

Cultural Aspects of Idiom Translation. Case Study: “Three Men in a Boat” and “Three Men on the Bummel”

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Abstract Studies on humour translation acknowledge the cultural priority in terms of message and amusement conveyance from source to target text. The tendency towards moving up and down the cultural translation scale which ranges from exoticism to cultural transplantation (Hervey, 1994:28) is reflected in translators’ effort to reach maximal closeness to the original text. One of the constitutive elements of the English comic literary text, the idiom, reflects the cultural identity of the source text humour as well as its linguistic value. Its lexical structure and semantic integrity determine the equivalence effect achievement. From these perspectives, the current paper aims at identifying the idiomatic expressions from J.K. Jerome’s novels “Three Men in a Boat” and “Three Men on the Bummel”, at analyzing their target variants in terms of the applied cultural translation strategies and humorous effect conveyance.

Keywords Idiomatic expression, Culture-specific items, Translation strategy, Diachronic perspective

1. Introduction

Early and current approaches to humour translation (Nida, 1982:59; Munday, 2001) lay the emphasis on the principle of equivalence effect achievement. Most authors (Delisle, 1999; Baker, 1993, Munday, 2000) agree that the must replace a source language idiom by a target language idiom which expresses the same situation even though they do not correspond formally. Thus, idiom translation covers a rather semantic than lexical or grammatical levels since the translators tend to express the same idea in different ways. Despite the increasing progress acknowledging the cultural value of idiom translation, not much area was covered by culture-specific idiom translation analysis. Moreover, little or no attention has been paid so far to the diachronic perspective of the culture-specific idiom translated from English into Romanian from 1957 to 2009. The research question this study addresses is how the translation strategies employed by different translators vary along time and how they differ in the case of J.K. Jerome’s novels “Three Men in a Boat” and “Three Men on the Bummel”.

2. Theoretical Framework

Several authors have published their findings on idiom translation strategies. This study, thus, takes as its theoretical

approach the translation strategies advanced by M. Baker (1993) in the case of the semantic aspect of analysis and Venuti’s in the cultural aspect. Baker’s practice involves such idiom translation strategies as:

1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form reveals linguistic, semantic and cultural similarities between SL and TL;
2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form is an alternative to the existing equivalent in the TL;
3. Rephrasing implies using another lexico-grammatical pattern but preserving the semantic value of the idiom. Consider the instances below;
4. Omitting (Baker, 1993:73-78)- a technique of dropping the idiom in the TT because of a not finding its equivalent.

An attempt to highlight the importance of cultural transfer in translation was made by Venuti (1995:20) who introduced the concept of foreignization and referred to it as “an ethnodeviant pressure on those (cultural) values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text sending the reader abroad”. Though the preconditions favouring foreignization existed long before in Schleiermacher’s (1938 qt. by Xun Lu:5) claim that “the translator leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer to the reader” the term is characterized as “not being transparent and it eschews fluency for a more heterogeneous mix of discourses in order to signify the difference of the foreign text” (Venuti, 1995); as “involving retaining the foreignness of the original language text” (Schuttleworth and Cowie, 1997:59) and idioms containing culture-specific items inclusively.

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From the cultural viewpoint of idiom translation, translator’s freedom is discovered in domestication (Venuti, 1992), a translation strategy which “leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader towards the writer” (Schleiermacher, 1938 qtd. by Xun Lu:5) and “seeks to achieve complete naturalness of the expression by means of dynamic equivalence” (Nida, 1982), by means of “foreignness minimization” (Yang [2010:77-80], Munday [2001:146-147]) and by means of “adapting translation to the context of the target language” (Lutas, n.d).

3. Method

Our case study builds upon the close reading of J.K. Jerome’s novels “Three Men in a Boat” and “Three Men on the Bummel”, on the idiom identification and classification into culture-specific and culture-non-specific according to the criteria provided by such scholars like Vinay and

Darbelnet (1958), Catford (1964); Cerdá Massó (1986), Newmark (1988), Harvey (2003:2), Espindola and Vasconcellos (2006:24), Behtash and Firoozkoobi (2009:1578), Santoyo (2010:15), Guerra (2012). Furthermore, the target language variants offered by the Romanian translators Levițchi (1957), Corduneanu (1959), Duțescu (1972), Bătrânu (1985), Decei (2006), Nițescu (2009) are examined and compared in order to disclose to what extent the semantic and cultural translation strategies have been applied. Thus, this comparative analysis is bi-directional: first, it focuses on translation strategy detection and their measurement on a percentage scale; second-it dwells on showing their fluctuation along the time axis which ranges from 1957 to 2009.

