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LOOK BOTH WAYS! CARRYING LITERATURE AND POETRY FROM ONE LANGUAGE TO ANOTHER

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The work of the literary translator is a complex process of transporting ideas, sounds, and images back and forth across languages. In this short paper I explore problems for translators working from Macedonian into English, systemic impediments to translation, and the development of a translator’s methodology and ethics. Working from my own experiences as a linguist and translator, and the experience of other well-known translators, I discuss the expanding corpus of works translated from Macedonian, the intersections of literary and linguistic knowledge, with examples from my translations, and the political implications of translating from Macedonian into English.

Keywords: literary translation, translation theory, ethics of translation, resources for translators.

ПОГЛЕДИ НА ДВЕТЕ СТРАНИ! ПРЕНЕСУВАЊЕ КНИЖЕВНОСТ И ПОЕЗИЈА ОД ЕДЕН НА ДРУГ ЈАЗИК

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Работата на книжевниот преведувач е сложен процес на пренесување идеи, звуци и слики меѓу двата јазика. Во оваа кратка статија се разгледуваат проблемите на преведувачите кои преведуваат од македонски на англиски јазик, системските пречки при преведувањето и развојот на методологијата и етиката на преведувачот. Поаѓајќи од своето лично искуство, како лингвист и преведувач, како и од искуствата на другите познати преведувачи, дискутирам за делата преведени на македонски јазик, коишто сочинуваат еден растечки корпус, за вкрстувањата помеѓу книжевното и лингвистичкото знаење, преку примери од моите преводи, како и за политичките импликации при преведувањето од македонски на англиски јазик.

Клучни зборови: книжевен превод, книжевна теорија, етика на преведувањето, ресурси за преведувачи.

1 Introduction to Macedonian translations

The work of the literary translator is a complex process of transporting ideas, sounds, and images back and forth across languages. I have always been a reader, always a lover of languages. My work as a linguist focused on contextually-derived meaning also prepared me for this work. In this short paper I discuss problems in translating from Macedonian to English, impediments to translation, and the development of a translator's ethics.

Macedonia has had a long oral tradition and has produced wonderful literary works of prose and poetry yet despite the proliferation of works in Macedonian literature during the twentieth century, few works were translated into English-language editions. Today there is literal explosion of creative works being produced in The Republic of North Macedonia and the beginnings of an international cadre of translators able to translate them. Still, it is difficult for translations to get published in English.

Some of the reasons why so few of these works were translated into English are clear: there have been structural limitations for language acquisition: first, there were few places for non-Macedonians to acquire the language fluency to translate, and second, for a long time there were limited technologies to make translation possible. My first translations from Macedonian required that I work from the three-volume Macedonian dictionary with glosses in what was termed Serbo-Croatian, and from there into English. I had to consult dialect works, dictionaries in other languages, small Macedonian-English dictionaries with many errors. New dictionaries appeared, including excellent Macedonian-Macedonian dictionaries and bilingual, Macedonian – English dictionaries. However, even when excellent dictionaries, like those by Zoze Murgoski, were compiled and published, the only way to get them involved purchasing them in Macedonia and lugging them home. Until recently, bringing Macedonian works into English involved challenges that took decades to overcome. Now, however, there has been a tremendous increase in digital technologies, and new dictionaries, both single language and dual language, let alone specialized glossaries of specific lexical domains. There has also been a rise in new digital technologies that open new avenues for the translator alongside new tools and new publications and online access to native speakers that make translation more possible.

There remains, however, the difficulty in finding publishers, despite a growing interest in global fiction. There are now many high-quality small presses, but they do not publish many works a year, and English is a desirable language in which to have works appear because of the size of potential readership, and as a gateway translation for other languages.

