

Of ecosystems and translations: some ways of translating non-traditional texts

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In spite of the fact that ecological concerns have become a part of the public discourse with governments and producers promoting their greenness, it is also arguable that none of their adopted measures and improvements have had a significantly positive impact on the ecological development of the planet. As Rees explains, “[a]lmost all mainstream sustainability measures implicitly assume that the problem can be solved through greater material and economic efficiency,” but “such strategies have actually *increased* the human ecofootprint” (2010, 14; italics in the original). This doublespeak – the gap between professed values and strategies and the real impact of technology and production on the environment has been read in post-ecologist terms (Blühdorn 2000, Zeyer and Roth 2011) and explained within the framework of the late-modern consumer society in which “self-construction, self-expression and self-experience have, to an unprecedented extent, become a matter of product choices and acts of consumption” (Blühdorn 2007, 260) and in which the politics of simulation helps ‘sustain the unsustainable’ (260). The human impact on the planet has recently led to a proposal of a new geological era starting in the 1950s – the Anthropocene (Waters et al. 2016). It is not a mere coincidence that its onset is paralleled by an acceleration in the reflection of translation with Fedorov’s *Vvedenie v teoriiyu perevoda* [Introduction to the theory of translation] published in 1953, Levý’s *České teorie překladau* [Czech theories of translation] in 1957, Vinay and Darbelnet’s *Stylistique comparée du français et de l’anglais: Méthode de traduction* [Comparative stylistics of French and English: A methodology for translation] in 1958, and a “steady growth of valuable works on translation in English since the late 1950s” (Bassnett 2002, 79). The emergence of Translation Studies as a separate discipline in the following decades was partly a reaction to the growing demand for translated texts springing from the unprecedented intensification of technological development and international trade – in this sense can Translation Studies can be seen as a by-product of the Anthropocene.

Although it is true that the ecocritical framework has been adopted by many sciences during the past few decades, it is relatively rare in Translation Studies in which much of the debate is aimed at making translation and interpreting faster and more effective with the aim of producing value in the sense of a commodity that can be consumed. Dizdar critically examines the constructs on which the legitimisation of

the instrumental approach in Translation Studies is based arguing that instrumental research is not able to assess the moral implications of the practices and processes under scrutiny or decisions based on its conclusions, since “the social praxis (...) seems to impose its ‘reality’ directly on research design” (2014, 209). Intensifying connections between ecology and the given area of study and adopting some of its prisms might be one of the ways in which unproblematised instrumentalist thinking can be provided with certain correction: a translation of a recipe might then not just serve to cook a dish as in the instrumental approach, but – as in Cronin’s (2015, 249–250) example – could become a linguistic application of the concept of slow food. Slow language, like slow food then would be a response to the “increasing industrialisation of the production of food and language” (247).

Aside from Cronin’s proposed slow language movement, the ecocritical framework has been applied to Translation Studies in a number of other ways – e.g. Valero Garcés (2011) approached the problem with a close relationship of the text and the landscape and bioregion in mind, Scott (2015) has attempted to create a poetics of eco-translation, and the concept of the “translational eco-environment” (Hu 2003, 284) has introduced a curious picture of a translator evolving in a Darwinian sense. The following paragraphs will attempt to take a look at texts and translations *as* ecosystems. The text will also contain my translations and, in one case, a co-translation of a poem by the Slovak poet Peter Macsovszky. In most cases, the language of the translations is English. Although the so-called Nairobi recommendation states that a translator should translate into his or her mother tongue or into “a language of which he or she has a mastery equal to that of his or her mother tongue,” (UNESCO 1976) it is also true that: (1) English is used as a lingua franca in many countries within and outside Europe, therefore translations into English are usually produced to address a wide audience speaking various varieties of English; (2) small locales struggle to export their texts, hence translating into L2 is a common practice, and, most importantly; (3) translating experimental texts, which are often fragmentary and agrammatical, differs significantly from attempts to produce a text that sounds “fluent” or “natural” in the target language.¹ I have chosen to translate a poem by Peter Macsovszky because in my opinion it reflects the contemporary situation of humankind, the liquidity of our experience and the ecological concerns that should be (but not always are) addressed.

