Transliteration, literal translation, word-for-word translation, verbatim translation and other rubbish

(This was an answer I posted on Quora in 2017 in response to the question "What is the difference between a word-for-word translation and literal translation?" and to several existing answers, some of which mentioned "transliteration" and all of which were uninformed and misleading)

Forgive me, the answers you have so far received are all rubbish. Please ignore them and consider this.

Firstly "transliteration" is the representation of sounds in a source language (SL) in the phonetic notation of the target language (TL). So when we talk about the capital of Japan we talk about "Tokyo". That is a *transliteration* into the Roman letters of the English alphabet of the Japanese word 東京. If we were to *translate* that word it would be "East Capital" but generally we don't translate proper nouns.

Note that this definition is slightly at odds with that in Wikipedia, which goes on to say that representation of sounds in another language is "transcription". I dispute that Wiki's definitions have wide currency (although I am an Australian English speaker so please feel free correct me) but "transcription" is much more commonly used to describe the process of recording in writing, speech from an audio recording, in the same language, nothing to do with translation.

Now the main question: "What is the difference between a word for word translation and literal translation?"

I would rather dismiss the question and deal with those two expressions individually.

We'll start with "literal translation".

All languages contain "figures of speech" or "figurative language". (This includes: metaphor, simile, metonym, irony - there's many, look 'em up) but they all have in common the fact that they are playing with reality. Picking one aspect of something and applying it to another to illustrate a principle or display their feelings or whatever. To give an example if a person in a Japanese organisation happens to be responsible for two different types of activity and wants to explain this to a foreign guest they can do so with a Japanese figure of speech. To translate this Japanese figure of speech おれ二足の草鞋を履くものだ　you would say in English "Actually I wear two hats in this organisation." That is translation. But the "literal" meaning of this Japanese "figure" of speech is that he wears two pairs of grass sandals.

So yes, "literal translation" is possible but ONLY in regard to figures of speech that have some element that differs from reality - like proverbs, euphemisms, metaphors etc.

It would be meaningfully used as part of linguistic investigation into various languages. This is not really what translators do for a living. It is a meta-linguistic activity and is more about understanding how another language works, so you might be a linguist studying some new language and want to ask what sort of imagery or symbolism is used when explaining things to children or declaring love or getting angry at your car and you might analyse the sorts of things people in that language group say and break down their proverbs and sayings etc. to see where they come from. Yes that would involve literal translation.

Apart from that, it is meaningless and is simply used by lay people as a way to say "There's something wrong with this translation but I am unable to articulate what it is."

Now, "Word-for-word translation". This is ridiculous, it means nothing. Don't ever use it again. (The following comments also apply to "verbatim" translation)

The history of this expression begins when missionaries (of various religions) sought to convert heathens far from the English (or more to the point Latin) speaking part of the world, and wanted to translate scripture into the native languages.

They were conflicted because they regarded these texts as sacred, the word of God etc., and were a'feared that changing them in any way would constitute heresy and piss off the almighty one. So while they attempted to translate them, they tried to retain as much "formal equivalence" as they could. That means they tried to preserve the "form" (i.e. shape) of the original as much as possible, as defined by them. So: Number of sentences, number of words in each sentence, words in exactly the same order, each word performing the same function etc.

So they would step through each sentence and try to replace each word in turn with what they thought was "the word for" that word in the TL.

The thing is, only religiously fervent people with little experience outside a single language family (like Romance languages that are all very similar: Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese) could possibly think this was a good idea, and even then they just produced gibberish. The reason is that the form as you define it is irrelevant to other languages.

To give an example the very concept of "words", that you can identify and enumerate thanks to the space between each one, is not universal by any means, only about half the (written) languages in the world have them. And since fewer than half of the world's languages even have a writing system, the very Western, Anglophone concept of lexemes that are unambiguously countable thanks to the spaces we leave between them when and only when we are writing them down, is not the norm, and it is a narrow view, even Imperialistic to expect it to apply to all languages.

But never mind that. Translation that is fit for purpose achieves not "formal equivalence" but "functional equivalence". To do that, the so-called "words" will all disappear, the long list of rules of usage attached to and etymological history applicable to each word will evaporate, their functions will be redistributed in a different pattern throughout the text or speech, they'll change places, multiply and vanish, sprout and condense, one will become ten and vice versa. In short the form will cease to resemble the original altogether, and that is not surprising because IT'S A DIFFERENT FRICKEN LANGUAGE.

So to repeat. There is no such thing as "word-for-word translation". If a string of words is strictly formally equivalent then it isn't a translation.

(Yes I realise that there are exceptions such as the sentence "yes" which could *end up* formally equivalent, but that's a coincidence, not a method or category of translation).

Better to call it rubbish, and reserve the word "translation" for only those strings of words that successfully reproduce in a TL, the information and pragmatic effect, of a SL text or speech such that the cost of producing it is less than the benefit to the buyer.

I'm very particular about how that word is used, because it's how I fed my family.