

TRANSLATION STUDIES IN SLOVENIA:
THE PROFILE OF A TRANSLATION-ORIENTED CULTURE

Martina Ožbot

In the Slovene cultural context, translations have historically had a variety of functions: they have been instrumental in the development of culture, and especially of its language and literature, and they have enabled Slovenes to stay connected to the wider world, notwithstanding the often unfavourable historical circumstances. Starting from this premise, the paper will attempt to show how translation as an activity and as a product was viewed through time and to sketch some features of contemporary translation research in Slovenia, and as far as it is relevant beyond its borders. By examining the (sometimes controversial) position of translated texts in the Slovene culture, it is possible to see how inextricably the history of the reflection on translation is linked to the general cultural history of the nation.

The special position of translation in the Slovene culture

Slovene culture, in common with other small European cultures, can be considered a translation culture *par excellence*. Many milestone events in the history of the Slovene language, literature and culture in general were to a significant degree shaped by translated texts. For instance, the first written documents in Slovene dating from around 1000 AD are translations from Latin and German and at various subsequent moments, such as the Reformation, Romanticism or the period between the two world wars, translations contributed greatly to the development of the Slovene language and Slovene literature. Initially, it was religious texts that were translated into Slovene, but from the Enlightenment on, translation was of central importance also for the development of Slovene poetry, prose and drama as well as of various non-literary genres.¹ Today, translations account for about one third of all

¹ For a short overview of the role of translation in the Slovene culture from a historical perspective cf. M. Ožbot, *Translation as an Agent of Culture Planning in Low-Impact Cultures*, in *Between Cultures and Texts: Itineraries in Translation History. – Entre les cultures*

the titles published in Slovene per year,² which is a very high proportion in comparison with other European countries, such as the UK (together with Ireland), which is at the opposite end, with translations accounting for only about 3% of the total book production.³

The important role of translation should come as no surprise. Translation has for centuries had a prominent role in the history of Slovene literature, but also in society in general. Like many other small cultures, the Slovene culture is characterized by a double need for translation: on the one hand, translations from other languages and literatures have to be produced to enable the Slovene literature to continue to develop its full potential; on the other hand, the Slovene culture, like other cultures with limited-diffusion languages, is often also forced to produce itself translations of its own texts into other languages, since the number of potential translators from Slovene who are members of other cultures is rather low. In Cronin's terminology, the Slovene situation therefore constitutes a typical case of the so-called "self-translation" or "autonomous translation", as Slovenes tend to translate both their own texts into other languages and texts from other languages into Slovene, as opposed to the "dependent translation" or "heteronymous translation"⁴ practiced in major cultures, which tend to import texts from minor cultures with the help of translators from those same cultures, and relying on members of other cultures also to translate their own texts into foreign languages.

The role of translation in the Slovene culture has been further strengthened by the territory's political and social conditions. The country only gained independence in 1991, but for about a century and a half its lack of political autonomy was to an extent compensated by a heightened cultural activity, in which translation (both, literary and non-literary) was of high importance. A comparison could perhaps be drawn here with other European cultures such

et les textes: Itinéraires en histoire de la traduction, ed. by A. Chalvin, A. Lange, D. Monticelli, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 55-66.

² The report provided by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia has taken into account the years from 2004 to 2007; <http://www.stat.si/doc/statinf/10-si-267-0901.pdf> (accessed 20 December 2014).

³ This is the average percentage comprising all translations, i.e. of literary and non-literary texts. The amount of translated literary texts is actually a bit higher, reaching about 4,5%. The figures have been calculated on the basis of data available for the years 2000, 2005 and 2008; see J. Donahaye, *Three percent? Publishing data and statistics on translated literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland*, Aberystwyth, Mercator Institute for Media, Languages and Culture, Aberystwyth University, 2012, p. 28.

⁴ M. Cronin, *Translation and Identity*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 40.

as those of Catalunya, the Basque Country or Wales, which have not enjoyed political independence, or with those which have attained it only relatively recently such as Ireland and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). In the Slovene case, translation mainly into Slovene, but since the last decades of the 20th century increasingly also from Slovene into other languages, was a means of connecting with other cultures and of placing Slovenia on the international cultural and in turn political map. Translated texts were central for Slovene literary and cultural development, in addition to being important mechanisms of taste formation and channels through which various Slovene circles became acquainted with ideological, political and other ideas, thus keeping up to date with what the world beyond the Slovene borders had to offer.

