

A Strategy of Cultural Americanization

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In April 2009 Swedish television broadcast a cultural program focusing on their preference for the local in a more and more globalized world. The first example used in the show to illustrate this trend was the comedy series *The Office*, which attained worldwide popularity in its original British version but also became popular in a local version. The second feature focused on two Swedish writers, who – to use the reporter’s words – “had encountered problems” as they were about to be introduced on the American book market (author’s translation). In order to secure a readership for the American editions the publisher had suggested substantial changes, for example to move the plot from Sweden to California and to omit or rewrite certain parts containing explicit references to sex and therefore considered unsuitable for a teenage audience. The two features discussed the same phenomena but were nevertheless presented quite differently. The localization strategy was not questioned as such when dealing with the various versions of the British sitcom; the American publisher on the other hand was placed in less favorable light. The Swedish authors declared in interviews that they were not at all happy about the request for changes, and when one of the American editors was interviewed she had to defend the publisher, as well as explain why they had decided to adapt the source-text. In this article I will explore this difference of response through analyzing the American version of a contemporary Swedish youth novel *Are u 4 Real?* by Sara Kadefors (one of the books featured in the television program mentioned above). The novel is about the difficulties of being a teenager today and has won many Swedish book awards, for example the August Prize in 2001, one of the most distinguished literary prizes in the country. Today it has sold 180,000 copies (Alevras). The impressive figure may partly be explained by the fact that it is used in Swedish schools, particularly as a starting point for classroom-discussions about friendship, internet use and behavior, growing up, finding oneself, etc. So far the novel

has been translated into ten languages: Danish (2002), Finnish (2003), Norwegian (2003), Dutch (2003), Icelandic (2003), German (2004), Czech (2004), English (2009), Serbian (2010) and Korean (“Libris.”) The Swedish source-text is called *Sandor Slash Ida* after the two main characters: Ida is a popular city girl who parties, sleeps around and hangs out with her friends and tries to forget her depressed mother at home and her absent father; on the other hand we have Sandor who lives in a sleepy suburb in another part of the country and dedicates his free time to ballet. He is bullied in school and has never had a girlfriend. The two teenagers meet online in a chat forum where they express their distress at being misunderstood and develop a friendship that will turn out complicated in real life.

Translation, Adaptation and Cultural relocation

Translation and adaptation have many characteristics in common and it is therefore quite difficult, perhaps even impossible, to make a clear distinction between the two. The difference between the two is considered a matter of degree, where texts are situated on a continuum depending on the nature and extent of alterations in comparison to a source-text. Eugene Nida and Jan de Waard mention the following types in their classification of translations: “interlinear, literal, closest natural equivalent, adapted, and culturally reinterpreted” (qtd. Oittinen 78). For other scholars (Hollander, Robinson, Oittinen), the difference between translation and adaptation is not related to form, but a matter of attitude. Douglas Robinson finds for example that people generally are more tolerant towards adaptations or versions, whereas our connotations for translation are rather restricted. John Hollander mentions that in terms of adaptations we tend to accept different readings, and that we do not speak of “the *only* version” or “the *right* version.” These attitudes seem to differ with respect to genre. According to Riitta Oittinen’s (2000) experience as a researcher, translator and illustrator in the field of children’s literature, translations are seen as “good” and adaptations as “bad.” She quotes scholars like Göte Klingberg, for whom the act of adapting is considered patronizing, implying that children are incapable of understanding a text which does not correspond to their frame of reference (Klingberg 74).

