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Translating Poetry – An Impossible Task?

T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* in Hungarian

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Abstract. Poetry is often claimed to be untranslatable. More specifically, rendering light verse, i.e. poetic humour in another language poses serious challenges for the translator to encounter. In spite of these alleged obstacles, T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* has been translated and lately retranslated into Hungarian in the form of inventive and jocular texts for children. After summarizing the theoretical aspects of poetry translation and providing a brief overview of Eliot's collection of poems about cats, the present study aims to approach the English source text by highlighting its foregrounded elements: titles, names, and cultural realia and their Hungarian counterparts in the latest translation by Attila Havasi and Dániel Varró.

Keywords: literary translation, poetry, light verse, realia

1. Introduction

"There are three kinds of reader: the first are those who enjoy without judging, the third those who judge without enjoying; the middle group judge with enjoyment and enjoy with judgement, and they actually reproduce a work of art anew" (qtd in Snell-Hornby 2006: 6). The words of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe are still relevant from two hundred years' distance. In this article, we intend to follow the trail of the last group by approaching poetry translation both from a theoretical and empirical perspective, not only analysing but also enjoying the translation of T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (and, hopefully, also engaging the reader in this joy). With this study, we aim to enrich the line of research dealing with the translation of poetry, both theoretical approaches and case studies (e.g. Holmes 1988, Bassnett 2002, Boase-Beier, Fischer & Furukawa (eds) 2018, Dobrotă

2020, Tymoczko 2014, Albakry 2008, Tisgam 2014). Accordingly, in the first part of the article, a brief introduction to the main features of poetry translation are enlisted, followed by a general introduction to Eliot's volume containing fifteen, slightly connected individual poems and to their latest Hungarian translation. The main part of the article contains the analyses of certain foregrounded elements of the poems: the main title of the volume, ways of rendering rhyme and metre, and a detailed exploration of names of cats that appear in *The Naming of Cats*, the first poem in the volume, and its Hungarian translation.

2. Translatability of poetry

Dezső Kosztolányi, the famous 20th-century Hungarian poet, claims that literary translation is "dancing tied into a harness"[1] (1913: 644). Similarly, János Lackfi claims that "restrictions guide us both during the original work and its translation [...] A contract ties me to the reader; I have undertaken to reconstruct the given text as perfectly as possible, and my responsibility is to keep this contract"[2] (Jeney & Józan 2008: 96). Poetry is a special type of literary text, especially when rhyming is also relevant. Due to all these restrictions, some researchers state that poetry is in actual fact not translatable, while others are for its possibility, with special limitations. Below, these two oppositions will be contrasted.

Basically, untranslatability is justified by both cultural and linguistic perspectives. Sapir (2000), for example, denies that literary works might be translated based on the conviction that there are no two languages identical in their vision to the same social reality. Furthermore, Catford (1965: 94) states that the sources of untranslatability are both of linguistic and cultural nature. In his view, linguistic untranslatability is caused by source-language and target-language differences, while the cause of cultural untranslatability is the absence of relevant situational features in the target language. In his book entitled *Poetry and Translation*, Robinson (2010) even calls poetry "the art of the impossible". On a humorous note, the Japanese poet in Jim Jarmusch's film *Paterson* also argues for the impossibility of poetry translation when he says "Poetry in translation is like taking a shower with a raincoat on."

On the other hand, Wittgenstein (quoted in Robinson 2010: 58) argues for the translatability of poetry. He says that translating is to be viewed as a mathematical task, and the translation of a lyrical poem is quite similar to

1 "műfordítani […] annyi, mint gúzsba kötötten táncolni" (English translations from Hungarian throughout the article are mine, Zs. A.).

2 "megkötések irányítják az embert mind az eredeti mű, mind annak fordítása során... Szerződés köt az olvasóhoz, vállaltam, hogy az adott szöveget a lehető legtökéletesebben rekonstruálom magyarul, s kötelességem ezt be is tartani."

solving a mathematical problem. Furthermore, Benjamin (2012: 76) argues for the possibility of transposing a poem into another language, claiming that nothing is "lost" in translation, but, on the contrary, there is always something "gained". He states that the result of the translation process is a text that will not be a simple reproduction of the original but will produce a newly created text with equivalent meaning. Accordingly, the "task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original" (1968: 77). In addition, Nida and Taber (2003: 132) argue that "anything that can be said in one language can be said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the message."

