5. The national, the transnational and literary prestige: revisiting the BOSLIT database

By Zsuzsanna Varga

Constructing a database of translations of literary works from one textual culture into a range of different ones appears a rather innocent and uncomplicated – indeed positivist – activity, yet work of this kind inevitably raises theoretical considerations about the historically shifting meanings of the 'national', the publishing culture of multinational and multilingual empires, scholarly definitions of 'official' languages, as well as historically sensitive and nuanced perspectives on the relative position and authority of individual national literatures within the republic of letters. BOSLIT, compiled from data gathered from a range of scholarly sources, offers an opportunity to reflect upon some of these perspectives, which gradually and necessarily emerged during our work on the project. The rich material covering the Middle Ages and Walter Scott's fortunes in the Russian and Hungarian languages demonstrates that these complexities influence the work of data gathering and also present opportunities for further projects.

National translations databases are normally understood to reflect the translation of works of a particular nation into foreign languages, yet the tensions between contemporary political borders (whose very existence justifies the setting up and financing of such a database) and the traditional historical multilingual reality of these current geopolitical units raises several issues. 'National translations databases' are based on the definition of 'national' as something reflecting an ethno-linguistic definition of nationhood; thus they are only partially able to cover the richness of literary production and translation. BOSLIT, even at its initial stages, had to reflect on the historical multilingual reality of Scottish source texts. From the start, its editors agreed that 'Scottish literature' is a collection of literary texts written in a multiplicity of languages of Scotland. The early periods of Scottish literature amply demonstrated the usefulness in this definition, as French and Latin sources were also included. An early example such as Barclay's

Latin language work *Argenis* (1621) shows that there is plenty of material to be captured: the text was translated into Polish in 1697, into Russian in 1751 and into Hungarian in 1792. Hence, the consideration of what constitutes 'Scottish' literature is bound up with tensions and challenges, although the stability of Scotland's borders makes the task much easier than it would be anywhere in Central Europe.

Translation as cultural mediation between literatures is inextricably bound up with the weight and volume of the accumulated cultural capital of certain literatures. It is tempting to use rather journalistic and ostensibly self-evident terms like 'minority languages' or 'small languages' but these terms lack any solid signification for our purposes. Instead, I would offer a pair of notions: languages of international circulation (that is, languages used in writing by non-native speakers for communication, unrelated to the number of native speakers) and non-circulatory languages; with the added dimension that publication in circulatory languages also confers value. In the nineteenth century, literary products existed in a slightly different ecosystem from that of the twenty-first century. English had significantly less circulatory potential then than during the post-Second World War world order, hence the translations of the work of Scott inevitably relied on the use of intermediary languages. For early translations into Hungarian (*Ivanhoe* came out in 1828), this was German, while for Russian, it was French that fulfilled the purpose: once the novels by the 'author of Waverley' appeared in French, Russian translators began to work on them. The French influence proved long-lasting even in the twentieth century: *Old Mortality* was translated into Russian as *Puritane Shotlandii,* reflecting the French of *Les Puritains de l'Écosse*, and even when the actual book was translated from the original in the 1960s, the title stayed as *Puritane*. The same goes for *The Heart of Midlothian*, which continues to be known as *Edinburgskaya Temnica* (The Edinburgh Prison). It appears therefore that Scottish texts found their way to East Central European, East European or Iberian readership through circuitous routes. An ideal national database such as BOSLIT would, arguably, record these processes of transmission, though documenting these processes would require considerable philological effort as the printed volumes in the nineteenth century did not record such information.

Translations into the non-circulatory languages also represent a prime example of certain cultural attitudes, and we may hazard the claim that non-circulatory

languages are more receptive to translations. Though BOSLIT data does not claim to offer a full coverage of any national literature, a comparative examination of Hungarian/Russian BOSLIT data translations lists 908 translations into Hungarian; 581 into Finnish, 1566 translations into Russian; 2289 into Spanish, and 5139 translations into German. Given the number of readers in these languages, the number of translations is proportionately high in the case of Hungarian and Finnish, and relatively small for German and Spanish, though translations into the latter two languages also served as intermediary steps encouraging and enabling further translations. Making these translations internationally visible or at least detectable is primarily an issue for librarians.

BOSLIT, therefore, is not simply 'just a database' that reflects an interest in or passion for Scottish literature, but it is also a rich and thought-provoking resource that enables us to reflect on notions of nation, multilinguality and cultural transmission in complex ways. The database holds immense potential for these reflections, and renewed access to its data will allow the user to query earlier assumptions.

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