# "Ein spezialgelagerter Sonderfall:" Leonore Puschert's German Translation of Robert Arthur's *The Three Investigators* Series and Its Cultural Impact

# **INGO PETERS**

Gesamtschule Nettetal/ Chulalongkorn University Von-Waldois-Strasse 6 41334 Nettetal, Germany ingo.peters@sjc.oxon.org

#### Abstract

Robert Arthur's *The Three Investigators* series did not sell well in the U.S., whereas in Germany, it became a huge success under the name *Die drei ???*. An analysis of Leonore Puschert's translation, specifically of her 1973 rendering of *The Three Investigators in the Secret of Skeleton Island*, suggests that Puschert's characteristic language contributed significantly to the popularity of the mysteries in Germany: In the specific cultural setting of the 1970s and 80s her complexification of the vocabulary—leading to books that were harder to read, more serious in tone, and, even in terms of the dialogue, closer to an idealized written German than to the authentic (and diverse) spoken language of the original—did not, as one might expect, hurt the sales, but hit the right notes with the youthful readership. Child readers from the aspirational *Bildungsbürgertum* appreciated the linguistic challenges and the aura of depth, substance and superiority the series afforded them. As Puschert's language is also highly quotable, it has stayed in the mind of the now-grown-up readers and contributed to the curious ongoing retro appeal of *Die drei ???*, which are perceived, nostalgically, as the last remnants of sophistication in a far more superficial society.

## 1 Introduction

Sometimes, though not often, a literary translation becomes more famous or influential than the original, developing a life of its own. One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon is the German version, entitled Die drei ???, of the American children's book series The Three Investigators (created by Robert Arthur in 1964; other authors include William Arden and M. V. Carey). In its country of origin the series, never a bestseller to begin with, was discontinued due to disappointing sales in 1987 (Goldstein 2009, para. 21). In Germany however, the adventures of the investigators have sold more than 15 million copies (Akstinat 2008, p. 110), and inspired an even more successful Hörspiel (radio plays on audio cassettes) series as well as two movies. Die drei ??? books continue to be published regularly; in 1993 the German publisher Franckh (now called Kosmos) obtained the rights to the series from Random House (Röhrbein 2010, para. 4), and has since then had Germanlanguage authors write 98 new mysteries, which are now mostly bought by adults who grew up with the investigators (Theurer 2009, para. 7). More than 40 years after their conception, the series' protagonists Justus, Bob, and Peter are cultural icons in Germany: A-list celebrities like actors Daniel Brühl and Ben Becker or formula 1 driver Nick Heidfeld rush to be associated with the adventures (Görtzen 2009, para. 8), live performances of selected drei ??? cases by the voices from the audio plays easily fill arenas like the 13,000-plus-seat Düsseldorf Dome (Gohlke 2009, para. 1), and several books, rap albums and TV features (and countless newspaper articles) have paid tribute to the series and its success (see e.g. Bärmann & Radtke 2009, Akstinat 2008, Fettes Brot 1998, Tagesthemen 2004).

The popularity in Germany, and the corresponding relative failure in America, are certainly due to more than one factor, as I have tried to illustrate in an analysis that focuses on the cultural impact of

plots, settings, and characters (Peters 2008, pp. 143-163). Yet, the translations of the first 53 books by Leonore Puschert are remarkable enough to warrant a paper devoted just to them, and to hypothesize that they must have played a special role in creating the German status of the *drei ???* (not for nothing has she been labelled the "heimliche Autorin" or secret, real writer by German fans (Puschert 2004, para. 1)). In this study, I will argue that Puschert turned the accessible, authentic 'pulp' language of the original into a sophisticated artifice that not only resonated perfectly with the educational and aspirational *Bildungsbürger* ethos of the time the books came first out—the 1970s—but also forms a mildly elitist shared space for today's educated Germans between 25 and 40 years of age, for whom the language functions as a retro joy or nostalgic experience that unites them.

