

Ivan Y. TENEV<sup>1</sup>

## Teaching Literary Translation at Tertiary Level: the Case of Scandinavian Studies at Sofia University

### Abstract

The paper outlines some of the challenges translation training at university level is faced with, drawing on examples from the Scandinavian Studies Programme of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski whose model of literary translation training has already yielded some impressive results. The boom of translations of fiction from the Nordic languages in the last decades, however, calls for streamlining literary translation curriculum to tackle both specific problems of foreign language teaching at the Programme (related mainly to acquiring several Nordic languages simultaneously) and more general ones – the deteriorating command of the Bulgarian language among students and the lack of motivation for upholding the traditionally very high standards for rendering a foreign work of fiction into Bulgarian.

**Keywords:** literary translation; foreign language teaching; Scandinavian studies

### Резюме

#### Обучението по художествен превод на университетско ниво: примерът на специалност „Скандинавистика“ в СУ „Св. Климент Охридски“

В статията се разглеждат някои проблеми на обучението по художествен превод на университетско ниво, въз основа на спецификата на специалността „Скандинавистика“ в Софийския университет. Успешният модел на обучението по превод в специалността в последните десетилетия доведе до формирането на група млади и висококвалифицирани преводачи от скандинавски езици. Нарастващата популярност на скандинавските литератури в България и големият брой преведени заглавия обаче налагат обучението по превод да бъде съобразено с особеностите на едновременното изучаване на няколко чужди езика и с по-обща фактори като непълноценното владение на изразните средства на родния език и намаляващата мотивация за поддържане на традиционно високото качество на преводите на художествени произведения в България.

**Ключови думи:** художествен превод; чуждоезиково обучение; скандинавистика

The methodological efficiency of translation has often been questioned by foreign language teaching (FLT) researchers worldwide, and justly so, at least in the light of the now outdated grammar-translation method<sup>2</sup> whose major drawback is the excessive focus on lexical and grammatical equivalence between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) thus neglecting the overall communicative aspect, the socio-cultural context and the genre specifics of the L1 input.

<sup>1</sup> Ivan Y. TENEV holds a Ph.D. degree in Scandinavian Linguistics from Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and has been teaching practical Norwegian language and Norwegian grammar at the Scandinavian Studies Programme at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology of Sofia University since 2004. His research focuses on foreign language teaching, comparative and applied linguistics and the reception of Norwegian literature in Bulgaria.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the grammar-translation method and the role of translation in FLT methodologies cf. Cook, Guy. Foreign language teaching. – Baker, Mona, Gabriela Saldanha (eds.). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. London/New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 112-115.

In recent years, translation has seen a revival in FLT strategies<sup>3</sup> and has been deployed anew, this time to balance the (direct) communicative method. Equivalence is sought beyond the level of grammar and lexis and translation is eventually instrumentalized to achieve higher level of multilingual competence.

FLT at university level in Bulgaria has developed to reach a relatively steady state of balance between the direct method and the successors to the grammar-translation method<sup>4</sup>, albeit more gradually and on different grounds. Literary translation has traditionally been considered an integral part of university training at the foreign language faculties commonly known as faculties of philology (in Bulgarian *филологически факултети*) in the system of Bulgarian tertiary education. Here, I will proceed from the following definition of literary translation given in Delabastita (2011)<sup>5</sup> without engaging into the intricate dispute about what a “literary” text is<sup>6</sup>: “[...] in most cases the phrase [*literary translation*] refers to “literary” translations made of “literary” originals, whereby the translators are expected to preserve or to recreate somehow the aesthetic intentions or effects that may be perceived in the source text.”

In Bulgarian tertiary education, and to a lesser extent in secondary education<sup>7</sup>, translation of original texts (and only exceptionally constructed sentences in the initial learning stages), has always been recognized as a major training tool for acquiring adequate competence on language levels beyond A2 and has never been fully refuted as such. It has had a strong place in foreign language teaching curricula due to the fact that achieving advanced level of literary translation competence has been and still is one of the major goals of foreign language training at the Bulgarian faculties of philology. In this sense, literary translation stands at the crossing point of both foreign language training and literary studies, touching upon other major text-related university subjects such as stylistics, discourse studies, culture studies etc.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cook *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Already in 1982 A. Danchev pointed out that “following the decline of the neodirect methods, a more reasonable and realistic attitude toward translation has gained ground” [English translation is mine, I. T.] (cf. Данчев, Андрей. Проблеми на учебния превод. – Сб. „Съпоставително езикознание и чуждоезиково обучение“, т. IV. ВТУ „Кирил и Методий“, 1982, с. 112).

