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# Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* in German: What's Missing in Translation?

### Summary

Several of Harold Pinter's works have been adapted as screenplays and filmed. This paper investigates director Robert Altman's TV movie *The Dumb Waiter* in comparison with the German dubbed version, *Der stumme Diener*, as well as the reception of Pinter's play in German. The translation of Pinter's dialogue into German involves stylistic aspects, such as Pinter's dry, concise style, as well as the subliminal wit, sarcasm and irony. Humour is particularly difficult to translate, often involving compensation or transfer from one (cultural) context to another. As one of the "comedies of menace", *The Dumb Waiter* employs black humour and ironic wit to create threat and dramatic tension. The unknown threat is counterbalanced by "black comic relief". The lack of a classical German tradition of black comedy problematizes the translation of Pinter's dialogue, while the limits of audiovisual translation add additional hurdles.

**Key words:** Harold Pinter, film translation, theatre, Robert Altman, humour

# *Mutasti natakar* Harolda Pinterja v nemščini: Kaj manjka v prevodu?

### Povzetek

Na podlagi del Harolda Pinterja je nastalo več scenarijev, ki so doživeli filmsko adaptacijo. Prispevek obravnava izvirno različico televizijskega filma *Mutasti natakar* (*Strežni jašek*) v režiji Roberta Altmana, nemško sinhronizirano verzijo z naslovom *Der stumme Diener* ter recepcijo Pinterjevih dram v nemščini. Pri prevajanju Pinterjevih dialogov v nemščino je treba upoštevati različne vidike, med njimi Pinterjev suhoparen, zgoščen slog, prikrite duhovite pripombe, sarkazem ter ironijo. Še posebej zahtevno je prevajanje humorja, saj je treba pogosto uporabljati kompenzacije ali prenašati besedne igre in šale iz enega (kulturnega) konteksta v drugega. V drami *Mutasti natakar* (*Strežni jašek*), ki velja za dober primer »komedije grožnje« (*comedy of menace*), črni humor in ironija gledalce držita v stalni negotovosti. Protiutež neznani grožnji je »olajšanje s črnim humorjem« (*black comic relief*). Zaradi pomanjkanja klasične nemške tradicije na področju črnega humorja je prevajanje Pinterjevega dialoga zahtevno, dodatno pa ga otežujejo omejitve pri avdiovizualnem prevajanju.

**Ključne besede:** Harold Pinter, prevajanje filmov, gledališče, Robert Altman, humor

# Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* in German: What's Missing in Translation?

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines Harold Pinter's play *The Dumb Waiter* as filmed by Robert Altman in 1987, starring John Travolta and Tom Conti. A comparison is made of selected dialogue lines in Pinter's original play script with Altman's film version, and these are then contrasted with the first German translation of the play by Willy Thiem, as well as the German synchronised version of the movie by Heinz Freitag. The author proposes to uncover any mistranslations or particular difficulties in translation.

The focus of this study will be on the translation of humour, which is especially challenging to render into another language and involves an intercultural transposition. *The Dumb Waiter* is a black comedy of menace incorporating gallows humour as a form of comic relief. Because humour is culturally defined, it is often difficult to recreate in another language. The German translations of Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* exemplify some of the problems encountered in the translation of humour.

## 2. Plot Outline of *The Dumb Waiter*

Two hit men and long-time partners, Ben and Gus, are awaiting orders to kill in a bleak basement. Ben, the superior, reads the newspaper while Gus tries to put on his shoes, finding a pack of cigarettes stuck in one of them, which is Pinter's signal for a comic routine. Ben quotes some newspaper articles on crime, foreshadowing nothing good.

Ben orders Gus to "light the kettle" for tea, and they get into an argument about whether the correct phrase is "light the gas" or "light the kettle" (Pinter 1987a, 141-2). Gus quotes his mother as an authority (an example of black humour when spoken by a hitman), but Ben decides the fight for himself with violent means. Gus asks who their victim will be. Ben gets angry over all of Gus's questions and tells him to do his work and keep his mouth shut.

