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The Challenges of Translating Cultural Irony: A Case Study of the Arabic Translation of Günter Grass's The Tin Drum

Kültürel İroninin Çevirisindeki Zorluklar: Günter Grass'ın 'Teneke Trampet' Eserinin Arapça Çevirisi Üzerine Bir Durum Çalışması

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Abstract

This article investigates the translational challenges posed by cultural irony in Günter Grass's seminal novel The Tin Drum (Die Blechtrommel, 1959), with particular focus on its Arabic translation. Drawing on theories of cultural untranslatability, irony theory, and postcolonial translation studies, the paper examines how the Arabic translator negotiates between fidelity to the source text's ironic register and the demands of the target cultural context. Through close comparative analysis of selected passages, three major categories of translational difficulty are identified: the domestication of Danzig's historically specific cultural markers, the attenuation of Grass's carnivalesque irony, and the neutralization of black humour rooted in German collective memory. The study argues that such transformations are not merely linguistic but ideological, reflecting divergent narrative conventions and distinct cultural horizons between the German and Arabic literary traditions. The findings contribute to the broader theoretical debate on the limits of equivalence in literary translation and call for greater critical attention to the Arabic reception of European modernist fiction, particularly works whose satirical and historical dimensions are inseparable from their cultural specificity.

Keywords: Cultural irony, The Tin Drum, Arabic translation, literary translation, Günter Grass



Öz

Bu makale, Günter Grass'ın başyapıtı Teneke Trampet'te (Die Blechtrommel, 1959) kültürel ironinin çevirisinde ortaya çıkan zorlukları, özellikle Arapça çeviri bağlamında ele almaktadır. Kültürel çevrilemezlik kuramları, ironi teorisi ve sömürge sonrası çeviri çalışmalarından yararlanan bu çalışma, Arapça çevirmenin kaynak metnin ironik söylemi ile hedef kültürel bağlamın talepleri arasında nasıl bir denge kurduğunu incelemektedir. Seçili pasajların yakın karşılaştırmalı analizi aracılığıyla üç temel çeviri güçlüğü kategorisi tespit edilmiştir: Danzig'e özgü tarihsel kültürel göstergelerin evcilleştirilmesi, Grass'ın karnavalvari ironisin zayıflatılması ve Alman kolektif belleğine dayanan kara mizahın etkisizleştirilmesi. Çalışma, bu dönüşümlerin yalnızca dilsel değil, aynı zamanda ideolojik nitelik taşıdığını ve Alman ile Arap edebi gelenekleri arasındaki farklı anlatı anlayışlarını yansıttığını ileri sürmektedir. Bulgular, edebi çeviride denklik kavramının sınırlarına ilişkin kuramsal tartışmaya önemli katkılar sunmakta ve özellikle tarihsel ve hiciv boyutları kültürel özgüllüklerinden ayrılmaz olan Avrupa modernist kurgunun Arapça alımlanmasına daha fazla eleştirel dikkat gösterilmesi gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Kültürel ironi, Teneke Trampet, Arapça çeviri, edebi çeviri, Günter Grass

Introduction

Translation has long been conceived as an act of cultural mediation — an enterprise in which linguistic transfer is inseparable from the negotiation of cultural meaning. This deceptively simple observation acquires particular urgency when the text in question is a modernist novel of the formal and historical complexity of Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (Die Blechtrommel, 1959). Grass's novel is saturated with irony: not the gentle wit of classical comedy but a carnivalesque, subversive irony rooted in the specific traumas of twentieth-century German history — the ruins of Danzig, the complicity of the petty bourgeoisie in the rise of National Socialism, and the grotesque absurdity of a world that has lost its moral co-ordinates. The challenge this irony poses to any translator is formidable; the challenge it poses to an Arabic translator, working across a cultural distance that involves not only linguistic difference but also profoundly divergent literary traditions, collective memories, and narrative conventions, is of a qualitatively different order.

The novel's narrator, Oskar Matzerath, is among the most brilliantly unreliable in the Western literary canon. His celebrated decision to stop growing at the age of three — taken, or so the reader is invited to surmise, at the precise moment he perceives the incurable corruption of the adult world — is simultaneously a metaphor for arrested political development, a Swiftian satire on the infantilism of fascism, and an exercise in black humour of the most unsettling kind. The tin drum he beats with manic persistence is not merely a theatrical prop; it is the weapon of the dissident, the instrument by which the solitary artist shatters the crystalline windows of bourgeois self-satisfaction, and the symbolic residue of a childhood that refuses to be superseded by the compromises of adulthood. That this drum is made of tin — cheap, resonant, garish, and ultimately disposable — is itself an ironic commentary on the fragility of the artist's protest in the face of historical catastrophe.

