

81'255.4
821.111(71).03-32=163.6

■ TRANSLATING ALICE MUNRO: CULTURE-SPECIFIC TERMS AS A TRANSLATION CHALLENGE

TJAŠA MOHAR¹
Faculty of Arts,
University of Maribor,
Maribor, Slovenia

U savremenoj teoriji prevođenja proces književnog prevođenja se doživljava kao akulturacija i pregovaranje između dve književne tradicije. U praksi prevođenja kulturnospecifični izrazi predstavljaju veliki izazov za prevodioca, jer u ciljnom jeziku često ne postoji odgovarajući ekvivalent. Ovaj rad, na primeru analize slovenačkog prevoda zbirke kratkih priča *Previše sreće* Alice Munro, ilustruje probleme koji se javljaju tokom prevođenja kulturno specifičnih izraza i moguće posledice njihovog postranjivanja na koherentnost i transparentnost književnog prevoda. Oslanjajući se na savremenu teoriju prevođenja, rad takođe predlaže alternativna rešenja za identifikovane probleme i za moguću veću transparentnost i tačnost prevedenog teksta.

Ključne reči: Alice Munro, *Previše sreće*, književni prevod, kanadska književnost, teorija prevođenja.

In distinguishing a good translation from a bad translation, Venuti (1997: 1) argues that a translated text is considered acceptable by publishers, reviewers as well as readers "when it reads fluently" and when it seems transparent because of the "absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities". This gives it the appearance of reflecting "the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text" (Venuti 1997: 1). In other words, the translated text needs to appear as an original. However, this transparency, which is achieved by the translator's endeavours "to insure readability", is according to Venuti (1997: 1-2) only illusionary, for underneath is concealed "the translator's intervention in the text".

Since its beginnings, translation theory has distinguished between two main methods of translation, which were defined by Venuti (1997: 20) as the "foreignizing method" and the "domesticating method". This dichotomy was introduced at the

1 Kontakt podaci (Email): tjasa.mohar@gmail.com

beginning of the 19th century by Schleiermacher, according to whom the translator has only two choices, either to “leave[s] the author in peace” and “move[s] the reader towards him”, or to “leave[s] the reader in peace” and “move[s] the author towards him” (Venuti 1997: 19-20).

Vevar (2001: 12-13) points out that foreignization was the preferred method with the older generation of translation theorists, as well as in the postmodern concept of translation, while contemporary translation practice perceives the translation process primarily as domestication or relativization of absolute foreignizing items, which aims at preserving the function and the artistic effect of the original text. He further argues that foreignization and domestication cannot count as proper translation methods, only as options, and that the appropriate degree of foreignization or domestication to be used in literary translation differs from case to case and is dependent on various factors. According to Vevar (2013: 58), the translation process thus requires that the translator negotiates between the two approaches, bearing in mind that the loss is greater if priority is given to foreignization.

Lefevere (1994: 6) also perceives the translation process as a negotiation and argues that translators are mediators between two literary traditions, that of the source language and that of the target language. Lefevere (1994: 10-11) thus seems to be more in favour of the hermeneutic approach to translation, which perceives translation in terms of interpretation, than of the linguistic-based approach, according to which translation is a mere search for equivalence. However, he argues that the best definition of the process of translation and the best alternative to both approaches is what Even-Zohar calls acculturation, or “the process of negotiation between two cultures” (Lefevere 1994: 11). In this new perspective, translation is above all a decision making process, during which translators decide on their own “what the most effective strategy is to bring a text across in a certain culture” (Lefevere 1994: 11). However, translators are not completely free in their work, but are constrained “by the times in which they live, the literary traditions they try to reconcile, and the features of the languages they work with” (Lefevere 1994: 6).

