

Translating rhymed poetry – Thomas Hardy’s Neutral Tones

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Among the many approaches towards translating rhymed metrical poetry from English into German, the probably most challenging approach aims to create a poem that, aspiring to poetic art in the target language, integrates as far as possible the meaning and formal features of the original. Drawing upon the example of *Neutral Tones* by Thomas Hardy, my paper will analyse the process of translation and suggest ways of structuring it. What to prepare, where to begin, and how to proceed: these are questions that will be tackled and tentatively answered. The paper will not provide a ready-made solution but open up new avenues towards a better awareness and understanding of the translational process.

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Any translation of rhymed poetry from English into another language has to take into account the extent to which the characteristics of English can, in principle, be reproduced or imitated by the target language. This is important because English poetry in general, and metrical English poetry in particular, exploits the linguistic potential of the language to generate meaning beyond the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. A target language with linguistic characteristics similar to the source language can more closely reproduce the original meaning and tone than a language unrelated to English, especially, when it comes to rendering the intricate subtleties of rhythm and metre. Lexical stress is phonologically relevant in German as it is in English and plays a central role in the metro-rhythmic organisation of many poems. Thus, German is a target language into which English poetry may be translated not just with its lexical,

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phrasal, and syntactic meanings, but also with the meaning conveyed in the rhymes, rhythm, and metre of its verse lines.

Given the relatedness between German and English in respect of their stress-bound phonological patterns and the significance of these patterns in the poetry of both languages, it seems to be only too natural to try to preserve them in translation. Yet, the trade-offs required by a translational approach that attempts to render all types of meaningful elements as they occur in the original often turn out to be mutually exclusive and, therefore, almost impossible. Sticking to rhyme and metre in the German translation of an English poem is not unlikely to result in a poetic message unwarranted by the source text (at least in some degree). Despite this obvious drawback, my paper focuses on the translation of a poem (Thomas Hardy's *Neutral Tones*) whose metro-rhythmic organisation calls for some kind of reproduction or imitation in the target language. For other methods of poetic translation, indeed, for a comprehensive systematic analysis of the different translational approaches used to render English (and French) poetry into German, I refer the reader to Andreas Wittbrodt's thesis *Verfahren der Gedichtübersetzung* (Wittbrodt 1995).

Written in 1867, *Neutral Tones* is one of Hardy's earlier poems. That it is also one of his better known verse compositions can be gleaned from the fact that it has been included in many selections of his poetry and set to music, for example, by English composer Nicholas Maw (for a recording, see Britten et al. 2005). This is the poem:

We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod,
—They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove
 Over tedious riddles solved years ago;
 And some words played between us to and fro
 On which lost the more by our love.

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing
 Alive enough to have strength to die;
 And a grin of bitterness swept thereby
 Like an ominous bird a-wing . . .

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
 And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
 Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,
 And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

Neutral Tones consists of four four-line stanzas; the rhyme scheme is abba cddc effe ghhg; the overall metrical principle is characterised by three four-stress lines and one three-stress line for each stanza, with the number of unstressed syllables between stresses ranging from one to two. The rhymes are perfect rhymes, with the possible exception of *rove* – *love* (depending on Hardy's pronunciation of the words and on how far visual rhymes are considered acceptable).

A German translation accounting for these patterns can do so in different ways. For example, the number of rhyme words available in the target language can be increased by opting for assonance instead of perfect rhymes as the rhyming principle; and the metrical structure of each stanza – rather than being translated into a similar 4443-pattern – may as well be rendered as three five-stress or even six-stress lines and one four- or five-stress line, respectively. Why should a translator want to do that? The answer to this question can be found in the fact that German, as a more synthetic language with many grammatically relevant suffixes, tends to require more syllables to express a particular idea than

