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# CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING LITERARY TRANSLATION: MIXING THE ETERNAL AND THE NEW

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**Abstract:** Today the criteria for evaluating translations of literary texts combine vast practical experience, insights of the translation theory and the demands set by the contemporary society for the translation of literature. The article describes the stages of developing literary translation criteria and offers the integrative multicomponent model which comprises aesthetic information, text unity, dominant style features and their frequency, diachronic distance, translator's individual style, literary norm of the receiving language and specificity of the social expectations. The above-listed components are considered crucial in the analysis of the present-day and past translations, as well as in the study of two-step translation method via the mediating language.

**Key words:** literary translation, quality assessment criteria, text unity, diachronic translation, individual style of the translator, folklore

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decades the theory and practice of translation have moved beyond the realm of literary translation. Language localization and post-editing, institutional or audiovisual texts have come to the fore of translation studies. At the same time, the proportion of 'pure' non-creolized texts without extraneous elements or complex semiotics is getting smaller, and this revives the interest in the translation of literary texts, which is as yet outside the scope of artificial intelligence. It is noteworthy that the notion of the translation quality as such emerged in the practices as well as in the studies devoted to literary translation.

Throughout the XX century it was the translated literary texts – those existing in the public limelight and read by most educated people – which were evaluated most keenly. The evaluation of literary translations is by necessity subjective, as translations are meant to be perceived individually. Yet the public significance of such texts is key to accumulating the vast evidence of their different evaluations which allows to draw the objective assessment. It is through the critical evaluation of many translators' work – those of Schepkina-Kupernik, Lozinskiy or Pasternak, that the best Russian translations of Shakespeare's plays were picked out of the existing multitude. It is the critical evaluation which showed that several translations of the same literary text can successfully vie for the reader's attention without eliminating each other. This well-established method of looking at different translations paved way for working out the objective criteria.

Most publications devoted to the analysis of new translations are limited to a personal assessment ranging from ‘good’ to ‘bad,’ or are searching out for the translator’s blunders, the funny ones, as a rule. Such criticism is neither scientific nor constructive, because pointing out to mistakes does not teach one how to avoid making new ones. Another remark: today’s critics of translations are for most part literary critics or publicists, and they tend to ignore the research done in the field of translation theory. They pay no attention to the latest developments, and having once declared the rupture between theory and practice they persist in shunning scientific methods when ‘diagnosing’ the problem.

## **2. Developing the Criteria**

A. Fedorov was the first to attempt the construction of a theoretical system based on the critical evaluation of literary translations. He introduced the widely spread concept of “completeness of translation” (Fedorov 2002). In the survey article *A Window into Another World* dated 1981, A. Fedorov remarked that generalizing on the translation quality calls for “the methodological foundation, theoretical conceptualization that would first introduce the idea of functional matching or non-matching between the stylistic means of two languages” (Fedorov 1981:50).

The German researcher K. Reiss devoted her monograph *Opportunities and Limits of the Translation Criticism* (1971) to the basic principles of scientific translation criticism. She outlines in detail the desperate situation in the translation criticism of the last third of the XX century, where we will search in vain for anything more substantial than personal evaluation of the kind “reads like the German original”, or “splendidly translated.”

Another attempt to develop serious criteria can be found in the monograph by P. Topor *Translation in Comparative Literary Studies*. In the section of the book entitled *Translation Criticism in the System of Interlingual Literary Communication* the author explains the poor quality of translation criticism by the lack of interest on the readers’ part in the quality of translation (Topor 2000:232).

One more reason, though not stated openly but transpiring from the article, is deemed symptomatic due to the very fact of it being present in the text only implicitly. This reason goes back to Schleiermacher’s idea that only translated literary texts deserve scientific research and criticism. One would be inclined to share P. Topor’s view that “literary translation takes a special place among other possible kinds of translation – both from the viewpoint of its genesis (as a process), and functioning (as a product).” Yet, the contemporary research in Translation Studies precludes us from supporting the conclusion made from this premise: namely, that only literary translation criticism is concerned both with ‘micro-level’ (according to the author, this is a critical evaluation of separate translators’ solutions referring to certain kinds of texts), and ‘macro-level’ i.e. the whole text. P. Topor criticizes K. Reiss for developing an evaluative model supposedly calculating ‘the arithmetic mean’ of various linguistic and extra-linguistic factors in their relation to different types of text. But she suggests

analyzing any text, including a literary one, on the ‘macrolevel,’ taking into consideration the unified whole that the text represents.

