



# The Translation of Ellipsis as Identity Marker in the Literary Dialogue

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**Abstract.** Apart from the ellipsis occurring in discourse as a fairly common cohesive device, the literary dialogue oftentimes uses ellipsis as a stylistic or rhetorical device or as a means of endowing characters with idiolectal or sociolectal features. This paper examines such instances of ellipsis which contribute to the construction of the literary heroes' identity through their speech, while providing them with features distinguishing them from the other characters either in terms of social identity or emotional state. The study is based on examples depicted from the dialogue of a number of literary works written in English and selected so as to exhibit a variety of functions which ellipsis acquires to complete some heroes' identity or state of mind. Considering the importance of the information embedded in such ellipses, a contrastive approach to translation is obvious. The analysis focuses on the translation of ellipsis from English into Romanian and scrutinizes the situations when structural differences between English and Romanian prevent formal equivalence, which triggers an important loss of information in translation. The findings lead to conclusions relative to translation solutions that can be adopted to compensate for the scarcity of structural similarities between the two languages in contact in translation.

**Keywords:** ellipsis, translation, contrastiveness, literary heroes' identity, stylistics

## 1. Introduction

Research into fictional dialogue can adopt multiple perspectives as it can fall within the scope of several disciplines. Broadly speaking, it can pertain to areas within literary and cultural studies (narratology, stylistics, critical analysis, etc.) or within linguistics (pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, language studies, etc.). The study presented herein adopts a primarily linguistic approach, which nevertheless is highly interdisciplinary in nature, stretching its reach up to areas of literary studies.

Considering that the objective of the study has been a contrastive analysis of ellipsis from a translational perspective, there are necessary conceptual borrowings from translation studies, contrastive linguistics, and discourse analysis. In addition, being an analysis based on a corpus of literary works that focuses on dialogue, it requires methodological and conceptual input from corpus linguistics and sociolinguistics but also from literary studies, literary and linguistic stylistics.

In more concrete terms, the aims of this study have been to (i) identify the elliptical dialogic turns that carry stylistic, idiolectal, or sociolectal functions, (ii) to investigate their translatability from English into Romanian, and (iii) to examine them contrastively.

The motivation triggering this approach is the recurrent recognition of language markers employed by quite a number of novelists and short-story writers so as to display features of the interacting literary characters' personal and social identities, their state of mind, emotional involvement and/or to reveal information about the social context. An illustrative selection of the investigated dialogic utterances of each category will be presented in the analysis section.

Ellipsis has been identified to be often engaged as a stylistic, idiolectal, or sociolectal marker. This, from a translational angle, raises the question whether formal equivalence becomes relevant in a literary context in which overall dynamic equivalence – to use Nida's denomination – is undisputedly desired (Nida 1964). This problem is also tackled in the analysis section below. The extraction of the examples took account of the functions and values of ellipsis beyond what qualifies it as a fairly common cohesive device. The analysis section pursues some functional categories of ellipses that have been identified in the corpus compiled for this particular purpose.

## **2. Theoretical considerations**

### **2.1. The literary heroes: Speech and identity**

As Thomas (2012) claims, experimenting with dialogue is a key constituent of modernist and postmodernist literature. In the same line, Genette asserts that experimentation with the speech of literary heroes is “one of the main paths of emancipation in the modern novel” (Genette 1980: 173). For dialogue is not only vital in advancing the plot and providing information about characters' actions, but it is also crucial in introducing the readership into their social worlds (Thomas, 2012). Sundry scholars have delved into the variety of devices used by fictional prose writers to capture the stylistic load and speech peculiarities of literary heroes (Bishop 1991, Fludernik 1993, Herman 2006, Kinzel–Mildorf

2012, Thomas 2012, etc.). Some even seem to appreciate writers' success by the extent to which their "ear" is fine-tuned to dialogue (Thomas 2012).

Besides the direct immersion into the characters' nature via the auctorial voice, the dialogue offers the possibility for the indirect inference of the characters' thoughts, feelings, habits, desires, preferences, etc. Their speech is an excellent source for retrieving the "linguistic fingerprint" that exhibits their idiolect (Coulthard 2004) in an unmediated way, when the author steps back. This, along with the information about the social environment they are part of, distinguishes them from the other interacting individuals.

