

TECHNIQUES OF APPROACHING OBSOLETE TRANSLATIONS

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Abstract

The issue of translating literary texts has been heavily and extendedly debated and approached throughout the literature worldwide so that little is there left to be said regarding this topic. Yet there is always room for new points of view and perspectives on different ways of approaching a certain aspect of such translations. A case in point refers to the obsolete parts of a literary text, parts that do not only refer the use of literary terms and expressions that have become obsolete in the current use of the language, but also concepts related to the source text, which impede even more a translator's already delicate and difficult task. Thus, this short article is looking at a possible alternative of dealing with this translation matter: retranslation of the source literary text and its re-adaptation, by analyzing an example in point.

Keywords:

Techniques, obsolete translation, translation studies, renewal, retranslation.

JEL Classification: K0

Introduction

The aim of this paper work focuses on a connection between general translation theories and more specific approaches to the issue in point. This approach of translation studies will outline some of the most important theories concerning this new discipline in the 20th century and also a brief historical approach—as delineated by the exponent figures in this field. The case in point discussed in this article refers to J. D. Salinger's novel, "The Catcher in the Rye" and the reason for choosing it is well-grounded: its overwhelming translations into over thirty languages soon after its publication, and, subsequently, its numerous re-translations.

Soon after its publication, Salinger's novel became available in many countries and by 1970 it had already been translated into thirty languages and this fact supports the idea that such an important novel requires a lot of attention while translating. The language is the body of the book, it is of utmost importance and, having in view all the controversy created around it, it has to be thoroughly analyzed and perfectly rendered while translating it into any language; otherwise it loses its "aura," its "charm" and its value. It is at this point that the translator's role becomes very important, (s)he becoming the second author of the book. The translator's work is double when compared to the writer's, (s)he has to thoroughly analyze every word, every detail, to understand the novel as a whole and then the novel in detail in order to be able to render it in the target language (TL) as close to the original as possible. All the meanings (more or less hidden), themes and symbols of the novel arise from Salinger's use and choice of the language, which is very important to him. That is why the task of translating the distinctive idiom of the novel was not an easy one for the translators—some of them even having problems and thus having little success in arriving at literary equivalents. Nevertheless, although the book was rapidly translated into many languages, the Romanian and the French translators were not an exception to the above-mentioned rule and they had to face some difficulties while translating the novel.

Defining Translation

The task of finding a comprehensive definition for translation is not an effortless one, but this does not necessarily mean that there are no complete definitions of translation. From one point of view, the difficulty in defining translation can actually improve the quality of the yet unformulated theories about what should be understood by translation. How can such a thing be possible? In my opinion this would be possible by joining together all the essential

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elements from as many pertinent definitions as possible and then reunite them in the effort of creating a clear and comprehensive definition. Nevertheless, defining a concept—in our case that of translation—also refers, in my opinion, to the tasks a translation should perform. And this is when the difficulty of this process intensifies. Translation and the discipline of translation studies were rather newly formed disciplines as such (as we know them nowadays) and this indicates that there has not been much attention in this direction until the 20th century.

I feel it would be fair to say that starting with the second half of the last century there was a period of “boom” in the field of translation. All the new studies, theories, developments, new approaches and perspectives led to the creation of a new field of research and study, even to a revolution in how contemporary scientists approach and deal with translations nowadays. This so-called “boom” in translation theory can also be viewed as the result of the interdisciplinary character of the 20th century: all the new breakthroughs, the discovery and use of new tools in translation (new dictionaries, machine translations, Internet, memory databases, specialized and computerized programs for translation, etc.), the new findings from inter-related disciplines: linguistics, psychology, literary studies, cultural studies, social studies, anthropology, philosophy, and so forth, all these new developments together with an increased interest in translation manifested by more and more scientists, researchers, translators, teachers and students finally led to an explosion of new ideas and theories in the field of translation. All these new findings affect both the way the process of translation is performed and the role and the tasks of translators nowadays. This newly rising discipline is developing faster than ever before and that is why more and more attention is being paid to this fascinating field of study and human interaction.