The history of using the metaphor of the text as a living organism, possessing the quality of organic unity, is an inherent part of the Western poetics (see, e.g., Orsini 1969 who provides a systematic outline of the history of the concept). With certain texts, particularly with more contemporary ones, however, this idea of organic unity ceases to have the potential to provide an insight into their workings. Online hypertexts, rhizomatic texts that “make a map instead of a tracing” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005 [1980], 24), the read-write Internet (Lessig 2008), clusters of texts united by a common spatial-temporal characteristic or some experimental texts – open works in the Ecoian sense (Eco 1989 [1962]) – behave more like ecosystems: although they are still controlled by alternating positive and negative feedback, their organization and function is “much less tightly regulated, with more pulsing and chaotic beha-

viour (...) – in other words, they exhibit *homeorhesis* as opposed to *homeostasis*” (Odum and Barrett 2005, 6). While it is true that “homeorhesis is an *inherent* feature of all living systems” (Piotrowska et al. 2008, 1124), its degrees vary – a cell can be imagined on the most steady pole of the spectrum, the whole ecosphere on the most pulsing one while an organism would be positioned somewhere between the two extremes (Odum and Barrett 2005, 6). A prototypical text-as-organism is then both static and dynamic at the same time. Its steadiness is given by its unchangeable materiality and its pulsating nature is predominantly a matter of changing interpretation. However, the steadiness of a text’s materiality is more often than not only arbitrary – most texts have variants and versions. As authors write, they usually produce several slightly (or sometimes significantly) differing versions which are further edited and changed by other agents involved in the process of creation. As well as these predominantly conscious and deliberate interventions, there are also intrusions and distortions that are the results of technology used for publication (page width and breaks, typographical errors, duplications, omissions, faulty fonts etc.). Upon abandoning the unity and finality of a text and accepting the fact that this steadiness is always only constructed, a text can then be seen as a *population* of texts coexisting in the same semiotic space. When metatexts, including translations (Popovič 1975), are also considered, we might see the text in all this plurality as a community or ecosystem (depending on whether or not the environment – readerships, market, distribution, etc. – of the text(s) is considered as well).

Translating a prototypical text-as-organism in this view means creating or sustaining the ecosystem it is a part of – adding to its diversity, boosting some of its elements while suppressing others. However, there are also texts which are *inherently* less steady. The read write (or RW) Internet (as opposed to read only Internet) theorised by Lessig is an example of such a multiple, dynamic text and its surroundings. Lessig himself described it as an ecosystem (2008, 63), although he sees the text only as a small portion of the RW Internet (68). Obviously, the agents, spaces etc. must be considered as parts of the ecosystem, but in a way they can also be seen as parts of a highly homeorhetic text, inscribing themselves into it. The energy or “currency” in such an ecosystem is the attention the text is able to attract; with growing attention, the text-as-ecosystem grows as well, provoking readings, rereadings and rewritings, occupying larger space, generating new behaviours of the system, increasing its diversity and self-regulating and self-organising.

When translating texts (or their snapshots or offshoots) that do not maintain steady states (not even in their models or abstractions), the translator might not only want to add his/her translation to this ecosystem, but might want to recreate the highly dynamic, pulsating and changing nature of this text-as-ecosystem. It is true that usually only small parts of the ecosystem – parts that may be treated as texts-as-organisms are translated –, but this is not always the case.²

In the following I will not attempt to provide a general typology or detailed characteristic of texts-as-ecosystems or suggest a universal procedure for translating them – that (if possible at all) would require, among many other things, a detailed discussion of metatextuality and intertextuality and specifying the connections with

the cultural ecology.³ I will only take a closer look at the possibilities of translating a text that can be conceptualised as an example or model of the text-as-ecosystem and provide translations that would account for its dynamic nature. The text in question is a poem originally written in Slovak by Peter Macsovszky. The poem – a fragment of a larger work – is mostly composed of fragments of sentences that exist in the online reality. The webpages from which the fragments come can be looked up and accessed, their context (images, other texts, potentially growing or changing discussions, advertisements etc.) can be viewed – it is in fact part of the text of the poem. The text of the poem is then highly homeorhetic – as the webpages change, so does the poem. A more traditional translation – a translation that would primarily consider the motivic and poetological structure of the poem as a relatively static and stable text-as-organism would eliminate this changeable nature. The latter parts of the paper provide a discussion of the text and suggest several translation strategies that might be considered.

