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The Translation of "Ja, vi elsker"

An analysis of the translation strategies used in two translations of the Norwegian national anthem "Ja, vi elsker"

Bachelor's project in Translation Studies

Supervisor: Annjo Klungervik Greenall

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Introduction

The song «Ja, vi elsker» has only been the official Norwegian national anthem since 2019. The song was written by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson in 1859, but the final version was published in 1868. The melody was composed by Bjørnson's cousin Rikard Nordraak. Despite not being the official Norwegian national anthem, the song has been sung as if it was the national anthem and had an unofficial status as national anthem for a long time. The song was first performed in the occasion of celebrating the 50th anniversary for the Norwegian Constitution in 1864.¹ The original poem had six verses, but one of the original verses was deleted, while three new was added in 1863. The reason for the deleted verse was that it was dedicated to King Carl XV, but since Bjørnson changed his political view from monarchism to republicanism, he deleted the verse.²

The Norwegian national anthem has been translated several times into several different languages. When translating a national anthem like this, there are several different motives regarding the translation. The goal could for example be to make a singable version of the national anthem or to make a translation to understand the lyrics. This thesis will use a literal translation from Nationalanthems.info and a singable translation from Wikipedia.³⁴ The original translators are unknown due to the translation being posted several places and have no translator credited. In this paper, I will look at what kind of translation the translations are, why the translator chose the translation he or she chose, but also what the goal of the translations are. In order to do so I will answer the question: What translation strategies have been chosen in the different translations of the Norwegian national anthem? Due to the poem having eight verses in total, I have chosen to only analyze the first verse, since it is the most famous verse.

Theoretical Background

The main theoretical framework of the present project is descriptive translation studies (DTS). This is, according to Rosa, “a descriptive, empirical, interdisciplinary, target-oriented approach to the study of translation, focusing especially on its role in cultural history”.⁵ In translation in general, Toury claims that translations first and foremost occupy a position in the social and literary systems of the target culture and that their position determines which translation strategies

¹ Solbakken 2018

² Nationalanthems 2021

³ Nationalanthems 2021

⁴ Wikipedia 2021

⁵ Rosa 2010

that should be used. To describe this, he introduced a descriptive translation study, DTS, with a three-phase methodology for systematic DTS. The first stage would be to situate the text within the target culture system and to look at its significance or acceptability. The next stage would be to undertake a textual analysis of the source text, ST, and the target text, TT, in order to identify relationships between corresponding segments in the two texts, called coupled pairs, leading into two different translation shifts: obligatory and non-obligatory. The last stage is to attempt generalization about the patterns identified in the two texts, to reconstruct the process of translation of the ST-TT pair.⁶

Within the field of DTS, this thesis will focus on the different theories within song translation, but more specifically different translation types and translation strategies proposed within these theories. According to Low, there are several different kinds of translations within the field of Art Song, but most fall under these seven different categories:

- A performer's crib: Editions of vocal music commonly print translations for the singer to use as a crib while rehearsing the song.
- A recording insert: Recordings of classical vocal music almost always print translations as well as the original words.
- A programme text: The printed programme for a concert gives translations of the foreign texts into the main language of the audience
- A spoken text: Sometimes a singer or presenter reads aloud a TT before the musical number is performed in the foreign language
- A sung text: Sometimes a "singable version" of a song is prepared, published — and even sung
- Surtitles: occasionally screened in concert halls, such as opera houses
- Subtitles: translation attached to videos of song-performances.⁷

Since I will be using both a literal and a singable translation in this thesis, I will first present what lays in the term singable translation. According to Low, the term singability often refers to the "phonetic suitability of the translated lyrics and to words being easy to sing to particular note values".⁸ When the song is performed, the aim of the translator should be to find ways to match the music and lyric to fit into the song's original melody, considering rhyme and rhythm. When

