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How many cogs are in the machine? A few thoughts on the practical application of translator studies

ABSTRACT

How many cogs are in the machine?

A few thoughts on the practical application of translator studies

The main aim of the paper is to propose a new way of studying literary translation, inspired by H el ene Buzelin’s claim to look at the translation process as a manufacturing activity, always involving several subjects. First, the concept of translator studies – one of the most recent subfields of translation studies – is briefly presented together with its major assumptions. Then, the traditional sender-transmitter-receiver translation scheme is developed to include more agents. The resulting list is to give a brief overview of how complex the situation of literary translator is, whose responsibility for the shape of a literary product requires dealing with several counteracting objectives

Keywords: translator studies, interaction, sociology of translation, publishing market, literary translation

Introduction

If we were to follow Johan Heilbron, who, inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein’s terminology, proposed to look at the translation of books as “constituting a cultural world-system”, having a hierarchical structure stratified into “central, semi-peripheral and peripheral languages” with all the power-related issues that go with it, Polish would be placed somewhere between the first and second orbit of the concentric scheme, far from the core of the literary universe (Heilbron

1999: 436; Warczok 2015: 26). Pascale Casanova also understands translation as an “unequal exchange occurring in a strongly hierarchized universe”, although, instead of opposing the centre with peripheries, she prefers to use the concept of “linguistic-literary capital” to confront the dominating languages with the dominated ones (Casanova 2010: 285–288). No matter which terminology we decide to follow, the very limited presence of Polish literature on the global market makes every published translation, especially done to the central languages (English, French or German), a particularly precious good. This, in turn, emphasizes the role of the translator, who is traditionally treated as the person entirely responsible for the quality of the *translatum*.

Translator studies

The evolution of translation studies in the second half of the 20th century first deflected researchers from focusing on texts and reoriented their attention towards language; then, in the 1980s and 1990s, the discipline has undergone the essential “cultural turn”, the results of which, in the form of developing sub-disciplines and new perspectives or research trends, we are still observing. One of the most recent evolution, initiated in the first decade of the 21st century, is referred to as the “sociological turn” and proposes to study translators through their interaction as agents “with and within the community’s structuring and structural dimension” (Merkle 2008: 175). This trend, that has been gradually evolving into the more and more developed “sociology of translation”, was based on and inspired by, among others, the works of Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury, who in the first half of the 1990s, according to Gisèle Sapiro, were the first scholars to treat and study translations “as a sort of sociological object” (Biliani 2014: 230). One of the natural consequences of this turn was the particular focus put on the translator. Researchers opting for such a perspective, “rather than concentrating on demonstrated behaviours as seen in cultural products [...] are more interested in studying the agents who produce them, and how and why they do so” (Merkle: 177). Andrew Chesterman, considering straight away all the ambiguity that goes with it, proposes to refer to this new subfield as “translator studies” focusing “primarily and explicitly” on the above-mentioned agents, including “their activities or attitudes, their interaction with their social and technical environment, or their history and influence” (Chesterman 2009: 20).

Manufacture

This catchy new term, quite logical from the perspective of word formation, should not, however, suggest narrowing the research to the person of the translator as such, as the key concept here actually is the agency in the production of

translations. According to H el ene Buzelin, the difference between the *translator* and the *translating agent* is crucial, as “the *translating agent* can consist of several individuals and does not equal the *translator*” (Buzelin 2005: 214, as cited in Bogic 2010: 183). The shape of the final product of translation, says Buzelin, cannot be explained neither with purely subjective notions (translator personal choices), nor with the objective ones (the widely understood context of translation), but only by the whole process of its manufacturing, by the way the invested human, technological and financial resources interact with one another (Buzelin 2004: 740).

The present paper, due to its limited volume, aims at presenting just a brief analysis of the complexity that such an approach brings to basically any activity related to literary translation and in particular to translation criticism, translator-oriented research and public institutions whose role is to promote national literature abroad. The first step in getting a deeper insight into the entire publishing process would be to take a closer look at all the agents involved in it and the nature of their agency.

The basic trio

The first and most obvious actor in the literary translation process is the author of original work, who may seem to be a rather passive participant of the process. However he/she cannot be entirely excluded or left apart, as one of his/her basic rights is the one regarding the integrity of work, which has been officially recognised by the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works from 1986:

Independently of the author’s economic rights, and even after the transfer of the said rights, the author shall have the right to claim authorship of the work and to object to any distortion, mutilation or other modification of, or other derogatory action in relation to, the said work, which would be prejudicial to his honour or reputation (WIPO 1979).

This, in legal terms, means that the author shall always have some minor control over the treatment of his/her work which stays in force during the whole publishing process.