The poem under discussion is the first poem of *Santa Panica* (2014) a collection of poetry by Peter Macsovszky, “the initiator, informal leader and key author” of the experimental-deconstructionist tendency in Slovak poetry of the final years of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century (Šrank 2013, 382, trans. I. H.). The collection can be thought of as a slowly disintegrating biomorphic fractal whose parts gradually become the soil for the subsequent growth of the text. The seminal point of the text is the Slovak translation of a phrase from a book on karma by the Czech author Helena Rerichová *Karma odsuzujících* (Karma of the condemning, 2007) “To consider facts does not mean to condemn.” (Macsovszky 2014, 11; trans. I. H.).⁴ Although it might be tempting to see this sentence, which gives rise to the subsequent verses, as the seed of a text resembling a Brownian tree, such a model would not be adequate. Since the sentence is a part of a previously existing text, it is not truly a primordial beginning in a creationist model of the text, it is not a seed at all – rather it is a replanted offshoot in the Guattarian/Deleuzian sense. The further growth of the text – growth that can be paralleled with the development of a homeorhetic system – is as follows: from each word of the sentence, a new sentence grows and these, together with the first offshoot, form the first paragraph of the first poem. The words of the first sentence generated from the original first sentence sprout into sentences of the second paragraph and the algorithm continues until all the sentences of the first paragraph have grown into their own paragraphs. The second poem sprouts in a similar pattern from the second paragraph of the first poem and this pattern is repeated until all the paragraphs of the initial poem are exhausted. The regular pattern of the first part of the collection is broken by the intrusion of poems partly springing from the corresponding paragraphs (the first poem in the second part of *Santa Panica* starts with the second paragraph of the second poem in the book) and partly infected by the parasitic element of *panic* both as an intruding lexeme and as a characteristic of the composition. Irregularities can be found, however, even in the first poem of the collection – in two cases, instead of generating a new element extracted from new sets of (online) text material, the initial sentence is repeated. This irregularity then behaves both as an intruder and, paradoxically, also as a kind of order-reinforcing mantra. Irregularities intensify towards the end of the book:

the first poem of the sixth cycle more or less only imitates the regular pattern which is utterly absent from the poem that follows and becomes the substrate from which the following texts grow (it can be noted that this trajectory also imitates the behaviour of an ecosystem – there are parasitic and predatory elements in it, matter-energy transformations, self-regulation etc.). Panic and its compensations as competing principles of organisation of the text's ecosystem result in trajectory changes; the fractal-shaped creode is shifted by erosion and disintegration, regulating the potentially endless growth.

The view of the text and its composition as a dynamic ecosystem suggests an environmental concern encoded in the text. The eco-poetical character of *Santa Panica* is supported by elements such as relativization and critique of the anthropocentric perspective (poem *Všekazy* [Termites]) or an echo of the motive of dysfunctional growth in one of the mottoes in the book – a fragment of a text by the Czech writer and philosopher Ladislav Šerý: “The notion of value metastasizes into a general growth of value, spreading in all directions and, as a result, losing any relation to referents.” (77, trans. I. H.)⁵ The critique of the endless growth of value or growth in general resonates with the ecocritical attitude to overpopulation and the production-consumption cycle. The first poem of the collection also contains motifs of (economic) growth and waste management:

Vety prvej strofy

Posudzovať fakty neznamená odsudzovať. Kedy treba posudzovať programy odpadového hospodárstva. Ujasníme si fakty. To že nepíšem neznamená že nemám záujem. Akým právom chceš odsudzovať svojho blížneho.

Spoločlivý test kedy zomriem. Dokedy treba polohovať bábätko? Posudzovať fakty neznamená odsudzovať. Programy vyžadujú vytvorenie miestnych partnerstiev. Cena odpadového papiera sa odvíja od množstva. Prioritami rezortu hospodárstva musia byť prorastové opatrenia.

