

KAFKAESQUE AS A STYLE IN TRANSLATION**KAFKAESQUE COMME STYLE DE TRADUCTION****KAFKAESQUE-UL CA ȘI STIL DE TRADUCERE****Paul-Alexandru VIDA**

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This article deals with the idea of translating the written works of Franz Kafka using a unique style - the Kafkaesque. A proper definition for the term "Kafkaesque" is needed to ensure a better understanding how to translate Kafka. An analysis of translations of Kafka side by side compared to the source text is also presented, along with an original attempt at translating.

Résumé

Cet article traite de l'idée de traduire les écrits de Franz Kafka en utilisant un style unique - le Kafkaesque. Une définition appropriée du terme "Kafkaesque" est nécessaire pour mieux comprendre comment traduire Kafka. Une analyse des traductions de Kafka côte à côte par rapport au texte source est également présentée, ainsi qu'une tentative originale de traduction.

Rezumat

Acest articol se ocupă cu ideea traducerii operelor scrise ale lui Franz Kafka folosind un stil unic – Kafkaesque-ul. O definiție potrivită pentru termenul "Kafkaesque" este necesară pentru a asigura o înțelegere mai bună asupra felului cum ar trebui tradus Kafka. O analiză a traducerilor textelor lui Kafka puse una lângă cealaltă comparate cu textul sursă este deasemenea prezentată, împreună cu o încercare originală de traducere.

Key words: *Kafka, Translation, Fiction, Style***Mots-clés:** *Kafka, traduction, fiction, style***Cuvinte cheie:** *Kafka, traducere, ficțiune, stil*

What can be defined as Kafkaesque has been blurred throughout the past century. A more accurate definition for this term is needed to better understand what makes Kafka's work authentic and to guide one through his inner machinations. Kafkaesque represents in my opinion the hindering absurd that is driven by mysterious motives, never to be revealed or with no motive as to its existence at all. Thus any protagonist, be it in a work of fiction or in daily life encounters a Kafkaesque situation once he cannot justify any logical reasoning behind the actions that shape it, and at the same time hindering progress. Kafkaesque functions as a style not only in literature, but also in the art of translation. To properly shape and mold such an environment when translating, one must become one with the author, a kind of neutral demiurge, in order to properly conceal the reasons behind occurrences through the clever use of language. A translator of the Kafkaesque should present just the facts, not the explanations and also not hint to any, unless the source-texts make a supposition. Kafka's writing style is more about reaction to form and context, rather than

the creation of it. Thus the context is never explained, the main characters are constantly left guessing in bewilderment as to why strange irrational events occur.

In the process of translation one must take Kafka's personal style into account, or else one risks producing a writing of something completely different. A key element to remember when translating Kafka would be his politeness of language and intellectual formality. Franz Kafka's word choice strengthens this trait, preferring words that are more neutral to subjective jargon or objective scientific language. When comparing his works of art to his letters, one can notice how Kafka wrote fiction in the same manner he'd correspond with his family and acquaintances – naïve politeness.

The following is an extract in its original German from the story "The Trial" by Franz Kafka. An analysis of this short text will be undertaken; afterwards a contrastive analysis of two English translations of the same extract will be presented, followed by an original attempt at translating it.

„K. dachte daran, ob er sich jetzt nicht eiligst entfernen sollte; wenn er es jetzt nicht tat, war keine Aussicht, daß er es während der Predigt tun könnte, er mußte dann bleiben, so lange sie dauerte, im Bureau verlor er so viel Zeit, auf den Italiener zu warten war er längst nicht mehr verpflichtet, er sah auf seine Uhr, es war 11. Aber konnte denn wirklich gepredigt werden? Konnte K. allein die Gemeinde darstellen? Wie, wenn er ein Fremder gewesen wäre, der nur die Kirche besichtigen wollte? Im Grunde war er auch nichts anderes. Es war unsinnig daran zu denken, daß gepredigt werden sollte, jetzt um 11 Uhr, an einem Werktag bei greulichstem Wetter. Der Geistliche – ein Geistlicher war es zweifellos, ein junger Mann mit glattem, dunklem Gesicht – ging offenbar nur hinauf, um die Lampe zu löschen, die irrtümlich angezündet worden war.“ (KAFKA, 1960, 233-234)

