

“...here, in this world, I am utterly useless and redundant.”

Roles of Translators in Scandinavian-Czech Literary Translation 1890-1950

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This paper investigates the circumstances and implications of power relations in the process of cross-cultural literary mediation in terms of the distribution of roles in the translation process. Based on a case study of Scandinavian-Czech literary translation in 1890-1950, it provides an analysis of the “sets of roles” individual translators would typically have in the changing cultural, social and political environments of the era. The paper suggests that there is a direct proportion between the power and influence individual translators potentially have and the pressure put on them in order to restrict their personal power and influence.

Keywords. Roles of translators, distribution of power, Czech translation, history of translation, translation and politics, minor languages.

Introduction

The rise of postcolonial studies has provoked a deeper interest in the position of minor cultures and language entities. Aside from the much favoured issues concerning the dominance of the Anglophone culture, (see for instance Venuti 1995, Cronin 1996, Bandia 2006) we have recently seen a number of studies focusing on other linguistic and cultural situations.¹ However, what has been given little attention yet, oddly enough, is the relation between two equally (or similarly) minor cultures and the peculiarities of their situation. It seems reasonable to presuppose that translation practices have a number of specific and unique features in this context, concerning for instance the roles of translators. Translating from a minor language area to another minor language area may strengthen the position of translators as experts and give them more freedom in terms of choice of

¹ The relation between a small and large culture in non-English context has been studied for instance by Meylaerts who focuses on the French-Flemish situation in Belgium employing Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Meylaerts 2006). Another example is a study of translation of Finnish literature into German in 1920s and 1930s, see Kujamäki 2006.

texts, translation method, and the overall intercultural communication. At a closer look however, the picture gets somewhat grim, as it becomes evident that a multitude of phenomena need to be taken into consideration, such as the specific historical situation, the everyday practice of text manipulation, as well as the issues of power and politics. In this paper I shall outline the dynamics of the distribution of roles in the translation process with specific regard to Scandinavian-Czech literary translation from 1890 to 1950.

The process of transferring a text from one culture to another involves a number of actions, only one of which is the translation. A text, once written and published, needs to be chosen for translation, translated by a contracted translator, edited, published, distributed, and hopefully read. Many decisions must be taken. As a matter of rule, the responsibility is delegated to several people. But who are all these people? Who has the power, authority and will to decide what, how and by whom will be translated? Who decides if, where and how the translation will be published? Who decides how the translation will be used? Moreover, what are the reasons, the politics behind these decisions: Why is such and such a decision taken? And most importantly: What is the position of translators among all these people?

Naturally, as we are going to see, in the course of time, different questions come to the foreground and gain importance, that is: not all of these questions are equally relevant at every single moment, in some moments some of these questions are virtually fruitless while others need to be asked and answered. Particular historical “sets of roles”, or operational territories, of translators are undoubtedly a result of a myriad of diverse causation factors. I shall argue, though, that each epoch has its dominant causation factor(s) that can be observed, *inter alia*, at the crossroads of interests on different levels of the mediation act. The promotion of interests goes hand in hand with power management and politics. In my view, politics is closely connected to decision-making, and it deals with the possibility to take part in the decision-process which ensures that one’s views and interests will be taken into consideration. Thus, I shall focus on the possibility for a translator to take part in the process of decision-making.

Most translators perform other activities besides translating. This is especially true of literary translation, which only exceptionally can provide a person with decent living. And it is all the truer of literary translation in a minority culture context, where there are usually few translations and low print-runs. These translators frequently earn money in different profession. On the one hand, economic independence from the publishing may be an advantage for the translator, since “‘translation as a profession’, at least as understood as full-time long-term employment, could paradoxically restrict the ability of translators to challenge power structures” (Pym 1998: 164). On the other hand, these non-professional “independent” translators may well be dependent on other power structures in the framework of their principal activity, perhaps with an impact on the translation activity.

Personal politics

To begin with, the 1870s and 1880s saw an unprecedented rise of influential literary production in Scandinavia, where authors such as Ibsen, Bjørnson or Strindberg gained international acclaim, especially in Germany.² Although a decent number of works appeared in Czech translation, it was only in the 1890s that Scandinavian literature saw a breakthrough in Czech. Of course, we should bear in mind that at that time the Bohemian lands were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Prague being a somewhat small provincial town in comparison to Vienna or even Budapest. German was commonly spoken and written side by side with Czech, resulting in (1) numerous second-hand translations using German as the most natural mediating language and (2) a reduced need of translations into Czech.

