MODIFYING THROUGH MODIFICATION. "POLITICALLY CORRECT" ADJECTIVES IN TRANSLATION (ENGLISH, ROMANIAN, FRENCH)

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Abstract: 18th-century definitions state that parodies rely on conserving the original plot while modifying the characters by means of burlesque words. James Finn Garner's 1994 book Politically Correct Bedtime Stories humorously rewrites fairy-tales for an adult public by ascribing a political agenda to every noun, verb, and, above all, adjective. Enormously popular in English, this collection of stories has been translated into a score or more of languages to this day. If generally speaking, political correctness involves neutrality, even euphemisation, in Garner's parody, the "less is more" philosophy is turned upside down by an abundance of politically correct modifiers which leads to a (humour-emgendering) saturation of the text. We mainly look at Little Red Riding Hood, because it is highly illustrative of the entire volume in its treatment of adjectives, in order to assess to what extent the paradoxical power of evaluative adjectives aiming at a semantic zone of indifference are rendered in translation into Romanian and French.

Keywords: fairy-tale, parody, political correctness, modification, translation

Adjectives as descriptors, classifiers and identifiers of nouns and pronouns make up a fairly heterogeneous class of words endowed with a remarkable, undeniable (potential) eloquence. Capable enough of building their own stylistic field (Guiraud, 1979) due to an autonomous semantic charge as well as a high level of abstraction (Sporiş, 2006: 281), adjectives have of late been rehabilitated up to the point of being redefined as "major" words (Ducrot & Schaeffer, 1996: 288), along nouns and verbs. A number of linguists (Găitănaru, 2002: 6-7) have even suggested that adjectives do not merely express, but rather ascribe features to objects, either by adequate or inadequate epithesis.

A strategic locus of creativity, the adjective is also quite revealing in terms of (literary) style because, as Suhamy observed (1994: 43-110, q. in Jenn, 2007: 5), if writers are ever in

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charge of their own choices, they have much more leeway in dealing with adjectives than in dealing with nouns[1].

In the present paper we aim at analysing a series of attributive adjectives in a literary text written in English and the way this series was transferred into French and Romanian, respectively, via the process of translation. Structurally, the original presents us with a variety of adjective types: simple (young, large, fresh, big, wise, happy), compound (fat-free, sodium-free), coordinate (foreboding and dangerous, wise and nurturing, rigid and traditionalist) or modified by adverbs (optically challenged, entirely valid). Semantically, some are relational (mental, physical), some more are descriptive (large, big, fresh, little), and only few of them are qualifying (attractive). While the examples in the original, taken as such, are hardly spectacular (with the possible exception of some compounds), and both the Romanian and French versions show it was possible to translate the majority of the adjectives literally, we still found it interesting to observe the dynamics of these adjectives on the scale of subjectivity (in the sense put forward by Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1980).

As a matter of fact, the very choice of the corpus (which falls under the heading of "paraliterature") led us to consider at least four major parameters: the fairy-tale genre (which is conventionally regarded as children-oriented), the parody genre (which is adult-oriented), the concept of political correctness and, finally, dealing in translation with all of the above. James Finn Garner's 1994 book Politically Correct Bedtime Stories humorously rewrites fairy-tales for an adult public by "ascribing a political agenda" (Ennis, q. in Canepa, 1997: 222) to every noun, verb, and, above all, adjective. Enormously popular in English, this collection of stories has been translated into a score or more of languages to this day. For our purposes, we mainly look at Little Red Riding Hood, not necessarily for its canonical status which typically places it in initial position in virtually any collection (from Perrault on) or for its alternative endings, but because it is highly illustrative of the entire volume in its treatment of adjectives.

