Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 8 (57) No. 2 – 2015

Degrees of untranslatability and levels of translation equivalence in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

Daria PROTOPESCU[1]

The present paper intends to provide an analysis of the main problems imposed by the translation of a postmodernist novel such as David Mitchell's "Cloud Atlas". Several excerpts have been chosen for analysis because of the uncommon narrative range, the set alternating time and space, each section being written in a different prose style. We will also provide the necessary examples taken out of the novel so as to show how particular translation theories work out when used in the active development of text interpretation.

Key terms*: linguistic untranslatability, freedom, fidelity, loss, gain, negative shift, levels of translation equivalence*

1. Introduction

The present paper analyzes the different degrees of equivalence employed in the Romanian version of David Mitchell's 2004 *Cloud Atlas.* The Romanian version of the text *Atlasul norilor* was published by Humanitas Publishing House in 2008, with a translation by Mihnea Gafița.

From a translator's point of view, *Cloud Atlas* is an unusual novel because of its radical and different perspectives on narrative technique, which the author disguises in the shape of a nested doll. The language of *Cloud Atlas* is another interesting topic when trying to approach it as a process in itself, since it is changed and adapted throughout the course of the narrative, in a way which makes it almost similar to a roller-coaster ride, starting from an extended and ever-changing glossary of terms and reaching an intense visual imagery from one set to another, shifting from a dense, rich musical prose to colourful dialogues and yet again, to thought-provoking monologues, Mitchell's philosophical narrative being on the same level with the use of dialect and puns. Trying to comprehend such a generous structure of combined literary modes and styles can prove extremely challenging. While trying to render the message of the author without alterations to the readers from different cultures and countries, the translator must also make it accessible by preserving the original intention of the author.

[1] University of Bucharest, dariapro@yahoo.com

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

Another reason for considering *Cloud Atlas* a translator's 'playground' brings about the kaleidoscopic nature of the narrative, the novel's temporal systems and the characters' voices shifting from one century to another, from one society to another, and, more importantly, from one specific literary genre to another. When approaching the text, the translators must use both their imagination and creativity, to substitute, in a way, the author himself in order to imprint on the target reader the same impression that was produced by the original text inside the source reader's conscience. *Cloud Atlas*' versatility and variety of language in forms of dialect and textual sociolect are interconnected at both micro and macro levels, ranging from the microscopic repetition of motifs and phrases to the macroscopic repetition and intersection of characters, plots and themes. This is how, by using a variety of postmodern narrative techniques and strategies, David Mitchell manages to offer his reader and possible translator also an equal opportunity to engage in alternative ways of reading and understanding the text in both its original and translated form.

Another issue discussed here regards the notion of *linguistic untranslatability* within its referential, pragmatic, and intralingual acceptations, for there will always remain an untranslatable rest, in the shape of connotation, nuance or poetic quality. Many examples for this aspect are found inside the fifth and sixth narrative of the book, when considering a translation of collective nouns derived from ultra-brands (like 'nikes', 'fords' and 'toshibas'), mutated names ('Nea So Copros') or altered expressions such as 'he snakysnuck up a leafy hideynick to snivel'n'pray' (Cloud Atlas 251). In terms of *freedom vs. fidelity* when interpreting the text and trying to find equivalents in the target language, the translator has an obligation to create a suitable translation even in the most difficult situations, being careful not to impair the voice of the original text, and taking into consideration the substantial degree of attention presupposed by *loss and gain* in translation.

Before a more ample discussion regarding these concepts, let us briefly comment upon the original translation of *Cloud Atlas*, delivered to the Romanian reader by Mihnea Gafița, who had the book translated and published in a first 2008 edition, followed by a second one in 2012 (along with the release of the *Cloud Atlas* movie). With *Cloud Atlas*, the translator manages to efficiently preserve the formal qualities of the text and at the same time he is more than able to offer his readers a translation with a consistent rhythm inside the narrative, without affecting the central message meant to be received by *Cloud Atlas*' readers.

