

Phonetic and lexico-morphological particularities of Homeric poems in Turkish versions

Icbal Anefi*

Faculty of Letters, "Ovidius" University of Constanța, Aleea Universității 1, 900472 Constanța, Romania

Article info

History:

Received November 30, 2021

Accepted December 8, 2021

Published September 26, 2022

Key words:

translation

Homeric poems

inflected language

agglutinative language

phono-morphological particularities

lexico-semantic structures

Abstract

The following pages are a sample of possible directions for analysing translations from an ancient and very special language – the Homeric Greek – into a modern language. Even if the two languages are genealogically and typologically related, any translation, naturally, is a challenge in terms of mentality and the linguistic approach. When differences imposed by the genealogical and structural-typological criterion interfere between the two languages brought into cultural contact, the difficulties in rendering the original text increase very much. However, the new versions may be very well done, because, as it is known, any natural language has compensating virtues for rendering particularities in the source language.

The corpus of texts selected for our little excursion into the diachrony of Turkish translations from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has been extracted from the most representative Turkish version, "Erhat-Kadir". In order to render the texts in Romanian, we have used the best-known version in this cultural-linguistic area, the "Murnu version".

1. Some observations regarding the Turkish language system

If Homeric Greek and modern Romanian differ in terms of grammatical categories (presence/absence of verbal aspect, differences in diathesis, given the deponent forms of the old Greek, differences in terms of verbal modality and tense) and word-formation mechanisms (system of compounds – much richer and much more complicated than the old Greek, the possibilities of conversion are more numerous etc.), the distinction between Homeric Greek and Turkish are much greater, for the two languages belong to two different structural types, beyond the genealogical differences.

In this latter respect, Turkish is known to belong to one of the wealthiest representatives of Asian language families, the Ural-Altai family¹. Within the huge linguistic area in which it formed, through various contacts and successive reorganisations, Turkish has a grammatical and lexical structure that is different from the Greek one, in that it is in principle an agglutinative and synthetic language.

1.1. The phonological level of word structure induces a first series of issues related to the translation from a foreign language, because Turkish is characterised by the vowel harmony phenomenon, which means that the vowel in the dominant syllable of the base word is to be found – identical, or, in any case, from the same series of the vowel system – in the suffix that plays the role of desinences in inflected languages.

When in the *Odyssey* it is said that many people landed on the shore in front of the city of Troy (Gk. *ἄνδρες*), the plural mark of the noun which makes up the referent in question is subject to the "vowel harmony law":

*Email address: icbal76@yahoo.com.

¹Cf. Wald & Slave (1968, p. 137–156). Through the Ural branch, Turkish shares some elements with the Finno-Ugric languages (Mongolian, Hungarian, Finnish), while through the Altaic one, it has common elements with the Tungus-Manchu group, the western and eastern Hunnic idioms, such as old Bulgarian (the current one is strongly Slavicized), Hazaragi, Chuvash, Oghuz-Turkmen etc.

Tk. sg. *adam* “man” – pl. *adam-lar* “men”

Similarly, when Agamemnon, the supreme commander of the Achaean fleet, orders that a temporary housing system should be built, with all necessary outbuildings, in the fortified camp on the seashore, which his army built soon after landing, sheltered by a solid line of defence consisting of human bodies, protected, in that first stage of the war, only by huge shields, “armoured”, “helmeted” bodies, the term used by the special troops, the sappers, as one might call them in the current military jargon, is taken from the common speech, *ἄικοι* “home”, with the plural *ἄικοι* “homes”. In Turkish, this numerical opposition is rendered by complying with the phonetic harmony law:

Tk. sg. *ev* “house” – pl. *ev-ler* “houses”

This vowel harmony represents an advantage for poetic texts, as it provides the musicality obtained by the figures of assonance, achieved in a more complicated manner in any kind of language, for the repetition of the stressed vowel in the same verse – *Argint e pe ape și aur în aer* (M. Eminescu) – induces the musicality which doubles the rhythm. In Turkish, it comes naturally, entailed by the lexicomorphological structure of the words. We shall further see what the limits of these particularities are.