I will attempt to demonstrate this by first illuminating the areas of change in translation, and then analyzing the effects of said changes with recourse to German culture. As the space is limited, the analysis will be somewhat impressionistic: It will concentrate on one book—*The Three Investigators in The Secret of Skeleton Island*—and its translation, *Die drei ??? und die Geisterinsel*. This work, the sixth book by original author Robert Arthur, is quite representative of the whole oeuvre and captures its linguistic essence well, as it is one of the most popular of the series, was chosen as the basis for the first movie, and, significantly, is the favorite of translator Puschert (2004, para. 19), compelling her to craft an especially careful translation that epitomizes her characteristic method.

#### 2 Leonore Puschert's Changes

By far the most striking feature of this method is a complexification of the vocabulary. Puschert routinely and systematically turns Arthur's kid-friendly, straightforward, everyday-language words and phrases into expressions that are considerably more formal, were already rather archaic at the time the books came out (and are even more so today), and at times pose difficulties to the average child reader.

Some of these renderings can be explained by the general tendency of German usage to express basic facts in a more complex way than English (Wagner 2007, p. 2), which values simplicity and conciseness. That, for instance, "It's like this," (Arthur 1966, p. 3) gets translated as "Es verhält sich folgendermaßen" (Arthur 2007, p. 9)—roughly: "The fact of the matter is as follows"—is not so much a sign of Puschert taking liberties; many Germans would perceive her solution as more natural than the literal "Es ist so."

However, for the majority of the changes this explanation does not hold. Puschert's German is a lot more sophisticated not only than the original English, but also than the German standard. For example, she translates "Although Mr. Hitchcock had said ..." as "Wenngleich Mr. [Hitchcock] behauptet hatte ...": "Wenngleich" is a rare and rather old-fashioned choice for the common "although"-the authoritative Langenscheidt Handwörterbuch Englisch dictionary (1988, p. 46) does not even list it among the alternatives-and with "obwohl" and "wenn auch," Puschert would have had terms at her disposal that are far more natural while not being informal (the fact that she renders the pedestrian "said" as "claimed" or "behauptet" further illustrates that she quite actively engages in complexification). Numerous similar cases could be pointed out. "They were driving through what seemed to be marshy, empty country" (Arthur 1966, p.13), where the most obvious choices for the "seemed" would be "schien," "aussah wie," or "vorkam wie" gets translated as "Sie fuhren durch eine Gegend, die wie ödes Marschland anmutete" (Arthur 2007, p. 16), with "anmutete" being another archaic, rarified, almost poetic term that the Langenscheidt entry on "seem" does not mention (p. 574). While one could argue that this German verb still would be part of the passive vocabulary of many young readers, few children would understand the verb in the sentence "Mr. [Hitchcock] weidete sich an Peters Erstaunen" (Arthur 2007, p. 9) without guessing it from context: "sich weiden an," in contrast to the well-known "weiden" ("graze"), means "to gloat over or to revel in, with a good dose of Schadenfreude," and constitutes an elevated choice considering the original sentence was as simple as "Mr. Hitchcock seemed pleased at Pete's astonishment" (Arthur 1966, p. 2).

Thus, Leonore Puschert, by almost always going for the more sophisticated word, the expression that bristles with associations, transforms a mystery story in the pulp spirit into a challenging literary work that is, depending on one's taste, poetic or stilted. This goes as far as making deliberately casual

sentences into elaborate statements: "As the Indians did not bother about digging very deep graves" (Arthur 1966, p. 24) becomes "Da die Indianer keine sehr tiefen Gräber auszuheben pflegten" (Arthur 2007, p. 24), literally "Since the Indians were not in the habit of/were not accustomed to excavating very deep graves." Puschert changes the overall tone of most of the narration from good, clean (yet hardly meaningful) fun into a kind of high seriousness, and certainly does so in a very skillful and consistent way, as her formulations never jibe and she displays a mastery of the language that is rarely seen even in professional writers.