2. The Analysis

As mentioned above, the overall impression about Gafița's translation is more than positive, leaving me with just a few disparities to adjust, presented as examples of how a different approach can work better by the very use of a particular strategy. At the same time, the translator's task was not an easy one, as he was (and still is) the

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

first translator responsible for the way a postmodernist novel such as *Cloud Atlas* is perceived by the Romanian readers, having a most definite artistic impact to be produced.

In Venuti's acceptation, the illusion of transparency is

> an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator's effort to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning. The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text. (Venuti 1995, 2)

In Gafița's rendition of *Cloud Atlas*, the translator has certainly avoided losing the voice of the original text, as a whole or as a specific genre for each of the six puzzle-like parts of the book (diary, epistolary, farce, mystery, sci-fi or post-apocalyptic), since that would have meant losing the entire essence of the novel. We can observe here a fine contradiction with the regular aspect of 'fluent translation', since the language in *Cloud Atlas* constantly shifts form the 'archaic' to the modern, or 'current', from the 'jargon' or 'colloquial' to 'pidgin' constructions, in a massive corpus of literary texts. Having this literary enigma to decipher, the translator has done a proper job by faithfully preserving the sense of precision within the text's semantics, and also giving a rhythmic definition to the novel, making it more familiar to the Romanian reader, by using an appropriate, domesticated language.

I can easily admit that the translator has fulfilled the mission of a suitable translator, in Nabokov' vision: 'while having genius and knowledge he (the translator) must possess the gift of mimicry and be able to act, as it were, the real author's part by impersonating his tricks of demeanor and speech, his ways and his mind, with the utmost degree of verisimilitude' (Nabokov, 1941). The translator has played the double role of 'receiver of the source text' and 'emitter of the target text', by linking the two chains of communications: Author-Text-Receiver = Translator-Text-Receiver and by using the appropriate 'scientific v. creative' distinction (Bassnett 2002, 45) when following the basic steps for a proficient translation.

Before discussing the process of translation of any writing, the translator must consider certain features of the text, by first assuming some 'strategic decisions' and second, some 'decisions of detail' (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 14). The strategic decisions are made before actually starting the translation and they involve: finding the significant linguistic characteristics of the text, drawing a conclusion about the major effects the text has on the reader, establishing to which genre the text belongs and of what nature the targeted audience must be. The second type – detail decisions – concerns specific problems of grammar, semantics and lexis that are ought to be made when translating particular expressions or collocation in their particular context (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 14).

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

To further illustrate the process, in the case of the novel *Cloud Atlas,* the first strategic decision brings about the most amazing element of the book, the combined genre, as David Mitchell drastically changes his writing style for each of the six sections. The switches are not just temporal, or rather, the temporal change affects more than setting or voice, but the very structure of the writing, so the translator has to decide what is the novel's intended audience and what effect is to be produced after the reader reaches the end of the book. Obviously, in this case we are dealing with a novel in prose, so the form of the source text must be preserved as such, which leaves the translator to deal mostly with an overall understanding of the message and the well-ordered thematic ties: time is cyclical and it repeats itself, but it is also malleable, life is seen as a narrative thesis and many of the novel's protagonists are conceived by using an episodic, as well as diachronic model. The philosophical facet of *Cloud Atlas* is probably meant to be delivered to a rather intelligent, educated audience, which is capable to comprehend and reflect on the central message of the novel, and to concentrate on the inescapable intrigue about human violence, ethnicity, colonization and so on without feeling the permanent need to consult a glossary of terms or other sorts of specific dictionaries.

