

Humour, Contexts and Translation

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When we talk about translation and humour, we normally mean translation of satirical texts. We consider whether, after having passed through to the other side of the "translation mirror", these texts have remained as satirical as they previously were. But if we assume that in this case the dominant function of translation is to re-create the humour, we have to ask further questions. First of them is: does the translator re-create the same type of humour that we find in the original text?

I think it is not possible, because there are different kinds of humour in different cultures. We do not laugh at the same things, and at the same points. Let me give you one example. Many songs written by Russian poet Vladimir Vysotsky include allusions to the political situation of the Soviet Union. They may take the form of puns, neologisms, or deformed words. But in Polish translations of these songs we find another kind of humour. Satirical elements of these text are often vulgar and brutal. In Polish versions of Vysotsky's songs we come across some colloquial elements which, in the opinion of the translator, should be satirical and, as a result, the recipient of Polish texts laughs at other points than the recipient of the Russian songs does (Bednarczyk 1994, 1995). Thus we may observe two different types of humour.

Of course, sometimes translators cannot render the kind of humour present in the original texts in their translation because:

- a) language structures of the target language do not permit it;
- b) elements of the cultural tradition of the target text are different from those elements of the cultural tradition of the source text.

An example seems appropriate to illustrate those remarks. In one of Vysotsky's songs we can find the following phrase, which I quote in the philological translation: "We are breaking saucers all year long/ We have eaten a dog on them/ if the cook does not lie" (Vysotsky 1981: 239)¹. In the Russian text we may observe two plays on words. The first one is the opposition: **saucers which fly in the madhouse** and **flying saucers**. The second and, in my opinion, more interesting one is the travesty of the Russian idiom "съесть на чем-нибудь собачку" (word-for-word translation: "eat a dog on something"). In one of Polish translations we read: "We gobbled a dog on them/ if the cook does not lie" (Vysotsky 1986: 43)². It is a mistake, because the Polish recipient may think that the narrator has really eaten a dog. But on the other hand it is funny because Poles do not eat dogs. Thus the target text contains a different kind of humour than the original text. But this different humour is acceptable for the recipient of the target culture. It should be explained here that in Polish there is an idiom "zjeść na czymś zęby" (word-for-word translation: "to have eaten one's teeth doing something") and it means the same as the Russian idiom does - "to know something very well".

The second example shows that we can translate the type of humour even if the structures of languages are different. Let me tell you an anecdote: "An Englishman, a Swiss and a German betted who of them was the best archer. The Englishman put an apple on the German's head. He shot, he hit and he exclaimed: 'I am Robin Hood!'. The Swiss put an apple on the Englishman's head. He shot, he hit and he exclaimed: 'I am William Tell!'. The German put an apple on the Swiss's head. He shot, he hit his eye and he exclaimed: 'I am sorry!' ". In Polish the expression "I am sorry" does not exist in that very form. The usual equivalent - "przepraszam" - does not allow an adequate rendering of the pun. In order to translate this anecdote we must choose another language structure. We might take advantage of a phrase which uses a comparison with the word "jak" ("like"): I do it like William Tell - *jak* Wilhelm Tell, like Robin Hood - *jak* Robin Hood, and the expression "I am sorry" would be replaced by the phrase "*jak mi przykro*". Thanks to this change of language structures we can re-create the

1 Russian text of this citation: "Мы тарелки бьем весь год
Мы на них собаку съели
Если повар нам не врет"

2 Polish version of this text: "Myśmy na nich psa wtroili
jeśli kucharz nie łże nam"

same kind of humour that can be observed in the original text, and adequately reproduce the satirical text in translation.

The next problem I would like to mention is the cultural tradition. It is impossible that two cultural traditions could be the same. They are different and these differences influence the process of translation and its outcome. The differences I mean here relate to associations:

- a) with political situation;
- b) with national tradition;
- c) with literary tradition.

As for this last point we must distinguish between two kinds of literary traditions: The first one is "international" literary tradition (those literary texts which are well-known in both the source culture and the target culture). The second, and more interesting for us, type of associations of literary tradition are those allusions of literary texts which are well-known in the culture of source texts only.

