

Disempowering the Translator as Intercultural Mediator. The Age of the New Media

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Abstract

Marketing quality translations in view of advertising local cultures has become increasingly difficult in the context of the omnipresent electronic means of getting the message across. Today, intercultural mediation via translation has added the machine element to the traditional actors involved in the procedure. Machine translation – whether rule based, transfer based, dictionary based, example based, interlingual or statistical – is ideally intended to assist human translators, yet it frequently seems to be the only preferred alternative in accessing texts produced in a foreign language, bypassing the services of a qualified translator, especially for time and money related reasons. Under the circumstances, the tremendous threats that machine translation poses to the quality of the translated text, especially if it is a literary one, need special consideration. Along these lines, the present paper focuses on a case study presupposing the translation of a famous poem by the Romanian nineteenth century poet Mihai Eminescu through Google Translate, comparing and contrasting it with an authorized version by a nineteen-year old translator-genius who died in the 1977 earthquake, published posthumously. It is available in print, as well as on the internet – as written text and as subtitling to poetry reading.

Key words: culture, literature, communication, mediation, machine translation

Introduction

In the third millennium, translating across cultures necessarily involves the World Wide Web, as well as intricate digital support. The internet, which now governs global communication, has the potential of allowing translators a space and a voice of their own, on condition that they adapt to and accept the norms of the new digital environment and format of hypertext interface. The pluses are mainly linked to the fact that the latter allow effective intervention and creative interaction, thus increasing the visibility of the act of translating. The minuses are obvious in the notions of ‘original text’ (undergoing a process of multiple reproductions) and of

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authorship (with the translator possibly remaining anonymous) thus being deconstructed.

Word processing is now interactive (some would even say intrusive), in the sense that the built in spelling or grammar checkers readily available provide unsolicited intervention. The solicited aid may come under the form of word count, proofing language options, bilingual or explanatory dictionaries/ thesauruses, not to mention the various tools obtainable for checking and adapting the form/ layout of each document in the making (from fonts and indenting to headers and footers, bibliography styles, citation insertions etc.). Additional help is also available, on condition that the translator plans ahead and compiles databases for future reference and use, or that he employs specialized, professional software like terminology managers, indexers and/ or concordancers. Although assisted by the computer, the human translator remains central to the whole process whereby a source text, rooted in a source culture, becomes a coherent target text, meaningful within a target culture.

In machine translation, on the other hand, the human element is stereotypically backgrounded, to say the least, with negative repercussions on the translated end product and on the associated conveyance chain. Despite the myth of speedy and efficient intercultural communication by means of machine translation software, all the latter is capable of achieving is lexical substitution, grammatical appropriation (from the morphological and the syntactical, to the stylistic, semantic and pragmatic) being either partly carried forth or altogether out of the question. In short, machine translation software alone cannot generate quality linguistic and cultural equivalence. Although it is true that numerous efforts currently go into the compiling of representative corpora in view of aiding the translation process from one natural language to another, "it is quite striking that so far there remains a considerable gulf between theoretical MT research projects and commercially available practical systems." (Somers 2001: 148). Thus, the professional human translator's presence is absolutely necessary. Not only does he have to intervene as post-editor or to use the resulting rough draft as a form of pre-translation (Hutchins 1999), but his contribution is essential to designing machines and software, as well as to checking the existing, usually problematic, corpora which are freely accessible on the internet, then to providing the badly needed correct corpora, useful for future reference/ translations by non-professionals.

The machine translation system designs which have been in use along the years have been classified as: the first generation or direct

translation type (principally rule based); the second generation or indirect translation type (the interlingua, the transfer based and the corpus based systems); the third generation or hybrid type (combining the early rule based approach with the latter day corpus based one, bringing interlingual features in support of transfer systems and transfer components to interlingua approaches, adding probabilistic data and stochastic methods to rule based systems and rule based grammatical categories/ features to statistics- and example based systems, etc.). (Hutchins 1999: 432-433) Today, translators are working with linguists and computer scientists to develop

a machine that discovers the rules of translation automatically from a large corpus of translated text, by pairing the input and output of the translation process, and learning from the statistics over the data (Koehn 2010: xi).

