

Ways with words



How can we translate creative works from English to BSL, or from BSL to English, in a way that creates the intended effect in the target audiences? **Rachel Sutton-Spence** reports

Literature is where we play with language, and there is a lot of literature in English and BSL that uses language in wonderfully creative ways for readers and audiences to enjoy. But what if you are asked to translate or interpret it from one language to the other? Suddenly, it might feel a lot less like fun and rather more daunting, precisely because it is so creatively phrased in the original. Luckily, once the initial alarm has subsided, there is plenty of research that can help us take on the task so that the translation itself could turn out to be enjoyable to receive and deliver.

The expectations for any translation and interpretation vary according to the discourse type, target audience and the context of the work. Even though we know that every translation requires some adaptation as the message goes between languages and cultures, legal translations are expected to stay more faithful to the source language vocabulary and structure than, say, those in a school classroom environment where interpretations need an explanation or rephrasing of unfamiliar terms. But what about literary translations and interpretations, where the form and meaning are closely intertwined and where meaning is often secondary to the aesthetic purpose and emotional impact of the piece?

The German translation theorist Walter Benjamin (in 1923) suggested that a literary

translation shouldn't aim to translate the apparent content of the work but rather to translate the way it functions, for example as a poem. How can we translate stories, poems, jokes, dramatic pieces and other creative works from English to BSL, or from BSL to English, in a way that satisfies and creates the intended effect in the target audiences? If the aim of a joke is to make the audience laugh, we may question our translation if the target language audience says earnestly, "Oh, yes, I understand".

There's no such thing as a perfect translation, just the best we can do within a set of criteria, and there is no set of rules to follow to make a 'good translation' every time because the priority of each of the criteria will vary. It is not easy to deliver a translation that manages to satisfy critics (including other translators), the target readership/audience *and* the original sponsors of the work. However, it is worth considering how to make our

.....
'If the joke's aim is to make the audience laugh, we may question our translation if the target language audience says earnestly, "Oh, yes, I understand"'

translations as satisfying as possible to our target audiences. We probably know the literary norms of contemporary English, but what are BSL literary norms and the literary translation norms of the deaf community?

Domestication and foreignisation

We have known for a long time that translations carry texts not only between languages but between cultures. As long ago as 1813, Friedrich Schleiermacher pointed out that the translator can either leave the *author* in peace and bring the reader towards the author or leave the *reader* in peace and bring the author towards the reader. These ideas have been reformulated into the ideas of 'domestication', in which the cultural context and culture-specific terms are adapted to suit the target language, and 'foreignisation', in which the original source culture's context and terms are retained in the translation. Lawrence Venuti (1998) argues that foreignisation is a means of combatting ethnocentrism and colonialism when one is translating from minority language into a majority language, for example from BSL into English. On the other hand, it can reinforce the power of majority languages when the same strategy is applied when translating from the majority into the minority language, for example, from English into BSL.

If we want to celebrate BSL and help empower the language and its users, a strategy could be domestication (bring the author to the reader) when we make a literary translation from English to BSL, and foreignisation (bring the reader to the author) when we are working from BSL to English.

Literary norms and target cultures

Gideon Toury (1995) in his influential book *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, reminds us that literature is a cultural institution, in that literary texts and their literary techniques and qualities are created and maintained that way by

.....
'Beginning in the 1970s, creative sign language took on higher social and cultural value within deaf communities'

the cultural system that makes its literary norms. For many years, deaf communities around the world had been told that literature was only for written language and did not think of their creative sign language as being part of their literature. People whom we now recognise as BSL poets or other language artists were simply 'smooth signers' or 'good storytellers'. Literature in sign language usually meant translations of written poems into sign language and these were often rather staid and formal.

Beginning in the 1970s and picking up pace in the 1980s and 1990s, creative sign language took on higher social and cultural value within deaf communities and more original deaf work was promoted and became recognised as literature. Additionally, as cultural institutions change the way they view literature, the criteria for literary *translations* can change. Previously, signers were expected to translate the meaning of the words of a written text using mostly sign language vocabulary and embellish the signs with performance movements and facial expression to add emotion, so that the stamp of the original piece was clear for everyone to see. Today, we may focus less on retaining the original words and ask instead 'How can we make this text as visual and aesthetically appealing as possible?', which is more in keeping with contemporary deaf literary norms.

Deaf literary norms

To make a literary translation more acceptable to its target culture, we need to know and use the norms of that culture. Most hearing British

people know what literary norms are because they learned about them at school and have subconsciously taken them in all their lives. It can be a bit of a surprise to find that other languages and cultures have different literary norms.

