

# Translation norms in the mediation of a peripheral literature into central cultures

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Povzetek

Članek se ukvarja z relevantnostjo koncepta “prevodne norme” pri opazovanju nekaterih značilnosti prevodov iz slovenske književnosti kot periferne oz. nedominantne književnosti v manj periferne (bolj centralne oz. dominantne) kulture. Na osnovi konceptualnega instrumentarija, ki ga nudi Touryeva tipologija prevodnih norm, in njegove aplikacije na nekaj reprezentativnih besedil klasične in sodobne slovenske literature, se izkaže, da so v opazovanih prevodih z normami povezane izbire precej homogene: v okviru začetnih norm lahko opazimo stremljenje k podomačevalni sprejemljivosti, ki večinoma močno prevladuje nad potujitveno adekvatnostjo. Tendencia se potrди pri operacionalnih normah, ki običajno kažejo trdno sledenje ciljnim jezikovnim in besedilnim vzorcem in tako na ravni preliminarnih norm v nekem smislu upravičujejo prevodno politiko odprtosti za nedominantne književnosti, čeprav še vedno v okvirih varne zasidranosti v idiomatičnost ciljnega izraza. Med avtorji, ki služijo za ponazoritev, so Ivan Cankar, Boris Pahor, Ciril Zlobec in Goran Vojnović.

**Ključne besede:** prevodne norme, prevajanje perifernih književnosti, podomačevanje, potujevanje, slovenski avtorji

## 1 VARIABILITY OF TRANSLATION NORMS

At least since the publication of Andrew Chesterman's paper (1993) and Gideon Toury's seminal volume *Descriptive Translation Studies and beyond* (1995), the concept of translation norms has been widely known and much discussed, and has become one of the fundamental notions of the study of translation. This is unsurprising since, as a social activity, translation is necessarily norm-governed. As a consequence, the concept of norm is of substantial heuristic value in our trying to understand the nature of translation as a particular kind of communication. Being norm-dependent is a universal characteristic of translation, although the norms themselves, which regulate translation practices, are far from universal. In actual fact, they vary greatly inasmuch as they are culturally conditioned and situationally constrained. This implies that different cultures may show different translation norm preferences and that the translation of generically different texts may trigger the application of different norms. Norm-related differences may also be the consequence of a change of some other variable (e.g. different translators, different translation purposes, different target audiences, different points in time at which a text is translated, etc.).

## 2 TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATION NORMS IN A PERIPHERAL LITERATURE

In the case of literary translation, a circumstance which may have a significant impact on which translation norms will be activated in the production of a translated text is the position of the source and the target cultures and their literatures within the wider literary polysystem. It appears that the behaviour of translators in peripheral cultures, i.e. those which occupy non-dominant positions in the international literary polysystem, presents considerable peculiarities compared to the behaviour of translators working in central cultures.

At this point it is necessary to emphasize that the terms "central" and "peripheral" culture and literature are relative, since the centrality or peripherality of a given culture and literature changes with time and is bound to be imprecise as well as determined by the observer's standpoint: if literatures written in English are central in today's global polysystem (although to different degrees), then French or German or Russian literatures are less so, although incomparably more than literatures like Catalan, Danish, Welsh or Slovene, which, again, differ with regard to the positions they occupy on the periphery of the global literary polysystem. Also, these positions can be perceived differently depending on the perspective from which they are viewed. Many peripheral literatures may thus be considered

of relative importance in neighbouring cultures, although on a wider scale their impact may be relatively low. For instance, Slovene literary texts may therefore be expected to arouse more interest among Italian, Croatian or Austrian readers than among audiences in Spain or Portugal. Another factor which may influence the translational reception of texts of a peripheral literature is whether the target literature is itself also a peripheral literature, since peripheral literatures tend to be more interested in other peripheral literatures than central literatures are interested in peripheral literatures (cf. Chesterman 2016: 36). However, in spite of reciprocal interests, within a given peripheral literature there may be hierarchies in terms of how much attention is given to various other peripheral literatures (cf. Vimr 2018: 47-48).

In proportionate terms, peripheral cultures tend to translate more than central cultures, Slovene culture being a case in point, with translated texts accounting for over one third of all the books published in the country. By contrast, in the United Kingdom, the amount of translated texts represents just about 3% of the total book production. The quantitative importance of translation in peripheral cultures is reflected in the relative value attached to it in society. Translated texts as products of the activity of translation as cultural mediation are regarded as essential elements of the corpus of literary works in the Slovene language. Peripheral cultures also usually rely to a large degree on their own resources in translational communication with central cultures, thus being characterized by “self-translation” or “autonomous translation” – as the two approaches have been defined by Michael Cronin –, whereas central cultures, which tend to be more self-sufficient, often depend on external input when importing texts from peripheral cultures, thus resorting to “heteronymous” or “dependent translation” (Cronin 2006: 40). This implies that the impulse to translate from a peripheral to a central culture would frequently originate in the former rather than the latter.

