



Translator Between Certainty And Uncertainty: Revisiting Translation As An Art Of ‘Negative Capability’

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Abstract

By applying the concept of ‘Negative Capability’ by John Keats to the field of Translation Studies, this research paper examines how the praxis of this theory allows uncertainty to be born in the act of translation. The very concept of uncertainty underlined by suspicion makes the translator resist the limit of the stability of the meaning of the given text pulling it out of the narrow renderings. More often than not, Translation Studies have been offered as a battle ground between the opposites like loyalty and disloyalty, loss and gain, imitation and re-creation etc. This research paper argues that the best act of translation inhabits in ambiguity, uncertainty, indeterminacy and the suspension of interpretive finality due to the textual openness without “irritable reaching after the fact” (Keats 1962: 257). By making a comparative study between Translation Studies and Keats’ concept of Negative Capability, this paper argues that the application of the negative capability by a translator can make the translation bear uncertainty which is not a weakness rather a required condition of translation process. Operating the concept of Keats, the Target Language Text is prepared to resist closure of the text situating translation between mimesis and originality. Making Keats to have a dialogue with certain contemporary theories of Translation Studies, it is attempted to project that translation is not an activity to solve problems but rather it is an intensive intentional condition to allow them to inhabit in the Target Language Text. This makes the translator a practising John Keats in the area of translated literature who is bound to resist the closure, to negotiate the multiplicity of meanings and to preserve alterity.

Keywords: Negative Capability, Keats, Translation Studies, Uncertainty, Interpretation, Originality, Creativity.

(1) Introduction:

Over a period of time, the theory and praxis of Translation Studies have been attacked by the multiple theories from the time of Cicero till the present day. The domination of linguistic, cultural and the post-colonial theories have mostly made the translators to rethink repeatedly what the translation is, whether an independent discipline or subordinated by such certain theories! The debate over freedom and fidelity has made the meaning stable, recoverable and therefore easily transferable from Source Language Text into the Target Language Text. However, due to the shift in the contemporary theories, Translation Studies have been witnessed with the potentiality to have uncertainty, cultural differences, interpretive plurality, multiplicity of meanings and indeterminacy.

Perhaps it seems that the concept of 'Negative Capability', articulated by John Keats, could foresee this shift. Of course, Keats was not a practising translator. However, his argument that it is in the endurance of the uncertainty, the greatest imaginative power exists. This concept of Keats does not allow the rational to come in to interfere to interpret. This research paper proposes that translation itself is, can be and will forever be the practice of 'Negative Capability', advocated by Keats to apply to literature however applicable to the field of Translation Studies as well. The translator is like a creative artist who writes the language between the two lines metaphorically. The space between these two lines is marked by scope of multiple interpretations. Thus, to attempt to translate at best does not mean to eradicate this uncertainty but rather make it breath in the translated text.

(2) Meaning of 'Meaning': 'Stability' vs 'Instability':

Translation activity is the activity that transfers the meaning embedded in any word by decoding it and recoding into another language. One has to know what the meaning is and how does one arrive at a meaning in a sentence. The first significant question is: What is the 'meaning' of the meaning? In order to know the 'meaning' of the meaning, one requires to peep into the linguistic concept of it. Meaning cannot be a single, fixed entity in a language. The meaning of the meaning rests on the relation and contexts among the signs used in a given statement. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image" (Saussure 1916: 66). To Ludwig Wittgenstein, the meaning is contextual emerging out of the social practice, ". . . the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953: 43), to Geoffrey Leech, the meaning lies in complexity, "Meaning in language is a composite of several elements, not a simple, unitary concept" (Leech 1974: 23),

The other significant question is: how do we arrive at meaning? We arrive at a meaning of word, says Saussure, "by its relations with other terms" (Saussure 1916: 122). J. L. Austin says, "To say something is to do something" (Austin 1962: 12). To Grice, "What is meant by a speaker can differ from what is said by the sentence" (Grice 1975: 44) and to Lakoff and Johnson, "Meaning is not a thing. Meaning is a matter of conceptualization" (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 69). Talking about the function of a text, Umberto Eco states, "A text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader" (Eco 1990: 6). Crystal says clearly, "Meaning is not contained in words; it arises in the interaction between language, users, and contexts" (Crystal 2008: 301).

