

# The Concept of Untranslatability in the Translation Theory of Early Czech Structuralism

## The Cases of Vladimír Procházka (1942) and Pavel Eisner (1938)

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### THE CONCEPT OF UNTRANSLATABILITY IN THE TRANSLATION THEORY OF THE EARLY CZECH STRUCTURALISM: THE CASES OF VLADIMÍR PROCHÁZKA (1942) AND PAVEL EISNER (1938)

Untranslatability, the word and the thing, appear frequently in the texts of the first period of Czech functional structuralism, from 1926 to 1948. According to the particular dynamic and systematic perspective observed by the authors of the Prague Circle, any text is always and in any case untranslatable, because it is impossible to transpose the set of functional interactions and correlations in which the original was imbricated. Indeed, untranslatability, in one way or another, has historically always haunted any theory of translation. During the classical period and also the during linguistic paradigm of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fact of essential inter- or intralinguistic untranslatability was either denied or tragically experienced as an irreparable loss. After the so-called cultural turn in translation studies, a shift occurred whereby untranslatability has come to be considered as a zone of emergence of creativity and generation of innovations. In this paper, I will focus on two articles written by V. Procházka and P. Eisner in order to examine how they can enrich the current conceptions of translation and evolution of literary systems.

#### KEYWORDS:

Untranslatability — theory of translation — Czech structuralism — Prague Circle

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### 1. DIVERSE TREATMENTS OF THE CONCEPT OF UNTRANSLATABILITY, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE LINGUISTIC THEORY OF TRANSLATION

Untranslatability, the word and the thing, appear frequently in the texts of the first period of Czech functional structuralism, from 1926 to 1948. According to the particular dynamic and systematic perspective observed by the authors of the Prague Circle, any text is always and in any case untranslatable, because it is impossible to transpose the set of functional interactions and correlations in which the original



was imbricated. Indeed, untranslatability in one way or another has historically always haunted any theory of translation. Or, rather, of the theoretical object that from a contemporary perspective is presented to us as translation, in accordance with Rita Copeland's assertion that translation does not exist as such, "it does not have an absolute trans-historical meaning".<sup>1</sup> However, it would be possible to make a certain demarcation on the basis of the way in which the different historical doctrines on translation have positioned themselves with regard to the fact of untranslatability. During the classical period and also during the linguistic paradigm of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fact of essential inter- or intralinguistic untranslatability was either denied or tragically experienced as an irreparable loss. After the so-called cultural turn in translation studies, a shift occurred whereby untranslatability has come to be considered as a zone of emergence of creativity and generation of innovations. In this paper, I will focus on two articles written by V. Procházka and P. Eisner in order to examine how they enrich the current conceptions of translation and evolution of literary systems.

To frame the discussion, I will begin with a brief description of the agoraphobic theorizations of the above-mentioned linguistic theory of translation, as a convenient element of contrast. To some extent, the linguistic theory of translation can be conceived as a transposition in terms of the Saussurean dichotomies of classical rhetorical conceptions of translation. The entire tragicism of the linguistic theory of translation stems from the fact that the two aspects turned out to be irreconcilable with each other. During its development, linguistic theory struggled to accommodate the rhetorical conception of language with the linguistic foundations of the Geneva master. The ultimate failure of the linguistic theory of translation and its replacement by a later paradigm was not only triggered from the outside, but also and mainly from within, due to its inability to resolve its constitutive contradictions.

Very briefly, the contradiction to which I refer consists in the fact that, according to the Saussurean theory, linguistic meanings are defined by a set of immanent internal relations, and are therefore untranslatable from one language to another (according to Saussure, "mouton" is not the same as "lamb", "bois" is not the same as "wood", etc.). On the other hand, for the rhetorical theory of translation, the act of translation consists essentially in the transposition of a universal semantic content from one linguistic clothing to another.