In this particular context, sociolinguistics is the discipline which primarily offers the scientific grounds and overall conceptual framework for the present study. This is because sociolinguistics deals with the study of language in its social context. The manner in which language is socially dependent has been granted substantial scholarly attention (Bell 1976, Hudson 1996, Bonaffini 1997, Trudgill 2000, Gardiner 2008, Holmes 2008, Spolsky 2010, Wardhaugh 2010, etc.). One of the reasons is that "[t]he way people use language in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the social relationships in a community, and the way speakers signal aspects of their social identity through their language" (Holmes 2008: 1). Spolsky (2010) explains that sociolinguistics examines the social and individual language variation, which, according to Bonaffini, "not only pertains to the depiction of local colour, but plays a key role in distinguishing and individualizing the various characters of a work of literature" (Bonaffini 1997: 280). Language variation further determines the sociolect, which is defined as "a variety or lect which is thought of as being related to its speakers' social background rather than geographical background" (Trudgill 2003: 122) and separates social groups by social factors such as age, gender, class, ethnicity, education, or religion (Hudson 1996).

With all this in view, sociolinguistics can be claimed a matter of the literary heroes' self-portrayal, crucially contributing to the full construction of their identity.

## **2.2. Ellipsis**

A synthetic definition of ellipsis derived from scholarly considerations would describe it as the omission of a second mention of some language items the meaning of which is implicit and can be effectively retrieved from the context (Toolan 1998, Wilson 2000, Merchant 2001, McShane 2005, Johnson 2008). Thereby, an unnecessary repetition is avoided, which generates a cohesive textual relation, ensures propositional development, and enhances the communicative effectiveness. A point in the flow of the text is made sense of by making a mental connection to some adjacent text, the so-called co-text. Cohesion by means of

ellipsis is especially common in two-party dialogues, in which the second party can customize his/her responses so as to incorporate the substance of the first party's claim without actually repeating it verbatim.

But the syntactic gaps or lexical omissions present in fictional work are not only matters of enhanced cohesion but often provide stylistic effect. Deviations from complete or explicit syntactic patterns as well as the lexical scarcity determined by ellipsis can foster the expressiveness of the discourse (Arhire 2011). Merchant even claims that “[n]owhere does this sound–meaning correspondence break down more spectacularly than in the case of ellipsis” (Merchant 2001: 1).

The occurrence of ellipsis as a cohesive device or formal link pertains to the linguistic norms, while its use for stylistic purposes is excluded from the grammatical framework. What is more, besides its being a cohesive and stylistic device, ellipsis can also be employed in the construction of personal and social identities of literary heroes. This is the case when elliptical structures are used in a deviant or idiosyncratic manner in some characters' speech only, distinguishing them from the others. Ellipsis can thus become a speech marker meant to point out some literary heroes' idiolect or sociolect and integrate them in a particular social category. The idiolectal or sociolectal functions that ellipses can acquire in the dialogue of some literary characters are presented in the analysis section along with their translatability from English into Romanian.

### **3. The translation of ellipsis: Analysis**

Considering the different possible values of ellipsis presented in the previous section, its translation requires different, dedicated approaches. Moreover, since ellipsis makes a contribution to the semantics and stylistics of the text, the question arises whether its translation should not be approached formally in the attempt to preserve ellipsis as an idiosyncratic or stylistic marker in the target language. To what extent this is possible will be investigated below.

The examples analysed in the following sections are divided by the functions ellipses carry: as formal links, as markers for some literary heroes' idiolect or sociolect, or as stylistic devices. They have been selected for this investigation from several English works of fiction in prose, the translation of which is discussed, while indicating contrastive aspects between English and Romanian.

