

BOHUSLAV ILEK AS A THEORETICIAN OF TRANSLATION

Anna Radwan

Slavonic studies in Czechoslovakia and then in the Czech Republic went through similar changes as in other countries. They started with documentation of Slavonic languages and then emerged into a wide field of academic studies that includes studies of literature, linguistics, culture, history and, last but not least, translation. In Czechoslovakia, studies of translation gained a position as an independent academic field of studies in the middle of 20th century, in the end of the 1950s. A person that had a big impact on the shape of this new field of science was Professor Bohuslav Ilek.

Bohuslav Ilek was born on April 9th, 1902, in Rovečné, a village that is now a part of the Vysočina Region. In 1922, after finishing secondary school, he became a student of Slavonic and English Philology at Charles University in Prague. During his studies he was a student of the famous professor Vilém Mathesius, the innovator and first president of the Prague linguistic circle, which led to Ilek's great knowledge in the field of linguistics and was visible later in his own academic work. In 1926, before even finishing his studies, Ilek gave a third lecture on the history of the Prague linguistic circle (*Jazyková kultura podle nových publikací ruských*). In 1927, he received his degree and began his job as a teacher of the Russian language at the Business Academy in Olomouc. From 1929, he also taught the Polish language. In 1930, he finished his doctoral thesis *Charakteristika spisovné ruštiny* although he received his official Ph.D. degree much later, after passing his Ph.D. exam in 1946. He stayed in Olomouc for 30 years, until 1957. In 1946, when Palacky University reopened after years of being closed due to Emperor Joseph II's act in the 1850s, Ilek taught Russian language and literature at the Faculty of Philosophy. When in 1950, the university opened its brand new Department of Slavonic Languages and Literatures, Ilek became a professor there. From 1953 to 1955, he was even the department chief. In 1957, he moved to Prague, where he led the Department of Russian Language and organized the translation studies unit at *Vysoká škola ruského jazyka a literatury*. From 1960 until his retirement, he worked as a professor and chief at the Department of Russian Language and Literature at Charles University. Although he retired in 1970, his professional work did not stop. In his later years, he was interested

mostly in technical, non-literary translation. During most of his academic career he was active in journals on Russian studies: from 1945 to 1950 he was a redactor of “Svobodná země – Slovanský týdeník” in Olomouc, then from 1958 to 1971 he was a chief redactor of “Československá rusistika”, in which he regularly published until his death. Bohuslav Ilek died in Prague in 1988.

When it comes to his academic work, Bohuslav Ilek was a man of many talents and interests. He acted in the field of literature studies, linguistics, versology, theory of translation. From his early years in Olomouc he also worked as a translator of Russian literature. His own practical experience in translation along with great knowledge in linguistics led him to deep and quite unique research on the theory of translation of his times. His first translations, *Zemljanička* by Elsa Triolet and one part of *Vojna i mir* by Lev Tolstoj, were published in 1929. He also translated other books by Tolstoj, as well as many works of Šolochov, Lermontov, Leonov, Gor’kij, Kuročkin and some theater plays by Puškin and Fonvizin. It is believed that his best translation is the autobiography of protopope Avvakum Petrov, which Ilek translated from the 17th century Russian language.

The beginning of the 1950s marks also the beginning of Bohuslav Ilek as a translation theoretician. His first article in this field of studies was published in 1951 and was about translating Russian proper nouns into the Czech language. Most of Ilek’s view on the theory of translation is clearly visible in *Metodika překládání*, his broad paper published in 1953 as a part of *Kniha o překládání*, a collection of articles published in Prague in remembrance of professor Bohumil Mathesius, the famous translator of Russian literature.¹ Ilek’s paper, just as papers of other contemporary scientists, has plenty of references to contemporary political and social situations, also some highly approving opinions on communist science and some questions on how to properly translate communist terms. If we skip those parts, the rest of the paper remains very up-to-date and still useful. In the very first paragraph of the paper Ilek claims that translation is equally a skill, knowledge and art. He does not deny that translation is a very creative process which demands some innate skills that cannot be learnt, but he also points out that if one applies certain rules based on theory and experience, it proves to be very helpful and fruitful. The first important issue introduced by Ilek is the question of untranslatability. He basically denies it and claims that everything can be translated, at least semantically if not literally. A major part of *Metodika překládání* deals with the process of translation from the practical point of view,

¹ B. Ilek, *Metodika překládání*, in *Kniha o překládání. Příspěvky k otázkám překládu z ruštiny*, Praha, Nakladatelství Československo-sovětského institutu, 1953, pp. 68-106.

which was very unique at the time. According to Ilek, the very first step that has to be taken in translation is reading the whole text carefully, but with no translational approach, just like an ordinary reader, to evaluate the book's quality and usefulness in target culture. Reading the text aloud may help evidence the important emotions in the text. It is important that the translator is proficient in his area of translation, for example poetry, children's literature or economics. Ilek warns though that keeping to one area of translation leads to a pattern and lowers the quality of work. To avoid this, every translator should translate something out of his standard area of interest, once in a while.

A very important and often omitted aspect of translation, according to Ilek, is the practical knowledge of the subject. Whoever wants to translate a thing from one language to another should be, above all, able to understand and explain its subject. After a translator reads the text, ensures that he is interested in translating it and that his knowledge of the subject is sufficient, the next step is a second reading of the text. This time, the translator reads it from a professional point of view and makes notes on lexicon and syntax of the text. Syntax is especially important, as it gives the translator an insight into author's way of composing thoughts and allows noting the most important ideas of the text.

Another vital issue of translation, according to Ilek, is understanding the author's style. The translator should be familiar with other works by the same author, with his opinions and biographical data as well as with cultural and historical context of the book itself.

