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A Comparative Study of Three Modern Translations of the Old English Lines (675-702) of Beowulf

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I compare the modern translations of lines (675-702) of Beowulf in Seamus Heaney's 2000 translation, Roy Luizza's 1999 translation, and Edwin Morgan's 1952 translation. I begin with Morgan's text since it is the earliest translation and ends with Heaney's translation, as it is the most recent one. My evaluations for the three texts take into consideration the syntax, the poetic dictions and the approach used by Haney, Luizza and Morgan. I choose these lines in particular because these lines describe the confrontation with Grendel, and because an evaluation of the translations of the entire epic would be an overwhelming task. The article begins with a brief introduction to Old English structure and typological descriptions so we understand the challenge the aforementioned translators of Beowulf have met as they worked on the original manuscript and be able to acutely evaluate the final product of their translations of the aforementioned lines.

Keywords: Beowulf, Modern Translations, Old English.

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1. Introduction: Old English structure and typology

The structure of Old English is quite different from the structure the modern reader of English expects. English language nowadays is prescribed usually as a language that begins with the subject followed by the verb and an object. Sometimes we might generate sentences without direct objects since some verbs in English are intransitive. But this order of the basic components of the English sentence (Subject/Verb/Object) has started to become the frequent case of English since the Normans invaded England in late 11th century. In other words, Old English does not always follow this pattern.

The problem is that if Old English does not follow the familiar structure of its modern version, any complexity in understanding modern English would be far more challenging in Old English. While the modern English which we usually refer to as an Subject/Verb/Object language seems hard to interpret in some occasions, Old English might be described as either Subject/Verb/Object or Subject/Object/Verb language and thus it is really hard to analyze it or understand it in many occasions.

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The problem of understanding Old English grows even worse when we think of certain structural patterns that relate to nouns and verbs as Greenberg notices in the 1960s. Greenberg insists that languages that follow VO structure share certain patterns, as do those that follow OV one. The patterns characteristically might be noticed in word ordering or typologies. These patterns include the position of adjectives and genitives to nouns. Languages that follow the verb/object order tend to have the noun first and have nouns followed by adjectives or genitives. On the other hand, languages that follow the object/verb order tend to have adjectives or genitives precede nouns (in Fennel, 2001). Nevertheless, modern English is an exception; although it follows the verb/object order, its adjectives and genitives precede nouns (Trask 1996). This exception of the structure of modern English does apply to Old English since English has undergone radical changes over time (McMahon, 1994). Because English has showed radical changes in its structure since the Norman quest of England, it might be located in a state of transition between the two aforementioned types; Verb/Object or Object/Verb orders (Lehmann, 1973). In other words, the modern word order (Verb/Object) of English developed from the Object/Verb pattern of Old English. Thus, translators of Old English manuscripts must take into consideration the structural differences between Old and Modern English which might be a very challenging task.

The challenge in translating Old English comes from the lack of typological harmony of this language. Old English is fundamentally an Object/Verb language since it comes from its close North West Germanic language, which is essentially an Object/Verb language. North West Germanic shows a lack of typological harmony since nouns might precede adjectives and genitives might appear both before and after nouns. Furthermore, these are some pieces of evidence in which Old English shows a subject/verb/object typology as it had been undergoing typological change from Object/Verb language to Verb/Object one (Lass 1994). For instance, a sentence like “Eanred mec agrof” which means “Eanred me carved” shows the regular form of old English as an Object/Verb language (Trask 1996, p. 149). Thus, there is no doubt that Old English is very similar to its Germanic ancestor.

Toward the end of 11th century and after the Norman quest of England, the Verb/Object order of English had developed as the basic structure of English language but the adjectives remained unstable as they appear both before and after nouns even though as the main structure became the Verb/Object order (ibid, p. 150). Thus, the old English translator should work hard on each sentence to figure out the final meaning of each sentence.

