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Interview

What Does an Author Expect from a Translator? An Interview with Poet and Novelist Zeynep Kurada

Yazar Çevirmenden Ne Bekler? Şair ve Yazar Zeynep Kurada ile Söyleşi

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On May 25, 2025, poet and novelist Zeynep Kurada delivered a talk on literature and translation at Çankaya University as part of an event organized by the Department of Translation and Interpreting Studies. Drawing on the highlights of this wide-ranging talk, the present interview brings together Mustafa Kirca and Beyza Havvanur Sarımehmet in conversation with Zeynep Kurada on the relationship between translation, the translator, and art, more specifically on what an author expects from a translator. The interview also addresses the translation of poetic novel and images, with particular reference to her novel *Hayatımın Çoğunda Yoktum* ("Absent for Most of My Life").

Zeynep Kurada was born in Ankara, but she is originally from Mardin. After high school, she studied English for over four years. She was unable to continue her education at Ankara University's Faculty of Language, History, and Geography, Department of Theatre Screenwriting. Her first poem was published in 1988 in the journal *Oluşum*. Her poems have been published in a wide variety of journals, including *Çağdaş Türk Dili*, *Oluşum*, *Karşı*, *Kalem*, *Çini*, *Düşlem*, and *Edebiyat Nöbeti*, and have been translated into many languages. In addition, her short stories, essays, interviews, and book reviews have been published in various magazines. In 1997, she was awarded the Mektar Poetry Prize. She won the M. Sunullah Arısoy Poetry Prize in 2003 with her book *Beni Kuşlarla*. Her short story "Gecenin Döndüğü Yerde" was awarded First Prize at the 2020 Homeros Literature Prize. She is also a member of the management and executive boards of the Writers' Association and the Arts Foundation, and has been active as a member of the Human Rights Association since 1997.

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Mustafa Kırca (MK) *I'd like to start by asking a question about the relationship between language and art. As a poet, what does the 'language of art' mean to you?*

Zeynep Kurada Let me begin with a quote from Holderlein: 'Writing is an innocent act.' Language, however, is the most dangerous of possessions. It is given to those who put it into words, who put it into writing, so that it may express itself. I will begin my talk by discussing so-called direct, literal translation in the literary field and look at the issue from a different perspective as much as possible. For translation is not just the transfer of words from one language into another; it is also about the arguments used in this transfer. First, I will talk about translating imaginative writing

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and what poetic novel translation is. I will also give examples and discuss the issue objectively, while also expressing my own subjective feelings. If it were another poet-writer colleague, their expectations might be different, but I will speak about an author's expectations in general terms. First of all, if we talk about the necessity of art for humankind, we can say that art began with cave paintings. In fact, in that era, when even fire had not yet been discovered, people living communally with their primitive emotions and instincts did not simply think, '*Well, I will go and paint a picture on the wall*.' Humans cannot experience pain as it is; we experience it by changing it, transforming it, turning it into something else; for this, we need a tool. This is perhaps what art is; its necessity emerges here. People of that era, living a life of struggle filled with hunting, without the tools of production or communication, may have depicted their lives to say just one thing: '*We were here*.' In those pictures, they told the story of their lives. Today, these traces seem magnificent to us. When I look at them, rather than seeing a work of art, I hear the cry, '*We were here*.' Living with pain as it is goes against human nature; we cannot sustain it. That is why we need a tool. So, what is this tool? Art. Painting, music… When you listen to Rachmaninoff today, you can hear that cry in every note. Moving closer to our time, Rodrigo's guitar concerto contains all the cries of the Spanish Civil War. In every rise of the music, in every note... If this is not art, then what is?