The balance between formal and informal language is broken six times, according to the characteristics of each section of the book, so the translator should carefully consider a mixing of the strategic and detail decisions, in a way that the delimitation of meaning can be rendered in two ways: syntactically, like in the case of the contrast between the use of nouns and verbs, and semantically, the same term having different meanings in various contexts. An example can be Mitchell's use of the word 'orison', in its double signification, as it means both 'oration' and 'speech' as well as 'prayer': in the sixth narrative, for Sonmi the orison remains an egg-shaped metal device meant to scan and record, but in *Sloosha's Crossin'*, the term undergoes a transformation of meaning, Zachry's 'orison' symbolizing a magical home of a goddess and the root of a new religion. The target text renders 'orison' as 'omelnic', a contraction of the noun 'pomelnic', which also has more than one denotation, applying to both of Mitchell's uses of the term: the first one describes a long string of names, of both living and dead persons, which are to be mentioned by the priest during the religious service or during someone's prayer; the second meaning is of funeral service; the third signification is of a rambling story of countless names, dates and facts, and is meant to be used in a sardonic context; the fourth symbolizes 'memorial'.

Other decisions of detail are stressed when translating each phrase and each word by choosing between several synonyms or versions that may fit the given context, this process meaning that there are some subjective choices to be made, since the use of one term or the other is based mainly on personal interpretation or, at times, the translator's creativity. By using an ingenious translated form of the source word or expression, the translator can guarantee an expressiveness of the translation, making it equal to the original. On the other hand, an exaggeration or

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

overemphasis on rather simple terms and constructions can cause the translation to digress from the original meaning, so the translator should never forget the basic mission of preserving his invisibility, as in Nabokov's vision 'the clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times better than the prettiest paraphrase' (Venuti 2002, 71).

(1)	**SOURCE TEXT**	**TARGET TEXT**
	'[…] "*the frigid old sow must be* ***on her last trotters*** *if she's letting Dr Quack frisk her*"' (Cloud Atlas 11)	'– Scroafa aia bătrână şi frigidă **şi-o fi trăgând ultimele băşini** de-l lasă pe Doctoru' Şarlatan s'o caute'n dos!' (*Atlasul Norilor* 16)

In this case, the translator chose to turn the expression 'on her last trotters' into the Romanian 'şi-o fi trăgând ultimele băşini', which is indeed an expressive choice, maintaining a pejorative meaning. We object to this because, according to the definition given by the "Longman English Dictionary of Contemporary English", the noun 'trotter' means 'the rear leg of a pig' and the verb 'to trot' describes a fairly slow movement of an animal or person's legs. It appears that Mitchell has come up with the expression 'to be on one's last trotters' in a way similar with 'to trot out', in order to underline a near death situation when the body makes its last movements. The translator's alternative 'a-şi trage ultima băşină' is an invented argotic one, possibly made up by the translator to emphasize the irony of the whole statement since he has linked it to another translation of the verb 'to frisk', his version for it being 'a căuta în dos'. Both of them lack a suitable value as Romanian counterparts, being limited to just that – sarcastic expressions, so a possibly better equivalent for the expression 'to be on one's last trotters' would be 'a fi cu un picior în groapă', the entire phrase being modified as follows: '[…] de bună seamă, scroafa aia bătrână şi frigidă e cu un picior în groapă de-l lasă pe şarlatanul ăsta de doctor s-o caute peste tot.'

The example above also proves that any process of detail decision also involves a trail of several steps, such as the semantic analysis of referential meaning, which applies to all types of linguistic units, from basic elements like morphemes to more complex ones like idioms. Other steps, ready to be followed, involve the grammatical relationship between constituent parts and the connotative values of both grammatical structures and semantic units or, as Nida calls them, 'semotactics inside the deep structure' (Nida 1969, 490).

But if the translator handles sentences for their specific content alone, their value as unit components in a complex overall structure will be shadowed. Whenever the translator tries to approach the source language in terms of units (whether words or sentences), isolated from discourse, serious difficulties will inevitably show up, since the many potential ambiguities are resolved only in the context of discourse. The term describing such errors in translation is known as *negative shift* and it involves three aspects: "a mistranslation of information, a

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

'subinterpretation' of the original text and a superficial interpretation of connections between intentional correlatives" (Bassnett 2002, 119).

