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Larisa Schippel

The Philosopher of Translation: Erich Prunč – Slavacist and Translation Studies Scholar

Translated by Karen Margolis

One of the good things of academic life is that even after scholars have passed on, they leave us a legacy: their oeuvre. This provides comfort to those who knew, loved and admired the deceased. And enhanced by this respect and esteem, the oeuvre may become a continuing source of inspiration.

Erich Prunč (1941-2018), was what the French call an *intellectuel engagé*. This is true of his oeuvre in Slavonic, I believe, and it is certainly the case in Translation Studies. To be sure, for Prunč, the essential issue, which actually motivated his whole research, was how translation relates to LIFE. Not simply in the sense of “embedding” translation within social conditions, but as a deeply social phenomenon with all its diverse effects, emanating from individual and institutional actions. Thus, Prunč’s main concern was the social function of translation – past and present. It is no coincidence that an extremely important stimulus for establishing a Sociology of Translation came from the University of Graz’s Department of Translation Studies, where he served as director for nearly twenty years until 2009. The 2005 Graz Conference was a milestone towards creating Translation Sociology as an emergent, if not yet fully established, field of research. The conference broke new ground, discussing different approaches, reviewing Bourdieu productively, and addressing challenges for translation as a craft and a subject of academic study.

Erich Prunč’s legacy is an oeuvre that developed, established, and critically applied key concepts of Translation Studies. A particular highlight is his comprehensive and dynamic idea of *translation culture* with its comprehensive access to translation processes, which has since been widely and successfully applied. His *Versuch einer Skopostypologie* (A Preliminary Approach to Skopos Typology) is far from being tentative – in fact, it is an ingenious extrapolation of skopos theory.

Prunč’s history of translation studies, *Entwicklungslinien der Translationswissenschaft. Von den Asymmetrien der Sprachen zu den Asymmetrien der Macht* (The Evolution of Translation Studies. From the Asymmetries of Languages to the Asymmetries of Power), is eminently readable and a very useful teaching aid. Yet it received far too little attention outside the German-speaking world. Although it was translated into Russian, it is still not available in English.

It is anything but chance that Erich Prunč approached the philosophical questions of his translation studies by various stages. And this is what I wish to concentrate on here, as I think he had not fully completed his major work, *Ethik der Translation* (Ethics of Translation). Probably its most comprehensive version to date consists of

the lectures he gave during two semesters he spent as the Walter Benjamin visiting professor in Vienna (2012-2013).

Prunč regarded an ethics of translation as a necessary outcome of the release and emancipation of translators from the ‘chains’ in which, according to Heinrich Heine, they were allowed to ‘dance’ – indeed, in which they were compelled to dance. The development of modern translation studies is in fact, an argument for the encouragement and self-encouragement of translators and interpreters, an advocacy in which Erich Prunč played a decisive role. But when translators are no longer reduced to invisibility by the demand for an equivalent text, and no longer confined by the pressure of *domestication*, but are (or can be) visible in the act of translation, this raises the question of the decisions they have to make. The logical next question is: what are the conditions of their actions?

Of course, these conditions include the languages involved. While the philosophical discourses on translation and translatability emphasize the equal *value*, or equivalence, of languages to justify translatability, and whereas the dispute about Herder’s view of cultures asserts the diversity of languages but at the same time their equal *value*, in this case, too, Prunč consistently applied his approach within a socially critical perspective, and built the asymmetry of languages into his translation model by making a logical link between the asymmetries of languages and the asymmetries of power. In other words, he posed the question of the social conditions for the participants’ translation options. Erich Prunč’s theoretical concept of *translation culture* profoundly captures the social conditions under which translators act, creating a conceptual framework for investigating historical and current clusters of action. This framework also offers a suitable place for the prototypology developed from the skopos concept developed by Reiss and Vermeer. For if, following the logic of the argument, the skopos is the *relation* the translator has to create between the source text and the target text, within the given social options for action, then there are as many skopoi as translational options. And in this case it is possible – and necessary – to make classifications. But when the translators’ options for action multiply, this raises the issue of the criteria for the actions:

The postulate of doing moral justice to the asymmetry of languages demands of translators that, in the first place, their interpretation does not try to curry favour with the ‘powers-that-be’, but should deconstruct the signe hégémonique as a protest against the monopolization of the opportunity for hegemony – like the defining power of the source text, the author, the reader, the original – and stand up for the opportunities of those silenced in society. Retreating behind the source text is like burying one’s head in the sand, reducing the translator to a lackey of interpretative power. Prunč regarded this as a political crime. But the act of deconstructing signs actually shatters the idea of a meaning that stays the same forever, thus creating a new sphere of thought in which new ‘preparatory signs’ are possible, and which resists blocking off what is presumed stable from the Other. (Review of Entwicklungslinien (Evolution) Marlon POGGIO, 2010: Relü)

This is the context for reading the texts published under the following titles:

- “Der gehörnte Moses oder das manipulative Potential der Translatoren” (Horned Moses, or the Manipulative Potential of Translators) 2011,
- “Neutralität in der Krise” (Neutrality in the Crisis) – 2011,
- “Hegemoniale und emanzipatorische Übersetzungsstrategien” (Hegemonic and Emancipatory Translation Strategies) – 2012,
- “Nachsprechen - Neusprechen - Fürsprechen – Widersprechen” (Repetitions - Novel Statements - Intercessions – Contradictions) – 2016.