The next question that puzzles all is whether the meaning is stable or unstable. The controversy over the meaning of meaning divides the critics into two groups. According to the classical assumption of theories, the meaning of a word is always fixed and therefore, it is not only recoverable but transferable also. The meaning is unstable, contextual and relative. About the stability of the meaning, Gottlob Frege states that the meaning is stable as object and intention remain the same. He says, "The reference of a proper name is the object itself which we designate by its means" (Frege 1960: 56). To Hirsch, "Meaning is that which is represented by a text; significance is a relationship between that meaning and a person or a situation" (Hirsch 1967: 8). Saussure says that the meaning is instable because "Language is a system of signs that express ideas" (Saussure 1916: 15) and further adds that "In language there are only differences without positive terms" (Ibid 1916: 120). In his essay, 'The Death of the Author', Roland Barthes rejecting the authorial authority says that "A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 1977: 148). This attitude of Barthes declares very clearly that the meaning is instable. Translation critic Walter Benjamin when says, "No translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original", his intention is very clear that no translation is perfect in itself and the likeness of the original due to instability of the meaning is not perfectly possible (Benjamin 1968: 255). The discussion above and various examples of comments given by linguistics approve very clearly that the meaning is always contextual, sometimes metaphoric and sometimes verbal.

(3) What is Translation?

In order to make an applied analysis of the influence of the theory of Keats on translation, it is first necessary to know what the translation is. Though translation is basically considered a complex activity for many centuries, it is an act of transferring a text from one language into another. The modern theories of Translation Studies have completely changed the attitude to look at translation not only as an activity of meaning transfer but something more also with reference to cultural, linguistic and post-colonial theories. In order to understand translation better, it is necessary to note a few definitions of translation. Roman Jakobson defines, "Translation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language" (Jakobson 1959: 232).

Modern theories emphasize translation as an art of interpretation. In order to translate, the Source Language Text needs to be interpreted first. This interpretation depends on the linguistic competence of the translator. Umberto Eco says, "Every act of translation is always an act of interpretation" (Eco 1990: 6). Though George Steiner says, "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to permit exact translation", one has to translate according to one's competence (Steiner 1975: 153). To Susan Bassnett, translation is "not simply a matter of linguistics but also of culture" (Bassnett 2002: 23), to Eugene Nida, "Translation consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message" (Nida 1964: 12), to Octavio Paz, "Every translation is an invention and so it constitutes a unique text" (Paz 1971: 12), to Walter Benjamin, "Translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife" (Benjamin 1968: 254) and to Lawrence venuti, "Fluency masks the violence of translation" (Venuti 2008: 21). All these definitions clearly state that translation is merely the transfer of words from one language to another. Translation is basically interpretive and creative art.

(4) Negative Capability: Its Concept:

The concept of 'Negative Capability' was articulated by John Keats in his letter to George and Thomas Keats, written on December 21, 1817. This theory of Keats is considered the benchmark to create universal literature. Keats believes that, as theorized by him, the form of poetic excellence rests in the capacity to remain open to ambiguity, mystery and uncertainty, thus allowing a literary text to be open-ended. While introducing the concept of Negative Capability, Keats writes, "I mean Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 1962: 257). This quotation of Keats highlights the aesthetic philosophy given by Keats.

The very theory of Keats argues that the greatness of poetry arises from the ability of the poet to endure uncertainty. This 'negative' capability of the creative artist leads him / her, intentionally not to be able to solve uncertainty, though capable of, thus making Negative Capability an art of neglecting the self. Keats has successfully implemented the same theory in some of his poems / odes allowing the tension to overpower the poem. A notable critic Walter Jackson Bate rightly notes, "Keats's greatness lies in his ability to sustain opposites without reconciling them" (Bate 1963: 58). This makes Negative Capability a type of endurance of complexity. Keats says that poetry has not to be experienced based. The reader should not be interpretive of the text. Keats does not like the morality encoded with a literary text. Keats writes, "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us" (Keats 1962: 257). Keats makes Negative Capability a platform for an aesthetic resistance to morality.

Developing the theory of Negative Capability, Keats states that the poet doesn't have any fixed identity. The poet is the most "unpoetical" on this earth because he has "no identity" (Keats 1962: 258). The poet has to negate the self, self-ego. The basic function of the poet, according to Keats, is not to impose the meaning of the text on the readers but to allow it overflow itself. The place of the poet is to be a medium, not an authority. Keats also defines truth saying that truth is not for its discovery but for feeling through an aesthetic experience. The same feeling of truth felt by Keats has been exemplified in "Ode on a Grecian Urn". He describes combining beauty and truth, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (Keats 1988: 49–50). Poetry is supposed to reveal, not argue. The poetry should, as Keats wishes, evoke, not to conclude. A critic Helen Vendler explains Negative Capability as "... Keats's name for the poet's refusal to translate experience into doctrine" (Vendler 1983: 115).

