

Brothers of a Lost Tongue: Comparing Translations of Franz Kafka's In the Penal Colony

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“Yes, you can,” the officer said. The traveler saw with a certain apprehension that the officer had clenched his fists. “Yes, you can,” repeated the officer. “I have a plan that is bound to succeed. You believe your influence is insufficient. I know that it is sufficient. But even granted that you’re right, is it not necessary, for the sake of preserving this tradition, to try even what might prove insufficient?” (Muir 213)

The famous linguist Noam Chomsky once argued that language is a biological component of humanity, and, as such, all languages contain basic universal components in the forms of phonetics, morphemics, semantics, pragmatics, syntax, and lexicon, which make up a speaker’s grammar (Fromkin 13; O’Grady 5). However, these language universals are merely categories within which each language can create numerous complicated and unique sets of rules collectively known as “Parameters” (Fromkin 118; O’Grady 214). Therefore, while understanding the language universals provides the basis for the linguistic competence necessary for translation, understanding the unique parameters of linguistic performance is the key to deriving deeper meanings and social nuances (Fromkin 5-6; Yousef 49-51). Willa and Edwin Muir’s English translation of Franz Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* demonstrates this dichotomy through their effective use of phonological, syntactic, and semantic components of English, but their lackluster understanding of pragmatics compared to later translations by Donna Freed. All citations within this essay are drawn from different translations of Franz Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* and will be cited using their respective translators and editors for reader convenience. Please refer to the appendix at the end of this paper for direct translation comparisons.

As genetically related sister languages stemming from Proto-Germanic, modern English and German share many phonological and lexical similarities, allowing for some level of translation through sound correspondence. Both languages are also intonated, meaning they do not rely on contour tone to convey different lexical meanings but may do so to indicate semantic nuances in a sentence (Fromkin 206). However, modern English diverges from German in its higher tonal pitches stemming from influences by the French language, particularly in its vowels (Characteristics of Literary Time Periods 2). In the aforementioned section of Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*, this difference is best highlighted by the phrase “balled his fists,” of which the German equivalent is “sie fäuste ballte” (Muir 213).

Owing to the genetic relation to the languages, there is a clear sound correspondence between “Fists” and “Fäuste” in the forms of its consonants /F/, a voiceless labiodental fricative, and /T/, an anterior aspirated alveolar stop (Fromkin 198). However, the vowel of “Fists” is represented by the phoneme [I], which is a high front allomorphic vowel of /i/ and much more common in the French language through the use of consonant endings to form the phonetic inscription [flsts] (Fromkin 201, “Characteristics of Literary Time Periods, 2). By comparison, the German equivalent “Fäuste” uses a more guttural intonated /a/ to combine the central low



vowel /a/ and the high back vowel /ʊ/ to form the diphthong [aʊ] and the mid front vowel /ɛ/ as an ending suffix to denote plurality (Fromkin 201; Forester and Antoniuk 80). The result of these parameters is the phonetic transcription [fauste], which shares more parameters with Old English than modern English, which lacks intonated vowels altogether (Characteristics of Literary Time Periods 2-3).

As an officially published and edited work in the English language, Willa and Edwin's translation does not appear to show any pronunciation errors and clearly indicates their linguistic competence in phonetics. However, as Bassnett-McGuire argues, this may not necessarily be a good thing as the strict adherence to English prescriptive grammar in line with Kafka's original work also highlights the original's lack of consideration of descriptive phonetics (Yousef 50). The officer, despite being noted as speaking a dialect of French in the story, never displays any of the phonetic qualities of a French accent, such as emphasis on long vowels, omitting the phoneme /h/, or replacing the voiced and unvoiced variations of [ð] with /z/ and /s/ (Pierre 2-3). Nor does the officer display any of the common characteristics of a bilingual speaker, such as code-switching or borrowing, which, while absent in the original text, would have provided a linguistic emphasis on the difference between the officer and the explorer (Fromkin 300-1).

Continuing up the list of the building blocks of language, morphology is the most basic unit of linguistic relevance found in language. Unlike syllables, the phonological segmentation of words, morphology refers to the use of discretion to recombine the basic meaningful components of words to alter their semantic properties (Fromkin 36-37; O'Grady 131-33). This system of discretion, in turn, allows root words to achieve additional meaning through the addition of affixes, such as prefixes and suffixes, to create new words known as "stems" (Fromkin 42-44; "Design Features of language" 25). As Willa and Edwin demonstrate, understanding the basic rules of morphology in a foreign language can allow for a successful gloss translation of literature. However, achieving greater fluency within a foreign language requires a better understanding of which morphemes are appropriate based on situational context rather than what is merely grammatically correct.