In this important paper, Ilek also writes about adaptation. He definitely agrees with the Czech tradition of adapting foreign words (proper nouns, the realia) to the Czech language. The only exceptions for Ilek are the words that have no equivalent in the Czech language or proper nouns that define well known figures.

According to Ilek's paper, the aforementioned work belongs to a preparatory stage of the process of translation. After all those elements are considered ready, it comes to the actual translation of the text, which basically means reconstructing the text using the language material of the target language. The first translation should not be the final version of the text, as it needs adjustments and re-editing at least once depending on the text's level of difficulty. The final stage of translation is reading the translated text from the target reader's point of view.

Metodika překládání is quite a unique text in Czech translatology. It is very broad (around 40 pages) and detailed, but also clear and easy to understand. Ilek deals with particular precise questions such as translation of dialect, phraseological units and language puns, translation of dialogues, questions of adaptation and language interferences on lexis and grammar level.

Every question comes with examples of good and bad translating solutions. Ilek's paper was the only contemporary handbook on methodology of translation from the Russian to the Czech language and it was a priceless help for the next generation of translators. Most of the paper became, in 1956, a part of an academic script *Kapitoly z teorie a metodiky překladau* that Ilek published together with Jiří Levý.

Metodika překládání was the biggest and most important of Ilek's works on translation, but there were many more and some significant ones are worth mentioning. In 1962, Bohuslav Ilek published an article in "Československá rusistika" entitled *Ideové stanovisko překladatele*.² Some of the most important ideas in it were that translators have high social responsibilities and that the idea of text is as important as its esthetical values. That led him to the conclusion that the translator should not focus only on translating the general picture without considering the text's structure, style, logical components, as it results in the target text being distant from the source, which is inappropriate. Ilek definitely opts for translation to be as close to the original text as possible without harm to its artistic values.

In the middle of the 1960s, Ilek became interested in non-literary translation. His most important article on this subject was published in 1977 in Bratislava and was entitled *Místo odborného překladau v soustavě věd o překladau*.³ The article marks the importance of translatology as an independent empiric area of study that evolved from linguistics, semantics, ethnography, theory of literature and psychology. Ilek also points out the difference between non-literary and literary translation. According to Ilek, the advantage of non-literary translation lays in the possibility to strictly determine the invariant information. Non-literal translation is focused on the content of the information, its correctness can be easily verified by comparing with the fact or phenomenon it describes. Formal means are less important, as opposed to literary translation. Ilek also pointed out typical qualities of non-literary functional style and its main components.

The most important article on translation published by Ilek in the 1970s is probably *Překlad jako zrcadlo stylu*, published in 1975.⁴ It is a reflection on how the translator may change the source text according to stylistic demands of target language. Basing on examples derived from Alexander Ku-

² B. Ilek, *Ideové stanovisko překladatele*, "Československá rusistika", 7 (1962) 2, pp. 69-76.

³ Id., *Místo odborného překladau v soustavě věd o překladau*, in *Překlad odborného textu*, Bratislava, 1977, pp. 19-38.

⁴ Id., *Překlad jako zrcadlo stylu*, "Bulletin ruského jazyka a literatury", 19 (1975), pp. 143-157.

prin's novel *Poedinok* translated into the Czech language by Zdeňka Psůtková, Ilek creates a list of possibilities available to translators from the Russian to Czech language (although most of them can also be applied in the process of translation from and to other Slavonic languages). Those possibilities make the target text closer to natural texts of target language and include such methods as making syntax changes in a chain of homogeneous parts of a sentence, changing the subject of a sentence from impersonal to personal, higher frequency of certain forms (for example choosing nominal forms instead of verbal ones) or applying variety of translations of repeatable words instead of using the same translation in the whole text.

The most interesting works of Ilek published in the 1980s are the articles *Překladatel jako interpret díla* and *Kritika uměleckého překladu*.⁵ The first one is a short critical commentary and addition to the translator's interpreting function described by Jiří Levý in his famous book *Umění překladu* from 1983. The second one is an evaluation of Czech translation, its development and quality. It also points out the most important rules that should be applied in the process of translation evaluation.

Although Bohuslav Ilek's contribution to Czechoslovak and Czech translation studies has been indisputable, there are not many works describing it in the Czech Republic. There is no monograph on Ilek. A lot of information can be found in the 1972 edition of "Bulletin Ústavu ruského jazyka a literatury" that was dedicated to Ilek on the occasion of his 70th birthday, but it does not cover over 15 years of Ilek's later work. A complete Ilek bibliography can be found in a Masters thesis written in 2004 by Kateřina Vykydalová at Palacky University in Olomouc.⁶ The most complete and up-to-date paper on Ilek's work in the field of translation studies is a short article by Zdeňka Vychodilová published in 2012 in Brno.⁷

Bohuslav Ilek's works were unique in Czechoslovak environment. What is typical of them is how they combine theory with practice, they also point out the interdisciplinary qualities of translation. There are not many scientists that are able to examine their field of studies in such a complex and detailed way.

⁵ B. Ilek, *Překladatel jako interpret díla*, "Československá rusistika", 27 (1982) 2, pp. 190-201; Id., *Kritika uměleckého překladu*, "Translatologica Pragensia", 2 (1988) 1-3, pp. 317-325.

⁶ K. Vykydalová, *Bohuslav Ilek jako překladatel a teoretik překladu*, Diplomová práce, Olomouc, 2004.

⁷ Z. Vychodilová, *Přínos Bohuslava Ilka české vědě o překladu*, in *Nosné tradice české slavistiky*, edd. I. Pospíšil, J. Šaur, Brno, 2012, pp. 229-235.