

PITFALLS OF TRANSLATION: ENGLISH WORDS AND PHRASES DIFFICULT TO RENDER IN ROMANIAN

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Abstract

Translation is a complex art and the translator often faces the many challenges of conveying the full depth and nuance of one language into another. In this article, we explore the intriguing terrain of translating English words and phrases into Romanian, shedding light on instances where direct equivalence proves elusive. Through an examination of real-life examples, we navigate the inherent complexities and idiosyncrasies of language.

This study showcases a curated selection of English words and phrases that resist straightforward translation into Romanian. Drawing from various contexts, we delve into terms such as "entitlement," "serendipity," or "holier-than-thou," demonstrating the unique cultural and linguistic gaps that emerge during the translation process. We try to provide insightful analyses and proposed translations, considering the subtleties and cultural connotations that may be lost or gained. By dissecting these linguistic challenges, we aim to enhance the understanding of the intricate interplay between languages and cultures.

As language continues to evolve and global communication grows ever more important, this exploration of untranslatable English terms serves as a compelling case study. It underscores the need for a nuanced and adaptable approach to translation, one that respects the richness of both the source and target languages. Through this investigation, we aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the intricacies of language and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: translation challenges; nuance; idiom; linguistic gap; untranslatability; English; Romanian

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1. Methodology and introductory remarks

The present research embodies qualitative analysis by employing in-depth textual examination and interpretation to uncover nuanced insights into the complexities of language and its cultural nuances. Through a systematic exploration of a diverse set of English words and phrases that resist straightforward translation into Romanian, the study delves into the subtle contextual, cultural, and semantic layers, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges and variations in interpretation across languages. Qualitative analysis in this research seeks to unveil the intricate interplay of

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language, culture, and communication, providing a rich understanding of the complex processes of translation and linguistic adaptation.

In terms of data collection, a corpus of texts was gathered, comprising a diverse range of sources including political texts, extracts from the media, from movies, and other instances of communication in English. These sources were selected based on our exposure to the English language and on situations we encountered where translation turned out to be unusually challenging – thus, the corpus includes extracts from speeches by two well-known public figures extremely different from one another, Barack Obama and Cardinal Luis Antonio Gokim Tagle, extracts from the legal context (more specifically, from the discourse of Judge Judy Sheindlin, the star of the arbitration-based reality court show *Judge Judy*, a TV program that attained huge ratings over significant periods of time - the longest-running court show ever “draws an average audience of about ten million viewers a day”⁴), from the well-known sitcom *Friends*, from the iconic movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*, as well as extracts from literature (William S. Burroughs) and from the written press (The Observer). We have selected our corpus so as to encompass a broad spectrum of language usage and contexts, ranging from extremely formal, standard language to a less formal register aiming primarily to entertain and thus subject to the unwritten demands of popular culture. In the collected corpus, instances of the selected English words and phrases (as listed in the study) were identified, along with their corresponding Romanian translations or interpretations. Additionally, the context surrounding these terms was dissected to analyze the nuances of usage.

A close examination of the context in which these terms are used was performed to identify any cultural or linguistic nuances, while sentiment analysis was conducted to assess the emotional connotations associated with these terms. Based on the linguistic analysis, the research aims to extract insights regarding the challenges and nuances faced in translating these English words and phrases into Romanian.

The research also includes a comprehensive discussion of the findings, presenting a nuanced understanding of the selected terms. It will discuss the extent to which these terms can be effectively translated and any cultural or linguistic gaps that may exist. We will attempt to highlight the potential implications of these translation challenges in real-life communication and provide recommendations for achieving more accurate and effective cross-cultural communication.

⁴ <https://variety.com/exec/judge-judy/>, accessed on November 22, 2022.

2. A few general remarks on translation challenges

Since translation has been defined as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent material in another language (TL)” (Catford, 1965: 20), in our research, we will focus on a number of English words and phrases that are difficult to translate into Romanian, as our language does not provide an exact equivalent; therefore, any attempt at rendering their exact meaning would end up in a painstaking search for a language structure closer in meaning, or sometimes even in convoluted rephrasing.

It is important to point out that the words and phrases we have selected are not what has been called “culturemes”, social phenomena of culture X that are regarded as relevant by the members of the respective culture and, when compared to a corresponding social phenomenon in culture Y, are found to be specific to culture X (Nord, 2022: 14). For example, an idiom like “to plead the fifth”, meaning “to refuse to answer a question on the grounds that you might incriminate yourself”, initially in a court of law but subsequently in any context, is undoubtedly a cultureme since its interpretation relies on the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution, whereby citizens are protected from self-incrimination. By contrast, the words and phrases we are analysing in our study have a general meaning, are not reliant on a particular culture (either English or American) and carry nuances that transcend the boundaries of their origins and can apply in other countries as well. For some of these we have provided a real-life context to illustrate the points we are attempting to make; for others, we have merely explained the meaning but, for reasons pertaining to complexity, we have not provided a real-life example.

It is important to point out that not all the words and phrases covered by our research technically fall under the scope of untranslatability, “expressions of a given language that simply cannot be converted into other languages”⁶. Untranslatability can be explained by a number of factors ranging from metaphoric or idiomatic usage to cases where a certain concept simply does not exist in a culture, hence a language. Out of the words and phrases covered by our research, some can be said to be untranslatable (such as *serendipity*, *entitlement*, or *to take for granted*), whereas for others, like *delusion* or *to fail*, equivalents can be found in Romanian that are considered accurate translations of the English term. In the latter case, we will be looking into nuances that we believe the Romanian term, albeit close in meaning, fails to cover fully.