Translators were few and they were pure enthusiasts. They had a regular job, for instance a post office clerk, a teacher or a university professor, and translation was a leisure-time activity. In the very start they would not know any Scandinavian language and they translated via German. They would gradually learn a Scandinavian language by comparing the original and a German translation, and through travelling to Scandinavia. In the beginning the choice of texts was based on the German reception of Scandinavian literature. Very soon, however, the situation changed.

In his correspondence with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Hugo Kosterka (1867-1956), undoubtedly the most active and influential Scandinavian-Czech translator of 1890s, is very open about his reasons for translating, describing the translation process as well. He describes the *Vzdělávací bibliotéka* (*Educational Library*), the publishing project of a group of students at the beginning of 1890s who are seeking to participate in the “tough reform age” and are aware of “the fear of the old people for the new and world-shaking ideas, they are afraid of confiscations, but they are ready to go on, undaunted” (Kosterka 1890a). The goal of the *Vzdělávací bibliotéka* is “to spread information amongst students and others and especially to promote new ideas concerning humanity”. (Ibid.) So far they have published Tolstoy’s *Крейцерова соната* (*The Kreutzer Sonata*) and Mills’ *The Subjection of Women*. Bjørnson’s *Det nye System* (*The New System*) is supposed to come next, and then his *En Hanske* (*A Gauntlet*): “issue of women is currently given much attention here because the very first female grammar school in Austria has recently been opened [in Prague]” (Ibid.) Moreover Kosterka mentions a magazine on theology they publish and he asks Bjørnson whether he has written anything on freedom of religion (Kosterka [undated]).

² For a rough outline of the overall European context see relevant chapters van Hoof 1991; for the German context, where the reception was with no doubt strongest worldwide, see Bruns 1977, Baumgartner 1979, Gentikow 1978.

Generally speaking translators in this particular group (1) sought contact with authors and asked them for help with choice of texts, (2) read German, Scandinavian and French magazines in order to get a better overview, and (3) tried to follow domestic affairs in the target system and contribute to the discussions with their translations. The motivations for translating a particular work were not as much aesthetic as educational, humanistic and ideological. Stories of individual translators, however, show that the reasons are more intricate. What might seem like a strategy of Kosterka's and a personal political attitude expressed through his translation activity is the strategy and the politics of a group. Although Kosterka was an active participant in the group, gradually he became involved in other translation projects, working for several small publishing houses, literary magazines, etc. The range of genres and authors he chose to translate is very wide and includes everything from Ibsen to Emily Flygare-Carlén, a popular Swedish author. In the letter he says his "efforts and ideals often break down from external causes" and sometimes he finds it impossible to find an appropriate publisher, and later on he started a small publishing house for more exquisite authors such as Kierkegaard (Kosterka 1890b). Throughout his life, however, translating remained just a leisure-time activity for him, as he worked as post office clerk, later a post office manager.

Hugo Kosterka—and stories of other translators of this era provide a similar picture—followed what I call *personal politics*. His role was more of a general literary and cultural mediator than simply a translator. He chose what he thought was interesting or amusing; he made first attempts to communicate with authors, ask for advice, and get their authorization, he decided how and by whom the translation would be published: he was the key decision-maker. Nevertheless, his translation and publishing activity was, especially in the beginnings, somewhat amateurish. Similarly the impact of his work was probably rather limited. I am not saying that Scandinavian literature was not read. It was read, and it was embraced very warmly by lots of students and intellectuals (including Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk who would become the first Czechoslovak president in 1918). But these intellectuals did not need a Czech translation, as they were used to reading in German.

Publishers' politics

At the turn of the century, translations from Scandinavian languages were usually published either in instalments in literary magazines or by numerous small publishing houses. The distribution of books was largely based on a subscription system, which provided publishers with certain economic stability. Importantly, the First World War led to the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the establishment of independent Czechoslovakia, Prague becoming her self-confident political and cultural center. The

interwar period then saw significant changes in publishing and translation practices. The main shift was towards professionalization, which went hand-in-hand with the consolidation of the book industry. The subscribers went to the front in 1914, and many publishing houses, small or large, ran into serious financial trouble and went bankrupt.

