

CAN (RE-)TRANSLATION HELP GAIN NEW INSIGHTS ON A TEXT ?

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Abstract

Translation has long been the object of research for numerous researchers, critics, theoreticians, academics and, of course, translators themselves. The numerous theories, trends, lines and schools of research do not represent the topic of this short paper, but the very act of translating, and that of re-translating a text. What are the gains of doing such work? Can it be applied to literary texts only or is there a wider range when it comes to re-translating a text? Upon little reflection of these questions, a natural answer would be that if the translation is well done, what use would there be for another one? Yet, upon more careful and detailed reflection, furthermore, upon analyzing and comparing such cases, the answer changes dramatically. Thus, this article tries to identify how the (re-)translation of a text can bring back to life overlooked meanings, details, connections, interpretations and, most importantly, new insights on a text and even on the author.

Keywords: Translation; (re-)translation; new meanings; new insights; text analysis.

JEL Classification: KO.

Introduction

This article aims to present the way in which translation and, by extension, re-translation, can play a vital role in and influence the literary system of a country. Such cases are not frequent and that is why it is all the more important to emphasize the role played by a novel or a text, in this particular case, J. D. Salinger's novel in this norm-breaking aspect of translation. I believe that such a courageous attempt would not have been possible without such a demanding text as Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is also true that there are not too many languages which function or which have the same system as the Finnish one, and this means that without the two above-mentioned components such a revolutionary norm-breaking and norm-changing aspect of translation would not have been possible. This also represents the reason for choosing the Finnish translation as the basis for this brief research given that it is neither my mother tongue, nor do I speak it. Nevertheless, due to the studies published and the research on this topic, it is possible to reach a conclusion in the light of the above-mentioned.

Text and Translation Analysis

Laura Routti in her paper entitled "Norms and Storms: Pentti Saarikoski's Translation of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*" discusses the relationship between translation and norms through a case study focusing on Pentti Saarikoski's Finnish translation of J. D. Salinger's novel. The most important point made by her study is that, in an attempt to render the stylistic qualities of Salinger's novel in his translation, Saarikoski was compelled to violate the norms regulating the use of language in the target literature of the time. Following the initial "shock" in the target culture, *Sieppari Ruispellossa* is, however, seen to have gained an influential, norm-initiating role in the evolution of the Finnish literary system as a translation through which the use of slang was introduced to it as a new, alternative means of expression.

In culture-related aspects of translation the concept of norms is a frequent subject of discussion. Many critics believe, and I share this point of view, that the cultural specificity of norms makes translating such a highly challenging activity. Norms are, in the majority of cases, not universal but particular, and that is the main reason why a translator has to maintain a position of mediator between two cultures. This means that a translator is also

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frequently faced with a situation in which (s)he has to choose whether to conform to the norms prevailing in the source culture (SC) or to those prevailing in the target culture (TC) in order to avoid a clash between the two. The first Romanian translation of Salinger's novel seems to fit the first pattern described by Laura Routti and the explanation may be represented by the culture-related and historical background of the period of the translation.

The relationship between norms and translation is a twofold one since norms influence translators, but translators in their turn can influence norms. As mediators between cultures, translators are in a position to change norms of the TC through their translations and, in this way, to contribute to the development of the literary system of the target language. There are, as Laura Routti stated, cases in which a translation conforming to the SC norms is altogether rejected as norm-violating by recipients in the TC, but in other cases such translations may, in fact, gain a position as exemplary literary models which authors in the target literature are willing to follow. Regarding translation as an activity characterized, at least in theory, by a double obligation, namely faithfulness to the ST on the one hand, and loyalty to the norms prevailing in the TC on the other hand, the aim in her paper was to shed light on the context, and on the specific constraints in that context, in which Saarikoski's translation was produced, as well as on the impact it came to have in the evolution of the Finnish literary system.

The concept of norms in translation and socio-cultural contexts is also highly important, but not discussed at this point. Yet, for better understanding the context in which the Finnish translation appeared, further brief general considerations on the concept of norms will be made. The concept of norms is generally considered to have been introduced to translation studies through the work of Gideon Toury in the late 1970s. Toury himself, however, has refused to claim credit for having associated norms with translation, regarding Jiri Levý and James S. Holmes as the originators of a norm-based approach to translation studies (Toury, "A Handful of Paragraphs" 10). The view of translating as a norm-governed activity presupposes that translators at work are subject to expectations prevailing in a certain community at a certain time. Norms influence not only the production, but also the selection and reception of translations (Schäffner, "The Concept of Norms" 6). However, as mediators between cultures in which different norms prevail, translators are also in a position to introduce and change norms. As Laura Routti notes, reader responses are highly time-dependent, and textual qualities introduced by a norm-violating translation may eventually be domesticated and come to be regarded as natural elements of the target literary system. In that process of change, a translator whose work may first have been disapproved of as norm-breaking may, in the course of time, come to be highly appreciated as a norm-initiator. Based on Toury's concept of initial norms, one can say that Saarikoski, positioned between the SC and the TC, could either choose to conform to the ST and the norms realized through it, or make his translation conform to the norms of the TC.

