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Dialect or Language – Language Politics behind Translation Strategies

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Abstract & Keywords

Where does the border between dialect and language lie? Does it follow the borders of countries? What difference does it make if we decide to handle a source-language novel as dialectal - or not? These are some of the themes I will discuss in my paper focused on Jopparikuninkhaan poika, a novel by Bengt Pohjanen, and its recently published translation in Transylvanian Hungarian. The birth of the novel (which Bengt Pohjanen wrote first in Swedish, later in Meänkieli) is interesting per se, but the relationship between the novel written in Meänkieli and its translation raises specific language-political speculations on dialect and language. In my paper I will discuss, on the one hand, the relationship between Meänkieli and the dialect of Finnish Nordbotten (Peräpohjola), and, on the other hand, the way in which the features of Meänkieli are transposed into the target language. Translating dialects causes problems for translators: what are the strategies the translator chooses when he/she starts to translate a novel written in Meänkieli?

In the world there are many idioms which cannot easily be classified as language or dialect. Language forms of this kind also exist in Scandinavia, such as Karelian, Kven and Meänkieli. In this article I will take a closer look at Meänkieli and ponder where the boundary between language and dialect can be drawn. My article will focus on Bengt Pohjanen's novel *Jopparikuninkhaan poika* (2009) and the possibility - or impossibility - of its translation. I will concentrate on the Meänkieli version, its Finnish translation *Rajan kolmas huone* (2011), translated by Jorma Aspegren and Enikő Molnár Bodrogi's Hungarian translation *A csempészkirály fia* (2011). My approach is mainly that of translation studies but due to the language-political viewpoint of the topic I will also provide a short review of Meänkieli.

Jopparikuninkhaan poika is a story about life on the border between Finland and Sweden. The narrator is a small boy called Pänktti. The novel is simultaneously a coming-of-age story, a description of a village community trying to survive on the periphery of Sweden and also a history of an entire language minority as Kaisa Mikkola (2011: 53) states in her review of *Rajan kolmas huone*. The novel can rightfully be called a statement on Swedish policies concerning minorities and languages.

Even the birth of the novel is fascinating. Bengt Pohjanen - a novelist living on the Swedish side of the Torne River and writing in Finnish, Swedish and Meänkieli - wrote the novel first in Swedish, calling it *Smugglarkungens son* [The Smuggler King's Son] but it was first published as Jorma Aspegren's Finnish translation *Jopparikuninkaan poika* in 2006, and in Swedish only in 2007. In 2009 Pohjanen published a Meänkieli version of the novel called *Jopparikuninkhaan poika*. In 2011 a new Finnish translation by Jorma Aspegren was published which was called *Rajan kolmas huone* [The Third Room of the Border]. My research questions are:

1. What difference does it make if a given source text is regarded as written in a specific language or a specific dialect?
2. What kinds of translation strategies have the translators of the Finnish and Hungarian versions used in their translations of *Jopparikuninkhaan poika*?
3. How does language policy affect the choice of their translation strategies?

From a linguistic typological point of view, Meänkieli is not an independent language. It is not a pure Finnish dialect either as over the past 200 years it has developed in another direction from the North-Western Finnish dialects spoken on the other side of the border. Finland was annexed to Russia in 1809 and the border was drawn according to the Treaty of Fredrickshamn in the middle of the Torne River region. Thus, a historically, culturally and linguistically unified area was split into two and the parts were annexed to two different countries. On the Finnish side, the population became a part of the Grand Duchy while those left on the Swedish side became a peripheral minority in the Swedish kingdom. (Andersson & Kangassalo 2003: 100.) This division has had an effect on the linguistic and cultural identities of the populations and also on the division between languages spoken on different sides of the border.

