

T(y)ranslators – Agents of Authority and Censorship in Translation

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Abstract: Censorship and self-censorship in translation have been associated with oppressive regimes, although they are encountered in democratic systems as well. The agents and mechanisms behind these phenomena play a key part in spreading a certain ideology, which serves the interests of the ones in positions of power, be it political, economic or religious. The main purposes of this article are to analyse the criteria of censorship in translation, to illustrate the strategies used for censoring the potentially “dangerous” texts, to present case studies inspired by the realities of communist Romania and the contemporary American society, and to give examples of censorship agents, objectives and techniques.

Keywords: *authority, censorships, translations, ideology*

1. Introduction

Over the years, translations have been the subject of censorship in various parts of the world, due to their dangerous potential of undermining well-established political regimes, religious dogmas or social practices. The foreign element has always been regarded with scepticism and anything related to it, such as translations, which could bring it to the attention of a larger part of a certain population, was perceived as risky. Therefore, many translated works have been banned in certain countries because they belonged to a culture, author or genre that was seen as inappropriate or even hostile.

For example, during the communist regime in Romania, many Western books were heavily censored simply because they were describing realities

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that the communists opposed to, such as the freedom of expression, capitalism or abortion. This kind of censorship varied from eliminating unsuitable words, paragraphs or whole pages to banning certain translated books from publication or even to sanctioning the translators for their choice of inappropriate words or phrases.

In many cases, translators themselves censored those parts of the work they were translating that they considered offensive to the regime. This form of self-censorship could be attributed both to the fear of repercussions, especially if the translator in question had been warned before, or to the desire to please the representatives of the governing political regime, in order to gain some favours. From fear to political servitude and from external pressure to inner beliefs, translators could have any reasons to become t(y)ranslators, as the first section of this article shows.

2. Criteria and mechanisms of censorship and self-censorship in translations

The systems that imposed the strictest rules on translators were the Catholic Church, the Nazi regime, Francisco Franco's dictatorship and communism. Needless to say, these are also the systems that led to the destruction of priceless books and to the killing of many famous authors. The saddest thing is that, in these systems, people became so indoctrinated that they censored or destroyed their works themselves, for fear that they might offend someone in a position of power.

The criteria that led to censorship or self-censorship in translations were numerous, from the type and genre of the source text to the target audience and from the author to the agenda of certain publishing houses, which had to publish books reflecting the accepted ideology. In rarer cases, the economic reasons prevailed over the ideological ones. For example, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which was banned in the USA and Britain in the 1930s for obscenity, was fully translated into Spanish during Franco's regime and published with very favourable reviews precisely because the author, due to the controversies surrounding his style and language, was very popular in Spain and people were willing to buy this book for a higher price than any other book (Lázaro 2001, 42).

The example presented above proves that censors may turn a blind eye to "nonconformities" if the market demands a particular "product". Generally speaking, translated literature is in high demand in the oppressive regimes especially because people want to see what life is like in other – maybe freer –

countries and this is the reason why there are instances of liberalism even in the most tyrannical systems of power.

In many situations, even though a certain translated book was accepted for publication, it had to suffer massive rewriting, or, in the worst cases, the original text was simply mutilated. The translators and editors were usually those who did this job of rewriting the text in translation, in order to avoid rejection for publication. It was a common practice for translators and publishers to negotiate what parts of the text to eliminate, to get the approval for publication of the book in question. The result of these negotiations was the acceptance of otherwise unpublishable texts, for the price of some omissions or reformulations.

For example, in Vera Călin's translation of *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens, the omission of a Jewish character's description is based on social, cultural and religious criteria. As she published this translation in 1949, right after World War II, at the beginning of the communist regime, Vera Călin decided to omit all the elements that could have led to a negative perception of the novel. Consequently, two pages from the 21st chapter of the original text are missing from the translation into Romanian because they contain anti-Semitic elements: Mr. Jaggers, the Jewish lawyer, looks like a devil, speaks English with an awkward accent, has the humiliating habit of kissing his clients' hands or coat hems and reveals the fact that some members of his family were involved in thefts and frauds. The omission of these pages is obvious, since, in translation, after the presentation of one of the lawyer's clients, there is the description of his office, without any connection with the previous part (Ghențulescu 2014, 431).

