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Theory and Practice of Translation: An Original Translation of Regina E. G. Schymiczek's Die Weide Der Seepferde (The Pasture of the Seahorses)

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THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TRANSLATION: AN ORIGINAL
TRANSLATION OF REGINA E. G. SCHYMICZEK'S *DIE WEIDE DER
SEEPFERDE* (THE PASTURE OF THE SEAHORSES)

By

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Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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Abstract: This study outlines the original translation of the recently published *Die Weide der Seepferde* (2013) from Regina E. G. Schymizcek. We employ known translation techniques by following Hervey's (2006) suggested gradients of degrees of translation and cultural transposition. While translating the work we discovered a unique aspect of German-English translation which we believe fundamentally adds to knowledge of translation theory.

Introduction: Translation is today an important method which facilitates the transferring of knowledge between languages and cultures. In particular, an original translation such as this one proposed, wherein the translator has no information from other translated versions as a precedent, is exceptionally important and challenging. This text, which is new to the English language, provides not only a unique task for the translator but a potentially interesting product for the reader.

The translation process can be broken down into two types of activity: understanding a Source Text (ST) and formulating a Target Text (TT). Translation requires not only the ability to work within both the Source Language (SL) and the Target Language (TL), but also freely between them. Furthermore, an understanding of the cultural intricacies and idiomatic expressions of both the SL and TL is fundamental to a successful translation. The process begins with the translator reading the ST, which is similar to a literature review, and determining its salient features (i.e., genre, syntax and meaning), intended audience, and cultural nuances. Then the translator must decide how these aspects should be incorporated into the TT. Finally, they must decide how to translate the work within the scope of two important gradients (Hervey, 2006):

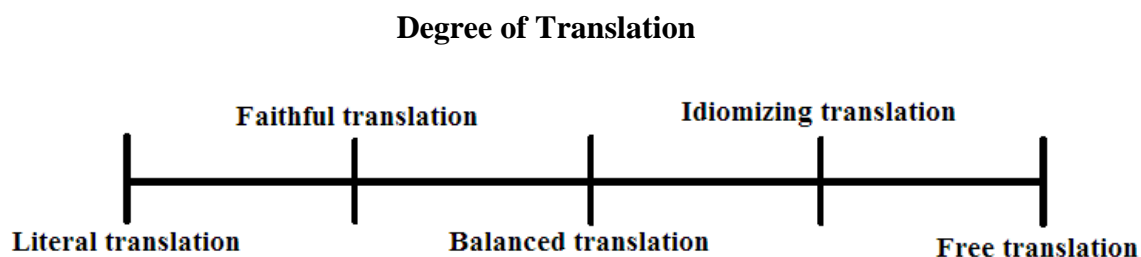


Fig. 1. This graph shows the possible implementations of a translation on the syntactical and lexical level. From the left to the right is an increasingly free style of translation.

A literal translation is also known as a word-for-word or formal-equivalence translation, which ignores grammatical nuances between the SL and TL. A free translation is known as an adaptation, and they often take the form of exegetic or gist works. They commonly bear little resemblance to the ST and SL. Although it is generally agreed that a translation between balanced and idiomizing is the “best” because of the cultural equivalences (idiomizing) between the ST and TT and the adherence to the textual qualities of the ST (balanced), there is, in reality, no such thing as a best translation (Hervey 2006). Rather, each work is intended for a particular audience, based on the goals of the translator and the appropriate amount of translation loss: the cultural meaning of an utterance is easily lost in translation and the translator has to determine when this is appropriate or how to reduce it via compensation. This is why there are over one dozen translations of Homer’s *Iliad*, each with their own bias and emphasis on academic and historical knowledge.

Cultural Transposition

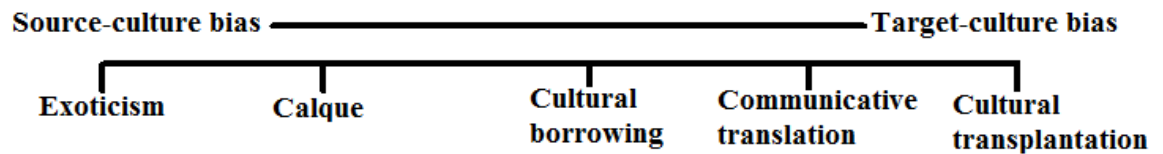


Fig. 2. This graph illustrates the ways in which culture can be translated. From the left to the right is an increasingly free style of translation.

These terms are somewhat more abstract than those belonging to degrees of translation. To begin, exoticism describes a source-culture bias, and is independent of the language and text. In practice, this means that the translator chooses to display the foreignness of the text, either through syntactical elements or unidiomatic expressions to signify an important distancing from the ST and the TT. This could be a wholesale transplantation of the ST (e.g., *Wie geht's dir?* / How goes it to you?), whereas a calque translation uses TL syntax and words, but with an unidiomatic TL meaning. (e.g., *Gebranntes Kind scheut das Feuer.* / The burnt child shuns the fire; instead of the appropriate translation: once bitten, twice shy.). Cultural borrowing directly uses the ST words (e.g., *Gesundheit* or *Zeitgeist*). A communicative translation attempts to reduce translation loss, convey the most appropriate idiomatic meaning and to maintain a level of synonymy. In this regard, a communicative translation is viewed by most theorists as the best method of cultural transposition, whereas cultural transplantation is an adaptation of the ST with little resemblance of it.

