

Accessing Local Literatures via Public Institutions Websites

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Abstract

Most public institutions create and disseminate pragmatic, community oriented information via their official websites. Some, however, also have pages dedicated to literary text production, distribution and consumption. A case in point is the regional "V. A. Urechia" Public Library, Galați, Romania, with its webpage, available at <http://www.bvau.ro/>. Its cultural component, Axis Libri, includes links to the homonymous literary salon, cultural magazine, publishing house and book festival – all of which primarily promote Romanian culture, literature and education – but for the larger public access is limited due to the fact that translation into international languages (mostly English and French) is only partly provided, for three of the twenty-four volumes of the Axis Libri cultural magazine. A sample text and its translation into English, 'Fănuș Neagu: Cum am scris Îngerul a strigat' ['Fănuș Neagu: How I Wrote The Angel Yelled'], are under scrutiny here, generating considerations regarding local representation and intercultural communication.

Keywords: culture, literature, translation, representation, website design

1. Introductory lines

Local literatures, produced in minority languages and carrying a relatively unknown cultural component, go global via translation into an international, majority language. In the contemporary new media age, one no longer resorts to translated hard copies of local literary productions only. Translations are now digitised and increasingly made public through the internet. However, one needs to exercise critical judgement in the selection of web resources that disseminate translated texts. Trustworthy, among others, are generally the official ones of public institutions like academies, national literary societies, research/ cultural institutes, colleges and universities, embassies, museums and libraries. Yet the obvious minuses of their electronic marketing strategies, as well as the flaws in the translations uploaded, raise questions with reference to the intercultural mediation they support and invite further investigation efforts. The particular case chosen for illustration is that of the "V. A. Urechia" Galați County Public Library and its webpage, available at <http://www.bvau.ro/>, which advertises Romanian culture, but provides little information to the international public. Under special focus is one of the few cultural translations from Romanian into English to be accessed on the respective site, Fănuș Neagu's 'Cum am scris Îngerul a strigat' ['How I Wrote *The Angel Yelled*'].

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2. Case study

Named after the renowned Romanian historian, writer and politician, Vasile Alexandrescu Urechia (1834-1901), the Galați County Public Library is more than one hundred years old. A parliament representative for the region at the time, Urechia made a donation of 3,000 volumes to “Vasile Alecsandri” College Galați in October 1889. Two months later, in December 1889, the library’s foundation was initiated by the Ministry of Cults and Public Instructions, signed by Theodor Rossetti – prime minister, and approved by King Charles I of Romania (Decree 3382/ 1889). Along the years, the public institution has gained prestige, has attracted numerous readers and collaborators, and has built trust in the information it circulates.

