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Translated Literature in Contemporary Slovenia

Verstine literatūra dabartinėje Slovėnijoje

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Abstract: Based on a typological model borrowed from sociology, this article analyzes literary translation support mechanisms in the world and especially in Slovenia. It tracks the growing inclusion of translation policies in the national cultural policies and subsequent growth of the translated books in the book subsidy system and their strong presence in the reading field. With the help of statistical data it shows the status of translated literature in Slovenian reading habits.

Keywords: translating, cultural policies, reading field.

Summary: Remiantis tipologiniu, iš sociologijos mokslų pasiskolintu modeliu, straipsnyje analizuojami literatūrinių vertimų rėmimo mechanizmai, taikomi Slovėnijoje ir kitur pasaulyje. Pabrėžiama auganti tendencija įtraukti vertimo skatinimo uždavinius į nacionalinę šalių politiką ir su tuo susijęs augantis atliktų vertimų skaičius subsidijų sistemoje bei didelis šių vertimų skaičius skaitomų tekstų lauke. Remiantis statistiniais duomenimis, straipsnyje parodoma, kokia yra verstinės literatūros padėtis slovėnų skaitymo įpročių kontekste.

Keywords: žodžiai: vertimas, kultūros politika, skaitymo laukas.

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1 Introduction: Background and purposes

In this paper we will observe changes in the production and reception of translated literature in Slovenia. As a starting point, we will choose typologies of development, as defined by the sociological theory, and use them in the field of literary translation policies. By comparing some of the available data, we will examine what are the current circumstances in the field of literary translation and how changes in this field affect the transformation of the reading field.

1.1 *Different types of development.*

In the sociological literature, several types of development are described. In this article, we will refer to the theory presented by, among others, Samir Amin, also interesting for our consideration because one of his books¹ established the term *eurocentrism*, which will be met later in the article. Following is the summary of Amin's theory by Frane Adam: "The first type of development after this division is the autocentric model based on closure, the second is the autocentric model on the basis of openness, and the third is the dependent-peripheral model. Autocentricity means that the social or national system has the resources and ability to self-

regulate and make key strategic decisions. This preserves the boundaries and identity of the system. An autocentric model based on openness is a combination of endogenous development factors and actors and involvement in the international environment and, of course, a certain dependence on that environment. Such societies must be meritocratic, as they must activate all the potentials of knowledge and develop quality institutions so that they can mate with a more complex environment.

The self-centered, closed-end model seeks to reduce environmental dependency, emphasizing national sovereignty and self-sufficiency. In today's global world, of course, such a model is unrealistic. We can only talk about a tendency towards smaller or larger opening or closing. [...] The characteristic of the third model – peripheral-dependent – is that it is too open to the environment, external interests dictate major decisions, domestic actors lose the ability to act independently. In the more extreme cases it leads to the so-called neo-colonial situation, and in a milder version we refer to this model when domestic actors do not have the right strategy to align foreign capital or foreign political interests with national priorities.”²

2 Policies of translation

Translating these models into systems of literary translation leads to interesting paradoxes. Some cultures are familiar with the self-centered, closed-loop model with almost no translations, nor is national literature translated into foreign languages. We usually associate these with closed societies and do not want to draw comparisons using them as examples. However, we have some one-way, closed, self-centered societies: a typical example is the field of literature written in English. It is very open in terms of export (most translated books are translated from English), and the import is almost completely closed – statistics show that translations into English amount to about three percent.³

Policies of the integration of translation into national cultural policies are very diverse, despite globalization trends. They range from radically accelerating external influences to blocking them intentionally, and it is not entirely self-evident that translation policies match the political stereotypes we associate with countries implementing concrete policies. Thus, according to a United Nations Development Programme report from 2002, Arab countries see the translation of foreign authors into Arabic as part of modernization and therefore devote a great deal of resources to producing translations. Typical forms of this modernization are the book fairs in the United Arab Emirates, in Sharjah and Abu Dhabi, which quickly, in only a few years of existence, established themselves as important international meeting points and are nowadays among the largest in the world. Both have a prominent international program with a wide range of invited experts in the publishing field and the publishers themselves. In addition to that, the Sharjah Book Fair designed a special scheme to subsidize translations into and from Arabic, and only visitors to the fair can apply for these subsidies. In contrast to these countries,

Korea perceives translation literature as an intruder that could threaten its cultural tradition.⁴

In recent decades, all European Union countries (and also many others, notably South American and non-EU European) have established specific mechanisms to promote the translation of national literature and publications of translations abroad. These grants could be divided between (1) grants for translators, (2) grants for foreign publishers, (3) travel money for the authors giving readings, interviews etc. abroad, and (4) major national campaigns, such as, for example, appearances at book fairs in the role of a guest of honor etc. Each member state of the European Union uses at least one of these mechanisms, some of them all four, the most common being the support for translators (used by all Member States). These mechanisms are an effective, and in many cases crucial, form of support in the field of non-commercial translation.

