Innovation in Language Learning International Conference

From Charles Dickens to George Orwell – Translational Techniques and Cultures in the German Democratic Republic

Martina Jauch

Trier University of Applied Sciences, Germany

Abstract

In an atmosphere of competition and cooperation, translators in the German Democratic Republic [GDR] during the 1950s and 1960s would be heavily censored and encouraged to translate works promoting the socialist Soviet cause. Racism proved a welcome topic for translated works from the US or other Anglophone countries as it would have aided in illustrating the downfall of Western society to the population of the GDR. Translators had to adjust their independence in translating, the higher cause of culture and adopt a more pragmatist view in order to pass the "print permit process" of the government. Nonetheless, not only did the situation improve in the late 1960s to normalize literary relations with the Federal Republic of Germany, but the literary marketplace changed to accommodate both Eastern and Western German literary works. The Eastern German marketplace, which previously fostered a culture of "socialist sister nations", such as, Hungary or the Czech Republic, now encouraged the role of translators as "active agents", who were supported in their time, self-image and mutual relationship by the publishers. Yet there are unexplored questions of how creatively the translators adapted Anglophone literatures, why certain works were chosen, and how the language was adjusted to the expectations of East German readership. This chapter intends to close this research gap in analyzing the British translations published in this "second world" [Berndt/Wells 19] and their ideological tendencies of interpretation. In presenting a variety of translational approaches, this essay focuses on the works of Charles Dickens – who was part of GDR school curricula and widely popular – and George Orwell, a highly controversial author not available until the 1980s in the GDR. They illustrate the slow acceptance of British literary translations at the beginning of the socialist state to an acceptance of thematic similarities, translators' and editors' efforts, and the belief in the "servantship to the author" on the part of translators.

Keywords: *GDR, Translation, Culture, Marketplace, British Literature*

1. Introduction

In an atmosphere of competition and cooperation, translators in the German Democratic Republic [GDR] during the 1950s and 1960s would be heavily censored and encouraged to translate works promoting the socialist Soviet cause. Racism proved a welcome topic for translated works from the US or other Anglophone countries as it would have aided in illustrating the downfall of Western society to the population of the GDR.

Translators had to adjust their independence in translating, the higher cause of culture and adopt a more pragmatist view in order to pass the "print permit process" [Heming 944] of the government. Nonetheless, not only did the situation improve in the late 1960s to normalize literary relations with the Federal Republic of Germany, but the literary marketplace changed to accommodate both Eastern and Western German literary works [Thomson-Wohlgemuth].

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In presenting a variety of translational approaches, this essay focuses on the works of Charles Dickens – who was part of GDR school curricula and widely popular – and George Orwell, a highly controversial author not available until the late 1980s in the GDR. They illustrate the slow acceptance of British literary translations at the beginning of the socialist state to an acceptance of thematic

similarities, translators' and editors' efforts, and the belief in the "servant of the author" [Creutziger 24-25] on the part of translators. Finally, this presentation details what effect these translational choices had on the curriculum, pedagogy, and means of foreign language acquisition in the GDR school and university system.

2. Translation and Foreign Language Didactics

While Western Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) marginalized translation as an outdated method, contemporary theories of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) now views it as a sociolinguistically important act of cultural transmission within an active and context-dependent communication tool, not merely a grammar exercise. The translations from GDR texts offer unique perspectives of this translational turn and can be a vital part of the concept of intercultural mediation in the CEFR framework. Of particular interest here is the analysis of Dickens as a vastly popular and translated author in contrast to the neglected George Orwell, especially in light of the sometimes outdated and politically informed translational techniques.

Both authors' works can be taught as a vital part of the concept of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) within the foreign language classroom, as students are taught to recognize regime-determined language, identify bias and also look for what is not translated or said. The works are a vital part of the specific social climate of the GDR and thus also useful examples of translation resistance, with which today's students can identify their own stereotypes, personal lens, and social media presences in the classroom. Moreover, the students can then discover for themselves in what ways the GDR novels illustrate an (un)translatability of this political narrative to the current context.

In the foreign language classroom, these translational techniques also shed light onto our reliance on translations of so-called experts, the creation of a canon of literature and languages, as well as a preference for particular pedagogies at different times. This provides a meta-perspective of the techniques of translation as well as foreign language pedagogy as they develop an awareness of the authentic engagement with these texts, transcultural competence and offers insight into modern translanguaging pedagogy within a specific cultural repertoire. In exploring these meta-issues, the next two sections will explore the characteristics of the translations in more detail before the paper will then move on to summarize the overall pedagogical implications of these translations.

