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Cross-Cultural Communication as a Mirror of Civilization (German Translations of Russian Literature as a Case in Point)

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In this article I would like to underscore Benjamin's fundamental insights that on the one hand cultural life (like the greater empirical life of which it is a part) can best be seen in its temporal or historical trajectory, and that translation plays a vital role in this; and that on the other hand, translation is a temporal as well as spatial affair (Benjamin, 1923/1991).

*In the following I will touch briefly on some general aspects of the notions of civilization and culture (section 1), and the reflection of culture in translations (section 2) before dealing with the reflection of culture in a changing society in three German translations of Vasily Grossman's story *Vse tečėt* (*Forever flowing*)(section 3).*

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, culture, civilization, otherness, translation, Russian culture, German translations, Grossman, «Forever flowing».

1. Who means what by “civilization” and “culture”?

Cross-cultural communication is both an act of experience of otherness and a depiction of the other in the self. The different ways in which this happens can be seen not only from translations of the same original for different civilizations/cultures, but also from different translations for the same civilization/culture at different times.

The German translator of Samuel P. Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations*, Holger Fliessbach, writes in a preliminary remark to the German edition (Huntington, 1998) that he found it impossible to translate the word “culture” with “Zivilisation” and “civilization”

with “Kultur” throughout and that in specific instances “culture” had to be rendered as “Kultur” in German (Huntington, 1998).¹ In my paper I will use “culture”.

When we talk about East and West (and this also applies to East and West Germany), we usually have in mind “the other”, that which constitutes “otherness”. Understanding is a function of the depth of the subjective (rational and emotional) perception of a text from a different world. As Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher sees it, understanding is something that is never achieved definitely, and that is, in a way, subject to a recurrent cycle. He stresses the need “to project oneself” into the author's world of

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thought. Whatever is peculiar must be sensed and guessed to some extent (Schleiermacher, 1988). The question pertains to a community of shared values, to the image and counter-image of what is called “civilized” or “cultured”. The ideas which people hold are frequently cliché-ridden and stereotyped (Wolff, 1994), the “other” being often seen as “disregard for a norm of civilized behaviour” (Stanzel, 1986). As Rorty points out, the constituting otherness works well whenever the others are declared to be less civilized people (Rorty, 2000). In the case of Russia, for example, the idea of community (the principle of *sobornost'* as a positive religious-orthodox ideal) stands in marked contrast to Western individualism (Salevsky, 2010). Wolff and Yanov ask with good reason who may arrogate to themselves the right to define the terms under which a country passes muster as “civilized” (Wolff and Yanov, 2003; Gramshammer-Hohl, Kaser and Pichler 2003).

One might be inclined to think that “othering” has become obsolete as cultures tend to become intermingled within the context of globalization. But old images die hard. The division of Germany had brought forth a new, specific type of East (Klein, 2009). Therefore, literary documents from a bygone era may be interpreted and translated very differently in Germany. The different basic attitudes stem from what people used to read, hear and see (in the cinema and on TV) over several decades.

Culture is to be seen as a dynamic system of values and actions² which controls our perception. In the process of translating this is clearly reflected in what is translated when, by whom, how and for what purpose (Kade, 1968 and 1980).

2. To what extent do translations reflect culture in a changing society?

The research findings published in the book “Translation as Systemic Interaction. A New

Perspective and a New Methodology” (Salevsky and Müller, 2011) reveal that translating is a time-related, field-related and situation-related procedure for the mediation of cross-cultural communication between different sociocultural spaces. The authors try to show how the interactions and interdependencies of the different variables of the external framework conditions and the inner subsystems (with the performer as the central factor) influence the degree of attainment of the requirements of the assignment and the effect caused by the target text (Salevsky and Müller, 2011). The conclusion is that it is the real-world structure (of the whole process) behind the texts and the way the agents are embedded in it that has to be analyzed.