The surviving publishing houses were those with a strong position on the market. Similarly the newly established ones were economically healthy. All these publishing houses were well managed and demanded greater discipline from their translators. The shift can be seen clearly in the ever more carefully formulated translator-publisher contracts. In the 1890s, a hand-written contract between a translator and a publisher would typically consist of a couple of sentences on a sheet of paper stating the basics facts and requirements. In the 1920s and 1930s, the pre-printed, several-page-long contracts included details concerning the use of language and the make-up of the text. Contracts from after 1930 very often define the obligatory use of normative grammar and orthography:

The manuscript shall be handed in to the editor [...] without any philological mistakes and shall require no further corrections. If in doubt, the author-translator shall check the latest edition of *Pravidla českého pravopisu* [Czech Orthography Rules] published by *Státní nakladatelství* as well as the journal *Naše řeč* [Our Language]. In the case of necessary corrections, these shall be made by a language expert at the author-translator's expense. (DP [undated])

We can clearly see three new elements: in-house editors, in-house linguists and prescriptive linguistic rules. In the pre-war period the publisher and the translator were typically two persons: the publisher and the translator. Now, while the translator remained a person, the publisher became a large institution employing a number of experts and advisors. Now it was the publisher who decided what and by whom will be translated, and to certain extent also how it would be done. The publisher employed editors to choose the works and to contract the translator, and linguists to keep an eye on the linguistic quality of the translation. As for the minority literatures, however, the linguists and editors were often translators themselves, such as Emil Walter (1890-1964), Doctor in German Philology, who started translating from Danish and Swedish in 1913, then became editor of a large publishing house in the beginnings of 1920s, before he moved to Stockholm as cultural attaché in mid 1920s.

Who were the translators now, what was their role, and how did they participate in the decision-making? Besides the older pre-war generation, which had to adapt themselves to the new system, the young translators were often recruited from universities. They were mostly young philologists. None of them made a living from translation, however. Translation remained a hobby. Interestingly, two women who became translators from the

Scandinavian languages into Czech were daughters of translators from these languages; they inherited the profession, as it were, which underlines the fact that one of the major reasons for translating from these languages was an emotional relation to the respective cultures, sometimes developed from early childhood.

Even though translators still had the possibility to promote some works of their choice, the editors and the publisher made the final decision. An experienced translator and an expert on Scandinavian literature might have helped choose a work for translation, but usually it was the editor who did this job and communicated with authors and foreign publishers, now even more often through international literary agents. Translators had become craftspeople who were supposed to make a rough translation that would afterwards be rendered suitable for print. We read in a letter from Josef Knap, editor of a major publishing house and writer, to Hugo Kosterka:

We would be very pleased if you could manage this [six-volume novel *Juvikfolket* (*The People of Juvik*)]. It will be a rather tedious and exhausting job as it will be published part by part in rapid succession, but this should not be a problem for you as you are so industrious. Moreover, you would not need to translate in detail and the translation could progress swiftly, as Dr. [Emil] Walter has agreed to review and prepare it for print. (Knap 1932)

In this particular case, the editor was another translator from Scandinavian languages (and with the rights he had to reformulate the text, the authorship of the translation may be at stake), but very often the revision was made by an in-house editor without any knowledge of the source language.

As we have mentioned, during the interwar years the translation activity became professionalized. Translation was established as a profession not in terms of monoprofessionalism (translators still had to make their living from other activities), but in terms of ever more clear-cut (1) distribution of roles in the translation process, (2) delimitation of powers the translators and other actors had at their disposal and (3) formulation of the restrictions all participants were supposed to follow. The translators' roles, potentially numerous in the pre-war era, were now reduced to the basic, though crucial one: translating.

Intermezzo: National politics

About one third of the population in the Czech lands being German-speaking in that time, the accession of Hitler in 1933 and his introduction of the politics of *Lebensraum*, including territorial claims in Czechoslovakia, were felt as imminent danger to Czechoslovakia. Hitler's propaganda, combined with ubiquitous threat, was gradually gaining ground in Western Europe, whereas the Czechoslovak international position was becoming worse and

worse. In this situation, on the eve of the Second World War, a new actor came into the field of Scandinavian-Czech translation, and he came from the outside: he was the professional politician.

