

Ane Mali Fiskvik

TRANSLATING SUBTEXT

A closer look at the difficulties in translating subtext in fantasy literature. A case study of 'Small Gods' and its translation

Bachelor's thesis in English bachelor

Supervisor: Ysabel Munoz

June 2023

Ane Mali Fiskvik

TRANSLATING SUBTEXT

A closer look at the difficulties in translating subtext in fantasy literature. A case study of 'Small Gods' and its translation

Bachelor's thesis in English bachelor
Supervisor: Ysabel Munoz
June 2023

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature



Sammendrag

Dette er en analyse av forholdet mellom boken 'Small Gods' skrevet av Terry Pratchett og dens oversettelse 'Små Guder' oversatt av Torleif Sjøgren-Erichsen. Oppgaven tar for seg forskjellene mellom de to bøkene og ser på hva grunnen til disse forskjellene kan være. Med hovedfokus på å svare på spørsmålet til hvilken grad oversettelsen er tro mot underteksten i originalen. Analysen tar utgangspunkt i Vinay og Darbelnet sin metode for analyse av oversettelse. Oversettelsen er stort sett bokstavelig, både på godt og vondt. De fleste av forskjellene i underteksten mellom originalen og oversettelsen kommer som en følge av oversetterens valg om å gjøre en bokstavelig oversettelse. For mesteparten av teksten er det helt uproblematisk at oversettelsen er bokstavelig, men det finnes mange tilfeller i teksten der det hadde vært lurt å ta mer hensyn til betydningen bak ordene. Som for eksempel når det blir brukt idiomer, som ikke gjør seg så bra i direkte oversettelse.

Synopsis

This is an analysis of the relationship between the book 'Small Gods' written by Terry Pratchett and its translation 'Små Guder', translated by Torleif Sjøgren-Erichsen. The thesis looks at the differences between the two books and tries to find what the reason for these differences might be. The main focus is answering the question to what degree is the translation faithful to the original. The analysis is based on Vinay and Darbelnet's method for analysing translations. The translation is mainly literal, which is sometimes good and sometimes bad. Most of the differences in the subtext comes from the translator's choice to do a literal translation. Through most of the text there are no problems with the translation being literal, but there are many incidents in the text where it would have been smart to give a greater consideration to the meaning behind the words. For example, when the text makes use of an idiom, that do not do well in direct translation.

Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Sammendrag | 2 |
| Synopsis | 2 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| Methodology | 6 |
| Analysis/discussion | 9 |
| Changes/mistranslations | 9 |
| Omissions | 17 |
| Idioms/sayings | 19 |
| Conclusion | 24 |
| Bibliography | 25 |

Introduction

This thesis will look at the difficulties in translating fantasy literature that uses a fictional setting to explore and discuss real world issues. The book I have chosen to study for this thesis is *Small Gods* written by Sir Terry Pratchett and its translation *Små Guder*.

Specifically, it will look at how the subtext translates from the original to the translation. The definition of ‘subtext’ as it is being used in this thesis is: the implicit or metaphorical meaning (Merriam-Webster, subtext, 2023). It is important that the translation includes the subtext as the subtext is a big part of conveying the greater story. The analysis of the text and its relationship to its translation will be carried out by using Vinay and Darbelnet’s (1958/1995) model for analysing translations, and their five-step procedure for how to go about an analysis, both of which will be introduced in its entirety in the methodology section. This will be followed by the analysis/discussion, in which I will hopefully clear up whether the subtext in the translation is faithful to the intentions in the original text. The analysis is divided into three parts: Changes/mistranslations, Omissions, and Idioms/sayings. The definitions used for these concepts are all retrieved from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, and are as follows: Mistranslation – an incorrect translation (2023), omission – something neglected or left undone (2023), idiom – a syntactical, grammatical, or structural form peculiar to a language (2023). The analysis will look at the instances where the subtext from the original is not transferred to the translation and attempt to ascertain why the translation differs.

Small Gods is the 13th published book in his Discworld series (Pratchett, 2014). The book's main plot is about religion, one religion, called Omnism, that worships a God named Om in a country named Omnia, and the way they treat all the other religions and peoples around them. And more specifically two very different men, and how they relate both to their own religiousness and to other people’s religiousness. One is a humble novice and will never be anything else due to his diminished mental capacity, his name is Brutha. And the other is the man in charge of the Quisition, his name is Vorbis, and he is the chief Exquisitor of the church. Quisition is a wordplay on Inquisition, and its function is to root out heretical thought and opposition both within the church and from outside sources. The two men travel to a neighbouring country called Ephebe, that is the centre of learning and philosophy, very reminiscent of ancient Greece. They go there to assassinate a philosopher who has written an account of his travels in which he states that he went to the rim of the world and has seen that the world is a flat disc that rests on the back of four elephants that in turn stand on the back of a giant turtle. This is comparable to someone saying that the earth is round, because this

world does in fact rest on the backs of four elephants that stand on a giant turtle. It may also be interesting to note that Omnism believes that the world is a globe, making this the direct opposite situation from the one in reality. This draws unavoidable parallels to the prosecution of Galileo Galilei, by the catholic church, for his belief in the heliocentric teachings of Copernicus about the solar system (Gingerich, 1982, p. 132).