Gus recollects their last victim, a girl, remembering what a mess that was, giving the audience the idea that he may be capable of showing sympathy. But then they discover a dumb waiter, and Gus finds a message in it. There was once a café upstairs, and someone is sending down orders for food. They send up what little they have in the dumb waiter, but more orders arrive for exotic dishes, increasing the absurd humour.

Next Ben gives Gus the orders for their job. They have to corner their victim. When Gus exits to get a glass of water, the dumb waiter's speaking tube whistles. Ben listens to the orders and confirms they're ready for their job. Ben calls Gus and points his gun at the door. To Ben's surprise, it's Gus who enters, without his gun and jacket: Gus has become the victim. This isn't typical comedy material, but Pinter, grand master of the comedy of menace, brings in plenty of humorous twists.

### 3. Brief Remarks on Humour

According to Sigmund Freud, “[l]aughter is the conquest of the pleasure principle over our own vulnerability” (2002, 89). Freud further defined black humour as a kind of vent for the purpose of dealing with topics that are socially taboo, whereas the morbid, ironic humour often used by Pinter can be called gallows humour. Oscar Blumenthal left us with a good definition of the modes of humour, which are also used by Pinter: “There is a laughing anger, and we call it wit. There is a laughing wisdom, and we call it humour” (Eisen 1994, 7). Playwright Joe Orton, who was a great fan of Pinter’s, has been quoted as saying, “Laughter is a serious business, and comedy a weapon more dangerous than tragedy” (Lahr 1987, 160). This would apply fully to *The Dumb Waiter*.

In Harry Burton’s documentary film *Working with Pinter* (made in 2007 only one year before the latter’s death), Harold Pinter made a highly revealing comment on his own mode of humour: “I think actually my plays are quite honestly much funnier than they are often seen to be or understood to be” (Burton 2007, 39:05 min).

### 4. Production History and Reception: *Der Stumme Diener* in German Translation

*The Dumb Waiter* had its world premiere in German translation as *Der Stumme Diener* at the *Kleines Haus* in Frankfurt am Main in 1959, only to be performed in English a year later. Willy H. Thiem made the first translation of the play, and although he received some praise in the first critique, the reviewer also emphasised that typical British humour was now lacking in the play. The German theatre critic Albert Schulze Vellinghausen wrote as follows about the first production of this play:

Pinter’s diction, with its sting, its conciseness and its trying banality, is derived from the great and magnificently lively tradition of English humour – to the extent that a translation into German presents almost unsurpassable obstacles, which lame the atmosphere, as well as the tempo. Willy H. Thiem [the German translator] has circumnavigated them intelligently. What’s now missing is the brilliant dry wit – the fatal brevity, British spirit. That’s a shame, because it’s misleading. Both in terms of the translation, as well as regarding its echo in the audience (Vellinghausen 1961).<sup>1</sup>

In his book *Anger and After*, John Russell Taylor writes of the contrast between the understanding and reception of *The Dumb Waiter* in the English original in comparison with its reception in German at the world premiere in Frankfurt:

The Dumb Waiter is consistently funny almost all through (though a friend who saw its first production, in German at the Frankfurt Municipal Theatre, assures me that then it

<sup>1</sup> Vellinghausen (1961), English translation by Renée von Paschen. German original: “Pinters Diktion entstammt in ihrer Schärfe, ihrer Lakonik, ihrer zermürenden Banalität der großen, großartig lebendigen Tradition des englischen Witzes – in einer Weise, daß sich da der Übertragung ins Deutsche kaum übersteigbare Hindernisse in den Weg stellen, die Stimmung wie auch das Tempo lähmend. Willy H. Thiem hat sie klüglich umschiff. Was nun fehlt, ist gleichwohl die brillante Trockenheit – der mörderisch kurze, britische Spirit. Das ist schade, denn es wirkt missverständlich. Sowohl was die Wiedergabe wie was das Echo bei den Zuschauern betrifft.”

was played as a completely serious horror piece without a flicker of amusement) (Taylor 1963, 329).

