

HARD WORDS FOR CHILDREN

Shakespeare, Translation and *The Merchant of Venice*

Graded Readers as Translations of Shakespeare for English Language Learners

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As someone who regularly introduces Shakespeare to people whose first language is not English, I do plenty of 'translation work', though maybe not in the more common sense of translating from one language into another (i.e. inter-lingual translation) but in the sense of intra-lingual translation according to Jacobson's terminology. I try to scale Shakespeare's language down to a level where it begins to be understood by language learners on different levels, and I also engage in quite a bit of cultural translation, as my audiences come from across the globe. However, my job is not one of a writer, I am an educator: I teach, I talk, I make my students react creatively to Shakespeare, but I normally don't produce written translation work. That is why I thought it might be interesting to take a look at other people's translation work in my field and consequently I decided to focus on Graded Readers.

When I started out thinking about this topic, I thought this would be a fairly straight-forward exercise in terms of 'translating Shakespeare', as we are staying within the same language. Consequently, there are probably fewer obstacles to be overcome and fewer painful decisions to be made compared to translations from one language into another. For example, I thought that at least I wouldn't have to think about how to replicate Shakespeare's wordplay in a language that is perhaps less rich in homonyms compared to English. But as it turned out, spending some time with Graded Readers sends one on an excursion into questions around the 'essence' of Shakespeare. In other words, what is the minimum of Shakespeare needed to make a text 'Shakespeare', or the other way around, what is the magic ingredient that turns Shakespeare into 'Shakespeare' – is it the language in terms of the imagery; the rhythm; is it the characters in all their ambiguity; is it the stories?

Before I attempt to come to any conclusions about these deeply philosophical questions for Shakespeare teachers, it seems sensible first of all to present a short introduction of what Graded Readers are, who they are targeted at, and what you can use them for. And then I would like to examine a couple of examples which were written for different language levels and which use different strategies to engage their readers with Shakespeare to get an idea of what their 'translation work' actually includes.

Graded Readers

The Extensive Reading Foundation, a non-profit organisation that champions easy reading for language learners in order to increase the fluency and speed of reading, defines Graded Readers in the following way:

"Graded Readers [...] are books (both fiction and non-fiction) written especially for language learners to build their reading speed and fluency and to give them chances to practice 'real' reading for pleasure. They are called 'graded' readers because they are written according to pedagogical syllabus which has increasing grades, or levels, of difficulty. They are graded through tight control of the plot, vocabulary, and grammar and judicious use of images." (*Extensive Reading Foundation's Guide to Extensive Reading* (2011), p2)

They are designed to enable students to

- R**ead quickly and
- E**njoyably with
- A**dequate comprehension so they
- D**on't need a dictionary

The idea behind Graded Readers is that they present authentic language in context and that they enable language learners to improve the speed and fluency of their reading while enjoying the texts. This is what language teachers call 'extensive reading', often talked about in connection to 'intensive reading'. Both forms of reading

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are essential for successful language acquisition as they complement each other, but they fulfil different needs of the learner: while intensive reading is used to teach new content – a new tense or a certain grammatical phenomenon –, extensive reading is all about using what the learner already knows in order to increase the enjoyment of reading. While intensive reading looks at the mechanics of language, extensive reading is about the magic of it.

In order to do this it is crucial to pitch the Graded Reader at the right level. Fluent reading without the need for a dictionary means in real terms that at least 98% of the language needs to be familiar in order to make sure that students are in their comfort zone and won't be frustrated by the slowness of the reading process (comp. *Extensive Reading Foundation's Guide to Extensive Reading* 2011, p. 2-4). In addition, it is important to remember that "language learner" does not necessarily equal "children" – in fact, quite a lot of learners who use these Readers to improve their English are young adults. This is especially the case when it comes to the design of the Readers, particularly in terms of illustrations.

How can Graded Readers be used for teaching? Extensive reading usually happens outside of the classroom and can be done individually, but many Graded Readers are also very useful to teach Shakespeare in the classroom. Some of them can even be used in drama workshops, as they retain the dialogue structure of the play instead of turning the story into fiction. But before I present a selection of examples, I would like to spend a bit of time on reflecting on what actually needs 'translating' when we deal with Shakespeare for language learners.

