S. Y. Agnon: word systems and translation

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Abstract

The stylistic concept of 'word systems' (Aphek, 1979) illustrated in the pivotal, tri-consonantal recurrent Hebrew root X–Z–R found in a short story by S.Y. Agnon is defined and explained in light of the problems of translating these 'word systems' (junctions where the plane of the plot and the ideas converge with the linguistic plane), from Hebrew to English, or possibly any other language.

The subject of translation both of literary prose and poetic texts has been discussed at great length in the past twenty years by linguists and nonlinguists alike (Bausch, 1970; Brower, 1966; Cary and Jumpelt, 1963; Catford, 1965; Dagut, 1976; Nida, 1964, 1970; Patterson, 1959; Smith, 1959; Steiner, 1975; and others). Specific stylistic, semantic, and syntactic issues related to Hebrew–English translations have also been widely investigated (Dagut, 1978; Megged, 1966; Rabin, 1968; and others).

Although various approaches to the study of translation may differ, there is general agreement that the quality of translations should be judged according to the following three criteria: (1) accuracy; (2) equivalency of style or register from the source language to the target language; and (3) fluency and readability in the target language. Translations of poetry and poetic devices such as metaphor, rhythm, plays on words, meter, alliteration, repetition, rhyme etc., present further problems in translations as do idioms, cultural transference, and 'intranslatable words' (Keen, 1975).

One of the problematic elements in translation is the pun. A pun is defined as 'a figure of speech depending upon a similarity of sound and a disparity of

meaning' (Preminger et al., 1975: 681-682). Puns, however, are usually a microstylistic technique, i.e. function on the sentence level or within units smaller than the sentence, and usually serve as an adornment to or embellishment of a text.

In this paper we would like to call the reader's attention to another stylistic component, word systems, which on the surface seem to resemble a pun, but unlike the pun, bear on the text in its entirety.

Word systems are a junction where the plane of the plot and ideas converge with the linguistic plane. These junctions are characterized by their simplicity and linguistic economy, on the one hand, and their compactness, on the other. A number of words are connected to each other to the point at which they create a 'tight word system' which contains the essence of the story. These systems can be regarded as the nucleus of the story. A nucleus which nurtures the themes of the story with a greater intensity than the sum total of the language employed throughout the work (Aphek, 1979: 111).

We do not contend in any way that it was the author's intention to create these word systems or that he is even aware of them, since they might be drawn from the unconscious. These word systems being more than a technique (a conscious, intentional device) may very well be untranslatable and untransferable from one language to another.

The notion of the unconscious in language is not new (Sapir, 1921: 222). It is our contention, however, that the concept of word systems, a matrix of words with a common denominator be it phonological, etymological, folk-etymological, or semantic, may be a partial reflection and formulation of this phenomenon. The concept of word systems is based on Buber's theory of 'leading words' in the Bible (Buber, 1964: 284) — recurrent words or word roots both intra- and intertextual which lead the reader to a deeper understanding of a text.

One of the common denominators of the elements of word systems is phonological, yet this is not the only element they share. The majority of the words which function within the word system are polysemous and are interconnected. Therefore, this stylistic component, word systems, is a junction of sound and meaning. Furthermore, it is the polysemous nature of the elements within the word system which allows us to read a text in different ways. Therefore, word systems, unlike puns, are macrostylistic textual elements, i.e. function on the level of the text in its entirety.

