

William Saroyan: *My Name is Aram*

A comparison of the original text with the Czech translation *Říkají mi Aram* by Věra Pourová

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My Name is Aram is a collection of short stories with topics from the Armenian-Californian author's youth. It is written from the point of view of a child, which is a quality that makes the book - together with its use of language and narrative technique - suitable for young readers, although it can be undoubtedly enjoyed by adults too. The stories take place in an Armenian immigrant community in California between 1915 and 1925. Since the main character, a boy who is between seven and seventeen, spends most of his time among his numerous family members, it is them he tells the stories about. With kind humour and light irony he tells about his patriarch grandfather, whom everybody pretends to respect, and about uncles who for some strange reasons are unsuitable for any kind of practical work. The narrative style can be characterized as a memory of the "good old days," which is to a certain extent beautified, but by no means melancholic.

The light irony and humour are achieved by a language which is quite straightforward and easy to understand. Saroyan does not use complicated words or thoughts, and he often lets his characters repeat themselves or speak deliberately incorrect English. The utterances are simple, but with a whiff of the farmers' own kind of wisdom. It is the advantage of English that it can be so uncomplicated and still not banal, and that it can use repetitions without this being considered stylistically clumsy.

This is difficult to achieve in Czech. Our language requires more diversity, such as the use of synonyms, so that it is impossible to translate e.g. the English "I/he/she *said*" which introduces direct speech as "*řekl*" in all instances. Moreover, the Czech sentence structure is by nature freer than in analytic languages, and therefore simple sentences with a fixed word order, which work in other languages, seem banal in Czech. The strength of the Czech language, on the other hand, lies in its rich pool of expressive words and of words with emotional loading, and the possibility of stressing various parts of the information by changing the word order. According to Levý, the translator who translates into Czech is obliged to use the stylistic richness of the Czech language in order to avoid the shallow, colourless style that he calls the "translators' style." The translator of *My Name is Aram* has worked very well in accordance with Levý's principles. However, in some cases she has given priority to achieving the non-translator's style before keeping the actual, original style of the narrative.

Expressivity

The translator often makes the language more expressive, the words and sentences become more dramatically charged in the Czech translation. This is what happens when she replaces the English "crazy" by the colloquial Czech word "cvok." In the same way the English sentence "We were poor", which is stylistically neutral, could be translated word-for-word into Czech ("Byli jsme chudí"). The translator, however, has chosen a more stylistically marked sentence "Byli jsme chudáci," which is both stronger and slightly more degrading than the original English sentence, and suggests the family is to be pitied. The most illustrative, though, is the example of the sentence "Our whole family was poverty-stricken", which is in itself very strong, but the Czech version "Celá naše rodina smrděla krejcarem" is even more expressive and derogatory. When one asks why the translator has chosen to do so, the answer is probably that she wanted to avoid the "translator's style," a faded, boring language.

Probably with the same purpose in mind she intensifies the English “wonderful” by translating it as “krása všech krás.” The translation then turns out more poetic than the original. It is the narrator, the seven-year-old, who says the word, and whose voice is changed in the translation. In the Czech version the boy seems to be more moved by the sensation he describes than in the original version, and the poetic language gives the Czech narrative a sentimental touch which is not present in the English version.

The semantic exaggeration in the Czech version is very strong in an example of an utterance by the narrator’s cousin. This is what he says to Aram after the boy has fallen off a horse and the horse has run away: “I’m not worried about you. (...)” (1947: 16), and this is how it is translated: “Ty si třeba hnáty zlámej (...)!” (1998: 17). In a similar way, in another situation the English “I couldn’t think of three little words” (1947: 219) becomes “A pořád jsem nemohl z mozku vydolovat tři mizerná slůvka” (1998: 151). The greater strength of the expressions is achieved by using a phrase that contains more action: “breaking one’s arms” or “digging something out of one’s brain.”

Sometimes the translator chooses to make obvious a quality that is not expressed directly in English: “Najednou se mi zezdalo” is the translation of “It seemed to me.” In English, there is not any marker of suddenness, while in Czech there are two: “najednou” and the prefix “za-“ in “zezdalo.” A similar situation is the translation of “We began walking” as “vykročili jsme po svých.” Here, too, we have a double marker of the fact that the persons concerned walked on foot as the opposite to riding a horse. In both cases the situation itself contains the fact which is stressed, but it is only in Czech that it is expressed explicitly.

