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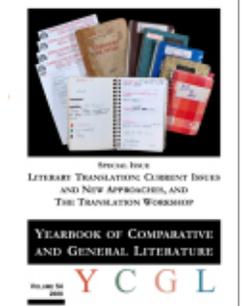
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Literary Translation: From the Diary of a Translator

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# FUNCTION AS AN ELEMENT IN CONVEYING CULTURAL DIFFERENCE IN LITERARY TRANSLATION FROM THE DIARY OF A TRANSLATOR

*Michael Henry Heim*

Anyone who has studied translation diachronically is aware that approaches to translation evolve over time in conjunction with approaches to genre, content, and style, that is, in conjunction with approaches to literature in general. Neoclassicism, for example, makes itself felt as much in the way texts were translated in the neoclassical period as it does in the way they were written, and neoclassical translation theory is to romantic translation theory as neoclassicism is to romanticism.<sup>1</sup> I have not chosen this example at random.

The current concern among translators to convey cultural difference stems from postmodernism's concern with alterity, its tendency to highlight, indeed to privilege the 'other.' In this, postmodernism resembles romanticism, which was to a large extent a reaction against the claims to universality made by neoclassicism's ideological arm, the Enlightenment. Romanticism reveled in the particular, in differences, especially in what distinguished one nation from another. If neoclassicism called for homogeneity, romanticism promoted heterogeneity. The Enlightenment *philosophes* assured their readers that all civilized humanity followed a common set of laws, the very laws the *philosophes* were busy disclosing; the Romantics countered by looking beyond 'civilization' and thereby calling those laws into question.

In literature the shift from neoclassicism to romanticism is well charted, and I need not rehearse it here. I shall instead move immediately to its fallout in the practice of translation. Translators in the romantic period felt it their duty to point up the distinctive features of the source culture. They typically did so by introducing elements from the source language directly into the target language; translators of the previous period would have called such a practice barbarous, their aim being to limit the lexicon to concepts all languages shared.

The parallel with postmodern translators and their predecessors is striking.

The former strive above all to capture the ‘remainder,’ the elements that are particular to the source language and make it, and by extension its culture, unique; the latter strive more to make a smooth translation, a translation whose diction replicates the diction of the target language as closely as possible. Lawrence Venuti, the scholar who has brought the concept of the remainder to the forefront of the burgeoning field of Translation Studies, takes it one step further than the romantics. He encourages translators to cast off their anonymity and call attention to themselves, not only by demanding that their names appear together with the author’s but also by translating in such a way that their readers will be conscious of reading a translation and thereby defamiliarizing the target language. His ideal therefore challenges the very notion of a ‘smooth’ translation, long the generally accepted norm. Moreover, it incorporates an extra-literary agenda: it is meant to raise the readers’ political consciousness, to alert them to the differences (and by inference the need for difference as such) among cultures.<sup>2</sup>

Let me adduce an early translation of my own to illustrate the danger of the overly smooth translation. In 1975 a Los Angeles theater asked me to do a ‘literal translation’ of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. The practice was a common one at the time: theaters would commission translators to provide a text that directors would then rework according to their lights, the assumption being that translators were incapable of producing a stage-worthy text, a smooth, ‘actor-friendly’ version. I accepted the commission but set myself the goal of producing a text that was as far as possible both literal and stage-worthy. The director accepted it as such and used it without changing a word. I should have been overjoyed, but when I saw the results of my labors I was appalled.

I had undertaken the project with the desire to make an American version of Chekhov as opposed to the British versions predominating until then. My feeling was that the American actors using the British versions identified Chekhov with the very British Shaw and accordingly misinterpreted Chekhov with disastrous results. I therefore deliberately Americanized the diction of the translation—domesticated it, as theoreticians would say today—but the results, though different from previous productions I had seen, were equally disastrous.

