

Would MT kill creativity in literary retranslation?

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Abstract

The increasing number of retranslations and wider availability of their texts on the Internet is expected to create a positive impact on MT systems by producing more matches. Yet, we argue that retranslations conducted using MT would differ from those completed without any recourse to MT in terms of creative solutions. This paper aims to discuss the possible effects of MT on retranslation of literary texts with a focus on creativity. 21 fourth-year T&I students translated two excerpts from Robinson Crusoe into Turkish, one with, and one without the help of an online MT service. We included the analysis of four different translations of the same text available on the market, in terms of creativity. Analysis of solutions produced for 252 translation units suggests that the use of MT is likely to hinder creativity for novice translators for English-Turkish language pair.

1 Introduction

Retranslation requires high level of creativity and originality. Although the range and volume of digitally-available and copyrightless literary works is growing, the classics remain the most attractive texts for translators and publishers, and thus the most frequently subject to retranslation in many contexts.

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and dominance of high-quality machine translation (MT) and computer-aided translation (CAT) tools in the translation profession brings the need to reconsider the assessment of retranslations of literary works. The digitization and online availability of the texts of earlier translations as processable data

for MT providers is likely to encourage retranslators to have recourse to such tools.

In this paper, we report on a small-scale experiment to demonstrate the potential effects on creativity of using MT for retranslation. We explore two possible effects of MT. On the one hand, we can argue that in retranslations, it is desirable to focus on the more lexically and syntactically complex structures in the source text, rather than the relatively easier parts. In this case, using MT might give translators freedom to engage in a more intense focus on such key sections of the text, and thus boost creativity. On the other hand, MT is likely to inhibit translators, particularly novices, by appearing to make the translation process more straightforward than it actually is. This approach risks undermining critical thinking process, and constraining the capacity to find creative solutions to translation problems.

Furthermore, the use of MT in literary retranslation raises another issue explored in studies, plagiarism in translations. The widespread use of MT is likely to hinder detection of plagiaristic elements in retranslation, since it can pave the way for a new mode of “translation”, namely *transcolage*. We discuss this recent trend, based on the current examples, and the possible repercussions of MT-driven retranslation.

2 Background

In the current study, we investigate the level of creativity in MT-supported retranslations. This brings into focus several key concepts, such as retranslation, plagiarism, and the use of MT for literary translation, and creativity in retranslation.

2.1 Retranslation

Retranslation is defined as “either the act of translating a work that has previously been translated into the same language, or the result of such an act, i.e. the retranslated text itself.”

(Gürçağlar, 2009). Retranslation in literature adds value to, repairs and competes with the earlier efforts, and through this evolutionary process creates a genealogy and history of translation. In a retranslation, as well as seeking the translator's personal voice, one may feel the need to understand the retranslator's agenda. Without such a new voice, perspective or agenda, it may even be difficult to describe it as a translation. In most cases, the repetitive or plagiaristic elements are clearly seen in the text.

2.2 Plagiarism

Plagiarism in translation has been a topic of discussion for the last two decades in various contexts, especially in Turkey (Turell, 2004; Gürses, 2007; 2008; 2011). This phenomenon was investigated in a two-year scientific project funded by The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (Şahin, Duman & Gürses, 2015a). One of the findings of the project was that of 28 different Turkish retranslations of Robinson Crusoe, only two showed satisfactory level of originality. The boom in retranslations of classics in Turkey is strongly linked to profit-oriented publishing policies fed by plagiarism (Şahin, Duman & Gürses, 2015b). Currently, two possible approaches to detect plagiarism in retranslations are document collusion programs, such as *CopyCatch Investigator*®, and qualitative analysis of translations. Yet, the use of MT for literary translation is expected to pose new challenges.

2.3 MT for literary texts

The use of MT for literary translation has become a topic of discussion in translation circles. The view that MT cannot be used for literary texts is now being challenged.

