Some reflections on the relations between language, writing, and translation

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The paper is an attempt to explore some implications of the argument that textual meaning cannot be reduced to an objective use of language. The problematic relations between language and writing are foregrounded in interlinguistic translation. Examples of different translations of a legal text and two poetic texts are used to examine how translation as an intertextual, dialogic process relates to the space between cultures described by Iser (1995) in terms of translatability as the mode of a cross-cultural discourse and the chance to embrace more than before. The examples show how translation procedures become interpretative decisions and how translating open-endedness into graspability involves the individually established, multiple routes of reference.

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Any research on translation will today be subsumed within Translation Studies – a firmly established discipline in its own right. However, this need not imply that a serious study of translation can or should be immune from the ramifications of ideas developed in the disciplines of which it was once considered a minor part, or that its insights have no important interdisciplinary relevance. In this paper, insofar as its brief nature will allow, I will try to relate some crucial aspects of translation to broader questions of language and its use, and above all to reflect on such relations in the light of some of the issues raised by Wolfgang Iser in his recent discussion about translatability and variables of interpretation (Iser 1995). Although Iser is not concerned with translation proper, his theoretical account of translatability as a key

concept in the encounter between cultures can be seen as highly relevant for a process-oriented approach to interlinguistic translation.

With respect to my understanding of translation as an intertextual or dialogic process, I will focus on Iser's definition of translatability as the mode of a cross-cultural discourse. In his view, translatability is a counter-concept to cultural hegemony, assimilation, or suppression in the encounter between cultures. It aims at compre-hension and therefore makes us focus on the space between cultures that allows them to mirror one another, opening up the experience of otherness. Otherness is never identical to itself, but is always other, translating itself into ever varying manifestations. Translation of otherness is concerned with giving it its due without subsuming it under preconceived notions.

Translatability requires a discourse that allows the transposition of a foreign culture into one's own by negotiating the space between foreignness and familiarity. As something inexplicable, the space energises an operational drive which Iser describes in cybernetic terms that are quite different from the prototype »sender→ message→receiver« used in communication models of language and translation and also implied in our common-sense view of communication. The grasping of otherness requires a continual looping from the known to the unknown and back again in a process of mutual refraction and rapid self-correction leading to a fine-tuning of further assumptions. This is an open-ended process in which the mutual translation of cultures brings about comprehension, and also the chance to grasp more than before.

As an operational mode, translatability is thus marked off from comparison – a central concept of cultural studies that focuses on the differences and similarities of the cultures scrutinised from a vantage point. Since comparison in itself does not contain a set of values, Iser's critique of the problematic nature of its transcendental stance is also pertinent to the concept of translation equivalence when in translation theory it relates to the theorist's objectivity as a »God's eye view«, with the presuppositions that govern it remaining uninspected.

In fact, cross-cultural discourse is a mode of interpretation that is no longer conceived as a subsumption of what is to be grasped under a presupposition. Interpretation itself is an act of translation: each interpretation transposes something into a different register. Iser describes interpretative activities in terms of an interplay between circularity, recursion, and the differential. These operations make everything shift into something else. The hermeneutic circle effects a negotiation between the given and its understanding; the recursion effects a carrying over from a given position to an open-endedness; and the differential effects the carrying across of a potential into ever variable shapes which can be grasped. In this, translatability represents the chance to embrace more than was possible before.

Iser's description of interpretation is very different from the decoding activity with which interpretation is identified in the model of human communication as a transfer of information – a model regularly referred to in the theory of translation. At best the decoding activity can only be part of one variable of interpretation – the hermeneutic circle which, according to Iser, appears to be adequate when a text is to be translated into understanding, or deciphered, or its understanding is to be turned into a form of application. Other variables of interpretation become a procedural necessity if something non-textual, or open-ended, such as the open-endedness of alien cultures or different systems, social or otherwise, has to be brought within reach. And this is exactly what is involved in interlinguistic translation. Moreover, the borderline that Iser seems to draw between textual and non-textual is itself questionable, since the complete process of understanding a text even in one's own language and culture requires filling in the textual gaps and integrating the fragments gleaned from the text into a vast mental database. And this is just one among the many aspects of textuality that warrant the use of the term »discourse« to describe human communication and that are also captured in the concept of writing to which I will return later. Iser himself shows how the interpretative operations shade into one another whenever interpretation occurs, and how the iterability of circular, recursive, and differential operations, activated by constantly shifting modes of reference, unfolds interpretation as production. Added to this, my comment is that in a very real sense production is also the mode of translational discourse.