The fact that the Czech translation is in many instances more expressive than the English version makes the language colourful and rich. In some cases, however, there are sentences that stand out in the Czech version without being of special importance in the original. In the above mentioned examples the Czech language offers possible translations that would correspond closer with the English original, but the translator has chosen to use a stronger, more expressive language. This results in a shift of tone, and the Czech translation sounds rather different from the original.

Explanations

In the first story a grumpy uncle is mentioned who is famous for saying only a couple of sentences in any kind of situation. In English the two sentences are commented on by the narrator as: “That was all” (1947: 13), while the translator has decided to explain: “Tato formulka byla jeho univerzální zaklínadlo pro libovolnou situaci” (1998: 13). The fact that she has chosen to rewrite the easily translatable sentence into three times of its length is not a major problem, since it does not disturb the Czech text in any way. But the meaning of the original sentence is lost: the Czech sentence overstates the fact that the uncle never said anything more.

When another uncle of Aram is described as “practical and nothing else,” the translator explains the subtle irony by saying that he is “praktický a jinak venkoncem nudný” (1998: 15). She does not thus let the Czech readers imagine themselves in what way the uncle is boring: because he lacks any other qualities apart from being practical. The original text, on the other hand, gives this possibility, and the description of the “missing” quality is funny.

A third example where the translator explains something which is not explicit in the original is in the sentence “Pod pojmem poušť rozumějte písčitou plochu rozprostírající se (...)” (1998: 149) which stands for the English “Desert is sand spread out (...)” (1947: 217). While the original sentence goes directly to the essence of the desert, seen through the narrator’s eyes, the Czech sentence is authoritarian and explanatory and turns towards the reader. Again, although the narrator probably means that the reader should imagine a (sandy) plain, he does not say so explicitly, while the translator does. Moreover, in this last case the

original is quite simple, while the translation turns out rather complicated. Through explanations of this kind the text misses some of its quality: the gaps that are up to the reader to fill with meaning.

The translator's interpretation

The process of translation involves a great deal of the translator's personal, subjective interpretations. In *My Name is Aram*, however, there are places where the translator's interpretation does not correspond with what the text seems to suggest. But it is necessary to point out that such conclusions are drawn from my personal point of view, because they can only be based on my own interpretations.

The introductory verb "said" is obviously most subject to the translator's interpretation, since for stylistic reasons it cannot be translated as "řekl" in all cases. Most of the time the translation of this verb corresponds with the particular situation. At other times the Czech verb chosen is rather too expressive, the overdone expressivity being, as we have seen, quite typical of the translator's style. For example, on an occasion where two boys walk with a stolen horse and meet the owner, it is unclear whether the farmer has understood that the horse is his. They part in this uncertainty and say quite a neutral "good day" to each other. But the translation contains a sense of stride. The boy who speaks does not only say "pěkný den," he does it in a defensive way: "revanšoval se." (1998: 21). In another story there is a dreamer who imagines that he is going to build a great house. In English he simply says "I'm going to build a magnificent house," (1947: 47) while in Czech he says it in a way that suggests that his imagination is ill: "blouznil" is the verb the translator chooses (1998: 38). In the original version there is no suggestion that the narrator disapproves of this man's idea or finds it crazy, while in Czech he is ridiculed.

There are also other ways in which the translator interprets situations more approvingly, disapprovingly or ironically than how the original describes them. For example, this is what the cousin, experienced in horse riding, says to Aram after he has fallen off the horse: "All right, he said, jump on." (1947: 16). But in Czech he says: "'No, to bysme měli,' povídá. 'Jen si naskočej, vašnosti!'" (1998: 17). The original sentence does not suggest whether the older boy wants to tease Aram or whether he has forgiven him and wants to give him a second chance, while in Czech his utterance is clearly ironic. In a similar way the phrase "most amazing and comical poverty" is translated as "nejúžasnější a nejgrotesknější chudoba," that is, there is something clearly positive about the poverty in the Czech version, while in English the word "amazing" only suggests that it was surprising or hard to believe.

Some of these interpretations have something to do with the fact that the translator wanted to use a rich and varied language, and perhaps because she imagined some of the situations in a different way than some other readers would.

Underinterpretation

It is quite surprising that the translator, although she has made many descriptions or utterances more expressive, sometimes "under-interprets" in other situations. For example, in one story there is a talk about Aram's age in the English version, which is quite important for the reader to know. Since Aram in this story gives his uncle quite a lot of good advice that the uncle did not know anything about before, it is useful to understand whether the boy is seven or fifteen years old. However, when the uncle says that he does not want the boy to die of a rattlesnake's bite at the age of eleven, the age is translated as "v útlém věku" (1998: 40). In another story there is a description of a tiny hotel room as "haunted," but in Czech it only is said that the room is "ubohá cimřička" (1998: 152). In the original the reader can thus expect ghosts and evil powers to raid at night, which eventually happens, while in the translation this meaning is lost, and the reader cannot sense the evil premonition.

