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# *The Influence of Publishing Strategies on the Process of Translation: the case of Milan Kundera*

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**Abstract:** *Throughout history, translation has never been an isolated activity or an independent literary entity; it has always been tailored by interior and exterior influential factors. In terms of social agents involved in the production of translations, the publishing industry is increasingly becoming a driving force in translation. Publishing is an integral part of the process, which controls mechanisms of translation and dictates editorial rules. Publishers have a huge influence on choosing books to be translated and on hiring translators, and thus on the way the translations are received by the audience. Despite their huge ascendancy however, little research has been carried out in this area. The purpose of this paper is to discover the extent of the publisher's influence on the translated text. Given that translation theory has often focused solely on the author–translator relationship, our objective is to demonstrate that the translation process is not an ordinary dyadic relationship between a source text and a target text, or a translator and an author, but is a central meeting point for a mixture of relationships in which publishers play a hegemonic role. The publisher`s influence is discussed here through one particular controversial case: Milan Kundera's novel The Joke (Žert), which first appeared in 1967.*
**Keywords:** *Control, Influence, Milan Kundera, Publisher, Translation Process.*
**الملخص:** بالعودة للتاريخ، لم يكن ينظر الى الترجمة كنشاطٍ منفصل أو كيانٍ أدبيٍ مستقل. لقد كانت الترجمة دائمًا رهن عوامل مؤثرة سوآءا داخلية كانت ام خارجية. بالنظر الى الوكلاء المشاركين في إنتاج الترجمات، أصبحت صناعة النشر قوة دافعة في الترجمة بشكل متزايد. يعد النشر جزءًا لا يتجزأ من العملية التي تتحكم في آليات الترجمة وعاملا مؤثرا في تحديد القواعد التحريرية. كما ان للناشرين تأثيرا كبيرا في اختيار المراجع التي سيتم ترجمتها ومن سيشرف على ترجمتها، وبالتالي على طريقة تلقي الجمهور لهاته الترجمات. على الرغم من تزايد اهمية اعمال الترجمة، إلا أنه لم يتم إجراء الكثير من الأبحاث في هذا المجال. يهدف هذا البحث إلى اكتشاف مدى تأثير الناشر على النص المترجم. بالرجوع الى حقيقة أن نظرية الترجمة ركزت في الغالب على العلاقة بين المؤلفين والمترجمين، فإن هدف الدراسة هو إثبات أن عملية الترجمة ليست علاقة ثنائية عادية بين نص المصدر والنص المستهدف، أو مترجم ومؤلف، ولكنها نقطة التقاء لمزيج من العلاقات التي يلعب فيها الناشرون دورًا مهيمنا. من خلال رواية

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ميلان كونديرا( *Žert*) The Joke، التي ظهرت لأول مرة في عام 1967، يتعرض المقال لمناقشة تاثير الناشر ودوره على عملية الترجمة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الناشر ، عملية الترجمة ، التأثير ، التحكم ، ميلان كونديرا.

## 1. Introduction

"To be translated or not to be?" is a question that is frequently raised when tackling the issue of quality in literary translation. A query of utmost importance within the industry of publishing since it is the quality of the selected corpora that will determine both the reception and the perception of an alien culture. André Lefevere was one of the first translation theorists to consider the matter independently from the intrinsic values of literary works by analyzing factors that systemically govern the reception, acceptance or rejection of literary texts.

Translation is seen by Lefevere as a form of reworking created and read with an arrangement of ideological and political limitations inside the social framework. Lefevere built up the possibility of translation as a type of rewriting which implies that any content created based on another has the expectation of adjusting that other content to a specific belief system or to a specific poetics. According to Lefevere "the literary system in which translation functions is controlled by two main factors.

The first of these is the professionals within the literary system, such as translators, critics, reviewers and teachers who partly determine the dominant poetics" (Munday, 2016, p. 200). The second "which operates mostly outside the literary system" (Lefevere, 1992, p.15) is that of what Lefevere terms patronage.

Lefevere (1992) defines it as "something like the powers (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature" (p15). Patronage covers a panoply of persons and institutions that can influence translation, such as powerful individuals in a given historical era (e.g. Elizabeth I in Shakespeare's England, Hitler in 1930s Germany, etc.), groups of people (publishers, the media, a political class or party), or institutions which regulate the distribution of literature and literary ideas (national academies, academic journals and, above all, the educational establishment).