The choice made by the translator in this case proves that, during the communist regime, there was a strong mechanism of self-censorship. As the censors working for the state were few and had to deal with a lot of artistic productions (e.g. books, films, theatre plays, TV shows), they devised an intelligent censorship system, in which the agents of cultural production themselves were involved, censoring their own works or the works of their fellow authors. The rules of censorship were not known by the authors or translators, so there was a great deal of uncertainty – and anxiety – related to what was allowed or banned. Consequently, the system of self-censorship became much stricter than formal state censorship (Kuhiwczak 2009, 48).

1949, the year when Vera Călin's translation of *Great Expectations* was published, is the birth year of a new institution in communist Romania,

namely the General Directorate of the State's Publications. This directorate was in charge with censoring all the publications, even if neither at the time, nor later (until its dissolution by a presidential decree issued in 1977) did it bear a name related to the idea of censorship. Unlike other censoring institutions, such as the ecclesiastical ones in the Middle Ages or the military ones in times of war, this directorate created by the Romanian communist regime censored not only the already published books, but also the ones that were going to be translated or published. Everything it considered dangerous for the state's ideology was eliminated in a certain stage, from the pre-translation phase to the publication one. It was a real instrument of control, indoctrination and manipulation.

Between 1945, so even before the General Directorate of the State's Publications was established, and 1989, when the communist regime collapsed, many libraries in Romania created a so-called "S-fund" (S for "secret" or "special"), in which they included all the publications that could not be freely loaned by the readers. This fund included literary works, as well as technical-scientific texts, original and translated publications, books and periodicals – everything that the censors considered dangerous for the official ideology of the state. In most cases, these publications contained references to the fascist regime, to Germany or other Western states, anti-Semitic or anti-Soviet elements, religious or sexual connotations and even descriptions of some countries to which Romanians were banned to travel (many travel guidebooks were registered in the S-fund). The most eloquent examples of translated works included in this secret book fund are Winston Churchill's biography, entitled *My Early Life*, and Adolf Hitler's *Speech to the Industry Club in Düsseldorf* (January 1942).

Although the General Directorate of the State's Publications was officially dissolved in 1977 by Nicolae Ceaușescu, censorship outlived it in more insidious forms, promoted by those who should have combatted it: artists, publishers, translators, already indoctrinated with its principles and governed by the omnipresent fear of the regime.

The particular situation of translations in communist Romania reveals a truth about censorship in various oppressive systems. Subject to external pressures and aware of the strict limitations imposed by the political regime, translators combined institutional censorship, promoted by different repression institutions of the state, and self-censorship, determined by a multitude of factors, such as individual ideology, economic considerations, respect for the

authors or for the readers. In many cases, translation started to be used as an instrument against censorship and oppression, whilst in others it was the very tool that endorsed censorship, so translators could be seen either as heroes or as executioners of texts and authors, depending on the ideology they embraced, as detailed in the following part of the article.

3. From ideology translation to translation ideology

Translators embraced the concept of “ideology transmission”, which implied passing on the communist ideology – and the values it promoted – from one culture to another. They considered themselves the valuable instruments of this transmission and tried to do their job as professionally as they could.

Besides the ideology transmission, a certain translation ideology is born. Translation in the communist period is seen either as a means of propaganda, by bringing to the public’s attention those works that spread the ideas praised by the regime, or, in more fortunate cases, as an alternative to genuine creation. In Efim Etkind’s words, Russian poets – as well as other writers living in communist countries –, “deprived of the ability to express themselves completely in their original work, began [...] to converse with their readers in the language of Goethe, Shakespeare, Orbeliani, and Hugo” (Etkind in Bethea 2013, 92).

In other words, talented authors, who could not express themselves freely, chose to become translators and opted for the works of the classics, because those were the only literary creations that were not censored by the communists. In Romania, the best translations of the classical works of fiction and poetry were done during the communist regime by very gifted writers, such as Lucian Blaga, who translated Goethe in the 1950s, Marin Preda, who translated Camus in the 1960s, and Marin Sorescu, who translated Pasternak and Borges.

Generally speaking, translators in communism served two divergent interests: on the one hand, they helped the regime promote its ideology and suppress free, genuine creation by accepting to translate only those works that contained this ideology and, on the other hand, they spread the fame of the classics, by masterfully translating their works. Between these two directions, there is a grey area, in which the translator chose to translate a seemingly inappropriate work in such a way as to make it publishable, by suppressing some parts, rephrasing certain paragraphs or using puns that misled the censors, but were correctly understood by the well-educated readers. These

variables depended on the translator's linguistic and cultural skills, their moral values, their courage to take the risk of becoming a non-grata persona if their subterfuges were discovered by the repressive system, their literary talent, etc.