There are also several other instances that can be seen as references to the catholic church, like the choir singing (Pratchett, 2014, p. 16) or the focus on weeding out impure thoughts in the apprentices (Pratchett, 2014, p. 9). But the largest reference to the Catholic Church is probably the Quisition, which is the Omnian church's division for routing out heresy and opposition. It features prominently in the book as one of the main characters, deacon Vorbis, is the leader of this division of the church (Pratchett, 2014, p. 11). There are also references that could point to other religions, like the mentioning of the God changing his shape (Pratchett, 2014, p. 19). This is a common thing in the Greek myths of Olympian Gods. There is also, the labyrinth of Ephebe (Pratchett, 2014, p. 26) that brings to mind the story of the minotaur, or the mention of a God of vine (Pratchett, 2014, p. 23), as well as the Place of Lamentation (Pratchett, 2014, p. 57) that puts one in mind of the wailing wall in Jerusalem. There is a reference to the Egyptian pantheon as well on page 77 (Pratchett, 2014), where it is said that the dead have their hearts weighed on a scale. The only way to avoid going to hell being if the heart weighs less than a feather. And there is also the general feeling of the church as the governing power of the nation, which is the case not only in the Vatican but also in several other countries around the world that are religious totalitarian regimes, like Iran and Saudi-Arabia. Based on this diverse spread of religions represented, a conclusion may be drawn that it is not one religion in particular that is being criticized but perhaps organized religion as a whole.

Which is the reason I have chosen this book to illustrate the difficulties of translating subtext, because this particular book deals with issues that most people have at least heard of. It is hard to miss the different critiques of organised religion; thus, making the intention and subtext more accessible than many of the other books written by the same author. But the author takes some liberties with the English idioms and language to illustrate his point, that presents a challenge for translators and is ideal for the study I wish to conduct.

Methodology

The process of translation between two different written languages involves the changing of an original written text (the source text, or ST) in the original verbal language (the source language, or SL) into a written text (the target text, or TT) in a different verbal language (the target language, or TL).

(Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, p. 8)

For the purposes of this thesis the source text, hereafter referred to as ST, is the 2014 edition of 'Small Gods' written by Terry Pratchett, while the target text, referred to as the TT, is the 2004 translation into Norwegian: *Små Guder*, translated by Torleif Sjøgren-Erichsen. In examining the differences between these two texts I have chosen to employ Vinay and Darbelnet's model for translation.

Vinay and Darbelnet's model for translation divides translation into two overall strategies where one orients towards the ST and the other towards the TT. Vinay and Darbelnet call these two strategies; direct translation and oblique translation and divide them into seven procedures (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, p. 75). Three of these procedures belong to the direct translation, and they are:

Borrowing: Which is exactly what it sounds like; the word is taken from the SL and used in the TL, usually to cover a gap in the TL, because the TL has no existing word that can fit the meaning. Some commonly used examples of this are words like *glasnost*, *perestroika*, *kimono* (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, p. 75), *tequila and tortillas* (Vinay & Darbelnet, A methodology for translation, 2003, p. 85). The translation employs borrowing for almost all names and titles present in the text.

Calque: Could be described as a special kind of borrowing wherein the expression is transferred directly from the SL in a literal translation (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, p. 75). You can have: a **lexical calque**, which changes the expression to fit the lexical rules of the TL, for example the English 'Compliments of the season' becomes the French 'Compliments de la saison'. Or you can have a **structural calque**, that introduces a new construction into the TL, one of the most recognizable examples of this is the French calque *science-fiction*, and its adoption into English (Vinay & Darbelnet, A methodology for translation, 2003, p. 85).

Literal translation: Also known as word-for-word translation it is the most common way to translate between languages when those languages belong to the same family or share a common culture. Vinay and Darbelnet have expressed the opinion that this is the best way to go about a translation and that deviations should only occur when demanded by structural or metalinguistic considerations (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, p. 76). Most of the book is translated in a very literal translation, only making changes for basic grammar differences, and this produces very few problems. So, for this thesis I have chosen to focus on the instances where the ST and the TT differ, either in phrase or meaning.

However, if the demands of the text are such that a literal translation is not possible, Vinay and Darbelnet have a strategy to employ, called Oblique translation, comprised of four procedures (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, p. 76). These procedures are:

Transposition: This is when you exchange one part of speech for another, for example a verb for a noun. This change is done without changing the meaning behind the words, and can be divided into two different categories:

Obligatory: It is as the name suggest, necessary to retaining the meaning of the phrase.

Optional: When the change is not required to retain the meaning but is rather employed to make the text align better with the way the TL normally choses to turn a phrase.

Modulation: Consists of a change in the semantics from the SL to the TL, this can be:

Obligatory: Necessary change to preserve the meaning of the phrase, employed when a word-for-word translation would make the text incomprehensible.

Optional: Is more linked to the ease of reading, a word-for-word translation would still be understood, but a change makes the text line up better with the preferred structures of expression in the TL.

The use of modulation is, according to Vinay and Darbelnet, what separates the good translators from the great ones and covers a lot of different instances in a translation.

Modulation can be subdivided into nine different kinds:

Abstract < > concrete: Give a pint of blood < > Give a little blood

Effect < > cause: You're quite the stranger < > We don't see you any more

| | |
|---|---|
| Whole < > part: | He shut the door in my face < > He shut the door on my nose |
| Part < > another part: | He cleared his throat < > He cleared his voice |
| Reversal of term: | You can have it < > I'll give it to you |
| Negation of opposite: | It does not seem unusual < > It is very normal |
| Active < > passive: | We aren't allowed < > They don't allow us |
| Change intervals/limits in space/time: | No parking between signs < > Limit of parking |
| Change of symbol: | French: La moutarde lui monte au nez ('The mustard rose up to his nose') < > English: He saw red ('he became very angry') |

(Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, pp. 76-77)

The author of the ST tends to modify any idioms used, probably to highlight that the world in question is not our world. This makes changing the symbol while preserving the intended feeling of the text more of a challenge.

Équivalence: As a description of a specific situation, not to be confused with the more general use of the term. It refers to the instances where the same situation is described by using different language conventions. The most easily understood example of this is probably the translation of onomatopoeia, such as animal sounds: the English 'miaow' becomes the French 'miaou' (Vinay & Darbelnet, A methodology for translation, 2003, p. 90). Very useful for idioms, for example: *comme un chien dans un jeu de quilles* ('like a dog in a game of skittles') becomes 'like a bull in a china shop' (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, p. 77).

