

The “Third Language” in Translations from Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian

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Translators usually keep themselves quite busy getting texts from a source language into a target language. In this article I would like to mix it up a bit more and consider “third language” material, i.e., the presence in a work being translated of important words and phrases from a language that is neither the primary source language nor the target language, but nevertheless a stylistic component of the original. I restrict my remarks to the translation of artistic literature.

One frequently encounters loaned material in the major languages of Western Europe, e.g., Spanish, French and German, such as German *Tasse* (from French) or *Knowhow* (from English). Such material typically presents few dilemmas for the translator, especially where twentieth-century prose is concerned, because the Western European languages have more or less continually and unceremoniously absorbed foreign linguistic material as needed, and such material is only infrequently of socio-linguistic significance. I should point out that the previous statement is in fact a gross simplification, but we may accept it as a working assumption for the purpose of a comparison with the languages of Southeastern Europe, where the situation has generally been much different. The peoples of Southeastern Europe have in one way or another always existed on the periphery of empires and power centers: Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Venetian, Austro-Hungarian, etc. A byproduct of this existence has been a relatively high degree of loan words (and calques) in the languages of the Balkans. Limiting my consideration to Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian (BCS), I focus here on Turkish and German language material, which at various times and in various dialects and jargons has been pervasive, during periods of Ottoman rule in Serbia and Bosnia and Austro-Hungarian rule in Croatia and Bosnia (with considerable effects in Serbia as well). Native speakers of Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian have long been accustomed to the occurrence of Turkish and German loan words, due to the cultural pressure resulting in the loans in the first place and the concomitant widespread bilingualism. Though individual loan words may be unknown to individual speakers, they nevertheless do not experience them as something completely alien, i.e., they almost subconsciously “culturally situate” such material.

Without going into detail, I suggest that Turkish and German language material has been socio-linguistically important in Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian artistic literature because for native speakers it has been *powerfully evocative of the position(s) of the lands of the erstwhile Yugoslav state in world civilization*, relative to Western Europe (embodied mainly in German/Austrian culture) and the Near East (embodied mainly in Ottoman Turkish culture). It should therefore come as no surprise that Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian writers have frequently included large amounts of Turkish and German language material in their works, availing themselves of the considerable communicative potential that such expressions have on several levels. To name just two examples: the prose of Ivo Andrić contains so many Turkish words that editions of his works regularly contain glossaries at the end; similarly, Miroslav Krleža’s prose often contains a great many (corrupted) German words, necessitating the same kind of glossaries.

Such third-language material presents a problem for translators from BCS. Should it be kept as a distinct element, and if so, to what extent? One could probably make a

convincing argument for several positions. Mine is that an adequate translation of a literary text should attempt to imitate what I would call the “linguistic dynamic” of the text as experienced by the native readership, as long as doing so does not produce an overly negative effect on readability. Foregoing a detailed discussion because of limitations on space, I suggest that the relevance of third language material for the “linguistic dynamic” of a text can be assessed based on whether an (admittedly idealized) urban native speaker of Bosnian, Croatian and/or Serbian would understand it in its literal sense or not. (The inclusion of glossaries is a fairly strong indicator in this regard.)

I should point out that nearly all the translations of twentieth century prose that I have worked on have presented “third language” issues. In what follows, I discuss two very different approaches that I, working with Bogdan Rakić as a co-translator, took in response to the particular situations of two novels, Meša Selimović’s *Death and the Dervish* and Borislav Pekić’s *How to Quiet a Vampire*; this is followed by a brief discussion of the same issues in Miroslav Krleža’s *On the Edge of Reason*.