In this context, we must recall that Germany and Austria were the perpetrators of World War II, so the widespread German attitude was that they had nothing left to laugh about. The aesthetic discourse was influenced by Theodor Adorno, who stated: “Nach Auschwitz keine Lyrik” (Kiedaisch 1995).<sup>2</sup>

## 4.1 Production History and Reception of *The Dumb Waiter* in English

To illustrate the successful production of Harold Pinter’s third play, *The Dumb Waiter*, a brief overview of productions and their reviews in Britain follows.

*The Dumb Waiter* had its English language premiere at the Hampstead Theatre Club on the 21 January 1960 in a double bill and was then transferred to the Royal Court Theatre. An excerpt from the review reads, “It is a rare excitement to welcome the strange and compelling talent of Harold Pinter into the West End. /.../ The first thing to be said about both plays is that they are extremely funny” (Dumb Waiter and The Room, The 1960).

A later production of *The Dumb Waiter* and other pieces at the Oxford Playhouse in 2004 was similarly well received. Critic Victoria Roddam wrote in her review: “Bleakly hilarious, engaging and above all eminently watchable, I can only urge theatregoers both local and further afield to catch this masterful production before it moves to pastures new” (2004).

And finally, *The Dumb Waiter*, directed by Harry Burton, was produced at Trafalgar Studios, London, in 2007 to rave reviews. Alastair Macaulay wrote: “But this mostly funny, absurd play ends with two further cruel twists that remind us that this is principally a play about humans: victim and oppressor, vulnerable and controlling” (2007). Pinter’s official biographer, Michael Billington, gave the above mentioned production five stars and recorded the following in *The Guardian*:

This is the real McCoy. /.../ it is bracing to encounter Harry Burton’s superbly orchestrated revival of this 1957 hour-long piece: instead of imposing the comedy on Pinter it allows it to emerge through the interstices of a gripping study of the mechanics of fear. /.../ That is what makes this such a fine revival. It reminds us that Pinter knows exactly how to balance comedy and fear to imply that we are all in the grip of invisible, higher powers (2007).

## 4.2 Production History of *The Dumb Waiter* as Filmed by Robert Altman

During his exile from mainstream Hollywood in the 1980s, independent American filmmaker and director Robert Altman directed a television feature film version of *The Dumb Waiter* with John Travolta and Tom Conti, which was filmed in Canada and first broadcast in the United States on ABC TV on 12 May 1987. In the trailer of *The Dumb Waiter*, the *New York Times* review calls Altman’s movie “subtle, evocative, multilayered, slyly humorous, ambitious, and off-beat. Tom Conti and John Travolta keep things fast and lively” (Dumb Waiter, The 1987).

<sup>2</sup> “After Auschwitz, there can be no more poetry” (back translation by Renée von Paschen).

## 5. General Commentaries on *The Dumb Waiter*

The essence of *The Dumb Waiter* boils down to the ambiguous status of victim and perpetrator that eventually proves to be interchangeable. Pinter constructs a storyline from which the audience initially concludes that both characters are hit men, thus both being the villains, yet this assumption slowly crumbles during the play. Throughout the dialogue there is a game of subservience and dominance between Ben and Gus, which is spiked with humour, yet creates a menacing atmosphere.

In terms of Freud's theory of joke telling, Gus begins sympathizing with the victims of Ben's humorous accounts from the newspaper, thereby refusing to be amused by Ben's jokes or to acknowledge him as the authority, in an attempt to tip the balance.

### 5.2 Pinter's Comments on *The Dumb Waiter*

To uphold the underlying political nature of *The Dumb Waiter*, we can refer to a remark made by Pinter in 2007 in the scope of Harry Burton's documentary film *Working with Pinter* on his political stance: "I've always been a political playwright. I haven't always written political plays, but I've always been a political person, and 'The Dumb Waiter' I consider to be a political play" (Burton 2007, 41:45 min).