Equally, we can see that the words and phrases discussed in our research appeared in recent times, in late stages of language development. Nowadays, society has become so complicated and multifaceted that language, in order to keep up, has in

⁵ <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/plead-the-fifth/>, accessed on May 13, 2023.

⁶ <https://www.languagehumanities.org/what-is-untranslatability.htm>, accessed on October 16, 2023.

its turn become increasingly more sophisticated and has acquired nuances and connotations that would have been inconceivable in the past. The changes also gained momentum under the influence of popular culture (Lilleker, 2006), with its strong emphasis on entertainment and on sensorial perceptions. Modern audiences, ever more demanding, ever more fickle, with ever shorter attention spans, no longer respond to “standard” language, i.e. language in its standardized variety, as used by the majority of speakers. In the fierce struggle to capture the public’s attention, language altogether has shifted towards a more vivid, more shocking, more imagery-based paradigm. Driven by the same attempt to jolt audiences out of their complacency and keep them hooked, some of these words and phrases have also taken on an ironic dimension.

3. A classification of the words and phrases used in our analysis

The categorization we are providing is based on the nature of the terms and on the potential challenges they raise in translation, considering both the linguistic and the cultural aspects thereof, and we believe it can help structure our analysis and discussion. It goes without saying that our lists are not exhaustive – we have merely made a selection of commonly used words and phrases and we have provided real-life contexts for some of them.

Conceptual and abstract terms: this category includes words and phrases that are often abstract in nature, related to emotions, concepts, or complex ideas. We believe they do not have direct translations in Romanian, which makes it more challenging to convey their meaning accurately. The words and phrases we have identified as belonging to this category include nouns (with their corresponding adjectives) and noun phrases like *serendipity/ serendipitous*, *entitlement/ entitled*, *gratification/ gratified*, *insight/ insightful*, *delusion/ deluded*, *dumbing down*, *breaking point* and *inception*, but also verbs like *to rationalize* or *to fathom* (a verb somewhat similar in meaning but deeper than the equivalent *to understand/ to grasp*).

Social and behavior-related terms: these words and phrases are associated with human behavior, interactions, and social dynamics. They often carry cultural nuances that can be challenging to capture in translation. Our list includes adjectives and adjectival phrases like *elusive*, *relatable*, *no-nonsense*, *low-life*, *holier than thou*, *self-righteous*, *street smart*, noun phrases like *role model* or *drama queen*, and verb and verb phrases like *to fail (someone)*, or *to have a crush (on someone)*.

Expressions and idioms: this category includes idiomatic expressions or phrases that may not have straightforward equivalents in Romanian, hence they often require context and explanation for full understanding. Our list includes nouns and noun phrases like *waffle*, *cliffhanger*, *deal breaker*, *sales pitch*, *squatter*, *kerfuffle*, *hissy fit* and *road rage*, adjectives like *vanilla* (meaning “bland”), but also idioms like *to take*

(someone or something) for granted, to jump on the bandwagon, to make a beeline for, silver spoon or something that can make you or break you.

3.1 Conceptual and abstract terms

Entitlement/ entitled

The word "entitlement" has its origins in the English language and is derived from the verb "entitle." It comes from the Old French term "entiteler",⁷ which means "to give a title to" or "to grant a right to." The word "title" itself can be traced back to the Latin "titulus," meaning an inscription or label. The concept of "entitlement", however, has evolved over time, encompassing both legal rights and social attitudes.

From a cultural standpoint, "entitlement" refers to the belief or expectation that one is deserving of certain privileges, benefits, or special treatment; it can be related to legal rights, social norms, or individual attitudes. The implications of "entitlement" and "entitled" can vary depending on the context. On the one hand, in a legal context, "entitlement" can refer to rights or benefits granted by law (for example, social security benefits are an entitlement for eligible individuals). On the other hand, from a social perspective, in everyday language, "entitlement" often refers to a perceived attitude of self-importance and the belief that one deserves preferential treatment or recognition. This attitude is sometimes criticized for promoting a sense of unwarranted privilege. In a broader social and cultural sense, therefore, entitlement can be associated with concerns about narcissism, lack of humility, or unrealistic expectations.

The word has become iconic in English, and in Romanian as well (where it is often used as such). Its connotations are impossible to fully render in our language; an attempt at translation would result in the adjective "îndreptățit"; however, the two are far from similar in meaning. Thus, while the Romanian "îndreptățit" implies that the person has the right to some privileges for a just reason, due to their own merit, or has a legitimate claim to something, therefore describing a fair consequence, the English "entitled" describes the opposite situation, where someone believes themselves to be inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment that they have done nothing to earn – thus, we are looking at an implied sense of unwarranted privilege or expectation. The connotations used to describe individuals who exhibit a self-centered or demanding attitude are lost in the Romanian translation. We must point out, however, that the colloquial noun "miscuvenism" has emerged and is sometimes used, even by established writers, but it has not as yet been recognised as an official Romanian word.

⁷ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/entitlement>, accessed on October 18, 2023.

Ex. 1. “Both Bill and Hillary Clinton knew the incidents were being videotaped and would receive national attention, yet still reacted with entitlement – for who dares interrupt them when they are speaking?”