When Macedonia became independent, my desire to translate works of Macedonian fiction grew, in no small part driven by Macedonia's difficulties in achieving full recognition after proclaiming its independence. As a linguist I recognized the validity of Macedonia's and the Macedonian language's claim to independence. When Macedonia and the Balkans were spoken of in the west, it was always couched in terms of inherited violence and conflicting claims of territorial ownership. It was difficult to find ways to bring forward other views on Macedonia and Macedonian. I became interested in amplifying alternative voices to Balkan violence. For authors, writing in Macedonian became, then, a statement of linguistic and cultural independence and, in turn, to translate from Macedonian became a political act of recognising the independence of the Macedonian literary language. As a Canadian scholar working in the Canadian context this felt particularly salient. Annie Brisset (2004: 340) writes about the publication of books "translated into Quebecois" rather than French, as an act of reclaiming, recentering identity.

2 The Balkan Saga and the beginnings of my work as a literary translator

In 2000 I learned of the Balkan Saga, the growing collection of novel-memoirs written by Luan Starova. I was drawn to the border-crossing language and identities of Starova's work. Unlike other works written about the Balkans, Starova emphasized the features, e.g. linguistic, cultural, and historical, that bind people of the region together. My foundation in comparative Balkan linguistics and the belief that the Balkan sprachbund, or language area, grew out of intense contact, not conflict, was reflected in the ethos of Starova's work.

I created a first draft translation of the first in the series. In the beginning of Starova's *My Father's Books,* the narrator, as a little boy, enters his father's study and destroys his father's valuable papers, pulling the stamps off deeds, lifting photos off identity papers, tearing illustrations out of rare encyclopedias. My translator mentor, the award-winning translator of Polish literature, Prof. Madeline Levine, read my first draft and objected to my describing the library storage as a *cupboard*, a standard translation of the Turkish-derived word *dolap*. She opened her computer and began searching images, assuring me that the word I wanted was *cabinet,* a word that can be a study, something large, wooden, old, something you can step into. Her mentorship showed me the power of these new digital sources and brought to my mind Roman Jakobson's studies on translation. Jakobson wrote about three different kinds of translation (1959/2000:114):

1. Intralingual translation or *rewording* - i.e. the interpretation of verbal signs by others signs of the same language.
2. Interlingual translation or *translation proper* interpretation of signs by means of some other language
3. Intersemiotic translation or *transmutation* signs with nonverbal sign systems.

The translator's toolkit employs all these methods. When we look words up in a single language dictionary, e.g. Macedonian – Macedonian, we receive an intralingual translation, a rewording of a sign. Dual-language dictionaries – both paper versions and online – that translate words into English, are, in Jakobson's terms, interlingual, i.e. translation proper. But intersemiotic translation, transmutation, of signs is also a key tool for the translator – the gift of image-search software. Botanical items, clothing, architectural features, food. On-line image searches are a powerful tool for the translator. Working with Vlada Urošević on the translation *of Мајун/Grape Molasses*, we have been able to create together an image-bank recreating the material world of Skopje in the 1930s-1940s, tracing types of candies, the model of a German safe, flowering plants, a certain kind of insecticide, etc.

3 Translation of fiction as affirmation of Macedonian language and literature

Robert Alagjozovski noted the significance of Goce Smilevski winning the EU prize for literature. This was the first time that a Macedonian novel had been published by a major publishing house, Penguin Books, outside of Macedonia and was widely reviewed, including by Joyce Carol Oates in the prestigious *New York Review of Books*. There were reviews on Amazon and hundreds of people posted reviews on Goodreads. *La Republica* in Italy compared Smilevski to José Saramago. Macedonian literature was suddenly recognized on the world stage and was included in social networks. The benefit of the EU prize for Macedonian authors was repeated with other authors including, in my translations, Lidija Dimkovska's *A Spare Life* which won the EU prize in 2013 and a special award in 2018 for *When I left Karl Liebknecht*, as well as Petar Andonovski's EU prize winner *Fear of Barbarians.* 2020, and in 2016, Nenad Joldeski for *Each with Their Own Lake* (two stories translated by Will Firth).

It is extremely important for Macedonia to continue its support to publishers to offset the cost of translations. When I won two awards from the prestigious National Endowment for the Arts (USA) for Luan Starova's *Path of the Eels* and Lidija Dimkovska's *A Spare Life* , and an honourable mention from the Lois Roth Foundation for Goce Smilevski's *Freud's Sister*, and PEN UK supported the translation of Petar Andonovski's *The Summer Without You,* Macedonian culture and literature appeared in the discussion of world translation and these works are put into conversation with other works of contemporary global fiction. While translators don't work for prizes, each prize does increase the visibility of individual Macedonian writers, and Macedonian literature as a whole.

