

## **STRATEGIES FOR EXPRESSING POWER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SLOVENIAN TRANSLATION OF AMITAV GHOSH'S NOVEL *THE HUNGRY TIDE***

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***Abstract:** The paper explores various narrative and rhetorical strategies for expressing power relationships in the Slovenian translation of Amitav Ghosh's novel "The Hungry Tide". Based on critical discourse analysis and the model of micro- and macrostructural shifts developed by van Leuven-Zwart, the paper provides a classification of the aforementioned strategies based on a pilot study of the source text and its translation into Slovenian. Illustrating the strategies with chosen examples, the paper then discusses the solutions adopted by the translator, focusing on general issues concerning the cultural transfer of relationships characterized by inequality in terms of social power.*

***Key words:** critical discourse analysis, postcolonial criticism, power relationships, social power.*

### **1. Introduction – Narrative Fiction and Social Power**

Inequality in social power and subsequent power relationships, be it in terms of race, gender, social class or status, form the core interest of postcolonial criticism (cf. Ashcroft et al. 2005, Loomba 2009). Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the analysis of colonial and postcolonial literary works, in particular those of narrative fiction, and their thematization and both explicit and implicit portrayal of distant lands, people and social practices. As Said (1994:xiii) points out in his seminal work on the subject, "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming or emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them".

One such aspect of the power to narrate is exhibited through translation, which from the postmodern viewpoint embodies both numerous opportunities and pitfalls in the struggle for greater social equality. In this sense, the act of translation, in particular in case of smaller and limited literary systems such as the Slovenian one, is both subject to existing power dynamics, as well as an active participant in the transfer and subsequently the construction of relationships of social power. When translating narrative fiction in which power relationships play a prominent role, the fact that social practices are inextricably connected to language and culture means that translators are faced with several issues. The first encompasses decoding indicators of power relationships, which are often subtle or implicit or may even have different implications in different languages and cultures. The second encompasses encoding these indicators in a way that makes them accessible to the reader across cultural borders.

Focusing on these translation issues, the paper will make use of the approach employed by critical discourse analysis to explore the strategies used to express different relationships of social power in the chosen work of narrative fiction and its translation.

## 2. Methodology

The study was conducted on two texts, Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* in English, published in 2005 by HarperCollins, and its translation into Slovenian, entitled *Lačna plima*, published in 2008 by Cankarjeva založba. The translation came out as a part of a *Modern Classics* (Moderni klasiki) series, thus assigning the source text, and consequently the translation, characteristics of a canonical text. The translation, done by Urša Červ, is integral and features an accompanying text about the author. *The Hungry Tide* was the first of Ghosh's novels to be translated into Slovenian; it has since been followed by *The Shadow Lines* in 2012. The paper will present the findings of a pilot study, which was conducted on the first 10 chapters of the novel or approximately one fifth of the whole text.

In devising an appropriate methodology for analysing the texts, I drew on the tenets of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2005, van Dijk 1993) and the model of micro- and macrostructural shifts in translated works developed by van Leuven-Zwart (1989 and 1990). In its simplified version, the model is composed of two stages. First, smallest meaningful text units that van Leuven-Zwart terms transeemes are identified in the source text and compared to transeemes in the translation to establish shifts in the microstructure of the text. Next, the researcher establishes the effects microstructural shifts have on the macrostructure of the translated text and all its functions.

The analysis was carried out in two steps: first, the source text was analysed, examining various narrative and rhetorical strategies used by the author to describe different power relationships. Narrative and rhetorical strategies for expressing power relationships are defined as strategies employed by the narrator to convey the relationships of power between the characters in the narrative. Narrative strategies are understood as strategies relating to the construction of the narrative world. They can, for example, feature descriptions or certain choices on the lexical level, such as, in the case of the analysed text, fragments in Bengali language. Rhetorical strategies are defined as a subset of narrative strategies, as they too, strictly speaking, arise from the narrative. They are, however, limited to spoken interaction between characters, such as the way the other person is addressed, the use of marked expressions in utterances and so forth.

The second step encompassed an analysis of the translated text to observe how the aforementioned strategies were translated into Slovenian, and if, and how, the resulting translation affected the reader's perception of relationships of social power between the characters in the novel and, consequently, the perception of the narrative world itself. Particular attention was paid to any translation issues that may arise from differences in the way power dynamics are encoded in different languages and cultures.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### **3.1. Types of Narrative and Rhetorical Strategies for Expressing Power Relationships**

The results of the analysis showed that the first discerning factor for narrative and rhetorical strategies for expressing power relationships was whether the strategies employed were explicit or implicit. An example of an explicit narrative strategy would be a clearly stated social relationship. Implicit narrative strategies, on the other hand, resulted either from description or characterization of the persons in the narrative. Descriptive narrative strategies encompassed strategies where the characters' social position was indirectly apparent from their clothing, gestures or unspoken interactions with other persons in the narrative. Their characterization, for example, may have featured the presence or absence of desirable or undesirable characteristics. Also frequently used were generalizations, where a certain set of characteristics was ascribed to a whole group and consequently to any character in the narrative described as belonging to that group. On the most basic and speculative level, as patterns in this case emerge only when the literary work is compared to a large body of similar texts and are in any case underpinned by the researcher's own ideological presuppositions and expectations, implicit narrative strategies also encompass absence of representatives of certain social groups in the narrative, such as women, lower social classes, ethnic and other minorities, etc.

