

Challenges to Literary Translation in the Age of Technology

Retos de la traducción literaria en la era de la tecnología

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ABSTRACT: The article outlines some of the challenges brought about by the advent of AI in literary translation. It argues that literary translators are threatened by the lack of discerning audiences whose taste for quality has diminished in the past twenty or thirty years. It claims that the biggest threat of AI is not that it would replace human translators in literary translation but the fact that it has taken over the area of commercial translation which used to serve as a source of supplementary income for literary translators.

KEYWORDS: translation; Czech literature; AI.

RESUMEN: El artículo esboza algunos de los retos que plantea la llegada de la IA a la traducción literaria. Sostiene que los traductores literarios se ven amenazados por la falta de un público exigente cuyo gusto por la calidad ha disminuido en los últimos veinte o treinta años. Afirma que la mayor amenaza de la IA no es que sustituya a los traductores humanos en la traducción literaria, sino el hecho de que se haya apoderado del ámbito de la traducción comercial, que solía servir como fuente de ingresos complementarios para los traductores literarios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: traducción; literatura checa; AI.

1. AI AS THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY?

The advent of AI in translation has been so quick that it has surprised many translation professionals. There has been an ongoing discussion for years about whether or when human translators can or will be replaced by machines. The technologically savvy claimed it would be very soon and that it would no longer be necessary for most people to learn foreign languages; others claimed that the future of translation would be a machine-human hybrid; still others were adamant that machines would never replace humans in literary translation.

For a long time, it was a commonplace belief that translation was too complex to be done by computers. In a study published in 2003, Doug Arnold thus says,

[t]ranslating is a many-faceted skill that goes well beyond mere competence in two languages. Roughly speaking, the job of a translator is to take a text in one language (the source language) and produce a text in another language (the target language) which is in some sense equivalent. Before we talk about why this is difficult, we should notice that translators are often asked to do rather more than this. In particular they are often expected to produce a text that is in some sense «good» in its own right — clear, unambiguous, interesting, persuasive, elegant, poetic, gripping, etc., according to the kind of text being translated. While this is understandable, it is clearly somewhat unfair, especially when one is thinking about trying to automate the process. It is one thing to ask a computer to produce a target text which is (in some sense) equivalent to the source text; it is quite another to ask the computer to make it *interesting*. (Arnold 2003, 119)

Let's leave aside, for the moment, the question of «equivalence», or, more precisely, the distinction between «semantic equivalence» and «dynamic equivalence». Indeed, computers fail to make translated texts interesting, but they are increasingly able to convey meaning. Much more than they did in the early days, when Arnold's article was published. The early versions of Google Translate were a joke. Now, the new translation tools using neuron networks are rather able. Or, to be more precise, they are very able in conveying meaning. And, let's admit it, most of the translation tasks — with the exception of literature, legal documents and some complex technical documentation — is about conveying a meaning.

For Arnold another issue is that:

[c]omputers are fundamentally just devices following rules, mechanically and literally, albeit with considerable speed and precision. Rule following can produce a kind of creativity, but not the kind of creativity required for these tasks. Coining a new piece of terminology is more a matter of inventing a rule than following a rule, and cultural mediation requires very sophisticated reasoning: one must be able not only to extract the meaning from a text, but also be able to think about what meaning a potential reader would extract. (Arnold 2003, 120)

On the other hand, in an increasingly globalised world, the terminology is very often just adopted or slightly adapted from English, so this is not so much of an issue.

The arrival of AI, or automation, is no different from the other times in history when human labour was replaced or, instead, relegated to other realms. «This view of the total organism of value creation opens up a different perspective on the limitations of automation. The abstract possibility of replacing certain work tasks with machines is juxtaposed with the increasing complexity of processes which require constant adaptation to changing environmental conditions», claim Florian Butollo and Sabine Nuss (Butollo and Nuss 2022, 6). The statement can be applied to translation: tasks done by machines may allow humans to use their potential in other ways.

The future has arrived, and it has many facets. All the three opinions were correct. In areas such as e-commerce, machines have taken over; in most areas, machines need humans not only as supervisors but also as engine drivers. In technical translation, for

instance, it seems now that the future will consist of a combination of translation memory, computer-assisted translation, and AI translation accompanied by meticulous (and responsible) human supervision. In literary translation, however, humans will continue to dominate — with some exceptions.

Major literary texts work with language on a creative and imaginative basis. It was T. S. Eliot who emphasised the crucial role of the poet in society as someone who saves language from the cliché. The best literary texts work creatively with language in a way that the machine translation can — at least for now — hardly cope with. AI translation tools, by their very nature of splitting texts into tokens to be rearranged on a statistical basis, cannot do justice to texts that work with language on an imaginative one. Yet, despite these limitations, AI can replace human translators in book translation. I will explore this in the following text, using, as a case study, the translations into my mother tongue, Czech. The Czech literary/translation market is somewhat peculiar and — precisely because of that, can serve as a good illustration of changes brought about by AI, or technology in general.