When choosing a translation approach, another aspect that has to be taken into account is that of language transfer, which can be described as a dominant process that occurs during the translation. When transferring the referential content of a message, the focus is not placed on specific words or 'exocentric' units, such as idioms (Nida 1969, 492), but on groups of componential features, carried out by words. The process of transfer is also characterized by three types of redistribution of the componential structures: the complete redistribution, the analytical redistribution and the synthesis of components. The first type addresses a literal transfer inside idioms such as the biblical one, which must be completely redistributed so it can avoid significant distortions in meaning. An example can be provided from the novel, in this fragment from *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*:

(2)	**SOURCE TEXT**	**TARGET TEXT**
	'I own, my mind was more on digestion than theology & I blurted out that Rafael could hardly have notched up a mortal portfolio of sin in his few years. (…) I affirmed the Almighty's mercy is indeed infinite, that *joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety & nine just persons, which need no repentance*' (Cloud Atlas 516-7; italics in original).	Că aşa şi în cer va fi mai multă bucurie pentru un păcătos care se pocăieşte, decât pentru nouăzeci şi nouă de drepți, care n-au nevoie de pocăință'.

The biblical idiom is emphasized in the original by the use of italics, since it is a direct quote from The Bible, Luke 15:7, King James Version (KJV). This literal transfer would normally involve considerable distortion in meaning, if its componential structure is not completely redistributed, so for a reader not accustomed with the biblical aphoristic idiom, it can be rendered as 'God forgives everyone who regrets his mistakes, more than other ninety nine people who have done no mistakes'.

The analytical redistribution of elements, meaning 'what is carried by one lexical unit in the source language is distributed over several terms in the receptor language' (Nida 1969, 493) is followed by the synthesis of components, which appears when a construction encompassing several elements can be transferred into one word which encompasses all the componential features of meaning (as an example, Nida (1969, 493) proposes the transfer of *brothers and sisters* into the word *siblings*).

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

A last step in the process of language interpretation, and a more difficult one, is restructuring the translation, which basically depends on the structures of each individual receptor language and which involves two types of dimension: formal and functional. When translating a postmodernist novel such as *Cloud Atlas*, the formal dimension obliges the translator to determine what stylistic level should be attained during the process of restructuring, for the intimate level of language found in *Letters from Zedelghem* is not equal with the formal and at times technical fragments of *An Orison of Sonmi~451,* so a special kind of attention has to be placed on the various literary genres and on the way in which they can be transferred in a Romanian variant without impairing the author's voice or losing parts of the novelistic effect. The literary genre (including epic poetry, proverbs, parables, historical narrative, personal letters and ritual hymns) is also illustrated by languages which do not have long literary traditions and standards, but abound in elaborate forms of oral literature, involving a number of distinct types. Hence, the real problems appear not in the correspondence between genres, but in the manner of how they are regarded by the receptors.

The second dimension of the restructuring process is the functional and more dynamic one, which Nida links with the *impact* desired to be produced on the reader, and the role of the receptor, a translation being judged "as adequate only if the response of the intended receptor is satisfactory" (Nida 1969, 494). By knowing both the source and the targeted language, the translator can decode the message of the source language and encode it into an appropriate equivalent form of the targeted language, therefore the focus of attention is properly attributed to the rendition of the closest natural equivalent for the original message, in terms of both meaning and style (Nida 1969, 495).

A dominant aspect, that has concerned almost every translation theorist, has always been the principle of equivalent effect, this issue still remaining a delicate one, even today, after being so well defined and analysed. According to Harvey and Higgins, this principle requires that the target text should produce 'the same' effects on its audience as those produced by the source text on its original readers (Harvey and Higgins 1992, 22). However, equivalence between two languages does not in any way presuppose that the two are 'alike', this assumption being characterized as purely utopian, so the translator should act with a maximum of attention when reinterpreting the original text into a second language.

Equivalence in translation is quite a controversial subject for more than one reason. First, it can prove to be a highly difficult task for the translator to know with a great deal of certainty what effect the interpreted text could produce on the readers, mainly because each reader is unique and the same text can even have distinct interpretations for one and the same reader on two different occasions, so to envisage the readers' reaction to the translation is a major endeavor. As the nature of this principle is not an objective one, it cannot be discussed from a scientific

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

perspective, a solution for this problem being found only by shifting through the several levels of translation equivalence.