Lefevere (1992, p.16) identifies three elements to this patronage:

- The ideological component: It constrains the choice of subject and the form of its presentation. Lefevere adopts a definition of ideology that is not restricted to the political. It is, more generally and perhaps less clearly, 'that grillwork of form, convention, and belief which orders our actions'. He sees patronage as being mainly ideologically focused.

- The economic component: This concerns the payment of writers and rewriters. In the past, this was in the form of a pension or other regular payment from a benefactor. Nowadays, it is more likely to be the translator's fees and in some cases royalty payments. Other professionals, such as critics and teachers, are; of course, also paid or funded by patrons (e.g. by newspaper publishers, universities and the State).

- The status component: This occurs in many forms. In return for economic payment from a benefactor or literary press, the beneficiary is often expected to conform to the patron's expectations. Similarly, membership of a group involves behaving in a way conducive to supporting that group: Lefevere gives the example of the Beat poets using the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco as a meeting point in the 1950s

Based on the above statement, we can say that conceiving translation as form of rewriting is both progressive and restrictive. It is progressive because it permits translation studies to enlarge the field of research and adopt fresh perspectives to the subject. That is to say, an interdisciplinary perspective to the issue that deals with extra-textual factors (socio-cultural and ideological) which lie behind the production of texts. Yet, this approach has restrictive outcomes because enlarging the framework of the study may result in a reduced comprehension of the process of translation as only a target-oriented movement.

Two main elements may explain this implicit conclusion. First, ideology and poetics that are represented in rewritten texts belong both to the norms of the target language. Second, patrons who are promoting and controlling translations, hence dictating translation strategies are also operating for the sake of the norms of the target system. It is, thus; concluded that translation from Lefevere's point of view is a target-oriented process.

It is worth remembering that the aforementioned ideas brought forward by Andre Lefevere originate from the Descriptive Translation Studies that emerged during the 80s. The term was originally used by the scholar James S. Holmes but mostly developed by Gideon Toury. Descriptive translation studies regards translation as an empirical fact distinctly oriented towards the target readership which implies that research on translation should start not from the source text (ST) but with the translated texts (TT). Translations are considered in the target culture as part of a complex system of texts and expectations, which often implies abandoning the attention traditionally paid to the relationship between translation and original, especially as seen in terms of equivalence. The constraints acting on the activity of translators are considered to be not only of a linguistic but also of an aesthetic, economic and ideological nature.

## 2. The Case of Milan Kundera

Few authors have been involved in the translation process of their work like Milan Kundera. 'Translation', he writes, 'is everything' (Kundera, 1988, p.121), but it was also his 'trauma' (Kundera, 1986, p 85) and his 'nightmare' (Elgrably, 1987: 17–18). Banned in his native country Czechoslovakia during the communist regime and forced to settle in France, he became a bestselling international success and gained worldwide readership thanks to the translations of his novels.

Milan Kundera is a contentious example of self-translator who has a tight and obsessive authorial control over his works. On several occasions, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the translations accusing translators of betrayal. The successive translations of his novel Žert (The Joke) exemplify this point. The joke had first been translated into French in 1969 and then into English one year later. According to Woods:

> The novel was altered considerably in both translations, without any consultation with Kundera. Ironically, whereas the French translator, Marcel Aymonin, freely added his own material to the novel, the English publishers removed a substantial amount of material (Woods, 2006:28)

Since then, Kundera made the decision to revise all the French translations of his Czech novels. At that time, Kundera`s intention was to rewrite new 'originals' from which translations into other languages could be made. He declared them to be the definitive and authentic version of his body of work more authentic than the originals themselves. The translations in other words became the originals. Nevertheless, The Czech novelist exaggerated obsession with his translation has provoked acid criticism and caused controversy. His demand for absolute fidelity to the original, while he himself deliberately changed the translations to make them more accessible to the western readership, is a typical example of the author`s self-contradiction.