As for rhetorical strategies, explicit rhetorical strategies for expressing power relationships encompassed, for example, titles, honorifics and forms of address in general. Indirect rhetorical strategies, on the other hand, refer to lexical choices of the speaker and encompassed features such as the level of formality or use of foreign terms.

### **3.2. Approaches to Translating Narrative and Rhetorical Strategies for Expressing Power Relationships**

Below, the strategies in question are illustrated by examining a few of the more interesting examples. The events in *The Hungry Tide* take place in the Bay of Bengal, India, in a group of mangrove islands called Sundarbans. The three main protagonists the reader follows in the analysed section of the text are Piyali Roy, a young female American marine biologist of Bengali descent, who came to the flooding islands in search of a rare and endangered dolphin, fisherman Fokir, who rescues Piyali after she is thrown off a boat due to a dispute with a guard assigned as her official company and whom Piyali engages as her assistant, and Kanai Dutt, a translator from New Delhi, who came to the islands to help his aunt with arranging the matters of his deceased uncle and who helps Piyali and Fokir, who have no common language. All emphases in the examples to follow are my own.

From the very opening of the novel, when Kanai sees Piya in a train station, he is characterized as a self-important city-dweller, a modern, highly-educated Indian. He has no trouble authoritatively approaching other persons and manipulating them in order to achieve what he wants. The narrator conveys Kanai's social status through a series of observations on the part of other persons in the narrative, for example:

It so happened that Kanai was carrying a wheeled airline bag with a telescopic handle. To the vendors and travelling salesmen who plied their wares on the Canning line, this piece of luggage was just one of the details of Kanai's appearance – along with his sunglasses, corduroy trousers and suede shoes – that suggested middle-aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence. As a result he was besieged by hawkers, urchins and bands of youth [...]. (Ghosh 2005:5)

Po naključju je imel Kanai letalski kovček na kolesčkah s teleskopskim ročajem. Prodajalcem in trgovskim potnikom, ki so ponujali robo na progi Canning, je ta del prtljage pomenil samo še eno izmed številnih podrobnosti na Kanaijevega videza – skupaj s sončnimi očali, žametnimi hlačami in čevlji iz semiša – ki so nakazovale na udobje srednjih let in velemestno blaginjo. Zato so ga oblegali poulični prodajalci, pobalini in gruča otročajeve [...]. (Ghosh 2008:11)

Here, the descriptive narrative strategy is translated without major microstructural shifts. We see that Kanai's class and wealth are broken down into a series of material possessions, some of which, such as the airline bag, not only distinguish him from his fellow passengers in a way that for example an expensive bag might, but also imply that he frequently travels by plane, lending Kanai a cosmopolitan air. These possessions, which are relatively familiar and accessible to the Western reader, create a sharp distinction between Kanai and the poor masses he is "besieged" by.

"Aré moshai, can I just say a word?" Kanai smiled as he bore down on his neighbour with the full force of his persuasion. (Ghosh 2005:5)

"Are mošai, ali lahko samo nekaj rečem?" Kanai se je nasmehnil, ko se je, poln svoje prepričevalne moči, sklanjal k sosedu. (Ghosh 2008:11)

In the example above, Kanai addresses a fellow older male passenger on the train with the Bengali honorific "moshai", a variant of "mohashoi", which is used to convey respect and a formal relationship with the addressee. In the translation, the expression is only transcribed, which coincides with the norm in Slovenian translations that expressions that appear in the source text in a foreign language are retained as such in the target text, and no information on its meaning is provided to the reader. Moreover, the Slovenian wording of the question is informal, implying intimacy on Kanai's part and resulting in a translation in which the power relationship between the characters is significantly changed: from formal and polite to informal and familiar.

"Here", said Piya, producing a handful of tissues. "Let me help you clean up" (Ghosh 2005:10)

"Izvolite", je rekla Piya in izvlekla robčke. "Pomagala vam bom počistiti!" (Ghosh 2008:15)

This example focuses on another instance of honorific speech, in this case arising not from the use of a title, but from Slovenian grammar, which, like several other languages such as German or French, but unlike English, encodes the level of formality in the pronouns and verb forms used by the speaker in his or her utterances. In the scene above, Piya is addressing Kanai after spilling tea on his papers, before they are introduced. In English, the neutral

“here” is used; in Slovenian, this is translated with the formal and polite “izvolite”. This verb form usually indicates a greater social distance between speakers; in other words, it signifies that the addressee is older or higher in status. It should be noted that there is no neutral option in Slovenian; the translator must opt for either formal or the informal verb form, an action that in any translational situation presupposes a certain level of interpretation of the source text.