<sup>5</sup> Delabastita, Dirk. Literary translation. – Gambier, Yves, Luc van Doorslaer (eds.). *Handbook of Translation Studies*. Vol 2. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011, p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> For an informative sketch of typical features attributed to literary texts from the translator’s perspective cf. Jones, Francis R. Literary translation. – Baker, Mona, Gabriela Saldanha (eds.). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. London/New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 152; cf. also Васева, Иванка. Характеристика на художествения текст. – *Стилистика на превода*. София: Наука и изкуство, 1989, с. 121-129.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. e.g. Друмева, Станислава. Мястото и ролята на превода в чуждоезиковото обучение. – Килева–Стаменова, Ренета (ред.) *Превод и културен трансфер*. Сборник в чест на доцент Ана Лилова. София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2007, с. 182-185.

After the 1960s when “translation began to win public recognition as a creative activity”<sup>8</sup> the “Bulgarian school of literary translation” began to take more or less definite shape owing to the active national policy and major theoretical advancements informed by the specifics of Bulgarian translation practice (cf. e.g. the series „Изкуството на превода“ [*The Art of Translation*] published in 1969 – 1980<sup>9</sup>). The theoretical approaches to literary translation widely adopted at that time paved the ground for later research in the field and were basically functionalist in orientation<sup>10</sup>.

Based on the above outline of methodological, theoretical and historical preliminaries I will try to map out the role and status of literary translation in Bulgarian tertiary education and the Scandinavian Studies Programme at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski specifically.

The Scandinavian Studies Programme was established in 1992 through the efforts of a small group of experts in Germanic and Scandinavian linguistics and literature<sup>11</sup> and since then has evolved into Bulgaria’s major hub for research and teaching of Nordic<sup>12</sup> languages, literatures, cultures and history. The founders of the Programme and the majority of their successors<sup>13</sup> have been also active translators of fiction from the Nordic languages. Quite logically, literary translation has been seen as one of the pillars of the Programme’s curriculum, partly as a result of personal preference and expertise, but also in line with the strong Bulgarian school of literary translation which had emerged in previous decades<sup>14</sup>. Although literary translation was not formally introduced as a designated part of the curriculum until 2013-2015<sup>15</sup>, it has been an integral component of the courses in practical

---

<sup>8</sup> Lilova, Anna. Bulgarian tradition. – Baker, Mona, Gabriela Saldanha (eds.). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. London/New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 361.

<sup>9</sup> A complete list of publications initiated and facilitated by the Union of Bulgarian Translators is available at [www.bgtranslators.org](http://www.bgtranslators.org) [retrieved 25.12.2017, in Bulgarian only].

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Людсканов, Александър. Принципът на функционалните еквиваленти – основа на теорията и практиката на превода. – Емил Георгиев (гл. ред.) *Изкуството на превода*. София: Народна култура, 1969, с. 99-115; Васева, Иванка. Интерпретацията при художествения превод. – *Стилистика на превода*. София: Наука и изкуство, 1989, с. 151-153.

<sup>11</sup> Ганчева, Вера. Скандинавистиката в България – досега, засега и по-нататък ... – *Език и литература*, 1-2, 2012, с. 9-10.

<sup>12</sup> Pertaining to or characteristic of the Nordic Region, i.e. “Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, as well as the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland”, according to the definition provided by the Nordic Co-operation (cf. [www.norden.org](http://www.norden.org) [retrieved 25.12.2017]).

<sup>13</sup> Prof. Boris Parashkevov, Prof. Vera Gancheva, Prof. Antoniya Bouchoukovska, Pavel Stoyanov, Antoaneta Primatarova, Stefan Nachev, Svetla Stoilova, Asst. Prof. Antoniya Gospodinova, Asst. Prof. Nadezhda Mihaylova, Asst. Prof. Evgenia Tetimova, among others.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the scope of education at the Scandinavian Studies Programme: “The education in the Scandinavian Studies Section is aimed at educating specialists with exclusive career opportunities in the sphere of culture, science and social services, teaching at school and university level, interpreting and translation.” ([http://skandinavistik.free.bg/learning\\_en.html](http://skandinavistik.free.bg/learning_en.html)) [retrieved 25.12.2017].

