

The Influence of Translation Strategies on Literary Meaning: A Case Study of Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* in English

Abstract

This study investigates the ways in which translation strategies influence the literary meaning and interpretive possibilities of Franz Kafka's novella *Die Verwandlung* (commonly known as *The Metamorphosis*) within the English-speaking world. Through detailed analysis of multiple translations published from the mid-twentieth century to the present, the paper examines how lexical choices, syntactic structures, register, and paratextual framing shape tone, characterization, and thematic emphasis. Using theoretical frameworks such as Eugene Nida's distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence, Lawrence Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization, and Antoine Berman's taxonomy of deforming tendencies, the study demonstrates that translation is not a neutral linguistic transfer but an interpretive act with ethical and cultural stakes. Particular attention is paid to the opening sentence, whose delayed predicate and understated diction are central to the novella's estrangement effect, and to the rendering of the German word *Ungeziefer*, a term that resists precise taxonomic identification. The findings suggest that translation strategies which preserve ambiguity, resist over-naming, and retain the bureaucratic flatness of Kafka's style tend to maintain the original's balance of horror and deadpan humor, whereas strategies that normalize syntax or specify imagery risk reducing interpretive openness. The paper argues that translators who make their decisions visible, rather than concealing them under the guise of transparency, enable readers to engage more critically with the mediated nature of literary experience.¹

Introduction

Translation is often framed in popular discourse as a faithful transposition of meaning from one language into another. However, in practice, it is a series of interpretive interventions shaped by linguistic structures, cultural assumptions, and the translator's aesthetic and ethical priorities. The notion of a purely neutral or mechanical translation has been widely challenged within translation studies, as scholars have emphasized that every decision about syntax, register, or lexical choice carries consequences for how readers perceive characters, events, and thematic resonances.²

In the case of Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, first published in 1915, translation becomes particularly consequential because the novella's effects rely on ambiguity, minimalism, and the careful pacing of revelation. English readers do not encounter Kafka directly; they encounter an English-language text that is one possible reconstruction of Kafka's narrative. As Venuti has argued, the translator's "invisibility" in many Anglo-American publishing traditions has tended to obscure the role of interpretive agency in shaping this encounter.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how distinct translation strategies influence literary meaning in *Die Verwandlung*, paying attention not only to obvious lexical differences but also to subtler shifts in rhythm, narrative perspective, and tone. This inquiry matters for both

¹ Bernofsky S. On translating Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." *The New Yorker*. 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/on-translating-kafkas-the-metamorphosis>

² Brill. Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*. Brill; 1964. <https://brill.com/view/title/17869>

literary scholarship and the social sciences because translations circulate globally as cultural artifacts, mediating how works from one linguistic and cultural context are integrated into another. Decisions about how to frame, clarify, or preserve ambiguity can either align the foreign text with dominant norms or challenge readers to inhabit unfamiliar interpretive spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws on three complementary frameworks. First, Nida's distinction between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence offers a way to assess whether a translation privileges structural fidelity to the source text or aims for an equivalent effect on the target audience.³ Formal equivalence tends to preserve source-language syntax and lexis even if it creates unusual patterns in the target language, whereas dynamic equivalence prioritizes fluency and reader comprehension.

Second, Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization frame translation as a cultural act in which the translator either assimilates the text to target-culture norms (domestication) or deliberately maintains traces of foreignness to resist cultural absorption (foreignization).⁴

Third, Berman's taxonomy of "deforming tendencies" identifies recurring ways in which translations can shift literary works, including clarification, expansion, ennoblement, and alteration of rhythms.⁵ Applying Berman's schema to Kafka's prose reveals how small changes—such as inserting a connective adverb or breaking up a long sentence—can accumulate into significant tonal or thematic shifts.

Analysis of the Opening Sentence

Kafka's first sentence—"Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt."—is syntactically layered. It postpones the revelation of transformation until the sentence's end, using German clause structure to delay the main predicate. This ordering heightens suspense and reflects Gregor's own gradual realization.

