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Wook-Dong Kim

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THE “CREATIVE” ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF *THE VEGETARIAN* BY HAN KANG

Wook-Dong Kim

The assessment of translation quality or translator performance is a fast-growing, significant field of translation studies. At the turn of the new millennium, Juliane House raised a highly important question, “How do we know when a translation is good?”¹ Undoubtedly, this question is still not only valid but also more important to every critic or scholar who is very much interested in the assessment of the quality of a particular translation. House further stated that “this simple question lies at the heart of all concerns with translation criticism.”² In response to the question that House raised, my answer is that we have no way of knowing whether a given translation is good *or* bad without a severe, scrutinized comparison of a source text with its translation. Any assessment of a translation is bogus unless it has gone through a rigorous comparison of the source and the translated texts.

This article aims to evaluate Deborah Smith’s English translation of *The Vegetarian*, written by Han Kang, one of the most promising writers in South Korea. In evaluating its translation, I will attempt to apply the Translation Quality Assessment (TQA) model, first proposed by Juliane House and later by J. C. Sager.³ However, I will not follow their model meticulously but substantively revise it for my own purpose, which will focus on translation errors. According to a research paper presented at a conference at Ewha Women’s University in October 2016, 10.9 percent of the first section of the book was found to be mistranslated, while another 5.7 percent of the original text was found to be omitted.⁴

Despite the allegations of numerous errors, omissions, and embellishments in South Korea, the criticisms of Smith’s translation have scarcely been heard outside South Korea under the roar of thunderous applause. A number of problems surrounding the translator’s ineptitude have been discussed in the Korean-language media. Although most of these errors do little, if anything, to derail the plot, the number of mistranslations in *The Vegetarian* is much higher than one would expect from a professional translator. In the West, on the other hand, reviewers lavishly praised the translation as “masterful” and “exquisite.” According to a media release by the publisher, Chloe Aridjis, author of *Book of Clouds*, even went on to say, “Poetic and beguiling, and translated with tremendous elegance, *The Vegetarian* exhilarates and disturbs.”⁵ Daniel Hahn, writing for *The Guardian*, stated that “[t]his is Han Kang’s first novel to appear in English, and it’s a bracing, visceral, system-shocking addition to the Anglophone reader’s diet.”⁶ I will identify the errors that Smith made in translating Han’s novel and classify the errors in detail. This article will shed some light not only on the quality of translation of a Korean literary work in particular but also on the assessment of translation performance in general.

I chose *The Vegetarian* because it has been on an international bestseller list. In May 2016, Han Kang won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize for Fiction, a reward given for the finest in fiction. As of 2016, the coveted prize has been awarded annually for a single book, translated into English and published in the United Kingdom. It is noteworthy that the Man Booker International Prize awards the writer and the translator equally. Han's winning the prestigious prize became sensational all the more because the novel was not only selected by a panel of five judges who considered 155 novels in translation, but also they chose it over novels by more established writers, including the Nobel Prize-winning Turkish author Orhan Pamuk and the well-known Italian writer Elena Ferrante. *The Vegetarian* was originally published with the title *Chaesikjuuija* (채식주의자) in South Korea in 2007, and the first English translation appeared in the United Kingdom in 2015, which was then followed by the United States' release in 2016. Its English translation provides an excellent example of assessing the quality of translation of Korean literary work into English. Despite Smith's apparent flaws, her translation can be regarded as "creative" and positive at least in that it is highly accessible for target-language readers. The translator's faulty grasp of both the source language and the source culture can potentially be fatal because the reader does not know the original version.

The Vegetarian by Han Kang has been translated into thirteen languages so far since its first publication in October 2007 by Changbi Publishers. Compared to the translations in other languages of Han's novel, the English translation is, surprisingly, a latecomer because it was published eight years after the publication of the original. The Japanese and Vietnamese translations of the book were published in 2011, only four years after the Korean original. Even the Spanish translation came out in 2012 in Argentina, followed by the Polish translation in 2014. Founded by the Korean government to promote Korean literature and culture overseas, the Literature Translation Institute of Korea has funded the translation and publication of *The Vegetarian* into those languages, excluding English.

The Institute decided not to fund a translation into English simply because an English version was expected to be produced without its financial support. Even so, Anglophone publishers seemed hesitant about paying attention to a writer from a somewhat unfamiliar literary tradition, which happens often enough in English-language trade publishing. In 2013, while she was working as part of the preparatory committee for events related to Korea (South Korea was invited as the Guest of Honor Country for the 2014 London Book Fair), Deborah Smith, a then 28-year-old PhD student at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, handed over a translation sample to the editor of Portobello Books, who showed great interest in the book. Impressed by a good reaction from readers at the Han Kang event at the 2014 London Book Fair, Portobello decided to go ahead with the publication. Hogarth Press, an imprint of Random House, published the book in the United States in February 2016.