It is precisely this multi-layered ironic structure that presents the Arabic translator with such formidable difficulties. Arabic literary culture possesses rich and ancient traditions of satire and irony — from the elaborate wordplay of the maqāmāt genre to the modernist ironies of Naguib Mahfouz and the sardonic wit of Mahmoud Darwish — yet the cultural codes that ground Grass's irony are deeply embedded in a Germanic world that is radically alien to the Arab reader: the Kashubian village life of the

Polish Corridor, the specific aesthetic codes of Nazi spectacle, the Protestant moral universe of Danzig's merchant class, the particular forms of guilt and self-deception that characterized the Wirtschaftswunder generation of post-war Germans who rebuilt their prosperity while suppressing their complicity. The question of how — or whether — such irony can be rendered into Arabic is not merely a technical problem for the professional translator; it is a profound theoretical question, touching on the limits of linguistic equivalence, the ethics of cultural domestication, the politics of literary reception across unequal cultural hierarchies, and the ultimately unresolvable tension between the universal aspirations of literary art and the irreducible particularity of its cultural moorings.

The present study addresses this question through close comparative textual analysis of selected passages from *The Tin Drum* and their Arabic translation, drawing on theoretical frameworks developed in translation studies, irony theory, narratology, and postcolonial literary criticism. The specific translation examined is the Arabic version published by Dār al-Madā (Damascus, 2007), translated by Muḥammad al-Raffā'ī, which remains the most widely circulated Arabic version of the novel and the primary vehicle through which Arab readers have encountered Grass's work. While earlier partial translations exist, the al-Raffā'ī translation represents the most sustained and ambitious attempt to render the full complexity of the novel for an Arabic readership, and it is therefore the most revealing site for the examination of translational strategies and their consequences.

The study proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant theoretical literature on translation, irony, and cultural untranslatability. Section 3 provides a contextual account of the novel's ironic architecture, identifying the principal registers of irony that inform Grass's literary practice. Section 4 presents the case study proper, organized around three principal categories of translational difficulty identified in the comparative analysis. Section 5 discusses the broader implications of the findings for translation theory and for the Arabic reception of German modernist literature. Section 6 offers concluding reflections and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Equivalence, Dynamic and Otherwise

The theoretical treatment of irony in literary translation has evolved considerably since Eugene Nida's foundational articulation of the principle of dynamic equivalence in the 1960s. Nida (1964) argued that the goal of translation should be to produce in the target-language reader an effect equivalent to that produced in the source-language reader: the translator's ultimate criterion of success is functional, not formal. This pragmatic optimism — the conviction that any message capable of being expressed in one language can, in principle, be rendered functionally equivalent in any other — has been enormously influential in Bible translation and in translation pedagogy. Applied to literary texts, however, and especially to texts whose meaning is generated not by propositional content but by formal and rhetorical strategies, Nida's principle encounters serious difficulties.

The problem is not that dynamic equivalence is theoretically incoherent. Rather, it is that the relevant effects in literary texts are often impossible to separate from the specific cultural knowledge and aesthetic expectations that generate them. The effect produced by the irony of the 'Shop Windows' chapter of *The Tin Drum* in a German reader in the 1960s — a reader for whom the events of Kristallnacht were recent historical memory, perhaps personal memory — is constitutively different from any effect that can be produced in an Arabic reader in the twenty-first century, for whom those events are remote

historical facts. This is not, as Nida might argue, merely a problem of reader education that can be solved by explanatory apparatus; it is a structural feature of the ironic mode itself, which depends for its operation on the reader's pre-existing familiarity with the conventions and histories that the irony subverts.

The Czech translation theorist Jiří Levý (1967) was among the first to insist on the fundamentally interpretive — and therefore irreducibly subjective — character of literary translation. For Levý, the translator's task is not the mechanical application of equivalence procedures but a continuous series of interpretive decisions, each of which forecloses certain possibilities and opens others. His decision-making model anticipates later work in descriptive translation studies (Toury, 1995) and in the sociology of translation (Bourdieu, 1980; Sapiro, 2008), which have emphasized the institutional and ideological constraints that shape translatorial choices, often below the level of conscious deliberation.

Irony and the Limits of Translatability

Sperber and Wilson's (1981) relevance-theoretic account of irony provides a particularly productive framework for understanding the specific difficulties of translating Grass's text. In their account, irony is a form of echoic mention — the speaker or writer does not assert a proposition directly but rather reports it attributively, with a distancing attitude that signals dissociation from the proposition's content. The irony is recognized as such by the reader or hearer because the contextual assumptions available to both parties make the sincere assertion of the echoed proposition implausible or inappropriate. Where those shared contextual assumptions are absent — as they inevitably are, to varying degrees, in any cross-cultural translation — the ironic echo cannot be recognized, and the utterance is read as sincere assertion rather than ironic deflation.

Gutt (1991), applying relevance theory to translation, argues that irony is translatable only insofar as the target-language reader shares the contextual assumptions that enable the irony to be perceived as such. Where those assumptions are absent, the translator faces a set of invidious choices: explicitation (unpacking the ironic content at the cost of its rhetorical effect, making the criticism overt where the original leaves it covert), substitution (replacing the source irony with a culturally equivalent form of target-language irony, at the cost of the original's specific cultural reference), adaptation (modifying the cultural content while preserving the ironic form, at the cost of historical fidelity), or omission (sacrificing the irony entirely, reducing the text to its propositional content). None of these strategies is neutral; each involves a judgment about what matters most in the source text and about what the target reader can be expected to bring to the act of reading.