The researcher who reads the Romanian and Turkish versions of the Homeric texts will be pleasantly surprised to find that Romanian translators have also benefited from the Turkish “vowel harmony law”. Given that there are quite many Turkish influences in Romanian, particularly in archaic and folk structures, preserved mainly in phraseologisms etc., as it usually happens², and that, on the other hand, all Romanian translators have extracted their linguistic material precisely from these language registers, compelled by the archaicity and often the rurality of the “language of Achilles and Odysseus”, one may frequently find expressions such as *a da bu-luc*, *a face buc-luc*, *a trimite un bir-lic* “to send a military unit” etc. in Romanian texts.

In Homeric texts, such expressions (usually consisting of a compound verb accompanied by an adverb of time/place or by some nominal modal determination) are used when the *aoïdos* describes battle scenes. The small formations are ordered to intervene fast when the front seems on the verge of giving way in a certain spot. In such situations, the available soldiers spontaneously regroup heading in droves (“*buluc*”) for that particular place. In other cases, the order is addressed to a subunit behind the active lines of battle, i.e. to regular rapid formations known as *birlic* in Turkish (light military unit). The word is formed by repeating one of the three frequent vowels – *a*, *e*, *i* – in the inflectional (lexicomorphological and semantic, sometimes simultaneous) derivation. In such a context, the expression *a face bucluc* was also used (somewhat differently from the current-day Romanian one *a intra în bucluc* ‘get into trouble’), meaning “to cause problems”, “to oppose a tendency, an action” in the old Romanian language.

Therefore, an important feature of the Turkish phonetic system naturally and massively favours the poetic, musical aspect of Homeric poems, wrapped in the vestments of the modern language. And not only that, due to the historically determined linguistic contacts, traces of this vowel musical harmony phenomenon are also to be found in Romanian versions as well as in Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Serbian ones, not to mention the Hungarian and Finnish versions, in which vowel harmony is part of the fundamental phonomorphological language system, as they belong to the same genealogical background as Turkish.

1.2. *At the lexico-morphological level*, things are a little more complicated. In principle, the lexico-morphological composition of Turkish words is based on a radical with a relatively stable phonological structure *c-v-c* (consonant-vowel-consonant). Of course, language evolutions have altered this phonetic stability in many situations, but modern loans do not fit into that pattern anyway. Still, the words in the fundamental vocabulary have this phonetic particularity around which the less complicated forms rendering verbal and nominal structures in inflected languages are built.

²We have used Bârlea (2012) for the text analysis methods and Varga (2017) for the dynamics of linguistic equivalents in the circulation of old, oral texts.

For example, in the famous scene of Helen's appearance on a terrace of the city of Troy, where one could have the best view of the main battlefield (Hom., *Iliad*, III, vv. 121–170), verbs such as “to come”, “to see”, “to love” are repeated in several lexico-semantic and phono-morphological variants: *gelmek*, *görmek*, *sevmek*.

...The elders in the council of the wise had been there since dawn, for, unable to fight, they participated with their heats in the bloody clashes on the field before the defence walls. The unexpected arrival of Hellen *beyaz kollarla* “with white arms”, the declared and almost unanimously acknowledged cause of those slaughters, did not entail too many protests, as one would have expected. The elders admired her beauty in silence. Only a faint voice was heard saying that even though she looked like a goddess, she had better leave as soon as possible with the Achaeans' ships so as to take the danger of revenge away from their children and grandchildren. The unforeseen effects of an impetuous love affair such as that between Helen and Paris were to no one's liking. Then, everybody commented what could be seen on the living stage of the battlefield in front of them.

In Turkish, all three verbs dominating the dynamic account of the episode are based on roots which comply with the classic structure of old words, c-v-c:

gel– “to come”
gör– “to see”
sev– “to love”

Furthermore, the infinitive desinence, *-mek*, is built on the phonetic trinitarian structure c-v-c, as seen above.