<sup>15</sup> Within a project implemented at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology aimed at bringing translation training in line with the requirements of the national market of translation services (cf. <http://umispublishing.government.bg/srchProjectInfo.aspx?id=86644> [retrieved 25.12.2017]).

language training and the course of translation theory. The syllabus of mid-term and final term exams includes translation of fiction texts from Scandinavian to Bulgarian and vice versa. Translation of stylistically challenging literary texts is also a major part of the final state exam syllabus after the completion of the BA degree in Scandinavian Studies.

Since Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007, this relatively smoothly functioning status quo has been constantly challenged by the expanding Bulgarian book market and the boom of translations from the Nordic languages due to the increasing global popularity of Nordic literature, the translation subsidies provided by the Nordic countries and last but not least the pool of young translators trained at the Scandinavian Studies Programme. All the pieces have fallen into place for an adequate reception of Nordic literature in Bulgaria and yet voices have been raised warning against the deteriorating quality of translations and calling for a “goal-oriented and more thorough professional and artistic training in university lecture halls”<sup>16</sup>. Setting aside the role of publishing houses for securing a proper selection of titles to be translated and guaranteeing the adequate quality of translations<sup>17</sup>, I will focus on the challenges university teachers meet in training young translators, as well as on some ways to overcome them.

The term “quality of translations” itself, as used in Bulgarian translation theory and translation criticism, is problematic and prone to subjective interpretation. There seems to be an unspoken common notion of what a “good quality translation” is, whose essence is to be traced back to Bulgarian functionalist-oriented translation research in the 1960s and the 1970s. On this background we may well assume that “a good quality translation” in the Bulgarian context refers to a translation which has achieved a high degree of semantic, emotional-aesthetical and functional equivalence between the foreign language text and its rendition into Bulgarian, taking into account the inevitable relativity and dynamicity of that degree<sup>18</sup>.

The training in translation theory offered at university level would therefore require a stronger focus on the Bulgarian tradition in translation studies research, since any prospective translation would function in a reception context shaped by it. One of the major advantages of the Bulgarian school of translation studies is that it is strongly anchored in translation practice rather than theoretical abstraction and is therefore particularly well-suited for contemporary university education, especially against the backdrop of increasingly pragmatic and real-life oriented approach to university training.

---

<sup>16</sup> За ювелирната литература на Скандинавския север, преводите и плаващите пясъци на книгоиздаването. Разговор с професор Вера Ганчева. – *Литературен вестник*, бр. 40, 10.-16.12.2014, с. 12. [English translation is mine, I. T.]

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Васева, Иванка. Понятието еквивалентност при художествения превод. – *Стилистика на превода*. София: Наука и изкуство, 1989, с. 147-150; cf. Людсканов *op. cit.*, с. 114.

When it comes to practical training in literary translation at BA level, it has already been pointed out that it is an integral part of the FLT at the Scandinavian Studies Programme. Although formally espoused in the FLT curricula, the degree to which literary translation is taught is still very much dependant on personal initiative and expertise. The literary translation within the FLT still needs a common framework to set out its goals and theoretical background, as well as to attend to its practicalities such as the selection of texts to be used in the training. This is not to diminish the value of what has already been achieved, but taking this provenly effective approach to literary translation training from more intuitive to more formal grounds will secure its long-term sustainability. An active group of both already established and aspiring young translators from the Nordic languages trained at the Sofia University<sup>19</sup>, whose translations skills and achievements have been widely acknowledged, have emerged in the course of the past two decades demonstrating that the above model of training, although not formally defined, yields impressive results.

Some of the specifics of the FLT at the Scandinavian Studies Programme are particularly challenging for both students and teachers and have a direct impact on translation training, including teaching methodology and students' performance.

The students at the Programme start learning a Scandinavian language (Swedish or Norwegian) from scratch and have to build up a linguistic competence at C2 level by the end of their 4-year BA studies as stipulated in the course plan. Starting from their third semester at the Programme (i.e. after acquiring linguistic competence at A2 level), they have to gain (at the beginning general and later literary) translation competence which since 2013-2015 has been formally integrated in the course plans. Impossible as it may seem, this demanding task has been tackled successfully so far by introducing the concepts of structural, semantic, pragmatic, functional etc. equivalence at a very early stage of the foreign language training. This is done inductively by guiding students into identifying units of equivalence, proposing translation equivalents and discussing the differences between them. On the one hand, this approach to early-stage translation training bears resemblance with Christiane

