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Some remarks on asymmetrical cultural transfer
(The Case of Slovenian Literature for Italian Readers)

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1. Intercultural asymmetries

One of the problems the so-called «small cultures»¹ (which might perhaps more appropriately be referred to as **limited-impact cultures**) continually have to tackle is that of making their cultural output known to other cultures, particularly to the so-called «great cultures» (or **great-impact cultures**), i.e. those which –being normally prominent also in quantitative terms– occupy hierarchically higher or even central positions on the cultural map, are internationally influential and usually enjoy greater prestige than limited-impact cultures (cfr. Lambert 1991: 137-138). The difficulty is, as is well-known, that great-impact cultures are relatively self-sufficient and therefore have a considerably lower interest in the cultural output of other cultures, especially in that of limited-impact cultures. As a consequence, the cultural exchange between great-impact cultures on the one hand and limited-impact cultures on the other normally tends to be prevalently unidirectional and cultural transfer between them asymmetrical, with great-impact cultures functioning as source cultures and limited-impact cultures as recipient cultures².

¹ «Culture» is here understood as a community of people with common patterns of behaviour which are governed by norms and conventions, which characterize the socially conditioned aspects of their lives and by means of which that community differs from other communities (cfr. Snell-Hornby 1988: 39 ff., Vermeer 1990: 229-230, Nord 1993: 20-23, Vermeer 1996: 3).

² It is obvious that asymmetries between great-impact cultures and limited-impact cultures do not only concern the level of culture in a narrow sense, but also, for example, the economic and political levels. Asymmetrical cultural transfer, also in the area of translation, is often directly related to political and economic asymmetries.» Cfr. Venuti's statement in this regard: «Translation is uniquely revealing of the asymmetries that have structured international affairs for centuries» (1998: 158).

Among various products like, for example, art exhibitions, theatre and music performances, etc., which a culture can offer to other cultures, literary texts appear to constitute a very special and a very important category of cultural export objects. Since they are usually highly culture-bound entities, they are, in principle, most representative of the culture to which they belong; however, since their transposition into other cultures requires radical interventions –which is not necessarily the case when cultural products of some other types are exported, like, for example, musical performances or objects of fine arts– the process of cultural exportation appears to be a risky undertaking the success of which depends on a variety of controllable and uncontrollable circumstances, which in concrete translational situations are rarely taken into account.

The aim of the paper is to examine questions concerning the translation of literary texts written in «minor» or limited-diffusion languages, i.e. those proper to limited-impact cultures, into «major» languages, i.e. those proper to great-impact cultures. Problems which very often accompany the reception of such translations in the target culture are to a large extent connected with the different positions the source and the target cultures occupy on the cultural map and, consequently, with the different degrees of interest they have in each other. At the same time, however, the poor response which is often characteristic of the way translations of texts originally written in limited-diffusion languages are received in great-impact cultures is often to be explained also as a result of a number of interconnected factors directly related to concrete translational situations. These factors are at the same time of intratextual and of extratextual nature and are situated in the source as well as in the target culture. They regard the choice of the text to be translated, target-culture reception conditions (including prior presence of the source literature in it), choice of publisher, translator's ability to produce a functionally adequate target text, etc.

2. Slovenian literature in Italian translation

2.1. Introductory remarks

A typical example of a limited-impact literature translated into a great-impact culture represents Slovenian literature in Italian translation, which has –with just few exceptions– up to now provoked a response which is rather meagre if compared to the amount of effort made. Being neighbours, the two cultures have for centuries been in intense contact with one another, which has resulted in considerable exchange between them not only at the political and economic levels, but also at the level of culture, and at the level of literature as

part of it³. However, as far as literature is concerned, the exchange has been to a large degree unbalanced, for the Italian culture has usually had the role of the source culture and the Slovenian culture that of the receiver. In addition to that, the majority of the Slovenian literary texts translated into Italian have been assigned marginal positions in the target polysystem, whereas Italian texts translated into Slovenian generally tend to occupy more central positions in the Slovenian polysystem, at least in those cases when they have prominent positions in the source polysystem as well. Therefore, at the level of literature, the transfer between the two cultures is to be considered highly asymmetrical.

