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An Original Perspective on Czech Translation Studies: A Comparison between the Theory of Otokar Fischer and that of Jiří Levý

Abstract

This paper compares the translation theories of Otokar Fischer (1883–1938) and Jiří Levý (1926–1967) and highlights the differences and similarities between them. It will be shown that the two scholars focused on similar issues and developed them in different ways, but with various points of contact. The first question to which both Fischer and Levý devote specific attention concerns the centrality of communicative functions, ideological and aesthetic values in the translation process and, therefore, the need to preserve them. Then, it will be shown how they both focus on the need to understand, interpret and translate what is not explicitly expressed, i.e. the subtext, the need to bring the words of the original text back to a prenatal stage, in which they existed only in the form of thought. It will further be highlighted that both Fischer and Levý place emphasis on the importance of translation as a work of art and means of cultural transmission and on the importance of the cultural education, taste and creativity of the translator. Finally, the issue of the dual norm of translation will be addressed: Fischer and Levý focus on what they believe to be the two fundamental requirements of a translation, i.e. fidelity and beauty, reaching different conclusions.

Keywords: translation studies, translation theory, Otokar Fischer, Jiří Levý, Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic, Central Europe

This study aims to show the evolution in translation studies in Central Europe. It will analyze the differences and similarities between the theoretical elaboration of two central figures in this discipline, Otokar Fischer and Jiří Levý.

First of all, it is necessary to remember that in the Czech context, before the birth of translation studies, specific attention has always been paid to translation, since the time of humanism when in 1513 Řehoř Hrubý z Jelení translated Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam's *In Praise of Folly* (1509) into Czech vernacular language with the title of *Chvála bláznivosti*: it was the first translation of such a significant work into a vernacular language.

Otokar Fischer (1883–1938) was a Germanist, comparatist, Bohemian studies expert, historian, critic and theorist of literature and theater, poet and playwright, and an excellent translator. Not only was his critical thought that of an outsider, but the complexity of his critical elaboration made the reception of his work less immediate. Fischer is known to be a pioneer in applying the concept of psychoanalysis to literary criticism¹. His personality reflected a symbiosis between artist and scholar, and, not surprisingly, he was both a skilled translator and a clever theorist in the field of translation.

Jiří Levý (1926–1967) was a Czech literary and translation theoretician whose internationally known work was crucial for developing translation theory in Central Europe. Considered the founder of Czechoslovakian translatology, he addressed a wider audience through his texts to help improve translation quality and foster the self-awareness and ethics of translators. His book *Umění překladau* (1963) is a milestone, it has been and continues to be a resource for all translators and translation studies scholars worldwide: its influence in the field of translation studies is still so strong and alive that this 1963 text was recently (2011) translated into English.

The comparison between the theories of these two scholars will start from the aesthetic premises.

First, Fischer's reflection occurs essentially on a literary level, avoiding a systematic theoretical elaboration of aesthetic premises. In this sense, it corresponds to a shift of attention from general aesthetic theory to the study of the artistic object, in other words, empiricism, common to the evolution of European aesthetics starting roughly from the second half of the 19th century. This shift is specified in the elaborations of Otokar Hostinský (1847–1910) and Otokar Zich (1880–1934), to then culminate and lead to further ramifications in the work of the structuralists (Cosentino 1999: 148–149). In particular, Otokar Zich developed a structural aesthetic theory containing ideas later elaborated by Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975), one of his pupils². Thus, Fischer, Hostinský and Zich prepared the ground for the younger structuralists, and their literary research is an essential point of reference in the study of the historical-cultural context in which Prague structuralism was established.

As far as Levý is concerned, Czech 'functional' structuralism is his theory's epistemological and methodological basis. Levý adhered to the principles of Prague structuralism, producing an open, dynamic and dialectic theory. Zuzana Jettmarová, the editor of the English edition of Levý's *Umění překladau*, defines Levý as a "structuralist of a special kind, he was a descriptivist but not western-positivist, he was a functionalist, not a formalist, and he was both a literary scholar and a linguist because the two branches of Czech structuralism—the aesthetic or semiotic branch and the linguistic branch – were integrated by functional stylistics, another specific Czech phenomenon" (Jettmarová 2011: XVIII).

There is therefore a continuity between Otokar Fischer and Jiří Levý's aesthetic elaborations: this finding explains why there are many similarities between two *apparently* contrasting translation theories.