House's TQA Model and Sager's Model Revised

One promising approach to the assessment of translation quality was the model provided by Juliane House. Her assessment model is largely based on the Hallidayan Systemic-

Functional Theory, as well as on the Prague School linguistic theories, speech act theory, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and, most recently, corpus-based distinctions between spoken and written language. In her assessment model (more appropriate to utilitarian prose than literary works), House classified the translation errors roughly into two categories: covert and overt.⁷ The former is a type of error characterized in relation to the strategy of what she called covert translation: that is, mismatches between the source text and the target text along a functional dimension. The latter, on the other hand, involves a type of error characterized in relation to the strategy of overt translation. Overt errors that result from a non-functional mismatch present the text explicitly as a translation. This type of error takes place when a text is closely associated with a historical occasion or is of literary status, and because of these qualities, while the text does transmit a message of general significance, it is also clearly source-culture specific. With these types of texts, House argued, a direct match of the original source-text function is not possible, thus making the translator ensure that the target reader has access to the original work’s cultural and contextual discourse world. House further categorized overt errors into seven subcategories: (1) not translated; (2) slight change in meaning; (3) significant change in meaning; (4) distortion of meaning; (5) breach of the source-language system; (6) creative translation; and (7) cultural filtering. Overall, House’s model is based on the degree of change or distortion of the meaning of the source text.⁸ J. C. Sager, on the other hand, proposed a much simpler grid with a familiar classification by type of error: (1) inversion of meaning, (2) omission, (3) addition, (4) deviation, and (5) modification.⁹

A careful examination of those categories proposed by both House and Sager reveals, however, that they either overlap or are somewhat incomplete. If a translator does not translate certain sentences or passages, distortion of meanings inevitably will take place. The breach of the source-language system leads no doubt to all sorts of changes in meaning. Given some inconsistency in House’s categorization and incompleteness in Sager’s categorization, I will reformulate the overt errors in terms of the kind, not of the degree, of translation mistakes as follows: (1) vocabulary errors, (2) homonymy errors, (3) undertranslation and overtranslation, (4) errors made on the syntactic level, and (5) words or phrases charged with culturally specific features.

Vocabulary Errors

In translating *The Vegetarian* into English, Deborah Smith’s frequent fundamental mistakes due to her meager Korean vocabulary made her translation weak. In a review for *The New York Times*, Porochista Khakpour stated that “Smith learned Korean only about six years ago, mastering it through the process of translating this book.”¹⁰ In May 2016, when *The Vegetarian* won the Man Booker International Prize, Smith told BBC News, “I had no connection with Korean culture—I don’t think I had even met a Korean person—but I wanted to become a translator because it combined reading and writing and I wanted to learn a language.”¹¹ In 2009, Smith graduated from the University of Cambridge with a BA in English literature, and in 2010 she went to the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies to do an MA in Korean studies, during which time she

became interested in Korean literature, as well as in translation. Smith had not lived in Korea until she got *The Vegetarian* published in the United Kingdom in 2015. Apparently, Smith is incapable of matching correct lexical items in both the source language and the target language. Regrettably, she was not even able to tell the Korean word *pal* (팔, arm) from *bal* (발, foot), which are two of the most basic words. In the translated sentence, “As she entered the room she stretched out her foot and calmly pushed the door closed,”¹² the word “foot” should be “arm.” Smith made the same mistake in one of Yeong-hye’s haunting dreams in which she first describes her being lost in a dark woods: “*The sharp-pointed leaves on the trees, my torn feet.*” The sentence should read: “*My face, my arms, torn, making my way through the sharp-pointed leaves.*”

A far more serious mistake of this nature can be found throughout Smith’s translation of *The Vegetarian*. In the first and title story, Mr. Cheong’s boss invites Mr. and Mrs. Cheong (Yeong-hye) to dinner. Due to Yeong-hye’s lingering, the husband and wife are late leaving their home, as Mr. Cheong describes in his narration: “We only just managed to get to the restaurant in time, and even then only because I’d gone flat out on the main road” (28). A comparison of this translated sentence with the original one reveals that the meanings are considerably different. The sentence should read, “We just managed to get to the restaurant in time, and only then because I’d taken the branch road.” Most probably, Smith mistook the Korean native word *saetgil* (샛길) for main road, *hangil* (한길). Smith may have been under the false impression that *saetgil* is a new (probably main) road because “sae-” or “saet-” is a prefix denoting new. For another example, in one of the scenes of the second story, “Mongolian Mark,” in which the husband of In-hye (Yeong-hye’s sister) visits Yeong-hye in her one-room studio, he is surprised to find her stark naked. The narrator says of her naked body: “Her waist narrowed sharply, her body hair was fairly sparse” (81). Here again, Smith has rendered a mistranslation; she should have translated the Korean word *chemo* (체모, 體毛) to “pubic hair.”

