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Slovak Thinking on Translation

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Abstract. The paper focuses on the contents, message of Slovak translation theorists as well as their contribution to international translation studies. At the same time, the paper presents and seeks for application of their theoretical musing in contemporary translation studies and searches for possible reasons of their often inadequate interpretation and lack of theoretical “updating”.

Keywords: the Slovak thinking on translation; shift; communication theory; taxonomy of expressions; Slovak translation school; Anton Popovič; Ján Ferenčík; Ján Vilikovský.

Introduction

Slovak translation studies / The Slovak thinking on translation* took shape as a discipline in a specific geographical, cultural, social and political space that was shared by Czechs and Slovaks, one that would influence and perhaps even predetermine its course over several decades. This basic truth cannot be ignored or circumvented when considering the Slovak thinking on translation and its fundamental ideas, works and thinkers; nor can we avoid discussing the entrenchment of former Czechoslovakia in the socialist, Soviet-led Eastern Bloc when articulating the foundations of the field. Furthermore, the works of Slovak translation scholars reflect the influence of Soviet structuralist and literary communication theory, represented by figures such as semiotician Yuri Lotman. The impact of Western translation studies on its Slovak counterpart was first put in motion by networking on the part of Jiří Levý and Roman Jakobson, thanks to whom the conference *Translation as Art* was held in 1968 in Bratislava under the auspices of the International Federation of Translators. The conference was also attended by James Holmes, who paved the way for the proceedings' publication under the title *The Nature of Translation* (1970). Anton Popovič, who contributed the paper “*The Concept of ‘Shift of Expression’ in Translation Analysis*”, also co-edited the proceedings, so it is likely that he had a close relationship with fellow editors James Holmes and Frans de Haan.

The basic concepts of the Slovak thinking on translation

The basic concepts of the Slovak thinking on translation were established as early as the 1950s, largely thanks to the efforts of Slovak and Czech linguists, literary scientists and translator-

*Traditionally in Slovakia, the designation the Slovak thinking on translation is used instead of Slovak translation studies.

theorists such as Bohuslav Havránek, Karel Horálek, Bohuslav Ilek, Jiří Levý, Karel Hausenblas, Viktor Kochol, Jozef Felix, Oskár Čepan, Zora Jesenská and Ján Ferenčík. It was then that the fundamental concepts of general translation theory were formulated, taking directions related to linguistics, stylistics, versology and literary science. The scholars involved devoted themselves primarily to literary translation, which reflected the translation trade's focus on literary texts at the time. But it was in the 1970s and 80s that the Slovak thinking on translation truly came into its own, a phase of theoretical development that could, without a hint of irony, be called the Popovičian Period. This period yielded five essential monographs that determined the course of the Slovak thinking on translation for several decades and, in our view, informed translation theory in other countries as well. The most influential of all was Popovič's 1975 monograph *Teória umeleckého prekladu* (*The Theory of Literary Translation*, 1975). It was followed in 1977 by Lubomír Feldek's *Z reči do reči* (*From Language to Language*, 1977). 1982 saw the publication of two major works: Ferenčík's *Kontexty prekladu* (*Translation Contexts*, 1982) and Július Rybák's *Kapitoly o jazyku a prekladaní* (*Topics in Language and Translation*, 1982), and in 1984 Ján Vilikovský published the monograph *Preklad ako tvorba* (*Translation as a Creative Process*, 1984). Each of these titles represent a distinct view of translation, their authors united by what may at first appear a trivial detail, but was in fact pivotal in the development of Slovak translation theory: in addition to being major theorists of their time, Feldek, Ferenčík, Vilikovský and Rybák also happened to be practising translators.

But despite its significant contributions to translation theory, history and criticism, as well as to the practice of translation, little of the scholarship in other countries cites the Slovak thinking on translation as an influence. Except a few entries in encyclopedias of Translation Studies focusing on F. Miko, A. Popovič, J. Vilikovský and Slovak tradition.* That said, conceptual parallels can certainly be found, though they are not explicitly acknowledged. This may be due to the fact that not all major Slovak monographs in the field have been translated into English. Slovak and Czech translation studies are given a thorough treatment in Zuzana Jettmarová's paper *Czech and Slovak Translation Theories: The Lesser-Known Tradition* (2008:15-46), in which she looks at how our theorists' conclusions have been misinterpreted and attempts to determine the causes thereof. In 2006, Popovič's *Teória umeleckého prekladu* (*The Theory of Literary Translation*) was translated into Italian. In his review to the translation Steconni (2007:174) describes the book as follows:

How can it be that the book does not show the age? I can think of two reasons: either Popovič was a Leonardo-like genius way ahead of his time, or Translation Studies has been running out of steam lately. Questions he asks are more than open.

In our attempt to describe the Slovak thinking on translation, we have opted to proceed from the work of translation theorists / literary scientists Anton Popovič (1933–1984) as well as that of the brilliant theorist-translators Ján Ferenčík (1923–1989) and Ján Vilikovský (1937). These authors' theoretical musings on translation have influenced both the Slovak and Czech cultural milieus for several decades, and they are beginning to inspire translation studies in other countries as well.

