

CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES WHEN TRANSLATING NON-LITERARY TEXTS FROM SLOVAK INTO ENGLISH

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1 WHO TRANSLATES NON-LITERARY TEXTS INTO ENGLISH?

English is the most common foreign language which translators work with in Slovakia, and non-literary translation into English is the dominant activity for translators working out of Slovak (Angelovičová, 2018, p. 103; Djovčoš and Šveda, 2017, pp. 74–78; Ličko, 2014(b), pp. 26–28). In contrast to the translation of novels, plays, poetry, rhymes, short stories, songs, and the like, the focus of non-literary translation into English is primarily informative; therefore, translators have the freedom to “depart” from the source text, at least structurally, in order to deliver the intended meaning in a comprehensible and natural manner. Translating into English is certainly no easy task; it is a multifaceted undertaking that is more complex than just reading a source text, selecting words out of a bilingual dictionary, and then stringing them together in a linguistically competent sentence. Good translations are faithful reproductions of source texts and are worded in such a way that readers of the translated text may not even realize they are reading a translation (Dekanová, 2015, p. 27; Pauleová, 2015,

pp. 9, 18). To do a good job, translators into English obviously need a solid grammatical and mechanical knowledge of the source and target languages as well as access to good dictionaries and other sources, usually electronic ones, which provide context. Importantly, translators also need a solid knowledge of the cultures behind the source and target languages; this knowledge is essential when properly understanding a text's content, context, and use of language so that intended meanings and nuances are naturally and accurately delivered (Dekanová, 2015, p. 49; Pauleová, 2015, pp. 12–14). Because of this grounding, good translators are confident in what they do, they have acquired a “feel” for the history, culture, and social realities of the languages they are working with, and they are motivated to continually learn to the extent that these languages become an integral part of their lifestyles (Pauleová, 2015, pp. 14, 66; Slatinská, 2017, p. 109). In a nutshell, good translators are well-read and curious ones.

In Slovakia, most part-time and full-time translators into English have a university degree, but not necessarily one in translation studies (Djovčoš and Šveda, 2017, pp. 63, 66, 133; Ličko, 2014(b), pp. 35–36). One straightforward way of professionally providing translation services is through getting a trade licence; the provision of translation services has been a regulated profession since 2007, meaning that translators seeking a trade licence have to present proof of a relevant qualification or experience in the foreign language(s) they want to work with. These regulations are targeted at native speakers of Slovak and have sought to establish a professional benchmark in Slovak translators' foreign-language abilities. However, they do not address the situation of foreigners living in Slovakia, who quite lawfully can acquire a trade licence in translation services (and in teaching foreign languages) simply by virtue of having been born and raised in their home country and without having to prove they have any knowledge of Slovak at all.

There are probably less than four thousand native speakers of English living in Slovakia (Ministerstvo vnútra Slovenskej republiky, 2017), and few of them understand Slovak well enough to translate anything complex into English. There is also a widespread, and not unjustified, perception that Slovak is a “difficult” language for them to learn (Foreign Service Institute, 2015; Heinz, 2007; Loyola, 2015). In any event, there is no pressing need for them to learn Slovak beyond a basic level; Slovaks are quite fluent in English for everyday purposes, at least in the bigger cities, which is where populations of foreigners are concentrated (EF Education First, 2018). Most translators in Slovakia who work with English are therefore native speakers of Slovak who are translating out of their native language; they have generally acquired their competency in English through learning rather than living the language, and they translate as least as often into English as they do from it (Djovčoš and Šveda, 2017, p. 180; Gromová and

Muglová, 2018, pp. 17–18; Liashuk, 2014, p. 83; Ličko, 2014(b), pp. 10–11, 25). For them, the translation of non-literary texts into English is both a professional necessity and something which they relish for the challenges it involves (Ličko, 2014(b), pp. 20, 34). Translating into English is also a lucrative activity, with rates per unit of translation (e.g., per standard page) being at least ten percent higher than translations into Slovak (Djovčoš and Šveda, 2017, p. 113).

