

**HOW TO EVALUATE TRANSLATIONS?
(CLOSING IN ON PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION
CRITICISM)**

Abstract: The author of the article argues that there is a possibility to objectify translation quality assessment (performed so far intuitively and subjectively) on grounds of the equivalence concepts elaborated by different translation scholars. By this the point of departure can be the basic idea that translation equivalence is far from being a universally uniform notion in the theory of translation.

1.0. In order to give a general picture of the state of the art in the field of translation criticism in Hungary, it is the best to start by asking the question: 'does it exist at all in this country?' István Géher, for instance, in one of his essays describes the situation in the following way: "Our translators of fiction, as men of literature and public educators, would doubtless be extremely pleased to have allies – objective critics of their activity – in their noble mission aimed at forming literary taste. Unfortunately they are looking for them (these critics) in vain... What translators know for sure about their work from experience is that they are working really hard; but there is no way to find an answer to the question 'how?', 'what is the quality of this work?'" (Géher, 1981:72). And to quote just another author, we could perhaps claim that "if there is anything in this country that actually does not exist at all, then it is a systematic translation criticism" (Lontay, 1975: 915).

In general, we have to agree with this opinion. Because if reviewers of translated works mention the name of the translator at all in printed articles, they do it in clichés or commonplaces only, either patting him/her on the shoulder or trying to prove that the translation they speak about is full of mistakes and gross

misinterpretations. It is needless to quote examples: the Hungarian history of translation abounds in them.

1.1. At the same time, if we say that there is no, or at least hardly any professionally objective translation criticism, then it will not be very difficult to understand the reasons for it either. After all, it is possible to give an objective evaluation of something only in cases when there are scientifically elaborated sound criteria at our disposal, a kind of gauge if you please, which, however, are missing even now, in an era of conspicuous achievements in the field of linguistics and translation studies. And instead of trying to elaborate the above mentioned objective criteria for assessing the quality of translations, there are still always hot – and absolutely useless – debates both in Hungary and abroad about whether it is possible to translate in general and at all, and then whether it is possible to evaluate objectively a given translation or not. Let me quote some typical points of view.

In the opinion of certain authors "professional translation is an art; and it is more than harmful illusion to demand or to try to give an objectively accepted clue, pattern or key. It is impossible to evaluate any translation objectively either in principle or in practice" (András, 1988:137). Another author, however, is of the opposite opinion, and it is stressed in the title of her article already: "If the exercise is translation, then we must have a key" (Előd, 1988:187). According to others, too, "it would be most expedient to have standards for assessing translations" (Fehér, 1988:199).

Earlier István Bart had already elaborated a definition to explain the essence of these 'standards' or – as Bart puts it – 'gauge' (mérce): "Translators of fiction have only one choice and alternative, have only one possibility and no other. It is to recompose the *hic et nunc* valid message of the original into a new work of fiction. That is the only requirement or gauge" (Bart, 1981:269).

Had the problem been as simple as Bart thinks it to be, further investigations and research would be quite useless. But the problem is that in case of literary works the notion 'valid message' is a rather broad and evasive category. First of all, "a work of literature is always open, and the bigger is the degree of this openness, the better it is for that work itself" (Eco, 1975:12).

Consequently, "the essence, the message of a given literary work is not a series of items which can be enumerated, moreover it is not just a leading thought, a moral lesson that can be hung on the wall, but something much more sophisticated and mysterious than that, so it must be handled with the utmost care" (Hankiss, 1985:157). Secondly, from the point of view of translation it is by no means the same what the form of a given message is. It is obvious that a poem, a verse must by no means be translated into prose, and vice versa, and so on and so forth (for a more detailed analysis see for example Ortutay, 1991: 289–295). And is it just István Bart who would not know it!

1.2. What is the situation, however, in the field of an objective translation criticism in countries other than Hungary? The truth is that the overall picture is hardly different at all, although serious efforts have been made to discover, first of all the 'laws' of translation, and then, on the basis of this the criteria defining objectivity in assessment (see, for example Reiss, 1971; House, 1976; Toury, 1993).