Lawrence Venuti's influential contribution to translation theory in the 1990s introduced a powerful political dimension to this discussion. Venuti (1995) argued that the dominant Anglo-American translation tradition has systematically favoured domestication — the assimilation of the foreign text to the norms, expectations, and values of the target culture — over foreignization, which would preserve the cultural difference and the productive strangeness of the source text, challenging the target reader to extend their cultural horizons rather than simply consuming a familiar product in a foreign guise. Venuti's critique is directed primarily at the ideological effects of domestication: by making the foreign text transparent, fluent, and culturally familiar, the domesticating translator renders invisible both the translator's own intervention and the cultural difference that separates the source from the target. The result is a form of cultural imperialism, a colonization of the foreign text by the assumptions and values of the receiving culture.

Applied to the Arabic translation of *The Tin Drum*, Venuti's framework raises questions that go beyond the technical. When an Arabic translator domesticates Grass's carnivalesque irony — softening its grotesque edges, neutralizing its black humour, substituting culturally neutral equivalents for the culturally specific markers of German historical experience — the translator is not merely solving a technical problem of comprehensibility. The translator is making a cultural and ideological choice: the choice to present the Arabic reader with a Grass who is recognizable, accessible, and unthreatening, rather than a Grass who is alien, disorienting, and morally demanding. The question of whether this choice is ethically defensible is one of the central concerns of the present study.

Postcolonial Perspectives on Literary Translation

The postcolonial dimension of translation theory, developed by scholars such as Homi Bhabha (1994), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993), and Tejaswini Niranjana (1992), adds a further layer of complexity to the analysis. For these scholars, translation is never a merely technical operation but is always situated within relations of power between languages and cultures of unequal prestige and historical weight. In the context of Arabic–German literary exchange, these power relations are complex and asymmetrical in ways that do not map neatly onto the colonial model that postcolonial theory was originally developed to describe.

Arabic is a language of immense historical and classical prestige, the language of the Quran and of one of the great literary traditions of world civilization. Yet in the contemporary global literary marketplace — the system of institutions, publishing houses, translation grants, literary prizes, and media attention that determines which texts circulate internationally and in what form — Arabic occupies a peripheral position relative to the major European languages. The translation of German literature into Arabic is thus an act of cultural transfer that moves from a language of high current international prestige to a language of high classical prestige but more limited contemporary international circulation. This asymmetry shapes the translator's self-positioning vis-à-vis the source text in ways that are not always consciously acknowledged.

Spivak's (1993) essay on the politics of translation argues that the translator of literature from a dominant language into a less globally circulated language has a particular responsibility to the rhetorical and formal texture of the source text — its rhythms, its silences, its ironies, its refusals of easy meaning. To translate for mere comprehensibility, smoothing out the formal difficulties that carry much of the meaning, is to do a disservice both to the source text and to the target-language reader, who is deprived of the challenge and the enrichment that genuine engagement with a foreign literary tradition might provide. This argument has clear implications for the present case study.

The Carnavalesque and Its Translational Challenges

The theoretical framework developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais (Bakhtin, 1984) and elaborated in his essays on the novel (Bakhtin, 1981) provides an indispensable analytical tool for understanding the specific ironic strategies of *The Tin Drum*. Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque describes a literary mode that systematically subverts official hierarchies — of class, of ideology, of the body — through the deployment of grotesque realism, the inversion of high and low, the mixing of registers and genres, and the celebration of material bodily life in all its transgressive abundance. The carnival is a space of licensed transgression, where the normal social order is temporarily suspended and the world is turned upside down.

Grass's appropriation of the carnivalesque is both deeply indebted to this tradition and significantly transformed by its historical context. The carnival that Oskar inhabits is not the medieval carnival of communal festivity but the degraded, commercialized, politically co-opted spectacle of the Nazi Nuremberg rallies — a false carnival, a carnival in the service of death. The irony of the novel lies in Oskar's use of the authentic carnivalesque instrument — the drum — to expose and subvert the false carnival of Nazi spectacle. This ironic dialectic between authentic and inauthentic carnival, between genuine festivity and deadly spectacle, is culturally very specific and makes particular demands on the translator.

The Ironic Architecture of The Tin Drum

Narrative Unreliability as the Primary Ironic Frame

Before proceeding to the translational case study, it is necessary to sketch the principal registers of irony in *The Tin Drum* with some care, since each register makes distinct and different demands on the translator. The novel's primary and most pervasive ironic structure is the unreliable narrator. Oskar addresses the reader from a mental institution where he has been committed following a murder charge, and the question of his culpability — moral, legal, metaphysical — is never resolved. His account of his own childhood and adolescence in Danzig is saturated with self-exculpatory rhetoric whose very transparency to the attentive reader constitutes a devastating ironic commentary on the mechanisms of collective self-exculpation that characterized post-war German culture.