2. LITERARY TRANSLATIONS INTO CZECH IN THE PAST THIRTY YEARS

The peculiarities of the Czech literary market are easy to identify. It is relatively small (10 million speakers of Czech) and was, until 1989, severely limited by political constraints. The number and character of books translated from Western languages were strictly regulated, and this scarcity brought about huge demand for Western writers, namely those from England and the United States.

The change in social conditions in 1989 naturally brought changes in the book market, two of which were significant: the abolition of censorship and economic liberalisation. At this time, new publishing houses began to emerge, but only some of them managed to survive.

The publication of books was often very lively, and it was only natural to reach for texts that could not be published in the previous era, either because of the political unacceptability of the author or because of their content. However, this liveliness, however understandable and sympathetic, also had its flip side in the absence of editorial practice, both in the selection of titles and in the careful editing of translations. In an interview published in the specialist foreign literature/translation online media *iliteratura.cz*, one of the most widely respected Czech translator and editor, Eva Kondrysová recalls the earlier practice, under the Communist regime, of writing careful editorial reviews of individual books, and the selection of the translator already at the stage of writing the editorial review, «for each proposal, a so-called lecturer's guide was created, which was a folder where all the materials related to the book were stored. For example, when we had a book externally reviewed, these reviews came in this lecturer's guide». The editor in charge would then close the reader's guide with a statement as to why he or she was recommending the book for publication. The publishing plans were then approved by the Ministry of Culture, where they had to be defended by the editor-

in-chief. I remember once, our editor-in-chief fell ill and I had to go in for him. Before I went there, I had to promise him that I would just listen and not say a word. It was a very curious meeting because there were strange people sitting there. I had my own theory about it. In my opinion, whoever was put in charge of culture in the Party apparatus was good for nothing else and could only read and write. They were people who had no relationship to culture and books just bothered them. Moreover, they saw them as dynamite of possible trouble and would have preferred if nothing at all had come out. (Seibertová 2017). This has changed after 1990.

While the established publishing houses still followed this practice, many new ones did not because of a lack of professional expertise and the desire to make a speedy and easy profit. At the same time, the pool of English translators expanded considerably. Often, these were people whose enthusiasm far outweighed their skills and knowledge. Within ten years, the Czech literary market witnessed an explosion of translations from English, with a considerable hunger for previously banned authors among the reading public. Readers were often willing to concede their claims, grateful to finally get their hands on a book they had not been able to get their hands on before. It should be added that of those previously unavailable books, some have been published in excellent translations, such as Nabokov's *Lolita* and William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, to name but a few. On the other hand, a long line of those literally «killed» the book for the Czech market: for example, let us mention Don DeLillo's *White Noise*.

On the publishing scene, this buoyancy was supported by foreign agents and publishers, grateful that the books were reaching a new market. They had less regard for the quality of translation and editorial workmanship than they do today and were equally quite tolerant of overrunning publication deadlines. All this was to change dramatically in the period ahead.

After 2000, there was an inevitable convergence towards global standards. However, there are both positive and negative sides to this development. The positive side is undoubtedly the consolidation of the market, from which publishing houses that did not worry too much about production quality have disappeared (or are gradually disappearing).

The main problem, and the legacy of the 1990s, is the fact that most Czech readers in general got used to translations that were not excellent. This claim deserves a more detailed explanation. As mentioned above, the general reading public in the 1990s was hungry for books and authors who had been inaccessible before. Once these books and writers appeared in the Czech translation, they were often ecstatically hailed while little attention was paid to the quality of translation, mainly on the stylistic level. The best example is the work of the great English stylist Martin Amis, whose major works appeared in Czech in a somewhat distorted form.

This leniency towards poor translations was accompanied by a lack of criticism in the media (then still predominantly in the print form). This had two causes: the reviewers of books translated from foreign languages often did not know the language, did not read the original (and compare it with the translation) or lacked space to write

about the quality of the translation. Usually, comments on the quality of the translation were relegated to the end of the review and scratched when the space was lacking.

This had a devastating impact on the critique of translation, which had a rather fine tradition in Czech. This was caused by the fact that the Czech literary culture is mainly based on translation, as the father of Czech literary criticism, F. X. Šalda, noted at the beginning of the 20th century. The critique of translation has more or less disappeared from the mainstream media and has been relegated to a few rather specialised outlets.

