

SELF-TRANSLATION AS MEDIATION BETWEEN CULTURES

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the image of cross-cultural translator *par excellence*, namely the self-translator. When facing a difficult task of translating his/her own literary work, the self-translator, who is also a bilingual and a bicultural author, is often free to do some changes in the process of his work's translation. Even if he/she is the author of the original text many theorists consider such a phenomenon to be a betrayal of the original work. However, we dare to say that in this case it is a conscious manipulation of the original, a manipulation that allows understanding and reception of the text by two different people. Assuming the task of linguistic and cultural transcoding of his/her own work, the author-translator reflects his personal experiences in the both versions which are slightly tinted according to the language and the culture in which they are written. The idea is that when rendering his/her experiences into the both languages the self-translator becomes a cross-cultural mediator and establishes certain relationships between these cultures in the process of translation.

Keywords: *Self-translation, original work, bilingualism, biculturalism.*

The act of self-translation or auto-translation, defined by the Slovak scientist Anton Popovič as "the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself"¹ occurs within linguistic environments where the language is in situation of bi- or plurilingualism. The concept occupies the fuzzy area between two domains: translation studies and literary studies.

As a phenomenon, self-translation has a long and rich history dating for more than two thousand years and continues to be widespread in different cultures. It has been practiced by many men of letters such as Leonardo Bruni, Etienne Dolet, Dimitrie Cantemir, Antioh Cantemir, Thomas More, Joachim Du Bellay, Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Julien Green, Chyngyz Aitmatov, Elsa Triolet, Andrei Makine, Lubomir Guentchev, Matei Visniec, Ion Druta and others.

By its definition self-translation is synonymous to bilingual and bicultural translation. Scholars

see the phenomenon more closely connected with bilingualism than to translation *per se*. So, the process of self-translation very often goes hand in hand with the problematization of identities. The bilingualism that nowadays faces the trilingualism and multilingualism is sometimes used to regenerate writing. These changes are very vivid and stress the reason why self-translation has been ignored. In Carolyn Shread's opinion, "one consequence of the marginalization of self-translation as a practice is that it reinforces Western models in which monolingualism, rather than multilingualism, is the norm"².

Self-translators do not only master but choose to create in more than one language [3]. Beaujour (cited by Grutman³) also draws a clear-cut line between the ordinary bilinguals who often shift languages with no conscious decision to do so, and the bilingual writers who deliberately decide which language to use at a time. Consequently, those writers should equally make vigilant a decision when they self-translate.

The works of self-translators and the works of bilingual authors are usually studied in only one of the two languages, in only one of the two cultures. As a result, an important dimension of these works remains unexplored without taking into account that the auto-translation represents the mediation between two cultures. The remark made by Nicola Doone Danby on this chapter 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 author⁴.

What is mediation? In the field of law, the mediation is a form of alternative dispute resolution, a way of resolving conflicts between two or more parties with concrete effects. It is not accidental that along the history some cultures regarded the mediator as a wise man, as

a sacred figure, deserving a special respect and admiration. From the linguistic point of view, mediation is “the extent to which one feeds one’s current beliefs and goals into the model of the communicative situation”⁵. For R. Taft “mediation between cultures requires the communication of ideas and information from one cultural context to the other”⁶. And finally, if speaking in translation terms, mediation is the textual relationship between the author and the translator, who is the reader of the source text and the creator of the target text. That is why Fitch studies the phenomenon of self-translation in connection with the intertextuality: “C’est donc dans le rapport entre le texte-cible et texte-source que résiderait la spécificité de la traduction de soi et non pas dans la structure interne du texte-cible. C’est le caractère de l’intertextualité qui serait ici en jeu”⁷. As Fitch says, the connection between the target text and the source text, the feature of intertextuality seems to be fundamental for the specificity of auto-translation. What does it mean? It means that the translator does not have to be only bilingual but also bicultural in order to be able to realize the cross-cultural understanding. So we don’t speak about translation of one text into another, of one language into another, but about translation of one culture into another. This is the idea launched by Hatim and Mason: “The work of the translator involves mediation between two parties: the producer of source text and the receivers of the target text for whom mutual communication might otherwise be problematic because of the disparities between the two cultures”⁸. Depending on the difficulties, textual peculiarities and on the *skopos* of translation, the mediation could be minimal, maximal or partial.

There is no doubt that the self-translation is a pertinent manifestation of bilingualism. But historically speaking, we can say that self-translators were mostly writers who chose to create in more than one language, even without mastering perfectly the foreign languages. Taking into account the knowledge the author has about the language in which his or her work is translated, we can classify the writers in some categories. First of all we can speak about the authors who don’t know the language of translation at all. It means, to our mind, that

the writer has no idea how equivalent and faithful the source text to the target text is. Secondly, there are authors who know the language of translation well and can check the correctitude of the work, but sometimes they are not able to assess the reliability of some fragments presenting a lot of difficulties when transferring the text from their native language. And, thirdly, there are writers who master two languages and translate their own works by themselves. The second language they know is explained by native things, by bilingualism or by successful learning of a foreign language (see the Figure below).

