

SOME REMARKS ON THE TRANSLATION STRATEGIES IN DRAMA TRANSLATION IN ENGLISH AND CZECH

The Seagull Revisited

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses Czech and English translations of the play *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov. The chief aim of the paper is to explore translation strategies typical for Czech and English contexts with respect to the period of origin of the translations. The article presents individual solutions as well as general tendencies which are critically evaluated with regard to specific requirements in the receiving cultures. The paper outlines the differences in drama translation between Czech and English cultures. The role of initiator and the importance of the economic aspect in English drama translation are pointed out. The paper also concentrates on the phenomenon of adaptation in English contemporary theatre practice and also considers the lack of this approach in Czech translations of Chekhov.

INTRODUCTION: THE SPECIFICS OF DRAMA TRANSLATION

Translation of dramatic texts should be recognized as a specific sphere of translation. It fundamentally differs from translation of other literary texts (prose or poetry). The dialogical structure inherent to dramatic text, the duality of theatre (the inseparable interconnectedness of the text with the spectacle) requires specific translation modes and approaches.

Individual characters and their motivations are described via dramatic dialogue, the dialogue outlines development of the plot and development of characters, and at the same time, it creates tension on the stage. Moreover, every play has its own pace and rhythm, and the language that the protagonists use on stage diametrically differs from language used in other literary works. The translator of a drama should be aware of these distinctive features of dramatic texts and employ specific translation strategies while translating a play. The translator should preserve fluency of individual utterances and should constantly bear in mind that dramatic text is intended for stage production, hence the resulting translation should follow the criterion of playability (speakability and performability).¹

¹ Although the term “performability” has been criticized by e.g. Susan Bassnett for its emptiness, the importance of the acoustic side of the translated plays in connection to the future production is indubitable.

These preliminary thoughts lead us to broader questions which extend beyond the linguistic aspects of drama translation. In order to ensure a successful drama translation, it is necessary for the translator to take into consideration not only the text in its printed form, but in the case of translation for a particular staging (the so-called “tailor-made” translations) also the staging requirements of a particular production. In other words, apart from the typical requirements for quality translation, such as perfect knowledge of the source language (SL) and the target language (TL), the knowledge of the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) cultures, in the case of drama translation, the staging and dramaturgic knowledge plays an important role as well, i.e. the author of the drama translation should ideally be also competent in dramatization and staging policies.

In our article, we focus on the linguistic properties of translated texts. Furthermore, we concentrate on the extra-linguistic aspects that play a crucial role in drama translation. We pay attention to the different approaches to drama translation in two different receiving cultures. Czech and English translations of Anton Chekhov’s *The Seagull* presented in the paper have been chosen to illustrate the general tendencies in drama translation throughout the 20th century. Both diachronic and synchronic approaches are applied.

DIFFERENT RECEIVING CULTURES

When analyzing English and Czech translations of one play, we deal with two target systems which are historically and culturally determined and, therefore, have their own specifics and characteristics. Undoubtedly, the differences already start on the statistical level, i.e. with the number of speakers of both languages. While Czech, a minor language, is used by approximately 10 million speakers, English, a global language, is used as first language by approximately 400 million speakers. Thus, while there exists only regional dialects within Czech, when speaking about English, we can distinguish between British English, American English, Irish English, Australian English, etc. The above-mentioned numbers and variations of English suggest a non-homogeneous approach to translation. Among the English translations, British and American translations can be distinguished, and their authors admit the subset used in their work: e.g. Paul Schmidt (1997: 5) claims: “I want to emphasize that this is an American translation, not simply another ‘English’ translation.”

The global vs. minor language opposition is connected with another phenomenon, in this case associated exclusively with drama translation. According to Gunilla Anderman (2009: 94), “translation [from English] into less frequently used languages is likely to be closer to the original, as familiarity with [English] social and cultural customs can often be assumed on the part of such theatre audiences“, while plays on the English stage “require a greater degree of adjustment because of English audiences’ lack of familiarity with SL cultures and societies.” This rule also seems to apply to translation from Russian to Czech and English. In the case of Czech translations of *The Seagull*, the historical context is definitely determinant. The knowledge of Russian literature and culture is on an incomparably higher level among Czech receivers than that of

English audiences. It is also the relative typological closeness of Russian and Czech (in comparison to English) that tends to influence the extent of naturalization.