It is significant and momentous that the above observations about the language are not only valid for what gets reported by the third-person narrator, but also for the dialogue, the direct speech by characters. Here, too, a word that outside poems or the realm of irony is hardly used at all, "Eiland" (Arthur 2007, p. 9), is used to translate "Island" (Arthur 1966, p. 2). In this case, one might concede that this rendering fits the personality of the speaker, as director Alfred Hitchcock, who makes frequent cameo appearances in the Three Investigators series, is portrayed as given to flamboyant utterances of the English-upper-class kind. However, this cannot be said of legendary pirate Captain One-Ear, whose earthy "crack o' doom" (Arthur 1966, p. 26) becomes the staid "Weltuntergang" (Arthur 2007, p. 15), "end of the world." Although the original is admittedly hard to translate more faithfully, this example already hints at a potential problem: Even colorful people who speak colloquial English or slang, or have otherwise peculiar speech patterns, get represented in a language that resembles the sophisticated, literary pattern of the narration. Gruff Sheriff Nostigon's no-nonsense ellipses (Arthur 1966, p. 32: "Sounds like Sam Robinson to me. ... Do anything for money, and likes to play practical jokes. Wonder if he could have been trying some crazy joke last night? Expect I'll have to ask him a few questions") get reduced considerably, and the awkward policeman transforms into a fairly skilled and urbane wordsmith: "Hört sich nach Sam Robinson an. ... Für Geld tut der alles, und besonders gern spielt er den Leuten einen Streich. Kann sein, dass er gestern Abend einen seiner üblen Scherze im Sinn hatte. Ich denke, ich werde ihm mal ein paar Fragen stellen" (Arthur 2007, p. 29).

It is clear that Puschert is aware of the danger of the characters losing their individuality, but it is also clear that her impetus to 'write good German' overrides her desire to render register correctly. A passage where the small-time crook Sam speaks demonstrates this well. "Sally's ghost will be mighty happy about that. Maybe if it gets running again she can finish her ride" is what he says in the original (Arthur 1966, p. 13). The translation starts with "Darüber wird Sallys Geist sicher entzückt sein" (Arthur 2007, p. 15), with "sicher entzückt" ("certainly delighted") being closer to a Boston Brahmin's ways of talking than to those of a thug who is about to maroon the three investigators on a small island. As if realizing this and trying to bring the real Sam back into focus, Puschert inserts a colloquialism in the following sentence which the original did not contain: "Vielleicht kann sie ihre Fahrt endlich fortsetzen, wenn das Ding wieder läuft" ("Maybe she can finally continue her ride once that thing is running again"). Yet this, being so isolated, does not so much balance the language out as it appears like a sudden, curious lapse on Sam's part. Overall Puschert's characters speak the polished high German that usually distinguishes high-quality written texts; they use the Konjunktiv—, Wie kommen Sie darauf, wir seien Detektive?" (Arthur 2007, p. 12)—and do not value contractions (the original reads "Why do you think we're detectives?" (Arthur 1966, p. 8)).

Regarding this 'polished high German,' the case of Christos Markos, the Greek immigrant boy whom the young investigators defend against false accusations, is especially interesting. In Arthur's book, Christos makes grammatical errors, especially in the areas of tenses and articles. Typical examples of the former are the scene where he has found the stranded investigators and explains his past achievement in the present tense, "I think I know where to look for you" (Arthur 1966, p. 22), or the statement "When I was a little boy, I start practicing to be a sponge fisher like my father" (p. 24). Missing articles appear in the form of "Movie people are very upset" (p. 22).

Christos' German in the translation is considerably better than his English; Puschert eliminates most of the errors. The sentences corresponding to the above examples, "Ich habe schon gewusst, wo ich euch suchen musste" (Arthur 2007, p. 22), "Als ich ein kleiner Junge war, habe ich angefangen mit Üben, um Schwammfischer zu sein wie mein Vater" (p. 23), and "Die Filmleute sind ganz aufgeregt" (p. 22), range from the perfectly nuanced to the mildly clumsy (in the second case), but use precisely

the articles and tenses that the rules would demand. Puschert does insert a few word order irregularities that are not in the original, as in "weil ich bin Ausländer," which should be "weil ich Ausländer bin" (p. 23), but the general picture, if by accident or on purpose, is that German readers are not really confronted with deficient language, even if the character, based on what we know about him, would almost certainly have to use it. Again, a concern for quality trumps realism.

