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**Competence in literary translation
in the past and today. With reference
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Abstract

Competence in literary translation in the past and today. With reference to two specific examples covering a period of 40 years in Hungary

Literary translation remains a debated topic within translation studies. While consensus exists for technical translation regarding competence and training, opinions differ for literary translation. This research places the concept of literary translation competence in historical context by analyzing two examples spanning 40 years. In 1975, István Bart initiated a discussion in the Hungarian magazine *Élet és Irodalom* on the status of literary translation and translators in Hungary. The study reviews contemporary ideals from that period. It then presents the PETRA-E Framework, a recent project outlining the knowledge, skills, and attitudes expected from literary translators at different career stages. As both a competence model and educational guide, PETRA-E defines qualification criteria for evaluating translation competence. The aim is to summarize evolving views on literary translation competence through these two case studies.

Keywords: *Élet és Irodalom*, PETRA-E Framework of Reference, literary translation research, literary translation competence, literary translation training

In this study, I discuss a range of issues dealing with the concept of competence in literary translation and the ability to define this concept (Sohár, 2024). Applying the method of discourse analyses, I integrate information gleaned from the analysis of three primary sources. The analyses and the conclusions made from them take us on a journey through time and space. They encompass a period of 40 years and apply in particular to the context of Hungary as well as Europe in a wider perspective.

The first source materials are the texts from a series of debates that occurred in the pages of the periodical *Élet és irodalom* (*Life and Literature*) in 1975. The discussion was initiated by István Bart's column entitled *Kihaló mesterség* (*Dying craft*) published on the 8th of February 1975 in the series *Vita a műfordítókról* (*Debate on literary translators*). As a response to this, articles from the pen of János Benyhe entitled *A fordító bére* (*The wages of the translator*) and *Ami nélkül nincs könyv* (*Without which there is no book*) written by János Domokos appeared on the 15th of February. Both the article introducing the debate and the responses to it triggered such a fierce reaction from the members of the

community in question that commentaries by Katalin Mezey, Pál E. Fehér, Sándor Rákos, László Antal, László Kolozsvári Papp, Ottó Orbán, László Ódor, József Világhy, György Szabó és Dr. István Timár appeared in succession in the next four issues (February 22nd, March 1st, March 8th and March 15th).

In addition to the writings published on this debate in the strict sense, the transcriptions of the series of interviews entitled *Műfordítók műhelyében* (*In the literary translation workshop*) published in *Élet és irodalom* (*Life and Literature*) at the same time in 1975 also serve as materials in my analysis. In this series, the writer, literary translator and publisher István Bart talks with the literary translators Tibor Bartos, Miklós Szentkuthy, Miklós Vajda, Ede Szabó and Geyza Bányay (January 11th, February 1st, March 22nd, May 7th and August 9th), asking them about their work, their credo, the essence of literary translation and more generally about the role that translations play in literature.

The second source material is the lecture by the translator, literary historian, editor and publisher Dr. Éva Pap entitled *Fordítás egykor és ma* (*Translation in the past and today*), which was presented to an interested audience on the 29th of May 2017 at the Finno-Ugric department of Eötvös Lóránd University as a part of the conference *Kaukovertailuja / Kaugvõrdlusi – Magyar–balti finn nyelvi és kulturális összehasonlítások 2017* (*Kaukovertailuja / Kaugvõrdlusi – Hungarian-Baltic Finnish Linguistic and Cultural Comparisons 2017*) that was related to the *Suomi 100* series of programs.

In the case of the first and second source material, a common aspect should be highlighted: both reflect the context of Hungarian and literature. Hungarian is a language of limited diffusion, similar to its related languages, Finnish and Estonian. The number of Hungarian native speakers is relatively low. In the case of Hungarian, we can even speak about language isolation, since it is a language that cannot be understood only if one is a native speaker or learns it as a foreign language. In understanding the phenomena of translations from and into the Hungarian language, we should clearly see that Hungarian literature is marginal compared to literature written in dominant languages, such as English, Spanish and German (Pusztai-Varga, 2022). Consequently, translation plays a fundamental role in the Hungarian language community: it is, for them, the umbilical cord to the rest of the world.

