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The Problems of Translation of Cultural Aspects of Literary Texts and Its Evaluation

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Abstract

The paper deals with the author's professional experience in the domain of evaluating the quality of students' translations of literary texts taking into consideration the cultural aspects of those texts. For a translation to be successful, often enough it does not suffice to carry the meaning across correctly in the appropriate register. What is frequently missing are certain cultural nuances that prevent the reader from grasping all the implications of the original on the basis of the translation at hand. Even though scholars like Wolfgang Iser have rightly pointed out that each attempt at translating cultures is marked by a trace of untranslatability, that mutual understanding of cultures is often faced with a certain degree of incommensurability, I believe that every effort should be made to carry across as much of the cultural aspects of the original as humanly possible. Within the framework of this paper, I propose to analyse examples of professional translations of the prose of Julian Barnes, focusing on its cultural aspects and providing examples of good, acceptable and inadequate translations and criteria for their evaluation.

Keywords: *Translation, Translatability, Culture, Evaluation*

Evaluation of translation work is a notoriously difficult undertaking. One of the reasons for this, as pointed out by Christina Schäffner, Emeritus Professor of Translation Studies at Aston University, Birmingham, is the fact that, despite much research conducted over the second half of the twentieth century, "translation studies has not developed into a homogeneous discipline and there is no agreement on its central concepts". While notions such as "accuracy, correctness or well-formedness" have played an important role when it comes to evaluating the quality of a

translation, but depending on what precisely is understood as translation, they have been assigned different significance. As a result, “[d]ifferent approaches exist side by side, each of which focuses on specific aspects, looks at the product or the process of translation from a specific angle, and uses or avoids specific terminology” (Schäffner 1999: 1).

Assessing translation work is generally related to a set of norms, either explicitly stated or implicitly implied, “related to assumptions and expectations about [the] correctness and/or appropriateness” of the given translation (Schäffner 1999: 1). In practical terms, this usually boils down to checking the level of the semantic accuracy of the translated text and whether the proper register has been used. However, as I have found out through classroom practice, the rule-of-thumb approach focusing on semantic/register appropriateness often proves insufficient when cultural elements enter the translation equation. In what is probably the most thorough examination of this issue, a collection of papers entitled *The Translatability of Cultures* (1996), edited by Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, all the contributors, dealing with the question of whether cultures are translatable in practice, through their papers answered “As a matter of principle, yes – but...” Summing up the results of this extensive research, Wolfgang Iser states that any effort at translating cultures is inevitably marked by a trace of untranslatability, and that a mutual understanding of cultures will inevitably “encounter a certain incommensurability” (Iser 1996: 301).

While this explains rather eloquently why certain cultural elements tend to get lost in translation, it only makes the task of evaluating translations all the more complex. In my teaching practice, this problem was manifested with particular intensity when dealing with the prose of a writer who, on occasion, tends to write about cultures other than his native one. Julian Barnes, as Malcolm Bradbury pointed out in his seminal study of the modern English novel, is probably the most prominent “cross-Channel” contemporary British author, that is, very much indebted to French literature, literary theory and French culture in general (Bradbury 2001: 486). Indeed, his first major critical success came with the publication of the novel *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), whose very title is indicative of Barnes’s indebtedness to French literature and culture. But even more remarkably for a Westerner, in his recent novel *The Noise of Time* (2016) Barnes dealt with the life and times of the famous Russian composer Dmitry Shostakovich, focusing in particular on the era of Stalinism in the Soviet Union.

It is on these “cross-cultural” aspects of Barnes’s prose and the problems encountered when attempting to translate them that I would like to focus on in my paper, as I believe that a specific

analysis of selected examples of Serbian translations of the aforementioned novels by Barnes will shed light on how to deal with cultural matters in translation in practical terms and point to a workable way of assessing translation quality.

The Noise of Time lends itself to this kind of analytical approach because of the cultural distance between Barnes's native culture and that of Soviet Russia. Let us just note briefly that this was not Barnes's first "excursion" beyond what used to be known as "the Iron Curtain". In his 1992 novel *The Porcupine*, which was even originally published in Bulgarian as *Бодливо свинче* (Moseley 1997: 145), Barnes showed – for a Westerner – a rare degree of empathy dealing with the traumas suffered by the inhabitants of the former Eastern Bloc after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Apparently, Barnes saw no progress in the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic social order, which, in principle, should provide a greater degree of democratic freedoms. On the evidence of this, one would expect at least the same degree of empathy in a novel dealing with the life of a great Russian composer who had the misfortune to live under Joseph Stalin. And that is what Barnes most certainly delivers.

