

TRANSLATORS' PREFACES – A KEY TO THE TRANSLATION?

In this paper I will discuss some of the questions that have arisen when I have studied, particularly from a translation-critical point of view, prefaces written by Finnish translators. I do not intend to provide any answers to the question included in the title of this paper but rather to view some of the salient features in Finnish prefaces. I will deal only with some preliminary observations, a more detailed and comprehensive account will be found in my forthcoming licentiate thesis on the role of the translator and in particular how Finnish translators describe their work.

The term *preface* is used here in a wider sense to include not only introductory remarks but also corresponding comments which a translator has attached to his translation and which have been published as an epilogue at the end of the translated book.

Let us first examine the purpose of prefaces. A simple explanation is that prefaces, whether they are written by the author, the translator or the publisher, are meant to be read and thus inform the reader. An author writes a preface for his readers, real or fictitious (Jorgensen 1976: 4-5):

Soll der Leser gewonnen und gelenkt werden, tut man es am besten sofort, am Eingang des Werkes. So ist die Vorrede ... die Stelle, wo man sich am schnellsten und leichtesten über die Ängste und Hoffnungen des Autors und über seine nötigen Erinnerungen an den Leser unterrichtet.

In the same way, a writer of non-fiction has the user of the book in mind while writing a preface. A paper on the language of introductions and footnotes in Finnish and Swedish grammar books (Sorvali 1986: 39-42) lists several points that ought to be found in a foreword: for whom is the book intended, what kind of background knowledge is required of the users, what points in the grammar are the most important or difficult, how should the book best be used, what is the background to the grammar.

As to translators' own prefaces, it is not so obvious that remarks have been written for the ordinary reader of the translation. Undoubtedly, most of the Finnish prefaces I have read are reader-oriented, but some seem to have been written for other purposes: to forestall future

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criticism or to explain why the translator is not fully satisfied with his assignment. In my view, the contents of the translator's preface determine for whom the preface is written, or more precisely who will read it. A Finnish translator's preface can provide information on the author and his work or describe the translator's strategies and techniques or do both. The more a preface describes the actual translating, the less interesting it might be for the layman but the more interesting for the researcher.

This leads us to one further question. Even though a preface is written for us, why should we read it, or for that matter, even take it into account. The first point to note is that writings on translation theory do not completely exclude translators' prefaces but do actually refer to them on several occasions. Some mention of them in recent literature will be presented below.

According to L. G. Kelly (1984: 357), translators' forewords are worth taking into account, even though desire and performance do not always coalesce. What remains unclear here is whether Kelly means that translators' prefaces reveal wishes that never obtain fulfillment in the actual translation or that translators are forced to admit in their forewords that they have not reached their goals. However, he clearly outlines the usefulness of translation prefaces for the reader of a translated work. Kelly's bibliographic article (1984: 350-358) mentions books that contain translation prefaces, such as "Essays by John Dryden", but it also lists other sources where translators describe their work and reflect on translation.

Prefaces to translated works are considered to be part of the preliminary data of translation description by Lambert - van Gorp (1985: 48, 52). Prefaces and footnotes are metatext which together with other macro-structural information (e.g. is the translation total or partial, is the name of the translator mentioned) ought to give some idea of translational strategies and to assist in further analysis and description.

Peter Newmark (1988: 91-93) gives examples on additional cultural, technical or linguistic information that a translator may have to add in his translation (changes within the text or notes). He addresses himself to translators and, if the book is important, encourages them to write notes and prefaces and deal with difficulties they have met on the term level or with ambiguities in the text.

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A plaintive call for prefaces can also be heard in the following: "In some cases - these are unfortunately still all too rare - the translator explains the intended function of the specific text he has created in a preface or appendix" (Snell-Hornby 1988: 114).