Associations with political situation may be completely incomprehensible for target culture recipients and even for the translator. Therefore the translator may make a mistake and, even when he does not, his recipients may not understand the political allusion. Researchers give various examples of these cases. One of them is the following: English students watched Polish film *Rejs (Voyage)* and could not understand why Polish audience laughed at the cultural-educational instructor on board the ship. While for Poles he symbolised a clerk of the odious political system, for English recipients he was the man who organised active rest for all passengers (Jędrzejko, Głąbik 1997: 120).

It may happen that the two political situations are similar. Then the translator may consciously turn one political association into another in order to bring the text closer to the recipient of the target version. This kind of translator's changes may include others associations too. For example in Vysotsky's song quoted above Russian patients in a madhouse write to the Russian lottery "Спорт-Лото" [Sport-Loto] to complain against television. In the Polish translation they complain to the Polish lottery "Toto-Lotek".

This brings us to the problem of associations with national tradition. Authors often reach for them to achieve comical effects. Vysotsky has used rare, archaic Russian names (Agrafena, Evstigney), which was humorous. In Polish versions these names remain Russian and strange, but are not funny any more. Polish recipients do not understand this humour because they do not know those names and their connotations in the Russian culture. But some comic elements may turn

out to be inconsistent with their intention when placed in another cultural tradition. I would like to illustrate this with one example. In the Polish tradition there exists an anecdote about a bald man meeting a redhead. The redhead says to the bald man: "God has not given you any hair." And the bald man answers: "He has, but it was red and I did not take it." I have been told by an interpreter that when he told this anecdote to a group of Britons they regarded it as a political joke against Irishmen. It is another proof that the type of humour in the target text is not the same as in the source text. But it is not the end. Recently in one of Polish newspapers I read the following announcement: "I wish all the best and far more patience to my dear Redhead... The bald one"³ (*Dziennik Łódzki* 1998, № 68: 32). For Poles this announcement brings to mind the anecdote mentioned above. And for us it is a signal that it is time to speak about intertextual associations and literary tradition.

I would like to mention a short story by Vasyl Shukshyn (1980). In this text, the author includes characters derived from Russian literature and folklore, fragments of Russian songs and allusions to other Russian literary works. What is more, these intertextual elements crash with elements of reality, of real social situation in the Soviet Union. Idiolects of Shukshyn's heroes crash with varied idiolects of contemporary Russian people. All these factors make the original text very witty. But how is the translation? (Bednarczyk 1997). It seems that the translation into English must be as difficult as translation into Polish. Maybe even more difficult, because Polish and Russian are related languages (Grosbart 1984), and thanks to it the translator can find some adequate equivalents. For example, he can translate the following play on words: "Бедная Лиза – все знаете какая я бедная" (Shukshyn 1980: 8). In English: "Poor Lisa – You all know how poor I am". In Polish it sounds: "Biedna Lisa – wszyscy wiecie, jaka jestem biedna" (Shukshyn, 1986: 4). But the translator cannot re-create intertextual associations with Nicolay Karamzin's novel *Бедная Лиза* (*Poor Lisa*). Polish recipients do not laugh reading that: 1) Ilya Murometz is sitting on his bookshelf and he cannot stand up, or 2) Lensky exclaims: "I would totally forbid duels". Polish and English recipients cannot understand Russian humour, because they do not know that Ilya Murometz, a hero of Russian folklore, could not move, and they do not know that Lensky, one of characters from Alexander Pushkin's poem *Evgeni Onegin*, was killed in a duel.

3 In Polish: "Kochanemu Rudzielcowi wszystkiego dobrego i dużo więcej cierpliwości... Łysy"

Some translators try to replace original intertextual elements with elements from the target culture but the results are not usually good. For example, in the text discussed here, the Polish translator replaced Russian folklore song (*tshastushka*), which Shukshyn had used as an allusion to the moustache of a witch's daughter, with a song containing a vulgar sexual allusion. Also in the Polish version of an English film the translator replaced the title of the Beatles' song *Yesterday* with the title of a Polish song (*Kolorowe jarmarki*), thus implying that English people know this Polish song.

