

Different Deaths: Emily Dickinson's Death Poems in Translation

Diferentes muertes: poemas traducidos de Emily Dickinson sobre la muerte

Andrea Vázquez Piñón
andie.vazquez@yahoo.com.mx
Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the concept of Death in Emily Dickinson's poems as it was translated into different languages. The discussion brings together a series of accounts by researchers and translators who reflect on various renderings and the way cultures interfere in the interpretation and reconstruction of the poems. The information gathered provides different perspectives on the understanding of the concept of Death to outline significant cultural problems regarding the translation of Dickinson's death poems.

Key words: literary translation; poetry; cultural differences; death.

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una visión general del concepto de la muerte en los poemas de Emily Dickinson y cómo fue traducido e interpretado en distintos idiomas. La discusión reúne una serie de investigaciones y traducciones que reflexionan sobre diversas interpretaciones y la forma en que las culturas interfieren en la interpretación y reconstrucción de los poemas. La información recopilada proporciona diferentes perspectivas sobre la comprensión del concepto de la muerte con el fin de delinear problemas culturales significativos en torno a la traducción de los poemas que tratan el tema de la muerte en la poesía de Dickinson.

Palabras clave: traducción literaria; poesía; diferencias culturales; muerte.

The way people deal with death, in all its aspects, changes across cultures. Wittenberg-Lyles mentions that talking about death implies making sense of death, as well as understanding and interpreting the dying process. In addition to the biological process that the body goes through when dying, there are also spiritual elements to the death process that need to be understood and explained (55). According to Ko, death is normally perceived as outside of the

person's control, and life, including death, is believed to be guided by God or other powerful supernatural forces that provide pathways for each person to follow (9). In these pages I will examine the accounts of researchers and translators who discuss the translation of Dickinson's Death poems into a variety of languages.

It is generally accepted that here is no such thing as just one worldview and one interpretation of a poem. Accepting that notion leads to admitting that there are different perspectives in translating poetry. Besides the translator's perspective, it also must be considered that "it is just not possible to convey a message to any audience regardless of their cognitive environment" (Thorsell 28). Translation of poetry might be considered, in general, a difficult process. Calvillo talks about three issues that may be the reason why some people have deemed poetry as "untranslatable":

a) translating poetry presents technical complications of extreme difficulty; b) poetry translations are not always satisfactory, either in relation to the original or considered on their own; and c) the concept of translation, along with what is expected of it, is incompatible with the results that the practice can yield (57).

Even though these three issues may seem something that could never be successfully dealt with, Calvillo argues that one single volume of poetry, among the years and years of translated poetry that exist out there, is enough to prove that poetry is not untranslatable at all (57).

Translating Dickinson's poems into various languages brings up a variety of results where death is dealt with differently, depending on the target audience. Paul Celan's translation of Dickinson's poems suggest that "Death is in many ways a meridian that cannot be directly explained because of its physical and spiritual components. Even as language attempts to explain death, it must do so by exploring all the different lines on the globe. As those lines meet and cross, the poet can start to approach death" (Devey 26).

The fact that death is a common subject in Dickinson's poems, that does not entail the theme is as common in the poetry of other cultures. According to Xu, in only seven of the poems translated into Chinese during the years 1984 to 2011 that he examined, death received significant attention from the translators. All seven contain bold and unusual depictions of death or after-death scenes. Some people may hope that the dead exist in some way and that their dead ancestors might be somehow blessing them, but that may change depending on the audience's

culture. Perhaps it is Dickinson's conception of death and how she describes it, combined with other different elements that make her poems so appealing for readers and a challenge for translators. "Translators must negotiate between the lines in order to figure out the essence or spirit of a poem, to know what Dickinson's thoughts were and what tone her speakers use" (Xu 113). Retranslation of literary texts is a common thing, but Dickinson's poems have been translated several times, and every time they are seen under a different light, expressing different meanings (Xu 114). Baranczak comments that translating Dickinson into Polish calls for stylistic principles, and obtaining help to match style, verse construction and composition is a complicated and difficult process (122). In translating her poetry, the best hope a translator may find is having enough opportunities for improvement to try and avoid losing much necessary information in the process. Baranczak found out that the relatively easy areas of literary traditions and cultures in translating Dickinson into Polish are more than made up for by the difficulties caused by linguistic features, those "inherent" to the poetic text and those "forced upon" it (123). The relatively easy areas are those phenomena which are natural traits of the English language, traits for which the poet is not responsible (although she may rely on them and use them deliberately for her own purposes). And the difficult ones are those linguistic (or rather, in this case, stylistic) phenomena which represent the poet's creative treatment of language, her unique use of it, and her poetic freedom.