We view the text as a multitextured and multidimensional structure in relief, where the word systems are its most outstanding feature.
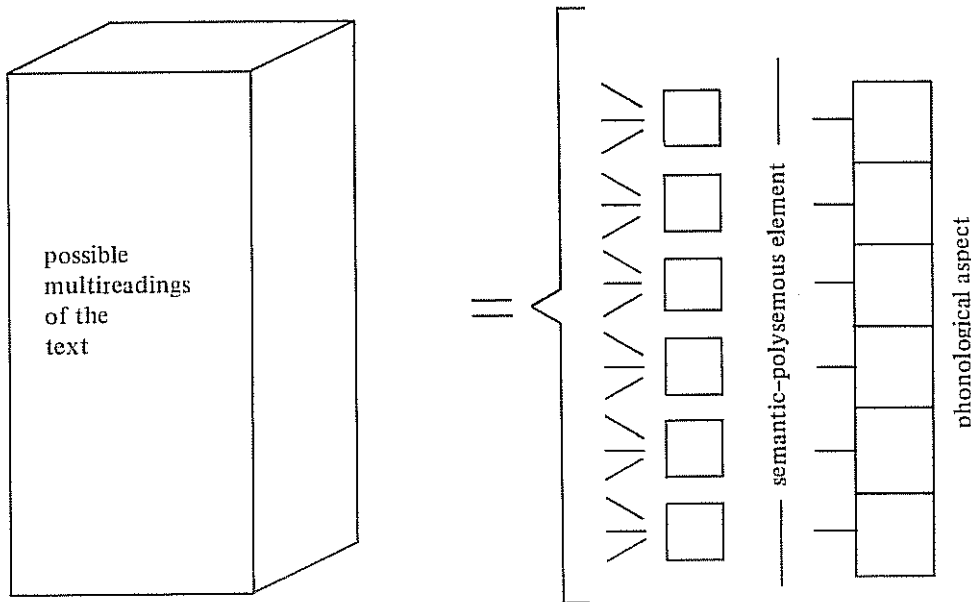
Figure 1.   *Word systems*

This stylistic dimension of word systems has almost never been applied to translation. In this paper we would like to discuss the obstacles presented by word systems to translation (in this case from Hebrew to English), using S. Y. Agnon's story, 'Ha'adonit ve haroxel' (Agnon, 1966), and its English translation, 'The lady and the pedlar' (Agnon, 1970). We will attempt to show how the stylistic concept of word systems is both integral and central to the original text, but lost in translation.

The story deals with a Jewish pedlar walking his rounds in villages. While selling his merchandise he meets a Gentile woman and stays at her house, at first only as a repairman, and later as her lover. The woman, however, does not eat or drink in the pedlar's presence and refuses to explain her behavior. We also learn that she has had several husbands whose fate remains unknown. As the story unravels it becomes apparent that the woman is a vampire. The pedlar senses the danger and moves from her bedroom into the workshop. One night, he remembers that he has strayed from his God and religion and goes out to recite the Hebrew prayer *Shema Israel*. When he returns to the house, he finds the woman severely wounded, by her own hand. He tries to save her, but she dies. He puts her in a coffin on the roof. Birds of prey break it open and devour her corpse. The pedlar then resumes his rounds.

The word system in the story under discussion is based on the tri-consc-
nantal Hebrew root – *X-Z-R* – and its phonological, etymological, folk-
etymological, and semantic ramifications. The semantic notions connected
with this root in Hebrew are: return, go back, revert, come back, come again;
repeat, do again; regret, repent; withdraw one's opposition, reconsider; to
go around; to court, to woo; to recur, to retreat; to review; to put back. In
addition, this root is employed in the following established idioms: to go
begging from door to door; circular; reflecting; to restore, to rehearse (Alcalay,
1965: 742–743). The root *X-Z-R* appears twenty times within the story in
eleven of the possible related meanings listed above. Each specific meaning is
determined by its context and collocation.

The intensity of the word system in this story based on the root *X-Z-R* is
further heightened by certain phonological and morphological phenomena
such as metathesis (X-Z-R —→ X-R-Z). (It is interesting to note that word
systems may also be enriched by the addition or deletion of a consonant to
the recurrent pivotal root.) In the present story the word system reaches its
peak with the introduction of the semantically and etymologically unrelated
word *XaZiR* (pig, hog), whose phonological resemblance to the root *X-Z-R*
is readily evident.

