Human and machine translation of occasionalisms in literary texts: Johann Nestroy's *Der Talisman* and its English translations

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Writers coin new words to introduce new ideas and concepts in many fields of science and technology; in literature, new words, i.e., occasionalisms (Chanpira 1966; Dressler & Tumfart 2017) can be used as a stylistic device and contribute to the very literariness of a text. For translators, they often pose a particular challenge. Given the recent advances in machine translation (MT), human-machine interaction is no longer restricted to the translation of non-literary texts (Rothwell et al. forthcoming) and the question arises whether MT could potentially assist literary translators when it comes to the translation of new words.

In our presentation, we will look at the work of Austria's most important 19th-century comedy writer, Johann Nepomuk Nestroy (1801-1862), whose fame also rests on his creative use of occasionalisms. Nestroy made ample use of occasionalisms for character portrayal, satirical and humorous effects and the stimulation of metalinguistic reflection. Our focus will be on one of his most-staged plays, *The Talisman* (1840). It has been translated into English three times so far; what has sparked our interest is the fact that all three English translations contain very few newly created words, the translators having mostly opted for non-occasionalistic, normalizing translation strategies, thus depriving the target text of some of its extraordinary effects (Kenny 2001).

We will compare the human translations of occasionalisms (compounds, derivations, and blends) in *The Talisman* with the translations produced by two widely used generic neural machine translation systems (Google Translate and DeepL), with the MT renderings of occasionalisms taken from the engines' translations of the complete play. We will explore the following questions: Which translation strategies did the MT engines use? Are there particular types of occasionalisms that have been translated more successfully by the engines than others? Are there significant differences in the performance of the two systems? Evaluating the MT output from a functional perspective, we will appraise its potential utility in an interactive human-machine scenario to determine whether any of the machine-generated versions are viable solutions or at least interesting enough options to be considered by translators, given the poetic and/or humorous function of the original occasionalism and what we assume to have been Nestroy's intention.

Our main result is that compared with the human translations, the MT systems generated more occasionalisms, all of them through literal translation procedures. The most successfully translated type were compounds, and indeed some of those MT solutions convey more of the humor, satire, and linguistic and philosophical wit contained in the original than normalizing versions used by human translators. MT could therefore well serve as a kind of repository from which literary translators could draw inspiration.

References:

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