

TRANSLATING CONCRETE POETRY

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It is interesting to examine the art form known as concrete poetry with translation — both practical and theoretical — in mind, because it was, according to Kopfermann (1974:xi), considered international by its creators:

the language-elements are not tied to the author's mother tongue, reduction and reproduction allows elements of different languages to be combined in the same text. The basis for this is the materiality (mostly understood in an optical or acoustic sense) of the vocables and elementary structures which are the same in all (or at least the Indo-European) languages.

This theoretical stance might suggest that it is not necessary to translate concrete poetry from one Indo-European language to another. However, most anthologies of concrete poetry contain translations and/or word glosses (see, for instance, Bann (1967), Solt (1968) and Williams (1967), so there is obviously a perceived need to provide some assistance to speakers of languages other than that in which any particular poem is composed. Still, the mere fact that such translations and word glosses are provided with the poems runs counter to the traditional stance on the translation of poetry, namely that it is impossible:

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no genuine, really valuable lyric poem can be translated into a foreign language... because the phonetic stratus is then replaced by a completely different verbal material, which cannot ever perform those functions which were performed effortlessly in the original (Ingarden, 1937/1973:266).

Part of the reason why the concrete poets felt able to countenance translations of their work, is, of course, that their conception of art, its value and its effect on readers was new. By reducing words to elements, and by concentrating on language as material, the concrete poets hoped to be able to appeal to 'the categories, the highest and most common concepts, which as the basic form of thought are not determined by impression, but rather, provide the possibility of any impression at all' (Gappmeyr, 1965/Kopfermann, 1974: 5) These categories, which Gappmeyr borrows from Kant (1781 and 1787), are, of course, shared by all humans and are not language and culture specific.

The starting point for the poet was to be 'everything that can be expressed with language and every linguistic expression on an equal basis with another in a given context that heightens its value' (Fahlstrom, 1953/Solt 1968:75). By 'Concrete' was generally meant 'the naturally, visibly, and tangibly real, which exists at a particular time, in a particular place' (Kopfermann, 1974:ix-x). The concrete in concrete poetry is the linguistic items used, and these were purportedly used in such a way as to eliminate from them any semantics — they were language as material, purely and simply. The concrete poets were 'against subjectivity, individuality, expression of personal feeling — against mimetic art, against representation, story (in the realistic sense) — in the field of language, against sequences of text describing story etc' (Kopfermann, 1974:x-xi); however, they did wish to engage the reader: the concrete poet, 'in finding, selecting, and putting down (language) creates 'thought-objects' and leaves the task of association to the reader, who becomes a collaborator and, in a sense, the completer of the poem' (Gomringer, 1952/Williams, 1967: 123).'

All this is appealing to a translator, because although the reader's response to a poem is thus still considered important, if

the concrete poet can appeal to the basic categories that form not only the basis for, but the possibility of our receiving any impressions whatsoever, then it must be the case that the categories to which s/he appeals are common to all people. So if a concrete poem in one language can appeal to these categories, so should the translation of that poem into another language. And even if readers' subsequent associations differ, this does not matter; the translation would still be perfect, since it would be appealing, like the original, to those categories which allow the process of association to take off. The translator would be able to concentrate on the thought-object per se, because the language which composed it could be seen as a concrete, association-neutral item.

Furthermore, since, to the concrete poet, all linguistic items are equally valuable as material, a translated concrete poem would be guaranteed to be as valuable as the original; and if the poet operates with one or a few linguistic items only, the restraints often felt to be imposed on translators by cadence, rhyme and rhythm will be negligible.

So much for the theory behind concrete poetry, and the appealing consequences of this for translators. Unfortunately, a quick inventory of the field of published concrete poetry, from the point of view of traditional translation theory, shows that practice is not wholly consistent with the theory.

