to linguistic use, cultural context, and the translator's choices and contextual manipulations of the original text. In the

same article, Theo Hermans, who is the earliest translation studies scholar to draw attention to the relation between translation and narratology, explains his reasons as follows:

Translated narrative discourse, it will be claimed, always implies more than one voice in the text, more than one discursive presence. It may be that in many narratives, this ‘other’ voice (the translator’s) never clearly manifests itself. Still, it should nevertheless be postulated, on the strength of those cases where it is manifestly present and discernible. (Hermans 1996, as cited in Ferreira, 2019, p. 26)

Additionally, Ferreira in her MA thesis writes that another scholar who expresses her views on narratology and translation is Schiavi, who “postulated that the process of translation significantly changes the structures of narrative, not only its stylistic, also using the concept of the “translator voice” to analyze shifts in translation with a narratological approach to literature.” (Schiavi, as cited in Ferreira, 2019, p. 26). Schiavi emphasizes that the translated text, unlike the original, has two narrators: the original text’s narrator and the translator, addressing one reader, the target reader. This observation recalls Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony, or in Hermans’ terms, “plurivocality of discourse” (Hermans, 1996, p. 44). M. Bakhtin’s book *The Dialogic Imagination* mentions that in a literary text, primarily a novel, the narrative structure consists of multiple voices, perspectives, worldviews, and attitudes that coexist and interact. Meaning emerges from the interaction of different voices. In translation, it is the task of the translator to identify and understand this plurality of voices in order to recreate the meaning in the translation (Bakhtin, 1981). Jean Boase-Beier, one of the prominent scholars of Translation Studies, writes about the importance of style and its weight in literary translation and how a style analysis of the text to be translated will yield more successful translations in many of her works, such as *Literary Translation: Redrawing the Boundaries* and in her article that appeared in *Language and Literature* (See Boase-Beier, 2014; Boase-Beier et al., 2014). In her study, Ferreira (2019) also underscores Boase-Beier’s opinions on the importance of narratological awareness and knowledge of translators in their literary translation endeavours. Within this background, this paper postulates that Genette’s concept of narratology can be studied to explore how translation’s path intersects with narratology and equips the translator and the translation studies scholar with valuable insights into the theory and practice of translation.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian formalists’ systematic investigation of the structure of literary narrative and their questioning of what makes a literary text literary in terms of its formal composition paved the way for a thorough study of narrative structure. The literary quality of a text and its presentation in narrative form are significant concerns for the translator as they undertake a smooth transference of literariness.

Therefore, Genette’s theories of narratology significantly impact the translator’s decision-making process and provide insights into how to explore the narrative mechanisms to fully understand the text and translate it effectively.

French literary critic and narratologist Gerard Genette, in his seminal work *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, delved into the diachronic relationship between what we may refer to as content and form, asserting that a literary text is an independent entity that should be read from the perspective of the distinction between “fabula” and “sujet”: between the “what” and the “how” of the narrative (Lodge, 1980). Genette’s proposed method, discussed in this paper, is inspired by the structuralist movement, Russian formalism, and Chomsky’s 1950s generative grammar concept. According to Genette, methodological clarification (Genette, 1980, foreword) is required to facilitate a more precise description of a narrative in its particularity and to subordinate poetics to criticism, transforming the concepts, classifications, and procedures he proposes in his writing into ad hoc instruments exclusively for such analysis (Genette, 1980, p. 22). Genette postulates that systematically investigating and differentiating fabula and sujet will provide both the narrator and the translator with a range of options in the literary work and develop “a true poetics of fiction” (Lodge, 1980).

Studying the impact of Genette’s narratology theory on translation may serve as a solid starting point for understanding his concepts of narrative. In his seminal book, *Narrative Discourse*, Genette employs three meanings to clarify what he means by narrative. In his own words, the first meaning is:

A first meaning—the one nowadays most evident and most central in common usage—has narrative refer to the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events. (Genette, 1980, p. 25)

This statement implies that the term “narrative” refers to any speech or discourse found in a literary text. Genette explains the second meaning as follows:

A second meaning, less widespread but current today among analysts and theoreticians of narrative content, has narrative refer to the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc. (Genette, 1980, p. 25)

Here, Genette means that the actions in a literary text constitute the second meaning of narrative. He describes Ulysses’ adventures from the fall of Troy to his arrival on Calipsyo’s island in *Ulysses* (Genette, 1980, p. 26). Similarly, Genette explains a third meaning to the notion of narrative:

A third meaning, apparently the oldest, has narrative refer once more to an event: not however, the event that is recounted, but the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself. (Genette, 1980, p. 26-27)

This definition concerns the translator; in the translation, he will be the second narrator narrating what someone has already narrated. Narrative, then, depends on what is narrated and how it is narrated in the translation.

