

## In Search of Cultural Universals: Translation Universals. Case Studies

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### Abstract

*Knowledge of the world is disclosed under various shapes, among which language is the best representative. Specific to humans, it renders feelings and thoughts concerning different communication contexts where words become dynamic primitives endowed with meanings, which recreate themes and reconfigure space and time as universal coordinates. The main objective of the paper is to provide a tentative analysis of the way in which translation universals are manifest in translating proverbs and sayings in the short novels Popa Tanda (Pope Tanda) and Moara cu Noroc (The Lucky Mill) by Ioan Slavici.*

**Keywords:** translation, universals, proverbs, Romanian literature, Slavici

### Outlining the theoretical background

Subject of interdisciplinary debates, the problem of universality has been discussed in various fields: linguistics, culture, philosophy, international law, mathematics, physics, computation etc. Within the framework of *culture*, Brown's contribution (1991) to the analysis of universality (cf. human universals) can be mentioned, the results being summed up in *cultural universals* belonging to areas such as: *language and cognition; society; myth, ritual and aesthetics; technology* (Cultural Universal at Wikipedia).

By way of illustration, some cultural universals are included under *language and cognition*: language employed to manipulate others; language employed to misinform or mislead; *language is translatable*; abstraction in speech and thought; antonyms, synonyms; logical notions of "and", "not", "opposite", "equivalent", "part/whole", "general/particular"; continua (ordering as cognitive pattern); discrepancies between speech, thought, and action; figurative speech etc. From *myth, ritual and aesthetics* we have selected: magical thinking;

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beliefs about fortune and misfortune; beliefs and narratives; *proverbs, sayings*; poetry/rhetoric; childbirth customs; music, rhythm, dance etc. (Brown, D.E. 1991). The cultural universals that we will refer to are *translation universals* and *proverbs and sayings*.

Vehicle of both knowledge and communication, *translation* has been also considered a means of achieving cultural interchange: "Translation is the act that renders knowledge, whether literary or scientific, a mobile form of culture. Such mobility, in turn, is what gives human understanding a deep and lasting influence beyond the borders of its original setting" (Montgomery 2006: 65). Still under research, *translation universals* have been analysed starting from at least three types of approaches: linguistic, stylistic and social, with a view to uncover the common elements that occur in the translated texts and obtain generalizations that may lead to the development of the domain of translation studies. Baker (1993), Toury (1995, 2004), Chesterman (2004) have brought influential contributions to defining translation universals and illustrating their existence in connection with both the process from the source to the target text and the comparison between translations and other language texts. Some of the most studied translation universals are *explicitation, simplification, conventionalization, source language interference, underrepresentation of unique target language, untypical collocations*. Their analysis in various types of translated texts may also contribute to the domain of text-type typology both synchronically and diachronically.

### Corpus analysis

The corpus selected for our research contains a few *proverbs and sayings* picked up from the short novels *Popa Tanda (Pope Tanda)* and *Moara cu Noroc (The Lucky Mill)* belonging to the Romanian writer Ioan Slavici, and their English versions. The aim of this endeavour is to test hypotheses about translation universals in such unrelated languages as Romanian and English, using a parallel corpus: "The quest for universals is by nature international and collaborative. It is vital to combine findings from a wide variety of languages and language pairs, both typologically distant and close" (Mauranen 2006: 99).

In the table below, we introduced the data obtained by aligning the A and B samples analysed, in the following order: ST: Ioan Slavici; TTa: Emperle's / Lucy Byng and John Lane's English variant and TTb: Năbădan's English variant.

