

# Heftings: A Preliminary System to Support Impossible Translation

*Chris Kerich and Nick Montfort*

June 2017

TROPE-17-01

## **Abstract**

The Heftings project is an experiment in alternative ways of approaching particularly difficult to translate literature, with the idea that different *attempts* at translation can be provocative and interesting, even if they do not result in a complete, successful translation as conventionally understood. The aim of this report is to describe the concept behind Heftings and the process of building the first particular Heftings platform, a site for collaborative translation, in 2016. Focusing on that system, this report details specific quirks and customizations and how this version of the Heftings system has been used.

A technical report from

The Trope Tank  
NYC, 545 E 14th St & MIT, 14N-233  
[http://nickm.com/trope\\_tank/](http://nickm.com/trope_tank/)

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Heftings began in 2016 as a project adjacent to Renderings. The goal of the Renderings project is the translation to English of computational work originally in languages other than to English, for instance, the translation of a working Polish text generator, a computer program, to a computer program that functions as an English text generator. The goal of Heftings is different, in that the project seeks to facilitate translation (or at least attempts at translation) from any language to any language. In addition, Heftings is concerned with exceedingly difficult to translate work, including literary works bound by formal constraints, such as palindromes, but also including visual poetry, highly allusive writing, and other sorts of texts. Heftings, unlike traditional translation projects, aims to collect many different “translation attempts” that experiment with different emphases or styles of translation, and valuing different aspects of a work. These attempts may paint a clearer picture of the source work than any single canonical translation. The idea is not new; one of the more interesting books that take a similar approach is Douglas Hofstadter’s *Le Ton beau de Marot* (1997).

### **Building Heftings**

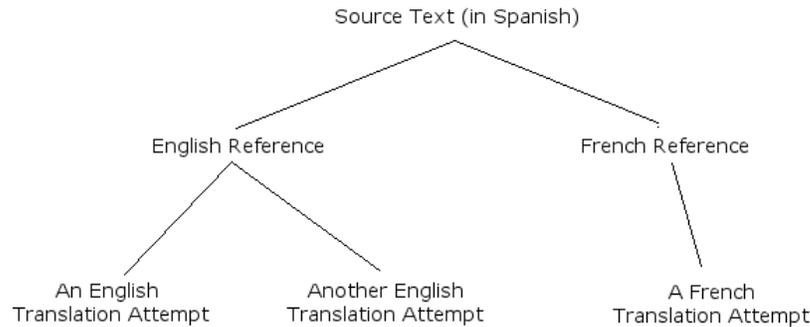
The first main decision was the technological basis for Heftings. We decided to use a wiki platform, specifically Dokuwiki. This was because of the participatory ease of a wiki and the availability of useful plugins, and also because, in the future, it seemed like it would be relatively easy to allow the user interface language to be swapped between many languages – something very important for a multilingual translation platform. The current version of Heftings uses 33 PHP plugins, and many of them are heavily modified to suit the needs of the specific project. It is structured in a four-level tree structure: the root, the source text page, a language-specific reference page, and translation attempts (Figure 1). As each is discussed, explanations will be provided of the difficulties in creating them and of what modifications or plugins were necessary for this implementation.

### **The Structure of Heftings**

The first page displayed when logging into Heftings, which has only been available as a private site, is the root page. The only items on the page are a link to create a source text node, a filterable list of all the source texts, and a diagram of the structure of the platform as it had been determined by Montfort, myself, and other Trope Tank researchers. The diagram was included because the structure of Heftings has been hard to grasp for new users, even a limited group that has discussed the project before joining. Although it is the content pages are all only on essentially three levels (strictly

speaking, the entire three is four-level, including the root), it is an unusual structure for a wiki of any sort and for any sort of translation project.

**Figure 1.** The diagram of Heftings’s structure, using examples, that is shown on the home page.



The list of all source texts can be filtered by language, which in turn is based on a language tagging system applied across Heftings. Each page has a tag that explains what kind of page it is: source text, reference, or translation attempt. Pages have an additional tag or tags which indicate their language or languages (for multilingual works). The tagging plugin is unmodified, but the filterable list plugin has been changed to display its information in a clearer way, to remove some unused UI elements for the purposes of Heftings, and to support a wider array of characters than before.

