The Seven Good Years in Japanese: Translating a Translation without the Original

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1. Etgar Keret, Hebrew Language, and *The Seven Good Years*

Etgar Keret is an Israeli short story writer who is very popular both domestically and internationally. His stories have been translated into more than 45 languages and are read worldwide. *The Seven Good Years* (2015) is Keret's first collection of nonfictional essays that depict the seven years between the birth of the author's son and the death of his father, which are, just like his stories, funny and profound at the same time. The book, which opens with a terrorist attack and the birth of Keret's son, Lev, ends with a chapter where Keret and his wife try to make their son lie down during the air-raid siren. Some pieces in the book deal with current issues facing his country and people, such as Keret and his wife's debate on whether they are going to let their son serve in the army in the future, and Keret's mistaking what a German stranger said to him as racial discrimination against his people which had made him very angry. On the other hand, it is a book about his family, too. His son is born and grows up during these seven years. There are stories about his brother, who read his first story and made him want to be a writer, and who now lives in Thailand as a social activist, and one about his sister who turned to religion and became an Orthodox Jew, and one about his father, a Holocaust survivor, who suffers from cancer and passes away at the end of the book. If we use the metaphor of fabric, the warp of this book is Jewish and Israeli stuff and the weft weaving them together is the family.

Etgar Keret writes in his native tongue, Hebrew, and in interviews he often makes claims for the uniqueness of his language. Keret responds to the interviewer who asked him what he thought is lost in translation as follows:

> A lot. The Hebrew slang in which I write represents a unique language, one that existed exclusively as a written language for two thousand years only to find itself "defrosted" at an arbitrary historical point. This created a spoken language that had preserved its ancient biblical roots on the one end but that was also very open to invented and imported words out of necessity—there were two thousand years worth of words that didn't exist in the language. This

> tension between traditional language and a very chaotic and anarchistic one creates a spoken language that is bursting with unique energy and that allows you to switch registers mid-sentence. All of these linguistic aspects can't pass translation (Interview with Rebecca Sacks).

As Keret says, Hebrew is a very unique language which had only been used as a written language for 2000 years and then suddenly and quite arbitrarily became a spoken language, and in order to adjust to the new reality, it adopted, imported and invented a lot of new words. However, there are few readers who can enjoy the uniqueness of his language, because the number of Hebrew speakers around the world is estimated to be no more than 9 million. On the other hand, Keret's stories are being read in as many as 45 countries, and it is safe to assume that far more people read his stories in translation than in the original, unable to enjoy the uniqueness of the original Hebrew. Although this concerns him, he seems resigned to the inevitability of the loss, and to the fact that for a writer who writes in a minor language, translation is the only realistic way to obtain a wide readership.

However, *The Seven Good Years* is actually quite different from his other works in one important respect, because although this book has been translated into more than 20 languages, there is no original Hebrew edition to work from. The book consists of 36 essays which were originally written by Keret in Hebrew, and then translated into English by various translators and published in a variety of English language media such as *The New Yorker, The New York Times*, and *Tablet*, an English web magazine on Jewish matters. The definitive edition is the English translation, and all the other editions are translated from this English edition, not from the original Hebrew; that is to say, all the editions except the English one are examples of retranslation, or indirect translation, which is usually not recommended in academic literary studies. Most of Keret's fictional works have been translated directly from Hebrew. Even in this process, as we have seen, Keret believes that many things are "lost". So all the translated editions of *The Seven Good Years* except the English one have been translated twice, and are two steps removed from the original pieces, which means that they suffer "loss" in translation twice.

What I want to discuss in my paper, though, is whether indirect translation is always undesirable and should be avoided. I will argue that it may well sometimes bring about advantages and thus have value and importance as a literary practice.

2. Examples of Indirect Translation

The most well known example of indirect translation is that of the Bible, which was written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek and Latin, and then translated into other languages, and

although not so common, indirect translation itself is not so rare in the publishing world either, especially where the source language does not have many readers among the population of the target language. For example, the first Keret book published in Japan was his picture book *Dad Runs Away with the Circus*, which was originally written in Hebrew, and then translated into English, and from that translation, translated into Japanese.

When it comes to serious literature, on the other hand, indirect translation is not without problems. Haruki Murakami's *Nejimakidori Kuronikuru* (translated into English as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*) is an example of indirect translation that was the source of controversy. The book was translated and published in Germany but later it turned out that this German version was in fact an indirect translation from the English translation by Jay Rubin. Rubin's text was an abridged version, due to the American publishing house, Knopf, stipulating that the book should not exceed a certain length. When the German edition was translated from this abridged English edition, although the English edition was authentic as a source text, it is different from the original Japanese edition even in the matter of physical length.[1]

Another example of a writer whose works exist in various translated editions is I. B. Singer. I.B. Singer wrote in Yiddish, but some of his stories were translated into English and won a wider readership in America. Moreover, Singer recommended using the English translation as the source text when his works were translated into other languages. As a result, most of the translation of Singer's works are indirect translation, which implies the author himself regarded the translated version, not the original, as authentic.[2]

In the case of Murakami and Singer, at least they had their original texts published as they were written by the authors themselves, so it is possible to insist that these Japanese and Yiddish editions are authentic and all the other editions are secondary to them. But *The Seven Good Years* does not exist publicly in an authoritative original form. It is quite a rare book that has many translated editions but no published original edition.

