

# The Translation of a Translation: Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog* and its Hungarian Translation

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## Abstract

Tibor Fischer's novels are intellectual and artistic products that can be the source of multiple approaches and studies. The topic of the novel *Under the Frog* deals with the period between the end of World War II and the anti-communist revolution of 1956 in Hungary. Tibor Fischer, the author, whose parents fled Hungary in 1956 and who was already born and educated in England, reconstructs the period through the stories of his own parents and renders it through a brilliantly elaborated style, with deep ironies rooted in Hungarian experience. The subtlety of the text lies in the fact that it is told in such a way as to make the Hungarian way of thinking and the atmosphere of the bleakest era of communism understandable and tangible for English readers. Writing in itself is the product of the interpretation (translation) of reality, thus the translation of the novel into Hungarian can fairly be regarded as the translation of a translation. What gives distinction to translating this particular English text into Hungarian is that the Hungarian version does not require the rendering of the pragmatic aspects to such depths, given the fact that the topic of the novel and the language of the translation correlate. The examples from the original English and translated Hungarian versions show various methods and strategies used in conveying meanings.

**Keywords:** comparative translation studies, cultural transfer, contemporary British literature, national stereotypes

Tibor Fischer's novel *Under the Frog* chooses as its theme the presentation of the Hungarian social conditions between World War II and the anti-Communist revolution of 1956; the realities of a period he himself could know only from the recollections of his parents who emigrated to England in 1956, three years prior to the author's birth.

The interpretation of the social reality - and a novel can fairly well be considered the result of an individual interpretation - can be regarded as a translation in itself. Tibor Fischer filtrates the experiences of the Communist era in the mid-fifties through his own personality and artistic talent and rearticulates them in the form of a corpus of written text bearing features that classify it as a text type (genre) conventionally known as a novel.

What makes this particular pair of novels interesting is that they are about Hungarian experience rendered originally in English and then translated into Hungarian. In this sense I call the Hungarian translated version of the novel the translation of the "translation." Tibor Fischer, having an English education completed at Cambridge, would almost have forgotten Hungarian, had he not been so inquisitive later on as an adult to know more about the country his parents had abandoned and the language his parents spoke only among themselves and not being too keen on handing the mother tongue down to the next generation.

This is what he says about his parents' attitude to their national identity and his own awakening interest in his ethnic roots:

... my parents left with an attitude that Hungary was a closed chapter and "We now live in England." Although there were books about Hungary on the shelves, they didn't make a fuss. (...) And although Hungarian culture wasn't drummed into me in any way, the books were on the shelves and I always liked to read, so I read about Hungarian history and Hungarian

literature in translation. It was always there as part of the background, and I worked there as a journalist (...). I started writing about Hungary, and I was quite lucky that the first thing I had published was in the Wall Street Journal – a little op-ed piece about Hungary. (...) I started getting work to do with Hungary and started visiting regularly. (...) And I ended up living in Budapest from 1988 through 1990, through all the big fun and games. ([www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum](http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum) 140 php.)

### **Historic and Subjective Time**

The novel is structured into twelve chapters which are dated instead of being numbered. February, March, April, May and June however do not appear among the months quoted in the titles and the only date which appears with the day is 23rd October 1956, the last, the longest and the most elaborate chapter.

Writing about the harsh years of the Communist dictatorship conceals several traps for an author who does not have personal experience regarding the period. When I make this statement I have in view the distinction between the contemporary English and Hungarian readers. The originally intended readership of the novel is the readership reading in English, among whom first-hand experience of the period may fairly well be excluded. This means that the English readership are neither influenced by the commonly-known facts of the 1956 uprising, nor about the fact that in the past twenty years quite many artistic interpretations: Hungarian films, memories, essays have appeared on the topic. As a result the book represents different levels of novelty, possesses different levels of entropy depending on whether the readership is Hungarian or English.