Moorkens et al. (2018), in their study investigating post-editing of literary texts, concluded that “all participants prefer to translate from scratch, mostly due to the freedom to be creative without the constraints of segment-level segmentation, those with less experience find the MT suggestions useful.” The use of MT for English-Turkish language pair also was investigated in several studies for different text genres, including literary texts with SMT paradigm (Şahin 2014, Şahin & Dungan 2014). Findings emphasized low quality of MT output was quite low in those experiments and the negative attitude of translators to using MT in the translation process, especially for literary texts.

2.4 Creativity in retranslations

Retranslations are expected to offer the readers novel and better solutions, thus require retranslators to show more creativity, which “is most usefully defined as something which happens in translation and is demanded of translators.” (Sullivan, 2013). Sullivan also argues that “[a]lthough literary texts are by no means the only texts which prompt creative responses, they are an important resource for promoting student creativity and language sensitivity.” (2013)

Paul Kussmaul (2000), one of the leading scholars focusing on creativity in translation, argues that “[s]cenic visualisations [...] contribute to the novelty of a translation and help make it a creative product.” The question of increasing use of MT in translation could contribute to creative solutions has not yet been answered. However, recent studies touch upon the issue peripherally, and provide empirical evidence.

In one of those studies, Toral (2019) investigated whether there is evidence of post-editing, and how PE differs from HT, in a corpus of news articles for different language pairs. By looking at the so-called ‘translation universals’ (Baker, 1993), Toral found that “PEs tend to be simpler and more normalised and to have a higher degree of interference from the source text than HTs.”

Stressing that “We need to help translators expand their creative repertoires of translation strategies.”, Robinson (1998) disassociates creativity from convergent thinking which entails “avoiding errors by narrowing in on the most conventional solution and refusing to take, or even to contemplate taking, risks — and enjoyment”.

In our study, we define creative translation as solutions that go beyond literal translation and differ from the MT solution. In line with these considerations, we addressed the following questions:

- How does MT-aided retranslation affect novice translators' creativity in literary texts for the English-Turkish language pair?
- What is the opinion of novice translators in regard to the use of MT in literary retranslation?

3 Method

We conducted a small-scale experiment with 21 fourth-year translation and interpreting (T&I) students following a course on literary translation, and with some experience in post-editing. They

translated into Turkish two excerpts (142 words and 145 words in length) from Robinson Crusoe. This classic has been frequently retranslated (about 30 times) into Turkish in the last three decades. Some of these retranslations are, partly or fully, available on the Internet.

The participants were divided into two groups. The first group translated the first excerpt using Internet resources on an online word-processing program, and the second excerpt by post-editing the Google Translate output, again using any Internet resources. The second group completed the translation task in the opposite order in terms of mode; that is the first excerpt was post-editing and the second was unaided human translation. The maximum time allowed for each task was one hour. Upon completion, the participants also wrote a short paragraph expressing their opinion about MT-aided and unaided literary translation.

Each translation was transferred to a Google Spreadsheet, and in each translation six translation units were selected for analysis in each mode (HT and MT+PE), according to where creativity was expected to come into play.

3.1 Sample Text

I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, **of a good family, though not of that country**, my father being a foreigner of Bremen who settled first at Hull.

He got a good estate by merchandise and, leaving off his trade, lived afterward at York, from whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer; **but by the usual corruption of words in England** we are now called, nay, we call ourselves, and write our name “Crusoe” and so my companions always called me.

I had two elder brothers, **one of which was lieutenant colonel to an English regiment of foot in Flanders**, formerly commanded by the famous Colonel Lockhart, and was killed at the battle near Dunkirk against the Spaniards.

What became of my second brother, I never knew, **any more than my father and my mother did know what was become of me**.

Being the third son of the family, **and not bred to any trade**, my head began to be filled very early with rambling thoughts.