Drawing a border across a unified language area is a primary reason for the emergence of two forms of language, states Eila Söderholm in her article. Söderholm (s. d.) lists a few reasons why Meänkieli has separated from Finnish. Following the border drawn in the middle of Meän country a policy of 'Swedishisation' drew a mental border - which was even stronger than the physical one - between the Finnish minority in Sweden and the mother country. Söderholm writes:

I believe that if these nationalisation policies in Sweden and Finnmark had not existed, and if, through history, Meänkieli speakers and Kvens could have been able to learn Finnish and if they had had Finnish-speaking schools and mass media, if they had been able to take part in the development of written Finnish and if the status of the language had been in every way better, standard Finnish would have suited them as well as it suits the Northern Finns. But as they have been trying to abolish the native languages in these countries and force a majority

language on people, the language has grown farther and farther apart from Finnish (Söderholm s. d.).

On different sides of the border, the languages have grown apart mainly because new words have been borrowed by Meänkieli from Swedish, the majority language, whereas Finnish has developed its own words and borrowed terms from the Finnish mass media, for instance. The influence of Swedish on Meänkieli is, according to Söderholm (s. d.), due to the low status of Finnish and Meänkieli in Sweden, compared to the position of Swedish, the dominant language.

In addition to the national border, another supporting factor in the independence of Meänkieli is that, for the inhabitants of Meänmaa, the position of Meänkieli is crucial: it is a part of its national identity (see Huss 2006: 586). Furthermore, linguistic studies show the importance of teaching Meänkieli, not Finnish, in Meänmaa schools, because Meänkieli is already so distant linguistically from Finnish that it is difficult for native Meänkieli speakers to learn and even understand standard Finnish (Winsa 1993).

It is exactly because of language-political reasons that Meänkieli is an independent, regional language; it received its status as an official minority language in Sweden in 2000 alongside with Finnish, Sami, Yiddish and the Romani languages (Andersson and Kangassalo 2003: 30). However, Meänkieli is not a homogenous language: its different variations are spoken throughout the region.

In prose fiction, dialects are used to express colloquial speech in one way or another. In addition to oral discourse, dialects are used as a way of literary expression to enliven the language or as a stylistic device to create an illusion of colloquial speech in dialogues. Dialects are also used in different texts to emphasise the importance of dialectal language. In these kinds of texts - columns or causeries, for example - the dialect is in itself more important than the factual content of the text (Koski 2002: 53). The so-called dialect boom which began in Finland in the early 1990s has given birth to different kinds of dialectal translations. Texts translated from standard Finnish into different dialects include comics (*Asterix*, *Donald Duck*), folktales (*Parahia tarinoota kersoolle ja aikuusille* [Great Stories for Kids and Adults]) and religious literature (for example *The Catechism*). In addition to dialect translations, fiction is written in different dialects: for instance, Heli Laaksonen writes poetry in the dialect of Uusikaupunki (for example, *Pulu uis*, 2000), Rosa Liksom writes prose fiction in the North-Western dialect, and Sinikka Nopola uses the dialect of Häme in her novels (Makkonen-Craig & Vaattovaara 2007: 402–406).

Thus, there are examples of the use of dialect in prose fiction, and even in religious literature, but dialects have not yet become common in academic writing and I do not believe that it is going to be the case. The language of science has different demands than the language of prose

fiction and actually I do not believe that this thinking pattern will change in academic circles very soon. A question which is of particular interest in the light of this article - the position of Meänkieli as an independent language - is emphasized, for instance, in Birger Winsa's cultural and academic work: he writes scientific articles in Meänkieli (see for example, Winsa 1993). As for an example, I could mention an academic conference I attended in Budapest in which Enikő Molnár Bodrogi, the Romanian Hungarian researcher and the translator of *Jopparikuninkhaan poika*, delivered her presentation in Meänkieli.

The translators of a dialect often think that they are translating spoken language; the translators of colloquial language, conversely, often use dialectal expressions in their texts (Tiittula and Nuolijärvi 2007: 400). Although the translators of colloquial prose have to pay similar attention to their work as do other literary translators, their work is not subject to such scrutiny as that of AV translators, for example. On the other hand, readers of a prose text often cannot check a particular section in the original work they have not understood, whereas a viewer of a film who hears – and perhaps also understands – the original language and reads the subtitles simultaneously pays immediate attention to the problems of the AV translator's work.

