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## Translating The Hobbit (2023) by Mark T. Hooker

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*Translating The Hobbit: Into Afrikaans, Belarusian, Bulgarian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Frisian, German, Icelandic, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, Sorbian, Swedish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish*, by Mark T. Hooker. [no place]: Llyfrawr, 2023. xviii, 270 pp. \$14.95 (trade paperback) ISBN 9798388530806.

The newest addition to Mark T. Hooker's series of linguistic excursions focuses on the work that brought J.R.R. Tolkien to the attention of readers around the world, and in particular on the difficulties that it may present to translators laboring to make that book understood by those whose native language is not English. Hooker has had years of experience in dealing with such matters, as a specialist in Comparative Translation at Indiana University's Russian and East European Institute and as the author of *Tolkien Through Russian Eyes* (Walking Tree, 2003).

Hooker's intended audience is not limited to translators and linguists, however. As he writes in his Author's Foreword, "Since many of the translation problems discussed are not immediately apparent to modern-day speakers of English, segments of the discussion will not only be of interest to professional translators, but also to both present-day native-English speakers (especially speakers of American English), and to English-language learners. You have to know what the text means before you can translate it" (iii).

Hooker's main areas of linguistic expertise are Dutch and Russian, and he limits the scope of the book to languages closely related to them, primarily those of the Germanic and Slavic branches of the Indo-European language family. On the Germanic side, he consults 13 translations in 9 languages: Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, Frisian, German, Icelandic, Norwegian (Bokmål), Swedish, and Yiddish. On the Slavic side, he examines 21 translations in 10 languages: Belarusian, Bulgarian, Czech, Polish, Russian (nine different translations), Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, Ukrainian, and Upper Sorbian. He also includes translations into two non-Slavic languages of Eastern Europe: Lithuanian, a Baltic language, and Romanian, a Romance language with heavy Slavic influence. Although the inclusion of translations from other branches of the Indo-European family, not to mention non-Indo-European languages, would undoubtedly have provided even more examples of difficulties in translation and their solutions, there is nevertheless enough variety in the selected corpus to give what Hooker calls a "representative overview of the types of problems" (iii) that *The Hobbit* has in store for the translator.

In the first chapter, "Place Names" (1–40), Hooker examines place names in *The Hobbit*, discussing the meanings of Tolkien's originals and how various translators have rendered them into their target languages. He cites real-world place names identical to or containing elements of the translated names, where such names exist, and he occasionally suggests translations that he deems more appropriate than those chosen by the translators. In some cases, his commentary

veers off into numerous different directions, providing a wealth of information on various topics. The discussion of *Wilderland* (32–36), for instance, includes occurrences of *wilderness* and *wildness* in *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer, a discussion of the Sindarin equivalent (*Rhovanion*), comparisons to renderings of *Disneyland* and *Wonderland* in several Slavic languages, references to songs that would have been familiar to Russian soldiers in Afghanistan and American soldiers in Vietnam, and a lengthy excursus on the use of *wilderness* in the Bible.

Given Hooker’s propensity for tangents of this sort, some comments are conspicuous by their absence. In discussing *Hobbingen* as the German translation of *Hobbiton*, he notes, “Connoisseurs of German wine are at once reminded of the town of *Bingen*” (2). Being someone with an interest in invented languages (and very little interest in wine), I am more inclined to associate Bingen with Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) and her *lingua ignota*. I was surprised that Hooker’s discussion of the element *cherno-* ‘black’ in some Slavic translations of *Mirkwood* (18) mentions neither of the names including this element that would probably be most familiar to people outside of Slavic-speaking countries: the terrifying *Chernobog* in Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940) and the Ukrainian city of *Chernobyl*, notorious for its 1986 nuclear disaster.

