

Fiction as a Mean of Teaching Foreign Language

Margarita Odesskaya, Irina Antonova

Russian State University for the Humanities (Russia)

mar-1432998@yandex.ru

Being an object of pragmatic approach fiction offers great opportunities for teaching a foreign language. It presents a number of language styles, so learners can produce their own oral and/or written speech by means of language models they obtain while reading. Fiction encourages them to plunge into a socio-cultural context of the language they learn. Thus, learning the language of a certain country and obtaining its culture are becoming simultaneous and indispensable. Besides, reading fiction has always been interesting. Such an important criterion as interest stimulates a learner to, first, reading and understanding and later – to speechmaking, discussing, arguing and debating. Fiction, however, presents considerable difficulties for a foreign student as it contains a variety of unknown lexical, grammatical and/or syntactical units, alongside a number of cultural phenomena.

We suggest original fiction alongside its parallel translation into students' native language (it might also be English as an international "mediator"). Reading parallel texts makes it easy to read and understand the meaning of what has been read. Such reading removes psychological barriers, which are obvious when students read foreign fiction. What is even more important, fiction presented in parallel texts is not adapted or abridged. In other words, it is not simplified and thus corresponds to the students' intellectual level. It is also of importance that the text with a parallel translation can be used at different levels of foreign language knowledge. Depending on this level the teacher defines the difficulty of the tasks he offers the students while reading and discussing the text they have read at home.

How to select texts for reading? We offer first of all Russian classical writers' short prose (Pushkin, Gogol', Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, Bunin, Zoshenko, etc). One might also address Russian poetry written in a rather simple language (eg. Anna Akhmatova).

While reading the text with a parallel translation for the first time the student might be rather passive in perceiving the text of the original. To activate the process of speaking and thus employing the language from the original, the teacher begins asking questions aimed at checking the students' comprehension. Our teaching experience proves that while answering the students first look for the answers in the translation and only after that – in the original parallel text. Thus, the students have an illusion that they speak a foreign language on their own and can discuss complicated issues, which correspond to their intellectual level. While speaking they address both texts many times trying to reproduce the language of the original in their speech. After answering the teacher's most general questions concerning the plot of the story students are recommended to speak either about the main characters or about the place, the landscape, etc. Thus, the students address the text over and over again using the language of the original in their answers. The very last stage of the instruction is students' speechmaking while defending their point of view, participating in debates, etc., by means of some data taken from the original. The students are offered to assess the characters, situations, events described in the story taking into consideration its data.

There is no doubt that fiction presented with a parallel translation needs to be provided with the teacher's comments which more often than not concern historic and cultural realms, idioms, metaphors, phraseology, slang, etc. The best way is to give comments in the students' native language, or the language-medium and later to initiate classroom discussions whether these realms are adequately translated. It is obvious that there are realms that cannot be translated into a foreign language as their translation needs some additional background. A. Fyodorov, an outstanding theoretician in translation, argues that "translation has always been a kind of window to a different world, the world of different people, sometimes – to a different epoch ...Both – the translator, to build his own window into a different world, and the reader, to look into this window – need some knowledge about the reality they face; this knowledge is called background" [1]. Even if there is an exact language equivalent of this or that word, it might not always reflect social and cultural realms in the life of different language communities. One of my former German students Christina Foihtinger who studied commentary of "background knowledge" in Russian literature argues that "in Russian literature a peasant, from Turgenev to Chekhov, is always depicted as miserable, even poor. A rich peasant is described as "kulak". The German Bauer (which is translated as "peasant") covers both – rich and wealthy peasants. So, the stereotype of a German peasant is different: it is a healthy, rubicund,

practical workaholic who is close to nature"[2]. There are more than enough examples (like this) of linguistic equivalent insufficiency in translating a literary text from one language into another. So, at the advanced stage, both the teacher and the students consider the issues of the linguistic and meaningful nuances, losses in translation, and implications meant by the narrator. While analyzing a literary text and comparing it with the original the teacher helps the students with some background knowledge, whereas the students do their best to assess the quality of the translation.

There are at least two, rather dissimilar, definitions of what translation is. The first defines translation as a system of equivalences between words/concepts/languages.

According to the second, translation is a kind of interpreting cross-cultural implications (meanings) from one language into another.

There are interpreters who argue that any translation should be aimed at its corresponding to the spirit of an original text. The others insist that it is much more important to make the reader perceive a foreign consciousness and culture and to reach this, the translator can even violate his native language. The latter vote for a literal, word-for-word translation, the former – for rendering. The best translations made by the latter acquire the features of subjective culturally valuable implications (they might be less complete but nevertheless), the worst ones anchor the meanings to definite words and word combinations. This threatens to leave behind the meaning implied by the narrator and to replace it with literal and mistaken substitutions. The reasons for such distortions (in A.V. Fyodorov's terms – falsifications) are not so far the insufficient knowledge of the language of the original but a peculiar form of asymmetry between the narrator, on the one hand, and the translator, on the other: difference in age, life experience, education, religion, etc. and finally – the absence of common semiosphere (Y.M. Lotman's term) which presupposes common conceptual space and common knowledge of the same realms.

