SELF-TRANSLATION, COMMUNICATION BRIDGE BETWEEN CULTURES

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Abstract: When the author of a paper translates his/her own literary work in another language, he/she might always do some changes of the original work in order to make the paper better understood in the language translated and to set out a relation, a way of communication, between the two cultures, through the work of translation. Still, there are theorists who consider the translated work as a betrayal of the original one, even if the author is the same and the paper is in the greatest measure the same. We would consider that this is an aware manner of transforming the text into a way in which two persons from different cultures would perceive the text and the real intention of the message to be communicated. Communicating the message of a work in two languages, through translation, the self-translator would create a bridge between the two cultures.

Keywords: Self-translation, culture, original work, bridge

The Slovak scientist Anton Popovič defined the work of self-translation as being "the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself"[1]. A self-translated text is somehow different from a non-authorial translation, as it is "the repetition of a process rather than the reproduction of a product".[2] As an author, the self-translator may choose to make changes to his work throughout the process of translation; he has the opportunity to review his work and even improve it. On the other hand, as a translator, the self-translator is most probably attached to the idea of faithfulness to the original. Therefore, the translated text will usualy be in a great measure faithful to the original, but there will always appear disparities between the two versions, disparities which can be however seen as a bound of the two cultures the text is dedicated.

Self-translation has a long history, being a common practice for many centuries. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance bi- or multi-lingualism was very common among scholars, many of them having written in their mother tongue and in Latin and later in French in order to spread new ideas. The same happens today, when contemporary researchers use English as a working language, or many scientists write their works in two languages, the main purpose being the circulation of knowledge. Therefore we can see that self-translation continues to be widespread.

There are many reasons for which authors can decide to translate their work. Wars or other conflicts determined some writers to leave their own country and to live in exile where they acquired a new language, a new different culture and in the end they started to write in that language. Other writers live in a multi-lingual culture and write in two or even more different

[1] Popovič, Anton (1976), Dictionary for the Analysis of Literary Translation. Edmonton: Department of Comparative Literature, University of Alberta, p. 19

[2] Wilson, Rita (2009), "The Writer's Double: Translation, Writing, and Autobiography". Romance Studies 7, p.186

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languages. Others, like the Nobel Prize winning poet Joseph Brodsky, decide to translate their work because they are not satisfied with the translations done by ”normal” translators. The self-translator being the author of the work to be translated, unlike a ”normal” translator, he will not have a different interpretation of this work than his own. Still others do self-translation simply because they know another language/s, and sometimes this can become the way in which they write.

Self-translation is associated more with bilingualism and less with literature or translation. Hokenson and Munson[3] consider there are at least two reasons for this: the first is that translations (being included here self-translations also) have been seen most often as being inferior to the original texts, because of the try to preserve the linguistic purity of a particular language. Another reason concerns conceptual problems of applying to self-translations the usual concepts of “author and translator”, ”original and interpretation”. Self-translations complicate notions of authorship, originality and equivalence. Still, self translation is undoubtedly a form of translation and it is important to translation studies to be researched as such.

The process of self-translation very often goes hand in hand with the problematization of identities. We can consider it a dual linguistic identity. In the research of self-translation, the focus is also on the side of bilingualism and the cultural identity that each language gives to the author. Usually, the bilingual author will see each language as a different part of himself, when switching from one language to the other many times presenting the reader a different point of view. If the self-translation will be done after a first version of the text was written in the mother tongue, the author will not only be constrained to write the text from another perspective, but he also has to translate, so to rethink his own thoughts. Unconsciously, the self-translator’s work relates simultaneously to two cultures, creating a communication bridge between them. The author who translates his work in another language will not only be a bilingual but also a bicultural person, he will translate a culture into another, not only a text into another, so that, in the end, he would be able to achieve a cross-cultural understanding. To the reader who knows both languages, of the original and of the translation, the friction between the two versions of the text makes the self available in a way that other sorts of translations don’t.