In comparing the translation of two literary genres, it is noted that "[b]oth prose and poetry have rhythm, but only poetry has meter, the regular grouping of elements of rhythm into a recognizable pattern" (Boase-Beier 2012: 477). In the same vein, in Newmark's (1988: 70) view, "the translation of poetry is the field where most emphasis is normally put on the creation of a new independent poem, and where literal translation is usually condemned". Poetry is a special form of art where the form itself (metre, rhythm, and rhyming) is laden with meaning, and it adds extra aesthetic quality to the contents of the text. This means that both meaning and form are equally important in its transposition as well. Newmark (1988: 162) claims that reproducing a poem in another language proves to be the most challenging task since it is a genre that not only requires the transference of ideas and images, but it has been originally created with the aim to achieve aesthetic pleasure. Translating a rhyming poem into another language requires the translator to closely follow both aspects of the source text and try to render them in the target language in spite of the fact that maintaining the rhyme and the metre poses excessive constraints on the re-creator of the poem, and word and line units have to be preserved (if the translator chooses to do so).

The main aim of poetry translation is to achieve a similar effect that the source text is believed to produce on the target audience. In other words, it is "the effect brought about in the reader" (Leech 2008: 61) that is followed in the process of translating poetry. In order to achieve this, not literal but dynamic equivalence is expected. Venuti (2004: 154) claims that "only rarely can one reproduce both content and form in a translation, and hence in general the form is usually sacrificed for the sake of the content". As our analysis below aims to demonstrate, no such sacrifice is required in the case of the latest Hungarian translation of T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*: both content and form are attended to in an inventive and enjoyable manner.

Intended to entertain young audiences, Eliot's poems about cats join the considerable body of poetry in English written in light verse, defined by *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as "poetry on trivial or playful themes that is written primarily to amuse and entertain and that often involves the use of nonsense

and wordplay. [It is f]requently distinguished by considerable technical competence, wit, sophistication, and elegance."[3] When it comes to the translation of this genre, the translator also needs to take into account the target audience they are translating for. "All translators, if they want to be successful, need to adapt their texts according to the presumptive readers" (Oittinen 2000: 78). No surprise then that the latest Hungarian translators of the poems, Attila Havasi and Dániel Varró, are themselves consecrated poets for children, and they managed to cope with the task brilliantly.

3. T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* and its Hungarian translations – A brief overview

An ardent lover of cats, Eliot claimed that the "great thing" about these pets was that they possessed "two qualities to an extreme degree—dignity and comicality." In the 1930s, the poet composed a series of light verses about cats, reminiscent of the nonsense verse by Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, and sent them to his godchildren signed under the pen name Old Possum.[4] At the end of the decade, in 1939, fourteen[5] of these poems were collected into a book of verses for children with the title *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, which was published by Faber and Faber in London, a publishing house where Eliot worked as an editor. For the first edition, the illustrations were also created by the poet himself. The volume does not have an organic world of its own, the poems are independent of each other, and there are only slight references at various points in the volume. From a commercial point of view, this book for children has become Eliot's most popular work, and it has been translated into dozens of languages, including Hungarian and Romanian. These verses have also served as lyrics for Andrew Lloyd Webber's famous and acclaimed musical *Cats* (1981), which has been performed on stages all over the world and has also been adapted to the big screen, the latest adaptation by Tom Hooper by the same title having been released in 2019.

So far, there have been three Hungarian variants of the volume. The very first Hungarian translation was published with the title *Macskák könyve* [The Book of Cats] in 1972 by Móra Publishing House and is the work of six outstanding Hungarian poets of the time: Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Zsuzsa Kiss, Dezső Tandori, István Tótfalusi, Gyula Tellér, and Sándor Weöres. A new Hungarian edition of Eliot's complete oeuvre including *Macskák könyve* [The Book of Cats] was

3 https://www.britannica.com/art/light-verse (downloaded on 03.16.2022).

4 Possum was Eliot's nickname given to him by Ezra Pound. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-improbable-insanity-of-cats (downloaded on 03.29.2022).