From among the existing translation machines exploitable, the most popular seems to be Google Translate (translate.google.com/). In a subtitled promotion video inserted on one of the company's official sites, it is advertised as "a free tool that enables you to translate sentences, documents and even whole websites instantly", and its mechanism is detailed upon in simple, colloquial terms:

But how exactly does it work? While it may seem that we have a roomful of bilingual elves working for us, in fact all of our translations come from computers. These computers use a process called 'statistical machine translation' – which is just a fancy way to say that our computers generate translations based on patterns found in large amounts of text.

Catch words like 'free' and 'instantly', together with the self-ironic tone adopted in the explanatory ad above aid the marketing policy, to such an extent that they manage to convince people to employ the product (see the large numbers of users worldwide), regardless of the downsides openly admitted to by Google Incorporated which, though placed at the top of the same page, are written in grey, and are thus less attractive than the colourful link to the mini-video previously referred to: "not all translations will be perfect, and accuracy can vary across languages." (https://support.google.com/translate/answer/2534525?hl=en&ref_topic=2534563).

Nevertheless, trust is invested in the system, whose capacities, once advertised, are taken for granted, as is the translator underneath (replaced by the derogatory 'elf'), without deeper consideration of the fact that the more natural and readily-available the translation, the more complex its

underlying mechanisms, the more highly trained the translator. It follows that, taking on intercultural tasks and multimedia features, the translation supporting the system (both as process and as product) demands that constant changes in its theory and improvements in its practice should be made to avoid obsolescence.

Moreover, the automatic translation system is conferred visibility through The Google Translate Help Center page, while the human translator remains invisible. The machine component is thus empowered, leaving the medium/ mediator disempowered, which unfavourably impacts on the translated text. Although it would make sense to say that “the better the translation, the more successful the medium and the more invisible the mediator”, practically “the medium is self-annulling and in pragmatic translation it is bad rather than good translation which makes the medium transparent.” (Venuti 2010: 27)

Transparency and invisibility in translation do not serve intercultural mediation well. Non-critical, technical service providing needs replacement by the critical, deliberate enterprise of visible translation – a vocational act sustained by intensive training (Valero-Garcés 2006) which has the potential of resisting the dominant Anglo-American tradition of reductive domestication operated by intrusive power structures and effacing cultural difference (Venuti1995). If machine translation systems were to render the backing translators visible and if the latter, in turn, were to invest their translations with a critical approach towards cultural otherness expressed in language, then users would be allowed the possibility of informed choice based on professional results, the endless replication of random questionable translation efforts available at present would be avoided, and communication across cultures would actually be facilitated.

Case study

In the particular case of literary translation, intercultural mediation asks for supplementary support, which may only be provided by critical, visible involvement. Marketing local literatures and facilitating access to local cultures has been demonstrated as the most challenging mission a translator undertakes, which, naturally, cannot be matched by simple machine translation, whose end result is frequently misleading when not downright impossible to decipher. The example chosen to emphasise the widening gap between literary human translation and machine translation is that of *To the Star* signed by Corneliu Popescu and *The Star* by Google

Translate – based on *La steaua* (1886), by the Romanian romantic poet Mihai Eminescu (romanianvoice.com/poezii/poezii/steaua.php).

Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889) is one of the most representative and highly regarded figures in Romanian literature. The country's national poet, Eminescu has published memorable works which capture and promote the essence and the spirit of Romanianness within the broader frames of universal aesthetic and philosophical models which define his art. His sources of inspiration are Romanian history, culture and civilisation, while his poetic diction revisits the literary language of the past and is resonant of all the Romanian dialects or regional speech patterns in practice throughout the three traditional provinces of Moldova, Wallachia and Transylvania. Although widely read, studied and acclaimed in Romania, Mihai Eminescu and his complex vision remain partly unknown to the international public. The exponent of a literature produced in a minority language, elsewhere he may only be accessed through translation. Eminescu has been and is constantly being translated into numerous languages (from English, French, German and Spanish to Urdu and Chinese). From among the translators having contributed to bringing Romanian literature (at its best with Mihai Eminescu) under the spotlight and thus to de-marginalising it, are Petre Grimm, Dimitrie Cuclin, Leon Levițchi and Andrei Bantaș – renowned philosophers, linguists and university professors who have significantly imprinted Romanian culture and education during the twentieth century.

