

LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATIONS: With Special Reference to The Translation From Lithuanian Into English

WILLIAM R. SCHMALSTIEG
The Pennsylvania State University

One frequently hears teachers of foreign languages exclaim that one must read the literature in the original language in order to appreciate it.* This is true, but it is only true if you are a native-speaker of that language, or if you have a near-native command of the language. But it is not the case that a beginning student or even a person with a fair command of a foreign language will appreciate the literature in the same way that a native does. A foreigner with some knowledge of a foreign language frequently over-appreciates the literature. Tolstoy once remarked on how much better poetry sounds in a language which a person knows poorly. The reason for this over-appreciation is actually quite clear. Literature has value in so far as it impinges upon the human consciousness, in so far as the literary text differs from the usual or everyday method of expression. The non-native, however, will be struck and impressed by the most casual cliché, the most trite phrase, if it differs from the thought pattern imposed by his native language. To the English speaker the expressions *short cut*, *if worst comes to worst* and *in the face of difficulties* are trite. But a Russian friend of mine once commented upon what a marvelous expression *short-cut* was; according to him it epitomized American inventiveness and ingenuity. "There is nothing like it in Russian", he said. Let us take the second example, *if worst comes to worst*. A Czech friend said that this was an excellent expression, because he could picture in his mind how two disasters were approaching each other, each one perhaps a huge glob of thick, dark substances which would merge, congeal and form an impenetrable difficulty. In addition he thought (because of his knowledge of German) that these two *worsts* may well be in the shape of mammoth sausages. Let us imagine how the expression *in the face of difficulties* might be interpreted. One might think that for the user of this expression difficulties were personified as an evil face and that he would feel the universe to be populated by hostile spirits which were searching to persecute him. The English speaker recognizes all these expressions as completely clichéd and obvious, but the non-native does not.

In a recent publication we read: "The study of a foreign language imparts a humanistic value from the very early lessons, as when the young pupil visualize the difference between the real image in 'au revoir' or 'hasta la vista' from the stereotyped archaic English "goodbye"¹ This is an excellent example of how an English speaker over-appreciates the trite idiom of another language. There is no more real image in *au revoir*, *hasta la vista*, or *sudieu* than in English *goodbye*. For the English speaker *goodbye* does not mean "God be with you" any more than Lithuanian *sudieu* means 'God be with you'. Both the Lithuanian and the English expressions are formulas used when people take leave of each other. The meaning of a word is not what its etymology suggests, interesting as this may be, but rather what the people communicating understand by the word. Etymology is, of course, a fascinating field for linguists and non-linguists alike, and it contributes greatly to the understanding of the historical development of culture, but it has little to do with the current understanding of a linguistic sign. It is interesting to know that *popierius* and *paper* are both derived from the Greek word *papyros*, but one can say that English *paper* and Lithuanian *popierius* express roughly the same thing and that neither has much to do with the Greek *papyros*.

All literature builds up a kind of tension in the reader and the reader derives pleasure from the understanding of the literature which relieves the artistic tension. Now it is just such artistic tension which is easier to build up in a foreign language. Thus I will over-appreciate the picture of spring when I read:

"Jau saulelė vėl atkoptama budino svieta
Ir žiemos šaltos triūsus pargriaudama juokės...¹"

The reason for this is that I am always wondering from one word to the next whether I will understand the meaning of the following word. When I do understand it, I am so delighted that the relief of the tension adds to my pleasure in a way that it wouldn't to a native Lithuanian. On the other hand it is difficult for me to appreciate those features which make it pleasurable for the Lithuanian to read. I would presume, although purely on an intellectual, not an emotional basis, that the use of the diminutive *saulelė* would mean something more than just *saulė*, although I have no real feeling for the diminutive here. An English counterpart 'sunlet' would just not do. Likewise I assume that the word *svietą* "world" probably has a delightful archaic flavor not to be found in *pasaulis*, although if I look in a dictionary I will find both words glossed as 'world'. One might compare the interesting remark of Ronald Hingley concerning Vladimir Nabokov: "Still, in spite of many miscuing, Nabokov's English is justly described as masterly, perhaps for the very reason that he puts twists on it such as would never occur to a native user." (*The New York Times Book Review*, January 15, 1967 p. 16).

