

From the United States (via the Soviet Union) to Hungary The first Asimov translations in the Kádár era

*Anikó Sohar*¹

Abstract

Isaac Asimov was the favourite American science-fiction author in the Kádár era due to extraliterary reasons, many of his works were therefore translated when science fiction, a previously prohibited popular genre was introduced to the Hungarian public. This paper analyses the first two Hungarian translations, that of a short story entitled ‘Victory Unintentional’ and that of a collection of short stories entitled *I Robot*. Both indirect and direct translations exhibit multiple traces of censorship and revision, significantly changing the structure, atmosphere and message of the original works. The paper also calls attention to the need to gather information about the literary translators of the Kádár era as long as some of them are still alive, make use of oral history.

Keywords

literary translation, indirect translation, translation under Communism, science fiction, censorship



science fiction was gradually introduced again to the Hungarian readership after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution against the Communist Police State as part of the consolidation process which was launched to placate the rebellious population. Translation always plays a central role when introducing new genres into a literary system (Even-Zohar 1990), and SF was no exception in the Kádár era (1956-89). Most of the published books were of foreign origin, and Asimov's were given pride of place among the non-Communist science-fiction authors. One of his short stories (“Victory Unintentional,” to be discussed later) was selected for the periodical *Univerzum* published by the Communist Party's

¹ Pázmány Péter Catholic University, sohar.aniko@btk.ppke.hu

publisher, Kossuth as early as in 1957; another story was included in the first SF anthology in Hungarian ("Nobody Here But-", trans. Tamás Katona, 1965); the first American SF short story collection and SF novel translated, *I Robot* and *The Caves of Steel* respectively (both transl. Pál Vámosi, 1966 and 1967), were also his works as was the very first volume of the first Hungarian SF series entitled *Kozmosz Fantasztikus Könyvek* [Cosmos Fantastic Books], *The End of Eternity* (trans. András Apostol, 1969), and when, due to the great public interest in the genre, a science-fiction monthly, *Galaktika* was launched in 1972, the first issue had two of his short stories ("Marooned Off Vesta," and "Anniversary," both trans. Péter Szentmihályi Szabó).

Asimov is perhaps the best-known science-fiction writer due to his Foundation series (published between 1942–1993). The original trilogy, written in the forties, won the Best All-Time Series Hugo Award in 1966, and still attracts new generations. According to the rather incomplete UNESCO's Index Translationum database, Asimov is the world's 24th most-translated author. Since his personality, behaviour and beliefs were thought to correspond with Communist norms (for example, he opposed the Vietnam war), many of his writings were rendered into Hungarian during the Kádár era despite the regime's scanty hard currency resources. These include nine novels, three nonfiction books (one about biology and two on astronomy), one collection of eight short stories, and fifty-four additional short stories in diverse magazines and fanzines (five only in fanzines) with several having two translations – the exact number cannot be determined as the translator is sometimes unnamed in the magazines, altogether in 14 cases. Asimov had no distinct Hungarian voice as his works were translated by at least 24 different translators in this time, and only five of them worked with an Asimov text more than once. Perhaps Pál Vámosi comes closest to a real Asimov 'spokesman' as he rendered 25 out of the 74 Asimov texts translated into Hungarian before the political transformation in 1989.

Using the first translation of a short story (1957), and the first short story collection (1966) as illustrations, I will examine how and why Asimov became such a favourite of the era, the institutional and conceptual framework, how these translations were adapted to the norms and expectations of Communist Hungary, to what extent they were changed (for example, which elements were censored or regularly modified) and in what respects. The translations' paratexts will also be discussed as will the differences between different types of publication, since magazines, to say nothing of fanzines, enjoyed much more freedom than books.

1. Introduction

After the 1956 Revolution, the new Kádár regime had to gain the support or at least the tolerance of the population and therefore announced new doctrines and new measures – political, economic and cultural – to achieve this goal, among them allowing the carefully controlled introduction of previously prohibited popular genres, the so-called “entertainment literature” which included science fiction from the West, even from the United States. During the Kádár era Asimov was the most famous science-fiction writer alive. Not only his incredible output – more than five hundred books and an estimated ninety thousand letters – but his sure sense of tackling truly important social, technological and ethical issues, his open-mindedness, eternal optimism, and, last but not least, his “colossal ego” (“Asimov” in Zebrowski 2018) contributed to this fame and favourable reception worldwide. Péter Kuczka, the advocate of science fiction in Hungary promoted his works as Asimov’s views and attitudes – for example, his atheism, or his future- and technology-orientation – were in accord with Communist tenets. As far as I know, Asimov never criticised the Soviet Union, or Communist ideology, and never praised the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, which were the most sensitive topics of the Kádár era and would result in an immediate and total ban (Czigányik 2011). He supported the Democrats and civil applications of nuclear power and later opposed the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon. Although Asimov considered himself a feminist and found nothing exceptionable in homosexuality, sex and gender were never the focal points of his narratives, so his works avoided the ban on eroticism and pornography. Thanks to his confidence in humanity, he never wrote horror fiction either, another genre prohibited in Communist Hungary. Perhaps most importantly from the translation perspective, he always said, “I don’t ask for anything but publication” (“Asimov” in Zebrowski 2018), that is, he did not really care how much he would be paid for the translation rights of his works which probably counted in his favour behind the Iron Curtain.