Dmitry Shostakovich's worst period in life began when the Communist Party daily *Pravda* published a vicious ideological attack on him entitled "MUDDLE INSTEAD OF MUSIC" (Barnes 2016: 26), this being the now standard English version of the original Russian title "Сумбур вместо музыки" (Anon. [2]). The Serbian phrase "POMETNJA UMESTO MUZIKE" (Barnes 2016: 36) correctly translates the meaning of the original. However, "pometnja" (Serbian for *muddle, mess*) is not the only possibility here. Apart from *muddle*, possible synonyms for the Russian *сумбур* include *jumble, mess, confusion, even garbage*.¹ Taking into consideration the ideological angle, so very important in Soviet Russia at the time, I believe that *confusion* would be a better alternative in this particular context, bearing in mind that the dogmatic thought of that era insisted on clarity of thinking, leaving chaos and confusion to the bourgeois way of thinking. In view of this, I would be inclined to give a bonus point to any students who came up with *confusion* here.

Another example of the importance of the ideological angle for the Soviet context is seen in the episode from Shostakovich's past when regime-oriented associations of Russian musicians were trying "to break the bourgeois stranglehold on the arts" (Barnes 2016: 25). The Serbian

¹ See the examples offered on the web page <http://context.reverso.net/translation/russian-english/%D1%81%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B1%D1%83%D1%80>, accessed on 2. 2. 2018.

translation “da raskinu s pogubnim buržujskim uticajem na umetnost” (Barnes 2016: 35), literally – “break with the pernicious bourgeois influence on the arts”, is a very felicitous one. Of the two possible Serbian forms for *bourgeois* – *buržoaski* and *buržujski*, the latter carries a much stronger negative ideological connotation, and is therefore more appropriate for the context.

A particularly effective example of inspired translation work is to be found in the pun on the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s nickname – Nikita the Corncob, earned due to the First Secretary’s vision of the economic development of the Soviet Union, based mostly on raising corn, which is why he often appeared in public holding a corncob in his hand. Compared to the possible solutions that the translator could have opted for – “Nikita *Klip* [“corncob” in Serbian]” or “Nikita *Kukuruz* [“corn” in Serbian]” readily come to mind, being more or less literal translations of the original – the one actually used in the text surpasses them in terms of inventiveness: *Nikita Klipeta* derives its effect from a well-chosen pun in Serbian. *Klipeta* is a colloquial Serbian variant of *klipan*, that is, “dunce”. The selected variant stresses the fact that Khrushchev was something of an intellectual and cultural dunce, but fortunately for Shostakovich, rather more benign than Stalin, even capable of expressing sympathy for the composer, who, in the First Secretary’s own words, “saw the light at the very beginning of the war with his... what d’you call it, ah, his symphony” (Barnes 2016: 131). On the evidence of the examples presented above, it is clear that the Serbian translator of *The Noise of Time* was well aware of the significance of the cultural aspects of the original, and his occasional inventiveness constitutes an added bonus for the reader in terms of the pleasure to be derived from reading such a translation.

The same, unfortunately, could not be said of the Serbian translation of Barnes’s novel *Flaubert’s Parrot*, for a number of reasons. As a true Francophile, Barnes included a lot of French words, phrases and even entire sentences in French, thus letting it be known right from the start that reading *Flaubert’s Parrot* would require a lot more knowledge of the French language and culture than that possessed by Del Boy, the protagonist of the popular TV series *Only Fools and Horses...*, who, for instance, often says “*Bonjour*” – when parting. The translator decided to translate most of the French content into Serbian, and as a matter of principle, I see nothing wrong with his decision. French is studied in Serbian schools to a rather lesser degree than English, and it would not be reasonable to expect the average Serbian reader to be acquainted with most of the French content of the text. However, it is the consistency with which French expressions were translated into Serbian that is questionable.

For example, the title of Jean-Paul Sartre's unfinished book on Flaubert *L'Idiot de la famille* is duly translated into Serbian (in a footnote) as *Porodični idiot* [*The Idiot of the Family*] (Barnes 2008: 9). However, the title of Flaubert's posthumously published unfinished satirical work *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is left in the original, without anything in the way of a translator's note. I do not think that the majority of the Serbian readers of the novel would know how to pronounce the French title without a Serbian transcription, and it is even more doubtful that they would have any idea of what the said book is about. Geoffrey Braithwaite, the novel's protagonist, is something of an expert on Flaubert, but his casual thoughts on that book, namely, that in it Flaubert "sought to enclose and subdue the whole world, the whole of human striving and human failing" (Barnes 1985: 5), do not convey any specific information about its content to the Serbian reader. Therefore, I would say that a brief footnote containing essential information on *Bouvard et Pécuchet* would not be out of place in this context.

However, the real problems with the text of the translation begin with transcriptions of proper names into Serbian. For a start, the protagonist's surname is mistranscribed into Serbian as "Brajtvajt", whereas it should really be "Brejtvejt", in view of the fact that it is actually pronounced 'breiθweit, to use the phonetic transcription. When Geoffrey mentions the names of the streets of Rouen that he passes through on his way to the hotel where he plans to have lunch, in Barnes's original text they are written, naturally enough, in accordance with the rules of the French orthography. In the text of the Serbian translation, they are transcribed into Serbian according to their pronunciation, in some cases erroneously, as it transpires. Thus "Graye-sur-Mer" (Barnes 2008: 5) becomes "Greje-sir-Mer" (Barnes 2008: 10), whereas it should actually be "Grej-sir-mer", in order to make it consistent with the pronunciation and the rules of the Serbian orthography.² If the addition of the superfluous "e" sound in "Greje-sir-Mer" may be ascribed to the translator's unfamiliarity with the rules of French pronunciation, how he came up with "Kurz-sir-Mer" (Barnes 2008: 10) as the Serbian equivalent of "Courselles-sur-Mer" (Barnes 2008: 5), instead of the correct "Kursel-sir-mer", is downright baffling.

