

TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN CONVENTIONALIZED SIMILES

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Introduction: Similes as language devices

Similes are treated by most linguists as *comparison-based phrases* that function as adjectives and belong to several semantic fields. Most similes contain a term that represents a prototype of the quality attributed by the adjective: *as white as snow/ a sheet/ chalk /ivory/ lily/ fleece/ porcelain/ lime/ salt* (alb ca varul/ marmura/ creta/ zăpada/ laptele); *as red as a turkey-cock* (roșu ca moțul/măgelele curcanului); *as red as a cherry* (rumen ca un bujor) etc.

Some lexicologists call these patterns *idiomatic comparisons* and insist upon the idea that, when the comparison of equality is made between notions belonging to different notional spheres ("words" and "gall" in *words are as bitter as gall*), the simile becomes a synonym of the superlative, due to its intensifying function.

There are two basic patterns for traditional, idiomatic comparisons:

- **as...as clichéd similes:** pattern X as Y (adj./adv.) as Z (the ones in which we take particular interest in this study): *as busy as a cat on a tin roof/ a cockroach on a hot stove*;
- **like-patterned similes:** pattern X (stative or action verb) like Z: *eat like a horse/a pig/a wolf*.

In this study, I treat them as placed on along scale going from the most stereotyped (*conventionalized/idiomatic similes, the type of fixed expressions stored as units in the lexis*) at one extreme, to *standard (ordinary) and original (fresh, but not totally unexpected) similes* in between, and to the most creative similes (*where a totally unexpected and surprising vehicle is associated with the topic*) at the other extreme (Pierini 2007: 27).

My motivation for the choice of the category of conventionalized similes to be analysed as translation units lies in the fact that they have been dealt with occasionally, in comparison with the creative ones. The aim of this paper is that of proving that there are plenty of issues to deal with and problems to solve: linguistic richness, stylistic variety, rhetorical effect, cultural specificity, contextual embedding and register constraints.

1. The Interpretation of conventionalized similes in translation

Similes raise problems in interpretation, due to the fact that, only some of them are easily recognizable as belonging to the class of idiomatic expressions.

We are well aware that some have one meaning (be it literal or metaphorical, or even ironical): *as clear as a bell* (very clear, as the sound of a bell = ușor de auzit); *as clear as day* (easy and plain to see = ușor de văzut/înțeles); *as clear as mud* (very confusing and unclear = dificil/greu de înțeles), etc. Others are given both literal and figurative interpretations: *as sharp as a needle/ needle-sharp* (literal: having a cutting edge = ascuțit ca un ac/brici; metaphorical: ascuțit la minte, ager la minte, deștept foc), etc. When similes play against expectations, they convey an ironic viewpoint (*as hairy as a bowling ball* or *as subtle as a sledgehammer*) or subvert another non-ironic simile to achieve a more obvious semantic

incongruity and a greater humorous effect: *as accurate as a blind archer, as precise as a drunk surgeon, as gorgeous as an anorexic supermodel, as fast as a three-legged cheetah*, etc.

Baker (1992) identifies two main problems for translators dealing with phraseological expressions: 1) the ability to recognize and interpret an expression correctly and 2) the difficulties involved in rendering the various aspects of meaning that a phraseological expression conveys into the target language.

Once a simile has been recognized and interpreted correctly, the next step is to decide how to translate it into the target language. Expressions directly linked to English social behavioural patterns (relate to specific habits or social occasions) may be difficult to translate because of *their associations with culture-specific contexts*.

Most often, expressions with proper names referring to characters that are more or less known, require disambiguation and evidence of cultural specificity. Thus, semi-proverbial English colloquial expressions such as *lazy as Joe, the marine, who laid down his musket to sneeze* or *lazy as Ludlam's dog, that leaned his head against the wall to bark* (leneș fără pereche) are used to characterize exceedingly lazy persons; *black as Newgate knocker* contains a prototype for blackness which has a questionable reference even for natives: either the fringe or lock of hair which costermongers and thieves twist back towards the ear (Cobham Brewer 1993) or the colour of the heavy iron knocker on the gate of the Newgate Prison from London. Their translation into Romanian entails a serious loss of these cultural elements, unless we use strategies of paraphrasing or an elaborate explanation in a footnote.

An interesting example of culture-specific elements in Romanian similes is represented by an expression containing an outdated prototype (in semantics, the prototype is the object considered as very typical of the kind of object which can be referred to by an expression containing the predicate *as, like or similar to... and*) for extremely inexpensive items: *ieftin ca braga* (where *braga* is the Romanian variety of *boza*, a non-alcoholic Balkanic drink, made of fermented wheat or millet, with a thick consistency and a slightly acidic sweet flavor). This local drink, which is barely known even to Romanians today, has become a typical example of objects which are described in English as devoid of cultural associations: *cheap as dirt, dirt cheap, a dime a dozen, two for a penny*.