English, which dispenses with most grammatical endings and features many monosyllabic words. If we, then, take into consideration that the syntax in *Neutral Tones* is fairly straightforward, without any poetic concessions such as the elision of words or an ungrammatical word order (for a syntactically controversial issue, see Doherty et al. 1973 and Morgan 1974), and that a translation into German is usually longer than the English original, it will be clear that for a target text to match the meaning of the source text with an equally smooth syntax and approximately the same lengths of rhymed verse lines poses an extremely challenging, if not insurmountable, task. It is the simultaneity of all aspects – rhyme, metre, syntax, and meaning – which would justify a comparison of the translation of a rhymed metrical poem with a jigsaw puzzle or a complex mathematical problem. Only that the result of the translation is never perfect in the sense that there are no other possibilities; there are, in fact, quite a few alternatives, each of which has to stand the test of being set against another translation with its in some respects better and in other respects worse solutions.

How this required simultaneity tends to thwart the inspirational guesswork of the translator can be demonstrated with a first attempt at translating the first stanza. To begin at the beginning:

We stood by a pond that winter day,

could be rendered, for example, as

- (1) Wir standen jenen Wintertag an einem Teich
- (2) Wir standen am Teich jenen Wintertag
- (3) An jenem Wintertag standen wir am Teich
- (4) An jenem Tag im Winter standen wir am Teich.

These solutions all have their advantages and disadvantages, and they form some kind of straitjacket for the translation of the other lines in this stanza.

Rendering (1), for example, with its six stresses instead of the original four stresses requires lines two and three (as well as the first three lines of the other stanzas) to also take six stresses. If, then, any of these lines could do with fewer stresses, they would have to be semantically inflated, for instance:

(5) und die Sonne stand weiß am Himmel, gescholten von Gott und dem
Wetter

rather than just

(6) und die Sonne war weiß, wie von Gott gescholten.

In (5), neither “Himmel” nor “Wetter” are warranted by the original and the idea of scolding weather is less convincing than that of a chiding God. This shows that having to add words to a translated line of verse for metrical reasons may lead to a semantically unsatisfactory solution. Still, such lexical line filling is certainly easier to cope with in terms of meaning than finding a semantically appropriate rhyming word that fits the metrical pattern, because the line could also be filled with two synonymous translations (“weiß und blass”) for one word (“white”) and a more elaborate syntax:

(7) und die Sonne war weiß und blass, als ob Gott sie gescholten hätte.

Although rendering (7) demonstrates that opting for a longer line in the German translation can be a promising strategy, it also reveals a potential pitfall of the German syntax, namely, the auxiliary verb at the end of the line. To exploit the semantic impact of rhyme, rhyming words, in general, should be charged with more meaning than that of a mere auxiliary.

Like (1), translations (3) and (4) form six-stress lines, with (4) avoiding the stress-clash in (3) at the caesura between “Wintertag” and “standen”. As both

opt for the slightly more colloquial phrase “An jenem [...]” instead of “jenen Wintertag” (thereby matching the conversational tone of Hardy's poem better than the alternative), they have to put up with a minor deviation when, for metrical reasons, the prepositional phrase with *indefinite* article, “by a pond”, has to be rendered with an implied *definite* article, “am Teich”. It may well be argued that such a deviation is not particularly significant (compared to the many other compromises that will have to be made), since the indefiniteness of the pond does not suggest that the speaker forgot by which pond the described scene took place (given the definiteness of “that winter day” and the importance of the meeting). The phrase “by a pond” merely indicates that the precise location of the pond is irrelevant; what counts is the mood conveyed by the description of the pond as remembered by the speaker.

While (1), (3), and (4) are possible six-stress renderings with their respective advantages and disadvantages, the translation given in example (2), by contrast, sticks to the metre of *Neutral Tones* in that it confines the number of stressed syllables in the line to four. This is achieved by squeezing “jenen” in between two stresses, thereby leaving the word unstressed – though at the expense of a natural syntax: the normal sentence structure would be, “Wir standen jenen Wintertag am Teich”. Despite this syntactic concession, we will take rendering (2) as a starting point for a demonstration of the vagaries encountered by a translator of rhymed metrical poetry, because the general tone of the source text can best be preserved in a target text with verse lines of a similar metrical length.

