

NEGOTIATING MEANING IN THE TRANSLATION OF RIDDLES IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE HOBBIT*

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Abstract: *The aim of the present paper is to investigate strategies of translating riddles in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit. Taking as framework Pagis' (1996) and Senderovich's (2005) model of analysis for riddles as well as Wagner's (2020) pragma-semantic model of ambiguity, the paper redefines literary riddles as forms of conventionalized ambiguity that are strategically produced, perceived and resolved. The analysis of four target texts reveals that the main strategies employed in preserving a balance between opacity and transparency in literary riddles are equivalence, explicitation, rationalization and omission and that translation loss can be repaired through compensation.*

Keywords: *ambiguity, compensation, literary riddles, opacity, transparency.*

1. Introduction: literary riddles as strategies of authentication

Most of the literature on riddles (Taylor 1943, Pepicello, Green 1984, Senderovich 2005, etc.) defines a riddle as a piece of encoded text presented by a riddler to a riddlee as a challenge. The riddle is not complete unless it is also provided with a solution (whether "guessed" by the riddlee or "revealed" by the riddler, if the riddlee finds himself/herself unable to work it out). Folklorists aptly define a riddle as "a traditional, fixed-phrased verbal expression containing an image and a seeming contradiction" that "consists of two parts: an image and an answer." (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2001: 9). Both linguists (Pepicello, Green 1984) and specialists in literature (Pagis 1996) agree that riddles are constructed through a careful balance between "anomaly" and "congruence" (Pepicello, Green 1984: 107) or between "lucidity and obscurity" (Pagis 1996: 84). What they mean is that for a riddle to function properly, it needs to contain both encrypting mechanisms and decoding clues, so that there is a balance between opacity and transparency of meaning.

The area of maneuver, though very large, is restricted on two counts. Just as a distant or arbitrary hint is too obscure and violates the condition of reasonable solubility, an overly detailed or self-evident hint violates the condition of reasonable opacity because it demands no effort and prevents the reader's active involvement in the game. (Pagis 1996: 91)

I believe that this delicately constructed balance between what needs to be known and what needs to be concealed in a riddle is the major problem that a translator will have to deal with when rendering the riddle into a target language.

On the one hand, the fixed form (prosody, rhyme, etc.) has to be preserved, while, on the other hand, the clues need to be kept intact so as not to upset the balance between opacity and solubility.

A second important point is that folk riddles differ from literary riddles. The difference between them is threefold: while folk riddles are pitched by the riddler to the riddlee during a “symposium”, under the eyes of a community that also serves as arbitrator, literary riddles are regularly part of a fictional contest that takes place between characters. There is no arbitrator involved and the characters’ contest is based on mutual agreement upon a set of rules. While both kinds of riddles rely on a shift of power between contestants (normally the riddler gets to have the upper hand because it is s/he that provides the challenge and it is also s/he that decides whether the answer of the riddlee is correct), while they take turns at pitching riddles, the literary riddle poses an intriguing problem in itself, since the delicate balance of power relies on the trust between the contestants and, in most cases, one of the contestants proves to be treacherous. The solving of such a riddle thus pushes the narrative forward. This is in fact the second difference between the literary riddle and the folk riddle: the former is context-dependent in the sense that, although “atemporal” or “extratemporal” (Bakhtin 1981: 156-158), it moves the story forward and has a clearly defined role in the plot. As remarked by Sebo (2012: 39), the riddle contest “occurs at the pivotal moment in the narrative”. Thirdly, as Pagis (1996: 84) remarks, the literary riddle is a protean species: once solved, it “ceases to exist” as a riddle and turns into a different kind of poem, such as a “descriptive epigram”.

I insist upon these differences between folk and literary riddles as I have gleaned them from the literature, because it is literary riddles in translated children’s literature that this paper deals with and because, to my mind, these differences are crucial for a translator’s task. If the translator is the first reader of the source text, s/he is already in possession of the answer to the riddle in question, which means that s/he will probably have to strategically “un-know” the answer before translating the riddle as a riddle. Otherwise, the balance between opacity and solubility might be upset and the translated riddle may be in danger of becoming just another “descriptive epigram”, to quote Pagis. This makes translating literary riddles even more challenging.

