Aleksander Brzózka

May Reduction Serve Foreignisation or What Happened to Sierotka Marysia in English Translation

Abstract: The translation of Maria Konopnicka’s O Krasnoludkach i sierotce Marysi (The Brownie Scouts) into English is an interesting fusion of two translation strategies usually considered mutually exclusive. At first glance, this careful and faithful rendering of passages describing Polish tradition, culture, history, geography and folklore is a good example of foreignisation. Taking the reader who represents a dominant culture on a trip to an unknown peripheral culture, it seems to counter Lefevere’s understanding of how cultural capital and asymmetries between cultures influence the translator’s decision to adapt the source culture’s exotic elements to the target reader’s horizon of expectations. Thus, her decision not to domesticate the original positions Katherine Żuk-Skarszewska (née Hadley) in a group of translators called bridgeheads by Cay Dollerup. They aim at familiarising the target language audience with most interesting and valuable aspects of the source language culture. Yet this assumption is undermined by Żuk-Skarszewska’s frequent use of reduction technique, which helps her to deal with the culture-specific elements she considers less important. The Brownie Scouts uses two strategies: the translator’s efforts to faithfully preserve some items and fragments characteristic of the source language culture are counterbalanced by her decisions to cut other elements and passages in order to make room for what she judges more worthwhile. As a result, reduction controls the intensity of the overall foreignising effect. This unusual strategy becomes even more interesting to observe, as the elements most readily given up are usually those related to the child (characters, subject-matter and folklore). Paradoxically, it is children who lose most in this translation of the book about them.

Keywords: children’s literature, folklore, Konopnicka, translation, foreignisation

1 Konopnicka (1842–1910) was a Polish writer, poet, translator, journalist and critic, today mostly known for her books for children. She was also an avid supporter of the struggle for women’s rights and for Polish independence (translator’s note).
If we consider the scale defined by Schleiermacher’s opposition between foreignised translation (where the target reader is made to reach out to the source culture) and domesticated translation (where it is the author of the original text that is brought closer to the target reader) *The Brownie Scouts*, an English translation of the Polish fairy tale *O krasnoludkach i sierotce Marysi* (The Gnomes and Little Orphan Mary) devised by Katherine Żuk-Skarszewska in the interwar period, must undoubtedly be classified as an example of foreignisation. A clearly distinguishable feature of this translator is her effort to present unfamiliar cultural reality with the greatest possible fidelity; however, what deserves even more attention is the way in which she handles what can be called a surplus of foreignness. It should be stressed from the beginning that the attractiveness of any target text may suffer both from excessive domestication, which takes away from the target reader an opportunity to learn something new, and from excessive foreignisation, which renders a text incomprehensible and thus unapproachable.

It is interesting that in order to preserve balance between the known and the unknown in the translated text Żuk-Skarszewska chooses to use reduction rather than any other, more common, adaptation strategy. This method, which can be called “adaptation through reduction,” shapes her translation in a rather unusual way: while some elements of the source culture, even those most obscure, remain practically unchanged, others disappear altogether, except when an attempt is made to replace them with equivalents that better match the reality of the target culture. Such a strategy naturally leads to the question: why such an uncompromising solution in dealing with foreign elements usually concerns fragments related to children’s folklore?

What seems most likely to provide an answer is the set of reasons for which Żuk-Skarszewska chose foreignisation as her translation strategy. It is worth noting that this strategy goes against the grain of the usual tendency or expectations in intercultural dialogue, according to which it is the weaker party that should make the effort to reach the dominant party. André Lefevere describes this phenomenon with a term borrowed from Bourdieu, namely *circulation of cultural capital*. As Lefevere explains,

---

2 Katherine Żuk-Skarszewska, née Kate Hadley, married a Polish poet Tadeusz Żuk-Skarszewski in 1897. She moved to Poland with him and worked there as a translator (Davies, Stape 2005: 633). The first English edition of *The Brownie Scouts* appeared in the interwar period, most likely in 1929, and was published by Arcta.