2. A Cognitive-linguistic approach to similes in translation

Typical comparison patterns with chromatic elements are invariably given in dictionary entries the same idiomatic equivalents in Romanian, disrespectful of the relationship between the source and target domains. The range of acknowledged objects/entities to which blackness is attributed by similes on the basis of empirical observation is quite restrained in our language: *negru ca cerneala* = black as ink, inky, ink-black; *negru ca tăciunele/negru cărbune/negru ca antracitul* = black as coal/obsidian, coal-black, coaly; jet-black; *negru ca smoala/catranul/ fundul ceaunului* = as black as pitch/tar, pitch-black/dark (also intuneric bezna); *negru ca funinginea* (negru de funingine) = black as soot, sooty; *negru ca abanosul* = negru de abanos) = black as ebony/ jetblack); *negru ca mura* (ochi) = black as a sloe/sloes/ a mazzard [small black cherry]; *negru ca pana corbului* (par) = black as a crow's feather/ a raven's wing/sheen; *negru ca noaptea* = black as night/ midnight.

As seen from the above examples, English provides a greater variety of forms (adjectival modifiers with or without intensifiers) and conceptual associations, whose rendering into Romanian entails great semantic loss: *black as a bag/ black as a collier's sack/ a tinker's pot; black as a tulgy [a dark gull]/ Alaskan sealskin/ the inside of a cow; black as Hades/ Hell; black as sin; black as the devil/ devil's/ Old Nick's nutting-bag [a bag for collecting nuts of coal]; black as the Duke/Earl of Hell's black riding boots/waistcoat; black as the ace of spades/ten of clubs*.

The contextual embedding of such idiomatic constructions confers wide stylistic variety; hence, it imposes a higher degree of selectivity of the translation strategies. The following examples are excerpts from authentic sources (novels, fictional magazines, etc.)

generated in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*. In using the strategy of compensation, we can make up for the loss of meaning, emotional force, or stylistic effect from the source text.

- e.g. *Two little children were seated on the veranda steps... One was **black as ebony** [unul era negru ca abanosul/fundul ceaunului/tăciunele]...*
*His room was **as black as pitch** [camera ...întunecată ca noaptea].*
*Rikki caught a glimpse of herself. No make-up, but with lashes **black as soot** [gene negre ca funinginea].*
*Dunham had white hair like a wad of cotton, with brows and a mustache **as black as shoe polish** [sprâncene și mustață negre ca pana corbului].*
*All had lustrous hair **black as ink** [păr negru ca cerneala/ abanosul].*
*The hole gaped **black as a tar pit** [groapă/gaură neagră ca gura iadului].*
*The sky was **black as death** [cer...negru catran/ negru ca smoala], and alive with sparkling stars.*
*It was large, nearly twice as big as Gus, barrel-chested, **black as death** [negru ca moartea].*
*He made himself a pot and nursed his first cup – **black as sin** [neagră ca păcatul], with five spoons of sugar in it.*
*Though I was white and Presbyterian as hell, I had hair **black as a crow** [păr negru ca pana corbului/ abanosul].*
*But his eyes, **black as a crow's feather** [ochi negri ca tăciunele], reflected only interest, nothing more.*
*Her long, silky hair, **black as a raven's sheen** [păru-i lung și mătăsos, negru ca pana corbului/ abanosul], swung sensually...*
*She had hair **as black as a raven's wing** [păr negru ca pana corbului] and eyes the color of a cloud's belly.*

The conceptual representations of death in English range from absolute superlative constructions (*stone-dead*) or hendiadys (*dead and gone*) to similes whose noun vehicles belong to different semantic categories: *dead as a mutton/ a door/ a doornail/ a herring/ mackerel/ a red lobster/ a meat axe/ Julius Caesar/ the Roman Empire* and even the New Zealand variant *dead as a dodo/moa*. However, as Dobrovol'skiĭ et al. (2005) rightfully observed, the choice of **doornail** as a prototype for dead beings is completely unpredictable (...) the entire simile is to a high degree idiosyncratic and arbitrary. *In this case, the alliteration of d in dead and doornail, just as in dead and dodo may be deemed as a plausible criterion for this choice. We have no similar problems to cope with in Romanian, where we have a single equivalent: mort de-a binelea.*

The situation is not that different in the case of drunkenness, seen as a generic property which is shared by several concepts. If Romanian expressions are almost exclusively informal and have intensifying function (*beat criță/ mort/ tun/ turtă/ cui/ mucii; rupt de beat; mut de beat; beat ca un porc*), the English ones outnumber them and use comparisons on the basis of their visual and affective resonance: *drunk as a piper/ a beggar/ a cobbler/ fiddler/ as a Gosport fiddler/ lord/ potter/ an emperor; drunk as a fish/ cooter [Amer.]/ skunk/ an owl/ a boiled owl/ a pig/ swine/ Essex hogs; drunk as a little red wagon [Amer.]/ a mop; higher than a kite/ Gilroy's kite; as tight as a fiddler/ a brick/ a drum [Amer.]; dead/ blind/ roaring drunk; swine-drunk.*