Moreover, with the literary riddle, there are at least two different planes that need to be taken into consideration (such as the narrative level of the characters and the extra-narrative level of the author and readers). If the riddle is translated, there will be a third level to be considered, as the translator may be seen to count as a mediator between the author and a new set of readers, therefore as an intermediate negotiator of meaning.

If I were to redefine the riddle according to Wagner’s (2020) pragma-semantic model of ambiguity, I would probably say that a literary riddle is a conventionalized form of strategically produced, strategically perceived, and strategically resolved ambiguity, both on an inner level (between characters) and on an outer level (between author and readers). In Wagner’s model, ambiguity is produced and/or perceived strategically when it has a clear communicative purpose. In this case, on the inner level, the characters produce riddles (which are forms of carefully constructed ambiguity), so as to compete in a contest that is but a reflection of what Sebo (2012, 2013) calls a “meta-contest”: the riddling contest is meant to hide the real contest between characters, in which one of them will be bettered (and possibly killed) by the other. So, the communicative purpose of the

riddle in this case is to negotiate meaning and ultimately to negotiate the character's life.

On the outer level, the author produces the riddles both as strategies of narrative advancement and as strategies of authentication (that is as authorial strategies that “lend the fictional world additional complexity and verisimilitude” (Gymnich 2005: 10, qtd. in Furkó 2020: 187).

Thus, on the inner level, the characters need to negotiate their lives by solving as many riddles as possible. But, as pointed out by Kaivola-Bregenhøj (2001: 9), solving riddles does not test one's wits as much as it tests one's *knowledge of the world*. The winner of the riddling contest is the one that is the more experienced and learned of the two contestants, the one that is able to make more sense of reality. On the other hand, on the outer level, the readers' attempt to solve the riddles can be seen as a way of accessing the fictional universe and of getting familiarized with it. This aspect of riddle solving may explain why, for the characters, the riddles might appear more “transparent”, therefore easier to solve, than they appear to be, for the readers. Obviously, the characters are more conversant with the fictional universe than the readers are, while the readers may, in their turn, be more knowledgeable about the events narrated in the story than the characters themselves might be.

To sum up, literary riddles are a species that is based on a carefully constructed balance between opacity and transparency, they are forms of conventionalized ambiguity, strategically produced, perceived and resolved on two levels, they are context-dependent, as they are integrated in the narrative and play a role in the plot, and they are a protean species in the sense that ambiguity resolution (the obligatory solving of the riddle) triggers their ceasing to be riddles and their being transformed into “an overt poem” (Pagis 1996: 98). All these aspects need to be weighed when translating literary riddles.

2. Riddle translation

I have chosen J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* as the source for the corpus of my paper not just because it contains a wealth of riddles, but because the riddle contests it contains are tactically placed at pivotal moments in the narrative and because the main character in the narrative is transformed by these encounters. More than that, the book has been translated and re-translated into Romanian, which provides variants to the source riddles that might illuminate the translational process. It is interesting to mention that, with the exception of the 1995 target text, neither of the other two translators I have analysed translated the poems in the book themselves: the first (1975) target text is due to Catinca Ralea and appeared at “Ion Creangă” Publishing House, and the poems were translated by Leon Leviț chi. Both translators are known to be some of the greatest translators Romania has produced. The second (1995) target text was signed by poetess Junona Tutunea for “Elit” Publishing House and was repeatedly criticized as being too domesticating and a loose adaptation of the original (Bîrsanu 2020, Vișan 2022). The third target text was signed in 2007 by Irina Horea (for the prose) and Ion Horea (for the poems) and appeared at “Rao” Publishing House. The first target text was republished in 2005 also by “Rao” and might have competed with the third target text, which was subsequently republished several times. For the purposes of this paper, I have also produced my own version, which will count as a fourth target text.

