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# WON IN TRANSLATION: TRANSFORMATIONS OF SONGS IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE

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*We have all heard the term “lost in translation”, referring to the way one can never capture the entire essence of the original when translating a text. What about cases, however, when a text (a poem or song in this case) is actually improved in translation, something is won and the translated version goes on to lead a rich life of its own, even exceeding in impact the original. This paper will look at various approaches to translating songs, from those which try to preserve the original as closely as possible when translating the source text to those which are more interested in capturing the rhythm and cadence and which amount to more of an adaptation. The examples used will be either from or into English and will cover a range of genres and time periods. The songs analysed herein are not meant to be by any means comprehensive. Several examples connected with the Czech language are included due to the author’s own long-term experience with this culture and country. Examples connected with the Ukrainian language are also dealt with. The other languages included (Mandarin, Greek, Irish and Zulu) are due to the particular songs chosen for analysis. There will also be a short discussion of related phenomena including adaptations or rewritings of songs within one language, in this case English or how particular songs meet with a remarkable response in another culture although the texts have remained in the source language. The texts of songs are some of the most widely translated cultural artefacts from time immemorial, but little scholarly attention has been focused on them. Translations of songs are an area deserving of further exploration and this contribution will hopefully lead to further discussion and theorizing.*

***Key words:*** *adaptations, songs, source text, target text, translations.*

# ЗДОБУТО В ПЕРЕКЛАДІ: ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЇ ПІСЕНЬ ІНШОЮ МОВОЮ

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Ми всі чули термін «труднощі перекладу», який стосується того, як неможливо охопити всю суть оригіналу під час перекладу тексту. Але як бути тоді, коли текст (вірш чи пісня в даному випадку) насправді покращується в перекладі, перекладена версія продовжує жити багатим власним життям, навіть перевершуючи за впливом оригінал. У статті розглядаються різні підходи до перекладу пісень: від тих, які намагаються якомога точніше зберегти оригінал під час перекладу вихідного тексту, до тих, які більше зацікавлені у виявленні ритму та каденції, які зводяться до адаптації першоджерела. Використані приклади будуть англійською або перекладені англійською мовою й охоплюватимуть різні жанри та часові періоди. Проаналізовані пісні не є вичерпними. Кілька прикладів чеською мовою включено через власний багаторічний досвід роботи автора із цією культурою та країною. Розглядаються також приклади, пов'язані з українською мовою. Інші включені мови (мандаринська, грецька, ірландська та зулу) пов'язані з окремими піснями, вибраними для аналізу. Окрім того, у статті обговорюються пов'язані з перекладом явища, зокрема адаптація чи переписування пісень однією мовою (у даному випадку англійською), або те, яким чином деякі пісні мають чудовий відгук в іншій культурі, хоча тексти залишилися вихідною мовою.

***Ключові слова:*** *адаптації, вихідний текст, переклади, цільовий текст, пісні.*

**Introduction.** Songs have moved back and forth from cultures and languages from time immemorial: melodies have often remained intact, but the lyrics with the names and places frequently change. There is usually more interest in metre and rhythm than in content and accuracy. Peter Low distinguishes between "a song-translation and a song-adaptation" [1, p. 229]. He characterizes a song-adaptation as follows: "An adaptor wilfully modifies a text to create meanings that readers would never find in the source. The cultural context may be different, names may be changed, substitute metaphors may be used, texts may be shortened or lengthened" [1, p. 230].

Song translations, in contrast, attempt to replicate and be faithful to the original as much as possible, these being: "texts where there is extensive transfer of material from the source text with a reasonably high degree of semantic fidelity, particularly

with respect to its main features" [1, p. 231]. This approach thereby pays the greatest attention to conveying the original content of the source text in the consequent target text.

Low also argues for a third classification which has almost nothing to do with the original, referring to this as a so-called replacement text: "When a replacement text is grafted onto a tune, it ceases to be the same song, and to call the new song lyric a translation or adaptation is false and may be unethical" [1, p. 240]. Isabelle Marc has, in contrast, come up with the term travelling song which she characterizes as follows: "The fruits of these transfers are what I call a "travelling song" and, by extension, "travelling music"" [2, p. 3]. In other words, these are the loosest versions to be discussed herein. The analysis which follows will demonstrate that the categories outlined above often overlap and display features of more than one category. Nevertheless, the terminology will be of use when analysing the songs and translations in question.