As can reasonably be expected, in such a translation-oriented culture the activity of translation itself has been accompanied by substantial reflection on translational issues mainly by translators, but also by writers and scholars of language and literature. These reflections, mostly of a non-theoretical nature, at least prior to the 20th century, often tie in with or (broadly) correspond to ideas promoted in canonical translation theories which developed in other intellectual environments and are now considered as the historical building blocks of the modern discipline of translation studies.

The legacy of the Reformation

A special position is occupied by the Protestant translations from the second half of the 16th century. The Slovene Protestants translated a number of religious texts, among which also the Bible, the first complete Slovene version of which was made by one man, Jurij Dalmatin, and was published in 1584. Although the Protestants' translation activities were necessarily religious in nature, they had a profound impact beyond the religious sphere and on the general development of the Slovene language and Slovene culture. The sheer output of the Protestant translators was also impressive, especially compared to what had been hitherto written in Slovene. The availability of their texts radically changed the fortunes of the Slovene language and its speakers, since by obtaining the translation of the Bible a culture which had previously very limited written resources became in a relatively short time comparable to other, much more developed cultures which also possessed their own translations of the Bible not only as a canonical religious text but also as a linguistic, literary and cultural reference point. The close relation between the religious and the linguistic function of the Bible was noted by Jurij Dalmatin himself in the introductory text to his translation: "[...] God revealed his word to the barbarian peoples [...] in the German language, which is intelligible to

the ordinary man. In this way, it was not only the German language which flourished through the pure word of God, but it was also the word of God which flourished through the language and especially through the good German translation of the Bible”.⁵

The passage is of significance also as an early instance of reflection on translation within the Slovene culture. In fact, it is with the Slovene Protestants that translation issues begin to be dealt with, although their translation-related observations are usually short and made in passing, as part of their introductions to translated texts. They mainly concern the circumstances under which the translations were produced, the purpose of translations and some general principles followed by the translators such as the intelligibility of the target texts and their faithfulness to the originals. For instance, some writings by Primož Trubar, the author of *Abecedarium* and *Catechismus*, the first Slovene printed texts, which were published in 1550 in Tübingen, offer interesting material in this regard. As a follower of Martin Luther, Trubar had an excellent knowledge of his German translations and certainly also of the principles of his work as a translator. It is very likely that Trubar also knew Luther’s *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, although he does not explicitly refer to this essay.⁶ Apart from providing arguments to justify the Slovene translations he made, Trubar writes about specific problems which he encountered and had to solve in his work and also offers us an insight into his general approach to translation, that is his endeavour to translate “in a faithful and understandable fashion”, so that the text would be perceived as natural and accessible by any target recipient. In emphasizing these two characteristics, “faithfulness” and “intelligibility”, he directly follows Luther, whose translation differs from older German versions of the Bible in that it strives to be intelligible to the widest possible audience by being based on contemporary German usage, syntactically as well as lexically, thus avoiding foreignizing Latin models observable in previous translations. The aim to produce a “faithful” and generally “intelligible” translation has a theological motivation and reflects the Protestant belief that the text of the Bible should be accessible to everyone.⁷ However, the theological basis of Trubar’s reaso-

⁵ The passage is quoted from: J. Dalmatin, *Biblija, tu je vse svetu pismu (1584): Iz posvetila*, in *Prevajalci o prevodu: Od Trubarja do Župančiča: antologija*, ed. by M. Stanovnik, Ljubljana, Založba ZRC, 2013, pp. 55-58, p. 55. The English translation of the quotation is mine.

⁶ M. Stanovnik, *Slovenski literarni prevod 1550-2000*, Ljubljana, Založba ZRC, 2005, pp. 14-15.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

ning notwithstanding, it also shows a highly modern and pluralist attitude towards the expressive potential of individual languages, which are considered to be capable of serving as comparable vehicles of the transmission of verbal messages. The translations produced by Trubar and his fellow Protestants conferred to Slovene the status of a language with a broad functional scope, thus opening up the way to its full development, both in the area of original and translational production.