In English, morphemes fall into two primary categories: bound and free morphemes. Bound morphemes consist of derivational and inflectional suffixes and prefixes. In contrast, free morphemes consist of standalone lexical and grammatical words (Fromkin 49). As displayed in Kafka's work, these morphemes can be very productive in the creation of new words which express different details, such as past tense "clench-ed," plurality "fist-s," negation "insufficient" and more based on certain grammatical and semantic context (Fromkin 52). German, by comparison, has similar applications of morphemes, but its parameters are also different as its morphemes may change based on the grammatical gender of the subject word (Forester and Antoniuk 24-25). With these rules in mind, the word "clenched," lacking a German gloss equivalent, becomes "ball-t-e" or "balled," which still uses an inflectional morpheme /t/ to form a narrative past verb but must also take the plural tense of the object it is defining "Fäust-e" (Forester and Antoniuk 25, 250). Meanwhile, "insufficient" in German becomes "genügte nicht" or "enough not," distinguishing itself from the later word "unzureichende" or "inadequate" by its

negative polarity item “nicht,” whereas “un-zureichende” uses the derivational prefix “un-” to form an adjective (Fromkin 49, 155; Forester and Antoniuk 100).

Overall, Willa and Edwin Muir’s use of morphology displays a clear and effective understanding of linguistic competence but a more limited understanding of linguistic performance. Technically, there are no errors in their translation of this section of *In the Penal Colony*, and the translation of the narrative elements in the story tolerates more enunciated language. However, the dialogue portions of this section are in the present tense, and despite a lexical change of the German word “zugestanden,” meaning “admitted” into “granted,” Willa and Edwin do not change the suffix to the more appropriate “-ing” to maintain linguistic performance (“-ing” Oxford Dictionary). Although German has no equivalent to the inflectional suffix “-ing,” it is commonly used in English as a positive, progressive morpheme often used to reference current events while -ed refers to the past (“-ing”; “-ed” Oxford Dictionary). This distinction is a clear example of how morphological rules can challenge linguists when translating literature from one language to another (Freed 145).

Moving from the building blocks of words to the building blocks of sentences, syntax refers to the overall structure of language and the grammatical rules of word formation and sentence construction (Fromkin 76-77; O’Grady 183-184). Under these rules, sentences can be broken down into syntactic categories known as constituents, which can then be arranged into recognizable sentences based on their grammatical relations (Fromkin 77-79; O’Grady 192). Like morphemics, a basic understanding of a language’s syntax is necessary for literary translation, and strict prescriptive syntax is acceptable for simple storytelling devices such as narratives, which focus on exposition rather than conversation. However, dialogue focuses much more heavily on linguistic nuance. English and German are both considered Subject/Verb/Object languages, meaning the sentence distribution focuses first on the subject, then the verb, then the object (Fromkin 386; O’Grady 192; Forester and Antoniuk 50). However, while English is more stringent in its constituent order, German contains additional transformational rules allowing its constituents to shift to different locations based on semantics, and understanding the rules that dictate these patterns is vital to achieving fluent speech in either language (Forester and Antoniuk 50, 232).

In the quote on page 1, the clearest example of these differences is in the sentence, “The traveler/ saw/ with a certain apprehension/ that the officer/ had clenched/ his fists,” which maintains the English S/V/O/ sentence structure in Willa and Edwin’s translation (Willa and Edwin 213). By comparison, the original German sentence is “Mit einiger Befürchtung sah der Reisende, daß der Offizier die Fäuste ballte,” which glosses into “With some apprehension/ saw/ the traveler/, that/ the officer/ the fists/ balled,” and transforms the word order into O/V/S/, and the relative clause to S/O/V/ (Kafka 170). In German, this order is acceptable as standard sentences are grammatically allowed to exchange the subject and object constants so long as the finite verb remains second and is attached to the subject phrase, except in a relative clause where the verb must move to the end (Forester and Antoniuk 232).