The few translators in Slovakia who work into English as their native language may be expected to have a high proficiency in providing a naturalness of expression, given that they are inherently aware of the limitations of English, particularly concerning the readability of a complex text, and they can quickly find appropriate (usually simplified) equivalents to deliver the intended meaning in a text (Liashuk, 2012, pp. 70, 73). However, English native-speaker translators are not necessarily any better at translating from Slovak into English than Slovaks themselves (Ličko, 2014(b), p. 24). When working unassisted, native speakers of English may not quite understand, or may even misunderstand, a source text and deliver a grammatically sound yet erroneous translation; while making some grammatical and mechanical errors in English, Slovaks doing the same task understand the source text on a fundamentally deeper and more accurate level and can identify encoded information and nuances to a higher degree (Liashuk, 2012, pp. 73–75).

2 MARKET REALITIES

When native speakers of English take part in the translation process, it is usually in the role of proof-readers of texts which have been translated into English or originally written in English by Slovaks, which is also a form of “translation” given that ideas formulated in one language are being expressed in the words of another. Being the identification and correction of linguistic errors of grammar and mechanics, proofreading is usually undertaken by native speakers of English without any consultation of the source text. It is not the proper revision of a translation and therefore will not always detect Slovak-language interference creeping into a final text caused, for instance, by false friends or the employment of the problematic word-for-word translation approach over the “sense-for-sense” one. However, if a Slovak translator is sufficiently proficient in English both linguistically and culturally for the purposes of professional employment, a proofreader will pick up any mistakes and help deliver an accurate translation. Working out of their own language and using the services of a proofreader, a competent Slovak translating into English can do an excellent job. However, an adherence to source-language sentence structures means that such translations,

even if properly proofread, may still come across as somewhat clunky and lacking an ease and naturalness of syntax and diction (Liashuk, 2012, p. 70, and 2014, p. 86; also see Cansdale, 2013).

In an ideal scenario, translations would be checked for accuracy and style by a bilingual third party acting as an intermediary between the translator/author and native-speaker proofreader. However, as R. Ličko (2014(a), p. 107) has pointed out, most translations into English are simply done by Slovak translators and then passed straight on to clients without any third-party revision or native-speaker proofreading taking place. This is because despite the acknowledged benefit of these additional services, they are a considerable addition to translation costs and add time to often already tight deadlines. While perhaps overlooking matters of style, grammar, and mechanics, price-conscious clients, who usually have a working knowledge of English anyway, are generally satisfied with a translation that looks “good enough” on paper so long as it is delivered on time and for a low price. In the same vein, and as I. Lacko (2017) has highlighted with translation from English into Slovak, translators often end up editing and proofreading texts that have either been machine translated, “translated” by people who lack core translation skills, or a mixture of both. This is a very ungrateful task for a translator, being both time-consuming and oftentimes extremely frustrating. Nonetheless, given that proofreading is a considerably cheaper service than translation, it is hardly surprising that clients opt for this arrangement so long as they believe the basic communicative purpose of a text has been preserved (Lacko, 2017).

3 TOOLS, CHALLENGES, AND APPROACHES

Translators of non-literary texts work with modern translation software and primarily consult online sources of information. There is a range of freely available resources offering parallel corpuses between Slovak and English which help with providing a context when deciding upon the appropriateness of a word or phrase. Also, comprehensive bilingual dictionaries provide valuable definitions, explanations, and examples of a word’s use in context. These are all extremely useful translation tools; they save time and improve translation accuracy, thus increasing productivity, efficiency, and earnings potential. Using a machine translation service such as Google Translate once used to be looked upon with much derision by translators working from Slovak into English. However, in recent years this software has got demonstrably better in translating non-literary texts with the development of neural machine translation technology, and it can speed up the translation process if used with some caution. While not capable of replacing a human translator (“*[I]t can omit words, wrongly translate proper*