The Clinton records are permeated with unabashed entitlement and disrespect for the people they were elected to represent.⁸”

The extract above contains a critical commentary on both Bill and Hillary Clinton, suggesting that their behavior reflects a sense of entitlement and disrespect for the people they served as elected officials. The text points out that Bill and Hillary Clinton were aware that the incidents in question were being videotaped and would receive national attention, so this awareness suggests that they were conscious of the public nature of their actions. The commentary accuses the Clintons of reacting to these incidents with a sense of entitlement – here, as expected, the term suggests that they may have exhibited a belief that they were deserving of special treatment, even in the presence of a recording device. It is implied that it is their sense of entitlement (a recurring theme in the Clinton records) that led them to disregard the audience or others present who may have wished to interrupt or engage with them while they were speaking. We are led to believe that there is a consistent pattern of arrogant behavior that the authors view as disrespectful and out of touch with the people they represented.

Serendipity

The word “serendipity” has its origins in the English language and is believed to have been coined by Horace Walpole, an English writer, in a letter he wrote in 1754. In the letter, he explained that he derived the term from the Persian fairy tale “The Three Princes of Serendip”⁹. This story featured characters who made unexpected and fortunate discoveries through chance and sagacity. The Persian fairy tale itself was based on a Persian literary tradition, where serendipitous discoveries and events played a prominent role.

“Serendipity” is a term that signifies the occurrence of fortunate or beneficial events by chance or accident, often when one is not actively seeking them. It carries a sense of unexpected joy or discovery and is used to describe moments when things unexpectedly align in a positive way. It is often associated with the concept of luck, good fortune, and happy accidents, implying that sometimes the best discoveries and experiences happen when one is open to unexpected possibilities.

The term has cultural implications in various domains, including science, art, literature, and technology. Many groundbreaking scientific discoveries and artistic

⁸ <https://observer.com/2016/03/no-shame-for-bill-and-hillary-entitlement-has-no-boundaries/>, accessed on April 5, 2023.

⁹ <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=serendipity>, accessed on October 18, 2023.

creations are attributed to serendipity, where individuals stumble upon something valuable while in pursuit of something else. In popular culture and literature, the concept of *serendipity* is often used to describe moments of destiny, chance encounters, or romantic events that lead to unexpected and wonderful outcomes. The notion of serendipity is often celebrated and regarded as a positive force that adds an element of mystery and wonder to life, as it suggests that the universe can sometimes conspire to bring people unexpected happiness and opportunities.

The word “serendipity” is widely recognized and used in English and is appreciated for its ability to capture the idea of delightful and unforeseen discoveries, both big and small. Overall, “serendipity” has become a beloved and culturally significant term in the English language, reflecting the human fascination with unexpected joy and the beauty of chance occurrences. It underscores the idea that life can hold delightful surprises when one is open to the unforeseen.

The noun in question, alongside its corresponding adjective (*serendipitous*) and adverb (*serendipitously*) appears to be a word impossible to render accurately in any other language. While a reasonable translation of the noun would go for the Romanian “întâmplare”, it is impossible to also convey the connotation of a “happy accident”. Moreover, the word can be used sarcastically, in order to point out that what seems to be a fortunate accident is in fact something that has been carefully planned to suit the volition of a human agent likely acting in ill-faith.

We must point out that the word “serendipitate” has ensued in Romanian¹⁰ and is now accepted by official records, although there are nuances and cultural aspects that do not fully carry over in translation. The Romanian term does not have the same level of cultural resonance, and it is less common and less entrenched in our language and culture. It is not widely used as yet, as it has not sunk into the collective unconscious, and native speakers tend to search for alternative ways to refer to the concept, possibly also because the word is completely foreign to Romanian speakers unfamiliar with the English language. It is, therefore, not a well-established cultural concept in our country, nor is the unique historical reference to the Persian tale well-known in Romania. Translators must make sure to consider all these nuances and the context in which they are using the word, so the intended meaning is effectively conveyed. In most cases, the safe translation resorts to briefly explaining the concept in more familiar Romanian words, rather than turning to the new, fancy-sounding “serendipitate”.

Ex. 2. Judith Sheindlin¹¹ :

“I don’t believe that things usually happen serendipitously, which means by chance. (...) As a matter of fact, it’s all part of the serendipity of this story, the serendipity of

¹⁰ <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/serendipitate>, accessed on September 14, 2023.

¹¹ https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=404958105008419_ accessed on March 25, 2023.

you just having to drive by the gas station, the serendipity of the driver of the triple A truck going to a second gas station that he liked the gas better and then disappearing and then coming back right after you exchanged numbers, now, the serendipity of who put a lien on his truck (...). Now, the serendipity gets better.”

Judge Judy, whose real name is Judith Scheindlin, is a well-known American television personality, judge, and author. She is best known for her long-running court TV show “Judge Judy”, which has been a significant part of American daytime television for many years. The show features real small-claim court cases and often features her no-nonsense approach and sharp wit. It quickly became one of the most popular daytime TV shows in the United States, as her straightforward approach to legal matters made her a beloved figure among viewers. She is celebrated for her significant contributions to the television industry and for bringing legal matters to the forefront of popular culture; her direct and candid style has resonated with numerous viewers worldwide, while her down-to-earth demeanour and memorable catchphrases have made her an international cultural icon.

In the example above, the famous lawyer, judge and entertainer famous for her wit and causticity uses the adverb “serendipitously” and then the noun “serendipity” six times in a row in a sarcastic way, to highlight that a series of events that may seem like they have occurred by chance, or that the defendant wants others to believe occurred by chance, are, in fact, interconnected. Thus, she aims to show that fortunate accidents that are just coincidental rarely come by, while the more reasonable theory to apply would be that something is clearly not revealed by interested parties. In this particular case, to the extent to which the case progresses, it becomes clear that the defendant has been involved in a scheme to defraud the plaintiff and he attempts to make the relevant details look like they had happened by sheer chance.