Soon afterwards, things become even more troublesome – for the reader and translator alike. Gazing through a "Télescope Panoramique", Geoffrey "trace[s] the curving morse of the Mulberry Harbour far out to sea" (Barnes 1985: 5). As a veteran of the D-Day invasion, Geoffrey

² The authentic French pronunciation may be checked on the Internet page <https://forvo.com/word/graye-sur-mer/>, accessed on 3. 2. 2018. According to the Serbian orthography rules, "mer" in "Grej-sir-mer" should not be capitalised.

remembers well what a Mulberry Harbour is and what its role in the invasion was. A contemporary reader would not necessarily be familiar with this. We have no way of knowing whether the translator had any idea that what Geoffrey was gazing at through the telescope was the code name for the remnants of one of the two artificial harbours constructed by the British to facilitate the unloading of supply ships off the coast of Normandy immediately following the invasion of Europe on D-Day.³ Judging by what came out of the original phrase in translation, it seems likely that he did not. The reader of the Serbian translation would have no way of knowing that the Mulberry Harbour (or what remained of it) *was* “the curving morse” stretching out to the open sea on the evidence of “kako se krivulja Morzeovih znakova proteže od Malberi Harbura dalje prema pučini [the morse curve stretching from Mulberry Harbour to open sea]” (Barns 2008: 10). If the translator did know this, it would not be fair to expect a contemporary reader to know such details about a historical event that occurred decades ago without a brief explanatory footnote. If he did not, this testifies to an elementary lack of caution on his part in view of the fact that Barnes consistently and scrupulously uses French spelling for all the local toponyms, and yet, all of a sudden, we encounter an English name for a place or object quite obviously located off the French coast.

Even on the basis of an analysis conducted, of necessity, on a rather small sample of the text, we can conclude that the translator of *Flaubert's Parrot* did not approach his task with the due degree of attention to the culturological aspects of the original text. Let me provide you with just one more example of this before reaching the final conclusion. As a true Francophile, the protagonist of *Flaubert's Parrot* does not hesitate to recommend to the reader his favourite French cheese – “Brillat-Savarin” (Barns 1985: 100). In Serbian translation, it became “bri-savaren [Brie-Savarin]” (Barns 2008: 92). While it is true that this is a variant of the kind of cheese referred to as “Brie”, no true admirer of French culture, let alone French cheese, would allow himself to degrade this delicious brand of cheese, named in honour of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826), a French lawyer, politician and epicurean, famous for his dictum “A dessert without cheese is like a beautiful woman with only one eye” (Anon, 2018a), by reducing it to the level of a generic term for a particular kind of cheese.

³ As can be seen from Adrian Lewis's article for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, available on the Internet page <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mulberry-artificial-harbours-World-War-II>, accessed on 3. 2. 2018.

By comparing translations of two works from the opus of Julian Barnes whose plots unfold within the framework of two cultures that are not his own native one, we come to the conclusion that a translator undertaking such a task must possess a well-developed awareness of the cultural elements and characteristics of the work being translated. In the Serbian translation of *The Noise of Time*, we could find no examples of obvious distortion of the meaning of the original text due to neglecting its cultural specificities. On the contrary, despite certain minor “losses” of cultural nuances, which are essentially attributable to what Wolfgang Iser has termed a degree of incommensurability in the mutual understanding of cultures, we were in a position to observe a number of “gains” due to the translator’s skilfulness and a fine ear for cultural details, which undoubtedly contribute to increasing the reader’s pleasure in the text. That, unfortunately, was not the case with the Serbian translation of *Flaubert’s Parrot*, where, even on a relatively small sample of the text, we observed a number of major distortions of the meaning of the original, which constitute an obstacle to the reader when it comes to achieving a fuller understanding of all the semantic nuances of the text.

Finally, let me get back to the vexing issue of evaluation of translation work. The examples discussed above are very useful when it comes to making students aware, first of all, what constitutes good, as opposed to bad or inadequate translation is. Equally importantly, they are also convenient when it comes to analysing the semantic or cultural nuances of two or more basically correct versions. As I said before, in such cases I am inclined to award bonus points to students who come up with inspired solutions in translation, thus enabling them to make up for mistakes made elsewhere in the text. While this is necessarily subjective, experience shows that such a practice tends to stimulate the students’ creative approach to translation, particularly important when translating literary texts. That, in my opinion, is more important than marking students’ work by merely adding or subtracting points.

Literature

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