

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSLATING KAFKA
L'IMPORTANCE DE LA TRADUCTION DE KAFKA
IMPORTANȚA TRADUCERII OPEREI LUI KAFKA

Paul-Alexandru VIDA

“Vasile Goldiș” Western University of Arad
paulvida@ymail.com

Abstract

This article deals with the intricacies of translating fiction in general, as well as the works of Franz Kafka. By putting Kafka's life under scrutiny and analyzing his worldview, the importance of translating the author's works of fiction is highlighted.

Rezumat

Acest articol se ocupă cu detaliile traducerii de ficțiune în general, cât și cu traducerea operelor lui Franz Kafka. Analizând viața și viziunea asupra lumii a lui Kafka, se poate constata astfel importanța traducerii lucrărilor sale.

Résumé

Cet article traite des subtilités de la traduction de la fiction en général, ainsi que des travaux de Franz Kafka. Si on met la vie de Kafka sous un examen minutieux et si on analyse sa vision du monde, l'importance de traduire les œuvres de fiction de l'auteur deviennent très importante.

Keywords: *Kafka, Translation, Fiction*

Mots-clés: *Kafka, traduction, fiction*

Cuvinte cheie: *Kafka, traducere, ficțiune*

Franz Kafka is considered a pioneer of 20th century fiction. It is important to understand his literary work, even though he wrote in German. Translators are tasked with recreating Kafka's inner world into another language. English being the lingua franca, it is crucial for his works to be made available to such a large readership. By understanding Kafka's biographical background one can delve deeper into what it entails to translate fiction, especially the works of the Kafkaesque.

Franz Kafka was born in Prague, at that time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on the 3rd of July 1883 to a Jewish family - his father, Hermann Kafka and his mother, Julie Kafka.

From 1889 to 1893 Franz Kafka attended the *Deutsche Knabenschule*, which was an elementary school for German boys. In 1893 Franz would attend the *Altstädter Deutsches Gymnasium* in Prague for eight years, completing his Matura exams in 1901 (CORNGOLD, 2004, xii). He was admitted to the *Deutsche Karl-Ferdinands-Universität* of Prague in 1901, studying initially chemistry, but switching to law after just two weeks (DIAMANT, 2003, 36-38). Studying law pleased his father given the range of career opportunities it offered his son, but because of the longer time span it took to finish his studies, Franz had time to also study German and art history (BROD, 1960, 40-41). At the end of his first college year he met Max Brod who would become a

lifelong friend and be instrumental to the furthering of his literary legacy (GRAY, 2005, 179). In the summer of 1906 Franz Kafka was awarded the title of Doctor of Law, thus successfully finishing his studies (MURRAY, 2004, 62).

For one full year after earning his Ph.D., Kafka was compelled to work unpaid as a law clerk for the civil and criminal courts (STEINHAUER, 1983, 390-408). On the 1st of November 1907 he took on a job at Assicurazioni Generali in Prague, but resenting his work schedule he resigned less than a year later on the 15th of July 1908. His next job was at the Worker's Accident Insurance Agency where he remained until 1918. He could not fulfil his job anymore due to his worsening medical condition (CORNGOLD, 2011, 339-343).

Franz Kafka developed the habit of writing at night after he had long finished his work engagements (STACH, 2005, 23-25). Writing became more and more important to him as the years went by, reaching a personal climax during the First World War. Kafka's personality was described thoroughly by his friend Max Brod. He was a shy person and not very outspoken (BROD, 1960, 40), personally tormented by the imposing image of his father Hermann, with whom he had an increasingly strained relationship.

Franz Kafka passed away on the 3rd of June 1924 in a sanatorium in Kierling, close to Vienna, due to laryngeal tuberculosis – a disease that knew no cure at that moment in history (BROD, 1966, 389).

Franz Kafka as a writer was actually born in 1904 when he wrote the short-story "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" (Eng. "Description of a Struggle"). After showing it to Max Brod in 1905, he encouraged Kafka to submit it for publishing and continue writing.

Kafka had a surge of creativity on the 22nd of September 1912 when he wrote the short-story "Das Urteil" (Eng. "The Judgment") and dedicated it to his lover Felice Bauer. This story is usually considered to be Kafka's breakthrough work. He most likely drew inspiration for the narrative from his own private life, invoking the image of his tyrannical father that disapproved of his every decision and wished to control every aspect of his life. The story was first published in 1912 in Leipzig (BROD, 1966, 389).