Beyza Havvanur Sarımehmet (BHS) *So, this leads us to the central question: Who, in fact, is the artist, in your view?*

Artists are those who depict the realities of their time. In other words, they bear witness to their era and cannot detach themselves from reality while creating their art. Of course, their images are different; every artist's way of using images is unique, but they must still produce without severing their organic connection to reality. Otherwise, the work loses its authenticity. When describing their time, artists broaden their perspective; they must do so. They need various tools to observe and synthesize what is happening out there. We can say that there is no definition of art that has 'completed its evolution.' No field of art completes its evolution. Each era gives way to another era, another writer, poet, painter, or a new understanding of, say, music. The spirit of the era determines the medium that carries the emotion.

MK *Building on the question of who the artist is, I'd like to turn to the relationship between translation, the translator, and art. When encountering a translation of your work, you might hope for an experience like gazing into a mirror and recognizing yourself in the reflection. To what extent can a translator make this possible? More precisely, what does an author expect from a translator?*

What does a poet or a novelist want from a translator? And what does a translator give to a writer? These two questions must be approached from two differing perspectives. When a poet entrusts a poem to another language, they want not a literal rendering of their words, but the spirit and resonance of the imagery to be conveyed. This is where the great test for the translator begins: the connection between language and emotion. The image is the soul of a language, as well as a meta-language. The image is not just a metaphor, but an echo of a culture, a history, a geography. That is why poets construct a metaphorical meta-language, a language of images, that goes beyond everyday speech. The poet or writer's expectation of the translator begins with the demand for their own voice and manner of expression. 'Don't just translate my work correctly; understand me!' says the writer or poet. 'Be the carrier not only of my words, but also of my silences.' More importantly, they say, 'Don't describe me –be me!' In short, our request is this: 'don't describe us or our work; be us and think like us.'

With this in mind, when discussing translation and its importance, I would like to emphasize the importance of the translator and the direct communication they establish with the author. Because if we ignore the direct connection between translation and art in a translation process, what we end up with is simply the transfer of words into another language. In other words, we end up with

a literal, mechanical translation. However, such a translation is not acceptable even in plain writing or scientific texts. This is because language many a time takes on a metaphorical form; this is true even in scientific texts. Some things can never be translated word for word. Cultural translation, even in scientific texts, as I said, requires the translator to find the most appropriate equivalent for the expression. If they cannot find it, the loss of meaning in the work begins right there. Therefore, cultural standardization and necessary localization must be carried out.

When an author or poet entrusts their work to another language, they entrust not only the words but also their soul. So today, as I hand over my novel titled *Hayatımın Çoğunda Yoktum* to Mustafa Kirca and Murat Dalman for its English translation, I am handing over not only the text but also my soul to them. We all need a translator who understands us. This is because feeling the emotion behind every word is very important for both the writer and the translator. The writer wants the translator to correctly grasp the emotions carried by the words or verses; that is what they really expect. They want the same pain, the same longing, the same love, the same passion, the same spirit to be conveyed in another language. And a writer who preserves the rhythm wants to see the translator as a vehicle that carries this rhythm. Let me use poetry as an example. Poetry is not just about meaning; it is also music, harmony. That is why the writer expects more from a translator who builds bridges between cultures.

I would like to add a brief note here… Every language is a different kind of imagination, and every language's imagination is different. It is very important for a translator to recreate the poet's or writer's thoughts and touch. The poet wants the translator to be not just someone who knows the language, but someone who knows the poet's heart. Because the poet knows and wants to believe that when the images written in her inner voice are translated into another language, this journey is not just a translation, but the beginning of a process of re-creation.

BHS *At this point, how is the relationship between translation and the target culture shaped?*

Translation is not merely the act of transferring a work into another language; it is an effort, a lifetime of experience, a journey of truth to the other side. Here, the importance of the reader in the target language also comes into play. In other words, it is not just a matter of translating for me; the translator must also consider the speaker or reader of that other language. The author expects the translator not only to translate their work, but also to translate it in a way that the reader can understand, in a manner appropriate to their language. Both the artist and the translator are cultural ambassadors. They carry culture and must preserve its authentic structure. The respect you have for your profession also demands this. That is why there is a need for excellent translators not only in this country but all over the world. Because every artist wants to become universal; they want readers of other languages to understand them, to know their culture and geography.