Faced with this irresolvable contradiction, the authors belonging to the paradigm of the linguistic theory of translation were forced to adopt two different positions: either they struggled to preserve the Saussurean untranslatability of meaning, or they simply abandoned it and embraced different kinds of linguistic idealism, abandoning at the same time the very foundations of modern linguistics and plunging into an archaic consideration of the relations between language, mind and nature. Georges Mounin or John Catford can be considered representatives of the first direction; Roman Jakobson, Eugen Nida or John Newmark, of the second.

The heightened problematic awareness that Mounin and Catford exhibit in their work may come as a surprise to students who know their work only from compendia or scholarly textbooks. Mounin indeed fully realizes the error implicit in regarding

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1 Copeland 1995, p. 222.

language as a “repertoire of labels” and the world as a “storehouse of objects”.<sup>2</sup> He even exposes with all clarity the destructive consequences of modern linguistics for the possibility of translation of isolated semantic contents:

Words do not necessarily have the same conceptual surface in different languages [...]. Contemporary linguistics has indirectly called into question both the legitimacy and the possibility of translation, by undermining in another way the traditional notion of meaning [...]. The theoretical problems of translation can only be understood, and perhaps resolved, if we accept —instead of avoiding, denying or ignoring— these facts that seem to destroy the very possibility of translation [...]. No theory has ever gained anything by denying the facts that hinder it.<sup>3</sup>

Catford, for his part, in the “Meaning and Total Translation”, the fifth chapter of his seminal book *A Linguistic Theory of Translation*, demolishes the system he constructs everywhere else, with the taxonomic frenzy characteristic of the period, overthrowing the very basis of the equivalence principle and proving beyond any possible doubt that the idea of transfer of meaning from one language to another is a “fallacy” and an “untenable” position:

In terms of the theory of meaning which we make use of here [...], the view that SL and TL texts have the same meaning or that “transference of meaning occurs” in translation is untenable [...]. This implies [...] that there is some pre-existent message with an independent meaning of its own which can be presented or expounded now in one “code” (Russian) now in another code (English). But this is to ignore the fact that each code (i.e. each language) carries with it its own particular meaning.<sup>4</sup>

In opposition to this problematic insight, Roman Jakobson’s oft-cited contribution to the initial shaping of the discipline of translation theory, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (1959), has the character of a particular blindness bent on “avoiding, denying, or ignoring” its own deconstructive underpinnings. At the beginning of his article, Jakobson seems to strategically assume the conceptions of structural linguistics: “The meaning of the word [...] is definitely [...] a linguistic fact”.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, on this account, the meaning of words is exclusively differential and necessarily untranslatable. However, as is well known, for Jakobson this initial recognition functions only as a springboard to leap over the difficulties and plunge into the zone of Platonic concepts: “All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language [...]. No lack of grammatical device in the language translated into makes impossible a literal translation of the entire conceptual information con-

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2 Mounin 1963, p. 23.

3 Ibid., pp. 27, 41, 58 and 72.

4 Ibid., pp. 35–41.

5 Jakobson 2002, p. 144.



tained in the original".<sup>6</sup> Again, in this paper, I am not concerned with whether this is true or not. I merely point out that this statement is foreign to the premises of modern linguistics and betrays a kind of universalism disdainful of the fact of cultural difference that renders it incompatible with (and useless for) contemporary conceptions stemming from the cultural turn.

In the same vein, but with much greater brazenness regarding the ideological implications, the translation theories of Nida and Newmark can be seen as colonial and xenophobic devices for the elimination of difference, firmly anchored in the idea that semantic content is always unique and identical: "I assume that when all societies reach a similar stage of health and well-being, there will be the same basic universal metaphors, consequently easing the translator's task [...]. Thus, boue, koto, fango, mud, will have the same connotations in every language".<sup>7</sup>

The displacement and substitution of the linguistic paradigm by the so-called cultural turn in translation studies, according to Thomas Kuhn's descriptions, does not mean the resolution of the problems that the former tried to solve, but rather their neglect and their replacement by other, no less unsolvable, problems. Within the lines of descriptive translation studies, the theory of polysystems, deconstruction, postcolonial studies or feminist studies, "untranslatability" still appears, it is still a component of the discourses on translation, but now it occupies a completely different discursive position. Briefly put, untranslatability is stripped of its drama, it is no longer a fundamental tragedy that threatens human communication, but, on the contrary, it is advantageously put forward as a positive and enriching aspect. This is also the transfigured return of something ancient, but of a different antiquity.

