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Use of Domesticated and Foreignized Methods in the Soviet School of Translation

Summary

The article focuses on prevailing translation methods used in the Soviet translation school. The main aim of the research is to analyze translation strategies, principles and methods used by Soviet translators who were forced to work in a cultural vacuum under strong ideological influence. The absolute priority of domesticated translation in the Soviet translation school is compared with strongly criticized foreignized translation. The primary use of the domesticated method of translation depended not on the personal tastes of the translators or current tendencies but on an artificial ideologically influenced cultural environment which was almost completely isolated from foreign cultures. The whole translation process in the Soviet Union differed greatly from that in democratic societies. It was inevitably influenced by an institution of censorship and strict centralization. In spite of all, there were intense efforts made by translators to preserve and even expand the horizons of the readers, to maintain a minimal cultural level, and to circumvent censorship.

Key words: Soviet Union, domesticated translation, foreignized translation, ideology, censorship

Podomačitev (*domestication*) in potujitev (*foreignization*) v sovjetski prevajalski šoli

Povzetek

Članek analizira prevladujoče prevajalske metode, strategije in načine, značilne za sovjetsko prevajalstvo. Glavni cilj razprave je ugotoviti in pojasniti vrste prevladujočih prevajalskih metod v obdobju Sovjetske zveze ter vzroke za njihovo rabo pri sovjetskih prevajalcih, ki so ustvarjali v kulturnem vakuumu komunistične ideologije. Avtorica pojasni, zakaj je prevladovala izključno metoda podomačitve prevodov (*domestication*), medtem ko je bila metoda potujitve (*foreignization*) strogo kritizirana in se je pojavljala samo v izjemnih primerih. Metoda podomačitve ni bila osebna izbira prevajalcev ali prevladujočih smernic v prevajanju, temveč so jo narekovale posebnosti umetno vzdrževanega ideološkega okolja, skoraj popolnoma izoliranega od tujih kultur. Prevajalski proces v Sovjetski zvezi se je bistveno razlikoval od prevajalskega procesa v demokratičnih državah, saj je nanj vseskozi vplival sistem cenzure in stroge centralizacije. Kljub temu so si sovjetski prevajalci prizadevali, da bi obšli cenzuro in s tem vsaj nekoliko razširili kulturni horizont svojih bralcev.

Ključne besede: Sovjetska zveza, podomačitev prevodov, tujitev prevodov, ideologija, cenzura

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1. Introduction

In the history of translation theory and practice, the pendant of translation focus has swung between two extremes: domesticated¹ (emphasis on the language and culture of the target text) and foreignized² (emphasis on the language and culture of the source text) translations. Both approaches were first conceived and published in 1813 by Friedrich Schleiermacher, (1768–1834), the German theologian, in his *On diverse translation methods*.

Venuti (1995, 20) argues that Anglo-American translation theory has been dominated since the seventeenth century mainly by the domesticated method, which intends the translated text to conform to the norms of target-language usage. In other words, the domesticated method means that the text should be transferred from source to target language in such way as if it had been originally written in the target language. The translator should erase every shred of foreignness and create a fluent, idiomatic text. The typical characteristics of this type of translation are “fluency”, “naturalness”, “transparency” and “readability”. According to Nida (1964, 167–70), domestication also permits adjustments to “special literary forms”, “semantically exocentric expressions” or “intraorganismic meanings”. Naturalness as a key requirement in this type of translation should be raised to such a degree that it “bear[s] no obvious trace of foreign origin”. If the source text contains linguistic and cultural elements alien to the target language and culture, they are likely to be avoided in the translation.

In contrast, a foreignized translation strategy is more oriented towards the source language and the source text. This type of translation strategies resists contemporary cultural, stylistic and idiomatic norms in order to convey the full aesthetic impact of the foreign poetic experience. As Venuti declares (1995, 20), it “sends the target reader abroad” instead of familiarizing the text in order to facilitate the comprehension. Using this method, the translator is expected to preserve the foreign identity of the source text, which means keeping linguistic and cultural differences in the translation. Thus, foreignized translation gives readers more information but tends to increase the difficulty of understanding.

