

Rhythmical Imitation as an Alternative in Translating Infrequent Metres

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Abstract

The paper deals with challenges Slovak translators of poetry can face when confronted with some infrequent metres like an anapest or an amphibrach, or their combination. Our aim is to prove that although the movable stress does not exist in Slovak, the translator can attempt to imitate the „foreign“ metre since he works on the more variable level of the rhythm rather than the abstract one of the metre. There are different approaches in dealing with unusual rhythmical patterns, from substituting them by traditional ones (an iamb) to endeavour to preserve them. We claim that clinging to conventional metres in translating poetry with more varied patterns may lead to an unfruitful stereotype.

Keywords: translation, poetry, metre, rhythm, accent, versification

For a Slovak translator of rhymed poetry, the accentual-syllabic versification system with its traditional metrical forms of a trochee, a dactyl, an iamb and a dactylo-trochee¹ seems to be quite comfortable, yet sometimes slightly limited. There is a need to inquire into this prosodic system especially from the point of view of its practical usage in artistic translation. First, we must specify that by „infrequent metres“ we mean those ones which are in rare use in *contemporary Slovak* translation and need not be marginal in prosodic systems of other languages. In this study, we focus on two of them – an amphibrach and an anapest – as a challenge for translators. We will try to find an answer to the question whether in translations into Slovak it is possible to preserve amphibrachic or anapestic metre of the original, and if it is so, by what means.

Up to now, Slovak translators coped with this challenge in two ways. Prevailing is a tendency to translate such poems with usual metres or their combination, mainly an iamb, a dactyl and a dactylo-trochee, rather than to try to imitate them. This is how some Russian poets (Yesenin, Bunin, or Akhmatova among them) were translated. In her translations of William Blake's poems *Oh! Sunflower*, *My Pretty Rose-Tree* and *The Garden of Love* that contain an unusual and aesthetically efficient combination of an amphibrach and an anapest, Jana Kantorová-Báliková chose an iamb in her translation, too. Regarding prosodic qualities of Slovak, this substitutional method is legitimate, however, it raises further questions: Is the Slovak iamb really able to preserve the prosodic character of William Blake's verse? Is it not that sometimes the poetry of world-famous authors tends to be "hurdy-gurdy-like" in Slovak translations? Is it not that the Slovak iamb has become somewhat worn-out and monotonous due to its frequent use?² Surely these questions are not new, especially for the translators who did not content themselves with the traditional replacement of these metres and have tried – more or less successfully – to imitate them. By the late fifties, Zora Jesenská attempted to preserve an amphibrachic character of Yesenin's poem *Anna Snegina*. In the sixties, Laco Novomeský published his translations of Pasternak's poetry including some

amphibrachic and anapestic poems. Later, in the early eighties, it was translator and theorist Ján Zambor who moved the limits of the Slovak translation verse in his selection of Achmatova's poetry and also gave a convincing argument for his method.

In the very first line of his famous poem, *L'Art Poétique*, Paul Verlaine asks for music: "*De la musique avant toute chose.*" We believe that in translating certain types of poetry, we should bear this in mind. It is as well to remind ourselves one of Ezra Pound's principles for the poetry of Imagists that primarily concerns a free verse but it can be applied in translating metrical poetry, too: "As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome" (Preminger – Brogan 1993: 55).

Let us repeat the question from the beginning: Is it possible to preserve amphibrachic or anapestic verses of the original in translations into Slovak? Our working hypothesis is: yes, it is.