In our view, prioritizing the literary text in the critical evaluation of translation disrupts the development and application of objective translation quality criteria. Let us remember that the development of translation theory did not progress as fast until the early 50s, when it was almost exclusively based on the analysis of literary translations. Truly linguistic foundations for the critical assessment of translation were laid by J. Nida, D. Catford, A. Fedorov, J. Retzker, and other theoreticians when they made any translated text an object of research. Doing so does not contradict, but instead helps to set clear differentiated criteria for evaluating the translation quality.

Another researcher who devoted her work to the specificity of literary translation and its history was T. Kazakova. However, she did not discuss the criteria for evaluating the quality of translation. Collectively, the body of work published in the recent decades touched on specific issues of translating one or several literary texts between two languages, and it could not aspire to grand generalizations. Having read the translation criticism of some literary works, as well as scientific papers discussing the literary translations one can discover the following: 1) the discussion of the translator’s isolated sense mistakes; 2) statement of what the translator failed to render – here we include certain cases of pun, metaphors, stylistically coloured vocabulary; 3) identifying linguistic or speech regularities through the comparison of the original and the translation; 4) identifying translation strategies. In the first two cases the discussion brings to the following conclusion: the translation is either downright bad, or moderately good (though not perfect). In the latter case the issue of quality is not raised at all, or commented on passingly. As the fourth point concerns, most attention is given to analyzing the ways to achieve equivalence, but this is realized only on the basis of one particular linguistic phenomenon (e.g. the strategies of rendering metaphors, the strategies of translating token names, etc.). As a rule, the authors of such translation criticism do not aspire to draw general conclusions about the equivalence between the original and the translation. But what we want is exactly general conclusions.

### **3. Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Literary Translation: Complex Integrative Model**

The present-day development of translation theory allows to return to its beginnings while all the time keeping in mind the recent achievements. We need to evaluate the definite results of the translation process in order to work out the objective evaluation criteria, bearing in mind that their stringency or variance will be different for literary or non-literary texts.

Let us look into the problem in order to at least try to understand what underlies the equivalence of the literary translation. To put it simply, what is a good literary translation? What do we expect of it? To answer these questions, we have to start by defining the concept. In fact, the borders of the ‘literary translation’ notion are quite fuzzy. Alongside authorial literary texts, which traditionally provide a research base, this notion also includes numerous translations of anonymous epic works, or fairy tales

and ballads. It prompts that the existence of the author figure is not the main condition for the literary text. Most researchers agree that the main parameter of the literary text is its aesthetic value, or 'aesthetic dominant.' A literary text is a work of verbal culture, so we expect the translation to be equally aesthetically charged.

Today there are four main approaches to develop evaluation criteria for the translation:

1. The textual-typological approach was introduced by K. Reiss who proposed the following critical categories: text type, intra-linguistic instructions (objective correlation of the languages) and extra-linguistic determinants (situation, theme, time).

2. The pragma-linguistic approach, suggested by J. House, foregrounds discourse analysis of the source text (register, thematic sphere, situation, form of communication with the three-level linguistic analysis) and genre (text type) as a foundation for the critical evaluation of the translation. The two above-mentioned parameters determine the individual text function, and then the evaluation of the translation is based on the type of translation (covert / overt translation)

3. The functional approach by M. Ammann goes back to the Skopos theory in its orientation on the addressee. It is the *translatum*<sup>1</sup> that undergoes the critical analysis, which is carried out in five stages: 1) defining the function of the *translatum*, 2) defining the intra-textual coherence of the *translatum* (unity of sense, formal unity, correlation between the form and the content), 3) defining the function of the source text, 4) defining the intra-textual coherence of the source text, 5) defining the intertextual coherence between the *translatum* and the source text. Defining the function of the *translatum* means creating a model reader who arrives at a certain understanding of the text by using certain reading strategy.