For the most part robots and humans collaborate peacefully toward their common realisation within their dual society. Most of the lower robots are employed in burdensome or boring tasks like housekeeping, manufacturing, or repair, while most of the “Spacer” humans have reached a high standard of contentment and education. Social or political crises are rare, and do not endanger the stability of the society. Robots prevent social conflicts and even attempt to remove individual frustrations. (Idier 266)

Asimov, being a political liberal, also expressed his belief in co-operation and peaceful co-existence of not just robots and humans, but diverse nations and ideologies not only in his fiction, but in public speeches and special forewords written for the audience of Communist countries – for instance, for the Hungarian version of *The End of Eternity*, in which he says "My foremost wish is the friendship of all peoples, because only this may save Earth from disasters. We are not enemies. We have common enemies threatening all of us: famine, diseases, ignorance. Defeat of these enemies (or the warning what happens if we do not overcome them) is the subject of science fiction." (my translation). Such declarations earned him the publication of his works in the Communist camp, but what were these translations like? In chronological order, the first in Hungarian was a short story ...

2. "Victory Unintentional"

"Victory Unintentional" about the first contact with an alien civilisation on Jupiter and a sequel to the non-robot short story "Not Final" was published in the August issue of *Super Science Stories* in 1942, and fifteen years later it was selected to be the first Asimov text in Hungarian. It is a classical short story with a (sort of) punch-line: Three robots are sent from the human settlement on the Jovian moon, Ganymede to the surface of Jupiter to assess the threat level from the hostile Jovians, and they return with a promise of eternal peace between Jupiter and humankind due to a misapprehension. Since it refers to a Terrestrial Empire, predecessor of the Galactic Empire, it is often considered a prelude to the Robot/Empire/Foundation series.

The text was translated anonymously, and published in the monthly *Univerzum* by Kossuth, the publisher of the Party – that is, Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, the only political party permitted in Hungary – in September 1957. It was the second American science-fiction short story to appear in Hungarian in this period as one of the first generation-starship tales, "The Voyage That Lasted 600 Years" by Don Wilcox, was published a month before. At that time any publication had to be planned well in advance, after a meticulous multistep examination approved it both financially and ideologically, although publications in periodicals were a little less strictly inspected and repeatedly employed as test cases (Bart 2002, Czigányik 2011, Sohár 2022).

The original in English consists of 7,262 words, while 4,265 words comprise the Hungarian version, as 2,466 words (34 per cent of the original) were omitted, and 298 added – to say nothing of the numerous textual modifications to be discussed. Since translated texts are usually a little longer than originals owing to explicitions

and embedded explanations, this text is a downright bowdlerization of the English short story. It is surprisingly honest that the then usual paratext “translation of...” was replaced with a “based on Isaac Asimov’s short story,” although it would have been even more honest to have confessed: “just reminiscences of Asimov.” This seems to be the policy of *Univerzum*: since only works by Soviet science-fiction writers were translated, those by everybody else were adapted to the generally unspoken and most certainly unwritten requirements of the era. First translated into Russian (by D. Zhukov), and only then into Hungarian as the later Asimov translations in this periodical named their sources as “Vokrug Szveta” or “Nauka i zhizny,” and so forth, transliterations of Soviet publications. All Asimov translations in *Univerzum*, including “Victory Unintentional,” were indirect translations, where Russian was the intermediary language. This finding also explains the systematic anonymity of *Univerzum* translators, since their names would probably have revealed the source language, and might have indicated the unusually numerous, blatant shifts and expurgations. It should not be forgotten that this is the time of the Cold War when an original American text was unavailable to the Hungarian public. Even supposing that it could be acquired somehow, very few people spoke English at the end of the 1950s, as learning English, the language of the arch-enemy Capitalist countries, had been discouraged, and its [English’s] teaching widely abandoned.

The content of the translations was radically modified by various cuts and lexical, grammatical and conceptual shifts. Some adaptations such as conversion of units of measurement (for example, mile to kilometre) are consistent with the translation universals that all translations display to some extent: normalisation, simplification, explicitation and levelling-out (Baker 1992). From my point of view, those changes are the most interesting which cannot easily fit these categories, since they may reveal the unspoken translation norms, strategy, policy of the era, and at the same time, offer insight into the introductory phase of a new genre, likely with contradictions and tentative solutions (Even-Zohar 1990). The opening sentence in English – The spaceship leaked, as the saying goes, like a sieve – for instance, immediately astounds the reader who is aware that space is a hard vacuum, so how could anyone survive in such a spaceship? But the Hungarian translation – *A szóbanforgó űrhajó a orosz nyelvűk szerint olyan lyukas volt, mint egy szita* [The spaceship in question leaked like a sieve according to gossips] – does away with wonder and implies that the spaceship did not leak at all, only some malicious beings say so. Since the following sentences claiming that this leaking happened according to plan were omitted, the Hungarian reader will not get a sense of wonderment, but of incompetence and confusion.

