

TRANSLATING THE EAST BACK FROM THE WEST**DOUGLAS LYTLE'S *PINK TANKS AND VELVET HANGOVERS******ALENA CHEJNOVÁ**

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ABSTRACT

Douglas Lytle's book *Pink Tanks and Velvet Hangovers* (1995) provides a detailed and in-depth picture of the post-Velvet-Revolution reality of Czechoslovakia through American eyes, and can be thus seen as a translation in the broader sense of the word; it is an attempt at explaining, interpreting and mediating one culture to another. The mechanism of this "cultural translation" is analyzed in the first part of the paper. The role of one's own, native culture in the perception of other cultures is determined, and consequently, the variety of encounters and even clashes between the two different cultures, Czech and American, are discussed, using David Katan's classification of approaches to culture (2004), with special attention being paid to the gradual development of Lytle's own cultural attitude from a behaviourist, i.e. static, to a rather dynamic one. Translation in the narrow sense is the focus of the second part of the paper. First, possible reasons for translating the book into Czech are examined, together with the basic functions such a rendering could serve (documentary vs. instrumental translation in Christiane Nord's terms (1997)). Taking these functions into account and based on concrete examples, certain general problems are then considered issuing from the task of translating the text into the culture it actually presents. These involve, among other issues, dealing with cultural facts that need to be explained in detail for source text recipients but are well-known to target text recipients, as well as minor factual errors, misspellings and other inaccuracies that cannot be detected by source text readers but would be immediately observed by target text readers.

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Pink Tanks and Velvet Hangovers: An American in Prague* (1995), Douglas Lytle describes the transition of communist Czechoslovakia from a centrally planned economy and totalitarianism to capitalism and democracy, which was a process he witnessed as an English teacher and journalist in Prague in the early 1990s. As such, the book aptly exemplifies the topic of our conference and illustrates both the political, economic, social and cultural divide between the East and West, caused by the Cold War, and the new encounters between the two cultures following the collapse of the bipolar world.

The paper is divided into two parts. First, I will analyze Lytle's attempt at capturing Czech culture and presenting it to the readers in the West. The main focus here is on

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the interplay between the two different cultures, Czech and American, in the book. Second, I will discuss the possibility of translating the text for a Czech readership and the implications that such a task would have for the translator and their decision-making process.

PART I

The fall of the Iron Curtain attracted thousands of Americans to Prague. Their common motivation for coming over was – as Lytle puts it – “a desire to participate in something unique and interesting while avoiding the withering job market in the United States” (1995: 44). Their influx to Czechoslovakia was soon noted also by the American press and Prague even earned the nickname “the Paris of the 90s” for young Americans. Douglas Lytle’s book can be thus seen both as a reflection of this newly awakened interest in the formerly inaccessible Eastern bloc and an attempt at satisfying it. Though the picture of the country it presents is now necessarily out of date, being it was published 15 years ago, it still contains a notable amount of background information and, as such, could be recommended to any Westerner intending to learn about the given period of Czech history and get an insight into Czech culture, provided they bear in mind that the country has undergone substantial changes since the early 1990s.

The book chronicles the whole period from the Velvet Revolution to the Velvet Divorce, i.e. the division of Czechoslovakia in January 1993, and offers several illuminating historical excursions to the times of Austria-Hungary, interwar Czechoslovakia, Nazi occupation, and of course, the years of communist rule. There are also many references to the situation in Slovakia, however, the focus throughout is on the Czech part of the splitting federation.

Lytle is very thorough in his undertaking: apart from the most important political and economic events and issues (such as the first democratic elections; withdrawal of Soviet troops; growing tension between Czech and Slovak politicians; price liberalization and privatization), he provides also a most comprehensive picture of everyday life in the changing society, including clothing, eating habits, sexuality, etc. Special attention is paid to the feelings of ordinary people during the turmoil of overall social transformation: their joy at the regained freedom, which was, however, gradually replaced by a certain disillusionment (the “Velvet Hangover”, to use Václav Havel’s term), caused by the slowly proceeding changes and the accompanying problems; the concerns especially of older people about their jobs, financial situation, and future; and, obviously, the difficult and painful process of coming to terms with the communist past and legacy.