A. Ioan Slavici: *Moara cu noroc*

**ST:** Ioan Slavici: *Moara cu noroc*

ST1: Omul să fie mulțumit cu sărăcia sa, căci, dacă e vorba, nu bogăția, ci liniștea colibeii tale te face fericit. (33)

ST2: — Așa e lumea... grăi Ghiță. Să nu crezi nimic până ce nu vezi cu ochii. (41)

**TTa:** A. Mircea Emperle: *The Lucky Mill*

TT1a: By rights, a man ought to be satisfied with what he has; for, since we talk about it, *not* riches make one happy, but peace and quiet in one's house. (3)

TT2a: Now such is the world. *One ought never to believe anything until he sees it with his own eyes.* (21)

**TTb:** Fred Năbădan: *The Lucky Mill*

TT1b: A man should be contented with his poverty because, if it comes to that, *it's not* wealth, but the peace of your humble home that makes you happy. (87)

TT2b: "That's the way people are," Ghiță said. "You should believe nothing till you see for yourself." (95)

B. Ioan Slavici: *Popa Tanda*

**ST:** Ioan Slavici: *Popa Tanda*

ST3: Unde nu e nădejde de dobândă lipsește și îndemnul de lucru. (143)

ST4: Este în cartea învățăturilor despre viața lumească o scurtă învățătură: binevoitorii de multe ori ne sunt spre stricare și răuvoitorii spre folos. (149)

ST5: Dar tot vorba cea veche: un necaz naște pe celălalt. (153)

ST6: Nevoia este cel mai bun învățător. (155)

**TTa:** Lucy Byng, John Lane: *Popa Tanda*

TT3a: Where there is no hope of reward there is no incentive to work. (...)

TT4a: In the Book of Wisdom, concerning the life of this world, there is a short sentence which says: *our well-wishers are often our undoing and our evil-wishers are useful to us.*(...)

TT5a: But there is the old proverb, "Much wants more".

TT6a: They say "Necessity is the best teacher". (...)

**TTb:** Fred Năbădan: *Pope Tanda*

TT3b: Where there is no hope of gain, there won't be any drive to work. (22)

TT4b: There is a short piece of wisdom in the Book about worldly life: *well-wishers often do us harm, while the malicious might turn out to be to our profit.* (28)

TT5b: But again *one piece of trouble brought about another.* (32)

TT6b: *Need is the best teacher.* (34)

<p>ST7: <i>Vremurile vin; vremile se duc: lumea merge înainte, iară omul, când cu lumea, când împotriva ei.</i> (157)</p>	<p>TT7a: <i>The years come, the years go; the world moves on, and man is sometimes at peace with the world, and sometimes at odds with it.</i> (...)</p>	<p>TT7b: <i>Times will come and go; the world keeps moving ahead, while a man will either go with it or stand up against it.</i> (36)</p>
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Table 1: Romanian sayings and proverbs and their English variants (from Slavici's *The Lucky Mill* and *Pope Tanda*)

The occurrence of proverbs and sayings in Slavici's short novels is both a characteristic of his style, and a manifestation of universal wisdom, of similarity in difference, aspects which the translators tried to preserve in their English variants. Tokens of universal wisdom in Slavici's *The Lucky Mill* and *Pope Tanda*, the proverbs and sayings are the direct results of the author's insertion of "a moral or a pragmatic thesis in the patterns of human behaviour ...in his stories, the characters and situations thus acquiring implicit exemplarity" (Năbădan 1987: 5).

The samples under research in Table 1 evince their thematic connection with well-known quotes circulating world-wide, in a two-fold direction: moving from the universal cultural repository towards the Romanian background, or reaching generality through interpretation of the Romanian specificity. The three interpretations below will try to support the first coordinate.

The frequently quoted sayings *Money doesn't bring happiness, Money can buy a house, but not a home, There is no greater wealth in this world than the peace of mind* are reiterated by the moralizing statement in ST1 *nu bogăția, ci liniștea colibei tale te face fericit*, praising happiness through peace in the house, not the one brought by money. This meaning has been preserved in the two English variants, with a plea for equivalence achieved through: addition, applied for the sake of emphasis either lexically, e.g. *peace and quiet* in TT1a, or syntactically, through a cleft construction e.g. *it's not wealth, but the peace of your humble home that makes you happy* in TT1b; borrowing, e.g. the French origin word *riches* in TT1a was preferred to the English word origin *wealth* in TT1b.