The following comparison of Czech and English translations of the play *The Seagull* by Anton Chekhov is based on the distinction of Czech and English receiving cultures and elucidates the translation approaches related to the aforementioned differences.

CZECH TRANSLATIONS OF *THE SEAGULL*

What follows is a brief survey of Czech translations of the 19th and 20th centuries, illustrating the varying general approaches to drama translation. The categorization can be divided into two main periods, with each period representing the then-relevant translation approaches to drama translation and literary texts in general.

CZECH TRANSLATIONS OF *THE SEAGULL* (1880s–1940s)

The first attempts to introduce Chekhov the playwright to Czech audiences date back to the 1880s; the first translation of *The Seagull* appeared in 1897 (Bořivoj Prusík) and it remained in use for staging for another 20 years. In 1920, a translation by Vincenc Červinka was published in the book series *The Russian Library*. These two translations are representative examples of the general approach to literary translation (from Russian) at the turn of the century. They are bookish, with great respect for the original; they often imitate the original or try to stay as close to it as possible, and thus contaminate the target text with Russian elements, in terms of both syntax and vocabulary. Apart from the systematic transfer of typically Russian features, the translations fail to deliver stylistic nuances, blurring the distinctions between individual characters.

Нина. За такое счастье, как быть писательницей или артисткой, я перенесла бы нелюбовь близких, нужду, разочарование, я жила бы под крышей и ела бы только ржаной хлеб, страдала бы от недовольства собою, от сознания своих несовершенств, но зато бы уж я потребовала славы... настоящей, шумной славы... (Закрывает лицо руками.) Голова кружится... Уф!..

Nina: za takové štěstí, jako býti spisovatelem nebo umělkyní, snesla bych nelásku těch, kdož jsou mi blízcí, nouzi, zklamání, žila bych v podstřeší a jedla bych pouze černý chléb, strádala bych nespokojeností se sebou samou, vědomím o svých nedokonalostech, ale za to bych si žádala slávy... opravdovské, hlučné slávy... (Zakryje si tvář rukama.) Hlava se mi krouží... Uf!... (Vincenc Červinka 1920: 162)

In this excerpt, the first sentence of the Czech translation imitates the original almost word for word, copying the phrase (*it is bliss to be a writer*), where in Czech the infinitive without a conjunction is more natural.

The last line (underlined) is an idiomatic expression in both languages (*It makes my head spin*), however, in Czech, a different verb (*hlava se točí*) would be the natural part of the idiom. The verb chosen is in fact the same as in Russian and almost loses its figurative meaning. Among the above-mentioned and also the following Czech translations, a strong tendency toward respect for the ST and source culture (SC) can be felt.

CZECH TRANSLATIONS OF *THE SEAGULL* SINCE THE 1950s

The 1950s mark the beginning of a new period in the development of translation of *The Seagull*. The translation by Vilém Mathesius (1952) is the first to attempt at stylistic differentiation and individualization, partially through employment of informal spoken Czech. On the other hand, a strong influence of the ST can still be traced. Mathesius never rises above the (complex) sentence level. This is surprising especially because Mathesius was otherwise known for his (then-much-used term) “free” translation. Another notable translation is that of Josef Topol (1965). He, unlike Mathesius, steps above the sentence level and works on the textual level, applying the approach of compensation (use of idioms) and preserving a similar level of expressivity.

Undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in the history of Czech translation and staging of Chekhov was Leoš Suchařípa – a translator, but also an actor and dramatist, whose translations have been in use (in staging) for almost 30 years. What is symptomatic of his approach is the high level of systematic naturalization/domestication. This can partially be attributed to the political environment in the 1980s (the time of the first publication of Suchařípa’s translation), when demonstrating dislike for anything Russian was popular. For example, quite contrary to the Czech tradition, Suchařípa disposes of patronyms and replaces them with various functionally equivalent ways of address. Similarly, he replaces Russian realia (roubles, versts, puds) with their Czech equivalents (crowns, kilometres, kilograms) and thus rids the text of a certain level of authenticity.

Медведенко. У меня теперь в доме шестеро. А мука семь гривен пуд. [...]