The story of the novel is rather simple: the perception and the experience of the 1950s in Hungary from the perspective of some young people, namely Gyuri Fischer and his close friends, who are all basketball players. As outstanding sportsmen, they have certain privileges guaranteed by the regime, such as a mock workplace, exemption from hard military service, relatively many opportunities of domestic journeys.

Although the story starts on November 1955, the subsequent eight chapters as flashbacks tell about commonly known details regarding Hungary's history between World War II and the anti-Communist revolution of 1956, giving a picture of the 1940s and early 1950s, and focusing on the plight that led to revolution. Chapter 1944 recalls the German invasion and the Russian take-over, the siege of Budapest with the starvation of civilians in cellars and the plunder of the Red Army. January 1949 describes a visit of the protagonists to a village where the greatest enthusiast of the Arrow Cross, Faragó, becomes the most fervent Communist. September 1949 acquaints the reader with the social status of class-X, or class aliens to which class György Fischer, the author's father and grandfather, belonged. Anyone branded as X meant that one had to start from the back of the queue for the goodies, ranging from a place to a university to finding a job in order to make a living. In August 1950 the protagonist, being threatened by the compulsory military training, decides to go to China, a comrade socialist country, which often engaged the attention of the contemporary media, stating that "anything seemed superior to home-grown misery" (111). Finally, the plan to emigrate to China in the "guise of ardent admirer of the Chinese Revolution" (112) and of the people's power in China fails. So does the project of joining the fight against the „imperialist bastards" in the Korean War. What remains the only compulsory option is to join the Hungarian People's Army and to express the revolt against the regime by the ironic act of buying a book entitled *Hungarian Writers on Mátyás Rákosi*, which was issued to commemorate Rákosi's sixtieth birthday (August 1952) as a birthday present for a fellow. The great event of 1954 is marked by Stalin's death and the loss of the

football match against the Germans, which was regarded as „a fix,” or „bought off.” This fired a spontaneous demonstration which was finally dispersed by the AVO (State Defence Authority). 1954 is also the year when Gyuri decided to start to learn English, which becomes crucial when choosing a host country after leaving Hungary during the revolution. The chapter ends with an ironic conclusion: “Hungarians don’t mind dictatorship, but they really hate losing a football match” (156).<sup>\*1</sup>

In chapter *November 1955* the thread of real love with the Polish girl, Jadwiga, a student at Szeged University is woven into the texture of everyday life-experiences. The longest and most detailed chapter is *23 November 1956* with the detailed description of the well-known course of the unfolding of the protest starting from the peaceful march of the university students and workers, the protest in front of the radio continued with the massacre on Kossuth Square, the triumph of the revolution and finally the treason of Kádár and the Russian invasion. One ardent fighter on the barricades is Jadwiga, the Polish student who, wounded by the Russians, dies in Gyuri’s arms, thus making it easier for Gyuri to leave the country.

### **National Stereotypes**

In the chapter dated *September 1949* on the way to his workplace the protagonist witnesses the suicide of a young country girl throwing herself from Margaret-bridge into the Danube, a typical place for committing suicide ever since the existence of the bridge. The incident described, apart from being typical and hinting at the Hungarians inclination to pessimism and their high rate of suicide, is also able to trigger inter-textual associations, as Arany János’s famous ballad *Hídavatás* (The Inauguration of the Bridge) - a core element of the Hungarian canon - also commemorates the place. Witty humour coupled with the oxymoron *exitless exit* explains the probable reason for the suicide:

She looked like a country girl, seeking a populous conurbation for taking the exitless exit and not really attractive enough to encourage diving in after her but then if she had been attractive enough to have hordes of men diving in after her, she wouldn’t have had to jump in the first place. (Fischer 80)

This matter-of-fact incident serves as an occasion for the author to enlarge the act of suicide as a sort of national passion, as one way among the many other possible ways of self-destruction. At this point the novel imparts information about the national psyche and emphasizes a national stereotype of the Hungarians, which is definitely not a novelty for the Hungarian readers, but might be of interest for the English readership:

Also, one had to respect suicide as the national pastime, as the vice Hungarian. Gyuri wasn’t up to date on how suicide was progressing under socialism, it could well have been abolished but the popularity of doing-it-yourself couldn’t entirely be laid at the door of Rákosi and Co. For centuries, Hungarians of quality and quantity, who hadn’t managed to be part of Hungarian armies that got wiped out, had been blowing their brains out or uncaging their souls in other ways. Yes, a few idle minutes, some melancholy music and a Hungarian would be trying to unplug himself. And not just the nobility – Hungarian maids in Vienna had been notorious for their fondness for bleaching their entrails. (...) Of course, Gyuri thought, the Hungarian propensity for suicide might stem from their other great proclivity: their love of complaining. What better to complain to than the chief architect? Go to the top, go meet

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<sup>1</sup> All the English quotations come from Tibor Fischer’s *Under the Frog*. London: Vintage. 2002.

your maker and give him an earful about the shortcomings of the universe. There was probably a dirty great queue of Hungarians outside God's office ready to remonstrate." (Fischer 81)

The title of the book itself is connected to the incurable national pessimism. *Under the Frog* harks back to the Hungarian slang idiom according to which if someone is in a desperate, hopeless situation, which cannot get any worse is "under the arse of the frog." The choice of the title reflects clearly the multiple pragmatic and stylistic twists of the novel. The idiom translated word for word into English does not bear any semantic meaning, as it does not exist in English as an idiom, and still, it calls the attention of the English readers exactly by its meaninglessness, by the semantic gap it produces, which arouses in the readers the need for it to be explained. The context of the key sentence is relevant: the protagonist is arrested by the AVO and retained for unknown reasons for one night in a dark cellar in Andrásy út 60 where he can read the names and inscriptions on the prison walls of well-known Hungarians who were also previously confined by the same walls, among which was the sentence under focus:

"If you can read this, you're in trouble."

Well, thought Gyuri, here I am under the frog's arse. Under the coal-mining frog's arse indeed, at the very bottom of existence. Nothing could make things worse. (Fischer 130)

"Aki ezt olvassa, nagy szarban van.

Nos, gondolta Gyuri, akkor én most a béka segge alatt vagyok. Sőt a bányászbéka segge alatt, a lét legmélyebb mélypontján. Ennél rosszabb már nem tud lenni." (Fischer 162)\*<sup>2</sup>

Comparing the source language English version with its target language Hungarian translation we have to pinpoint that the Hungarian slang applied by the translator Bart István..."nagy szarban van" (you are in great shit) is much ruder than the original version "you are in trouble." Stylistically the idiom is even emphasized by a gradation which is achieved not by a grammatical device but with a lexical (semantic) gradation: "I am under the frog's arse. Under the coal-mining frog's arse indeed; - én most a béka segge alatt vagyok. Sőt a bányászbéka segge alatt..." the coal-mining frog being vertically at a lower position and obviously in a more hopeless situation than a frog on the surface.

The genuineness and freshness of the novel lies exactly in the phenomenon that is encapsulated in the title, namely the Hungarian mentality which finds voice in English. The idiom appearing in a context allows an insight into the Hungarian way of thinking and its linguistic manifestation.

### **Story Time Versus Text Time**

The other relevant marker of the text which is stylistically distinctive lies in the contradiction between the time of its story and style. The author and also the translator often use idioms or wording which were not characteristic in the fifties but are rather characteristics of the colloquial language use of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The time gap between the time of the story and the time when the text became an independent entity, that is, the time of the text production is clearly discernible. This "switch" to

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<sup>2</sup> All the Hungarian quotations come from Tibor Fischer's *A béka segge alatt*. Translated by Bart István. Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub, 2005.

contemporary colloquial and sometimes even slang contributes to the readability of the text, and assures an easier access by the contemporary readership.