As previously suggested (Bîrsanu 2020), the first two target texts' implied readers are children, as demonstrated by the addition of the word *poveste*, "fairytale", in the title of the Romanian versions. It is quite possible that the translators of the first two target texts may have thought that, for translated children's literature, the norm was that of collaborative reading between parents and children (as pointed out by Kruger (2011: 823)). In the case of the third target text, given the fact that the translation was commissioned by "Rao" as a continuation of the recently produced Romanian version for *The Lord of the Rings* books, very popular due to their adaptation into feature films, the implied readers are probably made up of the fans of the Middle-Earth universe, which means a mixed lot age-wise. As for the fourth target text (mine), the implied readers are specialists in translation studies reading the present paper.

Let us now discuss the type of riddles used in Chapter V of the book. The riddling contest that takes place is between the main character, Bilbo, the hobbit, and Gollum, about whom we only learn that he is a scary, yet pathetic creature, living in the dark. Bilbo, the underdog, turns out to be the winner not so much because of his skill or cunning, as because of his being exceptionally lucky. In this contest, the riddles the two contestants pitch to each other are inspired from the reality of their every-day lives and their gradual solving of these riddles allows for the characters to get acquainted with each other. It turns out that they are two faces of the same coin (Olsen 2012: 94), one sunny and unthreatening (Bilbo), the other dark and dangerous (Gollum): "in the end it seems that they might almost be 'before' and 'after' pictures of the same character." Consider the table below, which contains the answers to the riddles the characters propose:

GOLLUM'S RIDDLES (starts first, has the advantage)	BILBO'S RIDDLES (goes second, is the underdog in the competition)
MOUNTAIN	TEETH
WIND	SUN ON DAISIES
DARK	EGGS
FISH	Leg riddle - FISH ON TABLE, MAN ON STOOL, CAT GETS SOME
TIME (Tempus edax rerum = time, eater of things) – destroyer of mountains	PRECIOUS RING (the answer to a false riddle, a "neck" riddle: WHAT DO I HAVE IN MY POCKETS?)

Table 1. Bilbo's and Gollum's enigmata: coincidentia oppositorum

The encounter with Gollum, from which Bilbo has a narrow escape only due to "good luck" and to unwittingly resorting to a "(save one's) neck" riddle, is crucial for the development of the story. While all the riddles pitched in the contest are "true" riddles, in that they are formed around subjects that are part of the characters' shared knowledge, the last question that saves Bilbo's neck is a "false" riddle, since only Bilbo knows the answer to it and there is no way Gollum can answer the impossible question. Interestingly enough, while the "true" riddles (to use the term employed by Taylor 1943: 145) are "easy" for the characters (Tolkien uses the adjective "easy" in relation to riddles at least five times in this chapter), they are quite difficult to work out by the readers. The opposite happens with the neck riddle, which is impossibly opaque to Gollum, but transparent to the readers, who are aware of the answer since they have already learned that Bilbo has found a ring and placed it in his pocket.

Let us see to what extent the translators have managed to preserve a balance between obscurity and lucidity by looking at a few of the translated riddles in the first contest, most of which are under the form of poems. In judging whether solubility and opacity have been preserved in balance, we make use of Senderovich's (2005) observations with respect to the form of the riddle. She points out that most riddles are built on syntactic parallelism and that structural symmetry is meant to seamlessly conceal the subject of the riddle. So it turns out that an important strategy of concealment is syntactic parallelism. Revealing clues, on the other hand, are often underlined by means of rhyme. As noticed by Senderovich (2005: 74), in many riddles the first part is meant metaphorically and is placed in a rhyme with the second, literal part, somehow placing the most important clues in focus. Thus, "syntactic and verse forms work at counter purposes."