names or non-traditional terms, or even translate isolated sentences instead of considering the context of a paragraph or a page”) (The Slovak Spectator, 2017), this technology is becoming increasingly usable for everyday translation purposes, if not yet professional ones, particularly when dealing with simple texts using short sentences. The translation of any complex sentences into English from Slovak remains beyond the abilities of artificial intelligence, and so Google Translate and similar services will not replace human translators just yet. However, assuming that machine translation services will continue to improve, and regardless of how unpleasant this may sound to purists, the translator’s role in the non-literary sphere will increasingly change to becoming one that provides the necessary human element to machine translations through revision and error correction to produce texts which competently fulfil their core communicative purpose at a low cost.

In addition to changes in the translation process which have been brought on by the advance of technology, there are some constant challenges which non-literary translators into English face. While not a common phenomenon in non-literary translation, some Slovak texts contain expressions which cannot accurately be reproduced in English due to their abundance of locally-specific cultural, linguistic, and historical information (Dekanová 2015, pp. 30–31). Recent examples include the best-selling “travel book” *Ako som vozil Nórov* (How I transported Norwegians) by Ondrej Sokol, which uses language full of locally specific information, and popular online blogs such as Daily Male’s *Mnohosrd*, which falls into the same category. When there is so much culturally specific information, it is hard to imagine how the intended meanings and reading experiences can be passed onto an uninitiated reader in the target language in their entirety. M. Baker (In: Opalková, 2016, p. 119) has pointed out that the “untranslatability” of expressions in such texts can come down to the lack of such a term or concept existing in the target language, the broadness of meaning in the term(s) to be translated, and the presence of culturally specific meanings and contexts. Dealing with such problems depends on the situation at hand, but D. Knittlová (ibid.) has presented five useful strategies: accepting the foreign term, adapting the foreign term into English, generalizing it, making a calque, or simply leaving the term out. Regardless of how diligently the translator deals with this challenge, texts which have a lot of locally specific cultural information will inevitably lose some of the nuanced meanings in translation, and in these cases, perfect translations appear to be impossible (Dekanová, 2015, pp. 30–31). However, a solid cultural knowledge of both languages does make a passable translation quite possible and can make the difference between a translation’s success and failure.

Other constant challenges can be seen when translating scholarly and other professional literature. English is the unrivalled international lingua franca of

international academic and professional communities, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. This is not the work of native speakers of English but is rather due to the dominance of English as a learned language; non-native speakers now form the clear majority of users of English in many professional and scholarly domains (David Crystal, In: Jenkins, 2009, pp. 232–233; Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 164). Professional and academic conferences tend to be held in English, and there are more serious publishing opportunities in English than in any other language because it is with English that the widest possible readership is reached.

Like elsewhere in the world, there is pressure on academics in Slovakia to publish in English due to benchmarking practices adopted by Slovak universities and the Ministry of Education. This situation has led to a strong demand for abstracts, articles, books, and the like to be written in English or translated into English from Slovak, which presents some translation challenges worthy of mention. The stylistic norms of academic English place an emphasis on the presentation of knowledge, conciseness, and clarity, which means preferring shorter sentences over excessively long ones, simple sentence structures, functional and not flowery vocabulary, as little unnecessary repetition as possible, and a discouragement of pretentiousness and elitism (Cansdale, 2013; Clyne, 1987, p. 238; Heng Hartse and Kubota, 2014, p. 76; Siepmann, 2006, pp. 142–145). By contrast, Slovak academic texts, like in the German tradition, place the responsibility on the reader and not the writer to comprehend a text's meaning; they tend to be difficult to read, having been designed as such, and there is a greater emphasis on complex theoretical considerations, a larger amount of digression and rehashing of background literature, a more complicated vocabulary, and a lack of conciseness and message clarity (see Clyne, 1987, pp. 227–228, 238; Kouřilová, 1998, pp. 110–112, Kouřilová-Urbanczik, 2012, p. 106; Siepmann, 2006, pp. 134, 139, 142). Like in Czech academic writing, there is a greater tolerance for implicit meanings in academic Slovak than there is in English, which makes reading Slovak academic prose an intellectually demanding and oftentimes unpleasant endeavour as it is palpably “*more verbose, convoluted, and baroque*” than the “*straightforward, direct, and fact-oriented*” style of academic English (Pípalová, 2014, p. 108). Whereas conciseness, clarity, and the use of plain language are central requirements for formal writing in English, this is a practice which is yet to come into use in Slovak academic and professional writing.

