

**Female diminutives
in English Translations of Czech Texts
(based on the examples from Michal Ajvaz *Druhé
město* and Karel Čapek *Válka s mloky*
using the Czech corpora)**

Keywords: female diminutives, comparative translation study, Czech texts, English translations

Abstract

This article is devoted to female diminutives in English Translations of Czech texts. The research for this article was conducted using the Czech corpora (korpus.cz) where the author created a query to analyze two texts originally written in Czech. The author briefly describes the struggle of translating Czech diminutives to English, as these two languages have quite different stylistic forms. The subject of the analysis is female Czech diminutives in the texts *Druhé město* by Michal Ajvaz and *Válka s mloky* by Karel Čapek and the measure of equivalence used when translating said diminutives to English.

While Czech, unlike West European languages, does not possess a very diversified tense system, it can be compensated through aspectual prefixes or temporal adverbials. Because many stylistic forms are not available in Czech, the translator must seek other features to omit a cold, colourless and insensitive style (Levý, 2011). Diminutives are just but one example of such features. They are an under-valued (and under-used by less creative translators) resource of Czech. Contrary to English, diminutives in Czech (as well as other Slavic languages) are a common phenomenon (Levý, 2011). In English *proper diminutives*, as in those that evoke an emotional response or refer to the size of the specified object, are practically non-existent. So, while being a useful

tool when translating from English to Czech, they might become troublesome the other way round. This paper will investigate translations of diminutives from Czech original texts to English based on the Czech Corpora tool. I will discuss the results of my research and try to answer what functions they have and what consequence the translation strategy used in the investigated works has for the text.

In this research, I have only included works of fiction, as diminutives are not used in technical literature unless they are technical terms, but then they are of no significance to my project. The novels I used were both originally written in Czech, and I compared them to the English translations. In my research, I focused on Michal Ajvaz's *Druhé město* (1993) and Turner's translation of it (2009) as well as Karel Čapek's *Válka s mloky* (1966) and its translation by Osers (1999). I chose to work with the translation of Ajvaz's book because Turner was a personal translator to Václav Havel, therefore I was interested to learn about his approach. Interestingly, he is British but uses American English in his translations. The reason I chose Čapek's work specifically is that he is known to use a lot of diminutives in his works, therefore I thought there was a lot of room for different translation methods.

The query I created for this research was quite limited, as I only worked with feminine noun diminutives. If I were to analyse a broader criterion, I would perhaps write a whole book on it. In my research I worked with two corresponding corpora: InterCorp v14 – Czech and InterCorp v14 – English. As mentioned before, I only worked with Czech original texts, therefore my source language was Czech. To find relevant and significant hits, I looked up the feminine nouns containing the lemma *ič*. With this query, I got 132 hits, with 11 of those being irrelevant to my research (e.g., *angličtina*).

As to why I created my query in such a way, perhaps it would be fitting to explain how the diminutives are usually created in Czech. They are mostly formed by suffixes which include the consonant *č*, specifically *-ček* (masculine nouns), *-čka* (feminine nouns), and *-čko* (neuters) (Schmiedtová, 2007). There are several Czech diminutives

formed without the consonant *c* (instead of with *-ek/-nek* to name but two), but for the sake of this research, I decided to only focus on those containing it. In English these diminutive suffixes have their counterpart in the suffix *-ie*, *-let* etc. (e.g., *birdie*, *doggie*, *rivulet*) (Schmiedtová, 2007). In Polish it could be *-ek*, *-ka*, *-ko* etc. (e.g., *domek*, *usteczka*, *miasteczko*) (Dlugosz, 2009).

Before I discuss the results of my research, it would be best to define what I was looking for specifically. I wanted to find out what measure of equivalence is used when translating diminutives. There are generally three levels of equivalence, variously referred to, but for the sake of this article I will stick to just one, introduced by Gouws (2002) in his discussion of equivalent relations. Gouws (2002) made a distinction between full equivalence, partial equivalence and zero equivalence. Full equivalence is characterised by a one-to-one equivalence on the lexical, pragmatic, and semantic levels where both source language (SL) and target language (TL) have the same meaning. It implies that the translation equivalent can substitute the lemma in all its uses (Gouws, 2002). We shall keep in mind Jakobson's idea that ordinarily there is no full equivalence between code units (when we talk about interlingual translations), although messages may serve as adequate interpretations (Jakobson, 1959). As he (1959) suggests "translation involves two equivalent messages in two different codes". Most commonly, we come across partial equivalence, which is characterised by a one to more than one relationship between SL and TL forms. It suggests that for a given lemma, there will be more than one translation equivalent (Gouws, 2002). At the last level, zero equivalence occurs where there is not a one-to-one equivalence between SL and TL. This is also not uncommon, as lexical gaps exist in any given language (Gouws, 2002). We shall keep in mind that, even if a provision of an equivalent lemma is not possible, there are various strategies to compensate for it. The lack of a dictionary equivalent does not necessarily mean that the lexical item is untranslatable (Vrbinc, 2017). Among solutions in the case of the zero equivalence, Svensén (2009, cited in:

Vrbinc 2017) names borrowing, loan translation, new coinage, encyclopaedic explanations, etc.

