

# Translatability of Tagore's *Stray Birds* into Chinese with Insights from Constrained Language

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## ABSTRACT

Poetry has long been considered untranslatable. However, Walsh (2018) proposes a theory of “essentially translatable poetry”. To test the feasibility of Walsh’s framework, this paper applies it to Rabindranath Tagore’s (1861-1941) poem *Stray Birds*. Based on an examination of all 325 poems of *Stray Birds* and their Chinese translations, there are four features greatly relevant to the translatability of poetry: dominance of imagery, absence of culture-specific items, free verse, and simple lexical and syntactic structures, in line with Walsh’s (2018) proposal. As *Stray Birds* comprises Tagore’s self-translations from Bengali into English and poems originally written in English, this study discusses the reasons for translatability from the perspective of constrained language, which refers to the language produced under prominent constraints. Readers’ reception is also examined to investigate the effects of Tagore’s strategies, which are found to contribute to ease of cross-cultural understanding and the circulation of *Stray Birds* as world literature.

KEYWORDS: constrained language, essentially translatable poetry, poetry translation, *Stray Birds*, Tagore, translatability, world literature

## 1. Introduction

Poetry translation has long been deemed as such a daunting task that it is doomed to fail. As a popular saying from Robert Frost goes, “I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation” (1961:7). Many other scholars and theorists have also emphasized the untranslatability of poetry. Jakobson (2004:143) says “poetry by definition is untranslatable”. Savory (1968:75) suggests that “all experts agree that translating a poem properly is impossible”. The major difficulty lies in the reproduction of the form,

such as metre, rhyme, and rhythm (Walsh 2018), and the form is usually forgone as Venuti (2004:154) writes that “only rarely can one reproduce both content and form in a translation, and hence in general the form is usually sacrificed for the sake of the content”.

Schleiermacher (2004:52) also points out that “the finest spirit, the highest magic of art” is lost when the musical elements in poetry cannot be successfully translated. Therefore, arguably, musicality poses the greatest difficulty in poetry translation.

However, countering the general sentiment, Walsh (2018) proposes a theory of “essentially translatable poetry” and argues that the essence of a poem can be preserved across languages through the careful selection of words and structures that resonate similarly in the target culture, thus maintaining the emotional and aesthetic impact of the original work. He believes that Federico García Lorca (1898-1936)’s *Poet in New York* is an example of translatable poetry, which serves as a refutation of the deeply rooted concept of the resistance of poetry to translation, because *Poet in New York* has certain characteristics that make it translatable (Walsh 2018). This canonical collection of poems was written in Spanish and successfully translated into English, which means that it is relatively easy to translate, and the translation has been well-received among English readers (Walsh 2018:265). Therefore, based on *Poet in New York*, Walsh (2018:272) has suggested four reasons or characteristics of essential translatability: 1) imagery rather than phonic features being the more dominant element of the poem; 2) universal or target-culture-oriented geographical reference points; 3) free verse; 4) simple lexical and syntactical structures such as the form “noun of noun”.

The first point refers to the prominence of imagery and a lack of phono-semantic relationship, i.e., “the close relationship between sound and meaning in a text” (Walsh 2018:267). In Walsh’s view, phonic effects are not at the heart of *Poet in New York* while its poetic force is primarily generated from the strength of imagery (2018:268). Together with its characteristic of free verse, *Poet in New York* does not exhibit notable musicality, thereby presenting fewer problems in translation. On the other hand, *Poet in New York* contains a lot of target-culture-oriented geographical reference points, such as Harlem, Manhattan, Wall Street, the Bronx, and Broadway in the US, which are familiar to the Americans and therefore could be translated into English and understood by Anglo-American readers more easily (Walsh 2018:267). Therefore, greater familiarity with these culture-specific items (CSIs) or the

absence of foreign elements enables a higher degree of translatability. Lastly, Walsh discusses the simple lexical and syntactic structures in the poems, as he has observed frequent use of structures such as “noun of noun”, “there be”, possessive structure, and repetition of simple nouns and verbs, arguing that “these simple grammatical structures are repeated throughout the book and naturally do not represent any conceptual or linguistic difficulty for Anglophone translators” (2018:269).

But his framework of the translatability of poetry has not been tested in other linguistic and cultural contexts, raising questions about the generalizability of his conclusions across a diverse range of languages and literary traditions. Drawing on Walsh’s (2018) idea, this study argues that Rabindranath Tagore’s (1861-1941) *Stray Birds* shares similarities with *Poet in New York* and is also an example of translatable poetry.

The selection of Rabindranath Tagore’s *Stray Birds* as the subject of study is motivated by two compelling reasons that highlight its unique position within the realm of poetry and translation studies. Firstly, *Stray Birds* stands out due to its distinct form, which diverges significantly from traditional poetic structures, thereby meriting closer examination. Secondly, this collection presents a particularly intriguing case for the study of poetry translation. *Stray Birds* includes poems that Tagore initially wrote in Bengali and subsequently translated into English himself, as well as poems originally composed in English. The dual nature of this collection, comprising both self-translations and original writings in second language (L2), offers a rich field for exploring the nuances of constrained language and its relationship with translatability. According to Kruger and Van Rooy (2016:27), constrained language is defined as language “produced in communicative contexts characterized by particularly conspicuous constraints”. *Stray Birds* is an ideal candidate for examining how linguistic and poetic constraints influence translatability and preservation of poetic essence across languages. Therefore, apart from discussing the features of translatability, the research aims to explore the role of constrained language in contributing to the translatability of *Stray Birds* and shed light on the rationale behind Tagore’s strategic choices. Readers’ reception is also examined to investigate the effects of his strategies.