4 How literal can we translate, and how literal must we translate?

Translations are a cooperation between author and translator. Lawrence Venuti recognized that no translation is unmediated. Translations don't magically appear. Rather, translation is a series of interpretive choices, and the translator's inclination. Judson Rosengrant, in citing Schleiermacher, noted that the best translations "preserve the authenticity of the original in all its disquieting *difficulty,* and at the same time, find a way to render that difficulty comprehensible and *meaningful* to the culture that will eventually make use of it." (1994: 3).

My translations from Macedonian begin with my knowledge of Macedonian and its grammar and the ways in which that grammar differs from English. In some ways, Macedonian is similar to English: case has been preserved in pronominal system (but not the nominal system); it has complex set of verb tenses, including perfects and pluperfects; it makes an opposition between definite and indefinite forms. Macedonian has, of course many ways in which it is unlike English, for example, while Macedonian is not a case language, the clitics marking direct vs indirect objects, allow for freer word order; it has a complex system of verbs that express things that we don't express grammatically in English but which must be solved lexically, e.g. non-confirmative, and admiratives. Still, even where English and Macedonian have the same grammatical categories, e.g. definiteness vs possessiveness, they function differently. Macedonian tends to use definite forms where English uses possessive forms. The translator must be sensitive to such distinctions and make choices, to determine, for example, where a noun is definite, or possessive.

A translator must have more than grammatical knowledge however, and more than cultural and historical knowledge. A translator must also develop an ethics of translation, a point of view about the relationship not only between languages, but also the relationship of the primary text to the translated text. To understand the grammatical, lexical, syntactic, and stylistic choices I make, I have had to consider the act of translation itself.

Antoine Berman, who lived in the second half of the 20th century (1942-1991) is known for introducing a cautionary list of so-called deforming tendencies, that a translator should try to avoid: for example: shortening sentences, rearranging syntax; clarification—the tendency to impose definite over indefinite; expansion—the tendency to be longer than original; unfolding what in original is folded; ennoblement—a rewriting, prettifying; qualitative impoverishment —lexical loss. (see, Berman, in Venuti 2000: 288) The translator must try to ameliorate the gap between original and copy, but in so doing, the translator must ask how far away is too far, and how far is not far enough.

These questions seem particularly important in translating from small languages, and unknown literatures. There is competition in the marketplace to find readers. While a new translation of Dostoevsky or Tolstoy is an event, a Macedonian author is handicapped at the outset by being from a small, unknown country with an unknown literary history. If the book appears too foreign, in language or structure, it becomes even harder to convince readers to read these works. Further, each work will likely only be translated once, and the English translation will often serve as a gateway

work for indirect translations into other languages so there is a responsibility to the author and to the text to give a considered reading of it.

When I translate, I imagine the translator as a scrim that stands between the original and the translation. A *scrim* is a theatre drop, i.e. a fabric screen, that appears opaque when a scene in front is lighted, and transparent or translucent when a scene in back is lighted. The translator is the scrim standing between the two texts. When the translation is really working, we don't see the scrim, the light shines through, and we see the work of art uninterrupted. But sometimes, the translator wants there to be a little texture, so the viewer of this new work of art realises that they are looking through something. The question for me, then, is how transparent, how seamless do I want this scrim to be between the reader and the experience of reading? Do I want it to sound foreign – to remind my readers that what they are reading was written in a different language, or do I want to domestic it, make it feel comfortable and familiar. How do I best render foreign words or sentence patterns, archaic words, colourful idioms to remind readers that that this work was not written in English but domesticating the language enough to make the reader's experience both seamless and contemporary.

I am, like all translators, guilty of some types of Berman deformation. Moving from Macedonian to English there is no way not to change syntax, or to make other interventions. Dimkovska has, for example, long paragraphs that can be eleven pages. Even though I added a few additional paragraph breaks, nowhere near as many as there would have been with a North American editor, readers have complained about the lengthy paragraphs. As a translator I work to be faithful to the author, but to bring the work into English, to be read by an English speaker in the context of English literature. Each decision feels the tension between author intent and reader understanding.

