

Translation in Exile: The Case of Hans Sahl in the USA

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Abstract

Translation serves as a significant medium for exiled writers who live in Diaspora without any legal status. In addition to the financial incentive, these writers perform translations to maintain their linguistic and cultural identities in adverse circumstances. Hans Sahl, a German-Jewish writer, who escaped from the Nazi regime to the USA and settled there for a long time, translated a lot of American plays into German. Through the translation of American plays, he made a crucial contribution to the restoration of the scant German theater after WWII and to fostering a positive image of American German society. For instance, his translation of Thornton Wilder's plays introduced style of American life to the devastated German society, which was void of many values and had not recovered psychologically from the trauma of the darkest time. Even though Sahl permanently perceived himself as a 'transzentaler Obdachloser', he provided a representative example for cultural exchange through his translation activities.

Keywords: Translation, Exile, Thornton Wilder, Hans Sahl

1. Introduction

In the current age of tumultuous world orders, problems of Diasporas including voluntary or forced migration and exile are highly controversial and serious, in addition to being tangled with innumerable kinds of political and economic issues. Apart from a wide range of diaspora from conflict areas like Islamic and African countries, countless migrations take place every day in nations and worldwide. In this sense, the term diaspora has changed from an issue of location to that of social nearness, and its diachronic perception has also been replaced by synchronism. (Reiter, 2007, 173)

People in Diasporas primarily struggle to overcome difficulties with communication in their daily lives. However, beyond various forms of communication, an essential issue is the problem of identity. These individuals eagerly want to express their identity in foreign environments, which comprise different factors like territory, nationality, race, gender, social status, etc. One of the more important factors for identity relies on the very use of language. It is often observed that even those who can speak a certain foreign language fluently and have no difficulties with communication do not regard the language of a guest land as genuine or natural. This means that language serves as more than a vehicle for communication. In addition to its basic function, language, especially the mother tongue, can be a tool to identify ourselves in a certain social or language group. If our mother tongue is, however, a marginal language in the world order, we may not feel very proud or free whilst using the language in unfamiliar public places. These uncomfortable feelings result from the hierarchy between different languages in the world, which depends chiefly on the economic, political, and even cultural power of societies in which the language is mainly spoken.

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Inferior languages inevitably cause cognitive and affective conflicts for their users. For example, if their mother tongue is the language of aggressors like German during World War II, users of this language in diaspora may experience much more complicated mental disorders. People should recognize that they are expelled from the user group of their mother tongue, but, at the same time, they are not accepted by users of other foreign languages. Those who view themselves as 'homo sacer' (Agamben, 1991, 126) are able to use the language of the guest land with a limited capacity, even incorrectly, while their mother tongue is gradually driven out of their consciousness. Furthermore, the situation may be worse if they have to maintain their livelihood with this unfamiliar language in countries hostile to theirs.

Exiled from the Third Reich of Germany into other countries all around the world, a number of German-Jewish writers tried to survive as translators. They published their own books in other languages (e.g. Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt) or rendered foreign language books into German (e.g. Rudolf Frank, Stefan Zweig, Walter Benjamin, Rudolf Fuchs, etc.) or from German in the opposite direction. It is well known that Walter Benjamin also struggled to earn a living as a translator in France, which resulted in the translation of a part of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs de Mal*.

On the other hand, people in exile may also consider translation as a medium to preserve their linguistic and cultural identities. They might like to introduce, earlier or later, the foreign culture experienced in diaspora into their former homeland, which they long to return to someday, even if they have been cruelly mistreated over there. During this process, the language as well as culture of a guest land could be not only disturbed or deformed by these unpleasant quests. On the contrary, they might have also the opportunity to be widely known and even to influence the culture from their location through their activities.