Keret provides an explanation for this absence of the original Hebrew text as follows:

> When you publish a work of fiction, people can tell you that your book is boring or your books suck, but when you write about your family people can tell you that your family is boring or your family sucks. And for me, never publishing nonfiction before, this is something that is very, very stressful. And I feel that there are many intimate details in the book that it's easier for me to share overseas.
>
> It's kind of like those stories that you feel comfortable to tell somebody in a bar or on a train,

> but you wouldn't tell your next door neighbor. So, I don't know, maybe one day I'll publish it in Israel, but right now it feels a little bit too scary and too personal (Interview, "'Seven Good Years' Between The Birth of a Son, Death of a Father").

Keret focuses on the nature of the material, and claims publishing in translation is less personal and helps to define the kind of audience he wants. The pieces in *The Seven Good Years* are sometimes about his family members or personal reflections that are written about in a way which involves a degree of caricature and irony. So it is, perhaps, understandable that he feels nervous about sharing them with his countrymen who could easily identify the individuals he writes about. At the same time, nonetheless, this book is also about how people in Israel survive their never-ending state of hostilities, and sometimes he cannot help but be critical of his own country. Therefore, it is understandable that Keret refrained from sharing it with his countrymen in anticipation of criticism from them. So, there are plausible reasons for his decision to forgo an original edition in Hebrew.

On the other hand, it is interesting that he doesn't refer to the technical problems of translation, nor to the need to reach an international audience; also interesting is his metaphor, illustrating why he needs to tell the stories to "somebody in a bar or on a train". All we can know here is that Keret chose that his stories be translated from English translation, not from his native tongue, even at the risk of indirect translation.

3. Translation Studies: Domestication or Foreignization?

In translation studies, Friedrich Schliermacher has argued as quoted below about the methods of translation:

> [T]here are only two. Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him (Schliermacher. qtd in Venuti 19-20).

Lawrence Venuti calls the former the "domesticating method" and the latter the "foreignizing method" and he supports the latter on the grounds that "foreignizing translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism". Accordingly, he criticizes the fluent, and therefore, domesticating translation into English as reinforcing the ethnocentrism of Anglo-American culture, as if taking postcolonial theory into translation studies.

I strongly agree with Venuti on the point that we should resist the cultural dominance of a hegemonic language and culture, and in that sense, *The Seven Good Years*, which employs English as its mediator to other languages and therefore reinforces the dominance of Anglo-American culture, can be criticized. However, from the pragmatic perspective of translation, Venuti's theory seems too politically-correct and too cut and dried. I wonder if "foreignization" and "domestication" are really mutually exclusive approaches that oblige us to choose one or the other. I suspect it is an artificial dichotomy.

My feeling is that translation is always a kind of compromise. Whether the translator tends towards the "domesticating" method or to the "foreignizing" method, translation is an act of transporting a text into another culture. However good your translation might be, it can never be the exact equivalent of the original text. There is always going to be some distance from the original text, and something can be lost at each stage. From my personal experience, I see translation as inevitably a process of "filtering out". When you transport a text into another language and culture, you cannot help "filtering" something out of the source text, just as Keret described what is lost from Hebrew when translated, in the previous quotation. We can easily find this kind of filtering out in other languages, too. For example, in Japanese we have a range of different first person singular pronouns, such as *watashi, boku, ore, washi*, and *atashi*, which reflect the gender, age, social position and self-recognition of the utterer. When translated into English, there is generally no alternative to replacing them all with a simple "I". The subtle nuances of the original Japanese words cannot generally be rendered. So, the important thing is what you filter out and what you leave in the translated text. That's where translators have to work hard, and continually choose how to keep the distance: sometimes they choose to domesticate it and in other places to foreignize it. A uniform policy of either domestication or foreignization would not produce a satisfactory result in practice.

I'd like to give an example from my own translation. When I translated *The Seven Good Years* I first chose to express the word "dreidel" using the phonetic *katakana* syllabary. The source text is quoted below:

> When I was a kid, I always thought that Hebrew Book Week was a legitimate holiday, something that fit comfortably amid Independence Day, Passover, and Hanukah. On this occasion, we didn't sit around campfire, spin dreidels, or hit each other on the head with plastic hammers, and, unlike other holidays, it doesn't commemorate a historical victory or heroic defeat, which made me like it even more (21).