The third source material for my examination is the *PETRA-E Reference Framework for the Education and Training of Literary Translators*, which was created within the context of an Erasmus+ project. The PETRA-E project completed a competence model for literary translators between the 1st of September

2014 and the 31st of August 2016, including the creation of a model course of study. In addition, the project also formed a PETRA-E Network, whose task it was to maintain, disseminate and further refine the competence model following the completion of the project.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods, combining discourse analysis and comparative evaluation to examine literary translation competence across three primary sources: the 1975 debate series published in *Élet és Irodalom*, Dr. Éva Pap's 2017 lecture and the PETRA-E Reference Framework (Lesznyák, 2024). Spanning 40 years, these sources provide historical and contemporary perspectives on translator training and professional roles. A textual analysis of *Élet és Irodalom* identifies key themes in the discourse on translator status, while Dr. Éva Pap's lecture examines changes in translation practices. The PETRA-E Framework is assessed as a structured competency model. The comparative analysis highlights continuities and changes in the perception of literary translation competence, with a particular focus on education, professionalization, and translators' responsibilities. This interdisciplinary approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the evolving competence frameworks in literary translation.

Source Materials 1: *Élet és irodalom* — Vita a műfordítókról (Life and Literature —debate on literary translators)

The observations from the general assembly of the Hungarian Writers' Union on the 29th of January, 1975 inspired István Bart to write the column initiating the debate, which was published on the 8th of February 1975. The debate organized under the title *A műfordítás és a műfordítók helyzete ma* (*The situation of literary translation and translators today*) discussed the literary translation profession in detail, as well as the status and prestige of literary translations in society and literary life.

A depressing picture unfolded at the Hungarian Writers' Union. Although they stressed that translated literature played an important role—in part due to the high ratio of translated literature that was read and in part due

to the characteristics of a new era with uniform translation practices that had developed in the past decades – the profession of literary translation in Hungary was struggling with serious issues and problems. The fees for literary translators were very low and it was only possible to make a living from this vocation under great stress, which quickly led to burning out and thus lower quality. This also made it difficult to ensure the supply of new professionals. This was also true because there was no proper training that would prepare future generations of translators for their careers. Although there were seminars here and there that may have dealt with literary translation at the universities, this was primarily an opportunity for language students if they were interested. Respect for the profession was low, and there was a lack of both objective, constructive criticism that was properly based, as well as a theoretical framework that was uniform, organized, teachable and learnable.

István Bart provided a summary of the Hungarian Writers' Union section meeting in his initiation of the debate, then evaluated the situation that had developed. He quotes Imre Makai, according to whom it was aptitude, ability, preparation and conscientiousness that made him a good literary translator. He also touched upon the issue of linguistic isolation, which fundamentally determined how Hungarian society related or should relate to the range of issues in literary translation and the profession of literary translators. He stated that literary translation was a mission for public education, which therefore must be supported, encouraged and developed. Literary translation was a kind of umbilical cord through which Hungarian cultural life could be connected to the world at large.

Source Materials 2: Éva Pap–A műfordító egykor és ma (Translation in the past and today)

The literary translator, literary historian, editor and publisher Dr. Éva Pap, in her lecture given at the invitation of the Finno-Ugric department of Eötvös Lóránd University, provided a report that was factual, while at the same time was of a personal nature, looking back upon her several decades of editorial, literary translation and publishing work. She had worked as an editor at the Corvina and Európa publishing houses, including in the area of Hungarian language publications of Finnish literature. Then, in 1997, she created the

Polár Foundation, which had the objective of publishing Scandinavian literature in the Hungarian language. Thus, Éva Pap is familiar with every step of the translation-editing-publishing process through her own experience, understanding every detail from the time when the source text to be translated is selected through to its placement on store shelves. Her summary is also a perspective that allows for comparison over time.