Iser's view of the nature and role of interpretation in the mutual translation of cultures can be related to some influential ideas about language and meaning, such as Bakhtin's dialogic philosophy of language, and the postmodern concept of »writing«. Bakhtin (1929) argues that in human communication a sign is always translated into a new context and therefore refracted into a new sign-response. No two individuals ever entirely coincide in their experience or are in precisely the same social situation, so every act of understanding involves an act of translation and a negotiation of values. Constant translation is also implied in the poststructuralist theory of meaning which states that the freeplay of language in either speech or writing displaces speakers from any central position over meaning. Under the influence of Barthes and Derrida, in the last two decades the term »writing« has acquired a variety of new senses. It stands for Derrida's idea that every sign engenders an infinity of new contexts without any centre or absolute anchoring (Derrida 1977), and Barthes's idea of textual plurality (Barthes 1971). Thus it is emblematic of the temporal and historical process between author and reader. In the study of language and literature it has come to stand for »uncertain, unstable« as well as »concrete«, as opposed to the certainty and abstractness of formal linguistics (Fabb & Durant 1987). »Writing« is generalised to a name for all texts and seems to characterise all forms of representation. Thus it is the fundamental claim of cognitive linguistics

that an expression's meaning cannot be reduced to an objective use of language (Langacker 1990: 5). In this context, it is also interesting to note that in cognitive neuroscience great emphasis is placed on the function of interpretation in cognition in general, even in processes to which we have very limited introspective access or none at all. The British physicist and biochemist Francis Crick demonstrates that seeing is a constructive process. We have no direct knowledge of objects in the world: what we see is a symbolic interpretation of the world (Crick 1994:33). Vision and textuality share some characteristics. In his book on the human language instinct, Steven Pinker describes understanding as a constructive process, and comments on the misleading character of the »conduit« metaphor in our everyday expressions about language, in which ideas are objects, sentences are containers, and communication is sending (Pinker 1994:230).

To draw a parallel again, it can be pointed out that in explaining translation by means of such »conduit« metaphors, the existing theories of translation rely overtly or implicitly on the notion of text as a stable, objective category.

In the contrastive-linguistic model of translation, meaning invariance between source and target language signs and combinations of signs at the level of sentences is the main principle. It is stated that meaning invariance allows greater possibilities of formal description. Emphasis is on translating procedures involving contrastive language constructions that are described as systematic or predictable.

In the text-linguistic approach to translation, meaning equivalence is distributed throughout the text, and the selection of linguistic resources is guided by the virtual translation in the translator's mind. The mental model of translation is an abstract construct defined normatively as based on the knowledge of textual prototypes and features of textuality in the degree in which they are predictable and can be replicated as translating strategies. The linguistic resources of the target »clothe« the virtual translation and so create the translation as a real text, and translators »navigate» given messages to »a foreign linguistic shore« (Neubert & Shreve 1992:23, 7).

In the communicative model translation is considered possible only when some extralinguistic content is transmitted in its own, though relative, identity (Ivir 1992: 94). Such restriction of translatability should be assessed in relation to the practical purposes that are to be realised. In literary translation, however, translators cannot rely on concrete situations, so the theoretical models of literary translation postulate other concepts as stable criteria of translation. According to Kravar (1994:98), the idea governing literary translation is the category of similarity. But, as we have seen, comparison is almost an empty category if applied to a mutual translation of cultures. Užarević (1994: 91–92) also relies on the concept of similarity and emphasises formal and semantic equivalence between source and target texts. His normative proposition is that the basic criterion of translation must be the

text, and not culture or the individual reader, since only a text is an objective entity with clear, exact and indisputable formal and semantic constraints. Similarly, in his model of descriptive translation studies, Toury states that translated texts and their constitutive elements are observational facts, directly accessible to the eye (Toury 1985:18). Such views of texts run counter to the concept of writing, and all approaches to translation that embrace such views separate communication from processes of interpretation as sign production. They totalise the text into an all-inclusive meaning that could be transmitted as a given message.