The developments described above had a joint effect: they numbed the sensitivity of readers to poor translations. At the time, it just seemed unfortunate; the later development clearly demonstrated that it was precisely this that put literary translators at risk in future: competing with AI, the stylistic quality and accuracy is the only thing they have. When these things are no longer valued and appreciated, the skilled and qualified literary translators lose their value.

In «highbrow» literature, this is not that much of a problem. No one seriously thinks that AI-based tool could translate Bellow, Joyce, Carter or Morrison. But, then again, freelance literary translators seldom translate only highbrow literature. Often they make their living as translators of mainstream books. It is precisely in the latter category that they are most threatened.

Most of the freelance translators translated a mix of texts: literary texts of outstanding value, classic writers but also mainstream or even entertainment texts. In the latter category, publishers soon discovered that readers can accept even mediocre or below-the-average quality. Some of them, therefore, started to use AI-based translation tools and the resulting text was then heavily edited. Translators were left out of the chain.

3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

The future of translators in Czech is threatened by AI not technologically but rather socio-economically. At the moment I am writing this paper, there is currently a single translator in the Czech language who is a freelancer, i.e. translating is his sole source of income. Other translators of literature have other jobs and translation is their second or third job.

How has this happened? A part of the reason has been hinted at above. The desire, after 1989, has been felt both by readers and budding translators. The latter were willing to do the job under insulting terms for qualified or unqualified work.

They could do so because many of the translators who translated literary masterpieces had their second income from what we may call «commercial translations», i.e. texts that had little lasting value: guides, corporate communication, press releases etc. This combination created sustainable conditions — to a certain time.

The balance of commercial and literary translation has sustained three major blows. The first one was gradual: more and more corporate professionals were becoming fluent in English, making corporate communication translations redundant. The other two were sudden. The 2009 economic crisis led to a significant reduction in the volume of texts to

be translated, mainly press releases. And the swift arrival of AI-based translation tools cut down much of the PR translation materials.

All of a sudden, literary freelance translators found themselves at a loss. Once they lost the other easy source of income, they discovered they couldn't make ends meet. But, unfortunately, it was too late. The pressure on publishers to pay more for literary translations came at a time when the publishers themselves struggled financially. The dumbing of stylistic sense among most of the readers also meant that there was no (economic reason) for publishers to pay their translators better. The outcome is what has been briefly mentioned above: in Czech, literary translations ceased to be a profession and became a hobby.

4. POSSIBLE WAYS OUT OF THE CRISIS

It must be stressed that there are no easy ways out of this crisis, if any. In a small but a crowded market publishers want to minimize their costs and maximize their profits. And it is not just the big corporate publishers. Even small book outlets — the ones that could be called «independent» — opt for AI-based translation (in mainstream titles) to minimize their costs. It is not, however, only the literary translators who suffer, but also the reading public. A small «independent» publisher recently made an experiment. They had a book translated by the machine translator too DeepL and then edited. The outcome was quite dreadful. And it was not just because the machine translator was poor. Well, it was but the editor was even poorer. To make it seem more «human», she overedited. And the question arose: was it worth the hassle?

For some publishers, it is indeed worth the hassle. Editors (and proofreaders) are notoriously paid even worse than translators. It makes economic sense to save on areas that have little impact on the overall outcome. If readers fail to distinguish between excellent and poor translations, then there is little hope for translators.

The situation with literary translations got so out of hand that the only way out of this crisis — speaking about the Czech literary market — is long and arduous. It must start with proper care paid to education, namely in competencies such as reading and writing. Educators must teach their students about the true power of language: that in some instances clichés are fine because they make communication easier; but that in other instances they are not fine at all, because they reduce our human potential.

Without educated readers, however, there is no hope for literary translators. «Educated» and «readers» are both essential words: «Educated» meaning educated in language, communication, expression; i.e. readers who have extensive and profound experience with major texts of our culture: from the Bible to Dante to Boccaccio to Shakespeare to Austen to Woolf and beyond.

«Experience» is here the crucial word. In literary terms it is a translation: translating something lived into something written. Literary translation, consequently, is moving between an experience in one language into an experience in another language, plus adding some experience of the translator. This makes translations lively and readable. And it is precisely this that takes us to the core of the matter.

T.S. Eliot, whom I quoted above, famously claimed that it was necessary for everybody interested in literature to learn at least one foreign language perfectly: not to become a translator but to get to know another way of thinking. Because language thinks. It thinks for us and on our behalf.

AI-based tools, however, make the lived experience obsolete. Can language function without it? To a certain level, it can indeed. On a pure communication level it can indeed function very well. But it cannot function on the level which could tell us about our humanity and the mystery of mankind.

On the more practical level, more attention should be paid to stylistic shortcomings of every kind.

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