Ujasníme si so žiakmi že y na obrázku je veľkosť výšky tohto pravouhlého trojuholníka a x je jeden úsek prepony druhý úsek má veľkosť 1. Tu nájdete v skratke najdôležitejšie fakty.

Rozhovor je aj to že jeden rozpráva. Nepíšem literatúru a už vôbec nie hodnotnú. Byť tmlenou neznamená byť šedou myškou. Viem že nemám tvár anjela. Tieto čísla odrážajú rastúci záujem.

Smajlíky menia spôsob akým pracuje náš mozog. Ľudia sa cítia byť právom oklamaní. Ak chceš niečo čo si ešte nikdy nemal urob niečo. Posudzovať fakty neznamená odsudzovať. Verím že každý má svojho anjela strážneho. Je to neslýchané takto žiadať skazu svojho blížneho. (Macsovszky 2014, 11–12)

Its near-literal translation would be:

Sentences of the First Stanza

To consider facts does not mean to condemn. When should the programmes of waste management be considered. We'll clarify the facts. The fact that I don't write does not mean that I'm not interested. What gives you the right to condemn thy neighbour.

A reliable test when I die. Until when does a baby need to be positioned? To consider facts does not mean to condemn. Programmes require creating local partnerships. The price of waste paper depends on the amount. Pro-growth measures have to be the priorities of the department of the economy.

We'll clarify to the students that y in the picture is the height of the right-angled triangle and x is one of the sections of the hypotenuse the size of the other one is 1. Here you can find in short the most important facts.

A conversation is also when only one person is talking. I don't write literature and certainly not valuable [literature]. To be restrained does not mean to be a grey mouse [idiom: plain, inconspicuous]. I know I don't have the face of an angel. These figures reflect a growing interest.

Smiley faces change the way our brain works. People rightly feel fooled. If you want something you have never had do something. To consider facts does not mean to condemn. I believe that everybody has their guardian angel. It is outrageous to call for destruction of thy neighbour like that.

One of the possible results of a conventional translation – a translation that would respect the semantic value of the textual elements – lexemes, phrases (including their communication value), formal graphic elements (verse length, enjambements), repetition of the motifs as well as the internal relationships between the elements including the composition of the poem described in the previous paragraphs – might be as follows:

Sentences of the First Stanza

Considering facts is not condemning. When To consider programmes of waste Management. Let's clarify the facts. I don't Write but that is not indifference. What gives you The right to condemn your neighbour.

A reliable test when I die. When to stop Positioning your baby. Considering facts is not Condemning. Programmes require that local Partnerships be created. The price of waste paper Depends on the amount. Pro-growth measures Must be the priorities of state management.

Let's clarify to the pupils that the y in the figure
Is the altitude of the triangle and x is one of the
Two sections of the hypotenuse the other one
Is 1. The most important facts can be found here.

I think a dialogue is that someone is talking. I don't
Write literature – certainly not the valuable kind. Be restrained
But not plain. That is, my face is not angelic. The
Figures show we can't speak of indifference.

What gives our brain further stimuli is the smiley
Faces. You can imagine people feel deceived. We have
the right to get what we never had if we do something.
Considering facts is not condemning. You also
have your guardian angel. It is quite unbelievable – to
call for the doom of thy neighbour like that.

However, a text like this – a recursive, homologous, ecosystem and rhizome-like formation that is on the very level of its composition concerned with ecological and ethical aspects of growth and spread (of values, meaning, texts, living organisms) and is itself built of recycled material – found texts – calls for a translation that would recreate the pulsating ecosystem spreading beyond the page of the book or “capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005 [1980], 10). One of the possible strategies that might give rise to a translation recreating the ecosystem and rhizomatic character of the text would involve following the procedure that gave rise to it. A closer look at *Santa Panica* and the author's note to it reveal that not only is its initial sentence a found and recycled language object, but that almost all parts of the text are quotations or modified quotations of previously existing texts. So it is not only the initial sentence that the textual elements grow from – they are at the same time replanted from other substrates and the newly-created unities continue to carry the connection. In order to recreate the connection of the text on the page with the ecosystem physically existing outside – online – I respected both the code/method and the recycled/replanted character of the textual fragments using a search engine for generating them:

Sentences of the First Stanza

Considering facts is not condemning. Any
program you may be considering. Relying
on actual facts and science, not just the. Is
full of commandments to kill. Condemning
the collective uproar over racist.