In the paragraph selection above, Willa and Edwin once again demonstrate basic linguistic competence in that most syntactic structures are technically correct. However, in the dialog tag phrase “repeated the officer,” it is clear that Willa and Edwin violate English syntax by placing the verb ahead of the subject (Willa and Edwin 213; O’Grady 192). Furthermore, Willa and Edwin’s separation of the two sentences, “You believe your influence is insufficient. I know that it is sufficient,” demonstrates a clear adherence to the German original text but could be combined into a compound sentence using a complementizer phrase to improve linguistic performance in English (Fromkin 87; O’Grady 200-201). However, this is a matter of pragmatics. The separation of the two sentences is still grammatically correct, but a combined compound sentence would better demonstrate linguistic performance through semantic contrast.

Generally, Willa and Edwin’s translation of Franz Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* is adequate in that it demonstrates a strong linguistic competence in the German language and makes few errors in phonetic pronunciation, morphological word formations, or syntax. However, it struggles to demonstrate adequate linguistic performance for the story’s characters to pass as native English speakers. The replacement of lexical terms while retaining the German suffixes, the failure to account for English X-bar Schema rules, and its lack of word contractions result in dialogue that violates the maxims of quantity and clarity (Fromkin, 99, 165; O’Grady 276).

Furthermore, Willa and Edwin’s efforts to change certain lexical terms showcase another major problem in translation, which linguists must consider in the form of changing situational context. The alteration of the word “muß” or “must” to “bound to” exemplifies this risk as the first implies that the officer in the story has no other plans beyond the current one, while the other implies he is merely assured of the plan’s success (Willa and Edwin 213). In this case, the impact of this change is minimal as the outcome remains the same. However, maintaining the original implicature would have provided better foreshadowing and symbolically demonstrated the officer’s conviction, which better suits the story’s theme of fanaticism. This example also demonstrates McGuire’s concerns about the risks associated with lexical changes that can alter situational context, especially in symbolic texts such as religious script interpretation, which can undergo significant semantic changes based on word context (Yousef 50-51).

However, it is possible that the enunciation of Willa and Edwin may have been a product of their time, which Bassnett-McGuire argues is a common issue when reading historical translations from a modern perspective (Yousef 50-51). Although word contractions have been recorded in the English language as early as the 15th century, and Wallace Rice notes their regular usage in novels and poetry as early as 1935, the use of contractions in literature was a controversial subject well through the 1950s (Cannon 106; Rice 420-421). Nevertheless, Wordsworth argued as far back as 1798 that poems and novels should include “the real language of men,” and Kafka himself includes the contraction “Zur” or “to the” in the original German text. (Wordsworth 21-22, Kafka 170). Regardless of the historical reasons for Willa and Edwin’s use of enunciated language like “is not” and “of the preservation” instead of “isn’t” and “of

preserving,” it severely cripples the authenticity of the dialog by making the character’s conversation appear disjointed and robotic (Muir 213).

By comparison, later translations of Franz Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* by Donna Freed in 1996 correct many of these issues and showcase a significant improvement in linguistic performance through her use of contractions, improved syntax, and better word construction. In terms of lexical semantics, Freed changes the word tense from past to present and changes the inflection suffix -ed in “clenched” and “granted” to “Clenching” and “Granting,” which is far more appropriate for present-tense dialog in Modern English (“-ing” Oxford English Dictionary).

Morphemically, Freed makes use of more contractions than Willa and Edwin, including “don’t,” “You’re,” and the possessive “-s” in “system’s,” which provides a more fluent and lifelike dialog than previous translations. In terms of syntax, Freed also maintains a stricter adherence to the English word order by using the correct sentence distribution in her dialog tag phrases, transforming “repeated the officer” into the much more appropriate “the officer repeated” in English (Freed 145; O’Grady 192). She also makes use of complementary phrases such as “but” to combine the sentences “You believe your influence is insufficient. I know that it is sufficient” into a much smaller fused sentence: “You don’t believe you have sufficient influence, but I know that you do” (Freed 145). This sentence compounding results in better fluency in dialogue, which supports the maxim of quantity and avoids structural ambiguity while maintaining semantic contrast and following the maxims of relevance and clarity (Fromkin 83, 165; O’Grady 276).