Altman's movie, however, introduces some entirely unexpected aspects. For example, Tom Conti goes into great detail in the role of Gus about how he loves the crockery, including the "red half-moons" (Pinter 1987b, 6:07 min) on the dishes provided by the hit men's boss. Conti may have thought this appropriate, because of Pinter's protests against the breaches of human rights in Turkey in 1985. However, in June 2011, the author conducted an interview in London with Harry Burton, a close friend of Pinter's and one of his favourite actors and directors, and asked him whether Pinter would have condoned that. Burton replied, "There's no way Harold would have condoned that. /.../ Between the three of them [Altman, Conti and Travolta], they invented all sorts of things. And Harold wasn't prepared for that. He was incredibly shocked" (Burton 2011). In a similar context, Pinter's wife Antonia Fraser writes: "Nothing causes Harold more pain than unlawful interference with his text" (2010, 286).

## 6. Comparative Study of *The Dumb Waiter* with Its German Translation by Willy Thiem, the Film by Robert Altman and Its German Dubbed Version *Der stumme Diener*

Pinter's first stage direction in his play already gives us an important clue about its comic nature: "Gus is sitting on a bed, right, tying his shoelaces, with difficulty" (Pinter 1987a, 129). This is Pinter's signal for a comic routine, indicating that the character of Gus is a kind of helpless klutz. English speaking actors have availed themselves of this scene to provoke laughter in the audience, which is something the earlier German directors apparently did not catch onto. Willy Thiem's German translation of the stage direction is: "*Gus sitzt auf dem Bett rechts und*

*schnürt sich umständlich die Schuhe zu*”<sup>3</sup> (Pinter 1981, 6). This translation is not entirely correct, because it plays down the situation, and would have been clearer as: “... hat Schwierigkeiten die Schnürsenkel zu binden.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps such unmistakable directions could have led early German-language directors to begin the play with a somewhat clownish routine, one resembling how the scene has been played in English language productions, lightening the plot and making the play easier to digest on the whole.

The film versions used for the purpose of this study are *The Dumb Waiter* by Robert Altman released in 1987 in the USA, and the German synchronised version *Der stumme Diener*, also dating from 1987. The German translator and dubbing director was Heinz Freitag.

## 6.1 Examples of Dubbing Trouble

In the first example, Gus is recalling a particularly unpleasant hit job he did with Ben, getting rid of a girl, who apparently bled all over the place. The manner in which Gus describes the mess is a prime example of Pinter’s gallows humour, but talking about it makes Gus have moral compunctions, and he falls apart. Ben is surprised at this and eventually shows a modicum of sympathy with Gus, rebuffing him in a relatively friendly manner, considering they are hit men.

The Pinteresque gallows humour expressed in the description of how the girl spread after having been shot was entirely missing in the original German translation. As quoted by Martin Esslin in the German publication of his book entitled *Pinter*, the line was completely misunderstood by Willy Thiem and translated as: “Und was sie zusammengefaselt hat, was?”<sup>5</sup> (Esslin 1973, 48).

### *The Dumb Waiter: Play by Harold Pinter (1987a, 146-7)*

Gus: I was just thinking about that girl, that’s all. (*Gus sits on his bed.*) She wasn’t much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess though, wasn’t it? What a mess. Honest, I can’t remember a mess like that one. They don’t seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. **Didn’t she spread, eh? She didn’t half spread. Kaw!** But I’ve been meaning to ask you.

(*Ben sits up and clenches his eyes.*)

Who clears up after we’ve gone? I’m curious about that. Who does the clearing up? Maybe they don’t clear up. Maybe they just leave them there, eh? What do you think? How many jobs have we done? Blimey, I can’t count them. What if they never clear anything up after we’ve gone.

Ben: (*pityingly*) **You mutt.** Do you think we’re the only branch of this organization? Have a bit of common. They got departments for everything.