## 2. THE PRINCIPLE OF "SIMILAR FUNCTION" IN VLADIMÍR PROCHÁZKA'S "NOTES ON TRANSLATION TECHNIQUE" (1942)

The translation theory of Czech functional structuralism is contextualist, relativistic, attentive to the multiplicity and internal stratification of systems at all relevant levels of analysis, from the macro-components that organize artistic communication more broadly (genres, trends, styles, etc.) to the textual elements (phonetic, lexical, rhetorical, etc.). Again and again, the texts of the Czech authors abandon any prescriptivist principle (the idea that there is only one correct translation). Instead, they adopt a general orientation attuned to the historical plasticity and variability of translations, forging a critical vocabulary of analysis of this variability that has not been sufficiently exploited so far.

When confronted with the question of how to translate a particular text, a particular passage or a particular procedure, the answer is invariably: it depends on the specific functions. František Novotný, in the article "On the Translation of Plato's Philosophical Language" (1935), regarding the appropriate translation of one specific term, the word "logos", states: "There is no other solution than to translate the word *logos* with different Czech words, according to the particular meaning it has in each

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6 Ibid., p. 147.

7 Newmark 1988, p. 88.

place”.<sup>8</sup> V. Mathesius, regarding the proper translation of the rhetorical figure of “violent enjambment” in poetry, states: “Compared with free enjambment and with lines without enjambment, violent enjambment is always abnormal, but the reasons for its use and thus its function may be different. Sometimes it is an expressive means employed deliberately with a view to achieving a particular aesthetic effect, sometimes it simply appears out of necessity”.<sup>9</sup> R. Wellek, in “The Translator’s Task” (1935), elaborates further in the same direction:

It is not possible to establish a general rule about the acceptability of paraphrasing, since each work demands its own style of translation and each detail must be extracted from a certain context. Translation must start from a careful consideration of the author’s style and the different stylistic layers, of what the author actualizes and what he actualizes in a deliberate manner, and only when these fundamental questions are resolved can one reflect on the stylistic layering of the translation, which *must have a similar function to that which it has in the original*. That is to say, not a mechanical translation, sentence after sentence, but a translation that starts from the whole and then endeavors to determine the *function of individual components within its construction*.<sup>10</sup>

In all cases translation requires taking into account the concrete insertion of textual elements in their relevant functional contexts. The key formulation here is that of “similar function”. On the basis of the notion of similar function, a concrete translation is not obliged in principle to preserve the lexical material, the syntactic construction, the rhetorical contexture, or the semantic content as such. It is obliged to preserve them to the extent that these elements acquire relevance and visibility, i.e. stand out in relation to the respective context. To put it in structuralist terms: if they belong to the structure of the work, if they have a structural function. To use contemporary critical vocabulary, it could be said that translation is not translation of “something”, but of a “relation”, and most often, in the case of literary texts, a relation of violence and deformation. For this reason, it is necessary to take into account both the relationships of the work with respect to the original context as well as the set of relationships of the work with respect to the —constantly dynamic and evolving— target context.

To illustrate the functioning of the principle of similar function, I will turn now to Vladimír Procházka’s article “Notes on Translation Technique” (1942). Due to its relatively late date, this article has a compendious and somewhat compilatory character of the Prague School’s translational doctrine, serving as a sort of theoretical manifesto which gives articulation to a good part of the dimensions worked out previously in the form of a unitary system. In particular, I will be interested in the emphasis placed on the idea of untranslatability, the impossibility of preserving the set of correlations implicit in the original, and the bias given to this idea towards a potential for cultural as well as literary innovation.