The expressive values of similes are made prominent in expressions which offer a vivid image of the way in which we conceptualize perceptions of people's appearance, feelings and states. Romanian offers an impressively rich inventory of adjectives and nouns which qualify people as being stupid/silly (the synonymic series includes terms found across different registers). Prototypical images of stupidity are reflected by idiomatic comparisons (*prost ca noaptea* and *prost ca oaia/ ca o găina/ o cizmă*) and adjectival and clausal structures with superlative value (*prost de dă prin gropi, prost de bubuie, prost grămadă, prostul proștilor*). They can be used to translate both transparent and opaque English similes mapping

stupidity: *as balmy as a bandicoot* [Aus]; *as daft as a brush*; *as free from sense as a frog from feathers*; *as nutty as a fruitcake*; *as silly as a goose/ a bauson*; *silly like a stunned mullet* [Aus.]; *as stupid as a goose/ an ass/ a donkey/ an owl/ a sloth/ a log*; *as thick as two short planks*, etc.

There is also the particular case in which the same simile has different meanings, respectively translations, in familiar and colloquial language: *as nutty as a fruitcake* = foarte nebun, nebun de legat, prost ca noaptea; *extrem de excentric/ fistichiu* (American slang).

3. Strategies in the translation of idiomatic similes

Confronted with all these aspects of similes, we are bound to consider some approaches and strategies that could help us in dealing with their interpretation and translation.

The translation of idioms and fixed expressions into another language implies strategies which are chosen depending on the contextual factors. For Baker (1992), the most effective strategies for idiomatic expressions are:

- Using an expression of similar meaning and form: using an idiom in the target language which conveys the same meaning as that of the source-language idiom: *as silent as the grave* = tăcut ca mormantul;
- Using an expression of similar meaning but dissimilar form (different lexical items): *as dull as ditchwater* = prost de ră în gropi;
- Translation by paraphrase represents the most common way of translating idioms: *wise as Solomon* = înțelept ca regele Solomon;
- Translation by omission is recommendable when an idiom in the source language has no close match in the target language, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons: *drunk as Essex hogs* = beat ca un porc.

According to Pierini (2007: 31), conventional and encyclopaedic similes raise problems in translation and the potential strategies to translate them might be:

- literal translation (retention of the same vehicle);
- replacement of the vehicle with a different vehicle;
- reduction of the simile, if idiomatic, to its sense;
- retention of the same vehicle plus explicitation of similarity feature(s);
- replacement of the vehicle with a gloss;
- omission of the simile.

These strategies largely overlap the ones proposed by Baker for idioms and translators are recommended to choose the most appropriate for each translation problem.

4. Similes in the translation of Romanian absolute superlatives

The Romanian absolute superlative expresses the absolute intensity of a feature and its configuration is rich in synthetic and analytical means of expression at different linguistic levels. Their typology has been extensively treated by Sporis (2006) and may serve as a basis for their presentation as translation strategies for idiomatic comparisons.

As far as the **phonetic and lexical means** are concerned, they are less productive in English than they appear to be in Romanian (our interest in the latter is only as a means of rendering comparison patterns from English). Superlative prefixes such as *arhi-*, *extra-*, *ultra-*, *supra-*, *hiper-*, *super-*, etc. (as in *superintelligent*, *extraextrafin*) and suffixes *-isim(ă)* (*rarisim(ă)*, *clarisim(ă)*) intensify the characteristic expressed by the adjective. It is the context that imposes the usage as these equivalents, especially when we choose augmentative or diminutive suffixes with deprecating value as in *mâncău* (as greedy as a cormorant/ dog/ pig/ hog, very greedy).

Of **morphological means**, the adverb *foarte* (very) is most frequently used. e.g. *foarte bătrân* (as old as hills/ Methuselah/ time); *foarte nefericit* (as miserable as sin); *foarte acru* (as

sour as vinegar); *foarte rapid* (as sudden as an April shower/ as quick as lightning/as swift as a hare/a deer/ thought) ; *foarte înțelept* (as wise as an owl/Solomon), etc.

Other adverbs that are preferred in familiar and colloquial style (as well as in literary style) may be grouped into semantic series: *mult, prea, tare, grozav, deplin, rău*. To these, we may add adverbs followed by the preposition *de*: *extraordinar (de), extrem (de), putred (de), îngrijorător (de), nemaîîntâlnit (de), nemaiauzit (de), colosal (de), teribil (de)*, etc. e.g. *putred de bogat* = rich as Croesus/ a Jew (filthy rich, extremely wealthy).