Anton Popovič and his contribution to translation theory

The key concept of the Slovak thinking on translation is **shift**, which would later become shift in translation. Popovič (1970:78-87) considered the idea as early as 1970 in his essay *The Concept 'Shift of Expression' in Translation Analysis*, defining it on the basis of Miko's taxonomy of expressions, but clearly also on that of Levý's stylistic shift. Up to that point, differences between the source text and its translation had only been assessed empirically and subjectively, though a certain amount of subjectivity is doubtlessly still present both in Popovič's shifts and Miko's taxonomy of expressions. Nonetheless, the concept of shift of expression is an attempt to objectively determine and give a name to what is lost and gained in the translation process. It allows us to delineate translation approaches more precisely, label differences between the original and the translation, even identify the styles of individual translators. And to this day it enables us to investigate oft-disregarded equivalence, given that shifts of expression are used in order to attain equivalence at the higher level of the text. Shifts can thus signalize equivalence between the source

*BAKER, M. (ED.), 2001. Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

and target texts, emphasizing the fact that the term is not restricted to describing “negative” changes occurring during the translation process; it also aims to describe the broadest possible array of phenomena that occur when textual-cultural material is transferred from one culture to another. Taken together, Popovič’s shifts of expression in translation – which he further divides into constitutive shifts, individual shifts, retardation shifts, negative shifts, thematic shifts, generic shifts and rhythmic shifts (1983:196) – and Miko’s taxonomy of expressions enable us to compare the source and the target text with the goal of establishing the extent of their commensurability or relation to each other. Popovič views the text within the wider contexts of its micro- and macrostylistic construction. Still, interpreting changes in translation is impossible without an understanding of Miko’s previously-mentioned taxonomy of expressions. Popovič (1983:196) therefore identifies four basic levels at which shift can occur:

a) **subjective/objective** (the level of opposition of constitutive and individual shift) The category of constitutive shift views the text from a linguistic perspective, while individual shift applies an interpretative perspective.

b) **invariant/variant** The level of positive and negative shift based on the character and size of the intertextual invariant, on the degree of loss and compensation (+ -), and on the preservation of the extent of semantic and aesthetic information in the text

c) **macrostructure/microstructure of the text** The level of a wide range of shift types depending on the extent of the text where the shift arises (changes of expression)

d) **functionality/baselessness** This axis overlaps with the subjective/objective level, but is understood as an expression of those aspects of translation style, canon, method and movement affiliation which are tied to the translation’s particular time of creation. This is the level of generic shifts, rhythmic shifts, thematic shifts, semantic-retardation shifts, etc. This view of shift typology is informed by a higher standard for the typology and determination of the character of shift—the goal of the literary communication (or, in the case of translation, metacommunication). This goal determines the essence of the shift and the relativity of its classification.

As we see it, Popovič does not consider shift as a negative phenomenon. Negative shift is only one of the possible categories of phenomena that can occur during translation. Popovič does not therefore prescribe what a text should ‘become’ when transmitted to another language and culture; he instead describes universal phenomena which always accompany transactions of text and culture. It is here where we pinpoint his principal contribution to the emergence of descriptive translation studies.

These are, above all, terminological contributions, but they also contribute methodologically to the theory, history and criticism of translation, and even to translation in practice. A further contribution of Popovič’s is his communication theory of translation. The theory’s central concept is the text, both the original and the translation, which manifests itself as an intersection of two axes: the operative/pragmatic and the communicational/iconic, that is to say reflective axis. This view of the text allowed Popovič to create a model where translation is regarded as one of various modes of communication. Communication theory of translation proceeds from the basic communicational rule of three: author—text—recipient, which Popovič expanded into author₁—text₁—recipient₁ (the primary act of literary communication) → author₂—text₂—recipient₂ (the secondary (meta) act of literary communication), resulting in a model that allows us to evaluate the presence of both the author and the reader in the text. Keep in mind that the presence of the author refers to all factors projected in the text that are connected to the author’s idiolect. Later developments in literary communication theory consider the reader’s presence in the text: their experience of reading the text, their past reading experience and their taste. Popovič’s translation model is a model of primary and secondary communication insofar as it acknowledges a two-fold projection of the reader in the text: first in the original, i.e. source text, and then in the translation, i.e. the target text. Furthermore, we cannot omit Popovič’s understanding of translation as intercultural communication, through which he introduced the following concepts: interspatial factors in translation, cultural factors in translation, cultural creolization in translation, temporal cultural factors in the translated text and domestic culture in translation. In defining these concepts, he drew on those conceived by Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman. Popovič’s theories have been criticized for being too theoretical and not offering ‘instructions’ on how to translate. He responds to such objections in *The Theory of Literary Translation (Teória umeleckého prekladu)*

(1975:9) by saying:

...it is not my intention to offer a ready introduction to translation practice, nor to the 'art' of translation. Between the theory and practice of translation, there may be many 'mediating' factors that open up avenues in both directions.*

To his own defence, he adds that "theoretical preparation has yet to do a single translator any 'harm' (1975:10).