The classification into domesticated and foreignized translation enables us to distinguish between the different levels of impression made on the target reader by the text (Beliaeva-Standen 2002, 199). Domesticated translation is more natural and easy for understanding because it is read as an original text. Foreignized translation presents foreign language and culture and for that reason requires certain details to be rationalized and clarified. In this case, the reader has to discover

1 One of the most famous theoretic of natural, domesticated translation is Eugene Nida, an American specialist in Bible translations. Nida is considered to be a follower of Martin Luther, who translated the Bible into the common German language and declared the priority of content above form.

2 Domesticated translation is also described as the target language (TL) or “reader-to-author” approach and foreignized as source language (SL) or “author-to-reader”.

the meaning behind uncommon textual structure and this makes the process of comprehension longer and more complicated.

2. The Soviet school of translations: “iron” censorship

In order to understand the position of the Soviet translation school, it is essential to consider some important background. Only a few months after the October Revolution, the first demands were made that literature should be put in the service of communist ideology. The government took over printing presses, replaced writers’ and musicians’ associations with state-controlled unions, and shut down theaters and art studios.

New ideological propaganda dictated harsh restraints on literary production, aiming to purge Soviet society of all expressions regarded as destructive to the new order. Henceforth, literature and the arts lost some of their public identification with civil society and gained a formal place in the official culture of the Soviet era. An attempt was made for a brief time to totally change the cultural orientation of the nation. All this was very evident in the field of translations because ideology also exerted pressures on literary translations. As a result, any literary text translated in the Soviet Union underwent a series of transformations or distortions depending on ideological demands. Translations of foreign materials had to pass official censorship at the Foreign Literature Committee³ and were not permitted either in small local libraries or even in private book collections. There were one or two notable exceptions, such as the Library of Foreign Languages in Moscow, where an unusually broad range of foreign literature was available to everyone – everyone, of course, who had found a way to learn a foreign language well enough.

The justification of censors who worked with foreign publications was to protect the minds of the Soviet people from the harmful influence and infection of the West and to offer the public well-selected information concerning foreign cultures. In 1922, the central censorship office was established, known as *Glavlit* for short, which had absolute authority to censor the performing arts and all publications. The strict authority of *Glavlit* covered not only the USSR but also all Soviet occupied countries. Censorship in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics remains the longest lasting and most comprehensive censorship in the 20th century.

An institution of censorship and centralization inevitably influenced the whole translation process in the Soviet Union. Principles and methods of Soviet translators were much more unified than in democratic societies. All participants in the translation process (translators, censors, publishers) existed as one united group which had strongly determined aims. The Soviet publishing world was closed, centralized and bureaucratically controlled. On the other hand, we find intense efforts made by translators to preserve and even expand the horizons of the readers, to maintain a minimal cultural level, and circumvent censorship.

This paper focuses on translation strategies used by Soviet translators who were forced to work under strong ideological influence and on the relationships between different methods existed in the Soviet translation school.

³ Committee for the purchase and distribution of foreign literature in the Soviet Union.

3. The “Black list” - dangerous and safe literature

The following list of Western authors which were among the first to be allowed for translation during the Stalinist period and had been republished during the whole period of the Soviet State characterizes the main direction of foreign literature policy.

English literature was represented mainly by classics written by Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Henry Fielding, John Galsworthy, William Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, and William Makepeace Thackeray. Among newer authors only James Aldridge could be found. There were just a few “safe” classics among American writers, including James Fennimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Theodore Dreiser and Upton Sinclair were also allowed because of their criticism of the capitalist system. Among French authors considered to be “appropriate” may be found Honoré de Balzac, Gustav Flaubert, Victor Hugo, Guy de Maupassant, Prosper Mérimée, Romain Rolland, Stendhal, and André Still. The works of Voltaire and Diderot were also allowed because of their anti-religious nature. During the Stalinist period German literature was practically unpublished, except for Heinrich Heine. Spanish literature was represented for a long time only by Cervantes. Obviously, the horizon of the reader was not allowed to rise beyond the nineteenth century. Isolation from the real twentieth century literary process was hermetic.