Adaptation: Can be described as a situational type of equivalence and is used in instances where the SL has a cultural reference that is not shared with the TL (Vinay & Darbelnet, A methodology for translation, 2003, p. 91). The idea is that if an English text makes a reference to cricket it would make more sense in French to make it a reference to Tour de France (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, p. 77). This has limited uses because in the English idioms that mention cricket need there to be a cultural understanding of cricket. For the sake of the meaning, a corresponding French idiom would be better. So instead of adaption a change of symbol would work better.

The translator has, as mentioned previously, stuck to a direct translation. So there were no examples of the different procedures from oblique translation found in the text when it was analysed.

When analysing the change from ST to TT I have chosen to employ Vinay and Darbelnet's five step procedure that goes as follows:

- (1) Identify the units of translation. These are not the individual words, but rather an entire sentence, paragraph, or a 'unit of thought' (Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, pp. 79-80).
- (2) Examine the SL text, evaluating the descriptive, affective and intellectual content of the units.
- (3) Reconstruct the metalinguistic context of the message.
- (4) Evaluate the stylistic effects.
- (5) Produce and revise the TT.

(Munday, Pinto, & Blakesley, 2022, p. 79)

The greatest challenge of this thesis has been to distinguish between translation choices that have an impact on the subtext and those that don't. And judging how big the impact is on the whole of the story when having the ST on hand to smooth out any gaps in the understanding.

Analysis/discussion

This section of the text has been subdivided into three sections that reflect the different ways the ST and the TT differ from each other. The first is Changes/mistranslations, followed by Omissions, and the last section is Idioms/sayings. This is only a rough divide and not all the examples under each heading is an exact match, this is simply to make the text easier to navigate for the reader.

Changes/mistranslations

The first instances being analysed are the ones where the translator has taken some liberties with the text, changing the intended expression to something else, without any apparent reason, simply for the sake of change. Most of these instances have little to no bearing on the greater meaning, which makes the decision to change them even more puzzling. Like the following examples, the first of which is in the explanation of the deadliness of the Ephebean maze:

His head rolled a further **seven** paces, (Pratchett, 2014, p. 131)

Hodet hans rullet ytterligere **fire** skritt, (Pratchett, 2004, p. 102)

Back-translation: His head rolled a further **four** paces,

The emphasis is mine. There is no apparent difference based on how far his head rolled, it seems to simply have been changes for the sake of it. It could be to change the perception of how gruesome and violent the death is, but ‘four steps’ is already pretty violent, and the main point is made by the head rolling further than the body in the first place. The same with this conversation between Brutha and the Ephebian slave cleaning his room about the rights of an Ephebian slave:

Run away for a **fortnight** in Djelibeybi every winter, though.’ (Pratchett, 2014, p. 152)

Men jeg rømmer til Djelibeybi en **helg** hver eneste vinter.’ (Pratchett, 2004, p. 117)

back-translation: But I run away to Djelibeybi for a **weekend** every single winter.’

The point of this exchange is to demonstrate that the slaves in Ephebe have a better life than a novice in the citadel, and so the length of his vacation makes little difference, but the translator still changed it. While these instances, and the others like them, do not have any impact on the overall understandability of the text, they do illustrate that the translator has chosen to take liberties with the translation.

Fortunately, most of these changes are like the examples above, and have little impact on the meaning of the text. But there are some changes made that have more of an impact on the meaning and the subtext. Like when Brutha is wandering in the desert and contemplating the nature of sand, the ST uses the description to illustrate that Brutha is slowly falling forward, but his mind and body is so exhausted, that he does this without noticing:

Sand (...)

Every one a little crystal. And all of them getting bigger ...

Much bigger ...

Quietly, without realizing it, Brutha stopped falling forward and lay still.

(Pratchett, 2014, p. 219)

Lydløst, og uten å merke det selv, falt Brutha forover og ble liggende stille. (Pratchett, 2004, p. 166)

Back-translation: Silently, and without noticing himself, Brutha fell forward and lay still.

The bolded text is my emphasis: This is the part that explains why the grains of sand were getting bigger and elegantly highlights what has happened by choosing to say that he has ‘stopped falling forward’, indicating that he had already done the falling, instead of the more conventional ‘fell forward’, that most texts choose to employ. When we compare this to the same section in the TT, we can see that this effect is lost. This almost seems like a case of modulation, specifically active < > passive, but it is possible to keep the same feeling in the TT without sacrificing the grammar. Due to this small change the TT loses both the slow-motion effect created in the ST and the connection to the rest of the section, the build-up created by describing the grains getting slowly bigger, misses its conclusion. This is a small change with a big effect that, while it causes a lack of cohesiveness has no great impact on the greater whole.

There are also cases where the change to the text is more profound and seem like more deliberate changes, out of political or moral considerations, that becomes clear when looking at the difference between the original and the translation. The most obvious example of this:

The Omnians forbade the use of all drugs. At times like that the prohibition bit hard, when you dared not go to sleep for fear of your dreams. (Pratchett, 2014, p. 40)

I slike stunder sved portforbuded sterkt, når man ikke våget å gå til sengs i frykt for marerittene. (Pratchett, 2004, p. 35)

Back-translation: ‘At times like this the curfew bit hard, when you dared not go to sleep for fear of the nightmares.’

