COMMUNICATING THE WOR(L)D (I)
On Difficulties in Bible Translation - case study on the 'Tower of Babel'-

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Abstract

The present paper intends to focus upon certain difficulties that arise from the attempts to render the language of the Bible. The case-study we propose is actually the precise excerpt that deals with the issue in question within the pages of Bible, i.e. the chapter referring to the Tower of Babel. We also intend to briefly browse through several other attempts of such nature, in order to depict the degree of difference and difficulty implied by the endeavor generated by the communication of the Word.

Keywords: Bible, translation, communication, comparative analysis, contrastive analysis

Importance of translation, in general

Just like many translation theoreticians have been trying to demonstrate for the last decades, translation is that omnipresent and indispensable phenomenon, vital in the process of mankind evolution. The necessity of the translation has, therefore, been acknowledged for a long time, since it is perceived in relation to communication between individuals belonging to different linguistic systems, different cultures. While man, implicit his language -as means of communication with his kind- have evolved, thus has translation, written or oral, become diversified starting with the last century. The *formative* and the *informative* role of translations are unanimously acknowledged.

Translation constitutes that bridge meant to achieve that cultural bridge that enables a permanent communion of aesthetic values, a communication of the aesthetic identification factor from one language to the other, and also cognition and recognition of the universal in every language, which contributes to the particularisation of a certain language in the general linguistic context. According to Titela Vîlceanu, translation is a 'trans-cultural phenomenon that enables communication beyond any territorial, linguistic and cultural boundaries'[1]. Considered for a long time a type of secondary or complementary activity, translation proved its utility and necessity in a world governed by pluralism of any kind, a world hallmarked by speed and changes at any level and in any field of human activity.[2]

In our days, when everything that was once said can and is completed or even revised, not to mention doubted or even undone, we feel it is imperative for us to comprehend the phenomenon in discussion; consequently, regardless the amplitude of the issue, we need to be and to act prepared, thus informed. In order to achieve this, we need to show understanding, even though our comprehension of the matter may be endangered by the variety of cultural-linguistic systems functioning in the world today.

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[1]T.Vîlceanu, *Fidelitate şi alteritate lingvistică şi culturală*, Universitaria Pulishing House, Craiova, 2007, p.91.
[2] B.O.Han, *On translation*: *Communication, controversy, cultural globalization*, Editura Universităţii 'Petru Maior', Tg. Mureş, 2011, pp. 45-46

In order to be able to solve this problem, we need to admit that we cannot function in a closed, pseudo-protective space, but we need to open our minds so as to accept a beneficial 'unity', a cultural-linguistic globalisation, which is felt by some, why not admit, suspiciously. Lest that this phenomenon be perceived in a wrong manner, we need to get a panoramic view, one able to provide us with the necessary distance required by an objective judgement.

This would be the initial frame in which translation became visible. We do believe that translation is endowed with the power to eliminate the discrepancies that exist among the languages, cultures, mentalities and conceptions that frame the world we live in today. We also wish to underline that we do not to intend to view translation as that phenomenon that uniforms up to confusion the aesthetic values of a people and thus destroy what made them valuable in the first place. We only imply that 'common denominator' at the level comprehension of ethic and aesthetic universal values.[3]

Regarding Roger T.Bell's statement according to which international communication depends on translation, George Steiner, this famous theoretician in translation field considers translation to be a special case of the arch of communication that every speech act closes within a given language. In within a language or among many languages, human communication equals translation. A study of translation is a study of the language[4]. It has become very clear, therefore, that we cannot 'cut out' the issue relating to translation from the context of inter-human communication without jeopardising the understanding of the whole ensemble.[5]

On the importance of translation of the Bible, in particular

Translation is communication and if communication is to be effective it has to convey the sender's message faithfully and successfully. Bible translation has been an integral part of the mission of the Church since its very inception. Translating the Bible into different modern languages of the world has always been a challenge for translators. The Bible is a product of particular cultures, of a particular geographical area, of a particular period of time. It is written in ancient languages and each book has its own specific goals or purposes. Just like other kinds of translation, Bible translation involves rendering the message from one cultural context to another.