Delusion

The word “delusion” comes from the Latin word “delusio”¹², which means “a deceiving” or “a mocking.” In Latin, “deludere” means “to mock” or “to deceive.” Over time, “delusion” evolved to refer to a false belief, idea, or perception that contradicts reality. It has been used in various contexts, including psychology, psychiatry, and everyday language.

“Delusion” thus refers to a belief or perception that is not in line with reality, and it involves holding onto a false, irrational, or unfounded belief despite evidence or reasoning to the contrary. Delusions can manifest in different ways and often occur in the context of mental health conditions, such as delusional disorder or

¹² <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=delusion>, accessed on October 18, 2023.

schizophrenia. However, delusions can also be found in non-clinical contexts, where individuals hold onto strongly held but irrational beliefs. They are typically characterized by their persistence, resistance to change in the face of evidence, and their deviation from commonly accepted beliefs and reality.

“Delusion” carries negative connotations, as it implies a departure from rationality and an inability to distinguish between what is real and what is not. In a broader sense, the term can be used metaphorically to describe situations or beliefs that are widely regarded as false, misguided, or unrealistic. For example, someone might speak of “political delusions” or “delusions of grandeur” to describe unrealistic or grandiose beliefs that lack a basis in reality.

While “delusion” can only be translated into Romanian by the noun “iluzie” or, more accurately, the noun accompanied by an adjective (“iluzie falsă”), both in everyday language and in the context of mental health and psychology, there are some nuances to consider in this translation. Thus, “iluzie” can be considered the translation for the English “illusion”, which is different from “delusion”. Thus, an “illusion” refers to a misleading or false perception or appearance, involving a misinterpretation of sensory information that creates a false or distorted impression of reality. Illusions can occur in various sensory modalities, including visual, auditory or tactile illusions, studied in the field of perceptual psychology. Metaphorically, in everyday language, people may also use “illusion” to describe situations or beliefs that are perceived as false, thus coming closer to the standard meaning of “delusion”. While, to conclude, a delusion is mostly associated with mental health issues, being primarily cognitive in nature, whereas an illusion is associated with sensory misinterpretations, the former term has no exact equivalent in Romanian and its translation may err amid nuances difficult to render.

Ex. 3. William S. Burroughs: “The greatest delusion is that there is only one reality”.

William S. Burroughs was a highly influential American author, known for his pioneering contributions to literature, particularly in the realms of avant-garde and countercultural writing. Burroughs is best known for his unconventional and experimental writing style, as he often employed cut-up and fold-in techniques, where he would physically cut up and rearrange text to create new narratives. His work was known for its non-linear structure and surreal, hallucinatory elements. His work often delved into dark and subversive themes, including addiction, control, and the dystopian nature of society. He was highly critical of authority, bureaucracy, and the establishment. His contributions to the counterculture and the avant-garde have made him an iconic and enduring figure in American literature.

The quote above, which offers a profound reflection on the nature of reality and human perception thereof, challenges the conventional notion that there is only a singular, objective reality, suggesting that people often fall into the delusion of

believing in one absolute reality, which may limit their understanding of the complexity of existence. It implies that reality can be highly subjective, influenced by individual perspectives, experiences, and interpretations - what one person perceives as real might differ from another's perspective.

The quote thus delves into philosophical territory by addressing questions related to ontology and the nature of reality, as philosophers and thinkers have long debated whether reality is singular or whether there are multiple layers of reality or even multiple "realities" based on individual experiences. By stating that the belief in a single reality is the "greatest delusion," Burroughs challenges individuals to expand their thinking, consider alternative viewpoints, and recognize that reality can be multifaceted.

Other words and phrases belonging to this first category would include nouns like *gratification* (which can be translated as *mulțumire* or *satisfacție*, but neither term captures the nuance that an action is punctually performed to achieve gratification), *insight* (no exact equivalent exists in Romanian that can convey the idea of deep knowledge of or thorough understanding of), *dumbing down* (no Romanian term comes even close to the original meaning, with all its ironic nuances), *breaking point* (*limită* would be an attempt to render the concept into Romanian, but it no way covers the meaning of the original term, which implies that a long period of resilience has finally come to an end, nor is its original force conveyed), or *inception* (the Romanian *început* represents a more general, less impactful term). Out of the verbs that fall under this category, we will mention *to rationalize* (the Romanian *a justifica* cannot cover the implications of phrases like *to rationalize your pain*, which refer specifically to finding potent rational arguments to cope with excruciating emotional pain) or *to fathom* (the Romanian *a înțelege* comes nowhere near the deep level of understanding that *to fathom* entails).