In Japanese there are two kinds of phonetic alphabet, *hiragana* and *katakana*. In contrast to *hiragana*, which is a major component in written Japanese, *katakana*'s main use is to represent phonetically words which are imported from foreign languages and don't have appropriate matching Japanese translations. Among the words used in this quotation, we don't have words for "Hanukha" or "dreidels" in Japanese, so in my first draft I transliterated them into *katakana* as seen in the next passage below. This is the translation of the second sentence, which begins with "on this occasion":

> この行事では、他の行事のときみたいにキャンプファイアを囲んで座ったり（※ラグバオメルでは焚き火をたいて一日を祝う）もしなければ、ドライデル（※ハヌカのときに遊ぶコマ）を回すことも、プラスチックのハンマーでお互いの頭を叩く（※独立記念日の習慣）こともないし、他の祝日みたいに歴史的な勝利や英雄的敗北を記念したものでもないから、それだけにいっそうヘブライ・ブック・ウィークが好きだった。
> (underlining added)

In Japanese, we can use brackets to insert a short note, so I *katakanized* "dreidels" to show that the term is a foreign one, and added a note in a bracket saying "the spinning top they play with during Hanukkha" as a way to maintain both readability and information of the foreign cultural background. My editor, however, suggested that I delete this bracket note and change *katakanized* "dreidel" into a Japanese noun "koma", which simply means "spinning top". I had no objection to my editor's proposal, accepting it because I thought too many brackets interrupt the reader's concentration on the story. In short, it is a matter of story or information. If you have to sacrifice either story or information, you have to make a choice, and my choice was to sacrifice a little of the information about the cultural background. This is the only place in the account that refers to driedels, and the story itself is about the narrator's experience at the Hebrew Book Week. Holidays in Israel are listed just as examples of legitimate holidays, so for ordinary Japanese readers, the necessary information is just that there are several holidays in Israel where they have different customs from those in Japan. I judged that the specific and detailed information about the dreidels was not significant enough to break the flow of the passage.

So, it can be said that I chose domestication here, but it depends on what you think the priority is at each point in the translation. Venuti might criticize this as an instance of domestication. He insists uncompromisingly on the authenticity of the foreignizing method. But I believe the translated text should be continually moving between the dichotomy of familiarity and foreignness according to circumstances. A translator's job is to decide what is to be filtered out, even when he wants to keep

everything in.

4. Reactions to the Japanese Edition

If the translation is the process of filtering something out, indirect translation is the process of filtering out twice. When it is successfully done and shedding the details twice, what is left after the process is a purer and more essential core of the story. When I compare my translation of *The Seven Good* Years with the translation of another Keret book available in Japanese, *Suddenly a Knock on the Door*, translated by another translator who worked from the original Hebrew, I have to say that I feel my translation is more fluent and easier to read for the Japanese audience, and I think this is partly due to the process of indirect translation, which necessarily involves delocalizing and shedding details twice. Because this book is nonfiction, readers already have a certain knowledge and know that this is a story about some foreign country. Too specific information about the culture might make the story too foreign for the readers outside of it, and this wouldn't have been a good policy for *The Seven Good Years*.

Here is an example that may help to prove the point. A Japanese fiction writer, Toh Enjo, wrote a review of *The Seven Good Years* in a Japanese national newspaper:

> When Japanese people travel abroad, no one would brag to their faces that they had killed many of their ancestors, nor ask if they are ashamed of being Japanese. But this kind of thing regularly happens to Keret.
>
> It is a very demanding experience to be expected to speak as a representative of your country abroad. Even when you know what is wrong with your country, you sometimes find yourself in the position of having to defend it, although in your own country you are widely regarded as someone who routinely speaks ill of it. You might feel like keeping your mouth shut, but you cannot escape from the stereotypical images other people have about you…. Keret's words are always uttered in a situation where it is hard to speak—so hard that you have to refrain from publishing your opinions in your own country. Yet for all Keret's intellectual rigor and toughness of spirit, he never forgets to offer the opportunity for laughter (Enjoh, my translation).

It can be readily appreciated that this reviewer saw the book as depicting something specific to Israeli and Jewish people and therefore emphasized the uniqueness of their experience as something others will never have or understand. Reading this review, however, two of my friends,

who are both academics majoring in foreign cultures—one in American Literature and the other in Arabic culture—told me that they have also suffered from this kind of racial discrimination abroad and believed this book should be read as something more universal, depicting situations and problems we can all experience, whatever our nationalities are.