The Bible, the book of all books, needed to be rendered in the languages of the people who embraced its word. That entitles the Bible to be considered the first great translation, actually, the most important translation project ever, since it was performed by a large number of translators, from and in a large number of language for a great number of users.

For instance[6], the translation of the Bible in Greek takes place at the request of king Ptolemy II of Alexandria (285-246), during the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., when tradition has it that seventy-two scholars (translators) independently translated it from Hebrew. This Greek version is known as the *Septuagint* or *LXX*, named after the seventy-two translators. During the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., different books of the Old Testament were translated into Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic. In the fourth and fifth centuries more Syriac translations were

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[3] idem, pp. 50-51
[4] Paraphrased from G. Steiner, *op. cit.,* p. 75.
[5] B.O. Han, *op. cit*. pp. 50-51
[6] acc. to http://cercetatiscripturile.intercer.net/article.php?id=7208

produced. Among them the Peshitta (meaning 'simple') was the most popular. There are indications that the Hebrew text was used, but here and there translators followed the LXX. The Peshitta became the official Bible of the Syriac churches. During the 2nd century A.D. the Hebrew Bible was also translated into Latin. These 'Old Latin' translations were based on the LXX. Commissioned by the Pope, St. Jerome produced the Bible in standard Latin in the 4th century, popularly known as the *Vulgate*. At first he used the Greek Bible, but later he became convinced that the translation of the Old Testament should be from the Hebrew Bible. The Vulgate soon replaced the Old Latin and became the standard Bible for the Western Church.

Starting with the reign of king Constantine, converted to Christianity in 312 A.D., several other translations are being performed: for instance, Mestrop translates the Bible for the Armenians in the 5th c.; around year 640 A.D. the Nestorian missionaries, who used Syriac language, translate the Gospels in Chinese during the king Tai-Tsung. In the southern part of England, the Psalms are translated under the bishop Adhelm, around the year 700 A.D.; Bede, the historian, begins the translation of the Bible in Anglo-Saxon around the year 735 A.D., but never finishes it. In between years 871-901 A.D. king Alfred translates parts of the Exodus, Psalms and Deeds of the Apostles. The year 758 A.D. brings along the first partial German translation of the Bible while the 8th c. hosts the Arabian translation. Approximately 4 centuries later Peter Waldo works on the French version of the Bible. In 1384 A.D. John Wycliffe offers the English version to the Vulgata while in 1415, Jan Hus, the rector of the Prague University begins the Czech translation of the Holy Book, his work being accomplished six decades later.

A very important date in the history of Bible translation is, obviously, the Johan Gutenberg invention, i.e. the release of printing around the mid 15th century. The first printed Bible is issued in 1456 in Latin. The first Italian version of the Bible appears in 1471, while Erasmus editions the first Greek Bible in 1516. In between 1522-1532, Luther offers probably the best German translation of the Bible, while King James offers the first complete edition of the Bible in English in 1611. The first variant of Romanian translation of the Bible is the one dating 1688, performed by Şerban Cantacuzino while Professor C. Cornilescu translates the entire Bible into Romanian in 1934.

In the last century more than 100 translated versions of the Bible have been issued. Some of them followed the literal, word-by-word pattern, some others applied the modern approach, that of thought-for-thought, idea-for-idea pattern.

Case study

The case-study we propose is actually the precise excerpt that deals with the issue in question within the pages of Bible, i.e. the chapter referring to the Tower of Babel.

Translation A. in Romanian: fragment from Genesa 11:1-9 (Biblia sau Sfînta Scripturǎ Vechiului şi Noului Testament*cu trimeteri, Rumanin Bible, United Bible Societies 1991-25-053 (K) p. 11

Translation B. in English (official version)
http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+11&version=NIV
Translation C. in English (our version)

