

On Multiple Functions of Translation: The Role of Translation in Diaspora, in Nation-Building and in Ideological Control

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Interviews

On Multiple Functions of Translation: The Role of Translation in Diaspora, in Nation-Building and in Ideological Control

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Interview with Nike Kocijančič Pokorn, University of Ljubljana

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I'm very privileged to talk to one of the leading scholars in the Translation Studies today, Nike Kocijančič Pokorn, a professor of Translation Studies at the University of Ljubljana. She publishes on translation and censorship, directionality in translation, public service interpreting and translation. Nike K. Pokorn is also the author of several books on Translation Studies.

So we are going to talk about Translation Studies, your research and development in the field. What are your major research interests?

Thank you very much for this kind introduction and for taking time to interview me. The research interests I pursued during my career have always been connected with the environment that I come from, the language group that I belong to and also the work that I have done professionally.

What does that mean? I come from Slovenia and my mother tongue is Slovene, which is a language of around 2 million speakers that had lived in various multicultural and multilingual states. This determined also my research interests. So, my first research interest was connected with translation away from one's mother tongue, the practice that is widespread in peripheral linguistic communities. I, as a young PhD student at the time, was also asked to teach translation into English, something that is inconceivable in central linguistic communities where translation has always been taught only into one's mother tongue. For example, in France teachers will always teach to translate into their mother tongue, and also students will mainly be asked to translate into their language A. In all peripheral communities, like mine and yours, the practices are reverse: translators are in the market very often, sometimes even more often asked to do translation away from their mother tongue than into their own language. This is a real need of our markets, the need

of our training institutes and departments, and that was also my first research topic.

Secondly, I come from and my whole youth was spent in a socialist state, so I was interested to find out whether there are any characteristics of socialist translation practices. That was my second interest in research.

And thirdly, the Republic of Slovenia slowly transitioned from the land of emigration to the land of immigration. We suddenly got an increase of people from linguistic groups that traditionally we had not cultural or linguistic contact. Thus, my third interest now is focused on community interpreting, because this is a field that has not been established in our environment, but is much needed.

What have you noticed? How have the fields that you research changed over time?

I have always tried to respond to what I considered the need in the society I live in. For example, when I started researching community interpreting, I was not only interested in purely scientific topics but also attempted to trigger a change in the society. In 2020 and in 2022, we have therefore managed to certify the profession of a community interpreter for Albanian, Persian and Arabic in response to the recent need for such a profession in the contemporary Slovene society. I strongly support the call of Kaisa Koskinen, a Translation Studies scholar from Finland, who urged Translation Studies researchers not only to pursue theoretical, descriptive and applied research, but also to do work in the field of public translation service. I therefore believe that we have a duty to actively engage with the society and respond to societal needs.

And now let us move to more particular questions. I know that your country started to create the history of Slovene literary translation and you are also working on it. It would be really interesting to learn what theoretical and practical problems this ambitious plan involves.

In 2020, we got a research grant from the National Research Agency for the creation of a national history of literary translation. We are now in the final stages of that project, which is going to result in two monographs with more than 100 chapters and more than 60 authors providing chapters for these books. Authors come from different fields, not only from Translation Studies, but also from different philological departments, from the faculty of theology and from publishing studies. The majority of them come from Slovenia, but we have also scholars from Austria involved because we have a Slovene minority living in Corinthian Austria. So, we cover quite a large field.

Our primary aim was to give visibility to literary translators and their contribution to the nation-building enterprise. The question we address is, therefore, how literary translators contributed to the fact that the Slovene nation was “imagined” or formed as a nation. The historical overview of the role of translation into and from Slovene has shown that the role of literary translators and translators of religious texts in the Slovene society and culture was crucial: they have been at the beginning of the formation of Slovene literary language, of certain genres like dramatical texts, and of different literary currents. The research has also

shown how every “imagining of a nation” is a result of a complex dialogue with the foreign element, and that every nation is formed in dialogue, in conversation with the foreign element. I hope, we will succeed in revealing this also to our prospective readers.