According to Ermolaev (1997), some authors were put on the black list very quickly and almost never appeared in the official literature:

- almost all Czech and Slovak literature
- Russian dissidents and émigrés: Andrei Belyi, Mikhail Bulgakov, Nikolai Gumilev (executed in 1921), Viacheslav Ivanov, Vladislav Khodasevich, Nikolai Kliuev, Vladimir Nabokov and Evgenii Zamiatin; from later authors three winners of Nobel prize in literature: Ivan Bunin (emigrated in 1917, received the Nobel prize in 1933), Aleksander Solzhenitsyn (deported from the Soviet Union in 1974, received the Nobel prize in 1970) and Joseph Brodsky (expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972, received the Nobel prize in 1987);
- Western authors of anti-Communist books, including Aldous Huxley, André Gide, André Breton, Arthur Koestler and George Orwell, André Malraux, John Dos Passos and Ignazio Silone;
- Catholics: Georges Bernanos, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Paul Claudel and Oscar Milosz, or mystics: Gustav Meyrink;
- writers who were affiliated with the movement of the extreme right, regardless of the degree or nature of their involvement: Hans Carossa, Louis Céline, Ernst Junger, Giovanni Papini as well as Gottfried Benn, and Ezra Pound.
- so-called “pornographic” writers, such as D. H. Lawrence, Georges Bataille, and Henry Miller.

Modernists who had the reputation of “reactionaries” or nihilists were sometimes published with special comments. To this group belong Beckett, Borges, Broch, Eliot, Joyce, Kafka, Musil, Proust, Italo Svevo, Virginia Woolf, and the representatives of the French “new novel”, Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

For instance, George Orwell's most famous novel *Animal Farm* was published after long debates in the Soviet Committee for foreign literature only in 1989 but appeared without indication of the number of copies and the name of the translator with the following preface:

[...] the novels *Animal Farm* and *1984* have brought fame to George Orwell. These books are a satire on Soviet society. This is why it is not accidental that *1984* has been turned into an instrument of anti-Soviet propaganda by bourgeois statesmen, economists, philosophers and journalists. The book has been widely publicized in the West and bourgeois authors often refer to, or cite from *1984* when writing about the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. (1989, 10)

In official literature the name of George Orwell⁴ was never mentioned until the fall of the Soviet Union. The only short reference appeared in the *Concise Literary Encyclopaedia*: "Bourgeois critics praise Orwell for the anti-communist and modernist trends in his works".

As for non-fiction, and especially the humanities and social sciences, hardly anything of importance was translated. Many foreign books and journals were confined to closed repositories called *spetskhran* – often called the Gulag for books – and accessible only to those inside the Academy of Sciences system or even more restricted party circles.

4. Translation methods

Soviet translators primarily used the domesticated method⁵ which prevailed after a short struggle with the "formal" method, advocated by the Russian formalist school⁶. A domesticated translation ideal had been resorted to as a means of protecting and developing the national language and identity and representing a certain picture of foreign culture which was important for ideological purposes.

The orientation on domesticated translations had a number of reasons dependant on the special status of foreign literature in the Soviet Union. First, the ultimate problem of Soviet translators became the low background knowledge of "mass" readers for whom they had to translate. Literary culture in Russia before the revolution was extremely highly developed. The most talented and famous Russian authors translated foreign writers. After the revolution, the Communists saw themselves creating not just a new society, but a new kind of society, one in which the masses would participate in every aspect. One of the prevailing ideological purposes of literature in the Soviet Union was to popularize literature and to make it comprehensible for the less educated levels of society. It was proclaimed at the first Congress of Writers in 1934 that literary work in the Land of Soviets had become the affair of all the toilers, "matter of mass consumption". Maxim

4 Because of his sharp satire on Soviet society, Orwell's books became widely popular among intellectual dissident circles. There appeared numerous Samizdat copies of *Animal Farm* and *1984* in Russian translation. In 1978 all copies were confiscated by the KGB.

5 The Soviet translation school used terms "vol'nost" (domesticating) and "bukvalizem" (foreignizing) to describe the prevailing methods in translation.