When we translate a literary piece from English to BSL, we need to know what the literary norms of the British deaf community are. Studies of sign language literature have progressed considerably in the last 20 years or so and can greatly help translators. If we study the canonical texts or original sign language productions of recognised and valued British deaf storytellers, poets and comedians, we will have a far clearer understanding of the creative BSL elements that are valued in the community so that our translations are closer to deaf literary norms, rather than hearing ones. If we don't, we are never going to produce acceptable, domesticated, satisfying literary translations. We may get across the meaning and the elements that make the piece literary in English, but it's highly unlikely that the translated text will create the same pleasurable, aesthetic effect in deaf audiences. Those who would like to know more about deaf literary norms, primarily focussing on BSL literature, can consult Sutton-Spence and Kaneko (2016).

First-person presentation

Literary translation is graded – it's not 'either or' – and there are a range of options for making the translation more in keeping with the target culture. Translators may suppress some source-text features, reshuffle some so that they appear in a different order or add some to make the translation more acceptably literary to the target culture even though not in the original.

Let's take an example of a children's story. Literary norms in English children's stories mean that we tell a story about a little girl called Red Riding Hood and what happened to her. However,

'Today, we may focus less on retaining the original words and ask instead how we can make this text as visual and aesthetically appealing as possible'

if we watch many original deaf stories, the signer does not *tell* us about the character but instead, from the beginning, they *are* the character, embodying and showing that character directly through role shift. Many translations narrate the story, often with role shift to show the behaviour of the characters, but fewer directly show the protagonist from the start to show what happens. This difference between 'third-person narration' ('there was once a little girl') and 'first-person presentation' ('I'm a little girl') has a huge impact on the translation. A translator may argue 'but that is what the story says' – to which the counterargument is 'but the story only says that in the source culture'. Why do we not use the target culture literary norms alongside the target culture language? Sometimes, it is because translators do not know those norms. Perhaps they have not even noticed that they are bringing norms from the source culture into the translation for the target culture.

Other times, socio-political values make the barrier harder to overcome because there is a feeling that to remove certain features from the original or to add features that make the translation closer to deaf norms is wrong, harmful or unjust. There might be justifications such as 'if I don't make these signs rhyme, it won't be a poem anymore', 'deaf people won't see these examples of rhyme and will lose the chance to see how beautifully this poem is structured' or 'deaf audiences will be deprived of the right to see the



'Better a living sparrow than a stuffed eagle': translator Edward Fitzgerald was willing to sacrifice technical niceties to make his translations readable to a general public

rhymes in this poem'. In some contexts, especially educational ones, these objections may have some justification, but they are worth examining for the ideology behind them.

Written word privilege

Such views come partly from a long-standing general belief that the 'genius' of the author in the original text in any language should be maintained in a translation, but there are also power differences between spoken and signed languages, bringing more respect to written texts (that are literary and high-status) than to unwritten ones.

We can't translate everything in one piece into another language and hope that it will be literary in the target culture. If we try to shoehorn all the elements that make the original text literary into the translation, making sure that

their importance and relevance are clear, the pleasure of the aesthetic version is quickly lost. Do we prioritise the richness of the original or the easy understanding of its content? As Edward Fitzgerald (1859) said about his translation of the highly complex, rich set of Persian poems, The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, 'Better a living sparrow than a stuffed eagle'. In other words, he was willing to sacrifice technical niceties to make his work readable to a general public.

When translating highly visual sign language literature into spoken or written texts, there is

'Do we prioritise the richness of the original or the easy understanding of its content?'

sometimes no need to ‘stuff the eagle’ because much of the information is visually available to hearing audiences who just need a little help to make sense of what they are seeing. In these cases, we may want to consider the strategy that Kenny Lerner (in Spooner et al, 2018) has termed ‘selective translation’. The goal of selective translation is ‘to provide a minimal soundtrack as support, and then let the picture speak a thousand words’. It provides spoken words only for the keywords and phrases that hearing audience members can’t understand on their own, giving contextual hints (via English phrases or other auditory cues) that complement the signing rather than providing a verbatim translation.

In one ASL poem, Kenny translates words, such as ‘tree’ and ‘snake’ because the audience would not necessarily know these signs without help. But, he explains, ‘both signs are immediately recognizable once you know. The snake winds around the trunk and slithers up the tree. There is no need for my voice. The audience gets it.’ The foreignising of the translation makes hearing people in the target language culture profoundly aware of the visual nature of the performance and allows them ‘to “see” those images for themselves’ (Spooner et al, 2018: 118).