Garner openly admits, on the jacket of the 1994 edition, that he intended to mock at the "sexist, discriminatory, unfair [and] culturally biased" content of children's stories (Ennis, ibid., 221). Preceded in his endeavour by no less than Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, but also by a little less illustrious names such as Antoine Hamilton or, more recently, Pierre Gripari, Garner does borrow from them "silly anachronisms" and "outrageous plots" (Ennis,

[1] In the orig. "...car, comme le signale Henri Suhamy, si l'écrivain a toujours le choix de ce qu'il écrit, il jouit d'une latitude plus grande en matière d'adjectif que de nom (Suhamy, 1994 : 43-110)." (my transl.)

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ibid.), but also extensively relies on synthetic nominal groups and on burlesque words in order to achieve one given humorous effect or another.

While attempting to define parody for the public at large, Antoine Houdar de la Motte (Troisième discours à l'occasion de la tragédie Inès de Castro, 1730, q. in Ennis, op. cit., 224) observed that parody conserved the original plot while modifying the characters. If characters are modified and to what extent, it is up to the readers to notice. But, as Linda Hutcheon suggested in her Theory of Parody (2000), parody only prospers in periods of cultural sophistication which enables the readership to contrast and compare. Furthermore, as Didier Coste rightly annotates, "...in a formulaic genre like the fairy tale, we should not overrate the distinction between the first, supposedly "linear" reading and subsequent readings; we can even neglect it to a large extent, since the implied reader of a formulaic genre is itself formulaic: it already knows, by definition, most of the structures of the tale and many of their potential actualizations." (Coste, 1989: 184).

If parody supposes, by definition, a modification of the text it "feeds on", it does so on a number of levels: it modifies the characters as well as the plot – especially the ending (in Garner's version of The Little Red Riding Hood, grandma kills the woodchopper for his insulting attempt at saving her, and goes on to live together with the girl and the wolf), but above all, it modifies the language of the original so as to suit the newer communicative purposes. Some compound nouns aside (woodchopper-person, log-fuel technician), the power of his discourse lies in modifiers. A third level of modification occurs in the process of translation (here, into French and Romanian), mostly in the use of transposition and modulation.

But ideologically, Garner's texts, while intended for leisure and amusement, are complicated even further, beyond the shreds of fairy-tale formulae or of parody formulae, by what the title overtly but subversively assumes: that is to say, political correctness.

Born out of the necessity to soften the edges between the various groups in the American melting pot and to ban discrimination, political correctness could be summarised as an effort to minimise if not eradicate offensive language in the public sphere. Theoretically, it involves all social groups, irrespective of their cultural, ethnic or gender diversity. Concretely, it is often brought into effect by means of euphemisms or neutral terms. According to Filip Ženíšek (2010: 16), political correctness is concerned with those words "whose original meaning shifted recently and gained (or were discovered to carry) undesirable and harming connotations – mainly regarding sexism, racism, [...] and other forms of prejudicial thinking."

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However, Ženíšek duly observes, neutrality has a way of getting eroded with time and politically correct terms tend to be substituted for new ones; or, this repetitive, potentially never-ending process of replacing negatively connoted terms by fresh euphemisms inevitably leads to what he calls a euphemism treadmill (Ženíšek, op. cit., 22). Furthermore, he also claims that the actual goal of political correctness is "not to ban discrimination from society but to banish it from the minds of individuals and their way of thinking and expressing" (Ženíšek, op. cit., 16).

Unlike Orwell's newspeak, politically correctness apparently comes "from below" (Takáč, 2014: 10) and is optional rather than compulsory. Much like Orwell's newspeak, politically correct language involves "the invention of new words", the elimination of "undesirable words" and / or "stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings" (Orwell, 1949: 270-1). In an article published in Los Angeles Times (august 1994) entitled "Bedtime Stories for These Oh-So PC Times : Books: James Finn Garner Tweaks the Language Police with His Reworking of Classic Tales for the Age Deficient (translation: Kids). And They're Selling like Thermally Boosted Flour Patties (that's 'hot Cakes' to Most of Us).", Russell Miller makes it plain that Garner's stories are meant to "savage those who try to fix the world by fixing thought and language. He parodies opponents of sexism, ageism and other –isms he invents just for fun, strewing his passages with their euphemisms." (q. by Takáč, 2014: 11) As a critic of political correctness, Garner was primarily against orthodoxy, firmly convinced that euphemisms in language do not really mean any real change for the affected people. (idem)

The profusion of modifiers in Garner's text must therefore, be treated with particular attention in translation, given the fact that their "neutrality" is more often than not overbidden to the point of overlapping with either sheer irony or pure humour. Nida and Taber used to define translating as consisting in "reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style" (Nida & Taber, 1974: 12), but in such texts as Garner's rewritings, style is all-important.