Selimović’s *Death and the Dervish* is set in eighteenth-century Ottoman Bosnia and contains a great many Turkish loan words (original editions also contain a glossary at the end). These words range from everyday terms such as *džam* ‘glass’ to Bosnian versions of all kinds of Ottoman Turkish administrative and religious terminology, e.g., *kadija* ‘judge’ and *ićindija* ‘afternoon prayer.’ Few of these words are understandable to non-Bosnians (though Serbian does have a fair amount of Turkish vocabulary), and many specifically Ottoman terms are outdated and incomprehensible to all but a few educated speakers of Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian. Thus, such words clearly contribute to the “linguistic dynamic” of the text, lending it its Ottoman Turkish/Bosnian historical “feel.” Aware of this stylistic aspect of the novel, we considered various solutions. We quickly decided that there was no point in including all Turkish words, e.g., *džam* ‘glass’ or *hurma* ‘date,’ as special items, since alternate terms for such ordinary items would add nothing to the English translation. On the other hand, getting rid of all Turkish words, including all Ottoman administrative and religious terms, would have resulted in many clunky, descriptive translations of historical and religious terms such as *muselim* ‘district administrator’ and *abdest* ‘Muslim ritual washing.’ We arrived at a very good compromise by using the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a standard, which in fact cites more anglicized versions of Ottoman terms than one might expect, and keeping Turkish terms included in the OED and translating those that are not. Thus, we kept *musellim* ‘district administrator,’ *dizdar* ‘fortress commander,’ *abdest* ‘Muslim ritual washing,’ etc., while translating *defter* ‘register’ *sevap* ‘good deed,’ *vaiz* ‘preacher.’ This approach allowed us to adhere to an established English standard while retaining the rudiments of the “linguistic dynamic” of the text, despite the fact that we reduced the overall number of Turkish words in the translation (we reduced 272 such terms in the original to 53).

Borislav Pekić’s *How to Quiet a Vampire* presents a very different case. The bulk of the narrative is set in Nazi-occupied Dalmatia, and typical of Pekić’s meticulously researched work, it contains many German words, such as *Generalleutnant* ‘lieutenant general,’ *Reichsminister* ‘minister of the Reich,’ etc. The most important of these are obsolete, distinctively German terms for ranks of SS soldiers, e.g., *Obersturmführer* ‘first lieutenant’ *Standartenführer* ‘colonel.’ Pekić sometimes used these terms, but also frequently replaced them with the Serbian term for the rank. At first blush there was no reason to do anything but translate the Serbian terms into English, e.g., *pukovnik* (=

Standartenführer) > ‘colonel.’ But there was in fact a problem. In the narrative, when superiors are addressed, Pekić used phrases with the salutation *gospodine* ‘sir’ in combination with the rank, e.g., “*Vrlo neobičan slučaj, gospodine poručniče,*” which translates literally as ‘A very unusual case, sir first lieutenant.’ In such cases, Pekić was following Serbian usage for addressing superiors, which seamlessly translates what the German usage would be: ...*Herr Obersturmführer*. The problem was that such salutations are not used in the Anglophone military tradition, in which any superior is ordinarily addressed as ‘sir’ without indicating his rank, so that the Anglophone military equivalent of the line above would be ‘A very unusual case, sir.’

In our view, there were two choices. We could simply reduce all occurrences of addressing superiors from *gospodine* [‘sir’] + *rank* to the Anglophone ‘sir.’ However, this solution had the negative effect of making the dialogue sound as if it were between American GIs and not the soldiers of one of the most infamously disciplined and hierarchically-spirited military organizations in history, the SS. We opted instead to consistently use the German SS ranks in the translation wherever they occurred in the original in either German or Serbian and to render Serbian *gospodine* ‘sir’ with German *Herr*. This amounted to an increase of the amount of German material in the translation, such as in the line given above, which ended up as “A very unusual case, Herr Obersturmführer.” However, it had the advantage of preserving the structure of military address in the original, which in our view contributed indirectly to the major theme of the novel, the destructiveness of totalitarian ideologies. Though we did add one or two specific ranks in German (e.g., *Hauptscharführer* ‘sergeant-major’), we did not insert any kind of German material into the translation that Pekić himself did not have in the original in various places (that is, we made a quantitative, but not qualitative adjustment in the German material). Further, as only half a dozen or so words were at issue, readability was not affected. It should also be pointed out that these SS ranks occur in various movies about World War Two in Slavic countries, so that the linguistic dynamic in our translation is not very different from that of such movies, which are intended for a popular viewership. Finally, anyone familiar with Pekić’s *oeuvre* is aware that he did not shy away from using all kinds of obscure words from a number of languages in his work. Thus, we considered our choice to be very much in the spirit of Pekić as a writer.