These levels have been compiled by Bassnett (2002, 33) into four types:

linguistic equivalence	**paradigmatic equivalence**	**stylistic equivalence**	**textual equivalence**
a homogeneity on both linguistic levels, i.e. word-for-word translation	for the elements of a paradigmatic axis, i.e. elements of grammar	a translational meaning of both texts, aiming an expressive identity	a syntagmatic structuring of the text, i.e. equivalence of form and shape

A suggestive example of stylistic equivalence in the case of idiom translation is the following excerpt, taken from *Letters from Zedelghem*, the novel's second story, in which we find Robert Frobisher on the deck of an old ship named *Kentish Queen*, as the young composer is saying his final goodbyes to his homeland:

(3)	**SOURCE TEXT**	**TARGET TEXT**
	'No going back now; *consequences* of what I'd done *struck home*' (Cloud Atlas 46)	'consecințele a tot ce făcusem pân-atunci – *cu ele rămânea să mă descurc*' (Atlasul Norilor 59)

In this case, 'to strike home' is a culture bound expression, meaning 'to be understood completely, to achieve the intended emotional or cognitive effect upon someone' (Longman), but if we are to translate it literally, the Romanian sentence should become "Nu mai e drum de întoarcere; consecințele a ceea ce făcusem *au lovit acasă*". The resulting image raised by this sentence is somewhat startling and meaningless, so the translator should try to find an equivalent which suggests, at least partially, the anticipated idea. By looking at the target text, this equivalence does not have the same echo as the original, since it diminishes the effect of fatality and a momentary remorse, which are both deeply felt by the character, as he is forced to abandon home, due to his own weighty mistakes. A better version would have been "Nu mai era cale de-ntoarcere; consecințele a tot ceea ce făcusem pân-atunci îşi atingeau din plin ținta". 'To strike home' and 'a-şi atinge ținta' are corresponding idiomatic expressions that render the idea of achievement, so word-for-word translation was not an adequate choice of action, since any substitution is made not on the basis of separate linguistic elements, but by one idiom being substituted for another, on the basis of idiom function (Bassnett 2002, 32).

Given that the process of translation certainly depends on scientific rules and logical parameters, the matter of equivalence in translation is provided with another suitable description, made by Hervey and Higgins, who consider it "too vague to be useful", for "a sound attitude to translation methodology should avoid an absolutist attempt to maximize sameness in things that are crucially different (ST and TT), in

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

favour of a relativist attempt to minimize dissimilarities between thing that are clearly understood to be different" (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 24). Having decided, there cannot be perfect similarity between two texts belonging to different languages, therefore the levels of translation equivalence cannot be fully concluded, although their function is an important parameter for the accuracy and quality of any type of translation.

When trying to retain as much as possible of the characteristics of the source text, at all the levels, whether syntactic, semantic or stylistic, the translator can easily acknowledge his difficult task of obtaining syntagmatic equivalence, so the conclusion waiting to be drawn in relation to the principle of equivalent effect is that sameness cannot exist between two languages and subjectivity constantly contradicts the process of translation, which can only lead to another matter, that of *loss and gain*, a theme that resonates at every level with the ones found in our novel. While approaching such a progressively evolving narrative as the one found in *Cloud Atlas*, it is clear that the problem of loss and gain will naturally go hand-in-hand with the one concerning freedom vs. fidelity when interpreting a text.

The studies of theorists such as Hervey, Higgins and Susan Bassnett are a rich source of information about the problems of translation loss, more precisely about the complications encountered by the translator when confronted with terms or concepts in the source language that do not exist in the target language. Even if the translator cannot avoid the disappearance of some features of the original, his mission should remain "to minimize difference rather than to maximize sameness" (Hervey and Higgins 1992, 25). Translation gain, on the other hand, is not only rare but also not always viable. To bring about some addition in the translated text is a laborious task on the part of the competent translator who has to resort to certain strategies, such as those of compensation, domestication, annotation and explication.

