THE DARK SIDE OF LITERARY TRANSLATION: 
AN ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATION TRAINEES’ PERFORMANCE

Klaudia Bednárová-Gibová

Abstract: The paper focuses on an analysis of translation testees’ performance in the in-class translation of an unseen literary text excerpt from English into Slovak. The paper aims to probe into the most common deficiencies observable in students’ translations and reflects on them by means of a linguistic-translatological commentary. The testees include both the students of translation and interpretation as well as British and American studies students, pursuing their first year at the master’s level, who picked Literary Translation as an optional module in the summer semester in the academic year 2013/2014. The results of the study revealed that both examined student groups manifested the very same problems when tackling literary translation. Shortcomings in the translation of adjectives, flaws in the rendering of more complicated syntactic structures, problems with the recognition of culture-specific terms, the lack of the comprehension of the original caused by misinterpretation or underestimating the influence of context, were elicited. The paper also draws attention to the most common errors that the translation trainees make and suggests which areas of their theoretical preparation should be improved in order to guarantee smooth, adequate and above all, equivalent translations.

Key words: literary translation, literary text, shift, students’ performance, error.

Introduction

The study of translation and interpretation at the Institute of British and American Studies at the University of Prešov may be traced back to the academic year 2010/2011, which saw the emergence of the first eager students willing to embark on their English language translation career. As part of the curriculum, they were given a possibility to pick “Literary translation” as an optional module at the M.A. level of their studies. Seen realistically, the professional and social (to say the least) standing of translators has shifted dramatically nowadays, in marked contrast to the situation some twenty years ago. However, the prestige of translators focusing on specialized, especially on legal and business texts, has been on the increase of late. This social trend is also observable at Slovak universities where pragmatically-minded undergraduates have shown almost zero interest in literary translation realizing that literary translation orders constitute, up to some counts, only 1% of all translation orders on the current market (Vilikovský, 2007: 15).

Fortunately (or perhaps still for romantic reasons), there have been enough students at the Institute of British and American Studies at Prešov, both among the translators as well as in the other non-translation related branch of study, who were not hesitant to sign up for “Literary translation” as an optional course. Drawing on my personal teaching experience over the years, I have collected an interesting material worthy of some analysis and deeper reflections with possible suggestions for teaching practice. To this end, two groups of students have been tested in the summer semester in the academic year 2013/2014: 12 first-year students of translation and interpretation at the M.A. level (who have attended also special translation theory classes provided by the Institute of Translation and Interpretation during their studies) and 11 first-year British and American studies students pursuing their master’s degree (who have knowledge of linguistics, literature and cultural studies only). The aim of the paper is to give an insight in the testees’ performance in the in-class translation of an unseen literary text excerpt from Ian McEwan’s novel On Chesil Beach into Slovak and probe into the most common errors made. At the same time, the paper aims to reflect on the ascertained deficiencies by dint of linguistic-translatological insights. The target text subject to analysis was equivalent to approximately one standard page and the time allocated for the
The task was ninety minutes. This was to simulate real time duress, which is many a time a crucial (but objective) extra-linguistic factor contributing to the detriment of translation quality. Prior to testing, both groups of testees had been provided with the same amount of translation theory within the same optional course: an overview of translation techniques across literary texts, translator’s competences, Baker’s equivalence on word level, equivalence above word level, grammatical, textual and pragmatic equivalence, Nord’s model of intra/extratextual factors providing useful tools for analyzing translations and authorial styles of selected writers including the tested one. The tested students were also familiar with the major evaluation items in their submitted translations, i.e. number of negative shifts made, keeping the target text equivalent, the level of Slovak stylistics, abiding by the rule of Slovak spelling, and assessment of the overall creativity of the translation solutions proposed.

1 The essence of literary translation

Before delving into literary translation, the issue of literary text as a distinctive text genre should be made clear. In this regard, Hermans (2007: 79) speaks of kinds of texts displaying certain features, notably such things as “foregrounding of language, the interdependence of different levels of linguistic organisation, the separation from the practical context of utterance, and the perception of texts as both aesthetic objects and intertextual or self-reflexive construct”. This exclusive characteristics of ‘literariness’ is also affirmed by Toury who depicts it by means of “the presence of a secondary, literary code superimposed on a stratum of unmarked language” (qtd. in ibid.: 78).

Understandably, the vital feature of a literary work of art is that it is a bearer of an aesthetic function. Literary text comes into existence as a subjectively transformed reflection of the objective reality in tune with the aesthetic-emotional intent of the author: he/she endeavours to convey his/her ideas, thoughts and emotions, which is enabled by his/her orientation towards experience. Further, it should not go unmentioned that the widely accepted principal feature of literary texts rests on their focus on the message, not on content (see Landers 2001, Hermans 2007 and Sánchez 2009). Consequently, literary translation must be approached as “studying the lexicon, grammatical structure, communication situation, and cultural context of the source language text, analyzing it in order to determine its meaning, and then reconstructing this same meaning using the lexicon and grammatical structure which are appropriate in the receptor language and its cultural context” (Larson, 1998: 3).