2. Hans Sahl as a Translator

One of the typical examples of translators in the German diaspora was Hans Sahl (1902 - 1993), who escaped from Germany's Nazi regime in 1941 and fled to the USA. In this new land, he translated many English plays into German, for instance, plays by American writers like Arthur Miller, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, etc. According to his bibliography, he translated about 80 books, mostly from English into German. (Ackermann & Brodersen, 1995, 232-245) In addition to his journalistic work for *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *Die Welt*, in which he served as a correspondent of cultural events in New York, he transferred culture from another part of the world to Germany through his translations. In this respect, his previous status as an established journalist and theater critic in Germany had a more positive effect compared to unknown exiled authors of the time, as described in his own words:

Lassen Sie mich von einem Dach an der Westend Avenue auch einmal einen Blick auf den oberen Broadway werfen und jener gedenken, die namenlos herüberkamen, sich abfanden mit etwas, das das über ihr Fassungsvermögen ging, da saßen die, die das Schicksal ausspie, am Abend auf den Bänken, wenn die Hitze zu groß wurde, und fächelten sich Luft zu mit dem Aufbau und mit dem Inseratenteil der New York Times, wo die Stellenangebote standen, dort auf den mit spärlichem Gras bewachsenen Verkehrsinseln, [...]. (Sahl, 1990, 196)

Contrary to many other exiled writers, he could be better integrated into American society, which was possible due to his comparatively proficient English. (Wolbold, 1999, 112)

Although he translated many works by American writers, Sahl collaborated especially closely with Thornton Wilder, who was a celebrated writer at the time. In this paper, I will, therefore, try to analyze Sahl's translation of Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* (1938), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and staged for the first time on 22 January 1938 in the USA. The earliest staging in Germany took place in Deutsches Theater (Berlin) in August 1945 with the title *Unsere kleine Stadt*. In the following section, the method and features of the translation by Sahl will be discussed in detail, and finally, the meaning of his translation of this American play for the German audience and theaters alike should be answered.

3. Translation Practice of Wilder's *Our Town*

3.1 Method of Collaboration

First of all, it is significant to observe that the translation of *Our Town* was performed in close collaboration with the original writer Wilder, a situation that occurs infrequently. The long relationship between the two, which continued until the death of Wilder, was described as "die Symbiose zwischen dem amerikanischen Dramatiker und seinem deutschen Übersetzer" (Reiter, 2007, 244). Sahl later recalled their cooperation:

Sie began jeweils damit, daß ich Wilder vorlas, was ich geschrieben hatte, und er verfolgte es Satz für Satz im Original, wobei er mich häufig unterbrach und Fragen stellte, die bewiesen, wie scharf und genau er zugehört hatte und wie gut er sich auf die deutsche Sprache verstand. Manchmal sprang er auf und spielte mir eine Szene vor, um zu zeigen, wie dies oder jenes gesprochen werden mußte, und dann spielte ich ihm dasselbe auf Deutsch vor. Er war ein vorzüglicher Sprecher seiner Texte, hatte auch mehrmals den Spielleiter in *Unsere Kleine Stadt* gespielt, eine Rolle, deren freundliche Gelassenheit seinem Wesen entgegenkam. (Sahl, 1990, 161)

The financial plight of the exiled writer is not sufficient to explain Sahl's sympathy for Wilder's plays in his translation work. Another reason for his attraction to Wilder's play *Our Town* can probably be found in its central themes: "What is the relation between the countless unimportant details of our daily life, on the one hand, and the great perspectives of time, social history, and current religious ideas, on the other?" (Wilder, 2007, 657) Wilder tried to illustrate in this play the universal importance of living simple, yet meaningful lives in order to demonstrate the value of appreciating life. In this sense, Sahl could relate to the ideas of humanity as well as the ethical themes of Wilder's works, which reflected the American society of the 1930s. Beyond that, he discovered in this play that "das Beste, was Europa hervorgebracht hatte, sich mit den Ingredienzien eines neuen Erdteils vermischte." (Sahl, 1990, 161)

3.2 Realistic Stage of Thornton Wilder

In addition to the themes of the play, *Our Town*, Wilder's vehement opposition to the main streaming of stage techniques also seemed to appeal to Sahl. Wilder found it impossible to create a play with a realistic setting, shaped by an accurate and detailed reproduction of reality. Instead, Wilder insisted on the use of unrealistic stage technique:

Most works in realism tell a succession of such abject truths; they are deeply in earnest, every detail is true, and yet the whole finally tumbles to the ground – true but without significance. [...] the truth tumbles down into a heap of abject truths and the result is doubly trivial. So I tried to restore significance to the small details of life by removing scenery. The spectator through lending his imagination to the action restages it inside his own head. (Wilder, 2007, 658)

In order to realize his 'meta-theatrical' stage, he imbued his stage with flexibility depending on the stage manager, the bare stage, interrupted action, pantomime, etc. (Haberman, 1989, 4) Therefore, Wilder required few staging devices and props like a few chairs and tables in the first two acts. Through the main issues of this play, the smallest events in our daily life, as well as his basic consideration of stage technique, Wilder might also be against high culture led by the elite-class. He intended to represent middle-class American families and their continuity through repetitions of daily life "in our growing-up, in our marrying, in our doctoring, in our living, and in our dying." (Wilder, 2007, 659) Many Americans tried to find "auch in den kleinsten Ereignissen unseres täglichen Lebens einen unbezahlbaren Wert" (Stresau, 1963, 10) in a play like *Our Town*.

3.3 Translation Practice

The main tendency in translations by Sahl can be called 'Foreignization', which can be recognized in his statement: "Ein gewisser exotischer Charakter sollte gewahrt, das Element des Fremden, Ungewöhnlichen und deshalb nur noch anziehender Wirkenden erhalten bleiben." (Sahl, 1990, 161)

As a representative example for this style of translation, he is not willing to render the typical New England slangs of Wilder's text into Wiener, Hamburger, Berliner or any other German dialects. In comparison to the German stage under the Nazi regime in which the strong 'domestication (Einbürgerung)', combined with the political ideology of 'Germanisierung', definitely prevailed in dimension of plots as well as of dialogues, such an attempt should be evaluated as recovering the German translation style since the Romantic age in which 'das Fremde' had been welcomed. (Berman, 1992, 7)

Here we will try to analyze Sahl's practice of translation using several categories of transformation: replacement, modification, addition, and elimination, even if these categories are often not exactly distinguishable and often come together in the same sentences.

1) Replacement

Comparing both texts, it is easy to recognize in many places that sentences are arranged differently. For example, the first scene of this play looks like the following:

Here's the Town Hall and Post office combined: jail's in the basement.
 Bryan once made a speech from these very steps here. Along here's a row of stores. Hitching posts and horse blocks in front of them. First automobile's going to come along in about five years – belonged to Banker Cartwright, our richest citizen. . . lives in the big white house up on the hill.
 Here's the grocery store and here's Mr. Morgan's drugstore. Most everybody in town manages to look into those two stores once a day.
Public School's over yonder. High School's still farther over. Quarter of nine mornings, noontimes, and three o'clock afternoons, the hull town can hear the yelling and screaming from those schoolyards. (Wilder, 150)

We can see Sahl's translated text below:

Die Schule für die Jüngern ist dort hinten, die für die Älteren noch etwas weiter. Dreimal am Tag kann man in der ganzen Stadt das Schreien und Brüllen auf den Schulhöfen hören – um dreiviertel neun Uhr morgens, um zwölf Uhr nachmittags und um drei Uhr nachmittags.
 Dies ist zugleich Rathaus und Postamt, im Keller das Gefängnis. In der Hauptstrasse eine Reihe von Läden. Davor Pfosten, um die Pferde anzubinden. Das erste Automobil wird ungefähr in fünf Jahren hier auftauchen – gehört dem Bankier Cartwright, unserm reichsten Bürger... wohnt jetzt in dem großen weißen Haus auf dem Hügel.
 Hier ist das Lebensmittelgeschäft, und hier is Mr. Morgans Drugstore. Irgendwie muss jeder in dieser Stadt mindestens einmal am Tag in beide Läden hineingeschaut haben. (Sahl, 8)

At first sight, the depiction of the village in this scene does not follow the exact same sequence, but most of the requisites are mentioned without exception in both texts. Though the general outlook of the village, a main location in the play, does not look very different, it is remarkable that sentences are situated in different places.