At the same time, in recent years, there has been an increasing support for translation between European languages (which might be called *eurocentrism* with Amin's term), promoted in particular through the political instruments of the European Union which include its translation programs under the Creative Europe program and its predecessors. The European Union Prize for Literature has become an important criterion for deciding which translation program to support and which not: for applicants for translation grants, the inclusion of each award-winning book into their translation program provides automatic additional points in the evaluation process.

Most translations into different European languages come from the modern lingua franca, English; according to Johan Heilbron, English has a *hyper-central* role, accounting for between 50 and 70 percent of all translations in Europe.⁵ For translations from other languages, English often plays the role of the bridge language, since the decision to translate is often made after reading the translation into English, or the literary work, in the absence of translators from the original language, is even translated into the target language through the English translation, even though the traditional understanding of translation is highly skeptical toward such indirect translation. English is the dominant language in global book production, also taking in account the presence of books in the globally dominant modes of book distribution, for example at the Amazon Books web page: "In March 2014 [...] as many as eighteen million book titles were available in English, while in German and French, slightly more than two million, one million in Spanish, eight hundred thousand in Russian and half a million in Chinese and Italian."⁶

This, however, does not end the dominance of the world's most influential language at the moment: according to a study by Miha Kovač and Rüdiger Wischenbart, who analyzed the charts of best-selling books in various European countries, bestselling authors do not necessarily write in English, but those who are present in more language markets are in many cases strongly characterized by Anglo-American linguistic and general culture, most often by living or having lived in an English-speaking environment.⁷ (These characteristics can be extended, we could add, to

most of the internationally renowned authors from Africa and the Indian subcontinent.)

2.1 Slovenian policies of translation.

The transformation of translation into an integral part of cultural policies can also be traced to the revised policy of Slovenian subsidies for book publications – until 1991, almost exclusively domestic works were subsidized, and in independent Slovenia, the subsidies eventually moved toward translation (in the first step, through support for translations of fundamental works of social science). The Ministry of Culture published recommended translation lists that, if titles from that list were chosen for publication, provided subsidies to publishers; the lists were made by experts in specific language and literature areas. In the same time, independent Slovenia started supporting the translations of Slovenian authors into foreign languages and publications of their works by foreign publishers. Today, we can conclude that Slovenia is using all four aforementioned ways of supporting the translation of Slovenian literature, all funded by the Slovenian Book Agency. Nowadays, the majority of approved applications for subsidizing books are gained for translations into Slovenian. In 2016, a grant was awarded to 85 books written in Slovenian and to 123 translated into Slovenian; in 2017, to 104 original and 122 translated; in 2018, to 96 original and 118 translated; in 2019, to 89 original and 131 translated, and in 2020, to 101 original and 145 translated. Of course, not only fiction but also (to a lesser extent) social sciences and humanities are funded from this source.⁸ In 2016, the percentage of originally Slovenian books among the subsidized was roughly 41%, in 2017 – 46%, in 2018 – 45%, in 2019 – 40%, and in 2020 – again 41%. It could therefore be said that the direct support for book publications, the subsidies of the Slovenian Book Agency for the publishing programs, moved from supporting original works to supporting translations.

The share of translations among subsidized editions can be compared with the data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia that apply to all registered book publications.⁹ To make a comparison with a study presented later, this paper will look at the publishing data of the year 2014. Out of all the titles published in 2014, there were 66% of original works and 34% of translations; 1599 titles of fiction were published, of which 804 were written in Slovenian and 795 translated from a foreign language. The ratio between domestic and foreign fiction was therefore approximately equal.

The numbers of published novels, the most widely read literary form, is different, though: in 2014, 173 original novels and 422 translations were published, which means that the percentage stated at the beginning is practically reversed: 35% of published novels are Slovenian, and 65% translated (the year before, there were 154 Slovenian and 398 foreign novels, about 28% of Slovenian and 72% of foreign novels.) Most translations are from English. In 2014, 328 novels were translated from

the EU's official languages, 223 of which were written in English.¹⁰ In the first decade of the 21st century, 64% of literary books published in Slovenia were translated, of which 61% were written in English.¹¹

Such a publishing policy is also encouraged in book use. In 2014, there were 4157 novels of Slovenian authors available in Slovenian public libraries and altogether they had 449,747 borrowings; 10,067 available novels of foreign authors translated into Slovenian had 3,732,677 borrowings.¹² The Slovenian novel had an average of 108 borrowings, as opposed to translated novels, which were borrowed 371 times on average. School readings are also included; therefore, the number for Slovenian novels is rather higher than it would be if only voluntary borrowings were taken into account)

With this information, a pessimist might interpret the ratio of 1 vs. 3.435 (if we take into account the number of novels available for borrowing) or 1 vs. 8.3 (if we calculate without this corrective) as a sign of the disappearance of national culture, and an optimist would point out that both ratios are still better than the results provided by the titles on the charts of the 100 most borrowed books, because with a few exceptions and the exclusion of home readings, they are all translated – so that the result is corrected if we descend from the peaks to the end of the so-called “long tail.”¹³ However, we can speculate that this situation is the result of specifics in the Slovenian literary field which will be discussed toward the end of this text.

