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“The Twelve Chairs” as the Translation Object: Historiographic Study

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The article deals with the famous novel by I. Ilf and E. Petrov “The Twelve Chairs” as the object of interlingual and intersemiotic translation. Having become the centre of translation attraction, the novel was translated into many languages and adapted for the screen in many countries due to the ability of the original literary text to generate secondary texts. Special emphasis is placed on the Chinese translations of the cult novel.

Keywords: “The Twelve Chairs”, interlingual translation, intersemiotic translation, Chinese language

Introduction

“The Twelve Chairs” is a part of the Russian literary heritage of the first half of the 20th century. After publication, the novel was regularly reprinted with wide circulation in the Soviet Union and Russia, and the editions contained detailed commentaries. Though more than 80 years have passed since the appearance of this cult novel and the life of the Russians has greatly changed, “The Twelve Chairs” still arouses a keen interest in readers. Such interest is easily proved by the fact that the text of the novel is frequently quoted by Russian people in their everyday life.

According to the reminiscences of the contemporaries, the plot of the novel and the idea of writing it in collaboration was suggested to the writers Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov by Petrov’s brother Valentin Katayev. The novel was written

in record-setting time, from the September of 1927 to the January of 1928. As early as in January 1928 the novel began to be published in the illustrated monthly magazine “30 Dney” (“30 Days”). The first separate edition of “The Twelve Chairs” appeared in 1928 as well. After the publication of the novel, the two ordinary journalists joined the ranks of the most popular USSR writers.

The novel is set in 1927, the year of its creation. The plot of “The Twelve Chairs” is traditional and fairly conventional. It is a story of two cons who run around the country hunting for diamonds hidden in one of the 12 chairs that once belonged to an old lady. Such a plot allowed the authors to pass freely from one scene to another. The novel is inhabited by various characters possessing many typical traits that are both time-specific (former

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noblemen and merchants) and universal, not limited by time and place (a charming fortune-seeker, a young girl in love, a mature bride, a priest, a thievish civil servant, a bureaucrat, etc.). Thus, the novel features a whole gallery of vivid and memorable characters.

"The Twelve Chairs" is a classical satirical and humorous novel. Though the plot in the novel is witty and sophisticated, it only serves as a thread connecting different satirical episodes which are the gist of the novel. The language of Ilf's and Petrov's satire aroused interest right after the publication of their novels, and this interest never declined, because the writers managed to capture a panoramic picture of the Soviet society in the 1920-s. "The description of the reality by the co-authors, with their ironic world perception, is expressed in the overall comic emotive background of their works and mocking emotive tone which manifest themselves in the emotional attitude towards reality" (Popchenko, 2005).

Apart from their most popular novel, the authors of "The Twelve Chairs" wrote other satirical works, the majority of which belong to small literary genres. Many Russian researchers wrote about Ilf's and Petrov's feuilletons, as well as about their creative work in general. The contemporary critic A.P. Selivanovsky in his article "The Laughter of Ilf and Petrov" positively evaluated their feuilletons devoted to the problems of art, but underestimated other satirists' feuilletons considering them too superficial (Selivanovsky, 1932). Another contemporary points at the optimistic nature of their satire, but criticizes their predecessors: "... in the satire of Ilf and Petrov which emerged on the basis of socialist victories a new feature of the Soviet satire is particularly prominent: its overall optimistic tone. It is not sustained by hate or bitterness (like the satire of Voltaire, Swift, Saltykov-Shchedrin), but rather by the proud

