

INDIVIDUAL STYLE IN TRANSLATION

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ABSTRACT

There have been various approaches to the presence of individual stylistic traits in translation. The paper briefly describes various concepts of individual translator's style as presented in Czech and Slovak translation theories mainly by Jiří Levý, but by other authors as well.

The main point of the paper, though, is to explore whether and how the structuralist ideas are present in modern translation studies. Is the notion of individual translator's style relevant for research in translation and/or for translation criticism? Has a clear and usable definition been formulated? What method should be used for determining the individual style of a translator?

The paper also proposes a method of finding stylistic patterns and tendencies in the translations done by translators who are writers themselves. The method is based on the analysis of the characteristic features of their own poetics, presuming that some of them are present in the translations, too. To illustrate the method, the paper presents partial results of the analysis of the poetry and translations by Jan Zábřana, a significant Czech post-war poet and translator.

Keywords: Jan Zábřana; individual translator's style; Czech poetry; beat poetry; poetics; stylistic patterns

In terms of translation research, style is quite a complicated category. Not only there are many various definitions stressing various aspects of using language for creating texts, but there is almost no systematic theory of assessing the style of individual translations and translators. This can be attributed to the fact that, traditionally, translation is considered mostly a derivative activity, rather than a peculiar artistic effort: "A translator cannot have, indeed should not have, a style of his or her own, the translator's task being simply to reproduce as closely as possible the style of the original" (Baker 2000: 244).

In the tradition of Prague School, translation is assessed, to put it simply, mainly in terms of shifts the translator makes, both intentionally and not, thus changing the function of the original (Levý 1963). In translation criticism, this means examining to what extent the translator manages to re-create the original, while staying as invisible as possible. In book reviews, for example, if style is mentioned, it is usually in relation to the

source text and the author. Even though we know that the text is somehow mediated, we are supposed to forget this fact and read the translation as original.

Some of the more recent translation theories question the desirability and the feasibility of the translator's invisibility. Theo Hermans (1996) says the notion of translator's invisibility is but an illusion. He names several objective reasons such as the asymmetry of languages, different contexts, intents, functions, and, in fact, the whole communicative situations. Hermans also claims that the translator will inevitably leave a trace in the text, asking: "Exactly whose voice comes to us when we read translated discourse?" (Hermans 1996: 26). This means that the voice of the translator should be posited even if it is not apparent, for instance in what Levý calls *translator style*, indicating the difference between routine and artistic translations (Levý 1955).

Levý himself says that literary translation requires talent, quite different from the talent necessary for writing. According to Levý, a translator does not need compositional, inventional and observational skills, but they need as much stylistic talent as the author, and sometimes even more (Levý 1955). So, if we accept the idea that translation is more than a mere reproduction and an attempt of approaching the quality of the original, we should think about the style of translation in the same way we think about the style of the original. We should be able to characterize the style of a translator, just like we are able to describe the style of an author. Paradoxically enough, many such descriptions we come across, mainly in newspaper and magazine articles and reviews, are based solely on the reading of translations.

Nevertheless, describing a translator's individual style poses several potential obstacles. Firstly, how do we distinguish between the author's and translator's voices? Is there any 'standard' translation, theoretically showing no translator's intervention? We have partly answered this question before. Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short (1981) present the opposition of monist and dualist perspectives in approach to style, claiming that the dualist perspective allows us to focus only on the form, regardless of the content. Thus we can assess the stylistic variants more easily. The dualist approach also implies that it is possible to write and translate in a *neutral* style. However, in translation research and criticism it would still be stylistically relevant to examine why the translator decided to use such equivalent (Leech and Short 1981: 18).

What Leech and Short describe as monist perspective is quite close to the main idea of structuralism – form is inseparable from content, meaning that any change to the form inevitably means a change to the content. In Leech and Short's point of view, monism denies the possibility of paraphrase and translation. As a solution, Leech and Short offer a *pluralist* approach, as they call it, based on Halliday's functional theory of language. According to Halliday (1971), language has three functions: ideational (the relation of language to reality), interpersonal (the relation of language and listeners/readers) and textual (enabling the language to create text). This functional approach to stylistics is also quite similar to the approach of Prague School, namely Roman Jakobson (Levý 1955).

