

**OVERLAPPING AND VISIBILITY
IN RETRANSLATION: TRANSLATING DAN LUNGU'S
SUNT O BABĂ COMUNISTĂ
FROM ROMANIAN INTO ENGLISH**

Daria PROTOPODESCU¹

Nadina VIȘAN²

Abstract

*This article investigates overlapping and stylistic variation in some 20 target texts of a fragment from Dan Lungu's novel *Sunt o babă comunistă*. Eighteen Romanian students enrolled in the MA programme "The Translation of the Contemporary Text" at the University of Bucharest, produced eighteen versions of fragments of this novel in English, under the supervision of their teacher, Nadina Vișan, who, in turn, produced her own version as well. Considering that according to the Retranslation Hypothesis, the first translation should be domesticating and the translator is supposed to be less visible, our expectation is that Alistair Ian Blyth's published version (Dalkey Archive Press, 2017) would be characterized by domestication and invisibility and we intend to check this hypothesis.*

Keywords: culture-specific items; domestication; foreignization; translatability; translation strategies.

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1. Introduction

The present article analyses a part of a "cultural translation" workshop that was subsequently published in 2022, with the Contemporary Literature Press of the University of Bucharest, within the Translation Café series, an online magazine dedicated to publishing works by M.A. students under the coordination of academic staff teaching in the Translation of the Contemporary Text M.A. Programme. The versions of an excerpt of Dan Lungu's novel (pages 85-90 from the 2010 version) are to be pitted against the "official" version made by Alistair Ian Blyth and published in 2017 by Dalkey Archive Press.

Drawing upon concepts such as 'overlapping in retranslation' (Van Poucke, 2020) and '(in)visibility in translation' (Venuti 2008), we investigate strategies in the translation of culture-specific items (see Aixelá, 1997) and the role of the teacher/editor in smoothing out instances of loss in translation.

¹ Daria Protopopescu, University of Bucharest, daria.protopopescu@lls.unibuc.ro.

² Nadina Vișan, University of Bucharest, nadina.visan@lls.unibuc.ro

2. Theoretical background and methodology

Starting from Berman's Retranslation Hypothesis (RH), we aim to look into the difference between translating and retranslating a text. In the case of retranslation, the retranslator has the opportunity:

1. to use the previous translation to get acquainted with at least one possible way of translating the source text (ST);
2. to recycle those particular sections of the translation that show no obvious deficiencies and, hence, can be reused in the new version without harming the final result.

However, in a number of cases, there is only one obvious translation of a certain word or phrase available, so it would be far-fetched to try and replace it. This strategy would obviously lead to instances of overlapping. Therefore, the two questions that we would like to address in our analysis are:

Q1: What if the proportion of text that could be reused in the new translation were to be so substantial that the new version would hardly differ from the previous one?

Q2: Does it make sense to retranslate at all in such a case? From which point on are we dealing with a "retranslation proper" instead of a revision or simple refreshing of the older translation? And how do retranslators cope with the presence of particularly successful lexical, syntactic or stylistic choices by the first translator(s)?

According to Antoine Berman, the continuous process of retranslating would, in the end, lead to the creation of a "great translation" (Fr. *grande traduction*) that would come so close to perfection that retranslations would become superfluous (Berman, 1990: 2). Yet, the practice of literary translation somehow points to the fact that this level of perfection is hardly attainable. The exact relationship of a text with the previous translation(s) cannot always be determined, even if the most recent translation is presented as a "retranslation, re-edition or revision" (Paloposki and Koskinen, 2010: 44). A retranslation is often clearly announced as such on the blurb or in the paratext to the edition out of economic considerations. The reasons why the boundaries between the different categories of revision are so unclear may be attributable to the complex nature of the retranslation process.

