

Translating Semiotic “Polyphony” of Texts as a Culture-Formative Creation. Based on the Example of Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*

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Abstract

The Master and Margarita is generally considered Mikhail Bulgakov’s literary masterpiece. It is a “melting pot” of literary genres, motives, themes, imagery and intertextual references. All these elements cooperate in creating a “polyphonic” novel, in Bakhtin’s sense of the word, not only when it comes to the different nature and “voice” of single characters but also with reference to the “poly-structured” construction of the text itself. The paper will illustrate the peculiarity of Bulgakov’s novel and the semiotic and semiosic character of his creation. The adjective “semiosic” derives from “semiosis” as defined, among others, by C.S. Peirce, who stresses the meaning-making “power” of some semiotic processes. The paper aims also at answering the question why this novel has been translated several times into Polish and Italian since 1967 (when the first edition of the novel was published in Western Europe). Due to the very specific construction of the plot and of the formal aspects of the novel, translators had to deal with a significant number of problems of “untranslatability” that they could solve only by using their creative potential. It was Roman Jakobson who through his linguistic analysis reached the conclusion that for the untranslatable—poetry for example—“Only creative transposition is possible”. Using creativity translators were also able to discover further interpretations of Bulgakov’s literary work and to perform a culture-formative act as their efforts offer new points of view on reality and its perception, wider knowledge of the social life not only in Soviet times but in a more universal perspective as well as new models of text and literariness. That’s why a novel like Bulgakov’s masterpiece has been translated so many times and it is still translated in the two languages selected for the purposes of this research and all over the world. And this is also the reason why it can be considered a meaning-generative and culture-formative text even if its first edition appeared in 1940.

Keywords: Bulgakov, polyphony, semiotics, text-structure, translation

Streszczenie

Przekład semiotycznej „polifonii” tekstów jako działanie kulturotwórcze: na przykładzie *Mistrza i Małgorzaty* Bułhakowa

Powieść Mistrz i Małgorzata jest powszechnie uważana za arcydzieło literackie Michaiła Bułhakowa. Jest ona mieszanką gatunków literackich, motywów, tematów, obrazów i odniesień intertekstualnych. Wszystkie elementy, o których wyżej mowa współdziałają w tworzeniu powieści „polifonicznej”, w ujęciu Bachtina, nie tylko gdy chodzi o odmienny charakter i „głos” pojedynczych postaci, ale także o odniesienie do „wielopoziomowej” konstrukcji samego tekstu. Artykuł zilustruje cechy charakterystyczne powieści Bułhakowa oraz semiotyczny charakter tego utworu, w tym jego zdolność do generowania znaczeń, a więc „semiozy” zdefiniowanej m.in. przez C. S. Peirce’a jako „moc” znaczeniowoczą niektórych procesów semiotycznych. Autorka niniejszej pracy postara się też znaleźć odpowiedź na pytanie, dlaczego powieść ta była wielokrotnie tłumaczona na język polski i włoski od 1967 roku, kiedy to pierwsze wydanie powieści ukazało się w Europie Zachodniej. Ze względu na bardzo specyficzną konstrukcję fabuły i formalne aspekty powieści tłumacze musieli zmierzyć się ze znaczną liczbą problemów „nieprzekładalności”, które mogli rozwiązać jedynie wykorzystując swój potencjał twórczy. Roman Jakobson omawiając kwestię nieprzekładalności stwierdził, że dla tego, co nieprzetłumaczalne – na przykład poezji – „możliwa jest tylko twórcza transpozycja”. Dzięki kreatywności tłumacze mogli także odkryć dalsze interpretacje literatury Bułhakowa, tworzyć i wykonać akt kulturotwórczy, ponieważ ich wysiłki oferują nowy punkt widzenia na rzeczywistość i jej postrzeganie, szerszą wiedzę o życiu społecznym nie tylko, gdy chodzi o czasy radzieckie, ale w bardziej uniwersalnej perspektywie. Ponadto mogli stworzyć także nowe modele tekstu i literackości. Dlatego powieść Bułhakowa była tłumaczona tak wiele razy i nadal jest tłumaczona na dwa wybrane przez autorkę języki (włoski i polski). I jest to również powód, dla którego można nadal uznać „Mistrza i Małgorzatę” za dzieło tekstotwórcze i kulturotwórcze, mimo że jego pierwsze wydanie ukazało się w 1940 roku.