Another solution can be found in the works of Jan Mukařovský, one of the co-founders of the Prague Linguistic Circle. Mukařovský was very much aware of the fact that the options for defining the uniqueness of a poem or a poet are limited and he believed that a clue for defining this uniqueness can be found in what he called *individual style*. The individual style, in his view, unifies the constituents of the text, thus overcoming the tra-

ditional dualism of content and form. According to Mukařovský (1982), meaning of a text is dynamic and can be characterised as a *current* which, in a poem or any text, is captured in a form so that it is perceivable for the readers who, in their minds, put the current in motion again. Later on, he developed a concept of *semantic gesture*, which can be understood as the organizing principle of a text. However, an organizing principle itself is of a semantic nature, which means that semantic gesture is also a unifying semantic tendency.

In its nature, the concept of semantic gesture somehow defines the main problems of research in stylistics, presenting a paradox of a gesture which is indeterminate but, on the other hand, establishes the semantic unity of the text. This means that it is very difficult to characterize what makes a text unique and the only instrument is one's stylistic competence which, according to Leech and Short, is "an ability which different people possess in different measures" (Leech and Short 1981: 49).

This brings us to the issue of stylistic relevance. What is stylistically relevant? Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short claim that every work of fiction contains certain departures or deviations from the norm, characterizing such deviance as "the difference between the normal frequency of a feature, and its frequency in the text or corpus" (Leech and Short 1981: 48). This idea is very closely connected to the Prague School's notion of foregrounding, indicating an artistically motivated deviation. One must bear in mind that the fact that a feature is foregrounded does not necessarily mean it is stylistically relevant. These deviations from the norm have to form a certain pattern, thus creating what František Miko calls *unity of style* (Miko 1977: 41).

So, is there a workable definition of the individual translator's style? Has there been any research into this field of translation studies? There are several studies and articles on the topic of individual style in translation. The first translation theorist to apply the notion of style specifically to translation was probably Mona Baker (2000) in her article *Towards a Methodology for Investigating the Style of a Literary Translator* published in *Target*. In her opinion, style is a sort of "thumb-print that is expressed in a range of linguistic – as well as non-linguistic – features" (Baker 2000: 245). By non-linguistic features she means such issues as "the translator's choice of the type of material to translate", and also the translator's "consistent use of specific strategies", including prefaces, afterwords, footnotes, or glossing (Baker 2000: 245). She claims that mainly repeating of preferred patterns in the translator's linguistic behaviour should be investigated.

Another view of individual style in translation is presented by Gabriela Saldanha. In her study called *Style of Translation: An exploration of stylistic patterns in the translations of Margaret Jull Costa and Peter Bush* she tries to "identify and explore typical stylistic traits in the work of two translators, using a corpus-based, data-driven methodology" (Saldanha 2005: 1). Her qualitative analysis is based on the data drawn from a bi-directional parallel corpus of English and Portuguese narrative, focusing on features such as emphatic italics, use of source language words etc. Saldanha defines the translator's style as "involving a consistent pattern of choices that distinguishes the work of one translator from that of others" (Saldanha 2005: 1).

In original texts, patterns and tendencies we find can be attributed only to the author or authors. In translation, however, this is more complicated, since the resulting text is a joint work of two creative minds (assuming there was one author and one translator and leaving out the editor and other people and factors engaged in the process). How do we distin-

guish the author's voice from the translator's input? To what extent the translator influences the result? And, again, whose voice is it that comes to us when we read a translation?

My own research focuses on translators who were themselves authors. The analysis of their own writings is used to find some of the patterns in translations more easily, the hypothesis being that similar tendencies can be found in translations, too. Since, in case of authors such as Jan Zábřana, Jiří Kolář, Jiřina Hauková, Kamil Bednář and others, translating is perceived as a secondary activity and very little attention has been paid to it in secondary literature, it is important to put translations in the contexts of the authors' work. What was their motivation for choosing texts for translation? Does the fact that the translator is primarily a writer influence the nature of the resulting translation? Does it in any way reflect the strategies the writer uses in their own, original work? Is a translation of poetry done by a poet in fact an adaptation? What is the position of translated texts in the context of the writer's canon?