One of the most important messages of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is the expression of Holden Caulfield's rebellion against the phoniness of the adult world and the use of language in the novel is of crucial significance in this regard. Holden's speech is, at one and the same time, typical and unique. Salinger created the double effect in a masterly fashion by making it a mixture of features typical of teenage vernacular spoken in New York in the 1950s, and of strong personal idiosyncrasies (Costello 327). The overall tone of the novel is highly colloquial and the vocal quality of the narrator's sentence structure has led some critics to conclude that Salinger thought of the novel more in terms of spoken than of written speech (Costello 329).

The Finnish translation of the novel, as mentioned by Laura Routti mentions, was published ten years after the original version's publication, namely in 1961. Reproducing Holden's distinctive idiom in Finnish turned out to be so difficult for the young translator. Laura Routti adds that Saarikoski was 22 at the time and that at some point he was, in his own words, driven to near despair. The main problem was related to Salinger's use of highly

informal language in *The Catcher in the Rye*, as in Finnish literature the use of slang was practically unknown at the time. In an attempt to remain faithful to the original novel and to make the Finnish Holden sound like his American counterpart, Saarikoski created a vernacular to correspond with the tone of the ST. This required not only linguistic and cultural competence from the translator, but also the courage to juggle with the norms that regulated the use of language in the Finnish literature of the time.

The same parallel could be easily drawn between the original version of the novel and the first Romanian translation, especially while thinking about the historical background around the year 1964 when the communist regime was in power and when the use of slang in print was not a matter of option, it was simply unconceivable. There is nevertheless a major difference between the Finnish literature and the use of slang and the Romanian one. In Romanian, both in the common use of language and even in literature, slang words and expressions existed, but they were not used in the same proportion. The censure of the communist regime was too high to allow such words to be seen in print at that time. And Romanian was not a singular case, as we have just seen and we shall see further on.

The Finnish *Sieppari* was published in 1961, at the beginning of a decade of great cultural turmoil in Finland, as Laura Routti noted. On the literary scene, modernism had had its breakthrough in the previous decade, but the struggle for the dominant position in the centre of the literary system was still very much in process, with modernist and realist forms of expression in opposition to each other, as she described the historical and cultural background, which was at the opposite pole in comparison with the Romanian atmosphere. In the overall context, the multiplicity and versatility of literary forms of expression in the 1960s can be seen to have contributed to the development of what has since come to be known as postmodernism, as Laura Routti stated.

Saarikoski accepted the task of translating *The Catcher* in October 1959 and finished it in December 1960 and, Laura Routti mentioned, according to the original agreement, Saarikoski was supposed to have finished the translation task by June 1960, but due to unforeseen difficulties the work was delayed by approximately six months. These difficulties arose mainly from Salinger's use of highly informal language in *The Catcher*, which seemed very difficult to fit into the Finnish literary context. Historically, one of the tasks of translated literature in Finland had been to enhance the development of literary Finnish, and until then the majority of Finnish national literature had conformed to that norm. However, exactly what "literary Finnish" should be like had been a matter of dispute for a very long time: disagreements on whether it should be based on western or eastern dialects had culminated in "the battle of dialects" in the first half of the 19th century, as Laura Routti stated in her paper.

I believe that one of the reasons why the original text is so difficult to translate is that the language itself raises such difficulties. The translator himself or herself must have the same intelligence as the writer himself in order to be able to render the same ideas with the same or at least similar means, to adapt the source text and culture to the target language and culture. Perhaps this is also one of the reasons why the first Romanian translation was not a complete success and why the Romanian literature, as many others as well, felt the need to revive, to improve, to give a second translation to the audience, as an alternative not only to a new perspective, but also to a new culture and society. The second Romanian translation of Salinger's novel seems to offer, at least, a new perspective after the fall of the communist regime, a freer one, and one in which all the language norms and barriers reflecting the political norms and barriers are no longer visible and no longer exist. It goes without saying that the Finnish translator's articles and opinions (mentioned by Laura Routti) did not enjoy only positive reactions, there have been many negative reactions too, many of them mentioned, explained and analyzed by Laura Routti in her book, but which no longer represent the aim of this sub-chapter.