Right here, let us note that criticisms in the case of Kundera have almost exclusively focused on the author-translator relationship ignoring the role played by the publisher in the reception of Milan Kundera's works. In fact, it is the publishers who have chosen the novels and assigned the translation. They have evidently paid the translators but also, to a certain extent, directed the translation method. This indicates that publishers also influence the way how translations are read and received in the target culture. Publishers have a dominant position within the cultural agenda and translators themselves are part of that agenda. As Franco Aixelá pointed out:

> Translators are usually the people who carry full responsibility for the product, but by no means the only ones who in fact control the results. There are people in authority like publishers, editors, proofreaders, directors, producers, other sorts of initiators, etc. who may change anything, usually to conform with what they feel to be social expectations.[...] there are other agents who will bring into heavy discredit or who will not normally allow the publication of works which are too prone to break not only translation norms, but the linguistic and pragmatic conventions of the target language cultures, especially in countries, like Spain or France, with a strong tradition of the notion of correctness in the written medium. (Aixelà, 2006:26-27)

Needless to say, that changes made in translations are generally done without the author's knowledge, they are sometimes operated with (out) the translator's consent. Hence, the problem raised by Kundera does not fall under the translation process per se, but under the subordination of the translator - and the author himself - to the editorial authority, which promote fluency and exhort translators "to produce an idiomatic and 'readable' TT, thus creating an 'illusion of transparency' (Venuti, 2008: 1).

The role played by the publisher in the translation process is best exemplified in the tumultuous history of the English translations of his novel Žert (The Joke).

### 3. Milan Kundera and the English Publisher

The first English translation of Žert (the Joke) was published in 1969. When Kundera saw the English version, he was outraged, and he expressed his disapproval in a letter addressed to the Times Literary Supplement:

> The publisher (Macdonald) has merely considered my text as a free basis for bizarre inventions of manipulators. Individual chapters have been shortened, rewritten, simplified, some of them omitted. Their order of sequence has been changed. The whole text has been cut up into pieces and put together in a daring 'montage' so as to form a completely different book … I had to witness with rage how whole paragraphs were disappearing. For a certain time I am not willing to accept the slightest intervention in my texts, even if this should mean that they will not be published owing to my attitude… I do not doubt that the English publisher has broken up my book in good faith that this would improve the sales. (Kundera, 1969: 1259)

Kundera's words are a blatant example of the publisher's involvement and authorship over the translators. The English publishers working jointly with the translators have deliberately unraveled the novel by (removing, shortening, simplifying, omitting, and reordering) a substantial amount of material because they "judged them to be irrelevant to a British readership" (Woods, 2006, p.29). An act of "domestication", in Venuti`s words, that fosters translating in a transparent, fluent, 'invisible' style in order to minimize the strangeness of the TT. Some scholars such as Kuhiwczak (1990) argued that the translators David Hamblyn and Oliver Stallybrass as well as the editor James MacGibbon perceived the novel as a book of secondary quality because, as many eastern European languages, Czech is a minor European language, which few British readers could understand.

The publisher`s interventionist policy has affected the reception of the Joke in two ways. First, it has prevented the English readers from tasting the book in the novelist's original organization and hindered them from judging for themselves whether the omitted sections (about Moravian folk music) were really abstruse or not. Second, it has consequently altered the 1969 American version based on the Stallybrass–Hamblyn translation; the novel was deliberately translated and read in terms of political event (the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) and thus was seen as a protest against the communist ideology.

Kundera skepticism towards McDonald was relevant, and his suspicious attitude grew even bigger when he discovered that foreign publishers had an agenda similar in form to that of the former Czechoslovakian censors, prioritizing the alteration of the 'foreign' work to conform to domestic cultural norms over the aesthetics of the work. As Michelle woods (2006) pointed out, "Kundera has always been suspicious of any potential manipulation of his work, attributed largely to his experience with censors in the former Czechoslovakia and to his own experience as a translator." (p25). That was the reason why he decided in the 1990s to supervise and collaborate on the retranslation of all the English translations of the Czech novels from the French translations.

To sum up, it could be advanced here that the origin of the problem in Milan Kundera`s case does not lay in the translator`s linguistic competence or ability to deal with the original, but in the publisher`s expectations which were sharply different to those of Kundera. Macdonald, who was regulated by commercial intents, wanted an accessible and a fluent English translation that can be easily assimilated by the English audience, whereas Kundera insisted on respecting his writing style.

## 4. Conclusion

Milan Kundera`s novel The Joke is an exemplary case study for examining the influence of the globalized publishing industry over the translation process. Hitherto, critics have focused almost exclusively on author-translator relationship ignoring the social pressures and physical processes in which various factors (not only translators and authors but also clients, publishers and so on) engage in order to produce a translation.

Questions such as power, the market, editorial control, translation decision-making, the translator–editor relationship, and normalization must be taken into account if translation studies are to set about providing a systematic and objective description of the translation process.

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