My father, who was **very ancient, had given me a competent share of learning**, as far as house-education and a country free school generally go, and designed me for the law; but I would be satisfied with nothing but going to sea; and my

inclination to this led me so strongly **against the will, nay, the commands of my father**, and against all the entreaties and persuasions of my mother and other friends, that there seemed to be something fatal in that propensity of nature, **tending directly to the life of misery which was to befall me**.

3.2 Analysis

We categorized translation solutions as follows:

- literal translation
- MT solution (literal, creative, or erroneous translation)
- creative solution (going beyond literal translation)
- undertranslation (not conveying the message fully)
- mistranslation (conveying the message incorrectly)
- untranslated (omitting the whole unit)

We only used four of the published translations: the first translation, and three retranslations. We analyzed the translations in terms of the expressions in bold, a total of 252 translation units. We acknowledge that some categories can overlap; for example, a literal translation solution can overlap with solutions found in previous translations. We coded each solution according to the categories listed above.

4 Results

The analysis of student translations based on MT solutions and previous translations provided results regarding the effect of using MT in literary translation on creativity.

4.1 Initial observations

MT output produced by Google Translate seems consistent with unaided translation outputs (student translations as well as retranslations already available in the market) in terms of sustaining-adapting words; neither output localizes. For example, the human translator and retranslators have not focused on the readers' perspective: ‘Flanders’ is transferred unchanged without giving the reader *Flamand / Flemish* context. Only two students in HT mode noted this and localized the word, whereas MT output in French does this automatically.

MT output also seems to present translations more faithful to the source text structure. Professional as well student translators tend to divide long sentences into parts, unlike MT. The tendency to keep the form of the original may be a sign and test of creativity from the perspective of the translator; so translational strategies correlate with creativity.

9 out of 12 translation units were translated by MT incorrectly and one translation unit was undertranslated. Other two translation units were translated accurately, one literally and one creatively.

4.2 Student translations

Time spent for translation both in HT and MT+PE modes was very close (See Table 1). Although the participants spent almost as much time as the other mode adjusting the MT output (see Table 1), in most instances they preferred to maintain MT output. The number of mistranslations was high in both modes, mostly due to comprehension problems. The participants did not check earlier published translations during the experiment.

As can be seen in Charts 1-3, the percentage of creative solutions that the participants produced is higher in the HT mode. In the MT+PE mode, the participants preferred to rely on MT solutions, whether literal or erroneous, to a considerable extent. Approximately, 23% of the translation solutions by Group 1 and 59% of Group 2 originated from the MT output, which was obtained through Google Translate. We observed overlapping solutions by MT, retranslators, and student translators as well. For example, the word “ancient” is translated into Turkish inaccurately not only by Google Translate, but also by retranslators and students, except for one. The translation unit “I was born” is translated as “doğdum” by MT and this solution is kept by all of the participants in MT+PE mode, whereas only two out of 10 participants used this solution in HT mode. Only about 7% of translation solutions produced by the student translators were exactly similar to those in earlier published translations included in our study.

4.3 Student views

Only two out of 21 participants found MT+PE more efficient, the remainder complained about the difficulty of post-editing and stated that they preferred translating from scratch. This was mostly due to the complex sentence structures in

the source text. Three of the comments by the participants are as follows:

G2-S5 (Group2-Student5)

It took the same time for me to post-edit a MT and to translate a similar text on my own. Machine translation fails to successfully translate such complex sentence structures, and there seems to be many mistakes in the MT, I would have preferred to translate the first part myself, upon seeing the MT. Translating on my own, for me was rather easier when compared to post-editing, as MT often seemed to confuse me with both its word choices and sentence structure changes. I had to pay more attention to the text due to these elements. As for the translation process itself, I found the text to be complex on a similar level but very much enjoyed translating it since it was a literary translation and a challenge on its own.

G2-S8

Even though the post editing and translation processes took a similar amount of time for me, post editing process was more efficient and easier when we consider the translation of the text. Except for the long sentence in second paragraph, sentence structures were good enough, and I did not need to change sentence structures so much.