Consider the first riddle in the table below, built on opposition. This particular riddle is made up of an alternation between metaphoric meaning (roots, trees, grow) and literal meaning (up it goes). Syntactically, apart from the coordinated clauses, the riddle also alternates assertion with negation (has roots – but nobody sees them; goes up – but it never grows). It is probably important that both the syntactic and the prosodic pattern should be maintained for the riddle in order to be successfully rendered into the target language and, indeed, all target texts seem to do so, with the exception of TT2. Apart from doing away with the interrogative form of the original riddle, TT2 also destroys the positive-negative pattern, preserving the negation only in the second part. As for concealing elements (roots-trees-grows), all target texts manage to preserve them, with the exception of TT1, which replaces *trees* with *orișicare*, "anyone". As for TT3, the first negation in the riddle ("as nobody sees") is reformulated as "like nobody else", which changes the semantics of the first clue. This is an important part in the riddle, since, as pointed out by Olsen (2012: 87), it is also an opportunity for Gollum to indirectly brag that he is the only creature that has seen the roots of a mountain, that he is "the knower of secrets" and will therefore best Bilbo in the game. Both TT1 and TT3 nail the repetition ("up, up it goes"), which is omitted in TT2. TT4 on the other hand makes use of compensation in kind (by using two verbs instead of the repeated particle) and compensation in place (inserts a repetition of the adjective *tall* in line 2 and a repetition of the verb *grow* in the last line.) In doing that, TT4 is more rhetorical, more emphatic and manages to place in a rhyme the very key words that rhyme in the original (*goes/grows*), which, as Senderovich (2005) explains, is crucial for the mechanism of the riddle.

Source Text	Target Text 1	Target Text 2	Target Text 3	Target Text 4
What has <u>roots</u> as nobody sees, Is taller than <u>trees</u> , Up, up it goes, And yet never <u>grows</u> ?	Ce are rădăcini, dar nimeni nu le vede, E mai înalt, cu mult, ca orișicare Și urcă ssuss, și tot mai ssuss, sspre sstele, El nu crește nicicum, și totuși el e mare!	Rădăcini furișe a-nfripat Mai mult ca pomii s-a 'nălțat! În cer are frunte-avântată, Însă nu crește niciodată!	Ce-are rădăcini ca nimeni alt, Decât copacii-i mai înalt, și tot urcă, urcă, iată, Fără să crească vreodată?	Ce-are rădăcini nevăzute de om, Ce-i mai înalt decât cel mai 'nalt pom, Ce se-nalță, sus țintește De crescut însă nu crește?

Source Text	Back translation	Back translation	Back translation	Back translation
What has <u>roots</u> as nobody sees, Is taller than <u>trees</u> , <u>Up, up it</u> <u>goes</u> , And yet never grows?	What has roots, but nobody can see them, Is much taller than anything And climbss <i>up</i> , <i>upper</i> still, to the stars, He never grows at all and yet he is big	Stealthy roots it extended Higher than trees it rose! In the sky its forehead peaks, Yet it never grows.	What has roots like nobody else, Than trees it is taller, It keeps <i>climbing</i> , <i>climbing</i> , look, Without ever growing?	What has roots Never seen by man, What is <i>taller</i> than the <i>tallest</i> tree, What soars, up it aims, But as for <i>growing</i> , it never <i>grows</i> ?

Table 2. Gollum’s riddle. Answer: MOUNTAIN. Metaphoric extension: roots-trees-grow, clue: goes up, never grows; built on paradox (goes up but never grows) (contradictive, oppositional riddle, Sebo 2012: 149)

The second riddle I have selected for perusal is, in my opinion, the trickiest to translate of them all. Here, syntactic parallelism is exquisitely used in order to conceal the answer to the riddle. Unlike all the other riddles, the answer is made up of two entities and the syntactic parallelism is meant to draw a parallelism between these two entities: the sun (also known in the Middle Ages as “the eye of the world”, as pointed out by Olsen (2012: 94)) and the daisies (whose English name contains the word *eye* in its etymology). This is a very clever riddle, quite opaque to the readers. However, Gollum has no problem decoding it by digging up long buried memories from the time when he used to live under the sun.