If we believe, like Mihail Bahtin, that "any man's verbal expression is a little ideological construct" (Bahtin 1993, 87), all these factors that create the individual ideology of the translator determine certain changes in the original work, as well as in the translation, and, at a certain point, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the text's ideology, the translator's ideology and the regime's ideology. Sometimes, translators themselves are not aware of the ideology they are influenced by, and they make their choices unconsciously, acting on the text based on their internalized principles related to what is sexually, politically, morally and religiously accepted by the official regime.

Such a particular case, in which the translator had been indoctrinated for so long that she did not even realize that the choices she made in her translations were wrong, is the one of Antoaneta Ralian, a famous translator of English literature and editor at Univers Publishing House during the communist regime. As she remembers in her memoirs, one of the most common targets of censorship was eroticism. The education people received in the communist schools was so pudibund that they were shocked by any sexual connotation they encountered in a book. Therefore, she, as a translator and editor, with the sword of censorship over her head, was aware that some erotic passages had to be omitted from translation, so she committed "the sacrilege of eliminating, eradicating from books every passage, line, word or allusion with an erotic connotation" (Ralian 2014, 154). Her confession illustrates the maniacal aspect of censorship, the obsession to suppress any allusion to sexuality and, at the same time, reveals the Romanian translators' tendency to self-censorship.

Although we are tempted to think that such practices belong to the past and the freedom of expression is nowadays a right guaranteed by the constitutions of all the democratic countries, there are a lot of new forms of censorship, determined by political correctness or fear of terrorism, as shown in the following section.

4. New forms of censorship

Nowadays, even in the most democratic systems in the world, we notice a revival of censorship, but not on the same grounds as in the oppressive regimes. Under the umbrella concept of political correctness, many

organizations of parents or teachers, racial, ethnic or sexual minorities militate for banning the publication of certain books – in original or in translation – because they consider them offensive from various reasons. For example, the famous work by Agatha Christie, *10 Little Niggers*, which was previously translated into Romanian as *10 negri mititei*, was later changed, for politically correct reasons, in both languages: *And Then There Were None* in English and *Și din zece n-a mai rămas niciunul* in Romanian.

A lot of “politically incorrect” books were excluded from the curriculum in many American state schools, for various criteria, such as racism, vulgar language, sexual connotations, violence, depiction of drug use, alcohol abuse or witchcraft. Among the books banned for their racist connotations and inappropriate language, there are famous novels like *Huckleberry Finn*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Gone with the Wind*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Although in the United States it is now considered a racist book and suppressed, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was used, in the Romanian translation, as a manifesto for the emancipation of the Gypsies. In 1853, it was translated by Theodor Codrescu and published under the title “Coliba lui Moșu Toma sau Viața negrilor în Sudul Statelor-Unite din America”, with a preface written by Mihail Kogălniceanu, who compared the situation of the Black people described in the novel to that of the Gypsy serfs in Romania and pleaded for the abolition of Gypsies’ slavery. The message of the Romanian translator, written in italics at the beginning of the book, to draw the readers’ attention, is that no nation that wants to be free can truly be independent as long as it considers freedom a privilege and not a principle. Due to both its literary value and to this association between the message of the book and the plea for freedom and independence, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is still one of the recommended novels in the Romanian secondary schools. Its most recent translation into Romanian was published in 2018 by Cartex 2000 and included in the collection entitled “The Smart Pupil’s Books”, as an incentive for children to read it.

Besides the novels with racist content, other books that have been eliminated from the curriculum of the American schools are those containing references to rebellious attitudes which might encourage children to disobey their parents or teachers. On the request of some parents’ associations, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s*

Nest were also suppressed. In Romania, they are still available in translation, but the tendency is the same, to consider them dangerous for young readers.

The most surprising proposals for banning in the USA are *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the *Harry Potter* series and the *Hunger Games* trilogy. George Orwell's novel was challenged in Florida in 1981 because it was considered pro-communist and vulgar, *Harry Potter* was perceived as promoting witchcraft and other occult practices and *Hunger Games* was "accused" of many "crimes", such as violence, offensive language, satanism and anti-family activism. Fortunately, all these novels are still present in the Romanian bookshops and libraries, both in the original versions and in translation.

