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WORLDS BEYOND WORDS: TRANSLATING DAVID LODGE INTO MEDIA(TED) CONTEXTS AND MEANINGS

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Punning Phrases, Puzzling Translations

As a rule, semantic and visual allusions enable the writer (translator, editor) to break out of the linear constraints of hermeneutic text construction by introducing echoic or reflected meanings in the manner of progressing regression. The aim of the present paper is, before anything else, that of investigating the process of translation as mediation (of meanings and/or cultural brands) wherein David Lodge the iconic brand (for satire on the academia) is culturally *trans*-lated into a new commodity, a new consumer good which is harnessing power not as product embodying work, but rather as a commodity which is different from and differing with the original, fathered both by the translator of the novel and by its editor (the artistic creator who finally decides on the book cover of the new, translated novel).

The analysis is carried out on David Lodge's latest novel (perhaps one would not be wrong to assume that it is his last novel, too!), *Deaf Sentence* (2008), published and translated into Romanian as *Mort de Surd***,** a most appropriate case of a cultural product which is translated and eventually mediated by the means of newly recreated and newly mediated language puns which are more situation based rather than language based.

The most frequently encountered use of metalanguage and the one most likely to cause translators sleepless nights is the pun and nowhere do the joys and the labors of translation coexist as noticeably as in the tight combat between a translator and a play on words.

As the title of David Lodge's latest novel seems to be alluding from the very beginning, perfect puns into the source text, *viz. Deaf Sentence* shade off into weak or imperfect puns in the target text, *viz. Mort de surd*. Seemingly, the translator of the novel accounts for her final choice into Romanian by the fact that in English the word *death* powerfully connotes with *deaf* – even the pronunciation of the two words poses some problems if they are to occur in the same sentence – but in Romanian this allusively phonological pun is quite impossible to render since *death* in English is *moarte* in Romanian and *deaf* in English is *surd* in Romanian thus leaving no room for any puns, regardless their nature. Moreover such a phrase as *deaf sentence* powerfully resonates with *death sentence*, therein the allusive pun which seems to be more language than situation based. In Romanian however, this pun is quite impossible to render – linguistically – but it is somehow compensated for and foregrounded by the visual account of the title *Mort de surd***,** i.e. a man (presumably the male protagonist of the novel) holding an old-fashioned trumpet-like hearing aid alluding thus to the hero's hearing problems and to the novel's seemingly comic nature.

Mediating Co(n)texts into Meanings

The entire novel seems to be gravitating around a pun (*deaf sentence/ death sentence*) which is announced as early as the novel's epitext and is developed throughout up to the end. One such punning episode in the novel is entitled '*Deaf in the afternoon*' and it powerfully connotes with Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* so that, what is apparently overloaded with comic potential eventually turns up to be somewhat more disheartening than hilarious: just like in a bullfight where there is always someone having fun at the expense of the bull tortured and killed on the arena by the matador, Professor Bates's ego (the male protagonist of the novel) is ultimately knelt down by his tormenting deafness.

Desmond Bates, a retired Professor of Linguistics woke up one day, twenty years ago and realised that his life was suddenly doomed to unexpected changes since he was diagnosed with high frequency deafness (H.F.D.). The story is taken up almost twenty years later, when Desmond Bates will have already coped with the anxieties of becoming stone deaf and the bitter awareness of his growing old. Sick and tired of having had his ears poked at to find a cure for this otherwise incurable disease, Desmond has to confine his life to using a hearing bug that connects him to the outside wor(l)d.

Deprived of his hearing and unable to really communicate, Desmond Bates represses his feelings of frustration and puts off forgoing psychological counseling: on the one hand, he oscillates between withdrawing in the world of the written word so as to avoid facing awkward social situations, while, on the other, he tries to mask his infirmity when this happens. Yet, feeling that his life is deeper and deeper sucked under by the distressing mediatic universe he is rooted in, Desmond Bates sees himself forced to start taking up lip reading classes – which to a certain extent eventually function like a group psychotherapy session, or like an Anonymous Association for people sharing his distress.

> I had my first lip-reading class today. The experience evoked dim memories of my first day at primary school, which I joined halfway through the school year because of illness: there was the same sense of being a new-boy, uncertain and self-conscious, in a group that was already bonded and familiar with the routine
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> (Lodge 2008: 139).

The episode entitled *Deaf in the Afternoon* reveals Desmond Bates and his much younger and flourishing wife, Fred barely speaking to each other. This has been going on since Christmas time when he and his father have gone drunk, made terrible fools of themselves and even humiliated Fred's guests, and so, under the pressure of a marriage which becomes more and more estranged, and with the worries of a headstrong, increasingly senile father whose health condition is worsening, Bates starts drinking heavily which causes him to behave in a rather reckless way: after having spent some time in the sauna, the quite intoxicated Desmond together with Chris (the lover of his wife's friend, Jakki) finally get out ready to take the ultimate test of manhood: pouring a bucket of cold water over their heads. Unfortunately for Bates, some ear wax melts as he is exposed to the high heat in the sauna, and so, when he pours the bucket of cold water over his head the wax in his ears coagulates instantly, thus turning into a wax plug which completely blocks out all sounds.