This plurivocality of discourse confirms what Hermans and Schiavi underline: the voice of the narrator and the voice of the translator. Hence, a translator who is well-informed about the intricacies of narrative and aware of their role as the voice of the narrator, who narrates the narrative, as well as their voice for the translated and transformed narrative, will try to

understand the structures and processes of translation and work more carefully on their steps in the translation process.

Genette underlines that without a narrating act, there is no statement and sometimes even no narrative content (Genette, 1980, p. 26). He concludes that his study mainly deals with the most common use of the term narrative, which is narrative discourse, since it is most pertinent to literature and represents the literary text itself (See Genette, 1980, introduction).

2. Discussion

In translation, the narrative structure of a literary text and its analysis are the primary undertakings of the translator. Although the translator may exert some degree of manipulation in the narrative structure of the translation that does not correspond to the original, their task remains the same: to recreate the narrative for the reader. Manipulative initiatives may depend on how cultural signs and linguistic forms are handled, on the audience's expectations, and on the literary conventions of the target culture. Nevertheless, a translator must fully understand what is told (narrative events) and how it is told (narrative discourse). Genette's key concepts and structural analysis of narrative events and narrative discourse reveal the structure of a story. Additionally, the narrative situation, which refers to the perspective from which the story is presented, plays a crucial role for the translator in analyzing and exploring all the formal and stylistic qualities of a text for translational purposes. Genette's distinction between *fabula* (story) and *sujet* (discourse), or the events in the story in chronological order and the way the narrator conveys them, is vital for the translator to combine them in the target text as in the original text. According to Genette, *sujet* differs from *fabula* in time, mood, and voice (Genette, 1980, pp. 25-35). These levels are essential for the translator to decide how the content matter (story) and how it is narrated (*sujet*) should be recreated in the translation.

These aspects of narrative levels are not Genette's only contributions to translation. His key concepts in narratology, categorized as follows, also offer a relevant framework for analyzing a literary text for translational purposes. The first one of these concepts is the order. It refers to the sequence of events in a literary text. Events can unfold in chronological order, or through flashbacks and flashforwards. The translator must identify flashbacks that recount events occurring before the point in time being narrated, or project events expected to transpire as flashforwards, where the story is presented before the anticipated events occur (Genette, 1980). In Jack London's story *How to Build a Fire*, the order of events is conveyed through flashbacks and flashforwards as the man and his dog venture into the harsh winter conditions of Yukon Valley in search of gold. The story reveals the order of events in a disjointed manner, as the "plot" begins earlier than the story "narrated," exemplified by the opening paragraph: "Day had dawned cold and gray when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail" (London, 2013, p. 1).

According to the story, the dawning day had already broken before the man began to walk. Aware of this fact, the narrative is recorded after some time has passed. This narrative structure, when carefully explored and interpreted by the translator, allows them to choose the appropriate verb tenses and time adverbs in the target language to recreate the meanings behind the language's structure while preserving and conveying the non-chronological narrative. Here is the Turkish translation of the same passage by Cinemre:

Adam ana Yukon yolundan ayrılıp nehrin yüksek kıyısına tırmanarak geniş ladin ormanının içinden doğuya doğru uzanan yola, üzerinde çok az gidilip gelinmiş belli belirsiz bir izden ibaret patıkaya saptığında, soğuk ve renksiz, fazlasıyla soğuk ve renksiz gün henüz yeni ağarmıştı. (London, 2019, p. 1)

Among other shortcomings in the translation, one first notices that the translator has merged the two sentences into one. This unnecessary choice diminishes the impact of the two short sentences, which stylistically parallel the fast-moving pace of the man walking in the snow and the narrator's style. Furthermore, the order of events narrated is compromised, as the temporal significance of the first sentence in the original opening statement appears at the end of the combined translation, leading to a loss of the temporal sequence's impact. From a translational perspective, the translator may have opted to expand the translation by repeating "Day had dawned cold and gray" as "soğuk ve renksiz, fazlasıyla soğuk ve renksiz gün.." likely believing that this would add fluency to the text, a change that seems pointless and represents an unnecessary intervention on the translator's part.

The second concept Genette mentions is "duration" between narrative and story, which he describes as "inaccessible and unverifiable" (Genette, 1980, p. 87). Genette asserts in his book that: "Comparing the 'duration' of a narrative to that of the story it tells is a trickier operation for the simple reason that no one can measure the duration of a narrative. What we spontaneously call such can be nothing more, as we already said, than the time needed for reading, but it is too obvious that reading time varies according to particular circumstances and that, unlike what happens in movies or even in music, nothing here allows us to determine a normal "speed of execution" (Genette, 1980, p. 86).