The process of translating such Slovak texts into standard English is one where the translator needs to respect the intended meanings of the source text as far as is possible while providing a significantly higher clarity of expression. The linguistic acrobatics present in Slovak academic and other formal writing will come across in translation as poor writing and possibly as an attempt to cover up deficiencies in content with complex language and jargon; without

rewriting the text, translators do need to depart from it through simplification and translating in a “sense for sense” manner so that the text will be readable to the target audience. Above all, translators should become aware of the most widely accepted standards of professional writing in English, and in the specific field they are working in, to aid the translation process and avoid the unnecessary and overcomplicated structures, lack of clarity, and textual ballast that pervade professional and academic writing in Slovak.

CONCLUSION

Predominantly undertaken by native speakers of Slovak, non-literary translation in English requires a set of skills which differ from the translation of literary texts; in addition to solid linguistic knowledge, translators need a firm cultural grounding in the languages they work with as well as the preference for a “sense for sense” rather word-for-word translation approach so that the intended meaning is delivered in an accurate yet concise and readable way. Ideally working alongside a competent proofreader, who is also a native speaker of English, and taking advantage of numerous online resources, Slovak translators into English can perform high quality work. However, market realities emphasizing cost and speed over translation quality mean that editing and proofreading processes are shortened or skipped; furthermore, the rise of machine translations is pushing would-be translators into the position of text editor rather than text creator. This is happening alongside constant challenges facing translators, which include working on texts which carry an abundance of local specificities as well as scholarly texts and other formal writing, where the English writing tradition’s priorities of clarity, simplicity, and conciseness are not present to the same degree in the Slovak one. Nonetheless, by using all the linguistic resources that the current technological age provides, not sticking religiously to source-language conventions, and with confidence in the richness of their own linguistic and cultural knowledge, Slovak translators into English can deal with the above issues, make a living, and even prosper.

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RESUMÉ

Tento príspevok mapuje súčasný stav odborného prekladu zo slovenského jazyka do anglického jazyka a venuje sa niektorým hlavným výzvam, ktorým čelia prekladatelia obvykle pracujúci s angličtinou ako s cudzím jazykom. Štúdia zdôrazňuje potrebu prekla-

dateľov mať nielen bohaté jazykové schopnosti, ale aj hlbšie znalosti a solídnu orientáciu v kultúrach východiskového a cieľového jazyka. Za ideálnych okolností prekladateľ počas prekladateľského procesu spolupracuje s kompetentným anglicky hovoriacim korektorom, no prax na prekladateľskom trhu ukazuje, že prekladatelia odborných textov často pracujú sami a namiesto prekladu sa neraz sami stanú „korektormi“ textov, ktoré sú výsledkom strojového prekladu. Príspevok tiež hovorí o možných postojoch a prístupoch pri stálych výzvach odborného prekladu do angličtiny, ako napríklad „nepreložiteľnosť“ textu pre vysoký obsah miestnych kultúrnych špecifík a problematika prekladu akademických a podobných odborných textov, pri ktorých má formálna angličtina celkom iné vlastnosti (hlavne je jednoduchšia a vecnejšia) v porovnaní so slovenčinou.

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