[2] Pornind ei înspre răsărit, au dat peste o câmpie în țara Șinear; și au descălecat acolo.	[2] As people moved eastward(a) they found a plain in Shinar(b) and settled there.	[2] Starting on a journey, they found a land in the country of Sinear towards East.
[3] Și au zis unul către altul: „Haidem! să facem cărămizi și să le ardem bine în foc." Și cărămida le-a ținut loc de piatră, iar smoala le-a ținut loc de var.	[3] They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.	[3] And they said to one another: "Let us make bricks and burn them hard in the fire." And the brick replaced the stone and the pitch replaced the lime.
[4] Și au mai zis: „Haidem! să ne zidim o cetate și un turn al cărui vârf să atingă cerul și să ne facem un nume, ca să nu fim împrăștiați pe toată fața pământului!" Deut .1.28.	[4] Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."	[4] And they also said: "Let us build ourselves a fortress and a tower whose top to touch the sky and let us make ourselves a name in order not to be scattered all over the face of the Earth!"
[5] Domnul S-a coborât să vadă cetatea și turnul pe care-l zideau fiii oamenilor. Gen18.21	[5] But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.	[5] The Lord descended to see the fortress and the tower build by the sons of the workers.
[6] Și Domnul a zis: „Iată, ei sunt un singur popor și toți au aceeași limbă; și iată de ce s-au apucat; acum nimic nu i-ar împiedica să facă tot ce și-au pus în gând. Gen 9.19; Fapt 17:26: Gen 11:1; Ps 2.1	[6] The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them	[6] And the Lord said: "Look, they are a single people and they all speak the same language; and that was the reason they got started; nothing could prevent them from doing what they had set their minds to."
[7] Haidem! să Ne coborâm și să le încurcăm acolo limba, ca să nu-și mai înțeleagă vorba unii altora!" Gen 1.26; Ps 2.4; Fapt 2.4-6;Gen 42.23;Deut 28.49; Ier 5.15; 1Cor 14.2-11	[7] Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."	[7] Let us descend and mix their tongues for them not to be able to understand their talk and the others.
[8] Și Domnul i-a împrăștiat de acolo pe toată fața pământului; așa că au încetat să zidească cetatea. Luc 1.51; Gen 10.25-32	[8] So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.	[8] And the Lord dissipated them all over the world; therefore they ceased to build the fortress.
[9] De aceea cetatea a fost numită Babel, căci acolo a încurcat Domnul limba întregului pământ, și de acolo i-a împrăștiat Domnul pe toată fața pământului.1Cor 14.22	[9] That is why it was called Babel (c) because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.	[9] That was the reason the fortress was called Babel, as that was the place where the Lord tangled the tongues of the entire world, and the place where the Lord dispersed the people from all over the face of the Earth.
	Footnotes: (a). Genesis 11:2 Or *from the east*; or *in the east* (b). Genesis 11:2 That is, Babylonia (c). Genesis 11:9 That is, Babylon; *Babel* sounds like the Hebrew for *confused*.	

Comparative and contrastive analysis:

The following analysis tries to demonstrate how the words in the Bible are rendered more or less different and how the meaning is, yet, the most important issue to be considered.

[3] Şi au zis unul către altul: „Haidem! să facem cărămizi şi să le ardem bine în foc.'' Şi cărămida le-a ţinut loc de piatră, iar smoala le-a ţinut loc de var.	[3] They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.	[3] And they said to one another: "Let us make bricks and burn them hard in the fire." And the brick replaced the stone and the pitch replaced the lime.

-The B. translation variant uses *They said to each other*; according to the English language rules, this formula implies that there are two people involved in the conversation, which is not the case, here. The C. translation opts for the more appropriate use of *they said to one another*, implying that the number of people involved is larger than two.

The use of the formula *Come, let's make …* appears to work better than the other translation variant that leaves out the orality-setting term *Come*, and it seems to tamper with the oral feature of the spoken register of language implied by such a text type.

We may note how repetition of *a ţinut loc de* from the source text was avoided in the B. variant, making it seem more elegant, but it was preserved in the C. translation, thus closer to the original, yet less expressive in comparison to B. variant.

[4] Şi au mai zis: „Haidem! să ne zidim o cetate şi un turn al cărui vârf să atingă cerul şi să ne facem un nume, ca să nu fim împrăştiaţi pe toată faţa pământului!'' Deut .1.28.	[4] Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth."	[4] And they also said: "Let us build ourselves a fortress and a tower whose top to touch the sky and let us make ourselves a name in order not to be scattered all over the face of the Earth!"