Translations vary in how they manage this structure. Some retain the delay, as in "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin." Others move the transformation earlier: "One morning, Gregor Samsa awoke from uneasy dreams to find he had been transformed into a monstrous insect." The

³ Brill. Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*. Brill; 1964.
<https://brill.com/view/title/17869>

⁴ Venuti L. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. Routledge; 2008.
<https://www.routledge.com/The-Translators-Invisibility/Venuti/p/book/9780415461021>

⁵ Taylor & Francis. Berman A. Translation and the Trials of the Foreign. In: Venuti L, ed. *The Translation Studies Reader*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis; 2000.
<https://www.taylorandfrancis.com/books/translation-studies-reader>

second option accelerates the shock, aligning with dynamic equivalence and domestication by prioritizing immediate clarity.⁶

The choice between “uneasy” and “troubled” for *unruhigen* also carries interpretive weight. “Uneasy” suggests low-level discomfort, whereas “troubled” hints at psychological disturbance. The translator’s decision influences whether readers perceive Gregor’s transformation as an abrupt rupture or an extension of prior unrest.⁷

The Problem of *Ungeziefer*

The word *Ungeziefer* resists direct equivalence. Historically, it referred to vermin or unclean creatures, particularly those unsuitable for ritual sacrifice, without specifying an exact species.⁸ Rendering it as “insect” narrows the semantic field and invites readers to imagine a specific creature, potentially undermining Kafka’s refusal to allow visual closure.⁹ Bernofsky and others have argued that over-specification erases the ontological uncertainty that is central to the story’s unsettling effect.

Translations that opt for “vermin” or retain the foreign term lean toward foreignization, preserving interpretive openness and aligning with Berman’s emphasis on resisting clarification.¹⁰ Conversely, choosing “cockroach” or “insect” domesticates the text, making it conform to common Anglophone imagery of revulsion, but also constraining interpretive scope.¹¹

Register, Rhythm, and the Comedy of Cruelty

Kafka’s prose often juxtaposes bureaucratic neutrality with surreal horror, producing a darkly comic effect. Translators who break long sentences into shorter units tend to increase urgency but lose the measured pacing that allows absurdity to emerge gradually. Retaining German-

⁶ Guardian Books. Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and its mutations in translation. *The Guardian*. May 13, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/may/13/kafka-the-metamorphosis-translations>

⁷ Bernofsky S. On translating Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis.” *The New Yorker*. 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/on-translating-kafkas-the-metamorphosis>

⁸ Open Culture. “Franz Kafka says the insect...should never be drawn.” Accessed August 13, 2025. <https://www.openculture.com/2015/05/kafka-says-the-insect-should-never-be-drawn.html>

⁹ Open Culture. “Franz Kafka says the insect...should never be drawn.” <https://www.openculture.com/2015/05/kafka-says-the-insect-should-never-be-drawn.html>

¹⁰ Taylor & Francis. Berman A. Translation and the Trials of the Foreign. In: Venuti L, ed. *The Translation Studies Reader*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis; 2000. <https://www.taylorandfrancis.com/books/translation-studies-reader>

¹¹ Venuti L. *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. Routledge; 2008. <https://www.routledge.com/The-Translators-Invisibility/Venuti/p/book/9780415461021>

style hypotaxis can appear awkward in English, yet it maintains the flat narrative tone that intensifies the reader’s discomfort.¹²

The choice of register—whether to use elevated diction or plain language—also affects the balance between comedy and cruelty. Phrases like “attendants” versus “helpers” or “apprehended” versus “caught” subtly reframe events, potentially shifting the novella toward satire or toward bleak realism.

Narrative Perspective and Focalization

One of the most striking features of *Die Verwandlung* is its consistent use of third-person limited narration, which confines the reader’s perspective almost entirely to Gregor Samsa’s perceptions and mental states. This focalization invites readers to experience events through Gregor’s subjectivity, even as his body becomes alien to him. In German, Kafka’s narrative voice is marked by an understated, matter-of-fact tone that refuses to sensationalize Gregor’s transformation. Translators face the challenge of maintaining this restraint in English, where idiomatic tendencies toward explicitness and emotional emphasis can distort the balance between empathy and detachment.