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<sup>8</sup> Novotný 1935, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Mathesius 1942, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Wellek 1935, p. 63, emphasis added.



From the outset, Procházka proclaims that translation theory “must be based on the structuralist theory of the Prague School”.<sup>11</sup> This means first of all the application of a functionalist point of view: “it is only possible to solve the technical problems posed by translation if we take the function of translation in literature as our starting point”.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, according to Procházka, it is the Czech structuralist doctrine that has succeeded in promoting translation to the status of an object of scientific research. Until then, translation studies languished as a pre-scientific discourse, focused on the making of hand-crafted or merely empirical rules. This is — Procházka suggests — all the more regrettable since translation plays a fundamental role in the life of cultures, and Procházka even points out the originarity of translation in the shaping of cultures: “It is surprising that the function of translation has not been elaborated on theoretically, especially if we take into account the enormous influence that translation has had and continues to have on the culture of all peoples. For, if we leave aside the case of the Greeks, all the cultures surrounding us have had their origin in the translation of foreign texts”.<sup>13</sup>

According to general structuralist epistemological postulates, translations can only be adequately studied as functional facts of the target cultures: “According to the Prague School, every linguistic phenomenon can be assessed exclusively according to its suitability for a certain purpose”.<sup>14</sup> One result of this is that it is impossible to establish principles and criteria of general validity, universally applicable to all translations. In particular, for Procházka, this is a refutation of traditional dichotomies such as the opposition between free translation and faithful translation or translation *ad sensum* and translation *ad verbum*:

From this general formulation alone, it is clear that the usual judgements that evaluate translation according to whether it is “free” or “literal”, “fluid” or “rough” do not go to the root of things and do not even make proper sense. Sometimes it is necessary to translate more freely, sometimes less freely, sometimes almost literally. What is decisive is that the translation of a certain element is appropriate in relation to the overall structure of the work [...]. *The fundamental question is how and to what extent the original discourse is deformed and whether the translator has given the discourse an analogous disposition against the background of the literary language into which he is translating.*<sup>15</sup>

Literary works do not exist in isolation, nor do genres, epochs or national literatures, but have contrastive and relational significance. Literary works arise from and are determined by a set of relations that constitute the systems in which they are inscribed. In order to be perceived as literary, a work exerts a certain deformation or transgressive displacement in relation to a given contextual positioning. If a literary work simply confirms or validates the dominant conventions of the time, it does

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11 Procházka 1942, p. 1.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., p. 3.

15 Ibid., emphasis added.



not achieve perceptibility as literary. In this respect, Czech functional structuralism follows the principle of deautomatization set in motion by Russian formalism. This deformation can affect any of the components that enter into the historical configuration of the literary code: phonic, lexical, syntactic, thematic, etc., bearing in mind that any shift in one of the points inevitably affects the mutual correlation between all the elements. In turn, the translation of the work into a different language and a different system must effect “an analogous disposition against the background of the literary language into which it is translated”, and must therefore provoke an aesthetic sensation of displacement that is in some sense equivalent to the dominant domestic codes. It follows, firstly, that any translation must start from a thorough historical analysis of the set of constitutive relations of the original context (“dynamic archaeology”). Secondly, that any (literary) translation must be deautomatizing or estranging in relation to the dominant codes in the domestic system. It is not possible to establish strict dichotomies that would make it possible to foresee in advance the concrete outcome of the translation; it will always depend on the functional interplay of interests and needs and the set of interactions present in each specific case, which may lead to multiple results.