The problem was that by giving American actors a language in which they felt thoroughly at home I had given them tacit license to behave like Americans on stage. Chekhov’s characters may no longer have resembled Shaw’s, but they acted very much like those of Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams or, even worse, television soap operas. Fortunately, I have had the opportunity to rework the translation and have purged it of the offending passages. But—and here I part company with Venuti—I have not gone to the opposite extreme, from the domestication of diction to its foreignization. The foreignization of diction may well alienate readers, who, encountering language that is not quite what their linguistic instincts lead them to expect, are likely to reject the work, whether consciously or unconsciously, on aesthetic grounds. The great ruse of translation—and I use the word ‘ruse’ advisedly—is to give readers the illusion they are reading the source language when they are in fact, of course, reading the target language. A quixotic goal, perhaps, but like the Don’s, eminently worth pursuing.

Having rejected the foreignization of diction as a means to achieve that goal, I

propose instead that we capitalize on the foreign elements already in the text. Let me again use Chekhov as an example. All Chekhov's plays contain references to Russian regalia such as samovars and kvas. Since the words for these objects exist in English (in the sense that they have found a place in the standard dictionaries), translators may assume their readers know them or at least have ready access to them.<sup>3</sup> And since these words remind readers they are reading a foreign text, they must not be domesticated (into, say, 'teapot' or 'beer').

Also foreign is the Russian use of the Christian name and patronymic (Ivan Ivanovich, Maria Ivanovna) as an alternative to the Christian name or surname alone. Readers without previous exposure to Russian culture are likely to be ignorant of or even misconstrue the social implications of these forms, which connote respect and a degree of familiarity somewhere between the use of the Christian name on its own and the surname preceded by *gospodin* and *gospozha* 'Mr.' and 'Miss/Mrs.' respectively. Nonetheless, they too can serve as a more or less unobtrusive indication of the text's foreignness.<sup>4</sup> The words for Mr., Miss, and Mrs. in certain languages (French, Spanish, Italian, and German) and the Japanese *san* are likewise familiar enough to English-speaking readership to serve that end. I would therefore advocate leaving *Monsieur Ferrière* as 'Monsieur Ferrière' and *Herr Schmidt* as 'Herr Schmidt' but translating *Kovács úr* as 'Mr. Kovács': leaving the latter as *Kovács úr* I would qualify as unproductive foreignization.

The same holds for words denoting certain geographical concepts—street, avenue, lake, mountain—in languages better known to speakers of English (basically French, Spanish, Italian, and German again) and for the toponyms they accompany. The first sentence of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* refers to Munich's Prinzregentenstrasse. Until recently it was usual to domesticate it into 'Prince Regent Street,' but now the tendency is to leave it in the original. This is a healthy development, I feel, because it maintains foreignness without undue foreignization.<sup>5</sup> How to create the illusion of reading a foreign text without resorting to foreignization, therein lies the crux of the matter, therein lies the key to translation's great 'ruse.'

The examples of names and places I have just given represent the most obvious categories of foreign elements in translated texts, the most ubiquitous, and the most elementary. Yet even they may entail a certain loss in communication. What happens when more complex foreign elements occur? What happens when foreign elements go beyond names and places to culture-specific customs, institutions, and historical events, when the translator can no longer rely on the context and only hope for the best? There is no blanket answer to the question and no blanket solution to the problem. But there is an approach that I believe will help to orient translators when they face such culture-specific references in a text, an approach based on functionality.<sup>6</sup> I have in mind two types of function: the first is external to the text, the text's social function, the role it plays in society; the second is internal, immanent, formal, that is, the role played by a given literary device in the text itself. In this paper I shall concentrate on the former but include one example of the latter as well.

Translations serve diverse social functions even within the relatively circumscribed area of literary translation. The translation of a work for the first

time serves one function, the translation of a work for the second (or tenth) time quite another: the very fact that a work is deemed worthy of a new translation makes the function of that new translation different. Similarly, the translation of a work written this year serves quite a different function from the translation of a work written five hundred years ago: although the words remain the same, their meanings may change over time; more important, their aggregate meaning cannot but change. After all, each nation reads its classics after experiencing two-, three-, five-hundred years of subsequent writing (to say nothing of subsequent life).