## 2. Tagore and *Stray Birds*

Rabindranath Tagore was a renowned Indian poet who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 and was also the first Asian to receive this prestigious award. Being talented in literature, Tagore started writing poetry at the age of eight (Kripalani 1962). In 1910, Tagore published his famous work *Gitanjali* in his native language, and in 1912 he translated it into English by himself, which later earned him the Nobel Prize in 1913 (Kripalani 1962; Xiang 2019). His self-translation of *Gitanjali* was in fact “due mainly to the force of circumstances”, according to the authentic record of his letter to his niece (Kripalani 1962:215). In 1912, Tagore planned to travel to Europe, but he suddenly fell ill just one day before the departure, and thus his trip had to be postponed (Kripalani 1962). During his convalescence, he decided to translate his poems of *Gitanjali* because he wanted to write and do some work but not having “the energy to sit down and write anything new” (Kripalani 1962:215). After his recovery, Tagore embarked on his voyage and continued to translate *Gitanjali* on the ship to London. His translation was well-received in Europe, bringing the poet great success. Before *Gitanjali* was translated, Tagore’s fame was confined to India, and the translation introduced him to the Western world and significantly contributed to his reputation and international popularity (Kripalani 1962; Xiang 2019). With a tremendous success of the translated *Gitanjali*, Tagore later published more self-translations from Bengali into English such as *The Crescent Moon* in 1913 and *The Gardener* in 1915 (Xiang 2019).

*Stray Birds*, published in 1916, is another notable work of Tagore (Ma and Wang 2020). It is a collection of 325 poems, some translated from Bengali into English by Tagore himself while some originally written in English (Bai 2022). Those poems are short philosophical poems, often with only one or two lines, which express Tagore’s ingenious and inspiring thoughts arising from everyday life. They center around topics about the nature, love, religion, human, soul, life, death, etc. It is likely that during his stay in Japan in 1916, Tagore was inspired by the brevity and the vivid images of Japanese poems, which were “picture-poems, not song poems” (Kripalani 1962:255) as he analyzed. Those Japanese poems probably refer to haiku. Yasuda (2001:9), a scholar in Japanese literature, relates haiku to painting: “Thus haiku has something in common with painting, in the representation of the object alone, without comment, never presented to be other than what it is, but not represented completely as it is.”

Here is an example of haiku written by Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644-1694) translated by Yasuda into English (Yasuda 2001:6):

On a withered bough  
A crow alone is perching;  
Autumn evening now.

In other words, similar to painting, visual elements, instead of phonic properties or metre, are the most prominent features for haiku. In this way, *Stray Birds* indeed shares similarities with such Japanese poetic style. For example, the poem in *Stray Birds* “Her wistful face haunts my dreams like the rain at night.” (Tagore 1916) is short, with only one line, but it presents vivid images of a woman’s face and a rainy night. This poetic style echoes Walsh’s (2018) argument about the dominance of imagery in translatable poems, giving a hint about the translatability of *Stray Birds*.

*Stray Birds* has been translated into other languages such as Chinese and German (Kubin 2009), but only a handful of studies have examined the translations of *Stray Birds*. Among the few studies on its translation, most of them were conducted in the context of Chinese translation. *Stray Birds* has been popular in China, with numerous Chinese versions including those by Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 (1898-1958) in 1922, Yao Hua 姚華 (1876-1930) in 1931, Lu Jinde 陸晉德 (1942- ) in 2008, and Feng Tang 馮唐 (1971- ) in 2015 (Ma and Wang 2020), and has had profound impacts on Chinese literature and Chinese poets such as Bing Xin 冰心 (1900-1999) who was inspired by the poetic form of *Stray Birds* (Kubin 2009). Although published early, Zheng’s translation remains the most popular and the most recognized version in China today (Ma and Wang 2020; Jiao and Wang 2023). The translation of *Stray Birds* has received relatively more research attention in China than in other countries. Ma and Wang (2020) compared four Chinese translations of *Stray Birds* from a linguistic perspective, analyzing phonological and lexicogrammatical choices in those translations. Zheng (2017) discussed Zheng Zhenduo’s and Feng Tang’s translations of *Stray Birds* using Lefevere’s manipulation theory. Similarly, Xiang (2019) analyzed the factors that influenced Feng Tang’s translation strategies from the perspective of the manipulation theory. The current study is novel in discussing the translatability of *Stray Birds*, providing theoretical

contributions to the debate about whether and what poetry is translatable. It offers fresh insights that deepen our understanding of poetry translation and its possibilities.

### **3. The translatability of *Stray Birds***

Building on the framework of essentially translatable poetry developed by Walsh (2018), this section discusses the translatability of *Stray Birds* from four aspects, which are the dominance of imagery, absence of CSIs, free verse, and simple lexical and syntactic structures. By examining these features, this analysis aims to shed light on how the characteristics of *Stray Birds* contribute to its circulation across language and cultural boundaries.

#### *3.1. Dominance of imagery*

As defined by Andrews (2018:51), imagery is the words “to evoke imaginative spaces and to add dimension to literal description”. Mehl *et al.* (2023:2) has also provided an explanation about imagery, which is believed to be “the process of imagining the experience of a sensory object without direct sensory stimulation”. Based on these definitions, imagery could be regarded as the words that induce readers’ imagination about an object or an idea as if the readers were really experiencing it. In literature, it is important for writers to describe but not to tell directly (Kao and Jurafsky 2012). Therefore, imagery plays an important role in depicting the scenes for readers and leaving some space for imagination and thoughts.

With the use of plain language and juxtaposition of imagery possibly under the influence of Japanese haiku (Kripalani 1962; Kubin 2009), the poems of *Stray Birds* are like paintings, presenting readers with lively scenes in a poetic world.

#### Example 1

Stray birds of summer come to my window to sing and fly away.  
And yellow leaves of autumn, which have no songs, flutter and fall there with a sigh.  
(Tagore 1916)

In example 1, the poem paints a picture of birds and leaves, capturing the fleeting beauty of nature and the transient moments of joy and sadness. The image of stray birds coming to the window to sing and then flying away evokes a sense of short-lived happiness and the

impermanence of life. In contrast, the yellow leaves of autumn, who cannot sing and can only fall with a sigh, create a melancholic atmosphere. The poem seems to reflect on the ephemeral nature of joy and the inevitability of loss and decay, achieving a great contrast between the vibrancy of life and the sorrow of death. Tagore's use of simple and evocative imagery creates a sense of wistfulness and nostalgia, reminding the reader to appreciate the beauty of the present moment before it passes. On the other hand, Zhou (2016) interprets the poem as a juxtaposition of freedom and helplessness. Therefore, like a painter, the poet drew the imagery and allowed the work to be open to different interpretations.

The following is the translation by Zheng Zhenduo.

