

## Some material for Chapter 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Literature translation as opposite to non-fiction translation

### 2.2 Poetry and poetry translation

### 2.3 Strategies and methods of poetry translation

### 2.4 Presentation of Source Language and Target Language

### 2.5 Similarities and contrasts between English and Russian poetics

#### 2.5.1 Rhymes

#### 2.5.2 Metre and rhythm

#### 2.5.3 Syntax and word order

Samuel Marshak, a famous translator of poetry from English into Russian, states in his article *Poetry of Translation* (1962) that “translation of poetry is a high and difficult art”. He personally “would put forward two – seemingly paradoxical and yet are true – statements: first, poetry is impossible to translate; and, second, each time the translation of poetry becomes an exception to the rule”.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, rendering verse may be a more challenging task than translation of other literary genres because the translator has to make decisions regarding both form and content in the response created of it by the audience. In poetry, the formal features are of no less significant than the content; they are highly interconnected and inseparable. In consequence, there has been much debate about the issue of translating poetry. Is poetry translatable, or is the loss of some qualities of the source poem inevitable?

There is no agreement among scholars about the question. For example, Roman Jakobson believes that poetry is by definition untranslatable (1959, 115). During translating, or rather, “the creative transposition”, the original text becomes subject to relocation and reshaping. Similarly, Robert Frost argues that poetry is what gets lost in translation (cited in Gentzler 2001, 27). In a similar vein, Clifford Landers claims: “If literary translation is itself a leap of faith, poetic translation puts that faith to the severest of all tests” (2000, 97). In André Lefévere’s view, most poetry translations are unable to capture the source text’s totality, and, therefore, they remain “unsatisfactory renderings” (1975, 99). However, he introduces a

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<sup>1</sup> my translation

number of methods for translation poetry, even if he remains skeptical of the very possibility of it. The methods consist of:

- *phonemic translation*, which aims at the reproduction of the SL sound in the TL text while rendering the acceptable paraphrase of the meaning.
- *literal translation*, or word-for-word translation which distorts the original sense and syntax.
- *metrical translation*, which emphasizes the re-creation of the original metre, subduing other poetic features of the original.
- translation *into prose*, which distorts the communicative value and syntax of the original, though not to the same degree as the literal and metrical methods.
- translation *into rhymed poetry* when the translator is restricted by the bondage of both the rhyme and metre. In this case, the resulting product poem is merely a ‘caricature’ of the original.
- translation *into poetry without rhyme (blank verse)*, which may result in a higher degree of accuracy with regard to the original poem. However, some structural restrictions are unavoidable.
- *interpretative translation*, when the translator uses a new form for the translated original poem, yet retaining its original sense. Lefevre calls such translations ‘versions’ and ‘imitations’.

All the approaches of translating poetry described by Lefevre concentrate on one or more aspect(s) of the SL text at the expense of the text as a whole. A further difficulty will arise if the SL poem belongs to a culture distant in time and space, as in the case with Shakespeare’s sonnets.

A somewhat different approach is outlined by the translation scholar James Holmes. He discusses the relationship between a poem and its translation by means of a “metapoem”, i.e. a verse intended as a translation of an original poem “with a double purpose as metaliterature and as primary literature” (1988, 25). Holmes represents scholars who believe in the feasibility of poetry translation and in the translator’s ability to recreate a poetic text, by seeking, as Holmes puts it, ‘counterparts’ and ‘analogues’ rather than exact ‘equivalents’ for all the source poem’s features (1988, 53). He describes a metapoem as follows:

What should the verse of a metapoem be? There is, surely, no other problem of translation that has generated so much heat, and so little light, among the normative

critics. Poetry, says one, should be translated into prose. No, says the second, it should be translated into verse, for in prose its very essence is lost. By all means into verse, argues a third. Verse into verse, fair enough, says a fourth, but God save us from Homer in English hexameters (55).

Samuil Marshak compared the process of a poem's translation with a delicate procedure of transplanting it from 'the soil' of one language into that of another. According to him, the operation deals with such delicate features as connotations, imagery, associations, which may be seriously damaged in the process of 'squeezing' them into the exact measurements of the original poem's form. Yet the 'shape' is as integral a part of a poem as is its sense. For the poet, the words do not only have a meaning, but they also sound through the combination of the vowels and consonants.

