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An examination of Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson universe: How were culturally specific items translated from English to Norwegian and German, and what does this indicate about differences between the languages?

Bachelor's thesis in ENG2123 - Translation

Supervisor: Annjo Klungervik Greenall

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Bachelorthesis

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Abstract:

This thesis explores differences between the two closely related languages German and Norwegian by examining the translation norms within these two cultures. This is achieved by highlighting key differences between the two by analyzing their approaches to translating culturally specific items (CSIs) in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning thief* from English to German and Norwegian. The study systematically analyses examples of CSIs to obtain a broad overview of translation procedures and the effect they leave on the translated work. The result is different from what the author theorized, as the data visualizes that the Norwegian translation was less likely than the German to domesticate foreign elements.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Topic

This thesis will analyze *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*, to understand how it was translated from English into German and Norwegian. The book is the first in a series of books named *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, and the book series is a very popular and successful franchise that has been read by millions of children and teens across the world. This includes the countries where the target languages Norwegian and German are spoken.

1.2 Background

Several aspects make a study examining English translations into Norwegian and German compelling. Firstly, the languages that I intend to examine in this thesis are closely related, all being a part of the Germanic language family. Therefore, a study such as this might highlight some key differences between the languages. I believe that while the languages are similar, there should be some major differences in for instance translation norms that a study such as this could highlight. In addition to this, there have been few studies conducted that examines the translation of CSIs from English to Norwegian and German. These two reasons make this study compelling.

1.3 Research focus

The central research question for this thesis is: how have culture-specific items in the Percy Jackson books been translated from English to Norwegian and German, and are there any noticeable differences between the Norwegian and German translations?

Based on my knowledge of German and Norwegian culture, I believe that there will be some differences between the Norwegian and German translations, but that the differences will not be too pronounced. Further, I theorize that the Norwegian translation tradition is far more inclined to accept procedures that allow for foreign elements into the Norwegian literature. The reason for this is that Norway is very exposed to the American culture and media, and the threshold for incorporating elements from American culture should therefore be low.

Compared to the Norwegian translation, I theorize that the German translation will take advantage of procedures that allow for as much domestication as possible.

1.4 Method

Considering the research question, I intend to focus mostly on the cultural aspects the translators of the Norwegian and German books translated and explain what strategies and methods they used to translate their versions of the novels. To do this, I will examine one

chapter from start to finish and note all examples of culture-specific items. Doing this will ensure that the data remains unbiased. Further, it will also make the differences between Norwegian, English and German more pronounced when all the data can be compared.

In my thesis, I have chosen to focus my analysis on chapter one. This chapter is excellent for analysis and comparison, as it is the chapter that sets up the story. It therefore has many elements unfamiliar to the reader that must be altered or explained by the translators. In my analysis, I intend to take all the instances of culturally specific items, analyse them, and categorize them according to procedures presented by Aixela (1996). Examining chapter one is sufficient, as it proved me with plenty of examples to analyse. Therefore, it is the only chapter of the book I have chosen to examine.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Descriptive translation studies (DTS)

There are several important theories I intend to include in this thesis. The first and most central of these are descriptive translation studies outlined by Toury. In short, we may say that DTS focuses on describing what goes on in each translation and explaining why they are the way they are. Toury has proposed a three-phase methodology for systematic descriptive translation studies. His strategy includes (1) Situate the text within the culture system, (2) undertake a textual analysis of the ST and the TT, and (3) attempt generalizations about the patterns identified in the two texts. This recipe will somewhat align with the structure of this thesis. (Munday, 2022, p.150)

2.2 Culture-specific items (CSIs)

Another key concept for this thesis is culture-specific items. There are many different definitions of CSIs, but I intend to use the definition from Aixela (1996):

“Those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text” (p.58)

In other words, CSIs in translations are translations that, when transferred to a target language, poses a translation problem due to the nonexistence or to the different value (determined perhaps by ideology, usage, frequency, etc) of the given language culture (Aixela, 1996, p.57). This definition, according to Aixela, makes it possible that all linguistic

items are CSIs. This will depend on its function in each text or how it is perceived in the receiving culture, insofar it poses a problem of “ideological or cultural opacity, or acceptability” for most readers (Aixela, 1996, p.58).

