

Translation as Love and Hard Work

An Interview with Ana Jovanović by Biljana Dojčinović



Ana Jovanović is an assistant professor at the Chinese Department of the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. She earned her bachelor's degree at that department and her master's and doctorate degrees in Beijing. For Laguna Publishing Company she translated the novel *Frogs* by Mo Yan, the Chinese literature Nobel laureate for 2012. She received two awards for that translation: *Ljubiša Rajić*, awarded by the Association of Literary Translators of Serbia, and an award at the 26th book fair *Word – Book – Universe* in Sarajevo.

The topic of your PhD thesis, with a long title “The Application of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory in the Analysis of Words for Body Parts and Expressions Related to Those Words in the Contemporary Chinese Language – the Role of the Human Body in the Process of Conceptualization“, is rather interesting. Would you please tell us something about the research?

The research was conducted from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. I analyzed 53 words for body parts in contemporary Chinese, including all the compounds derived from those words. The research enabled me to draw parallels between Serbian and Chinese and to draw my students' attention to some similarities between these two seemingly distant languages. The similarity lies in the very process of conceptualization. Of course, there are some cultural elements which create certain differences, but everything regarding our body and its experience through space is the same. For example, there are two Chinese words for “head” and both are able to extend their meaning. What is remarkable is that the Chinese, just like us, conceptualize everything which is small and round as a “head”. For instance, they would use the word “head” for “a head of garlic”, just like we say “a head of cabbage”... For someone who is in charge, they would use compounds derived from the word “head”, just like we would call that person “a head of” something. As for the conceptualization of the word “heart”, there are a lot of metaphors which concern traditional Chinese medicine. It might be slightly harder to explain.

Your curiosity about the parallels between these two languages certainly relates to translation. What was it like to translate Mo Yan, whom your colleagues consider a rather difficult writer? The novel Frogs seems to be unusually structured and has an authentic subject – planned-birth policy in China. What is your experience with the Chinese Nobel Prize-winning author?

Mo Yan has a diverse body of work. Even though all his novels depict his hometown, as a blend of the real and the fictitious, each novel tells a different story of the place. The novel *Frogs* spans a period of 60 years, from the 1950s until the first decade of the new millennium. It is focused on the implementation of the single-child policy in China. However, it is not solely about the one-child policy. It covers the Cultural Revolution and all those different events in the 20th century which shaped the history of China. Actually, the novel *Frogs* is his most recent novel and its form differs from his previous works. There aren't as many flashbacks; in the earlier novels you can't tell if he is talking about the present, the past, if he is going back or leaping into the future... The structure of this novel is not like that. The novel is divided into four parts and the fifth and final part is thespian. It completes what has been left unsaid, though

in a rather surreal fashion. Just like any other of Mo Yan's novels, this one too is quite strenuous; you need to have the stomach for it.

Why the title Frogs?

Actually, it's wordplay. In Chinese "wa" means "frog", "child" and "goddess Nüwa", the creator of mankind. In written Chinese the difference is obvious because the characters which denote these notions are different, but there is no way of telling the difference in pronunciation. Mo Yan draws on the resemblance, which, unfortunately, cannot be felt in the Serbian translation.

What was the hardest thing about translating it?

Nothing in particular because it is one of my favorite books. After it had been published in 2009, I read it in less than two days. Hence the whole endeavor was more of an emotional experience.

How did you become the Serbian translator of this novel?

It was a mere coincidence. The publisher contacted those who translate from Chinese. They listed the books to which the rights had been purchased and as soon as I spotted *Frogs*, I "made a reservation".

Did you have the opportunity to translate novels before?

Not really. I had translated scientific, literary and linguistic articles and one short story, but not a piece work of that size... I was working to a very tight deadline and it was six months of hard work. That's where the emotional attachment to an author might be helpful. Nevertheless, publishing companies should take into account the need for longer deadlines for translating, especially from Chinese.

Is there anything which you would recommend or a piece of advice that you would give to your students who are interested in translation? How many times should one read the text, how many versions does a translation have? What is the importance of the first draft and where do the others fit?

It depends on who is working. I like re-reading the text many times. The first draft is a great pleasure for sure, but later on, when you go back to that version, you are able to see many things which should be altered. The first draft is always a step back to the original. That's why I believe one should be as precise as one can in the first draft. The second draft means reading the text, but with close inspection of the original – that's when you check if an error has occurred. That's when you correct Serbian expressions and devote your attention to the Serbian aspects of the text – places where you have been misled by the foreign language and where you are supposed to go back to your own. In the third draft you put the original aside and work entirely on the Serbian version, to make it look like it had been written in Serbian originally. That's where thorough reading is necessary. There are always even more than three versions, depends on how much time you have.

What you also need is a good dictionary; a thesaurus and first and foremost the dictionary of Matica Srpska, for example, for consultation. Although Serbian is our mother tongue, when you are trying to find suitable synonyms, you are not always able to recall the right one – you need to look it up somewhere. It goes without saying that you should read Serbian literature as much as you can. That is the source of new words and the words you can use whenever you are translating.

What translation are you working on at the moment?

I am working on yet another one of Mo Yan's novels, *Sandalwood Death*. It is about a most cruel punishment from the Qing dynasty era. This novel goes back to the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Its form is highly interesting because it includes several narrators. The first one is a woman who uses fairly colloquial language; the second one is an executioner who uses contemporary Chinese, then his son who speaks a dialect... That is the kind of text which you cannot translate in a uniform way; there has to be a difference between

colloquial and standard language in the Serbian translation as well. That is why it is so challenging.

Have you ever translated from Serbian to Chinese?

No, not yet. I have translated a few poems from Serbian to Chinese, but no matter how good your knowledge of a foreign language is, it is still a foreign language. I believe that everyone should translate to their mother tongue because that is how you get the best results.

Translated by Damjana Petronijević