Moreover, standard [literary] translation is the one which “reflects all cultural-social and linguistic specifics of the source text” (Huťková, 2007: 53; translation by author). It may also be argued that standard translation shapes the original on the basis of a period idea about a literary work of art and its function (Vilikovský, 2007: 12). Thus, it is clear that literary translation is a far cry from being a strictly linguistic operation only but it is, first and foremost, an aesthetically-oriented bicultural transfer since the literary translator is a mediator of intercultural communication.

2 What it takes to become an apt literary translator

Gromová (1996: 20; translation by author) conceives of the translator’s competence as “a systemic ordering of the knowledge base of the translator, of his deductive and inferential capabilities.” By the knowledge base she understands a specialized linguistic training (knowledge of both the source and target language), a specialized stylistic training (ability to specify and determine text type), translation theory back-up, contrastive linguistics, stylistics and comparative literature (contrastive knowledge of elements). Among deductive translator’s capabilities she ranks the ability to decode texts (reading, analysis, interpretation, understanding of the source text, the ability to code texts (record texts in the target language) and intuition (talent prerequisites for literary translation).
Further, Gromová lists the following sub-competences of the translator’s competence (ibid.: 22):

1. **Linguistic competence**: consists in the knowledge of the rules of both the source language as well as target language, *i.e.* lexis, word-formation, syntax as well as pronunciation and spelling

2. **Sociolinguistic competence**: ability of the translator to produce and interpret utterances in context, resulting from the topic and interlocutors’ standing and aims of the interaction

3. **Discourse competence**: comprises combinatorial abilities of the translator when dealing with the form and meaning in order to achieve a text’s unity across multiform genres. The unity is contingent on the cohesion of form and coherence of meaning.

4. **Strategic competence**: is determined by the translator’s ability to master communicative strategies of the translator so as to improve communication or make up for the losses caused by limiting factors in communication or insufficient competence in one or more components of the translator’s communicative competence

5. **Intercultural competence**: consists of the knowledge acquisition of source culture and target culture in the implicit and explicit confrontation, ability of self-reflection of one’s own culture in connection with a foreign culture, and ability to anticipate cultural presuppositions

On top of these translator’s sub-competences, Gromová stresses abilities which can be subsumed under the umbrella term **technical competences** (*e.g.* IT skills, browsing the Internet for finding and verifying information, e-communication with the ordering party, text editing skills or ability to work with translation memories and softwares) which are not directly linked with translation *per se* but nevertheless, make the translator more expedient for the current translation market marked by a fierce competition.

Thus, all the above suggests that translation trainees ought to be well-equipped with the said competences after their translation training in order to be able to craft a target text intended to communicate its own form, correspondent with the source text, and accordant with contemporary literary and translational norms of the receiving culture.

### 3 The analysis of the translation trainees’ performance

Having put the translation theory providing a backdrop for the ensuing analysis to rest, I will focus now on the testees’ performance. The identified translation problems and/or infelicities inviting critical comments and reflections will be presented and consequently compared with the official Slovak translation by Katarína Karovičová, published in 2007.

Having studied the submitted in-class translations, in both groups of students under investigation, one of the most vexing problems seems to be connected with an appropriate choice of the equivalent adjective in Slovak. Consider the following examples from students’ translations:

**EN**: Florence was on the other side of town, near the Albert Hall, in a **prim** hostel for female students.

**SK**: Florence bola na druhej strane, blízko Albert Hall, v **konzervatívnom dievčenskom internáte**.

**SK**: Florence bývala na druhej strane mesta pri koncertnej sále Albert Hall v **prerobenej ubytovní pre študentky**.

**SK**: Florence bývala na druhej strane mesta, v blízkosti haly Albert Hall, v **upravenom internáte**.

**SK**: Florence sa nachádzala na druhej strane mesta blízko Albert Hall v **škrobenej ubytovní pre študentky**.
As it is known, the English language takes pride in having one of the most abundant vocabularies of all living languages and due to many historical influences over the centuries there is an incredibly rich synonymy of expression. Even if the choice of the language inventory in the target language may be largely subjective in literary translation, only through careful mapping of the entire denotative and connotative dimension of a word the desired translation equivalent may be arrived at. The provided students’ translation solutions reveal their incapability to clearly distinguish between propositional, expressive and presupposed meaning of a lexeme concerning Baker’s equivalence at word level (1992:12-17). Granted, most students tend to underestimate the powerful potential of words and rely primarily on the first meaning given by a dictionary in case of an unknown lexeme (i.e. prim). The biggest challenge in literary translation when rendering the individual lexical items, however, is that no word has a meaning which would be given once and for all. Notably, the parameters of each word are quite fragile. If each word was to have the same conceptual boundary, then all students would infer the same meaning from each word, which is blatantly not the case, as illustrated above. Besides, this would imply that several students could come up with the very same translation of a given sentence (or even text), which is patently not true. Many a time the majority of students had difficulty finding the appropriate equivalent due to failing to recognize the influence of a wider context of the meaning of a word. Thus, the possible translation versions with “prerobená/škrobená ubytovňa”, “upravený internát” or “staromódna dievčenská ubytovňa” are grossly inaccurate.