On the other end of the translation process awaits the reader, who – just like the author – we would intuitively treat as a passive ‘end user’ of translation. However, as stated by Katharina Reiss and Hans J. Vermeer, two major scholars behind the *skopos* theory:

Every translation action is directed at an intended audience. The translator/interpreter need not be consciously aware of the recipients and their situation, he may not be able to name them individually – but they are there (Reiss/ Vermeer 2014: 76).

So, the reader may not be an active actor of the Buzelin's 'manufacturing process', but the translators willingness to adapt or fit into the recipient's expectations, competences or requirements may definitely be taken into consideration, even though the application of the tools provided by the *skopos* theory in studying literary translation have been widely contested, usually when it came to the eternal question of translator's loyalty (cf. Schäffner 2001). Referring to the context of Polish literature translated into French – which perfectly reflects the inequality occurring between the peripheries and centre of the literary universe – we can quote Zofia Bobowicz, a translator and longstanding editor in chief responsible for publishing series dedicated to Central and Eastern European authors at the Robert Laffont publishing house, who gives a brief example of how the figure of model reader can shape the translation process:

France remains a very demanding country in terms of the quality of literary production. Compared to other countries – with rare exceptions – the excellence of writing is superior here. [...] Moreover, the foreign text must correspond at least in part to the image that a cultured Frenchman has of what we call literature (Bobowicz 2007: 193).¹

Having described the two most distant points of the translation process – the author and the reader – we can pass to the main intermediary between them, namely the translator. Putting aside all the complexity of the figure of translator, after the cultural turn in translation studies we can assume that the most basic purpose of the translator is to mediate between cultures (Tabakowska 2012: 177), which – in light of the above – would mean keeping the balance between the author's right to integrity of his/her work and the reader's expectations or requirements.

However, acting as a mediator is by no means reduced to "dialogical role-switching" and "swapping of source and target poles" (Delabastita 2008: 240), it is also a creative, original work, recognized in the UNESCO recommendation, stating that translators should be granted, in respect of their translations, "the protection accorded to authors [...] but without prejudice to the rights of the authors of the original, works translated" (UNESCO 1976). So the translator, obliged to respect the copyright of the author, is also an author himself/herself. It does not mean however that the role of the translator is limited to a purely artistic or artisanal nature, it is actually political par excellence. As stated by Chesterman,

the target culture designates certain texts as translations largely on the implicit say-so of their translators: the relation between the target culture and its translators

1| La France reste un pays très exigeant quant à la qualité de la production littéraire. Comparée à d'autres pays – à de rares exceptions près – la maîtrise de l'écriture y est supérieure. [...] De plus, le texte étranger doit correspondre au moins en partie à l'image qu'un Français cultivé se fait de ce qu'on appelle les belles lettres.

is therefore fundamentally one of trust – a culture must trust those who translate into it, and also out of it (Chesterman 2000: 57).

In the case of transfers from a semi-peripheral (or dominated) language into a central (or dominating) one and their unequal nature, translators play a truly responsible role, which is by no means limited to the act of translation itself. According to Mona Baker, the translators not only “provide the structure, transcending the personal and subjective, which causes knowledge to endure through time as well as to be carried through space” but also

face a basic ethical choice with every assignment: to reproduce existing ideologies as encoded in the narratives elaborated in the text or utterance, or to dissociate themselves from those ideologies, if necessary by refusing to translate the text or interpret in a particular context at all (Baker 2006: 105).

Let us point out that in the case of Polish literature in translation, due to its marginal position, the dynamics of the publishing process may be a bit altered with translators not only accepting or refusing particular “assignments” but also initiating them. This is, by the way, one of the founding concepts of the program Sample Translations ©POLAND, launched by the Polish Book Institute and addressed to translators of Polish literature, who can get financing for preparing a sample translation to be further presented to foreign publishers.

Moreover, no matter if the act of translation results from an accepted assignment or is partly initiated by the translator himself/herself, translators still have at their disposal “various strategies to strengthen or undermine particular aspects of the narratives they mediate, explicitly or implicitly” (Baker: 105). We then clearly see how important their choices are both in the field of the functioning of foreign literature on the given market and the content of particular translations published. This, in turn, raises the need to introduce some other ‘manufacturers’, who have their say in the translation process and interact directly with the translator.

(In)visible rulers

As written by Reiss and Vermeer, the translation is not only shaped by its purpose but also by “commissioners or publishers” (Reiss/ Vermeer: 90). The publisher, as other actors of the translation process, may have several different objectives of artistic nature (Sapiro 2014: 35–36), however at the most basic level, he/she is acting as an entrepreneur whose activity is always driven directly or indirectly by the economic purpose. This logic is simply implied by the nature of running a publishing house in the circumstances of capitalist economy. The publisher bears the economic burden of the whole process and usually also initiates it. Moreover, he/she is also responsible for all the content accompanying the publication, for

instance the paratexts, thus impacting the possible reception of the translated work (Skibińska, 2008: 39). However, despite such an authority, the publisher has to respect both the author's and the translator's copyright, so his/her actual ability to impact the work of translator is not as overwhelming as could be expected taking into consideration the economic engagement. In the majority of cases the publisher is accompanied by one of the most important actors of the translation process and at the same time one of the least studied one, namely the editor.