The subject of the next chapter, “Chapter Titles” (41–60), seems a bit odd until one considers the fact that several of the chapter titles in *The Hobbit* make use of idioms and/or wordplay, both of which can create potential difficulties for translators. For example, in the title of the first chapter, “An Unexpected Party,” Tolkien is playing with the ambiguity of the word *party*, which can here refer to either a group of people (specifically dwarves) or a festive gathering. In this case, however, Hooker notes that the translator also has something else to consider: the title of the first chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, “A Long-Expected Party”, which needs to match “as much as possible for the jest to work” (43).

The chapter on “Food and Drink” (61–100) examines the translations of words in this milieu, particularly those that are not as straightforward as they may seem. For the more markedly English foodstuffs, Hooker’s discussion can get quite detailed. For seed-cake (65–68) and mince-pie (76–84) he even includes several lists of ingredients from antique cookbooks. The mince-pies in some of the translations explicitly contain meat, whereas others do not, and the selected recipes reflect this dichotomy.

One thing that I found particularly interesting in this chapter was how the translators often replaced the food mentioned by Tolkien with (mostly) similar fare from their own homelands. For example, Bombur’s pork-pie (*Annotated Hobbit* 41) remains something made with dough and a meat filling in a number of the translations, be it a *burek* or a *pirog*, but in Krege’s German version it becomes *Schweinshaxe* ‘ham hocks’ and in Skibniewska’s Polish *gulasz wieprzowy* ‘pork goulash’ (74–76).

Similarly instructive is the section entitled “When Tomatoes Became Pickles” (84–86). I was already aware that the word “pickles” in current editions of *The Hobbit* (*Annotated Hobbit* 41) was originally “tomatoes” in the first and second editions, and that a number of translations (including seven of the thirty-six in Hooker’s survey) reflect this earlier text. What did not occur to me, however, was how ambiguous the word “pickles” is. As an American, I assumed that Tolkien meant pickled cucumbers (gherkins), but Hooker demonstrates that British usage of the word differs, referring more often to a “jarred pickled chutney” or a “spiced vegetable mixture” (85). Having grown up eating my Armenian relatives’ homemade *turshi*, a mix of pickled carrots, celery, cauliflower, cabbage, and chili peppers, but no cucumbers, I should not have jumped to such a conclusion. Some of the translators, at least fifteen of them, made a similar assumption and specifically mentioned cucumbers. Others did not. I note with satisfaction that the Bulgarian translator used a cognate of the aforementioned *turshi* (86).

The chapter “Low Philological Jests” (101–42) examines passages in *The Hobbit* where word origins and linguistic history come into play. An obvious example is the defeat of Golfimbul, Tolkien’s fictional source for the game of golf (*Annotated Hobbit* 48). Hooker supplies some interesting added information here, including a poem by Samuel K. Cowan, which includes the term “golfing ball” — an even closer match to the goblin chieftain’s name (124–26). A less obvious example is the word *audacious* (*Annotated Hobbit* 46–47). Hooker notes that this word sometimes appears as a dictionary gloss for the German word *tollkühn*, the source of Tolkien’s surname, and postulates that by using it to refer to Bilbo, Tolkien is identifying with the hobbit (104–10). Such a connection never occurred to me, but I suppose it’s possible.

Even more audacious is Hooker’s claim that the trolls in *The Hobbit* were intended by Tolkien to be a parody of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 (110–22). Trolls are creatures from Scandinavian folklore, and the Normans came to France from Scandinavia. The trolls’ leader, like the Normans’, is named William. The trolls eat mutton, a word that derives from Norman French. And so on. It’s an intriguing hypothesis, but I don’t buy it.