There is also a rich inventory of expressive adverbial phrases: *de mama focului, de pomînă, de mai mare dragul, la culme, peste măsură, peste orice limită, peste poate, de-a binelea, cu vârf și îndesat, fără tăgadă, la culme*, etc.

e.g. *urât de mama focului* (ugly as a sin/ toad/ scarecrow/ a dead monkey; ugliness itself; ugly beyond description); *vesel nevoie-mare* (merry as a cricket/a grig/ a lark/ spring); *nerușinat la culme* (as bold as brass), etc.

Morphosyntactic means comprise repeating the adjective in its diminutival form: *nou-nouț* (as clean as a newpin); repeating the adjective in its possessive form (found in fairy tales): *voinicul voinicilor* (as brave as Alexander/Achilles); *frumoasa frumoaselor* (as lovely as Venus); using a noun and an adjectival modifier with the same root: *adevărul adevărat* (true as Gospel).

Rhetorical means consist of adverbs converted from nouns and are based on metaphorical semantic transfer: (*pricepută*) *foc*, (*beat*) *turtă / criță / cui*, (*înghețat*) *boacă / tun*, (*singur*) *cuc*, (*curat*) *luciu*, (*îndrăgostit*) *lulea*, (*prost*) *tufă*, (*adormit*) *buștean*, (*slab*) *scândură*, etc.; *foc (de pricepută)*, *foc de frumos*, *supărată foc*. e.g. *supărat foc* = cross as two sticks/ cross/surly as a bear with a sore head/ like a bull at a gate; *sănătos tun* = as sound as a pippin/ a bell.

Similes are by far the most common figures of speech to be used, as long as they imply comparisons with objects that represent an epitome of some traits/features. e.g. *slab ca un țăâr* = lean as a rake/ thin as a lath/ a rail/ a whipping-post; *gras ca o dropie/ un purcel* = plump as a partridge/ dumpling/ puffin; *uscat ca iasca* = as dry as a bone/ dust/ sponge etc. However, we could also find some metaphors whose correspondents in English may be clichéd similes: *sloi de gheață* (as cool as a cucumber); *ocnă de sare* (as salt as a herring/brine).

5. Synthetic and analytical means of rendering English similes into Romanian

In establishing the SL-TL relationship between English and Romanian, we may have different grammatical means of equivalence for similes. Adjectives are obviously the most numerous and they range from adjectives in the positive degree (*as awkward as a bull in a china shop* = *stângaci*; *neîndemânatec*; *as green as grass/ a gooseberry* = *tânăr și fără experiență*; *as keen as mustard* = *nerăbdător*; *entuziast*; *isteț*; *as stupid as a donkey/ goose* = *bătut în cap*), to adjectives in the comparative (*as clear as crystal* = *limpede ca lumina zilei*; *as gay as a lark* = *veselă ca o zi de primăvară*; *as good as gold* = *bun ca pâinea caldă*; *as lively as a cricket* = *plin de viață ca un cintezo*; *as plain as day/ daylight/ the nose on your face* = *clar ca lumina zilei*; *as red as a cherry* = *rumen ca un bujor*) and in the relative superlative (*as busy as a ticking clock/ a child at play* = *foarte ocupat*; *as dry as a bone* = *foarte uscat*; *fără vlagă*; *as easy as ABC/ winking* = *foarte simplu*; *foarte ușor*; *as pleased as Punch* = *foarte mulțumit*).

The Romanian absolute superlative constructions have been recently treated by grammarians as degrees of intensification, just as they are in English. Their usage has stylistic effects (*as blue as the sky* = *albastru intens*; *as dead as a doornail/ meat axe/ mutton chop* = *mort de-a binelea*; *as dull as ditchwater* = *prost de rău în gropi*; *as mad as a wet hen* = *supărat foc*; *as poor as a church mouse* = *sărac lipit pământului*). Even though less common, noun phrases (for *as gruff as a bear* = *mârlan, mitocan*; *as salt as a herring/ brine* = *ocnă de sare*; *as thick as blackberries* = *puzderie, cântă frunză și iarbă*) as well as adjective and adverb phrases (*as fit as a fiddle* = *în formă*; *as good as dead* = *pe moarte*; *as happy as a lark/ king/ bird* = *în culmea fericirii*; *în al nouălea cer*; *as watchful as a hawk* = *cu ochii în patru*; *cu ochi de vultur*; *as white as snow* =

de un alb strălucitor) may be used as stylistic variants when trying to cope with register constraints.

Conclusions

Although similes are considered stereotyped and clichéd linguistic patterns, they are used not only for the meanings they convey, but also for the effect they produce on the reader. This is exactly why we need to evaluate first and then apply effective strategies and approaches to make up for the loss of meaning, emotional force, or stylistic effect from the source text.

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