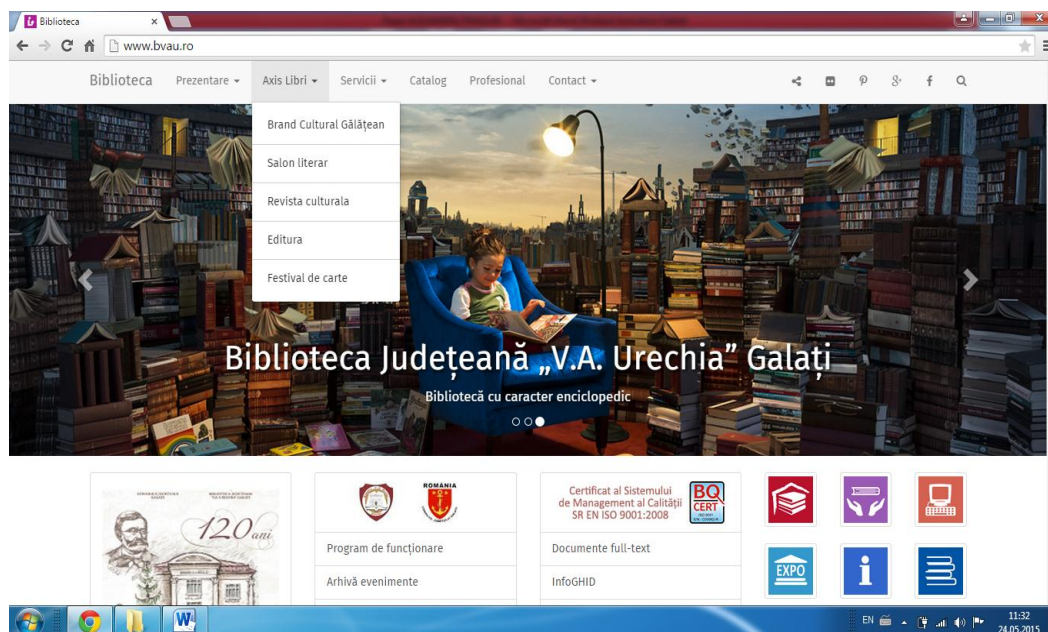
2.1. The website

Today, the public institution is well organised, addresses a large number of customers (common readers, scholars and researchers, etc.), and offers a wide range of services, including loans, access to resources, document supply, study and research, inter-library exchange, specialised assistance, training courses, cultural workshops and seminars, literary readings etc. Most of its informative archives and databases are accessible online, through an interactive website, relatively well managed and designed, structured along the following sections: *Prezentare* [Presentation], *Axis Libri* [Axis Libri], *Servicii* [Services], *Catalog* [Catalogue], *Profesional* [Professional] and *Contact* [Contact].

While four of the entries match the expectations of common library users, one does not. *Axis Libri*, the odd one out, is intended for the specialist, including links to *Brand Cultural Gălățean* [Galati Cultural Brand], *Salon literar* [Literary society], *Revista culturala* [Cultural magazine], *Editura* [Publishing house], *Festival de carte* [Book festival]. It is gratifying at the level of content, but has noticeable problems from the point of view of the language used (see Figure 1 below):

- a. There is no consistency in terms of the use of definite articles: *salon* [salon]; *revista* [**the** magazine]; *editura* [**the** publishing house]; *festival* [festival].
- b. Loanwords are employed, even if there are appropriate Romanian equivalents: *brand*, instead of *marcă*.
- c. Capital letters are misused: *Brand Cultural Gălățean* [Galati Cultural Brand]; in Romanian, the correct form is *Brand cultural gălățean*.
- d. Diacritical marks are sometimes omitted: *culturala* instead of *culturală*. Not only should graphemes correspond to phonemes in Romanian orthography, but the use of diacritical marks is compulsory in public places, relations and institutions (Law 500/ 2004; Law 183/ 2006).

Figure 1. “V. A. Urechia” Library main page



Under *Axis Libri*, the link to *Revista culturala* [Cultural magazine], which provides the sample text(s) focused upon in what follows, includes a short presentation of the publication, names the editorial team, reiterates the entries already mentioned, advertises the 2015 book festival organised annually by the library, introduces a brief bibliographical note and offers access to the *Axis Libri* archives (see Figure 2 below). The observations to be made about this page might be summed up as:

- a. Some diacritical marks are missing: *varietate tematica* instead of *varietate tematică* [thematic variety]; *buna și fertilă* instead of *bună și fertilă* [good and fertile], *urarea adresata* instead of *urarea adresată* [greeting addressed], *următoarea echipa* instead of *următoarea echipă* [the following team].
- b. From among the entries on the right hand side, at least one is superfluous. *Revista culturala* [Cultural magazine] takes users to the very same page they have just left.
- c. The archive is incomplete (not up to date). The September 2014 issue is the last one uploaded.
- d. *Fișă bibliografică* [Bibliographical note] announces that, starting with 2009, the quarterly magazine will also be published in French (first issue: March 2009) and in English (first issue: June 2009). Nonetheless, only three issues in French are accessible here (from March and September 2009, and from March 2010). The English ones are absent altogether. For those interested, the translations of *Axis Libri* into foreign languages are only available in hard copy, on library premises or, partially, through the Scribd digital library, at <http://www.scribd.com> (information not given on the institution's site).

Figure 2. *Axis Libri* Cultural Magazine page

While the flaws signalled at the level of web design and within the text in Romanian are easily rectifiable, the downside of the policy regarding translation as intercultural mediation –with no professional translators part of the staff (as shown in another study, following a questionnaire-based survey) – leaves deep traces in the long run. Therefore, the threat of denying access to local literary scenes due to the (partial) absence of translated versions of significant writing or due to inappropriately rendering its ideas and cultural content is to be scrutinised and found possible solutions to.