It may be remarked, first, that if, having lost traditional methods of engaging the reader, a concrete poet still wishes to do so, creating 'objectivity (through the material of language) — "poietical", constructive "generative" art-constellations of language elements' (Kopfermann, 1974:xi), and wishes to do so with fewer elements than a traditional poet, then the concentration on the language used is probably at least as great, if not even greater than that of the traditional poet, and the need for accuracy in translation will not be diminished. Nor was there universal consent among concrete poets to abandoning all reference to feeling, for instance, C.E. Osgood asks 'whether, say, black is more sad than gay, more heavy than light' (Bann, 1967:8). And if concentration on what is beautiful in language is no longer

paramount, it is not totally lost either, since what has superseded it is a concentration on what is interesting in language, and this is in some cases its beauty — many poems are pictures of parts of language.

Secondly, it may be remarked that should I decide to compose a concrete poem thus: Ø, then it is doubtful whether a Danish readership, even if well versed in the theory of concrete poetry, would be able to erase from their consciousness the fact that Ø means island — language just isn't like that, or language users aren't — and I hypothesize, therefore, that a Danish readership would bring to this poem an uneradicable association which would prevent the poem from gaining direct access to Danish readers' Kantian categories of pure reason.

Before further examining the translatability of concrete poetry, it will be useful to attempt to divide the poems into variations of the form, although it should be understood that the borders drawn here are by no means clear. Some poems exhibit features belonging to variations other than those under which I have chosen to place them.

The two variations most easily distinguished are purely visual poem and pure sound poem. It is unsurprising that whereas visual poems tend to stand in need of little translation, translators of sound poetry may easily find themselves beset with difficulties.

A visual poem such as Ernst Jandl's seance (fig. 1) would probably need no translation at all, since most Indo-European languages use the word seance and most speakers of these languages know what a seance is.

Similarly, Augusto de Campo's ÔLHO POR ÔLHO (EYE FOR EYE) (fig. 2) needs only to have its title translated; most Indo-European speaking countries have traffic signs, and the various peoples will have members who do, and members who do not associate the title with the Bible.

Some sound poems, too, are easily understood by speakers of languages other than the original, once the title has been given. For instance, Jandl's Schützengraben (fig. 3) which works by intensifying the phonemes composing the German word for trenches,

would probably work for speakers of any language, once they knew what the title meant — when read, the poem sounds like gunfire. In this poem, of course, Jandl avails himself of the very traditional poetic tool, onomatopoeia, as does Palle Jessen in Krobling (Cripple):

Hink
hink
honk
hinke,haenke, hank
hunk
illae, illae, hank
lakrimae
labrimae
honk.

In this poem, the items *illae* and *lakrimae* cripple the pattern set up earlier in the poem of vowel changes between repeated consonants, and Latin speakers will observe that the role-like structure of the poem is reminiscent of certain features of the traditional process of Latin learning in schools. These same observers will also note that *labrimae* is Latin for tears, and may associate this word the poem's subject as indicated by the title. So far, so good — any reader, of whichever mother tongue would be able to observe as much, once the title was explained. However, Danish speakers would, in addition, benefit from the knowledge that *hink* means *limp* or hobble and *hinke* means to limp or to hobble. A translator might, therefore, be forgiven for thinking that this poem could do with a little help in reaching the hearts of a non-Danish speaking readership. Say the translator wished to translate the poem into English. As indicated above, s/he would have available two possible translations for the first two lines of the poem, of which *limp* might seem preferable, since, like the original, it has only one syllable. However, *Limp limp lomp* is not nearly as close to the well loved *hic haec hoc* of the Latin classroom as the original is; if, on the other hand, *hobble* is chosen, then, to retain the 'limping' rhythm of the poem, it would be necessary to use trisyllabic items in line four, in which case it would not be possible to repeat the crippling process at line

seven while still retaining lakrimae, an item which most translators would probably wish to retain, since it contributes significantly to the poem as a whole. Perhaps it would be simplest, in a poem such as this, to settle for a word gloss and notes, by means of which the poem can be understood very well, but which is not the same as a translation.