The contribution of Ján Vilikovský to musings on translation

Vilikovský's musings on translation, grounded in translatorial optimism, proceeds from Levý's theoretical legacy as reflected in his view of the translation process and in Popovič's communication theory of translation, which in turn informed Vilikovský's view of the role of the reader of the translation as the communicational chain's final element. Vilikovský arrived at his theory inductively, through a comparison of the actual state of literature and translation practice, as opposed to basing it upon a priori postulates. His main innovation is his way of viewing the translation process, which he splits into three phases: interpretation and reception, establishment of a translation strategy, and creation of the actual translation, or reproduction. Vilikovský also points out that interpretation and strategizing differ significantly in focus, i.e. they are not the same thing. He emphasizes that Levý's division also expresses suspicion of the usual two-part division, and thus postulates a third phase dedicated exclusively to translation. In Vilikovský's view, translation is an inseparable part of a national culture. It is via translation that a culture becomes self-aware—and hardly anywhere is this more evident than in Slovakia. The smaller the nation, the greater the role of translation. Every translation and every development that fulfils its communicative function in the given cultural context is, according to Vilikovský, a good translation. In one of his more recent (2008:16) works on the subject, he answers the question "What is still translation?" thus: "Everything', or at least 'everything that wants to be.'"

Ján Ferencík and the Slovak school of translation

Analyses of actual translation production in the Slovak cultural context have also 'demanded' the application of translation theory in the form of a systematic, comprehensive translation method. It was through this method that the Slovak school of translation was born. Often referred to as a creative method, we see this 'school' as something open-ended and still in progress; after all, its formulation over forty years ago did not put an end to thought on translation. Quite the contrary—it intensified, partially influenced by the developments of other social sciences such as linguistics, culturology and literary science, among others.

Following the post-1945 cultural shifts in the region and their profound effect on the fields of literature and translation, there was a tendency towards the stabilization of translation methodology, a trend that affected the majority of translators. The accepted method began to be seen as a universal, supra-generational dogma. Later, in connection with the need to develop qualified translation criticism, this method began to be referred to as the Slovak translation 'school'. This designation applied above all to the field of literary translation. There is no need to view the Slovak school of translation as a unified coalition adherent to a particular agenda, devised once and for all time, set in stone and obligatory for its constituents. It could be more accurately described as a complex of techniques giving rise to a creative method which became the predominant, most productive and characteristic approach for a certain period of development.

The thought behind the translation method was never random or an end in itself; there is a history to its origins, and it took decades to fully take shape. Two works which could be considered seminal in this regard are Ján Poničan's translation of Alexander Serafimovich's novel *The Iron Flood*, (*Zheleznyj potok*, 1924) and Zora Jesenská's translation of Mikhail Sholokhov's novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* (*Tichij Don*, first and second volumes 1928, third volume 1932, fourth volume 1940), both of which featured translation strategies and solutions that inspired major discussion. At a conference on the interpretation of literary texts in Dudince in 1980, Ján Ferencík spoke on the state of translation criticism in Slovakia, including an evaluation of these works and their

* Own translation

influence. This assessment of the Slovak translation school drew the attention of certain theorists, and it would later become a topic of discussion on the turf of a translators' organization. Later that year, at the Summer School of Translation Studies, Ferenčík enumerated certain features in the form of principles (the principle of textual completeness, the principle of semantic equivalence, the principle of formal equivalence, the principle of good Slovak (along with the principle of strictly purposive use of non-standard elements), the principle of semantic equivalence's primacy over formal equivalence, and the principle of a conceptually unified translation). As Slovak translation at the time was dominated by Russian as a source language, these principles were largely formulated on the basis of Ferenčík's study of literary translations from Russian, though later they were generalized as a method for translation of other literatures. The abundance of high-quality Slovak translations of world literature attests to the wisdom behind Ferenčík's principles.

Conclusion

Why are Slovak translations theorists being forgotten today? Do they still have something to say? Several answers to these questions spring to mind. First of all, we suspect that the main cause is the inadequate promotion of the Slovak thinking on translation abroad, coupled with the insufficient coordination of Slovak inquiry with the field's international context. It is our duty to renew and revive these ideas and show that though many of them have aged, just as many of them still work and are applicable not only to theory but also to the practice of translation. A clear sign that we are currently witnessing a revival in this field can be seen in the activities of the four Slovak universities with translation programmes (Nitra, Bratislava, Prešov, Banská Bystrica and Košice). At these institutions, new topics are being explored, such as the sociology of translation and translation criticism, the application of shifts in translation of non-literary texts, audiovisual translation, problematic aspects of intercultural communication, ideology in translation and interdisciplinary cooperation in research on interpreting, particularly regarding the field of psychology. This is to say that the situation is far from critical, and we in Slovakia cannot complain of a lack of stimuli in the field of translation studies.

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