The translation of dialects, slang and other colloquial language is first of all bound to time and culture of their creation. Pirjo Mäkinen's (2001) article focuses on the temporal relations of the source text, particularly from the point of view of re-translation. Language changes constantly, as does slang, dialects and spoken language. A novel written today in the Turku dialect and translated by using a colloquial form of a language will be as obsolete for the modern reader in a hundred years' time as, for example, Aleksis Kivi's *Seven Brothers*. It is not always necessary to retranslate old texts; however, if a translation aspires to the illusion of a contemporary spoken language it might be expedient to consider making a re-translation in the 22nd century, particularly if the aim of the original work has been to retain the freshness of the original language. Similarly, the translation also has to strive for the same purpose. A new translation might also be necessary if the references to culture-bound elements of the language have changed. For instance, the function of children's literature – the literature for children – changes if the readers, the children, do not understand the text.

In the translation of dialects, one should primarily take into account the links the translated dialect has to the source culture. In addition, the translator needs to note the regional and social position of the dialect and needs to be aware of its political background factors. In fiction, dialect or other colloquial language is often used in dialogue in order to differentiate between characters, who have different dialects or ways of speaking. The best-known Finnish example of the use of dialects is Väinö Linna's classic novel *The Unknown Soldier* (1954). The characters of the novel are so strongly based on the regional and cultural backgrounds of their respective dialects that translation might seem impossible. Yet, *The Unknown Soldier* has been

translated into several languages; however, it is likely that the often stereotypical nature and other linguistic richness connected to the characters have not been transposed into the translation.

Researchers of translation have always been interested in the possibilities and impossibilities of translation. The translation of dialects as such may be an impossible task but the illusion of dialectal speech can be created through various means as Liisa Tiittula and Pirkko Nuolijärvi (2007) point out. The translator can use dialectal words here and there, change the word order or use other ways to bring the rhythm of spoken language into the text. When translating into Finnish, the translator can use the colloquial forms of personal pronouns (mä, sä, mie, sie), repetition, particles (no, ai se vai, nyt), short sentences or typically colloquial words or phrases (Ibid. 400). Translating becomes particularly problematic if the source text employs different dialects or other types of speech to differentiate characters with different speech registers.

In the novel's Finnish version *Rajan kolmas huone*, the narrator's voice has mainly been translated into standard Finnish. The translator's choice has most likely been influenced by the fact that *Jopparikuninkhaan poika* has been written in standard Meänkieli. However, the narrator of the novel is a small boy, whose rather stiff standard language does not suit at all. The translator has left some traces of Meänkieli in the dialogues, but these do not manage to bring the same kind of feeling of regional and cultural background to the text as the source text does.

It might be that an average Finn does not understand the entire Meänkieli version (mainly because the vocabulary might be difficult) whereas the translation rendered into standard Finnish makes the narration rather inauthentic at least to the modern reader. There is very little left of the juiciness of the Meänkieli version, although the translator has peppered the text with dialect words. Furthermore, the colourful descriptions of local life apparent in the original version lose some of their glow in the Finnish translation. The problem is not that the translation is of a substandard quality; it is due to the translation strategy employed. It would have been possible to adjust the language, so that the translation would have better suited the narration of a small child: the translator could have chosen a Northern Finnish dialect for this purpose. In that case the narrative style would have remained lighter.

The origins of the Hungarian translation are different from the Finnish translation. Although some regional variation is used in Hungarian fiction in general there is less of it or at least it is different from the Finnish usage. Hungarian dialects differ from each other particularly in their prosodic characteristics: thus, Hungarian texts, when spoken, can be clearly dialectal, but when written down they are not very clearly dialectal (cf. Koski 2002: 54).