It has to be remembered that for the first time in translation studies, Levý explicitly describes Otokar Fischer as a leading figure in Czech translatology in the first half of the 20th century. Although Fischer's influence and significance were known, Levý was the first to use the term "school" in reference to Fischer and his followers (Malý 2019: 69). Despite criticizing some of the tools used by what he calls "the Fischer school" (Levý 1953: 63–80), he argues that this is not an entirely correct definition, aware that "direct dependence on Fischer is evident only in a few younger authors, and that even within this group

1 Otokar Fischer wrote the first article on psychoanalysis in 1907, entitled "Sen a přání", which was published [in:] *Národní listy* on 07.26.1907; 1–2.

2 The concept of semantic figuration introduced by Zich is closely related to Mukařovský's concept of semantic gesture.

there are considerable individual differences”³ (Levý 1996: 212). Some commonly cited characteristics of the so-called Fischer school do not apply to Fischer himself; for example, applying some peculiarities of the Willamowitz substitution theory (Čermák 2017: 135). Therefore, the definition of “Fischer school” must be applied carefully, as it can easily be misleading.

Starting from the significance that each of the two scholars attributes to translating, some of the peculiarities of Fischer and Levý’s theoretical elaboration will be analyzed and compared below.

Fischer believes that “translating is a transversal activity arising from synthesizing scientific and artistic instinct. A translation cannot be equal to the original work in the true sense of the word because it does not bring essentially new elements; [...] because it does not shape life, but language” (Fischer 2014: I, 270)⁴. Therefore, translating, as an activity characterized by duality, should be collocated between science and art, on the border between two adjacent fields. Not only is dualism at the basis of Fischer’s entire work but also of his personality: he was a translator and a poet, a researcher into Bohemian and Germanic studies, bilingual (he had both Czech and German as native languages), and both Czech and Jewish (Cosentino 2018: 21). Translation is a “neutral zone” in which science and art can meet and merge, a territory in which they can take from the other what each of them lacks.

Fischer argues that a translation must be true, credible, like actors on stage (Fischer 2014: I, 271). At this point, it is possible to highlight a connection with the meaning that Levý attributes to translation: he elaborates the illusionist theory, according to which a work of literature needs to look like the original, like reality. Illusionist translators hide behind the original, as if they were presenting it to the reader directly rather than as intermediaries, just like actors in illusionist theatre, where the audience know that what they see on stage is not reality while demanding it has the appearance of reality (Levý [1983] 2011: 19). Readers of a translation, even if they are aware that they are not reading the original, require it to preserve the quality of the original, its values for the recipient, i.e. the distinctive or sociological functions of its elements (Malý 2012: 130).

Levý also states that “translation is communication” (Levý [1983] 2011: 23), so translators need to decode the message in the source text and encode it into their own language. The reader then decodes the message contained in the target text. Therefore, a work of literature can be defined as an encoded message: the linguistic code should be replaced, whereas the message should remain unaltered in translation. The text is only the channel through which the information, i.e. the message, is conveyed. Thus, it is vital to preserve the information. Translators must translate the source text’s *ideo-aesthetic* content and focus on the informative-communicative functions of source language elements to find the corresponding means in the target language that can perform the *same function*. A translation should produce the same artistic effect of the original text. However, this functional equivalence is not interpreted by Levý in the absolute sense (the same perceptions of the readers), but relatively, in the context (polysystem) in which the reader is embedded; Levý is interested in how these perceptions “work” in the whole relational system in which the reader operates (Svoboda 2018: 33–34). In this regard, Otokar Fischer adds that a translation cannot produce the same artistic effect with no damage to the original text (Fischer 2014: I, 267).

3 “Přímá závislost na Fischerovi je prokazatelná jen u několika mladších autorů a že i uvnitř této skupiny jsou značné individuální rozdíly”.

4 “Překladačství je pomezí činnost, jež vzniká ze syntézy pudu naukového a uměleckého. Originální tvorbě ve vznešeném slova smyslu nemůže se rovnat, protože nepřináší prvků v podstatě nových; [...] protože neformuje život, nýbrž jazyk.”

According to Levý, to translate the ideo-aesthetic content, translators need to reach beyond the text to identify the characters, situations and ideas that lie behind it, the imagined reality (Levý [1983] 2011: 34–38). Thus, a good translator must be, above all, a good reader because only a true reading of the text mediates its ideo-aesthetic values to the reader. Therefore, the translation process can be schematized as follows: source text – imagined reality – target text (Levý [1983] 2011: 34).