As literary translation is traditionally equated to art, which does not boil down to just transmitting the text, translation of fiction falls under the second definition rather than under the first. A.I. Kuprin, an outstanding Russian writer, used to say that "...to become a translator it is not enough to know a foreign language very well. One should also be able to penetrate into a profound and lively fiber of every word, as well as into the magical power of word cohesion". And who can do it better than a writer who knows more than one language?

Translation presents even more difficulties when a phenomenon or a catchword which exist in one language are absent in the other. For example, "The Grinch" (the name of an American film) was to be prolonged to "The Grinch – Christmas Thief" as he is the subject of American culture only and no Russian knows him. The name of Sholohov's famous "Тихий Дон" (literal translation "Quiet Don") is actually a catchphrase the equivalent of which does not exist in the English language. So, the literary translation sounds like "The Don Flows Home to the Sea". If the translator had offered the first word-for-word variant of Sholohov's novel (which is "Quiet Don"), it wouldn't have reflected the profound meaning of the title. Thus, in its literary translation the text might not coincide with the original. It is of greater importance that translation should reflect the general meaning of a literary text. To achieve this, the translator interprets the original text, rather than translates it.

What is to be interpreted in the literary text? The question is not as easy as it might seem. To answer it, let us first define the phenomenon of interpretation.

According to Longman Exams Dictionary, to interpret is to explain and/or to clarify the meaning of something. In the case of literary interpretation it means (1) extracting the original meaning of something and (2) understanding, that is, giving the translation of the meaning with other words without changing the latter. The synonym of to interpret is to construe which is not just to clarify the meaning but to supplement it with nuances of meanings. Hence the stem of the English to construe sounds like Russian конструировать (konstruirovat') which is translated into English as to build. Interpreting might be claimed a local instructional task but it is actually the main aim of teaching a foreign language.

According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, classical hermeneutics is science aimed at restoring (reconstructing) both the meaning of the text and the narrator's opinion. Thus, Gadamer's criteria of such hermeneutics are both the accuracy of the meaning of the text and the accuracy of the author's opinion about what he installed into the text. Both criteria are closely connected by distinguishing the meaning as an idea that a word, expression or sign represents, that is, what actually stands behind a word, expression, or sign. The synonym of meaning in English is sense, which is very close to benefit. The last statement is of paramount importance for the conclusion given in the next paragraph.

So, within the process of teaching a foreign language interpretation of meaning encourages the students to distinguish the essence of what is to be translated (What is the meaning of the object we are translating?) whereas sense (benefit) encourages them to distinguish the pragmatics of what is to be translated (Is there any sense to translate it?).

Russian смысл (smysl), which is translated into English as meaning sounds very much like the Russian мысль (mysl', translated into English as thought). In such interpretation it is impossible to know the meaning as it is impossible to know the thought. In other words, it is impossible to know for sure what the narrator means. Moreover, the narrator's meaning and thus – the narrator's thought – cannot be learnt once and forever. So, while penetrating into the depth of a literary text the meaning might not only change, but it might also become totally different and due to this it should be every time cognized afresh. In the process of such cognition, foreign language learners are engaged into extracting and cognizing the meaning, the idea, the thought and finally the implication the writer means. No matter how much this implication might change in the course of a literary text, it remains culturally valuable and thus more important (in comparison with a pure cognitive meaning represented in the plot of a literary text) as it transmits historical, genre, and/or traditional realms in a definite language community. Their absence in one language community is sure to give rise to the problem of misunderstanding, or even distorting their implications translated into a foreign language. From this point of view, to answer the question about the reasons for Anna Karenina's suicide it won't be enough to read the novel and look for the answer in it. The student will have to "extend" the frames of the novel to get to know the history and traditions of the Russian society in the XIX century, alongside with Leo Tolstoy's ideas and beliefs. To do this, foreign language students will have to address some other sources acquiring in such a way culturally valuable implications of a foreign language.

References

- [1] Fyodorov A.V. *Iskusstvo perevoda I zhizn' literatury*. Leningrad, 1983, p. 13-14
- [2] Fohntinger Christina. *Problema peredachi kul'turnykh realiy v nemetskiikh perevodakh Chekhova // Chekhov I Germaniya*. Moskva, 1996, p. 237
- [3] *Longman Exams Dictionary*. Pearson Education Limited, 2006.
- [4] И.Р. Гальперин. *Большой англо-русский словарь*. – М.: «Русский язык», 1977.
- [5] Г.Г. Гадамер. *Истина и метод: основы философской герменевтики*. – М.: Прогресс, 1988.
- [6] Г.Г. Гадамер. *Язык и понимание // Всемирная философия XX в.* – Минск, 2004.