



## Ridiculing the Other by foreignizing translations

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### Introduction

One of the questions in the Conference Call for papers was about perspectives and concepts applicable for analyzing aspects of the politics of translation. I would claim that the basic concepts of translation theory can be applied in this context: placing translations somewhere on a continuum making use of the figure drawn by Gideon Toury, who called its opposite ends *adequacy* (as close to the original as possible) and *acceptability* (a translation that is not taken as a translation). Strategies that lead to maximum closeness to the original have been called *foreignizing*, *exoticizing* and its outcome *estrangement*, its opposite being *domestication*. Applying foreignizing or domesticating strategies can in certain context be a political act and the choice of the strategy can have ideological consequences. In this paper the main claim is that a literal/foreignizing /adequate/exoticizing rendering of the message in translation or interpreting in the case, when the ways of writing texts in the source culture differ remarkably from those of the target culture, can be used for ridiculing the source culture and its actors. Citing Mona Baker (2006: 89): “Playfulness and the subversion of conventions is practically a convention in its own right in some genres.” This idea can be elaborated further: parodying dominant narratives of the Other relies on our understanding of the difference between our and their generic forms and conventions.

The concept of *strategy* denotes, following Chesterman (2005: 26), the initial choice of source or target orientation and decisions about foreignization or domestication. It is a cognitive decision, not linguistic. *Discourse* is in this article understood as a way of speaking/writing about certain issues in certain genres, manifested in concrete texts (Hatim 2000: 15). *Designing of texts* means choosing certain lexemes, syntactic structures and pragmatic elements for conveying the message. It manifests itself in specific *surface structures*. Source text and target text as messages may belong to the same genre, but the design that is expected in different cultures in order to meet the conventions can be different. Citing Tymoczko (2006: 25): “...text with similar surface structure may perform very different functions and may hold very different positions in the textual repertoires of diverse cultures. The converse is, of course, also true: text types with divergent surface structures

may nonetheless perform similar functions and hold similar positions crossculturally”.

The concept of *culture* has and can be described and discussed in numerous ways. In translation studies it is linked with the question of different languages having different ways of naming the material and spiritual phenomena and objects of the environment where users of certain languages are living. A more dynamic way of looking at culture points at the problem that culture is a way of thinking rather than a nomenclature. Hatim (2000: 20-21) cites Agar (1992: 11) who describes culture not as being something people have but as something that is between them “from lexical items through speech acts up to fundamental notions of how the world works”. Hatim (ibid.) reminds that these differences can cause culture conflicts or communication breakdowns. Culture conflicts and communication breakdowns in dealing with translations can be fruitful, when they force the reader of a translated message to try to understand the world behind the foreign words, and also speech acts and notions that are used in an unfamiliar way. This is the case with translations of literary texts and fiction in general, also with translations of texts that are meant to familiarize us to foreign ways of designing oral and written discourse.

We are facing a different problem when dealing with texts that are meant to convey informative messages. It can be very difficult to get across information or views of speakers and writers, if what they say or write is designed according to discursive practices alien to foreign readers. In this case the translator can acquire various roles and apply strategies based on various concepts of the ethics of the translator’s task. I refer to Chesterman’s four models of translation ethics (Chesterman 2001): (1) Ethics of representation meaning recreating a text that fully represents the source text; (2) ethics of service meaning following the translation commission by the client(s); (3) ethics of communication meaning aspiring to enabling communication between people who do not understand each others’ language, and (4) norm-based ethics meaning making the target text to comply with expectations of acceptability in the target culture. However, I would claim that essential strategic choice between the roles and consequently the strategies is basically done between two models: that of ethics of representation and that of ethics of communication. When translating informative messages the translator following the ethics of communication will try to make the message understandable to the foreign receptors by applying domesticating strategies, when needed. This involves being familiar with and following the acceptable norms prevalent among the target audience. The opposite ethical standpoint would be ethics of representation: the translator will represent the surface structure of the text as “faithfully” as possible and hence underline the foreignness of the message.<sup>1</sup>

The commissioner of the translation, the client whom the translator wants to serve in order to follow the ethics of service, can also pursue various aims.

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<sup>1</sup> For further elaboration of what to represent see Chesterman 2001: 144, where the possibility of representing the intention rather than the surface structure is discussed.

S/he can expect a foreignizing translation, if it serves her/his aims of making the translation sound alien, or s/he can expect a domesticating translation, with adaptations in the surface structure if considered necessary for getting the message across to the receptors.

