CHALLENGES IN LITERARY TRANSLATION: 
A CASE IN ENGLISH-VIETNAMESE TRANSLATION 
OF “THE GREAT GATSBY”

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Abstract: The present study aims to analyze challenges that the translator confronts in the English-Vietnamese translation of “The Great Gatsby”. The major method adopted in the study is comparative descriptive approach, which enables the researcher to describe the difficulties in the English-Vietnamese translation of “The Great Gatsby”. The findings unravel a number of constraints associated with linguistic and cultural differences between the source and the target language. Several recommendations to overcome the hindrances are also proposed.

Keywords: challenges, English-Vietnamese translation, literary translation

1. Introduction

The 21st century fosters nations around the world to come together in tremendous vigor to promote socio-economic development; thus, translators have been entrusted with the role of bridging the gap between people coming from various cultures. As a result, a surging number of novels have been translated into diverse languages. Among those, “The Great Gatsby”, a masterpiece by F. Scott Fitzgerald first published in 1925, has also been made available for the readership all over the world. With a unique writing style and profound insights into American values, Fitzgerald has been greatly regarded as one of the most influential representatives of American literature in the 1920s (Perkins, 2004).

Following its fame, the novel has been translated into Vietnamese. Among the translated versions, the translation of Trịnh Lữ (2009) has indeed attracted a myriad of contending reviews from translators (Đỗ, 2010). Therefore, the researcher aims to conduct the minor study entitled “Challenges in literary translation: a case in English-Vietnamese translation of The Great Gatsby”.

2. Challenges in Literary Translation

According to Catford (2000), instances of untranslatability can arise from two major sources, including language and culture.

Linguistic translation problems emerge due to structural differences between the Source Language (SL) and the Target Language (TL). Linguistically, each language has its own metaphysics that determines the spirit of a nation and its behavioral norms. Since words or images may vary considerably from one group to another, the translator needs to pay attention to the style, language, and vocabulary peculiar to the two languages in order to produce an adequate translation of the SL text.

Culture and language are closely interrelated. It is widely known that language is an integral aspect of culture. Nida and Taber (1982) also mentioned that words have meanings

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only in terms of the total cultural setting. Seeing eye to eye with other scholars, Newmark (1995) defined the culture as the way of life and manifestation that are peculiar to a community that uses a peculiar language as its means of expression. Culture includes and affects language; it is the ground from which language grows and develops.

According to Cui (2012), challenges for literary translators can be material culture, traditional culture, religious culture, and historical culture. First, different nations are in different places and will have distinct images for the same thing. For example, Vietnamese culture has “áo dài, bánh chưng, nhà sàn” and so forth. Western culture may have “pizza, sushi, continental breakfast”. It would be a huge challenge to deal with those culture-specific materials. Second, people live together in one country or region and will form their own traditions; these traditions will be passed from generation to generation. In other countries or regions, people may not have those traditions, thus making these traditions possibly untranslatable. For instances, in Quan ho Bac Ninh folk songs, there are some traditional customs such as “túc kết cha, túc ngụ bon” which merely exist in Vietnamese culture. Third, the history of a nation is the record of social development. Idioms and legends provide ready support in this respect. An idiom or fixed expression may have no absolute equivalent in the TL.

By and large, during the process of translating literary texts, there are linguistic and cultural challenges due to the cultural gaps between the SL and the TL. It is not adequate for the translators to know what words are used in the TL. It is even more vital for the translators to make the readership understand the sense as it is understood by the readership of the SL.

3. Methodology

Given the afore-mentioned research aims, this research encompassed the comparative descriptive design in order to compare and contrast the original with its translation.

The novel “The Great Gatsby” is selected in this study. The researcher collected comprehensive data from nine chapters of both the source text – the whole novel “The Great Gatsby” (1993) by F. Scott Fitzgerald of Wordsworth Editions Publisher and the target text – “Đại gia Gatsby” (2009) by Trịnh Lữ of Nhã Nam Publisher.

“The Great Gatsby” is selected as a case of this study because it is regarded as one of the greatest American masterpiece written by F. Scott Fitzgerald (Perkins, 2004). The novel was published in 1925; however, it was not until thirty years after its first publication that the novel finally found its remarkable position in American literature. This fact appears intriguing to many researchers; thus encouraging them to explore the reasons underlying the late-coming and everlasting popularity of this novel. “The Great Gatsby” has appeared in various reviews, articles, and studies. In the book The Fictional Technique of Scott Fitzgerald by Miller (1949), the author considered it “one of the finest pieces of American literature”.