The translator, or editors, may stray too far. Work on ethics in translation pushes translators to keep textual authenticity and ambiguity, to avoid domesticating a text too much. The translator is always open to criticism for going too far, or not far enough. Deborah Smith's translation of South Korean author Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* reached the pages of every major news and literary journal in the United States after Charse Yun, a Korean-American translation scholar charged that Smith had altered Han's spare, quiet style by embellishing it with adverbs, superlatives and other emphatic words that were not in the original. Yun (2017) writes. "This doesn't just happen once or twice, but on virtually every other page." So, what do we do when this mistranslation helps Kang win the international Man Booker prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature and brings millions of readers to her work? Yun argues, somewhat justifiably, if Kang's success depended on mistranslation, how much had really got through? Venuti (2018: xiv) while arguing that every translation involves domesticating a foreign text, still asks the translator to challenge the dominant linguistic and literary modes, by "drawing on marginal resources and ideologies" to respect different traditions, social hierarchies, and cultural norms between the source text and the translated text and, in so doing, "respect the differences of the source text."

5 How do we translate cultural knowledge?

The translator is faced with the task of either bringing the text to the reader, by domesticating, or bringing the reader to the text by foreignizing. Translators introduce the foreign, in part, through loan words that remind the readers where they are. Umberto Eco (2001:17) noted that a translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural. As an example, he describes a man entering a café and ordering a coffee. It matters what that coffee looks like to imagine what time of day it is, what the man is thinking, his intentionality, and what will happen for the next minutes – is it a long cup or a short? A Turkish coffee, a cappuccino, a long drip coffee? Starova's novels are filled with trays of Turkish coffee and sweet preserves brought by his mother into the father's study. The small cup of coffee and the sweet is a localised Balkan ritual – it

is not coffee and a doughnut. *Rakija* and *meze*, cannot become brandy and hors d'oevres. Turkish words carry with them an entire history. Macedonian, of all the Balkan languages, has best preserved this layer of Turko-Persian-Arabic vocabulary, unlike, say, in Turkey where it is considered controversial and politically motivated to draw on this historic layer of Ottoman layer vocabulary (Freely 2013: 119). Today, English has become the new Turkish of the Balkans. All languages share new inroads of English to express multivalent aspects of the contemporary world, from technology, to politics, and culture broadly understood. The shift from the 19th to 20th to the 21st century Balkans is captured in the layers of Macedonian vocabulary which is at times explicitly about Balkan cultural and linguistic contact, and other times filled with anglicisms and internationalisms when talking about contemporary life. Both Turkisms and Anglicisms can be marked as distinctive stylistic registers, but they are also part of the everyday vocabulary of all Macedonian speakers. In Lidija Dimkovska's *A Spare Life* I was confronted with a number of Turkisms. In one scene (2012: 53), I had to choose between the word *qeleshe,* as in the original, or white felt caps, in the segment that reads: writes: "Outside, I saw the red city transport buses raising dust, and on the grass by the side of the road sat Albanian men wearing with white felt caps on their heads." I wanted to keep *qeleshe*, but the author preferred to avoid the term, seeing it as foreignizing and exoticizing something that to her was every-day. This same issue of Turkisms came up with Freely (2013: 121) in translating Orhan Pamuk, who considered her use of words of Turkish origin such as *boerek,* rather than cheese pie, ethnic and folkloric. But to the North American reader boerek is already sold on the streets of large cities and to translate boerek as cheese pie gives the completely the wrong image. Boerek is what people eat, its name brings to mind not only scenes of meals in a village, but also of young people in urban centres going out for boerek in the early morning hours as they make their tired and drunken ways home. They are not lining up for cheese pie. While the word *qeleshe* isn't yet in English-language dictionaries, you can buy one on Amazon, or eBay, or Etsy. The introduction of these words into an English translation is a way to bring the reader to the foreign, not the foreign to the reader.