The translator's paradox lies in the fact that in both cases s/he can defend her strategy by referring to professional ethics. S/he can underline her/his task as a communicator who knows what to do with the source message in order to facilitate the target audience in understanding the message. Or s/he can refer to her/his task of faithfully representing the message leaving the responsibility of understanding it to the target audience. I see this as a crucial paradox of the role of translator, linked with hidden possibilities of exercising power. As Maria Caldaza Pérez (2003: 13) says that while translators "...explore the repercussions of their work among the audience, they also decide about their own ethical stance. In the same way they analyze the representation of politics, they debate the politics of representation".

Translators can hide themselves behind the words: "I just translated what was there in the original". *The subversive scribe* (I like this definition of translators' role by Levine in 1996) can play innocent.

In the following I shall briefly demonstrate my point of view with examples of the history of translation from Russian into Finnish.

### **Finnish translations of Russian informative texts**

My starting point is the notion expressed by many experienced translators from Russian into Finnish or vice versa: when translating from Finnish into Russian, it is recommendable to "heighten the style", whereas translating from Russian to Finnish one should "lower the style" (Repin in Jänis 2006: 113). These expressions describing recommendable procedures that translators have arrived at in practice as a result of intuition, can also be called strategies. What is the source of these recommendations? It must be a result of an intuitive contrastive stylistic analysis based on the notion that in many cases the surface structure of Russian texts is different from that of Finnish. The formulation of the recommendation is not very precise, but translators between Finnish and Russian understand what it means and try to observe it in their work.

What happens if these strategies that we can also call stylistic adaptations are not applied? This was the theme of the study by Inkeri Vehmas-Lehto in 1989. It is a critical study of Finnish translations of Russian journalistic texts from the Soviet time, from 1970's and 1980's. She calls *quasi-correctness* the result of the strategy applied by the translators, meaning that translations were very literal. Anybody who knows well Russian and Finnish will know how to retranslate the text back into Russian. The striking features of the translations as compared to Finnish journalistic texts are the use of emotive words, standard collocations, frequent use of nominal constructions based on verbal nouns and long sentences. Vehmas-Lehto made an inquiry among

Finnish readers who formulated their impressions in the following way: “they are clumsy, uninteresting, unpleasant, difficult to understand, and apt to arouse suspicion” (ibid.,208). All these negative expressions for describing translations from Russian indicate that there are major differences in writing journalistic texts in Finnish and in Russian. In her study, Vehmas-Lehto gave her alternative translation to the existing one. Hers is a domesticating translation – although she does not call it. The original text:

*В июле 1980 года, во время визита канцлера Г. Шмидта в Москву, в рамках этого соглашения была разработана и согласована долгосрочная программа основных направлений сотрудничества СССР и ФРГ, которая конкретизировала наиболее перспективные и реальные объекты хозяйственных связей.*<sup>2</sup>

Translator’s version:

*Liittokansleri Helmut Schmidtin Moskovaan heinäkuussa 1980 suorittaman vierailun aikana tämän sopimuksen puitteissa käsiteltiin ja lyötiin lukkoon SNTL:n ja BRD:n yhteistyön perussuuntia koskeva pitkäaikainen ohjelma, jossa konkretisoitiin keskinäisen yhteistyön lupaavimmat ja reaalisimmat kohteet.*<sup>3</sup>

Underlining denotes expressions that are superfluous from the point of view of getting the message across.

Vehmas-Lehto’s alternative version:

*Liittokansleri Schmidtin vieraillessa Moskovassa heinäkuussa 1980 tämän sopimuksen pohjalta laadittiin pitkäaikainen yhteistyöohjelma. Siihen kirjattiin lupaavimmat yhteistyömuodot...* (Vehmas-Lehto 1989: 196-197)<sup>4</sup>.

The alternative version displays omissions of what Vehmas-Lehto calls superfluous data, and reducing expanded constructions and modifiers, and also making short sentences, which are typical for Finnish journalistic texts.

Another study about Finnish translations of Russian informative texts, in this case, texts written in Russian about Finnish history, was undertaken by Hannu Kemppanen (2004;2008). His method of analyzing translations is based on comparing two corpora of texts: one corpus is composed of Finnish translations of Russian history texts on history of Finland, and the other of texts on Finnish history originally written in Finnish. The aim was to find out what kind of differences between translated and authentic texts can be traced by applying corpus method. Kemppanen compared the key words in these two corpora and

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<sup>2</sup> In July 1980 during the visit of Chancellor H. Schmidt to Moscow, a long-term program of the basic tendencies of cooperation between USSR and GFR was worked and agreed upon. It made concrete the most perspective and realistic objects of economic relationships. (Translated by M.J.)