Gus: What cleaners and all?

Ben: **You birk!**

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<sup>3</sup> “Gus is sitting on the bed, right, and tying his shoelaces at length” (back translation by R. von Paschen).

<sup>4</sup> “... is having trouble tying his shoelaces” (German translation and back translation by R. von Paschen).

<sup>5</sup> “And she sure blabbered around, didn’t she?” (back translation into English by R. von Paschen).

**The Dumb Waiter: Film by Robert Altman (Pinter 1987b, 2/11:56 min)**

Gus: I was just thinking about that girl, that's all. (*Gus sits on his bed.*) She wasn't much to look at, but still, you know. It was a mess, eh? What a mess. Honestly don't remember a mess like that one. (*Ben heaves a sigh of exasperation.*) They don't seem to hold together as well as men, women. A looser texture, like. **Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread.** I've been meaning to ask you.

(*Ben sits up and looks him straight in the eye at very close quarters.*)

Who clears up after we've gone? I'm curious about that, you know. Who does the clearing up? Maybe they don't clear up. Maybe they just leave them? You thought of that? How many jobs have we done? Blimey, I can't count them. (*Ben coughs and begins crying, wiping his eyes.*) Maybe they just leave them lying after we've gone.

Ben: (*pityingly*) **You mutt.** Do you think we're the only branch of this organization? Have a bit of common. They got departments for everything.

Gus: What cleaners and all?

Ben: **You birk!**

**Der Stumme Diener: German translation of the play by Willy Thiem (Pinter 1981, 23)**

Gus: Ich mußte bloß an das Mädchen denken, weiter nichts. (*Er setzt sich auf sein Bett.*) Sie war nicht hübsch, ich weiß, aber immerhin. Das war nicht appetitlich, was? Schön unappetitlich. Wirklich, ich weiß nicht, wann es je so unappetitlich war. Die hängen nicht so fest zusammen wie Männer, die Weiber. Weniger festes Gewebe, sozusagen. **Die wurde zu Brei. Richtig zu Brei. Kehhh!** Aber was ich dich fragen wollte.

(*Ben setzt sich auf und kneift die Augen zu.*)

Wer macht da sauber, wenn wir weg sind? Das möchte ich wissen. Wer räumt auf? Vielleicht wird gar nicht aufgeräumt. Vielleicht bleiben sie einfach liegen, was? Was meinst du? Wie oft haben wir's jetzt eigentlich schon gemacht? Meine Güte, ich kann's gar nicht mehr zählen. Angenommen, es wird gar nicht aufgeräumt, wenn wir weg sind.

Ben: (*mitleidig*) **Du Idiot.** Glaubst du, wir sind der einzige Zweig dieser Organisation? Hab doch etwas Verstand. Die haben Abteilungen für alles.

Gus: Was, zum Aufräumen und Saubermachen?

Ben: **Sei nicht so naiv.**<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "Don't be so naive" (back translation into English by R. von Paschen).

**Der Stumme Diener: German translation of the film by Heinz Freitag (Pinter 1987c, 32:35 min)**

Gus: Ich hab nur an das Mädchen denken müssen, weiter nichts. Sie war nicht unbedingt eine Schönheit, aber trotzdem. War das nicht eine Schweinerei. War eine Schweinerei. Ehrlich gesagt, ich wüsste nicht wann es schon mal so eine Schweinerei gab. Weißt du, die halten offenbar nicht so fest zusammen wie Männer, die Weiber. Die werden ein weniger festes Gewebe haben als Männer, weißt du. **Die wurde zu Brei. Die wurde richtig zu Brei.** Ich wollte dich noch etwas fragen.