3.2 Social and behaviour-related terms

To fail (someone)

The verb "to fail" is hugely versatile; overall, it carries the idea of falling short, of not meeting expectations, or of experiencing a lack of success in various contexts. Its usage can be both concrete, such as in exams or projects, and abstract, related to personal feelings and relationships. Its multifaceted implications reflect the complexities of human experiences and endeavours. From an etymological standpoint, it can be traced back to Middle English, where it was derived from the Old French word "falir," which meant "to be lacking or miss." The Old French term,

in turn, has Latin roots, coming from “fallere,” which meant “to deceive” or “to disappoint”.¹³

While the intransitive usage of “to fail” is most commonly translated into Romanian as “a eşua (în ceva)”, things change when the verb is used as a transitive one, taking an animate direct object. With this meaning, in its transitive usage, the verb conveys a sense of letting someone down, not meeting their expectations, or not fulfilling one’s obligations or responsibilities. Thus, “to fail someone” is usually translated as “a dezamăgi pe cineva”, and that is mostly due to the fact that the verb is transitive, it requires a direct object, and the closest transitive verb in Romanian is “a dezamăgi”. Indeed, when we translate a transitive verb from one language into another, the first (and best) instinct is to also translate the object, therefore we look for a transitive equivalent. However, the meanings of the two verbs in the two languages are not identical. While the Romanian version carries a meaning that is mostly abstract (to make someone lose their illusions, their hope), the English version carries implications that are more result-oriented (to fail someone is usually interpreted as not achieving a particular result). The line between the two is very thin; however, based on our extensive experience with the two languages, we tend to believe that the English version is more concrete in its connotations.

Therefore, we can say that the Romanian translation of “to fail someone” can be placed somewhere between the abstract, transitive verb “a dezamăgi pe cineva” and the concrete, intransitive verb “a eşua în ceva”, a second choice primarily due to its intransitivity. The English verb carries both connotations; it is a versatile usage that can apply to a wide range of situations, and also highlights the emotional impact of letting down someone who has relied on you. As with many idiomatic or nuanced expressions, there may also exist some subtle differences and cultural nuances to consider. Even when the basic meaning is preserved, the cultural and emotional connotations of the term may differ slightly.

Ex. 4. Barack Obama: “Our health care is too costly, our schools fail too many – and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet”¹⁴.

Having recently won the 2009 US elections, the then-incumbent president Barack Obama delivers an inaugural address replete with subtle attacks against his political opponents, the Republicans. In the extract above, he refers, among others, to the educational system, pointing out that schools “fail” many (students), and we can clearly infer that this is not an abstract occurrence – rather, schools failing people translates into them not obtaining the desired education – the purpose-oriented

¹³ <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=fail>, accessed on October 18, 2023.

¹⁴ https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/the_press_office/President_Barack_Obamas_Inaugural_Address, accessed on March 25, 2023.

approach is more visible than the Romanian equivalent, “școlile dezamăgesc”, would carry in a similar context.

His discourse fulfils all the characteristics of the discourse of change – namely, the emphasis placed on how badly things have been unfolding up until that moment and on how important it is to implement changes. All the problems he highlights (the costly healthcare that burdens individuals, the educational failures, the wrongful energy usage that affects national security and endangers the planet), it is implied, stem from the misguided policies of the previous administration. The tripartite rhetorical structure used (presenting the three interconnected issues) adds emphasis to the issues presented and enhances impact, as the key points resonate with the audience and reinforce the need for action. Against this compelling background, the emotional strength of the verb “fail” increases, reflecting a call for action and a vision necessary to implement the necessary reforms.

Street smart

The phrase “street smart”¹⁵ is a relatively modern colloquial expression that originated in the United States. Its exact date of origin is not precisely known, but it gained popularity in the mid-20th century.

It refers to a person's ability to navigate and succeed in practical, everyday life situations, especially those encountered in urban or challenging environments. It suggests a type of intelligence or wisdom gained through personal experiences, interactions, and an understanding of real-world, often untaught, skills. Street-smart individuals are typically savvy, resourceful, and capable of making practical decisions, often in complex or unfamiliar situations.

The key characteristics of someone who is considered “street smart” include practical knowledge (they have a deep understanding of how things work in their surroundings, such as understanding local customs, recognizing potential dangers, or knowing how to negotiate in various situations), quick thinking (they are often adept at making decisions on the spot, solving problems, and adapting to new circumstances), social awareness (they possess strong interpersonal skills and can read people and situations effectively, often using intuition and common sense), risk assessment (they are skilled at evaluating risks and making judgments that can protect themselves in challenging environments), resourcefulness (they know how to make the best use of available resources, whether it's finding creative solutions to problems or identifying opportunities), and survival instinct (in some cases, street smart can be a matter of survival, as individuals may need to navigate dangerous situations or environments).

¹⁵ <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/street+smart>, accessed on October 18, 2023.

The term “street smart” is often used in contrast to “book smart,” which refers to academic intelligence and knowledge gained through formal education. It's important to note that these two types of intelligence are not mutually exclusive, and individuals can possess a combination of both. The concept of "street smart" underscores the value of real-world experience and practical wisdom in addition to academic learning.

While the English phrase can be translated into Romanian as “descurcăreț”, it is important to note that, while a direct translation partly captures the basic meaning, there are certain nuances and cultural connotations that may not be fully expressed in the Romanian translation. Perhaps most importantly, the cultural context cannot be rendered. The concept of "street smart" is closely associated with urban life, particularly in American culture, whereas in the Romanian translation, the urban context may not be as strongly emphasized. Besides, "street smart" is a colloquial expression often used in casual conversations. By contrast, the Romanian translations provided are more formal and literal, which may not capture the same informality and colloquial tone. Specificity and resourcefulness may also be issues to consider: on the one hand, the English term is specific to the idea of practical intelligence gained through life experiences and the ability to navigate urban environments effectively, while the Romanian translations may not convey the same level of specificity. On the other hand, “street smart” often implies resourcefulness and adaptability in everyday situations; while the Romanian translations similarly convey the idea of being resourceful to some extent, the English term may emphasize it more.