Editors may also stand in the way of translator decisions. An editor argued with me over the term "entryway." He wanted me to domesticate a simple Macedonian everyday practice, by changing "entryway" to "lobby". However, in Macedonia apartments are designed vertically with an entryway leading to a staircase with two to four apartments stacked on each landing. In North America, apartment buildings are typically horizontal, with a common lobby and apartments ranged along hallways. But changing *entryway* to *lobby* turns Macedonia into Manhattan.

At least since the 16th century people have cited the Italian *'Traduttore, traditore'* 'translator, traitor' And yet, translation is all around us. The humanities, the sciences, mathematics, governments, everything is, in fact, impossible without translation. Translators as individuals may have historically been invisible, their names off the cover, so to speak, but everywhere we depend on translation. In carrying meaning from one language to another there are thousands of ways to be wrong, and, by this saying, no way to be right. I strive to follow Edith Grossman's goal. Edith Grossman, renowned Spanish to English translator, wrote in 2010: "The reader of the second language – of the translation – will perceive the text, emotionally and artistically, in a manner that parallels and corresponds to the aesthetic experience of its first readers. This is the translator's grand ambition. Good translations approach that purpose. Bad translations never leave the starting line" (2010, see link to Words without Borders).

This, as she notes, is achieved through a keen sense of style in both languages. A critical awareness of the emotional impact of words, the social aura that surrounds them, the setting and mood that informs them, and the atmosphere they create. Significantly, the original work becomes the translator's through a series of creative decisions and imaginative acts of criticism.

Nabokov wrote that "the person wishing to turn a literary masterpiece into another language, has only one duty to perform, and this is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and

nothing but the text." (Nabokov 2012: 119) But what exactly is the text? If it were that easy machine translation would have been an easier thing to accomplish. Grossman adds that "Fidelity is our noble purpose, but it does not have much, if anything, to do with what is called literal meaning. A translation can be faithful to tone and intention, to meaning. It can rarely be faithful to words or syntax, for these are peculiar to specific languages and are not transferable."[1]

6 Untying knots, Solving the tricky bits

Lydia Davis, in her work on the pleasures of translating spoke about the pleasure of undoing a particularly difficult knot. "In translating" she says, "you pose yourself a question – or it is posed to you by the text; you have no satisfactory answer, though you put something down on paper, and then years later the answer may turn up. Certainly, you never forget the question" (2012: 5). One of these knots was for me the word *zemjak* in Dimkovska's *A Spare Life*. A zemjak is translated as "countryman, someone from your same hometown or country, close friend." The passage reads:

> "Here you go, *zemjak*"
> "That was the first time in my life that I heard the word *zemjak* and it has remained in my memory, stitched in embroidered letters. I was thrilled with the word; it filled me with hope."

My first attempt was 'homeboy' which began circulating in the 1980's, an appropriate timeframe for this novel. The Oxford dictionary glosses it:

1. a boy or man from one's neighborhood, hometown, or region, often used as a familiar form of address especially among inner-city youths *broadly*, an inner-city youth
2. a fellow member of a youth gang

While its primary meaning works, its reference to inner-city youth and gangs shows its origins in African-American vernacular English. The term simply won't work for an older man in Skopje. I finally came up with *pal.* The word *pal* is widely known, but old-fashioned. The girls might not yet have heard the word, and the word implies familiarity, but it has the added advantage that the word is from Romany < Angloromani (English Romani) *phal* brother, mate < Common Romani *phral* < Sanskrit *bhrātṛ* 'brother.' In Skopje the Romany language would have been a regular part of the linguistic landscape of the characters. Perhaps they could have heard the word used around them.

Another untying of a knot from this same novel was the translation of the title of a crossword book, that appears here as *Brain Twisters* (2012:14). The Macedonian title was *kotelec* a mesh, a stitch, or run in a stocking. Taking the idea of *stitch* and thinking about the twist of thread or yarn, Brain Twisters seemed a reasonable solution, one my clever brother came up with.

These knots pass by the reader of the translation in the blink of an eye, but the translator may have spent days or weeks trying to find a solution, and when that solution is found, it is exciting.

