

Translators from European languages of limited diffusion: professional status

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The language map of the world is extremely colourful and ever-changing. Some languages are spoken by hundreds of millions of people, while others are used only by a few dozen old people. Some languages of this kind in Africa, Asia, America and Oceania are expected to become extinct by the end of the present century.

However, the significance of languages is not proportionate to the number of those who use them as their mother tongue; the importance of a language also depends on the degree to which it is used by members of different nations as an instrument of international communication. Although Chinese, Hindi, Arabic or Bengali are spoken by hundreds of millions, these languages transcend the borders of their native countries only to a limited extent.

Together with the most widespread or world languages, there are—among the four to five thousand that exist in the world—a few dozen that are spoken only by several millions of people but are rich in literary tradition. Others have modest literatures, since they took shape as literary languages much later. Finally, a very numerous group comprises languages existing only in spoken form.

From the psycho-sociological point of view the limitation of any LLD is relative. It depends on the specific relationship between two

languages between which translation takes place. The important thing about this relationship is not the specific nature of the two linguistic systems but that of the two cultural systems —that is, the specific historical and geographical environment in which a language has developed and its literature was written. Let me illustrate what I mean: Hungarian and Hausa, regarded from an absolute point of view, are equally limited. But relatively, for instance vis-a-vis Czech or indeed vis-a-vis any other European language, Hausa is more limited, even though it is spoken by roughly three times as many native speakers as Hungarian or Czech. This specific relationship between Hungarian and Czech —the linguistic systems of which are totally different— is characterized by their geographical disparity.

The SL - TL relationship with regard to translation from an LLD can be of two kinds: the TL can either be an LLD or a world language. From linguistic-typological and the translational point of view there is no difference between the two types, but from the social and sociological acceptance and reception of a specific literary work translated out of an LLD in a different cultural setting, the difference can be considerable.

Therefore, if we look at the problems of LLD translation from the sociological point of view, we find that the problems concern not so much translation as translators and that they affect finally their professional status.

A person becomes a translator from a Language of Limited Diffusion (an LLD) either from his or her own professional choice or through circumstances. One way or the other he becomes a specialist on the language, culture and literature of some small nation or ethnic group, or perhaps even a numerically large nation whose language, however, has not become a means of international communication. Thus he contributes to the popularization of cultural and literary values in a different linguistic and cultural environment; in other words he —and whenever I say «he» I always mean «he or she»— makes something accessible which otherwise would have probably remained

hidden from part of mankind. His work is therefore obviously useful, and it might even be claimed: irreplaceable.

When a student of philology considers his future special field, he will surely take into account not only what might be called «ideal» choices, that is his own cultural and professional interest in a certain ethnic community with its language and culture, but also some purely pragmatic aspects, in other words questions of livelihood, the existential prospects of one special field against another. If a student of language, or indeed of translation, hesitates between choosing one of the world languages or a certain LLD, he will —unless there are other circumstances affecting his decision— very carefully weigh up the practical applications of his chosen special subject. In favour of choosing one of the great world languages will be its suitability for extensive international communication at all levels of public life (i.e. political, economic, scientific, and cultural). Against such a choice, on the other hand, is the fact that a great number of translators work out of the great languages, and more particularly out of English. As for choosing an LLD, the livelihood arguments are the exact reverse: there is infinitely less scope for translation from an LLD, but, on the other hand, there are also fewer experts and translators working in that special field. In actual fact, the professional situation of the translator from an LLD is a good deal more complex than outlined by the two basic aspects just mentioned.

Until the Ninth World Congress of FIT, which was held in Warsaw in 1981, the International Federation of Translators did not devote any specific attention to the problems of translations and translators from LLDs. After that Congress, however, at which a separate workshop was concerned with problems of LLD translation, a Committee for the Translation from Languages of Limited Diffusion was established, and that Committee has endeavoured, for something like ten years, to study that set of problems from various points of view.

[F.I.T. is not the only organization to turn its attention to this problem. I believe that from the very beginning of its existence UNESCO has tried to promote the dissemination of literary works, created in

languages of limited diffusion by setting up a long term translation programme. Many masterpieces of African, Asian and European LLD literatures have already been included in this programme of UNESCO, and having been translated into English or French, they have found many thousands of new readers the world over.