In his article, Procházka presents several practical examples of translations that have either succeeded or failed in this goal of deautomatising relations in the target systematic context. One of them is the play *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767), by G. E. Lessing, by two different Czech translators belonging each to two successive historical contexts, the last years of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. First, Procházka identifies the structural dominance of the work and its relation to its original context. The innovative and properly revolutionary feature of Lessing’s play in relation to the situation of the theatre of his time, the particular deformation to which it subjected the dominant conventions, was the introduction of colloquial language on the stage. The characters express themselves not in accordance with the conventions of elevated speech but with a type of speech that attempts to imitate the resonances of everyday bourgeois language (although, as Procházka explains, this generates nothing but another literary convention, no less artificial than any other, and itself susceptible to automation). The translation of this work must entail the transposition of this innovation or deformation with respect to its original context, with the means available in the artistic language of arrival, and taking into account the set of conventions existing in the target context. Indeed, Procházka is aware that such a transposition, understood in such terms, must be deemed as properly impossible:

If we analyze how both Czech translations have tried to rearrange the stylistic construction of the play, we must ask ourselves the question of the function of translation. *Mina* is the first German comedy in which an attempt was made to make colloquial language resonate on the stage. This extraordinary situation, this inauguration of a new theatrical epoch, cannot be completely preserved. In the present epoch filled with plays using conversational language, this novelty cannot be expressed.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 7.



Translation of the function is equivalent to translation of the “novelty” here. In many cases this can be a practically impossible task, the precise innovative character of Lessing’s work is extremely difficult to translate into the concrete situation of the Czech theatre of the periods indicated. In a very concrete way, the difference that stunned the original audience can no longer be reproduced at a time when the use of colloquial language has become a common and dominant procedure in the local theatre scene. According to Procházka, what needs to be translated is not the successive semantic content of the sentences that make up the original, but the relationship, the way in which the work displaces or deforms the dominant artistic languages of its time. Translation is therefore necessarily a productive and “reinterpretative” activity that must transpose, with a wide margin of freedom, the original violence in terms of the languages and reciprocal tensions existing in the field of arrival.

As a matter of fact, this is what both Czech translators have managed to achieve, each in a different way, and that is why their translations should be considered valuable: “The translator had to come up with a reinterpretation of the work that would make it resonate on the stage with a new accent”.<sup>17</sup> The translation of an artistic work, as a consequence of its very impossibility, must be a “reinterpretation”, and therefore necessarily always a new work. Translation is creation or transcreation, an imitation that generates novelty. Translation as reinterpretation essentially involves a new form, a new verbal “artifact”, it does not relate exclusively to the structure of the original work (reproduction) but through its movement of displacement generates something previously non-existent and which can in turn prolong its energetic effects, both in its context of arrival and in other contexts, including the context of the original work itself.

As we have mentioned above, Procházka is drawing from postulates previously established by the authors of the Prague Circle. According to J. Mukařovský, in his article on the translation of V. Shklovsky’s work into Czech (1934), a translation must always function according to a “double vision” and be able to bring into play the difference between two cultural spheres with different dominant conventions, from which certain modifications are derived.<sup>18</sup> A few years later, in his analysis of the anthology of modern French poetry published by K. Čapek, Mukařovský argues that translations often have a “reproductive” function, and thus make known in one linguistic area contents from another, but in some cases they succeed in exerting a “transformative influence” (*přetvářející vliv*), which leads to unexpected, disruptive transformations in the local poetic system.<sup>19</sup> According to V. Jiráť, the two translations of the libretto of Lorenzo da Ponte’s *Don Giovanni*, both published in Prague in the same year of 1825, exhibited two different orientations each related to trends present in the local system: one with musical dominant turned towards Romanticism, and the other with semantic dominant aligned with the emerging Biedermeier tastes.<sup>20</sup> According to F. Vodička, in a later text, literary works are not only subjected to reinterpretations and deactualizations when they penetrate different contexts, but could even

17 Ibid..

18 Mukařovský 2000, p. 56.

19 Mukařovský 1936, p. 108.

20 Jiráť 1938, p. 202.



contribute to the generation of a previously non-existent literary system: the case of the translation of R. de Chateaubriand's *Atala* by Josef Jungmann in 1805, considered as an instrument of national struggle against Habsburg colonial domination.<sup>21</sup>