⁶ Toury 1995

⁷ Low 2003

⁸ Low 2005: 192-193

producing a singable version, it is often difficult to maintain the word-by-word translation. To counter this, the translator often use transparency, which is “an adjustment of vocabulary to the metrical system, subtraction or addition of some syllables in some stanzas; this could involve the subdivision or combination of some notes”.⁹ When translating songs, Franzon presents five different choices the translator can make. The translator can choose to leave the song untranslated, translating the lyrics without taking the music into consideration, writing new lyrics to the original music, translating the lyrics, and adapting the music or adapting the translation to the original music.¹⁰ The strategies are often chosen depending on what the purpose of the translation is. The singable translations are often measured in how well the song can be sung with the same elegance and sonority as the source language song. The better the song can be sung, the better the translation is considered to be, despite the lyrics having changed.¹¹

In order to determine what kind of translation has been used in the translation of “Ja, vi elsker”, I will use the translation model specifically designed for song analysis by Wakumelo. Wakumelo’s article addresses some of the different strategies used in a translation of a national anthem. She claims that “Some of these strategies have compromised the source meanings of the national anthem to the extent that even if the singers of the three versions are singing the same tune, the semantic content in the different versions of the national anthem is not always the same”.¹²

Wakumelo also claims that songs belong to the genre of oral poetry, and that translation of songs is closely linked to the translation of poetry. In song translations, the translator has to deal with the formal features and properties of the song, such as lyrics, performance, melody, harmony and musical sense. With this in mind, the translator also has to think about what the purpose of the translation is and depending on this decide which factors he or she will value the most in the translation. If the purpose of the translation is to understand the lyric, the translator has to value the semantic, while if the purpose is to produce a “singable” translation, the translation has to retain its structure and “singability”.¹³

Wakumelo mentions different syntactic strategies used when translating songs.

⁹ Wakumelo 2014

¹⁰ Franzon 2008: 376

¹¹ Wakumelo 2014

¹² Wakumelo 2014

¹³ Wakumelo 2014

Literal translation: when the translator follows the source text's forms as closely as possible without changing the grammatical aspect.

Transposition: Changes in word-class, for example from verb to noun without changing the sense of the sentence.

Phrase structure change: Changes that takes place within the internal structure of the phrase. Such as change in number, mood and tense.

Clause structure change: Changes to things such as from active to passive, finite to non-finite, transitive to intransitive or rearrangement of the clause constituents.

Sentence structure change: Changes the structure of the sentences, such as change in the relationship between main and subordinate clause.¹⁴

In addition to the syntactic strategies, Wakumelo also mentions semantic and pragmatic strategies. In order to refine this thesis, I have chosen to only explain the semantic strategies.

Synonymy: When the translator uses a similar, or close to similar (synonym or near-synonym), which may not be the literal translation, but has the same meaning.

Abstraction change: Changes from using a more concrete term to a more abstract term or vice versa.

Distribution change: When the same semantic component is used more times (expansion) or fewer times (compression).

Emphasis change: When the thematic focus of the text is decreased, increased or emphasized in the translation compared to the original source text.

Paraphrase: When certain semantic components at the lexical level is ignored or removed from the translation, and mainly concentrating on the overall meaning of the source text instead.

Cultural filtering: Mainly used when translating culture-bound terms and refers to the domestication of a culture-centered translation.

Explicitness change: When information that could be deduced from the source text is deleted or added to make the text either more (explication) or less (implication).

Information change: When information is either added or deleted.¹⁵

¹⁴ Wakumelo 2014

¹⁵ Wakumelo 204

Method

To analyze a translation of a song comes with challenges that do not exist in translation of other texts. After having chosen to analyze “Ja, vi elsker”, the first challenge was to find a good translation. I found several different translations but decided to analyze a literal translation called “English translation” and a singable/metrical translation called “common Norwegian-American English translation”. The next challenge was to find the person behind the translation. The same translations were posted on different websites, but neither of them gave credit to any translator. I have therefore chosen to use the translations from Nationalanthems.info and Wikipedia despite the creator behind the translation not being credited on neither of the pages.

As mentioned in the introduction, I have chosen to only analyze one of the eight verses of the song. The reason for this is that I want to be able to go deeper into the analysis in the verse rather than scratch the surface of all eight. Historically, the first and last two verses are the most famous verses, so it would be natural to choose either of these.