This paragraph constitutes a relevant part of the ninth chapter of "The Trial" entitled "In the Cathedral" – Josef K. meets the priest for the first and only time. K.'s clerical encounter can be considered the most "sane" moment of the entire story. The priest explains K.'s predicament through a carefully crafted parable ("Before the Law"), which can be considered the highest point in the novel.

K. finds himself in the cathedral, taking shelter from the rain outside and collecting his thoughts. Spotting a clergyman he panics, thinking a sermon is about to commence, even though it is 11 o'clock in the evening. The clergyman apparently was present merely because he wanted to put out a candle that someone left burning. The apparition of the priest takes on supernatural proportions within K.'s mind. Kafka's careful use of the word "Geistlicher" to describe him, instead of "Kleriker" or "Priester", creates a ghostly haunt within the reader's mind (Ger. der Geist = Eng. ghost; spirit). Josef K.'s confusion as well as anxiety is exacerbated within the cathedral while encountering the priest – all personal encounters so far had left a bitter taste behind and at the same time were plagued by a lack of reason.

Contrastive English Translations:

"K. wondered whether he shouldn't get away as quickly as possible. If he didn't now, there would be no chance of him being able to do so during the sermon, he'd have to stay as long as it lasted, losing all that time he could be in the office, since he wasn't obliged to wait for the Italian any longer. He looked at his watch; it was eleven. But was a sermon really going to be given? Could K. alone be the congregation? What if he'd been a stranger who just wanted to look round the church? Basically that was all he was. It was stupid to imagine a sermon could be given now, at eleven o'clock on a weekday morning, during the most awful weather. Obviously the priest — it definitely was a priest, a young man with a smooth, dark complexion — must be going to the pulpit just to put out the lamp, which had been lit by mistake." – (Translated by Mike Mitchell)
(KAFKA, 2009, 150)

“K. now considered whether he should leave as quickly as possible, if he did not do it now there would be no chance of doing so during the sermon and he would have to stay there for as long as it lasted, he had lost so much time when he should have been in his office, there had long been no need for him to wait for the Italian any longer, he looked at his watch, it was eleven. But could there really be a sermon given? Could K. constitute the entire congregation? How could he when he was just a stranger who wanted to look at the church? That, basically, was all he was. The idea of a sermon, now, at eleven o’clock, on a workday, in hideous weather, was nonsense. The priest there was no doubt that he was a priest, a young man with a smooth, dark face was clearly going up there just to put the lamp out after somebody had lit it by mistake.” – (Translated by David Wyllie) (KAFKA, 2007, 248)

The second sentence of this excerpt illustrates the quickness of Josef K.’s thoughts. Kafka employs only one semi-colon as a “breather” within the structure of the sentence. The two translators, Mitchell and Wyllie tackle this matter differently. Mitchell splits the sentence in three segments, whereas Wyllie respects the sense of urgency of the source text, producing thus just one long sentence.

Josef K. wonders if he alone could constitute the entire congregation for whom a sermon might be given. Afterwards he delivers a scenario regarding the possibility of him being but just a stranger that wanted to admire the church. Mitchell’s translation is accurate in conveying this probability (e.g. “What if he’d been a stranger [...]”) (KAFKA, 2009, 150). Wyllie does not abide to this detail, promptly delivering an affirmation (e.g. “How could he when he was just a stranger who wanted to look at the church?”) (KAFKA, 2007, 248). The upcoming sentence that reflects upon this, stating that K. was indeed merely but a stranger is contextually imbedded within the Mitchell text, compared to Wyllie’s.

