

Kafka's Metamorphosis: Translation and Transformation **by Johannes Jaeger**

This is a report for Bronwyn Lace on the translation of 'The Metamorphosis' with a special emphasis on the transformation of a human into an animal of some kind, and its potential significance.

Page numbers refer to the English version of the story that Bronwyn sent me.

I. Translation

My first task here is an attempt at scientifically determining the species of vermin Gregor Samsa turns into. This task is complicated by the fact that Kafka desires the precise nature of Gregor's state to be obscure, which is not only evident from the text, but also from the author's 1915 decree against any specific depictions of Gregor as vermin. This has been interpreted as a desire to highlight Gregor's human characteristics that he retains until the end of the story. Kafka clearly did not want us to dehumanise Gregor.

Despite all this, let me make an attempt at taxonomic determination, and discuss some of the issues that arise from the necessarily imprecise English translation of Kafka's story.

The author starts out (on page 3) by describing Gregor as "Ungeziefer," a generic German term for vermin. This term is not only used for invertebrate bugs, but also rodents and other vertebrate pests. However, Gregor's stiff exoskeleton, his segmented abdomen, his bug eyes, and his many wriggling legs immediately reveal him as a member of the invertebrate phylum Arthropoda, which is the only invertebrate taxon that contains species with a segmented exoskeleton and articulated legs ("einknicken" on page 8, explicitly documents the presence of joints in Gregor's legs). Indeed, Gregor's numerous appendages are frequently mentioned in the text, although their precise number remains unspecified (see, for example, pages 10 and 16). In addition, Gregor is toothless, and therefore probably not a mammal. To summarise the evidence so far: Gregor is no rodent, and no worm.

Another hint that Gregor turned into an invertebrate comes from the (somewhat harsh) remark (on page 6) that Gregor was already spineless as a human being.

On page 18, we learn that Gregor's legs feature adhesive pads, although their precise position on his appendages remains unclear. On page 41, he is crawling along the walls and the ceiling of his room, courtesy of these sticky pads, which therefore must be attached to his feet. Since only spiders and insects carry sticky pads on their feet, we can exclude the possibility that Gregor may be a terrestrial crustacean—an isopod woodlouse, for example—or a myriapod centipede or millipede.

On page 27, we learn that Gregor has "feelers" a feature of insects, but not spiders. Woodlice have feelers too, but we've just learnt that he is no woodlouse, since he has pads on his feet. Thus: we can say with certainty that Gregor is an insect.

But what kind of insect? Can we say anything more? Is Gregor a cockroach, maybe, or a true (hemipterous) bug? It could be. But we cannot be sure. He is smelly and lives in a filthy habitat, preferring dark and closed spaces. Moreover, on page 24, we learn that his “speech” is perceived as hissing, which is a term that lay people use to describe the noises cockroaches produce with their legs and wings. Unlike Gregor, insects have no voice (“Tierstimme,” as described on page 16). But then, his “voice” may be a construct of Gregor's imagination altogether. Curiously, on page 23, Gregor is snapping his strong jaws at people. Cockroaches and (sucking) bugs don't have strong jaws (or jaws at all). In contradiction to this, he is sucking on the cheese on page 30, which is a thing that bugs *would* do. Also: Gregor is a picky eater, while cockroaches will literally eat anything that has any nutrition in it. Finally, Gregor hates dampness, which is unusual for a cockroach (page 58).

The cleaning lady calls Gregor a 'Mistkäfer' (on page 59). However, this German term can be used quite generically (unlike its literal translation of “dung beetle”). In any case, we cannot expect the old cleaning lady to be a reliable insect taxonomist.

In conclusion, *little can be said about Gregor's identity beyond the fact that he is an insect.*

A few curiosities remain:

On page 17, Gregor is coughing, which is not a thing that insects do.

The brown color of the liquid emerging from Gregor's wounded mouth (page 18), and the observation that he is bleeding (page 26) are incompatible with him being an insect, which do not have blood, but instead feature a blue-green hemolymph, circulating through their open body cavities. There is no closed system of blood vessels.

Page 30: Gregor cannot fly away. This is curious. If he is an insect, he is likely to have wings. But maybe he can't fly away because the window and the door to his room are closed?

On page 70, we learn that Gregor's neck is getting stiff. Few insects have real necks. Whether those that do can get a stiff neck remains unknown (and probably unknowable).