Another organization —the International P.E.N. Club— a world organization of writers, has also focused its attention on the same problem. International P.E.N. set up a special committee to examine the problems connected with the translation of books created in LLDs into major ones. This Committee produced a list of recommendations that were later adopted by the P.E.N. Congress in Rio de Janeiro in 1979.]

A lot of positive work has thus gone into the popularization of literary works written in an LLD over the past twelve years, and a good deal of interest focused on those who have worthily striven to translate such works into other languages. So much for a brief outline of the history of the problem.

Although my task here is to talk about the professional problems of translators of works written in LLDs —not necessarily exclusively— I have mentioned also the propagation of the literary works themselves, because the two sets of problems cannot be closely tied up with each other.

The FIT Committee for Translation from LLDs carried out a survey in the eighties among FIT member organizations, both European and extra-european. It endeavoured to discover what were the professional and livelihood problems of translators in various countries throughout the world. That survey revealed that LLD translators —virtually in all European countries— have more or less the same existential and professional problems, and that those problems are not very different from the problems encountered by translators in certain African countries. This emerged, among other things, from a Round Table discussion, sponsored by FIT and UNESCO, in Dar-es-

Salam in August 1989. It was jointly organized by the Tanzania Translators' Association and FIT.

Because our subject today is the professional status of the translator from European LLDs, we shall confine ourselves to our continent. Apart from the above-mentioned survey by questionnaire, organized by the Committee for Translation from LLDs, and a few contributions to the subject in the journal «Babel» and in the FIT Newsletter, and a few papers given on the subject at FIT Congresses, there is not a lot of objective material devoted to the problem. I venture to believe, however, that my own research on the subject, together with my personal experience as an LLD translator—I translate primarily from the Slav languages of the Balkans: Bulgarian and Macedonian into Czech—have a certain measure of general validity.

When we look at the professional and livelihood problems of a translator from an LLD, we have to distinguish between the professional status of an LLD translator into a world language, and that of an LLD translator into another LLD. I shall try to point out some of these differences.

The professional status of an LLD translator must be viewed first of all under these aspects: (1) the education and professional training of LLD translators; (2) the specific professional conditions for the LLD translator's work; (3) the financial conditions and the livelihood of an LLD translator; (4) the social prestige of translation from an LLD and of the LLD translator.

Regarding point (1): The acquisition of specialized knowledge—that is, at university level—of some LLDs, insofar as the translator has not acquired knowledge of that language and its culture through personal circumstances, for instance by having that language as his mother-tongue, is usually less easy than acquisition of a world language. Not even all great and famous universities provide, in their language and literature departments, for the study of the language, culture and literature of lesser European nations or ethnic groups, or else such facilities exist only intermittently. To study the language,

culture, and literature of such a nation as a rule requires the coping with many more problems and a much greater effort. When I speak of problems I have in mind also access to a whole range of study aids, such as textbooks, grammars, lexicographical works, encyclopaedias, historical works, etc. In that respect the student of a world language and its culture and literature is incomparably better off everywhere.

Postgraduate study by an LLD translator, the maintenance and further improvement of his qualification, are likewise more difficult and require more effort and time. Considering that a good translator, especially a literary translator, must at the same time be an expert on the problem of the country and people whose literature he is translating, this means that he must continually follow everyday events in the country of his interest—and that does not mean only its literature and culture—because such information is indispensable to his work. A translator from English and other major languages enjoys much more favourable conditions for keeping abreast with events in the territories of his interest because newspapers and periodicals in those languages are readily available everywhere, either for sale or in public libraries. This may not be entirely true of events in the United States of America, but that is a problem of its own. However, a Czech expert on the Basque language, or on Macedonian, and even the neighbouring language of the Lusatian Sorbs, or Wends, is faced with an infinitely more difficult situation: unless he has direct contact with the region of his interest, in other words, unless he obtains most of his sources of information for himself, finds himself isolated and cut off from essential information. Obviously there are differences in the professional status of the LLD translator, and it is difficult to say whether his professional status depends on whether his Target Language is a world language or another LLD. A lot, needless to say, depends on the extent of political and cultural relations between two specific countries and states—the Source Country and the Target Country, if one can use those terms—at the official level of information exchange. An English translator from the Scandinavian languages has certainly more favourable conditions for following events in the Scandinavian countries than a translator in the Soviet Union or

in Albania, but it is difficult to draw any generally valid conclusions. What can be stated, however, is that whereas the translator from a world language can make use of an established and smoothly functioning information system, the translator from any LLD, as a rule, has to create his own, individual information system and continue to cultivate it.