MK *Taking a closer look at language and imagery, what challenges does their relationship present for literary translation?*

I have written numerous novels and novellas, but above all, I am a poet. For this reason, imagery has always been very important to me in all my works, including my novels, across languages. So I have never been able to write in a so to speak straightforward narrative style. I have received very positive feedback about this aspect of my work, particularly about one of my novels, from both readers and fellow writers. I was particularly impressed by the remark made about my book by a senior poet (Veysel Çolak): Zeynep Kurada's novel, 'Hayatımın Çoğunda Yoktum', has been published. It had been a long time since I had read a novel that affected me so much. It is a novel about people who live a complete nightmare within the life imposed on them. Like Latin American short story writers and novelists, Zeynep Kurada has also loaded her novel with poetry. The plot of life is stronger than the plots of even the most skilled novelists. Kurada, being fully aware of this,

has written her novel in accordance with the plot of life. It is not fictional, but a genuine work. She has told the story of people thrown into a deep well, whose cries went unheard and froze in the air.

The term 'poetic novel' means that the language contains not only the narrative but also the 'feeling.' Poetic novels are filled with music and imagery. For example, my novel *Hayatımın Çoğunda Yoktum* is an image of silence and also the character's past. The sentences are inverted and incomplete, written in the stream-of-consciousness technique. It is written entirely in an imagery-based language. When translating these texts, the voice of a feeling beyond meaning must be heard. Translating without disrupting this style requires the translator to establish a direct relationship with the author through their literary intuition and affinity for poetic language. It must be determined which images, metaphors, and narrative forms need to be specifically preserved. When the author says 'I am not here,' the character is actually saying 'I was here.' Just like in the cave paintings of ancient times… The character in that novel was in a mental hospital, and I personally observed this process for three months. That is why the novel is so vivid and so highly regarded. It contained authentic characters and real cries.

MK *What are the fundamental principles that a translator should take into account when translating figurative language?*

If the language used in a work is unique and also establishes a new narrative space, the translator's perspective should be as follows: Did I use the right perspective when transferring from the source language to the target language? Did I go beyond the surface meaning and engage with the deeper structure in a meaningful way? Did I only look at the surface meaning of the word, or was I able to delve into the deeper meaning? Was I able to capture the internal dynamics, emotional resonance, and rhythm of the image emerging from the original language? This should be an internal reflection for the translator. Now, let's see what emerges in a literal, word-for-word translation: If the author has constructed an original syntax, used 'unusual' words, or interpreted idioms in an unconventional way, the translator must notice this. Because we don't use every expression or every idiom as it is. It is also necessary to approach the density of words carefully. Sometimes words are piled on top of each other. The length of lines in a poem varies from poet to poet; some say, 'I am a poet of lines,' some say, 'I am a poet of images,' and some extract only a single image from an entire poem. Each has its distinct beauty. In the original language of the work, we emphasize not only the meaning but also the sound. Because alliterations and internal sound harmonies in poetry are very important. The translator must hear the music of the text; the target language must also be able to carry this tone. They should approach this process as if translating a piece of music, conveying the melody rather than the notes. They are expected to listen to the voice of the poet or writer and might think, 'What emotion is meant to be conveyed when choosing this image?'

In short, translation is actually a kind of illusion. It is like a dream the reader sees when putting the book down. In other words, when a reader of another language reads the translation, or when we read a work translated from another language into ours, if we feel all that music, that rhythm, the spirit of the work, what the author meant to say, then when we close the book we should be able to say: 'I saw this very same dream too, I was in it too.' At this point, the translator and the author both deserve equal credit for success. After a great deal of effort, they have earned this success.