In both example cases there is no obvious reason for the translator not to stick to the original meaning. It seems that she has given priority to the use of expressions that make a nice and readable Czech language before keeping the original meaning.

Old-fashioned, strange expressions

As mentioned before, the translator uses the Czech language very consciously. She tries to keep the language rich in vocabulary, and with this purpose in mind she prefers less usual words and expressions. However, although her language really is varied and pleasant to read, in some cases the very unusual words, or words that are used because of their being unusual, instead of their usefulness in the particular situation, disturb the flow of the text.

Such is the case for example with the “*pil a bálal*” (1998: 17) for the neutral “sipped and smoked” (1947: 16). The verb “*bálal*” implies that the person concerned smoked heavily so that a thick smoke rolled out of his pipe, and moreover, since it describes the particular way of smoking and since it is so colloquial, it might seem that it is of a greater importance for the story. The case is however that the uncle only smokes a cigarette, which in itself only is a secondary, unimportant information. The use of such an expressive verb is therefore disturbing.

As far as the narrator’s voice is concerned, the translator has given him two opposing qualities that are not present in the English original. On the one hand, he uses words that have a slight archaic touch, such as: “*inu, jenž, to jest.*” These words are not strange in themselves; it is only in the context that they stand out. One of the reasons for their noticeability is the fact that the same narrator uses colloquial expressions as: “*vyšpicovat ho z domu, rajzoval po poušti, bombardáky.*” The language that is neutral in English, gets a new, special sound in Czech.

Sometimes the choice of the less usual, less expected Czech expression seems rather clumsy and instead of making the language smoother and more pleasant to read, it makes the reader stop and notice the word. Such is the case with e.g “*kromobyčej*” (1998: 153), which is used twice in the same sentence within the span of four words, or the expression “*hmoždili se s tím tři měsíce*” (44) for the neutral English “it took them three months” (1947: 56), or “*vinné hlavy*” (14) for “vines.” Sometimes she uses the more expressive Czech word or phrase where the usual one would do a better job: “*vběhl jsem do šatů*” (1998: 14) (rychle jsem se oblékl, hodil jsem na sebe šaty), “*zbožný tvor*” (1998: 154) (pobožný člověk, zbožný muž), “*v krádež by se to proměnilo teprve tehdy,...*” (1998: 14) (krádež by to byla teprve tehdy...).

The translator’s fondness of unusual expressions is clearest illustrated by words and phrases that she has chosen to use where there is no, not even a neutral, basis for them in English. This happens when she translates “(it) was not the same thing as stealing something else, such as money” (1947: 12) as “(...) *a ukrást něco jináčího, kupříkladu peníze, jó, lidičky, to je rozdíl.*” (1998: 14, my italics). The same case is with “*nastaly krušné časy*” (1998: 22) where there only is “the time has come” (1947: 25) in English.

Diminutives

Diminutives seem to be the translator’s favourite way of varying the language. It is true that the Czech language gives one the opportunity to colour one’s language in this way, but the translator uses the diminutives in situations where there is no reason for it, such as speaking of the stolen horse as “*koníček*,” a cup of coffee served to an uncle as “*šáleček kávy*” (1998: 18), translating a big man’s “gentle heart” as “*něžná dušička*” (1998: 19). In other instances the use is not only abundant, but also strange: in a situation where two boys are quite in a hurry because their minor crime might be revealed, so that there is no time for being poetic, one of them says “*pomaloučku, polehoučku*” whereas in English he says “be kindly.” “*Kratinký*

čásek” (1998: 22) is quite as strange as “jedinký na širším světě” (1998: 27), or “všecičko bude prosté, všecičko půjde jako na drátkách” (1998: 155) being the translation of “smooth and easy.” “Vláček”, “líčko”, “čůrek blátíčka” (“a trickle of muddy water”) and a religious man’s speaking to the young man as “bratříčku” (“brother”) are in a sharp contrast with the seven-year-old boy’s speaking of his mother as “matka,” whom the reader would rather expect to be spoken of as “máma,” or “maminka.”

