INTER-CULTURAL TRANSLATION AS INTERPRETATION AND COMMUNICATION

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The paper focuses on literary translation regarded as a creative process and a powerful culture-shaping activity. It also looks at the complexities of inter-cultural translation: problems occurring in translating from one cultural system into another, and the possible strategies to be adopted; as well as some intricate issues of a more general and conceptual character, such as the limits of translatability, the divide, if any, between good and bad translation, the possible approaches to dealing with culture-specific items in translation, retaining the concept of 'otherness', of foreignness. The issue of foreignness also raises the question of the role of translation in the globalized world. Hence what are the effects of English, as the global lingua franca, and cultural imports from great powers, like the USA, UK and France on the cultures and languages of small countries? Apart from releasing 'the shaping power of one culture upon another', translation can also be detrimental to their national identity by encroaching on their cultures.

Under the impact of the cultural turn in translation studies, the landscape of translation has expanded and altered. From being traditionally regarded as a linguistic task, today translation is at the intersection of linguistics and literature. Language is, of course, an important tool, the only tool the writer and, hence, the translator has. The success of the ST (Source Text) and of the TT (Target Text) depends on a masterful handling of the language. However, translation probably pertains to the realm of literature rather than merely language or linguistics. As Jorge Luis Borges wrote in 1957, 'no problem is as completely concordant with literature and with the modest mystery of literature as is the problem posed by translation' (as quoted in Steiner 1977, 3). This same statement was aptly used by George Steiner as one of the epigraphs for his seminal book, *After Babel* (*ibid.*).

It is a truism of translation theory that a faithful and accurate translation must be communicative rather than strictly semantically faithful. It is obvious that a translator has to render adequately the complexities of the Source Text into the TL (Target Language). Thus translation is communication, but first and foremost, according to Paul Ricoeur, it is interpretation (Ricoeur 2010, 17). It seems to me that discussing

translation raises more questions than answers. This is the thesis I am going to argue in this paper, trying to map those puzzling questions of a conceptual character posed by the process of translation without going into the sheer practicalities of the process. Thus: is translation possible at all? What are the limits of translatability? What strategies should be adopted in translating culture-specific items from one cultural system into another? And are there any reliable prescriptive approaches for dealing with this complicated matter? Poetry, particularly symbolist poetry, is often regarded as untranslatable by virtue of being metaphoric, if we go along with Roman Jakobson's theory. Likewise, modernist fiction also tends towards the metaphoric pole of Jakobson's scheme. Some highly experimental modernist texts tend too close to the metaphoric pole at the risk of dissolution of their novelistic form and becoming untranslatable. A case in point could be such emblematic texts as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake.* Joyce himself declared that *Ulysses* could not be translated into a foreign language; the only medium that it can be transposed into is the language of film. Thus, as Walter Benjamin argues, translation is both possible and impossible (Benjamin 1988). Then how do we distinguish between good and bad translations? According to Steiner, 'ninety per cent, no doubt, of all translation since Babel is inadequate and will continue to be so' (Steiner 1977, 396). In Benjamin's view, 'bad translations communicate too much. Their seeming accuracy is limited to what is non-essential in the fabric of the original', while the essential significance of a text is largely missed (as quoted in Steiner 1977, 63). Paul Ricoeur, however, argues that 'there are no absolute criteria of a good translation. The absolute criteria would be *the very meaning* recorded somewhere above, between the text of the original and translation' (Ricoeur 2010, 43). These issues raised by Benjamin, Steiner, and Ricoeur are highly problematic and debatable. To accomplish the alchemy of meaning and expressive form in translation requires much more than linguistic aptitude and knowledge.

As contemporary translation theory tells us, literary translation is not only a search for the right linguistic equivalents, but a creative process and a powerful culture-shaping activity in which the translator has an important role to play and, naturally, faces a huge responsibility for the end result. According to André Lefevere, 'translation is responsible to a large extent for the image of a work, a writer, a culture. Together with historiography, anthologizing and criticism it prepares works for inclusion in the canon of world literature' (Bassnett, Lefevere 1990, 27). There are no ready-made formulas or recipes in literary translation; each time a new creative approach to the text under translation is required. As Vladimir Nabokov put it, neither education nor diligence can replace imagination and a sense of style. This is why literary translation is hardly possible to teach and to learn. As Paul Ricoeur paradoxically put it, translation, in principle, is theoretically impossible, and the practice of translation will always be a dangerous act (Ricoeur 2010, 20–22). It is also, we might add, an unpredictable act.