5 The fifteenth poem, *Cat Morgan Introduces Himself*, was added to the collection in the 1952 edition of the volume.

edited by Győző Ferencz and published by Európa Publishing House in 1986. The new Hungarian retranslation, i.e. the text for the musical, was prepared by József Romhányi for the 1983 Hungarian premiere of *Cats*, and it was published privately only in 2013. This text has also been taken over for the official Hungarian subtitles of the 2019 film adaptation. Finally, the latest Hungarian retranslation was created in 2019 by two poet-translators, Attila Havasi and Dániel Varró, and was issued by Pagony Publishing House. This edition was illustrated by Axel Scheffler.

In the present paper, a comparative analysis of the English source text and its latest Hungarian translation as the target text will be pursued. From the enormously rich textual world of Eliot's volume, we will look at the translation of those elements that draw the reader's attention by their challenges: the main title, metre, rhyming, and names of cats as they appear in the first poem of the volume, *The Naming of Cats*.

4. The main title and its translation

The title of the volume, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, has very strong intertextual connotations: on the one hand, *Old X's…* reminds the reader of the 18th–19th-century title types belonging to popular literature, referring to a compendium (a collection) of popular or esoteric wisdom. On the other hand, the second half of the title, *a Book of Practical X*, suggests a typical 19th-century title for how-to books. This humorous double reference is closely maintained in the 2019 Hungarian retranslation. The translators diverge from the previously established title and take up the title of the musical, *Macskák* [Cats], and complete it with an almost identical subtitle similar to the source text: *Opossszum Apó hasznos és mulattató Macskáriuma* [Father Possum's Useful and Amusing Compendium of Cats]. The word denoting the genre of the collection *macskárium* is the translator's coinage (non-existent word in Hungarian). The term was created from the Hungarian noun "macska" [cat] completed with the Latin *-rium* suffix suggesting a scientific connotation. The Hungarian title precisely renders the source title in the sense that three poems explore the general features, conditions, and "the anthropology" of being a cat on the one hand, and eleven poems present outstanding cat characterology, cat types on the other hand. It must be added that the Hungarian title contains two extra adjectives: "hasznos" [useful] and "mulattató" [amusing] that are not present in the source title. In my opinion, they add extra content to the title, provoking the target audience, the children's interest regarding their expectations related to the topic, and therefore this addition enhances the effect produced by the title on the audience.

5. Recreating rhyme and rhythm

In his essays *On Poetry and Poets*, Eliot came to the conclusion that "a poem begins first as a particular rhythm", which gives birth to "the idea and the image" (Eliot 1957: 32). This leads us to the conclusion that the rhyming and rhythm of all the poems in *Practical Cats*, the musicality of the lines has special salience for the created imagery and sets of ideas (cf. Douglass 1983: 117). The most characteristic beat of these poems is the four-stress lines (tetrametre) lying at the heart of all English verse. Northrop Frye (1966: 37) points out that the four-stress line is "the bedrock of English versification: it is the rhythm of alliterative verse, of nursery rhymes and of ballads, all rhythms close to Eliot". Most of the poems in the volume use these four-beat lines; Eliot's fondest were the dactyls and the anapaests.

Dactylic tetrametre appears in most of the poems of the volume, for instance, in the introductory poem, *The Naming of Cats*, and in *Old Deuteronomy*:

Table 1. *Example of dactylic tetrametre*

Source text	**Target text**
The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter, u / – u u / – u u / – u u / – u It isn't just one of your holiday games; u / – u u / – u u / – u u / – (Eliot 2010: 1)	A macskanévprobléma fölöttébb kényes, u – u u / – uu / – u u / – u Mit egykönnyen aligha intézel el; u – u u / – u u / – u u / – (Eliot 2019: 7)
Old Deuteronomy's lived a long time – u u / – u u / – u u / – He's a Cat who has lived many lives in succession He was famous in proverb and famous in rhyme A long while before Queen Victoria's accession. (Eliot 2010: 27)	Vén Miatuzsálem él századok óta, – u u / – u u / – u u / – u sok életet élt le, ezer cicaöltőt, már Cromwell előtt szólt krónika róla, és róla pönögtek a lanton a költők. (Eliot 2019: 33)

A dactyl is a 3-syllable unit that starts with a stress and ends with two unstressed syllables (– uu). As it can be noted in the table above, the same pattern is recreated in the target text version as well, thus maintaining not only the content but also the form of the lines. The lines rhyme traditionally (the rhyme scheme is *abab*), and the translation also keeps these cross rhymes.

