

The Culture of Translation: Texts and Practices*
– A Review –

Izabella ZSÓK
Department of Philosophy
Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj

Keywords: translation theory, translation practice, translatability, intranslatability, culture, text

E-mail: zizabell@yahoo.com

*

*T*ranslation and culture are most fashionable and highly used terms of today. The concept of *translation* implies first and foremost a linguistic operation, and it becomes necessary for interaction between people speaking different languages; however, it may also have other interpretations, depending on whether it is directed to the translation of our own thoughts, texts, or culture. If all languages carry a particular worldview, then, provided I want to understand the thoughts of another person who speaks a different language, I must not only learn that particular language, but I must also familiarize myself with its worldview or culture. A fundamental and overall feature of human life in general is that it has a *culture*. It is precisely their culture that distinguishes territorially and historically separated human communities.

The verb *fordít* [to translate] is the Hungarian correspondent of the Latin verbs *traduco* or *transfero*. The meaning of the words *traduco* and *transfero*¹ is “to carry over, to transfer,” so they suggest that they carry over the text from where it is to a different place but meanwhile the text stays the same. In most European languages the verbs expressing translation have preserved the semantic structure of the Latin verb: for example, the German *übersetzen*, the English *translate*, the French *traduire* all mean: “carry over, transfer”. However, the Hungarian word *fordít* contains the root *for-*, which is also the root for the verbs *fordul*, *forog* (to turn, to revolve). The verbs *fordul* [turn], *forog* [rotate], *fordít* and its prefixed versions, like *kifordul*, *kiforog*, *átfordul*, *lefordít*, *megfordít*, etc. all show the direction of the action. That is to say, the Hungarian verb comprises a change or indication of direction in its meaning, it transposes the text to another direction, to another language. It is an accurate interpretation of the operation: the same texts, turned into a different direction.²

* Csilla Gábor and Ágnes Korondi, eds., *A fordítás kultúrája – Szövegek és gyakorlatok* (The culture of translation. Texts and practices), Departmental Conference of the Dept. of Hungarian Literary Studies of Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, 8–9 January 2010, 2 vols. (Cluj-Napoca: Verbum, Láthatatlan Kollégium, 2010), vol. 1: 365 pages, vol. 2: 198 pages, ISBN 978-606-8059-35-8

¹ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%253Atext%253A1999.04.0059%253Aalphabetic+letter%253DA>

² Andor Horváth, “Az igazságról. Fordítás/megfordítás” (On truth. Translation/Turning around), in Gábor and Korondi, eds., *A fordítás kultúrája...*, 49–57.

In the sense of *traduco*, *transfero* the texts are included into a world of transportation, whereas the Hungarian term faces one with the problem that something may stay in place while it changes direction. Despite the semantic differences, the Latin and Hungarian verbs refer to the same operation; the Latin verb implies that we take the words or sentences from one language to another, and the Hungarian verb implies that the old text changes its direction in the new words, when it steps from one language to another.

Apart from the semantics of words, the great problem of the 21st century will most likely be how one can succeed in translating, transposing the different cultures, the texts of different cultures to the direction of another language or culture.

The two volumes of studies entitled *A fordítás kultúrája – szövegek és gyakorlatok* (The culture of translation – texts and practices) present different segments of a wide range of researches. The papers were delivered at the departmental conference of the Department of Hungarian Literary Studies, Faculty of Letters of the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, organized on 8–9 January 2010. The volumes are edited by Csilla Gábor and Ágnes Korondi, and were published by Verbum and Láthatatlan Kollégium in Cluj-Napoca, in 2010. The texts are authored by professors and doctoral students of the Department, who face the problem of translation on a daily basis on account of their profession, and their historical and cultural embeddedness. The 27 authors all approach the issue of translation from their own fields of research, thus the discussions of literary theory, translation theory, and literary history from the Middle Ages to the 20th century are simultaneously present in the book.

The first volume contains nineteen studies, the second one contains eight.

In the first study **Attila Benő** treats the problem of intranslatability as the central problem of translation theories. Generally speaking, it is dangerous to speak about intranslatability since the text as the phenomenon of a manifestation can be transposed to a different language, and the concepts specific for a language or a culture can also be made meaningful in any target language. The variation of linguistic and cultural sign systems can rather be regarded as partial problems which do not interfere with the text to be translated as a whole. Despite the difficulties of translation the conditions are given for the birth of similar translations, having identical function with the original text.

Four authors place the concept of translation into a philosophical perspective. **Andor Horváth** offers an etymological analysis of the word *fordít* and discusses the Heideggerian concept of truth, the meaning of which at Plato is non-concealedness. Starting from Plato's allegory of the cave, there is truth, and it reveals itself to man if the conditions for seeing are given. Leading man to light means nothing else than the turning, the transferring, the translation of the soul to the right direction. **Gyöngyi Orbán** sketches the hermeneutical situation of understanding, the hermeneutical dialogue by way of Averroes's translation of Aristotle's works into Arabic, productively misinterpreting them. Translation means interpretation, and even misinterpretation, the acceptance of failure, openness to the dimension of the Other, a dialogue for overcoming temporal and cultural distance. **Judit Pieldner** also places the activity of translation into a hermeneutic light, as the triad of understanding–interpretation–application. **Zoltán Nagy** develops the historical-philosophical aspects of the search and construction of identity of minority existence, reclining first of all on the work of Sándor Makkai.