When comparing the ST to the TT it is easy to see that the translator has removed the first sentence and changed ‘prohibition’ to ‘curfew’, this removes all mention of drugs and has the feel of censorship. Which would make sense considering the general Norwegian attitude towards drug use is, on the whole, inclined to be negative (Skretting, 1993, p. 127), and considering the intended audience of this book is young adults, it might not be so surprising that one would make the attempt to shield them from this. But censoring the mention of drugs also detracts from the harshness of the statement about just how bad it is to see the aftermath

of a battlefield. The original makes it clear that it is bad enough to drive someone to drugs to escape the visuals and assist in getting to sleep, but the translations lessen the severity of the statement considerably by removing the reference to drugs. One could perhaps argue that this change is because the Norwegian general attitude towards drugs and drug use is so harsh, that the implied severity of the reaction becomes greater than the author intended. But to change it to a difficulty sleeping due to nightmares in the translation may be a case of removing too much of the suffering imbued in the subtext of the original text.

Another example of the subtext being lost, in this case without major changes between the ST and the TT can be found in when Brutha is explaining to Om why he finds it inadvisable to keep Vorbis waiting:

‘He goes very calm if he’s kept waiting. (Pratchett, 2014, p. 115)

‘Han blir veldig rolig hvis han må vente. (Pratchett, 2004, p. 90)

Back-translation: ‘He becomes very calm if he has to wait.

The subtext in the ST is very clear, and that is that Vorbis becomes very displeased if someone keeps him waiting, and that consequently: bad things will happen to the person that kept him waiting. Like the calm before the storm. However, if we compare it to the TT, we can see that the translation is very accurate when it comes to the text itself, but it does not invoke the same feeling of something brewing under the surface that you get from the ST. This is due to the TL not having the inherent subtext that the SL does, imbued in the phrase. In English the concept of ‘the calm before the storm’ is a very culturally ingrained idea, this is not the case in Norwegian. And as a result, the TT is completely without the subtext present in the ST.

Another example of the subtext being lost in the translation is the exchange between Brutha and Om on the boat on the way to Ephebe after Om bargains with the Sea Queen to save the boat. This example takes place on page 107 of the ST:

‘You said you couldn’t do anything!’ he said accusingly.

‘That wasn’t m—’ Om paused. There will be a price, he thought. It won’t be cheap. It can’t be cheap. The Sea Queen is a god. I’ve crushed a few towns in my time. Holy fire, that kind of thing. If the price isn’t high, how can people respect you?

‘I made arrangements,’ he said. (Pratchett, 2014, p. 107)

‘Jeg gjorde en avtale,’ sa han. (Pratchett, 2004, p. 84)

Back-translation: ‘I made a deal,’ he said.

The relevant part of the exchange in regard to the subtext is the last bit, where Om says he ‘made arrangements’. This phrase could mean any number of things and is most likely a deliberate choice. Om does not want Brutha to know that he lacks in power, and that he asked someone else for help, so he deliberately rearranged what he was going to say, to hopefully give an impression of strength. He wants to avoid seeming weak in front of his only believer. The translation completely removes this subtext by simply stating outright what happened. Thus, making it crystal clear that this miracle was not his doing and completely omitting any trace of the subtext present in the ST.

This is a good example of how the subtext is lost with small changes being made between the ST and the TT. And is comparable to the change between the original and the translation that happens in the following exchange, between Vorbis and Nhumrod in their conversation about Brutha:

‘What about his memory?’

‘There’s so much of it,’ said Nhumrod.

‘He has got a good memory?’

‘Good is the wrong word. It’s superb, He’s word-perfect on the entire Sept—’

‘Hmm?’ said Vorbis.

Nhumrod caught the deacon’s eye.

‘As perfect, that is, as anything may be in this most imperfect world,’ he muttered.

(Pratchett, 2014, p. 50)

‘Hva er det med hukommelsen hans?’

‘Det er så mye av den,’ sa Nhumrod.

‘Han har altså god hukommelse?’

‘God er feil ord. Den er superb. Han kan utenat hvert eneste ord I Sept...’

‘Hmm?’ sa Vorbis.

‘Så perfekt som noe kan bli i denne alt annet enn perfekte verden,’ mumlet han.

(Pratchett, 2004, pp. 42-43)

Back-translation: ‘What about his memory?’

‘There is so much of it,’ said Nhumrod.

‘He has a good memory then?’

‘Good is the wrong word. It is superb. He knows by heart every single word in the Sept...’

‘Hmm?’ said Vorbis.

‘As perfect as anything can be in this imperfect world,’

This conversation gives the reader the information that it is considered sinful to think of anything on the material plane as perfect. It gives the reader valuable insight into the ruling belief system of the nation and shows that Vorbis holds a lot of power in the minds of everyone in the Citadel. This insight is missing from the translation as the translation does not include the word perfect in the statement about Brutha’s memory. Thereby losing the coherency that makes the subtext visible. This choice in translation makes the rest of the exchange feel disjointed, as there is suddenly no previous mention of the word ‘perfect’ for Brother Nhumrod’s muttered statement to be referring to. And as a result, the text loses the subtext that tells the reader about the churches’ opinion on perfection, Vorbis’ status in the minds of the clergy. This is not the only instance of a mistranslation in regard to Brutha’s exceptional memory, there is another instance when Brutha first meets Didactylos in front of the library:

‘Got a good memory?’

‘No. Not exactly a good one.’ (Pratchett, 2014, p. 159)

‘Har du god hukommelse?’

‘Nei. Ikke så god at det gjør noe.’ (Pratchett, 2004, p. 122)

Back-translation: ‘Do you have a good memory?’

‘No. Not so good as to matter.’

A good example of Brutha’s literal mind and a deliberately ambiguous statement meant to remind the reader that Brutha’s memory is not simply good, it is exceptional. Probably written this way to give the reader an opportunity to laugh at Brutha being too literal, again. However, in the translation the text gives the opposite impression. Brutha is suddenly saying that he has a bad memory, and the text makes a big point out of Brutha always telling the truth, because he finds lying to be too complicated. All of this subtext is completely lost in the TT, because of the mistake in the translation.