We shall present the examples of the pivotal phonological root *X-Z-R* and
its meanings within the word system as well as the examples of metathesis
(*X-Z-R* —→ *X-R-Z*) in Table 1:

Table 1.   *The word system X-Z-R in 'The lady and the pedlar'*[1]

English Translation	*Transliterated Hebrew Text*
1. There was a Jewish pedlar who walked *his rounds* in townlets and villages (169)	roxel exad yehudi haya *meXaZeR* ba'ayarot uvakfarim (92)
2. *Again* he bowed before her and took things out of his chest and offered them to her (169)	*XaZaR* vehishtaxava lifaneha, vehotsi devarim min hakupa. vehitsia la. (92)
3. . . . *and went back* into her house (169)	. . . *veXaZRa* leveita (92)
4. He entered among the trees and walked out of them and *entered again* among the trees (169–170)	nixnas levein hailanot veyatsa *veXaZaR* venixnas levein hailanot. (92)
5. . . . *He put them back* in their places (170)	. . . *veheXZiRam* limkomam (93)

Table 1. (*cont.*)

English Translation	Transliterated Hebrew Text
6. While he stood and looked, the lady of the house *returned* and brought him warm beer and some food (17)	im she hu omed umaabit *XaZRa* ba'alat habayit vehevia lefanav shexar xam uminei mezonot (93)
7. After a little while the pedlar spoke *again* . . . (172)	axar sha'a kala *XaZaR* haroxel veamar . . . (95)
8. And as he was sorry for this woman who . . . deserved that decent people *should court her* . . . (173)	Vehoil venitstaer al ota isha . . . she bnei adam naim *yeXaZRu* axareha . . . (95)
9. And she, too, kissed him *again* (174)	veaf he *XaZRa* venashka lo (96)
10. . . . he asked her *again* (175)	haya *XoZeR* vesho el (97)
11. She said: 'And the hair on your head rose up like *hog's* bristles' (177)	amra lo; vesearot roshxa amdu kezifim shel *XaZiR* (98)
12. While she walked away, she *turned* her face *back* . . . (177)	imshehi holexet *heXeZiRa* paneiha kenegdo . . . (99)
13. *Again* the pedlar began to think . . . (177)	hitxil haroxel *XoZeR* umeharher . . . (99)
14. *Again* she said: 'Eat' (177)	*XaZRa* veamra, exol (99)
15. . . . and *walked* with him to their house	. . . *veXaZRa* imo leveitam (100)
16. 'God in Heaven', cried Yoseph, 'how far have I gone! If I do not *return* I'm lost' (179–180)	"Avi shebashemayim, tsa'ak Yosef, Kama nitraxakti im eini *XoZeR* miyad harey ani avud (101)
17. *Again* he called and received no answer (180)	*XaZaR* vekara velo na'ana (101)
18. And the pedlar took his pack and *returned* to his rounds from place to place . . . (181)	veoto roxel natal et kupato *veXiZeR* mimakom lemakom *veXiZer* . . . (102)
METATHESIS: (*X-Z-R → X-R-Z*)	
19. He went up to it and *cried out* his goods at the door (169)	ba veamad lifnei hadelet *vehiXRiZ* al sxorato (92)
20. . . . and *again cried out* his goods (181)	. . . *vehiXRiZ* al sxorato (102)

The word system revolving around the root *X–Z–R* closes the story off thereby giving it density, intensity, and compactness. Specifically (1, 8, 18) with the Hebrew forms *meXaZeR, yeXaZRu,* and *veXiZeR,* which are all

derivations of the Hebrew form *XiZeR* meaning to court or to woo, to ca??
on someone, or to beg. The 'courting' of the rounds, or begging, (1, 18) de-
velop into the courting of a woman (8) at the simplistic level, but with the
inclusion of *XaZiR* (pig, hog) (11) the simplistic plane of courting or begging
is given a new and much deeper dimension, that of 'courting a new God'.
What is significant here is that the symbol of the profane pig (*XaZiR*), is
included in the same word system as the courting, and is also preceded by the
following passages:

And if she roasted him meat in butter, he did not turn away from it. At first
he shuddered when he saw her wring the head of a bird, then he ate and even
sucked the bones in the manner of frivolous people who in the beginning do
not intend to commit any offense and then commit every offense in the
world with pleasure . . .

And she, too, forgot that he was a Jew. (p.173)

By adding the *XaZiR* (hog) to the *maXaZeR* (courter), the entire notion
of religion, which is central to this story, is now subtly added to the text by
means of the word system.