II. Transformation

Apart from the taxonomic challenges to determine Gregor's species, and the ambiguities introduced by the English translation of the story, there is the overarching question of how to interpret Gregor's transformation. It seems obvious to me that it symbolises breaking out of an oppressive society, which results in estrangement, starvation, and ultimately death. I generally like Nabokov's interpretation of the story as representing the artist's fate in a society of philistines. It can equally well be applied to the situation of a metamodern intellectual in a (post)modern society.

Gregor escapes a life dominated by drudgery, meaningless human interactions, and extremely dull habits. The only thing that seems to keep him going is his adoration of Grete (his sister), and his support of her musical talents, which would allow her to avoid Gregor's own cruel fate. His relationship with his parents is burdened by pity, guilt, and a pervasive inability to

communicate which, of course, is greatly exacerbated by the fact that nobody can understand Gregor after his unexpected transformation.

Seen from this angle, Gregor's metamorphosis comes almost as a relief to him. He is unburdened, suddenly has to take exhilarating risks, and has an excuse to demand to be left alone. This seems a good metaphor for someone liberating themselves from societal conventions by entering the world of free artistic expression. It must feel like exhilarating at first.

Soon, however, alienation follows and the artist no longer feels understood by anyone. Gregor hears his own "voice" differently than others. Rapidly, humans fail to understand what he says, which only comes across as aggressive hissing. Although initially well-meaning, Grete cannot figure out what Gregor really needs in terms of nourishment. This will ultimately become his undoing.

Even worse, Grete turns against Gregor, probably out of frustration with his inexplicable transformation and its collateral consequences on her and her parents. Compassion is replaced by (understandable) resentment. Gregor becomes a burden to everyone. At the same time, he also fails to achieve his own goals. His room is rearranged beyond recognition. He does not get the nourishment he so urgently needs. Strong parallels here with another one of Kafka's stories, "The Hunger Artist."

Another interesting aspect of Gregor's metamorphosis is that its superficial, physical aspects are complete at the very beginning of the story, while its deeper, psychological aspects occur much more slowly, still not really being complete at the time of his sad and lonely death. In other words, the way people see him transforms much faster than the gradual change within. Again, a strong metaphor for the misunderstood artist, who does not even perceive the progression of his increasing alienation from society, since it happens gradually. Like the frog that's being slowly boiled to death, without ever escaping the pot it is being cooked in.

This story attracted me with morbid fascination when I first read it as a high school student in Switzerland. Now it moved me, made me sad. So little has changed since Kafka expressed his agony and alienation in writing. His story is harsh cultural criticism. All sentient beings are Gregor, to some extent. Alienated, dying bit by bit for lack of nourishment. Perhaps humanity's greatest challenge at this point is to create a more nourishing, listening society. Colonising Mars will be easy compared to this.

Appendix

Detailed notes on translation and what creature Samsa transforms into.

p3 'Ungeziefer' is 'vermin' (which can be bugs, but is also often used for rodents or other vertebrate pests. Samsa's segmented abdomen and his many wriggling legs strongly suggests that he transformed into an member of the arthropod phylum (no vertebrate has more than four legs, and arthropods are the only invertebrates with jointed legs---which is what 'arthropod' means). The white spots allude to a filthy creature,

a cockroach or a bedbug perhaps.

p4 'menschlicher Verkehr' is translated as 'human relationships' but in German is very close to 'Geschlechtsverkehr' (often abbreviated to 'Verkehr', a very technical (and ugly-sounding) term for sexual intercourse.

p5 'die Schuld der Eltern' is translated as 'the parents' debt' but could also mean 'the parents' guilt'.

p6 'ohne Rückgrat': again, he's an invertebrate and thus an arthropod. The squeaking in Gregor's voice does not fit this though. Insects hiss, rodents squeak. So there is at least some confusion as to what he has become.

p8 'einknicken' is translated as bend, but 'einknicken' clearly implies a jointed appendage (arthropod). The whole part about trying to right himself clearly evokes the image of an insect (a beetle?) on its back.

p10 'Der Rücken schien hart zu sein': his back is hardened, suggesting an exoskeleton (also: p6 describing Gregor as spineless even when he was still a human).