Aixela (1997) makes a classification of culture-specific items (CSIs). Following this taxonomy, CSIs were divided into two groups: 1) proper nouns; or 2) common expressions. The group of proper nouns is not the focus of investigation in this article. We have chosen to concentrate on the analysis of common expressions which are more problematic in translation. Since the excerpt under investigation comprises of only 5 pages of the source text (ST), the number of CSIs is quite limited, but it may be further subdivided into the following sub-groups: common

expressions denoting 1) concepts, slogans, and items of popular culture; and 2) food and drinks. Therefore, our investigation focuses more on the qualitative aspect of the translated versions. To reach the research aim, the following objectives were set: to define culture-specific items and their classification; to investigate translation strategies applicable to translation of culture-specific items; to determine the frequency of translation strategies used to render culture-specific items; to evaluate the motivation and justification of translator's actions in terms of the use of translation strategies. To achieve this, descriptive and comparative analysis was used.

As previously mentioned, the volume edited by Nadina Vișan contains 19 English versions of the excerpt from Dan Lungu's novel (spanning pages 85-90): 18 made by M.A. students and one by their coordinator, Nadina Vișan. For all intents and purposes, the version translated by Alistair Ian Blyth will be referred to as TT1, while the 19 workshop versions will be referred to by the initials of the translators, as follows: Alexandra Handrea (AH), Alexandra Lica (AL), Alma Miron (AM), Ana Stănilă (AS), Anca Ilie (AI), Andra Păuna (AP), Andreea Zofotă (AZ), Andrei-Claudiu Mihălcioiu (ACM), Cristina Fliter (CF), Cristina Șuică (CȘ), Darian Serghie (DS), Diana Simulescu (DSim), Dragoș Frangulea (DF), Elena Florea (EF), Ioana Grigoruță (IG), Iuliana Boruga (IB), Mihaela Dumitrescu (MD), Mihnea Arion (MA), Nadina Vișan (NV).

3. Analysis of the corpus

In what follows we are going to analyze four samples which contain CSIs, the first three referring to food and drink and the last one qualifying as a common expression.

The first CSI under scrutiny is the noun *ness*, which stands for the only instant coffee brand that was available in Romania during the communist era. As expected, a lot of overlapping occurs in the students' versions.

ST: Dar, pentru lumea aia, am avut tot ce-mi poftea inima. Beam numai cafea naturală și *ness*...

TT1: But relative to that world, I had everything my heart desired. I used to drink nothing but ground coffee and *instant*...

M.A.: But, for that world, I had everything I desired. I drank only real and *instant coffee*...

I.B.: But for that time, I had everything to my heart's desire. I only used to drink real coffee and *instant coffee (natural coffee and ness)* ...

M.D.: But, for those times, I had everything I could have asked for. I would only drink real and *instant coffee*...

C.F.: But the way things were in those times, I had everything my heart desired. I drank real coffee and *instant coffee*...

E.F.: But for those times, I had everything my heart desired. I was drinking ground coffee and *instant coffee*...

D.F.: However, given that period, I had everything my heart desired. I only drank real and *instant coffee*...

I.G.: But I had everything my heart desired, for those times. I used to drink real coffee and *instant coffee* alone...

A.H.: But, for those times, I had everything that struck my fancy. I only drank real coffee and *instant coffee*...

A.I.: But, as things were then, I had everything I could wish for. I had real coffee and *instant coffee* to drink...

A.L.: However, for that time I had everything my heart craved for. I only drank real coffee and *Nescafé*...

A.C.M.: But, for that time, I had everything my heart desired. I only drank genuine coffee and *Ness instant coffee*...

A.T.M.: But for those times, I had every single thing my heart desired. We only drank natural coffee and *instant coffee*...

A.P.: Though, for a world like that, I had all to my heart's content. I drank only real coffee and *Nescafé*. (I drank only *ness* and natural coffee)

D.S.: But, for that era, I had everything I desired. I'd only drink regular and *instant coffee*...

D.Sim.: But for that time and place, I had everything my heart craved. I was drinking only real coffee, whether ground or *instant*... (natural coffee and *ness*...)

A.S.: But for that world, I had all of my heart's desires fulfilled. I used to drink only *instant* or real coffee...