**Travelling Songs/Replacement Texts.** The first example is a classic brass band song entitled "Škoda lásky" in the original Czech. Its version in English translation, "Beer Barrel Polka", would be an example of a travelling song which is a complete replacement text, with lyrically nothing to do with the original. The Czech original, written in 1927 by the composer Jaromír Vejvoda has been translated and popularized in a number of other languages. The original song, which would be better translated as "Wasted Love", is from a woman's perspective lamenting the love she has invested over time into a man who seems to have abandoned her. The chorus in the original Czech is below alongside the present author's literal translation:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Škoda lásky, kterou jsem tobě dala,* | *Wasted is the love which I gave you* |
| *ty mé oči, dnes bych si vyplakala,* | *those eyes of mine, I would cry today* |
| *Moje mládí, uprchlo tak jako sen,* | *my youth, vanished like a dream* |
| *na všechno mi zbyla jenom,* | *all I have left is* |
| *v srdci mém vzpomínka jen.* | *only a memory in my heart.* |

The English version is known as the "Beer Barrel Polka" or sometimes simply as "Roll out the Barrel" or even as "Rosamunde". The song was "translated" into English in the 1930s or better said provided with new lyrics by Lew Brown and Wladimir Timm and became a song of celebration of the end of prohibition. It was also taught by Czechoslovak pilots to their British colleagues in the Royal Air Force and became an ideal accompaniment to drinking beer.

*Roll out the barrel, we'll have a barrel of fun*
*Roll out the barrel, we've got the blues on the run*
*Zing boom terrara, join in a glass of good cheer*
*Now it's time to roll the barrel*
*For the gangs all here.*

The English version is much simpler with the melody more or less intact. This version has achieved, not surprisingly due to the size of the listening pool, much greater popularity than the Czech original. "Beer Barrel Polka" was even said to be the favourite song of General Dwight Eisenhower, who apparently stated that it helped the American army win the war.

Another song which has met with a similar fate, but which needs no introduction for a Ukrainian readership, is the Christmas carol "Shchedryk". Based on an older Ukrainian folk tale and song, it was written and arranged in its current form by the composer Mykola Leontovych in the early twentieth century. Its translation, or better said rewriting, into English was by Peter Wilhousky from the year 1936. Entitled "Carol of the Bells", the song has kept the melody, but (at least in the popular version) has lost any connection with the original text. Similarly to the "Beer Barrel Polka", the English version of the Ukrainian original has achieved much greater fame, having been recorded by a number of prominent musicians including the jazz legend Wynton Marsalis or the renowned film composer John Williams, to name but a few. "Shchedryk/Carol of the Bells" is therefore once again a travelling song with a replacement text, although both songs are associated with the Christmas holidays.

**Song Adaptations.** The traditional African-American spiritual "We Shall Overcome", like other songs of the genre, cannot be dated with any accuracy, but in all probability has its origin in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. It was rewritten and popularized by the legendary folk singer Pete Seeger in the 1950s and received a new life during the Civil Rights movement [3]. The first verse runs as follows:

*We shall overcome*
*We shall overcome*
*We shall overcome some day*
*Oh, deep in my heart*
*I do believe*
*We shall overcome some day.*

It became a song of solidarity and resistance to evil, often sung on marches by individuals participating in various protests or events. It found its way, like many folk and country songs, into the Czech language and culture and eventually became an anthem of resistance to the Communist regime, most famously being sung by the crowds on Wenceslas Square in Prague on 17 November 1989 at the beginning of the Velvet Revolution. The first verse in Czech is not translated word for word from the source text, but does definitely capture the spirit and essence of the song.

*Jednou budem dál*
*jednou budem dál*
*jednou budem dál já vím*
*jen Víru mít*
*doufat a jít*
*jednou budem dál já vím.*

The text would be back translated as "We will go forward one day, only have faith, hope and go, we will go forward, I know". The Czech version of "We Shall Overcome" would be (at least in my view) a quite faithful song-translation, with almost the identical desired impact in both cultures. The song has also struck a chord in additional languages, interestingly in Hindi and Bengali in connection with their own national identity and pride.