In the translation of adjectives, literal translation proved to be the most prolific strategy, with occasional instances of transposition and modulation. The deliberate character of lexical choice and selection becomes apparent first and foremost in the way the adjectives used are exploited for their proper rather than for secondary, figurative meanings which might lead to misinterpretations. Seldom does the writer use epithets that are non-inherent (a notable

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exception being impassioned in impassioned speech). Most of them are non-axiological evaluatives, pointing to an internal feature of the object described, while allowing enough room for the speaker to fill in. Also, diminutives, being potentially offensive, are used sparingly, and definitely not hypocoristically; if they are to be found, then they are often derogatory e.g. little in little girl is used insinuatively by the Wolf: "You know, my dear, it isn't safe for **a little girl** to walk through these woods alone." (emphasis mine). In both the Romanian and French versions, the mockery is transferred not by the epithet alone, but contextually compensating in kind:

– Hum ! fit le loup. Vous savez, ma chère, qu'**une petite fille** comme vous ne devrait pas se promener toute seule dans ces bois.

- Știi, draga mea, pădurea nu-i un loc sigur pentru **fetițe** care se plimbă singure.

If "[h]yperbole is, of course, a stock device in fairy-tale portraits" (Ennis, q. in Canepa, op. cit., 230), it is definitely not the case here. Adjectives are carefully regimented as either scalar (big) or telic (sufficient) and only exceptionally as absolutive (huge). In their desperate attempt to stay neutral, they fall into a "zone of indifference", similar to some extent to the one proposed by Marcin Morzycki (Adjectival extremeness...). The speedometer metaphor starts from the premise that speedometers have two kinds of "zone of indifference": one having to do with precision (the speedometer can tell you when your speed reaches 60 or 65 miles per hour, but when your speed is 61, it falls in one kind of zone of indifference), and the other having to do with the highest value on the scale (the zone of indifference that extends beyond the highest marked speed). If adjectival scales work similarly, says Morzycki, then there should be degrees on each scale that are the counterparts of marks on the speedometer. And just as different cars have different speedometers, so too must different contexts be able to vary in which degrees they treat as "marks". Morzycki reaches the conclusion that an adjective can be contextually extreme in a given context. As in our corpus we do not deal with extreme adjectives but rather with monomorphemic weaker or "neutral" lexical counterparts (e.g. big, not gigantic; pretty, not gorgeous), the zone of indifference here is delineated in the very process of emptying adjectives of any semantic nuance perceived as politically incorrect and then reinvesting them with meaning in such an overzealous way that, instead of reaching a balanced, golden mean, it fills the semantic vacuum choke-full, thus obtaining the opposite intended effect: either an excessive or a vague sememe.

The contextual meaning of such words as big and large, for example, is always related to the basic sense involving physical size (a **large** wood, **big** eyes, **big** nose, **big** teeth), but it

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remains rather vague (How large a wood? How big a nose?). The same goes for young person (How young exactly?). Political correctness is definitely based on a politics of vagueness, of blurred contours, ultimately of hiding an ugly truth in the name of universal tolerance. Interestingly enough, the Romanian version provides vastă for large in a large wood:

There once was a **young person** named Red Riding Hood who lived with her mother on the edge of a **large wood**.

Il était une fois une **jeune personne** appelée le Petit Chaperon Rouge, qui vivait avec sa mère à la lisière d'un **grand bois**.