Identifying an author's ideological intention is the translator's greatest challenge, and considerable powers of imagination are required if the reader is to understand the artistic reality of the work in its totality. Grasping this is an essential pre-condition for a veracious translation, and this is why the gift of *imagination* is vital in translation: the main difference between creative and mechanical translators is that only creative translators can grasp the realities expressed in the source text, or, put otherwise, the *sub-text*. Another reason why vivid imagination is needed in the translator is to make the most appropriate choice among several available stylistic options. To cope with the great variety of expressive means and make a disciplined *selection*, translators must possess taste and self-discipline, avoiding introducing inappropriate stylistic expressions that may fail to respect the author's intentions (Levý [1983] 2011: 55). Here the concept of *subjectivism* comes into play: this is a negative risk factor (Svoboda 2018: 33), and translators must not succumb to self-projection when reading the source text. The aim is not to impose their own subjective tendencies but that of representing the original text's objective value as closely as possible (Levý [1983] 2011: 40). However, Levý also points out how "a translator who discovers a previously unrecognized aspect of the work or introduces a justifiable emphasis on a particular aspect may present a fresh view of the work" (Levý [1983] 2011: 44).

Another gift that translators need to have is a good sense of *style*, since an artistic re-stylization of the source is expected from them. "Practically, all translators [...] leave the stamp of their own stylistic tone on the work, and consequently their personal conception of it. Stylistic reevaluation should, however, not go so far as to distort the sense of the original. Above all, the translator should not impose his personal conception [...] on the original text" (Levý [1983] 2011: 47).

Generally, translators need to have a solid literary education. To be familiar with the environmental realia of the source, direct knowledge of the realities depicted in the original text is essential.

Fischer believes that there is a state of silence before each spoken word from which the word had to be born because it had to be transferred into audible, conceptual, and understandable speech. The aim of an ideal translation activity should be to remove the word that speaks to us from the finished work and bring it back to the prenatal stage in which it had not yet been verbally expressed. From this mysterious stage, the poet should create the translation in his mother tongue (Fischer 2014: II, 439). Fischer points to two particular characteristics that distinguish the translator: *tact* and *selection* (Fischer 2014: I, 272). The concepts of tact and selection can be linked to those of style, taste, and ability to make the disciplined selection formulated by Levý. As for tact, Fischer states that not even the most accurate translator can avoid inserting some element of subjectivity in the text, but it is necessary to assess whether these additions are in line with the spirit of the author of the original text, and whether they meet the interpretative requirement. Thanks to tact, the translator can avoid including subjective tendencies in the target text (Fischer 2014: I, 272).

The second principle, selection, is even more important: it is a matter of choosing the elements that have the major value and subordinating those that appear less important to the translator; it is a matter of prioritizing one expression over another. However, since there is no fixed rule and priorities

vary from case to case, translators must have an excellent and in-depth knowledge of the original text. They need to deepen everything that can be scientifically ascertained on the origin, composition, and meaning of the work to be translated, even if it is essential to avoid that the freedom of the new poetic creation is limited by pedantic erudition (Fischer 2014: I, 482). As a matter of fact, “translation is not a restriction of one’s own freedom, but rather a multiplication of it” (Fischer 2014: I, 277)⁵. Therefore, even for Fischer, translation is not a mechanical work, it is a *creative act*: the original text must be recreated starting from the spirit of the new language where it will have the value of a work of art (Fischer 2014: I, 268). Indeed, Fischer is convinced that a translator is a full-fledged poet, but the originality of his idea lies in the perspective’s reversal: it is the poet who must be a translator (Fischer 2014: I, 279).

So far, it has been shown that both Levý and Fischer, albeit in different ways, focus on the aesthetic values of the source text, on the apprehension and consequent translation of the sub-text, on the importance of the translator’s creativity, education, taste and ability to choose, on the concept of subjectivism in translation, on the idea of translation as a creative act.

Another issue on which both scholars focus their attention is the value of the translated work as a *cultural medium*. Levý argues that, since a translation carries its own specific cognitive values, it informs us about the original work and its culture. Moreover, translators have the opportunity to educate the readers and enhance their knowledge of foreign literature; a translated work becomes part of the literature written in the target language (Levý [1983] 2011: 69–70). Here the role of the reader acquires particular importance: a perfect translation requires “not only an ideal translator but also an ideal reader” (Levý [1983] 2011: 71). Translators can preserve national characteristics in a work in total or in part, according to the knowledge of the foreign culture that it is expected from the readers.

Fischer believes that the translation is a bearer of cultural value; it can reveal cultures hitherto unknown to the domestic readership. Thus, translators become mediators of two cultures, and the translated work becomes an integral part of the cultural heritage of the target language (Fischer 2014: I, 273–274).