Saarikoski simply decided to reject the use of “literary Finnish” altogether, and to create an artificial vernacular based on urban colloquial language. The vernacular came to reflect features from different language varieties. For the most part it was based on the teenage slang spoken in Helsinki at the time, but it also included dialectal features of the Finnish spoken in Vironlahti, a country district where Saarikoski had spent his childhood, as well as a number of anglicisms, as Laura Routti added. The task of creating this vernacular involved a lot of “field-work”: Saarikoski visited cafés frequented by young people and attended their parties to listen to their language, as the writer of the article continued her idea. This also seems to be the case of the translator of the second Romanian version of *The Catcher* though apparently not rising at the same level as the Finnish one. *Sieppari* thus came to symbolize the first step towards the modernization of literary Finnish. The articles written by Saarikoski and the strategy he then adopted in his translation of *The Catcher* show that, in an attempt to render the slangy tone that Salinger had employed in *The Catcher*, Saarikoski made a conscious decision to violate the norms governing the use of literary language in Finnish literature at the time.

Laura Routti mentioned that the responses to the eventual publication of *Sieppari* were, of course, controversial. In its employment of an informal, colloquial language variety it was bound to cause a commotion because it struck readers as something quite unexpected. Some critics applauded the Finnish translator’s vision and agreed that no other person could have produced the Finnish version of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* as skilfully as Saarikoski. Some other critics had been quite harsh on Saarikoski, even claiming that he has written his own version of Salinger’s novel, considering the Finnish translation even a fraud, as Laura Routti explained in her article by giving complete quotations of different critics and their points of view. But not all of the reviews of *Sieppari* were disapproving. Some critics did, in fact, think that Saarikoski had succeeded in his task remarkably well, and considered the use of Helsinki slang in *Sieppari* perfectly appropriate. Unfortunately, not being able to speak Finnish I can only attempt to appreciate as true or false these opinions based only on other critics’ points of view since I do not have the necessary means to provide my opinions on the Finnish translation, and thus an objective analysis is not possible at this point. But the main idea leads to the fact that the Finnish version actually managed to change the norms in the Finnish literature and this is one of the most important aspects of this sub-chapter since it opens the path to a whole new way of looking at and using translation and its tools combined with social and cultural norms.

Laura Routti stated that Pentti Saarikoski has probably been the best translator one could think of for this novel. His translation conveys the tone and the rhythm of the language spoken by today’s school children. *Sieppari* has captured the spirit of the Finnish city, although the story itself takes place in a city across the world. I consider that this seems to be the main task of any translator while transposing one text from a SL into a TL. Perhaps this idea is related to the fact that the first Romanian version of Salinger’s novel was not a very successful one and that the second one was considered “too bold” and at times the exact opposite of the first one—a fact which did not allow Romanian critics to have the same opinions about the Romanian renditions of *The Catcher* as the Finnish ones in terms of translation and norm breaking, at least not yet. Nevertheless, the future may always bring new attempts to translate a text and break old linguistic rules and norms, although it is less likely in the case of the Romanian linguistic system.

Conclusions

The conclusion, based on the critics’ studies and research, is that the Finnish translation played an innovatory role and an influential one in the literary system of Finland by breaking the norms of the TL, in order to render the stylistic qualities of the ST, and by

introducing the use of slang language in Finnish, as a new and alternative means of expression. Thus, translation can play a vital role and also influence the literary system of a country, as in the case of the Finnish translation. Salinger's novel can have a norm-breaking role in translation and such a courageous attempt is also mainly due to Salinger's text, from a linguistic point of view. The author of the Finnish translation, out of the desire to render the stylistic qualities of Salinger's novel, was forced to break the norms of the TL and thus his translation gained a highly influential and initiating role, a norm-setting role, in the evolution of the Finnish literary system. This was mainly due to the introduction of the use of slang in language as a new and alternative means of expression.

This also leads to the idea that translators have to be faithful to the original text and never attempt to censure the ST. The fact that some translations in question changed the language of the ST because they considered it offensive or taboo demonstrates that such cases should never be part of a translator's task. Furthermore, the fact that more and more people take interest in such situations may indicate that more and more researchers are concerned with finding ways of preventing or avoiding mistranslations from occurring in the future, but also to discover new meanings, to bring back to life overlooked ones or details, connections, interpretations and, most importantly, new insights on a text and even on the author.

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