It is hard to say how much about all these changes can be explained as a conscious attempt by Leonore Puschert to re-shape *Die drei ???* according to her vision, and how much just 'happened,' partly due to the unwritten laws of literary translation at the time in Germany, which stressed high educational standards and valued a certain Germany-centered prescriptivism at the expense of faithful representation: American names were more often than not turned into German ones (Puschert 2004, para. 4), supernatural elements could get removed altogether—as in *Die drei ??? und der Karpatenhund*, at the request of the editors (Puschert 2004, para. 11)—and frivolous fictitious places tended to be replaced by researchable real ones (as in *Die drei ??? und die flammende Spur*, where "Lapathia" becomes Romania). In a recent interview, Puschert, who likes to downplay her role, bemoans the patronizing pedagogical pressures of the 1970s, but also emphasizes that in terms of language and vocabulary, her editors always gave her complete freedom (2004, para. 5-8). Thus, it appears that the sophistication of the German texts can be attributed mostly to her, while the accompanying loss of realism and linguistic diversity was probably not directly intended.

#### **3** The Impact of the Translation Within German Culture

Much more significant than any speculation about motives, however, is the issue of the effects the changes had. At first sight, the features of the German translation do not exactly look like a recipe for success in the children's book market. To recapitulate, in contrast to the original *Three Investigators*, *Die drei ???* are hard to read, their adventures are told in a tone that is more serious than fun (and at times borders on the openly educational), and most of the characters speak in a uniform, idealized language. Yet, curiously, for the readers at the specific time and in the specific place the books came out, these apparent shortcomings proved to be attractive.

First, there is the level of difficulty, the number of sophisticated words that require reflection. In the Germany of the 1970s and 80s, the Bildungsbürger ideal, with its notion that knowledge, education and learning in general are not only practically essential but even a moral duty (Conze, Lepsius & Kocka 1992, p. 15), and that what comes easy is not real learning, was still very strong (Kempter 2005, pp. 1-2). Apart from the fact that middle class parents, who at the time exercised some control over what their children were allowed to read, were quite happy to support the series with its complexity and exemplary usage of German, this meant that children in the humanist Gymnasium were schooled in overcoming difficulties in reading texts, and in regarding these difficulties as challenging rather than daunting or tedious. Furthermore, at the heart of many of Arthur's mysteries were riddles using puns and obscure references (and many of Puschert's translations of those are brilliant). Thus, linguistic challenges were built into the series anyway and formed part of its original appeal; instead of distorting the character of the books, Puschert's complexity made the language finally match the ambition of The Three Investigators to present sophisticated cases to be co-solved by an active, thinking reader. The series, like its unapologetically intellectual and arrogant protagonist Justus, was elitist. One had to 'get it.' Children graduating from easier mysteries and successfully tackling the adventures of the kind of Geisterinsel looked down on those who were still reading The Famous Five or TKKG, and enjoyed bragging rights on the schoolyard, while those who had not dared to look at Die drei ??? yet were in awe of their older brothers and sisters who had. The complex language contributed to the mystique of the books as markers of those who are in the know. That Puschert's translation is not childish and does not talk to child-readers is precisely its strength here.

The issue of the seriousness is intimately related to this phenomenon. In a country where, at least until recently, entertainment value has often been equated with a lack of substance, where cultural products that are fun tend to be seen as forgettable distractions at best, where in the 1970s and 80s even the TV stations saw it as their primary mission to educate the people (*Bildungsauftrag*), and where literature and the arts are commonly approached, *Bildungsbürger*-style, with an earnest