The definition of a CSI from Aixela suits my thesis well. The reason for this is that it allows me great flexibility, but also gives me strict rules for what constitutes a CSI. This makes sure that I will remain consistent throughout my thesis.

Aixela (1996, p.61-65) presents a series of procedures that explain how to translate culture specific items, some of which I intend to use in this thesis. The procedures are divided into two main groupings, the procedures that conserve the original text, and the procedures that substitute the original text. Within the conservation group, we find repetition, orthographic adaptation, linguistic translation, extratextual gloss and intratextual gloss. Underneath the substitution group, the procedures include synonym, limited universalism, absolute universalism, naturalization, deletion and autonomous creation (Aixela, 1996, p.61-65) Some of these procedures will be used to analyse the translations into German and Norwegian and will be further described upon their usage.

2.3 Foreignization and domestication

Foreignization and domestication are concepts explained by Venuti (2018). He describes foreignization “a strategic construction whose value is contingent on the current target-language situation” (p.20). To supplement this, he states that:

“Foreignizing translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language. In its effort to do right abroad, this translation method must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience choosing to translate a foreign text excluded by domestic literary canons, for instance, or using a marginal discourse to translate it” (Venuti, 2018, p.20).

In opposition to foreignization stands domestication. Venuti comments on this translation strategy too, claiming that Anglo-American translation has been dominated by this strategy. The strategy entails “producing the illusion of transparency”, and masquerading translations as domestic, partial to domestic-language values, when they are foreign texts (Venuti, 2018, p.21).

Munday agrees with Venuti and claims that domestication is the dominating way of translation within the Anglo-American tradition. Venuti argues that this tradition is regretful, as it reduces the Anglo-American cultures to outside cultural values.

2.4 Similar studies conducted on the Percy Jackson books

While there is a general lack of studies examining translated CSIs in the Percy Jackson books, there are plenty of studies done on the general translations of the book series. One such study is the paper from Mata & Tangkiengsirisin (2018). In their study of the Percy Jackson book, *The Lightning Thief*, they compared metaphors in English with their Thai translations. While the target language in this article differs from the languages I will be using, the comparison and analysis in the article should give me some ideas and aid when comparing the original version with translated variants.

3 Data and analysis

In this part of the thesis, I will present my findings in tables. I aim to find all CSIs in a set parameter of the book and categorize them according to Aixela's definitions. Then, the coupled pairs will be analysed to examine if they exhibit traits of either foreignization or domestication.

3.2 Table

Table 1: Analysis of the translations in line with Aixela procedures, Chapter 1 of the book. In the table "N" refers to Norwegian, and "G" to German.

ORIGINAL WORD	TRANSLATIONS		ANALYSIS	
ENGLISH	Norwegian	German	Procedures	Strategies
ALGEBRA TEACHER	Mattelærer	Mathelehrerin	Limited universalization	Domesticating
PRIVATE SCHOOL	Privatskole	Internat	N: Repetition G: Absolute universalization	Domesticating
MANHATTAN	Manhattan	Manhattan	Repetition	Foreignizing
YELLOW SCHOOL BUS	Gul skolebuss	Gelben Schulbus	Linguistic (non- cultural) translation	Foreignizing
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART	Metropolitan museet	Metropolitan museum of art	Repetition	N: Domesticating