Consider the instances below:

1. Using an idiom of similar meaning and form reveals linguistic, semantic and cultural similarities between SL and TL.

Source Text J.K. Jerome (1889:110)	Target Text Levițchi (1957:118)	Target Text Corduneanu (1959:180)	Target Text Bătrânu (1985:129)	Target Text Decei (2006:166)	Target Text Nițescu (2009:116)
<i>You are afraid to poke your nose into any room in the house now; [...]</i>	<i>După aceea nu mai îndrăznești să-ți vâri nasul în nici o cameră din casă, [...]</i>	<i>După asta te temi să mai vîri nasul în vreo altă cameră.</i>	<i>După aceasta nu riscați să vă băgați nasul nici într-o cameră a casei acesteia.</i>	<i>Îți este teamă să-ți bagi nasul în oricebaltă cameră</i>	<i>După aceea nu mai îndrăznești să-ți vâri nasul în nici o cameră din casă, [...]</i>
<i>The old man burst into tears. (Jerome, 1889:65)</i>	<i>Bătrânul izbucni în lacrimi Levițchi (1957:69)</i>	<i>Bătrânul izbucni în lacrimi. Corduneanu (1959:116)</i>	<i>Bătrânul izbucni în plâns. Bătrânu (1985:78)</i>	<i>Bătrânul a izbucnit în lacrimi. Decei (2006:99)</i>	<i>Bătrânul izbucni în lacrimi. (Nițescu, 2009:70)</i>

The idiomatic expression *poke your nose*, which stands for trying to discover things that do not involve you, was translated by means of the Romanian equivalents *să-ți vâri/ bagi nasul* having the same meaning *a se amesteca într-o afacere, într-o problemă (care nu-1 privește)*. The same technique is applied to translating the *idiom burst into tears- a izbucni în plâns/ lacrimi* which means *to cry*. The same strategy was employed to idiom translation in the novel “Three Men on the Bummel” where the idiom *in the flesh and blood*, which stands for *a living human body*, was translated by a Romanian equivalent similar in form and meaning *în carne și oase*.

Source Text J.K. Jerome (1901:160)	Target Text Duțescu (1972:303-4)	Target Text Decei (2006:150)
<i>They were coming towards us in the flesh and blood, unless we were dreaming, alive and concrete—the English “Milor” and the English “Mees,” as for generations they have been portrayed in the Continental comic press and upon the Continental stage.</i>	<i>Veneau spre noi în carne și oase, afară doar că nu visam, vii și concreți britanicul milord și Britanica miss așa cum de generații au fost cartacterizați în presa umoristică de pe continent și pe scenele europene.</i>	<i>Veneau spre noi în carne și oase, asta dacă nu cumva visam vii și concreți-englezul Milor și englezoaica Miss, așa cum fuseseră înfățișați de generații în presa umoristică și pe scenele de pe continent.</i>

2. Using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form is an alternative to the existing equivalent in the TL. For example, the idiom *playing the fool*, besides being translated by its Romanian equivalent *face pe prostul* which is similar in form and meaning, the translators Levițchi (1957) and Nițescu (2009), chose to preserve the meaning but to bring slight variations in form such as in *o face pur și simplu pe nebunul*. Furthermore, the translator Bătrânu (1985) proceeded bringing variations to the form still remaining close to the original meaning *iși face de cap* whereas the translator Decei (2006) veered away from the original meaning and form using a different idiom *iși bate joc de tine* which is relevant to the general contextual meaning:

Source Text J.K. Jerome (1889:19)	Target Text Levițchi (1957:17)	Target Text Corduneanu (1959:44)	Target Text Bătrânu (1985:25)	Target Text Decei (2006:26)	Target Text Nițescu (2009:19)
<i>Instead of helping you, it seems to you that the other man is simply playing the fool.</i>	<i>În loc să te ajute, ai impresia că ajutorul tău o face pur și simplu pe nebunul.</i>	<i>Ți se pare că celălalt în loc să ajute face pe prostul pur și simplu.</i>	<i>Fără îndoială, tovarășul Dumneavoastră în loc să vă ajute, pur și simplu își face de cap.</i>	<i>Ai impresia, că în loc să te ajute, amicul tău își bate joc de tine.</i>	<i>În loc să te ajute, ai impresia că celălalt o face pur și simplu pe nebunul.</i>

The translators of “Three Men on the Bummel” did use the same strategy when translating the idiom *lost his temper* though it has a Romanian equivalent *a-și pierde cumpătul*. Yet, the translators preferred to vary its form *își ieși din fire* despite its close meaning:

Source Text J.K. Jerome (1901:58)	Target Text Dușescu (1972:237)	Target Text Decei (2006:56)
Then he lost his temper and tried bullying the thing.	<i>Apoi își ieși din fire și încercă s-o brutalizeze.</i>	<i>Apoi își ieși din fire și încercă să o brutalizeze..</i>

2. Rephrasing implies using another lexical-grammatical pattern but preserving the semantic value of the idiom. Consider the instances below:

Source Text J.K. Jerome (1889:135)	Target Text Levițchi (1957:145)	Target Text Corduneanu (1959:216)	Target Text Bătrânu (1985:156)	Target Text Decei (2006:205)	Target Text Nițescu (2009:150)
<i>I never saw such a thing as potato scraping to make a fellow in a mess.</i>	<i>Nu mi-am închipuit, zău, niciodată că e atâta bătaie de cap să cureți cartofi.</i>	<i>Nimic nu-l murdărește pe om cum îl murdărește curățatul cartofilor.</i>	<i>Nu mi-am închipuit, niciodată că a răzui cartofi și a te tăvăli în gunoi este același lucru.</i>	<i>Nu cred că există un lucru mai groaznic decât răzuitul cartofilor pentru a întoarce pe dos o ființă umană.</i>	<i>Nu mi-am închipuit, zău, niciodată că e atâta bătaie de cap să cureți cartofi.</i>

In these instances, the rephrasing strategy is obvious since it involves changes at lexical and grammatical level. For example, *Levițchi (1957)* and *Nițescu's (2009)* variants *că e atâta bătaie de cap*, illustrates a change from a verbal to a nominal phrase and big lexical difference. There is even a slight difference in meaning: *make somebody in a mess (make dirty) and bătaie de cap- frământare a minții (mental effort)*. Other instances, though preserve the status of verbal groups denoting the state of becoming dirty, consist of different lexical patterns: *make a fellow in a mess- nimic nu-l murdărește pe om- a te tăvăli în gunoi- a întoarce pe dos o ființă umană*.

Rephrasing occurs in “Three Men on the Bummel” where transformations are made rather at the lexical level: *take somebody's time- nu se grăbesc* while the semantic value is preserved.

Source Text J.K. Jerome (1901:58)	Target Text Dușescu (1972:15)	Target Text Decei (2006:56)
<i>“They seem to be taking their time,” said Ethelbertha.</i>	<i>Se pare că nu se grăbesc deloc.</i>	<i>Se parecă nu se grăbesc deloc.</i>

3. Omitting (Baker, 1993:73-78)- a technique of dropping the idiom in the TT because of a not finding its equivalent. Fortunately, the Romanian translators who translated both novels avoid applying omission, which proves their remarkable skill and a certain cultural likeness between SL and TL. However, cultural clashes exist and they are influential to translation efficiency.

We believe that cross-cultural awareness in idiom translation must be given more attention since fixed expressions may be problematic because of the apparent similarity in meaning or reflect SC realia which have no equivalents in the TL. We also consider that strategies such as foreignization and domestication (Venuti, 1995) can be applied to idiom translation. Moreover, we support the translators' attempts to employ cultural adaptation in the cases when idiomatic situations cannot be found in TL because of the cultural clashes between languages.

We decided to address this area in order to demonstrate again that considering only the linguistic aspect in idiom translation is insufficient without considering the cultural dimensions of it since they reflect their cultural background. The instances below have been translated either by means of foreignization and domestication:

Source Text J.K. Jerome(1889:26)	Target Text Levițchi (1957:24)	Target Text Corduneanu (1959:55-56)	Target Text Bătrânu (1985:25)	Target Text 4Decei (2006:36)	Target Text 5Nițescu (2009:27)
<i>How they pile the poor little craft mast-high with fine clothes and big houses, with useless servants and a host of swell friends that do not care two pence for them...</i>	<i>Cum își mai încarcă sărmana bărcuță până în vârful catargului cu haine frumoase și case mari; cu servitori nefolositori și cu un roi de prieteni grozavi, cărora nu le pasă de ei nici cât negru sub unghie...</i>	<i>Cum își mai încarcă ei șubredul lor vas pînă la catarguri cu haine scumpe și cu case uriașe, și cu servitori nefolositori, și cu o mulțime de prieteni mondeni, care nu le dă nici o importanță și pe care nici ei nu-i prețuiesc...</i>	<i>Să vezi câte și mai câte pun în vasul lor șubred încercându-l până în vârful catargului! Și îmbrăcăminte de sărbătoare, și case imense; servitori inutili și o mulțime de cunoscuți din lumea mondenă, care vă prețuiesc nu mai mult de două pence. (Bătrânu, 1975:33)</i>	<i>Încarcă sărmana bărcuță până în vârful catargului cu haine elegante și case uriașe, cu servitori fără număr și o mulțime de prieteni din lumea bună care nu dau doi bani pe ei</i>	<i>Cum își mai încarcă sărmana bărcuță până în vârful catargului cu haine frumoase și case mari; cu servitori nefolositori și cu un roi de prieteni grozavi, cărora nu le pasă de ei nici cât negru sub unghie...</i>