p10: 'wo dann die Beinchen hoffentlich einen Sinn bekommen würden': the transformation is described as Gregor acquiring a new purpose, although a non-human one. The physical transformation is complete at the beginning of the story. What's more important is the mental transformation to a new perspective on the world.

p11 'Prokurist' is translated as 'manager'. But he's more like an authorized officer or representative. He is the one with legal power in the office, not the one who manages people necessarily in the modern sense of enabling them to do their job. This is a rather old-fashioned term.

p16 'mit seinen Beinchen' translated as 'thin limbs', but literally means 'little legs'. Again, an arthropod feature.

p16 'eine Tierstimme' ('an animal's voice'): arthropods don't have voices! If they make noise, it's with their limbs (or wings).

p17 'hustete er ein wenig ab': coughing is something arthropods don't do either...

p18: 'die Ballen seiner Beinchen hatten ein wenig Klebstoff': insects and spiders have smooth adhesive pads on their limbs that make use

of liquid secretions for adhesion

p18 'daß er keine eigentlichen Zähne hatte': definitely not a rodent then, they are all teeth!

p18 'eine braune Flüssigkeit kam ihm aus dem Mund': not vertebrate blood, but arthropod hemolymph (a fluid, analogous to the blood in vertebrates, that circulates in the interior of the arthropod body), which is not usually brown though, but rather blue-green.

p22 'auf seine vielen Beinchen': how many legs does Gregor actually have? Knowing this would help us a lot to narrow his nature down to insects, spiders, crustaceans, or myriapods. 'Many legs' actually suggests something like a woodlouse or a centipede.

p22 'sie gehorchten vollkommen': Gregor is slowly gaining control over his arthropod body, becoming arthropod in his mind.

p23 'sinnlos' could be translated as pointlessly. She has no sense of what's going on and what she's doing makes no sense to Gregor.

p23 'war ganz aus dem Sinn gekommen' is translated as 'has disappeared completely from his mind' which is odd. This sentence should read 'The manager momentarily lost his mind.' Kafka plays with the word 'Sinn' a lot, which can both mean 'sense' (as in perception) and 'purpose'.

p23 'mehrmals mit den Kiefern ins Leere zu schnappen': this reminds me of a chelicerate (a scorpion, maybe) or a beetle; cockroaches don't have strong jaws

p24 'Zischlaute' is translated as 'sibilants' which is a technical term used by linguists; the impression I get in German that the father is just hissing in Gregor's direction. On p25, we learn that this hissing sound is deeply irritating to Gregor.

p24 'der tödliche Schlag...' does not really help; a blow from a cane could be deadly for any small animal. May represent divine retribution for a carelessly wasted life?

p25 The entire scene where Gregor has to squeeze through the door suggests that he has a hard exoskeleton, since is neither able to bend or squeeze his body through the opening without getting the legs on one side of his body lifted off the floor.

p26 'heftig blutend' Arthropods don't bleed. They don't have blood.

p27 'ungeschickt mit seinen Fühlern tastend' A feeler is an antenna or palp. The presence of an antenna may be the first really strong indication that we are dealing with an insect (but then, woodlice have antennae too).

p27 'Ein Beinchen war übrigens... schwer verletzt worden...' Does The fact that Gregor can move without his injured leg tell us anything about his species? I think not. Could be anything from millipede to cockroach.

p28 'wenn der ganze Körper schnaufend mitarbeitete' Whole body breathing is required if you breathe through trachea, i.e. if you are either an insect or a myriapod. But again the evidence is suggestive, not conclusive.

p28 'die Milch' Gregor does not like milk and bread, which is strange. A cockroach would eat almost anything with gusto.

p28 'ein Ende mit Schrecken' is a set phrase that doesn't sound as horrible as 'a horrible end', but imparts an ominous premonition on the reader in this context.

p29 'das hohe freie Zimmer...' Scurried evokes an insect much more than the much more neutral German 'eilte'. Many arthropods live underground, so this doesn't help us any further.

p30 'er hatte doch nicht wegfliegen können' Why does his sister think Gregor cannot fly away? Insects are winged animals. Maybe he can't fly away since the room is locked. Or is he a centipede-like creature after all?

p31 'Seine Wunden mußten übrigens auch schon vollständig geheilt sein.' Insects have rapid wound healing although Kafka could not have known about that.