The Enlightenment – a new translation of the Bible

If Protestant translations had the function of bringing Slovene believers in direct contact with the word of God, the activity of translation practiced in later periods was mainly of a secular nature, although, of course, religious texts continued to be translated. However, further reflection on translation has been mainly related to non-religious texts. An observation which can be made on the basis of examining the translation output, on the one hand, and the activity of reflecting on translational issues on the other hand, in the age of Protestantism and in later periods, is that an increase in the production of translations often also brings about a heightened awareness about translational matters and consequently more reflection on them.

Until the beginning of the 19th century, literary production (both original and translated) was rather scarce and there was little discussion of the general role and value of translated texts in the target culture. In the introduction to his new translation of the Bible published between 1784 and 1802,⁸ Jurij Japelj makes an ardent defence of the necessity of Biblical translation, since by having the Scripture available in their own language all believers, regardless of their intellectual endowment and social standing, could have access to the text. The period of triumphant Catholicism in which the new version of the Bible was produced was certainly very different from the time of Protestantism in which Trubar and his followers were active. Nonetheless, at both periods, it was believed that the translation of the Bible was necessary, but also that this necessity had to be justified: whereas Dalmatin's justification is based upon the Protestant view that believers should have direct access to God's word, Japelj is more concerned with dispelling possible qualms regarding the dangers which may threaten the believers' if the content of the Bible reaches them without the interpretative mediation of the Catholic Church, which was in actual fact the case with the Protestant translation.

⁸ *Prevajalci o prevodu: Od Trubarja do Župančiča: antologija*, cit., pp. 73-82.

The 19th century – translation as an obstacle and an instrument of cultural advancement

In the 19th century, translation started to be practised more intensely, the most common source language being German, in both literary and in non-literary translation. Several writers also engaged in translation, which was sometimes taken as an exercise aimed at helping them develop their writing skills, especially at the beginning of their literary careers, but at the same time the translations proved to be of wider importance as a crucial means for the expansion of the textual corpus of Slovene. In this period, the status of translations from foreign languages, which co-existed with texts originally produced in Slovene, did not seem to be problematic. However, in the middle of the 19th century, several Slovene writers began to express a rather negative view of literature in translation. Translated texts were viewed as competitors to original writing and some attempts were made to limit the production of translations, which were believed to potentially stifle the peculiarly Slovene character supposedly expressed in works of native literature. Nonetheless, translations of selected classics were tolerated. “Originality” was privileged as the main goal to strive for and it was not understood that through translation originality itself can be enhanced rather than weakened. When translation was tolerated, various limits were postulated; for instance, that only literary classics should be translated or that just the most accomplished authors could translate or that the source texts could only come from certain literatures, such as, for example, the Slavic literatures, etc.

Initially, the resistance to translation⁹ was probably a reaction to the overwhelming German influence, which was present in the Slovene culture of the time, also through numerous translations from that language, both of high literature and of popular texts as well as of non-literary genres, which of necessity only perpetuated the Germanic cultural pre-eminence in Slovenia in all domains, language included. However, in some cases such a negative attitude was not restricted to translations from German, but was generalized to all or nearly all instances of translation. Admittedly, there were some rather infelicitous translations published at the time, not only from German, but also from Italian and from Ancient Greek, which convinced Fran Levstik, one of the foremost literary critics of the period, that translation endeavours

⁹ As can be expected, resistance to translation is not restricted to Slovene culture, but has been fairly common in many other environments. For a short comparative sketch see: M. Ožbot, *Translation as an Agent of Culture Planning in Low-Impact Cultures*, cit. pp. 61-63.