Would these men have adopted the same attitude if she had been, say, a white European or a Japanese? She doubted it. Not for that matter would they have dared to behave similarly with her Kolkata cousins, who wielded the insignia of their upper-middle-class upbringing like laser-guided weaponry (Ghosh 2005:34)

Ali bi se ta moška enako obnašala do nje, če bi bila bela Evropejka ali Japonka? Dvomila je. Najbrž si ne bi upala tako obnašati do njenih sestričen iz Kolkate, ki sta med otroštvom v dokaz pripadnosti srednjemu višjemu sloju mahali naokrog z laserskimi pištolami (Ghosh 2008:37)

In the example above, Piya poses the question whether the guards would have behaved differently if she were European or Japanese, illustrating the previously made point about the fact that the issue of power relationships is closely related to the issue of identity, which is central to postcolonial criticism. The underlined section of the text features an interesting mistranslation into Slovenian – the metaphorical laser weaponry (used in the source text to illustrate the way in which Piya’s cousins exhibit the signs of belonging to middle class—openly and aggressively) is translated concretely as toy laser guns, a material possession from which the reader is supposed to infer that the children’s family was well-off. In order for the sentence to make sense, the translator added that this took place in their childhood (“v otroštvu”). In addition to losing the humorous touch the author brings forward by painting a mental picture of grown women handling their class as weaponry, the reader is also deprived of the notion of the importance of class in Indian society. While it is fair to assume that the “insignia” referred to in the source text encompass not only material possessions, but include (even primarily) behaviour, social attitudes, communication patterns and knowledge, the target text narrows down the complex markers of class to children’s toys.

On the walls, there were fading portraits in heavy frames; the pictures were of memsahibs in long dresses and men in knee-length breeches (Ghosh 2005:40)

Na stenah so viseli zbledeli portreti v masivni okvirjih; na slikah so bili memsahibi v dolgih oblekah in moški v jahalnih hlačah, ki so segale do kolen (Ghosh 2008: 41)

In the final example above, also a mistranslation, we see a description of an old photograph hanging in a colonial house. The term *memsahib*, which derives from the words “madam” and “sahib” and is defined by *Merriam Webster* as referring to a white foreign woman of high social status living in India, especially the wife of a British official, is translated into Slovenian as a masculine noun. Taken together with “in long dresses”, it implies that memsahibs are in fact male Indians, presumably in a form of local attire. As far as the target text is concerned, the chosen example somewhat obfuscates the power relationships in question: it is implied that the term memsahib is used by non-Indians to refer

to Indians, instead of vice-versa. In addition, the *Oxford Dictionary* notes that the term *memsahib* is “often used as a respectful form of address by non-whites”, indicating that the use of the noun is not only gender-, but also class- and race-specific.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The results indicate that translating narrative and rhetorical strategies for expressing power relationships often presents an issue for the translator, as we have noted that the strategies are intertwined with and strictly dependent on cultural and linguistic contexts. Van Leuven-Zwart (1990:89) notes that previous analyses employing the method of observing the effect of microstructural shifts on the macrostructure of the translated text have indicated a tendency towards specification, citing the translators’ aim to make the narrative comprehensible and accessible to the reader. While this strategy is explicitly target text oriented, the examples discussed above point towards the conclusion that the translation in question exhibits certain characteristics of source text orientation.

We have seen that with many Bengali expressions left untranslated and not commented upon in the target text in the form of footnotes or glossaries, as is the case with the majority of comparable texts, the nuances of power relationships were frequently disguised or difficult for the reader to decode. Moreover, the linguistically necessary introduction of formal or informal verb forms added another layer of meaning to relationships of power – a formal tone to the relationship between Piya and Kenai, or an informal tone to the relationship between Kenai and the people he encountered on his travels.

The underlying reasons can in part be explained by the specific nature of the Slovenian language, for instance the syntactic and lexical distinctions between formal and polite and informal and familiar address. Certain mistranslations can be ascribed to insufficient cultural knowledge on the part of the translator and may be interpreted as indicators of sections that are more likely to puzzle the reader, just as they have the translator. Somewhat unrealistically, the employed translation strategy presupposes that the Slovenian reader will be as familiar with certain aspects of Indian culture and Bengali expressions as her or his English-speaking counterparts.

To conclude, the study shows that relatively minor shifts on the microstructural level of the translated text may result in decisive shifts in its macrostructure and consequently affect the representation of relationships of social power and power dynamics between the characters in the narrative, altering the way in which social relationships are perceived by the reader. As noted by van Dijk, “discourse and communication are crucial in the establishment, the legitimation and the reproduction of power and inequality” (1994:19) and literature represents one of the discourse genres that should be, especially because of its privileged status, subject to close critical scrutiny. This in no way intended to imply that literature and its critical consideration can or should fully shoulder the weight or even replace true social change; however, it is my firm belief that by exploring and laying bare the many shades of inequality that pervade our society, critical analysis of all forms of discourse is crucial for our understanding of how these inequalities persist and perpetuate themselves, so that they can be challenged and subverted.

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