An Investigation into Self-Translation

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the nature, basic aspects, and specific features of self-translation in the context of translation theory and practice, as well as basic causes making writers translate their works. The analysis of the works on the topic shows that the issue is understudied and demands further investigation. Our analysis shows that self-translation (translation of the author) is considered to be the *translation of an original work into another language by the author himself.* On the one hand, it is a rather rare phenomenon. On the other hand, self-translation represents "ideal" translation since the author is *in a better position than any ordinary translator because he knows his creation as nobody else and* has the **authority** to allow himself **shifts** in the translation which might not have been 'allowed' by another translator. The results of self-translation can be regarded as certain "gold standards" for others to make use of. There are different reasons that cause bilingual writers to translate their works, both linguistic (interest to languages, wish to create and use new expressive means, dissatisfaction with existing translations, etc.) and extra-linguistic (emigration, challenge to check one's gift in new conditions, paying tribute to motherland, etc.). It is obvious that some reasons are objective, but others can be considered subjective, the latter being more powerful and stimulating.

Keywords: Linguistics, Education, Applied linguistics, Self-translation, Bilingualism, Language education, Migration, Culture.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of self-translation (ST) has been neglected in literary history and translation theory since it was regarded as idiosyncratic anomaly. It was called "*another vast territory without history*" (Bastin & Bandia, 2006: 22). The issue has become an object of theoretical studies only recently. Nowadays it is obvious that self-translation deserves close attention. In this case the source and the target texts are produced by the same person, that is the degree of their equivalence is extremely high. In general, self-translation implies that the author recreates his or her work in another language. Besides, self-translation often generates linguistic forms that can enrich the target language. Therefore, the subject is relevant and very important for translation theory.

The most famous writers who've translated their own works are Samuel Beckett (French-English), Karen Blixen (Danish-English), Jorge Luis Borges (Spanish-English), André Brink (Afrikaans-English), Italo Calvino (Italian-English), Julien Green (French-English), Nancy Huston (French-English), Vladimir Nabokov (Russian-English), Rabindranath Tagore (Bengali-English), Joseph Brodsky (Russian-English).

In this context, it is essential to understand why different authors resort to self-translation. Moreover, it is of great interest to compare the positions of the linguists who investigates the problem and self-translators.

Today, however, the term "self-translation (or auto-translation)" is not defined strictly enough, though the issue is studied by a number of researchers, such as Bahtikireeva U.M. (2005), Baleevskih K.V. (2012), Boyd B. (2016), Evseeva K. & Kozlova Yu. (2016), Feschenko V.V. (2015), Finkel A.M. (1962), Hokenson J.W. (2007), Khovanskaya E.S. (2016), Nesterov A. (2001), Nikolaev S. (1999), Râbacov G. (2013), Soboleva N. (2016), Santoyo J.C. (2006) and etc. But, irrespective of its actual quality, self-translation is usually considered **superior to non-authorial translations**. This is because "*the writer-translator is no doubt felt to have been in a better position to recapture the intentions of the author of the original than any ordinary translator*" (Fitch, 1988: 125) i.e. due to their thorough knowledge of the original text self-translators have the **authority** to allow themselves **shifts** in the translation which might not have been 'allowed' by another translator.

The analysis of the works on the topic shows that the issue is understudied and demands further investigation. The present paper studies the nature, basic aspects, and specific features of self-translation in the context of translation theory and practice, as well as basic causes making writers translate their works.

Materials and methods

The aim of the research defined the methods used and the materials studied. The investigation consisted of several stages. Firstly, we analyzed the works of linguists devoted to self-translation in order to clear up the situation with the term. Secondly, we explored interviews, texts of public speeches, and memoirs of famous self-translators, such as V. Nabokov and J. Brodsky as well as their translations to confirm or refute the arguments of the theorists. Finally, we developed a working definition of "self-translation" and identified basic reasons that cause writers to *translate their original works into another language by themselves.*

The research was based on different theoretical and empirical methods, such as comparative analysis of research studies and scholarly works on the problem, *content analysis of translations done by Nabokov and Brodsky from English into Russian and vice versa, as well as their* interviews, texts of public speeches, and memoirs.

Results and Discussion

Our research shows that self-translation is a complicated phenomenon that has different aspects which causes the existence of a number of its definitions. However, most researchers, one way or another, see it as *the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself. In addition, ST is regulated by the rules of literary translation and is based on bilingualism. Self-translation results in two separate original literal works that bear individual author's style.*

We managed to identify basic causes that make writers perform self-translation. However, the causes distinguished by theorists do not fully coincide with the ones mentioned by self-translators.