				G: Foreignizing
REVOLUTIONARY WAR	Frigjøringskrigen	Unabhängigkeitskr ieg	Intratextual gloss	Domesticating
MR. BRUNNER	Herr Brunner	Mr Brunner	N: Linguistic translation G: Repetition	N: Domesticating G: Foreignizing
MRS DODDS	Frøken Dodds	Mrs Dodds	N: Linguistic translation G: Repetition	N: Domesticating G: Foreignizing
GEORGIA	Georgia	Georgia	Repetition	Foreignizing
TARTARUS	Tartaros	Tartarus	N: Repetition G: Repetition	Domesticating
KRONOS	Kronos	Kronos	Repetition	Domesticating
ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER	Konsentrasjons- problemer	Hyperaktiv	Limited universalization	Domesticating
C (GRADE)	4	Befriedigend	Absolute universalization	Domesticating
NEW YORK STATE	X	Staat New York	N: Deletion G: Linguistic (non- cultural) translation	N: Domesticating G: Foreignizing
DETENTION	Husarrest	Nachsitzen	N: Limited universalization G: Linguistic (non- cultural) translation	Domesticating
CHEETO	Ostepop	Cheeto	N: Limited universalism G: Repetition	N: Domesticating G: Foreignizing

DORM ROOM	Rommet	Zimmer	Absolute universalization	Domesticating
TOM SAWYER	Tom Sawyer	Tom Sawyer	Repetition	Foreignizing
MA'AM	Frøken	Ma'am	N: Limited universalization G: Repetition	N: domesticating G: Foreignizing
CHAPERONE	Lærer	Lehrerin	Limited universalization	Domesticating
YANCY ADADEMY	Yancy Academy	Yancy Academy	Repetition	Foreignizing

4 Discussion

In this part of the thesis, I intend to discuss the findings of the previous section. Due to this I will discuss them in light of the theories I explained in the theoretical section. However, firstly it is wise to repeat the research question: The central research question for this thesis is: how have culture-specific items in the Percy Jackson books been translated from English to Norwegian and German, and are there any noticeable differences between the Norwegian and German translations? Before I analyse the chart, there are some key takeaways at first glance.

4.1 Some general trends

Firstly, the German translator, surprisingly, chose a more foreignizing approach than the Norwegian translator. The Norwegian translations were often translated from English using a domesticated approach, as in the examples of “Frøken Dodds”, in comparison with the English and German “Mrs Dodds”. Another key result is that the procedure most used by both the Norwegian and the German translators was the repetition procedure. They did vary significantly in other areas, which I will discuss now.

4.2 Analysis of the data

Delving deeper, in chapter one, there is indeed a moderate difference between the Norwegian and German translations when it comes to the usage of domesticating and foreignizing strategies. The Norwegian translator has used the domesticating approach fifteen times in chapter one, compared to the foreignizing strategy only five times. This stands in contrast to the German translation, where the results are mirrored. While the balance between the

domesticating and foreignizing strategies in the German translation is less pronounced than in the Norwegian, here, the domesticating strategy was less used than the foreignizing strategy. In the first chapter, the domesticating strategy was used nine times, compared to the foreignizing eleven times. A possible conclusion to these numbers is that the German translations were more faithful to the original text, only choosing to make certain elements of the books domesticated for German readers.

Having revealed that the German translation seems more inclined to foreignize rather than domesticate, and the opposite being true for the Norwegian translation, an intriguing abstruseness arises. As theorized early in this thesis, I assumed that the Norwegian translations would be more inclined to accept English and American elements into a Norwegian translation, compared to the Germans. Therefore, I will now aim to discuss some possible reasons why this is the case

One reason could relate to the procedures the translators of the differing languages used to translate culture-specific items in the book. The different approaches to different procedures play a role in whether the translations end up exhibiting domesticated or foreign traits. I will explore how different procedures result in different strategies being used by the translators now.

4.2.1 Repetition

Repetition is a procedure demonstrated by Aixela (1996) and is a conservation-type procedure. This procedure is therefore one that seeks to conserve and convey as much of the original reference as possible. It further ranks as one of the procedures with the least amount of intercultural manipulation (Aixela, 1996, p.61). For these reasons, it is perhaps not surprising that using this procedure often increases the chances that a foreignizing strategy is used. Indeed, this corresponds with the results of the findings. The German translator used this strategy more than any other, and more than the Norwegian translator did in their version of the book. Whether the German translation norm is to use this strategy frequently, or if it is the norm within the German translation tradition is uncertain. It does however aid in exposing a discrepancy between the Norwegian and the German translation norms. Some of the other procedures also aid in doing this.

