

THE ORIGINAL AND ITS TRANSLATION FROM THE READERS' PERSPECTIVE

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To claim that the readers' experience of a literary work in translation is different from their experience of the original at first seems very paradoxical and even heretical. Such a statement is so unexpected simply because we always think of the original and its translation as being the same literary work without paying any attention to their different concretizations on the part of their readers due to textual differences. This tacit assumption of their sameness seems totally unaffected by the fact that we never think of the original and its translation as representing the same text; on the contrary, we always take it for granted that they are two different texts in two different languages. The differences between the two texts and the differentness of the translation are never lost sight of in the discussion of the qualities and adequacy of the translation. When it comes to criticizing the literary work or teaching it, however, the translation is tacitly assumed to be identical with the original and approached as if it were the original, with little or no critical awareness of the fundamental textual and other possible differences. This critical and pedagogical approach to literary translation seems to be almost immune to the growing awareness of the importance of the textual elements, to an increasing body of research concerning their impact on the reader, and to the ample evidence about various inadequacies of literary translations, revealed especially by the processes of retranslation and thus visible in all works that exist in several translations. This approach also takes little if any notice of the overall tendency of the translation to assimilate the original to the receptor culture, to simplify and sometimes also to reduce the original.

The illusion of the sameness of the original and its translation can naturally be maintained only as long as we pay no attention to their differences, i.e. as long as we do not start to examine them, and do not analyse only the textual differences and inadequacies of the translation, which have been scrutinized and attacked for as long as translation has been practiced, but move on to the comparative study of their impact, i.e. to the examination and analysis of the differences in the readers' responses to the two texts, or rather their experiences as invited by the two texts. Our experimental work in this field shows that translations cannot only invite readings different from the original but may also exclude readings invited and made possible by the original. When the same work is read in the original and in translation by several groups of readers,

some differences in their responses appear so frequently and rather uniformly so that it seems only reasonable to attribute them to the differences between the two texts. The analysis of the readings of several groups of readers, and the readings of both texts by the same readers thus furnish reliable evidence not only about the different readings but also about the different interpretive possibilities as made possible by the original and by its translation.

The differences between the readers' experience and appreciation of the original and its translation become acceptable and even logical the moment we think of them as two texts: they are an inevitable consequence of the differences between the original and its translation. In spite of the transferred and thus common content, sometimes conceived of as extra-linguistic meaning, each text represents a different embodiment of this shared content, conforming to the different linguistic rules of the two languages and to different cultural expectations. Because of these differences, each text exercises different control over the readers and invites specific realizations on their part.

The differentness of the literary translations has been taken for granted and the possibility of a fully satisfactory translation has been despaired of. Whereas some authors have struggled to analyze the inadequacy of translations, others voiced their dissatisfaction metaphorically, by using the analogy representing the translation as different clothes for the content of the original. The best description of the inadequacies of translation is perhaps the complaint of Virginia Woolf that mediocre translations make the reader feel that »every idea is slipping about in a suit badly cut and many sizes too large for it.«¹ Also Walter Benjamin's commentary that in the original work language fits the content as the peel fits the fruit, whereas in translation it hangs around it like a king's robe, calls attention to the changed relationship between the content and the language of translations.²

Recent reader-response studies and linguistics have furnished ample explanation why the differences between the original and its translation simply cannot be avoided. It has become common knowledge that texts only come to life when they are read, or rather, that texts, i. e. series of sentences, are transformed into works of literature by means of the reader's act of realization. Such realizations are never independent of the individual dispositions of the readers, who always appropriate meanings from the texts according to what they need or desire and according to the critical assumptions or predispositions which they bring to them. Today the reader is no longer regarded only as a decoder of what is written down, but is rather considered a supplier of much essential information that is not written down.³ The reader's active involvement and subjective contribution to the production of the meaning are considered to be essential to the realization of the literary work. Because of this all texts are subject to a vast variety of realizations, and since the translator can neither claim impersonal access to their meanings, nor translate in a vacuum, s/he can only transfer to the receptor language her/his own realization of the literary text with all the limitations of such a realization. The cross-cultural context

¹ Virginia Woolf, »Phases of Fiction« in *Collected Essays II*. London, 1966, p. 89.

² Walter Benjamin, »Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers« in his translation of Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, Frankfurt am Main, 1963, p. 15.

³ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, p. 33.

of the translator also calls for the assimilation of the original to the receptor language and culture. That is why all translations must be regarded as context-bound readings, reflecting the peculiarities of their time and culture, being as they are addressed to a given generation of readers. These features of literary translations have become quite obvious with those works which have been retranslated several times.