The following section deals with lines (675-702) of *Beowulf*. I compare three modern translations of the aforementioned lines, which I choose as a sample of study because of three important reasons. First, in these lines Beowulf talks about his coming confrontation with Grendel. Second, these lines include some cultural aspects that are related to the time period. Third, a comparison of the three translations of the entire epic would be an overwhelming task. My evaluations explore how the three translations deal with Beowulf's character and how they transfer the cultural aspects of the time period into their modern texts or adaptations of these lines. I will break the two passages into lines and comment on them in the three translations, beginning with Heaney's translation, and ending with Morgan's one.

2. Discussion

Seamus Heaney insists on the importance of maintaining the cultural aspects of the Anglo-Saxon life in any successful translation. He thinks that translating *Beowulf* and turning it into modern English are not feasible. In Haney's words such a task is “like trying to bring down a megalith with a toy hammer.” Along with this difficulty, Heaney wants to give his translation the “metrical shape” and “the power of verse” while re-writing a modern version of the original text. Heaney's claims that part of him “had been writing Anglo-Saxon” while translating the poem (Heaney xxxiii). He uses some dictions or archaic words that remind the reader of the Anglo-Saxon origins of the text. Unfortunately, the *Broadview Anthology of British Literature* does not introduce us to the approach used by Liuzza. But it is clear that he tries to maintain some archaic diction in his translation along with some Anglo-Saxon aspects as well.

Haney's attempts might not be satisfying for Morgan who did not live long enough to read Haney's translation. In his introduction, Morgan thinks that all the previous translations of *Beowulf*—before 1952—have failed to produce a modern translation that look “like twentieth-century English

diction,” and therefore he decides to do it himself (Morgan xii). Morgan believes that “there is no use being faithful to the poetic archaism of the original” if the meaning will not be understood by modern readers (xiii). He thinks that the modern diction will not ruin the beautiful meaning of *Beowulf*.

Before I start comparing and contrasting the three translations, it is good to refer to the general context of these lines. The twenty-seven lines deal with the last words spoken by Beowulf before he goes to bed at the night of the confrontation with Grendel. The lines that succeed these lines move to describe Grendel in his way to Heorot. Interestingly enough, the three translations are radically different when we consider the way they treat the character of Beowulf. Morgan shows negative image of Beowulf describing him as being cakey and arrogant. Luizza shows him as a good man who says “few boasting words.” Heaney thinks that Beowulf is a good prince who is proud of what he has achieved in past battles.

Lines 675-679 in Morgan’s translation read:

Then the good warrior uttered a vow,
Beowulf of the Geats, before he went to rest:
“I do not count myself of feebler striking-force
In works of war than what Grendel boasts;

Lines 675-679 in Luizza’s translation read:

The good man, Beowulf the Geat,
Spoke few boasting words before he lay down:
“I consider myself no poorer in strength

And battle-deeds than Grendel does himself;

Lines 675-679 of Heaney’s translation read:

And before he bedded down, Beowulf,
That prince of goodness, proudly assert:
“when it comes to fighting, I count myself
As dangerous any day as Grendel.”

As we can see above the difference in presenting Beowulf is clear in the above quoted translation. Morgan uses the words “vaunt and vow” to describe Beowulf. Luizza translates the original text as “few boasting words” representing Beowulf in a positive way. Heaney presents him as a “proud good prince” and we feel Heaney’s positive attitude toward Beowulf as well. I think also that Morgan’s translation does not make sense when we take in consideration lines 77-8. Morgan gives us the impression that Grendel is a warrior rather than a beast when he claims that Grendel boasts his deeds. The fact is that Grendel never speaks throughout the whole epic. Luizza’s translation is somehow misleading as well since Grendel attacks people when they are sleeping and never comes during daytime. Grendel cannot be described as a warrior. Thus, I wholeheartedly believe that Heaney’s translation does make more sense. We also can see that Luizza and Morgan have used similar syntax but different dictions. Heaney uses different dictions and syntax. At the same time, Heaney produces a more reasonable translation since his translation of the above quoted lines seems closer to both, the modern reader and the original text in my opinion. It is also good to notice that Heaney uses fewer words in his translation but produces powerful meanings. Nevertheless, the syntax used in the next two lines might be similar in the three translations.