Baranczak discusses an aspect of English that can pose a threat to translations to other languages such as Polish (and Spanish). Perhaps the greatest loss in translating into Polish results from the fact that there is absolutely no way to retain the male personification of Death, a quality "forced upon" the English language by Dickinson's deliberate use of the pronouns "He" and "His." English has the characteristic of having genderless names for inanimate objects; however, every Polish noun is masculine, feminine, or neuter. In Polish, Death (*Smierc*) carries a feminine gender not just grammatically, but also in the way it has been traditionally personified culturally, mainly in arts and literature since the Middle Ages. To make things worse, *Smierc* has no masculine synonym in this context (the masculine noun *zgon*, for instance, has a medical / legal meaning and means the moment of life's termination rather than the continuous state of death or death as a metaphysical phenomenon) (Baranczak 125). Obviously, presenting Death as female distorts the entire set of personal relationships implied in Dickinson's poem. From a potential seducer, Death turns into a female acquaintance from the neighborhood who gives the speaker a

lift. Maybe some arrangements can be made to try and save the essence of the intended “male” Death, but surely it would not solve the problem completely.

Not only linguistic and cultural aspects must be considered when a text is translated to another language, but also others that have to do with legal and political matters. Anikeeva points out how Russian readers love Emily Dickinson’s poetry since her poems about God, religion, death, and life after death were read with popularity by the end of the 20th century (99). Before that, with the social restrictions and literary criticisms imposed by the Soviet Union, the topics on literature were different, and “Dickinson’s poetry was not socially important” (Anikeeva 99).

Takeda talks about the translation of the poem “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” and the cultural, ideological, and theological challenges it conveyed. The poem contains a satirical or cynical tone in Death’s civility, due to the deeply-rooted idea of “Death as a seducer” in Christian tradition. In the translation, the use of the word “kindly” often leads Japanese readers to miss the satirical or cynical tone and they end up carelessly reading the whole poem (Takeda 130). Takeda also mentions that there is no happy equivalent of “immortality” in Japanese, not as it is intended in relation to Christianity (131). This for sure causes a different reaction in the Japanese readers compared to the American readers or any other reader with notions about the Christian religion. Takeda concludes that “due to the mixture of linguistic and cultural problems, (...) the Japanese need detailed explanations to understand it fully” despite the popularity of Dickinson’s poem (132).

Hagenbüchle offers information on how German, French and Italian translators struggle to balance loss against gain in Dickinson’s poems. He compares how German translators tend to be faithful to the metrical form and the rhyme pattern of the original, whereas French and Italian translators prefer semantically exact versions, leaving metrics and rhyme patterns of the original aside. There are also differences on the morphological level. Both German and Italian show a high degree of etymological similarities with the original, unlike French, which has loosened the relation between the noun and the adjective (Hagenbüchle 31-32).

Cultures differ from one another. Those differences produce obstacles as we try to communicate across languages through translation. Andre Lefevere insisted that every translation, therefore, undergoes a series of inevitable adjustments. He proposed that all changes fit into one of four major categories: ideology, universes of discourse, poetics, and language.

Ideology relates to the modifications a text suffers as it travels to other culture where certain ideas, topics and words are deemed inappropriate or offensive. Censorship is an example of this category. The concept of universes of discourse is related to terms and ideas are present in the source text but do not exist in the target culture and, therefore, in the target language. Poetics relates the differences of text types and genres across cultures. Throughout history, translators have faced the complexities or translating texts whose genres have no equivalents in their target cultures. Language, apparently the most obvious, an get to be kind of tricky. In Lefevere's classification, language relates to the ways we use it: speech acts and language functions (87-88).

As we can conclude from these accounts, translators of Dickinson's death poems have encountered complications in Lefevere's first three categories: ideology, universes of discourse, and poetics. Anikeeva presented the ideological obstacles of translating Dickinson's work during Soviet regime. Hagenbüchle compared versions that reproduce sound patterns or meaning, thus following one preferred poetics or another. However, the most noticeable complications derive from differences in the universes of discourse. Death is part of life. It is universal and inevitable. Yet, what we make of it is not.

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