No better illustration of Smith’s mistranslation of a Korean word can be seen than in the first scene of the second story. Leafing through his sketchbook, In-hye’s husband says to himself, “There would have been no more suggestiveness about them than there was with spring flowers” (66). The words “spring flowers” are what Smith rendered from the Sino-Korean word *chunhwa* (춘화, 春畵), a word made by combining *chun* (spring) and *hwa* (painting). In Eastern Asian countries like Korea and Japan, the word “spring” has long been used to imply carnal desire, as in *chunjeong* (春情, spring affection), *chunsim* (春心, spring heart), and *chunsa* (春思, spring thinking), all of which mean sexual passion or drive. *Chunhwa* refers, therefore, not to paintings of spring but to pornography or erotic pictures. Undoubtedly, Smith had a homonym for this word in mind when she translated it as “spring flowers” (春花).

Smith’s insufficient command of Korean vocabulary can be seen in her translation of not only Korean nouns but also other Korean parts of speech such as adjectives, adverbs, and verbs. Take, for instance, the translated phrase “the passive personality of this woman” (11), describing Yeong-hye. The adjective “passive” is a mistranslation of the Korean word *munanhan* (무난한), meaning “passable,” “tolerable,” or “fairly good.” A similar mistranslation can be seen in the scene in which her husband, speaking of his wife, says, “Her

face was blanched, a result of protracted insomnia” (42). The word “blanched” is a mistranslation of the Korean word “blackened” (검게 타 있었다). The sentence thus should have been translated as, “Her face was blackened ...” As seen in this example, Smith often transmitted the opposite meanings of the original sentences into the target language.

Still another good illustration of this opposite meaning can be found in a scene in which Yeong-hye’s husband is worried about her turning vegetarian all of a sudden: “What if, by chance, these early-stage symptoms didn’t pass?” (25). Here Smith mistranslated the Korean phrase *jinaji anneunda* (지나지 않는다, nothing but; merely) for *jinagaji anneunda* (지나가지 않는다, do not pass). A similar translation error took place in the sentence: “my wife [...] as if having decided that this performance had gone on quite long enough, got back up onto the bed” (56). The original phrase should read, “My wife [...] as if passing through, got back up onto the bed.” Smith certainly mistook the Korean verb *jinachyeo-gada* (지나쳐가다), meaning “pass by” or “pass through,” for *jinachida* (지나치다), meaning “going too far” or “being too much.”

Homonymy Errors

On the other hand, in Korean, as in other languages, one word can be used to refer to more than one thing or concept, and it may cause frustrating confusion or translation loss. The meanings of the same words differ depending upon how they are used in different contexts—even in the same sentence. In fact, one of the common challenges to translators is words with multiple meanings. Words with multiple meanings often function in roughly two ways, as in either homonyms or heteronyms. What may be called “homonymy errors” can present potential pitfalls to most translators. In translating *The Vegetarian*, Smith made these errors on several occasions. For instance, the Korean word *bit* (빛) basically has two different potential meanings: light, ray, beam, flash, gleam, luster on the one hand; and color, hue, tint, and tinge on the other. The aboriginal Korean word *bit* is, in a sense, a short form of *bitgal* (빛깔). Apparently ignorant of Korean vocabulary, Smith misinterpreted the Korean phrase *chorok bit* (초록빛) to mean “green light.” Her translation, “*Trees thick with leaves, springtime’s green light*” (20), appeared to be a little awkward due to the expression “*springtime’s green light*.” Given the context, the Korean phrase in the source text refers no doubt to the green color of springtime, not to a green light. It would therefore be better translated as “*springtime trees thick with green-colored leaves*” or “*springtime trees thick with fresh verdure*.”

Moreover, in the climactic scene in which Yeong-hye’s parents try to force-feed her, the narrator says, “My wife stared at her mother as though entirely ignorant of the rules of etiquette” (44). The phrase “the rule of etiquette” in this translated sentence makes no sense. The text should read, “Mouth closed, my wife, as usual, was staring at her mother as though she could not make out what it was all about.” The possible explanation for Smith’s inappropriate use of the phrase “the rules of etiquette” is that she mistook the Korean phrase *yeyui* (예의) for the rules of etiquette (예의, 禮儀). The Korean word *yeyui* is

a homonym referring to different meanings: as usual, habitually, and as a matter of course on the one hand; and manners, courtesy, and rules of etiquette on the other.

The same type of error occurs in the second story, “Mongolian Mark.” A video artist, the husband of In-hye, cannot afford to have his own studio and shares with other artists a small studio in the basement of a big corporation’s headquarters. In-hye’s husband describes his feelings thus: “He was grateful to be able to use the overhead equipment free of charge” (65). Most English readers would interpret “overhead equipment” as referring to an overhead projector, a slide or film projector that projects images onto a screen, but this is in fact one of Smith’s mistranslations and should have been rendered as “expensive equipment.” The Sino-Korean word *goga* (고가) has many different meanings, including “expensive” (高價) and “overhead” (高架), but all things considered, Han’s intention was to refer to expensive.