Słowa kluczowe: Bułhakow, polifonia, przekład, semiotyka, struktura tekstu

1. Introduction

The Master and Margarita is generally considered Mikhail Bulgakov’s literary masterpiece and a sort of literary “riddle” as this novel does not fit in any of the traditional categorization of genres and text typology. Some scholars have labelled it as a satirical novel concerning communism and Stalin’s times. Professor J.A.E. Curtis, for instance, devoted an entire chapter of his *Reader’s companion to Mikhail Bulgakov’s the Master and Margarita to political satire in the novel* (Curtis 2019).¹ Others have pointed out the presence of supernatural in the novel and included it in the list of fantastic literature.² But none of those “labels” have succeeded so far in defining the text that seems to “escape” any definition attempt and typology.

¹ For an overview of *The Master and Margarita* recent critical interpretations see Weeks, Laura D. (1996) *The Master and Margarita: A Critical Companion*. Edited by Laura D. Weeks. Northwestern University Press containing, among other studies, also Barratt, Andrew (1987) *The Master and Margarita in Recent Criticism: An Overview*. Another interesting view is expressed by Paulette W. Kidder who defines Bulgakov’s masterpiece as “a novel of resistance” [see Kidder, Paulette W. (2013) *The Master and Margarita: Satire and Transcendence*. See <https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/c9BqLD>. Date: 19.12.2021].

² See, for instance, the interesting article of Le Fleming Svetlana (1977) “Bulgakov’s use of the fantastic and grotesque.” *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, no. 2. Another view about the supernatural in the novel is provided by Moss, Kevin (1984) “Bulgakov’s Master and Margarita: Masking the Supernatural and the Secret Police”, *Russian*

The Master and Margarita has also a complex writing and publishing history. Bulgakov started writing the novel in 1928, but burned the first manuscript in 1930 (just as his character the Master did) as he could not see a future as a writer in the Soviet Union at the time of widespread political repression. He restarted the novel in 1931 and completed his second draft in 1936. When Bulgakov stopped writing four weeks before his death in 1940, the novel had some unfinished sentences and loose ends. It was his wife who accomplished the novel after the death of its author.

A censored version, with about 12 percent of the text removed and other changes, was first published in a magazine called *Moskva* (no. 11, 1966 and no. 1, 1967). A manuscript was smuggled out of the Soviet Union to Paris, where the first book edition was published in 1967. The text, as published in the magazine *Moskva* in 1968, was translated into Estonian and remained for decades the only printed edition of the novel in the Soviet Union. The original text of all the omitted and changed parts was printed and distributed by hand in the Soviet Union (this kind of practice was known as *samizdat*). In 1969, a printed version containing the above-mentioned inserts was published in Frankfurt.

In the Soviet Union, the first complete version, edited by Anna Sahakyants, was published in Russian by *Khudozhestvennaya Literatura* in 1973. This was based on Bulgakov's last 1940 version and remained the official edition until 1989, when the last version (edited by Lidiya Yanovskaya) appeared, based on all available manuscripts.

Even if the first complete edition of the work appeared more than 50 years ago and a lot of translations (some of them appeared in 2020) have tried to grasp and transmit to final readers the main message of the novel and the intentions of its author, still nowadays the work is object of analysis and studies both in its original and translated versions.

Basing on existing Polish and Italian translations, the paper will try to offer an answer to the question why there are so many translations and whether they were really necessary.

2. *The Master and Margarita* as a semiotic text

Our assumption is that Bulgakov's novel is a semiotic text, which makes it be a text generative model in translation and a culture formative creation. Additionally in Bulgakov's novel the "text" is not only a tool used to convey meanings or a container of meanings but also a sign in

Language Journal, no. 38. Additionally, it's worth to mention an article by Sona Hoisington (1981) from University in Illinois at Chicago Circle "Fairy-Tale Elements in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*" published in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 25, no. 2.

the semiotic sense of the term. Therefore the interpretation of the structure and composition of the text is as much crucial in the translation process of the text as its content.