C.Ş.: But, in a world like that, I had everything I hankered for. I only drank real coffee and *instant coffee*...

A.Z.: But, for that world, I had everything my heart desired. I only drank brewed and *instant coffee*...

N.V.: But, as things were then, I had everything I could wish for. I had real coffee to drink, let alone *instant coffee*.

What is interesting, however, is that given the students' lack of direct experience with the communist era, two of them, A.L. and A.P. opted for *Nescafé* which is a brand name that was not available during that period. In an earlier, unpublished version, I.B., A.P. and D.Sim. – as proved by the versions in between round brackets – opted for direct equivalence with *ness*, which is opaque for the interpretation of an English native speaker as it does not point to any reference to instant coffee. Therefore, in this case the supervising teacher discussed it with the students, explaining the context of the time period in question. This resulted in the corrected, published versions for the three students. Alternatively, A.C.M. opted for *Ness instant coffee* which was left in the published version as such. The reason behind this choice has to do with the fact that the student resorted to explication and using *Ness* with a capital letter, turning it into a proper noun much in the spirit

of famous brand names. The rest of the versions went with instant coffee, while the official version, TT1 went with an elliptical version “ground coffee and *instant*...”

A second CSI related to food is the proper noun *zacuscă*, which is a sort of vegetable spread mostly made with roasted eggplants, sauteed onions, tomato paste, and roasted red bell peppers. Since it is a typically Romanian/Balkan “dish”, it is quite difficult to render it into English. Below, we illustrated the translated versions for this CSI:

ST: Castraveți, ceapă, usturoi, ardei grași de la el luam. Îmi ieșea *zacusca* la preț de apă minerală. Altul, nea Pardon, era șofer pe mașină la fabrica de lapte, mai precis căra zilnic laptele colectat în comune.

TT1: We got cucumbers, onions, garlic, and red peppers from him. Ø Another guy, Mr. Sorry, was a driver at the milk factory, or rather he went around collecting the milk from the villages.

M.A.: I could make *zacuscă*¹ for the price of mineral water. (Translator’s footnote: A vegetable spread widely consumed in Romania)

I.B.: My *zacusca* was at a price of a mineral water.

M.D.: I made *vegetable spread* at the price of sparkling water.

C.F.: I could make *zacuscă*² for the price of mineral water. (Translator’s footnote: type of vegetable spread, traditionally prepared as a winter preserve)

E.F.: I could make *zacusca* on very little money.

D.F.: I would cook *vegetable stew* for the price of sparkling water.

I.G.: My *eggplant relish* would turn out as cheap as sparkling water.

A.H.: I made *vegetable hotchpotch* at the price of sparkling water.

A.I.: I was getting my *zacusca* at the price of mineral water.

A.L.: I made *zacusca* worth as much as mineral water.

A.C.M.: I made *zacusca* at the price of sparkling water.

A.T.M.: I made *zacusca* at the price of sparkling water.

A.P.: I made some *zacuscă* for the price of sparkling water.

D.S.: I’d make *zacusca* with the same price of sparkling water.

D.Sim.: My *mashed vegetables* cost just as much as a soda did.

A.S.: The cost of making *zacuscă* was close to nothing.

C.Ș.: I made my *Zacusca* for the price of sparkling water.

A.Z.: I’d make *zacusca* at the price of a water bottle.

N.V.: I got to make my *winter preserves* at dirt prices.

Interestingly enough, the official translation, TT1, omits translating the whole sentence containing the word. It is difficult to guess why Blyth opted for omission, since to our mind the sentence does not contain information that might be irrelevant. On the other hand, this might be related to the idea that inner cultural values might be a troublesome case. For instance, Nida (1964) presumes that cultural differences might raise much more complicated issues for translators than differences of language systems (Nida, 1964, p.130). The surface of a culture –

language, is perceived as a minor translation concern in comparison with inner, or deeper, cultural items. Another possibility for explaining the translator's decision to erase the CSI, might be according to that "it may simply be an act of desperation by a translator who can find no adequate way of conveying the original meaning" (Davies, 2003:79–80). So, this might be the case here as well, which would explain why Blyth opted for omission.