In translation theory the translator is understood to be an active reader first before becoming a writer, s/he is both receiver and sender of the communication.

Contemporary translation theory also makes quite an emphatic point (probably due to the impact of post-structuralist theory) that literary translation is a creative work in its own right, a version of the original, which is by no means inferior to it. Susan Bassnet and André Lefevere, well-known translation theorists, observe in the Preface to their edited collection of essays: 'Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation (…) ant it can help in the evolution of a literature and a society. Rewritings can introduce new concepts, new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another' (Bassnett, Lefevere 1990, Preface).

Thus a literary translator is not only an active reader and communicator, he also functions as a literary scholar and a critic. A translation is in fact a literary analysis at its core; a translator has to figure out the thematic concerns, the problematic issues embedded in the linguistic structure of the text and to consider all its implications and connotations. The translator has to try to find the right key, the adequate tone, the right words to retain the dominant mode by choosing the appropriate lexis, which is yet another potential excitement and pitfall for the translator. Problems and pitfalls, as well as excitements, inevitably occur when a translator is operating within the framework of such two structurally different languages as English and Lithuanian. In this case, a translator faces head-on the problem of the limits of translatability.

According to Catford, 'translation fails—or untranslatability occurs—when it is impossible to build functionally relevant features of the situation into the contextual meaning of the TL (Target Language) text. Broadly speaking, the cases where this happens fall into two categories. Those where the difficulty is *linguistic*, and those where it is *cultural.* (…) Linguistic untranslatability occurs typically in cases where an *ambiguity* peculiar to the SL (Source Language) text is a functionally relevant feature— e.g. in SL puns' (Catford 1965, 94). Ambiguities also arise from *polysemy* of a SL item with no corresponding TL polysemy. **Polysemy** (a generator of implied meaning) is a most conspicuous feature of the English language, and this feature can generate lots of difficulties for a translator who has to be aware of all the implications of a seemingly simple sentence as well as being aware of the idiomatic character of English so as not to do damage to the text. Curiously enough, the point is perfectly made by the British writer Ian McEwan in his novel *Amsterdam*:

> In a language as idiomatically stressed as English, opportunities for misreadings are bound to arise. By a mere backward movement of stress, a verb can become a noun, an act a thing. To refuse—to insist on saying no to what you believe is wrong—becomes at a stroke, refuse—an insurmountable pile of garbage. As with words, so with sentences (McEwan 1999, 148).

In this case we are dealing with a pun: to refuse and refuse—the mere change of stress does the trick here by completely altering the meaning. **Puns** are particularly difficult to handle; idioms and puns can be productive in English but unproductive in other languages and cultures, and the other way round; consequently, they very often cannot be retained and conveyed. The principle rule in translation is to try and make up for it in another place where, naturally, the text allows for a pun. The crucial factor in translation is the **extralinguistic background,** as translation is primarily a crosscultural transfer and crosscultural communication, not merely linguistic decoding or transcoding. It is important to make the target text function in the target culture the way the source text functioned in the source culture. Because languages express cultures, translators should ideally be bicultural and not only bilingual. Features of material culture which differ from one culture to another may lead to translation difficulties. Translating from one cultural system into another can be highly problematic. According to Lefevere, 'language is not the problem. Ideology and poetics are, as are cultural elements that are not immediately clear, or seen as completely "misplaced" in what would be the target culture version of the text to be translated' (Bassnett, Lefevere 1990, 26).

The complexity of translation consists in rendering notions, concepts that are cross-culturally non-productive. What strategies should be adopted in the translation of them? The options are the following: descriptive translation, 'domesticated' translation, the introduction of the paratextual element. Every country has its translation and publication practices. The Lithuanian practice is that features of material culture which differ from one culture to another and may lead to translation difficulties, should be explained, abbreviations deciphered for the reader in the footnotes; foreign words (when they occur) should be retained in the TT but their translation provided in the footnotes. This is the normal practice. Thus to facilitate intercultural communication, paratextual apparatus (introductions, footnotes, endnotes) is often used to explain culture-specific cases. For example, in the Lithuanian translation of Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam* there are, all in all, 14 footnotes with explanations of some culture-specific items, abbreviations (AP—*Associated Press*, TLS—*Times Literary Supplement*) and translations of foreign words (Italian and French, related to music and food).

