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Translations, Retranslations, and Multiple Translations: A Case for Translation Variance Studies

The cluster of three related articles offered here represents what the authors propose to call “translation variance studies,” or TVS, a subfield of translation studies concerned with semantic, pragmatic, and stylistic equivalence and divergence between a single source text and its multiple translations into a specified target language. Multiple translations of a single source text into a single target language have become a widespread phenomenon. Its “ontological basis,” as Anna Muza recently observed, is “*variability of solution within the target language.*”¹ All parties to translation must of necessity negotiate this variability of solution, beginning with the translator in the act of generating a single target text, a process that consists largely in formulating and assaying multiple solutions for a given segment of the source text and finally selecting an optimal one. The algorithm of selection decisions by which a given translator or school of translation tends to operate could be termed the general *poetics* of that translator or school. The concerns of TVS are prominent in linguistically rigorous comparative translation criticism, that is, criticism that reconstructs or “reverse engineers” multiple poetics of translation from multiple target texts and assesses their relationship to the linguistics and stylistics of their common source text. Translation variance likewise figures in diachronic studies of the “tradition” of successive translations of given source works, authors, and even entire national literatures into a given target language and its literary tradition.² TVS is of direct relevance to instructors of translation and interpreting as well, and has natural interdisciplinary affinities with comparative linguistics, comparative literature, cultural studies, psychology, sociology, communication studies, semiotics, and media studies.

¹ Discussion during the panel “Lost and Found in Translation” at the 48th Annual Southern Conference on Slavic Studies, Gainesville, FL, March 26, 2010.

² Prominent examples of such studies for the English translatorly tradition are Oliver Classe’s *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English* (Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000) and Peter France’s *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

The articles that follow highlight distinct dimensions of TVS, but all unfold from comparative “interlinguistic” semantic, pragmatic, and stylistic analyses. Timothy Sergay’s article sets a brief critique of multiple recent retranslations of Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time* within a metacritical essay on the rhetoric surrounding the current “great cycle” of English translations of classical Russian literature, a cycle of retranslation. He takes the technical deficiencies and overratedness of certain recent retranslations of Russian classics as an occasion for reconsidering the opportunity costs and the diminishing cultural returns of multiple retranslations of frequently translated works. Next, Stephen Pearl offers a detailed account, at once analytical and highly personal, of his decision as a practitioner to retranslate Goncharov’s novel *Oblomov* (Bunim & Bannigan, 2006). He reviews many policy issues of the provenance and “vintage” of English required to improve on the previous (1954) translation by Magarshak, whose English he often finds hasty and outlandish. Pearl seeks to ground his translation policy decisions in an informed assessment of author intention. Finally, Alexander Burak’s article examines problems of semantic and pragmatic equivalence and divergence between an American cable-television series, HBO’s *The Sopranos*, and its two concurrent voice-over translations into Russian. His article addresses the current Russian practice of producing multiple voice-over dubbings or translations of foreign films that fall roughly into three broad categories: (1) “neutralized,” anodyne versions for general audiences; (2) “sexed-up” versions for discretionary viewing; and (3) hybrids of (1) and (2) designed to appeal to popular tastes while nevertheless passing muster with imagined translation authorities.

Ultimately, neither translation critics, nor translation theorists, nor translators themselves can control the production of multiple translations. Nor do “metacritical” interventions on this subject constitute attempts at exercising such control. What all of us can do is to engage more actively, coherently, and rigorously in the assessment of multiple cultural products—be they films, prose fiction, or poetry—that represent one and the same foreign source. Diverse scholarly and critical contributions to a continuing dialogue on the adequacy of those representations will constitute the raw content of what we propose here to call “translation variance studies.”

—Alexander Burak, Timothy Sergay