#### **3.1. Ellipsis as a cohesive device**

As with any formal link, the translator resorts to whatever cohesive device is reasonably available in the target language. The examples below are just meant to illustrate that, if no additional values are attached to ellipsis (marked by  $\Delta$ ) apart

from its being a cohesive device, a meaningful translation poses no problems irrespective of the cohesive device used in the target language. What is to be obtained is only a similarly cohesive and meaningful version, with no point in preserving ellipsis as a formal link:

- (1) *“I don’t remember, Cynthia. I really don’t Δ.”*  
*“You got to Δ.”* (Paley 1983: 392).  
 – Nu-mi amintesc, Cynthia. Chiar nu-mi amintesc.  
 – Trebuie să-ți amintești.  
 ‘I don’t remember, Cynthia. I really don’t remember.  
 You got to remember.’ (back translation)
- (2) *“If I wanted, I could call her up right now and tell her and she’d start back tonight.”*  
*“Why don’t you Δ?”* (Jones 1983: 77)  
 – Dacă aș vrea, aș putea s-o sun chiar acum să-i spun și ar fi înapoi în seara asta.  
 – De ce n-o suni?  
 ‘If I wanted, I could call her up right now and tell her and she’d start back tonight.  
 Why don’t you call her?’ (back translation)

The use of ellipsis is not possible in Romanian, but the repetition of the same lexical item is suitably applied twice in the translation of example (1) and once in example (2). Thereby, the cohesive texture of the Romanian version is well established.

### 3.2. Ellipsis as sociolectal or idiolectal marker

The analysis in this section follows the distinction of elliptical structures by the functions they bear to mark some literary characters according to their belonging to a social class. Therefore, the dialogic turns have been selected so as to illustrate their particular sociolect or idiolect as well as power relationships between heroes interacting in the dialogue.

The following examples exhibit either some characters’ language variety, their low educational background, or their belonging to a lower social class as compared to their interlocutors. They all comprise deviant grammatical speech acts, all of which make recurrent use of ellipsis.

### 3.2.1. Low-class sociolect and non-standard language

Ungrammatical, elliptical utterances have been identified consistently in the speech of characters from a number of literary works. These language features sometimes indicate some heroes' belonging to a low social class, but some other times they can be just indicators of familiar speech. Non-standard language occurs frequently in dialogue as colloquial speech and to implicitly mark the close relationship between the interacting literary heroes, without necessarily individualizing any character's personality. This is evident especially when both interactants in the dialogue use the same register level, and it substantially impacts the social context of the literary work. Whether they are matters of personal or social identity, the language phenomena are similar for low-class sociolects and for familiar, non-standard language. As will be demonstrated below, Romanian familiar speech does not resort to ellipsis in a similar way as English does. The most frequent ellipses occur in the English verb phrase and entail the omission of auxiliary verbs in English (have, do, be, would, etc.) but sometimes also of the copular verb. They often occur in interrogative sentences:

- (3) “*Δ You divorced?*” (Miller 1983: 130).  
 – Ai divorțat?  
 ‘Have you divorced?’ (back translation)
- (4) “*Δ You really want me to stay?*” (Jones 1983: 75).  
 – Chiar vrei să rămân?  
 ‘Do you really want me to stay?’ (back translation)
- (5) “*Δ You comin in here and have a drink?*” (Jones 1983: 75).  
 – Intri să bei ceva?  
 ‘Are you comin in here and have a drink?’ (back translation)

The translations of all these examples are complete and correct utterances in Romanian. There is no possible way to use ellipsis of auxiliary verbs since Romanian interrogatives are not constructed with any auxiliary verb. Instead, the main verb inflects the information about the subject.

But even in a situation when Romanian does resort to auxiliary verbs, as in the conjunctive mood (*conjunctiv*), the auxiliary cannot be omitted. Although this would be practically possible, it would create an unnatural Romanian utterance, comprising a mistake that no low educated Romanian would ever make. Therefore, the omission of the auxiliary verb would be rather indicative of a foreigner's speech and would thereby change the hero's identity. In the following example, besides the auxiliary *would*, the subject *you* is also omitted. Neither this ellipsis

can be formally transferred to Romanian due to the main verb inflection. The translation is a fully correct sentence in Romanian, as well:

