



**TRANSLATION  
WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?**

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## THE METAMORPHOSIS

**BY FRANZ KAFKA**

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Written originally in German and first published in 1915, *The Metamorphosis* is Franz Kafka's best-known and most frequently translated work. The earliest English translation, by A.L. Lloyd, was published in the 1930's. A slightly later translation by Willa and Edwin Muir was for many years the best-known English translation and is still widely available. Today, anyone interested in reading this story will find, in local bookstores and libraries, at least six different English translations. Most readers of *The Metamorphosis*, however, don't realize how important their choice of a translation can be, and how much it may affect their responses to what they're reading. The purpose of this module is to compare several of the most popular contemporary translations, illustrating the ways in which different translators have dealt with the key issues involved in translating this complex work.

The first problem involves the title of the story. The German title, *Die Verwandlung*, can be translated as either *The Transformation* or *The Metamorphosis*. The most frequent choice is *metamorphosis*, but this word has the disadvantage of being more "literary" and less commonly used in English than *verwandlung* is in German. The appearance of this word in the title perhaps too quickly alerts the reader to the strangeness of the story to follow; it doesn't really fit with the much more "ordinary" tone in which the story is narrated. Another problem is that those readers familiar with the word may know it primarily as a biological term referring to a caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly, not at all the type of transformation that the story describes. But despite these disadvantages, most contemporary translations use *The Metamorphosis* as the title of the story -- mainly because it's the title that was most often used in earlier translations and therefore the one most familiar to English-language readers.

Having decided on the translated version of the story's title, the translator must now grapple with the story's first sentence -- the sentence that announces, without apparent surprise, that Gregor Samsa awoke one morning to find he'd become an insect. In the boxes below you'll see how this sentence appears in the original German and in a literal (word-for-word) translation.

**ORIGINAL**

**LITERAL**

Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheuren Ungeziefer verwandelt.

As Gregor Samsa one morning from restless dreams awoke, found he himself in his bed into an enormous vermin transformed.

Now let's look at four translators' versions of this sentence:

<p><b>WILLA/EDWIN MUIR</b></p> <p>As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.</p>	<p><b>J. A. UNDERWOOD</b></p> <p>Gregory Samsa woke from uneasy dreams one morning to find himself changed into a giant bug.</p>
<p><b>STANLEY APPELBAUM</b></p> <p>When Gregor Samsa awoke from troubled dreams one morning he found that he had been transformed in his bed into an enormous bug.</p>	<p><b>JOACHIM NEUGROSCHER</b></p> <p>One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin.</p>

You'll see immediately that there are a number of differences in sentence structures and word choices among these four translations. The most important difference involves the words chosen to describe Gregor's transformation. The Muirs describe him as having become a *gigantic insect*, Underwood a *giant bug*, Appelbaum an *enormous bug*, and Neugroschel a *monstrous vermin*.

Let's consider first the different adjectives chosen by the translators -- *gigantic*, *giant*, *enormous*, *monstrous* -- to translate the original German word, *ungeheuren*. The first three of these words -- *gigantic*, *giant*, *enormous* -- relate to size; they tell us that Gregor has become an extremely large insect. But the fourth -- *monstrous* -- is different; it describes something horrifying that doesn't have to be very large. The dilemma for the translators is that the original German word can mean both things at the same time -- very large *and* horrifying -- but since English lacks an equivalent word, the translators have been forced to choose between these somewhat different meanings.

Another difference involves the translators' choices of words to describe Gregor's transformed state -- *insect*, *bug*, and *vermin*. The original German word -- *Ungeziefer* -- is literally translated as *vermin*. However, this word isn't commonly used in English, so some translators prefer to use words like *bug* or *insect* which will be more easily understood by their readers. Also, since the word *vermin* can describe any loathsome creature, not just an insect, using this word doesn't describe exactly what Gregor has become. The disadvantage of words like *bug* or *insect*, however, is that they don't convey the sense of disgust that's implicit in the word *vermin*. A bug or insect can be harmless, perhaps even beautiful like a butterfly. Certainly this meaning doesn't apply to Gregor Samsa, but the reader has no way of knowing this at the beginning of the story. And this kind of misunderstanding is even more likely to occur since the word *metamorphosis* in the story's title is often associated with a butterfly.

