Translating Style: Qualitative Parameters and Textual Factors

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Abstract

The situation with the concept of literary style is complex to the extent that it is not only variously misunderstood but also viewed as sufficiently intractable of definition. Translation studies, however, have to do with the concepts of style and stylistics at various levels on a regular basis. Can style be translated? If style is preferably a qualitative notion, what quantitative factors can be singled out to be retained in translation? To answer these questions, the concept of style is considered at the level of its etymology, definition, and complex nature. As is shown, in some types of texts style can only be interpreted but subjectively and, hence, only rendered in translation partially to the extent allowed by a given pair of languages. Finally, a text typology based on the notion of style and represented by a continuum between literary and nonliterary texts is suggested.

1 Style as a Concept in Literary and Translation Studies

Style is a common denominator in many disciplines which have long been involved in 'territory disputes': linguistics, stylistics, literary stylistics, linguistic stylistics, linguistic criticism, literary criticism, literary theory, literary history, sociolinguistics, psychology, translation studies, etc. What is 'style' etymologically? *Stylo*, the Latin name for an iron pen, the most rigid and simplest of instruments, "has lent its name to the subtlest and most flexible of arts" (Raleigh 1918: 1). The application of the word has later been extended first to arts other than literature, and then to the whole range of the activities of man. 'Style' is thus a dead metaphor, the history of which is that of metonymy.

As revealed by a comparison of various definitions, text style is commonly defined as an abstract notion closely related to the personal emotional response of the writer and the reader, which can differ significantly. The style of anything can be described as "the general way in which it is done or presented, which often shows the attitudes of the people involved" (BBCED 1992: 1165). The elucidations by, for instance, Blaise Pascal, "[w]hen we see a natural style, we are quite surprised and delighted" (ODQ 1992: 507), or by Brownell, "[t]he tension of style … is the need to make emotions count" (1924: 24), are crowned by de Buffon's "[s]tyle is the man" (ODQ 1992: 154). The unquantifiable emotional and attitudinal aspects are, hence, undoubtedly central in style descriptions, with the highest style sometimes enigmatically defined as "a combination of the maximum of personality with the maximum of impersonality; on the one hand it is a concentration of peculiar and personal emotion, on the other it is a complete projection of this personal emotion into the created thing" (Murray 1936: 35).

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Besides embracing the emotional constituent of the concept of style, many definitions dwell on its complex structure. Style is "a gesture … of the mind and of the soul" (Raleigh 1918: 127); it is "a quality of language which communicates precisely emotions or thoughts, or a system of emotions or thoughts, peculiar to the author" (Murray 1936: 71). It is recounted that "we both see it and see by way of it" (Lang 1983: 127); it is mentioned that "style is not an isolable quality of writing; it is writing itself" (Murray 1936: 77), and that "a concept of style [is used] to practice *on* and *by*" (Meyer 1987: 10–11, emphasis original).

Style is often described as an interface between texts and their perception. As is asserted by Murray, "the essence of all style worthy the name is the power to visualize" (1936: 91) realized via at least two channels since there appear to be "two qualities of style which are not infrequently put forward as essential, namely, the musical suggestions of the rhythm, and the visual suggestion of the imagery" (ibid.: 95). In terms of translation, this distinction implies the problem of a major choice. For instance, the three-stress line in a popular song, "I beg your pardon", has been translated into Finnish by a three-stress line "On paljon harhaa" ["There are plenty of illusions"], i.e., the rhythm has been preserved at the expense of total rewording, while exact translation would have resulted in a total loss of the rhythm.

Both psychologists and literary scholars describe, at least obliquely, style as a quantitative phenomenon associated with the discrete and systematic features of the linguistic make-up of texts. This idea seems to be explicit in the definition of style by Robert Louis Stevenson, "[t]he web … or the pattern; a web at once sensuous and logical, an elegant and pregnant texture; that is style, that is the foundation of the art of literature" (ODQ 1992: 667). Or, in stricter terms, "[t]hrough association and atmosphere even single words sustain thought and prolong feeling, and are thus factors of style" (Brownell 1924: 33). The idea of the key importance of the phenomenon of style is recurrent: "A sense of style is the foundation upon which the understanding, appreciation, and evaluation of works of art must rest" (Meyer 1987: 71).

