SOME ENGLISH AND AMERICAN WORDS AND IDIOMS IN THE OPPERMANNS

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In presenting the American public with translations of modern German books, the American publisher usually reprints the translation which has already been published in England. However correct these translations may be they necessarily introduce English words and idioms which are not current in America. Thus the characters in a story may go out for a "beanfeast" instead of for a "picnic" and the nurse may carelessly turn her "torch-light" on the patient instead of her "flashlight," and a thousand other peculiarly English expressions.

In the instances of the American edition of Lion Feuchtwanger's novel, The Oppermanns (New York: Viking Press, March, 1935), the publishers went to the trouble and expense of having an American translation made. The story itself was inspired by the early days of the racial strife in the Third Reich and the publishers were anxious to get the book on the market as soon as possible. The German original, under the title Die Geschwister Oppenheim, was ready in November, 1933 (Amsterdam: Querido Verlag). The English edition was put through in all haste, appearing as The Oppermanns in December, 1933 (London: Martin Secker). In a letter to the present writer, dated April 8, 1935, at Villa Valmer, Sanary, France, Dr. Feuchtwanger writes concerning the three editions:

"Wahrend ich fuer jeden meiner anderen Romane mindestens zwei Jahre brauchte, schrieb ich dieses Buch außerordentlich rasch, in sechs Monaten. Die Verleger wollten das Buch sogleich erscheinen lassen, das hatte zur Folge, dass fast alle Uebersetzungen schwaecher sind
als die Uebersetzungen meiner anderen Buecher. Auch
die englische Uebersetzung litt sehr unter der Eile, in
der sie angefertigt wurde. Im Einverstandenis mit mir
beschloss nun der amerikanische Verleger, das Buch
lieber ein paar Monate spaeter zu publizieren, um eine
bessere Uebersetzung herstellen zu lassen. Auch die
englische Uebersetzung wurde naturlich in den spa-
teren Auflagen verbessert. Mein amerikanischer Ver-
leger, Herr Huebsch von der Viking Press, ist ein ausge-
zeichneter Kenner der deutschen Sprache und lebhaft an
jeder Einzelheit seiner Uebersetzungen interessiert.”

Due to the short period of time between its inception
and its publication in the English and American transla-
tions—less than a year, The Oppermanns lends itself
admirably to an enlightening study of the differences be-
tween American speech and the mother English. Since
both the American and the English translators were
endeavoring to reproduce in their own terms the sense
of the original, the German may be used as a control.
Neither translator was entirely free to express himself
with the spontaneity which would have characterized his
own expression of thought, so the translations must
be considered as studied (even if hurried) expressions,
and therefore quite deeply rooted in traditional usage.

The American translator had the English version
before him, and, except those instances in which he may
have corrected evident mis-translations, any change he
made may be interpreted as an effort to express the origi-
nal thought in better, “more current” American manner.
Many times the changes are elusive of definition, as
indeed the stylistic variations of any two translations
are bound to be, even if made by two members of the
same group—or by the same individual at different
times. However, those changes which were evidently
made to remove a “foreign” flavor from the translation
and to make the text more natural are significant.

The language of the original was punctuated with
pithy expressions. The story portrayed emotional strug-
gle, conflict between loyalty and perfidy, love and hate in a chaotic world. The author put modern, vigorous expressions into the mouths of his characters who felt keenly concerning the new terror which had overtaken them. Some of the words and idioms employed were not—are not—in polite usage; some of them are not even in the dictionaries. This is true not only of invectives, but also of certain slang expressions. These offered special difficulties to the translators. They also provided some of the best examples for the present study, in which major emphasis is placed on the differences between the English and the American translations. Unless clearly indicated, the examples follow this (inverted) sequence: American, English, German.

From the American standpoint, the word which called most frequently for emendation was the overworked English got, e. g.: to be rid of him; to have got rid of him; ihn los zu sein. Further: What did he have to do today; What had he got to do today; Was hat er heute zu tun? But in one instance the American inadvertently retained the got, reading with the English: What had he got to do with them; Was hatte er mit ihnen zu tun?

The English it was getting on for six o'clock was changed to it was nearly six o'clock. German: Es war gegen sechs Uhr. The American rendition: the method of instruction was rigorous seems to be an improvement over the English: instruction was of a stringent character. German: Der Unterricht ist streng. The American has already recovered from the common use of kid and gone west: your young one; your little kid; Ihre Goere. His radio was out of order; his wireless had gone west; sein Radio war kaputt.

American radio is regularly wireless in British terminology, but this English translation is evenly divided in the number of times it uses radio and wireless. The German Radio may have influenced the translator.

The American translator was conscious of the preva-
lent aversion to *nice*: of a *fine house*; of a *nice house*; eines schönen Hauses. Nor would the American sanction the English use of *extraordinary*: *She had been very willing to help*; she has been extraordinarily willing to oblige; Sie sei sei ausserordentlich bereitwillig gewesen.