-It is interesting to observe how, in order to render the term *cetate* in the source text, the B. variant chose the term *city*, according to the former acceptance of the original term, while the C. translation considered the term *fortress* is more appropriate. We ought to observe, here, that the former translation 'rendered' the meaning, the connotative item, while the latter one went for the word, the denotative item.

The second part of this entry seems to be quite differently solved in the two translation instances: the B. one opts to render a negation by an affirmative ……..

[5] Domnul S-a coborât să vadă cetatea şi turnul pe care-l zideau fiii oamenilor. Gen18.21	[5] But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.	[5] The Lord descended to see the fortress and the tower build by the sons of the workers.

-Besides the translation of *a coborât* as *came down* in translation B. and *descended* in C. where the former term seems maybe too common and earthly while the latter appears to be more appropriate since the term used breathes a certain air characteristic to the religious writings, there is also the issue of the metaphor *fiii oamenilor*, which was rendered in B. as *people*, being perceived as a general entity, while C. translation translated, again, the lexical items *the sons of the workers*, even though here it might not have been necessary.

[6] Şi Domnul a zis: „Iată, ei sunt un singur popor şi toţi au aceeaşi limbă; şi iată de ce s-au apucat; acum nimic nu i-ar împiedica să facă tot ce şi-au pus în gând. Gen 9.19; Fapt 17:26: Gen 11:1; Ps 2.1	[6] *The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them."*	[6] And the Lord said: "Look, they are a single people and they all speak the same language; and that was the reason they got started; nothing could prevent them from doing what they had set their minds to."

-This instance proves us how a succession of (main) sentences can be transformed, by translation, into a main-subordinate sequence. According to the B. variant, the sentence contraction might work better in rendering the meaning than a word-for-word type of translation. Yet, we should not lose sight of the fact that contraction of sentence might imprint a certain degree of difficulty in understanding the meaning.

[7] Haidem! să Ne coborâm şi să le încurcăm acolo limba, ca să nu-şi mai înţeleagă vorba unii altora!" Gen 1.26; Ps 2.4; Fapt 2.4-6;Gen 42.23;Deut 28.49; Ier 5.15; 1Cor 14.2-11	[7] Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."	[7] Let us descend and mix their tongues for them not to be able to understand their talk and the others.

-None of the two translation variants kept the capitalization of the 'holy' pronoun, quite a common practice in religions writings.

The first translation preserves the orality of the original text, by rendering *Haidem!* as *Come!*, while the second variant did not consider it necessary due to the use of *Let us…*.

Another interesting choice of words is that of *să le încurcăm (…) limba* solved as *confuse their language* in the B. variant and *mix their tongues* in the C. one; here we notice that the English choices are partial synonyms, but they definitely have a less 'synonymous' impact upon the recipients; i.e. the former appears to be more explicit and clear as to the intention of the doer, while the latter is more plastic.

[8] Şi Domnul i-a împrăştiat de acolo pe toată faţa pământului; aşa că au încetat să zidească cetatea. Luc 1.51; Gen 10.25-32	[8] So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.	[8] And the Lord dissipated them all over the world; therefore they ceased to build the fortress.

-Besides the choice of the conjunction *So* in the B. translation, choice that seems less appropriate, considering the formality intended by the original text, this variant appears to better render the terms *a împrăştiat (…) au încetat* into *scattered* (…) *stopped* as opposed to *dissipated* (…) *ceased* from the C. variant, since the latter choices are too formal, thus unsuitable for the text intent.

Ever since people realised that they were not alone in this world, that they needed the Other to communicate with, to live with, they tried to find ways to understand one another. For the same reason of inclusion, of feeling of belonging, feeling of protection and care, people have always tried to find a common ground; it appears that, at a certain moment in the history of the world, the Bible managed to bring people together (just as it managed to drive them apart, for that matter). Yet, in order for the *holy word* to reach the ones willing to hear it,

language was always an issue. It is, therefore, not a surprise that the Bible is considered to be the greatest translation ever.

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