There is yet another feature of peripheral cultures which is important for a discussion of translation norms: such cultures tend to show a greater openness to accommodate a variety of translation strategies than central cultures. In terms of Toury’s notion of **initial norms** (2012: 79-81), *acceptability* and *adequacy*, peripheral cultures show a stronger tendency towards adequacy, whereas central cultures tend to prefer acceptability. The two approaches are not to be seen as totally exclusive of one another, since every translation will necessarily be both acceptable and adequate, though in different proportions, and “any attempt to get closer to the one would entail distancing from the other” (Toury 2012: 70).

In other words, in peripheral cultures *foreignizing (exoticizing)* translations are produced to a greater extent than in central cultures, which are more inclined to prefer *domesticating (fluent, invisible, assimilating, ethnocentric)* translations.

This seems to be a natural outcome of the position translated texts have in peripheral and in central cultures. Since the former tend to have a greater need for translation than the latter and are therefore used to continually importing and adopting foreign models, they will also have a more pluralistic approach to translation, considering foreignization (i.e. adequacy or source orientation) as a possible strategy, whereas central cultures, which tend to perceive themselves as more self-sufficient and are less prone to accommodate “visible” elements of Otherness, will favour domestication (i.e. acceptability or target orientation) to a greater degree. Further, since in peripheral cultures translations are likely to be considered of greater significance than in central cultures, the former may be more prone to allow translated texts to challenge the established linguistic and literary conventions than the latter. As Itamar Even-Zohar (1990: 50) has observed:

[s]ince translational activity participates, when it assumes a central position, in the process of creating new, primary models, the translator’s main concern here is not just to look for ready-made models in his home repertoire into which the source texts would be transferable. Instead, he is prepared in such cases to violate the home conventions. Under such conditions the chances that the translation will be close to the original in terms of adequacy (in other words, a reproduction of the dominant textual relations of the original) are greater than otherwise. (50)

Differences between central and peripheral cultures also appear to be considerable in terms of translation policy as one of the two components<sup>1</sup> of **preliminary norms** (Toury 2012: 82). The choice of texts which are translated may vary greatly between central and peripheral cultures, one of the differences being a consequence of the interest shown towards authors and works of peripheral literatures themselves. Typically, in central cultures it is lower than in peripheral cultures, which are likely to share an affinity with other peripheral cultures and their literatures. In its turn, this will be reflected in **operational norms**, i.e. norms governing the selection and distribution of linguistic material at all levels of textual organization, which consist of “matricial norms” and “textual-linguistic norms” (ibid.: 82-84). From Toury’s definition it may be inferred that “matricial norms” concern more specific translation choices, whereas “textual-linguistic” norms are more general; however, the distinction between the two types of operational norms is not very clear and their applicability to the analysis of translated texts may be of limited value. Depending on the initial norm adopted in the translation of a given source text, operational choices will reflect the translator’s orientation either towards adequacy or towards acceptability.

<sup>1</sup> The other component is “directness of translation”, which concerns the level of tolerance for indirect translation (Toury 2012: 82). It is not taken into consideration in this paper, since not enough is known about the possible relationship between directness of translation on the one hand and the position of a culture in terms of its peripherality or centrality.

### 3 TRANSLATION OF SLOVENE LITERARY TEXTS INTO MAJOR CULTURES

Since the period of national revival in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Slovene culture has witnessed a lively translation activity. However, the translational exchange was for a long time almost exclusively unidirectional: a great number of literary texts were translated into Slovene, but very few Slovene works found their way into other languages. It was only after the Second World War and in particular in the past couple of decades that Slovene literature started to be translated to a noticeable extent, both into central and into peripheral cultures. But the results achieved in terms of the recognisability of Slovene literature in other languages have perhaps not been proportionate to the efforts invested in the translational enterprise. In other words, the reception of the translated texts has often been rather limited and its effects relatively short-lived. On the other hand, especially over the last two decades, there have also been some translations of Slovene literary texts which have met with a favourable reception. The reasons behind such disparate outcomes, which go from almost complete lack of response to wide critical acclaim, typically reserved only for best sellers, are complex and reflect the specific circumstances, literary and extra-literary, of individual cases. Among the most significant factors are the selection of texts for translation and their communicative potential within the target culture; the choice of publisher and its position in the target publishing system; the expertise of the translator and his/her collaborators (e.g. language and literature experts consulted in the process of translation); the type and scale of the promotional activities accompanying the publication of the translation; the translation strategies adopted by the translator.<sup>2</sup>