I should point out that we included a glossary of all unfamiliar Turkish terms in the translation of *Death and the Dervish*, and did likewise for unfamiliar German terms in the translation of *How to Quiet a Vampire*. Such glossaries are likely to be cumbersome in one way or another for all but the most studious reader; but regardless of the quality of these novels as art, they are unlikely to ever be huge sellers. In any event, they are necessary for translations that preserve the linguistic dynamic of the works. And as mentioned before, they reflect the precedent set in original works of Bosnian prose, which regularly contain glossaries.

A third case are the Germanisms in Chapter 9 (entitled “The Lamentations of Valent Žganec aka *Sock'em*”) of Miroslav Krleža’s *On the Edge of Reason*. This chapter, which was omitted from De Paolo’s translation, consists largely of a monologue by a Croatian peasant spoken entirely in Kajkavian dialect and is peppered with Austrian German military terms the character would have learned in his service in the Austro-Hungarian army in World War One, along with a few Hungarian words. Because of its Kajkavian dialect, the monologue is basically unreadable for the majority of speakers of

BCS, though the chapter is crucial for the novel as a whole. I have translated this chapter for use in my course on “South Slavic Literature and Civilization” at the University of Kansas, and not for publication. This is the one case of the three considered here in which I have included the third language material more or less exactly as it occurs in the original, i.e., around forty Germanisms and a few Hungarian words. The original spells the German words with BCS letters in their corrupted Croatian versions, e.g., *mašingver* (< *Maschinengewehr*) ‘machine gun,’ *gefrajter* (< *Gefreiter*) ‘private.’ It made no sense to keep the BCS spellings, but the items were included without German orthographical conventions, such as the capitalization of nouns, and with English plural markers, which approximates the way they were used in the original, e.g., *maschinengewehrs* ‘machine guns.’ Each item is footnoted with the English translation. This approach reproduces the linguistic dynamic of the original, and is very instructive for students who are focusing on the history and culture of the region. (I should add that the reading we do in my course of *On the Edge of Reason* including the chapters missing from the published translation is also a real eye-opener for students about issues of translations and to what extent they reproduce the original.)

Death and the Dervish, *How to Quiet a Vampire* and *On the Edge of Reason* are but three cases of “the third language”. But as I mentioned above, I have faced such issues in almost every BCS prose translation I have worked on. Recently, while translating Miljenko Jergović’s *Ruta Tannenbaum*, which is set in pre-WWII Zagreb, I encountered the phrase *u restauraciji K caru austrijskome*, in which the name of the restaurant is transparent as a literal translation of the German restaurant name *Zum Kaiser von Österreich*. Though I decided to omit the typically German preposition in the translation ‘in the *Kaiser von Österreich* restaurant,’ in my view keeping the German name reflects the cultural spirit of the original better than ‘in the *Emperor of Austria* restaurant,’ perhaps because *Kaiser* is a known term in English and because we are dealing with a proper name to begin with. Jergović’s phrase is an interesting contrast to the cases discussed above, in that the third language expression surfaces only indirectly in the phrasing of the source language (i.e., it has been calqued to produce an occasionalism).

To conclude, I think that “third language” phenomena are a real part of translating Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian prose works. Their preponderance reflects the historical development of the Balkans. Views on individual solutions will surely differ, and different translators will obviously have different preferences and needs. Based on my experience, however, it seems that when translating Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian literary prose the development of principled approaches to “the third language,” even if by necessity on a case-by-case basis, is an issue that one cannot avoid.