If cross-cultural communication and translation processes are seen as systems and culture as a sub-system, we may along the lines of Posner (Posner, 1992³) subdivide culture into spheres all of which correspond to specific segments of reality and comprise four aspects:

- the extra-cultural aspect (completely unknown to the members of the society concerned);
- the non-cultural aspect (known to the members of the society concerned, but perceived as antithetical to their own culture);
- the culturally peripheral aspect (recognized by the members of the society concerned as part of their culture, but not regarded as central); and
- the culturally central aspect (recognized by the members of the society concerned as part of their culture and regarded as essential for their identity) (Posner 1992, p. 36).

These spheres and the demarcation lines between them may shift – from time to time, from culture to culture, from one communicative community to another and from one individual to another. This sheds light on the access to former and current segments of reality, on issues of

categorization and prestige aspects of a culture in a given society in a given period. The relationship between culture and non-culture (or extra-cultural aspects) is accordingly ambivalent. In other words: The “non-cultural” and the “culturally central” aspects are dynamic entities. This becomes apparent when a society loses access to previously known segments of reality. The codes used for this purpose then also fall into disuse. The gain and loss of reality are linked to the introduction and obsolescence of linguistic codes (Posner, 1992). Such differences are often related to historical experience and to the “shifts” one’s own culture has undergone through its contacts with foreign cultures, especially if non-Western categories, notions and patterns of thinking are involved.

It was the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) who referred to the term *habitus*⁴ as a set of dispositions which generate certain actions and reactions. These dispositions – the set of schemes of perception, thought, speech and behavior acquired during the process of primary socialization, and confirmed or modified in the course of further socialization – functions as a structuring principle (Bourdieu, 1990), a system of internalized patterns (Bourdieu, 1991). Adopting Freud’s terminology, Bourdieu describes *habitus* also as the “culturally unconscious” (Bourdieu, 1991). In this way the *habitus* becomes a kind of interface between the outer and the inner (subjective) world, between external conditions and internal factors (Salevsky and Müller, 2011).

For cross-cultural communication and translation the following idea by Bourdieu is of pivotal importance:

“The *habitus* is at once a system of models for the production of practices and a system of models for the perception and appreciation of practices. And in both cases, its operations express the social position in which it was constructed. As a result, the *habitus* produces practices

and representations which are available for classification, which are objectively differentiated; but they are immediately perceived as such only in the case of agents who possess the code, the classificatory models necessary to understand their social meaning. Thus, the *habitus* implies a ‘sense of one’s own place’ but also a ‘sense of the other’s place.’” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 131)

This concerns even East and West Germany. Klein speaks about a “communicative mist” in which West Germans found themselves when talking to East Germans after the reunification of Germany (Klein, 2009). It is all the more true when two cultures in different and changing societies are concerned. This will be illustrated by three German translations of the story *Vse tečēt* by the Ukrainian writer Vasilij Grossman (1905-1964).

3. The reflection of culture in a changing society in three German translations of Grossman’s *Vse tečēt* (in 1972, 1990 and 2010) as a case in point

The story *Forever Flowing* is, in a way, a sequel to the experience of Russian history analyzed by the author in his novel *Life and Fate*, joining traumatic memory with hopes for a future of freedom and human dialogue. Grossman’s creed is his belief in human goodness. He asks:

“Is there a common good – the same for all people, all tribes, all conditions of life? Or is my good your evil? Is what is good for my people evil for your people? Is good eternal and constant? Or is yesterday’s good today’s vice, yesterday’s evil today’s good? [...]”

Have people advanced over the millennia in their concept of good? Is this concept something that is common to all people [...]. To all classes, nations and States? Even to all animals, trees and mosses [...]? [...]

The good of the first Christians, which had embraced all mankind, in turn gave way to a purely Christian good; the good of the Muslims [“and the good of the Jews” in the original is omitted by the American translator- H.S.⁵] was now distinct.

Centuries passed and the good of Christianity split up into the distinct goods of Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy. And the good of Orthodoxy gave birth to the distinct goods of the old and new beliefs.