On the other hand, the notion of communication as being intertwined with the socially specific production of signs and relations of signification as well as the necessarily central role of context in a theory of meaning, when the contextual principle of interpretation articulates the relationship between signifier and signified, enable translation to be understood as a process of semiosis in which a sign of another language is an interpretative response translating and refracting the first sign into ever varying manifestations. The variability of sign-function becomes a prerequisite for translation, since translation, like understanding, is never complete. It is always approximate and relative to the shifting modes of reference and the purpose in view.

The following examples illustrate the main points made so far. The first example is an instance of legal discourse, and the other two belong to literary discourse, which also shows that there may be unexpected parallels between the legal and the literary as regards the basic aspects of writing and translation.

I will use the first example to explore how interlinguistic translation relates to Iser's description of translatability as the mode of a cross-cultural discourse.

1. Extract from a text on the Croatian Legal Services Act:

(1) Original Croatian text

Zakonom se uređuje ustrojstvo i djelovanje odvjetništva kao neovisne i samostalne službe koja osigurava pružanje pravne pomoći pravnim i fizičkim osobama u ostvarivanju njihovih prava i interesa (Zakon, članak 1.). Odredbe zakona utemeljene su na najboljim rješenjima iz višestoljetne tradicije hrvatskog odvjetništva, uz uvažavanje rješenja afirmiranih u zakonodavstvu i praksi zapadnoeuropskih i srednjeeuropskih zemalja. U zakonu su dijelom inkorporirana rješenja iz Zakona o odvjetništvu i službi pravne pomoći.

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(2) First English version (Acta Juridica Hungarica 35/1, p. 77)

The Act regulates the organisation and function of legal services as an independent and autonomous institution whereby advocates are authorised to represent natural and legal persons before courts and give them legal assistance in achieving their rights and interests (*Id.* art.1). The provisions of the Act are based on the best solutions from the centuries-long Croatian tradition of law practice, as well as the solutions established by legislation and practice in the West-European and Middle-European countries. The Act also incorporates some well-established solutions from the former Croatian law on legal services.

(3) Second English version (The International Lawyer 29/1, p. 209–10)

The Act regulates legal services, authorising advocates both to represent natural and legal persons before courts and to assist them in achieving their rights and interests (*Id.* art.1). The Act is based on centuries of Croatian common law tradition, on Croatia's former statutory law on legal services, and on legislation and common law in West-European and Middle-European countries.

Text 1 and English text 2 are of similar length, while English text 3 is much shorter. At first sight, text 3 also stands out in that it seems to give an inaccurate translation of the original. But this is so only from the viewpoint of the first English version (text 2) when the original text is seen under the preconceived notions of that version. This can be explained by greater closeness between Croatian and Hungarian systems of law. However, the first English version (my translation) proved acceptable not only to the editor of the Hungarian legal journal, who is a jurist, but also to a non-lawyer, a native speaker of English who is not an expert in legal discourse and who read the published text without any comments. The second English version (text 3) is from an international legal journal published in the US and edited in London by a British jurist. The question is whether this text (i.e. the same translation edited by a British jurist) should be seen as a misrepresentation of the original or an instance of contact and conflict across linguistic and cultural demarcations, i.e. an instance of a cross-cultural discourse.

Let me briefly comment on text 3 in terms of translatability. The more alien the culture encountered, the more a kind of translation is bound to occur, as the specific nature of the culture encountered can be grasped only when projected onto what is familiar (Iser 1995:30). Text 3 not only exemplifies the Anglo-American way of concise presentation, but also introduces the terms *common law* and *statutory law*. The expression *Croatian common law tradition* may seem a mistranslation of the original and a contradiction in terms, since the concept of common law is regularly conceived as referring only to the Anglo-American systems of law. But this is so only if conceptual meanings are subsumed under preconceived notions or specific dictionary entries. In a cross-cultural discourse, a foreign culture is not simply subsumed under the familiar frame of reference; instead, the very frame is subjected to alterations in order to

accommodate what does not fit (Iser 1995:30). Thus, the concept of common law alters in reference to Croatian and European law. It signifies unwritten customs (in this particular context relating to legal services or legal practice), and not a system of law as laid down in decisions of courts. Moreover, in an attempt of self-differentiation, the term *advocate* is retained, as opposed to the British terms *barrister* and *solicitor*, or the American term *attorney*. This illustrates Iser's point that a cross-cultural discourse establishes its own guidelines: in order to provide sufficient orientation, it cannot simply exchange one frame of reference for another, but has to establish multiple references (Iser 1995:34). Moreover, this example of different ways of translating a text into different cultures shows that rather than the text as an objective entity it is a cross-cultural discourse that is crucial to translation.