The famous opening paragraphs of the novel establish immediately the paradox of a narrator who claims omniscient self-knowledge while being certified insane, who asserts the reliability of his memory while confessing to its fabrications, and who presents his confinement as a form of privileged observation while acknowledging that the peephole through which his keeper Bruno watches him is also the aperture through which he watches Bruno. This *mise en abyme* of observation and narration is the ironic structure in miniature: every assertion in the novel is qualified by the reader's awareness that it issues from a narrator whose reliability is fundamentally in question, and that this unreliability is not accidental but constitutive — it is the form that Grass's critique of German self-deception takes.

This narrative irony is extraordinarily difficult to translate because it operates at the level of the entire text rather than at the level of individual sentences or tropes. A translator who succeeds in rendering individual ironies but fails to preserve the overall narrative frame — the studied ambiguity of Oskar's tone, the calculated unreliability of his self-presentation, the ironic gap between his stated values and his actual behaviour — will produce a text that is locally entertaining but structurally incoherent, a collection of anecdotes rather than a sustained ironic argument about history and moral responsibility.

Carnavalesque Irony and the Grotesque Body

A second, more locally textured register of irony in the novel operates through what may be called carnivalesque irony — the systematic deployment of bodily grotesquerie, scatological humour, and sexual comedy as instruments of social and political critique. Oskar's physical attributes — his arrested growth, his hump, his extraordinary vocal capacity to shatter glass at will — are all carnivalesque markers in the Bakhtinian sense. They identify him as a figure of transgression, standing at the boundary between the human and the inhuman, the rational and the irrational, the sacred and the profane. His very body is an

affront to the normative expectations of bourgeois respectability: too small to be taken seriously, too strange to be assimilated, too vocal to be silenced.

The scenes involving the Nazi rallies at the Danzig Maiwiese are among the most celebrated instances of this carnivalesque strategy. Oskar, concealed beneath the grandstand, subverts the military march rhythms of the Nazi parade by drumming a waltz instead, forcing the marchers involuntarily into a dance. The irony is devastating: the mechanical precision of the goose-step, which is both a display of military power and an aesthetic enactment of the fascist ideology of total control, is destroyed by the intrusion of a dance rhythm that insists on the irreducible humanity — the embodied, pleasure-seeking, individuating humanity — that fascism is committed to eliminating. The tin drum here functions as a metonym for art's capacity to resist totalitarian spectacle, not through heroic confrontation but through the more subversive and ultimately more radical strategy of mockery.

Black Humour and the Aesthetics of Historical Catastrophe

A third register, and the one that presents the most acute translational challenges, is what Grass's German critics have designated *schwarzer Humor* — black humour, the laughter that arises in the face of catastrophe and that is, in the moment of its arising, indistinguishable from horror. This mode is not unique to Grass; it belongs to the broader tradition of post-war European absurdism associated with Samuel Beckett, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, and Eugène Ionesco, a tradition forged in the ruins of the Second World War and the Holocaust, in which the only honest response to historical catastrophe seemed to be a laughter that acknowledges its own inadequacy. But Grass's deployment of black humour is distinctive in its consistent implication of the narrator — and through the narrator, the German reader — in the very events being ironized.

The novel's treatment of the destruction of the Jewish toyshop owned by Sigismund Markus during the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938 is paradigmatic. Oskar's response to the destruction is not moral outrage but proprietary concern: what he grieves is the loss of the tin drums that were displayed in the shop window. This response is carefully calibrated by Grass to be simultaneously recognizable — who would not first register the loss of the thing most precious to them? — and morally monstrous — what kind of person witnesses anti-Semitic violence and thinks first of their drums? The answer, of course, is an ordinary person: the ordinary German bystander whose selfish preoccupations and willed blindness constituted the preconditions for the Holocaust. The black humour of the passage lies in the reader's recognition that Oskar's inadequate response is not a characterization of a monster but a mirror held up to an ordinary moral failure that was historically pervasive.

This mode of irony presupposes a reader who brings a specific historical knowledge and a specific set of moral commitments to the text: knowledge of the events of Kristallnacht and their significance in the history of the Holocaust, and a moral framework that identifies the bystander's passivity as a form of complicity. Where that knowledge and those commitments are absent — as they may be, to varying degrees, in readers from cultural contexts where the Holocaust occupies a different place in the collective memory — the black humour risks either collapsing into incomprehensibility or being read as straightforward characterization of an eccentric child. This is one of the central challenges that the Arabic translator of *The Tin Drum* must confront.

Linguistic Irony and the Politics of Bilingualism

A fourth register, less frequently discussed in the critical literature but highly significant for the translator, is what might be called the novel's linguistic irony — its deployment of the multiple languages of Danzig (German, Polish, Kashubian) as an ironic commentary on questions of national and cultural identity. The city of Danzig/Gdańsk, with its historically contested status as a German-majority city within the territory of post-Versailles Poland, is a geographical embodiment of the irresolvable contradictions of Central European identity. Grass's deliberate oscillation between the German name 'Danzig' and the Polish name 'Gdańsk,' his inclusion of Kashubian folk traditions and linguistic fragments, and his treatment of the Polish Post Office as a site of both heroism and futility, all participate in this irony of multilingual identity.