夏天的飛鳥，飛到我窗前唱歌，又飛去了。  
秋天的黃葉，它們沒有什麼可唱，只嘆息一聲，飛落在那裏。(Tagore 2017:3,  
translated by Zheng Zhenduo)

Flying birds of summer, flew to my window and sang, and flew away again.  
The yellow leaves of autumn, they had nothing to sing, just sighed and fell there.  
(Author's back translation)

The imagery of stray birds of summer and yellow leaves of autumn were translated literally as “夏天的飛鳥” (*xiatian de feiniaio*; flying birds of summer) and “秋天的黃葉” (*qiutian de huangye*; yellow leaves of autumn). The juxtaposition of summer birds, who were agile and enjoying their freedom, and yellow leaves, which were full of sorrow and helplessness at the end of their lives, forms a stark contrast. The imagery used in the poem is commonly seen in our daily lives and easy to understand in different cultures. Even when the poem was translated into Chinese, the imagery could be preserved.

Related to the dominance of imagery, another important feature of *Stray Birds* is that the poems do not carry significant phonic properties. Phono-semantic relationship, which refers to “the close relationship between sound and meaning in a text” (Walsh 2018:267), can

enhance the semantic meanings and the feelings of a poem (Zhou 2011). An example given by Boulton (2013:59) is William Blake's poem:

For the gentle wind does move  
Silently, invisibly...

Boulton (2013) explained that the sounds of *l*, *f*, and *v* create a sense of quietness. Similarly, in the famous poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834):

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,  
The furrow followed free;  
We were the first that ever burst  
Into that silent sea. (Coleridge 1798)

The extensive use of consonants such as *f* and *s* can produce windy and breezy sounds, effectively echoing the semantic meaning of the text and establishing the phono-semantic relationship. Additionally, the consonants *b* and *r* can create "bubbly and stream-like" sounds (Boulton 2013:59).

However, phono-semantic relationship is not a prominent feature in *Stray Birds*, as Ma and Wang (2020) point out that the poems do not contain much alliteration or consonance and Tagore seemed to have put more emphasis on the content rather than the phonic properties. The aesthetic effects of *Stray Birds* are mainly achieved by the vivid imagery and the impressive and inspiring thoughts from the poet. This point echoes Walsh's (2018) case study that phonic properties are not the most outstanding features in *Poet in New York*. Therefore, with an emphasis on imagery and a lack of phono-semantic relationship, *Stray Birds* could be translated into other languages with lower difficulty.

### 3.2. Absence of CSIs

Some poems by Tagore are heavily loaded with CSIs. For example, as *Gitanjali*'s central theme is the relationship between God and human beings, the Bengali original is imbued with



CSIs about Indian religion (Ray 2022). Tagore’s self-translated English version of *Gitanjali* also contains words directly borrowed from Hindi and other local languages, such as “Vishnu” which is a Hindu God, “neem” which is a kind of tree, and “maya” which refers to illusion (Ray 2022:60). Tagore’s profound interest in contemplating the nature of God and his relationship with the divine makes religion a recurring theme in his poetry (Sengupta 2016). Many of his poems are pervaded with local religious philosophy and elements, which could be difficult to translate across cultural borders.

However, *Stray Birds* represents a different style of Tagore’s poetry. It does not contain CSIs, and the imagery is mostly universal. In Walsh’s (2018) proposition, one characteristic of translatable poetry is universal or target-culture-oriented geographical reference points. However, it might be better to generalize this characteristic as an absence of CSIs because like *Stray Birds*, not all poems include geographical reference points, and such universality extends beyond the geographical aspect.

To illustrate the use of universal imagery in *Stray Birds* in a more systematic way, this study applied corpus analysis techniques. All 325 poems were downloaded from Project Gutenberg website and saved in the format of word document. Next, the word document was uploaded to Sketch Engine, which has been widely acknowledged as a powerful and leading corpus tool (Pearce 2008; Hu and Yang 2015). The frequency of nouns in *Stray Birds* is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The twenty most frequent nouns in *Stray Birds*

Rank	Item	Frequency
1	world	44
2	heart	40
3	flower	31
4	love	30
5	life	27
6	earth	26
7	light	22
8	god	22

Rank	Item	Frequency
9	day	21
10	silence	21
11	night	20
12	death	20
13	man	19
14	star	17
15	morning	17
16	sun	16
17	sea	16
18	lamp	14
19	music	14
20	word	14

Simple nouns or objects that are very common, such as world, heart, flower, and love, appear frequently, illustrating the heavy use of simple words and imagery in *Stray Birds*. No CSIs were identified in my manual examination of all 325 poems in *Stray Birds*. Therefore, this study argues that the imagery used in *Stray Birds* is mostly universal or common among a lot of cultures in the world. Without CSIs, translators might encounter fewer problems in rendering the imagery into another culture, such as the Chinese culture. Here is an example illustrating the universality in Tagore's poem, along with a Chinese translation by Zheng Zhenduo.

#### Example 2

Power said to the world, "You are mine."  
 The world kept it prisoner on her throne.  
 Love said to the world, "I am thine."  
 The world gave it the freedom of her house. (Tagore 1916)

權勢對世界說道：“你是我的。”  
 世界便把權勢囚禁在她的寶座上面。  
 愛情對世界說到：“我是你的。”

世界便給予愛情以在她屋內來往的自由。(Tagore 2017:49, translated by Zheng Zhenduo)

Power said to the world: “You are mine.”

The world then imprisoned power on her throne.

Love said to the world: “I am yours.”

The world then granted love the freedom to move around in her house. (Author’s back translation)

In this poem, Tagore adopted the literary technique of abstraction. According to Gao (1981), unlike metaphor or symbolism, abstract imagery does not have a specific physical form but can just be a concept, such as death, sorrow, future, and happiness, or just even a pronoun like you, he, and she. This kind of technique is suitable for presenting philosophical arguments (Gao 1981), which is precisely the style of *Stray Birds*. “Power”, “world”, and “love” in example 2 belong to abstract imagery, vividly conveying the philosophical idea that power leads to confinement whereas love brings freedom. This philosophical idea can be preserved in translation due to the ease of translating the abstract imagery. As shown in 错误!未找到引用源。 , “world” and “love” have very high frequencies in *Stray Birds*, appearing forty-four and thirty times respectively. Although the noun “power” does not come to the top twenty on the list, it still appears eight times, which is also quite frequent. As simple nouns are often used for abstraction, this leads to lower difficulty in poetry translation.