BHS *You mentioned preserving imagery and culture in translation. In the process of transferring a text to another culture, where does the translator's responsibility begin in terms of preserving these elements?*

Preserving the image and the culture it belongs to is vitally important. Although this is not our

topic, I just mentioned cultural standardization, which is difficult to achieve even in scientific text translations. The translator must ensure that the images and cultural connections created by the poet or writer do not lose their meaning. Attention must be paid to ensuring that each image evokes the same feeling and thought in the new language. Therefore, a translation and a translator must be supported not only by linguistic knowledge but also by cultural intuition. In other words, it is not enough to simply translate the language; one must also be culturally nourished. This is precisely where the translator's understanding and creativity come into play. The translator is no longer just an interpreting agent but becomes a co-author. Together with the author, they recreate the text. They do not merely convey the narrative but also bring the emotions of the text to life in another language. Therefore, it is crucial that the translator approaches the text with an understanding similar to that of the author. When a text exists in another language, it is not just the words that change; the author's inner world, emotions, and images gain a new life, a new existence in that language, those spirits, and that culture through the translator's care. At this point, the following saying is very important: 'Climates do not push each other away; they support the other.' In other words, there should be no conflict of egotism between the translator and the author We must move forward in the right way, supporting each other without pushing one another away. Interaction and patience also illustrate this idea. 'The patience of both the translator and the author must be nourished and protected with mutual understanding and respect.'''

MK *We talked about imagery; it is perhaps the most powerful way to convey emotion. So, what is the translator's role in conveying emotion? How is the spirit of a text transferred into another language?*

The translator is the carrier of emotion; they are the most effective conduit for conveying the feeling of the text into another language. It is impossible for a translator to make an adequate transfer without feeling the emotional transformation within. For the poet, writing is building a world with words and transcending language while unconsciously forming an invisible bridge with the reader. That is why translators are not merely intermediaries; they become the author's most reliable companion and lifeline during the text's journey of emotion. Thinking of the translator as a traveler, a companion on this journey, also gives the author a sense of confidence. Because with translation, a text, a poem, is reborn. Translating a text into another language should be faithful not only to its letters but also to its spirit. Therefore, we cannot ignore the reader of the target language.

MK *What criteria should be considered when evaluating literary translation? For example, what strategies can the translator use to preserve the spirit, style, and cultural context of the source text?*

Irony or a unique style of expression are among the elements that translators must pay the most attention to. This is because metaphorical and ironic expressions are very important in novels, short stories, and especially poetry. What is needed here is a balance that will not seem foreign to the reader of the target language but will also not compromise the originality of the work. In other words, the reader will understand the language, but the spirit of the text in the original language will be conveyed to the other language without being lost. During the translation process, at points where the meaning is not fully established or in cases of critical decisions, the translator realizes that they are now in a process of creation. They take ownership of the translated work as if it were their own and feel the same desire to protect it with care. This is what we expect from our translators: to keep the text alive while remaining faithful to its essence. Because you cannot destroy language; you cannot ignore any expression, any image, any meta-narrative. On the other hand, there is no need for dramatization, plagiarism, or excessive improvisation on the part of the translator. These do not contribute to the work; they only lead to a loss of meaning and emotion. In reality, an artistic and labor-intensive process emerges between the author's rights and expectations in the translation process and the translator's responsibilities. It is not enough to convey the words; the spiritual atmosphere of the work must also be conveyed. Because every text

has a spirit, an atmosphere, and an internal dynamic that works with it. The translator must convey the spirit of the work they are translating into the target language. For example, is the work humorous, sad, resentful, or rebellious? These cannot be understood solely by their literal meanings; they can only be translated correctly by embracing the emotion. Therefore, a translator must fully embrace the work they are translating. If they cannot embrace it, I believe they should withdraw from the translation process. Otherwise, they would be doing an injustice both to themselves and to the author or poet of the source text.