On the other hand, this seemingly unfavourable situation of the LLD translator in respect of the upkeep and improvement of his professional skills also has a few positive aspects, some of them quite important. Literary translators, in particular, that is translators of literature written in an LLD, are usually more appreciated by the cultural circles of their region of interest and can even—provided they are truly distinguished translators—expect considerable professional support from that region than a translator from literature written in a world language could ever hope for. And it is such participation at summer schools and various literary and translators' seminars, organized by universities and cultural institutions in many LLD countries, provision of residence for the purpose of study, etc., that represents invaluable help and support for the LLD translator.

Now to point (2): The problem of professional and specialized conditions for the work of an LLD translator is closely linked to the problem I have just mentioned. The translator from an LLD, no matter in which European country, has at his disposal fewer lexicographic and specialized reference works than the translator from any world language, no matter where he does his work. This is due to three circumstances: (a) the lexicographic and reference literature of small—and especially of young—nations is not as a rule as extensive; (b) even existing works of reference are not usually accessible outside the regions concerned; (c) even domestic reference works outside the regions concerned, insofar as they are concerned with the LLD, are usually very limited.

In that respect it is primarily the position of the specialized, scientific-technical translator that is so difficult. While the translator of a specialized English text, no matter where he works, can always

consult difficult terms with any specialist in his own country—since every specialist, whatever language he uses in his work, is bound to know the terminology of his subject also in English—the translator of a specialized text written in an LLD is normally restricted to consulting with specialists in the region of the LLD concerned.

If we compare the conditions of a translator working into a world language with those of a translator working into another LLD, it is obvious that the translator working into a world language, especially into English, derives some help at least from the fact that, generally speaking, there are more bilingual dictionaries between any European LLD and English—though admittedly often inadequate ones, produced in the Source Language country—than between two European LLDs. Take for example Macedonian, one of the youngest literary languages of Europe: there are several Macedonian-English dictionaries in existence, but not a single Macedonian-Czech one, Macedonian-Finnish one, etc. And yet it is necessary to translate Macedonian texts into those languages too.

As for point (3): the existential conditions of an LLD translator are of course largely determined by the extent of political, economic, and cultural contacts between the LLD region concerned and the country where the LLD translator is working at a given time (i.e. between the LLD Source Country and the Target Country, to use those terms again); generally speaking however, it may be assumed that for a number of reasons they are always less favourable than those of a translator from any of the world languages. What specific conditions have a bearing on this aspect of the LLD translator's professional status?

A translator working exclusively from an LLD—or even several LLDs—can work as a staff translator only if, in the country of its official use, he works into one of the world languages, mainly into English. The same applies to his work as a staff interpreter, whether consecutive or simultaneous. If, however, he translates exclusively into another LLD, then he can work as a staff translator only in quite exceptional circumstances (for instance, as a translator/interpreter at

the diplomatic mission of the country whose official language is the Source LLD in the country whose official language is the Target LLD) —but such posts are exceedingly few.

A translator working exclusively out of an LLD can hardly ever work as a freelance translator or interpreter, even if he works into a world language, simply because there will not be enough work opportunities for him to make a living. The conditions of freelance work are much the same as those for work as a staff translator: an LLD translator can work as a freelance translator virtually only if he translates from his LLD, as the official language of his country, into a world language, especially English.

Another existential problem for the LLD translator is his limited opportunity for specialization on a certain type of text; this again stems from the circumstances I have just described. Whereas translators from the major languages usually specialize, at least into literary and sci-tech translators —and within the latter category on even narrower fields, such as medical texts, computer science, etc.— such specialization is scarcely possible for the LLD translator. The LLD translator as a rule has to learn to translate all kinds of texts —literary and non-literary— and not only for reasons of livelihood but also for objective reasons —quite simply because he is asked to do so. Quite often he will be the only one, or one of a small number of specialists on a particular LLD, and will be given the most varied texts to translate. And he will have to manage. Obviously, no LLD translator can command the terminology of many fields, and he will therefore be compelled to co-operate with an expert in the field, for instance a neuropsychologist, an ornithologist, or an art historian.