Smith’s apparent lack of Korean vocabulary and her mistranslations can be seen without difficulty throughout *The Vegetarian*. In the first story, for instance, the narrator describes In-hye’s new apartment thus: “True, the view out east was obscured by other buildings” (41). The phrase “the view out east” makes little sense because the apartment faces south on the seventeenth floor. The sentence should read, “The view was obstructed by the building in front.” It is not so difficult to surmise why Smith mistranslated this text. She undoubtedly mistook the Korean word *apdong* (앞동, the building in front) for eastward. The Korean word *dong* (동) is a homonym, referring to a dozen different things: a building (棟) and east (東), among many other things. Accordingly, she confused a building in front with one of the four cardinal points.

In connection with homonym errors, nothing seems to be more wrong than the translated sentence, “People mainly used to turn vegetarian because they subscribed to a certain ideology” (31). A comparison with the original text reveals, however, that Smith mistook the Korean phrase *sasang-chejil* (사상체질, 四象體質) for meaning “a certain ideology.” An aboriginal medicine first developed by the nineteenth-century Korean scholar-doctor Yi Jema, *sasang-chejil* refers to four kinds of physical constitution. The Korean word for ideology is *sasang* (사상, 思想); hence, Smith’s confusion of the Korean traditional medical term with ideology. She should have translated the sentence to “People mainly used to turn vegetarian due to their four physical constitutions.”

Undertranslation and Overtranslation

Most translations carry either more or less information than the original text had. This causes some problems for readers to grasp the real meaning. Such phenomena have been called undertranslation and overtranslation. As Peter Newmark asserted, these two phenomena are frequently found in translated texts. Every act of translation ineluctably involves, in fact, some loss of the source-text meaning.¹³ If this loss of meaning entails an increase in detail, it is overtranslation. When the loss of meaning, on the other hand, entails an increase in generalization, it is undertranslation. These two translation types or strategies are like two sides of a coin. The more great differences between the source and the target languages there are, the more frequently undertranslation and overtranslation

occur. Due to the linguistic and cultural differences between Korean and English, avoiding these phenomena would be almost impossible. However, skillful translators do their best to minimize them so that the target-language readers may better understand the meaning of the text. This type of translation error is what Juliane House called "creative translation." Creative translations are those that happen when the translator translates the source text freely by adding extra words or information that does not exist in the original-source text.

Smith's translation strategy as revealed in *The Vegetarian* is very similar to undertranslation on the one hand and overtranslation on the other. On many occasions, her translation seems too fluent because it heavily emphasizes the Korean language style at the expense of the original meaning of the text. Smith tended to carry out undertranslation and overtranslation frequently, and in fact more so than other translators, such as Anthony Teague, who has translated Korean literary works into English, including *The Poet* by Yi Mun-yol and *Little Pilgrim* by Ko Un, both of whom are highly influential writers. The beginning of the novel provides a good illustration of undertranslation. The first-person narrator, Yeong-hye's husband, is extremely frustrated by his wife's refusal to wear a bra: "Even in the summer, when I managed to persuade her to wear one for a while, she'd have it unhooked barely a minute after leaving the house" (13). To show Smith's errors in translation, I provide here my own translation:

Since our marriage, my wife has been going entirely braless at home. In the summer, when she goes out for a short period of time, she reluctantly wears a bra for fear that her round nipples may protrude through her blouse, but a few minutes later she has it unhooked.

Possibly, Smith's omissions leave out Han Kang's intended symbolism. Yeong-hye's unwillingness to wear a bra is a highly symbolic act of rebellion, a rebellion against the consumerism in late capitalist society that has been rampant in Korean society since the new millennium.

With regard to the reasons for turning vegetarian, the narrator of the first story states, "People turn vegetarian for all sorts of reasons: to try and alter their genetic predisposition toward certain allergies, for example, or else because it's seen as more environmentally friendly not to eat meat" (21–22). In translating this, Smith omitted one of the reasons for becoming vegetarian, which is significant in terms of the themes of the novel. The original text indicates another reason, which I provide here in my translation: "People turn vegetarian for all sorts of reasons: *to live long in good health*, to alter their constitutional predisposition toward certain allergies or atopic syndromes, or to be more environmentally friendly" (emphasis added). Most significantly, Smith omitted what she thought clogged the plot development (phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs) from the original text.

Another excellent example of undertranslation can be found in the scene of the first story in which Yeong-hye's husband wakes from sleep around four in the morning: "I'd woken up with a raging thirst from the bottle and a half of soju I'd had with dinner" (14). This translation is not faithful to the meaning of the original text. A better translation

would be as follows: “I’d woken up with *the urge to urinate* and a thirst because I’d had a bottle and a half of soju with dinner *with my colleagues*” (emphasis added). Most probably, Smith did not understand the meaning of the words *yogi* (요기, 尿氣), which refers to the urge to urinate, and *hoesik* (회식, 會食), meaning dining with colleagues. This omission explains, at least in part, that Smith did not have a proper understanding of *yogi* and *hoesik*. However, I will grant that *yogi* is a rather formidable word, even to some native Koreans.