Дорн. Денег? За тридцать лет практики, мой друг, беспокойной практики, когда я не принадлежал себе ни днем, ни ночью, мне удалось скопить только две тысячи, да и те я прожил недавно за границей. У меня ничего нет.

Medvěděnko: Nás je teď doma šest. Spočítejte si, co se vydá jenom za mouku. [...]

Dorn: Peněz? Za třicet let praxe, kamaráde, takové praxe, že jsem se nezastavil ve dne v noci, se mi podařilo dát dohromady jen dvě stě tisíc, a ty jsem nedávno utratil v cizině. (Leoš Suchařípa 2005: 50)

In these two examples, Suchařípa goes even further and rids the translated text of any signs of its original setting. In the first example, where in Russian, Medviedenko states that flour can be bought at seven grivnas per pud, Medviedenko complains in Czech about the cost of it: *Flour is expensive these days, you can count for yourself.*

In the second example, by way of actualization, the original *two thousand* is replaced with *two hundred thousand*.

Throughout the 20th century, the approach to drama translation in the Czech tradition has shifted in Newmark's terms from semantic to communicative. In the case of Czech translations of *The Seagull*, the shift from semantic to communicative is also apparent; however, contrary to the English tradition², we deal primarily with translations and not adaptations. Although the text might occasionally be labelled as experimental drama, it is usually due to interpretation during staging, not in relation to the text of the translation itself. As mentioned above, in Czech translation, respect for the author of the ST can generally be felt. Variations occur mainly on the textual level. The Czech approach appears to be, especially in comparison with the English tradition, "submissive" and text-based.

"PAGE" AND "STAGE" APPROACHES TO DRAMA TRANSLATION

In drama translation, two specific strategies can be distinguished – "page" and "stage" approaches (Aaltonen, 1999). While the Czech staging procedure often uses already translated texts ("page" translations), the English tradition often prefers "stage" translations for staging.

It is clear that the receiving theatrical system influences the translation approaches employed by individual translators. As Aaltonen remarks (1999: 38): "The duality of dramatic texts as elements of both the literary and theatrical systems affects the ways in which foreign drama becomes integrated into the domestic systems, as both the theatrical and the literary system have their own norms and conventions which regulate text-generation in them." The regulatory forces behind the Czech and English theatrical and literary systems are of different origin.

At this stage, we should comment on the contemporary staging policy in Britain, and in many cases also in the United States.³ In contrast with the Czech tradition, the British system often commissions translators to produce so-called literal translations to be treated by a well-known playwright who produces the resulting text. This is the reason why so many famous playwrights take part in the process of translating foreign dramatic texts into English, despite the fact that in many cases they have little to no knowledge of the ST language. The representatives of British playhouses explain this practice with the economic aspect of theatre performance. It is the reputation of the adapting playwright which attracts audiences to the theatres. The economic aspect dictates the technique used and is the driving force behind the adaptation.

² In the English tradition, the development from semantic to communicative translation can be noted as well (if we compare the translations by e.g. Constance Garnett from 1923 and Peter Carson 2002). However, on English-speaking stages the preference for "stage" texts is evident. There is also a prevailing notion of the necessity to adapt and not only translate.

³ We draw e.g. on the discussions and findings presented at the conference *Staging translated plays: Adaptation, Translation and Multimediality* held at the University of East Anglia (Norwich, GB) in June 2007.

The above-mentioned approach leads to different views on the role of the translator. While in the Czech tradition it is mainly the professional translator who works with dramatic translations, in English speaking countries translators are joined by professional playwrights in an attempt to produce a profitable production of the play. It is often the initiator who dictates the final shape of the dramatic text.

“PAGE” AND “STAGE” APPROACHES IN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF *THE SEAGULL*

Let us compare English examples of “page” and “stage” translations of *The Seagull*. The first translation listed is by Peter Carson and was published in the Penguin Classics series in 1992, the second is by Tom Stoppard and was translated “to order” for the Old Vic theatre in London and premiered in April 1997.

Медведенко. Да. Играть будет Заречная, а пьеса сочинения Константина Гавриловича. Они влюблены друг в друга, и сегодня их души сольются в стремлении дать один и тот же художественный образ. А у моей души и у вашей нет общих точек соприкосновения. Я люблю вас, не могу от тоски сидеть дома, каждый день хожу пешком шесть верст сюда да шесть обратно и встречаю один лишь индифферентизм с вашей стороны. Это понятно. Я без средств, семья у меня большая... Какая охота идти за человека, которому самому есть нечего?