were not of much worth.¹⁰ A more interesting case – since it was more paradoxical – was that of Josip Stritar,¹¹ one of the central figures of Slovene literary Romanticism, who spent a great part of his life in Vienna, where he was, among other things, the editor of “Zvon”, an important Slovene literary magazine published in the 1870s. Ironically, Stritar, who lived in the capital of the Habsburg monarchy as a teacher of languages (primarily of Greek and Latin) and was one of the more cosmopolitan Slovene authors, considered it imperative to circumscribe the influence of foreign cultures upon Slovene, especially those of the Germanic world, and decided to accept for publication in his magazine only texts originally written in Slovene, with the exception of translations of Slovene literature into other languages. Positions such as Stritar’s did not prevail in the end, but they were nonetheless rather influential for decades in that they contributed to the perception of translated literature as relatively unimportant in comparison to text originally produced in Slovene. This attitude also made translations appear less interesting as objects of intellectual debate and scholarly research, and it was only in the last decades of the 20th century that such a perception began to change. It must, however, be pointed out that viewing translated texts as second-rate in comparison to original ones is not typical only of the Slovene literary and scholarly circles, but was also characteristic of contemporary international research, which until the end of the last century tended to strongly privilege original production over translations, and Slovenia was no exception.

The negative attitude towards translation, which was prevalent in Slovene culture for some decades, began to change around the end of the 19th century, when several writers and scholars (e.g. Anton Aškerc, Ivan Prijatelj, Fran Albreht) affirmed the importance of translations as a means of literary communication with the wider world, which was finally seen as a necessity for all civilized nations and their literatures. There were various proposals as to what to translate, some suggesting that canonical works should be privileged, while some others emphasized the need to translate from small cultures and literatures (such as Scandinavian literatures), which faced similar political, cultural and linguistic situations as the Slovenes. A somewhat idiosyncratic proposal was put forward by the notable critic Josip Vidmar, who believed that the quality of translations should be checked before they are published and that the selection of texts to be translated should be subject to censorship, though not on political or ideological, but on literary and

¹⁰ *Prevajalci o prevodu: Od Trubarja do Župančiča: antologija*, cit., pp. 124-138.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 96-123.

aesthetic grounds.¹² Translation finally began to be considered as an instrument of cultural advancement and, indeed, of the protection of the target culture, rather than a threat to it. Translated texts came to be seen as an essential component of the Slovene literary corpus and the quantity of translations and their impact on Slovene literature and on Slovene society at large increased in an unprecedented way. Texts from various literatures, European and non-European, began to be translated into Slovene, mostly directly, but in the case of non-European literatures, such as Chinese or Japanese, often indirectly. With indirect translation, the situation had only started to change considerably over the last two or three decades, after enough Slovene experts in some of those languages had been formed who could begin to engage in literary translation.

However, the change of attitude towards translation and the increase in the volume of translations did not themselves mean that translated texts and translation-related issues soon became an object of intense study and research. The view of translated texts as less important than non-translated ones was prevalent in academic circles at least up to the last decades of the 20th century, and had important consequences for the development of translation research and for the general perception of translation in society. When translational issues did start to attract more attention, they were treated either from a practical point of view or in relation to culture planning and cultural policy questions, since the main problem was considered to be the position of translations within the general corpus of texts available in Slovene. At this stage, i.e. until the eve of World War II and for some decades after it, translation theory (or pre-theory, as we may see it today) was hardly dealt with. In Slovene writings on translation, the classics of translation theory, such as Schleiermacher, von Humboldt or Rosenzweig, were rarely mentioned. There is, however, an informative essay from 1928 by Anton Debeljak, a translator from the Romance languages, which is dedicated to the Slovene poet Oton Župančič as a literary translator: at the same time it also shows the author's vast knowledge of translational matters and offers insightful information on translation theory, but it is rather short.¹³

Contemporary research on translation

In the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s, in Slovenia, as in many other academic environments, translations began to be perceived on a wider scale

¹² Ibidem, p. 262.