Thus, all in all, it would be very difficult to find an exact equivalent in Romanian. Adjectival phrases like “cu capul pe umeri” or “cu picioarele pe pamânt” also come close, as well as “a avea școala vieții”, but still fail to fully convey all the nuances of the English phrase.

Ex. 5. Chris Gardner (The Pursuit of Happiness): “I'm the type of person who's always been street smart. I've had to hustle my way through life and figure things out on my own”.

In the movie “The Pursuit of Happiness” (2006), directed by Gabriele Muccino and starring Will Smith, the character Chris Gardner (played by Will Smith) uses the phrase “street smart” to describe his ability to navigate challenging situations. The film is based on a true story and depicts Gardner's struggles as a homeless single father who eventually becomes a successful stockbroker.

In one particular scene, Chris Gardner is interviewed for an internship position at a prestigious brokerage firm. During the interview, the interviewer asks him about his qualifications and experience. Chris responds with the extract above - this line showcases his resourcefulness, adaptability, and ability to overcome obstacles in

unconventional ways, all features the character believes could weigh even more than conventional skills and give him an edge over other applicants. He eventually does get the internship, despite facing many obstacles. This example demonstrates the use of the phrase “street smart” in a specific context within a movie, highlighting the character's life experiences and problem-solving skills, and the use encompasses the features discussed above.

Holier-than-thou

The adverbial phrase “holier than thou”, like its (almost) synonym, “self-righteous”, is religiously connotated. It is a colloquial term aiming to describe the attitude of a person who acts as if they were morally superior, taking a judgemental or sanctimonious stance towards others, often without any real justification. The phrase is believed to have originated from the King James Version of the Bible, specifically in the Book of Isaiah, a part of the Old Testament: “Which Say, Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou”.¹⁶ (Isaiah 65:5, KJV). The biblical verse criticizes individuals who adopt a self-righteous attitude, distancing themselves from others while claiming moral or religious superiority; the phrase “holier than thou” subsequently evolved from this biblical text to describe such an attitude in everyday language. It is often used in political and social contexts to point out hypocrisy or judgemental behaviour, often without justification or with a total lack of self-awareness.

While the phrase reflects the enduring influence of biblical language on the development of idiomatic expressions in English, it is very difficult to translate into Romanian. The only way to render this phrase is the literal translation “mai sfânt decât tine”, as our language lacks a similar idiomatic expression, but even the literal translation fails to fully cover the sarcasm and implications of hypocrisy that the original version masterfully conveys. While the religious connotation is preserved by using the adjective “sfânt”, others are lost. It is difficult to convey the judgemental attitude, the informality and colloquial tone, or to transfer the long-standing history the term has in English, as it has been used in various literary and historical contexts. It can be challenging for translators to make sure the intended meaning is conveyed effectively in Romanian as the target language, capturing all the nuances and the implications of the original term.

Ex. 6. Cardinal Tagle: “That’s why I started with sincerity so we don’t have the “holier than thou” attitude”¹⁷.

¹⁶ <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Isaiah-65-5/>, accessed on October 18, 2023.

¹⁷ <https://cbcnews.net/cbcnews/drop-holier-than-thou-attitude-cardinal-tagle-says/>, accessed on October 14, 2023.

Cardinal Luis Antonio Gokim Tagle, a prominent prelate from the Philippines, is widely known worldwide for his leadership within the Catholic church and his significant influence on various aspects of the Church's work. He is also known for his work in interfaith dialogue and social outreach programs, as he has been involved in efforts to promote dialogue and understanding between different religious communities and to address social issues like poverty and disaster response. He is an important religious figure respected worldwide, recognized for his theological insights, pastoral leadership and commitment to addressing social and humanitarian challenges; his influence extends beyond the Philippines, and he is seen as a significant voice within the global Catholic community.

The extract cited above reinforces the way in which he stands out through his emphasis on humility (a fundamental aspect of the Christian faith that many representatives of the Church and parishioners sadly overlook, acting as if they were morally superior to others), the sincerity of his faith and the avoidance of hypocrisy (characterised by a total lack of understanding and empathy). The extract aims to remind us that true faith and leadership should be characterized by love, understanding and a commitment to serving others, while the attitudes that frequently drive Church representatives can be contrary to the Christian values they preach.

Other words and phrases in this second category include adjectives like *elusive*, *relatable* (there is no exact correspondent), adjectival phrases like *no-nonsense* (the Romanian adjective *direct* fails to capture the nuances and the plasticity of the English term) or *low-life* (impossible to translate), as well as noun phrases like *role model* or *drama queen*, which have no exact equivalent in our language. Equally, an idiom like *to have a crush on someone* may be difficult to translate, mostly due to the meaning of "temporary nature" it conveys. Thus, the most common translation into Romanian, *a te îndrăgosti de cineva*, lacks the "temporary" dimension and, while it is not perceived to be as deep as *a iubi pe cineva*, still leaves room for the possibility of a profound feeling to ensue. By contrast, the English *to have a crush on* almost always bears the implication that the feeling is not a long-lasting one and has to do mostly with physical attraction, as maybe in the Romanian expression *a-i sfârâi călcăiele după cineva*.

3.3 Expressions and idioms

To take for granted

The phrase "to take for granted" has its origins in the Old English word "grante," which meant "to guarantee" or "to promise." Over time, the phrase evolved, and "granted" came to mean "acknowledged as true." "Take for granted" is a combination of "take," which means to assume or accept, and "granted." The phrase took on its modern meaning through the evolution of language.