Translating Shakespeare for Language Learners

The most obvious element that needs translating in this wider sense of the word is of course the language: how do you make language learners understand Elizabethan English when Modern English is already quite a struggle at times? There are several options available for Graded Readers to deal with this: on the one hand, there is the possibility of translating the entire text into Modern English, but the question remains whether to keep the dialogue of the play or whether to turn the play into a prose narrative (which in turn raises the question of narrative authority in the text as Laura's exploration of Shakespeare for children showed). On the other hand, it might be feasible for a Graded Reader to translate the more functional passages of the play only but leave the crucial scenes or speeches in the original and annotate those. This begs the question of which passages to leave in the original and how many passages your audience might be able to understand.

Another issue related to the language difficulties is the focus and the length of the text. A play that on average takes about three hours to perform needs translating into a Reader that can be easily and comfortably read, and therefore needs to be fairly short. Consequently, as well as simplifying the language, cuts to the story itself are almost inevitable.

In connection to the play at the centre of this conference, *The Merchant of Venice*, what is going to be the focus of your Reader and what can be left out without losing too much? And, more crucially, how might this change the story that is being told? For example, do the Gobbos need to stay in, or how much space will the storyline of Jessica's elopement occupy? In the case of a play where even the marketing geniuses of the Elizabethan book market weren't too sure how to advertise this play on the title page of the 1600 Quarto, how do you go about deciding what to focus on for your audience? Is *The Merchant of Venice* a love story between Bassanio and Portia? Is it about the bond between Antonio and Shylock? Is it about anti-Semitism and Shylock's tragedy? In short, is it possible to translate Shakespeare's complexity of character and storytelling into a simplified version that still resembles the original close enough?

The final element of translation that is important in this context is the question of how much further information the audience is going to need, i.e. how much cultural translation is going to be necessary to make a global audience understand the world of the play. While the importance and the image of Venice in the 16th century

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might be more familiar to Italian readers, this is probably not the case for audiences from other countries, as is probably also true for the position of Jews in Venice at the time. Then, on a more general level, will it be necessary to introduce Shakespeare as a writer, or to pay attention to the fact that this story was intended for the stage?

Examples of Shakespeare Graded Readers for Language Learners

As became apparent, there are a number of things that need translating, resulting in a number of different approaches Graded Readers of Shakespeare can take. The following examples are by no means an exhausting list of Shakespeare Graded Readers; they simply present a selection of what is currently on the market and were chosen according to the approach they take. Graded Readers from other publishers are available; for example, the Extensive Reading Foundation offers a list of all publishers currently offering Graded Readers on their website, www.erfoundation.org.

Staying Close to the Original

When thinking about translating Shakespeare for language learners in order to give them a flavour of arguably the world's most famous playwright and his craftsmanship, a version that stays as close as possible to the original might appear to be most suitable. So I started with two Readers that do not only retain the dramatic structure by sticking to the dialogue form, but that also stay as true to the source text as possible in terms of the language they employ.

Both the Macmillan Reader and the Pearson Reader of *The Merchant of Venice* try to do exactly this: they offer an almost uncut version of the play in modern English; they present the scenes in dialogue form, which makes it possible to use this text as the basis of a performance or at least for scenic interpretation; they try to follow Shakespeare's shape of the argument and his imagery in the modernisation of the language. The Macmillan Reader goes even one step further and occasionally offers the Shakespeare text in boxes next to the modernised version, so that readers can develop a sense of Elizabethan English and what it reads like. These Graded Readers are therefore obviously not aimed at language learners on a beginner's level; instead, they target learners at an intermediate level of language learning, B1/B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR.