In literary translation it is particularly important to bring the text across in a certain culture, to use Lefevere’s words, rather than simply to find linguistic equivalence between the source and target languages. Culture-specific terms play a crucial role in representing a certain culture in the source text; therefore, these deserve special attention in the translation process. These are items that situate the source text firmly into a specific cultural, historical and geographical background, as well as into a specific cultural and literary space. At the same time, they seem to be particularly problematic to translate, owing to what Newmark (2004: 94) calls a culture gap that exists between the source and target languages. He introduces the term “cultural words” to denote words that are “associated with a particular language and cannot be literally translated” (2004: 95), and proposes componential analysis as the most appropriate approach in translating them (2004: 119).

Vevar (2001: 105-106) also believes that the categories which are the most difficult to translate are items which are specific to a nation, such as a nation’s way of thinking, a nation’s psychology, a nation’s way of communicating, its character, as well as the customs of its historical milieu. He points out that in the translator’s endeavours to

genuinely transfer these items into the target language, there exists a certain danger of introducing exotic and foreignizing elements into the translated text. Therefore, he suggests that such cultural items should be preserved in translation only to such an extent that they are still understandable to the reader in the target language.

To move from theory to practice, this research discusses the translation of culture-specific terms from Alice Munro's stories, published in the collection *Too Much Happiness*, into Slovene. More precisely, we shall analyse the text units in the Slovene translation that have a foreignizing effect and thus testify that culture-specific terms were not translated in such a way as to assure transparency and smoothness of the translated text. Before moving on to the examples, it needs to be mentioned that Alice Munro's works were unavailable in the Slovene language (with the exception of three individual stories) until 2010, when two of her collections (*Too Much Happiness* and *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*) were translated into Slovene. One might argue that the fact that Munro received the prestigious Man Booker International Prize a year earlier might have encouraged the appearance of the two collections in Slovene. Since Munro was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2013, two other collections have been translated into Slovene; however, this is still a trifle in comparison with her extensive writing. But it is not just Munro. As Blake (2012 : 186-187) points out in his paper on Alice Munro's late appearance in Slovene translation, it seems that in the past, only a small number of leading authors from a certain country were translated into Slovene, and in the case of Canadian authors, Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje apparently overshadowed the work of other authors.

Munro's writing is almost exclusively embedded into the Canadian environment. As Nischik (2007: 206-207) points out, Munro is often characterised as a regional writer, because a great majority of her stories are set in the rural region in Ontario where she grew up, although several stories have a western Canadian setting. She most frequently writes about "small-town life of southwestern Ontario" (Nischik 2007: 206-207), and against this background she usually portrays lives of average (local) Canadians, mostly women, in the recent past and the present day. Owing to the regional colour of her writing, it can be expected that there would be many culture-specific items in her stories. Combined with Munro's writing aesthetics, which are according to Nischik (207: 24) characterized by explanatory gaps, as well as by what Gadpaille (1988: 78) calls a diversionary narrative strategy, these might represent a major challenge for the translator. While cultural words with an equivalent in the target language are usually easily translatable, translation problems occur particularly with proper names pertaining to material and social culture, which normally do not have a proper equivalent. In Munro's case, such cultural words are not only geographically limited, but may also be bound to the culture of a certain period of time in which her story is set.

What seems to be most disturbing for the fluency of the Slovene translation of *Too Much Happiness* are cases where the translator simply transfers cultural words with no proper equivalent into the target language, without explaining them in any way. This is the case with the following geographical names: *Wenlock Edge*, the title of one of the stories, and *Campbell and Howe* as the name of a street junction. Besides being a proper geographical name, *Wenlock Edge* is also a literary allusion, for, as we find out in the story, it appears in the title of a poem ("On Wenlock Edge the Wood's in

Trouble"). The fact that it is repeated twice in the same story testifies to its significance for grasping the multiple layers of the story. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to add an explanation in a footnote. The translator would thus also be able to explain the literary allusion, which would be in accordance with Levefere's (1994: 22) suggestion for translating (literary) allusions. In the case of *Campbell and Howe*, it seems necessary to add in the target text what Newmark (2004: 82) calls a culturally-neutral third term or a functional equivalent to reduce the foreignizing effect, for instance *junction* and *street*. The Slovene version of getting off (the bus) at *Campbell and Howe* would thus read *asna križišču ulic Campbell and Howe*, instead of *na Campbell in Howe*, which is stylistically marked.