Asimov was famous for his robots, and indeed, the protagonists of this short story, as has been mentioned, are three robots who visit inhabited Jupiter as envoys of the human race settled on Jupiter's satellite, Ganymede. The word *robot*, coined by Josef and Karel Čapek in 1920, has come into general use in many languages. However, in the first Hungarian translation, they are systematically named *robot-emberék* [robot-men] following the Hadrovics-Gáldi Russian-Hungarian Dictionary (1951). Not only the Hungarian term, but the translator's deliberate additions alter the reader's perception with the strong emphasis on the human aspect. This is the first appearance of the robots in the story – note that the word *ember* [(hu)man] occurs three times in the added part along with the doubled number of words:

Original: They were simply robots, designed on Earth for Jupiter.

Translation: Mégis, *emberiek* voltak, mivelhogy *ember*készítette őket. Robot-*emberék* voltak ugyanis, „akiket” éppen a Jupiterre való utazás céljából készítettek. [Yet, they were human-like, inasmuch as humans made them. For they were robot-men, ”whom” were particularly designed to travel to Jupiter. (strikethrough: omission, underline: addition, italics: (hu)man)]

In order to uphold his interpretation, the translator leaves out the description of the robots which explicitly refutes their resemblance to human beings (as well as the only reference to a US firm, to Capitalism), two whole paragraphs:

The ZZ robots were the first robots ever turned out by the United States Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation that were not even faintly human in appearance. They were low and squat, with a centre of gravity less than a foot above ground level. They had six legs apiece, stumpy and thick, designed to lift tons against two and a half times normal Earth gravity. Their reflexes were that many times Earth-normal speed, to make up for the gravity. And they were composed of a beryllium-iridium-bronze alloy that was proof against any known corrosive agent, also any known destructive agent short of a thousand-megaton atomic disrupter, under any conditions whatsoever.

To dispense with further description, they were indestructible, and so impressively powerful that they were the only robots ever built on whom the roboticists of the Corporation had never quite had the nerve to pin a serial-number nickname. One bright young fellow had suggested Sissy One, Two and Three – but not in a very loud voice, and the suggestion was never repeated.

Despite the author's stress on the robots' similarity to their human designers, the translator questions their selfhood, dehumanizes them with the double quotation marks around whom, and every time when the Hungarian version plays down the robots' personality, and enhances their machine-like characteristics (for example, omitting that ZZ3 sighs at ZZ1's silliness or dropping adverbs such as *philosophically*, *embarrassed* etc.). The altered names of the robots, from ZZ to RE (the numbers remain unchanged), do not imply the ultimate design in robotic production, just an abbreviation of their type, *robot-ember*. Asimov endows both his robots and Jovians with human-like characteristics and nonhuman bodies contrasting diverse forms of monstrosity, while the translator obviously separates the characters into good guys, humans and their representatives, the robots, and bad guys, the Jovians, completely changing the viewpoint, and the embedded values.

At the same time, the translator elevates the robots' status a little: in the original, the robots always talk about their human *masters*, but the word *master* never occurs in the Hungarian version, where the robots are seemingly equal, humans are only once designated as "our creators." It would likely have been unacceptable in a Communist country which, at least officially, dispensed with social hierarchy completely and where everybody was supposed to be equal to everybody else. This assumption is supported by the expurgation as in for example, "he [...] began inching his way forward in a curious grovelling fashion" or correction as in, for example, "If your honors will now *condescend* to swear peace" translated as "Ha Önöknek van felhatalmazásuk arra, hogy örökös békét kössenek velünk" [If you are *authorized* to make peace with us forever, my emphasis] – or all instances where references to subordinate behaviour occur in the original. Evidently, social hierarchy could only be tolerated in a rather limited form, excluding the master-servant relationship.

Reducing the strength or effect of expressions is also typical in the translation. Thus a *complete about-face* becomes a simple and neutral *change*, or *swoop overhead* turns into *descend*, resulting in a bland and absolutely humourless style, totally losing Asimov's distinctive voice. This finding corresponds to László Scholz's observation (2011) that literary translations of the period show a rather homogeneous style, but contradicts the later translation norm that demanded a refined literary parlance even in popular genres (Sohár 2022). I find it particularly revealing that during Communism humour was always toned down, and frequently eradicated from literary texts: the political system took everything far too seriously, while all forms of totalitarianism fear ridicule.