The phrase "to take for granted" now means to accept or assume something as true or real without question or without fully appreciating its value. When people take something or someone for granted, they often fail to recognize the significance, worth, or importance of that thing or person because it has become so familiar or expected.

"Taking something for granted" often carries negative connotations of complacency, indifference, or a lack of gratitude, highlighting the tendency to overlook the positive aspects of our lives until they are no longer available. This phrase serves as a reminder to be mindful of the things, people, and opportunities we may have grown accustomed to and to express gratitude for them.

The idiom has no direct equivalent in the Romanian language. As has been said, it conveys a sense of entitlement, a situation where one person assumes that an advantage of some kind is there forever and will never go away, no matter what they might do, no matter what might happen. Thus, the person who takes something or someone for granted minimizes both the value of the person, object or situation in question, and the possibility that the respective person, object or situation may at some point not be there anymore, for a large number of reasons that cover both contingencies and / or the initiator's own fault. There is a wide range of things that one can take for granted, all of them beneficial to the initiator, such as a good financial situation, a favorable set of circumstances, a good place of employment, a committed partner, one's health, social status or general well-being.

There are several Romanian expressions generally used to translate "to take for granted", such as: *a lua de bun*, *a lua ca atare*, *a lua de-a gata*. However, all of these fail at conveying the facet of entitlement that the English idiom implies. For instance, "a lua ca atare" means to accept a certain status quo without questioning it, *a lua de bun* usually means that you believe something that may or may not be true, whereas *a lua de-a gata*, although generally similar in meaning to *a lua de bun*, can also carry an implication of acceptance of a certain status quo. While these attempts at an accurate translation get as close as possible to the original English meaning, none of them represents an exact equivalent since, as we have pointed out, the connotation of entitlement is missing from all of them.

Ex. 7. Barack Obama: "Too often, we have taken freedom for granted."¹⁸

In the extract above, Obama contends that freedom has been taken for granted against the broader context of global challenges to democracy and, more specifically, to the international danger posed by the war in Ukraine. Against the brutal invasion

¹⁸ <https://www.outlookindia.com/international/too-often-we-have-taken-freedom-for-granted-barack-obama-news-192960>, accessed on March 31, 2023.

of Ukraine, a significant global event that is testing the principles of independence and democracy, freedom appears to be a luxury that citizens of the Western world have grown accustomed to, despite the larger trend where autocrats have become emboldened globally, actively subverting democracy and human rights and ignoring international law. Moreover, challenges to democracy have also spread to the United States, in the speaker's view, given the direct reference to Trump's attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 elections, attempts which culminated in the January 6 United States Capitol attack by the then-incumbent President's supporters. Thus, in his discourse and also in the short extract selected, Obama raises justified concerns about the health of democracy within the country.

Vanilla

The term “vanilla”, which has come to be used figuratively to describe something plain, boring or uninteresting, originates in the Spanish word “vainilla” (“little pod”)¹⁹. While the name “vanilla” was originally associated with the vanilla orchid plant and its pods, the expression has also grown to acquire the meaning we are now looking into, of something plain and unremarkable. This figurative meaning gained popularity in the context of popular culture, particularly in the United States, during the 20th century. It is negatively connotated, used to criticize things that are perceived as lacking in creativity or originality. The term can be used for food (describing a dish that is unadventurous or lacking in complexity), music (conventional, uninspired or formulaic), or even people (ordinary, unremarkable, leading cliché lives). It is often used humorously or informally to convey a sense of mediocrity.

While “vanilla” with this meaning would normally be translated into Romanian by use of an adjective like “banal”, “plictisitor” sau “obişnuit”, some of the more subtle nuances would undoubtedly be lost in this process. Thus, we would lose the cultural associations (referencing the vanilla scent, considered mild and unadventurous, as these would not transfer to Romanian), the informality of the term (even the colloquial nuances), the specific idiomatic value, as well as the personal subjectivity of the term. “Vanilla” also sometimes implies simplicity, paradoxically blending together negative and positive connotations, a case in which it would be downright impossible to convey the meaning in Romanian (since all the possible equivalents overemphasize the negative connotations and lack the positive ones) – for all these reasons, we believe it is a term very difficult to transport in our native language.

Ex. 8. Rachel – *Friends*²⁰

Phoebe: *Okay it just seems a little wild and you're so... vanilla.*

Rachel: *Vanilla? I'm not vanilla. I've done lots of crazy things. I mean I got drunk and married in Vegas.*

¹⁹ <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=vanilla>, accessed on October 18, 2023.

²⁰ https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0583545/quotes/?ref_=tt_trv_qu_, accessed on October 12, 2023.

Phoebe: *To Ross*.

The extract above, taken from the hugely popular sitcom *Friends*, illustrates the humorous use of the term described above. Phoebe does not believe Rachel when the latter tells her she once kissed a girl since, as she points out, her friend is “vanilla”; despite the humorous use, Rachel takes offence and strives to prove that she has, indeed, done something out of the ordinary, she once got drunk and got married in Vegas, which would be an unusual, spur-of-the-moment course of action, to which her Phoebe points out that the person Rachel married was Ross, her long-time boyfriend, thus what she did was in no way extraordinary. Thus, we can see one character (Phoebe), known for her eccentric and unconventional personality, teasing another (Rachel) for a behaviour the former perceives as plain and predictable. We can also see that the latter character resents the description and attempts to defend herself, which proves the negative connotations of the term, even when used amicably. The exchange showcases the humour and character dynamics of the sitcom, where Phoebe’s personality contrasts with Rachel’s more mainstream, even conventional behaviour.

