

## One Haiku of Basho with many translations: An imperfect re-creation

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper attempts to explore the original famous frog haiku of Basho and its eleven counterpart translations in English with an emphasis on both the content and form of the translations. English, being the target language for these translations is so rich that it can accommodate the rare words of Japanese language in many different ways and forms. The translations are analyzed on the basis of their perfection in form and creativity in thought. Each translation of the frog haiku is compared with the literal meanings of the original one. The translations are found to be imperfect with tremendous creativity which may be termed as re-creation.*

**Key Words:** Basho, frog, haiku, re-creation, translation

### **Introduction**

When Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) was a child in Japan, he fell in love with a type of poetry that began with a verse of 5-7-5 syllables. He traveled his homeland island writing short poems about his experiences of his travels. Centuries later, when this stanza was presented to stand-alone, it was named the *haiku*. Basho's incredibly rich anthologies of his poems have made him one of the most beloved poets in the history of Japan. He gained his popularity with the translation of his haikus in more than one hundred languages. What makes Basho's haiku so worthy to be translated in so many languages? Did the translators do justification to his haikus or the re-created an imperfect thought and form of haiku? How could there be significant meaning in such a simple poem?

The final product of literary translation is recreation, but recreation entirely derived from the translator's creativity. Therefore, the translational process is a creative process and, consequently, translation is also creation, for it entails the interaction of two creative elements i.e. the author of the original and its translator. The latter starts from a creation already completed and transform it into the 'secondary' product i.e. he transforms it into a second work but of equal value, the materialization of which required a degree of creativity different from that used by the first creative element, but by no means less valuable as creativity. Because the translator is always led to rummage the recesses of his language and the richness of its vocabulary, its source of sayings and proverbs, its forms of sign language, in short, its multiple semantic and morphosyntactic resources, in the attempt to solve similar problems imposed on him by the original (Bezerra, 2202, p. 47). He knows that he works with a finished text, to which he needs to give new life but in such a way that the characters in the text-boat do not lose

memory and the work can satisfactorily cross its Styx, arriving alive at the other side: the translator's target language and culture. To build this crossing the translator has to go through a creative process similar to that experienced by the author of the original, considering, of course, all due differences and specificities. According to Boris Pasternak (1985), himself a great poet and translator, "In thus daily progressing through the text the translator finds himself reliving the circumstances of the author. Day by day he reproduces his actions and he is drawn into some of his secrets, not in theory, but practically, by experience." (p. 316).

As a dialogue of cultures

Viewed from the angle of dialogue of culture, translation is a dialogue of creative individualities from different cultures, i.e., a genuine dialogue of cultures, in which the translator rummages the guts of the original, listens to the voices that populate it, dives into the sometimes almost inscrutable side of the language, focuses on the life of its characters; in short, soaks in the original to be able to interpret it as a whole and give it a new life; a life, however, marked by the uniqueness of the multiple ways of being of the translator's language and culture, by his creative individuality. This results in the re-creation of any piece of literature by the translator. Basho's haikus are re-created by various translators from their own perception and understanding which may or may not be perfect either in form or in respect of content.

### Rational of the study

Let's have a look at the original selected haiku of Matsu Basho with a literal translation.

Furu ike ya	Old pond!
kawazu tobikomu	frog jumps in
mizu no oto	water's sound

As far as its form is concerned Aitken (2003) is of the opinion that 'Ya' is a cutting word that separates and yet joins the expressions before and after. It is punctuation that marks a transition i.e. a particle of anticipation. He further argues that though there is a pause in meaning at the end of the first segment, the next two segments have no pause between them. In the original, the words of the second and third parts build steadily to the final word 'oto.' This has penetrating impact such as 'the frog jumps in water's sound.' Haiku poets commonly play with their base of three parts, running the meaning past the end of one segment into the next, playing with their form, as all artists do variations on the form they are working with. Actually, the name 'haiku' means 'plays verse.'

First of all, at the denotative level, Basho's haiku simply says that there is an old pond, that a frog jumps into it, and that the sound of water is heard. Semantically speaking, as is typical of haiku, his poem is made up of two parts through the use of the cutting word, 'ya' 'the old pond' and 'a frog jumps in / the sound of the water.' The tension is thus created by the collocation of

these two parts: the sharp contrast between the static image of an old pond, evocative of stillness and loneliness, and the lively image of an energetic animal that jumps into the pond and makes the water sound (Crowley, 2007, p.57) This tension leaves something for readers to ponder, furnishing both meaning and imagery for themselves.