The most striking additions are, however, the inserted four headings within the text dividing it into five parts: *Meeting the inhabitants of Jupiter* [Találkozás a Jupiter lakóival],

Visiting the city [Látogatás a városban], *The force field* [Az erőter], *Sudden turnaround* [Váratlan fordulat], dividing the story into unequal parts: the beginning and the ending sections kept more than 70 per cent of the original content (73 and 74%, respectively), while the middle sections were more radically edited (49, 44 and 40 per cent loss, resp.). Unfortunately, it cannot be ascertained whether the headings were the translator's idea, but from the other translations in this and other issues, it seems plausible that such additions were not the norm at *Univerzum*, and neither the original, nor the Russian translation boasts such headings. Since the people involved had already died, and censorship instructions were never written down, only a meticulous microtextual comparison of the three texts – the original, the Russian and the Hungarian – might provide answers if/when the manuscripts will be found and compared.

The newness of the SF genre to Hungary can also be detected in the translation of new concepts, for example, when the spaceship lands, the Hungarian text uses the nautical term *moor* out of the available vocabulary, and goes on doing this throughout the tale until the spaceship *sails away* at the end and only once employs an aviation term, which seems a little inappropriate in the Jovian atmosphere: “we will gladly promise to make no attempt to venture into space” is translated as “megígérjük, hogy nem zavarjuk a légiforgalmat” [we promise not to interfere with the air traffic]. Or when the spaceship approaches Jupiter's surface, the Hungarian text mentions “only 70 Centigrade,” (see Note iv) to which it later refers to as “low temperature,” consequently the attentive reader may guess that an insignificant detail, that is, the phrase “below zero” was left out resulting in a 140 degree Centigrade difference. I can only surmise, based on these and other scientifically unsound translation solutions, that the Hungarian translator was no scientist. It is likely that the publisher did not consider the specificity of this new genre and commissioned a tried-and-tested literary translator who did the job as best as s/he could without realizing that laws in physics should not be bent just to sound better. Science fiction fans may take umbrage. The cumulative changes resulted in a simplified narrative in a fundamentally different style and register. It is no wonder that this short story had to be re-translated after the collapse of the Kádár regime.

The other Asimov short stories published in *Univerzum* (“Robbie,” “Lastborn,” “Nightfall,” “Death of a Honey-Blonde,” “Youth,” “Old-Fashioned,” and “It's Such a Beautiful Day”) did not fare any better. Indeed, they were not only edited in and out, but also published in two or three instalments, except “Robbie,” and “Old-Fashioned,” whose length prevented this partitioning. Apart from “Youth,” all the others have been re-translated, “Nightfall,” twice, “Death of a Honey-Blonde,” three times in three years (1987-89), with the last re-translation appearing in a fanzine, anonymously. “Robbie” was officially translated for the first science fiction short story collection, *I, Robot*.

3. “*I, Robot*”

These short stories first appeared in *Astounding*, the leading SF periodical of the era, between 1941 and 1950 – except the first which was published as “Strange Bedfellow” in *Super Science Stories* in September 1940. Later Asimov wrote a frame story for the fixup edition: a reporter asks Dr. Susan Calvin, the first robopsychologist, the number one expert at U.S. Robot and Mechanical Men, Inc. – known from “Victory Unintentional,” alas, only by the readers of the English original – about her career on the occasion of her retirement. These tales about man-robot interactions and moral dilemmas are her reminiscences, and the author inserted an introduction, a brief epilogue and five linking texts. James Gunn summarizes the unflagging attraction of the collection: “each story exists as a puzzle to be solved. The delight of the reader is in the ingenuity with which Asimov’s characters solve the puzzle. The robots exist to present the puzzle in their behaviour; the characters exist to solve the puzzle” (1996). Despite the title, the stories have a third person omniscient narrator, and the events are not related from the robots’ perspective.

By the time of publication, Asimov had formulated the Three Laws of Robotics which were meant to relieve readers of their fear of man-made monsters (cf. technophobia and Frankenstein complex), and play an important role in the collection. In the beginning many people feel frightened by the robots as is shown in “Robbie,” and these fears are only allayed somewhat by the end of Dr. Calvin’s fifty-year-long career when robots become regular participants in the techno-utopian, transhuman everyday life. By that time, robots have learnt to circumvent the three laws of robotics by adding the so-called Zeroth Law which places the interests of humankind before those of an individual human being – that is, the individual becomes expendable for the common good, a tenet shared by the Communist ideology – and with this innovation the political profession opens up for robots. By investigating the human-robot relationship from several angles, Asimov became a pioneer of SF stories dealing with questions of moral philosophy and ontology (cf. works by Philip K. Dick or Terry Pratchett). The popularity of *I, Robot* is easy to explain: the topic is of current concern, the author focuses on problems which can be solved by accurate assessment of the facts and logical thinking even by the average reader, showing the robots in a favourable – non-threatening – light, and the narrative is as simple as a folk tale. The language has not dated, and Asimov took great care to avoid the technological terminology of his time when he named future devices, he always chose a neutral word or expression (for example, *pocket recorder* in the Introduction), or coined a word (for example, *visorphone*).