István Berszán presents two kinds of translation-practices, the practice of cultural economy and that of artistic translation. By the translation examples of “animal-analogies” of Ádám Bodor’s novel *Sinistra körzet* (Sinistra district), the author draws attention to the fact that in a good translation there is always a gesture that budges, the translation is made authentic by a sophisticated skill, the translator does not take something over “from there”, but invites us “there” by its resonating gesture.

Translation as a problem of literary theory forms the subject of three studies. **Péter Demény** compares Romanian and Hungarian national literatures, with an eye to differences in life conduct, as well as Hungarian and Romanian cultural differences. The literature of every nation represents the particularities of the given nation: Hungarians take Imre Madách or József Katona as their authentic symbols, while Romanians regard Ion Luca Caragiale as theirs. Humour is of central importance in Caragiale’s works, for Romanians it equals a way of life, while for Hungarians it is a gesture. **Orsolya Tőkés** examines the metamorphosis scenes and character types of Mihály Vörösmarty’s drama *Csongor és Tünde* (Csongor and Tünde), as generic conventions of the burlesque. **Ágnes Klára Papp** investigates the liminal situation of Hungarian minority literatures and cultures, and their relationship with the literature and culture of the mother country. The central concept of her article is the border, which not only separates, but also opens up the way to what is new. Culture is situated on borderlines, every instance of it lies at the intersection of borders.

Enikő M. Bodrogi’s translation enterprise is a very interesting attempt. She has been researching the condition of Finno-Ugric minorities living in Fennoscandia for almost a decade, from the perspective of several disciplines. During the last two years she has been focusing on the situation of the people living in Torne river valley in Sweden, speaking the Meänkieli language; she started learning the spoken language, which lacks a unitary norm, and received its status as an autonomous language in 2000. The author’s main aim is to translate Meänkieli literature and culture in general into Hungarian, to represent it in Hungarian culture. This task is a major objective, since it is a highly responsible affair to translate from a language which has never been translated into Hungarian before. At the same time, these efforts are facilitated by the motivations of this endeavour: cultivating the Hungarian and Finno-Ugric linguistic relations, experiencing Meänkieli minority literature and culture in another, Hungarian minority existence, as well as a tribute to the extensive work of writer Bengt Pohjanen, the most conscious organizer of Meänkieli language and culture.

Erika Kommer is the translator of the German texts of the multilingual electronic magazine entitled *Tus*. This periodical is a magazine for children, the Romanian texts are also published in German, English, French etc. translations. In her study, Erika Kommer discusses the linguistic and cultural obstacles one must face when translating children’s literature, whether or not the translation of texts for children depends on children’s culture. Comparing the Hungarian, German, French, and English translations of Valentin Marica’s poem for children, entitled *Mâini de alint - E marți* (Hands for Spoiling – It’s Tuesday), she concludes that, besides the general problems of translation, the rendering of tale motifs, expressions, symbols is also very much dependent on culture.

Imre József Balázs’s article reveals that the two surrealist magazines edited by Imre Pán, entitled *Index Rőpirat* (Index Pamphlet) and *Vitairat Könyvtár* (Pamphlet

Library), tried to convey values and ways of thinking unknown for Hungarian culture, by the translations of Imre Pán, Árpád Mezei, Béla Hamvas, Katalin Kemény and others. Their translations played a role in reconstructing Hungarian cultural life.

Levente T. Szabó analyzes Pál Gyulai's speech against a law on education restricting the teaching of Greek, and intending to eliminate it, detailing the preliminaries of this law on education, and the arguments of both those who supported it and were against it. Pál Gyulai's motivation was to point out that the teaching and learning of the Greek language meant in fact the understanding of what a general education, its nature and culture-shaping role really meant.

Nine authors analyze the translations of literary works in various languages, according to a given point of view. **Ildikó Varga P.** proposes to answer the question why, of the five Hungarian translations of the Finnish poem *Kalevala*, the fourth one belonging to István Rácz can be regarded as the most successful ever since its publication in 1976. Ildikó Varga P. compares the Hungarian translations with each other and with the original from a philological point of view. As a result of this comparison, it is revealed that the secret of the success of Rácz's translation lies in the use of alliteration and common language. **Tímea Berki** examines the first Hungarian translations of the poems of Romanian national poet Mihai Eminescu and the translators themselves, with regard to their profession. The keyword in the approach of these early translations of Eminescu in Hungarian literature is their reception. Analyzing the early translations, the author presents the changing of theories of translation from the concept of equivalence to the concept of translation as a mediation between cultures.

