

THE LIBERATED NOUN ADJECTIVE COMPOUND (NAC)

In his essay "German Compounds of Type Noun + Adjective (umweltfreundlich) and their Reproduction in English" Wills concludes that "applied translation must ... try to describe and explain the literal and non-literal transfer procedures relevant in the German-English transfer of NACs" (238). This statement serves as the starting point for the following argument.

Although Wills successfully points out the difficulties in finding the English equivalents to German NACs he nevertheless fails to envisage a possible part solution to the problem, namely the more liberal use of literal translation. Like few other WFPs the unique nature of the NAC serves as a justification of a breach of that translation dictum which forces the translator to stay within the performance norms of the Target Language (TL): for, (1) NACs are difficult to translate into English in a non literal way; and, (2) there exists a certain 'beauty' within the nature of the NAC, and other compounds for that matter, that is lost in non-literal translation.

As Jespersen states:

The merit of compounds lies in their conciseness ... compounds express the relation between two objects or notions but say nothing of the way in which the relation is to be understood.¹

¹O. Jespersen, Modern English Grammar, Vol VI (London/ Copenhagen: 1954) 137

Thus, the increased use of literal translations of NACs would facilitate the translation process as well as benefit society at large -- in this case the english speaking world -- by enriching the target language with compounds that are both efficient and precise. Still, the purist will undoubtedly take great objection to this approach, for, as mentioned, it disregards the very foundation of translation. Wills himself notes that even though all German NACs have English lexical equivalents, "such formations would be blatant offenses against the English usage norms (237)" . Like other traditionalists Wills seems to subscribe to the erroneous notion that a language's usage norms are of an unchanging nature, and thus cannot and should not be violated. The modern translator, influenced by such theory, naturally refrains from escaping these paradigms.

The area that would most benefit from such a liberation of usage norms is that of poetry, for here the translation process forcibly inflicts its utmost damage, be it by mutilating the original meter or by drastically changing the fine tuned metaphors. Although using the literal translation approach to NACs - and NNCs (Noun + Noun Compounds) for that matter - will not single handedly resolve this problem it nevertheless could be viewed as a step in the right direction. To briefly illustrate this point let us turn to the last two lines of the first stanza of Hesse's "Den Kindern"². Hesse's version reads as

²Both the english and the german version of the poem have been taken

follows:

Und toetet nie
Und fliehet nie aus brandzerstoertem Haus.

Wright translates this as:
And never die
And never rush out of a house crumbling in fire.

Quite apart from it being a rather questionable translation from a semantic point of view ("Und toetet nie" should read "And never kill"), Wright also wreaks havoc on the original meter, transforming it from Iambic to a mixture of Iambic and Anapestic. An attack on Wright's skill as a translator is not the issue here, nor can it be denied that the translation of poetry is an exceedingly difficult task, one where such items as rhythm and semantic exactness often have to succumb to the pressures of preserving the general meaning. Still, it can be contended that if Wright had made more liberal (and literal) use of the english language's potential for compound formation a more truthful translation might have been achieved. Hesse's passage, for example, could have read as follows:
And never kill
And never flee a fire-crumbled house.³

out of H.Hesse, Poems by Hermann Hesse Selected and translated by James Wright (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970) pp.68,69.

³Note that the spelling of "fire-crumbled" was chosen arbitrarily. It could equally have been rendered as "fire crumbled" or

In this particular case the literal translation of the German NAC has three distinct advantages: 1) it preserves the original number of syllables (10); 2) the original Iambic meter is kept intact; and, 3) the imagery maintains some of the ambiguity and the time-frame of the original i.e. "zerstoertem" like "crumbled" and unlike "crumbling" lies in either the immediate or the distant past. Whether or not this particular translation is at all successful and subsequently should be viewed as more 'truthful' than that of Wright remains a point of contention and is of only limited concern here. It should be noted instead that in the case of poetry the liberation of language from its traditional performance norms could serve as a vital tool to the translator whose aim is to reproduce the original not only semantically but syntactically as well. The literal translation of NACs from the English to the German should be viewed as just another one of these tools. Finally, it must be understood that although poetry was here used to illustrate the point, similar arguments can be made when arguing for the liberalization of English NACs in other areas i.e. the translation of plays, novels...⁴.

even as "firecrumbled". The nuances of the different forms that compounds take on in the English language is an aspect that, due to its complexity, cannot be dealt with in this essay.