G2-S11

Even though there are some advances in MT systems, non-similar language pairs (e.g. Turkish and English in this case, as they are from different language families) still seem to be problematic for MT. Some words were translated incorrectly, and disentangling the mess caused by the lengthy sentences of the source text proved to be more challenging than making the translation from scratch.

The translation (and not MT) was easier, and I felt like I had more command over the process than in the first step of the assignment. As far as the time spent on each task is concerned, it seems plausible to think that long and complex sentences, in the current technical circumstances, should be handled by human translators rather than automated processes.

G1_HT and G1_MT+PE

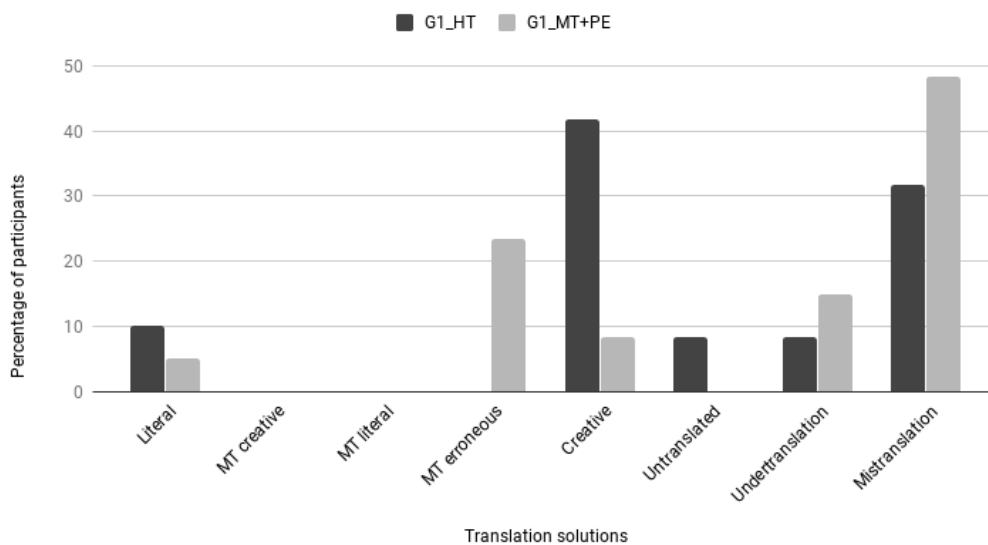


Chart 1. Translation solutions by Group 1 (n=10)

G2_HT and G2_MT+PE

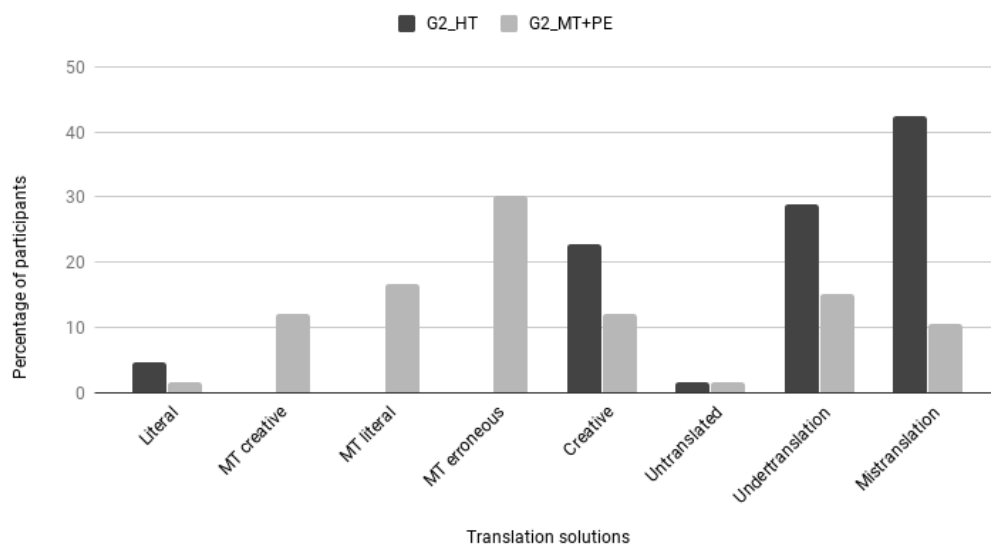


Chart 2. Translation solutions by Group 2 (n=11)