Related to the cultural function of translation is the idea of the translated work as a *hybrid configuration*, full of contradictions: “the content of a translated work is derived from the source culture, but it is written in the target language” (Levý [1983] 2011: 67). The reader realizes this contradiction only when there is a clear conflict between the setting of the action and a specific target language expression. A fundamental contradiction is the temporal distance of older works; contradictions are also particularly clear in translation between two ethnically distinct cultures. In order to accomplish the translation, such contradictions need to be successfully resolved, so translators must reconcile contradictions arising from the hybrid nature of a translated work.

Fischer also refers to the hybrid nature of translation, but differently: he focuses, as already mentioned, on the concept of translation as a border activity between art and science. However, he too tends to reconcile opposites, translation requires a resolution of contradictions, and this can only be achieved thanks to what, as already said, are two characteristics of fundamental importance for the translator: tact and selection (Fischer 2014: I, 272).

Another question of fundamental importance is what Levý calls “the *dual norm* in translation” (Levý [1983] 2011: 60), that is, the reproduction norm (the requirement of fidelity) and the artistic norm (the requirement of beauty). In translation practice persists a contradiction between *fidelity* and

5 “I není překladatelství není omezováním vlastní svobody, nýbrž naopak jejím zmnožením“.

freedom; it is an aesthetic antinomy. The “faithful” translation method denotes the procedure adopted by translators whose aim is to create a precise reproduction of the source, whereas the “free” method denotes an approach seeking, above all, to achieve beauty to create an original work of art in the target language. When referring to *veracity* in translation, Levý believes this requirement does not entail a naturalistic copy of the original but the communication of all its essential attributes to the reader (Levý [1983] 2011: 61). When referring to *beauty*, Levý actually refers to artistic excellence, the aesthetic value of the translation as a work of the target national literature (Levý [1983] 2011: 64). However, it is necessary to notice that even though beauty and fidelity are often treated as opposites, they are not: this only happens when beauty is confused with superficial appeal and fidelity with literariness. Both attributes are indispensable, but Levý seems to lean towards the artistic norm when he states that “a translation must be as accurate a reproduction of the original work as possible, but above all must be a work of value in the domestic literature” (Levý [1983] 2011: 60). There is a continuing conflict between the contradictory positions of the faithful translator and the free translator. These are two different approaches: the first, i.e. the faithful one, focuses closely on what is *specific*, the second, i.e. the free one, on the *general*, preserving the general content and form and substituting the cultural and historical specificity of the source with the cultural and historical specificity of the target culture (Levý [1983] 2011: 84). There are both general and specific values inherent in a literary work. However, once again, Levý seems to tend towards the preservation of the general values by stating that “the work will suffer less from the loss of specific values than from the loss of general values, if only because the general is more closely bound up with the meaning, which it is the translator’s task to communicate” (Levý [1983] 2011: 88).

Regarding Otokar Fischer’s position on this question, Levý himself suggests that “Fischer insisted that a translation must be free to such an extent that it can be faithful” (Levý [1983] 2011: 59). It can be noticed that, once again, Fischer tends to reconcile contradictions. Even if he does not take an explicit position, he affirms that the translation must focus on the general, not on the specific (Fischer 2014: I, 273). In this regard, reference can be made again to his conception of translation as an extension of personal freedoms. As Levý recalls, the *substitution* strategy (i.e. replacement by a domestic analogue) is one gimmick used in free translation (Levý [1983] 2011: 86), which can only be considered where the specific meaning is wholly subordinated to the general meaning. Fischer often uses substitution and promotes a particular form of substitution known as *compensation*, based on the principle that since a literary work suffers inevitable losses in some respect, it must make gains elsewhere. Fischer believes that compensation is an ancient translation necessity; it is his distinctive feature. For him, it is always a way out of the emergency. His use of compensation is more or less linked to so-called untranslatability. He does not talk about compensation as a general method of translation at all. For him, it is always a problem created concretely and practically, *hic et nunc*, and the solution never derives from any general formula, but from the tact and feeling of the translator (Čermák 2017: 146).

Finally, it can be argued that they both believe that there is no definitive translation concept, a translation represents only one of the many possibilities; no translation is definitive, unsurpassable and irreplaceable.

In conclusion, it can be said that, unlike Jiří Levý, Otokar Fischer did little theorizing about translation. He always resisted accepting or creating a unified and binding literary-scientific method (Čermák 2017: 135). However, he provided profound and interesting reflections, thanks to which it has been possible to show how both scholars focused on similar issues and how they developed them: certainly in different ways, but with various points of contact.

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