The source text for the next example was written in Irish English and translated into modern Greek. Mostly known as a playwright, Brendan Behan also wrote a number of songs both in Irish and English. His first memorable songwriting accomplishment was originally a poem dedicated to Michael Collins, one of the national heroes in the Irish struggle for independence from the British [4]. Entitled "The Laughing Boy" and written at the age of thirteen in 1936, Behan recycled the poem as a song in his play *The Hostage* (1958), where it is sung by one of the main characters, Pat. The first stanza is as follows:

*T'was on an August morning, all in the dawning hours,*
*I went to take the warming air, all in the Month of Flowers,*
*And there I saw a maiden, and mournful was her cry,*
*'Ah what will mend my broken heart, I've lost my Laughing Boy.*

The song, not surprisingly, given the age of the author, is somewhat mawkish and over-written. This song, translated into Greek by the renowned author and translator Vassilis Rotas, was consequently put to music by the well-known composer Mikis Theodorakis. It amazingly became a leftish anthem during the period of the military dictatorship in Greece in the 1960s and 1970s. Damian Mac Con Uladh comments on it as follows: "Written in honour of Irish revolutionary hero Michael Collins, Brendan Behan's song "The laughing boy", or "To gelasto paidi" in its Greek translation, has come to stand for various Greek historical figures and events and is one of the most recognised songs of the last 40 years in Greece" [5]. The Greek version of "The Laughing Boy" is fairly close to the original, but obviously sparked the imagination of a different audience which has found parallels invoked in their own history and political struggle. The example would therefore amount to something between a song-translation and a song-adaptation.

The song Sluil a Ruin (Come oh Love), originally from the eighteen century, is written in a combination of Irish English and Irish Gaelic[1]. The song is from a woman's perspective and is a lament about her beloved having gone to war in France in the military service of the British. The first stanza runs as follows and an English translation of the Irish of the final line is included in brackets.

*I would I were on yonder hill,*
*It's there I'd sit and cry my fill*
*And every tear would turn a mill.*
*Is go dté tú mo mhuirnín slán. (And may you, my dear, be safe).*

[1] I would like to thank the Irish language scholar and musician Radvan Markus from Charles University in Prague for drawing my attention to this example.

The song documents the colonial history of Ireland under British rule and the tragedy of an ordinary man forced to serve (and die) for a foreign power. The song has recently been translated into Ukrainian and recorded by the singer Eileen, full name Olena Androsova, with the first verse as follows.

*Йди, йди, коханий мій,*
*Йди незламно в переможний бій,*
*Йди і знай, що тут чекатиму я.*
*Бережи себе, любове моя.*

Although a loose translation, the song does capture the essence and feel of the original, despite the difference in historical periods and cultures [6]. I would therefore find definite affinities with Behan's text discussed above.

The following example is not a song in the original version but a poem. "When You Are Old", by the Nobel Prize winning Irish poet William Butler Yeats, dates back to 1892. It is one of the many poems expressing his unrequited love for his muse Maude Gonne. In the original poem, he does not get the girl, but finds solace in the thought that she will eventually regret not accepting his offer of love and marriage. The protagonist of the poem addresses her as follows:

*When you are old and grey and full of sleep,*
*And nodding by the fire, take down this book,*
*And slowly read, and dream of the soft look*
*Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;*

*How many loved your moments of glad grace,*
*And loved your beauty with love false or true,*
*But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,*
*And loved the sorrows of your changing face;*

*And bending down beside the glowing bars,*
*Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled*
*And paced upon the mountains overhead*
*And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.*

In the poem, the protagonist seems to find a perverse pleasure in the thought of her finally regretting not staying with him and realising in old age that it is too late. A Chinese version of Yeats' poem, put to song, has apparently a quite significant shifted meaning and is about a son's love for his elderly mother. It has become a hit by several performers over the last ten years: written and performed by the musician Zhao Zhao in 2012, it later became even more popular in a rendition by Karen Mok and Li Jian in 2015. Zhao Zhao apparently read the Yeats' poem and was inspired to write his

version about his mother. The description is quite similar to the original poem, in other words, an aged woman sitting by the fire. Her former beauty and her many admirers are recalled. The son, however, is the one, in this version, expressing his devotion to the subject of the song. Apparently, the song has especially struck a chord with Chinese listeners and corresponds to their cultural appreciation and respect for the elderly[2]. Thus, the poem is again part translation and part adaptation.

**Song Translations.** "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" began as an adaptation of a translation and has been retranslated into many languages around the world. Pete Seeger once again discovered and popularized this song after reading an English translation of the novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* by Mikhail Sholokhov which included the Cossack song "Koloda Duda". He used the text to write one of the most famous anti-war songs ever, "Where Have all the Flowers Gone". I include the celebrated first verse:

*Where have all the flowers gone?*
*Long time passing*
*Where have all the flowers gone?*
*Long time ago*
*Where have all the flowers gone?*
*The girls have picked them, every one*
*Oh, when will you ever learn?*
*Oh, when will you ever learn?*

I was hesitant to use this because of where Seeger took it from, but decided to finally do so because it was apparently a Cossack song and since it has been translated and performed in Ukrainian, among many other languages. The first stanza in the Ukrainian version is presented below:

*Де всі квіти, розкажи мені…*
*Зникли всі вони давно.*
*Де всі квіти,*
*Розкажи, де усі вони?*
*Їх дівчата віднесли,*
*Їх давно уже нема*
*І ніхто не знає де…*
*Там завжди зима…*

I would also like to explain that I am fully in support of the Ukrainian military defence against the full scale aggression by Russia, so am not advocating naive pacifism. The

[2] I have been assisted in this analysis by Ruowei Shi, a Chinese student at University of Maribor, Slovenia. She provided me, not only with some general information, but also with some helpful sources, including the one from Baidu Baike, When You Are Old (2025). Baidu. URL: https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%BD%93%E4%BD%A0%E8%80%81%E4%BA%86/13871014?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR3s4gXFrlxJ9KSs27BC1DuVymBRXYHW76ahTljU3jY1t3HHKihvuSFKa_0_aem_LKM__Pu_DJTg9IWmYzkFTw.

song has been recorded several times in Ukrainian, most famously by Maria Burmaka, who is of course known for her passionate support of her native language and country. The song addresses the tragedy of war, not only at present in Ukraine, but throughout history. This song also became especially popular in its German version by Marlene Dietrich which she famously sang in Israel as the first German language song to be performed there since the end of World War Two. The simple lyrics are easily translated and have effectively achieved the same or a similar effect in the new versions.

**Other Kinds of "Translated"/Travelling Songs.** Folk songs are frequently adapted and altered to fit new circumstances, historical periods or political realities. A celebrated example of this phenomenon would be the different versions of hymns remade by the union organiser and songwriter Joe Hill and the so-called Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) in the late nineteenth century in the United States. The practice among these left-wing activists was to write new political songs using the melody and song structure of well-known Christian hymns, often sung at Salvation Army (or the Starvation Army as the Wobblies called them) gatherings or revival meetings. One of the most famous examples is the classic Christian song for children "Jesus Loves Me" which kept the melody but was provided with completely new radical lyrics and entitled "The Tramp".

Pete Seeger is responsible for yet another of the discussed examples, this being the popular song "Wimoweh" or "The Lion Sleeps Tonight", which has been covered by a wide range of artists and used, most profitably, in the children's classic film *The Lion King*. The song was written and recorded in Zulu in 1938 by the South African band Solomon Linda and the Evening Birds. Entitled "Mbube", Zulu for lion, the recording was brought to the attention of Pete Seeger by Alan Lomax, the renowned musicologist and early proponent of World Music. Seeger misheard the lyrics and gave his version of the song the now established text. The song was recorded by his band the Weavers in 1951 and later became a hit for several other groups. The song was therefore a kind of accidental translation, but actually more of a travelling song as outlined earlier.

The story of the American musician Sixto Rodriguez has been told in the award-winning documentary *Searching for Sugarman* and once again involves a journey between the United States and South Africa. Rodriguez recorded two albums in the early 1970s, which met with little success. He spent the next twenty-five years working as a manual labourer in his native Detroit. To his great surprise and pleasure, he found out that he was extremely popular in South Africa, where his devoted fans believed he was dead. He enjoyed his new found fame up until his death in 2023. Rodriguez's music somehow struck a chord with his South African listeners. Marc comments as follows on Sugarman's remarkable success in South Africa: "This journey of improbable and late success is paradigmatic of the dramatic changes that can be experienced by the same song or album depending on the place and the time in which it is received and consumed" [2, p. 5]. Translations, in the broader sense, can therefore also take place without the actual words changing into another language.

**Conclusion.** The examples provided above demonstrate a range involving varying levels of adaptation and translation, from attempts at faithfulness to the original to complete ignoring of the original text and replacement with something completely different. It is often very difficult to define and categorize the boundaries between them. Sebnem Susam-Sarajeva has suggested that "in non-canonized music, such as popular or folk-songs, it is often impossible – and in my opinion undesirable – to pinpoint where translation ends and adaptation begins" [7, p. 189].

On the whole, texts of aesthetic value, i.e. Bob Dylan, African-American spirituals and the like tend to meet with translations which attempt to be as accurate as possible. Having said that, something is not only lost, but also won as Marc argues: "As in every translation, there is permanence and there is transformation, continuity and change, gain and loss, a duality shaped in as many forms or degrees as there are transfers" [2, p. 7]. Certain translations, be they loose or precise in their approach, have taken on a rich life of their own in the target language, often one which is also quite unexpected and unpredictable.

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