By the same token, all the other examples of *XaZaR*, or *XoZeR* (2, 3, 4,
6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17) translated *again, return, go back*, etc., achieve a deeper
religious significance as well when linked with (16) *XoZeR*, which was trans-
lated as *return* (to God), i.e. to *repent*. The semantic notion of *XaZaR* as
returning to God or repenting occurs shortly after *XaZiR* 'hog' (11) and is
preceded by the following passage:

Suddenly it came into his head to recite the bedtime prayer. As a crucifix was
hanging on the wall, he left the house to pray outside. (p. 179)

Thus, after *XaZiR* (pig, hog) appears in the story, the religious meaning of
XaZaR (return or repent) is emphasized and made obvious.

By using the word system revolving around the root *X-Z-R*, Agnon has
given his story a certain cyclicity (*maXZoRiut* in Hebrew, from the same root)
and leaves the Hebrew reader with the feeling that the entire situation or plot
may return or recur (*laXZoR* from the same root). This pivotal root *X-Z-R*
also gives the story a linearity since it runs through the entire text. It is also
significant to mention that in this specific case of word systems, the recurrent
pivotal root both opens and closes the story (1, 20).[2]

The basic question is, however, can word systems be translated? Can each sentence containing the recurrent root word in the source language be translated in such a way as to recreate the entire effect of the word system in the target language? Our contention is that a translator may succeed in part, but will most likely be unable to transfer the entire phonological — semantic — etymological and associative effects of the word system.

The fact that the Hebrew language is built upon consonantal roots (usually CCC), which appear in various conjugation forms and different meanings, aids to create the fusion of sound and meaning which is the basis of the word system. The intensive merger of the phonological, semantic, and etymological planes within the compactness of a single recurrent root in Hebrew will make it very difficult to translate.

Bearing this in mind, we would now like to attempt to retranslate 1, 8, 18, 11 and 16 in light of their being components of the word system and in view of their role in the development of the central theme of the story. 11 and 16 are phonologically and associatively related to 1, 8, 18, and carry this development to a deeper significance than that of courting a new God.

Were we to translate 1 and 18 using the word *courtyard* (walked his rounds in courtyards) and thus link them semantically and phonologically to 8 (to *court* the woman) we would still be unable to connect them with the crucial 11 (hog, pig), and 16 (return to God, i.e. repent).

The use of *X-Z-R* with another finite verb from another semantic field is one of the ways in Hebrew to express the notion of a repeated action. In 2, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, and 17, the pivotal recurrent root *X-Z-R* appears in collocation with another finite verb from another semantic field and is consistently translated as 'again'. It does not appear to us to be coincidental that Agnon chose this way to indicate the notion of repetition in the story. Translating all of these sentences with 'repeatedly' or 'again' breaks the link between these sentences and the theme of the story, which is represented by the recurrent use of the pivotal root of the word system.

The two instances of metathesis (19, 20) (*hiXRiZ*) further strengthen the recurrent sound element associated with *X-Z-R*, but cannot be translated in such a way as to connect them semantically and etymologically with the rest of the word system.

We have suggested alternative translations linking some of the sentences containing the recurrent pivotal polysemous root *X-Z-R* of the original, but we find that there is no way to link every example in an English translation

(or probably any other target language), so as to successfully duplicate the word system, which embodies the main themes of the story in its entirety.

The existence of word systems presents a linguistic level wherein the language used and the ideas expressed become so suffused that its translation becomes virtually impossible. The unconscious level of language and literature discussed at the beginning of this paper may find its expression in the form of this suffusion of sound and meaning expressed in the concept of the word system. A sensitive reader–translator may be intuitively aware of the existence of the word system while reading this story. Objectively, however, a conscious attempt to reproduce the word system of the original language in a second language might prove to be an almost impossible task.

Notes

1. The page numbers written in parentheses are taken from the published English version of the story (Agnon, 1970) and the Hebrew original (Agnon, 1966).
2. We would like to note that word systems do not necessarily appear at the beginning or the end of stories, but may be hidden anywhere within the text.

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