In 1912 Kafka wrote one of his most famous stories titled "Die Verwandlung" (Eng. "The Metamorphosis") (BROD, 1966, 113). He tells the story of how a travelling salesman named Gregor Samsa awakes one morning only to find himself transformed into a giant insect. The theme that is explored within this writing is that of fear, alienation and shame. Kafka managed to stir interest in the literary life of Prague through publishing this story in 1915.

Franz Kafka wrote three unfinished novels during his lifetime, one of which was published after his death under the name "Amerika" (BROD, 1960, 218). The main motif of this novel can be considered the bizarre circumstances in which the main protagonist finds himself, despite trying to apply reason to his situation, he fails to make sense of the world's illogical reactions to his presence. Such a motif can also be found within the other two unfinished novels titled "Der Process" (Eng. "The Trial") and "Das Schloss" (Eng. "The Castle"). In "The Trial" Kafka introduces Josef K. for the very first time as the central character. Josef K. awakes one morning, similarly to Samsa in "The Metamorphosis", only to find himself in a predicament – he is arrested without being given any explanation as to the underlying reasons. In "The Castle" the character of K., echoing Josef K. from the aforementioned story, attempts to gain access to a castle to fulfil his duty as a land surveyor. Both stories are fraught with the underlying problem of *treadmill progression* – the more the characters desire to fulfil their mission (Josef K. trying to find out the reason for his prosecution triggered a sense of guilt; K. trying to acquire permission to enter the castle, leading to the dilemma of an unaccomplished target) the farther away they find themselves from the answer they seek and the more psychological strain is exerted on them. "Like dreams, his texts combine precise "realistic" detail with absurdity, careful observation and reasoning on the part of the protagonists with inexplicable obliviousness and carelessness." (RASTALSKY, 1997, 1).

Before his death, Kafka entrusted Max Brod with his unpublished manuscripts, urging him to dispose of all of them by burning, so that they would never see the light of day (MCCARTHY,

2009). Kafka was extremely critical of his works and wished to be spared any public humiliation and judgment. Max Brod disobeyed his friend's wishes and ended up correcting the manuscripts and publishing them posthumously in Kafka's name. Thus he started gaining an ever wider reputation amongst literary scholars and readers (CONTIJOCH, 2000). Franz Kafka was heralded as one of the most important writers of fiction of the first half of the 20th century due to his impressive frankness in writing and laborious fight with unseen abstract powers that govern the world.

After his passing, as Kafka's literary works became accessible to a more widespread audience, he influenced a multitude of writers from all around the world. Writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Albert Camus, Eugène Ionesco and Jean-Paul Sartre felt inspired by Kafka's writings (SANDBANK, 1992, 441-443). His *Weltanschauung* (Eng. Worldview) would spearhead new philosophical and artistic currents such as existentialism, avant-garde and the absurd. Max Brod said that one day the 20th century will be known as "the century of Kafka" (STEINHAEUER, 1983, 390-408).

Numerous adaptations after his works have been created, be they theatre plays, radio dramatizations, movies and operas, just to name a few. One of the most notable spin-offs based on the life and work of Franz Kafka is the movie "Kafka" from 1991 directed by Steven Soderbergh, starring Jeremy Irons as Kafka.

Walter Benjamin used a metaphor to describe the translation of fictional works - the author stands within the forest of language, hearing all the words - whereas the translator stands outside the forest, on the edge, shouting into it and waiting for the echo (BENJAMIN, 1923).

In my opinion the translation of fiction is a backwards art - never perfect, never completed. But nevertheless - a necessity. The translator of fiction hones his skill and suffers and hungers for his work of translation, so that he himself becomes an artist - giving birth to a story anew in another tongue.

Fiction can be categorized into three main literary genres, those being: prose, drama and poetry. Franz Kafka wrote mostly prose. This type of writing is inherently narrative-descriptive and presents unreal and invented occurrences. When translating prose one must take into account the following areas of effect: the social factor, relating to context and impact; and the authorial factor, pertaining to narrative style and the individuality of expression.