In this respect, Lytle’s book can be described as a translation in a broader sense of the word; to borrow a definition from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (meaning 2c), what he does here is an attempt “to express in more comprehensible terms” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/translate>), that is to explain, interpret or mediate Czech culture to both his fellow citizens and readers in the West in general.

In this connection, it is worth mentioning the distinction that Lytle makes between Prague and Praha, which can be applied to the whole country as well. Prague is the foreigners' image of the city, "where one was able to glide effortlessly through the streets, absorbing the city's hushed beauty and feeling the mystical presence of the many famous personalities who haunt the buildings" (1995: 99). Praha, as it is called in Czech, is a city "where cars choked the roads"; "a place of bad restaurants and smelly restrooms"; "the city of waiting in endless lines" (ibid.). It is the "gap between the two cities" (ibid.), in other words, the real, everyday life in all its aspects, the culture in a broad sense of the word, that Lytle longs to discover and thus get beyond the superficial picture that tourists are usually offered.

In doing so, however, he is necessarily influenced by his own, American origin and cultural heritage. As David Katan in *Translating Cultures* suggests, "the context of culture is an important frame from within which we perceive, interpret and communicate" (2004: 167); it is, therefore, extremely difficult "to perceive another culture, except through our own ethnocentric map of the world" (ibid.: 223). In other words, upon encountering another culture, one inevitably starts to interpret and assess it against their own cultural background.

To a certain extent, one's background obviously determines also one's general knowledge about other cultures. Due to both the geographic distance and the decades of the East/West division, an average American's notion about the life in the Eastern bloc, let alone Czechoslovakia in particular, was strongly limited, more or less inaccurate, or outright distorted. This can be exemplified by the reactions of Lytle's friends when they learnt that he was moving to Prague:

"Imagine all the things you'll see", one friend said. "You can eat strange foods you don't know the name of and fall in love with wild, exotic women! You can drink vodka until it runs out of your ears!" (Lytle 1995: 5)

One cynical fellow... put it in the most earthy terms possible: "Doug, you *fucking* fool. It's a Communist country. Jesus, take a second look at your atlas and find a better country." (ibid.: 6)

It is, however, to be noted here that the situation on our side of the Atlantic was not much better either: Lytle recalls several occasions when total strangers expected him, for example, to pay for them in pubs as it was a rather common assumption that "all Americans had money, were tan, had good looking wives, girlfriends, husbands and lovers. Life was easy like the oranges on the trees." (ibid.: 196)

These quotations demonstrate well the mutual misperception and cultural limitations. Only upon his arrival in Prague does Lytle become aware of his ignorance of anything outside the US borders (ibid.: 15), of the fact that "my American-ness was written into my clothes, walk and look" (ibid.: 43). In the beginning, his American background functions as a crude filter, catching basically only those features of the Czech culture that are different from those he is used to from home. He thus merely notes down all aspects that he finds unfamiliar, and therefore, more or less surprising:

the use of pull chains to flush the toilet; the almost obligatory use of slippers in Czech households; receiving paychecks in cash; the fact that Czech towns, unlike in America, end “with a sharp abruptness” (ibid.: 128); or the popularity of *chlebičky*, small open faced sandwiches that “tend to fall apart quite easily... and collapse onto the plate or your lap in a soggy heap” (ibid.: 33).¹ Based on his first encounters with the locals, he also resorts to easy stereotyping, such as making general claims that Czechs tend to excessive drinking, Czech women are “gorgeous to look at” (ibid.: 108), whereas their counterparts are unattractive and fat, and do not cook.

With the passing of time, however, Lytle evidently comes to realize and accept that “cross-cultural communication is an extreme example of the fact that the world cannot be taken for granted” (Katan 2004: 129), and starts attempting to uncover the deeper causes of the differences. In Katan’s classification of approaches to culture, Lytle’s initial view is *behaviourist* and ethnocentric, i.e. based on mere observations of what people do and do not do, with the underlying belief in the righteousness of one’s own culture’s worldview only (ibid.: 28). Gradually, he moves on to the *functionalist* approach, which “looks at the reasons behind the behaviour” (ibid.: 29), and further still, the *cognitive* one, focusing on the “underlying patterns and the culture-bound categorizing of experience” (ibid.). As opposed to the previous ones, this approach already suggests that “cultures model reality in different (rather than better or worse) ways” (ibid.: 30). The fourth basic approach Katan mentions is *dynamic*, viewing culture as a changing process, “constantly negotiated by those involved,... influenced, but not determined, by past meanings and [establishing] precedent for future meanings” (ibid.: 31).