contempt, mockery of a winner" (Zelinsky). This opinion is in line with the official point of view of the Soviet literature which often undeservedly criticized the literary heritage of the past. One more positive assessment of Ilf's and Petrov's satire is found in A. Roskin's article "The Masters of Feuilleton". The researcher points out at the little number of studies devoted to their feuilletons and makes a shrewd observation: "Along with extraordinary perceptive faculties and lateral thinking, Ilf and Petrov introduced to feuilleton such qualities as softness that does not evolve into complacency and elegance that does not evolve into stylization. The newspaper-style flexibility of Ilf and Petrov is combined with a great literary talent..." (Roskin, 1935: 7). E.I. Zhurbina in her article "About Ilf and Petrov" argues that the approach of the Soviet critics to the work of Ilf and Petrov was incomprehensive: "Whenever Ilf and Petrov were "mentioned" in our criticism, the main question was whether they did everything right on the arena of the Soviet humour and satire... The Soviet criticism hardly included Ilf and Petrov in the range of its general problems" (Zhurbina, 1937: 174).

In the 1940-s Ilf and Petrov were generally considered to be the prophets of communist ideology (Moldavsky, 1981). Such a narrow approach to the satirists' works that was formed in the 1940-s is rightly criticized by L. Gurovich, who also claims that their contribution to the Soviet literature is poorly studied (Gurovich, 1957). This point of view is undoubtedly true. It should be underlined that all the above mentioned works mostly belong to literary criticism (Odessky, Feldman 2000). It was much later that studies exploring the language aspects of Ilf's and Petrov's texts began to appear (Rodchenko, 1984; Dergileva, 2008). Translation-oriented studies of the writer's heritage are also few in number. Research works studying the translation aspects

of the novels have begun to appear recently (Bestolkova, 2005; Razumovskaya, Zang 2009). All the works covering different aspects of the novel inevitably contain observations about the satirical and humorous features of the text (Fenenko, 2005). It bears repeating that the language of Ilf's and Petrov's satire aroused interest right after the publication of their first novel, as well as their subsequent works, and this interest has never declined.

"The Twelve Chairs" as the Interlingual Translation Object

Being a cult Russian novel of the 20th century, "The Twelve Chairs" regularly generates derivative texts, which is explained by such properties of a literary text as the inexhaustibility of the original and translation multiplicity (Ortega y Gasset, 1991; Tchaikovsky, 2001). Many translations of the novel were done, including intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translations, according to the classification by R. Jakobson (Jakobson, 1959). First interlingual translations of "The Twelve Chairs" appeared as early as in the 1920-s.

The novel was first translated into the French language in 1929 and was called "Les Douze Chaises". The last translation of "The Twelve Chairs" into French was published in Paris in 2002. Arguing that the western reader should be allowed to rediscover the novel of the talented satirists, the author of the latest French translation and a devoted researcher of Ilf's and Petrov's work, Alain Préchac, writes: "It would be wrong to claim that such outstanding representatives of high-class popular literature as Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov – the authors of the books which are published in millions of copies and which served as a kind of "escape" for ordinary people for decades (especially in the 1960-s) – are unknown in France" (Préchac, 295-296). The famous Russian composer A. Zatsepin

in an interview to the "Profile" magazine wrote about the translator of the novel, French Slavacist, Alain Préchac: "The French are very earnest about everything they do. For example, my best French friend Alain Préchac translated into French over 30 Russian books, including "The Twelve Chairs" and "The Golden Calf". To help the French people understand and appreciate Ilf and Petrov, Alain wrote 300 commentaries to these books! He spent months in the Lenin Library, read the newspapers of that period and even defended a thesis concerned with the work of Ilf and Petrov. The two heaviest volumes!" (Zatsepin, 2006)

Three English translations of "The Twelve Chairs" are known. The first translation into English was done by Eric Konkol in 1929, together with the first French translation. It was published under the name "The 12 Chairs". Here, the digital symbol was used. The second translation was published by the London publishing house "Labour Book Service" in 1940. It was called "Diamonds to Sit On: A Russian Comedy of Errors" (translated by Elizabeth Hill and Doris Mudie). The latest known translation of the novel was done by John Richardson and published by the publishing house "Northwestern University Press" in 1997 under the traditional name "The Twelve Chairs", where the number "12" is designated by a word, as opposed to the first translation.