When Stalin's statue is put down, Gyuri, with the other "souvenir-hunters," tries to chop down some bits from the statue. The term is translated as „szuvenírvadászal” (269) into Hungarian, which hardly existed in the everyday mentality and speech of the Hungarian speakers of the 1950s.

The pervading irony of the novel also suggests a distance between the story and its narrator and emphasizes that the facts related by the novel are not about the author's direct experience. Obviously, first-hand experience is not a requirement of any fictitious genre, but, given the fact that the novel tells true and widely known incidents from the recent past of the Hungarian history, makes the contextual environment of the novel one of special order. When reading the novel, the Hungarian readers cannot help being influenced by facts and incidents which are still being processed at present by historians, politicians, sociologists, journalists, stage and film directors and other scholars and artists, and which are being revised in various forms of self-history and oral history still today. However, the distance in time between the topic of the novel and its production will obviously alter the perception of the novel and also the attitude of the readership.

The cultural context of the Hungarian version is much wider and richer than that of the original, which naturally has an impact on its English and Hungarian interpretations. Traditionally, the source language version (the original) of a literary work is broader and richer than that of its translation, but in this case quite the opposite is true. The topic of the novel is more familiar with the target language readership than with the source language readership.

### **Ironic Distance and Humour**

What makes this true to life and true to history story enjoyable is definitely not the story itself, but the way it can mingle history with personal story. The tragedy of totalitarianism can only be tolerated by ironic distance and sarcastic humour resulting from the qualities of the fiction achieved with talent and wit. The novel, by the virtue of its style, structure and attitude of the narrator, has the power to convey detailed knowledge about the Communist period of Hungarian history and makes it not only understandable but enjoyable for contemporary foreign readers. Salman Rushdie calls the novel "a delicate serio-comic treasure" (on the back cover of Tibor Fischer's *Under the Frog*. London: Vintage, 2002.) – which I consider a very sensible definition.

The deepest seriousness expressing the priceless value of life lies deep under the surface of historic events and the sarcastically bitter life-experience rooted in the utter opposition between reality and the politically propagated virtual life.

Sheltering behind Stalin's head with the other souvenir-hunter, the first and only thing that occurred to Gyuri as the bullet smashed into the shops and cut down tree branches, was how much he wanted to live. He had never been aware of how enormous, how global this desire was deep down, a desire that was in no way smaller than the universe – how he would do anything, absolutely anything to live, to live for even few more seconds. If life meant huddling up to Stalin's head for the next forty years or so, that would be quite satisfactory as long as he could stay alive. Rolled up tighter than a foetus, he closed his eyes not questioning whether that could be of any use. (Fischer 218)

Besides, or rather along with the strong desire to live, no matter how, there is also a recurring longing for the politically free western world, a desire to live differently that is. The protagonist often fantasizes about being a street sweeper anywhere in the west, or is hypnotized by a telephone-set imagining that through it he might talk to a person whose voice comes from the free western world. Meeting a Swedish girl seems to him a “two legged ticket out of Hungary and worth a four hour wait for a phone-call.”

The streetsweeper was a sort of cerebral chewing gum that Gyuri popped in on long journeys. A streetsweeper. Where? A streetsweeper in London. Or New York. Or Cleveland; he wasn't very fussy. Some modest streetsweeping anywhere. Anywhere in the West. Anywhere outside. Any job. Now matter how menial, a windowcleaner, a dustman, a labourer: you could just do it, just carry out a job and you wouldn't need an examination in Marxism-Leninism, you wouldn't have to look at pictures of Rákosi or whoever had superbriganded their way to the top lately. You wouldn't have to hear about gambling production figures, going up by leaps and bounds, higher even than the Plan had predicted because the power of Socialist production had been underestimated. (Fischer 3)