For example the culture-specific idiom *do not care two pence for them* was translated by means of foreignization by the translator Bătrânu (1985), who borrowed the culture-specific element denoting English currency unit *vă prețuiesc nu mai mult de două pence*. Despite the obvious translation literalness, the present translator emphasizes his presence in the translation process which cannot be stated about the others who chose to domesticate the culture-specific element. The translators Levițchi and Nițescu employed cultural adaptation *do not care two pence for them- nu le dă nici o importanță, nu le pasă de ei nici cât negru sub unghie- ...* whereas Corduneanu (1959) chose dynamic equivalence *nu le dă nici o importanță..* The translator Lia Decei (2006) domesticated only the culture specific-element *pence-doi bani* by means of cultural equivalence: *do not care two pence for them-care nu dau doi bani pe ei*.

In the instance selected from the novel „Three Men on the Bummel” domestication is employed when translating the culture-specific idiom *hae'd the throat o' a Loch Tay salmon* which connotes *always being thirsty and longing for alcohol after eating some Scottish salty fish*. Its cultural specificity lies in employing the Scottish culture-specific element *Loch Tay salmon* which would seem totally unfamiliar and weird to the Romanian translator. In order to bring the TT closer to the Romanian readers both translators used domestication; Duțescu (1972) trying to preserve the linguistic pattern *parc-aș fi fost înfărcat cu lacherdă* whereas Decei (2006) domesticated not only the linguistic but also the semantic value: *parc-aș fi Setilă*.

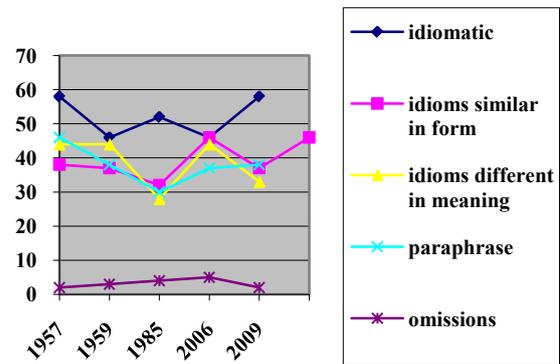
Source Text J.K. Jerome(1901:95)	Target Text Duțescu (1972:95)	Target Text Decei (2006:90)
<i>It's a sair thing for wif e an' bairns when the guid man canna keep awa' frae the glass; an' when the scent of the whusky comes to me it's just as though I hae'd the throat o' a Loch Tay salmon; it just gaes doon an' doon, an' there's nae filling o' me."</i>	<i>Mare pacoste pe nevastă și pe plozi când alde ăl cumsecade nu se dă dus de lângă pahar și mie când îmi adie pe la nas miros de whisky, parc-aș fi fost înfărcat cu lacherdă; torn și torn în mine, doar-doar oi stinge pojarul, și tot nu-l poci potoli</i>	<i>Tare-i trist pentru nevastă și plozi când bărbatul nu se poate ține departe de pahar; și eu când simt miros de whisky, parc-aș fi Setilă; torn și torn până nu mai știu de mine.</i>

As for the other idioms enframed in the same context, it is noteworthy that *canna keep awa' frae the glass* was translated by means of equivalence: *nu se dă dus de lângă pahar and nu se poate ține departe de pahar* whereas the idiom *an' there's nae filling o' me."* was omitted by Duțescu and translated by equivalence by Decei *nu mai știu de mine*.

4. Findings

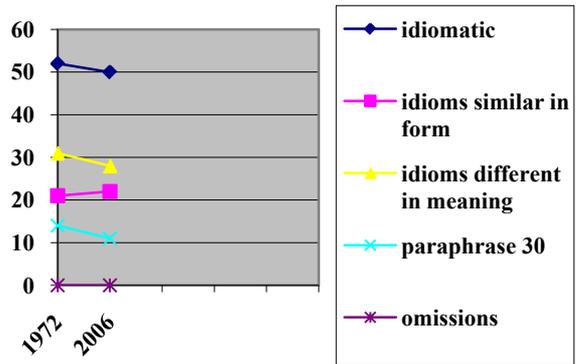
The observation of the corpus has revealed some discrepancy among the employed strategies to both novels. In “Three Men in a Boat”, for instance, priority is given to SM and SF=TM and TF (source meaning and source form = target meaning and target form) translation strategy whereas in “Three Men on the Bummel”, the paraphrase is the favoured translation strategy. As for the least employed strategy, the omission is to be mentioned as being used in 16 instances of the first novel and in none of the second. When placed on a timeline, it becomes clear that translation by idioms similar in meaning was favoured by the translators who performed their translations in 1957 and in 2009, translation by target language idioms similar in form- in 2006 and 2009, translation by target language idioms different in meaning- in 1959 and 2006, translation by paraphrase- in 2006.