In her translation of Pohjanen's novel, Enikő Molnár Bodrogi has used the typical characteristics of her own language region and therefore the translation retains the lightness of the Meänkieli version as other regional variants would probably also retain. The translator has used dialectal expressions, and yet the text is not linked specifically to the Hungarian cultural environment but rather to Meänmaa culture. This is because the novel includes many culturally bound terms which the translator has left in the text, however, with explanations. This kind of alienating translation strategy takes the reader right to the heart of Meänkieli culture. Moreover, the use of short sentences, which is atypical of Hungarian (literary) texts, renders the text fitting for a child's mouth.

> Mama nincs itt. Nem szeretem itthon. Finnországban, Aino néménéknél igazi háború van. Itt ülök a menekültházban (*here the translator uses a footnote*: a háborús menekülteknek, kitelepítettek számára épített házikó), ezt Aino férje, Paavo azért építette, hogy készen álljon, mire a németek tüze kialszik. Vajon miért nem égették fel a németek a mi oldalunkat is? (Pohjanen 2011a: 21).[1]

> Mother is gone. I don't like it at home. At Auntie Aino's house in Finland the war is real. I'm sitting in the evacuee house (*here the translator uses a footnote*: small house built for the evacuated war refugees), which Aino's husband Paavo has built so that a house will be ready after the burning fire of Germany is over. Why didn't the Germans also burn down our side?

Being short, the sentences give the kind of illusion the novelist has also striven for, namely that of a child's speech which is consistent with the source text.

When translators begin to work on a novel like *Jopparikuninkhaan poika* they have to decide whether to use standard language or dialect. In this case, such a decision deals primarily with language politics. The translator inevitably has to take a stand on the status of Meänkieli as an independent language.

The translator also has to decide how to transpose the culturally dependent aspects of the text into the target language. The translator can choose the strategy of alienation, leaving words and phrases of the source language in the text or using otherwise strange words in the target language. This is a worthy strategy, particularly if the words are necessary to understand the context. A good example of this is a description of a baptism ceremony. The minister and the child's family do not have a common language and as a result the child is given a strange name during the ceremony: Fryyky Sekasti (Pohjanen 2009: 28–29).[2]

In order to make the origin of the name understood, the original phrase "Fröökynä sen kasto," has to be left in the target language as well. Molnár Bodrogi has done so, adding an explanation in the text:

> Fröökynä se kasto. Vagyis hogy a tanítónő előkeresztelte. És így a fiú neve Fryyky Sekasti lett, ahogy a pap értette a választ. (Pohjanen 2011: 34).
>
> Fröökynä se kasto. Meaning that the (female) teacher baptised him. And so the boy was named Fryyky Sekasti, as that was the way the minister understood the answer.

The translator can also use compensation, which in fact has been utilised by both of the translations I have looked at. Compensation includes dialectal or colloquial words amid the text, bringing the illusion of spoken language. The translators can also use domestication and enter deeper into the structure of language and culture. In this case they will have to decide what can be transposed into the target language so that the source culture is still visible in the text.

Enikő Molnár Bodrogi follows a common strategy of the translation of factual texts in which the translator explains the content of an expression in the source language. She uses a lot of footnotes in her translation which I find a good option when we deal with a culture so distant from the Hungarian one. In the Finnish version, no such explanation is necessary as Meänkieli culture is rather close to Finnish culture. Furthermore, a Swedish dialogue is not necessarily expected to be translated into Finnish, whereas translating it into Hungarian is crucial.

In this article I have looked at Bengt Pohjanen's novel *Jopparikuninkhaan poika* and its Finnish and Hungarian translations. On the basis of the translations it seems that it is not insignificant how a translator regards the language of the novel, i.e. whether it is seen as standard Meänkieli or a Finnish dialect. The translator thus makes a choice, both of translation strategy and of language policy. The choice is not simple as the translator has to bear questions of style, for example, in mind. In this particular novel the narrator is a small boy: the kind of person who most likely would not speak the same language variety as an adult, no matter in which part of the world he was living in. The Finnish translator of the novel has thus made a rather curious choice by translating the main part of the novel into standard Finnish. The Hungarian translator, conversely, has chosen to use the local language variety of Transylvanian Hungarian, which is an interesting choice for the translation.