The next examples are extracts from two English poetic texts with two Croatian versions of each text. I will use the examples to explore what is meant by Iser's claim that translatability represents the chance to embrace more than was possible before. It seems to me that this point can be further developed in an attempt to explore the individually established routes of reference in the process of translation. Thus the second example poses the question whether coherence is an effect of interpretation or a semantic constraint as an objective property of the text itself. The third example is used to examine how translators conceptualise situations represented in a poetic text.

First, I will focus on one detail in the last stanza of Wallace Stevens's poem *Anecdote of the Jar* and its two Croatian translations, of which the first is Šoljan's (Šoljan 1980:199), and the second mine.

2. Wallace Stevens, *Anecdote of the Jar*, last stanza:

> It took dominion everywhere.
> The jar was gray and bare.
> It did not give of bird or bush,
> Like nothing else in Tennessee.

> (A. Š.) I posvuda je zavladao.
> Taj vrč je bio gol i siv,
> ni nalik ptici niti grmu,
> ko ništa drugo u Tennesseeju.

> (M. B.) Nadvladao je pokrajinu.
> I vrč je siv i pust.
> Stasao nije plod ni pticu,
> Ko ništa drugo u Tennesseeju.

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In the original text the stanza consists of three sentences without any connectors between them. This creates gaps and silences and also a need to fill in the logical steps that connect each sentence with the next. The example illustrates how two opposite ways of giving coherence to the sequence may be inferred from the two translations.

In Šoljan's version, the first word of the opening line *I posvuda je zavladao* »And it began to reign everywhere« is the connector *i* »and«, whereby the event described is foregrounded as a sequential event or a consequence of previous events. The next line begins with the demonstrative *taj* »that« in the emphatic expression *Taj vrč je bio gol i siv* 'That jar was naked/bare and grey', whereby that jar in the poem, as opposed to any other jar, is represented as having some special properties. The line can be interpreted as an explanatory assertion, and the last three lines of this version may function as an explanation of the unexpected power of the jar over the wilderness. The first line of the stanza, which is about the dominance of the jar, thus seems to bring out the main meaning of the poem. The coherence of the sequence can be expressed as follows: »The artefact is like nothing else in entire Tennessee, but it succeeds in subduing the wilderness.« This reading of the poem is actually given in the introductory note on Stevens's poetry in Šoljan's anthology (Šoljan 1980:196).

The other version is a different reading of the poem. The jar acquires new properties in the course of the events observed and narrated by the poet. His only action occurs in the first line of the poem when he places a jar, an artefact, in the wilderness, and thus creates a new work of art. This brings about interaction between art and nature. The jar on the hill becomes more and more round and tall and dominant as it is surrounded by the wilderness, at first slovenly and then no longer wild. The dominance of the jar, described in the first line of the last stanza, marks the end of the interaction, but not the main meaning of the poem. In my version, the next three lines begin with the connector *i* »and« introducing a short sentence *I vrč je siv i pust* »And /the/ jar is grey and bare«. The line acquires a variety of senses. It can function as a consequence. The jar acquires new properties of being grey and bare because of its absolute dominance over nature. Since these properties are unexpected, the connective can also have an adversative meaning and make the line function as an unexpected consequence. Thus the coherence of the sequence can be stated in terms that are exactly opposite to those of the first version: »The artefact succeeds in subduing the wilderness, but it is like nothing else in Tennessee«. This reading creates an effect of supreme irony, and is also related to one of Stevens's dominant themes: at the moment when they seem to be reconciled, art and nature, fiction and reality, are never more apart.

This example shows that coherence and irony are effects of interpretation, and not the properties of the text regarded as the only objective category of translation.