Analysis

Source Text: Ja, vi elsker	Target Text 1: English translation ¹⁶	Target Text 2: Common Norwegian-American English version ¹⁷
Ja, vi elsker dette landet, som det stiger frem, furet, værbitt over vannet, med de tusen hjem. Elsker, elsker det og tenker på vår far og mor og den saganatt som senker drømmer på vår jord. og den saganatt som senker senker drømmer på vår jord.	Yes, we love this country as it rises forth, rugged, weathered, above the sea, with the thousands of homes. Love, love it and think of our father and mother and the saga night that sends dreams to our earth. and the saga night that sends sends dreams to our earth.	Yes, we love with fond devotion This our land that looms Rugged, storm-scarred o'er the ocean With her thousand homes. Love her, in our love recalling Those who gave us birth. And old tales which night, in falling, Brings as dreams to earth.

¹⁶ Nationalanthems 2021

¹⁷ Wikipedia 2021

Table 1:

This table provide both the source text and the translated text 1 and 2. The three texts preserve their original formatting.

Since I will be following Toury’s three-phase methodology for systematic DTS, I had to firstly find out what kind of translation type and strategies have been used in the two translations. The larger strategy used according to Low in TT1, is a more programme text type of approach to the translation. The goal of the translation is to give the audience a translation of the foreign text to understand the lyric and the message of the song. This differs from TT2 that leans more towards a sung text which purpose is to create a singable version of the song in another language.

However, according to Franzon’s model with five different choices a translator can make, TT1 has been translated without taken the music into consideration while in TT2, the lyrics has been translated while trying to adapt the translation to the original music. When analyzing the text on a more microscopic level, I have chosen to use Wakumelo’s syntactic and semantic strategies.

Coupled Pair	Source Text: Ja, vi elsker	Target Text 1: English translation	Target text 2: Common Norwegian-American English version	Procedures
1	Ja, vi	Yes, we	Yes, we	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Literal translation
2	elsker	Love	Love with fond devotion	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Information change
3	Dette landet	This country	This our land	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Explicitness change
4	Som det	As it	That	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Synonymy
5	Stiger frem	Rises forth	Looms	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Abstraction change
6	Furet	Rugged	Rugged	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Literal translation
7	Værbitt	Weathered	Storm-scarred	TT1: Synonymy TT2: Synonymy
8	Over vannet	Above the sea	O'er the ocean	TT1: Information change TT2: Information change
9	Med de	With the	With her	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Cultural filtering

10	Tusen hjem	Thousands of homes	Thousand homes	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Literal translation
11	Elsker	Love	Love her	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Cultural filtering
12	Elsker det	Love it	In our love	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Paraphrase
13	Og tenker	And think	Recalling	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Paraphrase
14	På vår far og mor	Of our father and mother	Those who gave us birth.	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Synonymy
15	Og den saganatt	And the saga night	And old tales which night	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Synonymy
16	Som senker	That sends	In falling	TT1: Synonymy TT2: Synonymy
17	Drømmer	Dreams	Brings as dreams	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Information change
18	På vår jord.	To our earth	To earth.	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Explicitness change

Table 2:

Source Text: Ja, vi elsker

Target Text 1: “English translation” retrieved from nationalathems.info¹⁸

Target Text 2: “Common Norwegian-American English version” retrieved from Wikipedia¹⁹

Discussion

When looking at table 2, it is clear that TT1 mostly use literal translation some synonymy and information change. Since TT1 is a literal translation which purpose is to translate the song to help the reader understand the lyrics, this is not very surprising. The translator has done minimal changes to the original lyrics. This differs from TT2 where the purpose is to create a singable version without losing the message of the song. As seen in the analysis, TT2 has different, and more strategies used than TT1. All my definitions on the English words are retrieved from Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries.²⁰ My Norwegian definitions are retrieved from Bokmålsordboka.²¹

However, there are some places in the TT1 and TT2 where the translator has chosen to switch out the words with words that means more or less the same but are not the 100% translated

¹⁸ Nationalanthems 2021

¹⁹ Wikipedia 2021

²⁰ Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries

²¹ Bokmålsordboka

equivalence. In song analysis, when using Wakumelo’s strategies, this is called synonymy. Examples of this are “værbit” translated to “weathered” and “storm-scarred” and “som senker” into “that sends” and “in falling”.