---

<sup>19</sup> **Eva Kaneva** (translator of the historical trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter* by Norwegian novelist and Nobel Prize winner Sigrid Undset; recipient of the Norwegian NORLA's Translator's Award and the Vassa Gancheva Award for Young Translators from the Scandinavian languages in 2015); **Rossitsa Tsvetanova** (recipient of the Vassa Gancheva Award in 2014 for her contribution to promoting Nordic literatures in Bulgaria); **Stella Dzhelepova** (translator of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*; recipient of the Vassa Gancheva Award in 2016), **Iliya Tochev** (translator of works by contemporary Norwegian novelists Vigdis Hjorth, Thomas Enger etc.; recipient of the Vassa Gancheva Encouragement Award in 2016); **Lyubomir Gizdov** (translator of works by contemporary Swedish novelists Fredrik Backman, Jonas Jonasson, Camilla Läckberg etc.; recipient of the Vassa Gancheva Award in 2017); **Maria Nikolova** (recipient of the Elena Mouteva Award of the Union of Bulgarian Translators in 2017 for her translation of poems by Norwegian poet Olav H. Hauge), among others.

Nord's "pigtail method"<sup>20</sup>, i.e. "starting out with a small portion of theory, which is then applied to practice, where the need for more theory becomes obvious, which is then satisfied by another portion of theory, and so on." It is also in line with Stibbard's comment<sup>21</sup> to Heltai's list of situations in which translation can be used as a valuable exercise in FLT<sup>22</sup>. In brief, those include (adapted loosely from Stibbard (1994)<sup>23</sup> and as modified by him):

- i) the teacher must be able to speak the students' mother tongue, and the class must be monolingual.
- ii) the students should be interested in and consider important structural, pragmatic etc. equivalence.
- iii) it is desirable to see translation as a skill along with the others which can be carried out with success as a continuing activity at all but the lowest levels of proficiency.
- iv) the language should be being taught as a foreign<sup>24</sup> rather than as a second language.

All of these preconditions seem to be met by the Scandinavian Studies Programme. One of them proposed by Heltai and refuted by Stibbard (i.e. "students should be advanced, adult, learners who are disposed towards conscious learning") is not relevant *per se* but is descriptive of the situation at the Scandinavian Studies at the Sofia University. Stibbard's elaboration on precondition iv) is especially interesting and indicative of still unexplored aspects of FLT at the Scandinavian Studies:

"This is an example of an environment where naturalistic acquisition is less likely to occur than a more overt style of teaching, where the danger of losing language skills due to lack of practice is greatest and where real life is likely to demand an ability to translate informally at work or leisure." (Stibbard 1994)<sup>25</sup>.

Although discussing translation as a learning activity to build vocabulary, Heltai's methodological observations about the efficient use of translation in the classroom<sup>26</sup> may well be applied to literary translation training at university level and should be taken into account when modifying course plans and curricula:

- i) translation should not be used where it does not belong. It should not be used excessively or to the exclusion of other types of work.

<sup>20</sup> Nord, Christiane. Training functional translators. – Tennent, Martha (ed.). *Training for the New Millennium: Pedagogies for Translation and Interpreting*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2005, p. 215; This approach to translation training within FLT was proposed by Danchev already in the early 1980s (cf. Данчев *op. cit.*, c. 122-123).

<sup>21</sup> Stibbard, Richard. The use of translation in foreign language teaching. – *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, 2:1, 1994, p. 13-14.

<sup>22</sup> Heltai, Pál. Teaching vocabulary by oral translation. – *English Language Teaching Journal* 43, 1989, p. 289.

<sup>23</sup> Stibbard *op. cit.*, p. 13-14.

<sup>24</sup> "[A situation] when learners do not hear the language spoken outside the classroom, and what they hear spoken in the classroom most of the time is the interference-rich speech production of their peers" (Heltai *op. cit.*, p. 289)

<sup>25</sup> Stibbard *op. cit.*, p. 14

<sup>26</sup> Heltai *op. cit.*, p. 289.

- ii) a translation exercise should always be thoroughly prepared.
- iii) proper attention should be paid to integrate it with other activities.
- iv) measures should be taken to ensure that the exercise is interesting and motivating, both in the oral and the written mode.

From the above it is apparent that the functionalist approaches to translation studies typical of Bulgarian research tradition and their theoretical and methodological assumptions could also be easily adopted in literary translation training within FLT thus reconciling translation as a teaching activity with the now-mainstream functional and communicative methods of FLT.