2) Modification

It is also worth noting the modification of sentences as the next category of the transformation. Compare the following:

Mrs Gibbs, a plump, pleasant woman in the middle thirties, comes "downstairs" right. She pulls up an imaginary window shade in her kitchen and starts to make a fire in her stove. (W. 151)

Mrs. Gibbs tritt von rechts auf und macht sich an die Zubereitung des Frühstücks. Aus ihrem pantominischen Spiele ist zu sehen, dass sie Holz in einen Herd tut, es anzündet, Kaffee kocht und so weiter. (S. 10)

In this case, the sentences of the source text are not literally represented, but are modified with almost the same meanings. The part of the sentence, "She pulls up an imaginary window shade", is simply transformed into "Aus ihrem pantomischen Spiele".

3) Addition

In some places in the target-text, extra words are inserted which the original text does not include.

There's Mrs Webb, coming downstairs to get her breakfast, too. That's Doc Gibbs. Got that call at half past one this Sentinel. (W. 152)

Mrs. Webb tritt von links auf und beginnt ebenfalls, das Frühstück in der Küche zuzubereiten.
Das ist Dr. Gibbs. Um halb zwei Uhr früh haben sie ihn nach dem Polenviertel gerufen. (S. 10)

The word 'Sentinel' in the source-text is changed to 'Polenviertel'. With this modification, the meaning of the word becomes more concrete and, at the same time, sets a different cultural background for the stages on which this play is performed. In this sense, it could be called the addition of meaning.

4) Elimination

We can also find many cases of elimination, in particular, regarding stage directions. The underlined parts below are eliminated in the target-text:

- a) Catholic Church is over beyond the tracks. (W. 150)
- b) Dr. Gibbs: Hello Bessie.
He strokes the horse, which has remained up center. (W. 153)
- Dr. Gibbs: Wie geht's, Bessie? Er streichelt sie. (S. 12)
- c) Pause. Brief sound of chickens cackling. (W. 157)
- Pause. (S. 16)
- d) The Stage Manager enters briskly from the right. He tips his hat to the ladies, who nod their heads. (W. 159)
- Der Spielleiter kehrt zur Mitte der Bühne zurück. (S. 18)

3.4 Analysis

Sahl was basically against a certain kind of 'domestication (Einbürgerung)' that prevailed in the translation attitudes of his time in Germany. However, after a close reading, both texts look quite different at the textual level, though not at the semantic level. Although Sahl collaborated closely with Wilder, he likely did not aim to translate literally, word-for-word, as is usually done for critical editions of classical texts. Instead, the translated text should be more available to be performed on the stage. In this aspect, the transformation can be explained as especial feature of theater translation. Above all, it distinguishes the play from other literary genres which are merely read by readers: relatively free arrangement of persons and props on the stage is possible because stage directions change according to the location where the play is performed. In fact, it is rather common for a director as well as actors to adjust an original text to the circumstances of each stage as well as the inclination of the audience. In this sense, stage management and actors' actions in a source text are, to a certain degree, open to interpretation by the director. Sahl's text is, so to say, slightly (re-)created according to the habit us of a theater translation.

Furthermore, plenty of transformations in the details of the target text are likely to be tolerated by the author, who emphasized the so-called unrealistic stage. He consequently advised a director "not to distract and provoke the attention of the audience with two distinct and perhaps puzzling a picture of the many operations." (Wilder, 1990, 661)

As he suggested pantomime and imaginary props, many eliminations of stage direction as well as the replacement of requisites could be committed.

4. Influence of Sahl's Translation on German Theater

German audiences were wildly excited by the American play *Unsere kleine Stadt*. The simple plot with the monotonous daily life was viewed as peaceful scenery with the very message, which many Germans dreamed of during the long war and post-war periods: Everyone is a human being who has to live his or her own life. Wilder's depiction of American living in this play, therefore, precisely matched the desire of his German audience at the time. In this sense, Wilder was regarded as a representative defender of American idealism and his work was considered as "the most representative and significant product of modern American theatre." (Corrigan, 1964, 1075)

Through his translation of Wilder's play, Sahl introduced the American value of democracy, a society of ordinary people and everyday life, to the German audience. In this respect, positive images of America in Germany after WWII were influenced, to a certain extent, by Sahl's translations.