Furthermore, the quoted sentence from the English source text also showcases another common problem on the part of students, which resides in the insufficient knowledge of cultural realia: the inadequate rendering of the famous concert hall in London as “hala Albert”, which is nowhere near as acceptable in Slovak. With regard to this problem under discussion, the following sentence deserves a mention:

**EN:** The Pill was a rumour in the newspapers, a ridiculous promise, another of those tall tales about America.

**SK:** Pilulka bola iba tak fáma, prísl'ub na smiech, iná ako všetky tieto histórky o Amerike.

**SK:** Pill bola iba klebetou v novinách, s'miešna nádej, iba d'alšia z rozprávok o Amerike.

**SK:** V novinách f'amovala tabletka, komický s'ľub, d'alšia za vlasy pritiahnutá klebeta o Amerike.

**SK:** Noviny sa zaoberali antikoncepciou, trápsy prísl'ub, d'alši z tých veľkých príbehov o Amerike.

Official translation: V novinách sa objavili prvé zvesti o antikoncepčnej pilulke, ale bol to s'miešny prísl'ub, d'alšia z neuveriteľných rozprávok o Amerike.

Here, it does not take to be an experienced reviewer to be immediately struck by the Anglicism “pill” in the Slovak translation as a hopeless translation equivalent. Translation solutions like these only further testify to the translation trainees’ ostentatious lack of sociolinguistic competence, as explained by Gromová. The somewhat slangy translation
equivalent with “tabletka” is much better than the previous one; however, it is still not adequate enough. The other translation solutions containing “pilulka” and “antikoncepcia” convey at least the necessary conceptual core but are nowhere near as matching as the official translation. In addition, the quoted sentence also comprises a considerable variation in the translation of the English adjective “ridiculous”, which practically varies from student to student, serving to illustrate the already mentioned subjective and rather intuitive choice of the language inventory by the students, which is endemic to literary translation. Still, the transition of the invariant core from one language to another, as represented by the individual equivalents for the given adjective, is upheld and results in standard translations.

Another recurrent problem noticeable in both groups of students under study is connected with the semantic identification of the object in longish sentences whose syntactic structure is not all too straightforward at first sight. Compare the following:

**EN:** She revered the ancient types, who took minutes to emerge from their taxis, the last of the Victorians, hobbling on their sticks to their seats.

**SK:** Obdivovala staršie typy mužov, ktorým trvalo niekoľko minút, kým vystúpili z taxíkov, posledných Viktoriánov, ktorí sa krivkajú a podopierajú svojimi paličkami, snažili dostať na svoje miesto.

**SK:** Uctievala staroveké typy, posledných z viktoriánskej éry, ktorým trvalo celú večnosť, kým sa pozbierali z taxíkov a o paličke dokrivkali k svojim sedadlám.

**SK:** Vážila si tie antické typy. Boli to posledné predstavitelia viktoriánskej éry, ktorí s paličkami krivkali k svojim miestam.

**SK:** Vážila si postaršie typy ľudí, posledných viktoriánov, ktorým stačilo len pár minút na to, aby krivkajú so svojimi paličkami zaujali svoje miesto.

**Official translation:** Vážila si starčekov a starenky, ktorým trvalo večnosť, kým vystúpili z taxíkov, posledných viktoriánskych pamätníkov, ktorí krivkali s paličkami k svojim sedadlám.

As illustrated above, here the substandard translation is caused by the failure of several of the translator’s competences. The lack of sociolinguistic and discourse competence on the part of the testees is manifested by their incapability to decode the correct translation equivalent for the noun phrase “ancient types”, supported by the cataphoric reference to the Victorians. According to Baker (1996: 181-185), textual equivalence, especially its aspect of cohesion based on the erroneous reference has been neglected for the most part. Out of all listed translation solutions, only the equivalent with “postaršie typy ľudí” seems to the point. The cognitive mismatch in nearly all listed translation variants also witnesses the failure of linguistic competence, resulting in negative shifts.