*(Ben geht auf ihn zu und schaut ihn ganz nahe an.)*

Wer, wer macht sauber wenn wir weg sind? Ben ich möchte wirklich gern mal wissen wer sauber macht wenn wir weg sind? Aber vielleicht, vielleicht macht gar keiner sauber. Man lässt sie vielleicht ganz einfach liegen. Hast du daran schon mal gedacht? Wie oft haben wir das schon gemacht? *(hustet)* Sag mal, wie oft haben wir das schon gemacht. *(weint)* Ich kann's nicht zählen. *(hustet, reibt sich die Augen und weint)* Vielleicht lässt man sie einfach liegen wenn wir weg sind. *(verkutzt sich)*

Ben: **Du bist doch ein Idiot.** Denk doch mal nach Mann. Glaubst du wir sind die Einzigen in dieser Organisation. Die haben doch Abteilungen für alles.

Gus: Ja wirklich, Reinigungsleute und das alles.

Ben: **Du bist ein Trottel!**<sup>7</sup>

In the German dubbing script, Heinz Freitag culminates the scene with Ben insulting Gus rather blatantly, while Willy Thiem's translation of the play is more in keeping with Pinter's original terms of *mutt* and *birk*, which are comparatively light-hearted, affectionate or harmless slurs, particularly comical when uttered by a hitman, and perhaps indicating that Ben feels sorry for Gus in one way or another. However the constraint of lip-synching makes it more difficult to come up with a new insult, because it's uttered during a close-up of Travolta and Conti, and the result is less than optimal.

In another example, Gus notices that Ben has tired of the eternal game with the dumb waiter (in this case Wilson, the hit men's boss, rather than the powers on high). Both of them are fed up with the stress of waiting around to do their nasty hit job.

**The Dumb Waiter: Play by Harold Pinter (1987a, 158)**

Gus: (...) *What's the matter with you? You don't look too bright. I feel like an Alka-Seltzer myself.*

**The Dumb Waiter: Film by Robert Altman (Pinter 1987b, 3/9:55 min)**

Gus: (...) *What's wrong with you? You don't look too bright. I could do with an Alka-Seltzer myself?*

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<sup>7</sup> "You're an imbecile!" (back translation into English by R. von Paschen); possible lip-synched German translations would be: "Du Narr! / Du Blödel!" (R. von Paschen).



**Der stumme Diener: German translation of the play by Willy Thiem (Pinter 1981, 33)**

Gus: (...) *Was ist denn mit dir los? Du siehst nicht gerade munter aus. Ich könnte auch ein Sprudelwasser gebrauchen.*<sup>8</sup>

**Der stumme Diener: German translation of the film by H. Freitag (Pinter 1987c, 48:24 min)**

Gus: (...) *Was ist denn mit dir los? Du siehst nicht gerade munter aus. Ach, ich komme mir wie ein Alka-Seltzer vor.*<sup>9</sup>

This is actually a comic example of a complete misunderstanding in both German translations. Willy Thiem seems to have assumed that Alka-Seltzer is the brand name of a kind of mineral water, because ‘Selterswasser’ designates bottled water from a town in Germany. Heinz Freitag’s translation for the German-dubbed version of Altman’s movie has, on the other hand, simply opted for an incorrect literal translation of Pinter’s line in the play. If Freitag had carefully listened to Tom Conti’s clear interpretation in Altman’s film, he would have realized that Gus wants to **take** an Alka-Seltzer (or aspirin) for his headache, instead of that he feels like he **is** an aspirin!

## 7. Conclusion

In summary, it can be said that the somewhat literal translations of Pinter’s dialogue in *The Dumb Waiter* have caused certain fine distinctions to be lost in the German versions of the play and the film, although they are mostly correct in terms of general meaning. More sensitivity to Pinter’s gallows humour by the translators (and the directors) would probably have made *The Dumb Waiter* more accessible to German speaking audiences, which apparently have some trouble understanding the subtle nuances of British wit.

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<sup>8</sup> “I could also use a *mineral water*” (back translation into English by R. von Paschen).

<sup>9</sup> “Ah, I feel like I *am* an aspirin” (back translation into English by R. von Paschen); a new proposed translation into German would be “Ich könnte auch ein *Aspro-C gebrauchen*” (R. von Paschen).

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