Apart from managing a fruitful gain strategy, in order to minimize translation loss the translator can also make use of specific procedures that help him rearrange whole ideas or only gradations of meaning and stylistic nuances in the target text, in order to preserve the flavour of the original. Thus, by appealing to *cultural transposition*, he is able to transfer cultural elements from the source language into the target language. Cultural transposition is a wide-ranging term which comprises a variety of devices at the extremes of which are exoticism and cultural transplantation. Exoticism refers to the obvious manner of adapting foreign elements into the target language, allowing the translator to resort to several linguistic and cultural features which can be imported from the source text into the target text in a minimal adaptation (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 30). The reader therefore has an obvious advantage, as he is projected into the precise nature of the text, being presented with an original grasp over the whole narrative. On the other hand, by approaching a gain in exoticism can also entail that the translation's effect on the reader is increased, sometimes even greater than that of the source text on its intended audience, so the impact of the entire literary work changes.

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

A counterbalance is that minimizing translation loss via cultural transplantation involves an adaptation of the whole text inside a different cultural context, 'resulting in the text being completely rewritten in an indigenous target culture setting' (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 30). Some of the most straightforward examples of the basic issues in cultural transposition are offered by the translation of place-names and proper names, in principle by having at least two alternatives of this process: the first is identical to literal translation, the name being "taken over unchanged from the source language to the target language"; the second alternative is transliteration, which is less extreme, so the name "can be adapted to conform to the phonic/graphic conventions of the target language" (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 29).

In *Cloud Atlas,* a use of transliteration is the standard way any translator of this novel can cope with the place-names found all over the narrative. In *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*, 'Van Diemen's Land' would normally translate as 'Ținutul lui Van Diemen', being the original name used by most Europeans for the Island of Tasmania. The demonym for Van Diemen's Land was 'Van Diemonian', though contemporaries preferred 'Vandemonian', possibly as a play on words relating to the colony's penal origins, but a use of such term would have meant to insist on unnecessary exoticism in the given context.

The Journal is packed with a variety of adaptable place-names ('Skirmish Bay'/ 'Golful Ambuscadei'), proper-names ('the *Musket'/ 'Muscheta*') and institutional denominations ('New South Wales Colonial Office'/ 'Biroul Colonial din Noua Galie de Sud'). No doubt, the translator has done a good job by attaining the desired cultural transposition, except for one mistake that could be found in the following fragment: "The first blow to the Moriori was the Union Jack, planted in Skirmish Bay's sod in the name of King George by Lieutenant Broughton of **HMS *Chatham*** just fifty years ago" (*Cloud Atlas*, 12). One problem encountered in the target text relates to the translator's unchanged interpretation of the 'HMS' prefix, a naval acronym used for shortening the much longer title of "His/Her Majesty's Ship". The target text was thus rendered as "de către Locotenentul Broughton de pe HMS *Chatham*" (*Atlasul Norilor* 17), making it unfamiliar to the reader, as there is a similar Romanian expression, equivalent to the original one, namely 'Vasul Majestății Sale', and the corresponding abbreviation of the name as 'VMS *Chatham'*, keeping the culturally conventional formula in the target language.

Without a doubt, the way a name is transliterated may be entirely up to the translator, if there is no conventional pattern for transcribing the name in question, or it may require following a standard transliteration created by earlier translators. A further example is taken from Robert Frobisher's epistolary narrative, where conventional equivalents constrain the translator to follow a standard transliteration of place-names : the city of 'Gothenburg' has several indigenous equivalents, like the native Swedish 'Göteborg' or the French 'Gothembourg', and the translator chose to preserve the English 'Gothenburg'. Another example referring to the translation of names via cultural transplantation is in the following fragment:

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

'navigate lanes around Neerbeke on the bicycle, or ramble across local fields. Am firm friends with the village dogs. They gallop after me like the *Pied Piper's* rats or brats' (*Cloud Atlas,* 60). When translating names with a certain traditional background, the translator should consider the extreme degree of cultural transposition and find similar indigenous variants. The translator's choice for rendereing 'Pied Piper' was 'Trâmbiț-Pestriț' (*Atlasul norilor,* 77), a much more literal equivalent that does not have any cultural connotation in Romanian, even though the translator did place a footnote explaining the 'Pied Piper's legend.