But sometimes a similar conversion may be acceptable for the critic. For example in Shukshyn's short story mentioned above, when in the original text a beautiful devil-woman sings for the monk a song entitled *Разве ты мужчина (Are you a man?)* the Polish translator has replaced this title with the title of a Polish satirical song *Gdzie ci mężczyźni (Where are those men?)*. The translation is as witty as the Russian version and both of them have the same satirical functions.

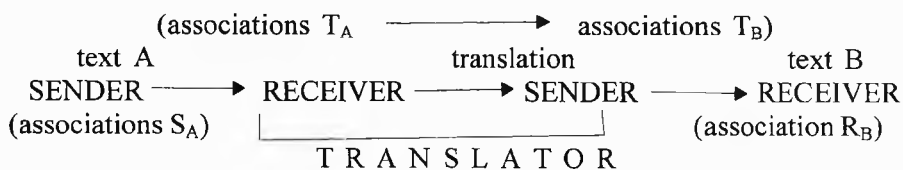
Analysing the question of re-creating the type of humour, we have considered questions of stylistic and artistic means which are not identical in the original and in the translator's texts, and we have stated that the types of humour in the culture of the source text and in that of target texts are different, because they are influenced by different contextual aspects. These aspects have also influence on the translating process and on the translation outcome, too.

But translators introduce changes into their own version of a text not for this reason only. Often, they change the text because they wish to bring it closer to the recipient of the target text. They insert into the target version comic elements that do not exist in the original. This may take the form of a quotation from literature of the target culture or an allusion to this literature or some song. Sometimes it is an allusion to the universal literary tradition. In the aforementioned translation of Vysotsky's song, the Polish translator replaced the name of Russian lottery with that of a Polish one, but in another translation of this very song another translator replaced the Russian lottery with Comecon, that is the Council for Mutual Economic Aid (in Polish: RWPG).

Sometimes the translator wants to amplify the humour of the original or compensate for those comic elements which disappear during the translation process by using other comic elements. These new elements introduced into the translated text by the translator may be acceptable from the point of view of recipients of the translation or not. They also may be acceptable from the point of view of the critic, or not. Thus some of satirical elements proposed by a translator may be accepted by recipients of the translation but not accepted by the critic of translation. For example, some translations of Vysotsky's songs by Jacek Kaczmarski

ski are witty and acceptable for Polish recipients but their satirical aspect is not directed against the political situation in the Soviet Union as it is the case in the original text. It is aimed at the situation in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s. These translations are not approved by critics who consider them as travesties of Russian songs, not as translations.

In my book (Bednarczyk 1999) and in one of my earlier papers I proposed a scheme of translation process which includes associations of the author of the original, associations of the translator and associations of the recipients of source and target texts (Bednarczyk 1996: 4):



This includes also comic associations. They are associations of the both source and target texts, associations of the author's subconscious, of the translator's subconscious and of the recipients' subconscious.

These associations are formed intentionally and unintentionally as unintentional humour in the translation. This type of humour may result from the use of archaic, pompous or incorrect constructions in the target language and from distorted semantics of original statements. The former may be illustrated with an example quoted by Zygmunt Grosbart (Grosbart 1997: 50). He wrote that Russian translator Irinarh Vvedensky has always extended his translations. While Dickens had written: "I kissed her" Vvedensky wrote: "I impressed a kiss on her little cherry red mouth" ("Я запечатлел поцелуй на ее вишневых губках"). An example of distorted semantics can be found in the following translation of Vysotsky's song where instead of the original phrase (in philological translation):

"I did not beat women before I was seventeen / When I was seventeen I hit for the first time"⁴ (Vysotsky 1981: 47). Polish recipients read:

4 Russian original: "Я женщин не бил до семнадцати лет
В семнадцать ударил впервые"

"I did not touch a woman for a long time
I am extremely resilient" (Vysotsky 1986: 15)⁵.