2.2. Text in focus

The sample text chosen is Fănuș Neagu's [1]: 'Cum am scris *Îngerul a strigat*', whose English translation 'How I Wrote *The Angel Yelled*' (*Axis Libri* 2009) demonstrates that translation-supported intercultural mediation is encouraged, but not carried through by the public institution "V. A. Urechia" Library.

As its title suggests, the article presents how the novel *The Angel Yelled* came to be, with emphasis on the context of its inception, not on the technicalities of writing. It is not an arid record of decisions made and steps taken, as much as it is a literary piece in itself. Fănuș Neagu brings to life an extinct universe and recreates the atmosphere of the sixties in Romania by blurring the boundaries between successive layers of representation: the beauty of the south eastern Danube landscape, the parochial savour of his native Braila and environs, the lingering memory of the country's national past and the overall harsh communist situation of the time. Romanianness breathes through the vernacular narrative,

appealing to the local reader, yet remaining difficult to decode by the cultural other (see Table 1).

Table 1. Text in focus. Fănuș Neagu, 'Cum am scris *Îngerul a strigat*' ['How I Wrote *The Angel Yelled*']

| Romanian original | English version (Paula Măhălean) |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Brăila</i> veche și mai cu seamă legenda ei suprapopulată de hoți romantici, plasată pe orbita Orientului de aventurieri zdrențăroși, doldora de vise și robiți de gândul pătrunderii în Eldorado, năucită de aur vechi, împotmolită în corăbii suple și azvârlită de către <i>Panait Istrati</i> pe altarul Mediteranei, unde <i>Șeherezada</i> mănâncă struguri, plutea în ancoră, prea puțin schimbată, la malul cel mai dulce al <i>Dunării</i>, pe care <i>Ștefan cel Mare</i> 1-a incendiat de șapte ori. Dacă n-a izbutit nici el să ne risipească, vă dați seama că nu vom pieri în veci. <i>Brăila</i> va fi mereu în vâltoarea visului, nedestrămată și numai învăluită în fumul jertfelor. Întinde mâna, zgâlțâie-i somnul și ascultă-i vorbele. Am mâna zdravănă și o ureche bună. Am ascultat-o și-am colindat-o în ungherele ei bătrâne. Ce oraș nemaipomenit! Suflet împovărat de crime, speranțe, năluciri, istorii cu <i>Chira Chiralina</i>, lăutari nebuni (de la <i>Petrea Crețu Șolcanu</i> la <i>Gheorghe Afloarei</i>) și Dumnezei ai ortodoxismului de toate nuanțele, plus felii de umbra lui, cel cu fața de tătar sau de turc. Zuruiau în amintiri și-n pereții caselor venite din alt veac averi fabuloase și pierdute <i>pe apa Sâmbetei</i>. Mulți înșelați de timp trecut mureau neîmpărtășiți, sub blestem și nenoroc. Apoi erau, adică umblau vii și alintate de purpura închipuirilor mele, poveștile despre <i>prinții Șutu</i>. (39)</p> | <p>Old <i>Brăila</i> and especially its legends, overpopulated with romantic heroes, placed on the Orient's orbit by ragged adventurers, packed with dreams and enslaved by the thought of El Dorado, drunk with old gold, stuck in supple tall ships and thrown by <i>Panait Istrati</i> on the altar of the Mediterranean sea, where <i>Sherezade</i> eats grapes, was floating tied by the anchor, not much changed, at the bank of the sweet <i>Danube</i>, that <i>Stephen the Great</i> burnt down seven times. If he didn't succeed in scattering us from here it means we will never die. <i>Brăila</i> will always be midstream of dreams. Unscattered and just enveloped in the smoke of sacrifice. Reach with your hand, shake her out of her sleep and listen to her words. I have a strong hand and a good ear. I listened to her and visited her in her old corners. What a great city! Her soul is heavy with crime, hopes, dreams, stories of <i>Kyra Kyralina</i>, mad fiddlers (from <i>Petrea Crețu Șolcanu</i> to <i>Gheorghe Aloarei</i>) and Gods of orthodoxism of all shades plus slices of his shadow, the one with the face of a Tatar or a Turk. Memories were rattling also in the walls of the houses that came from other centuries, fabulous fortunes lost in vain. Many were cheated by past time were dying with no last rites, under the curse and the bad luck. Then, there were, that is were walking alive and comforted by the purpura of my imagination, the stories about <i>the Șutu Princes</i>. (39)</p> |
| <p>Vedeți, cartea mea miroase a țărani, a oameni din mahalale și cârciumi și deopotrivă a întâmplări regale și princiare. Miroase și a <i>Dunăre</i>, și a <i>Panait</i></p> | <p>You see, my book smells of peasants, people from the slums and pubs as well as of royal and princelike happenings. It smells for the <i>Danube</i>, of <i>Panait Istrati</i> of</p> |