The array of authors and texts that have enjoyed a successful translational reception is varied and, at first sight, it may seem rather difficult to find a common denominator which could explain the circumstances behind their success. Among the writers who have been particularly well received are Ivan Cankar in Italy, Vladimir Bartol in France, Italy, and Spain, as well as Boris Pahor and Lojze Kovačič. Pahor has enjoyed a particularly good reception in France, Austria, and Germany as well as, over the past decade, in Italy, whereas Kovačič has been especially well received in Austria and Germany. Cankar's chief success in Italy was *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica* (*The bailiff Jernej and his rights*), a story dealing with questions of property, class, social justice and poverty, which appealed to Italian readers of the 1970s and 1980s, when socialist idea(l)s were a constant presence on the Italian political scene. Vladimir Bartol's pseudo-historical novel *Alamut* was first noticed in France and, through indirect translations from French, also in Spain and Portugal and later,

2 For a more detailed discussion of the factors potentially determining the success of some works of Slovene literature abroad see Ožbot (2011), on which this section is based.

thanks to direct translations, in the German-speaking world and in Italy. The novel's literary impact is bound to its narrative being set in the Arab world and opening up the question of the power of religion at a time of an awakened fear of Islamic fundamentalism in Western world. Finally, Boris Pahor, who is currently perhaps internationally the most prominent contemporary Slovene author, became initially known by French and German translations of his partially autobiographical novels (in particular *Necropolis (Pilgrim among the Shadows)*), which are often based on the author's concentration-camp experiences during World War II. Kovačič has been highly acclaimed in Austria and Germany after a translation was published in 2004 of the first part of his autobiographical novel *Prišleki (The Newcomers)*, a saga about his growing-up in Switzerland and the family's forced move to their father's homeland in the late 1930s. In the past few years, there has been another author, Goran Vojnović, whose texts, especially *Čefurji raus (Southern Scum Go Home)*, have been translated into several European languages, such as Italian, Polish, Swedish as well as Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. The story which is set in an immigrant community and deals with questions of identity, language and foreignness has found readers in different environments, especially in various parts of ex-Yugoslavia.

What do such cases of successful reception have in common? Probably little in terms of specific narrative, textual or linguistic features characterizing them, apart from the fact that all the above-mentioned works are prose texts. As such they may more easily find a relatively large readership than poetry. Although poetry has probably been the most translated genre of Slovene literature, it has generally met with considerably less success than texts of narrative prose. The problem is in no way specific to the translation of Slovene literature and is more likely to concern poetry as such and therefore also its translation. Although in contemporary literature, a lot of poetry is written, it tends to be read less than prose, possibly also because it may often demand greater interpretative effort from the reader than prose texts. Of course, there are some Slovene poets, who have been translated to great acclaim into various languages; for instance, Ciril Zlobec and Tomaž Šalamun have enjoyed a successful reception in Italy the United States (and some other cultures), respectively, but they are to be regarded rather as exceptions to the rule.

In view of all this, it is not surprising that all the works mentioned are prose texts. Apart from this, however, what they fundamentally share is a potential to appeal to the target readers by offering them experiences with which they can identify or by encouraging them to reflect upon questions which they find relevant in their own lives. All the texts in question have been able to establish a strong connection with the target culture – ideologically, politically or socially, as has been pointed out in relation to Cankar's and Bartol's texts, and/or by actually referring to the target environment, as has been the case with works by Boris Pahor and Lojze Kovačič, which are to a significant extent set in the French and in the German-speaking environments respectively. This may contribute to explaining the favourable reception

of their translations in the French- and German-speaking worlds. Pahor's success in France may also be connected with the interest that the French readers have traditionally had in literary works concerning the resistance, which is a popular subject dealt with in many works of 20<sup>th</sup>-century French literature itself.

What seems to be decisive for a successful reception of a translation in a given target environment is that there is a sufficient degree of communicative potential for the target audience. Without such common ground, a productive interaction between a translated literary text and its readers cannot take place. In terms of **preliminary translation norms**, this implies that the selection of the source texts for translation which takes into account various elements of the target situation so as to make possible a productive communicative exchange between the translated text and its readers will essentially contribute to the success of the translated text in the target culture.

However, besides trying to address the target reader through some shared common ground between the source and the target culture, the translations of the texts briefly discussed above share another common feature: all of them have been translated in an unfailingly domesticating fashion. Thus, at the level of **initial norms** they show the translators' preference for acceptability rather than adequacy. The overall domesticating nature of the translations does not exclude a potential presence of a variety of foreignizing elements in the translated texts, but they are used in such a way as not to affect the idiomaticity of the translation as a text written in the target language and integrated into the target culture.