Combinations with suffixes which render derivative structures and desinences with morphological values and syntactic functions in the agglutinative language, corresponding to the inflected Hellenic language, manage to equate the richness of compound and derived forms of the base text and the inflectional diversity, with the play of verb moods and tenses, with modalities resulting from the use of the verbal aspect, diathesis, gender, number and case oppositions:

Ἴρις δ' αὖθ' Ἑλένη λευκωλένω ἄγγελος ἦλθεν
εἰδομένη γαλόω Ἄντηνορίδαο δάμαρτι
τὴν Ἄντηνορίδης εἶχε κρείων Ἑλικάων
Λαοδίκην Πριάμοιο θυγατρῶν εἶδος ἀρίστην.
τὴν δ' εὖρ' ἐν μεγάρω: ἦ δὲ μέγαν ἰστὸν ὕφαινε
δίπλακα πορφυρέην, πολέας δ' ἐνέπασσεν ἀέθλους
Τρώων θ' ἵπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,
οὓς ἔθεν εἶνεκ' ἔπασχον ὑπ' Ἄρηος παλαμάων:
ἀγχοῦ δ' ἰσταμένη προσέφη πόδας ὠκέα Ἴρις
 (II, 3, 121–129)

The *oidos* describes Laodicea, one of the dozens of Priam's beautiful daughters, actually, the most beautiful, married to prince Helicaon, son of king Antenor (not to be confused with the Greek Laodicea, Agamemnon's daughter). In fact, it was only a face under which Iris, the winged goddess of the rainbow serving, not always faithfully, Hera and Zeus with messages intended to connect mortals and deities, had hidden. The scene of the princely chamber in which she found Helen, sitting quietly at the loom, the details about the embellished cloth she was making are in contrast with the emotional turmoil caused by the news brought by her sister-in-law's impersonator:

[„– *Vino să vezi, Paris al tău urmează să se lupte cu Menelau al tău!*”]
 (“Come and see, **your** Paris is going to fight **your** Menelaus!”)

Naturally, the words uttered by the versatile goddess, bearer of baffling news, are not exactly the same in the Homeric text, but the subliminal message is that and Helen perceives it as such, in all its harshness. Hence, the agitation manifested by sudden, sometimes uncontrolled movements, although she is aware of being watched by numerous pairs of eyes, not all friendly.

In the Turkish version of the translators A. Erhat and A. Kadir, the text is as follows:

*“İris de haberci geldi ak kollu Helene’ye,
kılığına girmişti görümcesi Laodike’nin,
Antenor’u’nun karısıydı Laodike,
Antenor’un oğlu Helikaon almıştı kendine onu,
güzellikten yana en üstündü Priamos’un kızları arasında.
İris sofada buldu Helene’yi,
büyücek bir kumaş dokuyordu,
ıpışıldı kumaşın iki yüzü de,
üstüne savaş resimleri işlemedeydi bir sürü,
atları iyi süren Troyalılarla
tunç zırhlı Akhalar arasındaydı bu savaşlar,
Helene uğruna Ares getirdiydi başlarına.
Ayağı tez İris, yanında durdu, dedi ki...”*
(*Il. –EK/H, III, 121–129*)

The Turkish translators, who later said they had studied the Homeric text verse by verse and word by word and discussed about each of them, establishing their meaning and place in the version they were thoroughly preparing, understood the purpose of the verbs of external movement in this text of great analytical depth and aesthetic subtlety (but, then again, which Homeric fragment is not so?). They were intended to reflect Helen’s inner feelings and the strong emotional impact caused by that information and by that imminent direct and unequal confrontation. Moreover, the words suggested that their effect penetrates even deeper into Helen’s consciousness: everything that happens there, all the suffering of the others spring from her recklessness. Therefore, a little later, when Priam himself, intuiting the complicated twists and turns of guilt and self-guilt in the generally human feeling and thought, blames everything on gods’ whims, Helen comes to her senses, coping brilliantly with a not at all comfortable dialogue. Then, after the restless Aphrodite defuses the conflict to everyone’s disappointment and desperation, including Helen’s, the conflicting feelings continue to manifest, more intimately or more loudly.

DIIn the fragment selected here, the verbs, adverbs, nouns, adjectives etc. rendering the peace of the cool working chamber in the labyrinth of the royal palace (the weaving of the fabric with its embroidery, used for the future purple clothes of the loved one, the aristocratic atmosphere marked by the mentioning of princely blazonry – twice only in the first *kolon!* –, the beauty of the two young wives etc.) intertwine with the dreadfulness of the events outside that chamber: the verb *gelmek* “to come” appears twice (in the imperative – *buraya gel!*), alongside of *find*, *approach*, *arm oneself*, *endure* etc., and such vocables as *immediately*, *swift of foot*, *tamed horses*, *razen-coated Achaeans*, *many battles* etc.:

*Tk. bulmak, yaklaşmak, silahlanmak, katlanmak;
artı hemen, hızlı yürümek, gergin atlar, bakır baltalar, çokça dövüşmek gibi kelimeler*

And, above all, *onun yüzünden*, placed in the middle of the picture, a remark which seems to be casual: *din cauza-i* (“because of her”)...