In her presentation, Éva Pap delved in detail into the differences between the practices in the publication of translations before the fall of communism and today. A thorough inspection from sentence to sentence was characteristic of the period before the change in regime. During the process, the translator and the proofreader reconciled the details working together as a team, resulting in the creation of the most precise translation possible. According to the concepts of the study of translation, this would fulfill the criteria for an authentic target-language text for the reading audience (Toury, 1995) or the criteria for communitive equivalency (Klaudy, 1996). An important characteristic of the period in question was that the text suggested for translation was recommended to the publishers by the translators or the editors themselves. They did this with a kind of missionary zeal, through their efforts they wanted to familiarize the Hungarian-language reading public with works that were of value according to their own judgment. This was because they knew the eras, main characteristics and current innovations as well as works canonized as classics in the source literature. Thus, it is possible to speak of a process of adding value in relation to the publication of translations before the fall of communism.

In contrast, it was typical in the period following the fall of communism that it was the publishers themselves that selected a greater portion of the works to be translated, and they were not necessarily guided by the goal of adding value, but instead took into account considerations of marketability to a much greater extent in their choices. In Éva Pap's words, the book became a commodity. This context encouraged a different kind of attitude from the translators and engendered translation strategies in accordance with this even on the micro-linguistic level of the text. The time provided for the task of translation was also reduced, which eventually could also be to the detriment of quality. In addition, the background knowledge and the number of sources providing linguistic solutions available to translators has increased to an astonishing degree in recent decades, and this demands a different kind of work process from these literary translators as well. The easily accessed

repository of background knowledge and linguistic solutions demands an attitude of critical evaluation from the translator, while at the same time providing quick and effective assistance.

In her lecture, Éva Pap highlighted the following elements of literary translation competence as the most important. The translator should be liberated in their work and in their solutions, as well as broadminded. A perfect translation that is exact in all ways to the source work does not exist. It should always be the impact of the individual words on the reader that is conveyed in the target-language text, and less so the denotative meaning of the words. In this way, they should be faithful to the original work and perform their task responsibly and conscientiously, since the translator is the representative of the original author and literature to the Hungarian reading public. They should have proper self-awareness, for example, knowing and understanding the limits of their own abilities. At the same time, their work should always reflect on them. They should care about the task of translation and understand that they are doing good work when the task gives them a good feeling inside and if they can personally relate to it.

Intersections: Élet és irodalom (Life and Literature) — Éva Pap

By comparing and collating the elements of competence highlighted in the two source materials related to the Hungarian context that bridge a period of 40 years, the following knowledge, skills and attitudes take shape as the characteristics expected from a literary translator.

Perseverance: A literary translator must have perseverance, so that even through a work process that may stretch over a long period, they are able to persist at the same level of quality throughout. Perseverance is also needed for the completed translation to find its publication platform, and in actuality, it must perform its own marketing. Literary translation, for the most part, cannot be performed as a communal effort, but instead is a solitary work, and this often challenges translators.

Self-reflection: A literary translator must be constantly able to self-reflect. On the one hand, the nature of the work demands constant self-assessment, and on the other hand, they must clearly see their own place within the community of literary translators. They must recognize their own value and

develop their own style, they must consciously make and commit to decisions in translation, and they must understand their own limitations.

Missionary drive: It is expected that a literary translator will have a kind of missionary zeal while practicing their profession. They must perform their work in a committed manner, knowing that they are mediating between cultures, literary canons and intellectual phenomena. This kind of activity to enlighten the community is often guided by an objective for improvement; it generates understanding between the two worlds. The work of a literary translator is fundamentally motivated by the goal of allowing the reading public of the target language to have access to texts that would not reach these readers without the translator's activity.

Motivation: Being motivated is fundamentally necessary for the work of a literary translator; they must identify with the status of the translation and the goal of the translation activity. Due to its nature, it can only be performed at a high level if the translator sets out to perform the work with attachment and in a liberated, open manner. Quality literary translations cannot be created with a routine, disinterested attitude.