The first Hungarian translation was published in 1966, two years after the Soviet edition, and similarly to that, the Hungarian collection was incomplete with the omission of the last short story, “The evitable conflict.” (The Soviet translation also omitted “Escape!”). This was probably due to politics, since “The evitable conflict” refers to the Soviet Union as erstwhile state, a federation already obscured in the past by the time of the story (2052), and that was evidently incompatible with the official ideology which hailed Socialism and particularly Communism as the political and ideological systems of the future. A total prohibition against criticism of the Soviet Union in any form was one of the unspoken rules of the structural censorship (Bourdieu 1991) pervading Hungarian cultural life at the time. The first unabridged edition was only published in 1991, after the political transformation.

The significant role of ideology even in the marginal, freshly introduced popular genres is clear from the brief foreword of the collection, which I. A. Yefremov wrote for the Soviet edition (1964). He cuts Asimov and his works down to size: Asimov falls into the permissible category (see Kontler 1999 quoted in Czigányik 2011, Sohár 2022) as he is not interested in autotelic fantasizing, shows great interest in the Soviet Union, inevitably and gradually turns away from science fiction – Yefremov fortunately was mistaken in this assumption. But perhaps we can thank the long-lasting tradition of afterwords in Hungarian science fiction publications classifying the authors and subject-matter and putting them in their proper light to this foreword.

Together with the last short story, the dedication was also omitted, because Asimov dedicated this volume “to John W. Campbell, Jr., who godfathered the robots.” This statement sins doubly against the ideology of the period by mentioning a godfather, a religious term on the one hand, and on the other by paying homage to Campbell who was labelled “enemy” on this side of the Iron Curtain (see Kuczka 1973). Since in the sixties, even books meant for adults were often illustrated, *I, Robot* acquired ten black and white illustrations obviously made for this volume by Anna Tedesco (they were omitted from later editions).

As has already been mentioned, Kossuth was the publisher of the Party, so when it brought out the first story of the collection in *Univerzum* in 1965, it meant official approval for the publication. That translation was probably well-received, thus the whole – seemingly complete but in fact censored – collection was then published the next year. Later the already-introduced new genre and author was passed on to another publisher, Móra. Móra specialized in children’s and juvenile literature, and from the seventies, also in science fiction (Kozmosz Fantasztikus Könyvek series, *Galaktika*, *Robur*) under Péter Kuczka’s guidance. It was not by chance, therefore,

that Móra re-published these Asimov stories in *Robur*, the science-fiction monthly for youth, and later in a volume as well.

I, Robot was translated by Pál Vámosi (1911-91) whose case confirms Venuti's famous claim about the translator's invisibility (1995) for it was difficult to find data about his professional activities. When I was trying to mine more information about Vámosi on the web during the pandemic, all literary translators who had known him agreed that he had been a fine old-school gentleman, originally a bank clerk, later an editor of Európa, a publishing house specializing in world literature in the Kádár era (for more information on Socialist book publishing see Bart 2002, Géher 1989, Lator 2002, Takács 2002), and literary translation had been for him a labour of love. Katalin Dezsényi, who used to edit Vámosi's translations at Európa, wrote to me in a private Facebook group for literary translators, editors and publishers that Vámosi had been an old-fashioned gentleman, but a sloppy translator whose work often had to be re-translated: an old-fashioned, pre-World War II style characterized all his translations. Whereas Márton Mesterházi, a famous literary translator himself, who commissioned a translation of *Orange Soufflé*, a one-act play by Saul Bellow from Vámosi for Hungarian Radio, called his rendering excellent. This dichotomy is also apparent in this Asimov translation. Besides the translator's possible personal preference, both the marginalized position of the genre and its jargon, its closeness to colloquial expressions and slang could be the explanation for the inconsistent quality of the Hungarian text.

Vámosi also translated philosophy, plays, poems, literary and scientific prose from English, German, Latin, and Russian. As far as I could establish, he did not specialize in science fiction: I found only one popular science text, two novels, and 34 short stories (25 by Asimov) of the genre translated by him. However, his translation of *I, Robot* has proven very successful as it was re-published seven times (1966, 1985, 1991, 1993, 2001, 2004, 2019), while the short story, "Reason" appeared eight times. This translation became so popular that it may even seem untouchable, almost canonized for its fans. Yet it remains uneven. The text displays both qualities and idiosyncrasies typical of the times. For example, Vámosi avoided exclamation marks almost as much as the British or Americans even when they are compulsory in Hungarian, or consistently committed a grammatical error (*magába(n) foglal* [include]). The translation is, however, fluent and definitely domesticated so it mostly reads well, but the translator sometimes misunderstands the original or sticks to it so closely that the resulting Hungarian sentence sounds funny, for example, when he chooses a peculiar word order with a verb – colour – which works both literally and figuratively:

Original: He now made a proper addition to the general atmosphere of these meetings on Hyper Base. In his stained white smock, he was half rebellious and wholly uncertain.

Translation: Pecsétes fehér köpenye, teljesen határozatlan, kicsit lázadó egyénisége új színekkel tarkította a megbeszélést. [His stained white smock, wholly uncertain and a little rebellious personality coloured the meeting with new colours.]