2.1. Bulgakov's novel genre and text construction

When analysing *The Master and Margarita*, the genre *satira* in the original meaning of the term seems to be the most appropriate term to “label” the novel³. When it comes to literature, in an earlier stage it meant miscellany, a collection of miscellaneous poems and did not definitely acquire the meaning of satire in the modern sense until the time of Horace. Bulgakov's novel is not a collection of poems, but it is a miscellaneous collection of texts and intertextual references.

Another word that seems to be appropriate to define this very peculiar text is “polyphony” applied both to the way the story is narrated and the way the novel is structured as it well describes and summarizes not only the complex plot of the novel itself but also and first of all its structure, which has a meaning-making function in itself. A “semiotic” function as C.S. Peirce would have called it.⁴ In this perspective textology and semiotics can throw new light on the discussed literature masterpiece and discover unexplored paths for its interpretation.⁵

Bulgakov's novel is polyphonic when it comes to the narrator's point of view(s) (third and first person are used), the mixed forms of narration (somewhere similar to the typical form of Russian *skaz*, elsewhere close to a “literary” hagiography and historical narration and somewhere else reminding of a motion-picture screenplay more than a novel). Difference of register and style are also visible throughout the book. Intertextual elements connect the novel to other great literary works such as Gogol's *Dead Souls*, Goethe's *Dr Faustus* or Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Needless to say, it was Bulgakov's intention not only to create a “strange” novel and astonish the reader, but to use structural “estrangement” in order to communicate something, to convey meaning that could be not transmitted on a verbal level.

As said previously the text-structure is used as a sign. In one of his many definitions of a sign, Peirce ([1931] 1966 2: 228) writes:

³ Gaius Lucilius (born c. 180 bce, Suessa Aurunca died c. 103 or 102 bce in Neapolis [now Naples]) was the actual inventor of poetical satire, who gave to the existing formless Latin *satira* (meaning “a mixed dish”) the distinctive character of critical comment that the word *satire* still implies (*Britannica*).

⁴ “I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former” (Peirce 1998: 478).

⁵ Boris Uspensky's *Poetika kompozitsii* (Moscow, 1970, English translation 1973) proposes a method for describing narrative structure. He distinguishes four “planes” of point of view in the arts. The phraseological, temporal-spatial and the psychological planes are linguistically analysed, while the ideological plane, or “the deep compositional structure” of the work that depends on “intuitive understanding”, is used to explain the phenomenon of polyphony.

[a] sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representation.⁶

Following Peirce ([1931] 1966), a sign is anything able to communicate a meaning, that is not the sign itself, to the interpretant of the sign. A sign is also what makes semiosis possible, that is the production of meaning. The interpretant plays a crucial role in this process as the interpretation of the sign depends upon him/her.

Meaning “[...] is, in its primary acception, the translation of a sign into another system of signs. [...] the meaning of a sign is the sign it has to be translated into” (Peirce [1931] 1966 4: 127). According to Peirce, this specific nature of signs leads to the concept of unlimited semiosis and consequently of the endless number of analysis of meanings and also of the search for understanding. Eco (1995), in his *The Role of the Reader*, pointed out that in this and in other Peirce’s statements the concept of unlimited semiosis and openness of the text can be found. Basing on the above we can state that when it comes to reading and translation, we can state that the semiotic process finishes when the reader/translator chooses a concrete interpretation, a text that may substitute the “prototext”. Eco stresses that this puts an end to interpretation, because

(...) the repeated action responding to a given sign becomes in its turn a new sign, the representamen of a law interpreting the former sign and giving rise to new processes of interpretation. In other words, the translating text sets an end to the otherwise unlimited semiosis of the prototext, but sets in motion a new chain of unlimited semiosis based on new signs, new texts, new interpretations.

(Eco 1995: 195)

That is why Eco’s conclusion is that: “semiosis explains itself by itself: this continual circularity is the normal condition of signification and even allows communicational processes to use signs in order to mention things and states of the world” (1995: 198).