- (6) “ $\Delta$   $\Delta$  Like to win some money?” (Miller 1983: 129)  
 – Ai vrea să câștigi niște bani?  
 ‘Would you like to win some money?’ (back translation)

The translation of the ellipsis of auxiliary verbs present in positive sentences follows the same patterns, whether they would be needed for the correct expression of perfect, continuous, and future tenses or modalities in Standard English:

- (7) “You  $\Delta$  done all right.” (Miller 1983: 132)  
 – Ai făcut ce trebuie.  
 ‘You have done all right.’ (back translation)
- (8) “I  $\Delta$  been married four times in five years.” (Jones 1983: 77)  
 – Am fost căsătorit de patru ori în cinci ani.  
 ‘I have been married four times in five years.’ (back translation)
- (9) “That  $\Delta$  be fun.” (Paley 1983: 390)  
 – Va fi distractiv.  
 ‘That will be fun.’ (back translation)
- (10) “You ought to  $\Delta$  seen their faces.” (Miller 1983: 130)  
 – Trebuia să le fi văzut fețele.  
 ‘You ought to have seen their faces.’ (back translation)
- (11) “They  $\Delta$  be glad.” (Miller 1983: 129)  
 – S-ar bucura.  
 ‘They would be glad.’ (back translation)

In rare cases, even the copular verb is omitted from some speaker’s utterance:

- (12) “He  $\Delta$  a natural gift giver.” (Paley 1983: 391)  
 – E un generos înnăscut.  
 ‘He is a natural gift giver.’ (back translation)

The ellipsis of the copular verb in Romanian would be forced and rather unnatural. The translation therefore is rendered in its full expression.

The ellipsis of the subject occurs at times as well. As previously mentioned, in Romanian, the information about the subject is inflected by the main verb

and is not explicitly mentioned – so, its omission is not possible. The following examples are indicative thereof:

- (13) “ $\Delta$  *Don’t know.*” (Miller 1983: 132)  
 – Nu știu.  
 ‘I don’t know.’ (back translation)
- (14) “ $\Delta$  *Might go north, I think.*” (Miller 1983: 132)  
 – S-ar putea s-o ia spre nord, cred.  
 ‘They might go north, I think.’ (back translation)
- (15) “ $\Delta$  *Might not like some of the passengers.*” (Miller 1983: 132)  
 – S-ar putea să nu-i placă unii pasageri.  
 ‘He might not like some of the passengers.’ (back translation)

The subject and the auxiliary verb are sometimes simultaneously omitted. The translation of such language instances also generates correct utterances in Romanian for the same reasons as in the examples above:

- (16) “ $\Delta \Delta$  *See what I mean?*” (Jones 1983: 77)  
 – Înțelegi ce vreau să zic?  
 ‘Do you see what I mean?’ (back translation)
- (17) “ $\Delta \Delta$  *Hear?*” (Paley 1983: 390)  
 – Auzi?  
 ‘Can you hear?’ (back translation)

Other grammatical items are sometimes omitted from the speech of characters also without affecting the semantics of the utterances but indicating or confirming some identity features of certain characters. Here is the ellipsis of the definite article:

- (18) “*My last wife left me  $\Delta$  day before yesterday.*” (Jones 1983: 77)  
 – Nevastă-mea m-a părăsit alaltăieri.  
 ‘My last wife left me the day before yesterday.’ (back translation)

The only Romanian equivalent of *the day before yesterday* is the single lexical item *alaltăieri*; so, no ellipsis is possible.



### 3.2.2. Foreigner's speech

Idiolectal features might appear in the speech of foreigners. As compared to the deviant structures attributed to native speakers, the ones occurring in the speech of foreigners are less structured, less typical and might be quite unexpected. However, their translation can be easier since the language mistakes do not need to be necessarily authentic ones made by native speakers of a target language. That is why they allow for more flexibility and dynamism in translation. What is nevertheless necessary is the consistency of deviant patterns used by the respective literary character throughout his/her speech. Some of the mistakes identified in the elliptical utterances of a foreigner in the short story *Goose Pond* by Thomas Williams (1983) are similar to those discussed in the previous sections:

- (19) “ $\Delta \Delta$  Do for you?” (Williams 1983: 147)  
 –  $\Delta$  În regulă pentru tine?  
 ‘ $\Delta$  It all right for you?’\* (back translation)

The double ellipsis above, that of the auxiliary and the subject, can be rendered in Romanian by a single ellipsis. Even if there is no equivalent in Romanian for the omitted subject *it*, which cancels the possibility of ellipsis, the omission of the verb is possible. The result is a meaningful interrogative sentence with no explicit verb, which could be a believable expression for a foreigner.