Before trying to critically examine the situation and discuss the factors which have been crucial in shaping it, let me briefly present the translational transfer between the two literatures in quantitative terms: in the period between 1945 and 1995 about 140 books⁴ containing mainly prose, poetry, folk tales and texts for children were translated from Slovenian into Italian and about seven hundred from Italian into Slovenian (Košuta 1997: 36). Taking into account that there are nowadays no more than approximately 400 new titles of Slovenian literature published per year, one could conclude that the number of Slovenian books translated into Italian is relatively high. On the other hand, however, this impression changes radically if one takes into consideration that there are now about seventy new book titles published in Italy per day⁵, which means that the number of all the Slovenian books translated into Italian during this period equals the number of titles published in Italy in about two days (cfr. Jan 1995: 258)... Nonetheless, Slovenian literature is one of the Slavic literatures most frequently translated into Italian.

However, these figures alone, indicative of some aspects of the relationship between the two literatures and cultures as they might be, cannot explain the complex interplay of elements which have conditioned the actual reception of the Slovenian literary texts in the Italian culture. In order to understand the response (or lack of it) of a target culture to translations of literary texts from a source culture, one must take into consideration a variety of interrelated circumstances, which regard primarily **the literary potential** and **translation policy** of a limited-impact culture as a source culture, **the reception conditions**

³ From the perspective of literary studies, the reception of Slovenian literature in Italy has been dealt with by various researchers, most notably by Jan 1995 and Košuta 1997. However, a thorough analysis which would be centred upon genuinely translational aspects of the Slovenian literary texts made available to Italian readers is yet to be carried out (cfr. OŽBOT 1999).

⁴ Apart from translations in book form, numerous literary texts of different genres have appeared in various anthologies, magazines and other publications.

⁵ The data are mainly taken from Jan 1995 and from *Conoscere Italia/Introducing Italy 1995* (Roma, ISTAT, p. 28).

in a great-impact culture as a target culture, and **the translator** as a mediator between the two cultures.

2.2. *Misery and glory*

In many translational situations it can be observed that decisions concerning the choice of texts to be translated are taken in the source culture and that the main criterion is the position a text occupies in the source literary polysystem. Since the specificities of the target culture are not taken into account, such translations often fail to appeal to target readers, who may have their specific tastes, interests and needs. If a book is a best-seller in the source culture it will not necessarily appeal to the target readership; similarly, works which are considered canonical in the source culture may appear completely uninteresting when introduced into the target culture (cfr. Jan 1995, Stanovnik 1995: 193). It may also happen that a text would be potentially interesting to the target audience if it was translated in a functionally adequate way, i.e. without becoming depoeticized or deliterarized in the process of translation if it is supposed to serve aesthetic purposes in the target culture as well.

Italian translations of Slovenian literary texts offer ample illustrative material in this regard. For example, France Prešeren (1800-1949), a Romantic poet and master of classical verse forms, who has the status of the Slovenian national poet, has been introduced into the Italian culture several times during the last century and a half, but has elicited no significant response. This is hardly surprising, since the majority of the translated poems are unrhymed, stylistically flattened and in general depoeticized. They are probably superfluous from the point of view of the Italian reader, who has at his/her disposal an enormous range of typologically similar literary texts of superb quality from the same period. Moreover, before translating such texts, it would be sensible to decide whether the Italian reader would be interested in the target texts even if they were not poetically enfeebled with respect to the source texts.