3. Socialist Translations of Charles Dickens

Since Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had explicitly praised Charles Dickens as an author, he was not only considered an acceptable socialist author, but also seen as a classic and became part of school curricula. He was heavily promoted from the inception of the GDR state to its end in 1989. Marx called Dickens and his contemporaries the "splendid brotherhood of fiction writers in England" [Marx 663], as he often dealt with themes of Victorian capitalism, poverty and the effects of industrial exploitation. Translations of his work were encouraged, with major publishers chosen to publish his work, among them, Rütten & Loening and translator Christine Hoeppener, Karl-Heinz Schönfelder and Hans Peterson of the publisher "Volk und Welt", and Reclam's translator Leo Gunther [Hollington 51-68]. Together with Disraeli, Kinsley, and Gaskell, Dickens was viewed as having "worked on the picture of the [Victorian] era with its depressing situation for the workers" [Thomson-Wohlgemuth, *Translation under State Control*, 214].

General differences to a West German translation include a deliberate avoidance of modern American idioms. Dickens' language as a historical-realist chronicler of class struggle was particularly focused on grounded vocabulary and vocabulary that matched his description of economic struggles and the working poor. For instance, Toby Veck from *A Christmas Story* is described as a man who "has become a victim of capitalist conditioning" and whose "spirit and energy have been shattered by hypocritical agitation and propaganda" [Thomson-Wohlgemuth, *Translation under State Control*, 139].

This included vocabulary that heightened the class gap between the bourgeoisie and the working poor as well as the poverty of the proletariat, emphasizing a common sentimentality with a clear, realist and close-to-reader language. They emphasized the satirical commentary of Dickens instead of escaping into a rather sentimental portrayal of the suffering. Wil Ferm from Dickens' story *The Chimes* becomes

someone chased like a deer by rich noblemen and a noble example of “the resistance which lives, in spite of all the humiliation” [209].

The greatest adjustment did not even come within the text, but in the addenda of the text and framing of Dickens’ classics. As he was celebrated as exposing the cruelty of the capitalist system, students were usually given forewords or afterthoughts in the books that highlighted how the described suffering and violence were the product and logical consequence of the capitalism that the German Democratic Republic had so successfully overcome. Child labor or poor houses could be found only in the capitalist West. Dickens’ work became “a major weapon in the ideological battle” [Hollington 492-5] of East versus West Germany.

An additional adjustment in the GDR translations of Dickens was the selection of works in the process of the state’s subsequent instrumentalization of these works. Publication permits were part of a centralized system through the *Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel* [the main publishing authority of publishers and book sellers]. “This censorship covered nearly every aspect of the cycle of production of books” [Christof-Füchsle 297]. The portrait communicated about Dickens to the public involved a selection of his works highlighting those with a maximum of socialist potential and power to incite reform. Among these were his works *Oliver Twist* through its critique of the poor house and welfare system, *Hard Times* through its direct criticism of industrialization and utilitarian education, as well as *Bleak House* through its references to the corrupt system of justice.

The explanatory notes often labeled Dickens’ interest in religious, Christian-moralist practices of salvation as civil illusions in East German textbooks, which “occurs again and again, and which cannot be explained” [Dickens Studies Newsletter 2.1, 1971], because they did not fit the Atheist model of the Eastern German state. His supposed flaws were downplayed in order to emphasize his alignment with Marxist-Leninist theory. In many cases, the afterword or other addenda had to be reworked several times, as they were a safeguard for the publisher against the censor and the SED Party. “The censors frequently demanded an afterword to a book when none had been planned, or they required changes to an existing afterword” [Pym 61].

Introductions were usually written by state-approved Germanists, such as, the Leipzig scholar Georg Seehase, who celebrated his masterful realism and deep empathy for the working classes. They often pointed out that he relied on moral conversion or philanthropy to fix social ills similar to Ebenezer Scrooge’s role since he was a bourgeois writer after all and might not have yet recognized the necessity of a proletarian revolution, which they saw confirmed in *A Tale of Two Cities* [Chapter 24]. East German socialists were presented with the realism of the nineteenth century as a “forerunner of Socialist Realism” [Hollington], Including the topography and pilgrimage-like structure of the works.

The East German editions were also uniquely presented through the original Victorian plates by Phiz or Cruikshank, but also commissioned work by graphic artists, such as, Klaus Ensikat [*Oliver Twist*], Ruth Knorr [*A Christmas Carol*] and Gerhard Goßmann [*Great Expectations*]. The “esteemed and successful” [Hollington 46, 52] illustrations were designed to highlight state-approved scenes teaching students about the benefits of Socialism and highly controlled as well.

From a language point of view, the translational technique encompasses a particular class-based framing as well as socialist consciousness, but also the creation of refreshing linguistic spaces. The translators’ aesthetic dissent was often visible in their use of rich style and metaphoric language as well as the subversive nuances of reading between the lines. While the GDR translation was expected to adhere closely to the sentence density of Dickens and the exact character names and long descriptions, translators also did not want to take over what they perceived as a “loose” translation style from the West.