Creativity: The work of a literary translator is a constant re-creation. It is not by chance that in many cases literary translators themselves are authors or poets in their own right, or in other words, creative individuals. It is not absolutely necessary that a literary translator must also be an artist, but it is expected that every literary translator should develop their own style of translation, have the ability to construct texts and have imagination. Thus, literary translation demands creative activity. However, the question comes up again and again whether the translation in large numbers and in a short time of works that can be categorized as literature for amusement should be considered an artistic or an industrial process.

Responsibility: Related to this is the next element of competence, the issue of responsibility. Every literary translator must perform their work responsibly, since the image of the author and the prestige of the literary work in the source language depend on the translator. If they do not translate with proper care, they will produce weak quality texts. In these cases, the target-language reader criticizes the author of the source-language work, not the translator, because the reader turns to the translated works with a fundamental trust. They have faith that they are receiving the experience, style and content of the source text. The retention of these qualities is the responsibility of the translator.

Cooperation: Another important element is being cooperative. During literary translation work as a professional activity, translators must work closely together in various contexts and with representatives of various professions. It may occur that they have to check with the authors of the source-language texts themselves, or the process may demand cooperation during communication with the publisher, the editor and the proofreader as well. If the translator is not open to this, the process bogs down and the publication does not come out.

Initiation: At the same time, initiative is also expected of literary translators. This is particularly the case in relation to marginal literature and languages that are not as widespread, where most of the time it is the translators themselves that come up with the idea of making a translation and have the thought of its utility, and they themselves select the source text that is worthy of translation. This demands proper preparedness and a persistent stance.

Reliability: A fundamental element of the literary translator's work is being reliable. Readers turn to the translated works with trust, assuming that they have in their hands a target-language version that is identical in all ways to the source-language work. This responsibility is placed upon the translator; they must translate precisely and faithfully, or in other words be loyal, to the source text. Naturally, this loyalty does not mean literally transplanting the words, but instead conveying their meaning, associations and impact in a manner that is attuned to the expectations and knowledge of the target-language audience.

Erudition: All of this requires outstanding erudition and knowledge from the literary translator. It is not only familiarity with the literature of the source and target languages that is expected, but also a thorough knowledge of the two cultures as the contexts within which the texts are created and function. This demands constant self-development, reflection and self-assessment.

Qualification: Emerging from what has been said, a qualified literary translator is needed. Only an individual who has ordered knowledge, is well informed on a broad range of subjects and is always prepared to further educate themselves can cope with the demands of being a literary translator. This demeanor also includes an attitude of constant inquiry. Strategies and decisions must be professionally justified when necessary.

An important expectation is that literary translators must always be able to translate while keeping in mind the expectations of the *target audience*.

They should not translate words, but messages and impacts, and the standard for every decision should be adaptation to the target-language culture.

The *ability to analyze* is also important. Delving into details and making parallels and conclusions are the firm foundations of translation work and serve as the conditions for coherence. Translation, as an intermediary activity, demands a constant analytical attitude.

The ability to *comprehend the text* is essential. If the translator does not fully understand the content or the impact that they must convey, it is not possible to talk about a functioning translation. This does not only mean proper knowledge of language but also the ability to interpret.

It is extremely important that literary translators can see the value of their own work and that of others. Proper *evaluation* demands self-understanding and humility toward the work of others, as well as a positive but critical attitude. The columns published in *Élet és irodalom* (*Life and Literature*) several times mention the lack of quality and reliable criticism of literary translation as a problem that guides the young generation of literary translators down the wrong path.

A fundamental knowledge that can be expected from literary translators is familiarity *with the genre*. This reinforces another element of competence, the importance of education, since literary translators can gain the most thorough and conscious knowledge through systematic education. If they are not thoroughly familiar with the characteristics and expectations of the genre in relation to both the source and target literature, then they cannot perform quality work.

Possessing acquired knowledge and creative ability is not enough by itself, if the translator does not have knowledge *of the process*. They must understand the entire process of editing, proofreading and publication, from the submission of the manuscript until its placement on the shelves of the bookstores, so that they can clearly see their own place in the greater whole. Therefore, they will see the place of their work and the tasks and responsibilities of the other actors precisely in the given phases of the process. This also contributes to the development of the aforementioned self-reflection and proper evaluation skills.