[The LLD translator as a rule is not only a translator but in many respects also a literary discoverer and propagandist, and simultaneously a kind of subjective filter. In those special instances when he is the only expert in his country on a specific LLD and its culture he bears a far greater measure of responsibility for the selection of the literary works he translates and offers to publishers than the literary translator from a world language, whose literature is much more

widely known and its standing much more objectively assessable on an international scale.]

The existential situation of an LLD translator is, moreover, affected by yet another aspect—one which in certain conditions may become even more compelling. As a translator from Czechoslovakia I may perhaps quote an example of such a situation in my own country, one of the so-called post-Communist countries of central and eastern Europe which are now passing through an economic reform for the restoration of a market economy. Thus in Czechoslovakia, where state allocations for cultural purposes were abolished last year, and where various possibilities of sponsorship for the publication of books have not yet come into being, the poor financial state of the former state publishing houses and of new privately-owned publishing firms has resulted in the commercialization of publishing. This means that publishers are afraid to take risks, and that is affecting translated LLD literature in particular. For the translators of good literature written in an LLD means—for the time being and let us hope only temporarily—that they cannot work in their special field at all.

As for point (4): The social prestige of LLD translation and LLD translators is closely linked to the reception of the translated LLD literature in a specific cultural and literary environment.

[The lesser of objectivization concerns not only the choice of the LLD work to be translated but also the quality of the translation. The LLD translator, unfortunately, rarely receives the recognition due to him even for highly-gifted or superb translations—more especially if the translation is between two LLDs—and only quite exceptionally does he receive international recognition. The reason, of course, is that there is practically no international forum competent in both languages, or indeed competent to appreciate an outstanding translation.

The translators from LLDs—no matter whether into world languages or into other LLDs—are appreciated chiefly in the cultural sphere of the SL, the translators from a world language into an LLD

are appreciated principally in the cultural sphere of the TL. As for international appreciation outside the SL and TL spheres, all categories of translators are in much the same position. On an international scale the most honoured and most popular translators are of course those working between two major languages.

In the translation of a literary work and its reception in a specific alien environment the important aspects is often not the absolute character of a specific LLD, as I have said, but its relative character. Reception of the LLD translations is easier in the cultural setting of a world language. Needless to say, in both types of cultural environment there exist time-limited situations when reception is particularly favourable or particularly un-favourable, such fluctuations being due to the influence of cultural or political events at the time in question.

All these circumstances —apart from the frequent lack of lexicographic aids for LLD translation— result in the fact that the translator of a literature written in an LLD labours under more difficult conditions than those of a translator from a world language and under incomparably more difficult conditions than those of a translator between two world languages. This is why I believe that far more attention and more support should be given on an international scale to translations and to translators from Languages of Limited Diffusion.]

Dear colleagues, my brief expose on the subject of the Professional Status of the Translator from LLDs does not, of course, sound particularly encouraging or tempting —mainly because I have tried to draw attention to all those difficulties which an LLD translator encounters, or may encounter, in his practice. But I would not wish to end on a pessimistic note. Least of all would I wish to discourage you from translating from a European LLD. It is usually argued that any work contains something beautiful, and that of course is true. It is the realization of being a cultural explorer and discoverer that lends the LLD translator the courage and strength to face up to all his difficulties. It also gives him a sense of professional satisfaction and

happiness in his work. Indeed, even the international prestige of LLD translation has increased over the past few years: at the initiative of the Committee for Translation from Languages of Limited Diffusion, FIT approved the award of Karel Capek Medal as a regular distinction, to be awarded regularly from outstanding translations from LLDs. At the Twelfth World Congress of FIT in Belgrade last year that medal was awarded for the first time to a Polish woman translator. Translation from LLDs is a deserving cultural activity, one that merits not only recognition of individual outstanding performances, but continual support.