Style as it is linked to expression and finally to the agency of persons simply, and certainly finally, cannot be manipulated or even anticipated. As a result, as Berel Lang asserts, "there are no handbooks of rules which ensure the quality of a piece of writing or of a painting, there is no technology of style, no set of formulas for creating it. It follows … from the history of criticism itself that the categories of style are invariably retrospective and open to alternative formulation" (1983: 133).

Therefore, even at the level of definitions, both the complexity of the concept and its necessity for instruction in text-related practices are difficult to underestimate. The problem of the extent to which the style of texts may be assessed and rendered in translation brings one to the domain of methods of text analysis.

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2 Methodology of Style Assessment

The two major concepts, and, hence, methods of assessment, of style go back to Plato and Aristotle. Members of the Platonic school regard style as a quality that some expressions have while other expressions have not, thus describing a text as either having style or having no style. According to this school, true idiosyncrasy of style should *be felt* as *necessary* and *inevitable*, *ensure* an immediate reference back to the *original emotion*, and occur in situations where the original emotion *demanded* this method of expression and this alone.

Members of the Aristotelian school regard style as a quality inherent in all expression, describing style with various epithets (DWLT 1970: 315) which, however, "qualify something that does not reciprocally qualify them. Style here is an external feature" (Lang 1983: 119). Murray describes this methodological trend as "the most popular of all delusions about style … The notion that style is applied ornament had its origins, no doubt, in the tradition of the schools of rhetoric in Europe" (1936: 10–11).

There seem, hence, to be two major manners of 'style' description: one impressionistic and subjective in its quality-depicting approaches based on labeling texts with various epithets; another seemingly scientific and objective in its quantity-based descriptions of stylistic elements. There is, however, no contradiction between the two approaches; on the contrary, connecting these two poles with a cline creates the possibility of a new perspective (see also e.g. Tarvi 2004):

> The myth of objectivism reflects the human need to understand the *external* world in order to be able to function successfully in it. The myth of subjectivism is focused on *internal* aspects of understanding – what the individual finds meaningful and what makes his life worth living. The experientialist myth suggests that these are not opposing concerns. It offers a perspective from which both concerns can be met at once. (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 229, emphasis original.)

The discipline of stylistics is known to be born of a reaction to the subjectivity and impressionism of studying literary style and in an attempt to put criticism on a scientific basis. Gradually, stylistic analysis was extended from literary texts to other types of writing. Today, creative literature is, in many respects, regarded as the most difficult type of language to approach stylistically, because it embraces qualitative stylistic elements which are often described as 'spirit', 'energy', 'intuition', and escape quantitative analysis. As reported by Chapman, "there is still a general disapproval of linguistics when it impinges on literary subjects. It is regarded as 'too scientific'; its mathematical diagrams and terminology, its development of theory from empirical observation, its refusal to be prescriptive about 'good' or 'bad' usage, all serve to alienate the more traditional literary scholar" (1973: 5). David Lodge reveals the roots of the problem: "It is the essential characteristic of modern linguistics that it claims to be a science. It is the essential characteristic of literature that it concerns values. And values are not amenable to scientific method" (1966: 57).

Of prime importance is the fact that distinct linguistic factors or stylistic features are instrumental in textual analysis only when they are viewed as interrelated with the

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general "intrinsic plan that integrates the separate devices used by the author into a unified system" (Tammi 1985: 4). Style is, therefore, not a sum of separate stylistic devices but rather a gestalt phenomenon. The problem with translation studies is that "[t]he complexity of translation, the number of factors involved, is enormous" (Russ 1981: 11), which makes the problem of text selection for practical translation classes even more acute.

3 Text Typology in Translation Studies

The importance of text classification in general and in translation studies instruction in particular is difficult to overestimate. However, attempts to divide texts into text classes (Gutknecht & Rölle 1996: 2) are understandably rare. There is no general approach to text typology, no unified terminology in designating various types of translation products.

In the book "intended as a guide for students who are required to undertake research in Translation Studies" (Williams & Chesterman 2002: 1), translation text types are called 'genres' and classified as follows:

> By 'genre' we mean both traditional literary genres such as drama, poetry and prose fiction as well as other well established and clearly defined types of texts for translation such as multimedia texts, religious texts, children's literature, tourism texts, technical texts and legal documents. (Ibid.: 9.)