In all these cases we observe the functioning of an overcoming of the exclusively linguistic consideration of translation, i.e. the idea that translation consists in the transposition of discrete semantic contents from one language to another. Structuralist authors engage in the description and detailed analysis of the historical variability and cultural entanglement of translation. To a large extent, they abandon the consideration of translation as an exclusively secondary or imitative phenomenon in order to grant it broad innovative significance. This recognition is not at odds with the recognition of the impossibility of translation; on the contrary, it is explicitly based on the postulate of essential untranslatability. From a functional perspective, translation is an interpretative force, appropriating texts and displacing or transforming them in ways that are potentially new and create unforeseen meanings. Translation has liberating potentialities, it can generate hybridism and new spheres of articulation of signification, but with the precision that no general scheme of analysis can be applied to all these rewritings, but that they must be considered "in each particular case", in the intertwined set of forces and tensions in which they enter each time in prismatic concurrence.

### 3. LANGUAGE AS "VIOLENT ABBREVIATION" IN PAVEL EISNER'S "ON UNTRANSLATABILITY" (1938)

The notion of untranslatability can be seen as the instance that encapsulates the understanding of cultural difference and of translation as a mediation between cultures that a particular translational doctrine embodies. The outright refutation of untranslatability in classical and linguistic translation theory stemmed from the universalist conviction of the existence of a single meaning, refracted in different ways in different languages, but essentially recoverable in its inherent sameness. Universalism as well as relativism can also have both progressive and liberating, as well as repressive and uniformizing declinations, depending on the concrete situation of the historical values and practices into which it enters as an integral component. The particular way in which the concept of untranslatability appears and is brought into play in the texts of the Czech structuralists departs resolutely from the idea of loss, and focuses rather on the pole of original productive interference, just as it does in theoretical zones such as German Romanticism and contemporary postcolonial theory. In general, untranslatability is recognized as an essential feature of language, as the given situation in which we always find ourselves already placed, and as a productive and enriching quality of transfers between systems, in directions of cultural innovation that are properly unexpected beforehand. Possibly, the text in which this topic is most comprehensively and persuasively elaborated is Pavel Eisner's article "On Untranslatability" (1938).

Eisner builds his conception on Mukařovský's aesthetic theory and Sergei Karcevski's notion of the "duality of the sign" (1929). Languages are mutually untranslatable

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<sup>21</sup> Vodička 1948, p. 131.



for many reasons, but above all for reasons of two different orders: 1) because of the internal constitution of the sign, 2) because of the relations between linguistic sign and reality. As far as the first type is concerned, for Eisner languages are constituted at their material base by a set of bodily and physiological relations, due to a phonocentric radicalization of the focus on the elocutive component of verbal material: “There are many untranslatable things, and they all stem from the original fact that every language is an autonomous system. It is a system of sibilant, hissing, guttural, lisping, barking, and any other kind of tones and noises, which are generated quite grotesquely in the space between the teeth, the palate and the tongue”.<sup>22</sup> The material sounds that make language up are conventionally linked to certain symbolic meanings, which adequately serve the purposes of everyday communication. However, “beneath these purposes flows an irrational semantic stream, interwoven in the bundles of sounds and noises, and these bundles are different in each language. This means that the semantic sensations, the semantic vibrations and evocations produced by these bundles are different in each language”.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the least that can be said is that already in these initial formulations we abandon the Saussurean conceptions of the sign as a univocal correspondence between signified and signifier and we are entering a different semantic conception of meaning as an unpredictable emergence, as an immanent vibration that drags the world along with it. Each linguistic — and hence cultural — system is a particular sound resonance of the world, located first and foremost in the body of the speakers.