Total number of translated idioms "Three Men in a Boat"			
430 instances			
S.M=SF	SM=DF	Paraphrase	Omission
191	69	154	16



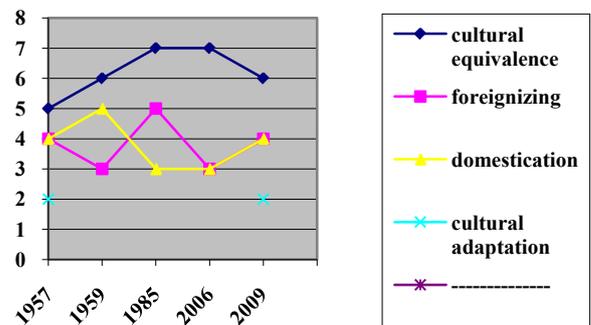
In the case of "Three Men on the Bummel", such translation strategies as idiomatic translation (idioms similar in meaning), translation by idioms similar in form, and paraphrase were used with more instances in the translation variant produced in 1972 except for those translated by idioms different in meaning which were employed in 2006 with more instances.

Total number of translated idioms "Three Men on the Bummel"			
165 instances			
S.M=SF	SM=D	Paraphrase	Omission
43	39	83	-



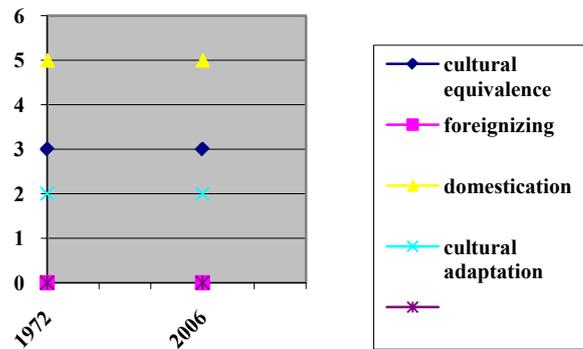
As far as the cultural translation strategies are considered, a tendency towards domestication can be noted in both novels with a slight predominance over foreignization in the case of „Three Men in a Boat” and with no foreignization in „Three Men on the Bummel”. Situational equivalence is achieved in the majority of instances of the first novel but in fewer of the second novel. The time axis shows that cultural equivalence was achieved to its highest extent in 1985 and 2006, foreignization was favoured in 1985, domestication-in 1959, cultural adaptation- in 1957 and 1959.

Total number of translated idioms containing culture-bound items "Three Men in a Boat"			
40			
Situational equivalence	Foreignizing	Domestication	Cultural Adaptation
36	19	21	4



In "Three Men on the Bummel", no fluctuation of translation strategies can be traced along time. Despite the fact that both variants are situated at different ends of the axis, the translation strategies under analysis were used to the same extent.

Total number of translated idioms containing culture-bound items “Three Men on the Bummel”			
Ame extent 10			
Situational equivalence	Foreignizing	Domestication	Cultural Adaptation
7	-	10	3



5. Conclusions

Idiom translation presupposes considerable attention to semantic and cultural transfer from source to target text. Despite the many investigations focusing on these aspects of idiom translation, the problem of preserving culture-specific features of source text idioms remains open. As concerns the translation of idioms of two J.K. Jerome's novels from English into Romanian within the period 1957-2009, the results of the research show a tendency to translate SL idioms by means of TL idioms similar in meaning, to decrease the number of translated idioms which differ in form and of those translated by paraphrase and omission, and to strengthen situational equivalence between SL idioms and their translated variants. This proves the existence of some semantic similarity between source and target text. The analysis of culture-based translation strategies illustrates the Romanian translators' inclination to domesticate rather than foreignize idioms containing culture-bound items. It is indicative of some cultural clashes between English and Romanian which determined the translators to draw the text closer to the target readers. By all counts and with proven results, it is noteworthy that it is not only humorous context which complicates translation from English into Romanian but also its semantic and cultural value.

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