Clicking the “add a source text” link will take the user to an HTML form through which they can add a source text, using an HTML forms plugin. This plugin references another template plugin which uses the contents of the HTML form to create a new page based on a template. In Heftings, unlike in some other wikis, users are not meant to create new pages by hand but instead to use these forms to create pages of particular types. The HTML form takes the source text and source language but, notably, does not reserve a field for a title. Instead, the plugin has once again been modified to create the page title itself based on the first line of text, replacing Dokuwiki’s reserved characters with underscores. The plugin has also been modified to change the browser’s page to the created page after the “create” button is pressed.

Welcome to Heftings!

Browse existing works using this filter or [add a source text](#):

Filter

Language

<a href="#">9691 edna d niluom ua</a>	2016/04/11 13:49	Chris Kerich
<a href="#">aatto saa taas ottaa</a>	2016/03/29 10:33	Veli-Matti Karhulahti
<a href="#">aeiti en iske seksineitiaie</a>	2016/04/07 12:10	Veli-Matti Karhulahti
<a href="#">alppiruusu</a>	2016/04/18 16:06	Veli-Matti Karhulahti
<a href="#">boom 1</a>	2016/04/06 19:05	Chris Kerich
<a href="#">boom 2</a>	2016/04/07 11:56	Michal Zmuda
<a href="#">boom 3</a>	2016/04/09 11:22	Michal Zmuda
<a href="#">iva</a>	2016/04/18 16:23	Veli-Matti Karhulahti
<a href="#">javenovi pivo nelej</a>	2016/03/18 13:08	Nick Montfort

**Figure 2.** A partial listing of source texts, shown on the home page after login.



The reference page is similar to the source text page, but it includes an HTML form to add a translation attempt and also features the current list of the current translation attempts. Adding a new translation attempt through the HTML form creates a title in the same way that the new source text title generation works, based on the first line of the text. On a created translation attempt page, there exists one more HTML form- to fork that translation attempt. This is added as a convenience, so that if one Hefter (our informal term for a user of the Heftings platform) is inspired by a translation attempt, they can create their own while keeping open the page of their inspiration. This new translation attempt will be attached to the reference page for that language.

### Up to Source

pig (sow)  
from  
USA

 English, Reference

#### Add a Translation Attempt

Attempt \*

Create Page

- [asp](#) 2016/03/17 23:32 Nick Montfort
- [cow](#) 2016/03/17 23:32 Nick Montfort
- [piglets](#) 2016/05/12 11:09 Veli-Matti Karhulahti
- [sin](#) 2016/11/20 13:26 Milton Läufer
- [swine](#) 2016/05/12 11:10 Veli-Matti Karhulahti
- [usa](#) 2016/03/17 23:31 Nick Montfort

## Discussion

Enter your comment. Wiki syntax is allowed:



**Figure 4.** The English reference page, with a short gloss. It could have also included other relevant high-level notes, for instance, that this is a word square. Six translation attempts have been made. Again discussion is enabled.

## Up to English Root

asp  
spa  
pas

 English, Attempt

### Discussion

 Nick Montfort,  2016/04/15 13:46

This is a word square in English ... none of the three-letter ones are really at all good translations of this.

---

Enter your comment. Wiki syntax is allowed:

**B** *I* U **TT** ~~S~~


















**Figure 5.** A specific English attempt. The translator (Montfort) computed all three-letter English word squares (based on a particular lexicon) and simply selected the “best” one, which, as indicated in a discussion comment, does make for a very good translation.

### Conclusions

As of writing, the current instantiation of Heftings has only twelve users, and work has tended to happen in bursts. The sometimes unwieldy nature of the platform sometimes necessitates guidance to facilitate even the smallest bit of work. Shorter works have tended to receive the most attention and have a greater diversity of translation attempts. Larger works have been attempted but require work to be done in smaller chunks and have generally been structured as diversified work on a single translation as opposed to a multiplicity of translations. In some cases (as with the “Boom” poems in Polish) the work done on the Heftings platform has contributed to a published translation. In other cases, work has revealed something about the plausibility of translating certain types of texts, such as short palindromes, across languages. While it is not known whether the project will remain in and be further developed using its current Dokuwiki incarnation, this version of Heftings serves as a prototype that can inform future incarnations.