A disciple and collaborator of Andrei Bantaș, Corneliu M. Popescu has translated a collection of sixty-nine poems by Eminescu (published in 1978, one year after his death at the age of nineteen), which has been commended by all, specialists and non-specialists alike, at home and abroad. In 1983, The Poetry Society of Great Britain has established, in his memory, The Popescu Prize, awarded biennially for a volume of poetry translated from a European language into English (poetrysociety.org.uk/content/competitions/popescu/). The young translator's contribution to making Mihai Eminescu's voice heard throughout the world is exceptional, firstly considering that he operates in a foreign language – while translators are generally encouraged to translate into their native language, which is the one assumed to be mastered to perfection – and, secondly, bearing in mind that he demonstrates literary skill and cultural sensitivity. Under the circumstances, replacing a translation by Corneliu Popescu with a machine generated text is baffling, but it happens. The table below parallels the two extremes.

	Original text	Human translation	Machine translation
1	La steaua care-a răsărit	So far it is athwart the blue	The star that has risen
2	E-o cale-atât de lungă,	To where won star appears	E- way - so long ,
3	Că mii de ani i-au trebuit	That for its light to reach our view	That thousands of years they had
4	Luminii să ne- ajungă.	Has needed thousand years.	Light to reach us.
5	Poate de mult s-a stins în drum	Maybe those ages gone it shed	Perhaps more quenched way
6	În depărtări albastre,	Its glow, then languished in the skies,	Blue in the distance ,
7	Iar raza ei abia acum	Yet only now its rays have sped	And only now its radius
8	Luci vederii noastre.	Their journey to our eyes.	Luci our vision.
9	Icoana stelei ce-a murit	The icon of the star that died	Icon star that died
10	Încet pe cer se suie:	Slowly the vault ascended;	Slowly the sky climb :
11	Era pe când nu s-a zărit,	Time was ere it could first be spied,	It was when he saw not ,
12	Azi o vedem, și nu e.	We see now what is ended.	Today we see, and it's not.
13	Tot astfel când al nostru dor	So is it when our love's aspire	So when our longing

14	Pieri în noapte- adâncă,	Is hid beneath night's bowl,	Pieri - deep in the night ,
15	Lumina stinsului amor	The gleam of its extinguished fire	Light off amor
16	Ne urmărește încă.	Enkindles yet our soul.	We aim yet.

La steaua

by Mihai Eminescu

To the Star

Translated by
Corneliu M. Popescu

The Star

By Google Translate

La steaua

A well-balanced, perfectly symmetrical metaphysical poem which juxtaposes the cosmic and the human spaces to interrogate the nature of being, *La steaua* foregrounds the relativity of perspective induced by the intricate game of distance, time, life, death, love and memory. Stanza one disclaims the apparent immediacy and proximity of a rising star by emphasising the extended duration of light travel. Stanza two reinforces the confusion by focusing on the paradox of the delayed projection of an image which is no longer there. Stanza three closes the cycle, portraying the journey back (from the earth to the heavens) and the associated metamorphosis (from the material to the spectral). Lastly, stanza four transfers the process to the inner level of feeling and thought, highlighting the correspondences.

Although published more than a hundred years ago, the poem does not make use of archaic language. Neither does it employ an extremely formal diction. On the contrary, its complex content of ideas is expressed in every day terms, so that the main notions stay with the reader just as the memory lingers on with the poetic persona. The inversions, images, symbols and metaphors employed are simple in themselves, posing no actual threat for the translator. The real difficulties in finding an appropriate English equivalent lie mostly in word order, meter and rhyme scheme.