Jan Zábřana was one of the most influential Czech translators and poets of the second half of the 20th Century. As an author, Zábřana was obsessed with rewriting his texts. For him, a poem was never complete, never finished. A text was meant to be rewritten and reconstructed over and over again, not to reach the only perfect form but treating it as a living organism. This means that most of his poems exist in several variants – manuscript, the samizdat version, the official version and the one from Zábřana's collected works, published in the early 1990s. The variants of his poems from the samizdat almanac *Life is Everywhere*, published in 1956, and from the 'official' collections, published approximately ten years later, were compared. The comparison revealed certain prevalent tendencies. The first and probably most prominent is a tendency towards more natural use of language so that it doesn't attract too much attention. This is achieved mainly through lexical changes – a more colloquial expression for a poetic one – and also syntactic changes. In such cases participle phrases are replaced with looser syntactic structures so that the text is more like a narration than a poem.

There are many changes to the semantic level, too. Some verses are intensified using for example idiomatic expressions. In some cases, the changes to the semantic level result in more consistency or a better coherence. On the other hand, Zábřana often makes the meaning more complex and less easily decipherable.

Although there are poems that were completely rewritten, most changes only concern individual words or phrases. If the changes go beyond a single verse they usually tend to adjust the strophic structure.

In general we can say that what Zábřana wants to achieve is as natural use of language as possible and coherent and clear (but not necessarily simple) expression. As the changes to the texts were done some time between 1956 and 1965 we can assume that similar tendencies and strategies can be found in Zábřana's translations of American poetry, and especially the poetry of the Beat Generation.

Since Jan Zábřana wrote many essays and studies on the authors he translated we have quite a lot of information to answer the question why he chose the Beat poetry. It was not only their defiance of the society and establishment but also their concept of poetry as something that should be read aloud. What Jan Zábřana and beat poets had in common was that for them a poem was an organic structure not finalised by writing it down. Although there is a difference – changes in beat poetry were often caused by

the fact that it was read aloud and included a certain amount of improvisation, whereas Zábřana rewrote his verses intentionally, as a result of his developing poetic vision. So, in this case we can say that Zábřana chose beat poetry because it was very close to what he was trying to achieve.

To answer the question whether Zábřana's own poetics influence his decisions while translating, I will use the results of my analysis. I chose Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* and *Starting from San Francisco*, Gregory Corso's poems from the collection *The Happy Birthday of Death* and also a selection of Kenneth Patchen's verses.

When reading Zábřana's translations and comparing them to the original, it is very clear that Zábřana tries to convey as many specific features of the poems and their authors as possible. Ferlinghetti's poems retain their "open form" and frequent alliterations and irregular rhyme scheme. However, the semantic aspect is always at the forefront, so Zábřana often prefers a clear expression over an exact equivalent, even though the beat poetry is based mainly on sequences of concrete motives so the translation can be quite literal. On the other hand, these motives are often very closely related to the source culture which, for the translator, presents another difficulty.

He comments on this in one of his essays:

If unusual language element is used in the original, the translator is obliged to use them, too (if they fulfil the same function as in the original). He is obliged to find them or make them, or, to be more precise, create them, sentence after sentence, because this difficult work is a matter of constantly reopened, unwearied confrontation and oscillation between the 'original' and the 'new original', the tension of creative act. To put it simply, it is a key and if no key matches you have to become a locksmith and file one out (Zábřana 1989: 375).

The analysis was carried out on each language level separately with regard to relevant factors on other levels as well. For example, on the morphological level, Zábřana often replaces participles, a characteristic structural element of Ginsberg's *Howl*, for instance, with present or past tenses. This brings a certain level of concretization, because in Czech, finite verb form implicitly expresses person, number and tense.

The main link between Zábřana and the beat generation is the effort to depoetize poetry. A poem, according to them, should not be an autotelic expression of the poet's aesthetics but an integral part of life experience. Hence the train of concrete motives resembling diary entries, quite close to the poetics of Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

In Zábřana's translations and changes to his poems, the depoetization tendency is probably most apparent in his attempts for as much speakability as possible. In his opinion, language should not attract too much attention, which is why he often adjusted expressions that obscured the meaning rather than pointing it out in an original and apt manner. This is something we can see in his translations, too. He often decides for a clearer, more natural solution instead of one that would imitate the original, but to the detriment of understanding. This is, for example, the case of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* or Gregory Corso's *Hair*.

We can conclude that there are certain tendencies traceable both in Zábřana's own poetry and his translations of beat poets. These tendencies and patterns characterize his style both as a poet and a translator. In case of authors who were also translators, the

research of their individual style helps putting translating into the context of their work. In general, it helps characterizing individual translators, provides methods for translation assessment and can even help promoting the position of translators.

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