The same problem arises with certain cultural words which Newmark (2004) categorizes under material culture. *Lifebuoy soap*, which appears in "Wenlock Edge", is translated into Slovene as *milo lifebuoy*. The translator has decided to transfer the brand name but to decapitalize it and change the word order in accordance with Slovene syntax. However, the brand name, which is undoubtedly important for the Canadian reader, is more or less insignificant in translation, as it bears no cultural connotations for the Slovene reader. In addition, it produces a foreignizing effect. A better solution would therefore be to translate *Lifebuoy soap* simply as *karbolno milo (carbolic soap)* and thus replace the brand name with a generic term. Additional information could also be provided to further define the soap, such as *popular* or *widespread*. This kind of solution would be in line with Vevar (2001: 106), who suggests that elements which might sound foreign in the target language should be translated hermeneutically, e.g. by explaining them to the reader; however, such an intervention, as he calls it, should be done unnoticeably.

Culinary terms from the category of material culture deserve special attention in the translation process, for, as Newmark (2004: 97) argues, food seems to be one of the most sensitive and important expressions of a nation's culture. In "Wenlock Edge", Munro gives the names of some dishes partly in French: "chicken *vol au vent*" and "duck à l'orange". The translator has retained the French words in the translation, although they have a more foreignizing effect in Slovene than they do in the original, French being Canada's second official language. According to Newmark (2004: 97), French names of dishes are used for reasons of prestige. Munro, however, uses them for a different reason, that is to show the clichéd nature of the dishes, which are considered as sophisticated only in a provincial restaurant, such as the one in the story. This clichéd effect is completely lost in the translation, or rather, the effect of using French words is quite the opposite, for French names of dishes do sound sophisticated in Slovene. It would be very difficult to achieve Munro's effect in the Slovene translation. One possibility would be to explain this local cultural characteristic in a footnote, if it was considered to be a crucial piece of information for the Slovene reader. The French names of dishes should, however, be explained in a footnote to enhance the reader's understanding. Another problematic culinary term in "Wenlock Edge" is *Cornish hens*, which was mistranslated into Slovene as *perutnina po Cornwalsko (chicken done in the Cornish style)*. The translator has added more information than necessary to this cultural term, which has resulted in what Newmark (2004: 124) calls over-translation. Cornish hens are merely a sort of poultry. This term could be translated either by transference

as *cornwalski piščanec*, or hermeneutically to further reduce the foreignizing effect: *a young hybrid chicken*. However, this would again mean adding information with no significant added value for the reader.

Cultural words that in Newmark's (2004) classification pertain to the domains of social culture and social and administrative organization appear to be the most problematic in the translation here discussed. As will be seen from examples, some have been transferred into Slovene without additional information or explanation, and some have been mistranslated. In "Wenlock Edge", the protagonist gets an A for her essay. In the Slovene grading system, numbers from 1 to 10 are used instead of letters. The grade 10 would be the cultural equivalent to grade A, and as Newmark (2004: 82-83) suggests, if a cultural equivalent exists, it should be used in the translation. The next two examples refer to names of public places. In "Dimensions", somebody buys takeaway coffee at *Tim Hortons*. Although it can be understood from the context that this is a takeaway coffee shop, such places are not common in Slovenia, and it is unlikely that an average Slovene reader would have heard of this Canadian chain of fast food restaurants. Therefore, it seems necessary to functionally define the term, as Newmark (2004: 98) suggests, by adding a functional equivalent such as *coffee shop*. In the story "Some Women" someone gets a job at *Eatons* (*na Eatonu* in the Slovene translation), which is one of the largest Canadian department store retailers. This information is of course omitted in the original; however, it should be included in the translation. In addition to the foreignizing effect in the existing translation, the preposition used is also misleading, for one might think of Eton (College). *Pri Eatonu* would be a more accurate translation. For a better understanding, it would also be necessary to add a functional word such as *department store*, for example. *Eatons* is mentioned once again in this story: getting a job at *Eatons* is compared to being discovered by *Warner Brothers*. Like *Eatons*, *Warner Brothers* also appears to be problematic in the Slovene translation. If it is simply transferred, a footnote with a short explanation should be added, for these Hollywood film studios may not be generally known in Slovenia. A more elegant solution would perhaps be to replace *Warner Brothers* with a more generic term, such as a *Hollywood director*, which means committing a minor semantic and stylistic inaccuracy but without affecting the meaning. The translator has opted for this possibility when translating *U-haul*, the name of a well-known rental company in North America, which stands for the actual equipment (a trailer). In the Slovene translation, *U-haul* has been replaced by *prikolica* (a trailer). The antonomastic quality has indeed been lost, but the meaning is not affected.