In table 3 below, I have underlined the revealing clues, which are placed symmetrically in the riddle. It can be noticed that only TT1 and TT4 manage to preserve the parallelism intact and, of the two, TT1 is the more successful, by also preserving the generic noun *faț ă*, “face”, instead of resorting to explicitation and replacing it with the more poetic and prosodically shorter *chip*, “visage, countenance”. The concealing, metaphoric element (“eye”) is meaningfully repeated five times in the source riddle. Of the four variants, only TT4 manages to fully recapture the repetition. Moreover, if one looks at the way in which words rhyme, TT4 manages to compensate the impossibility of rhyming the equivalent of the Romanian noun for *face* (due to adjectives being postposed in Romanian) by replacing the ABAB chiasmus in the original with a ABBA chiasmus in the translation: ST, *eye in a blue face – eye in a green face* vs. TT4, *on a blue face an eye – an eye on a green face*. TT4 is also the only variant that manages to place the noun *ochi*, “eye”, in verse-final position so as to rhyme, which, as explained before, is part of the carefully constructed balance between opacity and transparency in the source riddle.

Source Text	Target Text 1	Target Text 2	Target Text 3	Target Text 4
An eye in a <u>blue face</u> Saw an eye in a <u>green face</u> . "That eye is like to this eye" Said the first eye, "But <u>in low place</u> , Not <u>in high place</u> ." <i>Repetition of eye – 5</i>	Un ochi (1) pe-o <u>fată</u> <u>albastră</u> Vede un ochi (2) pe o <u>fată</u> <u>verde</u> . "Ochiul (3) ăla e ca mine, Spune ochiu'ntîi (4). Da, numai că eu <u>sînt sus</u> Iară <u>el e jos</u> ."	Din <u>chip de-azur</u> Un ochi (1) vede Alt ochi (2) în jur, <u>Pe fată verde</u> . „Mi-e aidoma”, Primul gîndea. „Dar sus stau eu, El – jos mereu.”	Dintr-un <u>albastru chip</u> , un ochi (1) <u>Pe-un verde chip</u> văzu un ochi (2). „O, cât ne- asemănăm” și-a spus – „Însă acolo jos, Nu sus!”	Pe un <u>chip albastru</u> un ochi (1) Un ochi (2) vede pe-un <u>chip verde</u> „Ăl ochi (3) e la fel ca ăst' ochi (4)” Spune primul ochi (5), „Dar <u>colo jos</u> , Nu- <u>ai</u> ca sus.”
	4	2	2	5
Source Text	Back translation	Back translation	Back translation	Back translation
An eye in a <u>blue face</u> Saw an eye in a <u>green face</u> . "That eye is like to this eye" Said the first eye, "But <u>in low place</u> , Not <u>in high place</u> ."	An eye on a blue face Sees an eye on a green face. That eye is like me, Says first eye. Yes, only I am up, And it is down.	From visage of azure An eye sees Another eye around, On a green face. It is the same, The first thought. But up I am, He- down always.	From a blue visage, an eye On a green visage Saw an eye. Oh, how alike we are, (It) said to itself, But down there, Not up.	On a blue visage an eye An eye sees on a green visage. That eye is the same as this eye, Says the first eye, But down there, Not up here.

Table 3. Bilbo's riddle. Answer: SUN ON THE DAISIES. Metaphor: eye. Clues: blue face, high place vs green face, low place. Hidden clue: etymology of the word *daisy* (OE *daeges eage* 'day's eye'). Symmetry; high degree of opacity (particular image, not a general definition).