In short, *Stray Birds* does not contain cultural or historical allusions. Those simple nouns of imagery without CSIs contribute to the translatability of *Stray Birds*.

### 3.3. Free verse

*Stray Birds* was written in free verse, which means that a poem does not conform to a regular rhyme and sound pattern, and the line length is not fixed (Ma and Wang 2020). In other words, there are no fixed number of syllables and no specific stressing and rhyme in a verse. The poems of *Stray Birds* are short and prose-like, usually with only one to two sentences, capturing fleeting feelings and thoughts. Here is an example from *Stray Birds*.

Example 3

The woodcutter's axe begged for its handle from the tree.

The tree gave it. (Tagore 1916)

In example 3, the poem is not bound by metre or rhyme but is rather like storytelling, which tells the story of a tree that is willing to provide the woodcutter's axe with a handle although the tree knows the axe will take its life, highlighting the ideas of generosity and selflessness. To further illustrate free verse, let us explore another example.

Example 4

Put out the lamp when thou wishest.

I shall know thy darkness and shall love it. (Tagore 1916)

Example 4 shows a poem of two lines without following a specific metre or rhyme scheme. The extinguishing of the lamp symbolizes the exposure of one's dark side, while the speaker is willing to understand and embrace the loved one's weaknesses and darkness, expressing a profound understanding of love. There are also a lot of other poems with only one line, such as "We live in this world when we love it.", "I shall die again and again to know that life is inexhaustible.", "Truth raises against itself the storm that scatters its seeds broadcast.", and "The echo mocks her origin to prove she is the original." (Tagore 1916). These aphorisms highlight the wisdom of the poet and his fascinating insights into the world and life.

Free verse poses fewer problems for translators because they are not subject to any strict limits or rules about syllables and rhymes. As Walsh (2018:269) puts it, with free verse, "no truly fundamental element of the original poem is lost" and he believes that the translation of free verse is just similar to that of literary prose. By asserting the translatability of *Stray Birds*, I am not suggesting that it is necessarily easy to translate; rather, I argue that it is translatable like prose, without the constraints of metre and rhyme.

### *3.4. Simple lexical and syntactic structures*

Although there is no metre or rhyme in free verse, there is often inner rhythm expressed by the form of repetition (Walsh 2018), which is also the case for *Stray Birds*. In example 3 above, "the tree" is repeated and such repetition foregrounds the centrality of the tree in the poem. There are also repetitions of "shall" in example 4 above, "we" in "We live in this

world when we love it.”, “again” in “I shall die again and again to know that life is inexhaustible.”, and “origin” in “The echo mocks her origin to prove she is the original.” (Tagore 1916). Translators only need to do the same repetitions in their translations to achieve this inner rhythm (Walsh 2018), and therefore, this kind of rhythm in poetry seems to be quite translatable, as long as translators could identify it. For example, “The echo mocks her origin to prove she is the original.” was translated as “回聲嘲笑着她的原聲，以證明她是原聲。” (*Huisheng chaoxiao zhe ta de yuansheng, yi zhengming ta shi yuansheng*; The echo mocks her original sound, to prove that she is the original sound) by Zheng Zhenduo (Tagore 2017:55), who seemed to be conscious of the rhythm of repetition and reproduced it in his translation. Therefore, the rhythm of lexical repetition is relatively translatable.

Furthermore, to better illustrate the simple lexical and syntactic structures of *Stray Birds*, this study conducted a systematic evaluation of *Stray Birds*’s lexical and syntactic complexity, compared with the English version of *Gitanjali*, which was selected because a comparison between *Stray Birds* and another renowned work by Tagore is more convincing to demonstrate the different linguistic styles from the same author. Table 2 sets out the lexical and syntactic complexity indices used in this study, which are the indices widely adopted to measure linguistic complexity (Chen *et al.* 2024; Fan 2024; Kwok *et al.* 2025). Lexical complexity indices were calculated by the NLP tools of TAALES (Kyle and Crossley 2015; Kyle *et al.* 2018) while syntactic complexity indices were calculated by TAASSC (Lu 2010; Kyle 2016).

Table 2: Lexical and syntactic complexity indices

Linguistic levels	Dimensions	Indices	Descriptions
Lexical	Word frequency	BNC written frequency	Mean word frequency derived from British National Corpus (BNC)
	Word range	BNC written range	Mean range (i.e., number of documents that a word occurs in) score derived from BNC
	N-gram frequency	BNC written bigram proportion	Proportion of bigrams in text that are within the most frequent 50,000 bigrams

<b>Linguistic levels</b>	<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Indices</b>	<b>Descriptions</b>
Syntactic	Lexical familiarity	BNC written trigram proportion	Proportion of trigrams in text that are within the most frequent 50,000 trigrams
		MRC familiarity	Mean familiarity score derived from MRC database
		Polysemy content words	Average number of senses (i.e., meanings) for content words
	Semantic network	Hypernymy nouns and verbs	Average hypernymy score for nouns and verbs (average for all senses, all paths)
		Length of production unit	Mean length of clause
		MLC	
	Sentence complexity	MLS	Mean length of sentence
		MLT	Mean length of T-unit
		C/S	Sentence complexity ratio (number of clauses per sentence)
	Subordination	C/T	T-unit complexity ratio (number of clauses per T-unit)
		CT/T	Complex T-unit ratio (number of complex T-units per T-unit)
		DC/C	Dependent clause ratio (number of dependent clauses per clause)
	Coordination	DC/T	Dependent clauses per T-unit (number of dependent clauses per T-unit)
		CP/C	Coordinate phrases per clause (number of coordinate phrases per clause)
		CP/T	Coordinate phrases per T-unit (number of coordinate phrases per T-unit)
Phrasal complexity		T/S	Sentence coordination ratio (number of T-units per sentence)
		CN/C	Complex nominals per clause (number of complex nominals per clause)
		CN/T	Complex nominals per T-unit (number of complex nominals per T-unit)
		VP/T	Verb phrases per T-unit

