

Theses of Doctoral Dissertation

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Tendencies in the translation of realia based on Szabó Magda's *The Door* in the  
Hungarian–Norwegian language pair

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## 1. The subject and relevance of the thesis

**“To make a literary translation is like dancing bound.”**

**( Dezső Kosztolányi 1885–1936 )**

Translation is a work of critique, exclusively correct or perfect translations do not exist. Kosztolányi’s description above rightly reflects the most common dilemma for translators, that it is a great challenge to create equality between the original and the translated text. Translators have to adhere to the norms of the target language and the original language, as well as they have to serve the author of the work and the readers of the target language.

This thesis examines the translational difficulties of the culturally bound language elements in Magda Szabó’s novel *The Door*, as well as the solutions to these in the Hungarian-to-Norwegian translation. The thesis details the lexical transfer operations and the translational strategies.

The corpus comprises of seventy culturally bound words and expressions as well as their Norwegian translations.

There has been relatively little written about the translation of culturally bound language elements in the Hungarian–Norwegian language pairing, so it was an important aspect that the subject of the thesis is a novel that has been translated into several foreign languages and it is also rich in realia. It is therefore Magda Szabó’s novel *The Door* has been chosen, which has been published in 35 languages (as of October 2014) and with this, it is regarded as the most translated novel in Hungarian literature.

The thesis was written in Norwegian with the aim to better raise the interest of Norwegian translators and translation researchers to both translation studies as a separate discipline and to Hungarian literature.

Owing to the changes of the last couple of decades, more and more translations have been published. The interest towards translations has dramatically increased, which can be felt not only regarding technical translations, but in the field of literary works of art as well.

“Everyone translates and we translate everything” - evaluated Kinga Klaudy (2005) regarding the state of translation in one of her presentations.

In my research, I have reviewed the bibliography of Norwegian works published in Hungarian as well as Hungarian works translated to Norwegian (Balogh 1984). I have found that there is a significant difference in the number of works published between the two languages. Unfortunately, fewer Hungarian works reach Norwegian readers than vice versa. I am not discussing the reasons for this, because the thesis itself has not elaborated on this disproportion, however it was important when choosing the subject of my research that the direction of the translation is from Hungarian to Norwegian.

## **2. The theoretical background and goals of the thesis**

Translation studies as a separate discipline was created in the 1960s through the works of E. Nida (1969), J.C. Catford (1965), J.C. Holmes (2004) and several other linguists. Their theoretical research has contributed significantly to the legitimization of this new branch of science.

In Hungary, the training of translators improved considerably from the 1970s. In ELTE's Translator Training Course more than 1300 students have gained a certificate in professional translation and interpreting, and more than 100 students have joined the PhD course since they were established.

The organization of the training and its related scientific activity was established by Professor Kinga Klaudy, who has carved a unique position for herself not only with her scientific work, but with professionally preparing the students for their scientific careers.

The introduction of the notions of transfer operations (átváltási műveletek) was also initiated by Klaudy.

The aim of the research is to present - based on the sorting of the knowledge needed for the translation of culturally bound language elements and knowledge related to culture - what strategies the translators can choose in a Hungarian–Norwegian language relation.

I have sought to answer the question if translational rules could be observed behind apparently individual translational decisions, and what are the factors that influence the translational solutions.

After reviewing the relevant professional literature, I have used Zsuzsa Forgács's definition for the culturally bound words and expressions (Forgács 2004).

According to Forgács's definition, all objects and referents that are characteristic of a given linguistic community and which induce the same emotional content and association in the members of these communities, are to be considered as culturally bound expressions. These objects and phenomena give the same connotation to individuals in linguistic environment, despite all individuals having a different cognitive environment.

### **3. Theoretical pre-assumptions of the thesis**

The thesis starts from the pre-assumption that the Norwegian translation is more explicit, its language would be more to-the-point and less poetic than the original Hungarian text. The two cultures are very distant from each other and this difference has to be explained in the translation. The Hungarian and the Norwegian readers have

different cultural backgrounds, their understanding of the world is also different, they process reality in different ways. To bridge this difference, besides linguistic competence, the translators have to have deeper cultural knowledge and transfer routine (Klaudy 2007).