Waive any right, but think about it. Residential
treatment program for your child. You should
have a clear idea of what you want to get. Any
questions you may have about safety.
Intervention has to be evaluated. Considering
facts is not condemning.

Most of us do that by relying. Have thrown no light on. Religion became an actual formal topic. Global warming and any facts are. Where their bacon and eggs come. Use science exclusively. A piece of evidence is or is not. Page is just reprinted. The claimed prophecy.

Death penalty is an integral part. Broadcasts are full of issues. Of bravado and exaggeration. Commandments was deliberately and artificially. Reward for raising a hunter to level. This kill command that you can use.

People sign a petition condemning. Country wants to be serious. Demolitions widely viewed as collective punishment. Huge amount of social media uproar. Expressed in a thoughtless way over. The reason it is racist to say.

The subsequent two translations are variations on this strategy – one of them is in a computer language called Groovy and the other one is a visual intermedial translation.

A string of computer code that would recreate, when run, the behaviour of the text could then be seen as a translation as well. I divided the code programmed for the requirements of this article by Róbert Novotný – a code that generates regular fractal-like structures from a predefined corpus – into stanza-like paragraphs and in two cases inserted the parasitic initial sentence:

Sentences of the First Stanza

```
def corpus = /* load corpus */
def initialSentence = "Considering facts is not condemning."
@Field def random = new Random()
@Field def maxNesting = 3
expand(corpus, initialSentence)

def expand(corpus, sentence, nesting = 1) {
if(nesting >= maxNesting) return "Considering
facts is not condemning."
println sentence
sentence.split(" ").each { word ->

    def nextSentence = pickRandom(search(corpus, word))
    def wordPrefix = word + "--> "
    if (nextSentence == null || nextSentence.equals(sentence)) {
println wordPrefix + "?"
    }
    else {
        print wordPrefix + " * " (nesting * 2)
        println nextSentence
        expand(corpus, nextSentence, nesting + 1)}}}
```

```

def search(corpus, word) {
  return corpus
    .findAll { it.toLowerCase().contains(word.toLowerCase()) }

def pickRandom(items) {
  return items.isEmpty() ? null : items “Considering
  facts is not condemning.”
  [random.nextInt(items.size())]}

```

When trying to capture the code and recreate the ecosystem of a text outside language, the translator might move into the visual sphere. With the first poem of *Santa Panica*, the procedure could be started by entering the initial sentence into a search engine. Searching for pictures will provide a set of images from which the translator chooses one he/she considers relevant with respect to the tone of the poem. This image could then be manually split into elements which, when inserted into the search field of the search engine, generate further sets of images (the triple occurrence of the initial sentence has to be taken into account). One of the possible results of such a procedure can be seen in Figure 1.