Abbreviations are specific cases of cultural words pertaining to the domain of social and administrative organization. While they are generally known in the source language culture, they are usually a complete enigma for the target text readers. If they are not explained, they produce a foreignizing effect in the translated text. In "Fiction", for example, the *CBC Radio* is rendered into Slovene as *radijska postaja CBC*. The CBC abbreviation is of course understood by Canadian readers and possibly also by many other Commonwealth readers; however, it is by no means transparent to an average Slovene reader. Some explanation would therefore be necessary to deforeignize it, for example by adding words such as *Canadian* and *national*: *kanadska nacionalna radijska postaja CBC*, or by providing the translation of the full name in a footnote.

In the same story, the sentence “She is a graduate of the *UBC Creative Writing*” was translated into Slovene as: “Diplomirala je na *UBC*, na programu kreativnega pisanja”. It cannot be expected that an average Slovene reader would know that UBC stands for the University of British Columbia. It would thus be better to use the full name instead of the abbreviation, or at least to translate the abbreviation in a footnote. Also, *na program kreativnega pisanja* is a stylistically marked translation. It would be better to change the whole sentence to make it sound more Slovene: “Diplomirala je iz kreativnega pisanja na Univerzi Britanske Kolumbije.”

As mentioned earlier, there are several examples of translation shifts in the Slovene translation of terms pertaining to social organization and administration. In the story “Free Radicals”, the *Registrar’s Office*, which is a place at a university where records of students’ enrolment are kept, has been mistranslated as *matični urad*. In the translation it has thus become a place at a town or city administration where people get married or where records of births and deaths are kept. The appropriate Slovene equivalent would be *vpisna služba* or *referat*. In the same story, the term *dean of arts* has been mistranslated as *dekan katedre za umetnost*. *Dekan* is indeed the Slovene equivalent for *dean*, but *katedra za umetnost* means *chair of art*. In the original text, *arts* is short for *faculty of arts* (and not art as such), which is usually translated into Slovene as *filozofska fakulteta*. *Dekan filozofske fakultete* (*dean of the faculty of arts*) would thus be the appropriate translation. Another translation shift appears in “Free Radicals”, where the term *Unitarian Fellowship meetings* is translated as *sestanki Družbe unitaristov*. What is meant in English are meetings of people who are members of the Unitarian Church, not members of a *Unitarian society*, as it says in the translation. The Slovene translation somewhat conceals the fact that these are meetings of a religious nature. The Unitarian Church is usually translated into Slovene as *unitaristična cerkev* and its members are called *unitaristi*. A more appropriate translation would thus be *srečanja unitaristov*, or *srečanja pripadnikov unitaristične cerkve*, to make the translation more transparent. Another major translation shift happens in the story “Deep-Holes”. The translator decides to define the term *Canadian Tire* by adding a functional equivalent, yet, misled by the name, changes it to the *Canadian tire factory*, when in fact Canadian Tire is the biggest Canadian retailer. The last example is a shift in the translation of a geographical name. A certain *Osler Bluff* is mentioned in the story “Deep-Holes”, which is rendered into Slovene as *morska pečina Osler* (*Osler sea bluff*). This would not be problematic if there was any mention of the sea in the story. However, as can be deduced from the story, there is no sea nearby, only a lake, probably Lake Huron. *Pečina Osler* would therefore be a more appropriate translation.