HT and MT+PE (both groups)

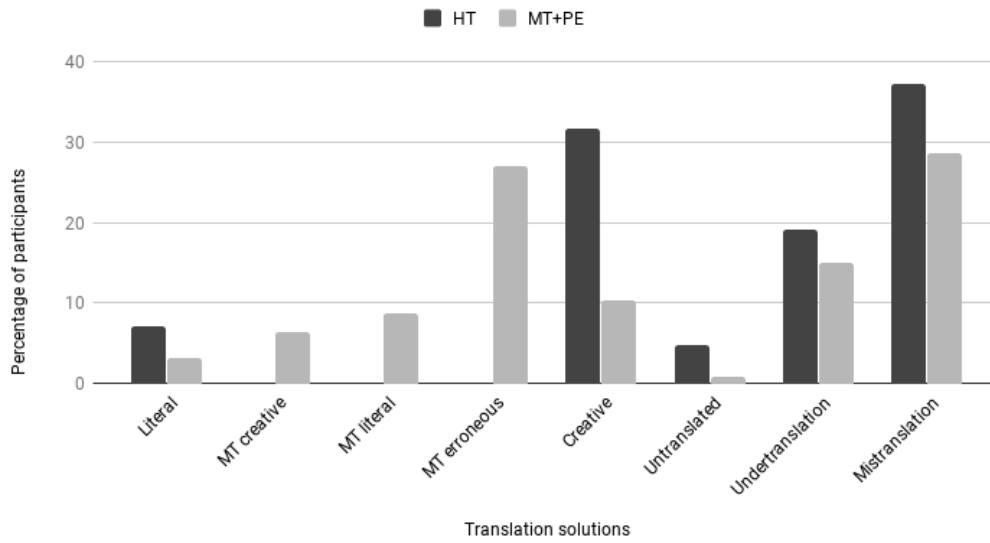


Chart 3. Translation solutions by all participants (n=21)

Table 1. Average time spent on translation tasks

	G1		G2	
	HT	MT+PE	HT	MT+PE
Average time spent in minutes	20.8	20	18.18	16.18

5 Conclusion

Our study focused on the question how the use of MT in translation of literary texts affects creativity. We used a qualitative analysis of a small set of data produced by fourth-year T&I students.

Toral (2019) warns that “the extensive use of PE rather than HT may have serious implications for the target language in the long term, for example that it becomes impoverished (simplification) and overly influenced by the source language (interference).” This finding is relevant to our study as well because novice translators are also susceptible to interference of source language due to literal solutions provided by MT services. In another relevant study, Vanmassenhove, Shterionov, and Way (2019) observed that “the process of MT causes a general loss in terms of lexical diversity and richness when compared to human-generated text.”

Our findings generally corroborate Toral’s (2019) and Vanmassenhove, Shterionov, and Way’s (2019) findings that students created less original solutions with MT aid; and more original in non-MT mode. A parallel can be drawn with a driverless car: when controlled by humans, the number of routes expand, and safety is increased. We also found that novice translators had difficulty in analyzing complex sentence structures, and hence mistranslated the high number of units in our analysis. Yet, this might be due to time pressure, as they were limited to one hour to complete the translation task in a laboratory setting.