For example, in the scene where Gregor struggles to get out of bed, some translations preserve the prosaic register of Kafka’s description—rendering his efforts in neutral terms that emphasize clumsiness rather than agony—while others opt for more emotive verbs that evoke suffering. The former approach aligns with Berman’s principle of preserving rhythm and tonality without embellishment, while the latter reflects a tendency toward “ennoblement,” in which translators elevate the emotional register beyond the source text’s intentions. In practical terms, the decision to describe Gregor’s movements as “wriggling” versus “thrashing” changes the affective resonance of the passage, shaping whether readers interpret Gregor as pitiable, grotesque, or absurd.

The question of perspective also intersects with cultural interpretation. In Anglophone literary traditions, there is often an expectation that moments of transformation or bodily horror will be described vividly, almost cinematically, to immerse readers in sensory detail. By contrast, Kafka’s original delays sensory elaboration, keeping readers in a state of partial awareness. Translators who resist the urge to “fill in” these sensory gaps, as Bernofsky does in her 2014 rendering,¹³ better preserve the cognitive dissonance between Gregor’s subjective normalization of his condition and the reader’s recognition of its monstrosity.

Paratextual Framing and Editorial Mediation

In addition to linguistic decisions within the text itself, paratextual elements—such as introductions, footnotes, and cover illustrations—also influence literary meaning. Gérard Genette’s concept of the paratext underscores how such framing materials shape interpretation before the reader even engages with the narrative proper. In the case of *The*

¹² Orion Magazine. “*Metamorphosis* transforms with this charming translation” (interview with Susan Bernofsky). *Orion Magazine*. 2022. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/metamorphosis-translation-bernofsky>

¹³ Bernofsky S. On translating Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis.” *The New Yorker*. 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/on-translating-kafkas-the-metamorphosis>

Metamorphosis, English-language editions vary widely in their paratextual strategies. Some include detailed introductions that situate the novella in the context of Kafka's biography, early twentieth-century Prague, or the existentialist tradition; others foreground psychoanalytic readings that link Gregor's transformation to repressed desires or familial guilt.

Illustrations, in particular, present a problem for preserving Kafka's indeterminacy. Kafka himself insisted that the creature should never be depicted directly,¹⁴ a request that translators and publishers often ignore. Depicting Gregor as a beetle or cockroach not only forecloses interpretive openness but also risks anchoring the novella in the genre of horror or grotesque satire, potentially narrowing its reception. Editions that omit illustrations and offer minimal introductory commentary arguably allow readers to confront the text without preemptive guidance, which may align more closely with the ethics of foreignization as defined by Venuti.¹⁵

Cultural and Temporal Shifts in Reception

The reception of *The Metamorphosis* in English has evolved alongside changes in literary taste, translation theory, and cultural politics. Early mid-century translations, such as those by Willa and Edwin Muir, domesticated Kafka's prose to conform to the syntactic norms and moral sensibilities of the time.¹⁶ These versions often replaced Kafka's plain diction with more formal or archaic vocabulary, subtly reclassifying the novella as a work of high modernist seriousness rather than an unsettling hybrid of the mundane and the fantastic.