To relocate a novel in an alternative location might be seen an adaptation, calling for major interventions to the source-text. On the other hand this technique is common, especially in children’s literature

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(Alvstad 22-7). Many terms exist to describe the process of rewriting a text into the culture of the target language – a process that may include change of places, names and other cultural factors, like food, traditions, transportation and clothes. Joseph Che Suh (53) listed no less than eleven English and seven French expressions used to describe “the ‘freest’ form of translation”: adaptation, rewriting, version, transplanting, naturalising, neutralising, integrating foreign works, large-scale amendments, recreation, transposition, and re-appropriate. In this article I will use the term “cultural relocation,” borrowed from the book *Moving Target. Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation* edited by Carole-Anne Upton (2000). This term suggests that the target audience will find it easier to relate to the target text. It comes as no coincidence to find that this strategy is particularly associated with theatre performance. There are several characteristics associated with this strategy:

- Cultural relocation is used as a means to “write back” to a postcolonial hegemony;
- Cultural relocation can be used by a dominant hegemony to suppress marginalized cultures;
- Cultural relocation often cannot take place when a source-text is too culture-specific.

Analysis

The American publisher Dial, a member of the Penguin group, decided to relocate the Swedish text to a California setting as they thought American teenagers would encounter difficulties in relating to the original and therefore choose not to read the book. The editor Alisha Niehaus explained that Gothenburg and Stockholm, where the two main characters live, project certain connotations for a Swedish audience, who would get a picture of the characters just from where they live (“Swedish Book Review.”) To an average American teenager, who is not exposed to foreign books, Stockholm has no particular significance. More importantly, the target text needed to tone down the sexual content: references to porn were either omitted or toned down. The editor explained this as a necessity in order to reach an audience, not because teens would reject the book and find it too risqué, but that book stores and other distributors would consider it inappropriate reading for young adults and therefore choose not to order or distribute the book (“Swedish Book Review.”)

The most obvious change in the translation was the geographical relocation from Sweden to California, where the capital of Sweden has turned into Los Angeles, and the unnamed suburb to Gothenburg has become Oakland. This move also involved changes of names (Ida/Kyla, Sandor/Alex, Babak/Kevin, Vanja/Elizabeth), and nationalities (Sandor/Alex is no longer of Hungarian descent, but his parents have now emigrated from Russia since this is a more important minority in the target culture). Although Aleksandr is not a common American name, the nickname Alex, which is used almost exclusively in the translation, is much more familiar to an American audience than Sandor is for Swedish readers. The same goes for Sandor/Alex's bully Babak/Kevin, whose immigrant origin has completely disappeared in the adaptation. One exception to this domestication and homogenization of foreign sounding names is the retention of the Hispanic name Javier, which fits in with the Californian setting.

A stronger focus on the virtual world is also characteristic of the American edition. This is made clear already in the title *Are U 4 real?*, with its use of abbreviated signs so characteristic of text messages and chat-rooms, and the cover, picturing on a black background two computer mice, one pink and one blue, connected through a cord forming a heart. In comparison the first Swedish edition used a cartoon of a girl in a miniskirt and tank top throwing a glass away in anger, and the second paperback edition has a close-up photo of the two actors playing Ida and Sandor (Aliette Opheim, Andrej Lunusjkin) in the 2005 Swedish feature film side by side. In the Swedish edition the internet theme is not indicated at all; the entire focus is on the relationship between two teenagers who do not seem to have much in common. In the American edition the chat room discussions and email exchanges follow the style often used today on internet forums (abbreviations, emoticons, no upper case); in the Swedish source text, on the other hand, there is no major difference between online and face-to-face dialogue. Both are expressed in colloquial language, occasionally via the use of dialect (insertion of a Western Swedish "la" for emphasis) but more often through a form of discourse close to spoken language ("they," always pronounced [dɔm] in standard Swedish, is written "dom" in the dialogue and "de" in the narrative). In order to create a setting corresponding more accurately to American teenage life, the American adapter added certain details. For example, a passage is inserted where Alex is checking out Kyla's profile on the chat forum when they first meet and instead of exchanging photos via regular mail, they upload pictures of

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themselves on Facebook, a social network which at the time the Swedish text was written had not yet acquired an international profile – today it is an indispensable part of most Swedes' lives.