However, there are issues to be found inside *Cloud Atlas* that raise above the extremes of cultural transposition scale, and in a much more complex matter than the domain of names. This contrast is made by the necessity of using techniques such as *cultural borrowing*, *calque* and *communicative translation*, three devices that are placed on the scale in-between the limits of cultural transposition, so let us briefly discuss them.

A brief definition of *cultural borrowing* admits the 'verbatim' conveying of source language expressions into the target language (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 31), when the referred expression raises a cultural problem that is inexistent in the target language, or when the translator has difficulties building a proper equivalent in the target language for a certain term devised by the author. If the respective term has not already been adopted as such in the target language and has not become a standard expression, which is sometimes the case, and is thus entirely unusual to the reader, then it is the translator's duty to explain it first. Let us consider, as an example the following phrase in *Letters from Zedelghem*: 'I sit at the piano, Ayrs on the divan, smoking his vile Turkish cigarettes, and we adopt one of our three *modi operandi*' (*Cloud Atlas,* 59). The expression 'modi operandi' is rendered here as the plural form of the Latin phrase 'modus operandi', which can approximately be translated as 'method of operation' and conversely as 'mod de operare/acțiune'. Therefore, an option of word-for-word translation for the expression does exist, in both English and Romanian, and a translator can be inclined to render it as such, if he is to consider that, first of all, the textual context of the target text should make the meaning of the borrowed expression clear (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 31). However, the translator's choice was to preserve the borrowed expression as such, without any modifications, on the one hand, because the expression is widely used in Romanian in its original Latin form, as a scholastic terminology when describing criminal methods of action, and on the other, given the special considerations of narrative style that clearly belong to Frobisher's character, who is constantly making use of borrowed terms, proverbs and foreign clichés in his discourse, emphasizing the background of his life and education. However, this also implies a degree of stabilizing the text's *exoticism*, since the resulting expression may prove to be unfamiliar to some categories of readers who are not used to this academic use of language.

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

Frobisher's story abounds in similar examples of cultural borrowing and exoticism which, although having recorded counterparts, are also to be rendered verbatim in Romanian, for the sake of preserving the text's natural flow. Some of them are probably universally recognizable , such as the italicized quotes taken from Latin ('ignoramus', 'pater', 'mater', 'terra incognita', 'reductio ad absurdum') and the Italian musical terms ('Il maestro', 'più fortissimo', 'vibrato'), but also French borrowings, literary references and insertions ('joie de vivre', 'à propos', 'cri de coeur', 'à la Wellington', 'enchantée', 'château', 'déjà vu'), and German ironic appellatives ('Kaiser', 'kasteel'). The more problematic matter here remains whether to explain them in the target text or not, by the use of footnotes. Since the entire novel and implicitly its translation is clearly meant for an educated audience, there is no reason to explain the more common or cliché expressions, such as 'joie de vivre' and 'à propos', the translator provided the reader with footnote references for only extremely unfamiliar borrowings, like 'memsahib' or 'Magnificat secular' (*Atlasul Norilor* 58-71). Nonetheless, it was of equal importance to stress the use of such borrowings in the target text by preserving their italicized form, just like in the source text. There is one example of such an instance of exoticism in *An Orison of Sonmi ~451*: 'I woke late, I think, after hour six. Hae-Joo returned xhausted, holding a bag of pungent *ttōkbukgi*' (*Cloud Atlas,* 355; italics in original). In this case, the translator chose not to use a footnote explanation for the word '*ttōkbukgi*'.

Consequently, cultural borrowing and exoticism do not necessarily reside in the meaning of the words/phrases in context, but in the role they play in the characterization of the protagonists and in the impact they have on the reader. In contrast with cultural borrowing, the translator may opt for *communicative translation,* which is often compulsory for "culturally conventional formulae where a literal rendering would be inappropriate" (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 32).