It is the adoption of this approach which finally enables Lytle to “make sense” of the behaviour of people that at first startled and/or frustrated him: the bribing of doctors to get better care in hospitals; unwillingness to accept responsibility; lack of entrepreneurial spirit; or the “almost Buddhist-like tolerance to accept a given situation and wait” (Lytle 1995: 142). He realizes that many of these traits developed under the specific circumstances of the communist regime, naturally survived the Velvet Revolution, and cannot disappear overnight. Without the concrete historical experience, or at least its deeper knowledge, an outsider can, however, never understand them and should avoid making any hasty judgements, as was the case with many of Lytle’s fellow citizens:

I don’t know how many times I’ve heard well meaning Americans puff up their chests and bellow in righteous indignation: “Geeze, how could you have let Communism happen? If it’d been me, [...] I *woulda* stood up to them, for God’s sake [...]”

¹ When discussing Czech cuisine, but also other areas of everyday life, Lytle often uses Czech words to add authenticity. Unfortunately, these are, more often than not, misspelled, which is rather surprising in view of the fact that he expressly thanks his Czech editor in the Acknowledgements for his “especially close reading of the text with regard to the Czech language” (ibid.: XIII). Ironically, these mistakes can only bother a reader with a sufficient knowledge of Czech; most target readers, however, would not be aware of them unless they want to do more research concerning personages with misspelled names (e.g. Vladimír Pistorious instead of the correct spelling Pistorius (ibid.: 114), Ivan Kíma instead of Klíma, ibid.: 115), or when they notice different spellings of the same word (e.g. *chlebičky* are named twice within one paragraph, as “chebličky” and “chebičky”, both times incorrect, ibid.: 33).

Well, sorry, but I don't think you *woulda* done much of anything. Certainly not after the authorities started questioning you, harassing you and threatening to take away your job [...]. Chances are you would have simply shut up and gotten on with your life, however difficult it was. (ibid.: 101–2)

Lytle recalls several other cases when Americans displayed a rather patronizing attitude, such as the editors of the first English newspaper in Prague, *Prognosis*, whose articles sometimes “wandered dangerously into the ‘arrogant American points a finger at the Czechs and laughs at them’ territory” (ibid.: 243). Consequently, the initial warm welcome that the Americans enjoyed after their arrival following the fall of communism was gradually replaced by a certain mistrust, or even outright hostility. An illustrative example is the reaction of one of Lytle's Czech friends to the opening of the first fast-food restaurants in Prague:

I am tired of the arrogance of some Americans who seem to think that we need these things [...]. I would prefer to take [them] on my own terms, and not be made to feel as if I have been missing something [...] and I will realize that American food and culture is simply so much better than our own. (ibid.: 244–5)

The fact that the mutual cultural encounter was not easy for either side is also demonstrated by the rather hasty retreat of many Americans back home after just a couple of months' stay. Throughout the book, Lytle records several personal crises he experienced himself due to the difficulties of getting accommodated to the different culture and lifestyle. Only in the very end (and after several years spent in the country) does he seem to become really comfortable, though he is still convinced that it is impossible to wholly understand the culture:

But as for truly understanding Czech society, I think much of their culture remains a mystery to me, and any Westerner – not because of the obvious linguistic barrier, but because another culture is an enigma that cannot be solved. (ibid.: 324)

PART II

Let us now move to translation as the act of “turning into one's own or another language” (meaning 2a as provided by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/translate>). Lytle's *Pink Tanks and Velvet Hangovers* has never been rendered into Czech; however, one can quite readily imagine the reasons that could lead to such a translation. In fact, they are to some extent already suggested in the previous part of the paper. The book presents a picture of Czech society as it is perceived from the outside, by a foreigner with a deep insight into, and a rich experience with the culture. Furthermore, it is also a highly informative chronicle of the tumultuous and chaotic years following the Velvet Revolution, when people were so absorbed in their newly arisen concerns and uncertainties that they could hardly follow

the “backstage” events in politics and economy. Obviously, there are many books on the subject by Czech authors as well; a translation of *Pink Tanks and Velvet Hangovers* would, nevertheless, offer a view from yet a different angle (see also the separate chapters comparing the two main political personalities of the time, Václav Havel, the then President, and Václav Klaus, the then Minister of Finance and current President).