Both translators have used several translation strategies. Both have used alienation but due to the greater distance between the source culture and the Hungarian one, the Hungarian translation utilises more footnotes. Both translators have used compensation in their texts. However, as a whole, these two translations are very different from each other.

Transylvanian Hungarian does not have the same position as Meänkieli but it is in many ways different from the standard language of the mother country. A Hungarian reader will notice the translator's choices in language and vocabulary but as the translator has left many

Meänkieli words in the text, the regional emphasis of the translation will most likely not bother the reader.

As the reader of the Finnish translation, I am bothered by the standard language which makes the narrator's voice stiff and inauthentic. The difference between the two translations is most likely that the dissimilarities between Finnish and Hungarian written and spoken varieties are not the same: spoken Finnish differs radically from the written standard, whereas the differences between spoken and written Hungarian are mainly prosodic. Another reason for my conflicting emotions about these translations is perhaps that the conventions of Finnish and Hungarian literature are so different. A Finnish reader has got used to texts which strive to create an illusion of spoken text whereas a Hungarian reader is more used to the use of standard language even in those parts of texts which would require the illusion of spoken language.

What the Finnish and Hungarian translations have in common is their goal to support and make the language and culture of Meänkieli visible; this is something Molnár Bodrogi (2010 and 2011) emphasises in her own articles. Although the rendering of Meänkieli in the two translations is very different, they both show that the translators wish to stress the status of Meänkieli as a language, not as a dialect. The translations are not only works of fiction, and thus cultural acts, but they are also political statements.

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Notes

[1] In Meänkieli: "Mamma on poijessa. Mie en triivastu kotona. Aino-musterin tykönä Suomen puolela sota on toelista. Mie istun evakkopirtissä, jonka Ainon Paavo oon rakentannu siksi, ette asunrakenus oon valmis Saksan kuuman tulen jälkhiin. Misis saksalainen ei ole polttanu meän puolta” (Pohjanen 2009: 16).

[2] Muonionalustan seurakunthaan tuli norjalainen pappi, jonka nimiki oli meile vieras: Julienbö, norjalisela ö:lä tavattu. Tämä oli ollu tamilien tykönä Etelä-Intiassa misunäärinä. Ruottia se puhu ko pukki venäjää. Suomea se ei koskhaan ollu kuulukhaan. Yhtenä päivän se tuli Parkajoen kylhään, Vaaran talhon kasthaan poikalasta. Talon emäntä oli harjaantunnu pärjäähmään ummikopappien kans ko se tiesi, ette pappi ensin kyssyy kuka lapsen oon kastanu ja sitte mikä sille panhaan nimeksi. Pojasta piti tulla oskar henrik. -- Mutta Julienbö-raukka vishiin käytti tamilien kastejärjestystä eikä kysyny ensin kuka pojan oli kastanu. Se kysy sen nimeä, mutta Vaaran emäntä tietenki vastasi niinku se pruukasi ensimäisheen kysymksheen, ette ”Fröökynä sen kasto.” Ja niin poika sai nmeksi Fryyky Sekasti. (Pohjanen 2009: 28–29).

The parish of Muonionalusta got a Norwegian minister, whose name was even strange to us: Julienbö, spelled with the Norwegian ø. He’d been a missionary with the Tamils in South India. He spoke Swedish like a goat speaks Russian. He’d never even heard spoken Finnish. One day he came to the village of Parkajoki to the house of Vaara, to baptise a small boy. The mistress of the house was used to dealing with ministers she had no common language with, as she knew that the first thing the minister would ask was who has baptised the child, and then

what to call it. The boy was to be called Oskar Henrik. -- But poor Julienbö was apparently using the Tamil order of baptism, because he didn't ask first who had baptised the boy. He asked the name first, but the mistress of Vaara naturally answered, as she always did to the first question, Fröökynä sen kasto. And so the boy was named Fryyky Sekasti (Pohjanen 2009: 28-29).

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