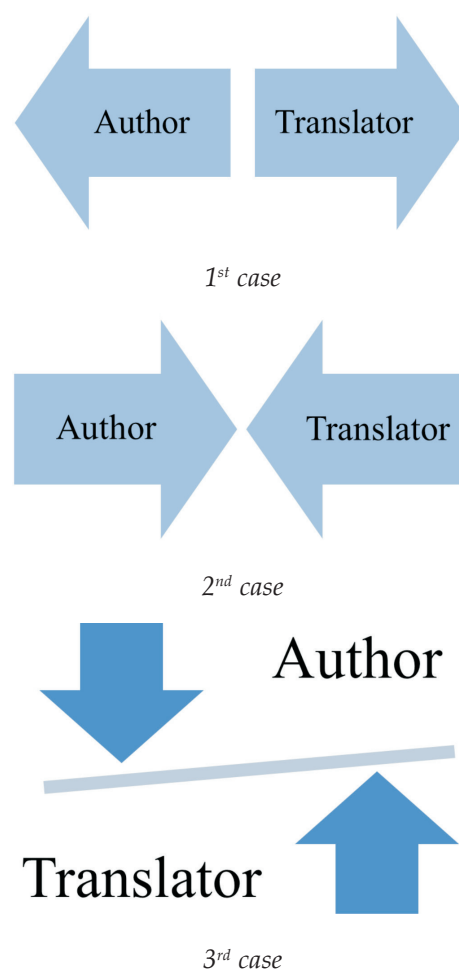


Fig. 1. The Relationship Author-Translator depending on how well the Author masters the target language

The ideal cases of a successful translation are obviously the last two ones: when the author who masters the target language cooperates with

the translator and when the translator is the author himself. Analyzing the 3rd case, we agree with Georges Steiner who in his famous work *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* mentions 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”⁹.

Being a researcher interested in the act of auto-translation, it was very interesting for me to see, besides the theoretical postulates, the point of view of a practitioner. In *Un autre dans le miroir (Traduction et auto-traduction)*, Jean-Yves Casanova, Catalan-French-Occitan self-translator, speaks about his experience. He explains that having written each poem, he did its French version and very often the author was obliged to come back to the original text and to modify the content as well as to change the form. And it was a continued process of changes and movement so that finally he couldn’t say in what language he had written his poems qualified as “self-translated product”¹⁰.

The present paper would not be complete without describing the factors that encourage self-translation. We classify these factors in two categories: individual factors and sociolinguistic factors. If we put them on a balance, studies will show that the sociolinguistic ones are stronger and have a bigger influence on the self-translation activity (see Fig. 2).

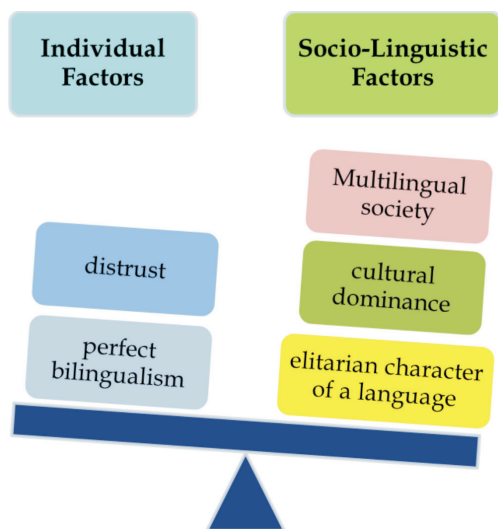


Fig. 2. Factors encouraging Self-Translation

SOCIOLINGUISTIC FACTORS:

Living in a translated society, (self-)translation brings into play some social issues. In certain contexts, from a historical perspective, translation functions as an ethnographic tool, at first simply recording cultures but then spurring their transition towards homogeneity¹¹.

The practice of self-translation may be encouraged by the elitarian character of a specific language from this to a local language. Here translations from Latin into vernacular languages in medieval and early modern times can serve as example. Persons living separated from one another cannot preserve a language because languages are essentially interactive, says Eugene A. Nida¹².

Another factor may be the cultural dominance of one language in a multilingual society (self-translation from a minority language to the dominant one) or in the international context (self-translation from a national language to an internationally recognized language like English).

As for **individual factors** encouraging the practice of self-translations we can mention the perfect or almost perfect bilingualism of the author-translator, the distrust or the dissatisfaction with existing translations.

It must be noted that self-translation is proper for literary works but also for scientific ones. Several scientists write their articles, monographs in two languages, the main objective being the circulation of knowledge.

In conclusion we can say that self-translation is not very much different from translation proper. Both of them involve transcoding source text into the target text. The (auto)translator has to mediate between the two texts so as to maintain the purpose of the translation action, he must master not only the two languages but also their cultures. The mediation and the maintenance of the purpose of the original work may engage significant changes during (auto)translation. While the translator proper may be blamed if the content of the original is not respected entirely, the self-translator may be deprived of such criticism.

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Endnotes

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