The issue of ST has been widely discussed recently. Many scholars studied the phenomenon of self-translation concentrating on the problem of identities, author's subjectivity and equivalence, the bilingual text, history and theory of literary self-translation (Arzhantseva, N. (2016), Savory, Th. (1957), Finkel, A. (1962), Bahtikireeva, U. (2005), Federman, R. (1996), Feschenko, V. (2015), Popovic, A. (1976), Nikolaev, S., and etc.). To start with, *linguists have been trying to define the term. Thus, S. Nikolaev identifies auto-translation as "a new work that possesses a number of distinctions from the source text due to grammar peculiarities of the target language as well as to its cultural background" (*Nikolaev, 1999)*. He adds that this self-translation differs from a traditional one because it may contain new stylistic devices which are not present in the source text.*

Finkel (1962) stresses one more important feature of ST, namely, its uniqueness and originality to compare with the source text. Besides, self-translation is supposed to follow traditional rules of translation. Moreover, the problem of self-translation makes it possible to study the theory of translation from a new point of view. The traditional approach is based on the concept of equivalence when comparing the source text and the target one. And it underlines the asymmetric positions in artistic freedom and creative independence of an author and a professional translator. As a rule, a translator excludes his/her own subjectivity and tends to explicit the author's subjectivity. R. Federman brightly illustrates this thesis: "We always admire the faithfulness of a translation in relation to the original, and quickly deplore and criticize the liberties a translator takes with the original work of a writer" (1996). On the contrary, "translating from one language to another the author continues to express himself/herself by the means of the second language" (Feschenko, 2015: 202).

Self-translators do not only master but choose to create in more than one language. Therefore, ST is closely connected with bilingualism. The phenomenon of bilingualism has been thoroughly investigated (Vereshchagin, Baleevskikh, Rozentsveig, Weinreich etc.). the most well-known is the definition offered by U. Weinreich who states that "bilingualism means possessing two languages and using them by turns depending on the communication conditions" (1953: 7).

E. Vereshchagin claims that in the context of psycholinguistics "bilingualism is an ability to use two linguistic systems in communication (1969: 160)". According to Nikolaev, "the target text will belong to another national culture and will be inspired rather than regulated, limited or bound by the source text" *(*1999). Thus, bilingualism and self-translation complement each other, knowledge of two languages and individual author's style make the target text valuable and unique not only in the source language but also in the target one.

What is the bilingual text? The most common answer is: "the bilingual text is a self-translation, authored by a writer who can compose in different languages and who translates his or her texts from one language into another" (Hokenson, 2007: 1).

There are many reasons for the author to make the self-translation of his or her work. The issue was studied by P. Toper (1998), S. Nikolaev (1999), R. Tchaykovsky (1997), Finkel, B. Boyd (2016), B. Nosik (1993), and etc.

Our analysis of their works help to distinguish the following reasons:

1.   Self-translators turn to auto-translation when they wish to create in the context of two different cultures.

2. The writer wants to reproduce the plot and the form of his creation for a new reader with maximum care.

3. The writer creates self-translation for foreign culture-bearers for them to evaluate his language and individual writing style.

4. The writer performs self-translating when he is sure that only he is able to reproduce every detail of the plot and the form of the source text.

5. The writer has to leave his motherland due to some political reasons. In new conditions, he writes his works in his native language, but later translates them into another language in order to acquire new readers.

6. Living in non-native language environment challenges the writer to check his talent in a new cultural context.

7. The writer is not satisfied with the existing translations of his works.

8. The writers strive to expand the boundaries of literal traditions both in the source and the target languages.

At the same time, self-translators add some more reasons that made them translate their works. Thus, J. Brodsky (2017) understood translation as a dialogue of two "language forces" resulting in the "self/non-self alloy". There are two types of the dialogue: between the author of the source text and the user of the target text and between the source and the target cultures. Besides, J. Brodsky (2017) mentions the sense of duty when the writer feels responsible for his creations and worries about their future.

Another reason is connected with the interest of the writer to the language as it is, be it his native or a foreign language. He is eager to experiment with new language expressive means (Nabokov o Nabokove, 2002). In addition, V. Nabokov states that self-translation helps him to feel Russian and to pay tribute to his motherland (Nabokov o Nabokove, 2002).

To sum up, we may say that reasons making writers translate their works can be subjective and objective. In real life they are interrelated and interpenetrating. However, the subjective reasons are considered to be more powerful and inflectional.

Conclusion

Self-translation has recently become an object of close attention in linguistics in general and in translation theory in particular. Most experts agree that self-translation is the *translation of an original work into another language by the author himself*. On the one hand, it is a rather rare phenomenon. Therefore, it attracts attention of researchers. In addition, ST represents "ideal" translation since the author is *in a better position than any ordinary translator because he knows his creation as nobody else and* has the **authority** to allow himself **shifts** in the translation which might not have been 'allowed' by another translator. The results of self-translation can be regarded as certain "gold standards" for others to make use of.

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