There were also ideologically based changes, for example omissions and rewritings of unsuitable parts referring explicitly to sex. These changes were harder to accept for Kadefors, since they affected the characters' behavior more significantly than the relocation of geographic setting. One particular change, which was highlighted in the Swedish press, was the omission of an episode involving references to a pornographic film (Kadefors, *Sandor* 50-3). In an inner monologue Ida/Kyla is trying to understand why she is so blasé with regards to sex. She wonders if unintentional exposure to R-rated movies ("at some horny guy friends") can explain her lack of interest, or if it is the sex itself, given that "she started at twelve." This paragraph, Kadefors explains, is important since it gives cues to understanding Ida/Kyla's behavior ("Bowdlerise Literature.") In the American adaptation the entire section leading up to the reference to the taboo has been rewritten. In the Swedish source-text, Ida's relationship to sex here appears very alienated, and she wonders if it is because of her exposure to pornography. The description of her sexual encounters with the two guys she and her girlfriends are hanging out with is extremely brief: "She can't look at him. Can't stop thinking that she's slept with him. So unnecessary. She's slept with Hampus too but that was so long ago, he's easier to look at" (51: my translation). In the American edition, the encounter with Isak/Adam is described in much more detail, and alcohol is now used as an explanation for the one-night stand:

She can't look at him. Can't stop wondering why she slept with him. Well she knows *why*. It's because they were partying and she was very drunk, and at the time his arms felt warm around her. Kissing made everything tingle and every little voice telling her not to, to just *shut up*. The next day it was never quit so Zen. Especially after she realized that Adam could barely string a sentence together without needing to go Ollie or whatever skate-board guys do. She's avoided him since. [...] Yeah, yeah. She slept with Jake too, but it was two years ago, so he's easier to look at" (52).

The reader of the American text is offered a description including sexual excitement, with a heroine appearing to know how to resist the temptations of the flesh.

A similar “purification” involving the male lead character did not receive as much attention in the media, but the effect in the narrative is about the same. In the Swedish source-text Sandor/Alex behaves more like an average teenager, curious about what intercourse is like, and therefore troubled that he “must be the only fifteen-year-old in the whole world who’s never watched a porn movie” (63). He is aware of his classmates watching it on special channels and that some of them are even selling videos in school. All these references to “adult” movies are deleted in the American version, and Sandor/Alex, who is now one year older, appears instead as a true romantic, since he “must be the only sixteen-year-old in the world who’s never held a girl’s hand” (68). The American edition also omits some unfavorable Swedish stereotypes of Americans and a few references to the word “fuck,” which as a loan-word is considered less coarse in Sweden than domestic swear-words.

When Kadefors had received the draft adaptation, she compiled a list of no fewer than a hundred alterations of which she did not approve. She was even so upset that she did not even read the published version. Kadefors mentioned three reasons why she disapproved of the American version. She regretted the fact that American teenagers could not become acquainted with a foreign culture: reading about how adolescents in another part of the world experience similar difficulties, joys and challenges, Kadefors argued, would enhance the belief understanding that people live similar lives, no matter where they live (Dahlin and Kadefors).

The news of how Kadefors’ book had been rewritten for the American market was reported in many Swedish daily papers, mostly by reproducing the telegram from the Swedish news agency TT Spektra (Magnusson). The story was picked up and developed further in the Swedish national press on the same day that the television show was broadcast (7 May 2009), but on the whole Kadefors’ reaction did not spark a debate. However, the story was not completely forgotten in the book world: when Kadefors attended Scandinavia’s largest book fair a year later to promote her new book, a major part of her speech, entitled “My American Adventure,” was devoted to the adaptation of *Sandor Slash Ida* (Dahlin and Kadefors). Four Swedish

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literary agents interviewed by Malin Axelsson (2009) took up Kadefors' point; they believed that the kind of cultural relocation introduced to the American version was too "extreme," "an excessive intervention in the source-text." In their view this was an "unusual" strategy, since "most publishers are decent", i.e. do not wish to domesticate the source-text in this way. One agent for children's and youth literature referred to a recent discussion with a French publisher, who had expressed concerns about sexual allusions in a book for juveniles. In the end no omission was made in the French text since "we talked about it and then they did not introduce the change" (Axelsson). In the American context, however, it seems as if the adapters were not so culturally sensitive.