They ensured, however, that the proletarian struggle felt visceral and real to the readers as a cautionary tale of Western capitalism. The style remained highly literary, educated and sophisticated, as they assumed an intellectually rigorous school and university environment. Hoeppener’s translation of *The Pickwick Papers,* where the metaphors are most closely kept compared to earlier translations in West and East Germany. She keeps the cold, unfriendly evening, the triste street and the melancholic expression of the Marquis [Wotjak 84]. She also keeps animal imagery, grotesque vocabulary and closely follows the sentence structure of the original.

The adaptation of Dickens' Victorian sentimentality, especially in works like *A Christmas Carol*, was not emphasized as religious charity, but rather became a celebration of universal humanism, solidarity and the warm working-class community imagined by the Eastern German state. This was designed to form a contrast to bourgeois individualism, ruthless freedom, and selfish consumption. These features formed a uniquely Eastern German translation style, which incorporated features of socialist state propaganda, but also some creative attempts at a dissent from this official discourse. As we will see in the next section, this was not entirely different to the West German translations of Orwell's works, which were illegally imported into the GDR.

4. The Linguistic Liquidation of George Orwell in the GDR

Any of Orwell's works available in the GDR would have been illegal copies imported in as a British original English version or a West German translation. Any translations would not be according to Socialist standards but confront readers with English terms not taught in the GDR. Linguistically, a critique of totalitarianism was non-existent in English literature and Orwell's works were considered critical of Stalinism and totalitarian systems. Yet Orwell also "wished to identify himself with the poverty-stricken people" [Rizwan 48] despite the projection of totalitarianism as something to fear and potentially spreading [48]. A likely translation would have been by Western German translator Kurt Wagenseil from 1950. Censorship prohibited the import, possession and distribution of his books and punishments could even include prison sentences. Only shortly before the fall of the Berlin wall there were internal discussions about a potential change in perspective, but there was no actual publication of his works before the GDR collapsed.

His works were considered particularly dangerous because his linguistic mechanisms in the novel were remarkably similar to the German used by the SED political leadership. In the dictatorship of the SED, democracy was re-branded as "anti-fascist protective wall" [Wengst 87] and the political language in Orwell included slogans like "war is peace" and "socialism wins", which were designed to overshadow the bleaker reality of everyday life [Orwell Chapter 1]. The German solution for Orwell's neologisms was to incorporate rather long explanations of each term instead of a completely comprehensible one-word translation only. Newspeak became "Neusprech" [4], Doublethink became "Doppeldenk" [9], and Thoughtcrime became "Gedankenverbrechen" [21].

There are numerous similarities to the translators of Charles Dickens in East Germany, however. For one, both Orwell's translators in the West and Dickens' translators in the East made heavy use of paratexts, footnotes, annotations, and the like in order to explain and re-interpret the authors' intentions according to either state propaganda or the West's desire to adapt Orwell's writings into the post-Nazi German lexicon. Anti-communist discourse was desired and the Information Research Department [IRD] and Congress for Cultural Freedom encouraged framing his works as tools of Cold War psychological warfare [Klemperer]. Orwell was intentionally translated not as a lifelong democratic socialist, but as a critic of left-wing authoritarianism to warn West Germans against the East German socialist life.

Furthermore, Orwell's translators, most notably Kurt Wagenseil, left the authentic vocabulary in the texts as well as the original metaphors, thus not as directly adding a subversive touch to the translation. Similar to Dickens' translators, Orwell's translations were financed by the state. They incorporated decoupled vocabulary referencing the East-West divide and were often prone to over-correction and a more literary and dramatic style.

It is curious that without the same socialist state control as the East, the West German translations also deemed it necessary to distinguish the English socialism [*Ingsoc* in the German Translation] from European socialism and used it as a reference to Nazi National Socialism or Soviet communism instead. They emphasized the cold, looming state power of Big Brother, socialist states like East Germany and adapted the language from the raw, direct, and bleak terminology of Orwell to sound more elegant and readable in many instances. The 1984 translation by Schlosser had changed that language from military-oriented war language [e.g. "air raid location", "landing runway one", "loyalty towards the party"] towards terms influenced by the technological developments since the 1950 version, for instance "Telescreen" or "installing something" [Bieck 163].