Colloquial speech

In the original there are not many instances of the use of colloquial language, while the Czech translation makes the characters speak quite colloquially. This is only natural, because in Czech people’s spoken language differs considerably from the written standard language. Therefore it is natural that a boy says “s koňma to umím” or even “mám na to cajk,” although the latter sentence contains a slang word, the use of which is questionable. In some cases, however, the colloquialisms are not so well chosen. For example, when a man says to another man, whom he is not very familiar with: “That may be all right for you, a city dweller”, the translated sentence is: “Tohle může říct jenom chlápek z města,” which is slightly derogatory and the tone becomes more angry because of the use of the word “chlápek.”

There is no reason to translate “Ryan, who had a farm-implement business” (1947: 52) as “s Ryanem, *maníkem*, který měl krám se zemědělským nářadím.” (1998: 42, my italics). The narrator does not need to speak colloquially here, and moreover, the word “maník” is so different from the tone of the narrative otherwise, that it attracts too much of the reader’s attention and disturbs the flow.

Family members – changed characters

The above mentioned changes that the original version has undergone during the process of translation, have all to a larger or smaller extent changed the mood of the narrative. This is especially noticeable in case of the characters. Because the characters can be known from their utterances and actions, and less so from the narrator’s description, one may get a different idea about them when their utterances are in a different tone. Therefore I want to look at some examples of the characters’ utterances and see how the translation has changed the impression they give.

In the story called “The Pomegranate Trees” we meet an uncle who is a rather unpractical dreamer. He is a poet at heart, so he tries to bring poetry into farming through something as impossible as wanting to turn a piece of desert into a pomegranate garden. He gives the impression of a very tender and soft-hearted man, who wants to let all the tiny desert creatures live, although he is slightly afraid of them. In English, his language is quite neutral. In Czech, however, he speaks colloquially: he describes the small creatures as “all these things” in English, while in Czech they amount to “žoužel” (1998: 37). When he asks: “What else have we got around that’s poison?” (1947: 48), it turns out as: “Najde se tady ještě nějaká jedovatá bestie?” (1998: 39). Such sentences really disturb the impression of a man who poetically loves all living creatures, and his attitude to them is rather disapproving. In a similar way when he refuses to hear a song from Aram, he says: “I don’t want to hear any song” (1947: 54) in English, while in Czech he becomes much more irritated: “Starou belu písničku” (1998: 43). When he speaks with his trade partner, he does not speak of “krabice” but “škatule,” which seems really too colloquial considering that it is a business conversation. In the Czech translation this uncle has missed some of his poetic grace, and has become a rather usual, down-to-earth man.

Another uncle, in the story “The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse”, is a robust man with a great authority. His typical utterance is a couple of sentences that he “roars” on any occasion: “It is no harm; pay no attention to it.” His roaring suggests that he has a strong

and deep voice, and the sentences show that he is a calm man who wants people to take things easy. However, in Czech he shouts: “Houby se stalo! Nech to plavat!” The exclamation marks make the utterance more aggressive, the word “houby” and “plavat” make it colloquial. When he asks “What is the loss of a horse?” this becomes an angry “Co znamená zatracenej kůň?”, or the sentences “Quiet, man, quiet. Pay no attention to it” become much stronger: “Jen se nezblázní, člověče! No a co má bejt? Nechej to plavat!”. This uncle is also changed towards the less gracious and more ordinary. Moreover, he is more aggressive in the translated version.

Similarly the grandfather turns out a more common man than in the original version. He is the head of the family and everybody shows him respect, while he plays his role with a certain artificial grace. He repeats one sentence in diverse variations, the sentence is about the fact that the writer who has written something that he, the grandfather, does not agree with, is a silly writer, something which he says in a way that he seems very smart. However, when he says to his wife: “You are a woman”, meaning something with this, in Czech he exclaims: “Můj ty světe, ženská!” (1998: 23). Or he uses words that do not fit his gracious pose: “rejžičku jedna báseň”, or “rozblemcaná rýže” (1998: 28).

Conclusion

The translator’s language is more colourful, richer and more expressive than the case is with the English version. The Czech translation is mostly smooth and pleasant to read. In some cases, however, it is obvious that the translator has chosen particular words, phrases or sentences only because they are less usual than what the ‘obvious’ translation would be; sometimes she chooses a word with a certain stylistic loading without any reason for it. This is done without considering their function in the text, which leads to a disturbing effect or to a shift of meaning of the sentences. Her use of language often changes the style of the narrative or the impression it gives: the descriptions become more explanatory, the characters lose some of their poeticism and are ridiculed more directly instead of being exposed to the subtle irony Saroyan works with.

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