7 Challenges in translating poetry, examples from Aco Šopov

Translating novels provides a sweeping canvas for the translator. If there is a play on words in one place, and it doesn't work there in English, there may be an option a paragraph later. Translating poetry is challenging because you are working in a small space. While there might be several ways to resolve

[1] Given in remarks by Grossman in 2003 in a speech for the PEN translation awards ceremony. See ALTA https://altalang.com/beyond-words/edith-grossman-on-the-art-of-translation/

a dilemma when translating prose, with poetry the choices are narrowed by the constraints of the form – line length, the shape of the stanza, rhythm, rhyme, and other effects. In translating the poems of Aco Šopov, there was also a new constraint: I was working with a co-translator, Rawley Grau, an award-winning translator of Russian and Slovenian poetry.

While I always have native speakers review my translations for errors, in translating Šopov we turned to native speakers to help with some of his syntactic ambiguities. Translating Šopov is complex because, as Rawley and I have noted elsewhere[2] his poetry is elliptical and open to different readings, his syntax often ambiguous, and his coined words not always easily rendered in English. In our translations, every decision had to satisfy Rawley's poetic sense, and my linguistic understanding. Two examples of our work will show the balance between the two.

Nabokov[3] discussed for two pages the accuracy of his translation of the "lingonberry". Compare his concern for the correct plant, to our concern for poetic veracity. Rawley and I were not sure of the correct translation of *zmijogrozd* in the poem *Horrordeath*. It is not clear what plant he is referring to by the word *zmijogrozd*, a compound from *zmij* ("snake") and *grozd* ("grape") Some translators have interpreted this as *arum* or *veronica*. Our translation uses snakeberry – *snakeberry in the mouth* – seeking to convey the ominous connotations of the Macedonian word, even if it is not botanically accurate. Coincidentally, "snakeberry" is a common English name used for the plant *Solanum dulcamara*, a member of the deadly nightshade, adding to the horror.

In the poem, *Lov na ezeroto,* we discussed at length the second verse. The fish in the bill of the bird is *raskinat* which could be torn, shredded, broken, or pierced. After trying to work with shredded (sounds too much like paper), torn apart (too many words), we settled on slashed. A cormorant, we note, has a hooked bill that pierces its prey, rather than shredding it. The word creates alliteration with fish and flash, and the motion of the bill slashing the fish, mirrors the beat of the wings that cleave the lake. The word order, however, was changed, to keep the lines short, and haiku-like.

Лов на езеро	**Hunt on the Lake**
Птица устремена. Стрвнина.	A bird, eyes fixed. A raptor.
Исправен нор со закана.	A cormorant erect with threat.
Глуне езерска поврвнина,	Utterly still the lake's surface,
модра од тага исплакана.	blue from sorrow wept.
Темниот удар на крилото	The dark beat of the wings
темно ја сече модрината.	darkly cleaves the blue.
Блеснува на студенилото	In the bill the slashed fish
рибата в клунот раскината.	flashes in the cold.
Денот е сив од умирање.	The day is gray with dying.
Сами сме. Ништо не велиме.	We're alone. We don't say a word.
Некое немо разбирање	A certain mute understanding
нè гони да се разделиме.	is driving us apart.
Слеј се со тишината, 1955	*Merge with the silence*, 1955

[2] More examples are discussed in Grau and Kramer, 2023a and 2023b.
[3] See Beam 2016 for a discussion of the translation controversies between Nabokov and Edmund Wilson.

8 Conclusion

As I translate, I enjoy the process of translation when I work with others. It forces me to defend my choices and to rethink, to reimagine my first translation impulses. Discussing particularly difficult passages with others leaves the door open for multiple solutions. Consulting with multiple references, discussing with native speakers, and sometimes pushing back against editorial suggestions, forces the translator to think carefully about each word while considering tone and balance. Discussions like these keep translation stimulating and collaborative, while also deepening my knowledge of Macedonian and the styles of individual authors.

The translator must be a reader, and like Janus, always look both ways. The translator must seek a way to bring two points of view into focus without hiding the other from view, to bring the sound and the sense of the original from one language, one community of readers, into another language, and another community of readers, shining some light through the scrim to see what lies behind.

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