¹³ A. Debeljak, *Oton Župančič – prevajalec* (1928), in Ibidem, pp. 251-258.

as valuable objects of research and important cultural phenomena. Before then, however, there were several literary scholars as well as some practising translators who wrote about developments in translation research and about the new interests of the international research community in translational matters. The main channel through which this information reached the Slovene audience was provided by the “Proceedings of the Association of Slovene Literary Translators” (“Zborniki Društva slovenskih književnih prevajalcev”), a series of annual publications which came out first in 1975 and continued to be published until 2006, when it was replaced by a journal (“Hieronymus”) to which soon (in 2008) a book series “Studia translatoria” was added. Currently, another book series devoted to translation and related fields is published by the Department of Translation of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, i.e. “Translation Studies and Applied Linguistics” (2008-). Initially, many of the contributions published in the “Proceedings of the Association of Slovene Literary Translators” were of a practical nature, and sometimes also showed prescriptive tendencies. Gradually, translation history and translation theory began to interest an ever-greater number of authors and, consequently, the scope of the publications widened considerably. The Association of Slovene Literary Translators has also published three reference works whose aim is to provide a register of translations (mainly into Slovene and to some extent also from Slovene into other languages) along with short biographical information on the translators.¹⁴ Over nearly five decades, the Slovene readership interested in international developments related to research on translation has also been able to gather some information on various translation-related topics from the journal “Mostovi” published since 1966 by the Association of Scientific and Technical Translators of Slovenia (Društvo znanstvenih in tehniških prevajalcev Slovenije).

Before translation became for many Slovene researchers the focus of attention from the 1990s on, it was dealt with within various disciplines – such as comparative literature and classical and modern languages – but as an object of study translated texts were often viewed as secondary compared to original writing. It was necessary to wait for the fundamental shift of the paradigm, which brought them to the centre of attention. This was made possible in the first place by the advances that took place in the study of language and in the study of literature internationally. When it became accepted

¹⁴ *Slovenski leksikon novejšega prevajanja*, ed. by J. Moder, Koper, Lipa, 1985; *Modrov zbornik*, ed. by M. Grum, Ljubljana, Društvo slovenskih književnih prevajalcev, 1998; *Slovenski prevajalski leksikon 1550-1945: Poskusni zvezek: A-J*, ed. by M. Grum, Ljubljana, Društvo slovenskih književnih prevajalcev, 2007.

that the understanding of the functioning of language presupposed a textual approach and, consequently, when literary and non-literary, canonical as well as non-canonical texts turned out to be interesting to study, in academia translations started to gain ground too. Then, in literary studies there was, for instance, the reader-response theory which shifted the emphasis from the author to the reader, thus indirectly helping translations come to the fore, since translations are, first and foremost, documented acts of reading the original. These circumstances were crucial for the development of translation studies,¹⁵ which from the end of the 1980s also began to interest Slovene researchers. A lot of work has been done since, and a variety of different approaches have been used to study translated literary and non-literary texts and their functioning. Particularly well represented are various descriptive approaches which deal with translation from a functional perspective (often on the basis of Vermeer's and Reiss' theory or some variant thereof), from a cultural and a sociological perspective, and a lot of applied work has been done with the aim of understanding the functioning of texts in Slovene and other languages from a translational perspective, which may be of help to practising translators and to advanced language learners. Some research on interpreting¹⁶ too has been carried out and has encompassed studies of subtitling, of community interpreting and of medical interpreting, to mention just some of the topics. What has also been developing, is history of translation, especially into Slovene, to which a number of publications have been dedicated, including a monograph on the topic,¹⁷ a series of six volumes of the Proceedings of the Association of Slovene Literary Translators (2001-2006) and some monographs which have appeared as part of the series "Studia translatoria".¹⁸ What remains a desideratum is, however, more robust translation criticism. Critical reflection on translation was actually highly developed and was relatively widespread in newspapers and journals in the period

¹⁵ M. Ožbot, *Interdisciplinarnost – je sploh (še) mogoče drugače?*, in *Meddisciplinarnost v slovenistiki*, ed. by S. Kranjc, Ljubljana, Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2011, pp. 351-356.

¹⁶ For a short overview of interpreting studies in Slovenia see: J. Markič, *O tolmačenju in tolmačeslovju*, in *Slovensko tolmačeslovje*, ed. by V. Gorjanc, Ljubljana, Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2013, pp. 6-19.

¹⁷ M. Stanovnik, *Slovenski literarni prevod 1550-2000*, cit.