6 This school of theory was popular in Russia from approximately 1915 to 1930. Russian formalists were interested more in the text itself and in the literary aspects of the text than in its actual meaning.

Gorky defined the place and the significance of Soviet literature, explaining which ideological and stylistic peculiarities distinguished it from the literature of the bourgeoisie. The literary work should bear some peculiar signs of progressiveness, such as the themes of labor, struggle for justice, protest against bourgeois society, pity for suffering, depiction of poor people, and social and class struggle⁷. One of the main aims of a new literary program became to make native and foreign literature acceptable for every single reader. Such engagement was supposed to raise the cultural level of the masses. Considering these new obligations, foreignized strategies focused not simply on “understanding” but on widening of comprehension borders became completely incoherent.

Secondly, Soviet translators wanted to protect and develop their native language, to preserve the magnificent and powerful Russian of the nineteenth century. Their desire was easily understood. From the very beginning, the Soviet period was characterized by linguistic instability and change which included the abolition of concepts and words from “old social structures”. As a result, the activation of new linguistic forms and word-formations permeated all spheres of social, cultural and political life (Roesen and Lunde 2006, 10).

The linguistic situation in the Soviet Union was characterized by the fact that to describe new levels of life a new vocabulary had to be invented. The first Soviet decade of Russia was turbulent, and rapid changes in the political and cultural life were accompanied by dramatic shifts in language culture. At that time Russia experienced a strong influx of ideologically charged words. Bolshevik revolutionaries endeavored to replace traditional language structures with a cacophony of new words, phrases, and communicative contexts intended to define and help legitimize the new Soviet order (Gorham 2003, 67).

The vocabulary of the Russian language changed, in the sense that it had been replenished with a considerable number of new words, expressions, abbreviations, derivatives, even personal names⁸. A number of words and expressions changed their meaning and acquired a new signification. A number of obsolete words dropped out of the vocabulary.

The proponents of Socialist Realism accused avant-garde⁹ artists of valuing style more than content. Hence, the battle over linguistics loomed as part of the class struggle for the direction of culture. Was Soviet linguistics to be bourgeois formalism, or proletarian realism? By 1934, that question had become, literally, a matter of life and death.

The task to protect and preserve literary Russian language gained a special importance in the situation of actually replacing the Russian language with some new “proletarian” language.

7 Even books for children published in the Soviet Union described mainly the difficult life of Russian children before the revolution, their role in the civil war, and the activities of the new political children's organizations.

8 The most popular names for girls in the middle of the 1950s were Stalina and Oktiabrina.

9 In the early 1920s, the time of Lenin and Trotsky, writers and artists were granted creative freedom, provided they observed the rule of not engaging in overt political dissent. Thus the visionary avant-garde aesthetic movement, formed in 1915 by Russian artists having embraced the ideals of the European Modernist Movement, survived until 1932.

Foreignized translation was strongly criticized by Soviet theorists, who proclaimed it to be “slavery copying” which destroyed the target language and could not transform the meaning (Levickaia and Fiterman 1963, 12). However, foreignized elements were not completely avoided in translations. A further significant aim of the Soviet translation school was proclaimed to be the enlightening of “mass” readers for educational purposes. Foreignized translation could give the reader more information than a domesticated one. For that reason, literary translations made in the Soviet Union were equipped with numerous comments, prefaces, footnotes, explanations, etc. Again, this care about the reader’s education was colored entirely by ideology.

On the proposal of Lunacharskii (a member of the Bolshevik government, responsible for literature and culture), each literary work written by a foreign author and published in the Soviet Union had to contain a special preface. The main task of these prefaces was to reveal the “correct” meaning of the work to Soviet readers who were completely unfamiliar with the real political and cultural situation in foreign countries. Thus, in the preface to Dickens’ novel *Oliver Twist* it was written that Oliver was a symbol of capitalist England, which overflowed with poverty, corruption and criminals, and that a frightening number of English children lived in such conditions. Such “explanations” should be considered as a part of ideological pressure.