Probably the most restrictive element in the translation of rhymed metrical poetry is rhyme. The challenge consists in finding a rhyming word that fits not only the meaning of the text but at the same time also meets all other requirements. Starting with

(2) Wir standen am Teich jenen Wintertag

requires a word rhyming with “-tag” in line 4, at the end of the first stanza. The question now is, which of the meaningful words in lines 4 and 3 of the original (if we take into account a possible syntactic change in the translation) – “leaves”, “lay”, “starving”, “sod”, “fallen”, “ash”, and “gray” – can provide a suitable German term. To find such a suitable term, we should first list all possible translations of the terms in question. This process can be complemented by a translation technique that does not focus on the meanings of words but on a rendering of the visual image conveyed in the source text lines. As a result, we get a large number of German words among which we now have to look for a rhyme with “-tag”. The idea that leaves which have fallen from an ash are, in the end, lying on the ground, gives us “lag” – a verb that furnishes not just a perfect rhyme but also the right tense. However, the fact that this verb has to go at the end of the stanza and, thus, at the end of a sentence, requires a subclause in German for that line. This can easily be done with a relative clause, for example:

(8) das welk auf der Erde lag.

Note that “lag” goes with a singular noun, which is why “leaves” would have to be translated as “Laub” rather than “Blätter”. A reference to “Laub” of the relative clause in (8) suggests “Laub” as the rhyming word at the end of line 3. This, then, implies that for line 2 a rhyme with “Laub” has to be found that suits the meaning of the text in that place. However, “Staub”, “taub”, or “Raub” would hardly fit semantically into any line-2 context.

A possible solution to this problem would be an extension of the relative clause into the previous line:

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- (9) und grau war das Laub, das – von Eschen gefallen – /
auf der sterbenden Erde lag.

This begs the question whether the meaning of line 2 can be satisfied using a rhyme with “gefallen”. At least, there is more choice. For example:

- (10) und die Sonne schien weiß, wie durch Gottes Missfallen
(11) und die Sonne schien weiß, um Gott zu gefallen.

Such rhymes are not ideal. While “Missfallen” in (10) jars with “gefallen” because of the same consonant “f” and a lexical stress in the wrong place (on the first syllable, “Miss-”, rather than on the second, thereby creating metrorhythmic tension), rendering (11) uses an identical rhyme albeit with a different meaning. Moreover, in (11), “um Gott zu gefallen” does not match the meaning of the original and is out of keeping with the general sense and tone of the poem.

The above discussion shows that the following translation of the first stanza is far from perfect:

- (12) Wir standen am Teich jenen Wintertag,
und die Sonne schien weiß, wie durch Gottes Missfallen,
und grau war das Laub, das – von Eschen gefallen –
auf der sterbenden Erde lag.

Following the translation proposed in example (8) for the last line of the stanza, one could also translate

- (13) welk auf der Erde lag.

Rendering (12) has the advantage of being closer to the meaning of “starving sod”. However, a clear drawback of both translations of line 4 is their syntactic integration in the context of the previous line: while the main clause in Hardy's poem – “They had fallen from an ash and were gray” – is syntactically and metrically detached from the rest of the stanza, a device that contributes

considerably to the stanza's melancholy tone, this effect is weaker in the translation, because there it is based only on the three-stress line.

The above translation of the first stanza shows that the simultaneous integration of rhyme, meaning, metre, syntax, and tone cannot easily be achieved by a serial process. The standard process would be one of trial and error, in which the translator winds his or her way through a maze of linguistic properties, ending up in several blind alleys and vainly clutching at the occasional inspirational straw before finally getting a result that may, or may not, be satisfactory. What is required is a process which imitates the simultaneity of all aspects of the poem – as much as this is possible with an inherently sequential medium such as the written language. For this purpose, I will now propose a procedure that can help the translator to find his or her way from the source text to the target text without getting lost.