According to my second pre-assumption, those translators who regularly use culture-specific transfer operations, are better at inserting “couleur locale” into the text than those who know the given culture less and who do not aim to present the differences between the two cultures. Kari Kemény puts the Hungarian meals, names, customs along with the characteristic notions and events of the socialist era almost intact into the Norwegian text, which on the one hand makes it harder for the readers to understand it, but at the same time carries new information and inserts “local colour” into the plot.

The third assumption tries to draw the conclusion regarding the language specific transfer operations in the case of a Norwegian–Hungarian language pairing. Transfer operations pertaining to a given language pairing exist depending on whether we are translating languages and cultures that are close to each other or we are translating “unfriendly” language pairings.

#### **4. The material of the research**

The thesis examines seventy culturally bound expressions in a Hungarian–Norwegian linguistic relation considering the system of observation of lexical transfer operations outlined by Kinga Klaudy (2007).

By transfer operations we mean such series of processes that are classifiable based on the level, reason and execution method of the process as well as based on the translator’s viewpoint. According to my assumption, all translational strategies -

regardless of whether they are automatic or non-automatic, obligatory or voluntary, alienating or naturalizing - significantly depend on the competences and skills of the translator.

The most important conditions, apart from the translator's language competences, are professional knowledge, general knowledge, possessing a wide range of information in all professional fields, being skilled in translation techniques and writing, furthermore intercultural communication skills and knowledge.

In the case of objects and phenomena characteristic of a given culture - later in the text referred to as culturally bound expressions - the translator is faced with especially challenging tasks. In these cases, the translator has to translate culture-specific phenomena that are lesser known in the culture of the target language, or are entirely unknown.

The translator of *The Door*, Kari Elisabeth Kemény had difficulties with Magda Szabó's 1987 masterpiece despite the fact that she has proven her familiarity with Hungarian language and culture many times before. She has translated literary works of art with difficult wordings such as Imre Kertész's *Fateless*, Péter Esterházy's *The Woman* as well as Kriszta Bódis's *Hard Butter*. The representation of the richness in Hungarian language use in an authentic Norwegian translation is not as easy as it seems at the first glance.

Magda Szabó's *The Door* describes the true friendship between two aging women, the bond that lives deep in their souls and the unique treasure of their moral cosmos - enchanting and astounding readers in many corners of the world. The work has been translated into 35 languages so far, and its success continues. The author felt

indebted to share this story of the eternal honor of Emerenc Szeredás and the painful battle of their unspoken sisterhood with her readers.

In her final testimony, in order to be able to live on bravely and free of lies, she states: “I killed Emerenc. This is not saved by the fact that I did not want to destroy her, but rescue her.”

She asks for forgiveness, as she has betrayed the true secret of her loyal servant. All Emerenc`s utterances - furthermore with her unheard-of act of helping the suicide of the old lady next door, Polett who was barely living anyway - wanted to prove this woman that life is worth living only until a person can bear life with dignity and is of use to other people and animals alike.

The broken door becomes the symbol of disgrace, which represents the fall of both people. The heart of Emerenc cannot bear this disgrace and the unmeasurable disappointment that the betrayal of his mistress has caused. Furthermore the author in the novel is not able to return to the usual everyday routine. In her dreams, returning shadows haunt her and the key is only turning in the lock, but the door never opens. “My efforts are in vain” - she admits at the end of the novel.

## **5. The method of research**

As the first step, I have marked the words and expressions in the source language that I have considered culturally bound according to my own translational experience and the definitions of realia. For the subject of analysis I have often chosen such language elements that consist of more elements themselves and that appear on the word list in an inflected form for an easier back-traceability.

After careful consideration, I have decreased the corpus to seventy expressions and listed them with their Norwegian equivalents in a table. I have tried to choose words that do not only appear in the vocabulary in one community or societal layer but are

characteristic of the entire culture and the understanding of which requires additional or background knowledge about Hungarian culture for the Norwegian reader.

This decision was only apparently clear as the measuring of what emotional-associative effect a given word can have in the source language reader has brought a number of research problems to the surface.

In my thesis, using Klaudy's (2007) taxonomy, I am examining the seventy culturally bound expressions chosen and evaluating the results.