In the title story, and particularly in the dream scenes in which Yeong-hye reminisces, chunks of the sentences and even paragraphs are silently omitted. The same thing can be said of the second story, “Mongolian Mark,” in which more than seven paragraphs are missing from the translated text. In the third story, “Flaming Trees,” substantial omissions also take place. The source text should be translated as faithfully as possible; and any omissions as well as additions need to be sparingly used in order to compensate for the linguistic (structural, stylistic, and rhetorical) differences that exist between the source and target languages. The phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that are not translated in *The Vegetarian* may be due either to Smith’s negligence or to her inability to translate.

On the other hand, Smith also did overtranslation in translating *The Vegetarian*. Compared to undertranslation, however, overtranslation is not so frequent, but even so poses serious problems to readers. For example, in the scene in which Yeong-hye and her husband are invited to dinner by his boss, overtranslation occurs more frequently. The translated sentence, “My boss’s wife [...] escorted my wife and me over to the dining table, already laid for what promised to be a lavish meal, and sat down at the head of the table” (29), is Smith’s own writing, not a translation of anything Han wrote. The same is true with the sentence: “When the other guests surreptitiously craned their necks, no doubt wanting to be sure that they really were seeing what they thought they were” (29). In connection with vegetarianism, Smith also added a few sentences that are totally missing in the original text, most probably to clarify meanings that a native English reader would not have otherwise understood as easily.

In translating *The Vegetarian*, Smith also made a slightly different type of overtranslation. At one point in the second story, the narrator introduces “the Japanese artist Y,” but Smith identified her as “Yayoi Kusama” (65), who throughout her career had worked in a wide variety of media, including painting, collage, scat sculpture, etc. Han might have had a reason to leave this character unidentified. The same type of overtranslation took place when she wrote, “[S]he lay there [...] as though she were a ‘comfort woman’ dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services” (38). The last part, involving the Japanese soldier, is entirely Smith’s own writing, an insertion that adds a negative cultural view of the Japanese that Han did not include.

This type of overtranslation can be also found in a scene of “Mongolian Mark,” in which In-hye’s husband meets his former girlfriend. Speaking of a complete transformation of his artistic style, she says to him, “Your nickname used to be ‘the May priest,’ you know. After Gwangju, your art was so *engagé*, almost as though you were atoning for surviving the May massacre. You seemed so serious, so ascetic [...] all very romantic, I

have to admit" (116). Compared to my translation "Your nickname used to be 'a conscientious priest,' an image of a staunch priest," Smith's translation is a long-winded explanation. Born and raised in Gwangju, Han has been very much interested in the massacre perpetrated by the military regime in 1980. Even so, she tried to avoid any mention of the tragic event in the novel due to the delicate political implications.¹⁴

Errors Made on the Syntactic Level

On the syntactic level, Smith's mistranslation of *The Vegetarian* poses more serious problems. Nowhere is her inadequate knowledge of Korean more conspicuous than in this type of translation error. An agglutinative language, Korean is rich in suffixes and endings. As a pro-drop language, Korean omits its first- and second-person subjects in approximately seventy to eighty percent of cases. Needless to say, this subject omission poses a formidable challenge to translators. In translating Han's novel, Smith made a number of mistakes due to her deficiency in this Korean usage. In the original text, for instance, the narrator of "The Vegetarian" wakes up at four in the morning, feeling very cold in the living room. I would translate the Korean to this: "I took a look at where my wife was, feeling a chill." Smith, however, translated this sentence as, "It was cold enough as it was, but the sight of my wife was even more chilling" (15). The translated sentence, "I went toward her, craning my neck to try to get a look at her face" (15), is also quite different in meaning as well as in form from the original sentence. In the source text, Han made use of a simile to graphically describe the strained relationship between wife and husband. A more proper and faithful translation would thus be, "I went toward the outline of my wife who was standing as rigid as a stone figure."

In yet another example, speaking of his wife's eyes, In-hye's husband says, "Her eyes were deep and clear, framed by naturally double eyelids" (71), but unfortunately this is an obvious mistranslation. I would translate the original sentence to say, "Her eyes were deep and clear, framed by the double eyelids whose surgery she had had performed in her early twenties." Her double eyelids are not *natural* but a result of blepharoplasty. A more serious problem relating to the subject omission takes place in the first scene, in which Yeong-hye's husband first finds her braless:

When I put my hand on her shoulder I was surprised by her complete lack of reaction. I had no doubt that *I* was in my right mind and all this was really happening; *I* had been fully conscious of everything I had done since emerging from the living room, asking her what she was doing, and moving toward her. (15; emphasis added)

In this passage, Smith is no doubt lost for the agent-action relationship: that is, "who does what to whom." The first sentence seems all right, but in the following sentences, the subjects are reversed, so much so that the meanings are totally different from Han's intentions. The person who is in the right mind at the moment is not "I," Mr. Cheong, but Yeong-hye. She, not "I," had been fully conscious of everything from his emerging from

the living room, his asking what she was doing, and his approaching her. Lost in her own world, Yeong-hye was completely ignoring all of her husband's actions.