In the chapter on “Exotic Vocabulary” (143–84), Hooker looks at several words and phrases that may cause difficulties for the translator, either because they may not have literal equivalents in the target language, as in the case of “half a mind” (147–52), or because they could easily be misunderstood, like “deep” in “Deep-elves” (143–46). Tolkien’s reference to Thorin having “his feet on the fender” in Bag-End (*Annotated Hobbit* 43) will no doubt puzzle many Americans, for whom a fender is only a car part, as Hooker notes, or for some (I might add) maybe also a brand of guitar. Hooker devotes over eleven pages (161–72) to explaining and illustrating this word and discussing how it was translated. When I was reading *The Hobbit* for the first time as an American sixth-grader, I was struck by the apparent

anachronism of Bilbo's "braces" (*Annotated Hobbit* 32), not knowing that they were what we would call "suspenders" in the U.S. and thinking instead that they were orthodontic appliances! I see no reference to this potential stumbling-block in Hooker's book, probably because none of the translators of *The Hobbit* were as clueless as my 11-year-old self.

In this chapter we also find a discussion of the mysterious "wild Were-worms in the Last Desert" (130–34; see *Annotated Hobbit* 49). Like Hooker, I was delighted by Rakhmanova's clever Russian version: хобборотень, a portmanteau of хоббит 'hobbit' and оборотень 'shape-shifter'. She thus uses as her base "a word most often used in the sense of *werewolf*" (134), but instead of it being part *wer(e)* 'man', it is part 'hobbit', which makes perfect sense for a monster in hobbit folklore. Hooker does not mention, however, that in the early "Pryftan Fragment" and "Bladorthin Typescript" of *The Hobbit*, the Were-worms are instead called "the Wild Wireworms of the Chinese" (Rateliff 9 and 40), which hammers home the fact that we really have no idea of how Tolkien envisioned these creatures.

The chapter "Elephants, Great and Small" (185–218) begins with a discussion of exclamations in *The Hobbit* that are "often common, everyday euphemisms that imply a phrase that once had an explicit religious element" (186). Here the translators were not always successful in avoiding what Hooker calls "the God problem" and in many cases made the religious element explicit, as in Scherf's German translation of "Thank goodness!" as "Gott sei Dank!" (thanks be to God) (186). From there we proceed to discussions of Tolkien's references to Yule-tide (200–07) and a Christmas tree (207–14), with the latter compared to other anachronistic (or seemingly anachronistic) elements in *The Hobbit*. Some of these are physical objects in the story (clocks, matches), whereas others, like the Christmas tree, appear only in similes used by the narrator (train engine, telescopes).

In the final chapter, "A Tough Nut to Crack" (219–54), Hooker deals with some translation problems that "look deceptively easy at first glance, but turn out to be a lot more difficult upon closer consideration" (219). These include the pronoun *you* used by the narrator in addressing the audience and various meanings of the word *hall*.

Those who have read Hooker's other works will probably already realize that he marches to the beat of his own drummer. Those published by "Llyfrawr" are self-published; the full catalog on the publisher's website (llyfrawr.com) comprises ten books by Mark T. Hooker and nothing else. Some of Hooker's terminology is idiosyncratic, such as his statement regarding *kroken* 'the corner' that "Norwegian has post-position articles" (37 n19). It would be more accurate to call them suffixed articles, since postpositions are properly words that function like English prepositions but are placed after their objects, as in German *die Straße entlang* 'along the street' and Japanese *Tōkyō kara* 'from Tokyo'. Hooker uses "first-world" (18 and elsewhere) to refer to things in the real world, as opposed to the "secondary"

world of Tolkien's fiction, but that term is loaded with geopolitical baggage, as it originally referred to mostly democratic and capitalist countries that were aligned with the United States and NATO and today usually refers to developed, industrialized nations, again typically democratic and capitalist. "Primary world" is the more usual term in Tolkien scholarship. References to *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (e.g., on 174–75) are rather strange, using the original title rather than the more familiar *Oxford English Dictionary*. Hooker's occasional citation of German forms in a Blackletter font (e.g., on 146 and 202) is also peculiar; in most passages cited from old German books he has not done this. As a fan of vintage German typography, I might be more forgiving here if he had used a proper Fraktur typeface, but ultimately the use of Blackletter for snippets of German text is antiquated and unnecessary.

