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## Alliteration as a Means of Characterization of Dramatic Personae: A Translation Issue

### Summary

Alliteration is usually defined as a repetition of the same initial consonant in consecutive or neighbouring words. Despite its importance for dramatic construction, alliteration is rarely preserved in Slovene translations of dramatic texts. Detailed research into this phenomenon in several British and American plays and their Slovene translations showed that the survival of alliterations in the translation process is mostly random. On the rare occasions when alliteration is preserved, no proof could be found of a clear translation strategy focusing on this linguistic element. Since alliteration in most cases appears not as an isolated language element but rather as one of many important text features, the translator should devise priorities. The purpose of this article is not to urge translators to give alliteration the highest priority, but merely to suggest its inclusion among the features considered. This paper also includes examples of non-preservation of alliteration in translated text illustrating the loss for the text and its implications.

**Key words:** translation, drama, drama translation, alliteration, characterisation

## Aliteracija kot sredstvo karakterizacije dramskih oseb: prevajalska dilema

### Povzetek

Aliteracija je navadno definirana kot ujemanje vzglasnih soglasnikov ali soglasniških skupin v zaporednih besedah. Kljub svoji pomembnosti za dramsko zgradbo, se aliteracija le redko ohranja v slovenskih prevodih dramskih besedil. Podrobna raziskava tega pojava v nekaterih britanskih in ameriških dramah in njihovih slovenskih prevodih je pokazala, da je ohranitev aliteracij večinoma naključna. V redkih primerih, ko je ohranjena, ni zaznati nobene opaznejše prevajalske strategije, ki bi ta jezikovni element posebej upoštevala. Ker aliteracija v večini primerov ne nastopa izolirano oz. kot edini jezikovni element, ki ga je treba upoštevati, mora prevajalska strategija predvidevati določene prioritete. Namen tega članka ni prepričati prevajalca, da bi aliteracijo uvrstil čim višje na prioriteten listo upoštevanja vidikov dramskega besedila, ampak ga opozoriti, da jo sploh vključi med obravnavane elemente. Poleg tega prinaša študija tudi nekaj primerov, ki ponazorijo posledice izgube aliteracij za besedilo.

**Ključne besede:** prevajanje, drama, dramski prevod, aliteracija, karakterizacija

# Alliteration as a Means of Characterization of Dramatic Personae: A Translation Issue

## 1. Introduction

Alliteration is usually defined as a repetition of the same sound, generally the initial consonant, in any sequence of words or neighbouring words. Historically, alliteration was a characteristic of Anglo-Saxon dramatic poetry, but it is still used, with modifications, by modern poets. This traditional poetic device is often associated with literary texts but is also frequent in everyday language (e.g. television advertising, folklore sayings, etc.). It is usually intentional, used for placing emphasis on the meaning of a text or for producing additional effects.

## 2. Alliteration in Drama

Alliteration is based on similarity of sounds and as such is bound to spoken rather than written language. In other words, alliteration will have a far greater effect on the listener than on the reader, because it is the sound of word, not its visual appearance or other characteristics, that brings alliteration to life. Therefore, this figure of speech is particularly appropriate in drama texts, because they are primarily intended for stage production and thus committed to the voice medium rather than reading. According to Kralj, drama needs to be staged in order to make the best of all its potentials: “drama is a literary text that, apart from being read, offers staging; in fact, it requires it” (1998, 5). This is, however, not true for the dramatic sub-genre, called *closet drama*. These plays are primarily intended for reading and therefore not the focus of this article’s interest.

## 3. Characterisation of Dramatic Personae

An important reason for alliteration in drama is the fact that it is an excellent means of characterisation. The characters who use it in their utterances tend to present themselves to the audience as educated, well behaved, naturally intelligent, belonging to a higher social rank, perhaps possessing a sense of humour, etc. In any case, they will sound more sophisticated than other characters who never use it. Alliteration is, of course, not the only instrument for portraying a person – this would be too much to demand of such a refined literary tool – but it subtly helps to underline characteristics that are also shown by other means.