Some examples of the repetition procedure include the noun “Manhattan” translated as “Manhattan” in both the Norwegian and German variants of the book, and the German translation of “Cheeto” also being the English “Cheeto”. The reason these may be classified

as repetition is due to them keeping as much of the original as possible. Aixela uses toponyms as an example of words that belong under repetition, which Manhattan neatly suits (Aixela, 1996, p.61).

4.2.2 Universalization

The second most frequently used strategy by the Norwegian and German translators is limited universalization. In contrast to the repetition procedure, this procedure is not conservational, but rather substitutive. Therefore, it seeks to moderately adjust the source text to better fit the target text (Aixela, 1996, p.63). Different from repetition, this procedure only resulted in a domesticated strategy being used. The Norwegian translator has been fond of this procedure, using it six times, in comparison to the German versions three times. If this is a procedure preferred in the Norwegian translation tradition, then it aids in explaining the high number of domesticated CSIs in Norwegian compared to German. The same can also be said about absolute universalization, which is akin to limited universalization. Here too, were the results in both the Norwegian and the German translations domesticated. The Norwegian translators used the strategy two times, and the German translator thrice. An interesting observation is that the Norwegian translator used this strategy far less than limited universalization. Perhaps we may claim that the Norwegian version of the book limited its use of absolute universalization because it would cut most ties to the original text. It could therefore be argued that while the Norwegian translation did use a domesticated strategy more, its use of strategies that completely cut out the foreignness of the text was still limited compared to the German translation. Perhaps this is due to the Norwegian closeness to American culture, where most Norwegians have a sufficient understanding of American cultural items. It therefore was not needed to remove and replace the cultural items of the US utterly.

Some examples of universalization from the table include the English “Algebra teacher”, which was translated into both Norwegian and German as “Mattelærer” (eng: math teacher) and “Mathelehrerin” (eng: female math teacher). This first example is an example of limited universalisation. The reason for this is that the original “algebra teacher” was likely deemed obscure for Norwegian and German readers, and the translators therefore sought a translation that kept some of the source language culture but made it more adapted to native readers in their countries.

Another example pertains to absolute universalization. Here, differently from limited universalization, the translator chooses to delete all foreign elements from a translated CSI (Aixela, 1996, p.63). Examples of this include the English grade system, where the word “C”

was translated into its Norwegian and German counterparts as “4” in Norwegian and “Befriedigend” (eng: satisfactory). The reason the translators chose to use absolute universalization here is likely due to the difficulty of finding a Norwegian or German equivalent that maintained some of the American cultural elements. Therefore, they chose more native equivalents.

4.2.3 Less Frequently Used Procedures

While repetition and the two types of universalization are the types that most frequently used and represent most of the total observations, there are also a series of more infrequent strategies used. One of these is linguistic (non-cultural) translation. This procedure is more split. There were two domesticated and one foreignized linguistic translation in the Norwegian version and two foreignized linguistic translations in the German version. Examples include the American “yellow school bus”. In both versions of the book, the translation was foreignized, becoming “Gul skolebuss” and “Gelben Schulbus”. The yellow school bus is a concept that does not exist in Norway and Germany but is a familiar concept. It therefore belongs under the foreignized distinction. On the other hand, there were also instances of the domestication strategy being used, such as when “Mr Brunner” was translated into Norwegian as “Herr Brunner”. This is a linguistic translation, as it directly translates the English “Mr” into the Norwegian equivalent “Herr”. This therefore also makes it a domesticated strategy because it eliminates the foreignness of the word. While this procedure is more split in its usage of domestication and foreignizing strategies, here, too, the Norwegian translators used the domestication strategy more frequently than the German, who preferred the foreignizing strategy.