An indisputable element of competence in the case of literary translators is a thorough knowledge of the *two languages*, the source and target languages. In addition to the knowledge of an average language user, this also includes

an in-depth knowledge of different linguistic versions, as well as an ability to use the native language constructively and creatively.

Supplementing the expected linguistic knowledge is a mastery of the *two literary* canons, the source and target literature, and familiarity in the area of the stylistic characteristics is also a fundamental expectation of literary translators for them to perform their work at a high level.

Source 3: PETRA-E reference framework

Objectives

The PETRA-E reference framework provided the following considerations as a starting point for its creators. Good training is fundamentally important for a literary translator, and following this, time brings the proper maturity to perform quality work. There is no a single perfect path, and it is possible to reach the zenith of a career as a literary translator through diverse routes. We also receive diverse answers when trying to map out the fundamental knowledge and skills necessary for literary translation. During the project, it was primarily European literary contexts with traditions of translation stretching back a long way that were examined, and the differing educational systems that had been developed over the years.

The goal of the project was essentially to systematically map out the skills necessary for translation, as well as examining the opportunities for the manner in which these skills can be further developed and transmitted during a career in literary translation.

However, the reference framework functions as an open system, so it only draft possibilities, not expectations. Nor is its objective to restrict translators or make them uniform. Its conclusions can be used in varied ways in differing literary translation contexts, since diverse viewpoints that may even be contradictory are present in it. The reference framework is intended to promote the debate about the quality of literary translation work and the expected skills and knowledge of literary translators.

The primary aim of the PETRA-E reference framework is to address literary translators and training institutions, making them conscious of the contexts of literary translation as a profession, as an activity and as a product. In addition,

it facilitates the comparison of the programs of educational and training institutions with one another as well as their possible harmonization. Both literary translators in the profession and students who are only preparing for this work can place themselves within the system outlined by the framework, and reflecting upon themselves can enable them to become informed and make plans about their own objectives and the paths that will lead to them.

Elements of competence

The PETRA-E reference framework collects the knowledge, skills and attitudes encompassed by the competence necessary for literary translation with the aid of an open structure model. The concept of competence employed in this model is defined (CEN 2006) on the basis of the specifications of the EN 15038 standard. At the same time, it determines the steps and levels leading to acquiring these, such as beginner (LT1), advanced student (LT2), beginning professional (LT3), advanced professional (LT4) and expert (LT5).

It provides sub-competences, which are defined with the aid of descriptors. These are the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a literary translator at a given level must possess. The specifically worded descriptors, which are therefore easy to apply in practice, define the individual sub-competences, which together provide the competence of the literary translator. Due to its transparent and flexible structure, it can also be easily used as an educational course model.

Eight sub-competences are differentiated by the model:

1. Transfer competence, the descriptors of which are the understanding of the source text, the recognition of translation problems, proficiency in translation strategies, employment of translation strategies, creation of target-language texts and the justification of the translation.
2. Linguistic competence, the descriptors of which are competence in the source language, competence in the target language, literary competence and linguistic variation.
3. Written competence, the descriptors of which are the analysis of texts, proficiency in literary genres, proficiency in the stylistic characteristics of the source text, employment of literary techniques, creation of target texts containing stylistic characteristics and editorial knowledge.
4. Heuristic competence, the descriptors of which are the finding of background materials, searches on the internet, use of background

materials, documenting of source texts, differentiating between texts and the employment of the critical apparatus.

5. Literary-cultural competence, the descriptors of which are the arrangement of source-language texts, arrangement of target-language texts, understanding of culturally specific elements, intercultural skills and intertextual skills.
6. Professional competence, the descriptors of which are the familiarity with professional organizations, knowledge of publishers, knowledge of the basics of literary tenders, knowledge of financial, ethical and legal considerations, knowledge of current translation approaches, skills in relationship building and didactic skills.
7. Evaluative competence, the descriptors of which are evaluative skills, selection of types of evaluation, comparison of translations, evaluation of the skills of the translation profession and self-reflection.
8. Research competence, the descriptors of which are knowledge of research methodology and translation technology, knowledge of theories of translation, scientific skills and knowledge of the theoretical systems of the science of translation.