Later translations, influenced by the linguistic turn in literary theory and by the ethical critiques advanced in postcolonial translation studies, have tended to emphasize estrangement and linguistic foreignness. Bernofsky's translation, for example, retains certain Germanic sentence structures and avoids over-specification of *Ungeziefer*, thereby preserving semantic instability. This shift reflects a broader movement in translation studies away from the ideology of transparency and toward recognition of the translator's visible role in shaping the text's literary and political dimensions.¹⁷

Translation Ethics and the Responsibility of Interpretation

¹⁴ Open Culture. "Franz Kafka says the insect...should never be drawn." <https://www.openculture.com/2015/05/kafka-says-the-insect-should-never-be-drawn.html>

¹⁵ Venuti L. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. Routledge; 2008. <https://www.routledge.com/The-Translators-Invisibility/Venuti/p/book/9780415461021>

¹⁶ Guardian Books. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and its mutations in translation. *The Guardian*. May 13, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/may/13/kafka-the-metamorphosis-translations>

¹⁷ Taylor & Francis. Berman A. Translation and the Trials of the Foreign. In: Venuti L, ed. *The Translation Studies Reader*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis; 2000. <https://www.taylorandfrancis.com/books/translation-studies-reader>

The ethical dimension of translation lies in the fact that the translator mediates not only between languages but between cultural worldviews. In Kafka's case, his work emerges from a multilingual, multicultural Prague under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, informed by German, Czech, and Yiddish linguistic contexts. An English translation that domesticates the novella into a monolingual, Anglo-American idiom risks erasing the historical and cultural specificities embedded in Kafka's prose.

Venuti argues that domestication reinforces the dominance of English as a global lingua franca by assimilating foreign works to its norms,¹⁸ whereas foreignization resists this homogenizing tendency by making the reader aware of the text's cultural otherness. In practice, this may involve retaining syntactic structures that feel slightly awkward in English, preserving culture-specific references without substitution, and allowing certain terms—such as *Ungeziefer*—to remain untranslated with explanatory notes. Such strategies may challenge the reader's comfort but foster a deeper engagement with the source culture's difference.

Implications for Literary Studies and Linguistics

The translation of *Die Verwandlung* offers a case study in how linguistic choices intersect with broader concerns in literary theory, sociolinguistics, and cultural studies. From a literary perspective, examining multiple translations highlights the instability of meaning and the multiplicity of possible readings, reinforcing post-structuralist claims about the text's openness. From a linguistic standpoint, the translation process foregrounds issues of equivalence, semantic range, and pragmatic function—demonstrating that even seemingly straightforward words can carry untranslatable connotations shaped by historical usage.

Moreover, in the context of applied linguistics, translations serve as valuable data for investigating how bilingual and bicultural mediation affects cognitive processing. Studies on reader reception have shown that variations in sentence length, lexical specificity, and narrative pacing influence not only comprehension but also emotional engagement and thematic inference.¹⁹ The implications extend to pedagogy: using parallel translations in literature courses can cultivate critical awareness of the translator's role and the constructed nature of all reading experiences.

Conclusion

This study has argued that translation is an inherently interpretive act with far-reaching consequences for literary meaning, cultural transmission, and reader reception. Through the case of Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, it has shown how lexical choices, syntactic adjustments, register shifts, and paratextual framing can either preserve or alter the novella's delicate balance of estrangement, dark humor, and existential unease. Drawing on frameworks from Nida, Venuti, and Berman, the analysis has underscored the ethical stakes

¹⁸ Venuti L. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. Routledge; 2008. <https://www.routledge.com/The-Translators-Invisibility/Venuti/p/book/9780415461021>

¹⁹ Orion Magazine. “*Metamorphosis* transforms with this charming translation” (interview with Susan Bernofsky). *Orion Magazine*. 2022. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/metamorphosis-translation-bernofsky>

of translation, particularly the tension between accessibility and fidelity, domestication and foreignization, clarification and ambiguity.

In line with the scope of the *American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research*, this inquiry situates literary translation not merely as a technical craft but as a socially embedded practice with implications for intercultural understanding. As global readerships increasingly encounter canonical works in translation rather than in their original languages, awareness of the translator's visible and invisible interventions becomes essential. Preserving interpretive openness, respecting linguistic difference, and foregrounding the mediated nature of the reading experience are not only matters of aesthetic integrity but of cultural ethics. Future research might extend this analysis to comparative studies of reader responses across different translations or to the translation of other Kafka works whose challenges and stakes are equally pronounced.

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