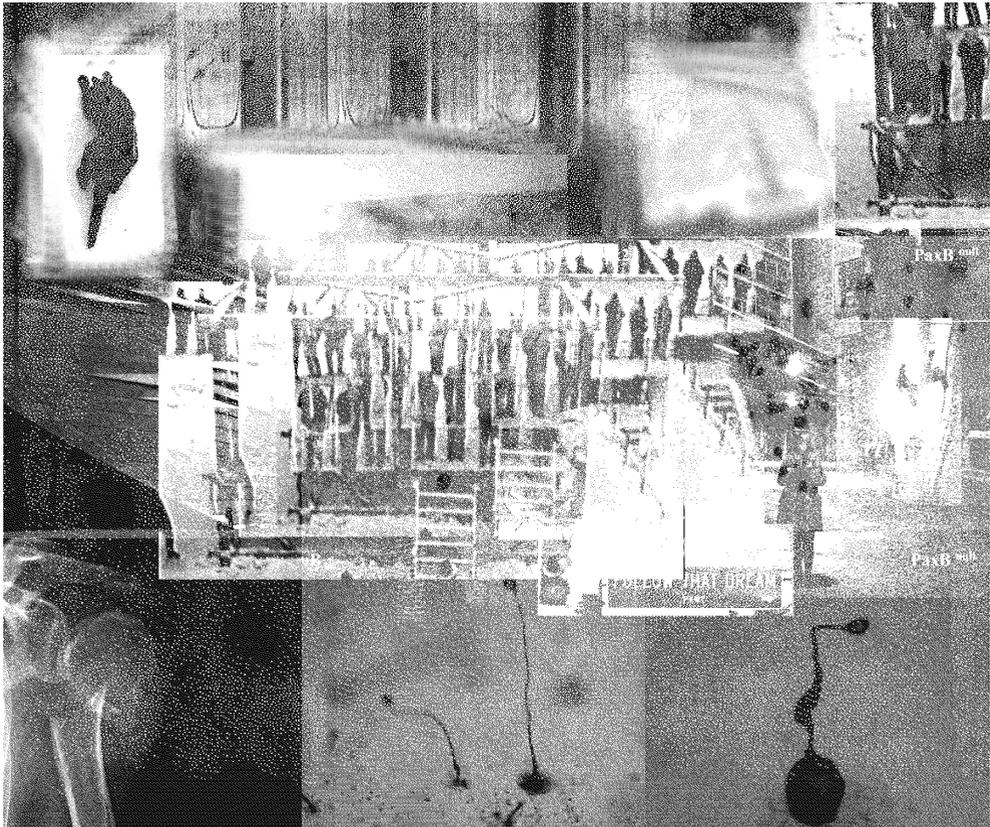


Figure 1: Peter Macsovszky: Sentences of the First Stanza

It might be argued that the translations presented here are not translations at all, but rather adaptations, rewritings, transcreations, transmutations or appropriations. But translating a text that resists and subverts prototypical attributes of a text-as-organism calls for strategies that also step outside the conventions of translation. Trying to recreate the high degree of homeorhesis – the potential of the text to change as its elements change (e.g., by existing online) – leads to a kind of translation of the principle (Feldek 1977), or, rather, a translation of the procedure.

To conclude, acknowledging the ecological consequences of translating fast and in large volumes calls for a development of more resistant translation strategies as well as a more intense application of ecocritical frames in Translation Studies. Thinking about translation in ecological terms might lead to view translation as a way of creating or sustaining an ecosystem or understand certain types of texts as a dynamic, pulsating and self-regulating ecosystems in themselves – ecosystems which can be recreated in a translation. Translation then would not be a mere tool speeding up the production-consumption cycle, but an opportunity to explore the inherent and adherent homeorhetic character of texts. Better understanding of ecosystems (natural, sociological, cultural) might also lead to a more ecologically-responsible behaviour – in translation as well as in other spheres of life.

NOTES

- ¹ This does not mean texts and translations are in any way random. Also, the translations into English – those of them that are not a product of a cut-up technique – were proofread by Jonathan Gresty, MA, PhD.
- ² Taking into account the pulsating and dynamic (multiple) character of the text-as-organism leads to a more (text-)environmentally-conscious translation.
- ³ An insightful overview of intertextuality has recently been offered by Sakellariou who stresses the “inherent indeterminacy of human action” (2015, 12) evoking the ecosystemic nature of society and its texts.
- ⁴ “Posudzovať fakty neznamená odsudzovať?”
- ⁵ “Pojem hodnoty metastázuje do zobecněného bujení hodnot, jež se šíří všemi směry, takže ztrácí jakýkoli vztah k referentům.”

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Translation. Ecosystem. Hypertext. Poetry.

After briefly summarising some ecocritical approaches in current Translation Studies, the paper proposes that texts with its variants, versions and metatexts can be viewed as populations, communities or (when spaces, agents involved in creation, distribution and reception of texts and other factors are considered) as ecosystems. The article then – on the material of a poem by Peter Macsovszky – proposes some strategies of translation that would recreate the inherently homeorhetic character of some less prototypical texts.

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