As for the second type of reasons mentioned, referring to the relations between language and reality, for Eisner isolated words are “violent abbreviations”, abstractions to refer to a set of aspects, relations, modes, traces, etc., taken from the infinite variety of the world: “each word is, as far as its symbolic meaning is concerned, an arbitrary cut-out, a singular perspective, a violent abbreviation, a unilateral perception, an eliminating abstraction”.<sup>24</sup> Each of these abbreviations makes it possible to apprehend as a unit a dispersed set of elements that in reality are scattered or intermingled with others. According to Maurice Blanchot’s Orphic metaphor, language does not refer to the world, but inevitably effaces it at the very moment of its enunciation. However, it so happens that these associations and groupings are necessarily different in each language. In each language these selections and provisional crystallizations are established according to a certain diverse “perspectivistic and existential dominant”.<sup>25</sup> Here the notion of linguistic dominant comes to mean something like a particular way of self-giving of the world, a particular way of visibility or openness of the world in its encounter with man.

Undoubtedly, Eisner’s text is one of the most original and consequential in the corpus of articles on translation theory published in the journal *Slovo a slovesnost* — the journal of the Prague Circle — during the 1930s and 1940s. This is because the semiotic and functional bases of structuralist theory are combined with a series of philosophical influences that are not difficult to discern, from phenomenology to Ni-

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22 Eisner 1938, p. 231.

23 Ibid., p. 232.

24 Ibid., p. 231.

25 Ibid.



etzscheanism and Heideggerian hermeneutics. But in any case, it cannot be said that he abandons the theoretical premises of Czech structuralism, although he does take them to a certain extreme. According to Eisner, in an admirable passage, the essential fact of interlinguistic untranslatability imposes the obligation of creative translation. All translations inevitably lose nuances and semantic correlations that were implicitly carried over within the original work. The translator's task is therefore to "translate with the greatest possible freedom", to make the target language resonate with a set of resonances which, although specific to it, awaken a similar "differential sensation":

In short, what I have tried to say is that each word is an abbreviation or an abstraction, and these abbreviations are different in each language. Every language is a forest of metaphors, and in every language this forest has different vegetation [...]. The interaction of all these facts results in the undeniable and desperate truth that everything or practically everything is untranslatable [...]. This is the height of the translator's desperate pessimism [...] However, there where the danger grows, there grows also the organic word that comes to our salvation. And this word is the song! If it is not possible to repeat what the author said in his original language, the only solution left is to sing in its place, to create a new work! [...].

From everything I have said about the impossibility of translation, it follows that the obligation of translation is to be as free and autonomous as possible. According to this concept, translation is a process of linguistic creation which, in order to replace an impossible model, provides a possible compensation, a paraphrase, a possible counterpart. Of course, this implies the loss of a multitude of stylistic and aesthetic values. But it is all about replacing these losses with a linguistic creation, as full and flourishing as possible, from the springs of our own language. To put it in the most sober way possible: it is necessary to translate as freely as possible [...]. Translation is a recreating and transforming deformation.<sup>26</sup>

According to the author's dual perspective throughout the article, which involves both the linguistic system and the cultural system as intimately intertwined, it can be concluded that the notion of cultural translation advocated by the Czech authors could be linked to contemporary notions, such as Homi Bhabha's "third space".<sup>27</sup> This influential notion of translation of the untranslatable and the radically alien necessarily problematizes the conception of cultures as stable and homogeneous spheres, clearly differentiated from each other, in order to advance a notion of cultures as ceaselessly worked by internal difference. The constitutive moment of translation involves the introduction of radical novelty as a dimension to which cultures are constantly exposed. Translation is a certain "work on the boundary" through which new forms (linguistic, political, experiential, bodily) emerge into existence: "the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 236–238.

<sup>27</sup> Bhabha 2004, p. 41.



continuum of past and present. It creates the sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation [...]. It is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative inventions into existence".<sup>28</sup> In a certain sense, all this means that we do not know what the future holds, just as we do not know what layers of the past will become legible in a future configuration. Be that as it may, to my mind, the elaboration of this dangerous dimension of translation, as a potential disruption and collapse of all the stabilities that we inhabit at each time, is one of the achievements of contemporary translational thought.

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28 Idem, pp. 10–12.