Americans would probably have misinterpreted the use of *sister* as applied to a nurse: *Nurse Helen; Sister Helene; Schwester Helene*. Again: *There you are, nurse; There you are, Sister Helene; So, Schwester Helene. Hausverwalter Krause was dubbed Krause, the caretaker by the English; the American consistently promoted him to be *superintendent Krause*. The American translated Kilometer into miles: *less than three miles; only five kilometers; nur fünf Kilometer.*

The German *Kleinbuerger* fared thus: the common man; the middle-class citizen; der Kleinbuerger. Small trades-people; provincial citizens; Kleinbuerger. But: the low instincts of the small citizens; petty bourgeois instincts; Kleinbuerger-Instinkte.

The German slang expression, *au backe*, was regularly *Oh, crumbs* in the English, but varied in the American: *that’s tough, Oh, say, and All right.*

*Der Lange Lulatsch* used as a nickname in the German was always *Long Lummox* to the American. Evidently not being able to find an English equivalent, the London translator retained the German, except in one instance in which he set the name of the boy *Werner Rittersteg*.

The *butter* idioms are interesting in this group:

No one would pay him a cent.
No one would pay him even the cost of the butter on the bread.
Zahlt ihm niemand auch nur die Butter aufs Brot.

which side his bread was buttered on.
which side his bread was buttered.
was eine Harke ist.
everything would be smooth.
everything in the garden would be lovely.
wird ihm alles Butter in Butter sein.

Now you're on velvet again. Or at any rate, on velveteen.
Now you're on velvet. Or at any rate on velveteen.
Jetzt ist alles in Butter. Oder doch wenigstens in Margarine.

In a few instances the American merely adopted the English rendition, although the translation might be neither exact nor American:

He was really a queer old bean, that lad.
Eigentlich eine drolle Artischocke, der Junge.

It was enough to make one puke.
Zum Kotzen.

Fool, idiot, dunderhead, rotten apple, brown-uniformed ass.
Narr, Idiot, Daemflach, weiche Birne, braune Uniform.

Let's hope the gentlemen don't burn their fingers.
dass sie sich man nicht schneiden, die Herren.

The exact wording of this last example occurred one other time in the English and the German, but that time the American rendered it:

Those gentlemen are going to burn their fingers some day.

When it came to the Arsch-expressions, the translators were puzzled. Once the American repeated the English; another time the American revised the English; a third time the American avoided the difficulty by omitting the expression—a procedure followed by the English in a fourth instance!

He is always licking the Ministry's boots.
He is always sniffing around the Ministry.
Er kriecht dem Ministerium in den Arsch.

that the new man would . . . show these donkeys.
that the new man would show the rickety-arsed crowd.
dass der Neue den Lahmaerschen einmal zeigen wird.

He didn't care a damn for what the Jewish doctors told him to do. The whole business together with the others, could go to the Devil.

He didn't care a damn for what the Jewish doctors told him
to do.
Er scheisse auf das, was die juedischen Aerzte ihm komman-
dierten. Der ganze Betrieb hier koenne ihn am Arsch
lecken, der Professor als erster.

These ten must suffice as further examples of the
many remaining idiomatic examples which could be
cited:

had bitten off more than he could chew.
had really taken a bit too much upon himself to jaw about.
die Schnauze wirklich zu voll genommen.

he did not care a hang about her pity.
he did not care a button for her pity.
er pfeift auf ihr Mitleid.

He had spent his money like a lord.
He had put on his spending trousers.
Er hatte die Spendierhosen angezogen.

his nonsense.
his sickly rot about the fatherland.
mit seinem vaterlaendischen Scheibenhonig.

That makes no difference to me.
That's all eyewash to me.
Mir ist das Scheibenhonig.

It wasn't a picnic.
It wasn't a beanfeast.
Ein Jontef war es nicht.

The fellow at last seemed finished talking rot.
He seemed to have stopped playing his fish now.
Der scheint jetzt zu Ende mit seinem Salm.

Then I shall have all I need.
Then I shall have collected the necessary spondulicks.
dann hab ich den Zaster zusammen.

What is the hunch today?
let's see what we can smell out today.
wonach steht uns denn heut die Nase?

Many of the well-established differences between
the American and English are evidenced in the two trans-
lations. Some of the single changes are symptomatic,
rather than general. Emphatic and intensifying words
as well as slang offer new comparisons:
Barker of a fair. The man who does the shouting at a booth in a fair. Ausruf er einer Jahrmarktsbude.


To care a rap. To care a peak of dirt. Sich einen Dreck darum kuemrnern.


Common sense. Shrewd knowledge of human nature; shrewd knowledge of humanity. Gesunder Menschenverstand.


To flounder about. To go to the devil. Abzappeln.

Frankly. As plain as a pikestaff. Pfeilgerade.


From the ground up. Down to its last detail. Aus dem FF studiert.

To prevent gypping. To prevent cheating. Dass man ... nicht mogle.


To have the jitters. To get icebergs down your backs. Eisgang in den Hosen haben.


Milksop. Slack-breecched fellow. Schlappschwanz.


To play tag. To play touch. Haschen spielen.


Such are some of the divergences between the American and the English of the 1930's.