When searching for relevant secondary literature, I did not really find any sources that would focus in more detail on the issue of translating a text into the culture it actually deals with, i.e. the target culture (TC). Nevertheless, it is clear that such a task requires a different approach than when the text is anchored in the source culture (SC). Like in any other translational situation, the translator has to adopt a clear and well-founded strategy and apply it consistently throughout the whole text. In general, two basic approaches seem to suggest themselves here: in Christiane Nord’s terms, the translator can opt either for a *documentary* or an *instrumental* translation. In the first case, the target text (TT) would serve as “a *document* of the situation in which an SC sender communicates with SC receivers via the source text” (ST) (Nord 1997: 51); in other words, the translation would primarily aim at showing the Czech readers how their culture at a particular point in time was presented to American readers.

In the second case, the translation would be rather “an *instrument* in a new TC situation in which the ST sender communicates with TC receivers via the target text which has been produced under TT conditions using the source text as a kind of model” (ibid.: 52). Essentially, the main purpose of such a translation could be to enable the Czech readers to see themselves and their history from a completely different perspective; through the lens of a foreigner, it could reveal certain traits or characteristics of their culture that they might not even be aware of because they have lived with them all their lives, and possibly incite them to self-reflection. In this respect, the translation could also provide an interesting means of comparison of how much the society has transformed and changed over the past 15 years since the original was written.

The implications of these two different approaches can be well illustrated by the specific translation problem presented by the multitude of Czech cultural references in the text in view of the fact that the target text readers actually have a much deeper background knowledge of the subject than the source text readers. On a general level, this issue is dealt with by Hatim and Mason within the framework of the pragmatic approach to translation. They speak of different “cognitive environments” of the source text and target text users and in this connection of the need of translators to apply Grice’s Maxims of Quantity, i.e. “Make your contribution as informative as (but not more informative than) is required”, and Relation, i.e. “Be relevant”, in order to ensure that the information load carried by the translation is appropriate for the intended recipients and the communicative purpose (Hatim-Mason 1994: 94).

The cognitive environments most evidently differ in passages containing facts of Czech (or Central-European) culture that are most probably completely unknown to the source text recipients and Lytle, therefore, has to explain them, while at the same time they can be presumed to be part of the common knowledge of every Czech. It now depends on the translator, their cultural awareness, the overall strategy and, obviously, the intended function of the translation whether such explanations from the original would be retained

in the Czech translation (documentary function) or perhaps sometimes omitted so that the target readers do not find them superfluous or even ridiculous and the text consequently tedious (instrumental translation).² This is illustrated in the following examples:

[...] he had taken a job helping to sift through the huge mound of secret papers left behind by the government, and especially, the StB (Státní tajná Bezpečnost), which was the Czech equivalent of the KGB. (Lytle 1995: 16)³

As the school secretary served us a cup of thick “Turkish” coffee, in which boiling water is poured right over the grounds [...] (ibid.: 23)

The noted Czech writer Jan Neruda and the painter Alfons Mucha both lived in Malá Strana [...] (ibid.: 33)

Dora pointed out some of the people in the pictures including T. G. Masaryk, the first Czechoslovak president in 1918 and Jan Palach, a young Czech who, as “Torch no. 1”, had immolated himself on Wenceslas Square in 1969 to protest the Warsaw Pact occupation of the country. (ibid.: 39–40)

Pavel [...] poured himself a large shot of Becherova,⁴ a sweetly bitter Czech liqueur [...] (ibid.: 210)

The Stones [...] then played to over 300,000 people at the mammoth Strahov Stadium, a structure usually reserved for the most holy of Communist events, including a massive sports presentation called Spartakiada that was held only once every five years. (ibid.: 31–2)

Similarly, there are cases where Lytle tries to elucidate facts of Czech culture which are well known to Czech readers by likening them to more or less corresponding facts of the American culture; sometimes, these can be supposed to be easily understandable also for Czech recipients (see the first example below), in most cases, however, they are rather culture-specific and might require an additional explanation in the target text, resulting thus in a sort of double explanation. Again, it is up to the translator to determine in view of the function of the translation how to deal with such passages: if he or she should keep them so that Czech readers can see the parallels with the American culture – however accurate they may be – or delete them as they are actually superfluous for the Czech recipients and it is doubtful whether an explanation (of an explanation) in a footnote or in the text would be able to convey the source text readers’ connotations anyway:

² Such an omission would be obviously hardly justifiable in cases where the explanation is not only informative but also carries a certain evaluation.