Another place in the text where the intended meaning failed to be conveyed is when Brutha and Om are discussing whether Brutha would make a good prophet. Om is for it, Brutha is against it:

‘The great prophets had vision,’ said Brutha. ‘Even if they ... even if you didn’t talk to them, they had something to say. (Pratchett, 2014, p. 168)

‘De store profetene hadde visoner,’ sa Brutha. ‘Selv om de ... selv om **man** ikke snakket med dem, hadde de noe å si. (Pratchett, 2004, p. 129)

Back-translation: ‘The great prophets had visions,’ said Brutha. ‘Even if they ... even if **one** didn’t talk to them, they had something to say.

This is in the ST, a demonstration of Brutha losing his unquestioning faith in the scriptures and the church, an admission that the prophets may not have gotten their inspiration to write from their God. Meaning that all the rules and regulations that everyone in the Omnian empire live their lives by, that the soldiers have fought and died for, none of that was divinely ordained. It is a section written to show the slow realization Brutha has that the church is not carrying out a divine will. Which is a very different impression than the one we get from the TT. It leaves the reader less with the impression of someone who while he may be losing his faith in the church, he is not quite ready to let go of the idea of the prophets as important and more with the feeling that he is speaking of the prophets as one of those annoying people that have no understanding of when to be silent. The people that cannot understand that not everybody is overjoyed to listen to them. In this case the loss in the meaning is caused by changing the specific reference ‘you’ in the ST to a more general ‘man’ (one) in the TT. And changing this one word is enough to have such a profound effect on the subtext of the section.

Another place in the text where a similar loss in the subtext occurs, but with a slightly larger change in the text is when Brutha is guiding Vorbis as they sneak through the Ephebian maze:

Brutha had the briefest glimpse of Vorbis, his face strangely peaceful, as he gripped the head of his staff, twisted and pulled. Sharp metal glittered for a moment in the candlelight. (Pratchett, 2014, p. 174)

Brutha fikk et kort glimt av Vorbis, med et underlig fredelig uttrykk i ansiktet, idet han grep rundt staven sin, løftet den og slo. Det glimtet raskt i skarpt metal i skjæret fra vokslyset. (Pratchett, 2004, p. 133)

Back-translation: Brutha got a short glimpse of Vorbis, with a strangely peaceful facial expression, as he gripped his staff, lifted it and struck. Sharp metal glittered for a moment in the candlelight.

The implication in the ST is that Vorbis has a sword or dagger hidden in his staff, the subtext being that he is the sort of person that would sneak a weapon with him wherever he goes, even in places where weapons are forbidden, as the Ephobians confiscated all their weapons before they were led through the maze and into the palace. This tells the reader that Vorbis is not only the kind of man that can order people to be tortured and/or executed, but he is also prepared to do the violence himself whenever he feels the situation calls for it. And if we look at the TT, the subtext of the ST is completely lost as it changes the hidden sword into simply hitting the man over the head with his staff, which is what was to hand. A weapon of convenience and necessity rather than a premeditated choice. And consequently, the text loses the subtext of a brutal and calculating man, as a result he becomes less of a terrifying figure and more a normal man doing terrifying things. Which is a significant change in the subtext.

We have seen that there are places in the TT where the translator has made small mistakes and most of them are of no importance to the understanding of the story. But there are examples of places where these small mistakes have wider ramifications for the flow of the story. For example:

Who did **Vorbis** talk to when he prayed? (Pratchett, 2014, p. 177)

Hvem snakket **Brutha** med når han ba? (Pratchett, 2004, p. 135)

Back-translation: Who did Brutha talk to when he prayed?

Emphasis is mine. The TT has changed the name from Vorbis to Brutha, this may seem like a small mistake that is easily overlooked, and perhaps it would be, except this is the culmination of a line of thought that has stretched through the entire book up to this point. It begins on page 6 with a general explanation of how belief works to empower the God and is mentioned at several places. On page 46 of the ST, we learn that no one Om met before he ran into Brutha could hear him because only those that believe can hear the God, and on page 52 it is stated that Gods who lose all their believers die. And then on page 81 of the ST it is written that in the whole of the Citadel, which is the main seat of the religion, there is only one flame of belief, and that belongs to Brutha. There are also several instances where Om clearly avoids telling Brutha just how important belief is to a God, the best example of which

is on page 121, where he stops himself in the middle of a sentence to avoid the topic. And this all comes together on page 177 when Brutha not only expresses his doubts about Om's power but also shows that he has understood that him being the only one that believes in Om means that all the people that say they are fighting, torturing and killing for the glory of Om are lying to themselves or the world. This point is completely lost in the TT with this error in the translation.

Omissions

There are several cases in the TT where the translator has taken the liberty of omitting certain parts of the ST, some of which have more impact on the story than others. The first example is when the turtle movement is discussing how to disseminate a written text to people that are illiterate:

‘But will people rally behind ... a book? People need more than a book. They’re peasants. They can’t read.’

‘But they can listen!’

‘Even so ... they need to be shown ... they need a symbol...’ (Pratchett, 2014, p. 30)

‘Men vil folk stille seg ... bak en bok? Folk trenger mer enn en bok. De er bønder. De kan ikke lese.’

‘Likevel ... de trenger å bli vist ... de trenger et symbol ...’ (Pratchett, 2004, p. 27)

Back-translation: ‘But will people rally ... Behind a book? People need more than a book. They’re peasants. They can’t read.’

‘Even so ... they need to be shown ... they need a symbol ...’

This makes the conversation a little disjointed as the last part is a rebuttal to something that is missing, but it does not have a large impact on the greater context. It is a confusing choice from the translator though, because saying that people can listen does not seem like a radical statement to make so omitting it is perplexing.