After uploading the original and its Hungarian translation into a translation memory, I found some inexplicable changes, for example, seven brief sentences, out of 603, were left out from “Runaround” (“Donovan’s pencil pointed nervously.”; “If Speedy didn’t come back, no selenium”; “What the devil!”; “Are you sure?”; “Silence fell.”; “All right.”; “He turned away.”). Their translation would not pose any difficulty, nor were they ideologically sensitive, so what could cause their excision? Since in the interpolated text linking this story with the previous one, one of the American engineers is named *Gregorej* Powell, perhaps it is not too far-fetched to suppose that Vámosi might have used the Russian translation – at least as an aid – during *his* translating process. This way he could make certain that his translation would not contain any offensive or problematic phrasings. I could not verify this hypothesis yet, but since none of 434 segments of “Robbie” was left out, this may later prove to be true. Interestingly, both the two Hungarian versions of “Robbie” are about a thousand words shorter than the English (7,082 words): the one by the anonymous translator totals only 6,014 words despite adding the Three Laws of Robotics as an epigraph, while that by Vámosi totals 5,933. This occurs partly because of the very different languages and partly due to small truncations (for instance, describing the Talking Robot as *csodabábu* [approx. wondrous puppet] instead of as a *tour de force*).

How is it that the editor – either in Kossuth, or later at *Robur*, or in Móra – did not notice the omissions? Or was it permissible then to take liberties with a text as part of the translator’s freedom? Did this happen only in popular genres or were mainstream works also modified? Perhaps even canonized literature? This certainly needs further research, but I can assert that all translations of the Kádár era I have so far examined (approximately a hundred) were to some extent abridged, re-written, or adapted to meet assumed expectations. At the same time, Vámosi did careful work in some instances and paid attention to little details: for example, since the Hungarian title of “Liar!” consists of two words, he changed the number from one to two in the sentence “and of all her turbulent thoughts *only one* infinitely bitter word passed her lips” (my emphasis). It stands out a mile that the short stories are

numbered as if there were chapters, and Vámosi added altogether 13 explanatory footnotes to the text (for example, the meaning of the roaring twenties, conjunction, the rotation of Mercury and so forth). Whenever he thought the audience would not understand the term or the reference, he conscientiously expounded it. This attitude fits the paternalistic enlightening-educational tendency of the Communist era which put popular genres into the service of spreading – approved – knowledge and indoctrination. Perhaps the footnote which explains the Frankenstein complex is the most interesting for us today because Frankenstein is one of the first science fictional novels but was then unknown to the Hungarian public and in addition the translator uses a now outdated word for complex (*komplexum*). From the paratexts it seems evident that the intended target audience for this volume did not consist of intellectuals or university graduates, but the not overly educated. This anticipated readership harmonizes with the initial notion of the genre as literature fit for the entertainment of youth as emphasized in blurbs on science fiction book covers and other publicity materials at that time.

The translation also has surprisingly many misunderstood passages, evident only for those who compare it with the original, such as this typical excerpt:

Original:

[...] I intend to make public the fact that you're wearing *a protective shield* against *Penet-radiation*." "That so? *In that case*, you've probably already made it *public*. I have a notion our enterprising press representatives have been tapping my *various communication* lines for quite a while. I know they have my office lines *full of holes*...

Translation:

– [...] Nyilvánosságra szándékozom hozni, hogy *Panet-sugár elleni védőruhát* hord.

– Tényleg? *Akkor* ezt már valószínűleg meg is tette. *Egyébként az az érzésem*, hogy a mi vállalkozó szellemű riportereink már jó ideje lehallgatják a vonalaimat. Azt biztosan tudom, hogy az irodai vonalaimat *át- meg áthyuggatták*.

[I intend to make public the fact that you're wearing *a protective garment* against *Panet-radiation*." "That so? *Then* you've probably already made it. *Moreover*, I have a notion our enterprising press representatives have been tapping my lines for quite a while. I know they *made lots of holes* in my office lines] (256, emphasis added)

The second speaker does not accuse the first in the original, on the contrary, he informs his rival that his conversations are monitored by journalists, and whatever they say will soon be known by the general public. Listening to people talking on the telephone was a delicate question at that time, as state security was known to

do it regularly, so Vámosi may have changed this segment deliberately. However, translating the idiom *be full of holes* literally means that the translator did not know the phrase and could not look it up – we must not forget that the Iron Curtain made it practically impossible to learn or keep up with idiomatic speech, spoken language, particularly slang, so Vámosi cannot be blamed for this. He usually omitted such words (for example, *lickety-split*). Since the Hungarian text is fluent and more or less logical, and the audience still likes and enjoys it, these shifts will probably remain undetected as long as nobody ventures to re-translate the collection.