As is evident from these examples, the Slovene translator of *Too Much Happiness* has often opted for a foreignizing approach when translating culture-specific items. This has resulted in several “linguistic and stylistic peculiarities”, to quote Venuti (1997: 1), which have left a foreignizing impression in the translated text. Or to use Even-Zohar’s (in Lefevere 1994: 11) term *acculturation*, the process of acculturation was not implemented to such an extent as to neutralize any foreignizing effect in the target text. If the foreignizing effect is too evident, the coherence and transparency of the translation as a whole may be jeopardized and the translated text may give away, as Vevar (2013: 17) points out, its secondary, merely post-created nature. In addition,

inappropriately translated culture-specific items do not contribute to bringing the culture of the original closer to the target language reader, as they should, but rather obscure it even more, while eventual translation shifts risk significantly changing the meaning of the original. However, this is not the case with this particular translation, which in general reads fluently despite the problematic items that were identified here. These seem to be scarce enough and are not concentrated in one place to compromise the coherence of the whole.

The aim of this paper, however, was not to judge the quality of the Slovene translation, but to show that culture-specific items present a translation problem, even for an experienced translator. This only testifies to the fact that any translation, a literary one in particular – because of the emphasis on its aesthetic value, demands from the translator not only excellent knowledge of the source language and the target language, but also to have a sufficient knowledge of the source language culture. For, as Lefevere (1994: 11) reminds us, “the text of a translation” is indeed “a culture’s window on the world”.

REFERENCES

- Blake, J. 2012. Late for the Party: Alice Munro in Slovenian Translation. In K. Kürtösi (ed.) *Canada in Eight Tongues: Translating Canada in Central Europe / Le Canada en huit langues: Traduire le Canada en Europe centrale*. Brno: Masaryk University.
- Gadpaille, M. 1988. *The Canadian Short Story*. Toronto: Oxford UP.
- Lefevere, A. 1994. *Translating Literature*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America.
- Munro, A. 2012. *Too Much Happiness*. Toronto: Penguin Group (Canada).
- Munro, A. 2010. *Preveč sreče* (trans. J. Ambrožič). Dob pri Domžalah: MIŠ.
- Newmark, P. 2004. *A Textbook of Translation*. Harlow: Longman.
- Nischik, R. M. 2007. *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*. Rochester, NY: Camden House.
- Venuti, L. 1997. *The Translator’s Invisibility*. London: Routledge.
- Vevar, Š. 2001. *Temeljni aspekti in principi teorije literarnega prevajanja*. Ljubljana: Študentska založba.
- Vevar, Š. 2013. *Vrvhodska umetnost prevajanja*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba – Založništvo d. o. o.

SUMMARY

TRANSLATING ALICE MUNRO: CULTURE-SPECIFIC TERMS AS A TRANSLATION CHALLENGE

According to contemporary translation theory, the process of literary translation is perceived as acculturation or negotiation between two literary traditions. In the translation practice, culture-specific terms seem to present a major challenge for the

translator, for they often lack a proper equivalent in the target language. By analysing the Slovene translation of Alice Munro's *Too Much Happiness*, this paper aims at illustrating translation problems which occur in translating culture-specific terms and the effects that a foreignizing translation approach to these items might have on the coherence and transparency of the translated text. By relating to contemporary translation theory, the paper also proposes alternative solutions to the identified translation problems which would enhance the transparency and fluency of the translated text.

KEYWORDS: Alice Munro, *Too Much Happiness*, literary translation, Canadian literature, translation theory.

(Original scientific paper received 19.01.2016;
revised 12.03.2016;
accepted 06.04.2016)