The solution to the problem posed by the simultaneity of rhyme, meaning, metre, syntax, and tone lies in a preparatory analysis of each of these aspects. The idea is to subdivide the translational process into two stages: in the first stage, the source poem's rhyme, meaning, metre, syntax, and tone are analysed individually and prepared for translation (or are pre-translated); in the second stage, the translator, using the target language, integrates the various poetic elements on the basis of the findings in stage one. Most restrictive among the five aspects are rhyme and meaning followed by metre. Especially with rhyme, a thorough preparation can provide a useful framework for an integration of the poetic elements. Ideally, the translator should be able to choose the most suitable rhyme word for a line from a number of other possible rhyme words.

This is how the first stage is implemented for rhyme: first, write down as many translations as possible for the meaningful concepts in the lines linked by rhyme; second, look up as many German rhyme words as possible for each of the meaningful concepts; third, try to find among the rhyme words for one meaningful concept a rhyme word that fits another of the meaningful concepts found in step one. Note that, in the second step, it is important not to exclude any rhyme words on the grounds that they appear to be semantically irrelevant; because such a pre-selection would limit the possibilities of resorting to equivalence as a method of translation in case meaning needs to be expressed in a different way, for instance, using a different image.

For rhyme in the first stanza of Hardy's *Neutral Tones*, the three steps might look like this: first, e.g. in lines 1 and 4: wir – Teich, See, Tümpel, Wasser – Winter, kalt – Tag – Esche, Baum – fallen, liegen – grau, bleich; second, e.g. Teich, weich, reich, Deich, gleich, bleich – Tag, Schlag, Ertrag, mag, lag – fallen, schallen, hallen, gefallen, Missfallen; third, e.g. Teich, bleich – Tag, lag. Of course, more words could be added to the lists in step one and two; luckily, the above examples already reveal two possible rhyme pairs for lines 1 and 4. A possible rendering of stanza one with the rhyme pair “Tag, lag” has been discussed in (12). The other rhyme pair, “Teich, bleich”, opens up the possibility in line 3 of a rhyme with “gescholten” at the end of line 2. In my final translation, I have favoured this option, because it eliminates the slightly unnatural syntax in the first line of rendering (12), avoids the strange rhyme between “Missfallen” and “gefallen”, and allows for a syntactic break at the end of the third line (as in the source poem) rather than having a strong enjambement in this place. Here is, then, the whole poem in German:

Neutrale Töne

Wintertag – wir standen am Teich
 Und die Sonne schien weiß, wie von Gott gescholten;
 Ein paar Blätter, die welk auf der Erde sich rollten,
 Von Eschen gefallen und bleich.

Deine Augen auf mir wie ein schweifender Blick
 Über längst vergangene Langeweile;
 Und zwischen uns Worte, spitzer als Pfeile –
 Verlorenes Liebesglück.

Dein Lächeln glich einem Todesspuk:
 Es erstarb als lebendig begrabener Schrei,
 Und ein bitteres Grinsen glitt vorbei
 Wie ein Unheilsvogel im Flug.

Die Erfahrung, dass Liebe Falschheit und Raub ist
 Von Gefühlen, formt mir seitdem in Träumen
 Dein Gesicht und die Sonne, das Geäst von Bäumen
 Und den Teich, dessen Ufer voll Laub ist.

Going into detail about the translation of stanzas two, three, and four is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the semantic sacrifices required by the constraints of rhyme, metre, and syntax are confined to the lexical level in such a way that the overall meaning of the poem remains intact. To achieve a satisfactory result when rendering a rhymed metrical poem into German, the translator would be well advised to employ the two-stage process described here, because it helps him or her to develop the wealth of ideas needed to choose the right word for the right context.

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