

Promoting “Lesser-used” Languages Through Translation

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Lesser used” (or, “minor”) languages were traditionally marginalized and ignored because of their incompatibility with national policies. In the last half-century they have become increasingly acknowledged by linguists, but have still had to struggle to be generally recognized as vehicles for everyday public discourse and for literature of all kinds; and in some cases they continue to struggle to be recognized as “languages” in their own right. The globalization of communication in the “major” languages has resulted in indifference to the claims made by the other, “minor” languages for attention. This never-ending fight for recognition, even for their very existence, is often a losing battle, despite the availability and provision of translations into better-known languages; my topic therefore fits well into the theme of this year’s *Conference to Celebrate St. Jerome’s Day*, “War and Peace: Translation as Conflict, Resistance and Resolution.” In the case of lesser-used and lesser-known languages, even when made widely available by translation, there is conflict, there is resistance, but there is seldom resolution.

Before considering Slovene, a state standard language that is nevertheless not well known and may be considered “lesser used”, let us first look at three European cultural figures, each one very well-known in his day, the less well-known languages they used for (some or all of) their works: Frédéric Mistral and Provençal; Pier Paolo Pasolini and Friulian; and Óndra Lysohorsky and Lachian. In each of these three instances, translation into better-known, “major” languages brought some recognition, but in each case that recognition was short-lived.

2. MISTRAL AND PROVENÇAL

The Provençal language of the South of France has about 350,000 speakers.¹ In the Middle Ages it was the language of an extensive literature and was held in high esteem by men of letters in Western Europe: the Venetian-born scholar Cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470-1547), for example, was moved to write, “Era per tutto it Ponente la favella *Provenzale*, ne

¹ Numbers are imprecise due to the lack of a definition of what can be classified as “Provençal”, and whether it comprises the same language-varieties as “Languedoc”. A figure of 354,000 is given by Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.com/>).

tempi ne quali ella fiori, in prezzo et in istima molta, et tra tutti gli altri idiomi di quelle parti, di gran lunga primiera. Conciosiacosa che ciascuno, o Francese, o Fiamingo, o Guascone, o Borgognone, o altramente di queue nationi che egli si fosse, it quale bene scrivere e specialmente verseggiar volesse, quantunque egli Provenzale no fosse, lo faceva Provenzalmente.”² Its use and renown declined over the centuries, but there was a renaissance of Provençal cultural activity in the 1850s and thereafter, led by the then young Frédéric Mistral (1830-1914) and “Les félibres”, his circle of fellow-poets (see Illustration 1).

Mistral wrote extensively in Provençal, and also in French. He became well-known in France after Alphonse Daudet read and publicized his *Lis Isclos d’Or* of 1876, and especially famous in 1904, when (along with the Spaniard José Echegaray y Eizaguirre) he was awarded the Nobel Literature Prize “in recognition of the fresh originality and true inspiration of his poetic production.”



**Illustration 1: Frédéric Mistral and “Les félibres”
at Font-Ségugne, near Avignon, 21 May 1854.**

² “The Provençal speech in the times in which it flourished was prized and held in great esteem all over the West, and among all the other idioms of that region was by far the foremost. Every one, whether Frenchman, Fleming, Gascon, Burgundian, or of what nation soever, who wished to write and specially versify well, although he was not a Provençal, did it in the Provençal language.”(*Prose*, 1529, folio viii; see http://jcsn.org/StudyCenter/Encyclopedia_Britannica/PRE_PYR/PROVENCAL_LANGUAGE.html).

Most of his works were available in French translation, often in parallel texts (see Illustration 2 and Rollet, 1966). The University of Alberta's collection has a probably representative sample: of seventeen literary writings by Mistral, six are in Provençal, six are in French, and four have parallel Provençal/French texts (the other being in English). See also Mauron, 1993.