Poems containing one word only often depend on spatial features for effect, as in the case of Eugen Gomringer's (1953),

silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio
 silencio silencio silencio

Since graphic space is the same in any language, this poem will need only a footnote translation of the word silencio in order to be understood; on the other hand, it would by no means suffer any loss of impact if each instance of silencio were translated into a TL. That is manifestly not so in the case of Jandl's sequence of one word poems partly reproduced below; for in those, Jandl removes layers of letters from his starting word, so that another word, contained within the first, is revealed:

BIOGRAPHY

for Ian Hamilton Finlay

LIFEBOAT

drown
 d row n
 d row n
 d row n
 d row n

STEPS

p lane t
p lane t
p lane t
p lane t
planet

MEADOW PEACE

clover
c love r
c love r
c love r
c love r

Readers can amuse themselves by translating these poems into other languages; in Danish, MEADOW PEACE is of particular interest, because clover translates as klover, which contains within it the word love, which means lion. These poems focus our attention on the arbitrariness in language — some words happen, when written down, to contain other words. But it is very rarely the case that a TL translation of a SL word will contain the same word as that contained in the SL word; indeed, it is very likely to contain no other word at all.

In poems containing more than one word, these are frequently made to do what they normally mean, and such poems are normally wholly dependent for their effect on the syntax of their language; as an example, let us examine Sădan moder by Hans-Jorgen Nielsen, reproduced here with a word gloss:

Sådan moder**Word gloss**

sådan moder
 teksten kvinden
 sådan moder
 kvinden barnet
 sådan moder
 barnet verden
 sådan moder
 verden teksten

sådan - thus
 moder - meets
 teksten - the text
 kvinden - the woman
 barnet - the child
 verden - the world

sådan skilles
 teksten fra kvinden
 sådan skilles
 kvinden fra barnet
 sådan skilles
 barnet fra verden
 sådan skilles
 verden fra teksten

skilles fra - is parted from

sådan blir
 teksten tilbage

blir tilbage - remains

In Danish, it is possible for the words in the poem to meet each other, because no definite article intrudes between the nouns, the definitive being given in Danish by the common gender suffix -en or the neuter suffix -et, and, in the second stanza, because the passive form of the verb is given by the suffix -s, rendering an auxiliary verb superfluous. Only by using nouns in the plural could an English translation begin to approximate toward this ST.

Finally, let us consider Jandl's

die sonne scheint
 die sonne scheint unterzugehn
 die sonne scheint untergegangen
 die sonne scheint aufzugehn
 die sonne scheint aufgegangen
 die sonne scheint

which revolves around the ambiguity of the German verb *scheinen*, to shine and to seem, which allows the sun to shine in lines 1 and 6 and to seem to be going down, have gone down, to be risen and to have risen in the remaining lines. It would be impossible to reproduce this wordplay in either English or Danish.

It appears to follow from this brief survey of a small selection of Concrete Poetry, that this art form is neither more nor less translatable than any other type of poetry; while some poems are easily translated, others are subject to some loss in translation and some are simply untranslatable. However, as mentioned above, the point of view from which the survey has been conducted and the comments made, is that of traditional translation theory. Therefore, the outcome of the survey was a foregone conclusion; the traditional procedure is to make a list of ingredients of a text and to judge a translation "by the extent to which it reproduces these ingredients" (Selver, 1966:21). That is, one proceeds from the point of view of the source text (ST) and source language (SL), demanding of the translation, the target text (TT) in the target language (TL) that it be equivalent to the ST with respect to all the features that have been listed as ingredients of the ST. However, it requires only a moment's thought to see that no TT could possibly meet such criteria; no two languages realize equivalent sets and systems at any level of description, and the sets and systems of each language therefore form networks which differ from those of all the other languages; or, in terms of linguists from a different home base,

The existence of deep-seated universals... implies that all languages are cut to the same pattern, but does not imply that there is any point by point correspondence between particular languages. It does not, for example, imply that there must be some reasonable procedure for translating between languages (Chomsky, 1965:30).

Translation is defined as the replacement of textual material in SL by equivalent textual material in a TL (see Catford, 1965:20); but since we all know that no equivalent material will be available, no translations are true or 'faithful' translations, and we are left to ponder only questions concerning 'loss and gain in the translation

process' (Bassnett-McGuire, 1980:30).

