

# Practical 2 Tutor notes

Chapter 2 is longer than it was in the original *Thinking German Translation*. The discussion of equivalence and translation loss needed to be illustrated with more examples. The chapter is no more theoretical than before, but discussing the examples in class makes the concepts easier for students to grasp. This can take anything up to 20 minutes, but it is time well spent. Several things can usefully be stressed. One is that the ‘culturally relevant features’ (p. 21) that are inevitably lost can be on any or all of the six levels of textual variables, from ‘micro’ to ‘macro’ (see Chapters 6–8). Another is that since translation loss, in our two-valued system, is inevitable, it is emphatically not something to be deplored unless it hinders the translator in realizing the strategy. Third, the examples of ‘gain’ have no more theoretical status than any of the other examples; they are there simply to show how easy it is to feed impressionistic ‘improvements’ into the TT which actually make it less fit for its purpose. Any tutor will recognize the kind of thing; if there had been more space, we could have given plenty more examples. Discussing the ones we do give will enable tutors to stress that it is more profitable to forsake the mirage of ‘gain’ for the real benefits of compensation – there is every reason to introduce this notion at this stage, pending proper discussion of it in Chapter 4. Another fact that should be emphasized, now and throughout the course, is the crucial role of genre and context in determining relevance and priorities – and thus the importance of the translation losses – on every level of textual variables. The importance of context is what explains the reminder in the final paragraph of the chapter that the challenge is to control and channel translation loss, not to eliminate it. Finally, the fact that our examples of translation loss are only on the ‘micro’ level of individual words is because of limited space, and because we shall look at plenty of examples on other levels as the course progresses. Showing the many losses in even individual words is a way of stressing that the more ‘macro’ the point of view, the more multiple and complex the losses. We certainly do not intend to suggest that texts can be translated word by word!

## 2.1 Degrees of freedom, translation loss

This assignment can be done either individually or in groups. Overall the TT is somewhere to the idiomizing side of centre: the translator has been more concerned to produce unexceptionable idiomatic English than to reproduce every nuance of the ST. This is normal in this genre. A good example is the title: ‘landmark achievement’ is an idiomizing translation of ‘Meilenstein’ which preserves the associations of ‘travel’ and ‘visibility from a distance’, but avoids the limited focus on a single career that would be implied in ‘milestone’ (the ST expression denotes more than just another milestone in the history of Audi, corresponding more to something like ‘Another first for Audi’ – but

perhaps that would have been too undignified). A different, but equally common, challenge is presented in line 16: in automotive contexts, 'Selbstzünder' is a common term for 'diesel (engine)' or 'diesel-powered vehicle'; there is little alternative but to use 'diesel' here – 'oil-burner' belongs to the jargon of car enthusiasts, not to this more dignified sales pitch.

In some cases, however, closer idiomatic renderings have not been chosen; these lost opportunities leave the persuasive impact of the text weaker than it might have been. Here are three examples. (1) 'Substantial' is offered for 'Bulliges' (contrast 'beefy', 'hefty', 'massive' or 'huge', each of them plausible in this context). 'Substantial' is more refined, even understated, perhaps in response to the translation brief, but it incurs avoidable loss in terms of the connotation of sheer power. Also, in British English at least, 'substantial' is losing some of its categorically positive force because it is used increasingly both to talk up something that is too small (e.g. 'We have made substantial progress') and to talk down something that is too big (e.g. 'There was a substantial fall in our share price'). (2) 'Characteristics' is an accurate literal translation of 'Charakteristika', but lacks the positive valorization of the ST term – 'hallmarks', or even 'attributes' (but see line 7 of the TT), would convey the positive connotation better. (3) 'Remarkable', although less faithful than 'outstanding' as a rendering of 'herausragendes', is an acceptable balanced translation, because less well-worn – but the idiomizing 'groundbreaking' would convey more of the energy of the ST word, and is appropriate for the genre. (If the TT tendency to understate is indeed required by the translation brief, the implied dignity contrasts sharply with the tone of the ST in Practical 4.1, taken from the same publication!)

Two renderings are more open to question. (1) 'Hohe Laufkultur' (l. 10) refers to smooth and efficient running, whereas 'plentiful refinement' suggests luxurious interior details (walnut, real leather, etc.); 'silk-smooth running' would be a balanced or idiomizing translation more suitable for the genre. (2) 'Durchzug' (l. 3) is motoring jargon for 'power', with special reference to the efficiency with which engine output is translated into propelling the car forward on the road; 'poke' or 'grunt' are not dignified enough for the implied brief, so in context the most faithful simple rendering is simply 'power'. The published TT's term 'pulling power' may be literally accurate, but, for some British readers at least, might incur regrettable loss through a connotation of Audi drivers pulling all the girls they want. Optimal 'Durchzug' depends on optimal traction control, so TT 'quality of traction' (l. 16) can be regarded as faithfully rendering both the subjective and the objective components of the ST term 'Durchzugserlebnis'.