If we strictly cling to the level of the metre, both an amphibrach and an anapest will seem to be very artificial and unnatural metres for Slovak. The reason is obvious: What impedes them to be realised is the fixed accent on the first syllable. However, neither with more used metres the situation is as clear as it seems to be. Czech literary theorist Josef Hrabák (1987: 129) claims that "in the Czech language, a *non-foot* iamb is absolutely predominant". It means that the end of the foot is usually not identical with the end of the syllable. It applies to Slovak as well. A strict foot iamb is a pure abstraction in Slovak. If a foot iamb was to be realised the whole poem should only contain one-syllable words, which is not possible save some experimental poetry. What is even easier than a foot iamb – though, very difficult to carry out practically – is to achieve a pure foot amphibrach since unlike an iamb, we can use two-syllable words here. Some theorists claim that a non-foot iamb is in fact a trochee with an anacrusis creating an illusion of an iamb.³ If we clinged to the level of the metre we would have to concede that for Slovak, only a trochee and a dactyl are admissible, which is quite a narrow space for a translator of poetry. More than that, a question can be raised: If a non-foot iamb is common in Slovak why not apply the same for a non-foot amphibrach? A typical example can be found in Pasternak's poem *Po daždi (After Rain)* translated by Laco Novomeský: „*A v jahodách leskne sa zmrazená zem*“. Let us ask a question: In what – as far as the purity of the metre is concerned – does this verse differ from that one from a Slovak symbolist Ivan Krasko's poem *Dnes... (Today...)*: „*Je milostivé ráno, svetla plné ráno*“? Only in the fact that in Krasko's poem, it is a trochee with an anacrusis creating an illusion of an iamb while in Pasternak's poem it is a dactyl with an anacrusis creating an illusion of an amphibrach. A pure foot amphibrach or anapest are not even as common in Russian or English – the languages for which they are more natural. It is slightly easier to create them in English than in Slovak due to the shortness of an English word and the sufficiency of one-syllable words. Their cumulation does not have to sound artificial. Another Czech theorist Jiří Levý (1963: 163) specifies that the average length of an English word in fiction is 1.4 syllable contrary to 3.0 syllable of the Russian word. In poetry, it is slightly less. As an example, let us quote the pure foot anapestic verse of Robert Frost from his poem *Come In*: "*As I came to the edge of the woods*", which does not sound unnatural despite including only one-syllable words. Since in Slovak it is not possible, we cannot find a positive answer to the initial question at the level of the metre, rather it is necessary to look for it at the level of the rhythm where other suprasegmental features like quantity, sentence stress, or intonation come to bear some importance. Viktor Zhirmunskij (1980: 60) defines the rhythm as „a real alternation of the stresses in the line based on the interaction between the natural features of the language material and the ideal metrical intention“. In poetry, there

is a tension between the ideal metrical intention and the real verse rhythm created by the resistance of the language material by its phonetical features to the ideal scheme. It is the very tension between the metre and the rhythm that impedes poems to become undesirably „hurdy-gurdy-like“. In Slovak, it is made possible by „de-accentation“ of some syllables, especially in polysyllable words (Andrey Bely speaks of „half-accent“), like in the above-mentioned verse from Ivan Krasko’s poem: „*Je milostivé ráno, svetla plné ráno*“, where it is the weakened stress in the fourth syllable that enables the tension between the scheme and its realisation. We can also achieve it by replacing a dactylo-trochaic beginning of the verse for an iambic one, just as Jana Kantorová-Báliková did it in the first line of her translation of Shelley’s poem *Mary Shelleyovej (To Mary Shelley)*: „*Najdrahšia Mary, kam si zmizla vlastne...*“. All the following verses begin iambically.

So what are the possibilities of Slovak to imitate an amphibrach, an anapest, or their combination? As for an amphibrach which requires that the first syllable be unstressed, with respect to the mentioned phonological features of Slovak it is obvious that by placing one-syllable words at the beginning of the verse, the poem starts to sound stereotypical and artificial after some time. Unlike a duple iamb, we cannot use a dactylo-trochaic replacement here, therefore we have to look for other means of imitation. Ján Zambor came up with an interesting solution in his translation of Akhmatova’s poem *Bežeck* where he put a four-syllable word to the beginning of the verse „*Diamanty nad mestom ruská noc porozožina...*“, by which he got rid of a certain monotonousness of verses in exchange for a certain rhythmical tension. Another solution is to put a four-syllable word with the second syllable long at the beginning of the verse by which the quantity would partly neutralise the stress on the first syllable. As a matter of fact, it is the quantity that Zambor used at the end of the mentioned verse where in the word „porozožina“ it partly substitutes for the absent stress.⁴ Another way to vary an amphibrachic verse – so as to differ it from a dactylic one with an anacrusis – is to refrain from using too many three-syllable words after the first, unstressed syllable. It is natural that the Slovak verse will not have such an ascendent character as, let us say, Russian one, nevertheless, S. J. Holmes admits such an imitative shift in the translation where the same form is used regardless of its usage and cognation in the target language. There is one more factor that plays an important role in imitating an amphibrach in Slovak – the accentuation of one-word prepositions. We cannot agree with the opinion held by poet Jozef Urban that in Slovak the preposition *always* takes over the accent. If it was so, there would not be possible to use the combination of a one-syllable preposition and a three-syllable word in the imitation of an amphibrach. In Pasternak’s poem *Inovat’ (White Frost)*, we could find this couplet: „*Les s ušami ovisnutými / po šašovsky zabáva nás.*“ In the phrase „po šašovsky“, the stress is unequivocally on the first syllable of the adverb „šašovsky“. Similarly, in the line „*pri kosáku zlatšom než lipový medový plást*“ from Akhmatova’s poem *Bežeck*, the stress falls on the first syllable of the noun „kosáku“. In their research, Ján Sabol and Július Zimmermann (1994) showed that despite the prevailing tendency to put the stress on the preposition in the combination of a one-syllable preposition and a polysyllable word, there also exists an opposite possibility, which occurs in more than one third of cases with four-syllable words. Ján Zambor came up with the original solution which clears away both this problem and a possible monotonousness of the beginnings of an amphibrachic verse: in his translation of Akhmatova’s poem *Skutočnosť (Reality)*, he simply omitted the first, unstressed syllable. The poem did not lose its three-beat rhythm, however, its dactylic cadence was strengthened.