Only one poem in the book, *The Ad-dressing of Cats* uses iambic tetrametre, also recreated in the Hungarian version. The iamb is a two-syllable unit made up of a short unstressed and a long stressed syllable (u –). Here the rhyming scheme changes to rhyming couplets (pair rhymes):

Table 2. *Example of iambic tetrametre*

Source text	**Target text**
You now have learned enough to see	Könyvemből kiolvasható volt,
u – / u – / u – / u – /	u – / – u / – u / u – / u – /
That Cats are much like you and me […]	hogy ahány macska, annyi hóbort, […]
And some are better, some are worse —	van gyenge jellem, kőkemény,
But all may be described in verse.	de mindről szólhat költemény.
(Eliot 2010: 58)	(Eliot 2019: 67)

6. The Naming of Cats – Translation of names

Concerning the translation of proper names, in the present paper we take into account the classification proposed by Leppihalme (1997). In the following, we will enlist the strategies he proposes for translating proper name allusions (1997: 79):

– Retention of the name:
  - using the name as such;
  - using the name, adding some guidance;
  - using the name, adding a detailed explanation, for instance, a footnote.
– Replacement of the name by another:
  - replacing the name by another SL name;
  - replacing the name by a TL name.
– Omission of the name:
  - omitting the name but transferring the sense by other means, for instance by a common noun;
  - omitting the name and the allusion together.

This classification can be completed by the distinction proposed by Hervey and Higgins (1986: 29), who discuss two strategies for translating proper names. They claim that "either the name can be taken over unchanged from the ST to the TT, or it can be adopted to conform to the phonic/graphic conventions of the TL." The former is referred to as exotism, while the latter is also called transliteration. In addition, they propose another procedure or alternative, namely "cultural transplantation". Considered to be "the extreme degree of cultural transposition", cultural transplantation is deemed to be a procedure in which "SL names are replaced by indigenous TL names that are not their literal equivalents, but have similar cultural connotations".

One of the most challenging parts of rendering proper names appears in *The Naming of Cats*. According to Eliot, "a cat must have three different names": a name "that the family use daily", i.e. "sensible everyday names", then "peculiar and more dignified names", and, finally, a name that only "the cat himself knows". Below, there is a list of ST names, and their TT counterparts can be found for the first two categories.

Table 3. *The naming of cats*

Source text	Target text
Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James	A Piroska, Géza, a Sheila vagy Wendy
Victor or Jonathan, George or Bill Bailey	
Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter	Plátón vagy Prokrusztész, Daphné vagy Thétisz
Munkustrap, Quaxo or Coricopat	Katzinger, Braxol vagy Kornyikopán
Bombalurina, or else Jellylorum	Zsolimelórisz vagy Fancsillaména

When enlisting possible "everyday names" for cats, the ST mentions a list of typical English boy's names: *Peter*, *Augustus*, *Alonzo or James* / *Victor or Jonathan*, *George or Bill Bailey*.[6] The dactylic tetrametre is clearly detectable in their succession: – uu / – uu / – uu / – // – uu / uu – /– uu / – u. What occurs as outstanding in the TT list is that the translator simply omits four names and maintains only four (*a Piroska*, *Géza*, *a Sheila vagy Wendy*), offering two ordinary Hungarian names and two totally different English names: three girls' (Piroska, Sheila, Wendy) and one boy's name (Géza). In the first half of the line, the strategy of domestication is employed: the SL names are replaced by TL names that are not their literal equivalents; in the second half of the line, the ST names are replaced by other English names (Sheila, Wendy), perhaps to maintain the foreign sound. Their rhythm does not closely follow the ST rhythm – the first syllable is longer than a dactylic foot, the last beat consisting of a trochee (the reverse of an iamb): uu – u /– uu / – uu / – u. It is to be noted that normally Hungarian proper names do not take a definite article – here, two names are used with the definite article *a* [the], typically used in colloquial Hungarian, this linguistic solution bringing the names closer to Hungarian children.