In this case the translator could not re-create the semantical essence of the Russian text. Perhaps the musical plane of the song interfered with it. In another example the original statement:

"I am not here, I abandoned Russia!

My girl-friends cry (in the Russian poem we have the idiom "to go snotty")

Now, I have moved to a different place (Russian idiom - "I sow my sunflower")

On the alien Champs Ellyse"⁶ (Vysotsky 1981: 339) has become in the Polish version:

"I am not here, I abandoned Russia!

My girl-friends are snotty

Now I sow my semen

On the cruelly alien Champs Ellyse"⁷ (Vysotsky 1982: 78-79). I think that the translator did not understand the source text.

But even if the translator has understood the original text, he can introduce unintentional humour in his translation if associations created by him are comical and not adequate for original associations, like in the case of one of Sergei Yesenin's poems where the Russian poet wrote about a pink steed galloping in the morning⁸ (Yesenin 1975: 80) and a Polish translator wrote about a "red mare"⁹ (Yesenin 1975: 81). It reminds one of Vladimir Mayakovsky's revolutionary poem *Левый марш* and with the line about "the mare of history" ("Клячу историю загоним"). It comically clashes with the lyrical poem of Yesenin.

5 Polish translation: "Kobiety nie tknąłem przez dłuższy czas
Wytrzymałość mam nadzwyczajną"

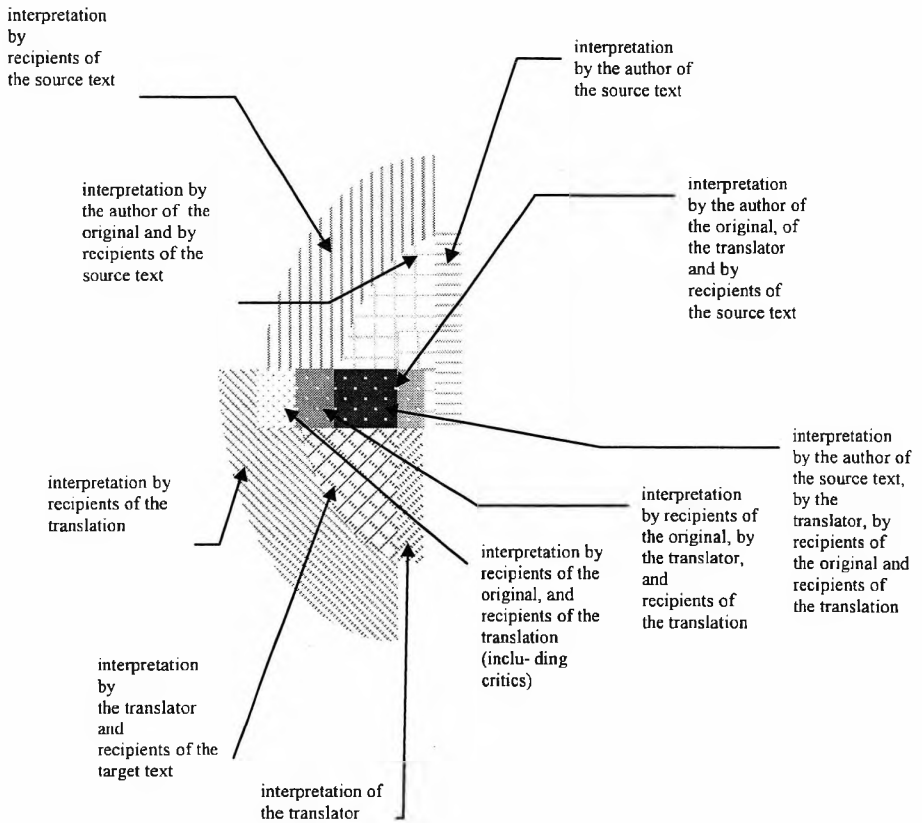
6 Russian text: "Нет меня, я покинул Рассею!
Мои девочки ходят в соплях.
Я теперь свои семечки сею
На чужих Елисейских полях"