In translating an amphibrachic verse, its end usually brings about similar problems as its beginning. Both Russian and English amphibrachic verse are often catalectic: they end with the second syllable of the foot, thus creating an ascending beat. Slovak, of which rather “descending beats” (Ondruš – Sabol 1981: 139) are typical, has quite limited means of replacement here – using mostly one-syllable words in the stressed position at the end of the verse. However, there is a risk that with the lack of one-syllable notional verbs, words with no semantic stress get to the rhyming position. For example, In Novomeský’s translation of Pasternak’s poem *Po daždi (After the Rain)* in the verse “*Ved’ nebude d’aleko okamžik už*” the adverb “už” rhymes with the noun “lúč”, creating an intrusive inversion on the top of it. A possible solution could be to use the quantity, as was mentioned above. Here, a four-syllable word with the last long syllable could be put at the end of the verse while this syllable would rhyme with a one-syllable word of the appropriate verse. In the rhymed, metrically organised verse, there is a strong factor of the rhythmical inertia when we expect the latter verse which is to rhyme with the former one to run in the same rhythm. Thus the rhythm of the former verse creates certain pressure, which, we believe, neutralises the absence of the stress and underlines the syllable with the quantity.

The situation is slightly different in the imitation of the anapest. At the level of the metre, the anapest is virtually impracticable in Slovak. Štefan Krčméry (1973: 215) even holds that the anapest is untranslatable into Slovak. Yet some translators tried to imitate it (Novomeský in translating Pasternak or Zambor in translating Akhmatova) and we can say their effort was quite successful. Zambor translates Akhmatova’s poem *Všetko vrátí sa, pride to zas (Everything will come back)* – as he calls it – only with an unusual combination of the trochee and the dactyl creating an illusion of a Russian anapest. So the first syllable that should remain unstressed becomes a stressed one by putting a trochee at the beginning of the verse. But let us look at the original: The first verse “*Vsyo opyat vozvratitsya ko mne*” also begins with the stressed syllable. Zhirmunskij (1980: 91 – 92) calls it “an extrametrical burdening of the unstressed syllables in the anapest”, and as an example, he quotes a poem by Afanasiy Fet in which four out of eight anapestic verses have the first syllable stressed. Some of them, like „*V etich zvukakh na zharkiye slyozi tvoyi*“, when taken isolated, even remind of the above-mentioned combination of a trochee and a dactyl rather than an anapest. Therefore we consider the method used by Ján Zambor fully applicable. Since the word stress in Slovak is not as strong as in Russian (Krčméry 1973: 190, considers it “rather weak”), we regard putting two-syllable trochaic words at the beginning of the imitation of an anapestic verse as justifiable. We can also strengthen the stress of the third syllable by syntactic and semantic means and by using the sentence stress as well. In Pasternak’s line „*Hviezdy pridľho kvapkali po hrdle, dnu*“ the sentence stress lies on the first syllable of the semantically stressed word „*pridľho*“. Similarly, in the mentioned Akhmatova’s poem in the verse „*nočná horúčosť, túžiace dlane*“ the stress on the first syllable of the determinant noun „*horúčosť*“ is obviously stronger than the one on the first syllable of the attribute „*nočná*“. Let us again recall one of the principles of the Imagist poetry: „To compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.“ In rhythmical imitation, it is also necessary to consider rhythmical patterns and intonation of the colloquial speech. It is important that the given imitation of an anapest – whether we call it a combination of a trochee and a dactyl or whatever – does not run counter natural phonological qualities of the Slovak language and is able to grant strong aesthetic effect, bringing certain innovation into Slovak translational poetry. Moreover, it goes against automation of the rhythm which is often schematic in substandard translations.