Such a typology seems to be a reductive backward step as compared to Katherine Reiss' earlier (1977) attempt at text classification for translation purposes. Reiss suggested the well-known 'triangle' text typology based on Cicero's and Bühler's three functions of language (to instruct, to operate, to delight), which she later modified with the 'fourth angle' of media translations. The typology suggested in the present paper is even more reductive since, while echoing Williams' and Chesterman's division of texts into 'traditional literary genres' and 'well established and clearly defined types of texts,' it is based on two language functions (to delight and to instruct/operate) and on Chapman's suggestion to typify written texts on the basis of stylistic considerations inherent in fiction and nonfiction.

The two poles of the continuum between fiction (nonfacts) and nonfiction (facts) are viewed here as both discrete and overlapping entities. The list of the features distinguishing fiction and nonfiction is substantial, but one should remember that this dichotomy is just a convenient instrument of analysis and that texts are actually always located in the grey area on the cline between its 'fiction' and 'nonfiction' poles. In terms of praxis, however, this dichotomy allows one to better structure students' training in rendering various types of nonliterary texts, while admitting that the translation of literary texts requires not only general skills but personal intuition.

The Cline Text Typology (CTT) of translation products that I suggest here – literary texts (fiction) vs. nonliterary texts (nonfiction) – is far from being problem-free.

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Raymond Chapman, for one, is not certain about the clear-cut distinction between the two text types:

> The distinction is not always quite clear. … There is not likely to be a perfect test of admissibility to determine all cases; rather a spectrum of linguistic utterance, at one end of which are specimen of undisputed literature, at the other a much larger corpus that cannot be so labelled. There will always be an area of doubt and it need not greatly trouble us (1973:3).

Berel Lang, however, makes an important remark: "nonfiction may be true or false and fiction would be – neither? Both? Something more? Something less? … The truth of the matter is that … fiction has nothing to do with facts, and nonfiction thinks of truth as a bit of information" (1983: 225). For pedagogical purposes, however, these distinctions are of major importance. Hence, some prominent differences between fiction and nonfiction will be discussed in the next section.

4 Cline Text Typology: Fiction vs. Nonfiction, or Literary vs. Nonliterary Texts

In terms of evaluation or criticism, the poles of the cline are equally important since "if … value is partly a function of 'relational richness,' then *all* relationships implicit in a work are relevant for evaluation. And this observation brings us back to the reasons why a knowledge of style – whether tacit or explicitly formulated – is indispensable for criticism" (Meyer 1987: 66, emphasis original). Text selection for instruction is a complex intuition-based activity rooted not only in the evaluation of texts as such but also in that of their potential usefulness as samples of certain types of texts.

In terms of basic framework peculiarities, the following two textual features are perhaps most noticeable: the writer's choice of framework for the discourses which together make up his extant work, or a 'genre', and the writer's use of the word which has been given many interpretations – 'imagination'. In literary studies, 'imagination' is commonly understood as not only confined to fantasy or to the creation of characters and episodes which never had a 'real' existence, but rather as implying that the linguistic utterance which involves imagination has a quality beyond the use of words to convey referential meaning: "[a] work of literature may indeed offer information; it may, and probably will, have a meaningful content which can be paraphrased in referential prose. But such a paraphrase will certainly seem 'less' than the original; it will have 'lost' something, it will be 'poorer'" (Chapman 1973: 3). In nonliterary texts, vice versa, re-phrasing might be a useful exercise elucidating their factual essence.

In terms of context, a literary text context is, as reported by Bronzwaer (1970), 'bi-scopal', i.e., any specific stylistic device may be related both to co-textual norms and to extra-textual norms or expectations. The authority of internal norms or standards is certainly one of the striking properties of literary texts, setting them apart from all other kinds of text, where any particular text is standardly treated as a token to be evaluated in the (external) context of text types. Likewise, Carter and Nash (1983) remark that in literature, uniquely, individual texts can be identified as a token of culturally enshrined types in many respects, yet they retain or are granted the license of counting as unique types in their own right – now token of a generic type, now unique type without tokens.