⁶ Signs consist of three inter-related parts: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. For the sake of simplicity, we can think of the sign as the signifier, for example, a written word, an utterance, smoke as a sign for fire etc. The object, on the other hand, is best thought of as whatever is signified, for example, the object to which the written or uttered word attaches, or the fire signified by the smoke. The interpretant, the most innovative and distinctive feature of Peirce’s account, is best thought of as the understanding that we have of the sign/object relation. The importance of the interpretant for Peirce is that signification is not a simple dyadic relationship between sign and object: a sign signifies only in being interpreted. This makes the interpretant central to the content of the sign, in that, the meaning of a sign is manifest in the interpretation that it generates in sign users (See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/peirce-semiotics/>. Date: 19.12.2021).

2.2. Italian and Polish translations of *The Master and Margarita*: an overview

The impressive number of existing translations (see: Appendix) and those that are still in the making confirms that unlimited semiosis unveils not only new interpretation possibilities included in the text but also the creation of new texts. It is the translator who is the interpretant and at the same time the creator/author of the text in a target language and a study of translations can provide a relevant number of new texts. Each of them carries a new meaning and is the source of new interpretations.

For the present research Polish and Italian translations have been taken into consideration. The chronological cross analysis of the versions published in the chosen languages can give a clear idea not only of the different approach and techniques and different interpretations but also about the different ways used by translators to recodify and recreate the text content and structure in the target language.

The first problem to deal with during the analysis of the translations is to determine which edition of the original novel was the source text for each translator. Other common problems reported by translators and scholars are:

- proper names: for instance such names Bezdomny, Golodnij, Massolit are meaningful and provide relevant information about people and institutions referring to that specific period of Soviet history;
- toponymy: the names of many places where the story takes place provide by themselves information about specific areas in Moscow and have a meaning for those who know them and know where there are located, what they are popular for, what kind of people one can find there or activities that can be done. Additionally a part of the story takes place in Jerusalem in those places depicted in the Gospel as they are related to important events before Jesus' passion and to Pontius Pilate's fatal decision;
- intertextual references: there are several references to the Gospel, other literary works, such as Gogol's as well as to folk stories and images excerpted from oral tradition;
- polyphony of narrators and points of view: as already noticed above narration is conducted in first or third person and we can follow the action taking place;
- culture specific items: locations, the architecture of building and space in general as well as mentioned institutions, expressions, party hierarchy and language as well as everyday life items and situations are strictly connected to Soviet times and culture;

- polyphony of text-structures and genres: as already mentioned Bulgakov mixed texts coming from both literary and folk tradition as well as from Gospel creating a unique new text-structure.

Therefore we can state that due to the very specific construction of the plot and of the formal aspects of the novel, translators had also to deal with a significant number of problems of untranslatability that they could solve only by using their creative potential. But is it the reason why so many translations appeared both in Polish and in Italian?

When it comes to Polish translations, Maria Mocarz-Kleindienst (2018) in her article whose title in English is “Why do new translations come into being? Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* in a new Polish translation” provides an analysis of Przebinda’s “family translation” and tries to explain what is the ratio behind the decision to retranslate a literary work which has already been translated several times into the target language. The Polish researcher tries to offer an explanation and answer from two different perspectives.

The first of them is the translator’s viewpoint, for whom the newly done translation is a domesticated translation. The other perspective, the researcher’s one, consists in analysing the translated text itself, in particular with regard to the applied translation strategies (exoticization vs. adaptation), indicating the differences between the latest translation and the previous ones.⁷

(Mocarz-Kleindienst 2018: 267)

The latest Przebinda’s translation was not only “necessary” because new passages of the novel, which had been removed from previously published manuscripts, required to be translated. It was an occasion for both the translators and the readers to rediscover Bulgakov’s masterpiece. But first of all a new translation was required because the novel had to suite contemporary readers’ understanding.⁸

When it comes to the history of Italian translations we have a similar scenario, but what is worth special attention are the circumstances that the very first two translations appeared in the same year as the first edition of the masterpiece in the original language in Frankfurt in 1967. Two different versions of the novel were used as source text and amazed the readers. Among

⁷ Quote from the abstract in English excerpted from Maria Mocarz-Kleindienst’s article written in Polish.