The strong preference for acceptability in different translations of the same text can be seen in the first three, introductory sentences to Boris Pahor's *Nekropola*, in which he narrates about his post-war return to the place in Alsace where he had been imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. The passage is given in the Slovene original and in translations into English, French, German and Italian:

Nedeljski popoldan je in asfaltirani trak, ki se vzpenja gladek in ovinkast zmeraj više v planine, ni tako samotnen, kakor bi mi bilo prav. Avtomobili me prehitevajo, drugi se vračajo v Schirmek, v dolino, takó da mi turistični promet trga in banalizira pričakovano zbranost. Saj vem, tudi jaz sem s svojim vozilom del motorizirane procesije, a predstavljam si, da bi, če bi bil sam, zavoljo nekdanje spojenosti s tem ozračjem, moja pričujočnost zdaj ne spreminjala sanjske podobe, ki skozi ves povojni čas nedotaknjena počiva v senci moje zavesti.

(Boris Pahor: *Nekropola*)

It's a Sunday afternoon, and the smooth and sinuous asphalt strip that leads ever higher into the mountains is not as desolate as I would have wished it to



be. Cars pass me or return down into the valley, toward Schirmeck, and the volume of tourist traffic disrupts, defiles, even, the calm I had anticipated. Admittedly, my car and I are now a part of the motorized procession. I had hoped that if there was no other traffic but me, my former intimacy with this place would keep my intrusion from distorting the dreamlike images that have lived untouched in the shadows of my mind ever since the war.

*(Translated by Michael Biggins)*

Dimanche après-midi : la route goudronnée qui monte, lisse et tortueuse dans les montagnes, n'est pas aussi solitaire que je le voudrais. Des voitures me doublent, d'autres rentrent à Schirmeck, dans la vallée, et la circulation entrave le recueillement que j'espérais trouver. Je sais bien que moi aussi je participe avec mon véhicule à la procession motorisée, mais je me figure que si j'étais seul, ma présence, parce que je suis un vieux familier de cette atmosphère, ne modifierait en rien l'image qui repose au fond de moi, intacte, depuis la fin de la guerre.

*(Translated by Andrée Lück-Gaye)*

Es ist Sonntagnachmittag und das Asphaltband, das sich in glatten Kurven immer höher in die Berge windet, ist nicht so einsam, wie es mir recht wäre. Autos überholen mich, andere fahren zurück ins Tal nach Schirmeck, und dieser Touristenverkehr verhindert die Sammlung, die ich mir erhofft habe, und lässt alles banal werden. Ich weiß, dass ich mit meinem Fahrzeug gleichfalls Teil dieser motorisierten Prozession bin, doch ich habe mich vorgestellt, meine Anwesenheit allein ließe wegen der einstigen Verschmelzung mit dieser Atmosphäre das Traumbild unverändert, das die ganze Nachkriegszeit hindurch unberührt im Schatten meines Bewusstseins geruht hat.

*(Translated by Mirella Urdih-Merkù)*

Domenica pomeriggio. Il nastro d'asfalto liscio e sinuoso che sale verso le alture fitte di boschi non è deserto come vorrei. Alcune automobili mi superano, altre stanno facendo ritorno a valle, verso Schirmeck; così il traffico turistico trasforma questo momento in qualcosa di banale e non mi permette di mantenere il raccoglimento che cercavo. So bene che anch'io, con la mia macchina, faccio parte di questa processione motorizzata, eppure sono sicuro che, vista la mia passata intimità con questi luoghi, se sulla strada fossi solo, il fatto di viaggiare in automobile non scalfirebbe l'immagine onirica che dalla fine della guerra riposa intatta nell'ombra della mia coscienza.

*(Translated by Ezio Martin)*



The four excerpts show that the target texts appear to be acceptable and to conform to the target patterns of the linguistic and stylistic idiomaticity. In order to achieve this, the translators “naturalized” their versions in various ways. For instance, the Italian and the French translations display a more nominal character than the Slovene original, which has a more verbal nature, as can be seen from the beginning of the first sentence, which contains a verb in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular (*je* ‘is’), whereas in the French and the Italian translations the opening consists of nominalized expressions of time. Interestingly, in the French version, the text is segmented into more sentences than those found in the original. The punctuation too is used in a completely idiomatic manner in all the translations, three of which therefore present noticeable differences with respect to the Slovene version, whereas the German translation is closer to the source text, since in German and in Slovene punctuation principles, which are syntactic rather than communicative, are largely the same.

#### 4 A FINAL OBSERVATION

The translations of works of Slovene literature are the result of the translators’ decisions which are far from random. In actual fact, norm-related translation choices appear to be homogeneous to a high degree. As far as initial norms are concerned, it is possible to notice a tendency towards acceptability (domestication), which strongly prevails over adequacy (foreignization). The tendency is confirmed further at the level of operational norms, where the translators appear to seek to reproduce target linguistic and textual patterns. In terms of preliminary norms, this implies a justification of a translation policy that is open to non-dominant literatures, albeit not beyond the safety of target-oriented idiomaticity.

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