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One more important distinction concerns the mode of presenting the situational context. Unlike nonfiction text types, "literature is a notional category for a kind of writing that defies an easy and direct assignment of its use and context of situation" (Toolan 1990: 35). Importantly for translation practice, Toolan states that literary art typically adopts a convention that no single purpose (translational skopos) shall be specified for the text and that "perhaps only this convention separates literature from advertising, parables, and propaganda" (ibid.: 41).

In terms of goals, fiction and nonfiction have to employ different strategies, which is important in instruction. Strategies are defined by Leonard Meyer as "compositional choices made within the possibilities established by the rules of style. For any specific style there is a finite number of rules, but there is an indefinite number of possible strategies for realizing or instantiating such rules" (1987: 51).

What might be the goal of a compositional strategy? Meyer does not conceal his uncertainty:

> I am frankly unsure. In a broad sense one might answer: the pleasure of comprehending and experiencing relationships. But the definition of such ends is, in the last analysis, the province of aesthetics. Indeed, the whole history of aesthetics might be viewed as a succession of attempts to define what constitutes winning in works of art – or, put the other way round, what makes a winning work of art (ibid.).

Ambiguity is the keystone of making fiction attractive to the reader through the device that Victor Shklovsky (1919) calls 'defamiliarisation' – the technique of art to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. On the nonfiction pole, ambiguity is, on the contrary, viewed as a huge drawback, which necessitates certain strategies in translation instruction.

In terms of time and space coordinates, on the fiction pole (the reflexive mode), "[t]he interior space and time of writing … are located initially on the two sides of Appearance and Reality; the purpose of the author is to overcome the apparent discrepancy between these modes of being. … The problem for the agent in the reflexive mode is how to span the two frameworks" (ibid.: 61). On the nonfiction pole, within the function to instruct (the expository mode), "… the interior space and time of the written work define a structure of stable dimensions; by his motion across them, the author serves as a pointer, focusing the attention of the reader on objects located in the matrix" (Lang 1983: 60); while within the function to move (the performative mode), "… the interior space and time of the work are not laid out *for* the activity which takes place; they are defined *by* it" (ibid.).

In terms of structure, the two poles of the suggested cline are fairly distinctive: "While other styles show *recurrent features*, literature is distinguished by what can be described as *pattern*" (Chapman 1973:13, emphasis added). In terms of instruction, it implies that patterns in literary texts are to be discovered each time anew, while recurrent features in nonfiction could be taught, starting from terminology. Chapman remarks that literature

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is obviously not confined to any aspect of human experience, nor does it exclude any. Like any meaningful use of *langue*, fiction contains a great deal of 'common core' which would cause no surprise in any situation. At the same time, fiction contains a higher incidence of special and deviant features than nonliterary texts. Between these extremes, it can be observed that literary style shows more careful and consistent use of the regular patterns of the language, which is exemplified by the fact that the rules of traditional grammar are usually illustrated with examples from fiction.

To recap: the fiction pole of the CTT that I suggest here is occupied with "**Literature**", also known as imaginative literature, artistic literature, creative writing, artistic writing, aimed to delight (function – expressive), and described as imagination-based, multi-purposeful, and 'located' in a non-specified context (situation). As shown above, literary style cannot, due to its polysystem nature, be fully retained in translation. The translator can only interpret it but subjectively and render it but partially in terms of the semantic and syntactic 'stylemes' chosen to be analyzed and retained. One can, however, develop one's intuition and perfect one's unverbalized internal analysis of fiction 'patterns' through individual praxis.

The nonfiction pole of the cline embraces referential prose or '**l**iterature', aimed to instruct or to move (functions – informative or operative), and described as fact-based, information-aimed, argumentative, single-purposed, and 'located' in a specified context (situation). Text classification on the nonfiction pole (e.g., academic writing, journalism, legal documents, etc.) is a fascinating topic far beyond the range of the present paper. I would like, however, to bring to your attention one group of nonfiction texts which is characterized by recurrent linguistic features in each of its subtypes, which means that the relevant translation skills can be effectively developed.