Comments and footnotes were also intended to “enlighten” Soviet readers. Comments were aimed to explain purely ideological features. Thus, in the comment to Robert Burns’ poem “My heart’s in the Highlands” which described the beauty of the Scottish landscape, it was mentioned that in the eighteenth century many protestors against the English government hid in the hills. Such comment insinuated that this poem was devoted to the Scottish rebels.

In the comment to Dickens’ novel *The Pickwick Papers* it was written that the courts in England were intended only to serve the prevailing social classes and skillfully used a complete absence of laws in England. The same comment contained more than one full page explanation of the corrupt court system in England which protected only the interests of capitalists.

As for footnotes, they usually contained useful information, such as historical facts, events, dates and cultural traditions. Soviet readers could not help feeling a certain interest and probably nostalgia for the unknown world of foreign culture. This traditional interest was intensified in the Soviet period because foreign cultures remained almost inaccessible. Traveling abroad was very restricted and the behavior of Soviet citizens while in foreign countries was controlled.¹⁰ Any publications from abroad were forbidden for private persons. Each attempt to bring in foreign literature was suppressed by the customs.

For Soviet readers, who were forced to live more than seventy years behind the iron curtain, literary translations represented the only “window” into the foreign world. They wanted to explore the foreign world, to understand exotic elements, national coloration, characters and atmosphere, but this desire was only partly satisfied.

10 Soviet citizens abroad were forbidden to meet or to talk to foreigners in private. A special KGB agent was always present at conversations, meetings or social occasions. It was forbidden to bring any foreign publications, including newspapers, journals or books to the Soviet Union.

Thus, the high standards of translations and ideological connotations demanded were combined with almost complete absence of information. Rait-Kovaleva (1965, 203–5), a famous Soviet translator, wrote that literary characters did not exist in a vacuum. The historical time and the place influenced the choice of means of translation. Therefore, the translator had to know at least something about foreign cultures. In the Soviet Union translators did not have an opportunity to access the necessary sources of information about foreign cultures and had to consider ideological demands. In the process of constant ideological adaptations characteristic of hermetic Soviet culture, a special virtual reality of foreign countries was shaped which remained unchanged for many years. Belov (1989, 177), a well-known Soviet critic and translator, wrote that he had translated American literature for more than twenty years but sometimes he thought that America did not exist at all, that it was just a myth. As a result of this paradoxical situation, despite the information contained in footnotes, Soviet readers were provided with adapted images of other countries which in most cases were far from reality.

5. Conclusion

It is true that in Soviet Russia, an unusually high number of gifted translators faced harsh censorship. Official ideological predilections bracketed out whole areas of literature; even in fiction, everything that did not fit the official canon was banned or severely limited. Another problem was that while there were certainly many talented and even well-trained translators, they could not study abroad and had very limited access to informational sources required for successful translations. Many of the skills and habits needed were inaccessible to them.

The choice of domesticated method did not depend on personal tastes or current tendencies but primarily on the specific ideological environment in which Soviet translators had to work. Thus, the main consequence of the prevailing domesticated method of translation is that works of Soviet translators can be appreciated primarily for their literary qualities rather than their faithfulness to the original.

Henceforth, the main slogan of Soviet translators, “Good translation in good Russian,” meant that in this case, Soviet translations became almost the only source of pure literary language for Russian readers. Soviet translators resisted the unification and simplicity of language sated with artificial, awkward linguistic formations flourishing in Soviet literature and preserved the literary Russian language for the next generations.

They also enabled Soviet readers to have at least momentary look at distant cultures. Despite ideological adaptations, translations were almost the only source of information about foreign lands. Even considering the fact that literary translations were strongly influenced by leading ideology, the privilege of reading translated literature opened a completely different perspective for those who had access to such periodicals as *Foreign Literature*. The meaning of such magazines was enormous.

However, the fact is that during the Soviet period, when the high prestige of literature was almost the only source of spiritual freedom, significantly successful translations appeared. Many of them are still republished in modern Russia because, unfortunately, irrespective of an absolute literary freedom, the overwhelming majority of translations in Russia today are of execrable quality.

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