<sup>3</sup> The Finnish translation contains the same text as the translation from Russian, consequently no translation of it is needed.

<sup>4</sup> When Chancellor Schmidt visited Moscow in July 1980, a long term cooperation program based on this agreement was designed. The most perspective forms of cooperation were listed in it.... (Translated by M.J.)

found remarkable differences in their frequencies. For instance, the main agent in the translated texts is a “double hero” - *Finland and Soviet Union/Russia together*. They aim in cooperation at friendship and mutual assistance and abolishment of the hostilities of the past. In the Finnish texts on Finnish history Finland is the lonely hero fighting for preserving its independence. (This is naturally a simplified description of the manifold observations that the author of the study came across.)

Hannu Kemppanen reflects about the translators' choices, for instance, in deciding whether the 1939-1940 war between Soviet Union and Finland should be called *winter war* in translation, as it is called in the Finnish history. Another example is the agreement on friendship, assistance and cooperation between Soviet Union and Finland that was signed in 1948. In Soviet discourse it was called *Agreement of the year 1948*, in Finnish *YYA-sopimus* (acronyms for *ystävyyys, yhteistyö, avunanto*). Different systems of naming the same objects or events are problematic in translation (Baker 2006: 123-124).

The results of these studies make one look for reasons of undertaking and tolerating this kind of translations of Russian texts in Finland.

### **Reception of foreignizing translations**

Why were these texts with their alien discursive practices tolerated in the Finnish media? One of the possible reasons is – what Kemppanen suggests – that they introduced Finnish readers to Russian ways of thinking and designing of discourse, to foreign views. Another reason might be the traditions. My own studies on Finnish translations of Russian literature indicate that since our cultures have been in contact as neighboring cultures there are certain traditions in translating from Russian into Finnish, which are more conservative in representing the source texts than in translations from other cultures (Jänis 1991: 234; 2007: 198). Of course, there might be political reasons for accepting the foreignizing translation strategies: literal translation can be a demonstration of respect to representation of the source discourse, especially in Finnish pro-communist media. In this case representation of the Soviet information with its alien surface structure was a conscious choice, commissioned by the client.

However, foreignizing translations were published in all Finnish media, not only pro-communist. Finland was not a socialist country and Soviet Union could not exercise censorship of Finnish press. Maybe foreignization was desirable from the point of view of the commissioner and applied as a strategy by the translator in order to make the source culture seem odd and even funny, because the discourse sounds funny? The following excerpt is from *Kanava* (1973: 378), a monthly with articles about politics, sciences, and art and representing central and right wing political thinking. This translation from Russian could be described using the same words that Inkeri Vehmas-Lehto got when asking readers' response to translations of Russian journalistic texts: “clumsy, uninteresting, unpleasant, difficult to understand, and apt to arouse suspicion”.

*Kysymys on siitä, että Tolstoi, kuten tiedetään, osoitti poikkeuksellista*

*mielenkiintoa Suomen kansan sosiaalista ja taloudellista elämää kohtaan. Hän ei osoittanut vain mielenkiintoa. Ollen kiinteässä yhteydessä Suomen edistyksellisimpien ihmisten kanssa, kuten esim. kirjailija Järnefeltin, erään Suomen kirjallisuuden sosiaalis-psykologisen romaanin luoja, kanssa ja saaden heiltä totuudenmukaista informaatiota sen ajan Suomesta Tolstoi kaikin tavoin pyrki edistämään Suomen kansan sosiaalista edistystä, kehotti protestoimaan kaikkia poliittisen ja yhteiskunnallisen väkivallan muotoja vastaan.*<sup>5</sup>

The political background of that time is very complex, and I shall only very briefly describe it in order to make you understand my point of view about the politics of translation.

In 1970's and in the first half of 1980's Finnish media was accused of non-critical attitude towards Soviet Union called *autocensorship* or *finlandisierung*. The refraining of criticizing Soviet Union has been documented in Finnish media research (Salminen 1996). However, Finnish press could not be forced to publish poor translations of Russian texts.

It seems likely that in Finnish non-communist media of that time the literal rendering manifested in foreignizing translations of the information provided by Soviet media agencies was a way of ridiculing the source text sender.