For the audience to perceive these characteristics, hearing the exact spoken words is essential. Indirect speech reported by the author of the text or various descriptions of a character’s language will not produce the same effect. The actual alliterative expression as uttered by the person is much stronger than the author’s description of this character’s use of alliteration. Moreover, such reporting on the utterances employed can appear only once or twice in the same text in order not to sound repetitive, whereas alliteration in direct speech can be much more frequent – in fact, as frequent as needed for characterisation – since it is the character himself/herself who utters them

and not the narrator. To sum up, alliteration can perform its function of characterisation only in texts with a sufficient amount of direct speech. From this point of view, drama is the perfect type of text.

Alliterations must not be disregarded by the translator, even though they sometimes represent a minor share of the whole dramatic structure from a quantitative point of view. The translator's awareness of their presence and their importance in the text is an important starting point in the process of translation. This information should be acquired during the stage of text analysis that takes place before the actual translation.

## 4. Coincidental and Planned Alliterations

A certain percentage of the alliterations in every text is coincidental, which means these have no particular importance for the dramatic structure. This is often the case when sound connections involve auxiliary words, unstressed monosyllables, words without full meaning, etc. In most cases, these alliterations (e.g. *for free, so small, he has*, etc.) are not a result of the author's (or character's) intention to serve a purpose but are simply there for grammatical reasons: certain words have a specific grammatical function and are used in various contexts and with no regard to the initial consonants of the neighbouring words. In the translation process, these alliterations can be disregarded with no harm to the text and, as Slovene translation practice shows, in general, they are.

The other extreme situation arises in instances where alliteration is so tightly bound to the structure of the scene (usually to the content) that its presence cannot be avoided. Here is an example of such alliteration, taken from Act II of G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Mrs. Pearce, the housekeeper, comes to professor Higgins in order to ask him if he could change his behaviour when Eliza is present. She asks him not to use "a certain word" (the audience can guess that she is referring to the word "bloody"), and the euphemistic technique that she uses to get her message across hints at alliteration:

Mrs. Pearce. That's what I mean, sir. You swear a great deal too much. I don't mind your damning and blasting /.../ – but there is a certain word I must ask you not to use. The girl used it herself when she began to enjoy the **bath**. **It begins with the same letter as bath**. /.../ (Shaw 1957, 51)

Higgins, of course, objects to her implications that he uses it frequently, but Mrs. Pearce presents the evidence by specifying the times of transgression, and this time she uses a salient alliteration. In his answer, Higgins finally calls the figure alliteration and thus prevents it escaping notice by the audience:

Mrs. Pearce. Only this morning, sir, you applied it to your **boots**, to the **butter**, and to the **brown bread**.

Higgins. Oh, that! Mere **alliteration**, Mrs. Pearce, natural to a poet. (Shaw 1957, 51)

In instances like this, it is necessary for the translator to consider and preserve alliteration. In the example from *Pygmalion*, it is so strongly interwoven with the plot that, were it to be misplaced, the conversation would become senseless. However, alliterations that are the focus of this article, and should also be the focus of the translator's attention, occupy a field between these two extreme situations. These are a result of authorial decision, and because of their specific role, they represent a building block of the dramatic structure. The translator must pay attention to these alliterations and try to identify their function. Thus he/she will set the grounds for an optimal and, in terms of all the structural elements of a play, balanced translation.

## 5. Translating Alliterations

Preserving alliteration is often not an easy task, specially when those involving more than two or three words are concerned. One of the difficulties may be finding a sufficient number of semantically adequate alliterative words in the target language. Moreover, alliteration is rarely the only feature, apart from the meaning, to be considered. Other very common features in drama translation include register, rhythm, length of words and various kinds of markedness. In practice, it is almost impossible to preserve all of these; however, the decision about which to preserve, which to replace with other means with similar effect, and which to disregard completely must not be left to chance. It needs to be the translator's conscious decision, made on the basis of a thorough text analysis, and it should be in accordance with an already defined translation strategy and its norms.