Examples of this type of error are too many to enumerate throughout *The Vegetarian*. A few more examples shall suffice to show how serious Smith's mis-translation of the novel is. Smith translated one sentence to say, "I sat in silence, steadfastly uninterested in this poor excuse for a meal, crunching on kimchi for what felt like an age" (23), but the agent of the action should not be "I" but Yeong-hye. If rendered faithfully to the original text, the sentence would be like this: "She didn't care at all if I stood and looked at the dinner table, crunching kimchi for a long time." Later, we can find another example when Yeong-hye's husband decides to talk to her parents about her vegetarianism. He narrates, "I was left pacing up and down when I hear the phone ring: my mother-in-law" (34). The reader of this sentence may misjudge that his mother-in-law calls and he answers the phone. But just the opposite is true because in fact the sentence should read: "I was walking back and forth and then took up a phone. His mother-in-law living in a small town answered." The same type of translation error also occurs in the second story. For example, in the scene in which In-hye's husband goes to his studio late in the night, Smith translated one sentence to say, "While he was busy rummaging around in the bag that held the two 6mm tapes and the sketchbook, his phone rang" (99). In the original text, In-hye's husband calls his wife to say that he is going to studio to finish the work. Smith thus should have translated the sentence to "While he was busy rummaging around in the bag that held the two 6mm tapes and the sketchbook, he opened his cellphone."

In another example, the sentence should read, "Showering abuse on her, I rummaged in the laundry basket," but is wrongly rendered by Smith as, "I splashed water on myself and rummaged in the laundry basket" (18). In one of her dreams, Yeong-hye recalls the day when she was mincing frozen meats and cut her finger. Immediately, her husband, she recalls, chewed a piece of metal: "*Later that day, when you sat down to a meal of bulgogi, you spat out the second mouthful and picked up something glittering*" (27). But it is at the same dinner table, not later that day, which he eats *bulgogi* and picks up a piece of metal. Later, Smith translated a passage to indicate that when the couple was driving home after the dinner party with Mr. Cheong's boss and superiors, Yeong-hye's husband became quite upset about his wife's behavior and said, "Naturally, I got angry" (33). But the sentence should read, "If I had acted as usual, I would have lost my temper" (34), meaning that he did not get angry at her at that time. Still another good illustration of this type of error can be seen in the scene in which In-hye's parents and siblings gather together to celebrate her newly purchased apartment:

"Now *you've* forgotten all *your* worries," my father-in-law pronounced, taking up his spoon and chopsticks. "Completely seized the moment!"

Even before she got married, my sister-in-law In-hye had managed to secure an apartment with the income she received from managing a cosmetics store (41; emphasis added).

The sentence should read, “From now on I won’t worry about you. You’ve completely settled down.” The person who says that he is not going to worry is not In-hye but her father. Very proud of his elder daughter’s economic stability, her father expresses admiration for her ability. His next words “Completely seized the moment!” are also hard to interpret. Does he mean “*carpe diem*,” a Latin aphorism first used by the Roman poet Horace? Or is he saying that In-hye was fortunate enough to purchase an apartment? More problematic than this is the second paragraph, which is even farther removed from the original text. The fact is that In-hye did not buy an apartment *before* she got married. In the original text, she owned a small cosmetics store close to a college and saved something out of her income and finally managed to secure an apartment *after* she was married.

A little later, in the scene in which Yeong-hye is hospitalized, her husband gives some money to his brother-in-law (the video artist) and says, in Smith’s translation, “Please use this to buy a set of clothes from the store” (50). His brother-in-law responds, “Me? Ah, my wife will bring me some clean clothes when she comes around later” (50). However, the text here is totally different from the source text. The translation should read, “And you? I’ll let my wife bring my clean clothes for you when she comes around later.” It seems clear that Smith has no clear idea of the syntactic structure of the Korean language. And this is exactly what House means when she talks about “distortion of meaning.” These types of mistakes result in complete distortion of the meaning of the source text.

Words and Phrases with Culturally Specific Features

The transference of cultural elements of the source language into cultural equivalents of the target language tends to be more daunting for the translator. Given that language and culture are interdependent, translation of one language into another is necessarily related to translation of the source culture into the target culture. Eugene A. Nida claimed that the existence of a dividing line between linguistic and cultural challenges facing translators is highly challenging. As he asserts, “In fact, differences between cultures cause many more severe complications than do differences in language structure.”¹⁵ A good translator should have not only linguistic competence with the source language but also with the source culture. In this respect as well, Smith seems to be unequal to the task. A small peninsula on the Far East side of Asia, Korea is home to a culture that is rich and profound, even if not as diverse as Chinese culture. Accordingly, Smith may have been faced with the formidable problem of crossing cultural barriers.