One comment on a Swedish blog was extremely negative towards the American publisher: even though the person admitted that geographical relocation could be acceptable ("I can buy that,") they totally condemned the omissions of references to sexual behavior, which were considered silly and "typically American" (*Pelles Personliga Punkt* [Pelle's Personal Point]). This posting generated quite a few comments, the majority of whom were of the same opinion as the blogger. One person regretted that the author did not put her foot down and restrain the American publisher ("Emma Says Style"). In comparing the two versions, it seems that while the adaptation captures the gist of the story, there are omissions, even though they do not seem particularly significant. The porn film is perhaps one ingredient in explaining Kyla's behavior, but from Kyla's behavior it is quite clear that she can't be bothered with sex anymore, and giving so much importance to the omitted scene perhaps takes readers too much for granted. It is clear that the reaction from Swedish critics, bloggers, as well as the author herself, has an ideological basis, based on the belief that the source-text has had to be bowdlerized for consumption by American readers. In this case adaptation or cultural relocation has been identified with colonization.

American readers did not see the text in the same way: for librarian Kathleen E. Gruver, who in a review stated that "[p]arts of the plot have not translated well from the Swedish setting to contemporary California" (106), the relocation was not completely convincing. At one point Ida/Kyla travels by train to stay with Sandor/Alex's family for a few days, a scenario that to Gruver is very European, even though she says it could also work for the north-eastern part of the United States. In a Californian setting Gruver does not see railroad travelling as a "practical option" since

this state is “notoriously ‘car culture’” (“Are U”). Gruver’s comment offers a value-judgment on how successful the relocation strategy was, and does not question the relocation strategy itself. Speaking from the center rather than the periphery of American literary culture, she felt justified in making such a remark. In similar vein Gruver wondered rather patronizingly whether an average American teenage reader would notice that the setting was different in the source text (Gruver, “Are U.”) Likewise an anonymous summary of the book in *Kirkus Reviews* (2009) does not even mention the novel’s foreign origin (“Are U.”).

American juveniles are generally not much exposed to foreign literature in translation, with the possible exception of Japanese manga cartoons: “I don’t know how often this goes on – translating a foreign book into English. I’ve never heard about it being done before,” writes “Liv” in her blog when reviewing the American edition of Kadefors’ novel (“Are U 4 Real by Sara Kadefors.”) Rather patronizingly she claims that: “It was a fun experience to read something that wasn’t by an American author,” but she admits to feeling “gypped” with regards to the relocation and the fact that many of the “dirtier parts” were left out. She learnt about this through an anonymous posting on her blog when she listed books she had decided to read. Interestingly no additional comments were made after this posting, which included a literal translation of the omitted porn film incident.

In deciding to relocate the novel, the American publisher was motivated by commercial concerns; the reaction from the author was typical of someone from the European margins objecting to this money-oriented view. Eventually she was persuaded to accept the adaptation – by permitting it to be published – by the vision of her book becoming a blockbuster and giving her money and fame. On the other hand, it is clear that, in terms of reception, the target text was a victim of colonization; it was perceived as somehow “inferior” to its American equivalents, on account of its failure to represent contemporary Californian teenage cultures. The fact that the target text had to be altered so extensively angered Swedish readers, who felt that the source-text’s basic essence had been lost.

It is perhaps not so interesting to draw a distinction between translation and adaptation. As Riita Oittinen has suggested, it is more important to understand the ideological implications of both translational or adaptational acts, to understand what they are really about. Is it possible

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that cultures which are not used to translation like the English-speaking United States are not open to new and radical forms of textual reinvention? Even though cultural relocation is commonplace in adapted or translated fiction, especially children's literature, the strategy is not always accepted by readers, publishers or authors. It would be interesting to investigate the use of cultural relocation further, in order to see where and when it is considered "appropriate," especially in particular genres, such as children's literature.

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