³ Passages highlighted by A. C.

⁴ The correct Czech spelling is *Becherovka*.

I laid out my forms like a Las Vegas gambler who knew he had a winning hand. (ibid.: 141)

[*about a visit to a clinic*] There is no schedule: one simply waits in line as though it were an American Jiffy Lube or Fotomat Drive-In. (ibid.: 93)

The waiter sets down beers and departs, leaving behind a small piece of paper with individual marks on it, indicating how many beers have been served. Unless the pub is highly unusual, you don't pay as you go but collect a tab covered with scribbles that slowly begins to look like a homage to Jackson Pollock. (ibid.: 121)

Wild, unpredictable, clever and often brilliant, Magor served as a sort of Czech Ken Kesey to the Plastic People, helping them arrange concerts [...] (ibid.: 198–9)

After a routine soccer match between Sparta Prague and Slavia Prague, the emotional equivalent of the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants [...] (ibid.: 318).

Finally, a specific problem is presented by factual mistakes or inaccuracies in the book. And again, the translator has the option either to simply correct these (as would most probably be the case with the all too frequent misspellings of Czech words mentioned earlier) or to leave them and/or add a footnote for the target text readers so that they know where the original provides a somewhat distorted image of Czech culture. Examples include:

On November 17, 1989, Prague police brutally and violently suppressed a student demonstration in Prague that was being held to celebrate “International Day of Students” and a Czech student named Jan Opetal,⁵ who had been executed by the Nazis during World War II. (ibid.: 77) [*Opletal was not executed but shot in the stomach during an anti-Nazi demonstration.*]

In the 1950s, workers had spent several years laboriously erecting a mammoth 100-foot high bronze statue of Stalin, Lenin and other Communist leaders in Letná Hill... (ibid.: 174) [*The statue depicted only Stalin and generic representatives of Czech and Soviet people and was not made of bronze.*]

One of the sweeter events in Czech culture is the celebration of a person's official “name day”, an event unique to European calendars. Each day has a special name, drawn from Christian designations: Monday is David, and the next Eva and the following day Markéta and so on. (ibid.: 188) [*All the names used as examples are frequent in Czech culture, and it is widely known that they do not follow one after another in the calendar.*]

⁵ The correct Czech spelling is *Opletal*.

CONCLUSION

Pink Tanks and Velvet Hangovers demonstrates clearly the key role of culture, in the general sense of the background we come from, in our perception of the reality around us as well as other cultures (see Katan's "ethocentric map of the world" and Hatim and Mason's "cognitive environment" above). Lytle's own example also shows that a deeper understanding of another culture requires a more *dynamic* approach (Katan's term), considering it as a constantly changing process rather than a static, given entity.

For a translator, such an approach is, of course, doubly important. As it is always stressed in the field of Translation Studies, translators need to master not only the respective languages they work with but also the underlying cultures if they want to handle crosscultural encounters – including cases such as Lytle's book – successfully. That is also why David Katan prefers the term *cultural mediator* to a *translator* or *interpreter* (2004: 16ff.).

In this respect, *Pink Tanks and Velvet Hangovers* presents a special challenge for potential translators into Czech due to the intermingling of Czech and American cultures. A translator would thus have to deal with specific problems not normally encountered in a text embedded simply in the source culture, such as the facts of the target culture that need to be explained to the source text readership, i.e. American, but would not really demand any elucidation for the target text recipients. Such a translation task obviously requires a clear and unequivocal approach on the part of the translator based on the intended function of the translation, the two basic options being *documentary* or *instrumental* (in Christiane Nord's terms). The decision as to which approach to adopt obviously depends on a number of factors, particularly the publisher's commission. In any case, it should always be well-grounded and, given the specificity of the translational situation, preferably explained in an informative and detailed translator's preface or afterword.

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