This was not openly put forward by the representatives of the media. Max Jakobson, a right wing politic and journalist, wrote: "A message from the East is received as such, whereas a message from the West is interpreted in a suspiciously critical tone..." (Kanava 1975 133-134; translation MJ). One can ask: if a message from the East is delivered directly but it is written in an alien way and translated in a way that underlines its being alien, is this not another way of giving the readers a hint that the message is not to be taken seriously?

Also Seikko Eskola, Editor-in-chief of *Kanava*, in which article from which the excerpt cited above was published, wrote in the leading article: "The Finnish reader must accept the information about Soviet Union that is delivered to him/her and that never contains criticism about Soviet system, although the normal way would be that the Finnish journalists sieve from the incoming information those facts that can be known to be true and deliver it to the Finnish reader applying the same criteria irrespective of the source culture." (*Kanava* 1975: 131-132; translation: MJ.) However, the editors of journals could have commissioned better translations – in this case they could be called domesticating – if that would have suited their aims.

## Ridiculing via irony?

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<sup>5</sup> The question is that Tolstoy, as we know, paid exceptional interest to social and political life of the people of Finland. He did not only show interest. Being in tight contact with the most progressive people of Finland, as for example the author Järnefelt, one of the creators of the socio-psychological novel in Finnish literature, and getting from them truthful information about contemporary life in Finland Tolstoy tried in many ways to promote the social progress of the people of Finland, suggested to resist all forms of political and social violence. (Translation M.J.)

A foreignizing translation might arouse a comical effect unintentionally. An unintended comical effect caused by translation or interpreting can be caused by lack of professionalism. In this case the translator is not familiar with the discursive practices of the target culture and has little or no experience in communicating across cultures via translation or interpreting. Among the layman the concept of correct translation is often based on the assumption of *being literal is being correct*, and the translator or interpreter is asked to act along these lines. Without training, translators cannot defend their view, even if they would intuitively feel that their rendering of the message in a foreign language is not working.

However, there may be political reasons for undertaking a literal translation. As Carmen África Vidal Claramonte (2003: 73) maintained: "As translation is rewriting of the original text and the translator, inevitably, a manipulator, we are faced with the problem of what to do with texts with an ideology which does not coincide with their own." A translator or interpreter, even with high professional qualifications, can be engaged into the hidden or open political agenda by those for whom ridiculing the message sender is desirable. S/he can defend her/himself by referring to the layman concept of translation: s/he has only rendered what was in the source message.

This way of defending oneself is linked with the way *irony* is used in human communication: the design of the message gives a hint of not being fully serious by using expressions that have an opposite meaning as compared to what is said. The sender of an ironic message can always deny her/his aim of being ironical.

Toini Rahtu, a Finnish scholar of irony (2006), in her study of irony in media texts claims that the interpretation of irony is dependent on the notion of coherence. Coherence depends on a complex interplay of contextual features, which is why all interpretations must be seen as socio-cultural processes. An utterance is perceived as coherent if it makes sense and if it hangs together. Incoherent utterances can result in an ironic interpretation; however, the incoherence must also be perceived as being intentional, and intentionality in turn is a sign of the ironist's rejecting stance.

Irony is defined by her as a combination of five components: (1) a negative attitude that reflects (2) the intention of the ironist, has (3) a target and most often (4) a victim too and one or more of these four components must be (5) inferred from co- or context.

It seems obvious that foreignizing translation strategy can be applied for ironizing the source text and its senders. An article translated from Russian differs remarkably from the prevalent norms and conventions of Finnish informative texts, but is published among them with a small sign *translated from Russian*. It arouses suspicions and distrust towards its content, and often – ridiculing laughter.

Another way of using literal translations for irony is by placing excerpts of them or whole texts as quotations within untranslated discourse. Rahtu applied in her study of irony the concepts and methods of narratology: *direct discourse*, *narrator's discourse* and *free indirect discourse*. According to her study, frequent use of direct discourse, if its surface structure differs from the narrator's discourse, makes an ironical effect. This is a very common way of using foreignizing translations for ironic purposes and hence ridiculing the message sender.

To conclude, I maintain that literal rendering of the source text can be used for ridiculing Other, alien cultures and their representatives. My examples are from the past: Soviet Union with its propaganda is gone. However, in our contemporary world the same strategies can be used for the similar purposes. And the subversive translator can hide her/his ironic intentions behind the innocent words: *I just translated what was there in the source text.*

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