## 2.2 Degrees of freedom, translation loss

This exercise lends itself well to group work. For homework, students can do both TTs. In class, there is only time for one per group, but class discussion can fruitfully cover both. Many students will have studied *Im Westen nichts Neues*. Even if they have not, they can be expected to comment on the major effects of the TTs. How convincing the colloquialisms and general tone of TT (i) were in 1929 is impossible to say now, but twenty-first century students will find much of it old-fashioned and inconsistent in register; one would expect comment on at least 'You won't say, that's the fact of the matter. Out with it!', 'We'll have quite a lot of jokes with him' and 'the fellows [. . .] hop it?'. In some details, TT (i) is pretty free, e.g. in the antipodean Great War military

slang term ‘possy’ (perhaps compensation for the lack of a corresponding TL term for ‘Spieß’) and in some colloquialisms (‘Fatty’, ‘steams off’, ‘put Tjaden wise’), which may have been included so that the TT matches target-culture expectations for a war novel better than a more faithful translation would. In other details, however, TT (i) is uncomfortably literal. Overall, it is a balanced translation, with occasional lurches into freedom. But that does not mean that there is not regrettable translation loss, most obviously in the omission of the whole ‘duzen’ exchange, but also in the occasionally unconvincing dialogue and in some other details – e.g. the addition of the connector ‘and yet’ (l. 17), which weakens the stark oxymoron of ‘Nicht viel/zuviel’ (here again the idea was perhaps to smooth over some of the unorthodoxies of this innovative ST and to make the TT more like a conventional TL war story). Other details are unexceptionable in themselves, but sit awkwardly in their context – e.g. ‘Those are anti-aircraft. We were over there yesterday. [. . .] Next time, when you go up with us [. . .]’: the reader knows that these are infantrymen, so there is no possibility of lasting misunderstanding, but after the reference to anti-aircraft fire, ‘over there’ and ‘go up’ are at best unintentionally comic, even though in themselves they are appropriate idiomizing translations of ‘Da’ and ‘rausgehen’ (First World War soldiers ‘went up the line’ to the forward trench).

TT (ii) is in general a more balanced translation, in that the most notable instances of free translation are in fact resourceful attempts to compensate for the impossibility of rendering the ‘duzen’ exchange literally. Using ‘you lot’ to render ‘ihr’ and the various circumlocutions to render ‘Sie’ introduces grammatical translation loss in order to prevent the still greater loss that would be incurred if nothing were done to convey the ‘ihr/Sie’ dichotomy. Taken individually, these are cases of idiomizing or free translation, and may not always be convincingly idiomatic (e.g. the first and last occurrences of ‘you lot’); but together they make for a balanced translation of the ‘duzen’ exchange.

As regards other areas of translation loss, students will probably be most concerned with the dialogue: it may be more contemporary than in TT (i), but is it more consistently convincing in tone or idiom? Similar questions may even be asked about the narrative (e.g. ‘He looks suspiciously at Kropp because he hasn’t any idea of what he is talking about’). The discussion will reveal big differences of opinion and, just as importantly, of *taste*, and so call into question the notion of equivalence as ‘sameness’. Even the military jargon, though more accurate than in TT (i) (‘CSM’, ‘Permission to fall out’, etc.), has its imperfections – e.g. ‘fatigues’ (clothing) vs ‘fatigue’ (chore), and the anachronistic ‘flak’ (post-1940 in English) vs First World War ‘archie’. The anachronism itself raises the question of what the ‘equivalent effect’ of a retranslation might be: equivalent to the ST as written and read in 1929, or as written in 1929 and read in 1994, or as (putatively) written in 1994 and read in 1994 or 2006, etc.? How many readers today would understand ‘archie’ – and was it perhaps airmen’s slang rather than soldiers’ anyway? Also relevant here is the exegetic tautological addition ‘going for the aircraft’. Even 40 years ago, most TL readers would have understood the cultural borrowing ‘flak’ to denote anti-aircraft fire. Today, it is so familiar in its figurative sense of ‘severe criticism’ that the original sense is perhaps only known to a few people. So the question of how to translate one simple ST word exemplifies the unavoidability of translation loss and the need to balance loss against loss – ‘anti-aircraft fire’? ‘archie’? ‘flak’? ‘AA fire’? ‘ack-ack’?