Most of the scholars investigating the problems of a more objective translation criticism are of the opinion that in case of evaluating the merits and pointing out the flaws of certain translations individual predisposition and a series of groundless impressions are much more relevant and typical than objectively measurable scientific approach. Therefore on the basis of a concerned analysis of the source language text (SLT) and investigating the available translational solutions they recommend a set of criteria which can be applied methodically and systematically. At the same time, however, they also sincerely admit that subjectivity cannot be completely excluded even if all the criteria they have recommended are rigorously taken into consideration, because different readers (translators) will interpret a given text always differently, moreover the reaction of different recipients will also be quite different. After all, says Katharine Reiss, "... any analysis, however concerned it may be to achieve total objectivity, ultimately amounts to interpretation" (1971:107). Consequently "it seems to be unlikely that translation quality assessment can ever be completely objectified in the manner of results of natural science subjects" (House, 1976:64). It is most interesting how Gideon Toury, perhaps

the most outstanding figure of modern translation theory, approaches this problem: "... it goes without saying that **the mere enumeration of all that is possible** in acts (or texts) which are presented and/or regarded as translational would yield no satisfactory laws. While no doubt theoretical in nature, these lists would simply have flattened out and neutralized all the factors which affect decision-making in real-life situations; from the languages involved in the act and their genetic and/or historical relations, through the texts in which the problem-items are, and will be embedded, respectively, the models underlying those texts and the tradition to which each model (and text) pertains, through whatever is inherent to the 'bilingual brain' and/or acts of linguistic mediation, to the general concept of translation underlying the act, which is always norm-governed, and hence culture-specific. Lists of this kind are thus equipped to deal with *options* rather than actual *choices* and *decisions*, which, in terms of a translation theory, makes them very elementary indeed: **nothing to object to, but far from sufficient**" (Toury, 1993:21–22; the emphasis is mine – P.O.).

1.3. Does it mean then that translation quality assessment should always remain as it is without any hope of ever becoming objectified?

My opinion is that it is far from being so, and on the basis of the latest linguistic findings it is perhaps quite possible to elaborate the rudiments of a much more objective translation criticism. As a point of departure we can accept the supposition that when comparing the original with the translation, or rather when trying to establish the (new) text of translation, that is to re-encode the original information, **every translator has, on the basis of certain professional intuitions, concrete ideas about the degree of the greatest possible and the smallest necessary similarity between the two texts**. By describing the different types of this similarity, which, as a rule, is termed **equivalence** in books on translation, we can make an attempt to model this intuition, and by doing so scientifically grounded points of view can be offered for critics of translations, who have been performing their task so far in the hope that their intuition and literary taste will serve as a more or less reliable compass in pointing out the merits and the drawbacks of the translation under review.

2.0. Equivalence is considered to be one of the crucial (if not the most important) questions in translation theory. The problem is, however, that most of the scholars are looking at it as a notion which is natural and self evident, and consequently they try to prescribe (and not to describe) it as an obligatory category, which must always be present in any translation. For instance: " The original text (SLT) and its message has a certain core which **must** be embedded unchanged into the translation (TLT)" (Dániel, 1983:13; the emphasis is mine – P.O.). Even professor Roger T. Bell is unable to avoid the traps of prescriptivism in his endeavour to define equivalence: "In essence ... the problem (of achieving equivalence in translation – P.O.) is to relate (a) sociological variables ... with (b) linguistic features which combine to create text which is realized in and as interaction" (Bell, 1991:9).

I am not going to encumber the attention of the reader with further definitions because they could be quoted almost endlessly, and still we would not get any closer to the solution of the problem. Instead I will make an attempt to demonstrate with an analysis that, even if the factors making up equivalence are extremely versatile, the sherey linguistic phenomena which determine the semantic possibilities and limits of utterances in different languages can easily be observed and described. At the same time I should like to emphasize that below I will always be trying to abstain from making judgements about the appropriateness of the given translation; no attempt will be made to assess its quality either. The analysis is going to be purely of a descriptive character and is aimed at examining and understanding **the degrees of the greatest possible and the smallest necessary similarity, viz. equivalence.**

2.1. First let us take an example in which contextual similarity between the original and the translation is the smallest in terms of the results of a comparison of any other translation with its original, which results reveal a greater closeness (between the two texts) than that we are having in the following examples (the quoted texts are all taken from the following two editions respectively: J. D. Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye*, Penguin Books,1985; J. D. Salinger: *Zabhegyező*. Fordította Gyepes Judit. Árkádia, Budapest,1983. The figures after the quotations indicate the page number where the given quotation can be found).