⁸ „Potrzeba przygotowania kolejnego tłumaczenia była podyktowana koniecznością przybliżenia arcydzieła Bułhakowa współczesnemu polskiemu czytelnikowi. Mając na uwadze fakt, że pierwszy przekład ukazał się ponad 50 lat temu, można już na tej podstawie domniemywać, iż język przekładu, jakim posłużyli się Lewandowska i Dąbrowski, wymagał leksykalnego i stylistycznego odświeżenia [A new translation became necessary in order to bring Bulgakov’s masterpiece closer to contemporary Polish reader. Taking into account that the first translation appeared 50 years ago, you can assume that the language used by Lewandowska and Dąbrowski in their translations required to be refreshed both from the lexical and stylistic points of view (translation by Caterina Squillace)]”. (Mocarz-Kleindienst 2018: 270).

them Eugenio Montale, Italian Noble Price for Literature in 1975, defined *The Master and Margarita* as a “bewildering novel” (Montale 1967: 2855) and foresaw a forthcoming great international interest and success of the book due to its “defrosting artistic expression” and thanks to translations. The third translation was announced to appear in the next few years, which once more makes it clear how remarkable and relevant was the impact of this novel on Italian readers and intellectuals.

As it happened with Polish translations, new translations continued to be published and it was not only because one version of the original was preferred to another or because the uncensored version was published. We agree with Mocarz-Kleindienst that translation needs be suited to changing readers and times. Nevertheless, considering that sometimes new translations appeared in a very short period of time and sometimes in the same year, other reasons should be considered.

Analysing the differences among the different translations both in Italian and Polish, it seems clear that it is not only a question of different “technical” approach and perspective. Peirce’s concept of unlimited semiosis and Eco’s idea of “open work” stressing the role of the reader/interpreter of literary texts seem to be the key to the understanding of the analysed phenomenon.

With regards to the problem of untranslatability stressed by translators and potential translators of the novel, it is worth mentioning Roman Jakobson ([1959] 2000), who through his linguistic analysis reached the conclusion that for the untranslatable—poetry for example — “Only creative transposition is possible”. According to Sternberg and Lubart (1999: 3) “[c]reativity is the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e. original, un-expected) and appropriate (i.e. useful, adaptive concerning task constraints”. Using creativity, translators were able to propose further interpretations of Bulgakov’s literary work and to perform a culture-formative act as their efforts offer new points of view on reality and its perception, new models of text and literariness, as well as wider knowledge of the social life not only in Soviet times but also in a more universal perspective.

At the same time, translating process implies different steps, and before encoding a text in a new language/culture, it must have been previously decoded. Decoding is strictly connected to interpretation which as we know depends on perception, mental processing of signs as well as on “contextual” aspects including personal education, language and cultural competences of translator and also the socio-cultural environment at a specific moment of a culture’s history. That is why every translation provides a different view on the text and has a different cultural impact in the target semiotic space.

3. Conclusion

Concluding, the impressive number of translations existing in the two selected languages are a proof of what the semiotic power of an artistic text may be. It doesn't concern only the intricate plot and all intertextual and cultural references, but the nature of this specific text in itself, in which even the structure becomes a meaningful element of the novel. It should not be surprising that many more translations will appear in the future creating a polyphony of different interpretations of the original text.

The analysis of translations also offers an overview of the specific role of translators which is not limited to a mere transposition of words and sense from one language to another but also to recreate a text able to offer the same semiotic richness of Bulgakov's masterpiece.

Appendix

Polish translations taken into consideration for the research:

Mistrz i Małgorzata, trans. Irena Lewandowska and Witold Dąbrowski. Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza „Czytelnik”, 1969. (In 1990, a new edition of the translation was published with a foreword by Andrzej Drawicz and footnotes by Grzegorz Przebinda).

Mistrz i Małgorzata, trans. Andrzej Drawicz. Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1995.