4. The poly-systemic approach, suggested by R. van den Broeck within the descriptive Translation Studies, is based on the comparative analysis of the source text and the translated text. It is undertaken to compare phonetic, lexical, syntactical elements, rhetorical figures, narrative and poetic means and conventions with regard to the function of each element in both texts. The changes pointed out in the translated text are divided into objective and subjective, i.e. those prompted by the translator's choice. The next step is the critical evaluation which takes into account the norms, methods and strategies chosen by the translator. This approach relies on established linguistic, aesthetic and moral standards, and as such can be applied only to modern texts.

All the approaches here described strive for universality and serve the aims formulated by K. Reiss. To put it simply, such aims can be summed up as follows: the reader wants to be sure that s/he has received a good translation, as it should be; the translator wants to be sure s/he did everything correctly, for which s/he needs an objective expert evaluation of his work. This is why any scientific approach to translation critique should lead to developing the normative criteria which will help both actors to evaluate the quality of work.

Taking into consideration the research undertaken previously, let us try to formulate such criteria for a literary text. We will proceed as a rank-and-file reader and imagine

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<sup>1</sup> By *translatum* we understand what is actually being translated.

the situation: a new book has come out and we as readers want to know if the translation is any good. What objective criteria can we, readers, can apply to answer this worrying question?

The contemporary idea of text equivalence is based on its functional meaning. All theories of text equivalence touch upon such an idea in this or that way; among them there is the Skopos theory. But the Skopos theory puts functionality in a subordinate position, and foregrounds the practical purpose. For literary texts, alas, this is just the other way round: the practical purpose set by the translator or the commissioner at the time of translation is of secondary importance, while the aesthetic quality is primary, and sometimes even becomes eternal. I will give several examples. In the 30-50s, within the Soviet Union there was a project to create children's literature through translation and adaptation of fairy tales from around the world undertaken by Marshak's publishing house. These fairy tales have since become a part of Russian literary culture, and nobody remembers the original purpose. In the XIX century some excellent translations of Goethe's and Heine's poetry were done by A. Tolstoy and K. Pavlova as a part of the saloon contest for speed translation. This purpose has nowadays been forgotten, while the aesthetic value of the works persists. What remained is the kind of equivalence which "does not guarantee success", according to K. Reiss and H. Vermeer; the kind of equivalence, the objective criteria of which we are trying to find.

We have described the immanent properties of a literary text, those which set it apart from other text types, so now we can turn to examining its diachronic properties. As a matter of fact, the literary text is not invested with aesthetic value right from the start. The value of some 'eternal' texts has not undergone considerable changes over time (e.g. the works of secular literary culture); for others, however, such as folk lore or cult texts, it has changed drastically. The latter can be deemed as literary texts only from the moment when their initial ritual or cult functions gave way to aesthetic ones, or, rather, when the aesthetic functions took precedence. This is why translations of literary works belonging to earlier epochs should be analyzed with regard to their function at the moment of translation, and not at that of creation.

Let us look closer at translations as such. What criteria of equivalence do we use to apply today? In essence, the authors of critical works on evaluating literary translation apply the criteria of completeness worked out by A. Fedorov. They analyze if the translation of each linguistic element is in correlation with its function within the text's artistic whole. Each separate case of rendering a metaphor, or a stylistic colouring, rhythm, etc. is brought under scrutiny. We usually fail to find some elements in the translation – does it mean that any literary translation is not equivalent to the original? Sometimes we find translations impeccable, we admire them, and we forgive the translator minor mistakes – and not because we did not read the original, but because the translation, in our perception, feels 'just like the original'... Does it mean that those who propagate the equivalence of emotional response are right? How is this emotional response formalized, then? Maybe, the heart of the matter is that in undertaking analysis we tend to take apart the harmonious artistic whole which is solely responsible for the emotional effect? Now we come close to the parameter which is proclaimed, but

in practice ignored, in analyzing a literary work. This feature is the text unity, and only the text in its wholeness possesses this special quality.