Based on linguistic knowledge of the target language and on literary literacy, a textual analysis of this sort, generally speaking, would give readers a sense of pleasure in understanding this poem, but it would not be sufficient to answer all the questions regarding translation. There are a lot of poets who write good haiku that leave something unsaid for readers to ponder. However, there had been no differences that would be made if Basho changed 'frog' to any other amphibian creature or any creature that can dive into a pond.

Secondly, at the connotative level, Basho added an extra layer of meaning or surprise by using a kigo, kawazu (frog), in an unusual way. With its circle of associations, kawazu provided a special pipeline to the reader, increasing the complexity and capacity of the poem (Shirane, 1997, p. 182).

Let us have a look the selected eleven translations done by different translators in Hiroaki Sato's *One Hundred Frogs*.

Old pond — frogs jumped in — sound of water.

*Translated by Lafcadio Hearn*

Hearn replaces 'Ya', the connecting word, with a dash (—) and uses plural of frog though the original haiku refers to a single frog. He uses the words 'sound of water' instead of making an acoustic word for it. The main idea of the nature remains the same but with the above stated changes which shows that the translator adds something from his own imagination which is his creativity but an imperfect one.

A lonely pond in age-old stillness sleeps . . .  
Apart, unstirred by sound or motion . . . till  
Suddenly into it a lithe frog leaps.

*Translated by Curtis Hidden Page*

Page makes extensive additions in his translation out of his own imagination as he tries to translate the selected haiku by introducing deep imagery and curiosity in it. He, very creatively, uses dots (...) and the word 'till' as a pause and an alternative to the original word 'Ya'. Along with an attribute to the pond in original haiku he awards the frog with an adjective, a lithe, in his translation. He enables the reader to enjoy maximum of his imagination about the frog and the pond and he uses so many words for this purpose. Thus he succeeds in resolving the curiosity of readers with such an extensive elaboration.

Into the ancient pond  
A frog jumps  
Water's sound!

*Translated by D.T. Suzuki*

Suzuki's translation differs from literal translations as he introduces the word 'ancient' instead of 'old' that automatically creates a sense of allusion to the historic or ghoulish events. He uses this word deliberately to enhance the calmness of the pond and transport the reader to medieval times. He uses the article 'a' before frog which signifies some specific kind of frog which the translator imagines. Suzuki ignores any pause in his translation so as to give a thorough effect to the haiku. He also avoids to use any acoustic sound instead he uses the words 'water's sound'

old pond;  
A frog jumps in —  
The sound of the water.

*Translated by R.H. Blyth*

Blyth uses semi colon (;) and dash (—) for the word 'Ya' to connect the second and third line with the first and second line respectively. Though the translator avoids to use the article 'an' before old pond but he uses the article 'a' before frog because he is clear in his imagination about a frog; its size and shape but he is not so sure about the structure of the pond. The translator wants his readers to see and feel the way he imagines. Instead of using an apostrophe for 'water's sound' he prefers to use 'the sound of the water' which lengthens the third line so as to give maximum of the sound effect to his readers. The translator is re-creating this haiku very creatively but he does not seem perfect in his translation.

An old pond —  
The sound  
Of a diving frog.

*Translated by Kenneth Rexroth*

Rexroth uses dash (—) to replace the connecting word 'Ya' and also dares to insert the article 'an' before 'old pond' as he has created an imaginary pond in his mind which is a special and specific one and he also specifies a frog in his translation but with an addition of an adjective 'diving' because he imagines a frog diving into a pond not jumping. He deviates from the original haiku thus re-creating the thought of Basho and enveloping it in his own imaginative and creative powers. His imperfection lies in the point that he does not refer to the sound of pond but he compels the reader to listen to the sound of the frog.

Pond, there, still and old!  
A frog has jumped from the shore.  
The splash can be heard.

*Translated by Eli Siegel*

Siegel's translation is a bit lengthy with a lot of elaboration and imaginative but rational insertions. He uses the sign of exclamation (!) to replace the word 'Ya' because he is wondering at the calmness of pond. Using the word there signifies that he imagines the pond lying somewhere far away. In the second line he has deviated from usual translations of this haiku in its tense. He imagines the frog has jumped some time ago and the sound of splashing water can still be heard. The translator uses the word 'splash' instead of explaining the sound of water. He imagines that the event has occurred but the effect can still be felt. Another important addition is the use of word 'shore' as he thinks rationally about a frog that must jump into the pond from its shore. His creativity is re-creative and rational and he is able to control the rational part of reader's mind.

old pond  
frog leaping  
splash

*Translated by Cid Corman*

Corman does not care about the pause used in the original haiku but follows the 5-7-5 syllables rule for his translation. He avoids using any article before 'old pond' and 'frog' which signifies generalization of the situation in his imagination. Further, he uses the self explanatory word 'splash' instead of explaining the sound of water. The translator varies from the original haiku in many aspects which shows that he is also re-creating what Basho created earlier but this re-creation is not perfect like that of Basho.