Even if one of the exasperatingly difficult things about literary translation in general is the translator’s ability to capture and render the style of the original composition (see Landers 2001), both groups of testees seemed to have mastered this item of evaluation fairly well, being sensitive to the composition of the source language. The only exception was represented by the clause “he got a girl pregnant” whose translation into Slovak was in most cases too marked in comparison to the stylistic connotation of the original (e.g. “nabúchal dievča” or “splodil dieťa” etc.). Decoding an expressive meaning of the English adjective at word level, leaning on to Baker’s approach to equivalence (1992: 12-17), and transposing it into a verbal element in the Slovak language results in an inadequate translation.

Another stylistic deficiency was connected with the translation of the English passive “was dragged to the altar”. Nearly all the testees failed to render the passive by an active
voice, which would have been also desirable in the Slovak language due to its tendency to eschew passive constructions, which are much more redolent of the English language. Thus, the appearance of the passive in the target text may be felt as a negative interference to some extent, resulting in grammatical non-equivalence (Baker, 1992: 102).

EN: He got a girl from the University administration office pregnant, and was, in his friends’ view, “dragged to the altar”.

SK: Otehotnelo s ním dievča z kancelárie dekanátu a on bol, podľa názoru kamarátov, „dovlečený k oltáru”.

SK: Podarilo sa mu priviesť do druhého stavu dievča z administratívnej kancelárie dekanátu a podľa slov kamarátov „bol prinútený ist’ k oltáru”.

SK: Nabúchal dievča z vedenia univerzity a podľa vyjadrení jeho kamarátov, bol „dotiahnutý” k oltáru.

SK: Splodil dieťa s dievčat’om, ktoré pracovalo na univerzite v administratívnej kancelárii. Z pohľadu priateľov bol dotiahnutý pred oltár.

Official translation: Priviedol do druhého stavu dievča zo študijného oddeženia a podľa názoru jeho priateľov ho „odviedla k oltáru.”

Last but far from least, it should be emphasized that apart from some selected lexicostylistic problems as presented above, most students in both groups had great difficulty with those text passages whose interpretation required a deeper reflection and consequently, their Slovak translation was in need of some creativity and required a greater degree of strategic competence. Then, the incorrect interpretation of the source language resulted in a mistranslation at a semantic level, leading to a negative shift as a consequence of the SL sentence’s miscomprehension and distortion, as shown below.

EN: Social change never proceeds at an even pace.

SK: Spoločenské zmeny nikdy neprichádzajú naraz vyrovnaným krokom.
SK: Spoločenské zmeny nikdy nechodia siťčasne a vyrovnaným tempom.
SK: Zmena spoločnosti nikdy nemala hladký priebeh.
SK: Sociálne zmeny nikdy nenapredovali takým tempom.

Official translation: K spoločenským zmenám nikdy nedochádza rovnomerne.

Conclusion

To sum up, this article is only a brief account of the most frequent problems occurring in students’ translations. The finding of paramount importance is that all tested students encountered the very same problems, connected primarily with finding an appropriate translation equivalent for English adjectives, struggled with the disambiguation of more complex syntactic structures, had considerable difficulty translating cultural references, and preferred to use English syntactic structures over the ones typical of their mother tongue. The nature of these flaws resides primarily in the testees’s lack of necessary competences crucial to a standard and equivalent translation. The perfect knowledge of the source and target language is only the first step for a successful translation, which must be backed up by an array of other sub-competences ranging from sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic up to intercultural sub-competence. What was commendable in the analysed sample was that the vast majority of students succeeded in rendering the style of the original composition fairly
well. Overall, there were no conspicuous differences in the performance of the tested students as the two groups under study manifested precisely the same problems in translation. These findings are perhaps quite disappointing with regard to the English language translation students. However, it cannot be claimed categorically that the translation studies students performed “better” than the British and American studies students or vice versa. The only advantage of some students of translation and interpretation against the other examined group was in their providing more “free-spirited” stylistic translations, not holding onto the source text too slavishly. The attested problem areas, as outlined by this article, could be taken for an indicative feature of the translation trainees’ performance at the Institute of British and American Studies at the University of Prešov, signposting certain tendencies. Of course, the limitation of the present article resides in the quantitative sample which should be much greater in order to have more serious implications. Nevertheless, I hope that the paper has shed some light on certain troublesome areas which should be improved in the students’ theoretical preparation regardless their branch of study. i.e. contrastive stylistics, contrastive morphology and lexicology, and knowledge of the culture of English-speaking countries. Based on this analytical probe, it may be suggested that within linguistically-oriented modules, greater attention should be paid to teaching about the wide range of word meanings (especially drawing a line of demarcation between propositional, expressive, presupposed or evoked meaning), intricacies of the English passive voice in translation, and the importance of cohesion and reference devices.

References

Author
PhDr. Klaudia Bednárová-Gibová, PhD., Institute of British and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Prešov, Slovakia, E-mail: klaudia.gibova@gmail.com