7 Polish version: "Nie ma mnie, porzuciłem Rosję
Moje dziewczyny chodzą zasmarkane.
Obsiewam teraz swymi nasionami
Obce okrutnie Elizejskie Pola"

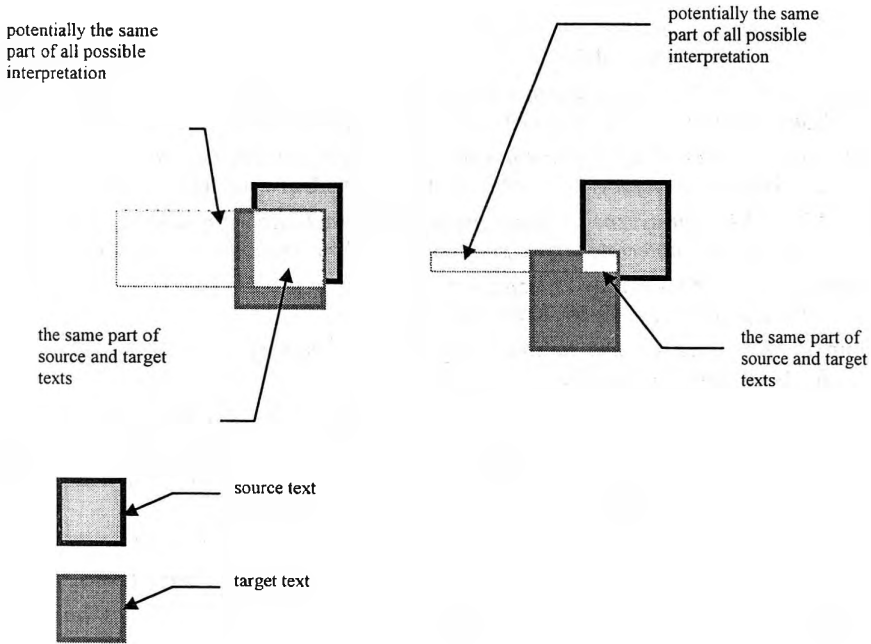
8 Source text: "Словно я весенней гулкой ранью
Проскакал на розовом коне"

9 Target text version: "Jakbym zgiełkiem w porannych zieleniach
Przecwałował czerwoną kobyłą"

However all the various issues raised here are connected with the notion of translation as a particular way of interpreting the world. Different interpretations of the text can be imagined as a series of layers superimposed upon one another. Partly they overlap. This is illustrated in the scheme:



The degree of the shift of interpretation depends on the degree of the shift of texts and vice versa.



I think that the shifts of the plane of humour in the interpretation on the level of the source text and that of the target text are subject to the same principles as shifts of other planes of translation. Thus manipulations of satirical elements of literary texts should try to preserve as many satirical associations from the source text and culture as it is possible without a losing the acceptance of recipients, including critics.

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Humor, kontekst i tłumaczenie

W artykule rozpatrywana jest problematyka przekładu elementów wnoszących do tekstu komizm. Zwrócono w nim uwagę zarówno na trudności przekładu związane z różnicami struktur językowych oraz tradycji kulturowych, jak i na możliwości kompensacji funkcjonalnej. Zadano także pytanie o rodzaj (typ) humoru w oryginale i tłumaczeniu.

Szczególną uwagę poświęcono inwencji twórczej tłumacza, wprowadzającego do tekstu docelowego elementy komizmu nieobecne w oryginale i zastępującego realia źródłowe realiami osadzonymi w kulturze tłumaczenia. Odnotowano przy tym przy-

padki niezamierzonego komizmu wersji przekładowej. Zwrócono również uwagę na konieczność uwzględnienia różnic interpretacyjnych, związanych z przesunięciami w płaszczyźnie asocjacyjnej w tekście oryginału i przekładu.

Przedstawiono schemat nakładania się na siebie interpretacji uczestników procesu przekładu z uwzględnieniem przesunięć, wynikających z innego widzenia świata.