¹⁸ Topics dealt with in the monographs concern the history of literary translation from French into Slovene, the historical concept of faithfulness in translation, the translation of verse, issues of Italian-Slovene and Slovene-Italian literary translation and the history of the Slovene reflection on translation.

between the two world wars, but now it has only a minor role, particularly in comparison to literary criticism.

By way of summary, it can reasonably be stated that in the Slovene culture, which is indeed heavily translation-oriented, the activity of translation has been accompanied by substantial reflection on various translation-related issues. Especially since the late 1980s research on translation has greatly expanded, in parallel with an increased amount of translation (or translation-centred) teaching developing at Slovene universities, not only in translation departments, but also in comparative literature and in language departments. However, in individual departments, translation may be taught from different perspectives and with different aims. As far as the formation of translators and interpreters is concerned, Slovenia has been able to provide the training on its own since 1997, when the Department of translation at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana was founded, whereas more recently translation programmes have also been introduced at the universities of Maribor and Koper.

However, what appears to characterize the Slovene reflection on translation is the absence of a fully-fledged theory, which developed in various other European traditions – for instance in the German tradition, with Katharina Reiss and Hans J. Vermeer, but also with some other researchers such as Christiane Nord and Juliane House – as well as in the Slavic world, where figures such as Roman Jakobson, Jiří Levý and Anton Popovič are among the most prominent, or in some other countries, such as Estonia with Peter Torop. There is no similar central figure in Slovene translation research, which offers no example of elaborate and coherent theoretical systems and where, for a long time, reflection on translation tended to be confined to the discussion of individual translations and to questions of translation and culture planning and policy. Apart from research preferences of Slovene scholars as such, one reason for a relatively limited autochthonous theoretical scope is probably the size of the country itself, in which not all areas of linguistic and literary studies can enjoy an equal amount of attention from researchers – compared to larger Slavic cultures such as Poland and Russia, which have indeed produced a considerable amount of theoretically original research on translation. As already mentioned, in the Slovene academic environment research on translation was not systematically developed until the beginning of the 1990s, which is, in actual fact, not surprising at all, since also in many bigger academic environments questions of translation were not dealt with extensively until the new discipline developed more autonomously and acquired more prestige.

‘Slovene’ translation research outside Slovenia

It is to be added that at present translation research involving Slovene is not only carried out in Slovenia, but also at the universities of Trieste and Graz, where important translator and interpreter training institutes are based, both of which have opened soon after World War II. Particularly in Graz, translation research encompassing Slovene is well developed, mainly through the work of Erich Prunč, a Carinthian Slovene who had a prominent role in the growth of the Graz Translation Institute and who is recognized as one of the foremost figures of contemporary translation research, especially in the German-speaking world, and is also the author of a reference work on the development of the discipline and on its current trends.¹⁹ He is also known to have conceptualized the term “Translationskultur”²⁰ (‘translation culture’), which has proved influential in translation studies.²¹ “Translationskultur”, constructed in analogy to the concept of *Sprachkultur*, refers to a subsystem within a given culture which is related to the activity of translation in the broadest sense and consists of socially established norms, conventions, expectations and values of all those who actually or potentially take part in translation processes.²² In addition to his work in German, he has also produced a number of publications in Slovene and has set up a large historical database on translations from German into Slovene.

Besides Prunč’s important contribution to the study of translation, the volume of translations produced and the intensity of translation research by Slovene scholars, which is now very much part of contemporary translation studies, also bode well and it is hoped that the trend will indeed continue in the future.

¹⁹ E. Prunč, *Entwicklungslinien der Translationswissenschaft: Von den Asymmetrien der Sprachen zu den Asymmetrien der Macht*, Berlin, Frank & Timme, 2012³.

²⁰ Id., *Translationskultur (Versuch einer konstruktiven Kritik des translatorischen Handelns)*, “TEXTconTEXT”, 11 (1997) [NF 1], pp. 99-127.

²¹ See, for instance, the volume *Translationskultur – ein innovatives und produktives Konzept*, ed. by L. Schippel, Berlin, Frank & Timme, 2008.

²² E. Prunč, *Translationskultur (Versuch einer konstruktiven Kritik des translatorischen Handelns)*, cit., p. 107.