Road rage

The term “road rage” refers to aggressive and violent behaviour exhibited by drivers on the road, often in response to traffic-related stressors or disputes. It is believed to have originated in the United States in the late 1980s or early 1990s²¹, and it became popularized during that time as a way to describe the respective problem. The concept likely predates the coining of the term, as aggressive driving and conflicts on the road had been observed for many decades, but the term helped to specifically identify and address the issue. It entered public awareness through media coverage, particularly in the 1990s, as high-profile cases of road rage incidents and media reporting on aggressive driving behaviour brought the concept and the term to the forefront of public discourse.

Various measures were taken to address this problem and penalize this deviant behaviour, and educational campaigns were launched to raise awareness thereof. It is also of significance that, out of all the stressful situations generated by life in our day and age, it is only this context that spawned a term specifically designed to describe conduct in a specific set of circumstances: while driving. The term drew attention to the psychological factors that can contribute to aggressive driving (stress, frustration, an increased sense of competition and individual personality traits that surface were recognized as potential causes of road rage).

²¹ <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/road+rage>, accessed on October 18, 2023.

While efforts have constantly been made to promote safer and more courteous driving (such as encouraging drivers to practice patience and seek non-confrontational ways to resolve disputes on the road), *road rage* remains a well-recognized term used to describe aggressive and dangerous behaviours exhibited by drivers, from verbal altercations and rude gestures to more serious instances of violence and even accidents. The very recognition of this phenomenon at societal level highlights the need for addressing the issue through improved road safety measures, education, discipline, anger management and awareness campaigns.

While *road rage* could literally be translated into Romanian via the phrases *furie rutieră* or *agresiune rutieră*, phrases which cover the core meaning of aggressive and / or violent behaviour on the road, some nuances and cultural connotations are undoubtedly lost in translation. Firstly, *road rage* has specific cultural connotations in English, especially in light of the United States “car cult”. Secondly, nuances stemming from the legal and regulatory context (such as laws and penalties associated with aggressive driving) or from social and behavioural norms (including media coverage, public awareness and sociological aspects) differ in a Romanian context. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the idiomatic usage of *road rage* in English has no counterpart in Romanian and any attempts at translation, albeit accurate, fail to attain the impact the original phrase has.

Ex. 9. Judge Judy: “Ladies! Road rage! Ladies and road rage! Haven’t had many of those. It’s usually reserved for the male counterparts.”²²

In this episode, Judge Judy expresses her surprise at a case of violent behaviour exhibited by two women who had a fight in traffic. Subsequent to what could have been a minor incident on a main road, one of the protagonists followed her fellow motorist onto a side street and assaulted her, violently pulling her hair and causing her serious injury. We notice that the judge first acknowledges the concept, and her repeating it conveys her genuine surprise not at the concept itself, but at who the protagonists are. Indeed, she immediately comments on the gender aspect of road rage, noting that she hasn’t encountered many cases involving women, as the phenomenon is mostly symptomatic of male drivers, while the current case upends the common gender stereotype she was accustomed to. We can notice that, even by stressing that road rage is commonly associated with male drivers, the speaker confirms the widespread awareness of the phenomenon and the importance of the place it occupies in the general perceptions of society, perceptions that the challenged gender stereotype only serves to reinforce. The fact that violent behaviour on the road has spread to such an extent that it is now exhibited by women as well proves the magnitude of the phenomenon yet again.

²² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2U8au74kVFU_ accessed on October 16, 2023.

Other words and phrases in this third category include nouns like *waffle*, *kerfuffle* or *squatter* (no equivalent word or phrase in Romanian can render either their meaning or their ironic dimension), *cliffhanger*, (a term based on visual imagery that also lacks an equivalent), metaphor-based, ironic noun phrases like *a hissy fit* or *silver spoon* that are impossible to translate literally, and idioms like *to jump on the bandwagon* (also ironically connotated, as it implies that one blindly follows what others are doing, with no filters of their own), *to make a beeline for* or *something that can make you or break you* which, without being inherently ironic, can only be transcreated rather than translated - where transcreation is defined as the transfer of messages from one language into another, as opposed to translation, which is the transfer of words from one language into another (Pedersen, 2014:62).

4. Conclusions

In this exploration of English words and phrases with elusive equivalents in Romanian, we have delved into the intricate world of conceptual and abstract terms, social and behavior-related expressions, and idiomatic language. Our analysis has unveiled the challenges of translation, revealing the nuanced meanings and cultural connotations that may be lost in the process. From the intricate dance of *serendipity* to the weight of *entitlement* and the intricacies of interpersonal dynamics, we have encountered a rich tapestry of linguistic complexity. While language often reflects our shared human experiences, these untranslatable gems remind us that every culture has its unique perspectives and emotions that resist a one-size-fits-all translation.

As we navigate the multifaceted landscape of translation, we have come to appreciate the delicate balance between conveying meaning and preserving cultural richness. Our journey through these linguistic pitfalls underscores the importance of context, interpretation, and the art of bridging linguistic divides. In the end, we are left with an appreciation for the complexities of language and a reminder that the beauty of expression often lies in its ineffability. This article serves as a testament to the inexhaustible richness of language and the art of bridging cultural divides, reminding us that in the world of translation, some meanings remain gloriously untranslatable.

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