Smith makes mistakes when translating words or phrases charged with culturally specific features. Discussing traditional Korean food is a good place to start. For example, she translated a restaurant called *hanjeongsik* (한정식) as a Korean-Chinese restaurant, which is far from the truth. It is a purely Korean table d’hôte in a traditional style, with no trace of Chinese cuisine whatsoever. For another example, speaking of the freezer at home, Yeong-hye’s husband complains, “It was practically empty—nothing but miso powder, chili powder, frozen fresh chilies, and a pack of minced garlic” (20). In her translation,

Smith rendered the Korean word *misutgaru* (미숫가루) as miso powder, which refers to powder made from traditional Japanese seasoning produced by fermenting soybeans with salt and fungus. Totally different from miso powder, *misutgaru* is a mixed-grain powder for a Korean-made energy drink, particularly prepared for summer time. Furthermore, Smith's translation of *dakdoritang* (닭도리탕), of half Korean and half Japanese origin, is hardly felicitous. Few Koreans would consider Smith's rendering of "a thick chicken and duck soup with large chunks of potato, and a spicy broth full of tender clams and mussels" (22) to be *dakdoritang*, which resembles chowder rather than soup. Either spicy chicken chowder or *dakdori-tang* would have been better. Strangely enough, Smith transliterated a finely chopped or minced raw beef as *yukhwe* (육회, 肉膾) even though she rather ambiguously explained it as "a kind of tartar" (26).

A sauna and its variant *jjimjilbang* (찜질방) are other culturally charged terms, which may be challenging to a translator who is not much exposed to Korean culture. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's husband uses a sauna while In-hye's husband uses a *jjimjilbang*. The narrator of the first story says at one point, "While In-hye was examining my wife, I changed into her husband's T-shirt and went to the sauna upstairs" (51). This is, of course, Smith's mistranslation of a sentence that should have been rendered, "While my sister-in-law was watching my wife, I changed into her husband's T-shirt and went to a nearby sauna." In the second story, the narrator says of In-hye's husband, "He started the car, but instead of driving home he headed to a nearby sauna" (102–103). A *jjimjilbang* is somewhat different from a sauna in that the former is larger and furnished with hot tubs, showers, and Korean traditional kiln saunas, among other things.

In addition, terms relating to blood relationships are also highly challenging for translators. As is widely known, Korea is a close-knit society where blood relations have traditionally been extremely important. As a result, kinship terminology is so much differentiated that even Koreans are confused about it. There are a variety of ways to refer to relatives in Korean culture. For instance, near the close of the first story, In-hye and Yeong-ho and his wife visit the hospital where Yeong-hye is being treated. Smith did not distinguish *cheonam* (처남) from *cheohyeong* (처형), the former being the wife's younger brother and the latter the wife's older sister. Speaking of Yeong-hye's husband, Smith translated the sentence as follows: "At nine o'clock the next evening I visited the ward. Yeong-ho greeted me with a smile" (53), which is an incorrect translation because the person who greets him is not *cheonam* (Yeong-ho) but *cheohyeong* (In-hye). In the next few pages, Yeong-ho unwittingly assumes the role of his elder sister, In-hye.

Furthermore, idioms and colloquial expressions are another cultural element featured in most languages. Closely related to a translation of words or phrases charged with culturally specific features are these common expressions. A competent translator should enable the reader in the target language to see and understand the text in terms of his own cultural context. As Katharina Reiss asserted, "The audience factor is apparent in the common idiomatic expressions, quotations, proverbial allusions and metaphors, etc., of the source language."¹⁶ Translators most often find idioms and colloquial expressions difficult to translate due to their unpredictable meanings. For this reason, idioms should

be translated very carefully; otherwise, their meanings are easily distorted. Much like English, Korean is widely known as a highly idiomatic language.

Unaccustomed to Korean culture, Smith also made translation errors in this matter. In one scene of the second story in which Yeong-hye serves as a model for her brother-in-law's video art work, she says to her brother-in-law, "I'm all wet." To Yeong-hye, who grins putting on her clothes after serving as a model, her brother-in-law asks, "Why are you laughing?" (113). She answers tersely, "Because I'm all wet!" (113). Yeong-hye's words, "all wet" (다 젖어버려서), refer to the state of being sexually excited or stimulated particularly on the part of a female. In English it is most often used for its literal meaning—someone has just come from the shower or the pool. According to *A Dictionary of American Idioms*, it also means "completely mistaken," "in error," or "on the wrong track."