Unfortunately, alliteration is often disregarded in translation, not just because of the translator's unawareness of its existence, but also as a result of his/her conscious decisions. This occurs when absence of alliteration does not disturb the textual structure, because the audience simply does not know that there should be alliteration at a particular point in the play. The overall dramatic potential is slightly lower, but there is no detraction from the flow of the play. This is, however, not true for many other features, whose absence or presence does disturb the text; in such cases the flaw is easily noticed by the careful audience (e.g. the use of inappropriate register, etc.). So, sacrificing an alliteration in order to preserve another, more noticeable feature sometimes seems an optimal emergency exit from a difficult translation situation.

The length of an alliteration (i.e. the number of words it involves) is for the translator often the first information about its importance; the longer ones represent a greater challenge but usually also have a stronger auditory effect. The other important characteristic is the nature of the repeated sound; theoretically, plosive and voiced sounds leave a stronger trace than other sounds. Nevertheless, none of the above statements should be accepted as an absolute translation rule for rendering alliteration. As the examples provided below will show, a short but strong alliteration involving no more than two words, or an alliteration with repeated voiceless, fricative sounds, is sometimes salient and thus important to preserve. The deciding factor for whether to give priority to alliteration or to some other dramatic feature is, therefore, the context and the role of these features within it. In the remainder of the article, there are a few examples of alliterations taken from British and American plays that illustrate the points already highlighted. Most of

these were not preserved in Slovene translation. The article also provides comments on these and suggests alternative translation solutions.

Many alliterations from Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*, translated into Slovene by Janko Moder (Pinter 1990), are lost or weakened in the translation. Here are two examples:

In this utterance, Davies, a homeless tramp whom a good-hearted and slightly mentally handicapped Aston has brought into his apartment and offered shelter, talks about the incident at the café where he worked as a cleaner. We do not know what happened to him and whether Aston really saved him from a fight and how, but this is what he says:

DAVIES. /.../ I could have got **done** in **down** there. (Pinter 1977, 17)

In the original, Pinter uses the alliterative words “done” and “down”. The repetition of “d” is intensified with the appearance of “n” in both words and the similarity of the vowels contained in the two words. The final effect of the alliteration is even stronger because each of the words is stressed. What is more, the plosive sounds contribute to the onomatopoeic effect, recreating the tense atmosphere of the physical fight (regardless of whether it actually took place or not), and they emphasise Davies’s panicky reaction to what could have happened to him. So, in this case, alliteration is a verbal representation of physical and mental actions, and thus it activates not just the reason but also emotions of the audience.

In Moder’s translation “Tam spod bi blo lahko po meni” (Pinter 1990, 3), the effect of the alliteration is weaker: there is no additional repeated sound to reinforce it, and the rhythm of the whole sentence places the stress only on the second word “blo”, while “bi” remains without its own accent. In terms of alliteration alone, one of my suggested translations – “**Skoraj** bi jo **skupil** tam spodaj” – might be preferable. It would preserve the alliteration – “sk” is rather strong – and the stress on each of the two words. It also contains a third word beginning with an “s”, that is “spodaj”, which is an additional intensifying element in the whole alliteration. However, the argument that speaks against this suggestion is its inadequate register; the phrase “skupiti jo” sounds somewhat too cultivated for an uneducated tramp. Therefore, I suggest the translation: “Lahko bi jih **dobil** tam **doli**.”

Later in the play, Davies starts complaining about the bag that he left at the café because everything he had was in it:

DAVIES. /.../ Every lousy **blasted bit** of my **bleeding belongings** I left down there now. (Pinter 1977, 19)

The “b” alliteration adds force and emotion. Davies is frustrated because he has lost all his belongings, and, apart from expressing his anger, he wants to make Aston aware of this terrible state. So, he is trying to put emphasis on how completely he left everything behind. The force of “b” as a plosive sound also suggests verbal violence, and with its repetition the belongings are

being verbally ‘trashed’. Most of the characteristics connected to this alliteration are not included in Moder’s translation: “Vso tisto prekleto usrano kramo, vso tisto piškavo mizerijo sem pustil tam” (Pinter 1990, 5). Only two adjectives start with the same sound, “prekleto” and “piškavo”, but they are so far apart that they can hardly constitute alliteration. My suggested translation preserves it more: “Vse tiste **preklete preostanke** mojega **posranega premoženja** sem zdaj pustil tam.” The effect of the alliterative sound “pr” is similar to “b” in the original: “p” being a plosive contributes the force, and “r” adds voice. The aforementioned characteristics of the original are thus valid for this translation, too. Grammatical incorrectness in the use of the pronoun “mojega” helps to establish the register: in colloquial language it is often used instead of the correct form “svojega” and is therefore more suitable for a character like Davies.