I find these two distinct reactions quite interesting. The book is the same, yet the readings are contradictory, and I think they can both be right, and that interpretive diversity is part of the appeal of this book. The hardship Jewish people suffered throughout their history is specific to them and the memory of the Holocaust and the current situation in which Israel exists permanently in a virtual state of war with some of the peoples and nation states in the region makes her situation unique. With few exceptions, it is hard for the rest of us even to imagine what it must be like to be an Israeli, let alone claim to understand from our own experience. The racial stigma, which had unjustly been cast upon Jewish people, is the worst in scale, and I cannot say that I really understand how it must feel to experience it. But at the same time, what this book is really depicting is, to a much smaller degree, what we all experience every day. Sometimes it is difficult for us all to escape the national stereotype within which other people seek to constrain us, and we all sometimes find ourselves speaking or being spoken of in a racist manner, even if it is unintentional.

"Bombs Away", a story contained in this book, describes the reaction of Keret and his wife when they hear the news of the possibility of an imminent nuclear attack by Iran on Israel. They give up their daily routine such as washing dishes, fixing a wet spot on the ceiling and taking care of plants, anticipating they are going to be wiped out soon. Finally, discovering that the rumor is not trustworthy, they feel afraid of peace. The closing lines are quoted below:

> "Don't worry, honey. We're both survivors. We've already survived quite a bit together---illnesses, wars, terrorist attacks, and, if peace is what fate has in store, we'll survive it, too." Finally my wife fell asleep again, but I couldn't. So I got up and swept the living room. First thing tomorrow morning, I'm calling a plumber (75).

What is funny about this conclusion is the paradox that they have to "survive" peace, which in normal circumstances would be the one thing you wouldn't need to "survive". But since they have already given up their possibility of survival and accepted their doomed fate, survival, which necessarily requires them to do the duties which they have long postponed and haven't taken care of since they heard the news, turns into a threat. As long as the readers know this is a story of Israel

and its enemy country, they can get the gist of the story. And I think as long as that core of the story remains after the process of translation, it does not much matter how domesticated or foreignized the translated text is. It is inevitable that through the process of reading and responding to the text, each reader will fill the blanks in the translated text.

5. Conclusion

In his op-ed article, "I'm Not Anti-Israel, I'm Ambi-Israel", published in *The New York Times* at the time he won the Charles Bronfman Prize, Keret reacts against his being called an "Anti-Israel Author", arguing that it is dangerous to define a person's position in terms of the dichotomy of "pro" or "anti". This can stop people debating specific issues, denying them the possibility of criticizing the side with which they identify. As an alternative to this 'pro' or 'anti' attitude, Keret proposes the third position which he calls "ambi":

> To lend a helping hand to those who are fond of simplified labels, I would like to suggest a third option. Let's call it "ambi." The terms "ambi-Israeli" or "ambi-Palestinian" will simply indicate that our opinions on Middle Eastern affairs, while they may be resolute, are complex. Those with "ambi" positions will be allowed to support an end to the occupation while still condemning Hamas; they may believe that the Jewish people deserve a state but also maintain that Israel should not occupy territories that do not belong to it. Careful application of this new label might enable us to delve deeper into the essential arguments around the conflict and its resolution, instead of merely squirting water at one another in the shallow end of the pool.

It is refreshing to encounter an appeal for a nuanced position in place of rigid, polarized standpoints in which the participants must accept a set package of views at one or the other end of the spectrum. It is not necessary to believe that everyone must accept a rigid set of views on the basis of their national identity. People must think as individuals with a variety of perspectives on the key issues. Disagreement with certain positions or policies is not incompatible with a fundamental patriotism or support for the Jewish state. And the same is true about the policy of translation. You don't need to choose between the polarized standpoints of either domestication or foreignization.

With this perspective of Keret's in mind, we can see why *The Seven Good Years* engendered two different readings among Japanese readers. In keeping with Keret's 'ambi' attitude, the book neither requires the readers to read it as something solely depicting specifically Jewish and Israeli issues, nor as something focusing totally upon the universal with which all people can identify regardless of

their ethnic and national backgrounds.

Indirect translation, the route through which this book has reached its audience, is a process in which many details, even more than usual, are "lost in translation". This has led to indirect translation being criticized as an invalid literary practice. But I believe that in some cases, the opposite may be true. In providing the text with more blanks for readers to fill in, this loss of detail can be beneficial. If we can let go of our fear of indeterminacy and uncertainty, we can see that indirect translation can be a good way to place a text somewhere between 'here' and 'there', allowing it to shift flexibly according to how close the readers want it to be to them, and give it the distance from the original that enables it to speak to a world-wide readership. Ideally, such a translation can welcome readers who stay "ambi"— readers who are free to respond to the book in different ways, so long as they each respond in their own way.

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Notes

1 As for the controversy over the indirect translation of Murakami's work, see Rubin, pp. 273-289. What is interesting is that Murakami himself supports indirect translations on the ground that English is the lingua franca of the literary industry and although direct translation is the most accurate and desirable, it is not always possible.

2 Osaki, pp. 221-228.