1. But it was just that we were too much on the opposite side of the pole (19).

Csakhogya más nyelven beszélünk (21).

The relation between the original and this type of translation is characterized by:

- a) a complete deviation of the vocabulary and grammatical structures used by the translator from those that we have in the SLT;
- b) the fact that on the basis of the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the two texts no explanation can be given to the semantic and syntactic transformations used by the translator to achieve equivalence;
- c) the impossibility of discovering real or direct logical bonds between the original and translation on the basis of which one would be able to claim that "we are speaking of the same thing";
- d) the smallest contextual similarity between SLT and TLT.

Seemingly in case of this type of equivalence the TLT speaks about something else; it is not the same that we have in the original SLT.

Basically the above mentioned features illustrate the contextual relations of this first equivalence type 'negatively': it is very easy to see that the linguistic units which make the original mean what it means are not present in the translation. At the same time it is obvious that there must be a certain contextual similarity between the original and its translation because if there was none, we would have to make the claim that this translation is not equivalent to the original, consequently the translation is not a translation, and as such it cannot be the subject of translation studies. Moreover, the common features in the content of the two different texts must be, for some reasons, more important than any other factor because their preservation alone can provide translation equivalence.

If these types of translation are compared with the original, then it can perhaps justly be said that they convey not the 'direct' content of the lexical and grammatical units of the original text, but the content which can be 'generated' from them and which is present implicitly, and can be derived from the whole utterance only, which is treated by the translator as a meaningful whole and one unit. Linguistic units

participate in the creation of such a content not through their direct meaning, but indirectly only, and together with other units they will establish a kind of meaning which may serve as a point of departure or basis for creating a meaning (interpretation) of another type. The 'direct' content, as it were, is pushed to the background. The part of the content which must be preserved in types of translation examined here is termed 'the aim of communication' by the Russian translation scholar Kommissarov (1986:196).

What we mean by the notion 'aim of communication' can be explained in what follows. In (1), as can easily be noticed, the text, by means of a figurative idiomatic expression conveys the idea of 'the impossibility of understanding one another': two people standing far away from each other (on the opposite side of the pole) will, firstly, look at things differently, then, secondly, will hardly be concerned with the problems of the other. The translator, however, is not willing to accept this figurative description of the information (it is not "Hungarian" after all), and uses another idiomatic expression, which is perhaps less iconic, but it also provides the necessary effect.

Since in translations like this the contextual similarity between the two texts, the SLT and the TLT, is the smallest, this should be regarded as a minimum condition in providing translation equivalence. Of course, this statement is by no means equivalent with the claim that translation equivalence is in conveying the aim of communication only. Minimum condition does not equal the maximum one. Equivalence, as we shall presently see, can of course be based on a greater similarity or closeness between the original and translated texts.

2.2. The second type of equivalence is represented by translations in which the contextual similarity with the original is not based on the similarity of the linguistic devices either:

2) I made it very snappy on the phone (181).

Nagyon röviden telefonáltam (153).

3) Quite a few guys came from these very wealthy families... (8)

Bőven volt itt jómódú fiú is (9).

In these examples the rendering of the majority of the lexical items and syntactic structures into the other language, the TL, is not possible directly (one to one), because direct, or word to word

translation would heavily infringe the norms (the rules) of the TL. But at the same time the content of the original and the translation is much closer than in the case of type one equivalence above.