The four-stress rhythm is maintained in the following list of names as well, which include names with an overt Greek mythological allusion, emphasizing a strong cultural intertext: *Plato*, *Admetus*, *Electra*, *Demeter*. The first one is the ancient philosopher's name Plato, which is taken over by the TT in its Hungarian consecrated form (Plátón). *Admetus* is a Greek mythological character, founder and king of Pherae of Thessaly, famed for his hospitality and justice. (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 6) This three-syllable name is replaced by *Prokrusztész* [Procrustes],[7] a name of the same length but a very different, negative character in ancient mythology. Seemingly also hospitable, he actually lures foreigners into his bed, then disfiguring them. The TT name contains a congestion of consonants,

6 Bill Bailey was derived from the 1902 song *Won't You Come Home Bill Bailey*.

7 "Procrustes would appear hospitable, inviting travelers to spend the night. He would, however, adjust their bodies to exactly fit his bed, stretching them if they were too short or lopping off their limbs if they were too tall. Theseus put an end to this when he dished out the same treatment to Procrustes" (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 262).

therefore it is much more difficult to pronounce, possibly making it less enjoyable for children. The third is the three-syllable name of the Greek princess *Electra*.[8] In the TT, her name is replaced by another mythological two-syllable female name, *Daphné* [Daphne].[9] The last name in the line of mythological names, *Demeter*, stands for the ancient goddess of harvest and agriculture, grains and fertility. In the TT, her name is replaced by *Thétisz* [Thetis], a sea nymph and a goddess of water. Summarizing these names and their TT variants, we can claim that two male and two female ancient Greek names appeared in the ST, and their distribution has been maintained in the TT as well; however, the rhythm of the line is not kept.

Eliot's special cat names are claimed to be "peculiar" yet "dignified", and the list includes the invented names of *Munkustrap*, *Quaxo*, *Coricopat*, *Bombalurina*, and *Jellylorum*. The TT variants are equally fictional, and include *Katzinger*, *Braxol*, *Kornyikopán*, *Zsolimelórisz*, and *Fancsillaména*. One can detect the traces of the German equivalent for 'cat' in *Katzinger*, a similarity of sound in the pair *Quaxo* vs. *Braxol*, while *Kornyikopán* contains the root of the Hungarian *kornyikál*, meaning 'yowl, caterwaul, a shrill howling or wailing noise like that of a cat' and a similar ending like that of the ST name (*-copat* vs. *-kopán*). The extravagant names such as *Jellylorum* or *Bombalurina* were replaced by the equally whimsical *Zsolimelórisz* and *Fancsillaména*, recreating the original oddness and singularity of the names.

7. Conclusions

The relatively brief comparative analysis of T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* and its latest translation entitled *Oposszum Apó hasznos és mulattató Macskáriuma* by Attila Havasi and Dániel Varró has demonstrated that the 2019 Hungarian translation is a brilliantly imaginative recreation of both content and form of the ST. In spite of being the common work of two creative minds, the TT recreates the rhyming scheme and the four-beat rhythm of the original in equal measure. In spite of the serious prosodic constraints, dynamic equivalence is achieved in the creative rendering of the ST images and ideas. The rendering of names from the first poem of the volume has shown the employment of the strategy of adaptation and domestication, which has led to similarity of effect.

The challenging task of translating Eliot's *Cats* can be considered a pertinent example that poetry *is* translatable – a good attempt at recreating a jocular and

8 Electra is King Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's daughter (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 120).

9 Daphne is a female nymph associated with fountains, wells, springs, streams, brooks, and other bodies of freshwater. One of her famous lovers was Apollo, who chased after the girl. "Unable to escape, Daphne prayed to the gods to rescue her. They responded by turning her into a laurel bush. Thereafter, Apollo wore a laurel branch on his head as a symbol of his love and grief, and the bush became sacred to him" (Dixon-Kennedy 1998: 104).

enjoyable text for children. The Hungarian poems can be considered new poems in their own right, but the preservation of real fidelity to the originals is also achieved.

The present study was limited to the discussion of the main title of Eliot's volume, the rendering of rhythm and the translation of cats' names in one particular poem. The transcreation of other proper names and realia (geographical and gastronomical references) that the text abounds in is proposed to be discussed in a future analysis.

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