In a contemporary era, Negative Capability is not looked at as the laziness of the creative mind rather it exemplifies rigorous discipline self-imposed on the creative artist. Christopher Ricks notes that Negative Capability "is not the absence of thought" in any way and form but rather "a higher form of thinking that resists premature closure" (Ricks 1974: 214). M. H. Abrams connects with romanticism saying, "Keats values a state of mind in which the imagination remains open to the fullness of experience without forcing it into a conceptual mould", thus turning Negative Capability active, rather than a passive one (Abrams 1953: 176). Negative Capability allows the poetry to sustain uncertainty, mystery and complexity.

(5) Translation as an art of Negative Capability:

Looking at translation through the eye lenses of Negative Capability, the translation does not emerge as failure but rather as successful ground for uncertainty to be nourished. Keats defines the art of Negative Capability as a poetic state of mind to remain in “uncertainties” (Keats 1962: 257). In the light of Keatsian concept, viewing Translation Studies results into the following observations.

(5.1) Translation: Praxis of Uncertainty:

In the modern time, the translation of any text can take place at various levels done by normally the human being and the machine. When the machine translates, it does so with its own mechanical limitations. In the same way, when the human being translates, s/he does so with his / her own human limitations. The translation is not and cannot be simply the mechanical and formal transfer of meaning but rather it is an interpretive act woven between the different languages and cultures also. The quality of uncertainty in translation arises as every language does not have the fixed meaning. As discussed prior in the same research paper, the meaning of a given text is not stable but instable. The complex uncertainty of translation is guided by various linguistic, historical, contextual, cultural and connotative aspects. George Steiner rightly remarks, “No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to permit exact translation” (*After Babel*, 153).

The absence of equal lexical models in two different languages invites the presence of Negative Capability essentially. Insistence of any translator on exactness or fidelity or closeness to Source Language Text, according to the concept of Negative Capability, results into the distortion of the Source Language Text. Rather, the translator has to remain with uncertainty and complexity. This idea is cherished by Walter Benjamin who declared translation more to be alive after its afterlife.

(5.2) Resisting ‘Irritable Reaching’: Translation as Negative Capability:

The theory of Keats, when applied to Translation Studies, admits very clearly that translation is at par the creative activity. The translator must not be “reaching after the fact and reason” irritably for the Target Language Text as usual and must not try to explain away ambiguity in a traditional way (Keats 1962: 257). The very famous quotation written by Walter Benjamin suits to note here that any type of exact likeness to the original is impossible (Benjamin 1968: 260). Steiner further states that “No act of translation can be wholly faithful” (Steiner 1975: 317). When translation cannot be wholly faithful, there is a scope for uncertainty to remain present in the very act of translation. Walking closer to meaning, Umberto Eco says, “Translation is the art of saying almost the same thing” (Eco 2003: 10). Eco uses the phrase “almost the same thing”, meaning not exact since the exact rendering is not possible because Roman Jakobson also argues in a similar way saying, “Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey” (Jakobson 1959: 232). Two possibilities raised by Schleiermacher clarifies that the exact translation is impossible. Friedrich Schleiermacher says, “The translator either leaves the writer in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader toward him, or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the writer toward him” (Schleiermacher 2004: 49). In a traditional way, earlier translation models emphasize fluency and clarity at the cost of the complexity and uncertainty of the Source Language Text. Umberto Eco declares confidently in his work *The Limits of Interpretation* that “To interpret a text does not mean to give it a

definitive meaning” (Eco 1990: 6). This contemporary critic Eco indirectly advocates to practise the art of Negative Capability rejecting the force to clarify everything in translation.

(5.3) Translation: Art of Negating the Self: Suspension of Authorial Ego:

When the literature is considered open-ended, it generates multiple scopes for readers for multiple interpretations. This is the reader’s point of view allowing the reader’s response theory. In contrast to this, Keats argues from a creative artist’s point of view applicable to a translator as well and therefore, he says, “A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity” (Keats 1962: 258). The absence of identity of the poet enlivens the idea of negating the self of the poet. The critic Keats further adds that the poet should not be like a chameleon, “As to the poetical Character itself... it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated.—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon Poet” (Keats 1962: 258). While explaining the concept of the foreign, Antoine Berman explains, “Translation is an experience of the foreign, where the translator must let himself be transformed by the other language” (Berman 1992: 4). Berman has here advocated for the readiness of the translator to any kind of receptivity.

The concept of negating the self, articulated by Keats, finds its striking equal in the critique of translator’s invisibility by Lawrence Venuti. The theories of domestication and foreignization advocated by Lawrence Venuti talk about the invisibility and the visibility of the translator in the translated text. The translator hankers for the authorial assertion by allowing the element of foreign inhabit in the Target Language Text, thus making him visible.