The relationship between this translation types and the original is characterized by the following factors:

- a) there is no direct correspondence between the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the original and the translations;
- b) there are no semantic or syntactic transformations by means of which the lexical units and grammatical structures of the two texts could be said to be bound together;
- c) the original 'aim of communication' remained unchanged, which means that the situation is the same in both texts, although they are described by means of different lexical and grammatical devices;
- d) both texts refer to the same facts of real-life, which is proved by the fact that there is a direct, real or logical connection between the English and Hungarian utterances, and it allows us to claim that in the examples above the two texts "say different things about the same thing."

Consequently, type two equivalence differs from type one in that these translations preserve even that additional part of the original content which tells us what the original utterance is actually about. This additional part of the content can be labelled as 'description of the situation' to use Kommissarov's terminology again (1986:193).

2.3. The third equivalence type could be illustrated by the following examples:

- 4) Grand. There's a word I really hate. It's phoney. I could puke every time I hear it (14).
Pompásak! Nem bírom ezt a szót, gennyes. Felfordul a gyomrom, ha hallom (12).
- 5) ... you'll probably want to know ... how my parents were occupied, and all (5).
... Biztos azt szeretné tudni ... , hogy mik voltak a szüleim , meg minden (5).
- 6) They give guys the axe quite frequently at Pencey (8).
Penceyben gyakran nyírnak ki embereket (9).

Comparing the original with these types of translation the following peculiarities can be discovered:

- a) there is by far no one to one correspondence between all the lexical items (or expressions) and the syntactic structures;
- b) it cannot be claimed that the linguistic structures of the translations are derived by means of certain syntactic (or any other) transformations from the structures of the SLT;
- c) the aim of the communication and the situation are the same in the original and also in the translated texts;
- d) all those general notions and ideas by means of which the situation is described in the original, viz. part of the original text mentioned sooner as 'description of the situation', can be easily discovered in the translation as well. This can be proved by the fact that the original piece of text can easily be altered semantically into a translated piece of text in which the same relationship between the basic lexical items will be retained. Thus, for instance, in (4) – both in the original and the translation – the basic relationship in the situation is causal. In the original we have: 'I could puke every time I hear it', if I = A; could puke = B; every time = C; I hear it = D; then because of D, A is always forced to perform B. And in the translation: 'Felfordul a gyomrom, ha hallom', if 'Ha hallom' = D; 'felfordul' = F; 'a gyomrom' = E. F is always forced to perform E because of D. The notion of cause (D) is the same in both cases, although its characteristic features are different. A graphic representation will yield the following formula:

(1) D A (C) B

(2) D F (C) E

The same way (method) to describe a situation presupposes one situation (not two different ones), and the identification of the situation which is to be described in its turn will demand the same aim of communication. In other words, if in the first two equivalence types the translator preserved part of the content which tells us "what the reasons were for giving the original piece of information", or rather "what the essential information is in it", then in the third type "the original form of the information", i.e. "the object of the communication in the situation" has also been preserved.

Naturally within the framework of the same way to describe the situation there is a wide range of possibilities for the semantic representation of a given proposition which MAY (and by different translators actually will) be realized by synonymous structures. They may be termed as synonymous because of the closeness of meaning of the lexical items selected for this purpose (Cf. to puke – to vomit – to toss one's cookies etc. or: hányni – okádni – felfordul a gyomra – rókát fogni stb. in the TL). This circumstance is an explanation for why the TL information is so similar structurally to the original one, and why it is possible to claim that the translation is a synonymous structure of the original.

2.4. The following examples will represent another type of equivalence, which are significantly different from the ones mentioned so far:

7) She didn't give you a lot of horse manure about what a great guy his father was (7).

Nem tömött azzal a maszlaggal, hogy milyen nagy fiú az apja (6).

8) There isn't any night club in the world you can sit in for a long time unless you can at least buy some liquor and get drunk (80).

Nincs a világon olyan bár, ahol sokáig bír az ember ücsörögni, ha nem ihat valami komolyat, hogy berúgjon (70).

9) Anyway, that's what I decided I'd do (58).

Szóval úgy határoztam, hogy azt teszem (48).

In this group of translations it can easily be noticed that besides the similarity of the lexical items carrying the original information (or rendering the original content) the syntactic structures also show a great deal of similarity although, because of language-specific reasons, they may be transformed to a certain extent, but by no means beyond recognition (seemingly having no correspondence at all, as it was in the examples (2) – (6), and especially in (1).