The famous adage *Seeing is believing* finds its Romanian counterpart in ST2 *Să nu crezi nimic până ce nu vezi cu ochii*, rendered in the two English variants by means of semantic translation which sticks

to the message, with a slight change in the addressee *one/two* and a shift from an overt expression of the instrument in TT2a which is more appropriate to the source text, e.g. *he sees it with his own eyes* to an opaque one in TT2b: *see for yourself*.

The well-known proverb *Necessity is the mother of invention* has as a possible Romanian equivalent in Slavici's sample, ST6, *Nevoia este cel mai bun învățător*, having the similar meaning, i.e. "if someone really needs to do something they will find a way of doing it", a truth accepted by the two English variants in most appropriate equivalent forms with a change in word choice for *Nevoia*: *Necessity* in TT6a e.g. "*Necessity is the best teacher*" and by *Need* in TT6b, e.g. *Need is the best teacher*, obtained through a word for word translation, that best fits the source text.

The following examples will try to delineate the second coordinate, i.e. the rise of the Romanian sayings to the status of universally shared forms encapsulating human values: "The themes, the metaphors, and the subjects of stories, songs, and sayings of peoples who live in countries remote from each other and who speak completely unrelated languages exhibit a high degree of similarity that history could not explain." (Roy in Samovar 2012: 224) (our emphasis).

In ST5: *un necaz naște pe celălalt* was translated in TT5a "*Much wants more.*" by a truncated sentence reminding us of the Aesopian proverb *Much wants more and loses all*. This is a case of non-equivalence both in form and meaning, as well as an example of both simplification and underrepresentation of unique target language elements. The translation *one piece of trouble brought about another* in TT5b is a literal one, sticking close to the meaning of the source text and of the acknowledged proverb: *Trouble is to a man what rust is to iron* (Yiddish Proverb quotes, searchquotes.com).

In translating ST4: *binevoitorii de multe ori ne sunt spre stricare și răuvoitorii spre folos*, where Slavici gives his word of advice about friends and enemies in our lives, the strategy of explicitation was used in both variants: TT4a: *our well-wishers are often our undoing and our evil-wishers are useful to us*; TT4b: *well-wishers often do us harm, while the malicious might turn out to be to our profit*, making us remember the universal saying: *Keep your friends close and your enemies closer* (phrase.com).

The English proverbs corresponding to *Unde nu e nădejde de dobândă lipsește și îndemnul de lucru* in ST3, about work done and the reward that should come after, are *Where there is no hope of reward there is no incentive to work* in TT3a and *Where there is no hope of gain, there won't*

be any drive to work in TT3b, representing cases of explicitation, symmetrically achieved by means of the cliché-structured expression *where there (be)...there (be)*, specific to proverbs. This aims at the truth expressed by one of Ovid's quotes: *Men do not value a good deed unless it brings a reward* (searchquotes.com).

In ST7: *Vremurile vin; vremile se duc: lumea merge înainte, iară omul, când cu lumea, când împotriva ei*, Slavici restates the leitmotif of time lapse and of man trying to deal with it. The translations proposed in TT7a: *The years come, the years go; the world moves on, and man is sometimes at peace with the world, and sometimes at odds with it.* and TT7b: *Times will come and go; the world keeps moving ahead, while a man will either go with it or stand up against it* are also cases of explicitation. We consider *Time flies, but you are the pilot. So, when they say you can't have your cake and eat it, too, rob the baker* (searchquotes.com) to be the best referential quote equivalent to our samples.

## Conclusions

The translation universals that we have found manifest in the corpus analysed, the English variants of Slavici's proverbs and sayings as cultural universals, are explicitation, simplification and underrepresentation of unique target language. This is the result of using a parallel corpora approach which has led to an increased knowledge about both source and target language-specificity, about typological and cultural differences, "[...] the principle of the saying is universal, while the expression relates uniquely to its culture" (Roy in Samovar, 2012: 224).

The paper has also aimed at initiating a discussion on the translation of small cultures and their reception abroad. With this in mind, we may consider that Slavici has his contribution to enriching the universal bulk of quotes as means of our coping with the ways of the world.

## Corpus

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