Following its fame, “The Great Gatsby” has been translated into numerous languages in the world, including Vietnamese. The translation “Đại gia Gatsby” by Trịnh Lữ was selected as the case of this study because it was the updated version among three translated versions published by Nhã Nam Publisher in 2009. More significantly, the translation “Đại gia Gatsby” has received a huge number of mixed reviews and contending commentaries from the readership; hence, it would be meaningful in order to examine the “The Great Gatsby” and its translation “Đại gia Gatsby”.

4. Challenges in English-Vietnamese Translation of “the Great Gatsby”

4.1. Challenges in Translating Proper Names

In “Đại gia Gatsby”, the translator adopts non-translation in dealing with proper names. Nonetheless, it is inarguable that “The Great Gatsby” is prominent for its use of distinctive language (Liu, 2010). The author meticulously selected names to convey a message and lace with symbolism to give the characters more meaning.

For instance, Gatsby’s name is a typical example of Fitzgerald’s amazing choice of words. The real name of Gatsby is James Gatz.
“Gatz” is a name of German origin. He changes it to Jay Gatsby after he meets Dan Cody on his yacht and leaves with him to travel the world at the age of 17. The name Gatsby is a play on words. “Gat” is a slang term for gun that is ironic since Gatsby was shot with a gun at the end of the novel.

Another example is the name “Buchanan”. The name Buchanan is a name for someone wealthy, pretentious, snobby, and sophistication auras are emitted from this name (Luft & Dilworth, 2010). This name connects to the American Dream because it represents someone wealthy, which is a part of the dream for most.

Regarding Daisy Buchanan, Daisy’s first name is a flower. The name fits with Daisy’s beauty and superficial purity. On the surface, Daisy, the protagonist of the novel, seems to be very naive and pure from Gatsby’s perspective, but in fact she is totally empty.

Tom Buchanan also fits the role of someone called Buchanan. He is a former university athlete from an established family. His first name also perfectly fits his character. It describes his lack of personality. The name Tom is common and uninteresting just like Tom himself.

Nick is a neutral name. It can be a name of someone who is immensely wealthy or someone coming from extreme poverty. Fitzgerald wished to convey the unbiased and neutral nature of Nick. He is the narrator in the middle of the whole story and stands with both words without being able to decide where he belongs. In the beginning of the novel, he even admits that he is “inclined to reserve all judgements” (p. 5).

On the whole, the meaningful names in “The Great Gatsby” align with the findings of the previous studies (Manini, 2014; Phầm & Phầm, 2018) in which proper names in a literary text carry contextual meanings and provoke cultural connotations.

Despite carrying contextual meanings, the names remain non-translated. The adoption of non-translation strategy can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, proper names are deemed untranslatable due to linguistic and cultural differences between two languages and cultures. As justified by Catford (1965), Faseng (2002) and Cui (2012), translators confront linguistic and cultural hindrances during the translation process. Cultural untranslatability means that a situational feature, which is functionally relevant for the SL text, is wholly absent from the TL culture. Secondly, the non-translation of proper names serves to preserve the American cultural exoticism of the SL. In line with the age of globalization, translation serves as an instrumental medium of cultural communication among different cultures. Accordingly, SL-oriented translation of the literary proper names would guide the Vietnamese readers through American culture. For that reason, non-translation of proper names motivates the Vietnamese readers to pronounce alien names and explore exotic English-speaking cultures and their naming practices.

From a different angle, one might argue that as these literary names carry contextual meanings, they should have been translated into Vietnamese. Therefore, to compromise on the linguistic and cultural barriers, the following translation techniques have been proposed. Early in the literature, Newmark (1995) recommends the use of “footnotes” to tackle the rendition of proper names. Though divergent in wording, Faseng (2002), Jinfang (2004), and Cui (2012) reach the consensus about adopting translator’s notes, non-translation plus additional explanation. More recently, Manini (2014) agrees that selecting an interpretation is an essential element in translation, which nevertheless entails risks for translators. Therefore, “if explanatory footnotes serve the translators’ purpose, they can be inserted with relative ease into a work of narrative fiction to inform the reader about what had to be left out” (Manini, 2014, p. 173). Additionally, Manini (2014) suggests that “the use of explanatory notes or other forms of meta-textual comment such as the translator’s preface can perfectly well be envisaged to compensate for the semantic loss that occurs when loaded names are not translated” (p. 173).