As Kussmaul (2000) states “We are faced here with a specific feature of creativity in translating, which at first sight seems to be a paradox. On the one hand translators can fulfil the requirement of novelty only if they move away from the source text; on the other hand, it may be more adequate for the overall purpose not to move very far from the source text and thus be less creative.” (p. 124). In this regard, MT use seems to be an adequate choice because of the linearity it presents. Yet, literary translation, and retranslation in particular, requires creativity entailing novel solutions. Unlike the conclusion of Moorkens et al. (2018), our participants, relatively inexperienced, found MT suggestions rather unhelpful, as reported in their post-experiment reflections.

Our results suggest that assuming that MT to Turkish continues to develop, it will help the translator to produce more creative retranslations, and may help free the translator from laborious

work and become more creative and open to experiment.

However, we argue that, even in its present state, using MT may help the translator 1) to check work, 2) or to create work by editing, 3) and to see her good and bad points. Nevertheless, starting with MT-editing may be time consuming, so probably own translations should be compared with the MT version. But if translators feel that it will be difficult to be creative, then they could start with MT version. We know that editors in publishing houses are uninterested in whether the text is human or MT, or even group work, they merely need a usable, original text from a human translator as named author who is legally responsible for the text.

But then, even if this is true for translation, in the case of retranslation, it becomes complex, as MT or HT may resemble other retranslations. Our experiment is important because it shows that, even though there exist several retranslations of a work, translations of greater creativity are possible in HT and even in MT. In fact, we may say that, if used wisely, MT becomes a tool for the retranslator in the same way as past HTs of the same text in the same language, and it is extremely likely that MT aid will eventually become as common as dictionaries are today.

One drawback in our investigation is that students have not yet achieved professionalism and professional attitudes, meaning they do not yet behave like professional translators in the field. In literary retranslation business, it is always a point of interest whether the retranslator considered other translations and whether there is any correlation with the current retranslation. This looking up and preliminary research process is in fact crucial if the republisher and retranslator intends to add value to the product; but in the Turkish case, our analysis of the published texts revealed no such an intention. The added value has been newness in translation alone, without new forewords by specialists in the field or footnotes to reveal the historical context. This shows that MT may add much value to the translation; for example, Google Translate has a pronunciation/reading tool, and words can be searched on the Internet for images, dictionary and encyclopedia entries. Yandex Translator has added previous Russian to English literary translations to its database, which are revealed if you try to translate from a Russian classic. As these tools evolve, they will probably either make retranslation unnecessary or make human retranslation evolve into a cyborg translation, in which the personal translation will be available

for the consumer. In addition, we may be witnessing a shift from the question of whether the translator will use MT, to the question of whether MT will need a translator, and in the case of retranslation, the answer is, not necessarily.

But today, even though the translation from, say, Finnish to English has developed greatly (Robinson 2019), translations into Turkish still have to catch up, and this makes our analysis necessary. In the Turkish case, we need to be aware that there is a market for plagiarism in retranslations; these are produced with methods such as renewing, changing the words, syntax, and sometimes, collaging different translations, which we call *transcollaging*. The producer of plagiarism does not aim at better texts, although this is possible, but usually they aim only to hide resemblances. The problem here is to decide whether MT is consistently repeating the same translation, or whether it is evolving, changing every day and giving different solutions to different users. If the latter is the case, a plagiarist (or so-called translator) may use MT to get a literary retranslation without recourse to other human retranslations, and there will be nothing beyond an IP number to identify him. This is a problem for attention and our investigation, which reveals similarities among Crusoe retranslations, plagiarisms and student works must be borne in mind in future analyses.

We should note that the source text in our study contains structures and expressions that could pose challenges for translators, whether professional or student. MT use can be more helpful for relatively easier literary texts. Further experiments should be conducted with different texts, and as well as with professional translators. Finally, comparing different online MT services, such as Bing Translator and Yandex and other offline commercial systems, in addition to Google Translate, would enable us to better assess the potential of MT use for creativity in retranslation.

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