5 The Nonfiction Pole of the CTT: Corporate Texts

When outlining the major differences in style between imagination-based literary (fiction) texts and fact-based argumentative (nonfiction) texts, Raymond Chapman underscored the fact that "[u]nlike other styles, literature does not and cannot exclude any aspects of *langue*" (1973: 15). Chapman, however, further chooses a specific group of texts and asserts that the notions of, for instance, 'legal language', 'medical language', 'religious language' are familiar enough, since they are the abstractions composed from a large number of *paroles* in which certain linguistic features recur with high enough frequency to be significant. Each of these 'languages' or 'text-class conventions' (Gutknecht & Rölle 1996: 280) is unquestionably part of a certain *langue*, showing enough common features to be intelligible in a general pattern, if not in every detail, to most users of the *langue*. Examples of such features include e.g. conjunctional phrases in English legal documents ('the last will and testament'), few imperatives and a high proportion of complex sentences in academic texts, or the use of simple present for a proximate future in news bulletins ('at the end of this bulletin we talk to a correspondent'). Chapman's suggestion is as follows: "Instead of talking about 'legal language' and so on it is better to call these distinctive usages styles. The notion of

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'legal style' or 'religious style' is, like all other attempts to categorize language, made possible by the performance of users" (ibid.: 10).

Having accepted the commonsensical idea that there exists a distinct group of nonfiction texts, each characterized by a certain set of common linguistic features based on professional performance, e.g., the *language of law* in legal practices, I would like to suggest an umbrella term to designate them – 'corporate' texts. This distinction, as will be shown below, seems to be particularly instrumental for pedagogical purposes, as "evaluations can be made and justified only in the context of some style" (Meyer 1987: 68). The term 'corporate texts' might, as less loaded than 'style', be instrumental in designating a particular pool of texts for special purposes, based on facts, pertaining to a certain professional domain, and characterized by a certain *parole* and recurrent linguistic features, e.g., legal, medical, religious, etc. Unlike the fairly rigid positioning prescribed by Reiss' 'triangle', a corporate text can, depending on its stylistic properties, be located closer to either of the poles depending on the personal style of the author. This fact alone might silence fruitless debates in which part of Reiss' triangle a sermon or as poem is to be located. Both literary and nonliterary texts can, of course, employ to a varying degree the available grammatical means of the 'common core' of the language, with clear emphasis on certain obligatory genre-related features, like strict terminology in corporate texts and free choice of words in fiction.

The skills of translating various corporate texts can be mastered, provided they are taught as a chosen set of recurrent features within their corporate subtypes on the nonfiction pole (legal, medical, etc.). What might be of a particular practical importance are 'checklists' of the recurrent stylistic, terminological and rhetorical features in each and every corporate text type, supplied with examples of typical texts.

6 Pedagogical Implications

The fiction-nonfiction dichotomy alone cannot be a valid replacement for Reiss' triangle; rather, it might serve as an additional useful pedagogical tool at the level of translation products. Concluding her paper on text typology, Reiss suggested the following hierarchy of translation factors for text assessment in terms of products, processes and functions: "in the first place one must determine the *kind of text* the original represents (in terms of text type and text variety); the *translator's* conception of the translation (to be inferred from the manner of translating …); and the *aim* of the translated text" (1989: 115, emphasis original). Therefore, the type of text product, the topic of the present paper, is of paramount but not overall importance. Each text to be analyzed should also be viewed in terms of at least two more clines, i.e., not only at the level of products but also at that of processes and functions. As reported elsewhere (Tarvi 2010, forthcoming), the instructor's and translator's choices at the level of processes (strategies) could be viewed along the cline between rhetorical choices and stylistic options (based on Milic 1971), and those at the level of functions as a dichotomy between accepted norms or clichés and various norm violations (based on Meyer 1987). These three dichotomies instead of one triangle could be a handy tool in

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instruction provided one remembers that dichotomies are just conventions which allow one to better position a text on the clines and thus to typify it.

As is asserted by Harris (1981: 186), language is "a communication game in which there is no referee, and the only rule that cannot be bent says that players shall improvise as best they can". The situation in translation studies is much more complex. As René Wellek (1971: 69) paradoxically remarks, the mere fact that great poets have exercised an enormous influence often in poor and loose translations which "hardly convey even an inkling of the peculiarities of their verbal art should demonstrate the comparative independence of literature from language". In language instruction, however, rules are to be established. The admittedly debatable Cline Text Typology (CTT) that I suggest here is, at one of its three possible levels – that of translated products –, just another attempt at bridging the gap between the abyss of existing texts and a selected set of texts for instruction which can be neither ideal nor final.

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