In spite of various unavoidable difficulties which have accompanied the introduction of Slovenian literary works into the Italian culture –as well as into other internationally influential cultures such as the French, Austrian, German cultures, etc.– there are also translations which have worked well. A case in point are poems by Ciril Zlobec (b 1925), a poet and critic, who has for almost five decades played the role of a major mediator between the Italian and Slovenian cultures. He is the only contemporary Slovenian writer who has also established himself in Italy and whose texts have been met with unusual acclaim in the target culture⁶. Over the

⁶ For a more extensive presentation see Ožbot 1999.

last three decades, his poems have constantly appeared in various periodicals and anthologies, and four times, at regular intervals (1982, 1987, 1991, 1997), also in books containing exclusively his poetic texts. One of them was published by Bulzoni, a well-known Rome-based publisher, as a volume in a highly prestigious series. What appears important to note is that the introduction of Zlobec's texts in Italy has been characterized by considerable domestication at different levels. For example, writers of prefaces or introductions are eminent Italian poets and/or critics, (e.g. Giacinto Spagnoletti), who try to present the author in such a way as to make evident his biographical as well as literary ties with the Italian culture. The same tendency can be revealed in the majority of the translations themselves: the poems, which have been translated⁷ into Italian by different translators, some of whom are well-known Italian writers and critics, are characterized by a high degree of target-orientation, at least at the linguistic level, and seem to be easily integrated into the target culture.

2.3. *Domestication, foreignization and asymmetrical cultural transfer in translation*

The principle of overt domestication appears to be a constant characteristic of those Italian translations of Slovenian literary texts which have been received favourably in the target culture⁸. Since such an orientation contradicts the theoretical tenets adopted by some influential researchers in the field of translation studies, most notably perhaps by Lawrence Venuti (see Venuti 1996a, 1995b, 1998), it seems sensible at this point to discuss it in the light of those tenets.

Venuti's well-known orientation towards foreignization is founded upon his belief «that translations be written, read, and evaluated with greater respect for linguistic and cultural differences» (Venuti 1998: 6), which means that at the linguistic level they should make explicit the foreignness of the source text, «introducing variations that alienate the domestic language» (ibid.: 11). However, a fundamental deficiency of such theories is that they neglect functional considerations, which are crucially important if one wants to find out whether foreignizing translation can be considered appropriate in a given situation or

⁷ In actual fact, the majority of Zlobec's texts in Italian translation are re-elaborations of his own draft translations; such a translation procedure made it possible for those with virtually no knowledge of the source language, but with well-developed poetic competence in the target language, to act as «translators» as well.

⁸ Apart from Zlobec, there are, among others, two prose writer, Ivan Cankar (1876-1918) and Prežihov Voranc (1893-1950), whose works have been translated into Italian in a domesticating fashion and have been received well in the target culture.

not. An important fact is that limited-impact literatures, which have normally not been involved in the formation of the world literary canon, may still be in the phase of establishing themselves as part of world literature. Slovenian literature, for example, is in the process of getting its own place in the contexts of great-impact cultures such as the Italian culture, and the success of this arduous enterprise would probably be at stake if foreignization was the fundamental principle observed by the translators, whose primary objective should probably be to make the target culture interested in the source literature. Linguistic deviance of the target text produced by a foreignizing translator may often not be interpreted as purposeful, but may rather be attributed to translator's lack of target-language knowledge, which may consequently lead to lack of acceptability and, ultimately, to lack of acceptance (Toury 1995: 172 ff.).

That foreignizing translations could only seldom be appropriate when limited-impact literatures are introduced into great-impact cultures becomes hardly surprising if one takes into account that Venuti's basic preoccupations concern the domestic situation, for his goal «is ultimately to alter reading patterns» (Venuti 1998: 13) in the domestic culture and make the domestic constituencies sensitive to what is culturally different. What seems questionable is whether linguistic innovations in the target text generated on the basis of linguistic properties of the source text can be considered an appropriate instrument by means of which target readers could get a less biased idea of the foreign text and culture. Since these innovations are encoded in a particular language system –which automatically makes them part of its grammatical, lexical, and textual networks– there is no reason to believe that such target texts should provide for its readers, who often have no knowledge of the source-language system, better access to the source-text reality.

3. Conclusion

The issues discussed have shown that introduction of texts from limited-impact literatures into great-impact cultures presents rather specific translation-related problems, which are very complex and need careful planning. If these problems are not taken into account, translated texts, which are normally essential in making cross-cultural communication possible, can also contribute to the lack of interest in what is culturally different.

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