As a non-native speaker I am also struck by the apparent laconic nature of the East European languages, all of which seem to express thoughts in fewer words than in English. This is, of course, in the very nature of the language and would not impress a native at all, but let us take for example: "Linguosiu gluosniu prie lygaus kelio" - "I shall sway like a willow, near the even road" from *Kad nebūtum viena* by Kazys Bradūnas. I am particularly impressed by the fact that in two words *linguosiu gluosniu* one can say 'I shall sway like a willow, an expression requiring six different words in English. Now I seriously doubt that this makes any impression on a native Lithuanian at all.

To come to my next point now. I do not believe that anyone can ever understand a foreign culture in the same way the native can. I am not saying that one should not make the effort, however. Thus no matter how much I may read about life in a Baltic village, or on a Baltic farm, I will never be able to experience rising early in the morning to the sound of the cuckoo, going out to milk the cows by hand, or feel the close intimate friendships (or enmities) which may arise in a village. These are beyond the experience of a twentieth-century urban American and can never be recaptured for him. This is not to say that one should not try to understand these things, but it is to say that they can only be understood intellectually not with one's feelings. Thus I was charmed by the delightful little vignette, *Lietuvos miestelyje* in *Kregždutė II* by A. Rinkūnas, but it remains for me an abstraction, an interesting and informative abstraction, but nevertheless an abstraction. The case is similar to that of certain New York children who grow up without ever having seen a cow, although they may drink milk daily at home and in the school. Another more concrete example is furnished by a line from the poem *Peizažas* by Jonas Aistis. Here we read: *Tik sukrykš, lyg gervė, svirtis* 'Only the water-pulley will cry like a crane'. Now I have only seen a *svirtis* in a Latvian ethnographic museum 'in Riga, but I have no idea how a *svirtis* sounds when it is crying — in addition the crane (*gervė*) is an animal familiar to me only from pictures and captive birds in Washington and Philadelphia zoos. This is undoubtedly a fine poem, but as a result of my lack of experience of the cultural setting in question, I must confess that it is a kind of nostalgic abstraction, not a reality.

In effect, then, we need more interpretative English translations of Baltic literatures. This is not to depreciate the fine work to be found in such works as *The Green Linden*, *The Green Oak*, the many fine translations by Professor Sealey and others, but we actually need many more such translations. Now of all the East European languages taught in American schools, Russian is without doubt the most popular. But it is even difficult to find a sufficient number of students to have Russian literature courses in the original at large American universities. Most Slavic departments find that enrollments in the courses in Russian literature in translation far outnumber the enrollments in the courses in Russian literature in the original. In fact it is frequently difficult to find a sufficient number of students for the Russian literature courses given in Russian. In order to spread information about Baltic cultures and literatures it is essential that it be presented in English, because the average American student does not have enough time to make the literature meaningful to him in another language. To the best of my knowledge there is no American university which offers more than one year of Lithuanian and this is just not enough instruction to prepare the student to read the language easily. Dr. Kostas Ostrauskas did an excellent job of gathering materials in English for the one-term course of Lithuanian literature in translation which he offered at Pennsylvania State University in the spring of 1966, but he had to use every resource available. In sum then my message is that there should be more good English translations of Baltic literature.

* Lithuanian translation appeared in *Draugas*, Jan. 18, 1969, Pt. II, p. 1. Reprinted by permission of the Editor.

1. Stephen A. Freeman, "Modern Languages for a Changing World," *Curricular Change in the Foreign Languages: 1963 Colloquium on Curricular Change* (Princeton, N. J., 1963), p. 10.