The social factor encompasses the multitude of cultural elements of the language in which the text was written, as well as the problem of finding suitable equivalents in the target language of translation. This aspect should be thoroughly analyzed in order to properly get the message across while at the same time, not alienating the reader. A translator of fiction must be well versed in the culture of both languages used, so as not to seem unarticulated and not to create cultural blunders. Translating *word-for-word* should be avoided at all cost, because certain expressions do not bare the same meaning in one language as in another. One must also be aware of the cultural impact of the translation - works of fiction have the capability of influencing their readership in many ways, on an emotional and pragmatic level. The translator should take notice of this fact and exert extreme caution when dealing with texts that tackle sensitive social and cultural matters.

The authorial factor deals with the author's individualism of expression, which is evident through his narrative style. Though certain styles stand out more than others, e.g. stream of consciousness (James Joyce, Jack Kerouac etc.), most styles can seem very much alike to the untrained eye. This is one of the reasons why a translator of fiction must himself be an avid reader of that which he is translating. Thus he knows how to discern between styles and notice their specifics and peculiarities. This narrative style of a given author must be properly transferred into another language by not altering the intent of the author and the atmosphere conjured up by him.

Franz Kafka can be regarded as one of the most influential European writers of the 20th century. Even though he insisted on his unfinished and unpublished manuscripts to be burnt after his death, by his trusted friend Max Brod, the latter disobeyed his wishes and thus Kafka would be delivered onto the world - a writer that articulated his every word with the precision of a surgeon

and who managed to bring forth a new dimensionality of the human psyche, unheard of and almost unexplored by past and contemporary literary colleagues. Kafka veils the skeleton of his tormented mind with pinpoint accuracy, so as to be intelligible in its simplicity, yet hypnotic in its layers of hurt and dark humour.

The only proper way to spread his writings throughout the world would be by translating the original German texts into any conceivable language – including English. By translating the works of Franz Kafka, the world would gain access to a personal authorial worldview full of personal trials and tribulations, self-doubt and self-scrutiny. Kafka would hence enrich his readers all over the world through his suffering and innocent approach to proto-existentialist philosophies. By reading Kafka the readers become scholars of their own personal world and its matching present-day surroundings. Though reading Kafka in its original German would be ideal to properly grasp the intent of the author, most readers must strictly rely on translations of his works in order to stand a mere chance of coming into contact with the author's creativity.

Translating poses a difficult problem to the one tasked with this undertaking – mainly to properly convey the original as accurately as possible into the target language. When translating technical or scientific texts the translator must take into consideration the proper usage of the specific terminology of the domain in question. Translating fiction though can be seen as a double edged sword, freeing the translator of the shackles of pre-determined terminology, allowing thus a freedom regarding word choice and the conjuring of artistic images. These visions should therefore be carefully analyzed, their craft and genesis properly understood through the eyes and mind of the author, so as to be able to synthesize and distil the very essence of the source text into the desired language. The translator of fiction himself must be aware of how his words can convey an artistic vision conceived in one language into another, being careful not to distort as much as possible the *Werkgeist* (Eng. Soul of the Work) that is to be transferred to new readers.

Translating the works of Franz Kafka requires an understanding of his background knowledge: the author's worldview, biography and his entire collection of writings. Seeing as though Kafka has taken great care to forge every sentence of his literary works with passion, delivering statements that startle and unnerve the reader, even to the point of gaining him a morphological meaning through the word "Kafkaesque" – his translators must themselves become alter egos of Franz Kafka to accomplish their task.

The term "Kafkaesque" is used to describe seemingly illogical situations, part of the realm of the bizarre, dreamlike and anxiety-driven emotional and rational apparatus. Kafka superimposed his innermost fears onto paper, exhibiting his perception of reality first and foremost to himself and, eventually, to the world. Through his way of thinking Kafka gave permission to reveal the undeniable uncertainty of all that which lies beyond the individual. In this respect the world has become less black and white, but more nuanced in grey, and therefore very uncertain – "Kafkaesque" is to be considered the permeating colour of a colour-blind modern world with its anxieties and psychosis.

To conclude one can argue that Franz Kafka has created a unique style that speaks to the world's dilemmas. By translating his writings the world will have at hand's reach a treasure trove of the absurd and a detailed depiction of the anxiety-driven mind.

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