Now I would like to refer to the research that you did some time ago. One of your research interests seems to be the influence of ideology on the manipulation of texts for children through translation. What examples of the ruling ideology have you noticed in these texts?

As I said earlier, my primary interest was to investigate any ideological influence of communism and socialist states on translations. When I started researching that, I realized that ideological interventions were most prominent in translations for children. My starting point was therefore an interest in ideology, and then came the focus on translations of children’s literature. Why are ideological interventions most prominent in translated children’s literature? It seems that in every age we are most lenient to any kind of changes of translations of children’s literature, because we believe that children should be brought up in such a way that they would become model citizen – and since the notion of model citizens changes throughout the time, the study of translated children’s literature usually becomes the most visible reflection of the values of a particular period, of a particular time, and also of a particular social system and culture.

What were the examples of the ruling ideology in translated Slovene children’s literature? *Cinderella* by the Brothers Grimm in the original versions ends quite cruelly: the Wicked Stepsisters get their eyes plucked out by a pigeon for being so cruel to Cinderella. The majority of Slovene socialist translations still keep that cruel ending; however, the beginning of this fairy tale is inevitably changed: in the very first paragraph of the fairy tale Cinderella is described as a very pious girl who prays at the grave of her mother. That was taken out or rewritten, while the elements of cruelty were left unmodified.

These changes are evident in many other translations as well: translations of *Bambi* or, for example, in socialist translations of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen. You probably know that in the original text the little mermaid has her tongue cut out in order to get legs. In Slovene translation she concedes to this mutilation because of her infatuation with the prince. In the original there is another reason given for this radical gesture: mermaids do not have souls, and since she longs for this part of immortality which she could gain only if a human could fall in love with her, she decides to relinquish her tongue.

These two instances belong to numerous similar changes we have found in socialist translations, which points to a systematic practice.

So violence was tolerated, but religious discourse was eliminated. What other sensitive topics were also disapproved by the censorship mechanism and the ruling ideology?

To my surprise, not many other. It was surprising that in the socialist times the ruling nomenclature did not decide to publish only new books for children, and rather focused on retranslations of classics. In fact,

in Slovenia, just five years after World War II when there was a lack of everything, also of paper and printing ink, they decided to reprint translations of children's classics, like fairy tales by the Brothers Grim, Hans Christian Andersen, and others. Since Slovene translations of these classical fairy tales had already existed, the new communist ruling class decided to replace them with new, modified translations, and their only focus seemed to have been the elimination of the religious element.

What are the research areas and topics that you are currently working on? In our conference you read a paper on the mechanism of ideology. Maybe there are some other areas and topics that you are currently researching.

There is one that I have not mentioned before: my focus on diaspora, i.e., on people who moved at one point of their life to other countries and lived for a while within the linguistic group of their origin. For example, currently I am interested in the Slovene diaspora in the United States of America that was particularly active in the interwar period, between 1918 and 1939. At that time, for example, in the USA 18 newspapers were published in the Slovene language and many of them published translations on a daily basis.

I am looking at the role of translation in diaspora, and also how these communities that quite quickly shifted from their native Slovene into English also used translation into English. The research I have done up to now seems to indicate that the representatives of Slovene diaspora with their translations of literary texts of Slovene origin into English tried to create their cultural image, and present their community to other diasporas and to the mainstream US culture.

And my last question is related to our conference „Translation, Ideology, Ethics: Response and Credibility“. Why have you chosen Lithuania and Vilnius University for reading your conference paper?

Out of respect and admiration for your department and for the people who work here. In particular I would like to single out Nijolė Maskaliūnienė and her work in running the department of Translation Studies at Vilnius University. I have been at your department before and I have always admired the work you have done: not only in the research field but also in the field of training translators and interpreters.

Thank you so much for your fascinating talk, for your detailed answers to all these questions. I really appreciate your willingness to share your knowledge and valuable insights about your research and developments in Translation Studies with all of us.