In Korea, loanwords adopted from a foreign language are common, but with a slight modification of meaning. Idiomatic expressions using loanwords are not uncommon in Korean. In the second story, In-hye calls her husband, asking him if he can pick up their child because, she says, "the babysitter's got a flat tire" (88). Her words may be interpreted as the babysitter's car having a flat tire and thus is unable to make it to their house. However, in Korean society it is very unusual for a babysitter to own a car. The expression has, in fact, nothing to do with a flat tire. What In-hye really means is that the babysitter cannot keep the appointment to babysit for some reason or other. The Korean loanword idiom *punk-naeda* (펑크내다) just means "break one's words" or "not keep the appointment." Interestingly, when their cars get flat tires, Koreans usually say *punk-nada* (펑크나다), which literally means that they have a puncture in their tire.

Conclusion

Deborah Smith appears to see translation of a work of literature as rewriting it "creatively" in another language. During a recent press conference, she stated, "Translation is a process that needs varying degrees of interpretation and editorial decision."¹⁷ As she rightly asserts, translation often involves a task of solving "context" problems, and at that point creativity comes into play. The complex and creative process of adapting one text into a new reality, as well as of mediating between the source and the target languages, indeed means that a translator's task is not only an intricate, demanding one, but also highly creative. Very unlike Russian author and translator Vladimir Nabokov, who warned against the great crime of "free translation,"¹⁸ Argentine author and translator Jorge Luis Borges is best known for complete disregard for the traditional views that either explicitly or implicitly consider the source text as sacred. Borges even went further and said that "the original must be faithful to the translation"¹⁹—but not vice versa. Smith, in this respect at least, may be a true disciple of Borges.

As regards this baffling matter, the crucial questions are how creative can translation be? Is what Smith has done in *The Vegetarian* an act of creation or an act of betrayal? A close reading of her translation reveals that the answer leans toward betrayal rather than creation. Speaking at the Seoul International Book Fair in June 2016, Smith argued that a

translator “must be unfaithful to some aspects in order to be faithful to others. I try to stay faithful to the spirit, and faithful to the letter as much as I can, without compromising the spirit.”²⁰ Given what she has done in *The Vegetarian*, her words certainly sound hollow because she failed to render “the spirit of the original” into English. Smith’s translation of *The Vegetarian* might be what Borges called “[her] happy and creative infidelity.”²¹ On the one hand, her translation is problematic; on the other hand, it is creative in terms of accessibility to target-language readers. As far as the translation’s style is concerned, it deserves commendation as a work of literature. Charse Yun cogently pointed out that “*The Vegetarian* is stylistically quite beautiful.... Here, finally, was a Korean book that worked spectacularly in English.”²² Undoubtedly, style is a highly crucial element in literary translation—*unless* it veers away from the original text to the extent to which it is unfaithful to the original.

The evaluation of a translation—or, for that matter, any human activity—is very hard to make. It involves asking a question that has long challenged many practicing translators as well as some theorists of translation. J. C. Sager, for example, asserted that there may be “no absolute standards in translation quality but only more or less appropriate translations for the purpose for which they are intended.”²³ Nevertheless, there are obviously some bad—not just “inappropriate”—translations or mistranslations. All things considered, despite her strenuous efforts to give Han Kang’s intended messages to English readers, Smith’s translation of *The Vegetarian* is quite flawed and thus inept.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wook-Dong Kim has a BA in English from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in South Korea, an MA in English from the University of Mississippi in the United States, and a PhD in English from the State University of New York at Stony Brook in the United States. He is a literary translator, whose Korean translations from English works include *The Great Gatsby*, *Animal Farm*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, etc. Professor emeritus of English literature at Sogang University, he currently teaches at Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology, Ulsan, South Korea.

NOTES

1. House, “Translation Quality Assessment,” 243.
2. *Ibid.*, 243.
3. House, *A Model for Translation Quality Assessment*; Sager, “Quality and Standard.”
4. Kim et al., “Creativity or Infidelity.”
5. “The First Must-Read Book of 2016.”
6. Hahn, “*The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, Review.”
7. House, *A Model for Translation Quality Assessment*, 66–69.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Sager, “Quality and Standard,” 121–128.
10. Khakpour, “*The Vegetarian*, by Han Kang,” BR12.
11. “Han Kang and Deborah Smith Win 2016 Man Booker International Prize.”

12. Kang, *The Vegetarian*, trans. Smith.
13. Newmark, *Approaches to Translation; A Text Book of Translation*.
14. Alter, "The Vegetarian: A Surreal South Korean Novel," C1.
15. Nida, *Contexts in Translating*, 130.
16. Reiss, *Translation Criticism*, 79.
17. Suh-young Yun, "Translation Work is Creative Rewriting."
18. Nabokov, "Problems of Translation," 71.
19. Quoted in Waisman, *Borges and Translation*, 113.
20. Doo, "The Vegetarian Translator Speaks Out."
21. Borges, "The Translators of *The Thousand and One Nights*," 45.
22. Charse Yun, "How the Bestseller *The Vegetarian*, Translated from Han Kang's Original, Caused an Uproar in South Korea."
23. Sager, "Quality and Standard," 21.

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