Even though the editor is an apparent participant of the process, by default mentioned in the imprint, his/her role is often overlooked or ignored in research, mostly due to lack of resources (drafts of translation, editor's remarks, written and non-written material collected within participant observation etc.), rarely shared by the publishers (Buzelin 2007: 145). This long-lasting neglect is a great pity, as it is the editor who is actually the final gatekeeper controlling the shape of the *translatum* (Mansell 2017, Janssen and Verboord 2015) and definitely one of the actors "who participate in the making of the text but whose actions and practices have so far received little attention" (Buzelin: 141).

Cogs in the machine

This brief list of different actors and their motivations is just a schematic model, which is in no way exhaustive as far as the complexity of the publishing process is concerned. It gives, however, some idea of the number of factors influencing the process of translation, defined by Buzelin as a joint effort carried out by many different people in their respective professional roles (Buzelin 2005) – and consisting of "conflicts, tensions and negotiations or even controversies" (Buzelin 2004: 739). Referring to the dichotomy of hard and soft power, widely applied in diplomacy and politics, we could say that in most cases the relations of the translator and other actors of the process, as sketched above, will rather be based on soft-power relations, defined by Joseph Nye as getting others to want the outcomes that you want based on attraction rather than might (Nye: 1990; 2004). This in turn underlines the importance of interpersonal and intercultural competencies of the translator, whose work seems to be a constant negotiation between several actors. As stated by Buzelin, more and more translation studies scholars underline the need of translator to be multi-skilled ('polyvalent') (Buzelin: 740).

Moreover, it makes every critic or research activity, which would ignore the complexity and multi-agency of the process of translation at least uncomplete and, in extreme cases, simply pointless. Narrowing the research analysis or translation critics to choices made by the translator, without taking into consideration the whole turmoil of forces impacting his/her decisions, is perhaps understandable from the "legal" point of view – after all the translator is mentioned in the book as the author of the translation and holds copyright thereof, so he/she can

be “held liable” on what concerns its content. However, such a limited perspective leads us nowhere, as it only points to the responsible person but does not really explain his/her choices, as these may actually happen as a result of several different, intertwining influences projected by other actors of the widely understood publishing process. Therefore, only after the perspective of research or critical activity becomes widened so that it takes into consideration the difference between the *translator* and the *translating agent* pointed out by Buzelin, we can really understand the process of translation and assess its results.

Seen from the semi-periphery

However, no matter if we are dealing with action, driven by “attraction” or by “might”, the internal dynamic of the translation process remains power-related, which draws our attention to the centre–periphery model mentioned at the beginning of this article. The inequality of translation balance between Polish and French can be clearly seen in the statistics: according to the data for the period 2016–2017, collected and published by the French Ministry of Culture, the share of Polish literature in the French market is below the 0.6% threshold (MC/DGMIC-SLL 2018), while the yearly report of the Polish Book Institute, highlighting the characteristics of Polish book market in 2017, indicates that the share of literature translated from French in the Polish market is about 8% (Dobrołęcki 2018).

Due to the highly limited number of Polish titles published in France, the quality of every translation is particularly important. Moreover, the publishing activity is carried out by a very small group of people, whose decisions, no matter if they are translators, publishers, editors or agents, are crucial on what concerns the promotion of the Polish culture abroad. Leaving aside how sophisticated and widely discussed the concept of “quality” in the field of translation studies is, it seems of crucial importance to understand the role of all the persons who actually stand behind the text that finally reaches the reader. This is recognised to a certain extent for example by the Polish Book Institute, which in 2007 had its grant activity enlarged, and which so far focused on publishers and co-financing publications, with the Sample Translations ©POLAND programme, addressed to translators, who can obtain financing for the preparation of a sample translation of Polish literature to be furtherly presented to foreign publishers.

Finally, even though the translation itself can be seen as a cultural artefact, its production and circulation are never limited to the simple exchange of narratives. According to Sapiro, it is actually, above all, “a space of international relations formed by nation-states and linguistic groups, which are linked together through competition and rivalry” (Sapiro 2014: 32). In the Polish context, following the bellicose rhetoric of Sapiro’s article “Translation as a Weapon in the Struggle Against Cultural Hegemony in the Era of Globalization”, we could call the act

of studying and analysing the functioning of the central languages' publishing industry as a recon mission sent to the foreground of a battlefield to deeply verify its characteristics and, therefore, support the preparations to the confrontation with the enemy's overwhelming forces.

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