⁴The use of literally translated NACs in the non-fictional area is questionable for, here 'understanding' is of prime

Having argued the 'why', let us now turn to the 'how': what arguments exist that would allow for, what appears to be, a major transgression of the english usage norms? Although a detailed discussion on this subject is impossible due to the nature of this paper, it is nevertheless possible to sketch out a number of approaches that will, if nothing else, begin to undermine Wills' position.

As mentioned, Wills opposes the literal approach to most NAC translations into english mainly because such action transgresses the English usage norms. Implied, here, is that usage norms are of a rigid, unchanging nature. Yet this rigidity seems to have little basis in anthropological and linguistic fact: in their chapter on Morphological and Syntactic Change, Fromkin and Rodman clearly state that "rules of morphology and syntax may be lost, added, or changed"⁵. To illustrate their point the "Winston" example is used: when the cigarette company advertised that "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should" the language purists balked stating that 'like' must be followed by a "noun phrase"; the sentence should have read: "Winston tastes good as a cigarette should"⁶. Not only did this change never

importance. The sometimes ambiguous nature of the NAC would probably make its use impracticable for such texts as technical manuals or instruction booklets.

⁵See Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman, An Introduction to Language. 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983) p.286

⁶ Ibid p.287.

take place, but the 'Winston usage' of the word 'like' has become deeply embedded in today's version of North American English. Precedence of syntactical change, similar to that required for our NAC argument, has been clearly established.⁷

Another, broader anthropological approach, using the concept of diffusion, can be employed when arguing for literal translation of German NACs; it should be noted however that this path is a highly speculative one. The process of diffusion involves the passage of various cultural traits, including language and language structure, from one culture to another. The literal translation of German NACs into English could thus theoretically be viewed as diffusion in action. The linguistic closeness of the two languages, both descendants of the Proto-West Germanic language, could serve as a further justification for this line of argument.⁸ If adopted, this view could drastically

⁷Fromkin and Rodman's text further contains a number of points that seem to directly support our argument. In their chapter on word coinage, for example, referring to compounds they state that "there is almost no limit on the kinds of combinations that occur in English..." (121). They go on to state "Compounding is thus a very common and frequent process for enlarging the vocabulary of all languages" (123). Compounds of any kind, including NACs, seem to encounter less opposition in English syntax than Wills leads us to believe.

⁸The proximity of the two languages is particularly advantageous to our NAC argument, for any literal translation of German NACs does not disturb the deep structure of the original message. Thus, a "house crumbled in fire" is essentially identical in its deep structure to a "fire-crumbled house".

expand the role of translation: no longer would translators be viewed purely as 'tools' for interlinguistic communication. Instead, they would find themselves actively participating in the expansion and evolution of their target language, in other words becoming conscious 'diffusers'. This in turn could be seen as a natural progression of the role of translation for, willingly or not, the translator has always been the instrument of diffusion. One need only to think of the Bible or the Koran to recognize the truthfulness of this statement. Still, it remains doubtful whether such a philosophy of translation can ever be implemented: fundamentalists in the linguistic field, the traditional 'watch-dogs' of language purity, will likely rise in opposition. It is reassuring, however, to note that more often than not the evolution of a language transgresses the barriers set by the scholars: even Wills' "environment-friendly" has sneaked into the English language.

Having explored some justifications for and advantages of a more liberal attitude towards language usage norms, I conclude by returning to the original argument, namely an appeal for an increase in the use of literal translation of German NACs into English. Even if the second half of this essay should not survive the ravages of scholarly scrutiny, other arguments must be found to encourage the increased use of literal NAC translation into English, especially in the realm of fiction for, the dichotomy of conciseness and ambiguity inherent in

the German NAC can often best, and most truthfully, be captured by its literal equivalent in the English language.

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FOR A MORE LITERAL APPROACH TO NAC TRANSLATION

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