> A terrible dread gripped him. He was deaf. Really deaf. Profoundly deaf. The trauma of the mass of cold water suddenly drenching his overheated head must have had some catastrophic effect on the hair cells, or on the part of the cortex that was connected to them, cutting off all communication. He had a mental image of some part of his brain going dark, like a chamber or tunnel where suddenly all the lights go out, for ever.

(Lodge 2008: 226)

Undoubtedly, language and cultural forms are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate or displace definitions and identities. Therein, the translation of *Deaf Sentence* could be seen as a negotiation between the source text and its translator who has to find the most appropriate equivalent cultural elements in the target language (although this hardly seems to be happening) so that, while negotiating on the borderlines of a common cultural background between English and Romanian, he could still mediate the new translated, rewritten, recreated 'other' product which turns out to be a cultural commodity as well.

Although there seems to be no direct mediation between the original and the translated edition, the re-created cultural hybrid (written and/or visual) seems to be hardly negotiating new punning meanings with the original text: while in the source text the title *Deaf Sentence* functions on two simultaneous levels, in the target text, the (unintended) omission of the alluding puns in the Romanian translation of the title seems to be hardly working on two levels. On the one hand, the novel's title in the source text seems to be anticipating an easy readable and digestible comic narrative, eventually reinforced by the choice of the word *deaf* in the title ('deafness is comic' and 'blindness is tragic' (13) alluding to a comic of situation caused by the language puns inevitably caused by deafness. On the other hand, the pun created by the noun *sentence* (*deaf sentence* vs. *death sentence*) seems to be announcing a rather sad story of someone who is literally sentenced to deafness so that, deafness is 'comic and death is tragic, because final, inevitable, and inscrutable.' (289)

Desmond Bates takes up writing in a journal in a rather difficult moment of his life when, while he shrinks '*into retirement and succumbs to deafness*' (or rather he succumbs to his death in society), his wife, Fred 'blossoms and becomes more successful in business,' thus making Desmond feel more and more like '*a redundant appendage to the family, an unfortunate liability*' (76).

> When he accompanied her to this or that social event he sometimes felt like a royal consort escorting a female monarch, walking a pace or two behind her with his hands joined behind his back, a vague unfocussed smile on his face. The social events themselves had become more of an ordeal than a pleasure because of the deterioration of his hearing, and there were times when he thought of refusing to go to them any longer, but when he contemplated the consequences of such a decision the prospect filled him with a kind of terror: more empty hours to fill, sitting alone at home, with a book or the telly. So he clung on grimly to the social-cultural merry-go-round, simulating an interest and enthusiasm he did not really feel.
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> (Lodge 2008: 33-34)

Initially intended more like a stylistic exercise to keep his mind trained and give him some sense of usefulness while his wife Fred is away with work, Desmond's diary gradually turns into some kind of unconscious subterfuge intended to keep him away from psychotherapeutic sessions that he so much dreads. The mere prospect of him lying down a sofa and opening up to some stranger does not appeal to him by far: he treasures his privacy dearly and he spends most of his time cut off from the outside wor(l)d. This seemingly impersonal mode of writing mediated by means of a third person singular point of view functions like an *intertextual* signaling post intended to make the reader experience exactly the same emotional dismay that Desmond is trying to overcome; likewise, Desmond's diary is also intended to increase readers' awareness that while offering for a mode of survival, the diary is also a form of fiction with innumerable prospects of healing itself.

Thus it is through his diary – a fictionalized game itself crammed with intertextual and allusive passages that Desmond Bates seems to be communicating himself to the outside world. David Lodge's fondness for puns and his generally elaborate exploitation of the phonological level of language probably makes *Deaf Sentence* quite a formidable task for the translator of the novel.

The language puns created on such variations as *death – deaf – dead* are, most often than not, lost in the process of translation, as is intertextual allusiveness which is made up for by explanatory footnotes. Needless to say that, the phonological element plays a crucial role in organizing readers' responses to a semantic content which is often ambivalent. Let us take just a few examples of such language puns which lose their allusive feature once they are translated from the source text into the target text.