Mistrz i Małgorzata, trans. Leokadia Anna Przebinda, Grzegorz Przebinda, Igor Przebinda. Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy „Znak”, 2016.

Mistrz i Małgorzata: Czarny Mag, trans. Krzysztof Tur. Fundacja Sąsiedzi, 2016.

Mistrz i Małgorzata, trans. Jan Cichoński. Warszawa: Bellona 2017.

Mistrz i Małgorzata, trans. Barbara Dohnalik. Kraków 2018.

Italian translations taken into consideration for the research:

Trans. by Maria Olsoufieva, *Il maestro e Margherita: Cristo, Pilato, Giuda, Satana, Mosca anni Trenta*, Bari, De Donato, 1967 (I ed. incompleta; III ed., 1968, integrale); Collana I Grandi Libri n.24, Milano, Garzanti, 1973; poi Milano, Dalai (collana "Classici tascabili" n. 26), 2011.

Trans. by Vera Dridso, *Il maestro e Margherita*, prefazione di Vittorio Strada, Collana Supercoralli, Torino, Einaudi, 1967; poi in *Romanzi*, Collana "Biblioteca dell'Orsa" n. 7, 1988; Collana "ET" n. 393, 1996; anche come allegato a "La Repubblica", Collana "La

biblioteca di Repubblica. Novecento" n. 8, Roma, 2002; Collana "ET Classici", Torino, 2014.

Trans. by Maria Serena Prina, *Il maestro e Margherita - All'amico segreto - Lettera al governo dell'URSS*, postfazione di Igor Sibaldi, Milano, Mondadori (collana "Oscar classici moderni" n. 41), 1991; poi in *Romanzi e racconti*, a cura di Mariëtta Čudakova, progetto editoriale di Serena Vitale, Milano, Mondadori (collana "I Meridiani"), 2000.

Trans. by Mario Visani, *Il maestro e Margherita*, Collana Primo scaffale n.45, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1974.

Trans. by Milli De Monticelli, *Il maestro e Margherita*, introduzione di Eridano Bazzarelli, Milano, Rizzoli (collana BUR L n. 135), 1977; (collana "Superclassici" n. 53), 1992; (collana "SuperBur" n. 33), 1999; (collana "BUR" L 1441), 2003.

Ed. ridotta, *Il maestro e Margherita, dal romanzo di Michail Bulgakov*, drammaturgia di Guido di Monticelli con la collaborazione del Gruppo della Rocca, Firenze, Il Gruppo della Rocca (collana "I testi, gli spettacoli" n. 9), 1984.

Trans. by Serena Prina e Bruno Osimo, *Il grande cancelliere e altri inediti*, a cura di Victor Losev, ed. it. a cura di Igor Sibaldi, Milano, Leonardo, 1981 (contiene le prime stesure del romanzo e diversi inediti).

Trans. by Emanuela Guercetti, *Il maestro e Margherita*, con introduzione di Giovanni Buttafava, Milano, Garzanti, 1982 (sostituzione della prec. trad. nella collana "I grandi libri").

Trans. by Salvatore Arcella, *Il maestro e Margherita*, con introduzione di Mauro Martini, Roma, Newton Compton (collana "GTE" n. 51).

Trans. by Claudia Zonghetti, *Il maestro e Margherita*, con introduzione di Mariëtta Čudakova, Rimini, Guaraldi (collana "Ennesima"), 1995 (in contemporanea edito da Orsa Maggiore di Torriana).

Trans. by Lucia Demaria, *Il maestro e Margherita*, Firenze, Cult, 2011.

Trans. by Margherita Crepax, *Il maestro e Margherita*, Milano, Feltrinelli (collana "UE" n. 2225), 2011.

Translation and introduction by Sarah Tardino, *Il maestro e Margherita*, Santarcangelo di Romagna (RN), Rusconi Libri (collana "Grande Biblioteca Rusconi"), 2018, EAN: 9788818033120.

Trans. by Caterina Garzonio, *Il Maestro e Margherita*. Ediz. integrale (Italiano) Copertina flessibile – 9 gennaio 2019.

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