This linguistic dimension is particularly challenging for translation into a language like Arabic that has no structural equivalents for the specific social meanings carried by the German–Polish bilingualism of the novel. The choice between Danzig and Gdańsk is, in the original, not merely a geographical designation but a political act: to use Danzig is to affirm the German identity of the city; to use Gdańsk is to affirm its Polish identity; and Grass's refusal to resolve this choice — his deliberate use of both names in different contexts and sometimes within the same sentence — is an ironic enactment of the irreducible ambiguity of Central European cultural identity. An Arabic translator who renders both names with the same transliteration, as the al-Raffā'ī translation does, makes a choice that is formally tidy but culturally impoverishing.

Case Study: Three Categories of Translational Challenge

Category One: The Domestication of Cultural Markers

The most immediately visible challenge confronting the Arabic translator of *The Tin Drum* is the dense network of culturally specific proper nouns, institutional names, and social practices that constitute the novel's topographic and historical texture. Unlike the cultural markers of a canonical text such as Homer's *Odyssey*, whose geographical and historical references have been extensively glossed in centuries of commentary and have become part of the common cultural heritage of educated readers across many traditions, the cultural markers of Grass's Danzig are unfamiliar to most Arabic readers and cannot be assumed to carry any resonance beyond their bare denotative content.

The treatment of the Polish Post Office in the chapter of that name is exemplary. The chapter recounts the defence of the Danzig Polish Post Office on 1 September 1939 — the opening day of the Second World War — by a small group of Polish postal workers and employees against the assault of the SS. For German and Polish readers, this event carries a powerful symbolic charge: it was both one of the first acts of Polish resistance to the German invasion and a futile, tragic gesture in which the defenders, who were civilians rather than soldiers, were subsequently executed. Grass's treatment of the episode is characteristically ironic: Oskar's putative father Jan Bronski participates in the defence not out of heroic commitment but almost by accident, and his conduct during the siege is distinguished more by fear and confusion than by courage. Yet at the end of the episode he is executed, and the narrator, who is himself partly responsible for Jan's death, confronts his own moral complicity with the same affectless irony that characterizes his account of *Kristallnacht*.

The Arabic translation renders this chapter with considerable skill at the level of narrative, preserving the ironic distance of the narrator's tone. However, it provides no explanatory apparatus — no footnote, no translator's note, no preface — that would enable the Arabic reader to situate the event in

its historical context. The result is that the full weight of the irony — the irony of the futile heroism, the accidental martyr, and the guilty survivor — is available only to readers who bring prior historical knowledge to the text. Readers without that knowledge will encounter a confusing episode in which several characters defend a building for reasons that are not entirely clear and are subsequently executed, without understanding why this episode is presented as a pivotal moral event in the narrator's development.

A similar dynamic obtains in the treatment of the novel's pervasive references to Nazi Party institutions and rituals. The Hitler Youth, the SA, the SS, the swastika, the Heil Hitler salute — all of these appear in the Arabic translation in phonetic transliterations or brief descriptive equivalents that carry none of the historical and ideological weight they carry in the original. This is inevitable, to a degree: no amount of explanatory apparatus can substitute for the lived historical knowledge that these markers activate in a German reader. But the translator's choice not to provide even minimal contextual footnotes compounds the difficulty, producing a text in which the irony of Grass's treatment of Nazi ideology and spectacle is likely to register as mere exoticism rather than as the incisive critique it actually is.

The treatment of place names is a related but distinct problem. As noted above, the oscillation between 'Danzig' and 'Gdańsk' in the German original is itself a form of irony — an irony of contested identity that has no equivalent in Arabic. The al-Raffā'ī translation resolves this irony by adopting a single consistent transliteration, thereby eliminating the bilingual tension that is central to the novel's thematic concerns. This is perhaps the most fundamental translational loss in the Arabic version, because it eradicates the novel's insistence on the irresolvable ambiguity of cultural identity — an insistence that is not merely thematic but constitutive of the novel's formal design.

Category Two: The Attenuation of Carnavalesque Irony

The translation of Grass's carnivalesque irony presents a distinct set of challenges that are both linguistic and cultural. The linguistic challenge arises from the need to find Arabic equivalents for the specific musical, theatrical, and popular-cultural references through which the carnivalesque is enacted in the German text. The cultural challenge arises from the need to convey the specific ideological valence of these references in the context of Nazism — a context that the Arabic reader cannot be assumed to share.

The celebrated scene at the Danzig Maiwiese, in which Oskar subverts the Nazi rally by drumming a waltz instead of a march, exemplifies both challenges. The irony of the scene depends on a precise musical distinction: the Prussian military march is not merely a genre of music but a cultural form loaded with specific ideological connotations — discipline, uniformity, the subordination of the individual to the collective will, the aestheticization of militarism that Walter Benjamin (1969) identified as the hallmark of fascist culture. The Viennese waltz, by contrast, carries quite different connotations: it is the music of the Habsburg imperial world, cosmopolitan, pleasure-seeking, individualistic, nostalgic. Oskar's substitution of waltz for march is a subversive act precisely because it opposes one set of cultural values to another — it insists, in the teeth of Nazi ideology, on the persistence of the individualist, pleasure-seeking, cosmopolitan dimensions of European culture that Nazism was committed to destroying.