In *Deaf Sentence***,** David Lodge usually replaces the word *death* which appears in the original text of various sources he intertextually uses, with *deaf or dead.* As such, while in the original ballad ***Horatius*** by Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) the text reads '*To every man upon the earth/ Death cometh soon or late'* David Lodge replaces *death* with *deaf*, resulting therein a phonological pun alluding to the idea of *deafness* as an inevitable *death.* However, in the target text such a pun is lost in translation, so that no phonological allusiveness of the pun between *death* and *deaf* is mediated: 'Pe orice om de pe pământ/ Surzenia îl ajunge.' Similarly, '*After the first death, there is no other*', the last verse in A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London, signed by Dylan Marlais Thomas (1914-1953) is deliberately altered and so the new Lodgian text reads '*After the first deaf, there is no other*' which, in the Romanian translated text has turned into 'După prima surzire, nu mai vine alta'.

Generally, David Lodge might be labeled as a fictocritical novelist whose writing of fiction is contaminated by and imbued with the writing about fiction. It is perhaps exactly this hybridity of the writing signature that makes David Lodge's novels appeal to a wide category of readers, well read and poor read alike.

Correspondingly, a novel such as *Deaf Sentence* appeals, on the one hand, to a category of sophisticated readers acquainted with and able to recognize the passages of poetry or prose which Desmond Bates seemingly quotes from memory throughout his journal: there are constant references to the Bible, J. Milton, Ph. Larkin, E. Waugh, J. Austen, G. Greene to name just a few. On the other hand, those who fail recognizing such intertextual passages will undoubtedly have a good laugh at the expense of Desmond Bates and the imbroglios that he keeps falling into on account of his deafness, which is 'comic' for those who don't have to live with it but always tragic for the beholder.

Unfortunately, the target text takes the form of a hybrid that, on the one hand, functions like a reading guide (the translated edition of the novel, *Mort de Surd*, provides literary and/or cultural explanatory footnotes) and, on the other, it seemingly gives the *faithful* translation of *Deaf Sentence*, unintentionally deleting language and phonological puns on account of cultural and linguistic differences.

'*Deafness is comic, as blindness is tragic*,' (13) or '*Deafness is always comic*' (81) are two of the epigrammatic statements that Desmond Bates usually makes and to which he is undoubtedly entitled, after having relentlessly slipped into H.F.D. for almost twenty years now: his life has turned into one long conversational pratfall, in which the simplest statement can entail a low farce played on the former academic he used to be and the present '*deafie*' who gives '*people a few laughs* ' (177) at his expense.

Since '*deafies have no such compassion-inducing signs*' as the blind have – their '*hearing aids are almost invisible*' and they '*have no lovable animals dedicated to looking after*' them (13-14) – Bates mockingly asks himself '*what would be the equivalent of a guide dog for a deaf*?' to which he gives the hilarious solution of '*a parrot*' placed on the '*shoulder squawking into*' the deafies' ears. (13-14)

Such self-mocking instantiations achieved through the use of the ironical tone are not isolated in Bates's discourse since he deliberately constructs them so as to be able to counteract his own misery and survive the ridicule of sighted people who regard the blind '*with compassion, go out of their way to help them, guide them across busy roads, warn them of obstacles, stroke their guide dogs*,' (13-14) but who would gladly grab at the chance of having a few laughs at the expense of a deafie.

> 'My mother's deafness is very trifling you see – just nothing at all. By only raising my voice, and saying anything two or three times over, she is sure to hear; but then she is used to my voice,' says Miss Bates in Emma. How subtly Jane Austen hints at the politely disguised frustration and irritation of the company at having to bear the repetition of every banal remark in louder tones for the benefit of old Mrs Bates. I must be in a worse state than my fictional namesake, because I'm used to Fred's voice, but I still can't hear what she is saying without a hearing aid.
>
> (Lodge 2008: 79)

In *Deaf Sentence* humour does not reside only in the comic of language (throughout the novel there are puns pertaining to Bates's condition, for which he shows a particular weakness) but also in the comic of situation which, if it doesn't show Bates caught in embarrassing situations caused by his hearing impairment, it casts a hilarious light on him (he treats seemingly trivial matters with an outmost seriousness).

Instead of Conclusion

It is a fact of life that many if not most puns will be untranslatable and Lodgian puns are no exception to the rule . But like other special uses of language (humour is one instance), the effect can often be reproduced by transferring the word play into a differing setting of the same text.

Translating any novel by David Lodge proves a tricky if thorny task which the novelist himself admits in an epigraph opening his latest novel, *Deaf Sentence*.

> Conscious that this novel, from its English title onwards, presents special problems for translators, I dedicate it to all those who, over many years, have applied their skills to the translation of my work into various languages, and especially to some who have become personal friends: Marc Amfreville, Mary Gislon and Rosetta Pallazi, Maurice and Yvonne Couturier, Armand Eloi and Beatrice Hammer, Luo Yirong, Suzanne Mayoux, Renate Orth- Guttmann, and Susumu Takagi.
>
> (David Lodge 2008: 32)

Sources

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