The main aim of this paper is thus that of pinpointing the most representative definitions, theoreticians, theories and new developments in the field of translation studies in order to understand the process of translation in general and that of literary translation in particular.

In the process of translation (or as other critics divide it into translation-oriented analysis and translation-oriented interpretation) there are six major areas which are to be followed and respected by a translator in order to be able to render the adequacy of a text from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL): denotation, accentuation, modality, connotation, coherence and style. Professor L. Levițchi, in the *Foreword* to “*Limba Engleză-Manualul Traducătorului*” (English Language-The Translator’s Handbook) (2000), says that to translate means to paraphrase, to reproduce something using other words, to convey an idea from the SL into the TL. To translate well means to paraphrase well, to reproduce in the TL with the highest degree of accuracy the content of ideas, the logical and emotional structure of the original text so that the transposition can produce the same effect on the receiver as the original text; and the translation should not seem a translation (7).

A complete translation is the translation that reproduces as many meanings and values as possible from the foreign language into the mother tongue. The fruit of a translator’s work has to be a paper work of the same value as the original one—no more, no less—having the same power of conviction. Fritz Güttingen said: “And when the original is not convincing, why should the translation be? From this point of view rises the belief or the conviction that the translator has to express himself just as the author would have expressed himself if his mother tongue had been the translator’s” [my translation] (qtd. in Levițchi 12). So the translator has to perfectly observe and render as such the original atmosphere of the text, by using the most appropriate associations of words and ideas in order to recreate the novel, but using his mother tongue. Professor L. Levițchi also said that everything can be translated, but only with extreme efforts, and thus the work of a translator is much harder than that of the writer’s. “A good translation must neither increase the difficulty of its comprehension (through an exaggerate encoding) nor ‘lighten’ it through an exaggerate decoding of some

meanings and connections which the writer himself wished to maintain ambiguous” [my translation] (Bantaş and Croitoru 128).

Lotfollah Karimi, for example, offers a very brief and concise definition of translation which he sees as converting one language, the SL, to another language, the TL, so that the TL could convey the intended message in the SL. In other words, it is a process through which the translator decodes the SL and encodes his/her understanding of the TL form. This is indeed a clear and concise definition which represents only the starting point for the following discussions. Translation can also be defined from the point of view of linguistics. Thus, translation is a branch of applied linguistics, because in the process of translation the translator consistently makes any attempt to compare and contrast different aspects of two languages to find the equivalents (Karimi).

Literary translation has as aim or task to reproduce the original artistic images from the SL into another language, the TL, so that the reader of the translation can become aesthetically entertained by the text, just as the native reader is moved or touched by the original. Clifford E. Landers argues that, as most critics do, “a translation should affect its readers in the same way that the original affected its first readers” (27), in other words to have the same effect on the TL readers as the original text had on the SL readers. A SL text should be translated using the same type of language as the original, the same style; it does not matter if the text is 300 years old, at that time the language of the original was modern to the readers, to its contemporaries, and it should be rendered the same ways, “not using slangy or faddish English” (Landers 27). He also considers that “if the speech patterns in the SL text struck the reader as deliberately old-fashioned, stilted, facetious, jargon-ridden, sub-standard, or in any other way a departure from expected modes of expression, that too should be reflected in the translation” (27).

Antar S. Abdellah, in the article “What Every Novice Translator Should Know,” considers that translation is a science, an art, and a skill. The main reason why translation is considered to be a science is that, to a certain extent, it requires “complete knowledge of the structure and make-up of the two languages concerned.” The main reason for being considered an art is that it needs “artistic talent to reconstruct the original text in the form of a product that is presentable to the reader who is not supposed to be familiar with the original.” And, finally, it is considered to be a skill because it necessitates “the ability to smooth over any difficulty in the translation, and the ability to provide the translation of something that has no equal in the TL.” Antar S. Abdellah gave a definition of translation which focuses on the qualities of a good translation: a good translation has to carry all the ideas of the original as well as its structural and cultural features; it has to be easily understood; to be fluent and smooth; to be idiomatic; to convey, to some extent, the literary subtleties of the original; to distinguish between the metaphorical and the literal; to reconstruct the cultural / historical context of the original; to make explicit what is implicit in abbreviations, and in allusions to sayings, songs, and nursery rhymes; and to convey, as much as possible, the meaning of the original text.