Medviedenko. Yes, Nina Zarietchnaya is going to act in Treplieff’s play. They love one another, and their two souls will unite to-night in the effort to interpret the same idea by different means. There is no ground on which your soul and mine can meet. I love you. Too restless and sad to stay at home, I tramp here every day, six miles and back, to be met only by your indifference. I am poor, my family is large, you can have no inducement to marry a man who cannot even find sufficient food for his own mouth. (Peter Carson 2002: 82)

Medvedenko. Oh, yes: the performance. Nina Zarechnaya: appearing in: a play by: Konstantin Gavrilovich. They’re in love and today their two souls will merge into one in an effort to create a single work of art. Your soul and mine, by way of contrast, don’t meet at all. I love you and can’t stay at home for longing for you, every day I walk four miles here and back again, and you don’t care. Well, why should you? I have no money, large family to support... Who wants to marry a man who can’t even feed himself? (Tom Stoppard 1999: 402)

These short extracts illustrate the differences in translators’ approaches. Stoppard’s “stage” translation fosters the communicative aspect and intensifies the staging side of the play. He uses punctuation to enforce the speakability (playability). The beginning of the utterance is full of dramatic caesuras, indicated by the colons. Formal expressions are replaced by less formal ones: *you don’t care* instead of *I meet only indifference at your*

side (literal translation from Russian). The text is enriched e.g. by the hesitator “well”, strengthening the coherence of the text and the communicative function of the utterance. On the other hand, Carson’s “page” translation is more ST oriented. The orientation on the ST can be seen on all lexical, syntactic and textual levels.

ADAPTATION IN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATION THEORY

“Page” and “stage” approaches to translation are inherently connected with the dichotomy of “faithful” and “free” approaches to translation, as well as with the concepts of “translation” and “adaptation”. Although the terms “faithful” and “free” are considered to be vague and outdated, in the English tradition, the distinction between academic translation and adaptation is often made. The academic translations are often criticized for their literalness and are declared to be unperformable (see Aaltonen 1999: 40). On the other hand, critics of “free” translations accuse the authors of adaptations of a too loose approach towards the ST.

When we look at the conflict of “free” and “faithful” approaches from the point of view of 20th century translation theory, the justification for an adaptation technique can be found within the functionally-oriented approaches to translation. Skopos theory foresees the importance of the TT and target audience. If we take into account the considerations mentioned in the section on differences in receiving cultures, the necessity for adjusting the text for the target audience in English-speaking countries is substantiated. As Nord puts it: “The function of the text is not arrived at automatically from an analysis of the ST, but is pragmatically defined by the purpose of the intercultural text transfer.” (2006: 11) There seems to be a wide range of possibilities for adaptation. However, the extent of adaptation (the qualitative ratio) might be and often is disputable: “While functionality is the most important criterion for a translator, this does not allow the translator absolute licence. There needs to be a relationship between ST and TT, and the nature of this relationship is determined by the purpose or skopos.” In the case of drama translation, the situation is complicated by the fact that the final product is likely to be of a collective nature, as it is not only the translator who participates in the translation process, but also other participants, mainly the initiator. In drama translation theory, the role of the initiator has been underestimated, however, as some of the following examples show, the initiator can be the driving force behind the adaptation technique.

ADAPTATION OF *THE SEAGULL* – AMERICAN, BRITISH, IRISH SEAGULLS

Among the translations of *The Seagull* into English, adaptations, free adaptations, and versions can be disclosed. Among the most illustrative ones, we could list the following: the “free adaptation” by Tennessee Williams published under the title *The Notebook of Trigorin* (first produced in 1981, with the United States premiere in 1996), Thomas Kilroy’s adaptation from 1981 (tailor-made for the Royal Court Theatre,

specifically for its then-director Maxx Stafford-Clark) and the already mentioned version of *The Seagull* by Tom Stoppard which premiered at the Old Vic theatre in London in April 1997. As the production places suggest, in the case of these texts, we deal with American (Williams), Irish (Kilroy) and British (Stoppard) versions of the original Chekhov play.