As mentioned before, I only focused on feminine noun diminutives in my research and analysed just two texts. I will discuss them separately first. In Ajvaz's *Druhé město* I got a total of 72 relevant hits and most of them were repeated words. Additionally, 4 hits were irrelevant to my research. One of the most repeated terms was "lasička", which was usually translated into a simple "weasel" or even just "animal", as in this example [1]:

[1]

Přede mnou nesýčí žádná lasička. (Ajvaz, 1993)

I had no animal hissing in front of me (Ajvaz, 2009)

None of the translations of the weasel, however, suggested that there was a diminutive used in the ST. What's more, we would not read from the translation that it was a female weasel. The adjectives "small" or "little" were used mostly when "malý" (or its equivalents) were also used in the source text (ST) or target text (TT) as in the following example [2]:

[2]

nad jemným pískem plulo hejno MALÝCH lesklých rybiček (Ajvaz, 1993)

a shoal of LITTLE shiny fish swimming above the fine sand (Ajvaz, 2009)

There were two hits in which an adjective suggesting a smaller size appeared, as presented in examples [3] and [4]:

[3]

tiché pleskání mnoha NOŽIČEK (Ajvaz, 1993)

the pattering of many LITTLE FEET (Ajvaz, 2009)

[4]

Vtáhl jsem z kapsy LAHVIČKU (Ajvaz, 1993)

I took out of my pocket the SMALL PHIAL (Ajvaz, 2009)

Other than the examples above, the diminutive was ignored. In most cases, we cannot read from the translated text that there was a di-

minutive in the ST. Even though diminutives are used quite often in the ST, the TT omits them most of the time. The adjectives suggesting a smaller size only appear when it is pointed out in the ST as well, as shown in example [2].

Since Čapek is well known for using a lot of diminutives, I was very curious to see the approach in the translation of his work. From *Válka s mloky* I got a total of 60 relevant hits, which were overall much more diverse than in the previous text, though with some repetitions anyway. Other than those, 7 hits were irrelevant to my research. Here again, the diminutive was mostly ignored, although less often than in *Druhé město*. Often, the translation itself did not include an adjective such as “small” or “little”, but the context would suggest that anyway, as shown in example [5]:

[5]

Lovil tlustými prsty v kapsičce u vesty' (Čapek, 1966)

He fished with his fat fingers in his waistcoat pocket (Čapek, 1999)

In the example above, the pocket is not translated as a “small pocket”. However, with the “fat hands” pointed out, we can imagine that the pocket was considerably smaller as he struggles with it. Sometimes the adjective “little” was added to the translation so as to suggest a smaller size, as shown in example [6]:

[6]

Po celém těle mu vyrazily KRUPÍČKY husí kůže (Čapek, 1966)

LITTLE PIMPLES of gooseflesh erupted all over his body (Čapek, 1999)

There were a few examples where a diminutive was translated as “little N” and then continued as just “N”. There again, we could read it from the context that the noun was small.

The following table [1] presents the results of my research. The first column discusses *Druhé město*, the second one *Válka s mloky* and the third one summarizes them both. The first row outlines the number of hits in which the diminutive was ignored *or* there was a possibility of reading it from the context. In *Druhé město* it was 63 out of 72 rele-

vant hits (87,5%), and in *Válka s mloky* it was 47 out of 60 relevant hits (78,3%). In total, 110 hits out of 121 relevant ones showed that the diminutive was either ignored or read from the context. The second row presents that there was only one instance of adding “small” to translate a diminutive in *Druhé město* and it made 0,83% of all the relevant hits. The third row shows that the adjective “little” was added only once in *Druhé město* and 10 times in *Válka s mloky* (16,7%). The last row describes the instances where the ST contained “small” or “little” along with a diminutive, so it was translated with that. In *Druhé město* it was 7 out of 60 relevant hits (9,72%), and in *Válka s mloky* it was 2 out of 60 relevant hits (5%). Overall, these instances made 8,26% of the 121 relevant hits.

Table 1.

Out of 121 relevant hits	Druhé místo (% of 72)	Válka s mloky (% of 60)	Overall (% of 121)
Deminutive ignored or we might read from the context	63 (87,5%)	47 (78,3%)	110 (90,0%)
Added “small”	1 (1,39%)	0 (0%)	1 (0,83%)
Added “little”	1 (1,39%)	10 (16,76%)	11 (9,09%)
The original had “small” or “little” along with a diminutive so it was translated with that	7 (9,72%)	3 (5,0%)	10 (8,26%)

As we can see, the discussed texts were translated mainly using zero equivalence. On the other hand, if we investigate the TT as a whole, we will notice that the translators used various techniques to enrich the TT in other ways. The TT does lack the diminutives, but mostly because they are almost non-existent in the English language. As discussed above, what one language lacks, can be compensated for in other ways. A translation can only try to convey a message but will always differ from the ST and the way the readers perceive it. Quite surely though, most readers of the English translation would not even sense a “lack of diminutives” in the translation. Since in English the “proper diminutives” practically do not exist, the reader will not crave

them. All in all, the research shows that the existence of diminutives in Czech original texts was usually ignored in the discussed texts. It does not necessarily mean that the translations are bad – every translator has a different aim and focuses on different aspects. Diminutives are simply not recognised as one of the most necessary tools in English, as they are not commonly used in everyday speech either.

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