

**“THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV” IN GERMAN TRANSLATIONS:
TRANSLATING THE RUSSIANNES OF DOSTOYEVSKY’S STYLE**

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***Abstract:** The article investigates the challenges of rendering the peculiarities of Dostoyevsky’s style linked to his philosophy of man and religious attitudes in four German translations of “The Brothers Karamazov”. The category of uncertainty is intrinsic to both Russian mentality and Dostoyevsky’s writing manner. However, the textual markers of uncertainty are perceived by German translators as essentially “foreign” and therefore may hinder the readers’ understanding. The paper reveals various approaches to conveying the desired semantic effect of uncertainty in the translations and points out problematic issues.*

***Key words:** Dostoyevsky, translation, Russianness, style, uncertainty.*

Within the context of cultural links between Russia and Europe Dostoyevsky has always stood out conspicuously as a true representative of the Russian culture and a messenger of its values, which largely explains the unceasing interest of European readers and critics in his personality and oeuvre. Dostoyevsky’s reception in Germany is a matter of particular importance. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, his ideas, frequently misinterpreted by controversial public figures, strongly influenced German social and political life. It was mainly the focus on the “Russian idea” in Dostoyevsky’s philosophy that bred German conservative-nationalist sentiments most explicitly voiced by Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, the chief editor of the first series of Dostoyevsky’s works in German translation in Piper Verlag, Munich (1906-1919). And it is “the “unusual” content and the “strange” new form of his works”¹ that have continuously kept alive Dostoyevsky’s appeal for Western readers.

With this unquestionable concern over Dostoyevsky’s “Russianness”, there is no clear agreement yet about what exactly is to be understood by the notion. Apparently, it is not confined to the presence of typical Russian realia in the novels, but goes deeper into the level of philosophical content. Here it is crucial to recognize that in a literary text nothing is accidental, but all units at the plane of expression are inextricably connected with the plane of content. Therefore, we are impelled to look for the textual markers of “Russianness” in Dostoyevsky’s fiction, and, more specifically, in his writing manner. So far, little attention has been paid to the issue in Western academic studies. A possible reason may be that for the vast

¹ Feher, Z.A. *Georg Lukács’s Role in Dostoyevsky’s Reception at the Turn of the Century: A Study in Reception*. University of California, Los Angeles, Diss. Ph. D., 197. p. 16.

majority of readers the only way to perceive a literary work is through translation, where many of the subtle shades of meaning and stylistic peculiarities inherent in the original text might get obscured or lost altogether, partly due to linguistic factors, or as a result of translators' deliberate or unconscious decisions. As a consequence, various elements of the text belonging to the realm of the author's style and at the same time bearing the cultural overtones may remain inaccessible for foreign readers, and it is only through detailed comparison of the original text and translation that these problems can be brought to light.

This paper seeks to examine four German translations of Dostoyevsky's last novel, "The Brothers Karamazov", by addressing the issues of rendering the elements of "Russianness" intrinsic to the author's style. The choice of translations was based on their popularity among today's readers and the time interval sufficient to reveal the evolution of translators' approaches. The translation done in 1906 by Elisabeth Kaerrick, alias E.K. Rahsin, was immediately accepted with enthusiasm, as well as other translations published within the Piper-Verlag undertaking. The second of the translations investigated below was done by Hermann Röhl in 1924, which was the peak of German fascination with Dostoyevsky and his mystical and religious "cult". The translation of 1958 by Hans Ruoff and Richard Hoffmann was created at the background of the arising scholarly interest in Russian XIX-century literature and in such phenomena as poetics and aesthetics of a literary text. Finally, the latest translation of the novel into German done by Ukrainian-born Svetlana Geier in 2003 has won widespread acclaim in the country, primarily thanks to the linguistic insight and sophisticated handling of the novel's polyphonic character.

The problem of conveying the national and cultural content in literary translation has only recently gained scholarly attention. The only comprehensive investigation focusing on the subject has been done by Anja Tippner¹, who clearly demonstrated the encounter of two cultures – "one's native" and "the other's" – in German translations of Chekhov's prose. Tippner singles out two levels of Chekhov's "foreignness" ("Alterität"): semantic "foreignness", where she analyzes not only realia of Russian spiritual and social daily life, but also a few "key words of culture" ("kulturelle Schlüsselwörter"), such as *toska*; and stylistic "foreignness", where Chekhov's writing manner comes under discussion. Tippner managed to transpose linguistic observations onto a broader cultural level and showed the ways the Chekhov translations contributed to creating the essentially "foreign" image of Russia in the eyes of the German readership.

In western philological research, Dostoyevsky's novels have traditionally been considered from the point of view of their ideological content and message, and, more recently, in terms of their poetics and structure. A further step into language-oriented investigations would inevitably be tied to translation issues. So far, the only systematic study of Dostoyevsky's translations into German has been

¹ Tippner, A. *Alterität, Übersetzung und Kultur: Čechovs Prosa zwischen Rußland und Deutschland* / Anja Tippner. – Frankfurt am Main: Lang 1997 (Slavische Literaturen; Bd 13).

attempted by Marliese Ackermann¹ who carried out a detailed analysis of six German versions of “The Grand Inquisitor” at the lexical, syntactical and stylistic levels. While the paper is quite innovative in its subject matter, it seems reasonable to suggest that the research could have benefited from a closer look at the literary features of the chapter as being a part of the novel as a whole.