The theory of domestication makes the translator invisible where the translator imposes on him the withdrawal of ego enabling the receptivity of translator to otherness. The act of translation is an exercise of impersonality / negating the self in which the meaning of the text emerges from the openness of the translated text. Venuti argues that the fluency of the Target Language Text creates, “the illusion of transparency,” whereby “the translator’s intervention is effaced”. He further maintains, “The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text” (Venuti 2008: 1-2). This vision of Venuti can be true only if the translator negates him/herself. In the same chapter titled as “Invisibility” in the book *The Translator’s Invisibility*, Venuti quoting Norman Shapiro writes, “I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass” (Venuti 2008: 1). Even about the transparency of the text, transparency to be understood here as self-negation, Venuti says:

“A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text—the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original” (Venuti 2008: 1).

To Keats, the self-negation makes the writer dwell in uncertainty, for the translator the invisibility suppresses the linguistic and cultural difference. Venuti critiquing states, “invisibility is the conceptual force

that masks the translator's labour and authorial presence" (Venuti 2008: 6). The invisibility of the translator risks erasing the foreign elements of the Source Language Text. This theory of Venuti urges the rethinking of the self-annihilation as a visible engagement with such differences. To negate the self does not mean to eradicate the responsibility but the practice to resist and restrain interpretive domination. Thus, translation is an art of self-negation and as Negative Capability.

(5.4) Openness to Multiplicity of Meanings:

No translation can be final as it is believed, in view of Negative Capability. Multiple translations of the same text are available as the same text is very often translated by different translators because, "A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures" (Barthes 1977: 146) since says A. K. Ramanujan, "No translation is ever definitive, for there are no originals that are not already translations" (Ramanujan 1991: 46). Many linguists have opined on the possibility of the multiple layers of meanings in a given text. Steiner notes, "Each translation is only one moment in a continuous process of interpretation" (Steiner 1975: 296). Steiner further states, "Each age retranslates because it reads differently" (Steiner 1975: 49). The multiple translations of the same text do not render translation inactive activity. About the requirement of retranslation, Harish Trivedi rightly mentions along the lines of George Steiner, "Retranslation becomes necessary because every age reads differently and translates differently" (Trivedi 1991: 49) and therefore, "Each translation defines a poem in a particular way" (Ramanujan 1985: 231). While talking about a textual plurality, Roland Barthes says, "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 1977: 146). Paul Ricoeur says, "A text always has more than one meaning" (Ricoeur 1976: 79). Having no stability of meaning invites multiplicity. Jacques Derrida states, "There is no single, stable meaning" but there is a possibility of multiple meanings (Derrida 1978: 279). However, Tejaswini Niranjana blames translation as perhaps political stating that "Translation is never a transparent or innocent process" (Niranjana 1992: 3).

Presence of gaps in a literary text invites plurality of meanings. Wolfgang Iser says, "The text is full of gaps, and these gaps invite the reader to participate in the production of meaning" (Iser 1978: 168). There is always a possibility of alternative meanings as Mikhail Bakhtin notes, "The meaning in language is half someone else's" (Bakhtin 1981: 293). Openness to many interpretations of a translator makes the creative artist die, inviting even trouble for the translators however, the translator-reader must be open to multiple meanings. Roland Barthes in his essay 'The Death of the Author' says, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes 1977: 148). Thus, the birth of the translator must be at the cost of the author. Barthes adds later, "A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation" (Barthes 1977: 146). When Roland Barthes says that "writing is the destruction of every voice" (Barthes 1977: 142), every dead voice of the author gives a birth to the voice of the reader, Barthes indirectly refers to the possibilities of having the multiple meanings as "To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text" (Barthes 1977: 147). Writing abolishes the capacity of a given text for multiple meanings.

This openness of the translator to multiple meanings does not mean that the Negative Capability rejects creativity. Every translation in a way produces a unique text, unique here refers to a novel text. The ambiguity of the Source Language Text has to be born even in the Target Language Text offering a chance to a translator

to allow uncertainty. Anyway, Roman Jakobson has already declared in his essay “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” about poetry that “Poetry by definition is untranslatable”. If one tries to translate a poem, according to Jakobson, “only creative transposition is possible” (Jakobson 1959: 238). This ‘transposition’ of poetry in translation offers a scope for retaining uncertainty in the translation.