This is a very curious state of affairs; translation theorists and translators of such a persuasion must be unique among us in operating with a theory according to which the outcome of their own and others' endeavours and the material they analyse cannot exist. Yet numerous texts exist in most cultures which are thought of and treated as translations by lay people and even, on occasion, by those who, at other times, flatly deny the texts the status now conferred on them. There is thus a most inconvenient chasm between theory and fact which the theory itself creates, and which it is therefore incapable of bridging (see Toury, 1981:13-15).

The problem is created by two features of traditional translation theories: they are ST and SL oriented, and they are normative. The way to solve it is to adopt a TT and TL oriented point of view, that is, to regard a translation as an empirical phenomenon which acquires its identity from its position as a translation within the TL culture, irrespective of any norms which it may or may not meet. Translations thereby become objects for study. One possible way of studying them will be to compare them to their STs whereby one will discover which actual relationships of replacement of ST material by TT material exist between the two texts. These relationships constitute translation equivalence which may now be defined as occurring 'when a SL and a TL text (or item) are relatable to (at least some of) the same relevant features', where relevance is relevance for TT. The features that are included in a translation are those which the translator has considered relevant from, presumably, his or her own point of view, from the point of view of readers as perceived by the translator, or from his or her point of view, considering the purpose for which s/he has made the translation (op.cit.:11-13).

It is, in my opinion, only if a view such as this is adopted that a fruitful theory of literary translation can develop. It will allow us to create a poetics of translation, and it will broaden our view of the languages and literary systems we investigate, highlighting many of those aspects of language which the concrete poets were intent on showing us. For although not all languages allow for the playing of identical games, they are all endowed with those playgrounds where we probably learn most about them.

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séance

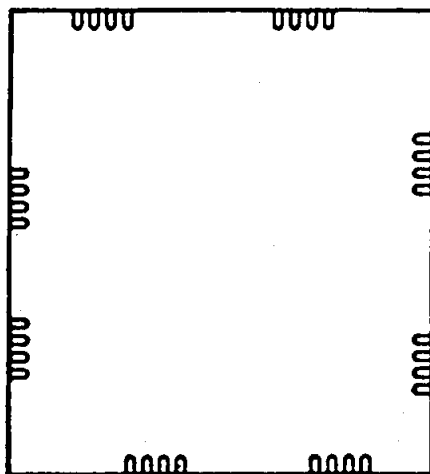


Figure 1

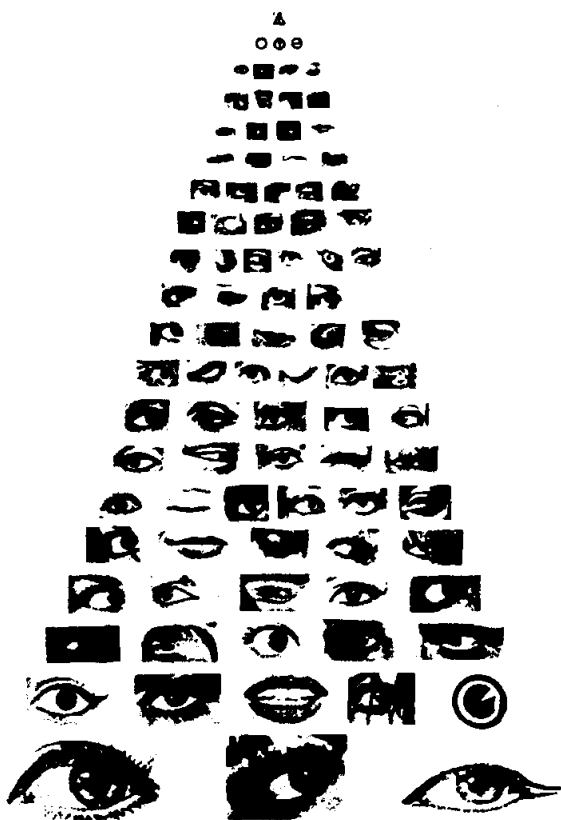


Fig. 2

[illegible]

Fig. 3