Another interesting observation could be made about the process of negotiating the space between foreignness and familiarity during translation, as seen in the ways in which the unusual, elliptic expression *It did not give of bird or bush* is rendered. The first version *Ni nalik ptici niti grmu* »Unlike /a/ bird or bush« is a form of domesticating the otherness of the original line and translating it into understanding. The second version shows that translating open-endedness into graspability is different from translating it into understanding. The expression *Stasao nije plod ni pticu*, itself ungrammatical (the intransitive verb *stasati* »grow up« is used in a transitive construction) and difficult to translate back into English (»It did not grow up as/produce fruit or bird«), is an attempt to give otherness its due and thus grasp more than was possible before. There is no time here to go into details about all other interpretative decisions, such as the choice of *plod* »fruit/produce« instead of *grm* »bush« in order to produce a pattern (*I vrč je siv i pust./ Stasao nije plod ni pticu*) which follows the poem's mode of meaning (*The jar was gray and bare./ It did not give of bird or bush*). Such solutions involve aesthetic effects of sound patterns regarded as important for this poem about art and nature.

The third example consists of two different translations of the last stanza of Larkin's poem *Poetry of Departures*. The poem begins from a contrast drawn between the unsatisfactory present life of the speaker and an imagined alternative. In the last stanza, however, the speaker reflects ironically on the artificial perfection of each of the two ways of life. In this, the meaning of the word *object* becomes important. Šoljan (1973:90) translates it as *cilj* »aim«. I translate it as *predmet* 'object/thing'.

3. Philip Larkin, *Poetry of Departures*, last stanza:

> But I'd go today,
> Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads,
> Crouch in the fo'c'sle
> Stubbly with goodness, if
> It weren't so artificial,
> Such a deliberate step backwards
> To create an object:
> Books; china; life
> Reprehensibly perfect.

> (A.Š.) Ali otišao bih i danas
> da, putovima skito kestenjem osutim
> il grčio se u brodskom kaštelu
> u kosmatoj dobroti, kada ne bi
> bio toliko izvještačen

takav promišljeni korak unatrag
da se stvori cilj:
Knjige, porcelan, život
bijedno besprijekoran.

(M.B.) Al' otišao bih i danas,
Da, gizdao se stazama kestenjem posutim,
Zgurio se u brodski kaštel
Dobrotom obrastao, ako
Ne bi bilo tako umjetno,
Tako smišljen korak unatrag
Da je predmet stvoren:
Knjige; porculan; život
Prijekorno savršen.

The use of the word *cilj* »aim« in Šoljan's version builds up implications about life as directed towards some immediately useful, practical aim, like books and china, and therefore *bijedno besprijekoran* »miserably irreproachable«.

In my version the situation described in the concluding five lines can be construed as stepping backwards when looking at a painting to see more clearly the represented object. So both the illusion of being able to leave the real life for a better alternative and the stepping back to see the present life from a distance prove artificial and unreal. The distancing from oneself makes one's life look like an object or artefact of culture, *prijekorno savršen*, »reprehensibly perfect«. The irony of the situation reflects the ironic reading of the title: poetry of departures.

It can be concluded that individual translators differ in how they conceptualise and portray situations that are implicit in the original. The example also shows that translation, like interpretation, is primarily a performative act. According to Iser (199:36), a performance has to bring about its own criteria, as exemplified by the individually established routes of reference, which means that we are invited »first and foremost to share in whatever is highlighted, rather than to validate the results achieved«.

Textual indeterminacy subsumed within the notion of writing does not prevent translation but rather, it starts reading and writing and translation moving again. The examples show how in the process of translation a cross-cultural discourse brings about the chance to embrace more than was possible before.

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PROMIŠLJANJE ODNOSA IZMEĐU JEZIKA, PISMA, I PREVOĐENJA

U članku se nastoje istražiti implikacije argumenta da se tekstualno značenje ne može svesti na objektivnu upotrebu jezika. Problematični odnosi između jezika i pisma izraziti su u međujezičnom prevođenju. Na primjerima različitih prijevoda jednog pravnog i dvaju pjesničkih tekstova ispituje se kako se prevođenje kao međutekstualni, dijaloški proces odnosi prema prostoru između kultura što ga Iser (1995) opisuje u smislu prevodljivosti kao načina diskursa preko razgraničenja kultura i kao mogućnosti da se obuhvati više nego ranije. Primjeri pokazuju kako prijevodni postupci postaju interpretacijske odluke i kako prevođenje otvorenosti u shvatljivost uključuje pojedinačno uspostavljene, mnogostruke referencijalne putove.

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