Linguistics, especially translation theory, has already made available some tools for examining various textual shifts necessitated by the different features of the receptor language which can account for some changes in the impact of the text upon the reader. Various kinds of contrastive textual analyses have revealed new complexities of meaning and its functioning, besides the changes in word-to-word relationship as usually discussed in terms of equivalence. Thus previously unsuspected changes in translation, as for instance shifts in textual cohesion due to the differences between languages and to the process of explication inherent in translating *per se*, and shifts in textual coherence resulting from the translator's misinterpretations of covert meaning relationships are attracting ever-more attention. Since cohesive ties do not only provide continuity and semantic unity, but may also function as devices for focusing the reader's attention on certain features of the text, such shifts can lead to differences in the experience, or rather, reader's realization of the translation.

Trying to find some compromise, every translation oscillates between two extremes: on the one hand, the source-oriented translation which endeavours to be as true to the original as possible, and on the other, the target-accommodating translation which tries to cater as much as possible for the taste and expectations of the target audience. Every actual translation can be seen as located between these two extremes. Every actual translation is only one possible realization of the countless possibilities between these two extremes. The oscillation between these two extreme possibilities explains why literary translations often have a dual character marked by an interweaving and conglomerate of two structures: on the one hand, the semantic content and the formal contour of the original; on the other, the entire system of linguistic and aesthetic features inhering in the receptor language. Depending on the translator's choice between the two extremes, the translation will invite also different experiences on the part of the readers, either by bringing the text closer to them, or by foregrounding its cultural differentness and alienness.

The outlined textual changes inherent in every translation are sufficient to explain why the translation, being a different text, invites a more or less different realization, or rather, literary experience. The differences in realization, however, become visible only when we compare readings and interpretations made possible by the original with those made possible by the translation. Such differences naturally remain inaccessible to the monolingual readers who, unable to read both texts, also lack the experience of the different expressive possibilities of various languages. These differences merit careful examination, not only because they can furnish important insights into the limitations and possibilities of the translation, but also because awareness of such differences can enhance the reader's appreciation and enjoyment of literature.

The differences between the interpretive possibilities made possible by the two texts and, accordingly, between their experiences on the part of

readers, seem to have the largest span in case of poetry. Reasons for this are not hard to find: in order to achieve the characteristic compression of meaning poetry makes extensive use of formal and linguistic devices that are frequently hard to translate and re-create, as for instance metaphors which are culturebound, and their placement in the poem which depends on the syntactic features of the language and has great impact upon the reader by determining the order of the perceived elements of the poem. All these features account also for the possibility of the reader's idiosyncratic reading and interpretation, which, when it serves as the basis for the translation, may also result in the exclusion of other possible meanings. Since the translator can only work from her/his own understanding of the given poem, her/his translation is inevitably governed by her/his interpretation of it. That is why some critics believe that translated poems could be regarded as a special case of retelling.⁴

The differences between the interpretive possibilities as offered by the original poem and by its translation have been shown to be significant and sometimes quite fatal in case of Janez Menart's Slovenian translations of Shakespeare's sonnets.⁵ To gain some insight into the actual impact of these translations on the readers, the answers of 122 respondents about the meaning of the Slovenian translation of Shakespeare's sonnets 116 and 129 have been collected.⁶ The analysis of these answers has shown that the Slovenian translation encourages, without a single exception, a rather uncomplicated reading of sonnets 116 and 129, which is at considerable variance with the interpretative possibilities contained in the originals. Some reasons for this reduction of meaning are traceable to the wording of the translation which, following as it does merely the obvious surface meaning, does not succeed in preserving the more complex implied meaning of the original. It also fails to re-create the formal features of the text used to direct the reader's attention to the latter, for instance the symmetrical repetition of »alters«, »alteration« in lines 3 and 11, or rather »bends« and »bending« in lines 4 and 10, and the persuasive rhetoric of the opening in sonnet 116, or the outstanding use of symmetry to establish important interconnection and intensify the meaning of sonnet 129. Thus Menart's translations, though seemingly quite adequate from the point of view of equivalence, do not succeed in preserving, or rather, re-creating the most important formal devices to condense the meaning and enrich the suggestive power of the original sonnets. In this way the translation loses an important means of controlling the reader and directing her/his attention to the rich ambiguities constituent of the challenging complexity of Shakespeare's meaning.

On reading the Slovenian translation of sonnet 116, most readers concluded that this sonnet is about »true« or »perfect« love, adding a relatively limited range of the descriptions of this abstract notion. When reading

⁴ Peter J. Rabinovitz, »Audience's Experience of Literary Borrowings« in *The Reader in the Text*, Ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crossman. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 247.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Soneti*. Prevedel Janez Menart. Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1965.