In 1936, when the Czechoslovak government saw that peace treaties with superpowers might not guarantee peace and territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia and that the international image of Czechoslovakia was deteriorating, they decided to conclude bilateral cultural agreements with other small democratic countries, and they began in Scandinavia. These cultural agreements were a mere page long, contained a dozen briefly formulated points on cultural cooperation, while the main aim was to make culture and education travel smoothly across borders. Such cultural agreements were a novelty at that time; it was for instance the very first cultural agreement in Norway.³ In the respective countries, these agreements were promoted on the grounds of the previous reception of Scandinavian culture, above all Scandinavian literature, in the Bohemian lands. Politicians began to build bridges on the basis of the existing translations. The work of translators and other persons who cooperated in translations was now used by politicians to achieve their goals. This suggests that translation is not exclusively a fact of the target culture: anything that is translated can be used “against” the source culture at any moment. Now translation became a means of promotion of *national politics*; it was politicians who decided how translations would be used. Translators were ascribed, after the fact, a new role, namely that of diplomat and political agent. Translators and their translations from a minor cultural and language area, possibly overlooked at the turn of the century, perhaps interesting for publishers in the 1920s and 1930s, were reckoned with by politicians from now on.

International politics

Pre-war politicians had never put pressure on the production of translations and on the activities of translators; they did not interfere in any part of the translation process: they only used what had been done. The war and especially post-war period saw a major shift: politicians actually began to organize the translation process.

Right after the war, the situation seemingly got back to the pre-war state. Although they faced paper shortages, the strong publishers and their editors again contracted translators; translations were again corrected by linguists. The choice of texts followed the pattern introduced in 1930s: publishers cooperated with scholars, experts in the Scandinavian literature such as Gustav Pallas (1882-1964), who came with suggestions, and the final

³ For Norwegian-Czechoslovak Cultural Agreement see RA: UD1924 7183, G27, D, 1/37.

decision was made by the publisher and the editor-in-charge. The biggest publishing houses even sought cooperation on the international level. In 1948, however, with the communist putsch in Czechoslovakia, all publishing houses were confiscated, becoming state-owned and state-managed. The choice of works for translation was now driven by international politics and by incidents in international politics. The major actors were professional politicians and persons delegated by these politicians.⁴

The selection criteria were defined politically on a supranational level. There were two basic criteria:

(1) Aesthetic qualities being irrelevant, the literary work was supposed to express a positive attitude to work and to the situation of time. A refusal of an undesirable translation proposal read for instance: "Paper shortages and ever higher quality requirements for our publishing scheme compel us to choose works which not only meet certain artistic quality criteria, but which at the same time furnish young people with a positive attitude to work and the current situation" (MF 1949). Already in summer 1946, the issue of paper shortages had most probably been solved, and from then on the argument was merely used as a reinforcement of a decision taken on more general structural levels (cf. Janáček 1998).

(2) The international political situation and the general political attitudes of the author of the original work were also key. A negative remark concerning the Soviet Union made by the author of the original or by important persons of the cultural and/or political life in the source-text country rendered the author and/or a group of authors untranslatable into Czech, no matter what the literary work was actually about. In her book *Back to the Future*, Sigrid Undset depicts her flight from Nazi-occupied Norway, her journey across the Soviet Union and her experience of the Second World War. Among other things, it is a fervent condemnation of the Nazi and Communist regimes in Germany and the Soviet Union respectively. The book was first published in English in the United States in 1942, while she was in exile there. When the famous author returned to Norway right after the war, the Soviet embassy in Norway protested against the publication of the book in Norwegian. The act of publication was seen as an act of hostility (Ørjasæter 1996: 343-345). The tension as a result of the final publication of the book, fuelled by protests against the 1948 Communist putsch by a number of Norwegian authors, made it impossible to publish translations of any work by Sigrid Undset, including both her historical novels, her socially critical novels (actually favourable to the ideology and aesthetics of social realism) and literature for children. We read in a letter from Gustav Pallas to Hugo Kosterka:

⁴ The general principles of the Czechoslovak cultural politics as well as the goals and positions of the main actors are in detail described in Knapík 2006.

[...] yesterday I discussed further steps in publishing the complete works by Sigrid Undset with the director of Vyšehrad publishing house, Dr. Fučík. I told him you intended to translate some of her older works such as *Fru M. Oulie*, *Fru Waage*, and some stories. Dr. Fučík asked me to convey that he cannot guarantee he will publish these works in Czech translation. If yes, then only much later, taking into account the existing tension between a number of Scandinavian writers and us. I ask you, therefore, not to commence the work, and if you have already begun, please do not continue. The next volume will be the children's series *Lykkelige dager*, then perhaps *Vige-Ljot* og *Vigdis* and maybe *Vidmund Vidutan*. My daughter would translate these, but it is not at all certain whether this will happen. (Pallas 1948)

None of the works mentioned in the letter were published. Although the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 gave an impetus to a gradual revision of some of the strict policies, it was only in 1963 that Undset's novels were published again.