Lines 679-680 in Morgan’s translation read as follows:

Therefore, not with a sword shall I silence him,
Deprive him of his life, though it lies in my power;

Lines 679-680 in Luizza’s translation read as follows:

and so I will not kill him with a sword,
put an end to his life, though I easily might;

Lines 679-680 in Heaney’s translation read as follows:

So it won’t be a cutting edge I’ll wield
to mow him down, easily as I might.

As we can see in the above quoted lines, Heaney and Luizza both begin their lines with “so” while Morgan uses “therefore” instead. However, in the above lines Heaney is the only one who uses

modern words or dictions that come directly from Old English through Middle English. The words “wield” and “mow down” are modern development of the words “mowen” (ME) *māwan* (OE) and the word “wieldan” (OE). The modern word “wield” is considered archaic these days as well. Heaney’s translation is brief and powerful at the same time. I also think Heaney’s translation is the best for the above quoted lines because it is the only one that avoids repetition in meaning for the coming lines; Heaney’s lines do not say that Beowulf will kill Grendel in a sword while Luizza and Morgan included such a meaning in their lines. I think the avoidance of repetition is very smart technique used by Heaney. In following 7 lines, we will also feel that Heaney has chosen to express his translation using different syntax and dictions:

Lines 681-687 in Morgan’s translation read as follows:

Of good arms he knows nothing, of fighting face to face,
Of the shattering of shields, though he stands renowned
For works of violence; but we two shall scorn
The sword tonight, if he dares to join
Weaponless battle, and then let God,
Let the Holy Lord decree the glory,
To whichever side May please his wisdom.”

Lines 681-687 in the Luizza’s translation read as follows:

he knows no arts of war, no way to strike back,
hack at my shield-boss, though he be brave
in his wicked deeds; but tonight we two will
forgo our swords, if he dare to seek out
a war without weapons—and then let the wise Lord
grant the judgment of glory, the holy God,
to whichever hand seems proper to him.”

Lines 681-687 in Haney’s translation read as follows:

He has no idea of the arts of war,
of shield or sword-play, although he possesses
a wild strength. No weapons, therefore,
for either this night: unarmed he shall face me
if face me he dares. And may the Divine Lord
in His wisdom grant the glory of victory
to whichever side he sees fit.”

As we have seen in the above quoted lines, Luizza and Morgan have repeated the same meaning of lines 79-80 when they refer to a weaponless fight between Beowulf and Grendel. However, in lines 681-687 Heaney refer to the weaponless fight for the first time. Again, Heaney uses fewer words that produce a more powerful effect when compared to Morgan’s 20th century diction. Yet, Heaney’s translation is way more readable than Morgan’s text. Again and again, we feel that Luizza is closer to Heaney than to Morgan, taken in consideration lines 686-7. In lines 688-690, we also see Luizza and Heaney keeping some originality in their text through the use of dictions that relate to the Anglo-Saxon while Morgan prefer modern dictions:

Lines 688-690 in Morgan’s translation read as follows:

The man lay down then, the pillow embraced
The hero’s face, and many about him,
Eager to sea-venturers, bent to their hall-beds.

Lines 688-690 in Luizza’s translation read as follows:

He lay down, battle-brave; the bolster took
the earl’s cheek, and around him many
a bold seafarer sank to his hall-rest.

Lines 688-690 in Haney’s translation read as follows:

Then down the brave man lay with his bolster
under his head and his whole company

of sea-rovers at rest beside him.

In the above quoted lines, Heaney and Liuzza both use the word “bolster” while Morgan uses the modern word “pillow.” Interestingly enough, everybody uses the word “lay down” in line 688. I do think that Liuzza’s and Heaney’s translations are fine ones for the aforementioned lines. In line 690, Heaney use “sea-rovers,” Liuzza uses “Seafarer” while Morgan uses “sea-venturers.” I think Morgan choice is the worse since the word “venturer” does not even exist in the dictionary in relationship to sea. It is neither modern nor archaic. One more time, Heaney is close to Liuzza than to Morgan. The same applies to lines 691-93:

Lines 691-693 in Morgan’s translation read as follows:

Not one of them thought he would ever again
Leave there to find his beloved homeland,
His folks and his fortress, where he once was bred;

Lines 691-693 in Liuzza’s translation read as follows:

None of them thought that he should thence
ever again seek his own dear homeland,
his tribe or the town in which he was raised,

Lines 691-693 in Heaney’s translation read as follows:

None of them expected he would ever see
His homeland again or get back
To his native people who reared him.