It is quite understandable that the decisions regarding the verse form are very important for translators to make. Those decisions are usually made at a very early stage in the entire process of a verse's translation because they "can be largely determinative for the nature and sequence of the decisions still to come" (Holmes 1988, 25). Moreover, as Jiří Levý points out, different languages can convey the same meaning of a poem's line in different number of syllables. In other words, the semantic density of languages can strongly influence the translator's choice of how to translate the verse form into the target language: "A discrepancy in semantic density between source and target language forces the translator either to compact the semantic meaning into a concise expression or, in contrast, to resort to padding, with implications for the overall interpretation of the poem" (2011, 196). For example, the semantic density of the English language is greater than that of Russian, which results in different prosodies and the fact that "[R]ussian translators have considerable difficulty in accommodating the content of an English poem within the bounds of its original metre" (Levý 2011, 196).

In practice, translators may choose different possible solutions regarding the verse form though "it is important to remember that these solutions can never be seen as innocent choices, since each type of form, by its very nature, opens up certain possibilities, while at the same time closing others" (Fochi 2011). Holmes, then, identifies three main approaches that can be chosen by translators on the formal level:

- *the mimetic form*, or replicating the original form, which implies emphasizing the source culture's foreignness, the distance, and the strangeness. This method requires

“the reader to stretch the limits of his literary sensibility, to extend his view beyond the bounds of what is recognized as acceptable in his own literary tradition”.

- *The analogical form*, or using a target form with a similar cultural function to the source form, with the effect of naturalizing the foreign poem.
- *The organic form* that allows the semantic material to take on its own unique poetic shape.
- *The extraneous form*, in which a translator adopts a form that is totally unconnected with the form of the original. (1988, 25-27)

As for rhymes, attitudes among scholars range from abandonment to recreation. Finding rhyming words is difficult when the target language has a less flexible word order or a greater variety of word-endings than the source language. On the other hand, William Frawley states, that a source-poem rhyme is an integral part of the poem’s meaning: “if one disapproves of rhyme in poetry, one should not translate poems that rhyme” (1984: 50). However, it is still done.

For Russian translators from the eighteenth century up to the present time, a very important principle concerning the translation of foreign poetry was that verse should be rendered in verse. This also applies to the material of my study. Shakespearean sonnet form consists of 14 lines structured as three quatrains and a couplet, and it follows the rhyme scheme ababcdcdefefgg. The main idea is introduced in the first quatrain, made more complicated in the second, even more so in the third, and resolved in the final couplet. Each line contains ten syllables and is written in iambic pentameter, in which a pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable is repeated five times. The structure is illustrated by the following examples:

When I / do COUNT / the CLOCK / that TELLS / the TIME (Sonnet 12)

When IN / dis GRACE / with FOR / tune AND / men’s EYES  
I ALL / a LONE / be WEEP / my OUT/ cast STATE (Sonnet 29)

Shall I / com PARE/ thee TO / a SUM / mer’s DAY?  
Thou ART / more LOVE / ly AND / more TEM / per ATE (Sonnet 18)

Of all poetic meters, iambic pentameter comes closest to conversational English, and it is by far the most widespread form in English classical verse (Kemball 1997, 308). Speeches in

verse that in Shakespeare’s plays are composed mostly in iambic pentameter. However, on average, the length of words in Russian is longer than in English<sup>2</sup>, and multisyllabic words are not uncommon in Russian verse. As a result, the translators of Shakespeare’s verse into Russian need to compress the meaning of a line into a fewer number of words. For example, the couplet of the Sonnet 18 contains 20 words:

[...] So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The maximum number of the words used by different Russian translators of this particular sonnet’s couplet does not exceed 15 (the back-translation is not provided here, since we consider not the meaning, but the number of words in the couplet):

Покуда люди дышат, говорят,                            10 words; Turuhtanov, 2006  
Живут стихи, жизнь и тебе даря.

Жить будешь ими, а они тобой,                            11 words; Finkel, 1977  
Доколе не померкнет глаз людской.

Жить будешь в них, свой продолжая век,            12 words; Fradkin, 1990  
Доколе зрит и дышит человек.

Среди живых ты будешь до тех пор,                    13 words; Marshak, 1948  
Доколе дышит грудь и видит взор.

Пока есть люди и пока есть зреньё,                    14 words; Ber, 1907  
Жив будет стих и ты, его творенье.

И так, пока дышать и видеть люди будут,            15 words; Gerbel, 1880  
Они, твердя мой гимн, тебя не позабудут.