There are a few interesting aspects of *Die Weide der Seepferde* that introduce challenges and uniqueness to the translation. First, the plot takes place primarily in the U.S. This introduces a possibility for me to forego certain tendencies in translation, such as using the formal addresses of *Herr* and *Frau*. These are unnecessary because they hold no idiomatic meaning from the German text and would therefore result in

little to no translation loss. Second, one of the side characters in the novel often has dialog in Spanish and I intend to keep the dialog in Spanish. This introduces some additional challenges, namely that I do not speak Spanish, but nevertheless have to appropriately translate the surrounding dialog. On the other hand, this is extremely interesting given the prominent role of the Spanish language in the U.S. Third, the plot involves a Roman “Atlantis-like” location, which requires certain knowledge of antiquity, whether due to certain words, clothing styles, behaviors, etc. Lastly, the linguistic register of the dialog changes often because the main characters, for a significant amount of time, switch prominence in the novel. Regardless of these challenges, my goal, in line with that of theorists such as Goethe and Walther Benjamin, is to produce a work that is completely capable of standing on its own, without the reader realizing that it is a translation.

The purpose of this study is to produce an original English version of a contemporary German novel, Regina E. G. Schymiczek’s *Die Weide der Seepferde* (Working title: *The Pasture of the Seahorses*).

Methods: This project was begun first by reading *Die Weide der Seepferde* and determining its salient features and cultural nuances. From this, it was determined that the intended audience is young adults and teenagers and that the appropriate translation would be a point between a balanced and idiomizing translation. This means that translation loss was reduced when necessary and idioms were appropriately translated so that the cultural meanings kept their equivalence in English. The Spanish dialog remains untranslated, the German addresses of *Herr* and *Frau* have been omitted and the English register remains at an idiomatic point. Overall, we believe we translated the voice appropriately and kept the intention of the

author, which was determined through weekly meetings and careful discussion of all translated parts.

Results: The primary result of this project is the translation, what here is called the practice of this study. However, it was also simultaneously necessary to document the theoretical underpinnings and new knowledge that was produced outside of the physical result, what here is called the theory of this study. Therefore, the results section of this study is twofold: The physical *The Pasture of the Seahorses* and the theoretical knowledge that was initially discussed in the introduction. To recount them, they are the theoretical keystones of translation and include: degrees of translation (fig. 1), cultural transposition (fig. 2), translation loss and compensation. In addition, an unpredicted phenomenon was explored, which is the relationship of English colloquialisms, proper English grammar and their German counterparts.

To begin, the work was translated using the degrees of translation outlined by Hervey in *Thinking German Translation: A Course in Translation Method, German to English* (see fig. 1). The goal of producing a translation between balanced and idiomizing was accomplished. Beginning from the left of the gradient, there were not any instances of a literal translation, but numerous faithful translations. For example, on page 3: “Nach Grannys Tod habe ich tatsächlich eine Schatzkarte gefunden, nämlich diese hier.” The translation: “After granny’s death, I actually found a treasure map, namely this one here.” This translation is not literal because the syntax does not signify to the reader that it is foreign. The words, however, do, when considering that they are spoken by a young teenage girl. Specifically, Rebecca’s use of *nämlich* in the German version and then “namely” in the English translation. This adverb has a high register in English and is a word that most young teenagers would not use. However,

given Rebecca's prominent family and her well-to-do upbringing, it is easy to understand why she would know and use such a high-register word. Therefore the faithful translation makes sense here whereas it would not, for example, if Tony had uttered the word *nämlich* because his lower-class upbringing and foreign heritage would signify to the audience that he should use a different register.

There are many instances of a balanced translation, which is a point between the ST and TT where both the SL and TL are emphasized. On page 22: "Der Körper des Tieres endete in einer Art Delphinleib und statt der Hinterbeine hatte es eine große, quer stehende Schanzflosse!" which is translated as, "The animal's body ended in a type of dolphin trunk and instead of hind legs it had a large, horizontal tail fin." The translation is almost word for word the same, with the syntax being the only difference.