In other words, the development of the narrative, the speed and time it takes to unfold, and the order and period of the events in the story are not always compatible or equal. In translation, the concept of duration helps translators identify the specific time events take and, conversely, the time the narrative takes to unfold that particular event, which is not the same. The translator must decide whether to adhere to the same period for a specific event. This decision should consider the pace that the target language allows, the purpose of the translation, and the nature of the intended audience. The use of time adverbs, verb tenses, and other grammatical conventions of the target language influence the translator's choices. Additionally, the duration of the narrative and the events in the story should also guide the

translator. To clarify Genette's concept of duration and its importance in translation, a paragraph from Joyce's short story *Araby* and its Turkish translation might be examined:

The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent Street. The career of our play brought us through the dark muddy lanes behind the houses where we ran the gauntlet of the rough tribes from the cottages, to the backdoors of the dark dripping gardens where odours arose from the ashpits, to the dark odorous stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harnesses. (Joyce, 1965, p. 1965)

The Turkish translation by Belge is as follows:

Soğuk hava iğneliyor, vücutlarımız alev alev olana kadar oynuyorduk. Bağırılarımız sessiz sokakta yankılıyordu. Koşup oynarken evlerin arkasındaki karanlık ve çamurlu ara yollara girdiğimiz oluyordu-burada gecekonduarda oturan vahşi kabilelerin arasına düşüyorduk, karanlık ve nemli bahçelerin arka kapılarına geliyorduk- çöp çukurlarının kokusunu alıyorduk; bir arabacının beygiri kaşağıladığı ya da süslü koşumları sallayarak müzik yaptığı kokulu karanlık ahırlara bakıyorduk. (Joyce, 1992, p. 36)

The events unfold in consecutive order, within a brief time frame and without pause. This sequence illustrates how swiftly the children run and roam while playing on the street. Consequently, the narrative pace is fast-moving and unfolds in sequence. According to Genette, such narration is called "iterative narration" combined with stretched duration and represents a habitual but important action (Lodge, 1980).

The concept of duration also includes tempo, and for the translator, it represents a significant dimension in translation that depends on the characteristics of the target language. A description in the original language may not be transferred directly and may require expansion or condensation based on the target language's potential and literary conventions.

In the excerpts taken from the original story and its Turkish translation, the iterative narration, which depicts habitual events that occur when children play outside, is expanded in the translation using semicolons after each translated action. This punctuation choice affects the rhythm and flow of the narrative: while the original conveys a sense of continuous, fluid motion as the children swiftly move through various gardens and places, the semicolons in the translation introduce pauses between actions. As a result, what was initially a seamless, dynamic sequence becomes a series of discrete, segmented events. Thus, the children's swift running through various gardens and places loses its sequential quality and is presented as paused actions, unlike in the original.

Genette's third key concept, which is significant for translation, is focalization, and he discusses it under the "mood and voice" concept. Genette prefers the term "focalization" over "point of view." To him, the Anglo-American term "point of view" conceals and confuses two very different aspects of narrative: the perception of the action and the narrating of that action; in other words, the question "who sees?" and the question "who speaks?" These are never one and the same person except in present-tense interior monologues such as Molly Bloom's in *Ulysses* (Lodge, 1980).

In Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, the narration describing Azaro, the abiku child's first encounter with his father's humiliation at being seen while performing slave labour is as follows:

And as the salt poured on his shoulder, tears streamed from his eyes, and there was shame on his face as he staggered right past me, almost crushing me with his mighty buckling feet. He appeared not to have seen me and he struggled on, trying to bear the load with dignity, weaving in the compensating direction of the load's gravity My wanderings had at last betrayed me, because for the first time in my life I had seen one of the secret sources of my father's misery. (Okri, 1991, p .114)

The narrator in this passage is not the small abiku-child Azaro; instead, the scene is viewed through the boy's eyes. He serves as the "seer" while an adult narrator recounts the scene. Although it is a first-person narration focused on the boy, there exists the "distance" that Genette refers to between the narrator and the narrated events. The boy, Azaro, observes his father in this situation, and the distant and mature narrator conveys the scene to the reader. The Turkish translation by Aksoy is as follows:

Omuzlarından ter dökülürken, gözlerinden yaşlar boşandı babamın ve güçlü ayağıyla beni ezercesine önümden tökezleyerek geçerken yüzünde utanç ifadesi vardı. Beni görmemiş gibi davrandı ve onurla yükü taşımaya çalışarak, yükün ağırlığının ters yönüne eğilerek mücadelesini sürdürdü..... Gezintilerim sonunda ihanet etmişti bana; çünkü yaşamımda ilk kez babamın mutsuzluğunun gizli nedenlerinden birini görmüştüm. (Okri, 2002, p. 176-177)

The first-person narrator is preserved in the translated narrative, maintaining the distance between the boy's and the narrator's accounts. What Genette calls 'internal focalization' in the novel means that the narrator presents the story through the eyes or perspective of Azaro, limiting the information available to the reader to what the character sees, knows, and narrates. This concept of "focalization" helps the translator construct the grammatical and linguistic structures allowed by the target language's rules and conventions. By remaining aware of the focus in the narrative, the translator, as seen in the above excerpt, can create the same effect on readers as felt by the original audience, thus replicating the same immersive quality.

As mentioned earlier in this study, in Genette's narratology, focalization is the key element in his concept of "mood and voice." Mood refers to the narrative's handling of the events occurring in the story and how they affect the reader. In some narratives, the mood is gloomy, as in Dickens's *Bleak House*; indifferent, as in *To Light a Fire* by London; or bleak, as in Hardy's *The Withered Arm*. It can be joyous and emotional in other narratives, as seen in Alexander McCall Smith's *Ladies No. 1 Detective Agency* novels. In Jack London's *To Build a Fire*, the narrative voice is a heterodiegetic narrator. This third-person narrator is not a character in the story. However, the main character, the man on his way to a camp in Yukon Valley, is presented through his own experiences, judgments, and decisions, which have grave consequences for his life. On the other hand, the narrator is detached and unintrusive, creating

the impression for readers that what happens in the end is solely the result of man's misjudgement in the face of the forces of nature.

The following passage describes how the third-person narrator establishes the mood and voice in the story:

The man put more tobacco in his mouth and started a new growth of yellow ice on his face. Again, his moist breath quickly powdered the hair on his face with white. He looked around him. There did not seem to be so many pools of water under the snow on the left side of Henderson Creek, and for half an hour the man saw no signs of any. And then it happened. At a place where there were no signs, the man broke through. It was not deep. He was wet to the knees before he got out of the water to the firm snow. (London, 2013, p.70-71)

Genette's concepts of mood, voice, and focalization provide the translator with significant insights when deciding on the next steps. The narrative mood of detachment and the internal focalization on the character help the translator recreate the equivalent mood and focus, ultimately resulting in a similar effect on the reader. The Turkish translation by Cinemre is as follows:

Adam ağzına bir tutam tütün atarak yeni bir kehribar rengi sakal oluşturmaya başladı. Nefesinin nemi çok geçmeden bıyığında, kaşlarında ve kirpiklerinde beyaz zerreler oluşturmuştu. Henderson Deresi'nin sol kolunda öyle çok kaynak var gibi görünmüyordu, nitekim yarım saat boyunca adam buna dair bir işaret fark etmedi. İşte her şey o anda oldu. Hiçbir işaretin bulunmadığı, altı gayet sağlam görünen yumuşak ve bozulmamış karlarla kaplı bir yerde, ayağının altındaki katman kırılıverdi. Düştüğü yer fazla derin değildi. Hemen sağlam tabakanın üstüne çıktı ama bu arada dizlerinin yarı mesafesine kadar ıslanmıştı (London, 2019, p.10).

The translator has preserved the narrative voice of indifference and detachment in his translation, while internal focalization offers the reader limited information about the event. The gloomy mood is also effectively conveyed in the translation. This example leads us to conclude that the translator has paid careful attention to the narrative quality of the original story and has succeeded in recreating it for the target reader.

3. Conclusion

This study discusses two issues: first, the significance of narratology in translation studies, primarily as proposed by Genette; second, by examining excerpts from original English stories and their Turkish translations, it explores how aspects of Genette's narrative concepts apply in translation to illuminate the translator's task of recreating the literary text in the target language while preserving the narrative qualities that contribute to its literariness. Thus, we can conclude that a translator should cultivate a thoughtful understanding of the narrative qualities of a literary text to maintain the elements that constitute its literariness.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The analysis is restricted to literary texts and focuses specifically on the English–Turkish language pair, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other genres or language combinations.

Additionally, the study primarily draws on Genette's narratological framework, which, while influential, does not encompass the full spectrum of narrative theories that could enrich translation analysis. Future research might expand the scope by exploring different narrative models or applying similar methods to other language pairs and textual genres.

Disclosures

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