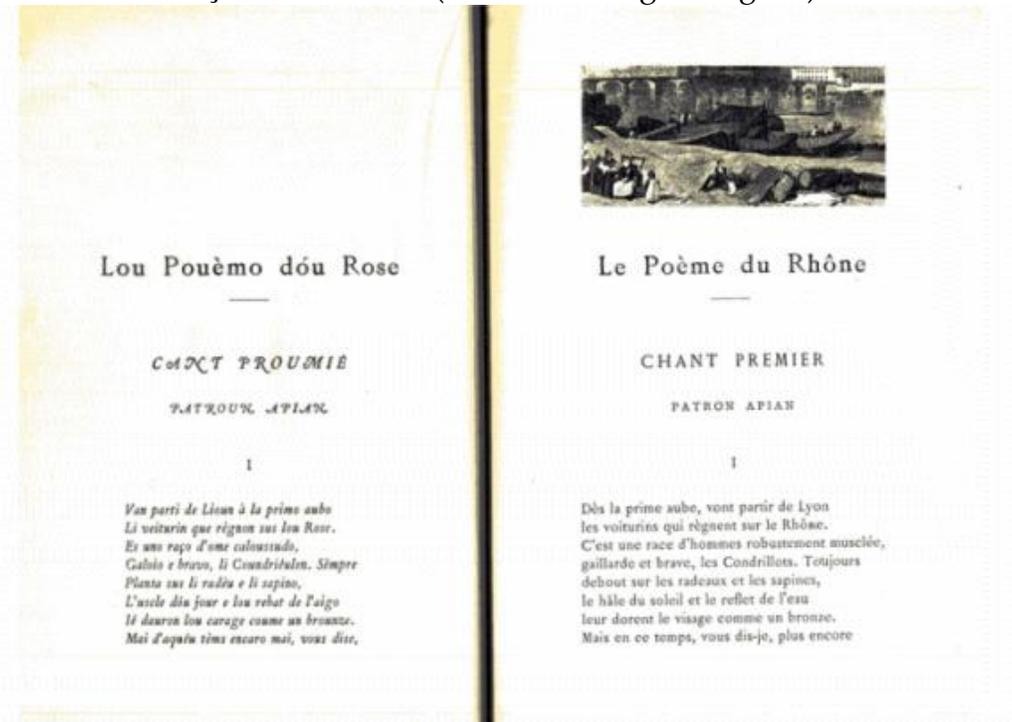


Illustration 2: Frédéric Mistral, *Lou pouèmo dóu Rose*, 1897.

To what extent did the translations of Mistral's writings into French and other languages provide international recognition for the Provençal language in which he wrote? I suggest that now, almost a century after his death, whatever recognition they brought was very short-lived.

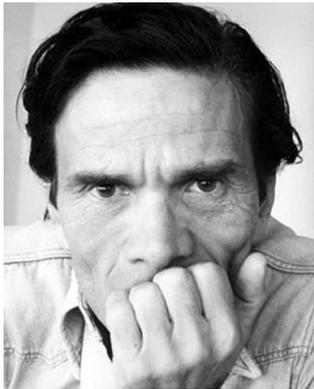
3. FRIULIAN AND PASOLINI

The Friulian (*Furlan*) language of the North-East of Italy has about 800,000 speakers.³ Like Provençal, it was the language of an extensive medieval literature, and like Provençal its use and renown declined greatly over the centuries. In Italy, at least outside of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, it is generally thought of as "just another Italian dialect" (cf. footnote 5), although Romance linguists consider it more closely linked, diachronically and structurally, to French than it is to Italian. It came to prominence in the mid-20th century not because of

³ http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=fur

publicity brought about by a Nobel prize (as in Section 2 and 4), but because of the notoriety of one man: Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975). Pasolini learned some Friulian from his mother and lived in her native village, Casarsa, from age 4 to age 11. He returned and lived there for most of the period 1941-47; during this period he espoused Friulian linguistic and cultural autonomy, and published two books of poetry in Friulian, *Versi a Casarsa* (1941) and *I diarii* (1946). Forced by charges of corruption of minors and public obscenity to move to Rome, he abandoned his "Friulian-ness".⁴ He achieved notoriety by a combination of outspoken leftist political writings, his open homosexuality, several graphic movies which he acted in or directed, and especially by his still unexplained brutal murder:

"Everything and the opposite of everything has been said about Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975). Not twice in the dust and twice on the altar, as Manzoni wrote of Napoleon, but thousands of times in the dust and on the altar, whether right or wrong, very often attacking his polemical diatribes, exploiting his obvious contradictions, changing his words. He was certainly a leading figure of Italian culture in the fifties and sixties, and did everything he could to stir the stagnating waters of a dead-end artistic, social and literary climate lacking authentic drive."⁵



Dansa di Narcìs

Jo i soj neri di ambur
né frut né rosignòul
dut intèir coma un flòur
i brami senza sen.

Soj levat ienfra li violis
intant ch'a sclariva,
ciantànt un ciant dismintiàt
ta la not yualiva.
Mi soj dit: "Narcìs!"
e un spirt cu'l me vis
al scuriva la erba
cu'l clar dai so ris.

Danza di Narciso

Io sono nero di amore
né fanciullo né usignolo
tutto intero come un fiore
desidero senza desiderio.

Mi sono alzato tra le viole
mentre albeggiava
cantando un canto dimenticato
nella notte uguale
Mi sono detto: "Narciso!"
e uno spirito col mio viso
oscurava l'erba
al chiarore dei suoi ricci.

Illustration 3: Pier Paolo Pasolini and a poem from *Poesie a Casarsa*

To what extent did Pasolini's notoriety, and the translation of his Friulian poetry into Italian and other languages, provide international recognition for that language? I suggest that now, thirty years after his death, whatever they brought was short-lived.

⁴ More details in Siciliano, 1982.

⁵ Dante Maffia, on <http://userhome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bonaffini/DP/pasolini.htm> (note: headed "Italian dialect poetry" !)

4. LACHIAN AND LYSOHORSKY

Both Provençal and Friulian have ancient pedigrees; both are certainly much better known than pedigree-challenged Lachian, which in Europe must rank low on the scale of “recognized” languages; indeed, the extremely comprehensive “Ethnologue” (see footnote 1) lists it as no more than a dialect of Czech. It is spoken on the Polish border of the Czech Republic. It would not deserve mention in this context if it had not received huge (if temporary) recognition when the one person who wrote what is recognized as “serious” literature in Lachian, Óndra Lysohorsky (the pseudonym of Ervin Goj, 1905-1989), came to prominence in the Soviet Union in the 1940s and again in the West in the 1970s. Born in Silesia, Goj began writing his poems around 1926, eventually making a name for himself in the 1930s shortly after adopting the Lysohorsky pseudonym. He fled German occupation and was interned by the USSR briefly and settled in Moscow for several years; there, his Lachian poems first gained widespread recognition and were translated into Russian by several influential writers, including Samuil Marshak (probably the most famous Russian translator of Shakespeare), Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva. Back in Czechoslovakia after the war, he continued to write Lachian poetry and a steady stream of his work was translated and published abroad, in particular the English release, *Selected Poems* (see Osers, ed. 1970), which included translations by Christopher Fry, Lydia Pasternak-Slater, and W.H. Auden. Lysohorsky could not ask for better-known translators.

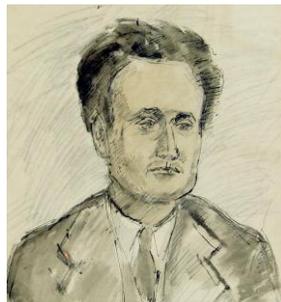


Illustration 4: Ervin Goj (pseudonym: Óndra Lysohorsky)

