OF INADEQUATELY EXECUTED TRANSLATIONS AND A HIGHLY OPINIONATED AUTHOR: A STUDY ON BACK TRANSLATED FRAGMENTS FROM THE SWEDISH VERSION OF"THE LORD OF THE RINGS", BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN

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Abstract : On their path to translation proficiency, young translation practitioners are taught that one of the most efficient tools in comprehending the savoir-faire of qualitative translations is the analysis of less than fortunate translation instances. By favouring this approach, Translation Studies lecturers are more likely to yield progress in terms of their students' ability to distinguish between different types of translation difficulties and the strategies required to overcome such hurdles. The object of this paper is to shed some light on various target text excerpts where the translator misadvisedly rewords the source text, thus betraying the author's intention and misshaping the perlocutionary effect it creates on the target audience. In this respect, we will quench our linguistic acquisitiveness by studying certain fragments extracted from the Swedish translation of the "Lord of the Rings", performed by Åke Ohlmarks between 1959 and 1960 and translated back into English by Martin Andersson in 2007.

Keywords: Back translation, lexical mix-ups, poorly executed translations, scarce idiomatic and phonological knowledge, "The Lord of the Rings".

Introduction

This article represents a short overview of how J.R.R. Tolkien's works have been translated into various languages, paying a special attention to the translators' "unauthorized" liberties featured in target texts and also offering the author's standpoint with regard to such linguistic and cultural deviations. Over the years, experts have documented a wide range of both successful and unsuccessful translations. In some versions, little care is taken in style or nomenclature – here, we can mention Max Schuchart's Dutch translation (1956-1957) and Åke Ohlmarks's Swedish translation (1959-1960) of "The Lord of the Rings". In other cases, however, the translator may go as far as inventing Tengwar and Cirth modes for the target language and will re-draw the title page inscription in translation, as well as re-lettering the translation of the West-gate of Moria in the illustration.

Since we have already mentioned the Dutch and the Swedish translations, let us take a look at the way the title has been rendered into these languages by using, of course, the process of back translation. The Dutch title is "In de Ban van de Ring", which translates back as "Under the Spell of the Ring", the Swedish version being "Härskarringen", which leaves us with "The Ruler Ring". In both cases, Tolkien strongly objected while the translations were still in progress, especially with regard to the adaptation of proper names (the Elvish ones, in particular). Despite lengthy correspondence, Tolkien did not succeed in convincing the Dutch translator of his objections, and was similarly frustrated in the Swedish case.

At this moment, we shall take the liberty to state that we consider the Romanian translation of the English title, namely „Stăpânul Inelelor" (translated by Irina Horea, Ion

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Horea and Gabriela Nedelea in 2006) to be a pertinent, faithful translation. The translation strategy that has been used is literal translation, following the model of the two well-known Canadian translation scholars, Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Dalbernet[1]. The correspondence between the source text and the target text can also be attested for semantically since, according to the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language, one of the primary meanings of the Romanian noun stăpân is "persoană sub a cărei putere, autoritate, dominație se găsește cineva sau ceva, considerată în raport cu persoana sau cu lucrul respectiv; suveran, domnitor".

Returning to the Dutch translation, Tolkien wrote the following:

"In principle I object as strongly as is possible to the 'translation' of the nomenclature at all (even by a competent person). I wonder why a translator should think himself called on or entitled to do any such thing. That this is an 'imaginary' world does not give him any right to remodel it according to his fancy, even if he could in a few months create a new coherent structure which it took me years to work out. [...] May I say at once that I will not tolerate any similar tinkering with the personal nomenclature. Nor with the name/word Hobbit."[2]

With regard to the author's opinion on the Swedish translation, Tolkien was especially bothered by the fact that Ohlmarks showed no respect towards the fact that the British writer spent quite a lot of time developing and perfecting the names in the novel, since all the names featured in his work were created in a particular context within his legendarium, and were certainly not invented by accident. The fact that the hobbits' language seemed to be related to the tongues spoken by the inhabitants of Rohan is no mere coincidence, even though the Rohirrim dialect appeared somewhat more archaic. In this sense, Tolkien's choice was entirely intentional, since the hobbits' language was presented as English. As such, the fact that the language of the Rohirrim is represented through genuine Old English should come as no surprise. Tolkien constructed every single name according to its special designated meaning and etymology and, for this reason, the Swedish translator should not have tampered with them so heedlessly.