LABURPENA

Europako Hedadura Mugatuko Hizkuntzetako itzultzaileak. Estatus profesionala

Hedadura Mugatuko Hizkuntza (HMH) batetik itzultzen duenaren egoera profesionala, nahiz eta itzal handiko itzultzailea izan, gehienetan, Hedadura Handiko Hizkuntzaren (HHH) batetik ari denarena baino okerragoa izaten da. Ondorio horretara iritsi zen, duela zenbait urte, FITeko Hedadura Mugatuko Hizkuntzen Itzulpenerako Batzordea erakunde honen kideen artean egindako inkestan. Professionari hauen arteko aldea, ordea, Europa eta beste kontinenteetako HMHetako itzultzaileen artekoa, alegia, txikia da. HMHetako itzultzaileek auzi profesional eta gizarte mailako arazo beretsuak pairatzen dituzte agi denez. Hori dela eta zilegi bide da Txekoslovakiaiko itzultzaile batek ikusi eta ikasia balio orokorreko esperientzia gisa azaltzea.

Bost ikuspuntutatik aztertu beharrekoa da HMHeke itzultzailearen status profesionala:

1.- HMHetik HHHera itzultzen duenaren eta HMH batetik beste HMH batetara aritzen denaren arteko diferentziak.

Linguistika eta tipologia aldetik ez dago bien artean inolako alderik; gizarte eta soziologi ikuspuntutatik, berriz, HMHetik itzuliak ez du harrera bera izaten beste HHHa erabiltzen den herrialdeetan eta HMHeke kulturetan, zeinetan errazago

onartzen bait dira beste HMH batetik itzulitakoak. Badirudi, soziologi ikuspuntu honi men eginez, itzulpenari baino, itzultzaileari ukitzen diola arazoak.

2.- HMHetik itzultzen dutenen eskolak eta praktika profesionala.

Batetik, ama-hizkuntza HMHa ez duen batentzat zailagoa gertatzen da hura ikastea, HHHren bat ikastea baino; eta bestetik, itzultzaile on batek, bere lanerako ezinbestekoa du itzultzen duen literatura sortu duen herriaren kulturaren aditua izateaz gain, bertako egunean-egungo berrien jakitun izatea. Horiek horrela, HMHetiko itzultzaileak, lanerako behar duen informazio horren faltan, bere informazio iturri propioak izateke, isolaturik ikusten du bere burua. HHHetikako itzultzaile batek, bestela, eskura izan ohi ditu interesatzen zaion herriari buruzko informazio bide eroso eta merkeagoak. Horren truk, HMHetikako itzultzaileak izan ohi du, hala ere, nolabaiteko ordainik; gehienetan, halako itzultzaileak HHHetik ari den edozein itzultzailek baino loria eta aintzatespen handiagoa eskuratzen bait du itzultzen duen herrialdean.

3.- HMHetikako itzulpen lanetan diharduenaren baldintza profesionalak.

Europako Hedadura Handiko Hizkuntza bateko edozein itzultzailek hiztegi eta erreferentzi liburu urriak izaten ditu aukeran HHHetik ari denaren aldean. Zientzia teknikoen itzultzailea da, hala ere, eremu latz hortan behartsuen.

4.- HMHetikako itzultzailearen bizibidea eta diru-baldintzak.

Normala denez, HMH eskualdearen eta XH herriaren arteko hartueman politiko, ekonomiko eta kulturalak eragiten dituzte. Halaber, HMHetik soilik ari den itzultzaileak ez du itzultzaile-staff batean lan egiteko aukera handirik, HHHetara itzultzeko ez bada, gehienbat ingelesera. Aitzitik, bere kasa ari nahi izango balu, nahiz eta HHH batetara itzuli, zaila izango litzaioke, oso, bizibidea ateratzea, ez bait luke hortarako lan nahikorik eskuratuko. Horretaz gain, halako itzultzaileek testu mota jakin batean espezializatzeke ere aukera gutxi izaten dute. Horren kariaz, itzultzaile berak hainbat gai desberdinetako testuak landu beharra izaten du; egunerokoa atera nahi badu behintzat.

5.- HMHetikako itzulpenen eta itzultzaileen itzala.

HMHeko literaturak eremu kultural eta literario jakinean duen harreraren araberakoa izaten da.