I shall now demonstrate how I have applied the concept of functionality to my own work. When translating a work that is appearing for the first time in English, I tend to leave foreign references unexplained, that is, leave readers to their own devices even though I could have recourse to at least two common expedients: the 'translator's preface' and 'translator's notes.' If I purposely avoid them, it is because I find they distract the reader's attention from the work itself and the pure, aesthetic pleasure of reading. Let me cite in its entirety an example of a recent translator's preface:

Andrei Makine was born and brought up in Russia, but *Music of a Life*, like his other novels, was written in French. The book is set in Russia, and the author uses some Russian words in the French text that I have kept in this English translation. These include *shapka*, a fur hat or cap, often with ear flaps; *dacha*, a country house or cottage, typically used as a second or vacation home; *izba*, a traditional wooden house built of logs; and *taiga*, the virgin pine forest that spreads across Siberia south of the tundra.

The text contains references to several well-known Russian place names, including the Nevsky Prospekt, the street in St. Petersburg (on the river Neva); in Moscow, the Stone Bridge and Arbat, the famous street in the city center; and Graben, the street in the heart of Vienna.

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Of the Russian words defined, 'dacha,' 'taiga,' and, to a lesser extent, 'izba' belong to the category of borrowings (like 'samovar,' mentioned above) that have made their way into English dictionaries, and the geographical information (about "well-known Russian place names) in the second paragraph is completely superfluous to an appreciation of the work or even an understanding of the plot.

Of translators' notes it might be argued that nothing reminds readers more that they are reading a translation, though not in the sense Venuti had in mind. Notes can make even a bestseller read like a textbook. Günter Grass, when asked at a seminar I attended for the translators of his novel *My Century* how he felt about footnotes, replied, "No footnotes, please. This is a work of literature, not of history. The notes I've handed out are for your eyes only. [He had provided us with more than fifty pages of detailed glosses on the historical references that riddle the text]. It is your job to incorporate them unobtrusively into the translation." In other words, the translator should not wear his erudition on his sleeve.

There is a more subtle device than notes for handling cultural references in a translation, but it requires great finesse. The translator may weave a brief explanation into the text while making certain that it does not sound like an

explanation. For an example I have chosen a work that is not a translation, yet I cite it because it illustrates the process to a T. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the best-selling English writer of Japanese origin Kazuo Ishiguro introduces the Japanese concept of *miai* as follows: “Shintaro’s visit had come only a few days after Noriko’s *miai*. The negotiations around Noriko’s proposed marriage to Taro Saito had progressed successfully enough.” The non-Japanese reader learns immediately and painlessly what *miai* means, while the Japanese reader does not perceive the ‘definition’ (“negotiations around [a] proposed marriage”) as such. From then on Ishiguro can—and does—use the word *miai* with impunity, secure in the knowledge that his audience will understand it in its own terms, that is, free of the cultural baggage that would have inhered in a translation of the word (as, say, ‘matchmaking’).

That said, I must confess that I myself enjoy both prefaces and footnotes in the translations I read; most translators probably do as well. I would even go so far as to postulate that the penchant of translators for prefaces and notes accounts for their popularity. But translators make up an infinitesimal and highly distinct subset of readers. The common, non-professional reader approaches literature for different reasons and with different expectations.

Yet prefaces and notes do have their place. The function of the translation, and the closely related issue of the translation’s audience, can best determine when they are appropriate. Non-literary translations are natural candidates. Their audience approaches a work for enlightenment rather than pleasure. I therefore did not hesitate to write a preface to a retranslation of Karel Čapek’s *Talks with T.G. Masaryk*, explaining why the parallels between Masaryk’s role in founding the First Czechoslovak Republic and Václav Havel’s role in founding the new Czechoslovak Republic in 1989 made the work topical again.