To the star

Corneliu Popescu's translation of *La steaua* has been uploaded on the internet – both as text and as subtitle frames – by various people, most of whom, interestingly, are Romanians living abroad, in English speaking countries. This in itself is symptomatic for the rising awareness of each nation's cultural potential and for the ensuing necessity of marketing quality artistic products across frontiers via translation.

In *To the Star*, Corneliu Popescu renders the content of the original faithfully, but operates changes at the level of linguistic register. His version is in formal, slightly archaic English, probably considered as better illustrating the poem's philosophical complexity: see 'athwart' = across (line 1), 'won' = dwelling (line 2), 'languished' = weaken, decline (line 6), 'ere' = before (line 11), 'aspire' = rise up, soar (line 13) and 'enkindles' = sets on fire (line 16).

The same types of figures of speech as those present in the source text are inserted, though context dependant variations are observable: inversion – 'so far it is...' (line 1), 'for its light to reach our view has needed...' (lines 3-4), 'only now its rays have sped...' (line 7), 'slowly the vault ascended...' (line 10); image – 'light' (line 3), 'glow' (line 6), 'rays' (line 7); symbol – 'star' (lines 2, 9), 'skies' (line 6), 'journey' (line 8), 'eyes' (line 8), 'icon' (line 9), 'fire' (line 15); metaphor – 'the blue' (line 1), 'vault' (line 10), 'night's bowl' (line 14), 'extinguished fire' (line 15).

Word order is disrupted by the deliberate inversions meant for emphasis (as shown above), but in translation it already poses problems due to the different grammatical norms in Romanian and English. The Romanian language allows the construction of clauses without a subject, while English does not. The original subject elliptical constructions are rendered by using the impersonal 'it' or by introducing personal/ relative pronouns and nouns ('we', 'what', 'time'): 'E-o cale-atât de lungă' (line 2) was translated as 'So far *it* is...' (line 1), inversion included; 'Poate de mult s-a stins în drum' (line 5), became 'Maybe those ages gone *it* shed/ Its glow...' (lines 5-6); 'Era pe când nu s-a zărit' (line 11) was turned into '*Time* was ere *it* could first be spied' (line 11); 'Azi o vedem, și nu e.' (line 12) has as equivalent '*We* see now *what* is ended.' (line 12).

Meter and rhyme scheme add further challenges to the translation of poetry, with faithfulness to the source text necessary in preserving the overall specificity of style and structure. Eminescu's ode follows the French prosody (with Romanian being a Romance language). It is written in syllabic verse, with rhythm based on the eight syllables per line. Its meter is

classical iambic, based on short-long syllable pairs. It has end stopped lines and an ABAB rhyming pattern.

Popescu's translation, on the other hand, abides by the rules of English (Germanic) versification. It is written in accentual-syllabic verse, with rhythm based on both the eight syllables and on the stresses in each line. Its meter, specific to languages with non-phonemic orthography, is based on stressed-unstressed syllable pairs. It has run on lines and preserves the ABAB rhyming pattern. The double jeopardy is overcome by choosing to maintain the fixed features of prosody (number of syllables and rhyming scheme), while assuming creativity resulting from the free play of replacing the Romance element with the Germanic one.

The star

The Google translation of the famous Romanian poem by Mihai Eminescu – *The star* – has one quality only: on the whole, it is in contemporary English and has an informal diction, which makes it easily accessible to all. Oddly enough, however, the formal 'quenched' and the scientific 'radius' appear (lines 5 and 7 respectively), with no perfect correspondence of the former in the original and as mistranslation of the latter: 's-a stins' = went out, was extinguished; 'raza' = ray, not radius.