Another element we can mention is 'respect for the author's voice'. Because every author has their own unique style; some write in a clear and simple language; some are more imaginative, metaphorical; some rely on irony; others use satire similar to that found in classical or folk literature. A good translator does not override this style; nor do they consider doing so. The rhythms of the sentences, the silences, and the choice of words in the text must be preserved as much as possible. The translator must be close enough to the text to know where the author speaks and where they remain silent—or at least make an effort to ascertain it. This is where mastery of cultural transition becomes crucial. One of the points we pay the most attention to is precisely this skill and mastery in the process of cultural transfer. Because this is where the translator's burden becomes increasingly heavy. Some concepts can never be translated directly into another language; 'hüzün' is one of the best examples of this. The Turkish word 'hüzün' (eng. sadness; melancholy) has no direct equivalent in other languages. We say 'hüzün', while others try to express the same feeling with completely different words. Therefore, the translator must find an equivalent that conveys the feeling of 'hüzün' to the reader in the other language without disrupting the spirit and atmosphere of the text. This is precisely where the translator's skill, even their ability to become a second author, comes into play. The translator must understand the cultural context and, if necessary, provide an explanatory note, a small adaptation, or a natural justification without disrupting the flow of the text. Because when translating a book into another language, the most delicate thing to preserve is the spirit, style of the text and the intent of the author. The author's intent is very important. Which emotion, which inquiry, which existential question prompted the author to write such a text? A good translator must convey this intent, this spirit and this depth into the other language.

MK *Considering all these creative and interpretive processes, we need to rethink the translator's role in the creation of the text. What do you think is the translator's creative contribution in literary translation? Who is the rightful owner of the translated text—the author, the translator, or both?*

Many poets say that rather than saying 'What a beautiful translation' when reading a translated work, one should say 'What a beautiful writer.' I disagree with this. I think this process is 50-50. It is just as true to say, 'We have created a beautiful work together,' as it is to say, 'I have written something beautiful.' As I said at the beginning, 'Don't write like me, be me. Feel the way I feel.' In summary, returning to the key points to consider in the translation process, we can say that it is necessary to preserve the meaning of the text and convey what the author wants to say without distorting it; to remain faithful to the style, language, and inner voice of the text; and to reflect the author's linguistic characteristics—poeticism, harshness, simplicity, or whatever form it may take—in the target language. Furthermore, cultural references, i.e., elements that are meaningful in the source culture but have no direct equivalent in the target culture, must be conveyed without causing a loss of meaning. All of this depends on the translator having a deep cultural background and a good understanding of the spirit, culture, and authentic structure of the target language.

A good translator is a bridge that balances both the author's voice and the reader's ability to comprehend the text. Translation is not merely a transfer of meaning; it is a transfer of emotion. This is very important. You must translate the emotion before the meaning. When a declaration of love in the original text is transferred into another language, it must be felt with the same intensity.

Imagine reading an intense romance novel; you must convey the spirit of that novel into the target language. Otherwise, if we translate 'Leyla and Mecnun' into English based solely on how we perceive them, rather than their cultural context, nothing will actually be conveyed. In such a case, it is impossible to even discuss cultural transition.

BHS *Lastly, we would like you to tell us about your latest novel.*

If I may, since I believe it is relevant to the topics we discussed, let us leave the floor to the publisher and share Mr. Arif Altan's assessment in connection with our topic. Every sentence has been examined with the meticulousness as you have witnessed yourself. It begins with 'We have you to thank, for every word.' Which is the most beautiful reward of my life. And the assessment of the book continues as follows: Highly intellectual, maintaining an intense poetic tone, both aesthetically and in terms of its literary and thematic world, *Afšarān* is more than a text; it is the voice of a soul, kneaded with the silence of memory and carved deep within, an inner refuge plastered with abandonment and walls of loneliness. In this text, words do not murmur to narrate, they speak to heal. Sentences are like scabs, each turned page like the return of a breath. The author's choice of words in the very beginning 'healing is not erasing the past, but giving it meaning,' stands as both the aesthetic and existential thesis of this text. Because *Afšarān*, on that fine line between forgetting and living, constructs the human return to oneself as an act of remembrance.

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