The following examples are taken from T. Williams’s *Streetcar Named Desire*. The play is set in New Orleans. Blanche comes to her sister, Stella, and her husband, after having sold and lost the family estate in a suspicious way. Throughout the play, alliterations appear almost exclusively in Blanche’s utterances. They masterfully reveal her character by depicting the changing states of her mentally and emotionally unstable personality. The audience gradually realises that these are reflected in her speech. When she feels upbeat, her language is poetic and often over-formal; on the other hand, her moments of depression are marked by nervous attempts to hide her confusion. In both of these sets of mental states, alliterations subtly support her belief that she is superior. Apart from the fact she is an English teacher, her upper-class standards, one of which is the necessity for polite and erudite diction, seem to be built into her subconscious.

This excerpt is a good example of how alliteration effectively and elegantly adds force to Blanche’s statement, with which she wants to stress the difficulty of her position in managing the family assets and, at the same time, to keep her integrity and absolve herself from guilt. At this point, Stella still does not know about the loss of the estate, and Blanche is trying to prepare her before she reveals the news:

Blanche. /.../ I know that you’re bound to reproach me – but before you do – take into consideration – you left! I **stayed** and **struggled**! (Williams 1989, 1826)

The last sentence in the utterance is short and powerful. The most obvious reason for its effectiveness is, of course, the meaning of the two stressed words, which is tightly connected to the idea of the speaker’s sacrifice for a noble cause. But the contribution of alliteration and rhythm to the phrase can hardly be overlooked. The Slovene translations: “Jaz sem ostala in sem se borila!” (Williams 1952, 15) and “Jaz sem ostala in se borila!” (Williams 1999, 16) by Grün and Duša, respectively, lose the alliteration and weaken the original rhythm. The loss of rhythm is at least partly due to the attributes of Slovene grammar, which only has composed tenses to express past actions; therefore the constructions are necessarily longer. However, the presence of three-syllable words in both key positions in the sentence is the choice that loosens the condensed force of the original statement. The first of my suggested translations is “Jaz sem branila **dom** in se **dušila**!”, in which the alliterative “st” is replaced by “d”, still a plosive sound which adds force to the meaning. “Dom” is emotionally a very powerful word with connotations that fit this

context, and “dušiti se” picks up the meaning of “struggle”. My second suggestion, “Jaz sem se postavila v **bran** in **izbrala boj!**”, is, from an alliteration point of view, even more appropriate. The nouns “**bran**” and “**boj**”, which carry the meaning, are short and stressed, and also semantically a better choice. Moreover, the original alliteration is strengthened with a consonance, “**bran**” and “**izbrala**”, which, apart from the alliterative “b” sound, brings out the strong “r”.

When Blanche and Mitch, her potential suitor and Stanley’s friend, return home after they have enjoyed an evening out, Blanche is obviously overcome with emotion. Mitch has been courting her, and she has responded to his admiration in accordance with her “rules of ladyhood”. The favourable atmosphere has been building up throughout their conversation. They get to the front door, and she hands him the key with the following words:

Blanche. /.../ Honey, you open the door while I take a **last look** at the sky.  
(Williams 1989, 1853)

The above alliteration is just one example of the figurative language that prevails in Blanche’s utterances in *Scene Six*. It is an important indication of her emotional state. In Slovene translations, though some elements of her poetic diction are preserved, unfortunately not many alliterations are among them. This one is lost, too: “/.../ tačas pa še enkrat pogledam v nebo.” (Williams 1952, 63); and “/.../ jaz pa še zadnjič pogledam v nebo.” (Williams 1999, 71).