The quiriness of the book is evinced most of all in the illustrations. Hooker has not taken these from foreign editions of *The Hobbit*, undoubtedly for financial reasons, but has instead used clip-art from a variety of sources in the public domain. The artistic styles range from fine 19th-century engravings to the illustration for "Staggerment" (153), which employs a human figure of the sort found on traffic signs and restroom doors. In the latter case, Hooker has co-opted a "Dizziness" icon from *Wikimedia Commons* (see 262), and he has repurposed other illustrations, as well, such as an engraving of *Mt. Whitney from the West*, captioned as "Rivendell" (27, see 261).

The illustrations are sometimes useful, such as those in the section on fireplace fenders (161–72), though one might question whether it was necessary to have *eight* pictures of fireplace fenders. The picture of the Were-worm (130), however, is misleading, cobbled together from an engraving of an "Ethiopian dragon" and part of a wolf's head from an illustration entitled "The Wolf and the Man" (see 262). Finally, the illustration of the "Deep-Elf" (144) is an image of an "1870s Deep-sea Diver" (262); Hooker is just being facetious here, of course, and he emphasizes this by including a smiley-face emoji in the caption.

Readers may disagree with some of Hooker's opinions and aesthetic choices, but the number of outright factual errors in the book does not appear to be very large. One that stood out was the statement that there were "20 British shillings (abbreviated 's.') in £1 (sterling), and twelve pence (abbreviated 'p.') in the shilling" (168). Prior to decimalization in 1971, *penny* and its plural *pence* were abbreviated not as "p." but as "d." (for Latin *denarius*). This was apparently just a slip, however, since Hooker is here explaining some prices immediately preceding, in which the correct abbreviation "d." appears twice. Another clearly unintentional slip is his translation of Russian "Вода и пламень" as "*Fire and Flame*" (41), which should be "*Water and Flame*".

Another error is repeated at several points in the "Version Check" section (256–57) and the "Bibliography of Editions Used" (258–60): Hooker appears to be

unaware of the existence of the 1951 second edition of *The Hobbit* and identifies the 1966 edition as the “second” when it is more accurately the third. He states, for example, that in the “pickles” passage noted above, “the first edition says *tomatoes*, while the second says *pickles*” (256), but “tomatoes” appears in both the first (1937) and second (1951) editions, with “pickles” first appearing in 1966: in the Ballantine paperback “Revised edition” in February and the “third edition” from Allen & Unwin (hardcover) and Unwin Books (paperback) in June. The same is true of the other two examples of “second edition” revisions that he gives here. The most notable revisions introduced in the 1951 edition are the major changes to the Gollum story, which Hooker does not mention. Several translations of *The Hobbit* have been based on this 1951 second edition, with some inconsistently incorporating later revisions,<sup>1</sup> but to the best of my knowledge, none have ever been based on the 1937 first edition text *per se*, in which Gollum offers Bilbo a “present” if he wins the riddle-game (*Annotated Hobbit* 121).<sup>2</sup> For example, Maria Skibniewska’s Polish version, which Hooker notes as “translated from the first edition (1937)” (259–60), has the hallmarks of the 1951 text, which retains the 1937 tomatoes (“pomidory” Skibniewska 13) but has the new prize for the riddle-game: “We shows it the way out, yes!” (“Na przykład pokaże mu wyjście na świat.” Skibniewska 61).

Although etymologies often qualify as opinions rather than facts, I have to mark as an error Hooker’s claim that “Both *hall* and *Saal* [a German synonym] are ultimately derived from the Sanskrit *śālā* (f.), a word that identifies a *house, room, covered pavilion* or *enclosure*” (233). I can find no evidence of such a derivation, and Hooker provides no reference for it. According to generally accepted etymologies, English *hall* does not derive *from* the Sanskrit word cited by Hooker, but both words are indeed cognates, deriving from the same reconstructed Proto-Indo-European root *\*kel-* ‘to cover, conceal’. German *Saal*, however, derives from a different Proto-Indo-European root, *\*sel-* ‘human settlement’.<sup>3</sup> The shifts of Proto-Indo-European *\*s-* to *h-* in Greek and Welsh, to which Hooker alludes, have nothing whatsoever to do with these words.