Kafka uses the word “Unsinn” to describe the situation, and not “blöd”, setting a more mature and paced tone to the scenario. Mitchell translates the word as “stupid”, more akin to “blöd” than to “Unsinn”. Wyllie uses the direct English analogue of “nonsense”, respecting the source text.

Kafka clears up the situation at the end of the fragment, explaining how apparently it is just a priest that wants to put out a lamp. Translating the word “offenbar” poses a real problem for these two translators, none of them managing to translate it as “apparently” (Mitchell – “must be going to the pulpit just to put out a lamp, [...]”) (KAFKA, 2009, 150); (Wyllie – “was clearly going up there just to put out the lamp [...]”) (KAFKA, 2007, 248).

Original English Translation:

>>K. thought about if he should remove himself from the situation rapidly; if he wouldn’t do it now, there would be no possibility of him doing that during the sermon, he would then have to remain as long as it would last, he lost so much time in the bureau, he did not have the obligation anymore to wait for the Italian, he looked at his watch, it was 11. But could someone really hold a sermon now? Could K. solely constitute the congregation? How could that be possible, if he would have been a stranger that just wanted to look at the church? Actually it was not any different. It was nonsense to believe that a sermon would be held, now at 11 o’clock, on a workday with the most horrible weather. The cleric – it was undoubtedly a cleric, a young man with a smooth, dark complexion – apparently just went up, to extinguish a lamp that had been lit by accident.<< (Translation done by Paul-Alexandru Vida for the current article)

When translating the works of Franz Kafka there are certain aspects one must pay attention to. Some of these have been tackled in the beginning of the current article. Worthy of mentioning would be Kafka’s neutral and polite discourse, which should be carefully emulated through the translator’s word choice in the target language. Another would be the concealment of information

that tends to become explanatory of depicted situations. Next I will add to these elements three more that can aid the translator when processing Kafka's fictional writings.

An important aspect is the proper conversion of long sentences from German into English. Given syntax permissiveness, the German author can string long sentences one after the other without using a semi-colon or a period – yet still maintaining a sense of intelligibility. At times even these sentences of the source text are ambiguous in construction, requiring more than just one reading to be properly comprehended. Therefore the translator must take care when working with such sentences, re-reading them should be compulsory to assure oneself the task of translation has been filled out accordingly and permits the reader to understand the text.

Another topic up for debate would be if given names of characters found in Kafka's works, albeit not many, should be anglicized or not. This is the case with Josef K. (Eng. Joseph K.) of "The Trial" and "A Dream", and with Rosa (Eng. Rose) of "A Country Doctor". The latter is crucial to the work of fiction it occurs in, given the use of the word "Blume", "Rose" and the color "rosa" throughout the text. The German given name is used poetically and it should be decided if one should exchange it for its English equivalent or not.

Translating Kafka is akin to walking an absurd thin line that separates the comic from the tragic – Kafka masterfully crafted this point of view that has cemented his legacy of originality. By respecting this, one can much more easily convey the correct artistic vision normally intended.

Translation is a constant process that should not be seen as a "one-off". One translation of a text will never suffice due to the handicap of this task. Walter Benjamin wrote an essay entitled "The Translator's Task". In it he used a metaphor to describe the translation of fictional works. The author stands within the forest of language, hearing all the words – whereas the translator stands outside the forest, on the edge, shouting into it and waiting for the echo (BAUDELAIRE, 1923). Thus the translation is never perfect and can be tackled from a myriad of perspectives. Another reason for periodic translation of Kafka's works would be the ever-evolving and changing society and its language. To be made comprehensible, translations are Zeitgeist-sensitive, regardless of their timelessness of tackled subjects.

My intent with this article is to give a better overview of what it entails to attempt translating the works of Franz Kafka, in hope that it will help current and future translators when honing their craft. One must constantly attempt translation of fictional works, in the hope of attaining a transcending perfection, the translator's "alchemical gold" or "Holy Grail of Translation" – an exact representation of the original text in another language, conveying the same meaning, rhythm, rhyme and reason, conjuring the exact same atmosphere as the author, as if both texts were written by the same human being.

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