As was the case with "ness", the students mostly exhibited overlapping in this case as well, 13 of them opting for equivalence with various forms of spelling "zacuscă", either with a final -ă, or without, one even spelling it with a capital letter turning it into a proper name. Only two of the students, M.A. and C.F. opted for a translator's footnote in which they explain what "zacuscă" is. The rest of 6 versions resorted to explication of the CSI: M.D. opted for "vegetable spread", D.F. – "vegetable stew", I.G. "eggplant relish", A.H. – "vegetable hotchpotch", D.Sim. – "mashed vegetables" and N.V. – "winter preserves". M.D.'s version seems to be the closest to describing "zacuscă", if we take into account the definition we provided for this term. D.F.'s and A.H.'s versions highlight the preparation process which might lead to a different mental representation of what "zacuscă" is. I.G.'s solution emphasizes on one of the ingredients used in the preparation of "zacuscă", the eggplant. D.Sim. also seems to focus on part of the preparation method, resorting to idea of mashing the vegetables, while N.V. opts for a very generic explication.

The third food item qualifying as a CSI is „gumă țigarete”. This is an item that was typically found during communist times in Romania, mostly in the 80's, a sort of chewing gums shaped as a thin cylinder and wrapped up so as to resemble cigarettes, hence the name. Below, we illustrate how the various translators fared in this particular case:

ST: Ce, Alice mesteca gumă din aia, *țigarete*, care se făcea făină în gură?

TT1: What, did Alice used to chew that *Ø* gum that turned to powder in your mouth?

M.A.: What, you think Alice would chew gum of that kind, *cigarette-like*, the one that turned to flour in your mouth?

I.B.: What, did Alice ever chew that kind of *Ø* chewing gum which filled your mouth with flour?

M.D.: What, you think Alice ever got to chew those *bubble gum cigarettes* that turned into flour when you put them in your mouth?

C.F.: What, like Alice chewed those *cigarette-shaped gum-sticks*, the kind that turned to flour in your mouth?

E.F.: Do you think my Alice would chew those gum *sticks* that crumbled in your mouth?

D.F.: Do you think that Alice chewed that *cigarette-shaped* chewing gum, that would crumble in your mouth?

I.G.: What do you imagine? That Alice would chew on Ø gum that would become floury when you put it in your mouth?

A.H.: What, did Alice ever chew on those *sticks of gum* that turned to flour in your mouth?

A.I.: What? Would Alice chew those *sticks of gum shaped like cigarettes*, which turned to flour in your mouth?

A.L.: What, did Alice chew that kind of *cigarette gum* that turned into flour in the mouth?

A.C.M.: Do you think Alice would chew on that floury *gum that came in sticks*?

A.T.M.: You think that Alice got to chew that kind of Ø gum that was just like flour when you put it in your mouth?

A.P.: That Alice chewed *cigarette-shaped gum* which tasted like flour?

D.S.: Alice chewed that kind of *gum, cigarette-like*, that would turn into powder in your mouth?

D.Sim.: Do you think Alice chewed that gum, *in a cigarette form*, that became flour in your mouth?

A.S.: You think Alice chewed that horrible Ø gum that turned to ashes in your mouth?

C.Ş.: Did Alice chew on that floury *cigarette* gum?

A.Z.: What, did Alice chew that *cigarette-like gum*, which turned into flour in your mouth?

N.V.: Do you think Alice chewed *those sticks of gum* that turned to *ashes* in your mouth?

Five of the translators, including Blyth's (TT1), omit the idea of 'cigarette' altogether. Other four translators opted for describing the shape of the gum as "sticks", while the rest went with explicitation including the term 'cigarette' in their solutions.

