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Language and Translation in *No Country for Old Men*

Introduction

One of the most easily noticeable things in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* is that it has a very particular use of language and syntax. It is a rather interesting choice of style, which influences the way this work is read by giving it a particular rhythm—a smooth flow. In this paper, I will focus on this use of language and what meaning and influence it may have. The effects of the specifically chosen language schemes will be discussed. I will then use this analysis to compare the original work in English to the Croatian translation of the book, *Ovo nije zemlja za starce*, in order to compare their use of language.

Use of Language in *No Country for Old Men*

This paper is based on the idea that, within a body of text, particularly a lengthy narrative, the chosen words and modus of narrating are in some way related to the meaning that is supposed to be conveyed. This implies that, for example, short and simple sentences and words of everyday use would hold a different meaning if used

to tell a story, as opposed to long, complex sentences and sophisticated, perhaps even scientific, words.

The language, its structures and vocabulary are mostly simple in *No Country for Old Men*. There are expressions of regional language, seen in the characters' speech, with a couple appearances of Spanish—all reflections of the South. Aside from this, the text is simplistic and cut down only to what is necessary. As Jarrett puts it, this is "a narrative that is stripped to the bare bones of a dramatic script, one that sketches only the literal gestures, speech, and bare details of the setting" (39). There is nothing "fancy" or "artsy" to it—at least not at first glance. But all of it does serve its purpose, which will be touched upon later in the paper.

In *No Country for Old Men*, the chosen language and words catch one's eye after only a couple of pages—certain expressions and structures are constantly repeated. An example of this are the long compound sentences connected into chains with the coordinator "and"; sometimes, up to six or seven sentences are tied into one by simply adding "and" between them. And if not connected in this way, the sentences are simply separated by periods and line up one after the other without a pause. Instead of deciding to use more variety in the text, which is usually expected of this kind of text, this unusual sentence structure was chosen to deliver the story. The word "and" appears in the text some 2800 times, evidencing the prevalence of this type of sentence. Everything that is described in the text—aside from the characters' dialogues—is described in this way.

The question as to the point of this language style is raised: why would anyone limit a text to practically only one sentence form and such a simplistic vocabulary? The possibilities are indeed numerous, but the one explored here will be the

following: the modus of narration used in this book serves a rhythmical, as well as a semantic purpose. It sets the tone of reading—especially if reading aloud—and relates to the topics thematized in the book. This is best seen in the following example: “[w]hen he went back to the bedroom he got his shorts off the floor *and* put them on *and* went into the bathroom *and* shut the door. He went through into the second bedroom *and* pulled the case from under the bed *and* opened it” (McCarthy 11, emphasis mine).

In his book *Writing Well – The Essential Guide*, Tredinnick also uses McCarthy’s examples for this type of sentences. He explains what implications they have and how they should or should not be used. Therefore, according to Tredinnick, the long compound sentence, which he calls a freight-train, “strikes only one note, but it flows. It makes what it narrates run like a film in front of a reader. As well as action sequences, landscapes and journeys, the freight-train lends itself to descriptions of the activities of the subconscious” (79).

The long sentences impose a rhythm of reading and understanding the actions. But they are not, as Tredinnick notices, very abundant or lush in expression; they are bound to the necessary minimum (74-81). They are used to keep the story going, to continue the flow of thought without interruption. And by not using any complex grammatical structures, aside from this simple coordination, no hierarchy or causality is introduced into the meaning. It is merely a stating of facts—this happened and that happened and something else happened. There is no generalization of a plot, no necessary order of things. This 'lawlessness' can be related to the plot itself—Bell lives in just such a world, with no imposed order and

no rules to follow—and he is lost in it. But this is a very broad discussion that deserves a separate analysis in another paper.

To further explore the rigid structure of the text, here is an example of another very frequently used sentence type—the fragment sentence, as Tredinnick calls it (93). The example is as follows: “[h]e lay flattened against the rocks. A spotlight went skittering over the lava and back again. The truck slowed. He could hear the engine idling. The slow lope of the cam. Big block engine. The spotlight swept over the rocks again” (McCarthy 14).

A fragment is a short sentence with only a subject and verb and, perhaps, another element or two; more specifically, a fragment is also a sentence-like construction which lacks one or more of the basic sentence elements, such as the subject or verb. Tredinnick describes these sentences as, “[s]trictly speaking failed sentences, fragments belong, nonetheless, in the best writing . . . They work because they’re striking; they’re striking because they’re different. They’re emphatic; they’re bold . . . The fragmentation of the list implies disconnection and contemporaneity; it is a shifting mosaic—a kaleidoscope” (94-95).