7	Værbit	Weathered	Storm-scarred	TT1: Synonymy TT2: Synonymy
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The reason I choose to analyze these and synonyms and near-synonyms is that the literal translation of “værbit” would be “weather-beaten”. Værbit in Norwegian means something that is marked by weather and wind. Both weathered and storm-scarred add a tiny nuance to the word making it a synonym of the word instead of being the literal translation. “Weathered” means changes in colors and/or shape caused by the sun, rain or wind and can be translated into “forviteret” which indicates that something is falling apart, while “storm-scarred” can be translated into something that is scarred by the storm, excluding other weather phenomena.

16	Som senker	That sends	In falling	TT1: Synonymy TT2: Synonymy
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The literal translation of the word “senker” would be to lower something. The word “send” means to make something go or be taken somewhere while “to fall” means to drop something down from a higher level to a lower level. What the words have in common is that it indicates that something is moved from one place to another, which is why I chose to put these as synonyms. They all indicate that, in this scenario, dreams are moved from one place to another. The words are not the literal translations of each other, but they all indicate the same action, movement from one place to another.

Another strategy that is used in TT1 and TT2 is information change. According to Wakumelo, information change is when information is either added or deleted.

8	Over vannet	Above the sea	O'er the ocean	TT1: Information change TT2: Information change
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Although one could argue that the words “above” and “over” are synonyms, where “above” refers to something that is at or to a higher place or position than something/somebody while “over” refers to something that is resting on the surface of somebody/something and partly or completely covering them/it, I have chosen to put them as information change. The reason for this is that it is “over vannet”. In Norwegian this can indicate several things. It can indicate that something is across the water, above the water or over the water. “Vannet” also indicate any type of water, it can be ocean, fresh water, a puddle or a pool amongst others. While in TT1 and TT2 the

information of that water being the ocean/sea is added. The information change from being a general term, “water”, into a more concrete term, “sea”/”ocean”. One could argue that these are synonyms because “vannet” can also be used instead of ocean/sea, but I have chosen to put this as information change because it changes the information given about the water.

Different from TT1, there has been used several different strategies in TT2. The first strategy I will discuss is explicitness change. Explicitness change is when information is either added or deleted to make the text more (explication) or less (implication).

18	På vår jord.	To our earth	To earth.	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Explicitness change
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In the coupled pair 18, I have chosen to put “på vår jord” -> “to earth” as an explicitness change. The reason for this is that the pronoun “our” has been deleted in TT2. One could, however, argue that it is implicated that “earth” is the same as “our earth” because there are no other planets called earth in our universe. Therefore “earth” has to refer to the earth we live on, meaning “our earth”. This deletes the information about the earth referring to “our earth”, making it an explicitness change, but you can draw the conclusion from the word “earth” that it has to be “our earth”, without it being explicitly stated.

Another strategy used in TT2 is abstraction change. Abstraction change is, according to Wakumelo, when there is a change from using a more concrete term to a more abstract term or vica versa.

5	Stiger frem	Rises forth	Looms	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Abstraction change
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“Å stige frem” means to show up or show yourself, while “loom” means to appear as a large shape that is not clear, especially in a frightening way. The reason I have put this as abstraction change is that “å stige frem” is a concrete term where everyone knows what is happening, while when something looms multiple scenarios can unfold. When something “stiger frem” something will eventually come into sight, while when “looming” it does not necessarily show itself. The term going from something concrete and known, into something more abstract and unknown, is the reason I chose to put this as an abstraction change.

The next strategy I will discuss is paraphrase. Paraphrase is when certain semantic components at the lexical level is ignored or removed and the translation mainly focus on the overall meaning

instead.