Deaf translation from English to BSL

Literary translators are usually assumed to come from the target language culture and be target

.....
‘The goal of selective translation is “to provide a minimal soundtrack as support, and then let the picture speak a thousand words”’

language artists (writers, poets or comedians) themselves. This is currently less likely to be the case in sign language literary translation, where hearing translators or interpreters are members of the source language culture (often with an explicit awareness of only source culture literary norms) and are not necessarily poets or storytellers in English, let alone in BSL. When a deaf poet or recognised deaf storyteller translates from English to BSL or ‘recreates’ a work in BSL, they frequently bring elements that a non-deaf or non-artist translator would not have thought of. Maybe instead of using a vocabulary item, a non-artist translator will use a classifier to make the production more visual. But will it be a new classifier, showing the object from a completely different perspective? Will the translation sign the classifier simultaneously with a full incorporation of the referent, in which the face, head, eyes and body work together, delivered in a flash of information before moving on to the next sign? It might be like that in the hands of a sign language artist. A non-artist may narrate that there is a character, and his name is Jack, and, in deference to deaf culture say that this is his name sign. But an artist might use half a dozen classifier-based signs that swiftly show us the physical appearance of Jack (whose name is omitted entirely because we will be sure to know him next time, now that we have seen what he looks like) and will order them carefully so they are produced flowingly from the top of his head down to his knees. Would the signer already be half in Jack’s character when describing him (rather than still in the narrator’s role)? Was the description slightly exaggerated to make it just that bit more entertaining? If the translator is a deaf sign language artist, the answer is often ‘yes – and more’.

Not every deaf translator is an artist, but deaf signers frequently have a sign language experience and knowledge far deeper and wider



‘After some healthily fluttering sparrows, we can try to make the eagle fly’

than most hearing translators. Translations arising out of partnerships between hearing translators who are native users of the source text and deaf translators who are native users of the target language have an added richness and depth. Hearing translators who are not native signers *can* perform successful literary translations that are appreciated by deaf audiences, but only if they make the effort to embrace deaf literary norms and deaf translation norms. As Toury remarks, translators who are not members of the target culture can ‘tentatively assume that role’ (1995: 179).

Much of a translator’s task is normally thought of as deciding what language elements might need to be added, omitted or altered to make

.....
‘Deaf signers frequently have a sign language experience and knowledge far deeper and wider than most hearing translators’

an appropriate enjoyable piece. But what about the performance elements? Dorothy Miles, in her pioneering workshops in the 1980s, noted that signing poets also need to be actors. It follows that anyone performing a translated poem or other literary piece in sign language needs some acting skills. Many of us are aware that ‘increased use of non-manual elements’ makes signing more


fluent and visually coherent, but performance of a literary translation takes this to a new level.

Video signing vs live signing

The technical side of translation is new and not yet much talked about – although it needs to be. Video has radically changed sign language and its literature. It is so pervasive now that we almost forget that video signing as a mode of signing is vastly different from live signing. The fact that it frees a literary piece from the here and now, giving it a vastly wider audience and allowing repeated viewing over (potentially) years has all sorts of implications. Better cameras and video-editing packages that are accessible to non-professionals mean that filming and editing techniques and especially the insertion of images can be used in delivering sign language literature. We are used to the idea that children’s literature uses illustration with texts to increase early readers’ engagement and understanding, and children’s stories translated into sign language also need to consider it.

However, Perry Nodelman (1981: 62) warns that pictures must be used carefully because they ‘can be a distraction, a pretty way of ruining good stories’. A well-placed and well-used image in a sign language translation can help make the story more enjoyable, but not when they are badly

placed, especially if they get in the way of seeing the signer clearly. Sometimes, translators may feel that they need to sign everything that is in the source text, but if the textual information is also already clearly shown in the illustration, it may be wiser to leave it out of the signing. Conversely, when signing an illustrated text, we may wish to incorporate information from the images into our signing, rather than simply translating the words. This technical side of literary translation is an area where language professionals may need to team up with video and design professionals, and this may increase costs. It is probably something that ought to be offered for CPD, given the impact it has.

If translators use only source text norms, we can say the translation is not so much ‘introduced’ into the target culture as ‘imposed’ upon it (Touy, 1995). Norms are socio-culturally specific and essentially unstable, and translators contribute to them. Alongside mainstream norms, there are remnants of previous norms (which might make the translation old-fashioned) and the start of new, progressive, norms. It will take a while before we can tell if that norm is going to become mainstream, but let’s make a start by studying deaf literary norms and trying some new strategies. After some healthily fluttering sparrows, we can try to make the eagle fly. 

REFERENCES:

- Benjamin, W, 2000. *The Task of the Translator*. Trans. by Harry Zohn. In *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed, by Lawrence Venuti, pp15–23. New York: Routledge.
- Nodelman, Perry, 1981. *How Picture Books Work*. Children’s Literature Association Quarterly, 1981 Proceedings, pp57-68.
- Spooner, R A, Sutton-Spence, R, Lerner, M N, Lerner, K, 2018. *Invisible No More: Recasting the Role of the ASL-English Literary Translator*. *Translation and Interpreting Studies* 13:1, pp110-129.
- Sutton-Spence, R and Michiko Kaneko, 2016. *Introducing Sign Language Literature: Creativity and Folklore*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Press.
- Touy, Gideon, 1995. *Descriptive translation studies and beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Venuti, Lawrence, 1998. *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.