5. Implications for Language Learning and Foreign Language Acquisition

To a great degree, language learning and foreign language acquisition and pedagogy in the German Democratic Republic depended on the SED regime's controls of the printing press, school curricula and foreign languages as a tool for global communication. French and English authors were viewed through a Marxist-Leninist lens as being "enemy languages" and students were taught either to critique it rather than use it for tourism or integration in Western culture. Accordingly, the acquisition of vocabulary – also based on Dickens' and other works – was highly economic and political language with words like exploitation, strike or class consciousness. There is mention of an unjust system of society, classes, as well as the justice system itself, as society becomes nothing more than a commodity instead of a value system in characters like Evermonde [Britto 3]. The German translation emphasizes his counting houses, hands associated with paid manual and exploitative labor as well as capitalists and manufacturers.

The primary vehicle for English language acquisition, mostly from the 19th century, and Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy or Mark Twain were the chosen vehicles of anachronistic instruction [Wentzlau]. This meant that students usually acquired an archaic, stilted, or slang language that had very little to do with 20th century conversational phrases. Similarly, the students were taught a socialist bias through the selected works they read. This also meant that they might have read the English or American novels but received hardly any cultural insight into current Western culture.

This systematic erasure of cultural studies consisted of a censored mixture of the reality of Britain and the USA, in which London became synonymous with 19th century poverty, smog, slums and strikes. This goes so far as to call humans "reasoning animals" whose minds can only be formed upon facts in the German translation of Mister Gradgrind from *Hard Times* [Koeppener 7], even though they also need life experience, intuition and creative imagination.

Due to the restrictions, GDR students received a largely input-oriented education in which communicative competence and use of the language in everyday life was replaced by their own efforts at reading and translation, grammar and the analysis of the outdated text. Due to travel restrictions, there was no need to teach them the practical production of the language as only socialist countries could be visited or imported from, ultimately making Russian a more important language than English. Literacy rates regarding advanced grammar

While Dictionaries existed in a bilingual form, there was also a semantic shift to prevent bourgeois ideological infiltration that would prevent the formation of a harmonious socialist personality [Herzog], for instance, the the *Verlag Enzyklopädie Leipzig* editions. Words associated with Western concepts of democracy, finance or lifestyle in general were either reframed and translated negatively or completely omitted, which increased the one-sided indoctrination and created an entirely imaginary narrative of Western language and culture [MDR].

While the inclusion of Charles Dickens in foreign language learning still functioned as a somewhat positive example of language learning, the case of George Orwell is an entirely negative example where the lack of translated works highlights other complex problems of a missing exposure to 20th century language. In Orwell's case, readers missed out on the entirely new vocabulary of how states control speech and, thus, also thought, for instance, through his Newspeak, Doublethink, Thoughtcrime and Ingsoc. His works were, in fact, forbidden in the entire East of Europe.

Students did not get the opportunity to analyze political propaganda in a neutral setting, acquire analytical tools and language or find a meta-language discussing surveillance and censorship. Their over-exposure to formal historical English through Dickens also did not introduce these terms into their analytical vocabulary. East Germany also often utilized translations from the nineteenth century, for instance, by Julius Seybt or E.A. Moriarty] and merely adjusted the grammar, spelling and amended these through commentary [Anderson in Hollington].

Beyond this semantic blind spot and suppression of linguistic thinking on critical topics, students did not learn the possible ways in which language could be manipulated, weaponized or used for the sake of a distorted logic. Rote Memorization and fixed translation were the classroom reality. Nonetheless, students managed to occasionally get their hands on an Orwell translation from Western Germany

and engaged in a kind of subversive self-study through smuggled British or German paperback copies. This act of political resistance became a tool for liberation and a teacher for critical thinking, that is, reading between the lines to possibly question their political reality. The readers are already trained as such. As Per Qvale cites, that East Germans reading literature are more easily offended as they see political significance everywhere. “This is a consequence of East Germans’ being used to reading between the lines in a state-controlled press” [Qvale, Chapter 2].

English teachers themselves were in a similarly awkward position as translators in the GDR, as they were expected to overlook their own knowledge of these works and teach within tight pedagogical constrictions at schools and universities. The fact that Orwell’s 1984 and Animal Farm were global literary milestones had no effect on its prohibition. This led to difficulties in pedagogy, as instructors had to move directly from nineteenth century Victorian fiction consistent with Marxist ideals to twentieth century works of socialist writers, often skipping several decades of language and literary development.

6. Concluding Remarks

While the GDR translators of Dickens developed a peculiar translational style for his works, it not only mirrored the translations of Orwell’s works in West Germany but also did not prepare readers for the twentieth-century English communication skills needed to even interact with native or other foreign language speakers of English. At least an entire generation of scholars and students remained deprived of this knowledge and the cultural, non-biased realities of English-speaking cultures.

Orwell’s example in comparison to Dickens’ translations illustrates that even in supposedly liberal nations like West Germany, translators’ creative agency was not entirely uninhibited and the state still had their hands in the culture of translation as a vital form of communication and teaching the next generation.

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