In the Arabic translation, both musical forms are rendered with generic Arabic terms — 'march' (mārshy) and 'waltz' (wāltiz) — that carry none of these connotations. This is, in a sense, unavoidable: the Arabic reader who has no prior acquaintance with the specific cultural meanings of the Prussian march and the Viennese waltz in the context of Nazi Germany cannot be expected to grasp the full ironic force of

Oskar's musical intervention. What is regrettable, however, is the translator's apparent unawareness of the problem — the absence of any attempt to signal to the reader that these are not merely genre labels but culturally loaded terms whose meaning in this context is more than musical. A brief translator's note explaining the significance of the distinction would not solve the problem but would at least alert the reader to its existence.

A parallel attenuation occurs in the treatment of the novel's pervasive scatological and bodily humour. Grass's deployment of the grotesque body — Oskar's hump, his sexual adventures, the scenes of physical violence, the descriptions of food and drink in terms that deliberately conflate the organic and the corporeal — is essential to the novel's carnivalesque strategy. It is through the body, in all its transgressive materiality, that the novel asserts the irreducible humanity of its characters against the dehumanizing abstractions of Nazi ideology. The body in *The Tin Drum* is both the site of individual pleasure and suffering and the collective residue of historical experience: the bodies of the dead are as present in the text as the bodies of the living, and the insistence on their physical reality is a form of anti-idealist resistance.

The Arabic translation consistently softens these bodily references. Sexual episodes are rendered with greater circumspection than the original warrants; scatological details are omitted or euphemized; scenes of violence are described in more decorous terms. This softening reflects, no doubt, a reasonable assessment of the norms of literary propriety that govern Arabic publishing and readership. But it also has consequences for the novel's ironic structure: a text that is less bodily is also less carnivalesque, and a text that is less carnivalesque is less capable of performing the subversive social critique that Grass's carnivalesque strategy is designed to execute.

Category Three: The Neutralization of Black Humour

The translation of black humour presents the most theoretically acute challenges and produces the most significant losses in the Arabic version of *The Tin Drum*. As argued above, black humour is a rhetorical mode that depends for its effect on the reader's recognition of the gap between the narrator's tone and the moral gravity of the events being narrated. This recognition is itself dependent on a set of shared cultural and historical assumptions that cannot be assumed to be present in readers from different cultural backgrounds.

The *Kristallnacht* episode in the chapter 'Shop Windows' has already been mentioned as a paradigmatic case. It is worth examining the specific mechanisms of the irony in greater detail. In the German original, Oskar's account of the destruction of Sigismund Markus's toyshop is rendered in a tone of studied indifference — the affectless, matter-of-fact narration that Grass employs throughout the novel for the most morally charged events. Oskar describes the destruction of the shop — the smashing of the windows, the defacement of the merchandise, the humiliation of the shop's Jewish owner — in the same register that he uses to describe a shopping trip or a visit to the beach. This tonal flatness is not a failure of moral imagination on Grass's part; it is a deliberate rhetorical strategy, designed to implicate the reader in the narrator's moral failure by making the horror normatively invisible.

The effectiveness of this strategy depends on the reader's awareness of the gap between the narrator's tone and the moral weight of what is being described — an awareness that is itself dependent on the reader's historical knowledge of *Kristallnacht* and its place in the sequence of events leading to the Holocaust. A reader who knows this history will recognize Oskar's affectlessness as morally shocking and

*The Challenges of Translating Cultural Irony: A Case Study of the Arabic Translation of Günter Grass's
The Tin Drum*

will experience the black humour of his proprietary concern for his drums as a devastating commentary on collective moral failure. A reader who lacks this historical knowledge will simply read the passage as the characterization of an eccentric, self-absorbed child, missing entirely the ironic critique that Grass is performing.

In the Arabic translation, the tonal flatness of the original is not preserved with the same precision. The translator introduces small but significant modifications — slight elevations of register, minor additions of evaluative vocabulary — that break the studied indifference of Oskar's narration and partially restore the moral commentary that the original deliberately withholds. These modifications may be well-intentioned: the translator may have felt that the original's affectlessness would be misread by Arabic readers unfamiliar with the context, and may have judged that some restoration of moral perspective was necessary to prevent the passage from appearing simply incomprehensible or tasteless. This judgment is understandable, but it represents a fundamental misreading of Grass's ironic strategy: the whole point of the affectlessness is precisely to deny the reader the comfort of explicit moral commentary, to force the reader to supply their own moral response and thereby to implicate them in the very failure of moral imagination that the passage is designed to critique.

A further consequence of this neutralization is the loss of the novel's complex negotiation of narrative voice and historical complicity. The black humour of *The Tin Drum* is not merely a stylistic feature; it is the primary mechanism through which the novel performs its central critical operation — the indictment of the German bystander. When the black humour is neutralized, the indictment is softened, and the novel's demand that the reader confront their own potential for moral failure is correspondingly weakened. The Arabic version of *The Tin Drum* is, by this measure, a less morally challenging and ultimately a less politically significant text than the German original.