reverence that borders on religious worship and seeks meaning, not delight (Schlaffer 2002), children who were reading Die drei ??? would feel even more superior. Rising above the mass of exchangeable books that offered easy entertainment, they were dealing with something meaningful, substantial. Solving the cases was not a trifle, a trivial activity that gives instant yet superficial gratification; it was-as Puschert's tone helped to convey-important, deep. The publisher Franckh and its editors had realized the potential of a 'serious, sophisticated mystery for *Bildungsbürger* children' early on, and marketed the series as such: While the American covers had been in the spirit of B-movie shockhorror, showing the three investigators hunting for treasures or fighting monsters, for the (now famous) German ones an austere, refined corporate design was chosen. Bauhaus-inspired white sansserif letters announced the title on a black background, and a minimalist painting by artist Aiga Rasch hinted at the central puzzle the detectives would face, without ever displaying any of the three. The editors also chose to rename the chief investigator; "Jupiter Jones" became "Justus Jonas." The change symbolizes the 'serious' German transformation of the series in a nutshell: A lighthearted, somewhat outlandish juxtaposition of superhero/space associations (Jupiter) and everyman (Jones) was replaced by a decidedly classy name with humanist connotations (Justus and Jonas are both first names that are popular with Bildungsbürger parents, and Justus Jonas also was a Protestant reformer). Everything about the books seemed to proclaim, as Peters (2008, p. 153) says, "This is not pulp, this is art-Du bildest dich, wenn Du dies liest." Puschert's language fit well into this successful picture of substance and sophistication.

What remains is the factor that to a certain degree, the characters' language is less diverse and individual in the German works. Although this is objectively a loss, it also might have helped make *Die drei ???* into icons in a way. First, the uniform sophistication of the speakers allowed young readers to participate in exciting adventures in faraway foreign lands while retaining cultural control—after all, the characters, even the evildoers, were speaking the language, and, by extension, followed the cultural patterns, that were held up as the natural gold standard by the individuals and institutions the children were influenced by and immersed in. The mysteries and their characters were difficult, but difficult in a familiar, safe and welcome way; one felt just at home enough in Puschert's America to stay.

Secondly, Puschert's renderings are highly quotable. Having hardened criminals like Tom Farraday in *Geisterinsel* say "Zum Kuckuck!"—a cute, anachronistic expression that today even the most well-behaved child would consider ridiculously tame—as a curse appears like a *Verfremdungseffekt* or estrangement effect; the phrase calls attention to itself (Arthur 2007, p. 123). The German mysteries are full of such sentences that stay in the mind; and remembering and reciting these forms part of the ongoing appeal *Die drei* ??? have even for grown-ups who used to first read them decades earlier. Fansites like www.rocky-beach.com collect the best quotations for shared reminiscing, and some of them, mostly words by Justus, whom Arthur conceived as fond of big words and with whom Puschert can therefore go to especially great lengths in terms of sophistication, have entered the German vocabulary: Almost every 30 to 40-year old in the country knows "spezialgelagerter Sonderfall" (from *Die drei* ??? und die Flüsternde Mumie) or "Guter Mann, was hemmt unseren Fortgang" (*Die drei* ??? und das Gespensterschloß).

The quotes are not the only force behind the retro charm that makes the investigators into superstars today. In fact, all of the above phenomena contribute. Today, the language of Puschert's translations is even far more of an outlier than it was in the 1970s and 80s, and the *Bildungsbürger* ideals of knowledge, education, quality, and seriousness have been replaced, many commentators bemoan, to a certain extent by the oft-cited *Spaßgesellschaft*, which values leisure and fun (Ludwig & Mannes 2003, Boberski 2004). *Die drei ???* are thus not only a vehicle for a whole generation to relive their childhood and feel united, but also give the nostalgia concrete meaning and justification: Former child readers that perceive themselves, consciously or unconsciously, as the last *Bildungsbürger* generation can revel together in their staying true to what they feel is the only remaining pop culture enjoyment that is one of depth, flair, and substance.

## 4 Conclusion

All in all, Leonore Puschert's translation of *The Three Investigators* might not be the only or even the most important reason behind the lasting success of *Die drei* ??? in Germany, but it is doubtful if without her contribution the series would have ever reached the cult status it enjoys today (the language of the mega-selling *Hörspiele* stays very close to the books). Puschert's work illustrates how a mix of individual linguistic skill and a particular cultural environment, how vision and coincidence together (the books came out at exactly the right place and time) can turn a translation into a powerful cultural player in its own right, rather than a mere copy or even a necessarily inferior version of the original. Thus, *Die drei* ??? are an important case study in the cultural impact of literary translation, one that in its significance can compete with the groundbreaking and legendary rendering of *Donald Duck* by Erika Fuchs.

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