Let's have a look at two text passages from both Readers and see how they deal with representing Shakespeare's language. The first one is from a dialogue at the beginning of the play, when Antonio cannot explain his sadness, and his acquaintances Salarino and Salanio offer their reasons. Here is what Salarino thinks is wrong with Antonio:

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The Arden Shakespeare, <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Macmillan Reader of <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Pearson Reader of <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
<p style="text-align: center;">“My wind, cooling my broth, Would blow me to an ague when I thought What harm a wind too great might do at sea. I should not see the sandy hour-glass run But I should think of shallows and of flats, And see my wealthy <i>Andrew</i> docked in sand, Vailing her high top lower than her ribs To kiss her burial. Should I go to church And see the holy edifice of stone And not bethink me straight of dangerous rocks, Which, touching but my gentle vessel's side, Would scatter all her spices on the stream, Enrobe the roaring waters with my silks, And in a word, but even now worth this, And now worth nothing? Shall I have the thought To think on this, and shall I lack the thought That such a thing bechanced would make me sad? But tell not me; I know Antonio Is sad to think upon his merchandise.”</p>	<p>“Each time I blew on my soup to cool it down, I would think about the damage a great wind can do at sea. If I saw sand, I would think of shallow waters, and imagine my ship lying on its side. And when I went to church, the stone walls would make me think of the dangerous rocks which might rip open the side of my ship, throwing its expensive cargo into the water. That cargo can be worth so much one moment, and worth nothing the next. I know the truth, Antonio: you are worried about your ships and the cargo they are carrying.” (p.81)</p>	<p>“Every time I blew on my soup, I’d worry about the harm a wind can do at sea. I couldn’t look at dust on a table without thinking of my ship hitting sand in shallow water. Every time I saw a stone church, I’d think of dangerous rocks damaging my gentle ship and filling the sea with everything that she carries. One minute you’re rich, the next you have nothing. I’m not surprised that you’re nervous when you think about it.” (p.44-46)</p>

It becomes clear that both Readers are trying to follow Shakespeare almost line by line with their modernisation, although the Pearson occasionally veers away from the imagery to make it clearer for a modern-day reader. For example, “One minute you’re rich, the next you have nothing.” is a fairly apt translation of this particular passage and certainly less clunky than the Macmillan version (which nevertheless is closest to Shakespeare): “That cargo can be worth so much one moment, and worth nothing the next.” Taken as a whole, this passage offers a good insight into the approach taken, but what happened to the beauty of Shakespeare language, one might ask – even though the imagery is there and even the sentence structure remains intact as far as possible, the passage reads oddly quaint in Modern English and I can’t help but wonder whether any language learner might be less confused by the modern version compared to Shakespeare’s English.

Let’s compare this to another example of a more abstract passage from the play that is more overtly concerned with ideas and imagery. The Quality of Mercy speech by Portia, delivered in the court scene in Act IV to soften Shylock’s thirst for justice, also happens to be one of the key moments in the play, so as a teacher I would place more emphasis on this speech compared to other, more functional passages in the play.

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The Arden Shakespeare, <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Macmillan Reader of <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Pearson Reader of <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
<p style="text-align: center;">“The quality of mercy is not strained: It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes The throned monarch better than his crown. His sceptre shows the force of temporal power, The attribute to awe and majesty, Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings. But mercy is above this sceptred sway; It is enthroned in the hearts of kings, It is an attribute to God himself, And earthly power doth then show likest God's When mercy seasons justice.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">“Mercy is not something that can be forced. Mercy falls like gentle rain from the skies onto the ground below. It blesses those that give it, and those that take it. It is strongest when it is used by great people. It suits the King better than his crown. His crown shows the strength of his power here on earth. But mercy is above his power, and lies in the hearts of kings. It comes from God himself. In our hands, power is most God-like when mercy is added to justice.” (p.81)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">“The quality of forgiveness is the most important quality of all. It falls like gentle rain from heaven. It is precious to the one who gives it and the one who receives it. It makes a man a king more than a golden palace does. Earthly power becomes more heavenly when a king’s justice is guided by forgiveness.” (p.44-46)</p>

The variation in the two translations in this instance is more pronounced than in the earlier example. Already the opening line of the speech poses certain problems for the editors: is Portia talking about mercy or is she talking about forgiveness? In terms of language learners’ familiarity with the words, both terms pose equally challenging vocabulary, so ‘forgiveness’ is not necessarily an easier word than ‘mercy’. What is more, the end of that line has also undergone an interesting shift in meaning in the Pearson version: ‘strained’ has suddenly turned into ‘the most important quality’, which is so far removed from the original idea that I am not sure I could let this go uncommented in a real teaching situation. However, the Pearson in my view seems to offer a better translation of the second half of this passage, where the idea behind the speech takes precedence over a literal modernisation and therefore offers the reader more clues to figure out what Portia actually means.