p31 'saugte schon gierig an dem Käse' Sucking feeding suggests a detritus-eating insect. Gregor also hates fresh smells. Could be a cockroach. But many other bugs as well. Definitely bug-like though.

p32 'mit etwas hervorgequollenen Augen' This is curious. Insects can't move their eyes at all. But then, they're protruding all the time. Maybe I'm overthinking this?

p38 Gregor is losing sight of the human world outside. Maybe a sign of his becoming insect. Or a feature of his complex eyes?

p38/39 The increasing stench which Gregor seems to produce is an indicator for him being a cockroach or a bug.

p41 'kreuz und quer über Wände und Plafond zu kriechen' That's what those sticky pads on his feet are for! Definitely an insect. Spiders have those pads too, but don't breathe with their whole body (and have softer exoskeletons than Gregor).

p44 Now Gregor is becoming estranged from his sister as well. With the furniture goes the last human remnant...

p49 'ausrücken' is translated as setting out, but has distinct military connotations in German. A sign of how Gregor treated his job?

p50 'staunte über die Riesengröße seiner Stiefelsohlen' Is Gregor shrinking over the course of the story? How could a massive insect (human-sized!) stick to the ceiling...? But then, how could such an insect breathe and move in the first place, without getting crushed by its own weight and asphyxiated by a lack of oxygen?

p52 The scene with Gregor's mother coming out of the room, increasingly half-dressed and 'in gänzlicher Vereinigung' with his father has weird but very obvious sexual undertones.

p53 Equally weird is the apple that gets stuck in Gregor's 'Fleisch', which is not something you would usually use to describe an insect.

p58 'die viele Feuchtigkeit kränkte allerdings Gregor' Not typical for a cockroach to be sickened by dampness...

p59 'vor Wut darüber zischte' Hissing cockroach? But again, the noise these insects make are not coming from their mouths...

p59 'alter Mistkäfer' is correctly and literally translated as 'old dung beetle'. Clearly, Gregor is an insect, but beyond that, the old widow's zoological accuracy cannot be trusted. Also: 'Mistkäfer' may be used quite generally for any kind of smelly insect. Gregor does not seem to like the term.

p64 'War ein Tier, da ihn die Musik so ergriff?' This is strange. Has Gregor become so much of an animal that he has forgotten that he *is* an animal? And why does being seized by music imply that you're an animal?

p68 'Untier' is a peculiar expression in German. Literally a monstrous animal, not just a monster. Similar to 'Ungeziefer' (vermin), as in the initial description of Gregor's state.

p70 'er fühlte den Hals steif werden' This is curious. Cockroaches or beetles don't have a real neck. Certainly, they don't get a stiff neck!

p73 'Seht nur, wie mager er war' Again, this is curious. An insect with its exoskeleton would not get thinner upon starving. Is Gregor becoming more human again in his last moments? But then, maybe, it's just a figurative statement, since in actuality Gregor is not really thin, but rather 'flat and dry'.

Als Gregor Samsa* eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen* erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer*

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug.

'O God,' he thought, 'what a demanding job I've chosen! Day in, day out on the road. The stresses of trade are much greater than the work going on at head office, and, in addition to that, I have to deal with the problems of traveling, the worries about train connections, irregular bad food, temporary and constantly changing human relationships which never come from the heart. To hell with it all!'

»Ach Gott,« dachte er, »was für einen anstrengenden Beruf habe ich gewählt! Tag aus, Tag ein auf der Reise. Die geschäftlichen Aufregungen sind viel größer, als im eigentlichen Geschäft zu Hause,* und außerdem ist mir noch diese Plage des Reisens auferlegt, die Sorgen um die Zuganschlüsse, das unregelmäßige, schlechte Essen, ein immer wechselnder, nie andauernder, nie herzlich werdender menschlicher Verkehr.* Der Teufel soll das alles holen!

Nun, die Hoffnung ist noch nicht gänzlich aufgegeben; habe ich einmal das Geld beisammen, um die Schuld der Eltern* an ihn abzuzahlen—es dürfte noch fünf bis sechs Jahre dauern—mache ich die Sache unbedingt

Anyway, I haven't completely given up that hope yet. Once I've got together the money to pay off the parents' debt to him—that should take another five or six years—I'll do it for sure.

He was the boss's minion, without backbone or intelligence

Es war

eine Kreatur des Chefs, ohne Rückgrat* und Verstand