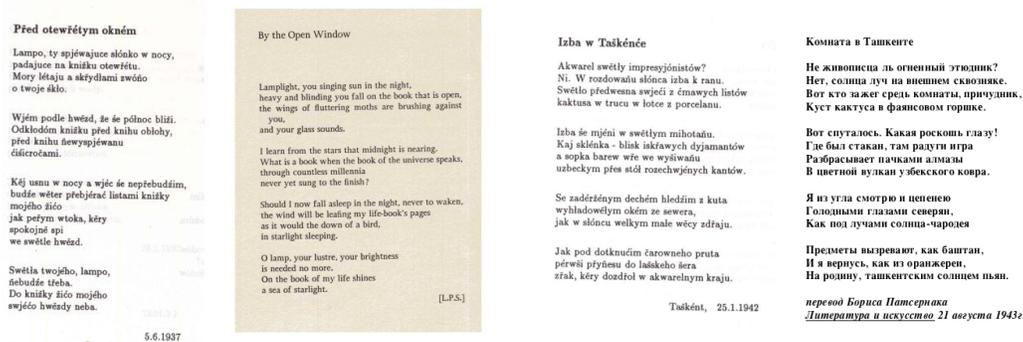


Illustration 5: Translations by W.H. Auden and Boris Pasternak

To what extent did the translations of Lysohorsky's writings into Russian and into English by extremely famous poets and translators provide international recognition for the Lachian language in which he wrote? I suggest that whatever recognition they brought was so short-lived as to be negligible today.

5. TRANSLATIONS OF SLOVENE LITERATURE⁶

Slovene is a language with an established literature, with roots in the Reformation; it is an official state national language; but it qualifies as a "lesser-used" language, at least because of the number of its speakers — 2 million. One source lists 178 languages in the world as being spoken as a native language by over this number, and another lists 202 cities in the world as having more than 2 million inhabitants;⁷ the diminutiveness of Slovene and Slovenia, as compared with the rest of the world, is apparent.

What I suggest is that, given this relative smallness (and also, perhaps, because of it), there has been, for many years now, an unusually large *per capita* number of translations from Slovene into other (and for the most part, "major") languages. This is a very difficult

⁶ I wish to express my thanks for their advice and assistance to colleagues in Ljubljana: Nike KocjanĚiĚ, Martina Oæbot and Tanja PetriĚ. The last-named works for the Друπтво Slovenskih Pisateljjev (the Slovene Writer's Association), and is in charge of the "Trubarjev sklad" [Trubar Fund], which supports translations from Slovene into other languages. Viewpoints expressed in this paper do not always mirror theirs.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_number_of_native_speakers and <http://www.citypopulation.de/World.html>, respectively.

suggestion to prove objectively, but I believe that some of the facts I shall now report may be considered convincing.⁸

First, the rates of pay for translators of literature in Slovenia has, since I began translating about 20 years ago, appeared to me to be unusually high. The same seems to hold true for the neighbouring Austria. I cannot compare rates in these two countries with those elsewhere in Europe; but it is clear that literary translation in Slovenia, at least, is a better-paid endeavour than it is in North America. I was informed that this state of affairs was inherited from the Yugoslav period, thanks to official multilingualism and the excellent bargaining skills of the translators' unions of the time. Recently, however, I am told that rates have stagnated, and translation as a well-paid profession is becoming a thing of the past.⁹

In the period 1997-2003 the proportion of total published literary works that were in translation (in whatever direction) for five selected countries is as follows (I omit Canada and other officially bilingual countries): the U.S.A., 4%; France, 10%; Germany, 14%; Italy, 25%; and Slovenia, 36%. In the same period, of all novels published in Slovenia, no fewer than 64% were in translation. Although the great majority were translated from other languages into Slovene, a not insignificant number were translations from Slovene into other languages.

I now turn to an examination of the holdings in the library of the Društvo Slovenskih Pisateljev (see note 6, henceforth, *DSP*), and specifically translations from Slovene into other languages. The lists may not be fully representative of the total number actually published in Slovenia and elsewhere: the Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica [National and University Library] naturally houses all translated titles. The latter's holdings were, however, not amenable to analysis as were those of the *DSP*. The total for the *DSP* is however imposing, see Illustration 6:

⁸ I thank Martina Oæbot for bringing Majda Stanonik's book of 2005 to my attention; many of my statistics are taken from this source.