Creating Context

The independent Italian publisher Black Cat aimed their Graded Reader of *The Merchant of Venice* at a similar language level but this beautifully designed book follows a markedly different approach. The story is retold in prose in eight chapters (it is therefore not possible to use this Reader as a basis for a performance). A big strength of this Reader is that it offers a wealth of wrap-around activities in addition to the text proper, which go far beyond the “Note about the author” and the “Questions for comprehension” section in the other Readers. Black Cat opens with a fairly detailed biographical introduction to Shakespeare and his life and times, including the importance of the theatre at the time. In the following, each chapter break is used for additional activities and exercises that not only focus on comprehension and grammar but that also make the readers analyse character relations and emotional developments. In addition to those activities that are closely linked to the development of story, the Black Cat Readers also supply dossiers, three-page articles on a certain topic that is related to the historical context of the play. In this instance, Venice as a place of trade is introduced in detail as well as the importance of masks, and the position of the Jewish community is dealt with too. What is striking in relation to the latter is that the dossier about the Jewish community in Venice does not mention pogroms or indeed the

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Holocaust – this is an astounding omission in a Reader about a play that so obviously raises questions about anti-Semitism and discrimination.

However, it is interesting to see how much emphasis is actually given to the ambiguity of the characters, particularly in terms of Bassanio's original idea to woo Portia. It is made very clear that he is also in dire need for money and not just in love with a beautiful woman who also happens to be rich. This already gives us an idea of how this 'translation' of the *Merchant* works out in terms of focus: it is very much concerned with the world of money, commerce, of banking, of contracts, etc. In short, it does not reduce Shakespeare's play to a love story. Unfortunately this also seems to mean that the potential homoerotic desire between Antonio and Bassanio has disappeared. And even though the Reader dedicates an entire dossier to the Jewish community in Venice as mentioned before, the scene in which Salanio and Salarino insult Shylock has been toned down considerably, and the forced conversion of Shylock is left out entirely.

Consequently, although this Reader offers a wealth of material that explain the world of the play and the world surrounding the composition of the play, it unfortunately shies away from the homoerotic undertones and the anti-Semitic content of the play, which removes two of the main 'talking points' of *The Merchant of Venice* for a teaching context.

Short Retellings

I'd like to finish with the *Merchant* Reader that is for the lowest language level I could find, which is for beginners (probably CEFR A2): *The Merchant of Venice and Other Stories from Shakespeare's Plays*, published by Oxford University Press in their Oxford Progressive English Readers series. This Reader presents the story as a short prose retelling of 16 pages only, including many illustrations. It is fairly light on further activities or additional material about historical contexts as it also includes four other stories from Shakespeare. As the title already suggests, it is mainly interested in story. But in which one? Judging from the cover one might think that they turned the story into a thrilling 'last-minute save from ritual slaughter' story but what *The Merchant of Venice* has turned out as is a straight-forward love story between Bassanio and Portia. Once again the homo-eroticism and the anti-Semitism Shylock faces is simply omitted – including his famous "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech.

Character ambiguities are glossed over and once again the play has been whitewashed in terms of its politics, so the question arises whether this 'translation' of *The Merchant of Venice* into something resembling a fairy tale can still be seen as a decent introduction to the play and its topics. It has become a slightly amusing tale of "the wife who dressed up as a lawyer in order to be clever in court and save her husband's friend" and little more.

Conclusion

This leads me to my original observation that translating Shakespeare within the same language perhaps raises the question of what is lost in translation even more than inter-lingual translations does, or at least it becomes more expressed as we are operating within the same linguistic frame. Simplifying Shakespeare is not an easy task, whether it is done for language learners or for native speakers who need support with Shakespeare's language. There is the risk that the modern version might create either a rather dull adaptation of one story element that does not reflect the incredible craftsmanship of the original in terms of storytelling. Or, on the other hand, a version that stays too close to replicating the original language with all its 16th-century imagery and that runs the risk of losing readers mid-way through because the language and the ideas do not make sense enough to be enjoyable. However, in the end what we are trying to do with simplified versions of Shakespeare is find a way in for language learners. Graded Readers are hopefully the beginning of their journey with Shakespeare, not the end point.

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