Prefaces and notes may likewise be called for in the case of retranlations of literary works. The function of a retranslation differs from that of an ‘original’ translation in that its audience, primed by the knowledge that the work has attracted renewed attention, is seeking a combination of pleasure and enlightenment. I therefore had no compunction about providing extensive notes and two introductory essays to a retranslation of Chekhov’s plays I have published in the Modern Library series. The volume reflects twenty-five years of revisions since my first attempt at *Three Sisters* mentioned above. During that period I worked closely with numerous groups of actors while they were learning their lines. It was mainly their input that led to the revisions. The result is, I believe, the first English translation of the four major plays done expressly for the stage. That function clearly excluded the possibility of notes: an actor could not very well step out of character and explain to the audience the duties of, say, the district council in nineteenth-century Russia. But the function of the translation changed once the translation changed from script to book: it became a handbook for actors as well as a text. Just as Grass feels his translators need to know the cultural background of his texts so as to translate with greater sensitivity rather than pass it on directly to the reader, so I feel actors performing *Three Sisters* need to understand the role played by the district council, a social institution that figures prominently in the play, so as to understand the role it played in the lives of the characters they are

portraying.

Are prefaces and notes then *de rigueur* whenever retranslation is the issue? Not necessarily. Again function provides the answer. The editor who asked me to retranslate *Death in Venice* had only one end in mind: he had read that the original is a paragon of German prose and he had failed to find a paragon of English prose among the contending translations. True, an extensively annotated translation already existed among those translations, but that is not the point.<sup>7</sup> The point is that the inclusion of notes would only have detracted from the translation's function given its orientation on the language as such.

Sometimes instances of cultural difference do not lend themselves to so straightforward a treatment as explanatory notes. Again I shall take an example from my own work. The contemporary Russian novelist Vassily Aksyonov introduces a regular flow of English dialogue into the text of his *Island of Crimea*, a political fantasy written two decades before the fall of the Soviet Union. His fanciful premise is that the Crimea, having managed to remain Soviet-free, became a Western-style democracy. The male protagonists represent three generations of a prominent family, where speaking English as a second language is taken for granted. Whereas in the original, English functions as a major element of cultural difference, in the English translation its distinctiveness, its very presence would disappear were it merely allowed to stand. What is a poor translator to do? My first impulse was to examine French translations of nineteenth-century Russian literature and see how they coped with the standard practice of lacing Russian texts with French: if the French passages in *War and Peace* were laid side by side, they would run to 250 pages. What I found proved of little use: the standard practice of the French translators was to mark the passages with an asterisk referring to a footnote that read "*En français dans le texte.*"

In the end I rejected the ideal of a single, pat solution and took four main tacks. The first was to qualify English with "he said in English" instead of merely "he said," occasionally expanding on the tag to make it clear why the character felt the need to switch codes: "he said to his grandson in English to hide his embarrassment." This device is analogous to the one of smuggling in an inconspicuous explanation I proposed above as a means of dealing with a culturally marked object, concept, or institution. The second was to translate the English into another language. Although I most often opted for French (the most natural choice both because of the Russian tradition and because part of the novel takes place in France), I threw in an occasional German or Spanish expression as well. The use of German and Spanish might seem daring in that neither language occurs in the original, but I felt it warranted by the worldly nature of the characters and of the novel as a whole. The third was to insert Russian words into the English, a reverse strategy of sorts. But while Aksyonov could count on his Russian-speaking readers knowing a modicum of English, I could not count on my English-speaking audience knowing Russian. I was therefore very circumspect, limiting myself to single words whose meaning could be grasped from the context. One word I chose was *privet*, an informal greeting, the equivalent of 'hi!' in English. Occurring as it does only when characters meet, its meaning is easy to guess, and it has the added advantage of being short and easy to pronounce. Finally, I stylized the

grandfather's English throughout as British (he had studied at Oxford) and the grandson's as American (he had hitchhiked around America), my goal being to make the English dialogue stand out, that is, sound marked with respect to the neutral English narration surrounding it.