HMHetan ari diren itzultzaileen auziek konponbide espezifikoak eskatzen dituzte; ez bait dira itzulpen zientziari berari dagozkion arazoak, gizarte eta kulturarekin zerikusi estuagoa dutenak baizik. Honexegatik arduratzen da FITeko Hedadura Mugatuko Hizkuntzen Itzulpeneko Batzordea gaiok bereziki; eta eutsi egin beharko lioke gogo horri.

SINTESIS

Estatus profesional de los traductores de Lenguas de Difusión Limitada de Europa

La situación profesional del traductor de una Lengua de Difusión Limitada (LDL), incluso aunque se trate de un traductor consagrado, suele ser generalmente peor que la de un traductor de Lenguas de Amplia Difusión (LAD). A esta conclusión llegó hace varios años la Comisión sobre Traducción de Lenguas de Difusión Limitada de la FIT tras una encuesta realizada entre sus miembros. En cambio, la desigualdad existente entre traductores de LDL de Europa y de otros continentes es pequeña, lo que muestra que estos traductores sufren los mismos problemas sociales y profesionales. Debido a ello, puede ser válido exponer la experiencia obtenida por una traductora de origen checoslovaco, autora de la presente conferencia.

Al analizar el estatus profesional de un traductor de LDL deben tomarse en cuenta cinco puntos de vista:

1.- Diferencias entre traductores de LDL a LAD y traductores de una LDL a otra LDL.

Desde el punto de vista lingüístico y tipológico no hay diferencia alguna, pero en lo que se refiere a los aspectos social y sociológico, en cambio, lo traducido de una LDL no suele tener la misma acogida en los lugares en que se emplea una LAD y en las culturas de LDL, ya que en estas últimas se acepta con mayor facilidad lo traducido de otra lengua que se encuentra en semejante situación. Desde este punto de vista sociológico, parece que esta constatación afecta más al traductor que a la traducción.

2.- Formación y práctica profesional de los traductores de LDL.

Por un lado, aprender un idioma de difusión limitada es más difícil para quien no es hablante nativo de dicho idioma que aprender una lengua de amplia difusión; y por otro, un buen traductor está obligado a conocer no sólo la cultura del pueblo cuya literatura traduce, sino también su vida y su devenir diarios. Debido a ello, si un traductor de LDL carece de la información que precisa para su trabajo y no tiene sus propias fuentes de información, necesariamente se verá aislado. Por el contrario, el traductor de LAD suele tener a mano medios de información más cómodos y baratos sobre el pueblo que le interesa. A modo de compensación, quizás, el primero puede llegar a obtener mayor «gloria» y reconocimiento en el pueblo en que traduce.

3.- Condiciones profesionales del traductor de LDL.

Estos traductores suelen disponer de pocos diccionarios y obras de referencia, incluso en Europa, frente a los traductores de lenguas de mayor difusión. Suelen ser, además, los traductores de ciencias técnicas los que se encuentran en peor situación.

4.- Condiciones económicas y de vida.

Como es lógico, éstas dependen de las relaciones políticas, económicas y culturales entre los países en que se habla la LDL y la lengua de llegada. Por otra parte, el traductor que únicamente traduce de una LDL no suele tener posibilidad de formar parte de un «staff» de traductores a no ser que traduzca a LAD, generalmente el inglés. Y en el caso de que pretenda valerse de sus propios medios, aunque traduzca a una lengua de amplia difusión, le será muy difícil salir adelante ante la poca demanda de trabajo. Aparte de ello, estos traductores suelen tener pocas posibilidades de especializarse en determinados tipos de textos, ya que se ven obligados a traducir textos de temas muy diferentes.

5.- Prestigio de las traducciones y traductores de LDL.

Generalmente suele depender de la acogida que tenga la literatura de esa lengua en un determinado ámbito cultural y literario.

Los problemas con que se enfrentan los traductores de lenguas de difusión limitada requieren por lo tanto soluciones específicas, ya que no están directamente relacionados con la ciencia de la traducción, sino con determinadas condiciones sociales y culturales. Por ello es por lo que la Comisión de Traducción de Lenguas de Difusión Limitada de la FIT se ocupa, y en el futuro se seguirá ocupando de estas cuestiones.