The ellipsis in the following example affects only the auxiliary verb in an interrogative sentence, which cannot be translated by a reasonable equivalent into Romanian:

- (20) “ $\Delta$  You going to shoot?” (Williams 1983: 150)  
 – Ai de gând să tragi?  
 ‘Are you going to shoot?’ (back translation)

Just like in other examples presented above, the Romanian main verb inflects the information about the subject and no auxiliary verb is used in questions. Therefore, the translation can only be a correct interrogative sentence.

Some other times, the foreigner in the short story issues untypical utterances, which no English native would use:

- (21) “*In the umbrella stand  $\Delta$  is some arrows.*” (Williams 1983: 150)  
 – E niște săgeți în suportul de umbrelă.\*  
 ‘In the umbrella stand there is some arrows.’ (back translation)

This dialogic statement includes the ellipsis of the subject only, which is implicit in Romanian. Therefore, the ellipsis is not possible. But the other language mistake, namely the disagreement between the plural subject and the singular verb can be preserved in Romanian.

The ellipsis of the auxiliary verb in the construction of the continuous aspect, as in the example below, provides a convincing illustration of a foreigner's speech:

- (22) *"The children Δ going crazy they couldn't shoot."* (Williams 1983: 150)  
 – Copiii înnebunesc că n-au tras.  
 'The children are going crazy they couldn't shoot.' (back translation)

Romanian does not possess a continuous aspect and has only one present tense (*prezent*), which is constructed with no auxiliary verb. So, the ellipsis is not possible, and the translation can only be fully and correctly expressed.

The ellipsis of the preposition also occurs in rare cases:

- (23) *"Just a couple Δ small herds left."* (Williams 1983: 132)  
 – Au mai rămas doar câteva turme mici.  
 'Just a couple of small herds left.' (back translation)

The omission of the preposition in Romanian would create an unnatural way of expression even in careless speech. Therefore, it is not a desired solution.

### 3.3. The stylistic value of ellipsis

Apart from its being a cohesive device or having the function of displaying literary heroes' idiosyncratic speech, ellipsis can also be engaged in the expression of emotionally charged utterances. In the following example, it is the ellipsis of an adjective which makes nostalgia traceable, whereas the explicit version would have been neutral:

- (24) *"We really had some Δ times."* (Jones 1983: 80)  
 – Ce timpuri Δ am trăit!

The ellipsis of an adjective specifically determining the noun is possible in Romanian, too, with the emotional content preserved.

However, the Romanian structural peculiarity in the next example prevents the translation by ellipsis, thereby reducing the level of the hero's hesitant position:

- (25) *“Anyway, I’ll be goddamned if I know what to do. Δ Wait around? Δ Pretend she’s never coming back?”* (Friedman 1983: 308)  
 – Oricum, să fiu al naibii dacă știu ce să fac. Să aștept? Să mă prefac că nu se mai întoarce?  
 ‘Anyway, I’ll be goddamned if I know what to do. Shall I wait? Shall I pretend she’s not coming back?’ (back translation)

The back translation in example (25) illustrates the equivalent complete Romanian translation, which cannot omit the full expression of the conjunctive mood needed to render the meaning. The speaker’s lack of authority and self-confidence can be inferred from the repetition of the conjunctive mood in the two questions, but it is significantly reduced in intensity.

## 4. Findings

The analysis focused on the translation from English into Romanian of ellipsis identified in the dialogue of several works of fiction. Three types of ellipses have been subject to investigation: (i) as a cohesive device, (ii) as sociolectal and idiolectal marker, and (iii) as a stylistic device.