Let us concentrate on one of the adaptations, the work of Thomas Kilroy. In this case, the play undergoes significant changes. The action is relocated to the West of Ireland, the time is changed to the late 19th century, the characters are renamed, and the text diametrically differs from the original. Compare:

Медведенко. Позвольте вас спросить, доктор, какой город за границей вам больше понравился?

Дорн. Генуя.

Треплев. Почему Генуя?

Дорн. Там превосходная уличная толпа. Когда вечером выходишь из отеля, то вся улица бывает запружена народом. Движешься потом в толпе без всякой цели, туда-сюда, по ломаной линии, живешь с нею вместе, сливаешься с нею психически и начинаешь верить, что в самом деле возможна одна мировая душа, вроде той, которую когда-то в вашей пьесе играла Нина Заречная. Кстати, где теперь Заречная? Где она и как?

Dr. Hickney: Well, Paris is a different place to different people, I dare say. For me, it is the Salon and the Opera Comique. For others it may be the café life, the cuisine or the intellectual conversation. By the way, Constantine, did I tell you? There is great interest nowadays over there in the Celtic thing and all that. I believe Professor de Joubainville's lectures on the old Celtic mythology are highly regarded in the Collège de France. I thought of your play. Remember? Moytura. The one about the battle of the two giants, the Light and the Dark. The one which Lily acted for us, outside on the lawn. Was it two years ago? By the way, whatever has become of Lily? (Thomas Kilroy 1981: 48)

Medviedenko. Of all the cities you visited when you were abroad, Doctor, which one did you like the best?

Dorn. Genoa.

Treplieff. Why Genoa?

Dorn. Because there is such a splendid crowd in its streets. When you leave the hotel in the evening, and throw yourself into the heart of that throng, and move with it without aim or object, swept along, hither and thither, their life seems to be yours, their soul flows into you, and you begin to believe at last in a great world spirit, like the one in your play that Nina Zarietchnaya acted. By the way, where is Nina now? Is she well? (Peter Carson 2002: 120)

As the extract shows, Kilroy's text presents new meanings and thoughts absent in the original text. The text is pregnant with cultural and political hints of Anglo-Irish

history. The new setting of the play provides the text with a new specificity. Parallels can be drawn between the main characters (now named: Isobel Desmond- Arkadina, Mr. Aston – Trigorin, Constantine – Treplev, Lily – Nina) and the representatives of the so-called Irish Literary Renaissance (Yeats, Lady Gregory, J. M. Synge). As Kilroy explains (2000: 86), his choice of e.g. Paris should evoke the character of J. M. Synge, who visited Professor de Joubainville’s lectures.

In the case of this particular adaptation, it was the personality of the initiator, who dictated the technique and approach toward the ST Thomas Kilroy was asked to provide an adaptation of *The Seagull* by Maxx Stafford-Clark, and it was the latter’s idea to relocate the text and create an Anglo-Irish version of the Russian context.

CONCLUSION: DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO DRAMA TRANSLATION IN ENGLISH AND CZECH

Based on the differences in approaches to drama translation in Czech and English, as demonstrated on the material of Czech and English translations of *The Seagull* by A. Chekhov, the following generalizations can be made:

	English	Czech
Translation technique	for staging, prefers the “stage” approach	for staging, uses mainly “page” translations, rarely “stage” translations
Cultural aspect	lack of familiarity with the SL culture, more adjustments	familiarity with the SL culture (history of translations from Russian)
National mentality	global culture – the “colonizing” approach	minor language, culture – the “submissive” approach
Overall tendency	global cultures tend to domesticate texts	respect for the SC and the author’s style
Importance of the economic aspect	Chekhov and playwright-translators sell	Chekhov sells
Translator	academic or professional playwright (knowledge of the SL not necessary)	professional translator (knowledge of the SL)

The paper has focused on different approaches employed by translators in specific receiving cultures (Czech and English) and explored how these target cultures influence the translations.

We have outlined different strategies employed by translators of dramatic texts produced primarily for publication (the “page” approach) or stage performance (the “stage” approach). The findings presented in this paper are by no means finite. Further research could concentrate in detail on the role of the initiator in drama translation, the status of adaptation in contemporary drama translation, and the ideology behind the translations.

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