At the same time there was the good of the poor and the good of the rich. And the goods of the whites, the blacks and the yellow races ... More and more goods came into being, corresponding to each sect, race and class. Everyone outside a particular magic circle was excluded.

People began to realize how much blood had been spilt in the name of a petty, doubtful good, in the name of the struggle of this petty good against what is believed to be evil. Sometimes the very concept of good became a scourge, a greater evil than evil itself.”⁶ (Grossman, 1985/2006)

The story *Forever Flowing* was the first attempt in Soviet literature to come to terms with the harrowing experience of the Stalin regime. The title, derived from Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.E.) and his basic idea *panta rhei* (Heraclitus, Fragment 91), is meant to symbolize that all things are perpetually in flux. Going on from Heraclitus, Grossman seeks to demonstrate that the only way to know is to go beyond what is apparent to the senses, to break away from mere “opinions” and uncover the truth (Heraclitus, Fragment 56).

Grossman’s story was first distributed as a *samizdat* publication before it was brought out by Posev⁷ publishers in Frankfurt am Main in 1970, subsequently being translated into English, French, Italian, Serbian, Spanish and Swedish.

This edition provided the basis also for the first German translation, which was likewise

published by Posev publishers (in 1972). The second German translation was published in 1990 (Grossman, 1990) by Volk und Welt, formerly an East German publishing house. It was based on the first version to come out in the Soviet Union in the periodical *Oktjabr’* (No. 6) in 1989 – a second original, 25 years after Grossman’s death (Grossman, 1989). The third German translation was published by Ullstein in 2010, 20 years after German reunification (Grossman, 2010).

Each of the three translations into German had to take into account a different context with different prerequisites for understanding. The following examples drawn from the three German translations are to illustrate how each of these translations is a mirror of culture in a changing society in a given point in time.

But first let me say a few words about the plot:

If one had to pick just one character, an emblematic person, to tell us about the 20th century, it would have to be a character like Ivan in Grossman’s story *Forever Flowing*. A nameless figure, he sits in a train, a silent old man among travelers talking politics, who is returning home after spending 29 years in the Gulag.

When he reaches home, the fact that he comes across many graves is not the worst of it. Even more depressing is the fact that his return prompts his old friends to display a deceitful urge to justify their behavior. Not infrequently, they have bought their life in freedom by betraying those who now – during the “Thaw” following Stalin’s death – make their way back from the labor camps. Ivan sees that they are anything but free in both their actions and their thoughts. Now they seem to expect Ivan to grant them some kind of absolution:

„Vanya, Vanyechka“, his cousin burst out, „it sounds crazy, wild, but I envy you. I envy you because in your terrible camps you did not have to sign vile letters, nor vote for the death

of innocent men, nor make foul speeches.” (Grossman, 1972b).⁸

Ivan meets Anna, a woman who has gone through many ordeals herself. She feels love for him and understands his inner torment. But Anna develops cancer. While she wrestles with death, Ivan desperately looks for the causes of the troubled history of his people which claimed millions of human lives.

But that was, however, considered reprehensible during an era in which only favorable official comments on life in the Soviet Union were allowed both in the Soviet Union and in East Germany. It is the interest in the truth or the lack thereof that characterizes both individuals and the State.

The three German translations of this story are closely linked to the East German and West German communicative community as it existed at the time of publication. Nikolaj Artemoff, the translator of the first (West) German translation, which appeared in 1972, clearly had West German readers in mind. His primary concern was to put across the historical events and personalities depicted in the source text and the Soviet *realia*. Preceding the translation is a list of the characters with their Russian diminutives, and the annex features a list of 75 names with biographical details of the historical figures appearing in the book. There are also 53 explanatory notes in the text itself. The translator wanted to make explicit information which Soviet readers understood implicitly and which was in large part known or accessible to readers in the former GDR, a state with a different culture but the same social system (for this problem cf. also Salevsky, 1998).