Since alliteration is the most outstanding sound effect in this word group, it should – apart from the content – be the translator’s main concern. Two alternative translations come naturally to mind. The first one, “/.../ medtem ko se jaz še **zadnjič ozrem** v nebo”, according to some definitions does not contain pure alliteration. It is a consonance, but a great deal of the sound effect is still there. The word “ozrem” could also be replaced by “zazrem”, which would improve the alliteration but would also move slightly away from a meaning that suits the situation; “zazreti se” suggests a somewhat longer act of gazing into the sky, which probably could not be concluded by the time Mitch unlocked the door (whereas “ozreti se” is an instantaneous act). The other suggestion is even more straightforward and needs no special commentary: “/.../ medtem ko jaz še **poslednjič pogledam** v nebo.”

Many alliterations have onomatopoeic characteristics. This is not surprising, considering the fact that both figures operate on the basis of sound effects. Onomatopoeia adds another dimension to an alliterative group of words; thus the joint effect on the audience is even more observable than that of plain alliteration. Such an instance automatically implies a more demanding task for the translator, whose restriction in the selection of target language elements doubles. Finding a suitable solution in this case needs to satisfy two conditions because of the more complex sound manipulation. A good example of such a combination is Blanche’s utterance when Stella is about to pour her a glass of Coke:

Blanche. Yes, honey. Watch how you pour – that **fizzy stuff foams** over!  
(Williams 1989, 1850)

Grün had, obviously, noticed the double sound effect and also successfully transferred it into Slovene: “Pazi kako nalivaš – ta šumeča reč **precej prekipi!**” (Williams 1952, 57). As we see, he replaced the onomatopoeic sound “f”, that imitates the foaming of a drink caused by released carbon dioxide, with “š”, also a voiceless fricative, and the plosive “č”. This combination has a similar, maybe even stronger onomatopoeic potential. As far as sound effects are concerned, this translation alone would meet the original qualitatively and quantitatively, yet Grün strengthened it with another alliteration, “**precej prekipi!**”.

Duša’s translation, “Pazi kako nalivaš – tile mehurčki udarijo čez!” (Williams 1999, 65), is less successful in preserving the indicated sound qualities. He also used the sounds “č” and “š”, the latter, in fact, being a part of the previous phrase (which in Grün’s translation is also present). Apart from the fact that the translation is quantitatively weaker, the alliterative sounds are farther apart from each other in comparison to the original (and Grün’s translation), which weakens the effect.

Not that Grün’s translation would need improvement, but here is my attempt at an alternative translation which builds on his solution with “š” and “č” sounds: “Pazi kako nalivaš – ta šumeča reč rada **steče čez!**” Instead of introducing a new alliteration in the last part of the sentence, I extended the existing one with two more “č” sounds. Moreover, there is also the double appearance of a new sound, “š”. Technically, this is a new alliteration, but, in fact, it adds to the overall sound image because it is onomatopoeically highly compatible with the existing sounds.

## 6. Conclusion

At first sight, alliteration may seem a marginal language feature with no significant impact on the overall potential of a play. This article tries to prove the opposite and thus draws the translators’ attention to this and other generally neglected elements of the language. In Slovene translation practice, translators often pay too little attention to these aspects of their work (cf. Hribar 1999, 2001; Onič 2003). A possible reason – but not an excuse – for this may be that translators, especially drama translators bound by theatre contracts, are constantly under time pressure, which does not allow for a thorough text analysis and formation of a translation strategy before they actually start translating. On the other hand, published versions are often just slightly or not at all changed working translations – despite the fact that the time pressure argument is practically irrelevant in these cases.

The selected examples illustrate the role of alliteration in different dramatic situations. Moreover, they are supported by analysis of their Slovene translations, pointing out the negative influence of unintentional translation shifts on the meaning potential of the play in the target language. It is hoped that this article will contribute to drawing the translators’ attention to alliteration and other similar textual elements in drama translation and thus have a positive long-term influence on drama translation in our language space.



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