Once again, there is significance to what seems too simple and almost childish writing. Fragments are action-packed and fast, even faster than freight-train sentences. The time it takes to read them is almost instantaneous—just like the actions they are usually used to describe. And they are used in McCarthy’s book often and with a purpose. Indirectly, they also agree with the themes of the book—speed, change, and being unable to keep up.

Of course, this is just one way of interpreting the curious use of language in *No Country for Old Men*. But it cannot be denied that this unique style and very

specific grammar are an indication of something more than just—grammar and syntax. Keeping all these implications in mind, another possibility of research opens up, specifically a comparison of the original book and the sentence structures and their meaning as the work is translated into different languages, in this case Croatian.

Comparison of the English and Croatian Version

To explore whether the language structures have been kept in the translated version, the book *Ovo nije zemlja za starce*, translated by Petar Vujačić, is used. At the date of writing this paper, this was the only published translation in Croatian.

The elements compared in this section are the sentence structures (compound sentences) and the meaning that can be inferred from them within the text. The point is to see whether the specific style used by McCarthy is translated into an equivalent within the Croatian language. In order to do this, paragraphs containing these structures from both books will be used and compared.

No Country for Old Men

He got the shotgun out of the bag and laid it on the bed and turned on the bedside lamp. He went to the door and turned off the overhead light and came back and stretched out on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He knew what was coming. He just didn't know when. He got up and went into the bathroom and pulled the chain on the light over the sink and looked at himself in the mirror. He took a washcloth from the glass towelbar and turned on the hot water and wet the cloth and wrung it out and wiped his face and the back of his neck. He took a leak and then switched off the light and went back and sat on the bed. It had already occurred to him that he would probably never be

safe again in his life and he wondered if that was something that you got used to. And if you did? (60)

Ovo nije zemlja za starce

Izvukao je pumpericu iz torbe, spustio je na krevet i upalio svjetiljku pokraj kreveta. Prišao je vratima, ugasio svjetlo, vratio se, ispružio na krevet i zagledao u strop. Znao je što ga čeka. Samo nije znao kad. Ustao je, otišao u kupaonicu, povukao lanac i tako upalio svjetiljku iznad umivaonika, te se promatrao u zrcalu. Sa staklene police uzeo je ručnik, otvorio vruću vodu, ovlažio ručnik, iscijedio ga i njime otro lice i zatiljak. Pomokrio se, onda je ugasio svjetlo, vratio se u sobu i sjeo na krevet. Već mu je palo na pamet da u životu više nikad neće imati mira, te se zapitao može li se čovjek na to naviknuti. Što ako se navikne? (71)

What can be noticed from the very start when comparing these two versions of the text is the lack of “and”, or rather, “i” in the Croatian version. While this connector could indeed be used in Croatian with the same purpose it has in the English language, the translator’s choice was not to use it. Instead, commas appear, just as they would in sentences of this type written according to the rules of spelling in Croatian: if there is a long string of various elements, the connector only appears before the very last member of the string.

However, based on the previous analysis, the result of this is that the effect of a flow, such as the one which appears in the English version, is lost in the translation. There is a rhythm, but it is different from the original one. This is only enhanced by using “te” and “i tako” instead of “i”, when no such construction appears in the original. The order of words in the sentence can also break the rhythm. This is what happens when the translator uses “sa staklene police uzeo je” instead of “uzeo je sa staklene police,” as the word order in the rest of the paragraph is verb first,

everything else later. The sentence structure varies throughout this paragraph, as well as throughout the book, thus changing the rhythm and implications of the original sentences.

To judge whether or not this translation is *good* based on only this is a more complex matter than will be discussed in this paper. However, there is a difference between how language is used in the original and in the translation. Although these two languages vary on many levels, when it comes to sentence-forming structures such as this, they show much similarity. This is why it is quite possible to use “i” in the place of every “and” in order to achieve a similar effect—it is as unusual and repetitive in Croatian as it is in English, and therefore, equivalent to it—and it might look like something along the lines of “Izvukao je pumpericu iz torbe i spustio je na krevet i upalio svjetiljku kraj kreveta. Otišao je do vrata i ugasio svjetlo i vratio se i ispružio se na krevet i zurio u strop.” It is odd to read, but that is the case with the original as well.

Conclusion

To surmise, it is worth pointing out that the language and syntactic structures chosen by McCarthy and used in this book serve a purpose of their own. They help form a rhythm of reading and add to the overall meaning of the text with their peculiarity. Precisely because this is *not* how language is usually used, nor is it standard, these formations should not be avoided, especially when translating, as all the meaning they carry with them will be left out. Therefore, the Croatian translation, which lacks the repetition the original has, has lost some of the meaning that the text normally carries. By taking advantage of the various possibilities the Croatian language has to offer, and therefore making the text sound more “literate”, the

translated text has gained quite a different tone and rhythm when compared to the original.

Works Cited

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