Soon after the publication of the French and English translations, the novel was translated into German by Elsa Brod and Mary von Pruss-Glowatzky; the translation was published in 1930 by publishing houses in Zurich and Vienna. This translation was reprinted several times (in 1954, 1958, 1965 and 1968). The second German translation was performed by Ernst von Eck and published by publishing houses in Leipzig (1965), Berlin (1978), Munich (1978), Berlin (1980), Bucharest (1987) and Frankfurt-on-Main (1987). In 2000 in Berlin and in 2003 in Munich

the third translation was published (translated by Renate and Thomas Reschke). All the German translations have a traditional name "Zwölf Stühle".

The Spanish translation of the novel was published in 1975 and 1999 in Madrid, it was named "Las doce sillas", and the translator was J. Gázquez. The Bulgarian translation was done by Tatiana Balova and received an award of the Union of Translators.

Four Chinese translations of "The Twelve Chairs" are known. The first translation was published by the publishing house "Ni Tu" in 1954 in Shanghai (translated by Fei Mingjun 费明君, 1911-1973); the second translation came out in "Heilongjiang People's Publishing House" in 1984 (translated by An Yuchen 安郁琛 and Zhong Ding 钟鼎). A year after (in 1985) the third translation was published which was highly appreciated by readers (translator Xu Changhan 徐昌翰). The latest known translation came out in 2004 in "People's Literature Publishing House" (translator Zhang Peiwen 张佩文).

The first Chinese translation of "The Twelve Chairs" named "十二把椅子" was done by Fei Mingjun from the Japanese translation "12 の椅子" published by the Japanese publishing house "Science" in 1934. Fei Mingjun studied in the famous Japanese Waseda University (早稲田大学) from 1936 to 1938 and obtained the qualification in the Japanese language and literature. During his professional career Fei Mingjun translated more than 30 foreign texts of major importance, including "Capital" by Karl Marx, "The Twelve Chairs" by I. Ilf and E. Petrov, "What Is to Be Done?" by N. Chernyshevsky, "The History of the Ruin of Europe" ("Trust D.E.") by I. Erenburg, "The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin" by A. Tolstoy, and many works by Maxim Gorky. Fei Mingjun also translated several works of the Japanese historian and literary critic Kurahara Korehito (the author of a monograph

about progressive Japanese literature and a well-known translator of Russian literature).

Fei Mingjun presumes that the Japanese translator Hiroo Takeshi (広尾猛) worked with the original Russian text of the fifth edition published in 1933 by the publishing house "Federation". The original Russian text was not available for Fei Mingjun, so he was not able to correct his Chinese text translated from Japanese. This lack of the source, as well as the fact of translation through a third language (mediator language) resulted in many shortcomings and mistakes in the Chinese text, which were carried over by the Chinese translator from the Japanese version. The main drawbacks of the first Chinese translation are translation lacunas and a considerable misrepresentation of information.

The translator Xu Changhan (1936 -) translated the novel in 1985 and used the number "12" in its title - "12 把椅子". Other translation works of Xu Changhan include: "Jews in Harbin", "Biography of Dostoevsky", "The Garnet Bracelet" by A. Kuprin, "The Heroes of Brest Fortress" by S. Smirnov, "The Shadow of the Devil in Moscow" (translation of novel "The Master and Margarita" by M.A. Bulgakov). The style of Xu Changhan is different from that of the other translators who worked on the translation of "The Twelve Chairs". He abbreviates the characters' long names and uses the semantic translation method.

The style and strategies of translations done in 1984 and 2004 reveal considerable similarity. In our opinion, the latest translation of "The Twelve Chairs" by Zhang Peiwen is the best of the existing four Chinese variants. However, we should keep in mind that this translation was done and published fifty years after the publication of the first Chinese translation of "The Twelve Chairs". Today, all the four translations are available for readers in the People's Republic of China.