To examine whether there are significant differences in those complexity indices between *Gitanjali* and *Stray Birds*, a t-test was conducted if Shapiro-Wilk test showed that the data did not violate normal distribution. Otherwise, Mann-Whitney U test was carried out instead. The results are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Comparing lexical and syntactic complexity between *Gitanjali* and *Stray Birds*

Indices	Tests conducted	<u><i>Gitanjali</i></u>	<u><i>Stray Birds</i></u>	<i>p</i>
		( <i>n</i> = 103) Mean	( <i>n</i> = 325) Mean	
BNC written frequency	Mann-Whitney U test	8.98	11.11	<0.0001****
BNC written range	Mann-Whitney U test	70.33	70.41	<0.0001****
BNC written bigram proportion	t-test	0.46	0.49	0.0050**
BNC written trigram proportion	Mann-Whitney U test	0.10	0.11	0.6115
Polysemy content words	Mann-Whitney U test	590.56	591.75	0.0254*
Hypernymy nouns and verbs	Mann-Whitney U test	11.19	10.19	<0.0001****
MRC familiarity	Mann-Whitney U test	4.56	4.72	0.0169*
MLC	Mann-Whitney U test	12.03	9.65	<0.0001****
MLS	Mann-Whitney U test	21.43	14.70	<0.0001****
MLT	Mann-Whitney U test	17.48	12.91	<0.0001****
C/S	Mann-Whitney U test	1.90	1.52	0.0003***
C/T	Mann-Whitney U test	1.54	1.38	0.2227
CT/T	Mann-Whitney U test	0.39	0.36	0.0011**
DC/C	Mann-Whitney U test	0.32	0.21	<0.0001****
DC/T	Mann-Whitney U test	0.63	0.43	<0.0001****
CP/C	Mann-Whitney U test	0.33	0.15	<0.0001****
CP/T	Mann-Whitney U test	0.46	0.21	<0.0001****
T/S	Mann-Whitney U test	1.30	1.09	<0.0001****
CN/C	Mann-Whitney U test	1.30	1.22	0.0387*

Indices	Tests conducted	<u><i>Gitanjali</i></u>	<u><i>Stray Birds</i></u>	<i>p</i>
		( <u>n = 103</u> )	( <u>n = 325</u> )	
		Mean	Mean	
CN/T	Mann-Whitney U test	1.90	1.61	0.0870
VP/T	Mann-Whitney U test	2.16	1.73	0.0006***

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < 0.0001$

Out of the twenty-one complexity indices, eighteen have statistically significant differences between *Gitanjali* and *Stray Birds*, indicating that the two poetry collections have different levels of lexical and syntactic complexity. For lexical complexity, *Stray Birds* has significantly higher scores in word frequency, word range, bi-gram frequency, word familiarity, meaning that the words and bi-grams used in *Stray Birds* are more common and familiar to readers than those used in *Gitanjali*. *Stray Birds* also exhibits higher polysemy and lower hypernymy scores. This indicates that *Stray Birds* contains more words with general meanings, which are often the easier words, and corroborates the findings of other lexical complexity indices. Therefore, the results support the argument that *Stray Birds* has relatively low lexical complexity. For syntactic complexity, *Stray Birds* consistently reports lower scores than *Gitanjali* in most of the indices, including those of mean length of production unit, sentence complexity, subordination, coordination, and phrasal complexity. The results provide evidence that *Stray Birds* contains simple syntactic structures.

With those measures of linguistic complexity, there are not only subjective impressions that *Stray Birds* is pervaded with simple lexical and syntactic constructions. The analysis supports the argument that simple lexical and syntactic structures are the prominent characteristics of *Stray Birds*, which will likely lead to fewer challenges for translators and enhance the poems' translatability.

#### 4. Constrained language: Translation and L2 writing

Bai (2022), who is proficient in Bengali, has searched in Tagore's Bengali collections of poetry and identified that in *Stray Birds*, there are forty-three poems written originally in Bengali and translated into English by the poet himself and 282 written originally in English. Therefore, forty-three of them are translations while 282 are L2 writings. Both translation and



L2 writing belong to the category of constrained language, as they are “produced in communicative contexts characterized by particularly conspicuous constraints” (Kruger and Van Rooy 2016:27), for example, by “the cognitive and sociolinguistic parameters of a speaker’s or translator’s first language” (Chen *et al.* 2024:1-2). Translation is bound by the target culture and target readers’ acceptability, as well as by the source text which the translation is based on (Kruger and Van Rooy 2016). L2 writing is constrained by the “perceived standard language norms” (Kruger and Van Rooy 2016:27) and influenced by the speaker’s first language (Chen *et al.* 2024).

When Tagore was translating *Stray Birds* from Bengali into English, he faced the difficulties in translating the metre and rhyme, just like other poetry translators did. According to Bai (2022), all of Tagore’s original Bengali poems of *Stray Birds* follow strict metre in rhyme, which would pose constraints for the translator because it could be difficult to retain both the meanings and original poetic forms in English translation. Tagore chose to translate them into free verse in English, and the traditional Bengali metre and rhyme schemes were forgone. His strategy to handle such constraints contributes to the translatability of *Stray Birds* when it is further translated into other languages.

Furthermore, Tagore held English readers, or even global readers, in his mind and considered cultural differences in his translation, and thus he adopted simpler and more common imagery, as shown in the following example.

Example 5

The bird wishes it were a cloud.

The cloud wishes it were a bird. (Tagore 1916)

As Bai (2022:188) points out, the original Bengali version of example 5 is different from the English one because it is “mango” instead of “bird” and “sugar cane” instead of “cloud” in the original. Mango and sugar cane have their cultural meanings in India, with the former being regarded as the king of fruit while the latter providing juice and sweetness for the common people (Bai 2022). Therefore, a mango symbolizes the upper class or aristocracy in India, while sugar cane represents the common people, and the poet was trying to convey the ideal of social harmony and mutual respect among people from different social classes (Bai

2022). However, readers from Western countries are not familiar with the local fruit of India and might feel alienated or not be able to understand the meaning. In the context of constrained language, this could be viewed as a constraint of target readers' acceptability and readability because such cultural meanings only exist in Indian culture but are not available in Western culture. To handle this issue, the poet eliminated these CSIs and replaced them with the more general imagery of bird and cloud. Therefore, Tagore seemed to intentionally simplify his verse and utilize more universally relatable imagery, demonstrating a conscious consideration for the needs and preferences of his English audience (Chakravarty 2015).