4.2. Challenges in Translating Alliteration

One of the reasons why “The Great Gatsby” is considered a masterpiece is its excellent use of language (Arthur, 1963;
Kathleen, 1988; Ronald, 2003). Along with Ernest Hemingway and William Faulker, Scott Fitzgerald is regarded as one of the three great American prose writers with its most distinctive style (Ronald, 2003). In this novel, Fitzgerald strived to develop a unique language creating an emotional response not only through its content but also its sound and rhythm to appeal all the senses. The language in the novel is characterized by the use of figurative language, namely alliteration.

Nonetheless, due to the linguistic differences between Vietnamese and English, it is a huge challenge for the translator to convey that unique feature. For instance, in the title “Great Gatsby”, the sound “g” in two words is repeated to generate a sound effect on the readership, but its translation “Đại gia Gatsby” cannot express the alliteration. Similarly, in “she smiled slowly”, the sound “s” is repeated to create rhythm, but it is impossible to convey the rhythmic style of the original in the translation “bà chậm rãi mim cười”. More examples are illustrated in the following table.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English-Vietnamese Translation of Alliteration in “The Great Gatsby”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bond business (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we walk (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high hallway (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breeze blew (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blown back (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people played polo (p. 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a low white washed railroad fence (p. 28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens (p. 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>she smiled slowly (p. 30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cream-colored chiffon (p. 30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby’s enormous garden. On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors-d’oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold. (p. 32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms. (p. 52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“sun-strained eyes” (p. 63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, and monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. (p. 71)

I heard a car stop and the sound of someone splashing after us over the soggy ground. (p.131)

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. (p. 136)

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (p. 136)

According to Liu (2010), the structure of language commonly shows the characteristics of the language, these characteristics can only be found in relative language, the similar transfer is difficult to find in non-relative language, for it needs to change the code completely. It is generally agreed that each language has its own special phonemic system (Lâm, 2013), which cannot be replaced by another language. No translation language can reproduce the same sequence of sounds as the language of the original, simply because the two languages are not totally the same from the standpoint sound. In the case of “The Great Gatsby” and its translation, there are linguistic differences between English and Vietnamese; therefore, it is understandable that the translator of “The Great Gatsby” may sacrifice the sound and rhythm effect in order to achieve meaning.

4.3. Challenges in Translating Complex Structures

Fitzgerald’s syntactic structures are vividly illustrated through his use of clause complexes. This style is pertinent in describing emotional changes and highlighting the inner complex feelings of the narrator towards the Jazz Age in the 1920s. Moreover, the narrator of the novel Nick presents himself as a learned man with Yale University education, which can be seen from his use of language, particularly the use of both coordination and subordination.

However, in the translation of “The Great Gatsby”, clause complexes were simplified into short and simple ones. Several instances are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English-Vietnamese Translation of Complex Structures in “The Great Gatsby”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ST</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint, promising to unfold the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I looked back at my cousin, who began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Slenderly, languidly, their hands set lightly on their hips, the two young women preceded us out onto a rosy-colored porch, open toward the sunset, where four candles flickered on the table in the diminished wind.

As mentioned above, each language has its own structures (Lâm, 2013). In order to deal with syntactic differences, Newmark (1995) proposed a translation procedure named shift or transposition. In his opinion, shift or transposition means a change in the grammar from the SL to the TL. The change in grammar can be from singular to plural; from gerund to noun/adverb; from complex verb to noun/adverb; from subordinate clause to infinitive; from verb to noun/adverb; from complex sentence to simple sentence and so on. This procedure is applicable because when an SL grammatical structure does not exist in the TL or where literal translation is grammatically possible but may not accord with natural usage in the TL to give natural expressions in the TL. Therefore, it is understandable that Trịnh Lữ adopted shift or transposition in separating clause complexes into simple ones in order to achieve naturalness Vietnamese.