Conclusion

If we review the elements of competence provided in the Hungarian literary translation context from the period 40 years ago and compare these with the survey performed in the European literary translation context in the 2010s, and then with the elements of competence determined in the reference framework that was created in the wake of this, we see that there is a great degree of correspondence. That is to say, the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are expected from literary translators performing high-quality work adapted to the expectations of the target-language reading public and that have been accepted in literary society (Parkko, 2012), have not changed radically in the past decades. This has not occurred despite the fact that in the past four decades examined in this study, the methods of obtaining information and experience as well as generating knowledge have been revolutionized throughout the world.

However, differences were found in relation to the two periods. The only sub-competence determined in the PETRA model that did not appear in the

discourse 40 years ago is the sub-competence of research. If we look at the descriptors of this in detail, perhaps the knowledge of translation technologies is the only one that was expected from literary translators at that time as well, but these were learned within the context of less systematic training, such as in a master-apprentice relationship or during joint group work. Research methodology, knowledge of translation theories, scientific skills and knowledge of the theoretical systems of the science of translation do not appear at all. However, today, with the acceptance of the science of translation as an independent field, as well as with the commencement of systematic research activities linked to this and the appearance of university-level institutional translator training programs, it has merited a place as an independent sub-competence. Naturally, the PETRA-E reference framework, which is a model to be interpreted as open and flexible, does not provide this as an essential sub-competence, but as something that the given literary translator or translation student must take into account and decide the extent to which this knowledge will be necessary during their career. According to this, they choose and evaluate, while measuring their own aims.

Naturally, with the broadening of the training of translators, and literary translators in conjunction with this, a uniform knowledge and theoretical framework distributed and transmitted by all has become an important element. This presages the making of translation criticism more uniform as well as providing a more reliable and predictable quality level, a problem that was prominently indicated in the discourse in the columns of *Élet és irodalom* (*Life and Literature*) 40 years ago.

If, however, we look at which elements of competence are not present in the PETRA-E model but constitute important parts of the expectations from 40 years ago, then we find three attitudes: perseverance, responsibility and reliability. The elements related to knowledge and skill amongst the points of discourse at that time – erudition, training, target audience, analysis, linguistic comprehension, evaluation, knowledge of genres, familiarity with process, and knowledge of the two languages and two literatures – were all present in the reference framework set up at the beginning of the 21st century without losing their significance. However, three of the elements that could instead be categorized as attitudes – perseverance, self-reflection, mission, motivation, creativity, responsibility, cooperation, initiative and reliability – were missing from the model created by the project. The reference framework studied did not clearly emphasize the importance of perseverance, responsibility,

and reliability. Perseverance being left out can perhaps be explained by the fact that the toolkit for translation work today – thereby considering actual technical means, such as in terms of access to information – has been developed in a direction that decreases the time for the translation process. Due to this, perseverance as an attitude does not appear as prominently, while it played a prominent role in the discourse in 1970s Hungary. Reliability and responsibility are attitudes that can be linked, and they should be given a place in the profession of translation today as well, in my opinion.

However, due to the objectives and open structure of the PETRA-E reference framework, it is a type of model that is being constantly formed and shaped and it awaits the addition of new competence elements and descriptors. In my opinion, the creation of the model answers many of the questions brought up in the discourse 40 years ago and analyzed in the present essay, and it provides a systematic list of competence elements that affords a basis for educational institutions as the critics of translation as well as for the translators themselves. It is also important to point out that the conclusions and focal points of research into the science of translation are also integrated into the systematized elements of the reference framework (Orozco & Albir, 2002; Lőrincz, 2007; Pusztai-Varga, 2008; Jones, 2011; Kahrizsangi & Haddadi, 2017; Percec & Pungă, 2017). Its strength and applicability is certainly also inherent in the fact that it is a consensus model that has been created encompassing several European countries and their traditions of translation, and its intentions are always aimed at finding common voices and points of emphasis.

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