There can be differentiated two types of self-translation. The first takes place after the original was written. The author/self- translator has his work in a language and he decides, immediately after it is finished or even years later, to translate it into one or more other languages. The second type of self-translation is when the author/self-translator writes the both versions in the same time. In this process, one language can influence the other, this way giving the writer the opportunity to see things from a different point of view and to reconsiderate aspects which in one language can be significant but in another language not to have revelance. Considering this type of self-translation, it becomes even more uncertain which is the original version and which is the translated one. As Wilson[4] underlines, none of the two versions can be considered as being the original text or both versions can. An example in this way is ”Un autre dans le miroir” (Traduction et auto-traduction)- Jean-Yves Casanova,

[3] Hokenson, Jan, Marcella Munson. 2007. The Bilingual Text. Manchester: St. Jerome, p.12
[4] Wilson, Rita (2009), “The Writer’s Double: Translation, Writing, and Autobiography”. Romance Studies 7, p. 190

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Catalan-French-Occitan self-translator, explains that having written each poem, he has written also the French version and many times had to go back to the original text and to modify the content and the form. It was a continuous process of changes so that in the end he wasn't able to say in which language he had written his poems qualified as "self-translated products".[5]

Comparative studies between self-translation and "normal" translation that have been realized so far (Mavrodin 2007: 51-56) or between "first texts" and "self-translated texts" (Ehrlich 2009; Miclău 2007: 41-47 etc.)– most often come to the same conclusion: the self-translator is doubtlessly a translator, using the same translation methods and strategies but in the same time is an author who is recreating his work. Therefore, the distinction between the original and its translation is many times unclear.

The works of self-translators and of bilingual authors are most of the time studied in only one of the two languages and in only one of the two cultures. A consequence of this is that, a significant dimension of these works is unexplored without considering that the auto-translation could be seen as a mediation between two cultures. The remark made by Nicola Doone Danby on this is very significant: Each version of the text is valid, and should be included in the reader's appreciation and interpretation of the work, since they are both produced by the original author.[6]

There are theorists who are in favor of self-translation and others who are against it. The first sustain that the writer is the best translator[7], he knowing the best what he wants to transmit to the readers. Georges Steiner, in his famous work „After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation" states that the best translator "will be one who has consciously gained fluency in his second tongue. The bilingual person does not 'see the difficulties', the frontier between the two languages is not sharp enough in his mind".[8] The opponents of self-translation pretend the opposite. According to Paul Valéry, "the author has no special authority" (Valéry 1971: 93 in Whyte 2002: 68)[9]. Whyte, following Valéry, claims that "the person least qualified to translate any poem is the person who wrote it" and "there is", according to Whyte, "no better criticism than translation"[10].

In conclusion we can say that translation and self-translation have not many differences, both of them involving transforming source text into the target text. The translator has to mediate between the two versions so as to maintain the purpose of the translation action, he must know and understand not only the two languages but also their cultures. The mediation and the keeping of the aim of the original work may involve important changes during translation. But, while the translator may be blamed if the content of the original is not fully respected, the self-translator may be exemptied of this criticism.

Research on self-translation can bring a better understanding of translation in general. Self-translation is a form of translation, but there are important and interesting differences.

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[5] Boyacioglu, Nisan (2009), Auto-traductions françaises dans la littérature arménienne de diaspora (vol. 1). Paris: INALCO, p. 26

[6] Danby, Nicola Doone (2003), The space between: Self-translators Nancy Huston and Samuel Beckett. Masters thesis, York University, pp. 10-11.

[7] López Gay, Patricia, Natalia Novosilzov, Helena Tanqueiro and Francesc Parcerisas Vázquez. 2007. "L'autotraduction litéraire comme domaine de recherché". Atier de Traduction 7: 92

[8] Steiner, Georges (1998), After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation. Oxford University Press, p. 125.

[9] Whyte, Christopher. 2002. "Against Self-Translation". Translation and Literature 11: 68

[10] Idem, p. 69

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Since the late 1990s, researchers have tried to comprise similitudes and differences between translation and self-translation, but it is still a lot to be learned. Finding out more about self-translation will bring benefits to other fields of research as well and it may also reveal from the differences between cultures, hierarchies between a culture's dominant language and other, less spoken languages and so on. The disparities between the two cultures determine the author-translator to make changes in the work in order to minimize them. What has been carefully chosen in one version is in purpose overlooked or altered in the other one.

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