### Table 3

**English-Vietnamese Translation of Conjunctions in “The Great Gatsby”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ST</th>
<th>TT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He didn’t say any more, but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that.</td>
<td>Ông không nói gì thêm, nhưng cha con tôi vẫn luôn hiểu nhau theo một kiểu tiếp cận khác biệt ý ông dành là hơn thế nhiều.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And, after boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit.</td>
<td>Những sau khi đã hụt hẫng như thế về tính bạo động của mình, tôi phải công nhận rằng nó cũng có giới hạn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The practical thing was to find rooms in the city, but it was a warm season, and I had just left a country of wide lawns and friendly trees, so when a young man at the office suggested that we take a house together in a commuting town, it sounded like a great idea.</td>
<td>Thực tế ra thì phải tìm chỗ ngay ở trong thành phố, nhưng lúc ấy trời đang âm écoute, mà tôi thì vừa mới ở quê ra vẫn còn nhớ cảnh cay có than quen trông rải, nên khi có một anh chàng ở văn phòng bảo muốn thuê chung với tôi một cái nhà ở chỗ nào ngoài thành phố mà vẫn tiện đi làm hàng ngày được thì tôi ưng ý ngay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He found the house, a weather-beaten card-</td>
<td>Anh ta đã tìm được một chỗ - một căn nhà một</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.4. Challenges in Translating Conjunction Words

Excessive conjunctions convey the intentional discrepancy of the writer between East Egg and West Egg. In the novel, the most popular conjunctives were additive “and”. Fitzgerald purposely employs conjunction “and” in order to vividly depict how different and “grotesque” West Egg is compared to the cultured, high society that exists in the East Egg (Liu, 2010). Fitzgerald desired to stress on the differences between East Egg and West Egg in his novel. The writer repeatedly used “and” to emphasize that there are many important differences between people living in the East Egg and those living in the West Egg.

Besides, Fitzgerald strived to develop a unique language creating an emotional response not only through content but also through its sound and rhythm (Ronald, 2003). This feature is characterized by the use of repetition, namely the repetition of additive “and”.

Several examples are illustrated in the following table.
It can be seen from the translation that “and” was translated as “nên”, “nhưng”, “mả” and so forth. According to Oxford dictionary (2015), the conjunction “and” has a total of eight layers of meaning as follows:

- Be used to connect words or parts of sentences and have the same meaning as “also, in addition to”
- Have the same meaning as “added to”
- Have the same meaning as “then, following this”
- Have the same meaning as “go, come, stay, try” and be used before a verb instead of “to” to show purpose such as “go and get me a pen please”.
- Be used to introduce a comment or a question such as “We talked for hours. And what did you decide?”

- Have the same meaning as “as a result” such as “Miss another class and you will fail”.
- Be used between repeated words to show that something is repeated or continuing such as “He tried and tried but without success”.
- Be used between repeated words to show that there are important differences between things or people of the same kind such as “I like city life but there are cities and cities”.

Therefore, it is rational that “and” can be translated into different ways such as “nên”, “nhưng”, “mả” and so on. For example, additive “and” can be translated into different ways such as “nên”, “nhưng”, “mả” and so on. For example, additive “and” can be translated into different ways such as “nên”, “nhưng”, “mả” and so on. For example, additive “and” can be translated into different ways such as “nên”, “nhưng”, “mả” and so on. For example, additive “and” can be translated into different ways such as “nên”, “nhưng”, “mả” and so on.
número de ejemplos mencionados.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The present minor study delineates challenges in an English-Vietnamese translation of “The Great Gatsby”. Through qualitative descriptive approach, the difficulties in the English-Vietnamese translation of the Great Gatsby are unraveled. The findings reveal a number of constraints associated with linguistic and cultural distinctions between the SL and the TL.

The findings of the study also yield several implications. Firstly, the findings of the study serve as a beneficial reference for literary translators. It is essential for literary translators to master the writing style of the SL author so that a proper selection of lexical, syntactic and textual means can be done. This will assist literary translators in creating the same effect of the translation on the TL readers and the SL readers.

Secondly, it can be inferred from the study that the SL-oriented kind of translation should be considered for the translation of literary works, especially well-known timeless masterpieces. In an SL-oriented translation, the original is tied in a specific manner to the SL community and its culture, and is often specifically directed at source culture addressees. In literary translation, it is significant to convey distinctive features and styles of the SL author; therefore, SL-oriented translation should be considered for the translation of literary texts.

Although this study has yielded several insights into challenges in English-Vietnamese translation, during the research implementation, it might not avoid the following limitation. The reasons underlying the translation strategies adopted by the translator are matters for future research. The choices of translation strategies undertaken by the translator deserve research attention. It is recommended for future research that interviews with the translator would be conducted in order to dig deeper into the underlying reasons affecting the choices of translation strategies.

References


THÁCH THỨC TRONG DỊCH VĂN HỌC: NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP DỊCH ANH – VIỆT TRONG TÁC PHẨM “ĐẠI GIA GATSBY”

Triệu Thu Hằng
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Từ khóa: thách thức, dịch Anh - Việt, dịch văn học