This text feature can hardly be used as a criterion. It is not that the criterion is hard to apply, but rather in assessing a literary translation we evaluate a work of art – and it produces an effect on us. We take pleasure in original comparisons, admire unusual rhythms, i.e. we pay attention to particulars, - and we lose sight of the whole. We fail to capture the text in its wholeness behind these isolated fragments, the complete text becomes elusive and eventually escapes. Yet the author, free as he or she is in the creative act, always attempts to make a harmonious whole. The author's method, be it manifested in one work of art or in the entire oeuvre, makes up a system of expressive means. These systemic features create the necessary impression of unity. If we look at the text level, the presence of systemic features is relevant in itself, but also in the reoccurrence of components. Let us consider an example. The systemic features of Hesse's work are as follows: prevalence of syntactic coordination over subordination; rare use of parenthesis and participial phrases which makes the impression of the action developing linearly; bookish vocabulary, disruption of normative collocability. For this reason the translator who on several occasions chose to use subordinate connection instead of coordinative did not violate the systemic equivalence with Hesse's text; but if the translator introduced colloquial lexis instead of bookish, the reader's verdict will be that 'it is not Hesse.'

The criterion of the text unity acquires more prominence in defining the equivalence of translation when we have to deal with anonymous rather than author's literary work. Regarding folk lore, which has become part of literature within living memory, the criteria of the adequacy theory do not look sufficient. The concept of the unified artistic design realized through a system of artistic means is based on the authorial text. The harmonious whole is even harder to grasp in the folk lore texts. The folk lore texts, despite their present-day written modus, still retain a considerable degree of variation (observed, specifically, in the so-called 'wandering stories'), and are characterized by the systemic dominance of certain features. The big number of compensations and 'liberties' (e.g. in translations of folk tales) can be explained by the pre-existing idea of a folk lore text as a text with an established set of language means. The system of dominating text features (conventional epithets, word order, disjointed action, the linear principle in describing a sequence of action, archaic diction) makes up the text code which determines the stylistic colouring of the fairy tale, especially when it is used as an inter-text in the authorial narration.

So, in our opinion, it is the retaining of the text unity understood as a system of dominating features in their quantitative proportion that allows us to talk about the equivalence of the literary translation. The presence of this system makes Hesse in Russian translations sound like the original Hesse, it makes Hemingway in Russian feel like Hemingway in English, Russian Lorca sounds like Lorca in Spanish, and Woolf in Russian translations is similar to Woolf in English.

If these principles are kept, the translator of literary works, who is an artist of his own, can still exercise his/her creative potential. It makes up his/her individual style in translation; it makes him/her choose catchphrases, opt for some syntactical constructions instead of others. The rendering of other, non-dominant features of the



original literary style depends on the level of the translator's professional skill. These side effects are connected, maybe, with social requirements – the Skopos which will cease to be relevant in the future (e.g. the elimination of Christian motifs in translating the foreign folk tales into Russian in Marshak's publishing house).

Yet, a translator is also a reader, the very first one and the most careful. As a reader he can respond to – and, consequently, render – some artistic qualities of the text and fail to do so with others. Well, let us grant him/her this right. The translation is his/her version. Still, the aesthetic quality he/she renders will not be less valuable for the reader. We will presume that the notion of a 'good translation' in relation to the literary text covers the rendering of only a certain share of aesthetic information. This limitation is compensated by the factual co-existence of many versions of translation, and each version brings us closer to the perception of the aesthetic value of the original.

However, there is another criterion that is seldom formulated but often used in the essayist translation critique. It is connected with literalness, awkward turns of the phrase or wrong semantic usage. As it turns, we are ready to perceive the aesthetic information in translation only when the translator is a master of his own language and follows the rules of his/her native tongue. A chance mistake may ruin the beauty of the text. Thus, another important criterion is the normative usage of the native language by the translator.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Taking stock of the conclusions and theories developed by previous researchers we have worked out the essential features which make up a dynamic (i.e. flexible, developing) integrative model for assessing the quality of the literary translation. These features are:

1. the completeness of the aesthetic information;
2. masterful command of the literary norm of the native language;
3. the degree of rendering the text wholeness and the systemic features of the text unity (both their distribution and frequency in the text);
4. the degree of impact of the translator's individual style on the translated text;
5. the translation of the diachronic distance between the time of text creation and text translation;
6. the consideration of the social demand for the completeness of cultural and aesthetic information in the translation.

The integrative multicomponent model here developed takes into account the present-day level of intercultural text communication via translation; the components listed above can be regarded as crucial in analyzing translations of the past as well as of today. The suggested criteria can also be applied in the study of the two-step translation method via the language-mediator.

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