Apart from simplifying the imagery, Tagore also shortened the originals.

#### Example 6

Rockets, your insult to the stars follows yourself back to the earth. (Tagore 1916)

The Bengali original of example 6 is much longer with more details, which has a direct speech by the rockets who boast about their bravery to smear a handful of dust on the stars' face (Bai 2022:187), while the English version only contains the line spoken by the poet, and the action of the rockets is generalized as "insult".

The above examples illustrate the strategy of Tagore to simplify his poems for Western readers to achieve greater readability. Translations often exhibit certain characteristics, which are called translation universals in translation studies, such as simplification, explicitation, and normalization (Chesterman 2004). *Stray Birds* seems to exemplify the characteristic of simplification in terms of metre, rhyme, imagery, and content, contributing to the translatability of the poems.

When it comes to the poems of *Stray Birds* originally written in English, they are the L2 writings of the poet, whose native language is Bengali. Some previous studies on L2 English have revealed the common features of lower syntactic and lexical complexity in writing and speaking when compared with those of native English (e.g., Kajzer-Wietrzny and Ivaska 2020; Liu *et al.* 2023; Chen *et al.* 2024). Those findings potentially reflect the simplification phenomenon observed in the studies on second language learning and translation, also mirroring our discussion about Tagore's simplification of his Bengali originals of *Stray Birds*.

By highlighting the L2 nature of Tagore's poems, this study does not suggest that his English was not proficient. Born into an aristocratic and wealthy family in India, Tagore had access to lots of learning resources. Having been immersed in the study of English literature from an early age, Tagore developed profound familiarity and admiration for these literary works, particularly valuing their humanistic traditions (Kripalani 1962). His ability to self-translate *Gitanjali* and other works indicates his mastery of English.

The decision for Tagore to write in English was probably driven by his success in translating *Gitanjali*, as he realized the importance of publishing his works in English. The translation opened the door for him to enter the international literary arena and won him the Nobel Prize, and he also saw his ability to make great impacts through his works (Kripalani 1962). Since then, Tagore had been longing to reach out to an international audience and become a "world citizen" (Kripalani 1962; Chakravarty 2015). He became an active traveler, visiting different countries such as Britain, America, Japan, and China (Kripalani 1962). This could explain why Tagore chose to write in English and his use of simple imagery and abstraction in many poems of *Stray Birds*.

Through a close examination of the L2 poems in *Stray Birds* that were identified by Bai (2022), we can observe the simplicity and conciseness in Tagore's poetic language. Let us consider this example.

#### Example 7

Man is a born child, his power is the power of growth. (Tagore 1916)

The poem shown in example 7 has only twelve words but conveys a thought-provoking idea about the nature of human beings. It delivers the message that humans are inherently full of potential like children who keep learning, exploring, and growing. The desire for improvements and growth defines humanity, and the power of growth serves as the driving force that propels the development of civilization and continuously improves the society we live in nowadays. A good example to illustrate the power of growth that drastically changed the world is the industrial revolution, in which technological advancement led to the mass production of goods and services for consumption, thereby substantially raising people's living standard (Scherer 2012). Through this short yet profound line, Tagore captures the

essence of human nature as a state of perpetual growth and potential. Moreover, the poem resonates with Western culture, or the L2 culture, which is characterized by highly capitalized societies, in which productivity, efficiency, and development are much valued (Scherer 2012). Such pursuit of growth could be demonstrated by what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2017:54) described: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production”. The emphasis of growth as human nature in *Stray Birds* fits the core value of Western societies that are often characterized by capitalism.

Another L2 poem in *Stray Birds* is shown in example 8, which is a succinct yet profound analogy that conveys deep philosophical and practical meanings.

Example 8

Do not blame your food because you have no appetite. (Tagore 1916)

By highlighting the phenomenon that people tend to blame their food when they do not have good appetites, the poem wittily alludes to the tendency of individuals to criticize others or external circumstances instead of reflecting on their own shortcomings. Therefore, the poet emphasizes the importance of self-reflection before blaming external factors. It is also noteworthy that the poem portrays a quotidian situation in simple language to deliver philosophical meanings, exemplifying the poet’s effort to make his work readable in L2 culture.

Tagore’s eagerness to reach the worldwide readership might have prompted him to avoid CSIs related to Indian culture in his poems in order to better appeal to and resonate with the Anglophone audience, thereby sustaining his international acclaim (Chakravarty 2015). Therefore, in this case, Tagore’s English poems are the L2 writings constrained by the reception of L2 culture, and the translatability of his poems has facilitated their rendering into other languages.

## **5. Readers’ reception and the making of world literature**

Tagore’s aim to reach a global audience by underscoring the universality of his poems contributes to the key stylistic features of *Stray Birds*, such as the dominance of universal imagery, the absence of phono-semantic relationship, the use of free verse, and simple lexical

and syntactic structures. To investigate the effects of these simplified poems on readers, I analyzed all readers' English reviews of *Stray Birds* posted on Amazon and Goodreads, which are the two most representative social reading platforms (Murray 2019; Wang and Humblé 2023). The readers' comments posted on the two platforms have been widely used for conducting research on readers' reception, such as Zhou and Xu (2024), Wang and Humblé (2023), and Piryani *et al.* (2018). Therefore, this approach has been extensively applied in literary studies and translation studies (Wang and Humblé 2023).

From Goodreads and Amazon, I collected 175 English reviews in total which contain 6,810 words and which span from June 2007 to July 2024, excluding some reviews or parts of the reviews that simply shared quotes from *Stray Birds* without personal comments because they could not explicitly reflect readers' reception. These reviews were uploaded to the online corpus tool Sketch Engine for my analysis. Table 4 shows the frequency of the top twenty adjectives in readers' reviews.