From the Romanian versions, we would choose that of George Murnu, who constantly paid attention to the contrast so skilfully suggested by the ancient *aoidos* and who was acknowledged by earlier or modern editors of the Greek text:

„Iris veni într-aceea ca sol la Elena brațalba;
 Zîna leită era Laodice, cumnata Elenei,
 Cea mai frumoasă din fetele craiului Priam, soția
 Unui fruntaș domnitor Helicaon Antenorianul.
 Ea în cămară găsi pe Elena țesînd la o pînză
 Mare, veșmînt porfiriu îndoit, unde ea-mbrebenase
 Alesături ce-arătau o grămadă din luptele date
 Între Abei și Troieni și-ndurate de ei pentru dînsa.
 Iris cea iute la mers s-apropie-ndată și-i zice:
 „Vino, surato, să vezi ce minune făcură Troienii
 Buni la strunitul de cai și Abeii-narmați în aramă.”
 (Il.-M, III, 121–129)

“But Iris went as a messenger to white-armed Helen, in the likeness of her husband’s sister, the wife of Antenor’s son, even her that lord Helicaon, Antenor’s son, had to wife, Laodice, the comeliest of the daughters of Priam. [125] She found Helen in the hall, where she was weaving a great purple web of double fold, and thereon was broidering many battles of the horse-taming Trojans and the brazen-coated Achaeans, that for her sake they had endured at the hands of Ares. Close to her side then came Iris, swift of foot, and spake to her, saying: [130] “Come hither, dear lady, that thou mayest behold the wondrous doings of the horse-taming Trojans and the brazen-coated Achaeans.”
 (Il., 1924)

Further on, one of the lexical strategies of the *aoidos* (Homer or whoever that might have been) is the common one of the synonymic alternations. Helen *arrives* unexpectedly, *comes* to the group of city elders, *walking softly* like a fairy, then she wants to *retire* to an edge of the terrace to better *see* what is happening in the distance, in the clear morning light, but it is suggested to the reader that maybe she does that for more subtle reasons: she would not want to be in the sight of the sour city elders, for it was not appropriate, but, at the same time, like any woman who is aware of the value, she would also like *to be seen* in all her splendour. She carefully *scrutinises* the battlefield, trying to *distinguish* the faces of the men she knows (loves?), while the old understanding king Priam speaks about the involuntary love between young people, about the gods’ will and invites his troublesome daughter-in-law to join him, asking her to identify the Achaeans who stood out by their stature and attire in the besiegers’ camp³.

Turkish translators first resort to all possibilities of agglutination of their language system in order to render the nuances of these verbs and verbal phrases, to create the temporal, modal and spatial circumstances in the Greek text and after that they employ the synonymic series of literary Turkish.

Even adverbiality in sentences is achieved by agglutination, with the series of different affixes – suffixes with lexical-semantic value, suffixes with desinence value in order to mark the morphological values and syntactic functions etc. In Book 24 of the *Iliad*, in the scene depicting the invasion of the Achaean armies in the city and the attack on the inhabitants in various parts of the city – houses of the common people or chambers in the royal palace –, the idea of “expelling the dwellers from their homes” is rendered through such an agglutinating-synthetic construction built around the central term *ev*– “house”. Here is an example of the few dozens that can be found in the Turkish versions of this episode:

ev-de-ki-ler-den

corresponding to:

Rom. “casă” + locative desinence + relation suffix + plural desinence + desinence for the starting point/Abl. locative. In Romanian, the structure would be: “...de la cei care se află în casă” (roughly translated as ‘from those who are in the house’).