The cultural references in the original (*Brăila, Dunării/ Dunăre [(of the) Danube], Panait Istrati, Ștefan cel Mare, Chira Chiralina, pe apa Sâmbetei, prinții Șuțu*) are mostly preserved as such, translated word for word or found English spellings: *Ștefan cel Mare [Stephen the Great], Chira Chiralina [Kyra Kyralina], prinții Șuțu [the Șuțu Princes]*. The exception is the expression *pe apa Sâmbetei*, which is rendered in English by the equivalent phrase *in vain*. If the exotic proper names of secondary characters (*Petrea Crețu Șolcanu* and *Gheorghe Afloarei*) – inserted for authenticity and local colour – may be overlooked by the translator, for the clarification and disambiguation of the remaining elements of cultural specificity, a set of translator's notes would have been in order:

- a. *Brăila* – old town on the Danube, in south-eastern Romania; first attested in the mid fourteenth century; many legends about its romantic aura, its beautiful women, daring heroes and notorious villains still circulate;
- b. *Dunăre(a)* – large river which springs from the Black Forest in Germany, crosses several European countries, Romania included, and flows into the Black Sea on Romanian territory;
- c. *Panait Istrati* (1884-1935) – famous Romanian writer; born in Brăila, a town which is constantly revisited in his fiction;
- d. *Ștefan cel Mare* – voivode of Moldavia, a province of Romania, between 1457 and 1505; famous for his military deeds against the Ottoman Empire and for the monasteries he built (today World Heritage sites); a famous defence strategy of his was to torch the lands about to be invaded;
- e. *Chira Chiralina* (1923) – a tragic and romantic short story by Panait Istrati, part of the Adrian Zografi series; portrays a violent, decadent, Dionysian environment where kidnapping and human trafficking reign supreme; covers wide spaces and crosses cultural frontiers, from Eastern Europe to the Levant;
- f. *pe apa Sâmbetei* – in Romanian mythology, Sâmbăta (the Saturday) is the river of all rivers, which separates this world from the world beyond, and heaven from hell; the expression *a se duce pe apa Sâmbetei* (literally *to flow down the Saturday*) means *to be/ get lost, to go to waste, to vanish, to disappear, to die, to be destroyed*.
- g. *prinții Șuțu* – rich aristocratic family who, in the nineteenth century, owned estates and palaces in the Șuțești-Grădiștea area of Brăila county; had numerous peasants working their lands and used gypsy slaves for domestic chores and entertainment.

As regards the language of the translation provided, the following aspects deserve special consideration: misspellings/ punctuation mistakes have not been corrected; a few lexical and grammatical errors may be identified; some of the choices made structurally modify the meaning of the original; some others ask for improvement.

- a. misspellings:

- *Sherezade* (instead of *Scheherazade*);
 - *succed* (instead of *succeed*);
 - *Aloarei* (instead of *Afloarei*);
 - punctuation mistakes (no comma used): *of Panait Istrati of unchained dogs* (instead of *of Panait Istrati, of unchained dogs*).
- b. lexical errors:
- *purpura* (instead of *rosy colour*).
- c. grammatical errors:
- double subject – *If he didn't succed in scattering us from here it means we will never die.* (instead of *If he didn't succeed in scattering us from here means we will never die.*);
 - double direct object, unnecessary preposition – *visited her in her old corners* (instead of *visited her old corners*);
 - *his shadow* (instead of *her shadow*);
 - passive verb instead of verbal adjective – *Many were cheated by past time were dying.* (instead of *Many cheated by past time were dying.*);
 - unnecessary definite article – *the curse... the bad luck...* (instead of *curse... bad luck...*);
 - wrong preposition – *It smells for the Danube* (instead of *It smells of the Danube*).
- d. choices modifying meaning:
- *heroes* (instead of *thieves*);
 - *at the bank of the sweet Danube* (instead of *on the sweetest bank of the Danube*);
 - *dreams* (instead of *visions/ apparitions/ illusions*).
- e. choices to be improved:
- *Old Brăila and especially its legends, overpopulated with romantic heroes / Old Brăila, legendarily overpopulated with romantic thieves;*
 - *the thought of El Dorado/ the thought of finding El Dorado;*
 - *drunk with/ dazzled by;*
 - *supple tall ships/ slender ships;*
 - *tied by the anchor/ at anchor;*
 - *not much changed/ almost unchanged;*
 - *burnt down/ torched;*
 - *scattering us from here/ driving us away;*
 - *midstream of dreams/ caught in the vortex of dreams;*
 - *Unscattered and just enveloped/ unscattered, only enveloped;*
 - *reach with your hand/ reach out;*
 - *listened to... visited.../ have listened to... have visited...;*
 - *Gods of orthodoxism of all shades/ Orthodox gods of all shades;*
 - *past time/ the past;*
 - *Then, there were, that is were walking alive and comforted by the purpura of my imagination, the stories about the Șuțu Princes./ Then, there were the stories about the Șuțu Princes, alive and well, still circulating, comforted by the rosy colour of my imagination.;*

- *pubs/ taverns*;
- *princelike/ princely*.

The cultural and linguistic issues shown at work in the excerpts above are symptomatic for the whole article and its translation into English. The Romanian substratum slips under the foreign surface layer, and thus the translation misses the point. The language used does not do justice to the beautiful, magical story Fănuș Neagu tells about a novel which encapsulates the spirit of a people and the discourse of a generation.

An upgraded translation of ‘Cum am scris *Îngerul a strigat*’ [‘How I Wrote *The Angel Yelled*’] as part of a revised electronic edition of the issues of *Axis Libri* in English might be the short term solution to the current situation. On the other hand, a long term approach for “V. A. Urechia” Galați County Public Library might reside in reformulating both its language and its website design policies.

3. Concluding remarks

What the case study shows is that the representations of symbols, values, rituals and heroes run the risk of going unnoticed or of being misunderstood when no visibility is conferred to the translation as process and product, and when domestication – for the sole benefit of the reader immersed in the target language/dominant culture only – remains the only operating principle. (Venuti 1995, 1998) Stored in the collective unconscious of the inheriting nation and surfacing in its literature more frequently than in any other art form, these cultural fundamentals ask of the literary translator to find the perfect balance between politically determined domestication strategies or stylistically oriented text naturalizing, deforming tendencies (Berman 1985), and excessive foreignizing or minoritizing translation policies which, although cultivating heterogeneous discourses (Venuti 1998), will find few readers interested in interacting with it. As for the language skills required of the literary translator, especially of someone who translates out of their native language, it goes without saying that attaining those demands vocation and sustained professional training. It follows that leaving the act of translation as intercultural mediation to chance is unaffordable with public institutions which attempt to promote local literatures via their official websites.

Notes

[1] Born in Grădiștea, Brăila, Fănuș Neagu (1932-2011) was a Romanian novelist, playwright, memoir and short story writer, representative for the neo-modernism of the sixties. Well known works: *Îngerul a strigat* [*The Angel Yelled*] (1968), *Frumoșii nebuni ai marilor orașe* [*The Beautiful Madmen of Large Cities*] (1976), *Scaunul singurătății* [*The Loneliness Chair*] (1988), *Amantul Marii Doamne Dracula* [*Great Lady Dracula’s Lover*] (2001) – novels; *Ningea în Bărăgan* [*It was snowing in Baragan*] (1960), *Dincolo de nisipuri* [*Beyond the sands*] (1962) – short stories; *Cartea cu prieteni* [*The Book of Friends*] (1979), *Insomniile de mătase* [*Silk Insomnia*] (1981) – memoirs.

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