Any mention of the use(fulness) of translation prefaces is uncommon in translation studies, but those few references I have found, show a positive attitude towards preface-writing. In Finland where translation prefaces are rare and any reference to their use almost nonexistent, it is worth mentioning two recent statements. Ydaus Taubert, a representative of the largest publishing house in Finland, stated in a seminar on literary translation held at Kouvola in October 1990, that footnotes should not be used in translated books, rather a translator can write an appendix or an epilogue at the end of the book. According to Ellen Valle, a lecturer in the Dept. of Translation Studies at Turku University (Moisio 1990: 5), translations of Finnish literature in the U.S.A. fall into a kind of vacuum. American readers generally do not have a "map" or scheme of Finland in their minds, so they have to create it while reading, and without sufficient background knowledge, such a "map" will become deficient. Valle claims that it is the responsibility of the translator to make the text more explicit by adding metatext that would help the reader in interpreting the text. She suggests two metatextual strategies: the translator writes an introduction or adds metatext within the text, the latter being the more recommendable solution.

Let us now return to the main issue of this paper, translation prefaces and translation criticism. Translation criticism starts with, and also often ends in, a comparison between the SL text and the TL text. A few critics go one step further and see the compared texts as a part of the SL and the TL cultures. It is very seldom that a translation is seen as a product of a process starting from the publisher's decision to have a literary work translated and ending in a published book. When a translation critic sees translation in this light, he cannot avoid taking the translator into account: it is not only the linguistic and pragmatic relations between the SL and the TL text that count, it is also the decision-making and the argumentation of the translator that is important. What is unfortunate is that we cannot see the alternatives nor perceive the reasoning of the translator, we only see the final solution in the translation, and our possibility of taking the translator's views into account is therefore

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limited. A translation preface could be helpful in such a situation, but as stated above prefaces are rather rare.

The idea of seeking support from prefaces in criticism is quite well described by Werner Koller (1979: 215-216). According to his translation criticism, translators' remarks are to be taken into account in the second part of his criticism model, the reconstruction of Äquivalenzforderungen. What one seeks in the prefaces are statements on translation principles, methods and procedure and information on how the translator has understood his task. The translator's views on what constitutes free, literal etc. translation are also important. If the critic is not satisfied with a particular decision that a translator has made, he must check whether it consequently follows the translator's views or Vorentscheidungen. As Koller puts it, "Die Kritik wird in solchen Fällen in erster Linie beim theoretischen Konzept des Übersetzers ansetzen".

Discussing a critique that would do justice to the translator, Hans J. Vermeer (1986: 149-150) puts forward the plea that the translator make his intentions known, one has to know what the translator wanted. It is a prerequisite for a just assessment. Vermeer also states provocatively (p. 149) that he is not primarily interested in the solutions, rather he is interested in how such solutions are justified, and asks if we ever really expect a translator to offer such an explanation or even argue for his respective choices.

As now being pointed out, some theoretical writings offer support to the idea of reading translation prefaces and even of making good use of them. These supporting views do not necessarily mean that there are any prefaces to be read and used. As mentioned above, prefaces are "unfortunately still all too rare", a statement which refers mainly to the situation abroad. In this paper we do not intend to make a comparison between the number of translation prefaces abroad and in Finland, a comparison that might even prove to be useless. But there is one significant difference between Finland and, for instance, Britain or Germany - countries where there is a tradition of translators writing prefaces to translations and, as a matter of fact, writing about translation on the whole. It seems to me that in Finland we do not have the same kind of tradition as those countries mentioned above: we cannot write a history of translation in Finland by simply referring to the famous writings of translators as

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is done in "English translation theory 1650-1800" by T. R. Steiner or in "Translating literature: the German tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig" by André Lefevere. The lack of such a tradition in Finland might be explained by both historical and practical reasons. Up to the 1850's Finnish translated literature consisted mostly of religious material, and it was not easy to commence publication of literary translations: printing conditions were poor, there were hardly any publishing houses, written Finnish had not, as yet, developed into a standard language and there was no real demand for translations, because educated people read books either in the source language or in Swedish translations (Suomen kirjallisuus vol. VIII: 418-422). Translators were not professionals but often idealists with a desire to educate the nation. Translation first became a profession when publishing became organised (p. 479). At that time, the status of translation in Finland was not on a similar level to that in England or Germany, so, I do not find it peculiar that preface-writing in Finland never really began to develop into a tradition.