³In Turkish: *gelir, geldiğinde, hafifçe adım atar; uzaklaşmak için; Tarlayı dikkatle inceler; bilinen erkeklerin yüzlerini ayırt etmek.*

2. Conclusions

The analyses above show, in our opinion, how deep the linguistic, mentality and even socio-historical coalescences can become in the translation process, especially if one studies them in diachrony. This confirms a statement made by an expert on diachrony and the history of translations, Al. Gafton:

„Prin traducere, elemente, forme, structuri și funcții ale gândirii, ideologiei, mentalității și moravurilor generate de o anumită civilizație, cultură și societate, pe calea limbii aceleia, pătrund în gândirea, ideologia, mentalitatea și moravurile unei alte civilizații, culturi și societăți, servite de o altă limbă. Un astfel de contact, o astfel de pătrundere, la nivelul a două complexe sociale este mijlocit de instrumentul fundamental de comunicare, iar nu altfel. Lucrul acesta înseamnă și că înseși limbile – care, o dată, dețin formă, conținut, structură și funcții ce deserveșc calitatea lor de instrument, în al doilea rând, există și ca entități cu viață și capacitate de autodeterminare propriei - intră în contacte proprii, una cu cealaltă.”

[“Through translation, the elements, forms, structures and functions of thought, ideology, mentality and mores generated by a certain civilisation, culture and society, by way of that language, penetrate into the thought, ideology, mentality and mores of another civilisation, culture and society, served by a different language. Such a contact, such a penetration at the level of two social complexes is mediated by the fundamental communication tool and not otherwise. This means that languages – which, on the one hand, have a form, content, structure and functions inherent to them as tools, and, on the other hand, exist as entities with their own life and self-determination ability – come into their own contacts, one with the other.”]

(Gafton, 2014, p. 15)

In terms of the code, these are generally *interlingual* translations – or translations proper, as Roman Jakobson considers them – and *intrasemiotic* translations (Jakobson, 1963, p. 57), which means the interpretation of semiotic codes, more precisely of verbal signs, including those at metaphorical and symbolic level, such as: *Fierul îi reteză vorba* (‘The iron cut him off’) / ‘Sabia îl făcu să tacă’ (‘The sword silenced him’); *Luciul aproape neted, nepăsător, al apei îi ascunse pentru totdeauna pe vâslași* (‘The almost smooth, careless water hid the oarsmen forever’) / ‘Au fost înghițiți de apele calme ale mării’ (‘They were drowned in the still waters of the sea’).

In terms of the process and the result, in Turkish, as well as in Romanian, most fragments are actually *complete translations*, which abide by the principles of faithfulness and pertinence at the same time.

Bibliography

A. Sources

- Homer (1920). *Opera* in five volumes, eds. Rogers Benner, A. & Seymoor, Th., Oxford University Press, Oxford, [online].
- Homer (1924). *The Iliad*, translated by A. T. Murray. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA / William Heinemann, Ltd., London, [online].
- Homer (1967). *Iliada*, traducere în metru original de George Murnu, studiu introductiv și note de D. M. Pippidi. Ediție definitivă, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, București.
- Homer (1971). *Odiseea*, traducere de George Murnu, studiu introductiv și note de D. M. Pippidi. Ediție definitivă, Editura Univers, București, ed. I: 1928.
- Homer (2010). *Odysseia*, trad. Erhat, A. & Kadir A., Can Sanat Yayınları, İstanbul.
- Homer (2016). *İlyada*, trad. Erhat, A. & Kadir A., Can Sanat Yayınları, İstanbul, ed. I: 1958–1962.

B. References

- Bârlea, R.-M. (2012). *Tehnici de cercetare în științele comunicării*, Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj.
- Gafton, Al. (2012). *De la traducere la norma literară*, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași.
- Gafton, Al. (2014). *What do translations do?*, în Boldea, I. (ed.), „The Proceedings of the International Conference Globalization, Intercultural Dialogue and National Identity. Section: Language and Discourse”, 1, Editura Arhipelag XXI Press, Târgu-Mureș, p. 13–16.
- Jakobson, R. (1963). *Essais de linguistique générale*, Minuit, Paris.
- Varga, O. (2017). *Creația folclorică în patrimoniul cultural românesc*, în „Studii de Știință și Cultură”, XIII (1), p. 247–254.
- Wald, L. & Slave, E. (1968). *Ce limbi se vorbesc pe glob?*, Editura Științifică, București.