(5.5) Translation as Reconstruction of Meaning:

Translation Studies raises the basic question: What is that which gets translated during the act of translation? Words? Function? Meaning? Linguistics treats translation as the transfer of the stable meaning from one language into another. With the invention of the modernized theories that assume that the meaning is not stable, but instable and it gets constructed, the traditional view of translation as a meaning-transfer has been challenged. However, the benefit is that it renders translation as an interpretive and creative art. Nida using the term message for translation states, “Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style” (Nida and Taber 1969: 12). Nida has asserted that the meaning becomes a primary unit of translation with a contextual nature.

With reference to Saussure, the meaning is produced out of the difference within a linguistic system, and not out of reference to reality. Saussure argues that there are always differences in a language “without positive terms” (Saussure 1916: 120). When applied to translation, it proves that equivalence is not absolute since each and every language organizes the meaning in itself in a different way. Catford has rightly observed, “Translation equivalence depends on the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language” (Catford 1965: 27). Thus, the meaning is reconstructed through the functional function of the language.

The approach to look at translation changes with the view given by Wittgenstein’s notion. He argues that the meaning of a word lies in “its use in the language” (Wittgenstein 1953: 43). This suggests that words are not translated as words but rather out of their situational use and the cultural context. Vermeer says, “To translate means to produce a text in a target setting for a target purpose and target addressees” (Vermeer 1989: 20). To conclude, it can be noted that with a view to Translation Studies, meaning is not transferred but rather conveyed as the meaning is produced out of contextual language. The application of the linguistic theories to Translation Studies establishes that translation is fundamentally an interpretive art. The meaning in a sentence gets re-enacted, re-created and re-established within the linguistic and cultural framework. Thus, this clarifies that the translator cannot be the neutral transmitter but an active meaning-maker.

(6) Conclusion:

Translation Studies has for long suffered the swing back and forth between fidelity and inevitability of transformation. The very common and famous traditional debates looking at translation as—literal vs free, faithful vs unfaithful, source vs target, loss vs gain, original vs translation, domestication vs foreignization, word-for-word vs spirit for spirit—establish the fact that though the meaning is unstable, it is transferable.

One must accept that the philosophy of Negative Capability advocated by John Keats is not especially for translation but rather for literature. This research paper has attempted to apply the Keatsian idea of Negative Capability to Translation Studies to examine the pros and cons. The result of the application of

Negative Capability to Translation Studies has brought certain positive characteristics to surface level. The translation of any text is not translation only, the transfer of meaning but also it is a case of trans-creation establishing translation as a creative activity. The introduction of Negative Capability to Translation Studies offers a deep generative framework for rethinking translation to establish linguistic and cultural uncertainty without enforcing closure intentionally or unintentionally. Negative Capability brings creative equality and openness. Ambiguity is not a problem to be solved rather an opportunity to be sustained neglecting the self to encourage humility. Translation is thus not a compulsory search for something equivalence but a type of an ongoing process with difference.

The interesting comment made by Lawrence Venuti justifies the concept of Negative Capability where the translator stands neutral negating the self. Venuti notes, “The ethnocentric violence of translation is inevitable: in the translating process, foreign languages, texts, and cultures will always undergo some degree and form of reduction, exclusion, inscription. Yet the domestic work on foreign cultures can be a foreignizing intervention, pitched to question existing canons at home. A translator can not only choose a foreign text that is marginal in the target language culture, but translate it with a canonical discourse (e.g. transparency)” (Venuti 2008: 310). A text *A Handbook for Literary Translators* published by Pen American Centre notes, “The translation should be a faithful rendition of the work. . . it shall neither omit anything from the original text nor add anything to it other than such verbal changes as are necessary in translating into English” (Pen 1991: 16).

George Steiner’s assertive statement about translation that “To translate is to experience the tension between fidelity and freedom, between precision and resonance” reinforces the tension not to be solved without loss but to be endured (Steiner 1975: 49). This openness resists the violence of domestication. According to Walter Benjamin, translation “issues from the original” to dislocate it from equivalence in order to survive (Benjamin 1968 254). “The translator’s invisibility” as a “disciplined suppression of the translating self” aligns very closely with the Keatsian idea of the self-negation of the poet. (Venuti 2008: 7). Similar to Keats’ view of “egotistical sublime” in Negative Capability translation demands the annihilation of the self (Keats 1962: 258). Reading through Keats, the view of Susan Bassnett that “Translation is a . . . negotiation across instability”, this instability is not a flaw but a required condition to create a literary text (Bassnett 2002: 39). Translation flourishes and nourishes not through certainty but through uncertainty, through the courage to remain in doubts. To end the discussion here, the advice of Eco is the most useful. Eco said, “The text imposes limits on interpretation, but within those limits there is freedom” (Eco 1990: 6).

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