3 Domestication of Translation

Translations enter the publishing programs all over the world in a variety of ways, among which the suggestions of literary agents have been on the rise in recent years. A few years ago, Slovenia was a market too small to be really interesting for agents, which is shown also by the fact that it is served by many subagents of larger agents, some located in Prague or Belgrade, for example. However, the situation is slightly different now, and agents offer a wide variety of titles to those Slovenian editors they have identified as the relevant entry points into the Slovenian book market. It also helped, it can be argued, that these offers no longer represent any material investment for the agents, since the agents no longer send printed books, only their digital versions.

Because of the method of remuneration for the work (an agent is not paid a fixed rate, the revenue depends on the volume of the sale), the agent is naturally more interested in selling bestsellers, from which the highest revenue is expected. Therefore, agent sales increase the effect of the aforementioned “long tail” and at the same time narrow the diversity of the translation offer and its cultural and social impact. Editors' decisions, influenced not only by reading and literary taste, but also by non-textual factors (such as echoes abroad, representation in similar publishing programs, recommendations from experts and various coincidences), are also highly influenced by translators' suggestions. The

translator takes over much of the publishing activity, called *amplifying* by Michael Bhaskar.¹⁴ Quite often, the translator takes care not only about the proper translation but also about the resonance of the translated book in the target audience, so it is not uncommon for a translator to have a noticeable role in the publishing activity. In addition, translators are likely to be more familiar with literary scene in less common languages (nowadays this means almost all languages except English), but they are also (unlike agents) familiar with the reading habits of the target literary field, which is of course important for selection.

It cannot be denied that many translators propose a book for translation simply because they want to translate it – but a translator rarely proposes a book that he or she does not like. If the proposal is accepted, the translator will have to deal with it. Non-textual factors, such as the volume of a book (translations of large books are usually so expensive that an acceptable market price cannot reimburse the production cost) or the possibility of obtaining Slovenian, European or national translation grants may also influence the decision.

4 Conclusion: “Why should we read ...

... domestic authors? Translated authors are better!” This is often heard from students when a professor asks them what was the last book they read, and they mainly refer to the translated books.

Of course, they are better. Especially those who get translated. Those are usually the best the world has to offer. However, authors of national literature are not so bad either, as shown by, among other factors, the number of literary translations into foreign languages (scientific authors are already writing in foreign languages, almost exclusively English, because of the specifics of scientific publishing). In most cases, quality fiction and poetry is translated from Slovenian, not genre or popular literature. Original Slovenian books of that kind have not been present in the market until recently and therefore are still very scarce even for domestic use, let alone for export.

This fact also explains some of the Slovenian reading habits, for example, the one mentioned beforehand and summarized in the statistical data – that Slovenians are almost four times more likely to read foreign and translated than domestic novels. Reading, as shown by the Slovenian research studies *Culture and Class*, 2011, *Books and Readers V*, 2014, and *Book and Readers VI*, 2019, has lost the ability of generating an imaginary community¹⁵ and predominantly turned into one of many leisure activities. However, reading still effectively connects marginalized communities (we can mention the promotion of national literatures that do not have a state framework, such as Basque, Catalan, Scottish in Europe, the promotion of minority language literatures in India, the interest in ethnic literature in both Americas, etc.) and broadens the horizon of the individual, as it increases not only the perspective but also

the empathy,¹⁶ as advocates of reading have been increasingly pointing out.

The aforementioned optimist could therefore see a welcome market niche in the Slovenian reading habits and in shifting of the cultural policy focus on translation, because (a pessimist would say) empathy is a rapidly disappearing commodity in the world today, and the reading of translated literature encourages it in two ways: firstly through the activity of reading fiction as a way of getting in touch with the mental and emotional processes of others, and secondly, through the act of reading translated fiction, where these mental and emotional processes take place in a less well-known social environment.

The Slovenian field of translated literature may seem to us to be endogenously open if, of course, we neglect that its autonomy is limited by the increasing influence of public funding, but at the same time also peripherally-dependent due to the publishing programs which follow the suggestions of agents and reduce the impact of their own selection. This duality brings new challenges and new tasks for everybody involved in the transfer of book contents to the Slovenian reading field

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