Klaudy's lexical transfer operations are sorted into the following categories:

1. Narrowing down of meanings
2. Extension of meanings
3. Merging of meanings
4. Splitting meanings
5. Omission of meanings
6. Adding of meanings
7. Replacement of meanings
8. Swapping of meanings
9. Antonymous translation
10. Total transformation
11. Compensation

I have extended Klaudy's system with two further categories,

12. Word-for-word translation
13. Borrowing, which often causes problems for translators when translating culturally specific expressions.

I have classified the culturally bound expressions based on the classification by Bulgarian linguists Vlahov and Florin and then I have examined, from a translation viewpoint, what transfer operations and strategies the translator has used.

Vlahov and Florin`s (1980) five groups are:

1. Geographic
2. Ethnic
3. Art-related, cultural
4. Ethnographic
5. Social-political realia

In the analysis part of of the thesis I have tried to find an answer, by contrasting the two systems, as to whether typical translational processes, that are significantly characteristic to certain realia categories, exist.

My other important research aim was that in the case of an “unfriendly” language pairing, like Hungarian and Norwegian, I examine the explicitness of the original and the translated text and summarize the results.

The contrastive comparison was made significantly difficult by the fact that the lexical and grammatical systems of the two languages differ greatly from each other and so far no academically edited Norwegian-Hungarian or Hungarian-Norwegian dictionary has been published.

We cannot find a descriptive grammar of the Norwegian language in Hungarian, which would serve as a direction in grammatical rules and linguistic correctness. We can also only partly rely on Norwegian sources, when we want to identify the most characteristic transfer typologies and choosing the right terminology, as only a very small number of professional works have been published in this field in Norwegian.

## 6. The results of the research

In my analysis I have examined the translational operations from the viewpoint of explicitness, and by the values that came out we cannot state that the translator executed several explicitational operations. These are absolute values however there is no consensus regarding at which proportions we can claim that the translator chose more explicit solution over the more implicit one. According to my statistics - which we cannot call representative, as we have little data at our disposal to draw more general conclusions - the transfer operations are symmetrical in Magda Szabó's novel. My experiences as a reader and translator both show that the historical events and the literary-cultural relations require a more detailed description. These are consistently carried out by the Norwegian translator for the Norwegian readers. The result is a more explicit target language text, which cannot be proven by the number of transfer operations, but can be rendered probable separating and examining categories.

Categories	70	100%
Narrowing down of meanings	6	8,6%
Merging of meanings	11	15,7%
Extension of meanings		
Splitting meanings	6	8,6%
Omission of meanings	6	8,6%
Adding of meanings	14	20%
Replacement of meanings		
Swapping of meanings		
Antonymous translation		

Total transformation	8	11,4%
Compensation	3	4,3%
Word-for-word translation	11	15,7%
Borrowing	5	7,1%

The outcome proves that there are certain translational laws despite the fact that the translator can choose from countless translational solutions and strategies. The results of the analysis however only serve as a guideline, and they are not significant enough to draw the final conclusions in the Hungarian–Norwegian relation. Regarding how much the target language translation makes explicit the source language text is confirmed to us only partly. The Norwegian translation is loyal compared to the Hungarian original, it often has translational solutions that do not break away in a large extent from the source language text. Typically language specific transfer operations can be shown during the course of translation of certain cultural expressions, but due to the limits of the corpus these results are not significant, but rather are a guideline for translators and translation researchers.

In order to draw conclusions, the analysis of a larger corpus is essential with a significant amount of translation and involving more researchers, maybe in another Scandinavian language as well.

## **7. The benefit of the research**

The present research is the first to undertake the examination of the translational solutions of the culturally bound expressions in a given work in a Hungarian–Norwegian relation, mainly by analyzing the occurrences of lexical transfer operations. The findings of the thesis may be the base of comparison to other languages in later research. The dissertation was written in Norwegian, therefore its results are available

for Norwegian researchers more readily. The results of this research based on the analysis of concrete culturally bound words and expressions can be used in translation courses or when creating a contrastive research analysis as well.

Besides the aspects of translation studies, as with all works encompassing different cultures, translation analysis can enable the better and more precise understanding of foreign cultures.

The careful translation of realia, that is culture-specific expressions, plays an integral role in raising interest in a given unknown or lesser known culture, or it can facilitate the acceptance of the given culture.

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