This suppression of some books considered inappropriate for the Americans can be included in the phenomenon described as bibliocaust by Fernando Baez or libricide by Rebecca Knuth – the attempt of a political, social or religious system to destroy the written culture of a nation in order to control the individuals and the society. Translators are important factors in this process, as they can be manipulated and indoctrinated by the official ideology to refuse to translate certain texts or to mutilate them by omission and rephrasing.

Not only literary works have been the objects of bibliocaust. Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, many technical and scientific texts have been banned or withdrawn from publication in the US, for fear they might fall into the wrong hands and be used as sources of inspiration for creating lethal weapons.

The texts that are considered dangerous and, consequently, rejected by the technical and scientific publications are those that refer to the production of biological and chemical weapons. Over 6000 specialized documents about deadly viruses and bacteria, toxic substances and drugs have been banned since 2011, and current policies become even stricter, to withdraw more and more publications from circulation. This kind of censorship reflects the view that, although knowledge is power, certain types of knowledge may have destructive power.

The same tendency to censor the information considered potentially dangerous can be also noticed in the discourses held by various politicians on scientific topics. Even if the scientists provide them with a rational and well-documented perspective, the speakers prefer to present only the generally known facts, without getting into details, because there is a very thin line between the dissemination of objective arguments and the support for a certain

policy goal. For example, in 2009, the chairman of the UK's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, David Nutt, was dismissed from his position for saying in a discourse that cannabis, LSD and ecstasy were less harmful to society than tobacco and alcohol (Tran, 2009). Even though the scientific evidence supported his statement, his speech was regarded as an incentive to the consumption of drugs and was severely criticized. Since in Romania there are no major scientific breakthroughs in the fields of biology and chemistry, which could be hazardous if wrongly used, most published articles are translated from English, so the censorship in the original is preserved in translation.

This section of the article has shown that, although censorship is associated with the oppressive systems, it is still present in very democratic societies, being paradoxically used in the name of freedom, security and egalitarianism. As a result, translators have no other option than to modify the texts accordingly, in order to obey the same rules in the target language as in the original one.

5. Conclusions

Despite one of the fundamental principles in Translation Studies, according to which a translation should preserve the message of the source text, relying on completeness, cohesion and acceptability, there are numerous situations in which the translators, under the influence of censorship or self-censorship, modify the text, by omitting or rephrasing some parts of it.

The main agents and mechanisms involved in censorship have been described in accordance with the following criteria: the authority in charge with censorship (i.e. a state institution or an individual indoctrinated with the official ideology), the time when the text was censored (i.e. before, during or after publication), the degree of rewriting the text in translation (i.e. from mere replacements of words or phrases to a severe mutilation of the entire text), the system that has imposed censorship (i.e. an oppressive regime or a democratic society, in which the citizens decide what texts should be banned from publication) and the purpose of the translation (i.e. in most cases, to replace a previous one, which has been withdrawn because it did not comply with the official norms).

In communist Romania, it was difficult for translators to preserve their "invisibility", which Lawrence Venuti (Venuti 1995, 1) was talking about. A translated text that could read like an original text was hard to obtain, because

the translators, having in mind the principles of censorship and self-censorship, used to bring so many modifications to the source-text that finally it sounded very different from the original and bore the mark of their own style, not that of the author. For example, in Vera Călin's translation of *Great Expectations*, some equivalents are either purely Romanian and they cannot properly render the local specificity of the novel, namely the British Victorian atmosphere, or they are wrongly used false friends and the reader instantly realizes the translation is faulty: "cozonac de nuntă", instead of "tort al miresei", for "bride-cake", or "mizerie" for "misery", instead of "suferință" (Ghențulescu 2014, 427).

As far as eroticism is concerned, censored translations either omitted it completely or replaced it with "milder" versions of the original scenes. It is still unclear whether this approach was explicitly imposed by the official censorship institutions or was chosen by the translators themselves, who, as Antoaneta Ralian remembers, were so indoctrinated by their pudibund education that they perceived eroticism as something wrong, vulgar, unacceptable.

The distance between censorship and self-censorship is hard to establish, because the translators, put under the pressure of the strict norms initially imposed by the official repression system and then internalized, became agents of authority themselves and made their own less fortunate choices, thus turning sometimes into t(y)ranslators.

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