So far, the CSIs that we have discussed are extralinguistic (Vîlceanu, 2017). We need to take into account the distinction "cafea naturală și ness", "zacuscă", "gumă țigarete". All of them have what can be called hidden semantics, related to knowledge of the context, in this case the later part of the Romanian communist era, the 1970's and the 1980's. For example, "cafea naturală" yielded a lot of overlapping in the versions (i.e., translated by REAL COFFEE) due to the fact that real coffee was a rarity in that era. To this end we should contrast this concept with what was known during that time as "nechezol". This, in turn triggers the ambiguity for the word, 'natural', which some of the translators render as 'ground' while others render it as 'real'.

In the case of CSIs which are linguistic, such as: idioms, puns, euphemisms, etc. –, their accurate translation depends on knowledge of the co-text. In the excerpt chosen to illustrate a linguistic CSI, we are faced with another instance of ambiguity: "și apoi dă-i și toarnă". This was either interpreted literally (as does

TT1), where the salient elements in the co-text are: *afumat, whisky* – and they form a semantic chain with the idiom, or it was interpreted non-literally (as do most of the other versions, under guidance from the teacher): *spill the beans, let the cat out of the bag*. In this case, the idiom forms a semantic chain with the segment represented by “nea Pardon începe să povestească ce ne chinuam să scoatem de la el de vreo doi ani”.

ST: Până într-o zi când nea Pardon al nostru a venit cam *afumat*. L-am chemat la noi în bucătărie, *să nu stea omul în picioare*, și l-am servit cu una, cu alta. Țin minte că i-am dat și un whisky, nu știu de unde-l aveam, de *a făcut ochii cât farurile*: „Băăă, da' tot voi vă respectați, pardon!”. Vorbind despre toate și despre nimic, când ne așteptam mai puțin, nea Pardon începe să povestească ce ne chinuam să scoatem de la el de vreo doi ani.

– Asemenea cum nici directorul nostru nu mai mănâncă, zice el, și *apoi dă-i și toarnă*.

TT1: Until one day our Mr. Sorry turned up rather tipsy. We invited him into the kitchen to take the load off his feet and gave him something to eat and drink. I remember I gave him some whiskey, I don't know where we'd got it, but he made eyes as big as saucers and said: “This is quality stuff, sorry!” We chatted about this and that, and just when we were least expecting, Mr. Sorry started telling us what we'd been striving to get out of him for the last two years:

“Not even our director eats such good butter,” he said and poured himself another tot.

M.A. Until one day our uncle Pardon came to us quite tipsy. We invited him into our kitchen, so he wouldn't have to stand, and gave him a bit of this and that. I remember we also gave him whisky, I don't know where we had it from, so that he stared, mouth agape: „My God, but you folk don't mess around, pardon me!”. Chit-chatting about this and that, when we expected it less, uncle Pardon started *spilling the beans* to us after we'd been trying to get something out of him for about two years. “Not even our boss gets his hands on butter like this”, says he, and then he *lets the cat out of the bag*.

I.B. Until one day when our nea Sorry came *a little bit intoxicated*. We invited him in our kitchen, *so that the man would not have to stand*, and we served this and that. I remember I gave him some whiskey, I don't know where I got it from and *he was so pop-eyed*: “Man... you like to live well, sorry!” We kept talking about everything and nothing and when we less expected, nea Sorry started telling us what we'd been struggling to get out of him for about two years.

“Our boss himself doesn't eat butter like that,” he said, and then he started to speak his mind.

M.D. “Not even our boss eats such butter” he said and then *came clean*.

C.F. “Not even our manager eats such butter,” he says, and then on *he goes spilling the beans*.

E.F. “Not even the manager of the dairy farm can enjoy such good quality butter”, he pointed it out. And then *he let the cat out of the bag*.