Beside poetry written in an amphibrach or an anapest separately, Slovak translators can come across poems written in their combination as the above-mentioned William Blake's poems *Oh! Sunflower*, *My Pretty Rose-Tree* and *The Garden of Love*, translated to Slovak by Jana Kantorová-Báliková in 1977. Her choice of an iambic rhythmical substitution of Blake's combined amphibrachic-anapestic rhythmical pattern is, as we stated, legitimate, however, it brings about some risks. Anna Valcerová-Bacigálová (1999: 120) claims that „the relation between semantics and rhythm is in fact the relation between the subject (theme) and its language form“. In Blake's poems the very rhythm is, to a degree, a semantic factor. Its frequent use of ascending triple metres together with its musical character are in direct relation to their mysteriousness and mystique. We also should not forget the title of the collection they come from – *The Songs of Experience*. The initial lines of an iambic translation of *Garden of Love* „*Raz šiel som lásky záhradou / a videl čudné premeny*“ are rhythmically somewhat more down-to-earth and monotonous, more mechanical than the original „*I went to the Garden of Love, / And saw what I never have seen*“. More than that, natural diction is impaired by two inversions in the first line. Smaller syllable length of the English word resulting in higher semantic density of the English verse pose a long-term problem in translations of English poetry in Slovak. Some translators attempt to preserve the metre of the original, though often at the expense of ellipses, others draw from the semantics and choose to extend the verse by one foot (like Jan Vladislav or Anna Sedlačková in their translations of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*). In Kantorová-Báliková's translation of Blake, paradoxically, we can meet with the contrary. In a short, eight-line poem *My Pretty Rose-tree*, a number of syllables in the line varies between 8 and 9. The deviation in metre in the seventh line even extends it up to 10 syllables. The Slovak translation has a constant number of syllables of 8, by which a translator deprives herself of a chance to shape a verse rhythmically and semantically. In Blake, as we can also see in his most famous poem *The Tyger*, the deviation in metre is *productive*, preventing rhythmical stereotype, therefore, we think, there is no need to correct or improve Blake's rhythm.

The mentioned Blakian combination of uncommon metres – an amphibrach and an anapest – quite naturally makes a Slovak translator think of rhythmical substitution, however, it is necessary to ask whether there is no possibility of rhythmical imitation that could preserve the cadence and character of Blake's verse or at least to come close to it. In connexion with the indicated ways of imitation of both metres, we think such possibility exists and the given metrical combination, paradoxically, makes it easier because it facilitates the coherence of the text. If a catalectic amphibrachic line is followed by an anapestic one, these two lines give an impression of a coherent unit („*A flower was offered to me / such a flower as May never bore*“). If the order is reversed we can reach such an impression in translation by adding one syllable at the end of the anapestic line (if it is unrhymed) or lines (if they are rhymed). Thus we can preserve the musicality of the original without forced diction.

As it turns out, in spite of marginal position of an amphibrach and an anapest in the prosodic system of contemporary Slovak, in translation from languages with much stronger position of these metres it is not always necessary to turn to rhythmical substitution since rhythmical imitation is productive, too. It can be proved by concrete translations (we only mentioned some of them) that have already been reflected in the theory of translation. Anna Valcerová (2000: 81) says: „If the translator preserves the rhythmical structure of the original, i. e. translates it using the rhythmical imitation that does not exist in home literature (an anapest, an amphibrach) his method can be labelled as a preserving one in relation to the

original but viewed upon from the perspective of the development of home literature and poetics of translation, it can be felt as rhythmical innovation, especially if home poetry does not apply such principle. This kind of activity is a sign of the translator's originality.“

If we finally come to a positive answer to the initial question whether in translations into Slovak it is possible to preserve amphibrachic or anapestic verse of the original, we should point out that we mainly explored short lyrical poems. Applicability of these metres in translation of longer poems is questionable with regard to lesser chance of variability. Here, only sporadic attempts have appeared with rhythmical substitution being predominant.

As it follows from the above-said, attempts to overcome rhythmical nivelisation by way of imitation of infrequent metres is less an initiative of an individual rather than a notable tendency of the modern Slovak poetic translation.

Notes:

1 The applicability of these metres is mainly influenced by the fixed stress on the first syllable in Slovak.

2 What makes an iamb possible and frequent in Slovak in spite of the fixed stress is to use one dactylo-trochee at the beginning of a line.

3 Others (like Sabol, 1983) do not hold this opinion. We think that to some extent, the character of a iamb is in direct relation to the cadence at the end of the verse which is determined by the fact whether the foot is full or not. A catalectic iambic verse with feminine ending and descending cadence at the end is clearly closer to a trochee with an anacrusis than an acatalectic iambic verse with masculine ending and ascending cadence. Besides, the cadence of an iamb is influenced by a degree of its footness. The bigger it is, the more ascending character the given verse has.

4 This incorporation of some elements of the quantitative prosody can be viewed upon as experimental, nevertheless, we regard it as innovative.

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