As regards style and prosody, all rules are broken. The only surviving tropes are two visual images – 'light' (line 4), 'blue' (line 6) – and three symbols – 'star' (lines 1, 9), 'icon' (line 9), sky (line 10). Inversion still occurs in 'Blue in the distance' (line 6), 'And only now its radius' (line 8) and 'Slowly the sky climb' (line 10), not necessarily dictated by the Romanian pattern. In terms of word order, the machine has generally identified ellipsis and has introduced surrogate subjects, but with no regard for meaning transfer – e.g. 'We aim yet' (line 16). Meter, rhythm and rhyme are totally overlooked.

The most cumbersome remains the formal component. There are instances of Romanian lexical items being taken up as such: 'E' = is, exists (line 2), 'Luci' = gleamed, glowed, shone (line 8), 'Pieri' = disappeared, vanished (line 14) and 'amor' = love (line 15). Furthermore, the editing is incorrect: dashes are wrongly introduced – 'E- way - so long,' (line 2), 'Pieri - deep in the night,' (line 14); spaces follow punctuation marks – 'long,' (line 2), 'us.' (line 4), 'distance ,' (line 6), 'vision .' (line 8), 'climb :' (line 10), 'not ,' (line 11), 'see ,' (line 12) and 'night ,' (line 14).

Semantically empty, *The star* only has the appearance of a text and bears a slight resemblance with a four stanza poem. On a small scale, its

lexical units and its phrases serve reference and denotation purposes, yet its sentences and larger units of discourse signify nothing. For instance, if the phrase 'in the distance' (line 6) makes sense, the sentence 'Perhaps more quenched way/ Blue in the distance' (lines 5-6) does not. Language seems to have exploded, indeed for no artistic reason, and the poem has been turned into a collection of graphemes and an amalgamation of languages which discourages the reader, blocking out representation and communication.

Conclusions

What the case study primarily shows is that the difference between machine translation and human translation lies in that the former is a clumsy single-level conversion from source language to target language, whereas the latter is a complex three-level act of intercultural mediation. This is achieved thorough knowledge of the foreign language (level one: enabling), through bringing cultural apprehension into play and adjusting the message to the target audience (level two: facilitation/ localisation) and through providing a message which is both coherent in the target language and culture, and carries the specificities of the source language/ culture (level three: adaptation) (O'Hagan and Ashworth 2002: 74-76).

In effect, disempowering the translator as intercultural mediator, the new media interferes with the reader's engagement with the cultural substratum of the source text by limiting the experience to an outsider's approximation of the inside world beneath the language. It totally disregards the fact that

Language constructs the world through naming it, and constructs the concepts through which we understand life and the world. Thus different languages represent the world in different ways, and speakers of one language will understand and experience the world in ways peculiar to that language and differently to the ways of speakers of a different language (O'Shaughnessy 1999: 32).

Additionally, the new media is incapable of capturing the combinations and permutations of linguistic elements occurring in each text and carrying traces of subjectivity and/ or intentionality.

Each particular form of linguistic expression in a text – wording, syntactic option etc. – has its reason. There are always different ways of saying the same thing, and they are not random, accidental alternatives. Differences

in expression carry ideological distinctions (and thus differences in representation) (Fowler 1991: 4).

Such difficulties in encoding and decoding representation raise even more provocations where literary texts are concerned. Literature adds artistic technique and intertextual references to the puzzle, opening it up to multiple readings, varying interpretations and possible in-depth interactions with the texture beyond the structure. Thus, the translation of a literary text is ultimately a visible rewriting, a specialized and professional enterprise for the relatively few highly trained, competent and talented people in the branch.

These demands cannot be made on machine translation systems. Even the most versatile translation software, still to be developed, will never be able to serve cultural marketing goals entirely without input from the human actor. To minimize the threat of free, instant, effortless but poor machine translations circulating on the World Wide Web and not to endanger the future of quality translation as intercultural mediation, the idea that machine translation systems are nothing but tools must be reiterated and the contribution of the human translator must be advertised. Hence, conferring visibility to and encouraging his taking part in designing software, raising awareness regarding his role in adaptation, and soliciting more critical annotations to existing or subsequent translations are the sensible strategies to be adopted.

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