An interesting case in point is the verbal transposition of foreign food culture which is an important aspect of national identity. It is a distinctive feature of the nation's culture and it highlights the concept of otherness, of foreignness. How, then, should it be dealt with in translation? Should the translator retain the feeling, the notion of foreignness, of otherness and opt for the source-oriented approach to translation? Or should he opt for the so-called 'domesticated' translation in which the ST is 'combed', smoothed over, simplified and mangled in order to comply with the norms of the TL, even though much of the flavour of the original becomes lost in the process. This seems to me an entirely inadequate solution. At this point one can only agree with Walter

Benjamin that 'it is not the highest praise of a translation (…) to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language. (…) The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue' (Benjamin 1988, 77). I think this should serve as a guiding principle for translators.

The issue of foreignness also raises the question of the role of translation in the globalized world. What are the effects of English, as the global *lingua franca*, and cultural imports from great powers, like the USA, UK and France on the cultures and languages of smaller countries? Apart from releasing 'the shaping power of one culture upon another', translation can also be detrimental to their national identity by encroaching on their cultures. As George Steiner rightly put it, 'in many societies imported English, with its necessarily synthetic, "pre-packaged" semantic field, is eroding the autonomy of the native language culture. Intentionally or not, American-English and English, by virtue of their global diffusion, are a principal agent in the destruction of natural linguistic diversity' (Steiner 1977, 470).

On the other hand, the creative interaction between two different languages and cultures in translation can yield positive results for the Target Language and Culture. For instance, Lithuanian is rather an archaic language, conservative in the sense that it has preserved lots of archaic, dated words and it is very reluctant to accept and embrace foreign words, colloquialisms, and slang into its stock and use. This is why one meets with numerous difficulties when translating contemporary fiction; very often it is necessary to coin words and expressions which have been so far non-existent in Lithuanian. We can speak about a case of interaction between the two languages with the Target Language being affected by the Source Language; this interaction often produces quite interesting results when new terms or words are coined in the Lithuanian language. Translation forces a language to expand. In other words, translators have a duty, albeit often a very pleasurable one, to play with and to experiment with the language, even where this means pushing it to its limits. This can be instrumental in the above mentioned magic alchemy. Although, as Martin Heidegger tells us, this might be an illusion: 'Man acts as if he were the shaper and master of language, while it is language which remains mistress of man' (as quoted in Steiner 1977, 3).

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TARPKULTŪRINIS VERTIMAS KAIP INTERPRETACIJA IR KOMUNIKACIJA

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje formuluojamos kai kurios bendro pobūdžio konceptualios literatūrinio vertimo, kuris traktuojamas kaip kūrybinis, kultūrą formuojantis procesas, problemos: ar apskritai įmanomas vertimas, ypač poezijos; neišverčiamumo ribos; takoskyra / kriterijai tarp blogo ir gero vertimo. Taip pat mėginama aptarti kai kuriuos gana painius tarpkultūrinio vertimo atvejus, kai mėginama transponuoti kultūriškai specifinius reiškinius / informacijos vienetus iš vienos kultūros sistemos į kitą, ir galimas tokio transponavimo strategijas. Ar tikrai geras vertimas tas, kuris suparastintas ir nudailintas taip, kad „gražiai" skambėtų, sudarydamas originalo įspūdį, lyg būtų parašytas ta kalba? Walteris Benjaminas manė kitaip: vertėjas taip pat turi kūrybiškai žaisti su kalba kaip ir rašytojas, leisdamas savo gimtajai kalbai vystytis, mėgindamas vertime išlaikyti originalo kitoniškumo, svetimumo įspūdį, sukurti „sukeistinimo" efektą. Kita vertus, iškyla vertimo vaidmens globalizuotame pasaulyje klausimas: kokį poveikį daro anglų kalba kaip *lingua franca* ir kultūrinis importas iš didžiųjų valstybių – JAV, Didžiosios Britanijos – mažų šalių kalboms ir kultūroms, kaip veikia jų tautinį tapatumą.