The translator of the second (East) German translation (1990), Renate Landa, clearly had East German readers in mind, who found it easier to follow the plot because of parallels with their own social system at the time and because of a more intimate knowledge of Russian history and culture,

which can be put down to the then very close contacts between the two cultures. The translator needed only about half as many annotations and explanations. One half of the annotations found in the translation for West Germany, but not in the translation for East Germany were omitted because they were not considered relevant for understanding the text. The other half concerned circumstances and personages with which former GDR citizens were more or less familiar from textbooks, widely read Russian literature, the cinema and the media. Cases in point included Budjonny and his Cavalry Army, the leaders of the White forces in the Civil War (Denikin and Kolchak), the names of Lenin’s wife (Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaja), and of the scholar Michail Lomonosov, commemorated in the name of Moscow’s oldest university (founded 1755), which were featured in textbooks for compulsory Russian lessons.

The translator of the third German translation (2010), Annelore Nitschke, had to take into account the background knowledge of present day German readers which is comparable with that of the readers of the first German translation (1972). Even the appendix in the translation of 2010 features the same list of names with the same biographical details of the historical figures appearing in the book as that in the translation of 1972.

Applying the four cultural aspects mentioned above to our case, it becomes clear very soon that the bulk of the differences between the three German translations and the most pronounced ones are attributable to the fact that what West German readers considered extra-cultural in 1972 was still perceived as culturally central by East Germans in 1990 and that 20 years after German reunification what was considered culturally central by East Germans in 1990 had reverted to extra-cultural status in the eyes of most Germans (excluding those who spent most of their life in

the GDR). In this regard the translation from 2010 resembles the translation from 1972.

Here are some examples to bear this out:

*The rendering of the Russian word **pionervožataja*** (Grossman, 1970, p. 61; 1989, p. 53)

The Pioneers, the Communist children's organization, were founded in Soviet Russia in 1922. They provided the model for the Pioneer organization established in East Germany (then the Soviet occupation zone) in 1948 with a similar purpose and ritual. In both countries colleges of education offered training courses for *Pionierleiter/innen* (this word is used in Grossman, 1990, p. 61). The word *Pionierführerin* used in the West German translation (Grossman, 1972a, p. 157) was avoided in East Germany because *Führer* was associated with Nazi Germany (the Hitler Youth was directed by a *Reichsjugendführer*). Regrettably, this word reappears in the 2010 translation (Grossman, 2010).

The American translation is clear: the Young Pioneer group leader (Grossman, 1972b).

*The rendering of the Russian word **subbotnik*** (Grossman, 1970, p. 159; 1989, p. 90)

Subbotnik (derived from Russ. *subbota*, Saturday) denoted voluntary unpaid work performed on Saturdays, a practice current in Russia from 1919. The Russian word had found its way into the life and vocabulary of the former GDR (Grossman, 1990, p. 157). There is also an entry in the *Duden* (vol. 7., 1995, p. 3309), marked „former GDR“. *Subbotnik* was rendered as *Samstagsarbeit* (Saturday work) in the 1972 translation (Grossman, 1972a, p. 187) which expresses neither the voluntary nor the unpaid character of this work. The 2010 translation opts for *gesellschaftliche Arbeit an Samstagen* (work for the community on Saturdays) instead (Grossman, 2010, p. 172), which comes closer, but fails to explain that an entire movement was involved.

The American translation retains the Russian word *subbotnik* (Grossman, 1972b, p. 191). But does an American know what *subbotnik* means?

*The rendering of the Russian word **instruktaž*** (Grossman, 1970, p. 122; 1989, p. 77)

The original says: „I kogda instruktaž byl...“.

The German translation from 1972 is ambivalent (Grossman, 1972a, p. 146): *Und wenn Instruktion war...* (when instructions were issued).

The East German translator chose the word *Anleitung* (briefing) which was commonly used in the GDR in this context (Grossman, 1990, p. 122-123). *Anleitungen* were customary both in the former USSR and the former GDR. The third German translation from 2010 returns to the word *Instruktion*, employed as follows: *Wenn Instruktion gegeben wurde...* (Grossman, 2010, p. 134). Admittedly, the word *Instruktion* means *instruction, guidelines* or *directive* (*Duden*, Bd. 4, 1994, p. 1716), but it was not used in this context.