FLT at the Scandinavian Studies Programme is faced with another major challenge which impacts both FLT and its component activities, including translation training, and that is *negative language transfer*. Crosslinguistic influence is a notorious double-edged sword in FLT which has more than one blade at the Scandinavian Studies. Since most of the students at the Scandinavian Studies Programme are multilingual, having English and/or German as their second/third language, the first and major Scandinavian language they learn is exposed to negative language transfer from their native language (Bulgarian, in rare cases Serbian or Russian), their second language (English, German, in rare cases French), their third language (typically English or German) and at a later stage from their second Scandinavian language<sup>27</sup>. This unusual situation of *combined crosslinguistic influence*<sup>28</sup> involving genetically closely related languages has not been explored yet, but suffice it to say it is manifested on all levels of language description up to the textual level. This negative transfer often leads young translators into a number of linguistic pitfalls which require a special focus on interlingual asymmetries in the FLT process at the Programme. A common blind spot is the failure to see that the overt crosslinguistic similarity only rarely implies similarity in the underlying socio-cultural patterns. This is reflected in the widely spread fallacy among aspiring translator and publishers that mastering one Mainland Scandinavian language, e.g. Swedish, enables one to translate also from Danish and Norwegian without much in-depth knowledge of the respective country's specifics.

The students' *motivation* to focus on acquiring and developing high-level literary translation competence is largely a matter of personal inclination and is subject to constant attrition due to the state of flux typical of Bulgarian publishing milieu and reading (and writing) culture in general after

---

<sup>27</sup> Until 2008 Swedish was the major language taught at the Scandinavian Studies Programme and had consequently the formal status of *first Scandinavian language*. In 2008 Norwegian was also introduced as a major language and is offered to incoming freshmen every second year. In their third semester, students choose a second Scandinavian language – Norwegian, Swedish or Danish.

<sup>28</sup> The term *combined crosslinguistic influence* was introduced by De Angelis to cover situations when “two or more languages interact with one another and concur in influencing the target language, or when one language influences another, and the already influenced language in turn influences another language in the process of being acquired” (De Angelis, Gessica. *Third or Additional Language Acquisition*. Clevedon/Buffalo/Toronto: Multilingual Matters, 2007, p. 20-21).

the fall of communism in 1989. The expanse of real-time Internet-based communication and the insufficient critical discourse around original and translated works has led the general public to relinquish the achievements of previous decades, including the sense for collocation accuracy, stylistic register and adequate translation equivalence, among others. Probably all this made one student ask once “Why do we put so much effort into finding adequate translation equivalents when almost nobody would appreciate that?”. I do not intend to go into a discussion of the factors and strategies to overcome this situation which is often (and probably hastily) described as detrimental to Bulgarian culture, but in any case, motivation is a major factor to be taken into account when mapping out translation training methodology at university level.

The adequate rendition of the source literary text into the target language presupposes *full and flexible command of the target language* in its whole spectrum of expressive means. This is rarely the case with students born in the 2000s who have not been exposed to literary discourse, at least not to the same extent as older generations. The iconicity of Internet and mobile communication and the dominance of visual culture are gradually limiting the students’ ability to recognize and perceive subtle nuances of form, meaning and style in texts written in their native language, let alone texts in a foreign language. In practice, little can be done to overcome those insufficiencies and one may well ask whether the student questioning the essence of functionally and socio-culturally oriented literary translation was not right in the long run and whether literary translation is bound to confine itself to more formal translation approaches. Until then, as far as Scandinavian Studies is concerned, students who intend to pursue a career in literary translation but lack the requisite sense for detail are encouraged to read extensively books of fiction in both Bulgarian and Scandinavian with the pious hope of being able to hone their skills.

One may also ask why Bulgarian universities still remain a stronghold of literary translation and to what extent the focus on translation in FLT is justified given all the challenges it is exposed to. Besides tradition and a missionary attitude towards translation shared by many university teachers, the reality is that, as Danchev puts it, “this does not mean that we expect every student at any educational establishment to become a qualified translator; on the other hand, there is no doubt, however, that every person knowing a foreign language to some extent, is also a potential translator”<sup>29</sup>. The abilities and competences traditionally forming the scope of literary translation training extend beyond its domain to apply to creative writing, non-fiction translation, oral interpreting etc. – all of those pertaining to the potential career pathway of philology faculty graduates. On the more general level,

---

<sup>29</sup> Данчев *op. cit.*, c. 118 [English translation is mine, I. T.]



the heuristic approach to literary translation acquired at university level can be applied to any problem-solving situation related to oral communication and written discourse in general.