Table 1

Summary of Translational Challenges and Their Critical Consequences in the Arabic Version of The Tin Drum

Category of Irony	Source-Text Strategy	Translational Response	Critical Consequence
Narrative unreliability	Studied tonal ambiguity; ironic self-exculpation	Minor tonal elevations that partially restore moral clarity	Attenuation of the indictment of collective self-deception
Bilingual place names (Danzig/Gdańsk)	Deliberate oscillation between German and Polish names	Uniform transliteration eliminating bilingual tension	Erasure of the irony of contested cultural identity
Carnavalesque irony (music and spectacle)	Culturally specific musical/theatrical references	Substitution with culturally neutral equivalents; no contextual notes	Loss of political satire; spectacle reads as mere eccentricity
Grotesque body	Scatological and sexual grotesquerie as anti-idealist critique	Systematic softening in line with target-culture norms	Diminution of carnivalesque subversive force

Category of Irony	Source-Text Strategy	Translational Response	Critical Consequence
Black humour (Holocaust references)	Affectless narration of atrocity to implicate the reader	Partial restoration of moral commentary	Neutralization of the indictment of the bystander

Discussion

The Ideology of Translational Choice

The translational patterns identified in the case study are not random or accidental. They constitute a coherent, if largely implicit, ideological orientation on the translator's part — an orientation that might be characterized as enlightened protectionism: a determination to protect the Arabic reader from the full disorientation of Grass's ironic world, to offer them a readable and culturally accessible version of the novel rather than the genuine challenge of the original. This protectionist impulse is not, of course, unique to the Arabic translation of Grass; it has been identified by scholars in many different translation contexts and is, as Lefevere (1992) has argued, a structural feature of translation as a cultural institution rather than a personal failing of individual translators.

What makes the protectionist impulse particularly consequential in this case is the nature of the text being protected against. The *Tin Drum* is not a novel whose irony is decorative or incidental; it is a novel whose ironic mode is its critical project. The whole force of Grass's indictment of German collective moral failure — the indictment that earned the novel its extraordinary historical significance in the context of post-war German culture and that contributed to Grass's eventual receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1999 — is carried by the irony. A domesticated *Tin Drum*, rendered safe for Arabic readership by the softening of its black humour, the neutralization of its grotesque bodily energies, and the elimination of its culturally specific historical markers, is a very different novel from Grass's original: it is a novel about an unusual child in an unfamiliar European city, rather than a devastating interrogation of the mechanisms by which ordinary people become complicit in historical catastrophe.

This observation is not intended as a criticism of the translator's personal competence or dedication. Muḥammad al-Raffā'ī's translation represents a significant achievement of literary translation and has been recognized as such by Arabic readers and critics. The domesticating choices that have been identified in the case study are the product of institutional as well as personal pressures: the expectations of Arabic publishers and readers, the norms of literary propriety operative in the target culture, the absence of an established Arabic tradition of German literary translation that might have equipped the translator with relevant precedents and strategies. To criticize these choices is not to hold the translator personally responsible for the structural conditions that shaped them, but rather to illuminate those conditions and their consequences for cross-cultural literary understanding.

The Problem of Historical Memory in Cross-Cultural Translation

The case study raises a broader theoretical issue that deserves more sustained attention in translation studies than it has hitherto received: the problem of translating texts whose irony is grounded in a specific historical memory that is not shared by the target culture. This problem is not unique to *The Tin Drum*; it arises in the translation of any text that presupposes what Paul Connerton (1989) has called

the habitual memory of a particular community — the embodied, sedimented, often unconscious knowledge of shared history and cultural practice that forms the background against which irony, allusion, and indirect reference operate.

For German readers of the 1950s and 1960s, *The Tin Drum* spoke directly to this habitual memory: its ironic commentary on the behaviour of ordinary Germans during the Nazi period addressed experiences and evasions that were part of the living memory of Grass's original audience. The novel's capacity to disturb and challenge its readers derived precisely from this intimacy between the ironic critique and the shared historical knowledge of the audience being critiqued. In translating the novel for audiences who do not share this historical memory, the translator is not merely confronting a technical problem of lexical or syntactic equivalence; the translator is confronting the fundamental challenge of mediating between different historical worlds.

One possible response to this challenge is the adoption of what House (1977) calls overt translation — a mode of translation that signals explicitly to the target reader that the text belongs to a different cultural world and invites the reader to engage with that world on its own terms, rather than assimilating it to their own. Overt translation typically involves the use of explanatory paratexts — prefaces, footnotes, translator's notes — that provide the contextual information necessary for the target reader to appreciate the cultural and historical specificity of the source text. This approach has been advocated by a number of translation scholars as the appropriate response to the translation of historically and culturally embedded literary texts (Hermans, 1999; Nord, 1991; Berman, 1992).

The Arabic translation of *The Tin Drum* makes very limited use of such paratextual apparatus. There is a brief translator's preface, but it does not address the specific historical and cultural issues that make the novel's irony so demanding for Arabic readers. There are very few footnotes, and those that exist address primarily questions of lexical difficulty rather than cultural or historical context. This absence of paratextual mediation is, arguably, the single most consequential translatorial choice in the Arabic version of the novel, because it leaves the reader without the resources necessary to appreciate the full force of Grass's ironic critique.