The American translation gives: *And when commands came...* (Grossman, 1972b, p. 149). Although “commands” does carry the right kind of totalitarian overtone, I suggest that “whenever commands came” would catch the implications better.

This list of examples could be continued.

The analysis reminds us that cross-cultural communication is a mirror of culture of a certain society at a given point of time, that translation is a temporal art, one that, as Sandra Bermann puts it, “can contribute to the action of history itself, and to the ongoing ‘conversation’ that gives it a meaning and a future” (Bermann, 2005, p. 272).

Conclusion

Cross-cultural communication opens up spaces and makes it possible to experience boundaries which must be explored – boundaries of latitude as well as individual boundaries and

boundaries of what can be mediated and how. Thus translation has socio-cultural, linguistic and historical aspects, as well as fuzzy boundaries.

Every domain of life, including literature and translation, is linked to every other one, and nothing that goes on in our world has ever been isolated and devoid of any outside influence. Reality is much more complex and dynamic than the models which have been elaborated so far. The re-presentations can be quite different, but what they all have in common is that they are connected with institutions, traditions, codes, conventions and norms: in short, a web of related interests in a certain situation of power in a certain society. Studying cross-cultural communication, literature and translation together in their interrelationships

and with all their interdependencies, it will become obvious in which way products of culture are created and operated by society, and how they reflect the *habitus* of the agents at a certain time (Salevsky and Müller, 2011).

Concluding I would like to refer to André Lefevere:

“Translation can tell us a lot about the power of images and the ways in which images are made, about the ways in which authority manipulates images and employs experts to sanction that manipulation and to justify the trust of an audience – which is why the study of translation can teach us a few things not just about the world of literature, but also about the world we live in.” (Lefevere, 1990/1995, p. 27)

¹ For the national interpretations of the words civilization and culture see the different overviews, e.g. by Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; for the development in Germany, cf. Elias 1976, Vol. 1, pp. 1-64 and pp. 302-306; for England cf. inter alia Cowell 1959, pp. 237-248; for the United States cf. inter alia Geertz 1973/2000. The Anglo-American authors took as their starting point the English ethnographer Edward B. Tylor who equated culture with civilization (cf. Tylor 1871; 1873/2005, Vol. 1:1). Other authors later applied the term civilization to material culture and reserved culture for mental culture. They postulated an antithesis between mental culture (literature, art, science and ideology) and the concept of civilization to denote material European culture (which included politics, society, technology and everyday life). Towards the end of the 19th century the antagonism between West European civilization and Russian culture mounted in intensity. Moreover, in Russian intellectual history, culture has since then increasingly assumed the importance of a national and religious identity. Another feature is the dual structure of the cultural layers, namely official high culture (emanating from the Church and the State) and everyday and popular culture (cf. Uspenskij/Lotman 1996:339). This is reflected right to the present day. From a different perspective, cf. Freud 1930/1993, Eliot 1949).

² A dynamic concept is advocated by Wierlacher/Hudson-Wiedemann who define “Kultur” (culture) as a “changeable, coherent but not entirely consistent sociographically structured system of rules, hypotheses and validities which is geared towards exchange and encompasses political and social institutions as well as works of art and activities of the workaday world”, as a “way of coping with life [...], which has a great deal to do with external economic and social conditions and which consequently is not immutable, but responds to changes through changes, with the self possibly finding itself in a multidimensional and hence partly contradictory pattern of affinity” (Wierlacher/Hudson-Wiedemann 2000:221- transl: H.S.).