However, while Freed’s later translation makes far better use of grammatical structures in her writing, she still makes the same mistake in lexical translation by maintaining the phrase “bound to succeed” instead of the original “must succeed,” as Willa and Edwin did (Freed 145; Willa and Edwin 213). Furthermore, she also fails to include accents or bilingual behaviors, which could have further emphasized the officer’s French dialect. These decisions suggest that even Freed’s translation is still somewhat imperfect and affirms Bassnett-McGuire’s concerns regarding the potential of changing semantics due to lexical changes (Yousef 50). Nevertheless, as a demonstration of linguistic competence and performance, Donna Freed’s translation of Franz Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* demonstrates a better understanding of the nuances of German to English translation, giving the characters more authenticity than Willa and Edwin’s translation.

Overall, comparing the original German text of Franz Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* to Willa and Edwin’s 1948 translation and the later 1996 translation by Donna Freed provides many examples of the challenges linguists face during literary translation. Although Willa and Edwin demonstrate good linguistic competence and adherence to the rules of phonology, morphology, and syntax, their translation does not consider the pragmatics of these disciplines. As suggested by Bassnett-McGuire, their efforts to adhere to the original German pragmatics resulted in a slow, overly enunciated, disjointed, and robotic dialog that lacks the linguistic performance later demonstrated by Donna Freed’s 1996 translation (Yousef 50-51).

Understanding these differences is paramount to achieving a successful translation, particularly in dialogue, which adheres to Wordsworth's principles of "Speaking in the language of men" (Wordsworth 21-22). Although Willa and Edwin's translation may be acceptable for documentation or academic work, it ultimately fails to translate the lifelike qualities paramount to good story writing. With this understanding in mind, it becomes clear that the greatest challenge to translating literature into or out of English is not simply altering the text to fit into the prescriptive requirements of the target language but also capturing the pragmatic nuances that bring the language to life.

Appendix

"Sie Können es," sagte der offziér. Mit einiger Befürchtung sah der Reisende, daß der Offziér die Fäuste ballte. "Sie Können es," wiederholte der Offizier noch dringender. "Ich habe einen Plan, der gelingen muß. Sie glauben, Ihr Einfluß genüge nicht. Ich weiß, daß er genügt. Aber zugestanden, daß Sie recht haben, ist es dann nicht notwendig, zur Erhaltung dieses Verfahrens alles, selbst das möglicherweise unzureichende zu versuchen? (Kafka 170).

This section is the original German text of Franze Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, and it offers an effective means of comparison with Willa and Edwin's translation. From this, it is clear how much clearer German is to Old English as there are numerous examples of accented vowels and more use of deeper tonal pitches. Furthermore, there are also numerous examples of German O/V/S syntax and a distinct example of morphemic changes stemming from grammatical gender rules. (It originally said "stemming resulting" back-to-back, I chose to remove "resulting")

"Yes, you can," the officer said. The traveler saw with a certain apprehension that the officer had clenched his fists. "Yes, you can," repeated the officer. "I have a plan that is bound to succeed. You believe your influence is insufficient. I know that it is sufficient. But even granted that you're right, is it not necessary, for the sake of the preservation of this tradition, to try even what might prove insufficient?" (Willa and Edwin 213).

This is an additional copy of Willa and Edwin's translation of the selected section of Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* for additional comparison to the original German text. It demonstrates clear phonetic differences which can be traced to French influences through its greater use of higher tonal pitch consonants and vowels such as /I/ and complete lack of vowel accents. However, it also maintains much of the structure of the original German translation, such as its maintenance of past tense and continued use of inflectional suffixes "-ed" in dialog even when the conversation is being held at the present time.

"Yes, you can," replied the officer. With some alarm, the traveler noticed the officer was clenching his fists. "Yes, you can," the officer replied more urgently. "I have a plan that is bound to succeed. You don't believe you have sufficient influence, but I know that you do. However, even granting that you're right, isn't it necessary for the sake of the old system's preservation that we try everything, even things that are potentially ineffective?" (Freed 145)

This is an additional, more modern, translation of Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* by Donna Freed in 1994. Unlike Willa and Edwin Muir's translation, Freed focuses far more on linguistic performance in her work and fluency within the dialog between the officer and the explorer. In particular, the use of conjugated words such as "don't" and "you're," possessives such as "System's," and the inclusion of the progressive morphemes "-ing" on "granting" provide far more fluency to the dialog between the characters, allowing readers a more fluent translation that doesn't interrupt the theme through unnecessary enunciation. She also changes the dialog from past tense to present tense, adding the morphemes -ing to "Clenched" and "Granted" to create "Clenching" and "Granting," which is more appropriate for the text.

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