The key peculiarities of Dostoyevsky’s style are to be understood from the ideological perspective. Man in all his complexity was at the centre of the author’s creative thinking, and he viewed the Russian man as a true embodiment of the human nature – dualistic, irrational, dynamically strained between the good and the evil, and defiant to facile categorization. The heroes of “The Brothers Karamazov”, both principal and minor ones, collectively represent the Russian national character. Their depiction in the text of the novel at various levels – in the narrator’s discourse, through the heroes’ speech and the author’s remarks – can give clues to understanding the author’s concept of man.

One of the most prominent textual features relating to the portrayal of the Russian character in Dostoyevsky’s works is the abundance of “elements of uncertainty”, i.e. indefinite pronouns, impersonal syntactic constructions, and a range of adversative conjunctions. It must be highlighted that these units are also very typical for the Russian discourse as such. As Arutyunova points out, “the indefinite pronouns “*kakoi-to*” (“some”), “*kak-to*” (“somehow”) and “*kak by*” (“as it were”) significantly outmatch their analogs in Germanic and Roman languages in the flexibility and frequency of their usage”, which is one of the reasons why “translations of Dostoyevsky’s texts into these languages do not adequately reveal the peculiarities of his style”².

Let us review a few fragments illustrating this feature and analyze the translations. (The translation into English has been kept as close to the original as possible for the purpose of the analysis.)

Что-то как бы перекошилось и дрогнуло в лице Ивана Федоровича. –
Something, as it were, distorted and flinched in Ivan Fedorovich’s face. (*Chto-to kak by perekosilos’ i drognulo v litse Ivana Fedorovicha.*)

R Es war, als ob sich in Iwan Fjodorowitschs Gesicht etwas verzerrte. Er
ahsin zitterte am ganzen Körper.

R In Iwan Fjodorowitschs Gesicht schien sich etwas zu verkrampfen.

öhl

R Iwans Gesicht verzerrte sich.

*uoff and
Hoffmann*

¹ Ackermann, M. *Dostoevskis “Grossinquisitor” in sechs deutschen Übersetzungen. Analyse, Kritik, Bewertung.* Philosophische Dissertation, angenommen von der Neuphilologischen Fakultät der Universität Tübingen am 19. Dezember 1985. Tübingen 1986.

² Arutyunova N. *Stil’ Dostoyevskogo v ramke russkoi kartiny mira.* In: *Poetika. Stilistika. Yazyk I kul’tura. Pamyati Tat’yany Grigor’yevny Vinokur.* Moscow 1996. p. 88.

G Iwan Fjodorowitsch verzog das Gesicht, ein Zucken lief darüber.

eier

Here, the reader of the original would infallibly feel the hero's emotional vacillation and the sudden change in his spirits or thoughts. The translations display various approaches to rendering the elements of "uncertainty". As is obvious, the earliest version keeps both of them ("als ob", "etwas"), which effectively conveys the author's intention. However, it fails to keep the phrase laconic. Instead, the sentence gets split into two with a noticeable semantic exaggeration ("zitterte am ganzen Körper" instead of "*chto-to* <...> *drognulo*"). Röhl preserves the general impression of "indefiniteness" through different means ("schien sich"), but omits the second verb, which also plays a semantic role ("*drognulo*"), perhaps on the grounds that it would sound excessive. In the third translation the meaningful peculiarities of the style get reduced to a sheer informational content. Geier's version looks more complete, but both elements of "uncertainty" are lacking. As a result, the phrase loses the Dostoyevskian flavor.

The following sentence is taken from Chapter 3 of Book 1 "The Women of Faith" and describes a grieving woman who lost her baby. As can be seen, Dostoyevsky avoids being very specific in depicting her truly evasive emotional state and seems to be unsure whether any lexical denotation is appropriate here.

Во взгляде ее было **что-то как бы** иступленное. – There was something, as it were, ecstatic in her look. (*Vo vzglyade ee bylo chto-to kak by istuplennoye.*)

R In ihrem Blick lag etwas Geistesabwesendes.

ahsin

R In ihrem Blick lag etwas wie Verzückung.

öhl

R mit einem wahrhaft ekstatischen Ausdruck in den Augen.

uoff and

Hoffmann

G In ihrem Blick lag etwas Fanatisches.

eier

It can be observed that in most variants the translators reduce the degree of uncertainty and make the phrase sound smooth and natural by leaving out the second element in question (Rahsin, Geier). The translation by Ruoff and Hoffmann transforms the original modality into quite the opposite, lending the phrase a certain definiteness by the adverb "wahrhaft". Röhl's is the only translation where the unusual combination of the elements is preserved.

The statistical analysis of the similar fragments related to depiction of heroes' emotional state in the whole novel has demonstrated that the most serious error in translations while rendering the effect of uncertainty is the complete omission of the indefinite pronouns and adverbs. Rahsin's translation features the lowest degree of omission (26 percent of all original elements in question are omitted), while the highest omission rate is observed in the translation by Ruoff and Hoffmann (approximately 39 percent).