An added complication familiar to most translators is that the word *vermin* has particular historical significance lacking in the words *bug* and *insect*. In the region where Kafka

lived, Jewish people were often referred to, in times of persecution by anti-Semites, as *Ungeziefer*, or *vermin*. Since Kafka was himself Jewish, he was undoubtedly aware of this derogatory meaning of the word *Ungeziefer* -- but there's no way of knowing if he intended this meaning to apply to Gregor Samsa. Translators who feel he did intend to suggest it are more likely to use the word *vermin* in their translations; those who feel it's not an intended meaning may choose more easily-understood words like *bug* or *insect*. There's no way of deciding conclusively which is the better choice. Translators have to weigh the pros and cons of the words they choose, recognizing that it's impossible to convey all levels of possible meanings in the words originally used by the story's author.

This discussion will continue on the next page with examples of other issues involved in translating *The Metamorphosis*. But before you go on, please do the exercise below.

### EXERCISE A.

In the boxes below you'll see four translations -- by Willa and Edwin Muir, Malcolm Pasley, Stanley Corngold, and Donna Freed -- of a passage in Part I of *The Metamorphosis*. Read through them and then follow the instructions beneath the boxes.

<p><b>WILLA/EDWIN MUIR</b></p> <p>But Gregor was now much calmer. The words he uttered were no longer understandable, apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him.... Yet at any rate people believed that something was wrong with him, and were ready to help him. The positive certainty with which these first measures had been taken comforted him. He felt himself drawn once more into the human circle....</p>	<p><b>MALCOLM PASLEY</b></p> <p>But Gregor had grown much calmer. It was true that the words he uttered were evidently no longer intelligible despite the fact that they had seemed clear enough to him.... But at least the others were persuaded that all was not well with him and were prepared to help. He felt comforted by the confidence and firmness with which the first instructions had been issued. He felt restored once more to human company....</p>
<p><b>STANLEY CORNGOLD</b></p> <p>But Gregor had become much calmer. It was true that they no longer understood his words, though they had seemed clear enough to him.... But still, the others now believed that there was something the matter with him and were ready to help him. The assurance and confidence with which the first measures had been taken did him good. He felt integrated into human society once again....</p>	<p><b>DONNA FREED</b></p> <p>Gregor had become much calmer however. Apparently his words were no longer understandable even though they were clear enough to him.... But at least it was now believed that all was not right with him and they were ready to help him. He felt cheered by the confidence and surety with which the first orders were met. He felt encircled by humanity again....</p>

You've just read four translations -- by Willa/Edwin Muir, Malcolm Pasley, Stanley Corngold, and Donna Freed -- of a passage in Part I of *The Metamorphosis*. In the left-hand boxes below, I've written five groups of words from the translation by Willa and Edwin Muir. Next to each group of words, write in the words used by Pasley, Corngold, and Freed to express the same ideas.

CLICK ON THE LINKS AT THE TOP OF EACH BOX TO REVIEW EACH TRANSLATION.

<b><u>MUIRS</u></b>	<b><u>PASLEY</u></b>	<b><u>CORNGOLD</u></b>	<b><u>FREED</u></b>
But Gregor was now much calmer.	But Gregor had grown much calmer.	But Gregor had become much calmer.	Gregor had become much calmer however.
The words he uttered were no longer under-standable, apparently....			
Yet at any rate people believed that something was wrong with him, and were ready to help him.			
The positive certainty with which these first measures had been taken comforted him.			
He felt himself drawn once more into the human circle....			

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