Table 4: Top twenty adjectives in readers' reviews

Rank	Item	Frequency
1	beautiful	41
2	short	31
3	good	29
4	great	26
5	many	21
6	simple	15
7	more	15
8	first	13
9	wonderful	12
10	little	10
11	easy	9
12	deep	8
13	own	8
14	stray	8
15	favorite	7

Rank	Item	Frequency
16	few	7
17	poetic	7
18	worth	7
19	human	7
20	single	6

According to the results, the adjective “short” occurs thirty-one times, “simple” fifteen times, and “easy” nine times, indicating that a lot of the readers perceive *Stray Birds* to be quite easy to read. Such simplicity and brevity of the poems might contribute to their beauty and philosophical profundity, as the adjective “beautiful” has the highest frequency, appearing forty-one times, and the word “deep” also occurs eight times. Tagore’s *Stray Birds* are praised for their conciseness, as many of the poems consist of only one or two lines but still manage to convey profound insights. The language that the poet employed is rather straightforward and accessible, allowing readers to easily grasp the meaning and emotions behind the words. Yet despite this simplicity, his poetry explores complex themes and stirs deep feelings in the readers. Tagore’s verses paint vivid, beautiful imagery and metaphors that linger in the mind long after reading. Overall, his poetic style succeeds in being highly approachable while still having the power to move and inspire.

Table 5: Top twenty nouns in readers’ reviews

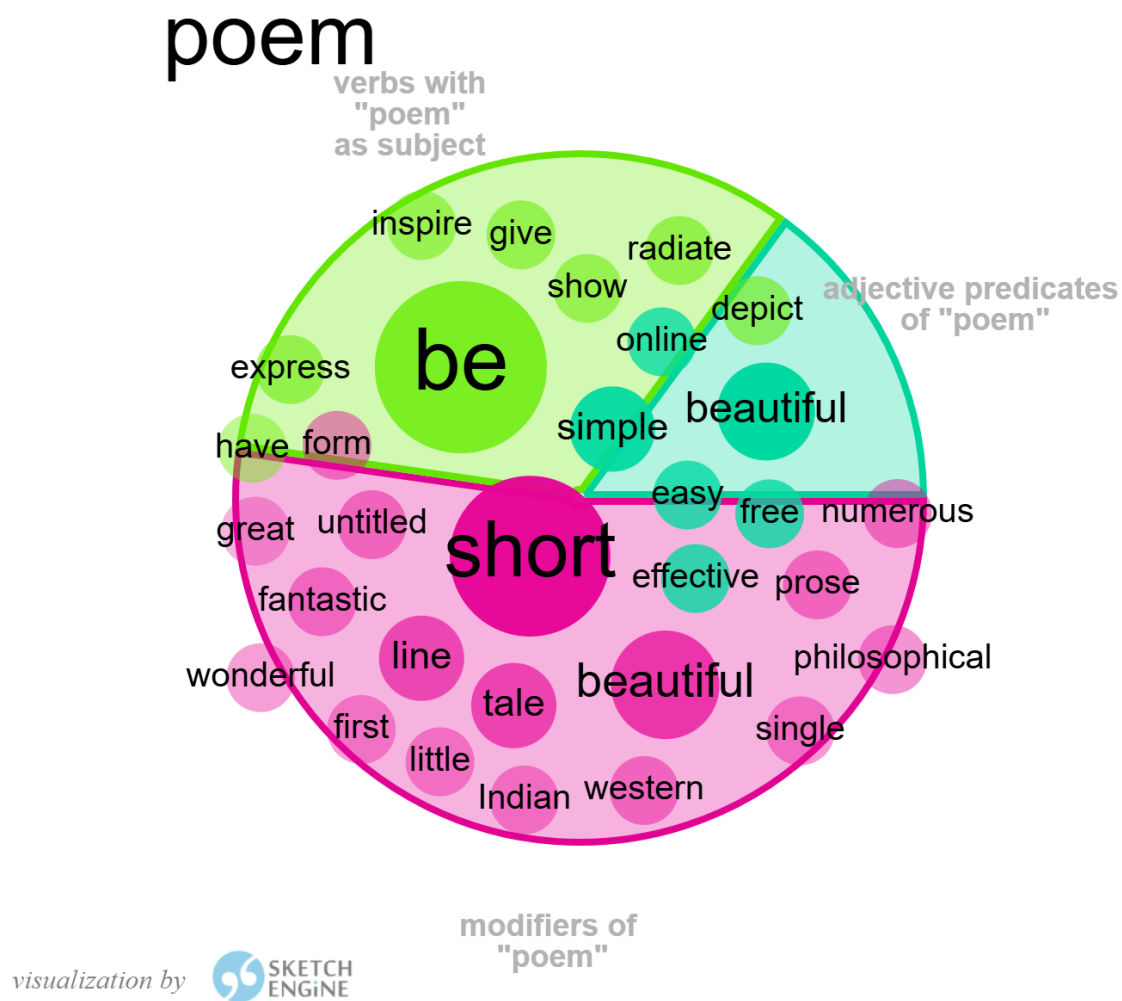
Rank	Item	Frequency
1	tagore	99
2	book	83
3	poem	80
4	bird	43
5	poetry	37
6	nature	34
7	collection	34
8	life	31
9	word	28

Rank	Item	Frequency
10	line	27
11	work	26
12	time	24
13	stray	23
14	read	21
15	poet	19
16	thought	19
17	beauty	17
18	love	17
19	verse	17
20	world	17

According to the frequency list of the top twenty nouns in Table 5, the words related to the main themes appear quite frequently. For example, the noun “nature” occurs thirty-four times, “life” thirty-one times, “beauty”, “love”, and “world” seventeen times each. The results reflect readers’ high awareness of the main themes of the poems. A reader posted a comment that says, “This book is like a little pocket filled with infinite love... for nature, for the universe, for Life, for everything!” (Sanya 2022). The universality of the themes seems to be apparent among the readers.

Collocations of the word “poem” were also analyzed by Sketch Engine, which is a particularly useful tool for obtaining collocations as it can provide detailed categories of the collocations and produce visualization. Therefore, Sketch Engine has been commonly used for analyzing collocations in previous studies, such as Zhou and Xu (2024), Rahmayani (2022), Hu and Yang (2015), and Pearce (2008). Figure 1 shows different collocation relations of the word “poem”. The collocation relation named “adjective predicates of ‘poem’” on the right-hand side of the figure indicates that the readers believe that the poems are “simple”, “easy”, “beautiful”, “free”, etc., while the modifiers of “poem” (shown at the bottom half) include “short”, “beautiful”, “prose”, “line”, “philosophical”, etc. The results once again highlight the stylistic features of *Stray Birds* perceived by readers.