### **Inventiveness and Humour: the Absurdity of the Age**

If we consider *style* and *attitude* arising from the novel its real achievement, we need to devote attention to the sources of humour and stylistically relevant linguistic and structural devices. Here are some examples for achieved humour:

Talking about the possibility of emigrating to China and eventually leaving it when things would turn to worse the protagonist mentions: “With a border that big, it'll be no problem walking out”. (Fischer 112)

The text is also abundant in *aphoristic conciseness* coupled with *irony* that convey deep meaning involving synthesized knowledge of the Hungarian history:

“The Germans, what a cultured people when they're not invading your country.” (Fischer 219)

„A német nagyon kulturált nép, kivéve, amikor megszállja az ember hazáját.” (Fischer 271)

Or:

Talking about the forced labour camps, which based on their mortality rate and living conditions were similar to concentration camps, and were set up for those members of society who were considered working class aliens, and whose personal profiles were marked with an X the author remarks sarcastically:

„The concept of Recsk (the most ill-reputed forced labour camp) was that you went in but you didn't come out.” (Fischer 220)

„Recsk azon az elven működött, hogy az egyik kapun bementek az emberek, a máik kapun meg nem jöttek ki.” (Fischer 271)

The revelation experienced in the revolution is expressed in the following remark:

“Strange that I had to wait twenty-two years to see someone saying what they thought in public; there was something almost improper about it.” (Fischer 223)

“Huszonkét évig kellett várnom, hogy szemtanúja legyek, amint valaki nyilvánosan kimondja, amit gondol; szinte szemérmertlenségnek tűnt.” (Fischer 276)

“The old joke about two Hungarians on a desert island resulting in three political parties had been enacted in earnest.” (Fischer 232)

“Valóra vált a régi vicc, melyben egy lakatlan szigeten két magyar három politikai pártot alapít.” (Fischer 287)

“Not only do I get a dictatorship, fumed Gyuri, but I get a tatty dictatorship, a third rate, a boring dictatorship.” (Fischer 159)

“Nem elég, hogy diktatúrában kell élnem, füstölgött magában Gyuri, de ráadásul ilyen ócska diktatúrában, egy harmadosztályú, unalmas diktatúrában.” (Fischer 197)

Talking about the anachrony of shops open day and night but running short of food he mentions:

„...the day-and- night **people’s buffet (a delicatessen short on delicacies)** had been open earlier...” (Fischer 218)

„...az éjjel-nappali **közért (a csemege mentes nagy csemegeüzlet)** még árusított...” (Fischer 26)

With this remark the author seems to be trapped by his own experience of a contemporary metropolis because there were no day – and night shop since 1956 in Budapest.

In the following example the **genuineness** and the **brave creativity** of the translator is worth noticing, who creates a completely new word, a compound adjective (otthonülő ‘someone who loves staying at home’) by adding a suffix suggesting a tendency (ülékény) or inclination (‘prone to stay at home’) and finally uses this individual derivation in the superlative degree (-ebb), thus exploiting to maximum the possibilities to synthesise meaning in Hungarian.

“Never an outgoing fellow in the first place, Gáspár had become even more **armchair-bound than Elek.**” (Fischer 144)

„Gáspár sose volt közlékeny, társasági lény, ezek után pedig még Eleknél is **otthonülékényebb** let.” (Fischer 180)

The snore of a man sleeping in the train is described as “Relentless **bombardments of zeds**” (Fischer 165), wittily translated into Hungarian with the contamination of two words (the verb ‘zúg’ (buzz) and the noun ‘dugattyú’ (piston), followed by a suffix turning the compound into an abstract noun: “folyamatos **zúgattyúzás**” (Fischer 205).

Jadwiga, the Polish student “... had the sort of slender **age-resistant** frame that would provide the same conjugal scenery at forty as at sixteen.” (Fischer 171)

“Age resistant” is translated with the unusual and ambiguous “korálló” referring both to age and the red radiance of the young girl.