- D.F. "Not even our manager eats such butter" he said and then *went on*.
- I.G. "Not even our manager eats such butter" he said. *And then he spilled it all*.
- A.H. 'Not even our manager eats butter of this kind,' he said, and then *he spilled the beans*.
- A.I. "Even our manager doesn't eat such butter", he says, and then *he starts blurting it all out*.
- A.L. "Not even our manager eats such butter anymore", says he, and then *everything came to light*.
- A.C.M. "Not even our director eats such fine butter", he says, and then *spills it all out*.
- A.T.M. "Not even our manager eats this kind of butter anymore" he says and *then continues coughing it up*.
- A.P. "Not even our boss eats such a good butter!" he said, and *then there was no going back*.
- D.S. "Not even our boss eats such butter", he says, and then proceeds *to pour the whole story*.
- D. Sim. "Not even our manager eats such butter anymore!" he says, and *then pours his heart out*.
- A.S. "Not even our manager gets to eat this kind of butter", and then *he revealed his cards*.
- C.Ş. 'Not even our manager eats such butter anymore' he says and then *he comes clean*.
- A.Z. "Not even our manager eats such butter anymore", he said, then *he started spilling it all*.
- N.V. "Nobody eats such treats, not even our manager," he says and then *he coughs it all up*.

M.A. resorts to reinforcement by using the idiom "spill the beans", "let the cat out of the bag". I.B. opts for semantic deviation in the translation of the last idiom. The use of 'nea' instead of 'uncle', is a sign that foreignization was the preferred strategy in this case. D.S. and D.Sim. are the more ambiguous versions (this strategy of preserving some of the ambiguity actually does some justice to the source text). A.T.M. and N.V. opt for adaptation without preservation of the ambiguity of the ST, by using an equivalent idiomatic expression. It appears that the idiom to spill the beans occurs in most versions, leading to quite a lot of overlapping as well.

4. Conclusions

CSIs related to foods and drinks can be a feature of a specific culture that makes it truly distinguishable from any other culture. Thus, the variety of foods that belong to particular countries can lead to translation puzzles, as in many cases local foods or drinks have no equivalents or share no similarities with other cultures. Therefore, the translation of culture-specific items related to cuisine can be a

difficult obstacle for a translator. In this case, most of translations of the food names preserved the original ST name with or without an explanation or a translator's footnote, but the other versions literally translated them. This was shown in the analysis of the three food-related CSIs investigated in this article.

As predicted by Berman, the first translation is the more domesticating, the translator is the less visible, because he manages to blend the extralinguistic CSIs into the text without offering extratextual explication (footnotes), which are the marks of foreignization and which make the translator visible. He prefers the strategy of implicitation (generalization, as in the case of the CSI "gumă țigarete", omission, as in the case of "zacuscă"). By contrast, the other versions are more 'foreignizing' and the translators are more visible: it seems the Retranslation Hypothesis is, in this case, confirmed.

However, due to the fact that all the subsequent versions were what Saeedi (2020) refers to as 'early-career' or 'amateur' translations, which were published under guidance, there was a high degree of overlapping and the teacher was instrumental in the selection of strategies or in decoding ambiguity in the case of linguistic CSIs.

In the case of the translation of idiomatic expressions a variety of strategies and methods were employed. Therefore, we were able to observe the translators' inconsistency in using strategies to treat homogenous cultural references. As far as overlapping is concerned, we noticed that even after the teacher's corrections, the phenomenon persisted, which was only natural in the case of food CSIs.

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The authors

Daria Protopopescu is an Associate Professor in the English Department, University of Bucharest. She holds a PhD degree in Philology, from the same university. She is the author of the books *Elements of English Terminology*, 2013, Editura Universităţii Bucureşti, and co-author of *New Perspectives on English Grammar*, 2014, Editura Institutul European Iaşi, as well as numerous articles on literary translation studies. Her research interests include translation studies, terminology, syntax and the history of the English language.

Nadina Vişan is a Professor in the English Department, University of Bucharest, Romania. Her main interests lie in the direction of historical linguistics and translation studies. She is the author of *A Discourse Representation Theory Analysis of the Perfect in English and Romanian* (Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii Bucureşti, 2006) and *Elements of English Lexicology* (Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii Bucureşti, 2015).

Both are also members of the research Centre for the Translation and Interpretation of the Contemporary Text (CTITC) at the University of Bucharest.