
Reviewed by David Pruett, Austin Community College

Jiří Levý’s influential book was first published in Czech in 1963. It appeared in German, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian translations over the years but, until this edition, never in English. In fact, the editor, Zuzana Jettmarová, spent three years preparing a text for this translation, as previous editions had been revised somewhat by L, mostly to include literary examples more familiar to the readers in their own literary traditions. Writing from the point of view of Prague School structuralism, L’s approach to translation, visible in practice throughout his text, exemplifies a stratification model of poetics wherein the verbal strata—phonic and semantic—are complemented by an extralinguistic layer, i.e. a thematic structure. Jettmarová’s introduction to the English edition gives readers a clearer understanding of L’s position in Czech structuralism, which is discrete from French and Russian versions of that theory.

L uses the concepts style, stylization, and re-stylization rather than the narrower concept of linguistic style since he sees translation as a hybridization of two languages and cultures. In Ch. 1.1, L offers a concise history of translation theory, comparing and contrasting literary and linguistic methodologies. In Ch. 1.2, he proposes three stages of translation: apprehension, interpretation, and re-stylization. Ch. 1.3 discusses the hybridization aspect, focusing on the variables of the translator’s literary creativity as well as cultural and historical situation. Ch. 1.4 turns attention to the poetics of translation styles, and Ch. 1.5 addresses translations of drama, highlighting the importance of speakability, intelligibility, and selective accuracy. Ch. 1.6 deals with the issue of translations in the context of literary criticism.

Part 2 of the book is devoted to issues relating to the translation of verse. Ch. 2.1 compares and contrasts the work of translating prose and verse, noting each genre’s predominant motifs, syntactic formulas and variations, semantic ‘density’, and formal specializations. Ch. 2.2 addresses the situation of translating from non-cognate versification systems, and Ch. 2.3 treats in detail the circumstances of translating from cognate versification systems. Ch. 2.4 contains L’s notes on a comparative morphology of verse rhythm, and Ch. 2.5, on integrating style and thought, includes L’s paean to Karel Čapek’s skill in translating French verse into Czech.

L’s work on translation theory, in this book and many other works, eminently stands the test of time. Very little in this work can be said to be outdated or even superseded by more recent theoretical texts. This edition, translated by Patrick Corness, finally presents one of L’s seminal works in translation theory for English readers, and it is a valuable work for all who have an interest in translation studies and theory.