Culture-specific items also had to be re-written or adapted since the Hungarian readers did not know much about the United States of America in the Kádár era as the dissemination of information and people's ability to travel were restricted. Hence the generalizations: instead of *gingham* he wrote *szövet* [cloth], *collie* became *juhászkutya* [sheep dog] and *Virginia reel* was replaced by *virginiai tánc* [Virginian dance]. However, in the sixth chapter ("Little Lost Robot"), Vámosi translated *general* as a typical Soviet military rank, *vezérőrnagy* (approx. major general), which brings up a potential Russian source again. Units of measurements are inconsistent, they are sometimes taken over, sometimes transformed, even within one short story (for example, the Hungarian "Robbie" has a half-mile tall Roosevelt Building, but twenty-five square yards of coils and wires becomes twenty-five square meters, increasing the Talking Robot's size). Vámosi indeed seems to like archaic, literary expressions (for example, *früstköl* approx. break fast), and always employs a determinedly domesticating strategy: conversion of units of measurements, using sayings and idioms (for example, *amíg ebből a kátyúból ki nem kecmegünk* approx. until we do not wriggle out of this difficulty), so readers may have the impression that the text was written in Hungarian until they chance upon a catachresis (for example, a confusion of mind with brain in an idiom: *De az agya még jól vágott* [approx. he still had a sharp mind]) or nonsense, for instance, mixing up university and academic degrees (translation: *2008-ban bölcsészdoktori diplomát szerzett* [approx. in 2008, she obtained a Master of Arts], original: In 2008, she obtained her Ph.D.), or sending the Westons on an *instructional* instead of an *exhibition* trip. I am convinced, however, that these few blunders are hardly noticeable to the average reader.

Before starting to discuss the translation, I wondered whether the translator managed to follow Asimov in avoiding a dated technological terminology. The answer is no, his terms are usually bound to the era, therefore they sound obsolete today. When Asimov cleverly shuns naming the medium writing "They brought about five tons of figures, equations, all that sort of stuff," the Hungarian translator

adds *paper*. The already mentioned pocket recorder became *zsebmagnó* (pocket tape recorder) although this may sound science fictional enough for the young generations these days because of its outmodedness. Vámosi altered quite a few other futuristic concepts as well: we read *cosmic jump* instead of *interstellar jump*, *spaceship theory* instead of *Franciacci's space-warp theory*, *four dimensional space* instead of *hyperspace*, *beam field generator* instead of *field generator*. These Hungarian terms – the second and the third especially – fail to evoke estrangement which Suvin (1972) considers the essence of science fiction. Recall that this is still the introductory phase of science fiction in Hungary and Suvin's views will very much influence the cultural import of this genre later on (Kuczka 1973, Szélesi 2019, Sohár 2022).

All in all, although this collection is re-written to a lesser extent than “Victory Unintentional,” the translation is still ambivalent. Obviously, only some of the manifold and conflicting loyalties expected from a translator worked here, mainly loyalties to the client, the one who commissions the translation and to the target audience, resulting in a version well-adapted to the target culture's norms, which of course explains its long-lasting popularity. Science-fiction fans still insist on a domesticated translation, preferably in a refined literary register (see readers' comments on Moly and occasionally on Goodreads). But it creates a false Asimov image which still pervades public opinion about his writings in Hungary, that is, he focussed on ideas and plotlines, almost completely ignoring characterisation and descriptions, he therefore falls into the storyteller category, and could not be called a stylist. While it is true that Asimov did not pay special attention to style and mainly concerned himself about contingencies and concepts, he did have his own characteristic voice and idiom. As George Zebrowski noted Asimov “speaks in a gracefully lucid and sophisticated voice,” and I would add has a sly sense of humour lurking in the background, which is less apparent in the Hungarian translations than in the English original.

4. Concluding remarks

Asimov as a science fiction writer and a supporter of societal changes was indeed privileged in the Kádár era, but this privilege seems limited to the number of publications and certainly it did not include the publication of his writing unabridged and uncensored. This small sample proves that the early Asimov texts, instead of receiving a straightforward translation, were adapted and re-written to an unusually great extent – but whether this was carried out due to the newness of the genre, the short prose form, the person or the nationality of the author, or the translators, or possibly other factors needs further investigation.