Orsolya Antal rereads a text translated into Hungarian in the 18th century, attributed to Sándor Szacs vay, entitled *Zakkariásnak levelei* (The letters of Zechariah). The Hungarian translator managed to create an entertaining reading in a genre previously unknown in Hungarian literature: the satire. **Emese Egyed** presents the circumstances of the translation into Hungarian of the scandalous Voltairian work *La Pucelle d'Orleans* (The virgin of Orleans). The Hungarian translator was Count János Fekete, he also disseminated the translation in manuscript form, and sent it, albeit unsuccessfully, to the *Erdélyi Magyar Nyelvművelő Társaság* (The Hungarian Society in Transylvania for the Cultivation of Language) with the hope of being published in print. In addition to the practice of translation, János Fekete also formulated the conditions of a good translation, the task of a translator, which betray a lot about the translation practices of the age. Namely, three things are important: empathy between the author and the translator; expressiveness, the translator must pay attention to the target language audience; and the translator's advanced level of language knowledge both of the native and the foreign language. **Anita Széll** compares the use of set phrases in Gáspár Heltai's translation of *Ponciánus császár históriája* (The history of Emperor Poncian) and its German original. The use of set phrases as idiomatic expressions prove a highly advanced level of the knowledge of a particular language. The comparison makes us conclude that the Hungarian text translated by the German native Gáspár Heltai is richer in set phrases and more varied in its expressiveness than the original German text, therefore we might have the impression that Heltai's native language is actually Hungarian, and not the Transylvanian Saxon (that is, German) language. **Anna-Rózsika Szilágyi** analyzes the legend collection of ecclesiastical writer András Illyés from Csíkszentgyörgy, more precisely its part dealing with saints and apostles, focusing

on how the meaning of biblical places, the translatability of their meaning changes from age to age. **Franciska Kónya** examines the work entitled *Jó akarat* (Good will) of the 17th -century Jesuit writer István Tarnóczy. The writer used very many Latin citations, almost all of which he also translated into Hungarian, completing and explaining them. This bilinguality within one work is due to the fact that the Hungarian language was subordinated at that time to Latin. **Júlia Demeter Volkán** investigates the translating, interpreting, and coding operations of Mihály Szatmárnémeti in the preface of his collection of sermons entitled *A négy evangélisták szerint való dominica* (Sunday sermon according to the Four Evangelists). **Ágnes Korondi** compares translations of Bonaventure in late medieval Hungarian monastic codices. Several parts of Bonaventure's work *De perfectione vitae ad sorores*, written for nuns, were translated in the Weszprémi, Lebkowicz, and Debreceni codices. Translations of the *Regula novitiorum* appear in the Vitkovics and Érsekújvári codices. The translators and copyists of the texts were probably nuns. The Hungarian translations differ to a lesser or greater extent, translations of other texts were also included next to Bonaventure's texts. The language and concepts used in the translations were greatly influenced by the target audience, the aim of the translation, and the translation practices of the age.

Four authors dealt with a chosen writer's translation activity. **Hedvig Dáné** analyzed the correspondence of Péter Bod, 46 published letters, of which 43 were written in Hungarian and 3 in Latin. Hedvig Dáné gives a detailed account of the addressees, the subject of the letters, and their language. The functions of letterwriting are information, culture mediation, contact, and at the same time they offer insight into Péter Bod's private life, placed in the service of public affairs. **Zsombor Tóth's** case study examines the main acts of Mihály Cserei's use of literacy: writing, reading, and translation. By these acts Cserei connected the assimilated mass of knowledge with his experiences in such a way that the subject, the I assimilating and perceiving the experience was perpetuated in a narrative way. **Kinga Papp** proposes to highlight, by the correspondance of Antal and Lajos Kálnoki, father and son, both at the son's young age and maturity, the function of writing in family roles and discourses, and the mediation or solution of family conflicts. **Csilla Gábor** summarizes the lessons of the juxtaposition of two texts, the third part of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* and his hymns for the Office of Corpus Christi. Thomas Aquinas presents the mystery of the Eucharist in the two texts with a different purpose and in a different language: the *Summa* uses firstly the fundamental categories of Aristotelian philosophy, while the hymns use a biblical language and a set of biblical motifs, imposing a conduct of wonder and worship.

Gergely Tamás Fazakas analyzes early modern prayers.

The authors of the volume wish to answer timely questions of our age. An up-to-date approach to the theory of translation cannot be separated from the interpretation of the concept of culture. Translation is not merely a metaphor of the mediation of another culture or a linguistic problem to be solved, but it is a more complicated issue than that. In the absence of a historical and cultural understanding, not even a philologist can be successful in understanding the meaning of texts. Literary texts abound in symbolic information sources, which are models of reality, cultural patterns. These cultural patterns create meanings, as long as they yield objective concepts about social reality. If we ignore and fail to understand the operative intention of symbols, these

hidden pieces of information, and if we cannot make abstractions, then we shall not be able to understand the message of texts.

“Because whatever they may say about the insufficiency of translation, this is and will be one of the most important and respectable things in the world of the universal spirit”¹ – Attila Benő quotes Goethe.

Translated by Emese Czintos

¹ Attila Benő, “A fordíthatóság és a fordíthatatlanság kérdése. A probléma forrásai.” In: Csilla Gábor and Ágnes Korondi, eds, *A fordítás kultúrája – szövegek és gyakorlatok*, 9–22.