In fact, it was this kind of discontent which led Tolkien into writing "Guide to the Names in the Lord of the Rings" in 1967. Here, the author states that "the names in English form, such as Dead Marshes, should be translated straightforwardly, while the names in Elvish should be left unchanged".[3] Unfortunately, Åke Ohlmarks chose to oversee such prescriptions, thus committing serious translation errors. The examples illustrating this mishap are provided by the Swedish connoisseur, Martin Andersson, and can be retrieved in the article entitled "Lord of the Errors or, Who Really Killed the Witch-King?", published on January 23, 2007.[4]

"Rivendell becomes "Vattnadal" [Waterdale], probably because Ohlmarks thought that "riven" had something to do with "river", Esgaroth becomes "Snigelöv" [archaic: Snail leavings], most likely because Ohlmarks was thinking of the French word "escargot" which means "snail" and nobody in Middle-earth speaks French of course; Shelob's Lair becomes "Honmonstrets lår" [the She-monster's Thigh]. The only explanation I can come up with is

[1] Vinay, Jean Paul and Darbelnet, Jean , *Sylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, Didier, Paris, 1968 .
[2] Carpenter, Humphrey, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1981, pp. 249-251.
[3] Tolkien, J. R. R., *Guide to the Names in the Lord of the Rings*, edited by Jared Lobdell, Open Court, La Salle, 1975, p. 38.
[4] Andersson, Martin, "*Lord of the Errors or, Who Really Killed the Witch-King?*", 2007, http://sswftapa.blogspot.ro/2007/01/lord-of-errors-or-who-really-killed.html, accessed October 5, 2014

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that the Swedish word for "thigh" is "lår" (pronounced "lawr"), which bears an extremely superficial resemblance to 'lair'."[5]

The difficulty arises in the case of the names where the author, acting as translator of Elvish names already devised and used in this book or elsewhere, has taken pains to produce a common speech name that is both a translation and also (to the English-speaking audience) a euphonious name of familiar English style, even if it does not actually occur in England. An example of such a case is "Rivendell" – Tolkien's adaptation for the Sindarin word Imladris, whose back translation gives "Glen of the Cleft", or "Westernesse", the author's adaptation for the island of Númenor.

Translation excerpt analysis

As common sense would require, I begin my case study by stating that my analysis will be based on the comparison between Tolkien's original work (which will be abbreviated as "ST") and the back translation from Swedish (abbreviated BT), given the fact that, having no grasp of this language, I could not possibly conduct the analysis directly on the target text. As I have previously specified, the back translated fragments have been selected from an article written by Martin Andersson. I have chosen to analyze some of the fragments he exemplified and I classified them, according to the different translation problems I have identified. I would also like to mention that all the commentaries provided after each pair of fragments are my own.

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The first criterion involves the translator's scarce idiomatic knowledge of the source language, which can best be exemplified through the following fragment:

ST: "What's more, *if you turn over a new leaf*, and keep it turned, I'll cook you some taters one of these days."[6]

BT: "What does it matter to you *if you tear off a fresh leaf* and then hold it in your hand - then I'll one day cook you some taters too."[7]

This fragment, taken from the second volume of *"The Lord of the Rings",* namely *"The Two Towers",* is actually a part of the conversation between Sam and Frodo in which Sam is trying to encourage Frodo to see the positive side of their journey to Mount Doom and stop letting the Ring take its toll on him, thus the idiomatic expression "turn over a new leaf". Unfortunately, the translator wrongly takes this idiom literally and "poetically" twists it into the nonsensical structure "if you tear off a fresh leaf", and then takes his imprudence one step further by unadvisedly interpreting the original structure "and keep it turned" with the much too concrete phrase "and then hold it in your hand". In addition, he takes the phrase "what's more" from the source text, whose equivalent would be "moreover", and translates it by "what does it matter to you"? Åke Ohlmarks's reinterpretation of the original message is basically that Frodo's effort of seeing the bright side of things is purposeless, thus completely annulling the author's intention.

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[5] Andersson, op. cit., p.2.
[6] Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Lord of the Rings,* George Allen & Unwin, London, 1954-1955, one-volume paperback edition, Harper Collins, Grafton, 1992.
[7] Tolkien, J. R. R., *Sagan om de två tornen,* translated by Åke Ohlmarks, Almqvist & Wiksell, Stockholm, 1960, p. 305

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The second category of translation problems I was able to spot has to do with the fact that too much morphological economy can lead to serious gaps in logic, thus negatively affecting the coherence of the text:

ST: "For if his legs were tied, how did he walk? And if his arms were tied, how did he use the knife?"[8]

BT: "*If his legs were tied, then how was he able to use the knife*?"[9]

Professional translators are aware of the fact that a commonsensical amount of linguistic economy constitutes a plus in a translation, in the sense that redundant structures should be omitted. However, this is a perfect example of the fact that some translators can become overzealous and reduce so much of the target text that they end up with illogical structures. Without providing any more gratuitous remarks on this unfortunate mishap, it is nonetheless worth mentioning that there are many ways one could use a knife if their legs were tied.

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We move on with our study by stating that, even if Tolkien's writing style may seem uncomplicated, the translation of his works can become close to harrowing if the translator is not familiarized with the author's famous legendarium, the fictional historical and geographical frame he created for his works. The example I am going to give actually contains two unforgivable errors, which I will analyze before long.