References

- Baker, Mona. 1996. "Corpus-based Translation Studies: the Challenges that Lie Ahead." In *Terminology, LSP and Translation Studies: Studies in Language Engineering, in Honour of Juan C. Sager*, edited by Harold Somers, 175–186. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bart, István. 2002. *Világirodalom és könyvkiadás a Kádár-korszakban* [World literature and book publishing in the Kádár era]. Budapest: Osiris.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. "Censorship and the Imposition of Form." In *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by John B. Thompson. Translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Clute, John, David Langford, Peter Nicholls and Graham Sleight (eds). n.d. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/>. (2021.01.31.)
- Czigányik, Zsolt. 2011. "Readers' Responsibility: Literature and Censorship in the Kádár Era in Hungary." In *Confrontations and Interactions: Essays on Cultural Memory*, edited by Bálint Gárdos, Ágnes Péter, Natália Pikli, and Máté Vince, 222–232. Budapest: L'Harmattan.
- Even-Zohar, Itamar. 1990. "Polysystem Studies." *Poetics Today* 11(1).
- Géher, István. 1989. *Mesterségünk címere. Amerikai könyvek magyar olvasóknak* [Peculiar to our craft. American books for Hungarian readers]. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó.
- Gombár, Zsófia. 2011. "Dictatorial Regimes and the Reception of English-Language Authors in Hungary and Portugal." In *Censorship Across Borders: The Reception of English Literature in Twentieth-Century Europe*, edited by Alberto Lazaro and Catherine O'Lary, 105–129. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- . 2018. "Literary Censorship and Homosexuality in Kádár-Regime Hungary and Estado Novo Portugal." In *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer: Theory, Practice, Activism*, edited by Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl, 430–466. London: Routledge.
- Gunn, James. 1996. *Isaac Asimov. The Foundation of Science Fiction*. Revised edition. Laham, MD: Scarecrow Press. E-book.
- Idier, Dominic. 2000. "Science fiction and technology scenarios: comparing Asimov's robots and Gibson's cyberspace." *Technology in Society* 22: 255–272.
- Kalmár, Melinda. 1997. A kora kádárista könyvkiadás paradoxonjai [Paradoxes of book publishing in the early Kádár era]. *Beszélő Online* 2(2). (2020.08.17.) <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/a-kora-kadarista-konyvkiadas-paradoxonjai>

- Kuczka, Péter (ed.) 1973. *A holnap meséi. Írások a sci-firől* [Tales of tomorrow. Writings on sci-fi]. Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó.
- Lator, László. 2002. "My Life as Editor." *The Hungarian Quarterly* 165: 64–74.
- Scholz, László. 2011. "Squandered opportunities. On the uniformity of literary translations in postwar Hungary." In *Contexts, Subtexts, Pretexts: Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia*, edited by Brian James Baer, 205–218. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/btl.89.16sch>
- Sohár, Anikó. 2020. "A fantasztikus irodalom fordítása a Kádár-rendszerben" [Translating Science Fiction and Fantasy in the Kádár Regime]. In *Nyelv, kultúra, identitás 1. Terminológia, lexikográfia, fordítás* [Language, culture, identity 1. Terminology, lexicography, translation], edited by Ágota Fóris. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. (2020.12.29.) https://mersz.hu/hivatkozas/nyki1tlf_97_p1#nyki1tlf_97_p1
- Sohár, Anikó. 2022. "'Anyone who isn't against us is for us.' Science Fiction Translated from English in the Kádár Era." In *Translation under Communism*, edited by Christopher Rundle, Daniele Monticelli, and Anne Lange, 241–279. London: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-79664-8
- Szélesi, Sándor. 2019. "A sci-fi magyar útja" [The Hungarian path of SF], *Sci-fi.hu*. (2019.08.07.) <https://www.scifi.hu/2019/07/07/a-sci-fi-magyar-utja/>
- Takács, Ferenc. 2002. "The Unbought Grace – Publishing as it Was. Literature and Publishing under Socialism." *The Hungarian Quarterly* 43: 75–78.
- Venuti, Lawrence. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.
- Zebrowski, George. 2018. "Isaac Asimov: The Last Interview." – . *Talks with the Masters*. Rockville, MD: Wildside Press. E-book.

Sources

- Asimov, Isaac. 1950. *I, Robot*. New York: Gnome Press.
- Asimov, Isaac. 1966. *Én, a robot* [I, Robot]. Translated by Pál Vámosi. Budapest: Kossuth.
- Asimov, Isaac. 1969/1988. "Foreword." *A halbatatlanság halála* [The Death of Immortality/The End of Eternity]. Translated by András Apostol. Budapest: Móra.
- Asimov, Isaac. 1942. "Victory Unintentional." *Super Science Stories*.
- Asimov, Isaac. 1957. "Akaratlan győzelem" [Victory Unintentional]. Anonymous translator. *Univerzum* 9: 76–89.

- Fehér, Géza. 1988. *Supernova 6. Fanzin-katalógus* [Catalogue of fanzines]. Manuscript.
- Hadrovics, László, and László Gáldi. 1951. *Orosz-magyar szótár* [Russian-Hungarian dictionary]. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Vámosi Pál, translations of, on Moly.hu. (2020.07.24.) <https://moly.hu/alkotok/vamosi-pal>
- Univerzum-bibliográfia 1957–1988 [Univerzum bibliography 1957–1988]. (2020.06.15.) <http://galaktika.hu/bibliography/Univerzum.html>
- Zsoldos, Endre. 2018. *Alapítványtól Zsákutcáig: Asimov magyarul 1957–2018* [From A to Z: Asimov in Hungarian 1957–2018]. Manuscript.
- Zsoldos, Endre. n.d. *Science fiction elbeszélések magyarul* [SF short stories translated into Hungarian]. (2020.12.29.) <http://galaktika.hu/bibliography/>