Hugo Kosterka, aged 81 in February 1948, made efforts to have several his translations published, and he continued translating. When he died in 1956, his personal archive included five translations of novels that remained unpublished. His last translation, published in 1950 with an enormous print-run (the shortage of paper was obviously no problem in this case), was the memoirs of Martin Andersen Nexø, a famous Danish Communist novelist, who dispraised Jan Masaryk, the son of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, social-democratic Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as a symbol of the democratic opposition to the Communist Party politics. Right after Masaryk's death by an unexplained fall from a window at the Prague Castle in March 1948, A. M. Nexø, who believed it was a suicide, said Masaryk was "constrained to act in dignity [...]. In committing suicide he atoned for all the iniquities of social democrats we have witnessed" (NTB 1948).

Similarly Emil Walter, the cultural attaché in Stockholm and an active translator of both contemporary Scandinavian literature and Old Norse texts including the *Eddas*, refused loyalty to the new political representation and he resigned from his position in protest. He remained in exile in Sweden. More than a decade later, in a letter to his Norwegian friend, Professor Olaf Broch, he summarized his current personal and professional position. He was aware of the fact that he would never be allowed to enter his homeland and see his relatives and friends, and as for his translations he writes:

I have discontinued my translations of Old Norse literature because there is no chance of publishing them. But I have not stopped studying this great literature. Mr. [Halldór] Laxness offered me to arrange the publication of these texts in Bohemia three years ago. I refused his *bona officia*. He tried to describe my retreat from the position of attaché as an inconsiderate and precipitous act, he tried to pave the way for my reconciliation

with Bolshevism [...]. He did not succeed. I had to protest against his accusation, as it were, that I had acted imprudently [...] (Walter 1959)

By the turn of 1950s, translators had lost any chance to influence significantly what would be translated. Most of them had no chance to translate (and publish) at all. Based on what translators did, they had about four options: (1) conform to the new system (as a rule it was only a small number of young translators who did so), (2) discontinue their work, (3) emigrate (that is, discontinue their work), (4) die (that is, discontinue their work).

By way of conclusion

Looking closely at the biographies and archives of several individual translators, I have tried to outline the dynamic distribution of the roles of translators in the specific minority context of Scandinavian-Czech literary translation in 1890-1950. Although literary translation between minor literatures might seem to provide translators with greater freedom and power concerning all levels of the translation process, since they are the exclusive experts on the source culture, literature as well as language, we have seen that this is very often not the case. At any one time, they had particular “sets of roles” at their disposal, and these sets were constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Previous work or experience did not guarantee future publication opportunities. Continuously, all translators had to come to terms with (1) the current social and cultural situation of the homeland, (2) the current practices of the publishing industry, and (3) the current political situation both nationally and internationally. There were frequent changes in the dominant factors that co-determined the possibility of translators (co-)deciding on different levels of the translation process.

This historical outline suggests a power-relational aspect in negotiating a translator’s position in the process of translation and intercultural mediation: the more power and influence translators potentially have, the higher pressure is being put on them to yield ever more power and territory. As long as the translation activity had modest influence, translators had vast freedoms and their sets of roles were potentially large. As Scandinavian literature gained popularity and the translators’ work became more influential, publishers hurried to participate in the success. They renegotiated the sets of roles of translators and took over many of the jobs some translators were used to do. When it came in handy, the cultural capital built up by translators and other actors of the translation process over years was used by politicians for an international promotion of national politics. Later on, the values the translation and publishing activities brought in from the outside ran into contradiction with the ideology of the newly established supranational totalitarian regime. Ultimately translators, editors as well as publishers were deprived of their roles. Moreover, the (mis)behaviour of a number of

Scandinavian authors, resulted in most Scandinavian literature being banned, and it took almost a decade before the regime partially revised the extreme closedness toward these (and all Western) literatures.

One result of these changes was expressed by Emil Walter in 1959: “How sad to realize that here, in this world, I am utterly useless and redundant” (Walter 1959).

This paper is part of a dissertation project on the history of Scandinavian-Czech literary translation in 1890-1950 with regard to minority context, power structures, politics and personal involvement.

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Archives

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- BB—Nationalbibliotek i Oslo, Bjørnsonarkivet—Bjørnson Archive, Norwegian National Library, Oslo
- RA—Riksarkivet—National Archives, Oslo
- LA PNP—Literární archiv Památníku národního písemnictví, Praha—Museum of Czech Literature, Literary Archive, Prague