ST: "... the last strongholds of the mighty woods of the Elder Days, in which the *Firstborn roamed* while Men still slept."[10]

BT: "... the very last bastions of the mighty woodland reaches of the Elder Days, where *the Firstborn One mooed* while the race of Men were still asleep."[11]

In "The Silmarillion"[12], a compilation of J. R. R. Tolkien's mythopoeic works, edited and published posthumously by his son Christopher Tolkien in 1977, the author provides us with his own version of the Creation story, thus shedding light on the much needed background for the disambiguisation of the different locations and characters dwelling in Middle-earth, as depicted in "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings". Here, he mentions that the first race of the Children of Ilúvatar were the Elves, who were awaken before the race of Men, hence their appellative "Firstborn". The Swedish translator, however, was not aware of Tolkien's fictional historical framework and interpreted the plural form from the source text as a singular one, ending up with "the Firstborn one". And now let us move on to the second mistake, which does not belong in the same category of translation problems, but it cannot be left untreated nonetheless. I am referring, of course, to the lexical item "to roam" whose Swedish pseudo-equivalent translates back as "to moo". I have to admit that, if Tolkien were still alive, I would be highly interested in learning his opinion on mooing Elves… But let us not get ahead of ourselves and mention the fact that the morphological ground I needed in order to even mention this example was offered, of course, by the Swedish connoisseur, Martin Andersson: "In Swedish there is a word, "råma" (pronounced RAW-mah), that means "to bellow" or "to moo". It is obvious that Ohlmarks was ignorant of the word "roam", and therefore picked the Swedish word that bore the closest phonetic resemblance."[13]

[8] Op. cit., p. 510
[9] Op. cit., p. 106.
[10] Op. cit., p. 463.
[11] Op. cit., p. 51.
[12] Cf. Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Silmarillion*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Allen and Unwin, London, 1976.
[13] Martin Andersson, op.cit., p. 6.

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The next category of translation mistakes refers to lexical mix-ups and the way they can alter the audience's general perception of the target text. Before we go into further detail, let us have a look at the fragment:

ST: "Beside Glorfindel there were several other *counsellors of Elrond's household*, of whom Erestor was the chief."[14]

BT: "Beside Glorfindel there were several other *members of Elrond's bodyguard*, of whom Erestor was in charge."[15]

As we all know, most concepts belonging to a certain source language can have more than one potential equivalent in the target language, according to the context in which said concept is employed. The Swedish translator, however, chose erroneous equivalents for both "counselor" and "household", thus ruining our mental picture of Elrond and Rivendell. Elrond was one of the fairest, wisest and noblest of all the Elves, the master of Rivendell and father of Arwen Undómiel, the Elf Maiden, who would later wed the lost king of Gondor and Arnor. But by replacing the "*counsellors of Elrond's household"* with the "*members of Elrond's bodyguard"* the reverie experienced by the source readers will hardly correspond to the one envisioned by the target audience.

Another example which falls under the category of lexical confusion, leading to a mistranslation can be found in the following fragment:

ST: "To Sam he [Bilbo] gave *a little bag of gold*.' Almost the last drop of the Smaug *vintage*,' he said."[16]

BT: "To Sam he [Bilbo] gave *a rounded little bottle in a golden case*.' Almost the very last drop of Smaug's best *vintage*,' he said."[17]

Here, the problem starts from the misinterpretation of the word "vintage" which can, of course, have more than one meaning, depending on the context within which it is employed. In the ST, Tolkien uses the noun "vintage" with the sense of "the output of a particular time; a collection of things manufactured or in use at the same time", as cited from the online English monolingual dictionary, thefreedictionary.com. However, the translator settled upon a more widely used meaning of "vintage", namely that of "(brewing) the wine obtained from a harvest of grapes, especially in an outstandingly good year, referred to by the year involved, the district, or the vineyard", cited from the same source. For this reason, he chooses to translate the noun phrase "a little bag of gold" by the erroneous equivalent "a rounded little bottle in a golden case".

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Some errors are simply nonsensical, as no explanation can be given to such faulty instances of translation other than, perhaps, a complete disregard for both the author and the novel:

1). ST: "'*It* [the darkness] comes from Mordor, lord,' he [the messenger] said."[18]

BT: "'Lord,' he [the messenger] said, '*I* come from Mordor.'"[19]

2). ST: "Two swift *hours* passed, and now the king sat upon his white horse ..."[20]

[14] J.R.R. Tolkien, op. cit., p.257.
[15] Op. cit., p. 288.
[16] Op. cit., p. 1023.
[17] Op. cit., p. 307.
[18] Op. cit., p. 832.
[19] Op. cit., p. 51.
[20] Op. cit., p. 834.