In the cases when ellipsis had the exclusive function to establish the cohesive flow of the discourse, its equivalent in Romanian was repetition. The use of repetition as a cohesive device did not affect the meaning or the cohesive texture of the dialogue. This proves that cohesiveness is not a matter of one-to-one formal equivalence in translation. Even if the ellipses in the source-language text cannot be translated by ellipses, another formal link can suitably take its stead.

It is evident though that when ellipsis bears additional functions, affecting either the social context or the stylistic content of the work, a formal approach to translation might be desirable. However, the investigation revealed that the translation of ellipsis is most of the times impossible due to structural differences between English and Romanian, which triggers certain losses of either information regarding the characters’ identity and emotional state or of stylistic effect.

The most frequent elliptical identity marker traced out in the dialogues is the omission of auxiliary verbs in interrogative sentences but also in some positive ones. From a contrastive perspective, the preservation of such ellipsis is not possible in Romanian due to the main verb inflecting the information about the subject in terms of person, number, and gender. For the same reason, the additional or sole omission of the subject in some utterances is formally untranslatable as well. Another finding is that ellipsis pertains both to the verb phrase and the noun phrase, both categories displaying lack of equivalence in translation. Even if the translation can preserve the surface semantics of the message (as it always

can), there is a significant loss of information in terms of social context and/or stylistic load. Therefore, the translation of such ellipses lies beyond the formal equivalence level, but a dynamic or functional equivalence approach is needed although formal equivalence might be desired.

This study revealed also that the particular idiolectal or sociolectal values of ellipsis embedded in the dialogic turns require different, dedicated approaches. More precisely, the implicit information about the heroes' low social status or their use of non-standard language is more difficult to render in translation because the deviant structures that occur in their speech need to be translated by authentic deviant structures of the target language. In contrast, the foreigner's deviant elliptical speech allows for a more flexible approach since the language mistakes do not need to be typical of the native target-language speakers.

## 5. Conclusions

The variety of literary works used as corpus for the extraction of the examples for analysis indicates a noteworthy occurrence of ellipsis with sociolectal/idiolectal information and stylistic content. The contemporary authors' experimenting with dialogue brings about new challenges in the act of translation. Ellipsis is but one of the language devices employed in the delivery of additional content at deep semantic level. The lack of equivalence between English and Romanian causes significant losses in the target readership reception and perception in the absence of some compensatory measures. The strategy to be adopted for the compensation of the full semantic and stylistic content ultimately envisages the functional equivalence of language devices. Moreover, due to the diversity of the functions embedded in language devices, this compensation strategy is to be designed in a dedicated manner, taking into account the macro-contextual level of each literary work. In such an encounter and in the particular case of translations into Romanian, the authentic deviant language structures can be searched for in collections of typical language mistakes made by native speakers of Romanian. Such language mistakes can be others than the ones used in the source language. Important is that they authentically display the personal or social features of the speaker and they are consistently used throughout his/her speech acts. Possible deviant Romanian structures that can be introduced wherever possible and suitable in the dialogue would be: subject–predicate disagreement, incorrect use of demonstrative articles and connectors, etc. (Sporiş 2013: 18–29).

In short, when ellipsis is a cohesive device only, its translation is not problematic. Even if ellipsis cannot be formally translated by ellipsis, other cohesive devices will be used to effectively provide the cohesive texture of the target-language text. Nevertheless, as Baker asserts, “[t]he lack of a grammatical device can make the

translation of the entire conceptual information very difficult indeed” (1992: 86–87). It may even change the load of information in the target language as compared to the source-language text (Baker 1992: 86). When ellipsis acquires additional values and cannot be translated as such, it needs dedicated means of compensation with authenticity and consistency being crucial selection criteria and functional equivalence being the aim even if formal language means carry essential information.

The conclusions and the suggested translation solutions in this study can be extended to other language pairs and used in translator-training environments. Nonetheless, further investigations could complete the findings and adjust the conclusions if other language devices were scrutinized and additional or different corpora were used as grounds for investigation.

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