True, these devices take the translation quite far from the original, but here the second type of function, the immanent variety, comes into play. What matters is not the fact that the characters use English. That fact could have been indicated by placing the English in italics, as the French translators did. What matters is the function of the embedded English text. Since the function of English in the Russian context was to indicate the characters' cosmopolitanism and vibrancy, I had to find devices capable of conveying that cosmopolitanism and vibrancy. Paradoxical as it may seem, I felt it necessary to move away from the text to give the English-language reader an experience as close as possible to that of the Russian-language reader.

Macaronic texts like *The Island of Crimea* are the legacy of the recent global 'migration of peoples' and of globalization in general. They demonstrate that globalization need not mean homogenization. 'Fusion,' the term that has come into use lately to characterize the new combinations of cultural elements in food, has reached literature as well. We translators will thus continue to face the challenge of conveying cultural difference. Yet we may also find that our authors 'help' us more than they used to: the passage of the Ishiguro novel I cited above is indicative of a tendency on the part of many contemporary authors to write with an eye on the world audience and consequently do some of the explaining of cultural and historical concepts for us.<sup>8</sup>

Be that as it may, they will never do the whole job. Certain culturally marked references whose meaning and purport are obvious to readers in the source language but obscure to readers in the target language will inevitably remain. And since, clichéd as it may sound, one of the main reasons we read literature in translation is to learn about cultures different from our own, translators will have to keep grappling with them. What I have tried to show in this paper is that while no single device will handle every one of them, the notion of functionality can help the translator to choose the device most appropriate to the situation at hand.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough treatment of translation's 'isms' see Levý, a history of Czech theories of translation.

<sup>2</sup> See Venuti (1995). London: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Analogous words from Japanese culture are bonsai, origami, samurai, and, more recently, manga, from Chinese culture are chi, tai chi, the Tao, and, more recently, feng shui and kung fu.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Hingley mars an otherwise admirable translation of the Chekhov plays by substituting the formal, stiff-sounding Mr. plus surname (Mr. Ivanov) for the natural, unmarked Christian name plus patronymic (Ivan Ivanovich): the characters thus turn into insufferable prigs and are presumably played as such by the actors using his translation. Hingley also translates some of the Christian names (Andrei, for example, becomes Andrew), which, while a convention in some translation cultures (it is common in French, for example), is nothing if not confusing in the English context: if Ivan becomes John but Uncle Vanya does not become Uncle Johnny, the reader has every right to wonder who is what nationality.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, Mann vacillates in the original between giving Venetian toponyms in Italian (*piazza San Marco*) and German (*Markusplatz*). He even refers to the hotel where his protagonist stays as both the *Hôtel des Bains*, its actual name, and the *Bäder-Hotel*.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of functionality I will use here goes back to the *Thèses* of the Prague Linguistic Circle. It lays prime emphasis on social function. For an introduction to the Prague Linguistic Circle see Vachek.

<sup>7</sup> This translation (Koelb) appeared in a highly regarded series, the Norton Critical Editions, which comprises a distinguished list of classic Anglo-American and world literature. Its statement of purpose, as formulated on the back cover of the Koelb translation, runs as follows: "Norton Critical Editions include authoritative texts annotated for undergraduate readers, contextual and source materials, and a wide range of critical interpretations—from traditional critical perspectives to the most current critical theory—as well as chronologies and selected biographies."

<sup>8</sup> Let me cite an example from a novel by the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić: "He [...] was sent to Goli Otok, Naked Island, where he spent three years at hard labor" (Ugrešić 105). The second half of the sentence explicates the reference to Goli Otok (Tito's most draconian labor camp) in the first half. The fact that Ugrešić, though continuing to write in her native Croatian, has been living abroad for ten years (mostly in Amsterdam, where the novel takes place) cannot but have influenced the way she deals with cultural difference.

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