As we can see clearly in the above quoted lines, Heaney is close to Liuzza in terms of syntax while Morgan is radically different in syntax and dictions. Morgan uses the word “bred” in line 693 while Heaney uses the archaic word “rear” and Liuzza uses the word “raise.” I do believe Heaney’s and Liuzza’s choice of words is more suitable for the context than Morgan’s “bred.” However, we see some general agreement between Morgan and Liuzza on lines 694-698 in terms of the syntax and the word choice:

Lines 694-698 in Morgan’s translation read as follows:

For they knew how sudden death had already
Swept from the wine-hall more than too many
Of those Danish men. The Lord wove them
Fortunate war-fates solace and support
He gave the Weder-folk,

Lines 694-698 in Liuzza’s translation read as follows:

for they had heard it said that savage death
had swept away far too many of the Danish folk
in that wine-hall. But the lord gave them
a web of victory, the people of the Weders,
comfort and support...

Lines 694-697 in Heaney’s translation read as follows:

They knew too well the way it was before
how often the Danes had fallen prey
to death in the mead-hall. But the lord was weaving
a victory on his war-loom for the Weather-Geats.

Morgan and Liuzza both agree on some words like “Weder” and “Danish” to describe Beowulf’s people while Heaney uses the words “Danes” and “Weather-Geats” instead. Unlike Morgan and Liuzza, Heaney’s word choice is the best because he could keep the consistency in his text while referring to Beowulf’s tribe. Heaney could also keep the originality of the text in line 696, which relates to the Anglo-Saxon culture while Liuzza and Morgan are not as successful in conveying the cultural aspects of that line. Once more, Heaney uses fewer words and keeps the originality and the readability of his text.

In lines 698-702, we see Heaney and Liuzza closer in semantics while we see Morgan and Liuzza closer in syntax:

Lines 698-702 in Morgan's translation read as follows:

... so that they all
Destroy their enemy through the strength of one,
By his powers alone. The truth is shown,
The great hand of God time out of mind
Moving mankind.

Lines 698-702 in Liuzza's translation read as follows:

..., so that they completely,
through one Man's craft, overcame their enemy,
by his own might. It is a well-known truth
that mighty God has ruled mankind
always and forever.

Lines 698-702 in Heaney's translation read as follows:

Through the strength of one they all prevailed;
they would crush their enemy and come through
in triumph and gladness. The Truth is clear:
Almighty God rules over mankind
and always has.

Heaney successfully finishes his translation at line 697—for that part which talks about how God was siding with the Geats while Liuzza and Morgan keep going half way in line 698. Therefore, Morgan and Liuzza are close in Syntax. But a careful look at the above quoted lines tell us that Liuzza and Heaney are close in semantics since their choice of words is similar to some extent in lines 700-2. For example, they both use words like “Almighty,” and “Mighty” to describe God. They also use similar syntax in the last two lines.

3. Conclusion

I do believe that Morgan's translation fails to present *Beowulf* in pure 20th century English dictions as he promised in his introduction of the lines examined in this article. This might explain why Liuzza and Heaney both have used dictions that relate in a way to or comes directly from the Anglo-Saxon. Liuzza's translation of the same lines seems to follow Morgan's syntactic choice but with different word choices. I do believe that Heaney's translation ranks as the best of the three regarding in terms of syntax and semantics. Liuzza's translation comes in the second place but he provides us with a fine translation at the same time. Morgan comes last in my opinion if we take into consideration his syntax and semantics. The differences we noticed in three translations are natural since the translators' understanding of Old English is not expected to be similar. Again and as explained in the introduction, Old English might be misleading with genitives and adjectives preceding or following nouns.

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