An example of an idiomizing translation which is by far the most commonly used translation in this work is on page 21: "Das Pferd konnte sie jetzt deutlich sehen." The chosen translation: "The horse was now clearly visible." A balanced translation would be, "She could now clearly see the horse," but was avoided because of repetitive use of the feminine pronoun "she" in the previous paragraph. Aligned with translation theory, we chose an idiomatic approach because German literature is characterized by a heavy use of the passive tense which is currently not the literary norm in English. Furthermore, German syntax is much more flexible than its English counterpart and leaves little room for a balanced translation. Simply, German sentence structure is often so untranslatable that one has to rewrite a sentence to make it readable in the English version. Using the above example, a literal translation would be, "The horse could she now clearly see." This is clearly unidiomatic and leaves little room for the translator to work with the original syntax. If the syntax is grossly

different as in this case, we believed it best to also translate the individual parts of speech (i.e., subject, object, etc.) differently as well because the difference in syntax often leads to a difference in meaning. Using the same example, it is clear from an understanding of German literature that the position of the object, in this example “das Pferd”, in the first position in the sentence signifies to the audience that the focus should be on the receiver of the verb(s) “could see”, rather than the subject, or actor of the verb, “she”. Thus, if we had translated this sentence as balanced, again, “She could now clearly see the horse,” then we would have shifted the focus from the object, “the horse” to the actor, “she”, which is not what the author had intended. This methodology was continued throughout the entire translation.

Progressing to the far right of the gradient, an example of a free translation is on page 2. “Sie starrte ihn mit ihren großen, wasserblauen Augen unverwandt an.” The chosen translation: “She had an unwavering stare and her large eyes were as blue as the ocean water outside his office.” A balanced or faithful translation would be, “She starred unwaveringly at him with her large water blue eyes.” Although rare, we chose a free translation when either a word is not directly translatable, “wasserblau” in this case, or when the translation would be too lengthy as in other examples in the novel. We were careful to avoid free translations when possible.

The second aspect is regarding cultural transposition (see fig. 2). Although it was originally determined that very little cultural nuances existed in the book, this was later found to be false. An example is from page 60 where Dr. Schymizcek writes, “Tony schnippte mit den Fingern gegen den inzwischen leeren Donut-Karton, den er samt zwei XXL-Lattes zum Frühstück mitgebracht hatte...” which was translated as, “Tony flicked his fingers on a donut box that he had brought along with two large lattes...”. The focus on this excerpt is “XXL-Lattes” and “large lattes”.

There are numerous intentions that the author could have had while writing “XXL-Lattes.” For example, is it to signify Jack’s exhaustion after having experienced a week of captivity, a subsequent violent escape and then a swim to shore? Simply, did Jack need an “XXL-Latte”? More importantly, is there such a thing as an “XXL-Latte”? Said differently, would an American audience understand this or was it intended for a German audience who is presumably under the assumption that Americans drink extremely large coffees? The latter was decided to be the case and thus the translation “large latte” was chosen.

Although seemingly insignificant, this is an important aspect of translation because it could signal to the reader a foreignness that would be described as “calque” or “exoticism” from earlier. The given translation is characterized as a “communicative translation”, which was the main goal of this project. There are numerous other cultural issues with the translation such as Tony’s use of the Spanish language and connection to Spanish culture, which is maintained. Further, Jack’s relationship with his mother is brought into question. That is to say, how does a German author with her German notions of family depict an American relationship? For example, Jack refers to his mother only by the noun “mother” and not others such as “mom”. It was determined that this was somewhat foreign and therefore the German, *Mutter*, is sometimes translated as mom, which would normally be *Mutti* or *Mama*, and not just mother.

Lastly, an issue with translation loss and compensation was discovered during this project that was neither mentioned in the introduction nor in any theory from the literature review. That is, the translation of colloquial words that are grammatically incorrect, but idiomatically sound. The intransitive verb “to lie” and transitive verb “to lay”, which are *liegen* and *legen* respectively, are the main cases and examples

from this project. It is idiomatically sound for an English speaker to say “I lied down for four hours today” or “I was laying down when there was a knock at the door” but grammatically correct would be, “I lay down for four hours today” and “I was lying down when there was a knock at the door.” The German language is not experiencing this same phenomenon and therefore requires a challenging task from the translator. Does one translate strictly according to grammar or according to readability? More importantly, where does this fall? Is this a question of grammar and syntax and therefore dictated by the degrees of freedom or is this a question of culture and therefore dictated by cultural transposition? Furthermore, this focuses attention onto the translator as having an important role in shaping English literature and therefore the English language.

This is the most troubling aspect of this project because it calls into question the truthfulness of the translation. If the TT intentionally no longer resembles the ST, then this is an issue if the goal is to produce a balanced translation. The translator has three options. One has to consciously choose to deviate from transliteration¹ and grammatical correctness to produce a more idiomatic translation (otherwise known as compensation), or preserve the words of the author and therefore produce a more balanced and faithful translation. The third would be to avoid the issue altogether and use transliteral synonyms such as “to place” or “to put” instead of “to lay”. This is still in line with transliteration and is the path that we chose to take with this translation. We found with this method that we were best able to adhere to the intentions of the ST while also producing an idiomatic TT. Therefore, we avoided using grammatically incorrect but idiomatically sound words in favor of

¹ Merriam-Webster defines transliteration as “to write words or letters in the characters of another alphabet” but the term is also broadly used to describe the generally agreed upon acceptable translations of any given word.

grammatically and idiomatically correct words and maintain the tradition of transliteration. This shows that although the translator has an important role in shaping literature, his or her duty is first to the source material. This obligation is reflected in our translation of *Die Weide der Seepferde*.

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