Figure 1: Collocations of the word “poem” generated by Sketch Engine



It is also noteworthy that verbs with “poem” as subject include “express” and “inspire”. One of the reviews on Goodreads says,

The short poems express the profound philosophy of life to lead the world to seek the source of truth and wisdom. Reading this book is like opening the bedroom window in the early summer morning after a storm and seeing an indifferent and clear world where everything is so fresh and bright. The prose poems in Tagore’s book are quiet and remote, full of philosophical charm, let me experience the good and evil in the world, and let me learn more. I have learned many principles



of life, and writing this book is really a bright gem in the treasure house of world literature! (Leyi 2022)

In the review, the reader emphasizes the profound inspiration and valuable lessons gained from *Stray Birds*. This suggests that the reader finds the verses not just aesthetically pleasing, but also deeply meaningful and motivating on a personal level.

Similarly, another review from Goodreads expresses that:

The very simplicity of each poem is quite effective. It made me pause and read slowly, to think each passage carefully. In the process, I found myself inspired, enlightened, even humbled - and wanting to read more. Reading just the first few pages of this collection, I could easily feel that Tagore had seen a lot of life. For how could someone find the smallest of things deserving to magnify the infinite and what we consider absolute? (Shari 2013)

Tagore's short and simple poems of *Stray Birds* have inspired deep reflection in readers. With their concise form and accessible language, his verses manage to touch on fundamental questions about humans, nature, and our relationship with the divine. The poems have offered great insights into life and such philosophy has been pondered and interpreted by many readers, making them poetry classics of all time.

Overall, the results of this analysis of reader reception shed light on the effect of Tagore's strategies on writing *Stray Birds*. His strategies have aided the making of *Stray Birds* as part of world literature. As proposed by Cui and Bai (2023:725), the general characteristics of world literature include: 1) high relevance to the global audience; 2) cultural peculiarities and universality; 3) accessibility. Tagore's intentional adoption of universal themes and generalization strategy to avoid using CSIs allows the poems to retain high relevance to the global readership and great accessibility, facilitating cross-cultural understanding, as the readers on Amazon and Goodreads have reflected their awareness of the universal themes and expressed that it is easy to read *Stray Birds*. However, this does not mean the cultural peculiarities of the poems are all eliminated. *Stray Birds* diverges significantly from

traditional poetic structures. Not only that the poems were written in free verse, but their brevity, conciseness, and prominence of vivid imagery have also created a special form of poetry similar to haiku. This poetic form offers a taste of cultural otherness, which is needed to attract worldwide readership (Cui and Bai 2023). As mentioned in a reader's review, "Tagore provided a harmonized link between human and nature that is seldom seen in the western poems." (FairVoice 2017), illustrating the unique quality of *Stray Birds*.

This case study of *Stray Birds* also illustrates the relationship between translatability and world literature. Translation plays an important role in world literature, as David Damrosch (2003:281) aptly describes: "world literature is writing that gains in translation". Through translation, a literary work can travel across cultural boundaries and be read by foreign readers, thereby expanding its impact on the world. In this sense, translatability is of great importance to enable accessibility to a literary work. "Works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range" (Damrosch 2003:289). For the case of *Stray Birds*, its characteristics of translatability, including an absence of CSIs and simple lexical and syntactic structures, allow for broader accessibility and appreciation among global readerships. There are very few stylistic losses in translation due to the use of free verse and the absence of phono-semantic relationships, leading to a greater gain in its range of influence and contributing to the work's status as world literature. Therefore, this study argues that Tagore's strategic decisions in writing in his second language, English, and translating his Bengali originals into English have contributed to the translatability of *Stray Birds*, thereby establishing it as a significant work within the realm of world literature.

## **6. Conclusion**

Building on Walsh's (2018) discussion about the translatability of poetry, this paper presents a case of translatable poetry, which is Tagore's *Stray Birds*, and shows that the key features contributing to a poem's translatability are the dominance of imagery, the absence of CSIs, the use of free verse, and simple lexical and syntactic structures. The significant role of imagery and its universality could increase the translatability of a poem. Alliteration, consonance and other features that constitute phono-semantic relationships, as well as rhyme and metre, would be challenging to translate. Therefore, the absence of these phonic elements

and constraints enhances translatability. Simple lexical and syntactic structures will also pose fewer challenges in translation.

In addition to examining the characteristics of translatable poetry, this paper has also explored the reasons for Tagore's strategic choices of those stylistic features from the perspective of constrained language. Tagore's strategies were influenced by a range of factors, including the challenges he encountered when translating his Bengali poems into English, such as cultural differences and difficulties in retaining metre and rhymes. These constraints prompted him to simplify his verse by employing the technique of abstraction, universally relatable imagery, and free verse, thereby making his work more accessible to English readers and increasing the ease of translation. For his L2 poems, Tagore's choices were constrained by the reception of Western culture and shaped by his aspiration to reach a global audience. He was acutely aware of the needs and preferences of English readers and consciously adapted his poetic style to appeal to them. This consideration for the readership is evident in his deliberate use of free verse, universal imagery, alignment with Western culture, and proximity to people's everyday life, enhancing cross-cultural understanding of *Stray Birds* without much loss in its essence. My analysis of readers' comments on Amazon and Goodreads further illustrates the effects of Tagore's strategies, which have succeeded in reaching the international audience and contributed to the circulation of *Stray Birds* as world literature.

This article makes a theoretical contribution to the discussion on translatability by testing Walsh's poetry translation framework and enriches our understanding of Tagore's works, while also advancing the broader field of translation studies by identifying specific elements that could influence the translatability of poetry. In essence, this paper has illuminated the complex interplay of factors that contribute to the translatability of poetry. As such, it contributes to a deeper understanding of poetry translation, offering valuable insights for scholars in the field. A limitation of this study is that Chinese readers' reception is not specifically investigated. Future research could explore Chinese readers' reception of various translated versions given that *Stray Birds* has been translated into Chinese by multiple translators and compare readers' reception between English and Chinese versions, thereby gaining further insights into the impact of translatability on different translators and the perception of the text across different audiences.

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