⁹ Current rates, as quoted to me by one source, will still I believe strike readers of this article as high: "Typically, from 130 to 220 euros for approximately 30,000 'signs'" (this latter term means 'number of characters with spaces').



**Total number of translated titles
in the DSP library:**

6 8 6

**... For a country with a
population of 2 million.**

Illustration 6

The following three tables, I - III, shows the total numbers of translations in the DSP listed according to decade of publication, and shown separately for (I) Slovene in Slovenia; (II) Slovenes in three other countries with important Slovene-speaking populations; and (III) non-Slovenes. It is immediately apparent that translations increased enormously in number during the 1990s and have continued to proliferate. It may of course be that the DSP did not have the same acquisition policies and funds available before 1990 that they had thereafter, but the numbers are still striking:

(I) Translations by Slovenes in Slovenia

(46 different authors in total)

numbers of titles:

1950-59	2
1960-69	7
1970-79	7
1980-89	6
1990-99	34
2000-06	17

(II) Translations by Slovenes in

Austria, Italy and U.S.A.:

(35 different authors in total)

numbers of titles:

1950-59	0
1960-69	0
1970-79	9
1980-89	7
1990-99	20
2000-06	24

(III) Translations by non-Slovenes

(99 different authors in total)

numbers of titles:

1950-59	2
1960-69	11
1970-79	45
1980-89	76
1990-99	100
2000-06	146

All told, therefore, there are 187 titles in the DSP library translated from Slovene into other languages during the last seven years, 2000-06; the actual figure for all published translations is probably nearly 300. Matching this figure of 187 titles for a population of 2,000,000 to a few other countries, *per capita*, I find that, to be comparable, over the same period there would have had to be 3,000 translations (from English and French) in Canada, 3,500 translations from Polish, 4,300 translations from Ukrainian, 5,500 translations from Italian, and 8,400 translations from German. I doubt that the actual numbers approach these.

My first conclusion, therefore, is that Slovenia may be considered, for its relative size, a kind of “translation factory,” and a large and productive one at that. Any efforts to make the literary output of a “lesser-used” language (in the sense I am using the term) known to speakers of other languages, “major” and not so major, is understandable and laudable. Whether it is deliberate policy or an automatic response to the relative diminutiveness of Slovenia and the relative paucity of the speakers of Slovene, I do not know.

I now suggest an unfortunate addendum to this conclusion, namely, that, sometimes at least, quality has been, from time to time, sacrificed to quantity. This is an entirely subjective assessment, and may hold true of some, or even many, other countries; but I do maintain that it is the case for Slovenia. (I emphasize the phrase “from time to time”: poor quality translation, although it can be very obvious, is not the rule; and high-quality translations are in the majority. However, every weak translation reflects poorly on all translators, and such efforts deserve neither payment nor publication). I have been recently encouraged in this point of view while employed in the editing of a number of Slovene-English translations, namely, those first published in Berger, 2003, and now republished in »ander & Priestly, 2008. For this task, I reviewed the translations by seven different translators of 15 short and not-so-short stories. These varied greatly in quality, and here I provide examples at both ends of this spectrum. The illustrations are from my “Reviewing mode” version of the texts before my corrections, here shown in blue, were incorporated. The first (Illustration 7) shows a

translation which I corrected only minimally, namely changing British into American English and amending the style in a few places.

He kissed her on the cheek.
She ran into the living-room, turned the volume all the way up and leapt onto the love-seat. He heard the springs groan.
He sat down at the table and lit a cigarette. He washed down the first drag with juice.
— Have you eaten? Did you eat yet? — he called to her.
— What? —
— Have you eaten? Did you eat? —
— No, I'm not going to eat today, — she said.
Mister Arnelly put out his half-smoked cigarette and went to stand in the doorway. He watched her bouncing about on the love-seat. Their eyes met and he accepted the invitation in hers. He jumped up to join her and together they bounced up and down on the love-seat. Barefoot and in time with the music. For a while First they held hands, then they let go. Next she made a turn, then he did. Then she again she and he again he. She and he. Sara and Mister Arnelly, the fat-butt. She laughed, he laughed. They danced.
— Wait, — he said and strained his ears.
— What is it? —
— I think it's the phone, — he said.
He hopped off the love-seat and turned down the radio. There was ringing coming from the hall.
— Oh, my God, — Sara said.