The old pond,  
A frog jumps in:  
Plop!

*Translated by Alan Watts*

Watts tries to translate Basho's haiku literally so as to avoid any intervention. He uses coma and colon at the end of first and second lines respectively and a sign of exclamation at the end of the third line which is a single word and so far a new word in translation i.e. plop. He specifies the old pond by using the article 'the' and he does the same with the frog by using the article 'a' before it. The main idea and imagery of the haiku remains the same except the word plop which creates an acoustic effect to signify the sound of water.

Breaking the silence  
Of an ancient pond,  
A frog jumped into water —  
A deep resonance.

*Translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa*

Yuasa's translation differs from others with an addition of an extra line. She uses comma and a dash after second and third lines respectively to give the pausing effect. She adds one extra line at the beginning of her translation which is not there in the original haiku. 'Breaking the silence' is a line which she adds from her own imagination as she imagines that what happens next must break the silence of the standing waters in the pond. She also adds the word 'ancient' so as to make it more mysterious. She does not say that the frog jumps into the pond because she thinks that an empty pond will not make any sound of water so she opts to translate the third line by replacing pond with water. The translator imagines that the some splashing sound that's why she chose this word. The translator has modified the whole haiku through her own glasses. She also has this power of re-creation but lacks perfection.

pond  
frog  
plop!

*Translated by James Kirkup*

Kirkup's translation is the tersest form of the selected haiku. He chose single but important words from each line of the original haiku and arranged them in such a slop that makes sense and convey's the message and imagery to the reader completely. He avoids any pause in the lines and inserts a sign of exclamation at the end. He does not elaborate the pond whether it's old, ancient or what so ever. He does not qualify the frog with any attribute. He leaves all these things to the perceptions of the reader. Here the reader is free to imagine anything about the frog or the pond but he/she is bound to consider that something has happened which makes this sound plop. His use of sign of exclamation is also a note for the reader to wonder at something. This translation may be termed as an open ended translation which allows the reader to imagine in any way he/she deems fit.

There once was a curious frog  
Who sat by a pond on a log  
And, to see what resulted,  
In the pond catapulted  
With a water-noise heard round the bog.

*Translated by Alfred H. Marks*

Mark's translation is the lengthiest and unique one among all the translations of the selected haiku. His translation goes to five lines with a lot of insertions. Mark tries to give it a narrative effect and explain any possible minute things which he imagines while reading the original haiku. Instead of beginning with the pond he considers it necessary to explain the frog's situation. He further goes on and elaborates the mental status of the frog thus making prophesy about its curiosity. He adds where the frog sat and introduces the word 'catapulted' in order to make it rhyming with the word 'resulted', used in second line. He does it because he was conscious about the previous rhyming in first and second lines i.e. 'frog' and 'log'. He ends the fifth line with the word 'bog'. Though it seems unnecessary but he has to rhyme it with the first two lines. Therefore his intended rhyme scheme aabba is achieved. All the explanation he has added in his translation comes out of his own imagination. It is also an imperfect re-creative translation of the original Basho's selected haiku.

### Conclusion

One of the basic principles of translation is that the ideas, not words, should be translated. Translators use full resource and vocabulary of the target language in order to choose an appropriate word for the original. Translation is one of the most exhaustive and cautious tasks but it gets much harder when it comes to literary translations. During literary translations a translator may be left asking: should I maintain the image order or change it in order to keep the type of imagery and avoid adding explanatory word? During this tension between what to add and what to omit the translator begins to add out of his own imagination. The reader, unaware of the original work, begins to imagine what the translator has added. Thus the translator controls the imagination power of the reader. Translator, in fact, re-creates the original piece of literature very creatively but that re-creation is not as perfect as the original one. The selected haiku of Basho and all the translations done by various translators are different from each other. The main idea of all the translations remains unchanged but the choice of words and explanation is different. If a reader knows both the original and the target languages then he may not be moved by the perceptions of the translator but if he knows the target language only then his imagination lies in the hands of the translator.

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