The next example of exclusion has a greater influence over the meaning of the section, it takes place when Didactylos, Urn, Brutha, Om, and Simony are on the rowboat escaping from Ephebe while the Omnian soldiers are razing it:

There was no sound but the slosh of water against the *Unnamed Boat’s* hull and the spinning of the philosophical engine. (Pratchett, 2014, p. 198)

This is completely omitted from page 151 of the TT. The purpose of this sentence in the ST is to create some space, to slow the conversation down, to show that nobody is talking at this moment. A moment of introspection. To give the reader the opportunity to figure out whether they agree with sergeant Simony that putting Vorbis on trial will be easy to do. The TT does not give this breathing room for introspection which takes away the subtext that trying to put Vorbis on trial might be a very bad idea indeed.

The third example of exclusion happens while Brutha and Vorbis are out walking in the Ephebian night air on their way to sneaking through the maze. It is in the middle of Vorbis' description of the town of Ephebe:

‘Ephebe looks to the sea,’ said Vorbis after a while. ‘You see the way it is built? All on the slope of a hill facing the sea. **But the sea is mutable. Nothing lasting comes from the sea.** Whereas our dear Citadel looks towards the high desert. And what do we see there?’ (Pratchett, 2014, p. 170)

‘Efebe vender seg mot havet,’ sa Vorbis etter en stund. ‘Ser du hvordan den er bygget? Hele byen ligger på en skråning med utsikt over havet. Mens vårt kjære Citadell vender mot ørkenplataet. Og hva ser vi der?’ (Pratchett, 2004, p. 130)

Back-translation: ‘Ephebe turns to the sea,’ said Vorbis after a while. ‘Do you see how it is built? The entire town is on a hill looking out over the ocean. While our dear Citadel is turned to the high desert. And what do we see there?’

The bolded section is the part that is missing from the TT, excluding this part from the TT removes much of Vorbis' thoughts about the Ephebians from the statement. He feels they are shifting and unpredictable, like the sea, but without the middle sentence the paragraph in the TT becomes nothing more than a comparison of the differences between Ephebe and the Citadel.

The fourth and final example of exclusion included in this paper is in the conversation between the boat captain and Death, aboard the spirit of the captain's dead ship, after the captain has drowned, on page 211 in the ST and missing from page 161 of the TT:

The memory of *Fin of God* sailed on through the silence. There was the distant sighing of wind, or the memory wind. The blown-out corpses of dead gales.
(Pratchett, 2014, p. 211)

The purpose of this break in the conversation is to both set the scene and let the reader know that there is a gap in the conversation. To signify that the captain is taking a moment to consider what he just heard. Removing this contemplation takes away significance from the revelation that he has died.

Idioms/sayings

There are instances where the author has taken idioms and modified them to heighten the immersion in the fictional world, the changes do a very good job of emphasizing that this is not the world you are used to, it is different. These changes do of course add to the challenge of identifying and translating said idioms, as they no longer match exactly with what is expected. While the translating of an idiom is in most cases solved by simply extracting the meaning and translating that in what Vinay and Darbelnet would call a change of symbol. However, the change in the structure of the idiom has in this case led the translator to choose a literal translation which leads to confusion instead of a heightening of understanding. It varies how much impact this has on the understanding of the context, and sometimes it has a limited impact, like this example:

Life's a beach, he remembered. And then you die (Pratchett, 2014, p. 214).

Livet er en strand, husket han. Og så dør man (Pratchett, 2004, p. 163).

Back-translation: Life's a beach, he remembered. And then you die.

This is a modification of a saying in the SL, the original idiom being: Life's a bitch and then you die. If you translate the original directly it is fairly straight forward to understand the underlying meaning, but with the modification the translation becomes a little nonsensical, due to the fact that the TT does not have this idiom and so the reader has to take the sentence at face value. Because the symbolic meaning of comparing life to a beach is in the context completely non-existent. It would have been better for the intended meaning to deviate from the literal translation and employ a change of symbol to preserve the meaning. This does not, however have an undue influence on the flow of the story. But there are other cases where the impact on the understanding of the context is greater, like the following examples:

The highest post that could be held in the Quisition was that of deacon, a rule instituted hundreds of years ago to prevent this branch of the church becoming too big for its boots (Pratchett, 2014, p. 12).

Den høyeste stillingen man kunne inneha i Kvisisjonen, var diakon, et prinsipp som var knesatt for hundrevis av år siden for å hindre at denne grenen av kirken vokste ut av støvlene sine (Pratchett, 2004, p. 15).

Back-translation: The highest position one could hold in the Quisition, was deacon, a rule written hundreds of years ago to stop this branch of the church grew out of its boots.

The original idiom would be ‘too big for its britches’, meaning ‘to behave as if you are more important than you really are’ (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The political underpinnings here are a reference to giving the military too much political power, and all the less than desirable outcomes this has resulted in over the centuries. This is made very clear in the ST by the use of the altered idiom. It becomes much less clear in the TT, where the translator has directly translated the idiom giving the impression of someone growing up/coming of age. This leads to a confusion as to what is being said, as the TL does not have any of the necessary meaning attached to growing too big for either your britches or your boots. This section would have greatly benefitted from a change of symbol or even a plain text explanation of the meaning behind the expression to help the reader understand.

The readers understanding of the story is not helped by the TT containing what I would call mistranslations. It happens several places in the text and these mistranslations actually change the meaning of that section of the text in a very obvious fashion, one of the most obvious examples of this is in a secret meeting of the Turtle Moves movement:

‘And now,’ he said, ‘we will draw lots ...’ (Pratchett, 2014, p. 30)

‘Og nå,’ sa han, ‘skal vi tegne massevis av dem ...’ (Pratchett, 2004, p. 28)

Back-translation: ‘And now,’ he said, ‘we will draw lots of them ...’