Consider also another riddle told by Bilbo in the first contest, which, oddly enough, is the one that Gollum finds hardest to solve. As pointed out by Olsen (2012), this is probably because the riddle is built around the subject EGGS, which are a symbol of light and life, while Gollum is a symbol of death and darkness. Actually, the only way in which he manages to find the answer is by remembering how he used to suck eggs robbed from birds' nests. If you look at the target texts in Table 4, you can see that TT1, TT3 and TT4 preserve the syntactic pattern quite meticulously. Both TT1 and TT3 retain all the elements of the metaphoric extension, while TT2 and TT4 either resort to explicitation by employing marked variants (*box*, whose equivalent is "cutie", is replaced by the poetic variants *sipet* "coffer, trunk" or *lăcrișă*, "little case") or change some of the components of the box (*hinges* is replaced by *lock* in TT4, due to prosodic reasons). The poetic or obsolete language seems to be an archaizing feature that is preminent in TT2

(which uses the obsolete, poetic *zăvor* for *key*, or the regional *țâțâni* for *hinges*), although the source text makes use of simple, basic vocabulary. TT2 employs disjointed syntax, which makes the decoding of the riddle almost a herculean task for the readers. In point of translation loss, all four versions seem to be unable to preserve the passive voice and the impersonal tone of the source text. The most upsetting instance of translation loss, however, is TT3's omission of the adjective *golden*, which is an important clue in the riddle. It appears that, due to disjointed syntax or to such omissions, both TT2 and TT3 fail to recapture the "riddle quality" of the source text.

Source Text	Target Text 1	Target Text 2	Target Text 3	TargetText 4
A <u>box</u> without <u>hinges</u> , <u>key</u> , or <u>lid</u> . Yet <i>golden</i> <u>treasure</u> inside is hid.	O <u>cutie</u> fără <u>balamale</u> , <u>cheie</u> sau <u>capac</u> , <u>Comoară</u> de <i>aur</i> închide ca-ntr-un sac!	Fără <u>țâțâni</u> , <u>zăvor</u> și- <u>ncuietoare</u> , În sipet sunt <u>comori</u> de <i>aur</i> oare?	<u>Cutie</u> fără <u>cheie</u> , <u>capac</u> sau <u>balamale</u> , Ascunde o comoară-n lăuntrurile sale.	<u>Lăcriță</u> fără de <u>lacăt</u> , fără de <u>capac</u> sau <u>cheie</u> , Ascunde înăuntru <u>comoară</u> <i>aurie</i> .
Source Text	Back translation	Back translation	Back translation	Back translation
A <u>box</u> without <u>hinges</u> , <u>key</u> , or <u>lid</u> . Yet <i>golden</i> <u>treasure</u> inside is hid.	A box without hinges, key or lid, Treasure of gold Closes as in a sack.	Without hinges, latch and lock, In the trunk maybe there are gold treasures?	A box without key, lid or hinges, Hides a treasure in its insides.	A little case without lock, without lid or key, Hides inside golden treasure.

Table 4. Bilbo's riddle. Answer: EGGS. Metaphoric extension: box, hinges, key, lid, treasure. Clue: golden, no hinges, key, lid. Contrast, paradox.

It is interesting to notice that even for this third riddle, TT4 manages an instance of compensation by using the repetition of the prepositional phrase *fără de*, "without", which makes this version more emphatic, while trying to repair the loss of the adverb *yet* that in the source text connects the two parts of the riddle and establishes the opposition upon which the riddle is built. The repetition of this prepositional phrase contributes to the retrieval of the concessive meaning that lies implicit in the fourth version.

3. Conclusion

My investigation indicates that riddle translation is tricky exactly because of the main mechanism by means of which a riddle is created: observing both a condition of reasonable opacity and of reasonable solubility, as identified by Pagis (1996).

An analysis of the riddle translations in the multiple versions of *The Hobbit* reveals that the main strategy that translators should employ is that of equivalence both at the lexical and the syntactic level. Most versions manage to preserve the

original syntactic parallelism and to faithfully render the revealing clues into the target language. When syntax is disrupted or when clues are omitted, the result is a riddle that can no longer be properly solved. The delicate balance between transparency and opacity is upset and the resulting poem no longer counts as riddling material. Since the narrative role of literary riddles is crucial for the advancement of the story, such translation loss should be avoided at all costs. One possible solution is resorting to compensatory strategies, as attempted in the fourth variant produced by the author of this paper.

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