Muhammaf Hassan Askari, in a recent article called “If the Benefit of Translation is Concealment,” follows Ezra Pound’s belief and considers that “a good translation is one that may not necessarily contain the spirit of the original,” but one that should become something. He also believes that the problem, until now, was that translation was regarded as a purely literary problem, “and that’s why our literature, and especially our prose, is becoming feebler by the day” (195). Perhaps he is right about the latter part of his theory, but concerning the former part I believe that he is not entirely correct. A translation, in my opinion, must create the same effect on its readers as the original did on its readers at the time of publication of that text. This implies not only containing the “spirit of the original,” but also the effects of the original. And, yes, a translation should indeed “become something,” it should not be an

average—or worse, a mediocre—translation of, let's say, a famous literary text; it should have at least the same value as the original, but this is a very strenuous process.

M. Teresa Caneda Cabrera, in her article "Translation as a Paradigm of Thought for Modernism," believes that many modernist writers showed a great interest in translation, in the beginning of the 20th century, because they found "in foreign languages and cultures not only sources of inspiration and models for renewing their own culture but also ways of expanding the possibilities of expression in English" (55). This is perhaps one of the reasons why it is believed that translation played a crucial role in the development of modernism. She also points out that the new studies in the field of translation studies focused on "the aspect of literary translation as a complex cultural activity, thereby emphasizing its centrality to the emergence of innovative aesthetics and the development of new ideologies throughout different historical contexts and literary traditions" (54). Translation must be seen as a vital mechanism in "the process of consolidation of new poetics as well as in the negotiation of issues of cultural and individual identity" (54).

In general terms, numerous critics agree that not many things have drastically changed concerning translation. Translation cannot happen if there is not sound knowledge of both the source and the target languages, but there also has to be a thorough understanding of the topics dealt with in the text. Vicky Hartnack states that "one's cultural baggage and open-mindedness about the other's culture have always been decisive factors and the painstaking job of checking and rechecking one's work has always made part of the conscientious translator's routine" (59).

The Issue of Obsolete Translations

Translators usually adopt the "intermediary position," as G. Mounin calls it. It has scientifically been proved that it may, and often does happen, that not all the elements of the original can be rendered exactly the same way in the TL as in the SL. This may make us think about the idea of "gains" and "losses" in a translation. But this is not necessarily a loss, and thus there is the possibility of finding poetic equivalents in the SL, which have an aesthetic value as close to the original text as possible. Any translation tends towards perfection, but unfortunately not all of them become perfect. The Romanian and the French versions of Salinger's novel are not exceptions to this tendency; there are some cases of inadequacy in these versions of "The Catcher." It is possible that the translators put themselves, and thus implicitly Holden, in the corresponding Romanian and French periods of the writing of the novel, the 1950s. This fact raises an often argued and discussed problem connected with translations, the one of becoming obsolete. It is a process connected with the translator's responsibility concerning the original text. Some other critics consider that a translation can indeed become obsolete just because the translator, being profoundly dedicated to the text and to the respective culture, generally translates only for a couple of generations. It seems that this is the reason why every epoch needs its own translations.