This is a case of the translator not being familiar enough with the ST to understand the meaning of the sentence. As the translation has shifted the meaning from the men gathered making a decision about who will be chosen from among them to go to Ephebe, to them being symbolic and drawing turtles everywhere to signify that their movement is strong. This has consequences later in the book when we are introduced to sergeant Simony on page 53 in the ST and page 45 of the TT, he is the one that was selected to go to Ephebe when they drew lots. But in the TT, there was no mention of drawing lots in the first place, which means there is no context for Simony’s introduction to the story making his appearance feel out of

context. But the subtext that is lost in this change is that the underground movement does not have a hierarchy, they do not get ordered to do things and do not have to bow and scrape in front of their betters, in stark contrast to how things are done in the Omnian church, where you are always walking on eggshells, in case someone higher up than you chooses to take offense. Another place in the text where there is a mistranslation is when Om is convincing Brutha to go find the Cenobiarch, the supreme leader of the church, to help Om with his situation, the relevant section is Brutha explaining why he cannot do this:

‘Novices aren’t even allowed in the Great Temple except on special occasions. I’d be Taught the Error of My Ways by the Quisition if I was caught. (Pratchett, 2014, p. 31)

‘Noviser har ikke adgang til Det store Tempelet, ikke engang ved spesielle anledninger. Hvis jeg ble tatt av Kvisisjonen, ville jeg fått en Lærepenge. (Pratchett, 2004, p. 28)

Back-translation: ‘Novices aren’t allowed in the Great Temple, not even on special occasions. If I got caught by the Quisition, they would teach me a Lesson.

The ST states that there is an exception that allows novices in the Great Temple sometimes, but the translation flips this and doubles down on barring them entrance no matter the occasion or circumstance. This takes away from the illustration that this rule is artificial and simply there as a device to remind the novices of their place in the hierarchy. There is also another instance in this section that lessens the potency of the point, and this is the difference in the way the TT has chosen to describe the severity of the punishment received, as the ST statement strongly hints that he would die in interesting ways with the choice of phrasing and the capitalisation. Meanwhile the phrasing in the TT is much less severe, a ‘Lærepenge’, even with capital letters is something that you should survive and only indicates moderate to severe pain. This could perhaps have been solved by sticking closer to a literal translation.

But sticking to the literal translation carries its own risks and pitfalls as demonstrated in the following examples. The first example takes place when Brutha is explaining to Om; how much time the Great God Om would make him spend in hell for failing to show up for class:

‘In this one case I could be merciful,’ said the tortoise. ‘No more than a thousand years at the outside.’ (Pratchett, 2014, p. 35)

‘I dette tilfellet skal jeg vise nåde,’ sa skilpadden. ‘Ikke mer enn tusen år, og bare på utsiden.’ (Pratchett, 2004, p. 32)

Back-translation: ‘In this case I will show mercy,’ said the tortoise. ‘No more than a thousand years, and only round the outside,’

A case of the translator missing the intended meaning of the ST, and simply aiming for a literal translation, possibly not noticing that this is an expression and would retain the intended meaning much better if it was modulated to align with the TT. Another instance where a less literal translation would be beneficial to retaining the meaning is an occurrence on page 25 of the ST and page 24 of the TT:

‘It was only idle curiosity.’ (Pratchett, 2014, p. 25)

“Det var bare idel nysgjerrighet.” (Pratchett, 2004, p. 24)

Back-translation: ‘It was only exclusively curiosity.’

This is proof that literal translation can on occasion be detrimental to the translation, as there are sentence structures or words in the ST that have what appears to be equivalents in the TT. Causing what looks like a literal translation to actually become a mistranslation. For example the use of the old-fashioned word ‘idel’ in the TT when the ST uses ‘idle’. These two words may look and sound similar, but their meanings are not. To convey the same meaning the word ‘tom’ meaning ‘empty’ or ‘tilfeldig’ meaning ‘random’ should have been employed. But the most common thing in the TL is to leave out the extra word in its entirety and simply say: “Det var bare nysgjerrighet.” ‘It was only curiosity.’ Instead, the translator has chosen to use a word that is no longer in common use in the TL to the detriment of the naturalness of the flow of the story.

There are places in the text where the flow is not interrupted but the loss of subtext is very hard to avoid. Where the subtext is lost in the TT simply because the ST makes use of a naturally occurring linguistic convention within the SL, like in this example:

Before you sent them your letters, that put the minds of men in **chains**.’

‘That set the feet of men on the right road,’ said Vorbis.

‘**Chain** letters,’ said the Tyrant. ‘The **Chain** Letter to the Ephebian. Forget Your Gods. Be Subjugated. Learn to Fear. Do not break the **chain** – the last people who did woke up one morning to find fifty thousand armed men on their lawn.’ (Pratchett, 2014, p. 145)

Før du sendte brevene dine som la menneskers tanker i **lenker**.’

‘Det ledet menneskers føtter inn på den rette sti,’ sa Vorbis.

‘**Kjedebrev,**’ sa Tyrannen. ‘**Kjedebrevet** til efeberne. Glem gudene deres. Underkast dere. Lær å frykte. Bryt ikke **kjeden** – de siste som gjorde det, våknet en morgen og fant femti tusen bevæpnede men ute på plenen.’ (Pratchett, 2004, p. 112)

Back-translation: Before you sendt your letters, that put the thoughts of men in chains.’

‘It led the feet of men onto the right path,’ said Vorbis.

‘Chain letters,’ said the Tyrant, ‘The chain letter to the Epebians. Forget your Gods. Subjugate yourselves. Learn to fear. Do not break the chain – the last people that did, woke up one morning and found fifty thousand armed men on their lawn.’