A more difficult procedure to categorize is the deletion procedure, only used once in the first chapter of the book. The only example of this was in the case of the English “New York”. In the Norwegian version, the translator deleted this from the book. While the German translation used the linguistic translation procedure, the choice to delete the word from the Norwegian translation could be seen as a domesticated approach. The reason for this is that even translating the same noun from the source to the target language, could be seen as foreignizing, such as in the case of “New York”. This notion is echoed by Aixela when he claims that “something absolutely identical [...] might be absolutely different in its collective reception” (Aixela, 1996, p.61). Thus, also in the case of the deletion procedure, the Norwegian tradition maintains its domesticative line.

4.3 What are the implications of the data?

One important implication of the data is that it suggests trends I was unaware of. Firstly, the German use of the foreignization strategy is not a trend I expected to find. As noted in the research focus section, one theory was that the German translation norms would incorporate as few American cultural aspects as possible. However, the data suggests otherwise. Perhaps this is due to longstanding German translation norms, where the norm is not to domesticate as much as possible but to expose Germans to outside cultural items. Venuti (2018) claims that American and English publishers sell the rights of bestsellers from America or the UK, but rarely purchase the rights to foreign literature that can be translated (Venuti, 2018, p.14). In the Anglo-American translation culture, there is therefore little exposure to foreign CSIs. This needs not be the case for Germany's publishers, who Venuti (2018) claims, published approximately 9000 translated books, out of 61,000 total books (ca.14%) (p.14). In short, therefore, it could be that the Germans are more open to foreign elements than I previously thought and could therefore explain the Norwegian and German translation norms diverging.

Conversely, the Norwegian results surprised me in the same way the German results did, but here the results were the opposite of the German results. As previously stated, the Norwegian culture is very close to the UK and the US, and the Norwegians have great cultural insight into Anglo-American culture. Despite this, the findings in this study prove that the Norwegians are not more inclined to accept Anglo-American CSIs into the Norwegian culture. Quite the opposite, it is possible to argue that the Norwegian translation culture is influenced by Norwegian being a smaller language (compared to German and English). For this reason, the translators actively chose to domesticate as much as possible, while still preserving the integrity of the ST. It is possible to argue that they do this to maintain the strength of the Norwegian language. This is supported by a point made earlier in this thesis, relating to universalization. Here, the Norwegian translator chose the strategy lesser influenced by intercultural manipulation (Limited universalization) than the one more influenced by it (Absolute universalization). This could be indicative of the Norwegian translation norm being concerned with preserving the integrity of the ST and the Norwegian language as much as possible

Thus, a key result of the study is that the two, despite appearances, are quite different. The German translation norm seems to be more motivated by persevering the ST. This is a luxury the Germans can take, as the German language is large and is not threatened. In opposition to this are the Norwegians, who, due to the Norwegian language being a lesser spoken language,

may not take these liberties. Still, the translation norm here seems to be influenced by maintaining the integrity of the ST whenever possible.

5 Conclusion

There are several limitations to this study. First and foremost, the result of this study is mainly based on one written text. If I had more time and resources to research more books and literature, the results could have diverged greatly from those presented in this study. Another central limitation is the closeness of the languages examined in this study. All three languages belong to the same language family and thus share many similarities that make a study comparing differences arduous. Further, while the similarity can expose many differences between the three languages, it has its limitations. A study comparing languages significantly different would be able to demonstrate far more variety in the use of translation strategies and procedures. A last limitation that makes concluding challenging, is that I am less intimate with German and Norwegian translation norms. For this reason, it is hard to claim if the results from this study may reflect the translation norms within Norway or Germany. A suggested theme for further study therefore is to compare findings from similar studies and mine to the general trends and traits the Norwegian and or the German translation cultures adhere to.

Despite the limitations of the study, it has proved fruitful. In this thesis, I have analysed the Norwegian and German translations of the English *Percy Jackson*. At the start of this thesis, I believed was that the German translation would be far more conservative in its willingness to accept foreign elements into the German translation. On the other hand, I figured that the Norwegian culture, traditionally open to foreign and especially Anglo-American influences, would have more examples of a foreignizing strategy. This belief has broken, after having analysed the data from the two translations. It seems that the Germans may value preserving the ST out of respect for its integrity. The Norwegians also believe this but translate books while aiming to maintain the strength of the Norwegian language.

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