What types of preface, then, do Finnish translators write? As already stated, we cannot commence this presentation by simply listing the most famous, nor by giving statistics on preface-writing. We have therefore to resort to another kind of presentation, and as already mentioned, such a presentation will not be complete but will focus only on particular issues and observations.

In an attempt to obtain an overall picture of various types of preface, I have gone through my own home library and gathered information from books which have been translated into Finnish. I do not claim that a corpus collected in this way is representative in the sense that it would reflect the qualities and quantities of all the books ever translated into Finnish. Rather, my aim has been to obtain a systematically collected corpus and for this purpose, a home library has offered a good starting point.

The basic corpus consists of 353 translated books, both fiction and non-fiction. The books have been published between the years 1886 and 1987. The year of publication of the first printing or first edition is known for 289 books and 80% of these have been published in the 1960's, the 1970's or the 1980's. As to the classification of the books, 55% are fiction (novels, short stories, poems, plays, epics, causeries), other larger groups are books on

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religion, history and natural history, 8% each. The source languages number twenty, with 70% of the books being translated either from English, Swedish or Russian. In 7 books out of the total corpus of 353 books the name of the translator has not been mentioned.

A quick study of 155 books of fiction in the corpus shows that 31 of the books contain prefaces, altogether 35 examples. A preface can be written by the author or the writer, the publisher, the editor or by someone else, e.g. an expert in the field (19 examples), or by the translator. The translator can write an introduction, a preface or an epilogue (16 examples), he can also use footnotes and give explanations in an appendix (in 9 books). As our main concern here is the translator's prefaces, a closer analysis of five prefaces might give us some idea of the possible contents of a Finnish translator's preface. I will deal only with those parts of the prefaces that refer to the translation and translating. The prefaces to the following books will be used:

(A) Euripides, *Bakkhantit*. [Bacchael Translated by Mauno Manninen. 1967

(A) is a play. The translation has a 4-page-long introductory section without any title. The translational part of the introduction is 39 lines long. The translator comments on solutions concerning the translation of place names and also on clarifying additions he has made and discusses the problems of metre.

(B) Pentti Saarikoski/Euripides, *Herakles*. 1967.

(B) is also a play. The translator has written a 3-page-long introduction without a title. On one page he writes about the history of the translation: how he translated the play first for the theatre and then for television. 19 lines of the preface have been used to describe various translational strategies in the new version. The translator explains how he has treated the original text, how he has solved the problems of metre, what he has omitted, how he has sometimes changed dialogue and what has been his aims with the translation.

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(C) Johan Fjord Jensen, *Kirjallisuudentutkimus. Aristoteleesta uuskritiikkiin*. [Den ny kritik] Translated by Sirkka Heiskanen-Mäkelä and Veli Ketvel. 3rd printing 1979.

(C) is a book on literary studies. The preface is 73 lines long and contains information only about translation. The translators write about the need for a book such as this that could be used in teaching. They explain how they have proceeded when the translation is not a direct translation of the Danish original but done from a Swedish translation. Linguistic solutions are discussed, as well as omissions and changes. Problems with terms receive a lot of attention in the preface, and emphasis is placed on the role of future users. The subject index has been made much more comprehensive.

(D) Graham Houhg, *Kirjallisuus ja tutkimus*. [An Essay on Criticism] Translated by Eila Pennanen. 1971.

(D) belongs also to the field of literary studies. The translator has written a 14-line-long epilogue, where she mentions those who have contributed to the translation. She then goes on to explain her intentions when translating this work and describes how these intentions conflicted with those of the people who had been the initiators in the publishing of the book. At their request, the translator has used terms of foreign origin in her translation. The translator ends her text with the statement that those terms not to be found in the glossary of the book, can be found in dictionaries.

(E) Michel de Motaigue, *Tutkielmia*. [Essays] Selection, translation and introduction by Edwin Hagfors. 1922.

(E) is a collection of essays. The introduction is 9 pages long. The comment on the translation is written in 2 lines and is about spelling.