12	Elsker det	Love it	In our love	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Paraphrase
13	Og tenker	And think	Recalling	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Paraphrase

In the coupled pairs 12 and 13, “elsker det og tenker” -> “in our love recalling”, it is focus on the overall meaning instead of trying to literally translate TT2 with a word for word translation. The translation chose to remove “elsker det og tenker” and replace it with the overall meaning of “in our love recalling”, which indicates the same, but is phrased differently.

The last strategy I will discuss is cultural filtering. Wakumelo defines cultural filtering as the translation of culture-bound terms and the domestication of a culture-centered translation.

9	Med de	With the	With her	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Cultural filtering
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10	Tusen hjem	Thousands of homes	Thousand homes	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Literal translation
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11	Elsker	Love	Love her	TT1: Literal translation TT2: Cultural filtering
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Since the Norwegian National Anthem was made as one of the tools to create awareness around the national romanticism that took place after the secession from Denmark, it is not surprising that words that are typical Norwegian or emphasizing Norway as an independent country is used as a strategy in the TT2 translation. I believe that since the purpose of the song is to praise and promote what is good and glorious about the Norwegian past, the Viking Age, and its traditions, is a natural subject to mention. In the seven other verses, there are also mentioned other people like Harald Hårfagre, Håkon I den gode Adalsteinsfostre and Sverre Sigurdsson, among others. What all these people have in common is that they were all important in one way or another for Norway to become the country it is today. In addition to important people, several historical events are mentioned together with a romanticization of the Norwegian nature, traditions and unity. In the coupled pair 9 and 11, Norway is referred to as “her”. By saying “her thousand homes” it shows that the translator is proud of it being Norway’s thousands of homes instead of those thousands of homes over there. Later in the verse, the translator refers to Norway as “her” again in “love her in our love recalling”, referring to loving Norway. It gives the TT2 audience a peak into the history of the song and some of the reasoning behind the Norwegian lyrics is transferred into the TT2 translation.

To sum up, what I found in the analysis was that in TT1, literal translation was the most used strategy with 15 of 18 times used, while synonymy and information change were only used three times combined. In TT2, the usage of strategies was more spread. Synonymy was used five times, being the most used strategy. Literal translation, information change, explicitness change, abstraction change, paraphrase and cultural filtering were all used between one and three times.

The fact that literal translation was the most used strategy in TT1 is not very surprising. Following Low's model, TT1 is a programme text type which purpose is to give the audience a translation of the foreign text to understand the lyric and the message of the song. It does not take music into consideration and therefore can also offer a quite accurate literal, word for word, translation of the song. It only goes away from the literal translation to replace words with synonyms or near synonyms and the information change is also minor and does not change the content drastically.

This differ from TT2 where there has been used seven different strategies between one and five times each. The goal of TT2, after Franzon's model, was to create a singable version that takes the music into consideration without losing the essence of the lyric. By doing so, a literal translation would not have been able to fit the rhythm of the song. Instead of translating the song literally, the translator has chosen to try to enhance the message of the song. Since the song was written to romanticize Norway, the translator has chosen to for example refer to Norway as "her" and put his or her own flavor to the song. For example, replacing "elsker" with "love with fond devotion".

Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed two different translations of the first verse in the Norwegian national anthem, "Ja, vi elsker", one literal translation and one singable translation. I have looked at different translation strategies after Toury, Low and Franzon's models and analyzed the two song translations using Wakumelo's model for song analysis. I found that in a literal translation, the translator changed as little as possible using mainly literal translation as strategy for his or her translation. This differed from the singable translation where the translator had used several different strategies to convey the message of the song to the audience. The reason for this is the purpose of the song analysis. In a literal translation the purpose is to translate the song as literal and accurate as possible while changing as little as possible, while in a singable translation, the purpose is to create a singable song while preserving the essence and message of the song.

If I were to do some further research, I would look at more than one verse, and put the song in a more historical context. I would also try to find out when the translations were written and look at whether when the translations were written would have had an impact on the language chosen or not. The reason for this is that “Ja, vi elsker” was originally written in 1859, and the language that is used in the source text song reflect that. Another thing I would look at is different purposes of the translation, for example from Low’s list, and see how that affect the strategies used.

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