Although uncertainty pervades the descriptions of the heroes' emotional state, it would be wrong to attach to it a purely psychological label. Ultimately, all phenomena crucial to Dostoyevsky's vision were placed in a religious context. To understand the function of uncertainty in the author's spiritual outlook, it is important to realize that his way to faith was by no means an easy one, but lay through suffering and tormenting doubt. Therefore he strived to show his heroes' personal spiritual experience as a divine revelation as opposed to mere adoption of ready-made religious postulates. This quality was highlighted by philosopher Vasily Rozanov: "Throughout his entire life Dostoyevsky tried to express, and sometimes managed to, <...> a totally new perception of life <...> This is neither science, nor poetry, nor philosophy, ultimately, this is not a religion, <...> but simply a new feeling of man, his newly born hearing, his newly born vision, but the hearing and vision of the soul"¹. As an artist in literature, Dostoyevsky was keenly aware of the insufficiency of worldly language to denote that higher spiritual matter that fascinated him. This is the reason why the key pages in his novels where the hero experiences a religious commotion are also marked with a high degree of uncertainty. A stark illustration is Alyosha's spiritual upheaval in Chapter 7 of Book 3 "Cana of Galilee". Let us review a sentence where the author avoids giving a name to the great mysterious force that overpowers his hero and uses an indefinite pronoun, whose key role is emphasized by the anaphoric syntactic construction.

Что-то горело в сердце Алеши, **что-то** наполнило его вдруг до боли... -
Something was burning in Alyosha's heart, something filled it suddenly painfully. (*Chto-to gorelo v serdce Alyoshi, chto-to napolnilo ego vdrug do boli.*)

R Es war Alioscha, als brenne etwas in seinem Herzen und erfülle es
ahsin mit unsäglichem Schmerz.

R Es entbrannte etwas in Aljoschas Herzen. Sein Herz war so übervoll,
öhl daß es ihn schmerzte.

R Alioscha empfand ein Brennen im Herzen. Bis zum Schmerz war es
uoff and auf einmal von etwas Unbestimmtem erfüllt.

Hoffmann

G Etwas loderte in Aljoschas Herz, etwas erfüllte ihn plötzlich
eier schmerzhaft.

The variability of translations is quite surprising, given the outward simplicity of the original and the availability of the direct German equivalent to the highlighted pronoun. Rahsin's translation suggests a multiple intensification of the uncertainty through various means. The initial impersonal construction "es war Alioscha" immediately divests the hero of the active role in the scene. In addition to preserving the pronoun "*chto-to*" ("etwas"), the translation renders uncertainty

¹ Rozanov V. *Chem nam dorog Dostoyevskiy?* In: Rozanov V. *O pisatel'stve i pisatelyakh*. Moscow, 1995. p.534.

through the comparative construction (“als”), thus rejecting direct nomination of the hero’s emotion. Not less important is the deliberate lexical extension: the adjective “unsäglichem” alludes to the impossibility to express the final truth in the worldly language. A similar addition is observed in the translation by Ruoff and Hoffmann: the phrase “von etwas Unbestimmtem” partially compensates the omission of the indefinite pronoun in the first sentence. In this way, the importance of the indefinite agent as meant by the author is also ignored. Röhl slightly modifies the beginning of the phrase, shifting “etwas” to a weaker syntactic position, which, as we believe, runs counter to the author’s intention. The second sentence lacks the original conciseness. The anaphoric effect playing up the uncertainty is preserved only in Geier’s variant, which, on the whole, stays closest to Dostoyevsky here.

The examples given here are only a small fraction of the investigated material, yet they disclose the key problems of handling the Russianness of Dostoyevsky’s style in translations. The study has revealed that the category of uncertainty plays a major role in Dostoyevsky’s vision of man and his religious outlook. Moreover, it demonstrates a strong connection between the writer’s creative thinking and the Russian mentality and discourse. On the textual level, the relevant fragments are characterized by the presence of indefinite pronouns and adverbs. In this way, semantics and style of the original get intertwined. As the comparative analysis of the four translations has shown, the German translators tend to reduce the degree of uncertainty. It is particularly true for the psychological contexts. Apparently, the duality and vagueness of the heroes’ emotions was perceived by German translators as a culturally foreign substance, and they preferred to sacrifice a certain stylistic effect to facilitate the reader’s comprehension. As regards the fragments of religious content, the translations display a higher degree of equivalency. Almost all elements of uncertainty are rendered, or, in a number of cases the translators convey the desired effect through a flexible lexical substitution for the elements concerned. A possible explanation may be that Dostoyevsky’s spiritual views largely stemmed from German romanticism that suggested a mysterious perspective to religious beliefs and attached great significance to personal spiritual experience. Therefore, the translators may have felt the affinity of Dostoyevsky’s religious outlooks to their own cultural background and managed to trace their realization in the text. On the whole, it can be claimed that “The Brothers Karamazov” in German translations is a unique representation of the multifaceted cultural dialogue between the two countries.

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