Also erroneous are Hooker’s changes of several instances of *ss* in German words and names to *ß* (*Eszett*). By making these changes he violated the rules of German spelling, which dictate that *ß* can only appear after a long vowel or diphthong, or (prior to the German orthography reform of 1996) at the end of a

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of one of these, see Smith 26–28.

<sup>2</sup> See Hammond and Anderson 21–23 and 28–43 for details of the revisions introduced in these editions.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Pokorny I.553 (4. *kel-*) and I.898 (1. *sel-*). The more recent German etymological dictionary by Pfeifer et al. agrees; see the entries for *Halle* (<https://www.dwds.de/wb/etymwb/Halle>) and *Saal* (<https://www.dwds.de/wb/etymwb/Saal>) (accessed 24 August 2023).

syllable or before a consonant, if the *β* was at the end of a word-stem, regardless of the length of the preceding vowel.<sup>4</sup> Thus *Straße* ‘street’ (5) is correct, since the *a* is long, but *Gaße* [*sic*] ‘lane’ (6) should be *Gasse*, because the *a* is short. Similarly, in “fließendes Waßer” [*sic*] (22 and 24), the use of *β* in the first word is correct, but the second word should be *Wasser*. In some places, mainly textual citations, Hooker does nevertheless retain the original, correct spellings with *ss*, e.g., “überflüssig” (38) and “Wasser” (41). On a related note, in “*ein Bißchen* | *ein Wenig*” (88), the *β* was correct before the 1996 spelling reform but should now be *ss*. However, neither *ein bisschen* nor *ein wenig* should be capitalized here, even though nouns are generally capitalized in German.

Some other spelling errors or typos that appear in the book are: “*rasberry*” for “*raspberry*” (83); “*Berkley*” for “*Berkeley*” (98); “*Conquerer*” for “*Conqueror*” (one instance on 117, but spelled correctly elsewhere); “*Schwedish-Teutsches Wörterbuch*” for “*Schwedisch-Teutsches Wörterbuch*” (138; the original edition marks the umlaut with a small *e* above the *o*); “*Shepherd-Walywyn*” for “*Shepherd-Walwyn*” (140); “*Golum’s*” for “*Gollum’s*” (196); and “*Braiter*” for “*Braiter*” (260). Although linguistic reconstructions for the Proto-Germanic antecedent of *shirt* and *skirt* vary, “*\*skjurton*” (233) should rather be something like *\*skurtjon* or *\*skurtijon*; the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., s.v. *shirt*) has *\*skurtjōn-*. Hooker may have been misled by modern Scandinavian words for ‘shirt’ that begin with *skj-*, such as Swedish *skjorta*. Some words that appear to be misspelled, such as “*Quire*” instead of “*Choir*” (196) and “*gild*” instead of “*guild*” (220), are in fact accurately quoted from their sources.

In conclusion, I would say that Hooker does a fine job of presenting the sorts of problems that *The Hobbit* presents to translators and gives a solid sampling of solutions to these problems, those appearing in published translations as well as Hooker’s own suggestions. Readers interested in language and translation will find much of value here. Those with less interest in these areas may find such things as the finer points of word usage in the Slavic languages tedious, but even they may find some of Hooker’s cultural insights enlightening. I certainly learned some things. Be that as it may, the reader should approach this book with a critical eye.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the words *dass* ‘that’ and *musste* ‘had to’, now spelled with *ss* because of the preceding short vowels, were previously *daß* and *mußte*.



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