The last example employs the highest number of words (15) but in terms of feet, each line consists of six feet instead of five. Therefore, Gerbel has changed the metre of the sonnet (not only this one) having extended the lines by two syllables, or an entire foot, in order to gain

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<sup>2</sup> “The average word length for prose is 1.4 syllables in English, [...] and 3.0 in Russian” (Levý 2011: 196). “For every thousand words of an English literary text, 824 are monosyllabic; the analogous figure for Russian is only 328” (Friedberg 2008: 132).

more space for couching the meaning of the original in a single line in Russian. Overall, the translations have moved closer to the original, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, translators have almost without exception faithfully followed the iambic pentameter of the original sonnet.

Another characteristic feature of Russian verse is their strict division into masculine (ending in a stressed syllable) and feminine (ending in an unstressed syllable) rhymes. In English rhymed verse, some 95% of all endings are masculine (Kemball 1997, 306). Feminine rhyme is relatively rare in English poetry<sup>3</sup>, and Shakespeare almost uniformly employs the masculine type of rhyming in the sonnets. Here is an example:

That time of year thou mayst in me be-**hold**/  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do **hang**/  
Upon those boughs which shake against the **cold**/  
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds **sang**/... (Sonnet 73)

In Russian poetry the situation is reversed, and feminine and masculine rhymes equally frequent. Traditionally they alternate – the feature that is considered to be the norm in classical Russian poetry (Zhirmunsky 1975, 237). The problem of using only masculine or alternating pattern of rhymes in translation of the sonnets has been the subject of much controversy among Russian translators and critics lately. Some argue that masculine rhymes should be used in translations since it is essential in order to preserve the energetic rhythmic flow of the sonnets, while feminine rhymes would attach some Russian flavor to the sonnets. According to Mikhail Zhirmunsky (1975, 240), the translation of English masculine rhymes into Russian would confer exotic flavour to the target poem which has not been present in the original. The others claim that the reason for why the masculine rhyme has never become popular in Russia is that it has, traditionally, been perceived as a pause or stop of the poetic flow of the lines (Gasparov 1985). Vladimir Kozarovetsky takes the argument even further by stating, that there are very few really good poems in Russian which use uniformly masculine rhymes (2009, 99). As a result of differing opinions, there are now various variants of rhyming in, for example, the Russian translations of Sonnet 73:

|  |   |               |
|--|---|---------------|
| Во мне ты видишь сумеречность <b>го</b> /да: | F | Fradkin, 1990 |
| Лист пожелтел, даль холода пол- <b>на</b> /, | M |               |

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<sup>3</sup> "As the vast majority of English verse lines end on a stressed syllable, it is obvious that the monosyllabic rhyme is far the commonest. [...] the proportion of feminine to monosyllabic rhymes seldom exceeds on the average one in twenty" (Swann & Sidgwick as cited in Kembal 1997: 306).

|   |   |                 |
|---|---|-----------------|
| Разрушен храм, умчались звоны <u>сво/да</u> ,     | F |                 |
| Напевы птиц сменила тиши- <u>на/</u> .            | M |                 |
| То время года видишь ты во <u>мне/</u> ,          | M | Pasternak, 1938 |
| Когда из листьев редко где <u>ка-кой/</u>         | M |                 |
| Дрожа, желтеет в веток голиз- <u>не/</u> ,        | M |                 |
| А птичий свист везде сменил по- <u>кой/</u> .     | M |                 |
| Во мне теперь нетрудно разгля- <u>деть/</u>       | M | Vinonen, 2004   |
| тот трепет осени, когда желтеют <u>листь/-я</u> , | F |                 |
| и холод, разъедающий их <u>медь/</u> ,            | M |                 |
| поставил крест на соловьином <u>свис/-те</u> .    | F |                 |
| Во мне ты созерцаешь время <u>го/да</u> ,         | F | Badygov, 2005   |
| Когда желтеют листья, увя- <u>да/я</u> ,          | F |                 |
| И на ветвях, дрожащих в непо- <u>го/ду</u>        | F |                 |
| Собираются к отлету птичьи <u>ста/и</u> .         | F |                 |

Following Holmes' classification, we can say that Russian translators traditionally opt for the *mimetic* approach regarding the overall metrical structure. Yet, the fact that the most translators prefer not to retain the original masculine rhyming may be regarded as seeking for *analogical* decisions more suitable for Russian traditional prosody.

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