⁶ The readers who provided responses concerning Shakespeare's sonnets were students of English between 1980 and 1986. Their cooperation was voluntary. The readings of the translations and of the originals were performed at different time intervals with groups of fewer than 25 students.

the original poem, however, some of the same readers have been able to notice the importance of the emphatic introductory lines and the presence, even pressure, of doubt behind the paradoxically numerous negative descriptions and the emphatic negative beginning of the fifth line, and thus to reach a more complex understanding incorporating several possibilities of meaning. Though at first they professed a moderate liking or even dislike for the easily understandable Slovenian translations, they eventually came to admire the original sonnets for their profound and deeply personal exploration of the tensions and stresses of human passion.⁷ The readers' awareness of the possible differences between the original poem and its translation and their understanding of the reasons for such differences will not only make them more critical readers, but will also make them more tolerant of the translation and enable them to make up for its losses of meaning.

Besides this the contrastive reading of the original and its translation is useful not only in revealing the differences and shortcomings of the translation, which constitute useful knowledge for every reader of literature, but in providing invaluable insights into the functioning of literary language and into the differences between the languages which enhance the reader's capacity for appreciation of literature and its language-bound nature. The contrastive reading of the original poem and its translation can be handled in different ways and used for different purposes in poetry reading classes. The discussion can start from the original, while the translation is used at a later stage as an illustration of a possible meaning of the original, offering also the possibility of a discussion of the differences introduced by the translation and of different expressive means of the two languages. With complex and difficult poetry the reading of translation initially frequently facilitates the readers' entry into the original. Should the readers decide to prefer the translation in spite of its limitations, simply because it may speak more directly to them, then the reading of the original can extend their reading of the translation. More experienced and interested readers will of course move on to the examination of the different interpretive possibilities as sometimes offered by the original and its translation, of the shifts in formal features used to condense the meaning and enrich the suggestive power, and of the consequences of such shifts for the poem's impact upon the reader. Last but not least, such contrastive reading is made possible and invited by ever more frequent bilingual publications of translated poetry.

The differences between the readers' experiences of longer fictional texts, such as original novels, and their translations are harder to locate. Novels are too long to permit the detailed analysis of the readings of both texts as is necessary for making such differences visible. Since the individual ways in which the readers assemble their meanings depend on so many unpredictable factors it is usually impossible to trace the differences to some particular features of the two texts, though such differences do appear and even reappear in several groups of readers. This is especially true of the differences which come to expression on the level of the final interpretation which depends so heavily on the readers' recall and com-

⁷ A detailed analysis of the responses to the Slovenian translation of sonnet 116 and 129 and the comparison of the responses to the translation and the original are published under the title »Shakespearejevi soneti v slovenščini« in *Slavistična revija*, Vol. 35, 1987, pp. 303—320.

bination of perceived elements that the readers' contribution must be considered more important than the initial differences in the perception of the text.⁸

With longer fictional texts the differences in the readers' experience of the original and translation often become visible in case of faulty translations. Such translations make it impossible for the readers to grasp those textual and conceptual features which have not been preserved and/or re-created by the translation. Such losses occur because of inattention or through unnecessary assimilation of the text to the receptor culture which does not have at its disposal the same or similar concepts. Depending on the importance of such concepts their elimination or assimilation may result in literary experiences that will be confusing and different from the experience invited by the original. The Slovene translation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*⁹ seems to invite experiences at variance with those offered by the original. Thus the readers of it have reported uneasiness at ascertaining the characters social positions and the resulting motivations.

Taking for granted the readers' knowledge of the highly structured society in England of that time, especially of the position of gentry and of the underlying concept of gentlemanliness, *Pride and Prejudice* uses the word »gentleman« and its derivatives in several descriptions and conflicting situations. The translator, probably unaware of the importance of these words and of the underlying concept, does not translate them consistently. Thus when »gentlemen« and »gentlemanlike« are used in the descriptions of some characters the Slovene translation sometimes keeps »gentleman«, the use of which is permitted by Slovene dictionaries¹⁰, and sometimes renders these words by »gospod« and its derivative »gosposki«. Being the usual translation for »Mr« preceding the family name, »gospod« is used also in reference to all male characters thus presented. In this sense, »gospod« does not suggest to Slovene readers gentleman or gentlemanlike appearance, especially since it has many other more characteristic uses. Thus the introductory descriptions: »Mr Bingley was good looking and getlemanlike...« and »Mr Hurst, merely looked the gentleman« are rendered in Slovene as follows: »Gospod Bingley je bil čeden in gosposki... gospod Hurst je bil gosposki samo na videz,«¹¹ whereas »Colonel Fitzwilliam... (was) in person and address most truly the gentleman« is translated by »Polkovnik Fitzwilliam... a vsa njegova osebnost in nastop sta kazala, da je pravi gentleman.«¹²

⁸ Differences between the perception of the original and its translation seem, according to research done so far, to appear above all in the perception of the various elements of the novel. Thus in the readings of *Wuthering Heights* the differences in the perception of physical background seem to be more visible than the differences in the perception of characters. At this point of our research it is impossible to say whether such differences are attributable primarily to textual features or to other factors.