Illustration 7: from "Love Seat"

The second (Illustration 8) is from one of the more faultful original translated passages. Some comments: although "counter" is understandable in this context, the reference is to an actual bar, which is apparent from the next sentence; "exchanging toasts with myself" is not easily understood English; "aroused me from the lethargy" is a simple error for ". . .my lethargy"; and the original Slovene did indeed read, "The hands of the clock were showing six in the evening," not simply "At 6 p.m.;" and so on, and so on.

Leaning against the counter-bar, I was exchanging toastings with myself. The bus station was the last shelter resort, the lowest dump of all. It is the A suburbs of hell visited by ultra-lost souls and by those few pensioners who wait helplessly in their frailty for the last mercy bullet.

An invitation from a forgotten friend aroused me from the my lethargy. At 6 p.m. The hands of the clock were showing six in the evening when he announced he was going to celebrate the New Year's Eve in the Poljane valley of Poljane.

Illustration 8: from “See Æiri and Die”

Whether this occasional (or maybe not so very rare) shoddy workmanship, this lack of “quality control,” is the inevitable outcome of the size of the “translation factory” is a matter for speculation, as is the degree of success of the prolific output from this factory in bringing recognition to the little-known Slovene language and culture.

I finish with an example of non-literary translation in Slovenia, one that has probably been read by more people than any single translated literary work. In one old street in the coastal city of Koper/Capodistria on the Slovene Istrian coast stands a medieval building, with the inscription for curious passing tourists shown in Illustration 9:

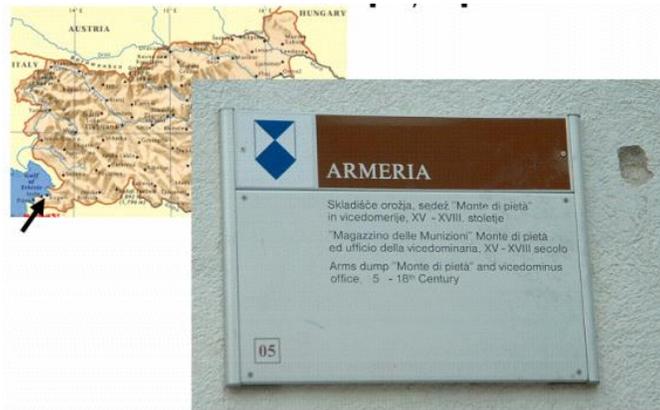


Illustration 8: On a Wall in Koper/Capodistria

The Slovene is provided first, then a translation into Italian and then one into English. Slovene *vicedominarije* is correctly rendered as Italian *vicedominaria* and English *vicedominus office*, for those who understand the term, at least. But even those Slovene-speakers without the historical knowledge to understand either this term or the phrase “Monte de Pietà” will understand the phrase *skladišče orožja*, and their Italian-speaking counterparts will understand *magazzino delle munizioni*, for the building was indeed an armaments storehouse. But it very definitely was not an arms dump! English-speakers will wonder why such a beautiful building was used for such a lowly purpose. The translator could easily have, but did not, ask an English-speaker to check: again, a lack of “quality control.”

6. A BRIEF CONCLUSION

The role of translation in enhancing the recognition of the three “lesser-used” non-state languages considered here — Provençal, Friulian and Lachian — was, it appears, transitory at

best. Translations brought the writings of Frédéric Mistral, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Óndra Lysohorsky to the attention and delight of people who could not understand those languages, but they achieved little for the languages themselves; the contribution of translation into better-known languages was, after all, neither systematic nor sustained. Looking at a “lesser-used” language which is the official language of a state, namely Slovenia, I conclude that — quantitatively, if not always qualitatively — translation is very much involved in the establishment of that language in international consciousness as a language of a literature that deserves recognition.

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