We could ask, furthermore, how Wilder play is related to the German stage in the 1950s, in particular, to Brecht's epic theater, which was one of the mainstays of German theater. On the one hand, the two types of plays apparently have a lot of similarities, especially with regard to the function of Wilder's stage manager and Brecht's *Spielleiter*, who appeared personally on the stage just like an actor and tended to intervene in the plot with explanations, comments, etc. Both stage managers commonly contributed to disrupting the illusions of the traditional theater and evoking the 'alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*)', which prevents the audience from becoming too involved in the events on the stage. They should maintain a distance from the plot and be aware of their immersion in a fictional illusion.

However, in spite of many similarities in the stage techniques, it is doubtless that Wilder's play is fundamentally different from the epic theater of Brecht. The most significant difference lies in the main aim of the theater: Brecht conceptualized the chief propose of his epic theater to change the political consciousness of his audience as well as the social order. In other words, Brecht's earlier 'Lehrstück' and his later epic plays intended to change the world views of the audience as well as their political attitudes (*Gestik*) toward reality.

Compared to Brecht's epic theater, Wilder's plays translated by Sahl did not attempt to proclaim any ideological or political issues. Instead, they aimed to represent the universal, unchangeable truths of human beings hidden behind routine, monotonous life. In this aspect, the author and translator basically seemed to agree with each other and kept their distance from political or ideological connections.

5. Conclusion

Translation is often practiced by people in exile, like many German-Jewish writers under the Nazi regime who were scattered all around the world, as a means of earning a living. Consequently, translation was a significant medium for the existence of exiled writers who lived abroad without any legal status. However, they also translated in order to maintain their linguistic and cultural identities, first constructed in their alleged homeland through the language which they grew up with. This kind of linguistic identity remains permanent as many exiled writers confessed.

In Sahl's case, he did not deny his German-Jewish identity, but considered himself a "transzendentaler Obdachloser." (Ackermann & Brodersen, 1995, 12) He avoided any connections with ideological groups like communists and social democrats during his exile and also after his return to Germany. He tended to consider his situation in exile rather as a spiritual attitude than a political consequence. When he returned from Germany to the USA in 1958 to settle down for the long term, he explained: "Ich bin ein exterritorialer Mensch geworden, ich habe einen Pakt mit der Fremde geschlossen. Ich kann nicht mehr ohne sie leben, ohne dieses Gefühl, nicht ganz zu Hause zu sein, ein Gast in fremden Kulturen [...]." (Ackermann & Brodersen, 1995, 12)

Sahl's translations of American plays contributed crucially to fostering positive images of America that spread through German society after WWII when people eagerly dreamt of a normalized life. Consequently, through his activities as a translator, Sahl took on an important role in introducing new values and scenes of American lifestyle to the devastated German society, which had still not spiritually or psychologically recovered from the trauma of their darkest time. In this sense, Sahl served as an intermediate between both cultures, acknowledged by the fact that he was awarded with the 'Verdienstkreuz 1 Klasse des Verdienstordens der Bundesrepublik Deutschland' in 1959 for activities that enabled 'deutsch-amerikanischen Kulturaustausch'.

The relationship between Wilder and Sahl, which goes beyond the usually unequal relationship between author and translator, offers a significant model of how a congenial translation can be conducted. The very question of why the translated text looks fairly different from the source text can be answered with an argument that the dynamics and characteristics of a theater translation distinguish it from the translation of other texts which are merely read by readers. In the latter, the 'readability (Lesbarkeit)' serves as one of the main criteria, whereas the performability is regarded almost important in the former. In a theater translation, there might be much more space for transformation based on the situation of the stage in different contexts.

Sahl's translations provided cultural otherness to the German society, which had suffered deeply from a void of human values, in spite of the distress in the unfamiliar circumstances of exile. Such cultural otherness is strengthened by Sahl's translation attitude, 'Foreignization', which was strongly against that of the 'Germanisierung' under the Nazi regime.

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