Intersemiotic Versions of the Novel

The first screen adaptations of the novel appeared abroad, not in the USSR. The first film based on "The Twelve Chairs" was shot in Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1933 («Dwanaście krzesel» / «Dvanáct křesel») with the famous comedy actor Adolf Dymśa in the lead role. The filmmakers made Poland the scene of action. That is why they had to think of another set-up which was not connected with the expropriation. Later this move was used by many other foreign directors who changed the setting of their film versions. In 1936 the English film "Keep your seats, please" was released. The German film based on the novel was shot in 1938 and was called "13 Stühle". It should be noted that the titles of many subsequent film versions contain the number "13", not "12". Perhaps, such change is justified because the number "13" has stronger expressive and cultural connotations in the European cultures. The German filmmakers borrowed a set-up from the Poles and used a number of interesting brand new stage effects. The title of the Swedish film released in 1945 is similar to that of the German one – "Tretton stolar". Another Swedish film version of the novel was released in 1954 and was called "Sju svarta be-hå". In 1939 the Italian film called "L'Eredita in Corsa" appeared which was lost and never found. The American version "It's in the Bag!" of 1945 is set as a criminal detective story. The name of the German film released in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1957 is made up of the phrase "Das Glück liegt auf der Strasse". In 1957 the Brazilian film version appeared; it was called "Treze Cadeiras" (13 instead of 12), and the main character was replaced with a girl dancing in a variety show. In 1962 "Las Doce Sillas" went out on Cuba: the setting was changed to Cuba, and Ostap became Oscar. Another screen adaptation of the novel was made in 1969 and was called "12+1".

Later this version was dubbed for distribution in Spain, Hungary, Greece, Italy, France, Turkey, Finland and FRG. It is noteworthy that all the title translations contained the number "13" or a sum "12+1". A TV series released in 1972 in FRG was named "Rabe, Pilz und dreizehn Stühle". The idea of 13 chairs is also present in the title of the Austrian film that was released in 1997 – "Mein Opa und die 13 Stühle". One of the latest film versions of the novel is the German film "Zwölf Stühle" (2004).

Several screen adaptations were also filmed in Russia, though the Russian versions appeared much later than foreign ones – more than 30 years after the release of the first Polish-Czech adaptation in 1933. The first television play based on the novel was staged in Leningrad in 1966 (director A. Belinsky). The most famous films were released in 1971 (director L. Gaidai) and in 1976 (director M. Zakharov). In 2004 a musical comedy was shown on television in Russia (the music of M. Dunayevsky was used).

Apart from films, intersemiotic translations of "The Twelve Chairs" include musicals (2002, Russia), theatrical performances (The Satire Theatre, The Russian Independent Theatre, Novosibirsk Theatre of Musical Comedy), a ballet to the music of G. Gladkov, and a play of The Bolshoy Puppet Theatre (Leningrad, 1957). The list of the novel's intersemiotic interpretations can be extended.

Conclusion

The novel by I. Ilf and E. Petrov is the centre of translation's attraction, which is true for both interlingual and intersemiotic translation types. The fact that the novel was translated many times and is popular in the target cultures makes it possible to conclude that translation is possible even for the texts with dominant satirical and humorous elements and culturological message, and the problem of untranslatability can be

overcome. However, there is a considerable difference between the two types of translation: in case of interlingual translation a translator chooses the most efficient translation strategies aimed at rendering of the novel's information complex, and intersemiotic translation implies a greater freedom of interpretation achieved by cultural adaptation and cultural replacement.

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Роман «Двенадцать стульев» как предмет историографического исследования в теории перевода

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В статье рассматривается знаменитый роман И. Ильфа и Е. Петрова «Двенадцать стульев» как объект межъязыкового и межсемиотического перевода. Способность оригинального художественного текста генерировать вторичные тексты определила существование многочисленных иноязычных переводов текста романа и киноверсий, что сделало роман центром переводческой аттракции. Особое внимание уделено китайским переводам культового романа.

Ключевые слова: «Двенадцать стульев», межъязыковой перевод, межсемиотический перевод, китайский язык.