Towards a More Adequate Theory of Cross-Cultural Irony Translation

The case study suggests that the existing theoretical frameworks in translation studies are not fully adequate to the specific challenges posed by the translation of cultural irony. The equivalence-based frameworks associated with Nida (1964) and Catford (1965) are too optimistic about the translatability of culturally embedded irony and provide insufficient guidance for the translator who is confronted with the specific problems identified in the case study. The descriptive frameworks developed in the tradition of Holmes (1988) and Toury (1995) are more nuanced but are primarily analytical rather than prescriptive, offering tools for describing what translators do without offering criteria for evaluating what they should do.

What is needed is a framework that combines the analytical resources of descriptive translation studies with the normative commitments of a translation ethics informed by the insights of postcolonial theory. Such a framework would need to acknowledge, first, that the translation of cultural irony involves irreducible losses that cannot be solved by any purely technical strategy; second, that the translator's choices in the face of these losses are ethical as well as technical choices, reflecting judgments about the relative importance of different dimensions of the source text and about the translator's responsibility to

the target reader; and third, that the most responsible response to the problem of untranslatable irony is not domestication — which conceals the problem by eliminating its signs — but a form of critical translation that signals the difficulty to the reader while attempting to preserve as much as possible of the ironic texture of the original.

The development of such a framework is beyond the scope of the present article. What the case study does suggest is that the translation of a text as complex and culturally specific as *The Tin Drum* requires not only high levels of linguistic competence and literary sensitivity but also a deep knowledge of the historical and cultural world from which the text emerges and of the theoretical literature on translation, irony, and cross-cultural communication. The translator who lacks this knowledge — who does not know, for example, the cultural significance of the Viennese waltz and the Prussian march in the context of Nazi aesthetics, or the place of the defence of the Polish Post Office in the collective memory of both German and Polish communities — is unlikely to be able to make adequate choices in the face of the specific translational challenges that the novel presents.

Conclusion

This article has investigated the challenges of translating cultural irony in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, with particular attention to the Arabic translation published by Dār al-Madā in 2007. Through close comparative textual analysis informed by theories of equivalence, irony, the carnivalesque, and postcolonial translation, the study has identified three principal categories of translational difficulty: the domestication of Danzig's historically specific cultural markers, the attenuation of Grass's carnivalesque irony, and the neutralization of the black humour through which the novel performs its central critical operation — the indictment of the German bystander and the exposure of the mechanisms of collective moral failure.

The study has argued that the translational losses identified in the case study are not merely linguistic but ideological, reflecting a systematic tendency to domesticate the foreign text in the interests of accessibility and cultural comfort. This tendency, while understandable given the institutional and cultural pressures under which literary translation is produced, has significant consequences for the critical force and the political significance of the translated text. A domesticated *Tin Drum* is a less disturbing, less challenging, and ultimately less important novel than Grass's original: it asks less of its reader and therefore achieves less.

The findings have broader implications for translation theory and practice. They suggest that the translation of culturally embedded literary irony requires a degree of cultural and historical knowledge that goes well beyond the linguistic competence conventionally regarded as sufficient for literary translation; that the concept of equivalence, while useful as a regulatory ideal, is inadequate as a practical guide to the translation of texts whose irony is grounded in specific historical memories that are not shared by the target audience; and that the most responsible approach to such texts involves the adoption of an overt, paratextually enriched translation strategy that acknowledges the cultural distance between source and target and equips the reader to engage with the foreign text on its own terms.

The Arabic reception of Günter Grass — and of European modernist literature more broadly — deserves far more sustained critical attention than it has hitherto received. The translation of works such as *The Tin Drum* into Arabic is not a minor cultural event; it is an act of intercultural dialogue whose success or failure has significant consequences for the development of Arabic literary culture, for the formation of

*The Challenges of Translating Cultural Irony: A Case Study of the Arabic Translation of Günter Grass's
The Tin Drum*

Arab readers' understanding of European history and literature, and for the quality of the global literary conversation of which Arabic culture is an indispensable constituent. It is to be hoped that future translations of Grass's work, and of comparable texts, will benefit from the kind of critical reflection that the present study has attempted to provide.

Future research might profitably extend the comparative analysis to include other Arabic translations of German modernist fiction, as well as translations of *The Tin Drum* into other languages of the Global South, in order to assess whether the translational patterns identified in the Arabic case are specific to the Arabic–German cultural encounter or are more generally characteristic of the translation of European modernist irony across large cultural distances. Such comparative work would contribute to the development of a more adequate theory of cross-cultural literary translation and would enrich our understanding of the complex dynamics of global literary circulation in the contemporary world.

Declarations

Declaration Title	Explanation / Text
Ethical Approval	I declare that this research falls within the scope of studies that do not require ethics committee approval.
Conflict of Interest Statement	The author of the study declares that there is no financial or other substantive conflict of interest that could affect the results or interpretation of this study.
Author Contribution Statement	The author contributed solely to the entire work.
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*The Challenges of Translating Cultural Irony: A Case Study of the Arabic Translation of Günter Grass's
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