The emphasis is mine. This double use of the word ‘chain’ that is naturally occurring in the SL has no equivalence in the TL so the translator has had to choose between keeping the poetic double meaning or going for a literal translation, and has chosen a literal translation, without forcing the connection. It is also interesting to note in this section that the ST uses capital letters to add emphasis to the sentiments being expressed which the TT has omitted. The ST makes it very clear that the point the Tyrant is trying to make is that the Omnians are binding the other nations in chains, they are using letters to force compliance out of their neighbours. And putting anyone that disagrees in actual physical chains. While at the same time making a tongue-in-cheek complaint about the number of letters being sent. While the TT does not convey the same subtext about chains and reads more like a complaint about how annoying and persistent Vorbis can be. But I am not certain how the translation could have been done differently, because borrowing would not work, and a change of symbol would have required rewriting the text entirely, and that is perhaps more liberty than the translator was comfortable taking. This section also contains a case of modulation from passive to active, the phrase ‘be subjugated’ is changed to ‘subjugate yourselves’, to fit better with the TT grammar.

One of the things that leaves a permanent mark on the understanding is the lack of emphasis in the one part of the story where the overarching metaphor and the story are connected. This happens when the relationship between the tortoise that is Om and the eagle that is mentioned throughout the book and is used as a metaphor for the situation between Brutha and Vorbis. There is one place in the book that brings the metaphor together with the story, and that is on page 101, where Om thinks about Vorbis, and describes him as:

‘An eagle kind of person if there ever was one ...’

Side 80: ‘En riktig ørnepersonlighet ...’

Back-translation: ‘A right eagle-like personality ...’

While this is not a change in meaning or words, it is important to note that saying that someone has an eagle-like personality in this way does not stand out in the TL the same way ‘an eagle kind of person’ does in the SL. And without this connection there are large parts of the subtext in the conflict between Vorbis and Brutha that is lost. The eagle is referenced throughout the story, always hunting the tortoise, and the story even begins with an explanation of the relationship between the eagle and tortoise. This is a very important symbol of the struggle of the little guy and the triumph of finally beating the odds and turning the table on the eagle for once. It is the culmination of the entire story, just slightly missing its mark.

Conclusion

In the course of this analysis, I have found several changes from ST to TT that change the subtext. These changes can be big or small and vary in how much impact they have on the greater whole of the text. The translator’s choice to translate word-for-word preserves the subtext perfectly in most cases. Problems mostly arise when a modified idiom is used, or the translator misunderstands the meaning of the text. It was an interesting experience to read a published text that was allowed this many errors in its translation, it made for a unique experience doing the analysis. Whether or not the translators’ issues with the idioms arise from the author modifying them is hard to say, but it is clear that the subtext would have benefited greatly if the translation was less literal in these cases.

The text suffers for what appears to be the translators incomplete understanding of the source languages idioms. It could be argued that most of the examples shown in this thesis are small and have no lasting impact on the overall understanding, but with every change or omission another brick is removed from the foundation. There are many thought provoking and entertaining ideas and images that are missing from the TT, and it becomes poorer for it. It is hard to say for sure if the difficult translating the subtext is a facet of fantasy literature removing the story from the familiar cultural framework or if there are other reasons, but it is clear when comparing the original to the translation that the translation is lacking.

Bibliography

(n.d.). Retrieved from Cambridge Dictionary:

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/too-big-for-britches>

(n.d.). Retrieved from Norsk Oversetterforening:

https://oversetterforeningen.no/m/webmedlem/client.php?do=getProduction&s=1&medl_nr=334

Gingerich, O. (1982). The Galileo Affair. *Scientific American*, 247(2), 132-143. Retrieved May 27, 2023, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24966665>

Merriam-Webster. (2023). *idiom*. Retrieved from Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/idiom>

Merriam-Webster. (2023). *mistranslation*. Retrieved from Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mistranslation>

Merriam-Webster. (2023). *omission*. Retrieved from Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/omission>

Merriam-Webster. (2023). *subtext*. Retrieved from Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subtext>

Munday, J., Pinto, S. R., & Blakesley, J. (2022). *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* (5th ed.). Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

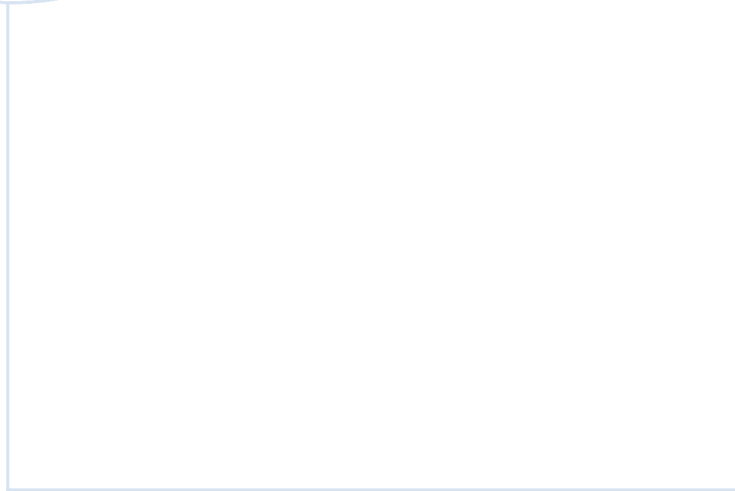
Pratchett, T. (2004). *Små Guder*. (T. Sjøgren-Erichsen, Trans.) Oslo: Tiden Norsk Forlag.

Pratchett, T. (2014). *Small Gods*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.

Skretting, A. (1993). Attitude of the Norwegian population to drug policy and drug-offences. *Addiction*, 125-131. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1360-0443.1993.tb02770.x>

Vinay, J.-P., & Darbelnet, J. (1958/1995). *Comparative Stylistics of French and English: A Methodology for Translation*. (J. Sager, M.-J. Hamel, Eds., J. Sager, & M.-J. Hamel, Trans.) Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Vinay, J.-P., & Darbelnet, J. (2003). A methodology for translation. In L. Venuti (Ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (J. C. Sager, & M.-J. Hamel, Trans., pp. 84-93). New York: Routledge.



 **NTNU**

Norwegian University of
Science and Technology