“Épp az a fajta sudár, **korálló alkat** mely negyvenévesen is ugyanazt a látványt kínálja házastársának, mint tizenhat éves korában.” (Fischer 212)

The author often applies comparative sentences in a very productive way, quite often relying on the shared knowledge of the readers, thus increasing the pragmatic load of the sentences: Gyuri had got all the details about that but

“Jadwiga had been pleasingly reticent on the subject of her husband who seemed to have been **airbrushed out of the picture, like Trotsky standing behind Lenin.**” (Fischer 177)

“Gyuri az események legapróbb részleteiről is értesült tőle, üdítően szűkszavú volt viszont a férjét illetően, akit **mintha kiretusáltak volna a képből, ahogy Trockij a Lenin háta mögül.**” (Fischer 219)

The presumed meaning is that Trockij indeed was in the picture and later airbrushed for political reasons and this fact is treated as common knowledge shared between the readers and author.

Fischer has the capacity to make fine observations about everyday, seemingly unimportant, but still characteristic phenomena of the age. After casually describing the long lines of pickled gherkins and small jars of apricot preserves that are lined up neatly on the shelves of all the shops, the only products available in an economy working on strict plans, he reaches to a general conclusion:

They were what you could find all over Hungary in all the one-room shops: pickled gherkins and apricot conserve. If you liked pickled gherkins and apricot conserve a lot, you were in the right country. (Fischer 145)

The author however surpasses the observations of a journalistic report by treating the experience as a major symbol of socialism. The tinned food becomes a metaphor, a semantic concentration of the very core of the communist fifties. Neatness suggests the „organic stagnation, obedience and docility”; people themselves were like jars of tinned food, not needing care or attention possessing endless self-discipline.

There was the sort of organic stagnation, displayed stasis, obedience under clear glass that they would like from people, stacked in their homes, products that didn't require attention, that wouldn't be troubled by the languorous of the system of distribution, that would just exist docilely on the shelf until needed. (Fischer 145)

## Conclusion

Tibor Fischer's book contributes to deepening the insight into the realities of communism in Hungary in the 1950s that finally led to the revolution of 1956. The theme treated in the book *Under the Frog* may be regarded popular among the English readership, as attention and deep sympathy in the Western World turned towards Hungary exactly in 1956 for the first time and then in 1989 again, when the regime finally collapsed. The publication of the novel takes place only three years after this event, so the theme itself may have looked forward to a warm welcome among the English readers. The detailed description of the armed resistance of the Hungarians in Budapest and the invasion of the Red Army after November 1956 might be well known to the Hungarians, but less known by the foreign readers. The book, besides popularizing historical facts, also emphasizes certain stereotypes linked to Hungarians, which of course have their experiential basis: the strong friendship between the Hungarians and the Poles, (Jadwiga, Gyuri's lover, is Polish, and she is finally killed on the barricade); the position of Hungarians always fighting a battle that cannot be won; the image of the Hungarians who can never agree among themselves and thus fail to demonstrate national unity in issues of national interest; the image of the brave Hungarian who is prepared to sacrifice himself if he is right and to uptake an uneven battle:

take the example of the few, unarmed Hungarians against the army of the strongest world power: the Red Army.

Besides the popularization of true-to fact, already historic events, the literary value of the book lies in the freshness of its style. A distance is manifested between the author and the treated theme which is manifested in bitter irony in the first place. Fresh humour, however, reflects an inherited Hungarian mentality.

Tibor Fischer's book definitely deserves a place among contemporary British novels on the one hand on the ground of its stylistic and narrative virtues, and on the other hand deserves the attention of Hungarian readers and scholars as it promotes Hungarian heritage in English. The author's dual linkage results in a specific mentality and attitude. And last but not least, Tibor Fischer's first novel *Under the Frog* is an example of Hungarian–English cultural relations embodied in literature.

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