³ “From the semiotic point of view culture may be regarded as a hierarchy of particular semiotic systems, as the sum of the texts and the set of functions correlated with them, or as a certain mechanism which generates these texts. If we regard the collective as a more complexly organized individual, culture may be understood by analogy with the individual mechanism of memory as a certain collective mechanism for the storage and processing of information.” (Lotman/Uspenskij/Ivanov/Toporov/Pjatigorski 1975:73)

⁴ The concept can be traced back to Aristotle who (in the second book of his “Nicomachean Ethics”) defines ethical virtue as a disposition to judge actions reasonably, and described *habitus* as “the things in virtue of which we stand well or badly with reference to the passions, e.g. with reference to anger we stand badly if we feel it violently or too weakly, and well if we feel it moderately” (Aristotle 1985:33). The concept of *habitus* was consequently used by different authors, including Hegel, Husserl, Weber, and Durkheim.

⁵ In his foreword the American translator Chandler confesses: “I have myself omitted or abridged some of the sententious passages.” (Chandler 2006:XXX)

I would hardly consider the omitted passage (“and the good of the Jews”) a sententious one since it is one of several parallel statements.

⁶ In the original this passage reads as follows:

“Est’ li dobro obščee, primenimoe ko vsem ljudjam, ko vsem plemenam, ko vsem položenijam žizni? Ili moe dobro v zle dlja tebjja, dobro moego naroda v zle dlja tvoego naroda? Večno li, neizmenno li dobro, ili včerašnee dobro segodnja stanovitsja porokom, a včerašnee zlo segodnja est’ dobro? [...]

Prodivinulis’ li za tysjačetija ljudi v svoich predstavlenijach o dobre? Est’ li éto ponjatje, obščee dlja vsech ljudej [...] ? [...] klassov, nacij, gosudarstv? A byt’ možet, ponjatje ešče bolee širokoe, obščee i dlja životnych, dlja derev’ev, mcha [...]? [...]

Dobro pervych christian, dobro vseh ljudej smenilos' dobrom dlja odnich liš' christian, a rjadom žilo dobro dlja musul'man, dobro iudeev.

No prošli veka, i dobro christian raspalos' na dobro katolikov, protestantov, dobro pravoslavija. I v dobre pravoslavija vzniklo dobro staroj i novoj very.

I rjadom šlo dobro bogatych i dobro bednych, rjadom roždalos' dobro želtych, černych, belych.

I, vse drobjas' i drobjas', uže roždalos' dobro v kruge sekty, rasy, klassa, vse, kto byli za zamknutoj krivoj, uže ne vchodili v krug dobra.

I ljudi uvideli, čto mnogo krovi prolito iz-za ètogo malogo, nedobrogo dobra vo imja bor'by ètogo dobra so vsem tem, čto ščitalo ono, maloe dobro, zlom.

I inogda samo ponjatje takogo dobra stanovilos' bičom žizni, ból'sim zlom, čem zlo." (Grossman 2008:400-401)

⁷ The Posev publishing house was founded in Germany in 1945 by Russian émigrés with the aim of publishing works by Russian authors which were proscribed in the former Soviet Union for political reasons (for details see Salevsky 2002:466-467).

⁸ In the original this passage reads as follows:

"Vanja, Vanečka, díko, stranno, no ja zaviduju tebe, zaviduju tomu, čto ty ne dolžen byl podpisivat' podlych pisem, ne gosoloval za smertnuju kazn' nevinnyim, ne vystupal s podlymi rečami." (Grossman 1970:39)

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Межкультурная коммуникация как зеркало изменяющейся цивилизации (Перевод на немецкий русскоязычной литературы)

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В статье получает подтверждение одно из фундаментальных положений Вальтера Беньямина о том, что культура (как часть эмпирической жизни) распознается лучше всего в ее временном, историческом ракурсе. Перевод при этом, с одной стороны, сам играет немаловажную роль, а с другой – является феноменом, непосредственно зависящим от времени и пространства (Benjamin, 1923/1991).

В первой части статьи рассматриваются понятия «цивилизация» и «культура», во второй – обсуждаются проблемы отражения культуры в переводах. Третья часть посвящена трем разным немецким переводам повести Василия Гроссмана «Все течет».

Ключевые слова: межкультурная коммуникация, культура, цивилизация, чужое, перевод, русская культура, немецкие переводы, Гроссман, «Все течет».