While a literary text is "final," "irreversible," a translation has to be renewed from time to time. It is also said and believed that the translation of an original text is made with the linguistic and stylistic means of the TL, means that are specific to a certain historical moment. After very long periods of time have passed, these means become obsolete, they are no longer "fashionable," and the reason why this phenomenon occurs is because each generation has a specific vocabulary, with its own linguistic "sensitivity" or "particular aesthetics," and also its own requirements regarding a translation. And this is all the more important and obvious in "The Catcher," as Holden's language is the teenage language. Translating is not just an exact science or an exact art, as G. Steiner says, it is also the relationship between art and science, it is the process of deciphering, decoding and interpreting the original text. As Jakobson said, and as G. Mounin has also agreed, the translation is nothing but the adequate interpretation of

a unit belonging to a foreign code and a perfect equivalence is impossible (qtd. in Bantaş and Croitoru 18). That is why it is important to refer to Tytler's three laws of translation:

- The translator must give a complete transcription of the ideas of the original.
- The style must be the same as the original one.
- The translation must 'flow' just like the original version. [my translation] (qtd. in Bantaş and Croitoru 13)

Mounin also claims that "unique personal experience is untranslatable"; the base units of two languages are not always comparable; and communication is possible when account is taken of the respective situations of the speaker and hearer / author and translator (Bassnet 36). But this also implies perhaps the most important of the translators' tasks (besides the one of having a serious and profound knowledge of both the source and target languages), namely the one of having a deep knowledge of the novel's context and of the writer's culture and style. Albrecht Neubert believes that a translation can undergo changes in the sense that it becomes obsolete: "What was a good translation under particular local conditions years ago may no longer be adequate in another place today" (qtd. in Schäffner and Adab 5).

Clifford E. Landers believes that the life, or better as he says "the half-life of a translation," usually lasts between 30 to 50 years, and then "the translation loses its vitality, its freshness, its ability to communicate to the reader in a contemporary voice" (8). If we accept that such a situation is true, then "major works of literature must be retranslated periodically if they are to retain their function as a bridge between cultures and eras" (8). Clifford E. Landers also considers, and I share his point of view, that "[l]iving languages are *moving* targets, and all we can say with certainty of today's translations is that, however good they may be they will at some future date become obsolete"(8). I believe that this can lead to the development of a new branch of translation studies in which the comparison and analysis of different (multilanguage) retranslations, from different countries, of a same original literary work represents the very core of this new branch. The main aims would be those of updating the language of a previous translation, of reviving the literary work itself (if necessary, especially by means of marketing strategies dealing with the new retranslation) and of finding the closest translation to the ideal one. The present book would be fitted for such an attempt. Clifford E. Landers also thinks that "[i]t matters little that all translations are foreordained to obsolesce. Their value to the future lies in their expression of how we spoke and thought and wrote in our own time" (12).

Conclusions

In this brief article I have tried to offer an overview on defining the concept of literary translation by reuniting the points of view of important theoreticians in this field although the task of giving a comprehensive definition of translation is very difficult mainly because it is a rather newly formed discipline. Nevertheless, a complete definition of translation, in my opinion, should always include the tasks that a translation should perform. Thus, in my opinion, a literary translation does not have to compete with the ST, it only has to recreate the same effect of the ST on the TT readers, to complement the original and make the readers understand the original text (especially when they do not speak the SL or even to understand better the ST even if they speak the SL). Another important aspect of a complete translation must necessarily take into account a series of contexts, such as the linguistic, the social, the political and the cultural contexts in which the ST was produced and those in which the TT has to be reproduced, and even adapting the TT to such contexts if necessary. I have also briefly discussed the discipline of translation studies from the perspective of "boom" developments due to the numerous researches, theories and revolutionary developments in this field, to its multi- or interdisciplinary character and to the wide range of new

technological breakthroughs that affect and influence the translation process and translators themselves.

I have also briefly approached the issue of translations that become obsolete by presenting some reliable points of view. The conclusion was that translations, from a variety of reasons, do become obsolete and they have to be retranslated after a period of 30 to 50 years. This process also helps to the renewal of the translation, to its revival (as well as of the original), to its improvement and updateness of its language—all of them arguments in favour of Salinger's Romanian retranslation and its further analysis.

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