As a starting point for the study of these prefaces I would like to put forward the notion

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that a translation is always done in a particular situation and at a particular time and is representative of a particular point of view - that of the translator's. It can of course represent views that are widely accepted, but in the end, it illustrates those ideas which the translator, also, has accepted. Besides, the comments we read in prefaces (A) - (E), do not describe routine but how the translator has solved a particular problem and how he argues for the solution. The translator of (A) explains why he has added words of clarification by stating that it is justified because a knowledge of ancient times has diminished in modern-day Finland. As they inform us in the preface, the translators of (C) have preferred to translate as few terms as possible, because the book is meant for university students who have to recognize such terms in foreign texts as well. The translator of (B) writes that he has not tried to imitate the metres of Euripides, because the result would be a text that is neither suitable for the Finnish actor nor pleasing to the Finnish reader. The translators state the problem, offer their solution and what is most important, also list their arguments. So, it is not the comment itself that justifies the solution but rather the argument put forward by the translator. A translation critic may notice that clarifications have been added in a translation. A translator, in his preface, may even have mentioned such clarifications but it is only when the translator gives an explanation that the reviewer can make use of the preface. Now that the critic is familiar with the background to the solution, it is up to him whether or not to accept the argument, an argument that reflects the translator's point of view.

We do not here have to pay attention to why or to whom these five prefaces are written. Even a short characterization of the contents as given above reveals what could be possible reasons and who might be potential readers, on the other hand, a study of the style of these texts might even strengthen this impression. Instead, attention should be paid to the contents: what is it the translators are actually writing about in these prefaces? Firstly, we must bear in mind that we have only five prefaces to study so the results cannot be generalized. Secondly, our prefaces are short or at least the number of lines used for translational comment is small, so we cannot expect a full report on translational strategies. Thirdly, as such prefaces are rare, those remarks that have actually been written down must have been important to the preface-writer.

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What we can see in these prefaces is a declaration of intention: it appears from the preface (B) that the translator has had the aim that Herakles, in Finnish, would become a play that both the readers of the book and those who went to see it on stage would regard as interesting; the translator of (D) declares that she intended to create a translation that would be as easy as possible to understand. We can also see mention of problems on the word level: in (A) place names, in (C) terms, in (D) terms, and in (E) spelling. Additions, omissions and other changes are discussed in (A), (B) and (C). Special difficulties have been caused by metre in (A) and (B).

In my opinion, prefaces (A) - (D) contain such information that could be used when assessing a translation. They reveal the translator's view of certain problems and their solutions and in some cases, his opinion on the function of the translation. If the reviewer is to criticize these solutions and, in turn, these views and opinions, the preface then offers information that cannot be found in the TL text. But of course, we can use the information contained in the preface only when criticizing those areas actually dealt with in it, for all other problems the critic must then study the SL and TL texts. As these five prefaces deal mostly with detail, they do not offer much help to the reviewer when writing a comprehensive assessment but they do offer some insight into the translation.

According to Koller (1979: 51, 55-70), what we find in translators' writings, essays and prefaces, is an account of practical difficulties and decisions taken on principle; in prefaces, however, most comments concern difficulties: terms, culture-bound expressions, sayings etc. but translation principles, difficulties in understanding and interpretation and translation methods could also be discussed in such prefaces. The observations that can be made about these five Finnish prefaces are partly the same as Koller's but what strikes us most is the absence of those problems caused by cultural differences. The observations are not, however, commensurable, because the material available in Finland is not comparable either in amount or in extent. However, these observations do indicate that there are common problems.

In order to better understand the work of a particular author we acquaint ourselves with his life, so also can we better evaluate the work of a translator when we know what lies

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behind the translations. This background can be interesting, and one part of it is contained in the prefaces. The translator is the link between the original text and the translation, and for anyone who is interested in translations and their quality, prefaces might at best offer a good starting point perhaps a key to the translated text or even a window on the world of the translator.

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Meddelanden från institutionen för nordiska språk vid Uleåborgs universitet Serie B nr 9.
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Source : Ritva Hartama-Heinonen, «Translators' Prefaces – A Key to the Translation?», dans Milan Hrala & Ivana Cenkova (1995), *Folia Translatologica*. International Series of Translation Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, p. 33-42.