Thus the relationship between the original and translations representing the fourth type of equivalence may be described as follows:

a) a significant, but not complete similarity of the lexical levels; the lexical items (their so called dictionary equivalents) of the original texts can also be found in the translations even if to a certain degree they may have slightly different connotations;

b) the syntactic structures in the translations are the transformed varieties of the original structures (synonymous structures);

c) this translation type retains the most characteristic features of the previous three equivalent types.

2.5. Finally we can mention the group of translations in which the established closeness of meaning between texts written in different languages is the greatest possible (maximum). This type may be represented by the following examples:

10) You should've seen the steaks (39).

Látnod kellett volna azt a sült húst (36).

11) He didn't say a word about Jane (44).

Egy szót se szólt Jane-ről (38).

12) I had a feeling old Ackley'd probably heard all the racket (49).

Az volt az érzésem, a jó öreg Ackley nyilván hallotta az egész ricsajt (43).

The relationship between this type of translation and the original is characterized by the following essential features:

a) there is a great deal of parallelism in the structural framework of the two texts;

b) almost a word to word correspondence between the lexical items; one can easily show in the translation which word stands for a given word in the original;

c) the translation retains all the contextual details of the original (in other words, all the peculiarities of the former four equivalence types have been preserved).

2.6. Thus a contrastive examination of the SLT-s and the TLT-s shows that there are at least five different types of linguistic equivalence in translation. The peculiarity of each separate type lies in containing the information which is present in the previous ones, and also in preserving part of the original meaning or content which is lost in the previous types. (Whether this lost information is compensated or not in the translation, is another problematic issue in translation theory which is not going to be discussed here). And if there are sufficient linguistic data at our disposal to analyze and compare, it will by no means be an exaggeration to conclude that these five types (or systems) of information, the preservation of which is crucial in any interlingual communication (called translation), can easily be discovered in **any discourse**. These systems will, as a rule, create those essential features of the content through which any information can be delivered to the recipient.

3.0. Now, from the point of view of translation practice and theory what is the use of knowing that we have at least these five types of equivalence to deal with? In other words, what is the difference between this equivalence concept and all those we have had so far (formal and dynamic, precise and free, etc., the essence of which is not my task to investigate here)? First of all, one is expected to note that this idea about translation equivalence is totally devoid of normativity (prescriptivity), and is characterized by a sheer descriptive approach. Secondly, it gives a much more detailed picture of equivalence than the ideas trying to define it through invariance in meaning or content. On the other hand, on the basis of what was said above the question arises: if there is a possibility to create different types of equivalence, then which is the one the translator is expected to choose?

3.1. To answer this question means to give a clue, the required criteria or 'gauge' if you please, for a more objective translation quality assessment.

Every professional translator and/or interpreter knows it very well from experience that from a linguistic point of view it is always the easiest to start creating equivalence on the last, the fifth level of the description suggested above. Of course linguistic peculiarities, the lack of isomorphism between languages, the notion of linguistic

distribution will, as a rule, **almost never** (which is not the same as never) permit translators to do so. If it is so, they can make a try to create equivalence on the next level, which is the fourth. If for different reasons (linguistic or any other), it is not possible either, then they may try level number three, and so on and so forth till equivalence is achieved. Now, by testing translations, which involves a meticulous comparison of the translated texts with the SLT-s, it is easy to tell whether the translator chose the appropriate level, or because out of certain considerations, or just for the sake of accepting the first easiest solution, he made a decision, or even a series of decisions which can be hardly justified (see such an analysis in Ortutay,1993:111–118). In other words, evaluators, as a rule, may – and actually should – always take into consideration the above described system of equivalence types as a guideline. Of course, it must not be forgotten that translation has a lot of other aspects as well, sociolinguistic ones for instance, which must by no means be overlooked or neglected either in making judgements about translations. Still, it seems to be quite obvious that from a linguistic point of view (when it is only lexis, grammar and syntax which are taken into consideration), the five equivalence types described here may prove to be a very good basis or point of departure for quality assessment of translations.

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