⁹ Jane Austen, *Prevzetnost in pristranost*. Translated by Majda Stanovnik. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1968.

¹⁰ *Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika I*. Ljubljana: DZS, 1970, p. 676: gentleman, moški plemenitih lastnosti in uglajenega vedenja... France Verbinc, *Slovar tujk*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1974: getleman, prvotno angl. plemič, pozneje človek z vzgojo in navadami višjih plasti družbe; fig. poštenjak, vrl mož odličnega vedenja.

¹¹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 58. All further references will be to the same edition. *Prevzetnost in pristranost* (for bibliographical details see note 9), p. 53.

¹² *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 204 and *Prevzetnost in pristranost*, p. 192.

The use of »gosposki« for »gentleman« seems even more confusing in the situation of explicit social conflict between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine in Chapter 56, when the latter accuses Elizabeth of upstart pretensions and of wishing to quit the sphere in which she has been brought up. Elizabeth defends herself by claiming social equality with Darcy: »He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal.«¹³ Though the Slovene translation tries to explicate her statement by adding »rod« (origin) »Gospo-skega rodu je in moj oče je gosposkega rodu: po tem sva si enaka.«¹⁴ This translation leaves many readers unable to see the importance attributed to this social status by Elizabeth. The uncertainty of their response should probably be attributed to the wide range of meanings of »gospod« and »go-sposki«, which for some readers may also be quite negative.

When Darcy first proposes to Elizabeth in Chapter 34, he is most startled and reduced to silence by her words reproaching him for his manner of (linguistic) behaviour: »Had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.« Then, she tells him, also she would have had more concern with the wording of her refusal.¹⁵ On this occasion her words are rendered in Slovene in the following way: »če bi se bolj gentlemansko vedli.«¹⁶ These words are given central importance in Chapter 58, where Darcy quotes them as her well-applied reproof: »had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.' Those were your words,« thus directly revealing how much they have been on his mind all the time.¹⁷ The Slovene translation, however, does not quote Elizabeth's words as translated in Chapter 34, but rather renders them in a different translation: »Če bi se bolj olikano vedli'. To so bile vaše besede.«¹⁸ In this inconsistent translation we can see a clear proof of the lack of awareness of the importance of the concept of gentlemanliness for this novel.

Though at first also unfamiliar with the concept of gentlemanliness, the readers of the original revealed no uncertainties as regards the social relations among individual characters. That is why it seems but reasonable to expect that constant use of »gentleman« and its derivatives without alternative use of »gospod« and its derivatives would make this translation more understandable for the Slovene readers. It would also help to foreground the importance of the concept of gentlemanliness and thus, making it more visible, also make it more graspable for the readers who have relatively little knowledge of the social structure of the English society of that time. Instead of unnecessarily assimilating the English »gentleman« to the Slovene »gospod«, the translation could in this way preserve and emphasize the differentness of the original and thus sensitize the readers to the fact that they are dealing with a different social reality and accordingly cannot rely solely on their own culturally conditioned and limited expectations. In cross-cultural reading such awareness of the possible differences often contributes to a better understanding simply by preventing unnecessary mistakes and by inducing the readers to make more effort at understanding. Last but not least, the translation could also add a note explaining the relevant meanings of »gen-

¹³ *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 366.

¹⁴ *Prevzetnost in pristranost*, p. 348.

¹⁵ *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 224.

¹⁶ *Prevzetnost in pristranost*, p. 210.

¹⁷ *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 376.

¹⁸ *Prevzetnost in pristranost*, p. 357. The Slovene translation means »had you behaved more politely«.

tleman« in *Pride and Prejudice*, which the readers of the original can find in any English dictionary. This seems highly commendable, especially because the Slovene dictionaries are mostly restricted to those meanings for »gentleman« which are currently used in Slovene.¹⁹

A comparative reading of the original and its translation can, in this sense, highlight the processes of assimilation which accompany translation, and, to some extent, all cross-cultural communication. Since every translation has been subject to some processes of assimilation and adaptation to the receptor culture, detailed analysis of the differences between the two texts makes it possible for the readers to see these processes at work. A careful comparison of the experiences as invited by both texts thus offers the best means of sensitizing the readers to the tendencies inherent in cross-cultural reading and so of enhancing their capacity for fuller appreciation in such a situation. This seems especially important when the particularities of the novel's socio-cultural context are not known to its readers, and when the readers bring significantly different extratextual and intertextual experiences to bear upon their readings.

¹⁹ The explanation concerning the social position of gentlemen in Jane Austen's time as a rule facilitated the understanding of this novel.