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BT: “Two swift *steeds* passed by and then the king himself sat in the saddle upon his white horse ...”[21]

3). ST: “He [Pippin] stopped *dead*” (this is when Pippin finds Gandalf facing the Lord of the Nazgûl at the gates of Minas Tirith.

BT: “He [Pippin] had stopped *Death*”

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Moreover, Åke Ohlmarks clearly shows that he does not possess a very strong grasp of the overall context in which he translates “The Lord of the Rings”, as this can be easily seen in the following fragments:

1). ST: “Only a remnant of our eastern force came back, destroying the last bridge that still stood amid the ruins of Osgiliath.”[22]

BT: “Of our force in the east only a remnant came back, and *the enemy* destroyed the last bridge that still stood amid the ruins of Osgiliath.”[23]

If he had paid attention to the story from the third volume of “The Lord of the Rings”, namely “The Return of the King”, he would have known that Osgiliath was the last stronghold between the legions of Orcs sent by Sauron, the Dark Lord, to defeat the already feeble army of Men and Minas Tirith, the City of Kings. As such, the enemies would have never chosen to destroy the bridge that could bring them one step closer to conquering the city.

2). ST: “'Ha! ha! What does we wish?' he [Gollum] said, looking sidelong at the hobbits. 'We'll tell you,' he croaked. 'He guessed it long ago, Baggins guessed it.'”[24]

BT: “'Ho ho ho, yes! What is it that we want?' he [Gollum] asked and looked from the side at the hobbits. 'We will tell you that,' he croaked. 'He guessed it long ago, Baggins *here* guessed it.'”[25]

By adding the adverb “here”, the translator convinces the target audience that Gollum is referring to Frodo, who shared his uncle’s last name, and was the only Baggins present at the moment. The truth of the matter is that this is an example of intertextuality, where J.R.R. Tolkien was actually summoning a passage from “The Hobbit”, in which Gollum and Bilbo have a riddle contest, the former loses and Bilbo gets to keep the One Ring. Besides, in “The Lord of the Rings”, Gollum never refers to Frodo as “Baggins”.

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One last aspect related to the Swedish translator’s poorly executed translation that I cannot fail to mention deals with the fact that he did not possess enough English phonological knowledge when he was translating “The Lord of the Rings”. Let us now ponder upon this fragment:

ST: “Prisoner is to be *stripped*. Full description of every article, garment, weapon, letter, ring or trinket is to be sent to Lugbúrz at once, and to Lugbúrz only. And the prisoner is to be kept safe and intact ...”[26]

[21] Op. cit., p. 86.
[22] Op. cit., p. 1216.
[23] Op. cit., p. 294.
[24] Op. cit., p. 645.
[25] Op. cit., p. 263.
[26] Op. cit., p. 767.

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BT: "Prisoner will be *whipped*. Full description of all equipment, clothes, weapons, letters, signs, ring, or jewelry is to be sent to Lugbúrz immediately and only to Lugbúrz. And the prisoner is to be kept safe and unhurt ...[27]

If I were to give it some thought, the only explanation as to how the translator could have made such an error is the fact that he was probably unable to make the distinction between the two English verbs "to strip" and "to stripe", since the only aspect that differentiates the past participles of these two verbs is an added "p". Thus, given the fact that, in some cases, the verb "to stripe" can be interpreted as "to whip", the translator's syllogism becomes quite transparent. Nonetheless, it is hard to believe that he was unable to detect his faulty logical argument since the following lines in the same dialogue were:

ST: "'*Stripped*, eh?' said Gorbag. 'What, teeth, nails, hair, and all?'"[28]

BT: "'*Whipped*, heh?' said Gorbag. 'What, with teeth, nails, hair and everything else?'"[29]

To further expand upon this fragment would only mean to destroy its amusing effect. Though I have to admit I am quite curious to find out how it would be possible for someone to be whipped with their own teeth and nails…

Conclusions

By conducting this investigation, I hope I was able to bring further proof in support of the idea that the translation activity does not involve unaware, arbitrary instances of transcoding from one language into another, that all the decisions a translator takes have to be in tune with the socio-cultural background in which both the source text and the target text have been produced, and that taking too many liberties can have a seriously harmful effect on the translation as a product.

Translating involves much more than simply "knowing and using a foreign language", since the translator must also have a strong knowledge of the morphosyntax and semantics of the source and target language, plus a thorough initiation in cultural studies. Translators should also be aware of and respect the author's intention, so as not to negatively influence the source text's illocutionary force. In addition, a proficient translator should always strive to find a balance between the amount of explicitations he performs and the cases in which presuppositions are best left unaltered. Having said that, I consider that the study I have conducted mainly showcases what can happen when the translator adopts an extreme target-oriented approach.

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[27] Op. cit., p. 410.
[28] Op. cit.
[29] Op. cit.

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