A fost odată ca niciodată o **tânără persoană** pe nume Scufiţa Roşie, care trăia cu mama ei la liziera unei **păduri vaste**. [a vast forest]

The order and position of adjectives is also a matter of controversy. While in English most of them come before the noun, French, like Romanian and like most Romance languages, displays both prenominal and postnominal placement of attributive adjectives, sometimes with a difference in meaning. Common monosyllabic or disyllabic adjectives such as petit, grand, gros, beau, bon, mauvais, joli, vieux, jeune usually come before the noun; when postposed, their meaning is intensified and instantly becomes more concrete. In the incipit of the story, quoted above, young person is used in order to describe the title character in a politically correct vein. In English, this is standard word-order; in French, une jeune personne conveys less than une personne jeune, but it is the right choice mitigation-wise, as implied by political correctness, whereas in Romanian, placing the adjective before the noun (o tânără persoană) is a little too emphatic in the context.

When translators come across degrees of comparison in the original, the strategies they use may vary. In Little Red Riding Hood's reply to the wolf: "Oh, I forgot you are **as optically challenged as a bat**.", the politically correct counterpart of the idiom as blind as a bat is translated by equivalence as aussi optiquement contrariée qu'une taupe into French, but is only partially rendered in Romanian: dezavantajată optic cu desăvârşire.

Many adjectives in Garner's text are, in their turn, modified by adverbs. As emphasized by Ennis (op. cit., 230), in most fairy-tales, things (character types, events etc.) are organised into polarised strctures: ugly vs. beautiful, evil vs. good etc., and parodies make no exception. The "good" in Little Red Riding Hood is usually emphasized by singular completive adverbs (in Cinque's terminology, 1999, q. in Morzycki, Modification) such as fully, completely, entirely (**fully** capable, **entirely** valid worldview, **entirely** valid course of action) or by occasional speaker-oriented epistemic adverbs such as certainly ("Grandma,

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what a big nose you have—only relatively, of course, and **certainly attractive** in its own way.", or "...my grandmother, who is **certainly capable** of taking care of herself..."). The French version uses parfaitement for fully and tout à fait for certainly, and the Romanian mainly uses transposition (adjectives such as perfect or absolut instead of adverbs). Enough, on the other hand, far from expressing, as it usually does, relative intensity, also points to an idyllic, ideally good:

Red Riding Hood, however, was **confident enough** in her own budding sexuality that such obvious Freudian imagery did not intimidate her.

Dieu merci, la jeune fille en fleur qu'était le Petit Chaperon Rouge **assumait très bien** sa sexualité naissante, et jamais une imagerie freudienne aussi évidente ne l'aurait intimidée!

În ciuda acestui fapt, Scufiţa Roşie avea **suficientă încredere de sine** şi în sexualitatea ei crescândă, încât să nu se lase intimidată de asemenea clişee freudiene.The Romanian version uses transposition to render this part of the sentence and is generally sticking to the original. The French version, on the other hand, while taking some (creative) liberties from Garner's text, modulates at large, much to the delight of the reader, using Dieu merci to render a simple however, and la jeune fille en fleur to refer to Little Red Riding Hood's budding sexuality.Full, fully, enough, entirely and their Romanian or French equivalents all give a sense of completeness, of no more, no less than perfect. By contrast, the "bad" is euphemized by means of challenged (optically challenged, vertically challenged) and here adverbs are meant to situate rather than intensify. Largely speaking, the source-oriented Romanian version fails to fully exploit the richness of the target language by oversimplifying the text and steering clear of too explicit, too many modifiers. Nevertheless, it does convey, at times, the irony directed at politically correct (therefore wooden) language(s). As for the French version, it never holds back from supplementary puns (e.g. the invective appellative-conative "Speciesist!" is rendered by a polyptotonic "Espèce d'espéciste!") in order to illustrate the paradoxical power of adjectives to lead to saturation while becoming devoid of meaning.

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Corpus

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