This viewpoint is by no means the state of the art, as some people may remember from the fierce attacks on Erich Prunč at the LICTRA-Konferenz in Leipzig in 2010. He also received a mixture of admiration and opposition when he gave a plenary lecture on translation quality at a CIUTI Forum in Geneva. It was not just that the lecture’s title compared translation quality to a chameleon – but also that he was speaking at the UN, and he had been heard to comment that their translation services followed Peter Newmark’s translation ideal!

Prunč’s lecture series in Vienna on translational ethics began by distinguishing between professional and personal ethics and examining the major models of translation studies to discover how far they acknowledged a need for discussion about ethical issues in the first place. Of course, neither normative equivalence-oriented translation studies nor *stylistique comparée* have a perspective on ethical questions, and whereas *skopos* theory does discuss personal ethics, this is done outside the framework of translation studies. Meanwhile, in studies based on Nord’s functional translation approach, Prunč argued that the loyalty principle can be seen as an ethical category. The deconstructivist perspective of translation, by opening up the text, allows for endless possibilities of interpretation, but on the other hand, in relation to the aporias of the UN/translatability, leaves the translator helpless in a potentially infinite space of ethical decisions.

Prunč pointed out that even the *Manipulation School* which, as we know, focuses heavily on the manipulative potential of translation, remained largely silent about the related ethical questions. Prunč accused the DTS of regarding ethical questions as incompatible with its empirical approach. At most, he said, their plea for nonconformity allowed some scope for ethical issues. The same applied to *Cultural Turn*, which generally promoted an emancipatory approach and thus indirectly addressed ethical questions from the feminist or post-colonial perspective, for example. It was not until the sociological turn, Prunč argued, that interest arose in the ethical implications of translational action. An ethics of translation had begun building on this and trying to open up and explore the intellectual, spiritual, and social scope for ethical action. For people familiar with Prunč’s lines of development, the strategy of the discourse is revealed solely from the selection and sequence of strands and schools of thought he examined. It follows the lines of development to some degree and scrutinises their ethical sensibility.

Following an occasionally amusing excursion through the codes of ethics of institutions and organisations, which he titled “Ethik als Sprach- und Sittenpolizei” (“Ethics as Language and Morals Police”), Prunč described the developing ethics discourse

from Nord to Chesterman, Gutt, and Pym with his ethics of intercultural spaces, before going on to Arrojo and an ethics of resistance and postmodernism. As usual, he is critical and descriptive, with explanations that really explain and illustrations that really illustrate. Readers and people attending his lectures were treated to a *tour d'horizon*, a sweeping survey, and felt informed and instructed in the best sense of the term.

It is also worth reconstructing how Erich Prunč elaborated categories for knowledge production in translation studies. Again, we can follow this in the ethics lectures, alongside his categories of skopos typology, the zero translation, the homologous, analogous, dialogical, trialogical and diaskopic types of skopos. Starting from the four principles of a democratic translation culture, he formulated his maxims of ethical action, and exposed the general neutrality demanded in many professional codes of conduct as a myth. In his view, neutrality cannot be established solely from textual characteristics; rather, it can only be determined within the overall structure of communication:

Possibility and degree of neutrality are determined by the type of communicative event

– structural differences between the languages involved

– intra-intersocial consensus.

The functionality of neutrality (is consequently) dependent on the type of interaction in each case. (Slide 158, Part II)

This is followed, once again, by a typologisation of types of interaction – monologues, dialogues, trialogues, and polylogues – within which different ethical maxims apply.

Contrary to the maxims of illustration, fidelity and neutrality, in a growing number of cases, particularly translators who are aware of their responsibility feel the ethical necessity to understand and live by translation as an intervention to preserve higher values such as the dignity of humankind, its personal physical and intellectual integrity, human rights, and peace (MUNDAY quoted by PRUNČ 2012: Slide 178, Part II).

In this respect we can say that Prunč filtered his historical summary of development of theories and methods in translation studies, based on his work *Evolution (Entwicklungslinien)* and his own concepts of translation studies, through his ethics of translation. In doing so, he created a deeply humanistic and socially critical blueprint for the future of a democratic translation culture worthy of the name.

Conclusion

The contributions of Erich Prunč and Hans Vermeer to German-language translation studies were mostly written in German. In a predominantly Anglophone discipline, this has restricted their reach. It even led to the demise of a very important, in-

novative professional journal, *TextconText*, edited by Vermeer, in which Erich Prunč published important texts. Most of Prunč's works are still only available in German. From the start, Erich Prunč supported our founding discussions for a journal of translation history with great interest and commitment. He became a member of the advisory board. He died on 28 May 2018 after a lengthy illness. We miss him.

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