A relevant example of such a communicative equivalent is by making a parallel examination of the translation of colloquial expressions such as 'bloody' and 'to bleep blue murder' in the following context taken from *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*:

(4)	**SOURCE TEXT**	**TARGET TEXT**
	'Down in Reception, domino four was *bleeping blue murder* on the main gate intercom machine. Veronica knew what button to press. "I've been *bloody* bleeping this *bloody* thing for ten *bloody* minutes while Mother is *bloody* fading away!" Johns Hotchkiss was upset. "What the f*** are you people playing at?"' (Cloud Atlas 393; my emphasis).	'Jos, la recepție, piesei numărul patru a dominoului *i se băteau porcii la gură* la poarta principală, de unde vorbea la telefonul cu circuit interior. Veronica ştia pe ce buton să apese. - Stau şi sun la *porcăria* asta *dată dracului* de zece minute, *fir-ar al dracului*, în timp ce mama se stinge! – se simțea că Johns Hotchkiss era supărat. Ce, *f_tu-m-aş*, faceți acolo, băi oameni buni?' (Atlasul Norilor 469).

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

Translating can be a very subjective matter, even what at first glance appears to be a perfect translation can be improved or revised. Our objections regarding this excerpt focus on the detail decisions that a translator had to take when dealing with this type of informal use of language. The expression 'to bleep blue murder' is a variation of 'to shout/scream blue murder', meaning 'to show your anger about something, especially by shouting or complaining very loudly'. By substituting 'shout' with 'bleep' inside the text, the author has clearly wanted to emphasize the nature of such a deviant conduct, given the crisis situation and since the character was having trouble with getting inside the building, his overall actions at that particular moment consisted in howling invectives and constantly pressing the intercom button, all at the same time. The translator's equivalent for this expression, 'a i se bate *porcii* la gură' is not a relevant choice, since this proverb does not even exist in Romanian. The translator has probably tried to mix the adverb 'porceşte' 'like a pig' with 'a i se bate *turcii* la gură', meaning 'to eat in a haste and with greed', an thus resulting in a sort of exoticism that quite aggravates the nature of the confusion. Therefore, a more relevant translation of 'Domino four was *bleeping blue murder* on the main gate intercom machine' would be 'Piesa numărul patru zbiera ca din gură de şarpe în interfonul principal'. This communicative paraphrase has the advantage of being idiomatic and plausible in Romanian, and still keeps the stylistic proverbial nature of the original text. On the other hand, the repetitive use of some epithets in one short context, in this case the use of 'bloody' in a definite diatribe meaning, has produced alternative epithets in the original translation: 'porcăria', 'dată dracului', 'fir-ar al dracului'. The idea of automatism of the trivial 'bloody' is not completely lost in the target text.

As already said, in the context of a choice between literal translations, communicative translation, cultural transplantation and so on brings about the constant presence of a particular and persistent problem, seen as a necessary compromise the translator must cope with. Compromise in translation means reconciling oneself to the fact that, while "one would like to do full justice to the 'richness' of the source text, one's final target text inevitably suffers from various translation losses". Inside the *Cloud Atlas'* layers, the different types of text suggest – and even dictate – different kinds of compromises, leading to problems such as the undesirable, yet apparently inevitable, translation losses. This is the moment when the translator may feel the need to resort to techniques referred to as *compensation* – that is, 'techniques of making up for the loss of important source text features through replicating source text effects approximately in the target text by means other than those used in the source text' (Hervey, and Higgins 1992, 35).

Another distinctive characteristic of language belonging to the dystopian Nea So Copros society is the extensive use of brand-names instead of common nouns: any other car is a 'ford', 'traffic jams' are now called 'fordjams' and parking lots are 'fordoparks'. Purebloods are equipped with their 'sony', they watch 'disneys' on their 'toshibas' or in a 'disneyrium' and they wear 'nikes' and 'rolex'. The media

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

uses ‘nikons’ and inside any hotel room clients may find ‘kodaks’ of the ‘Beloved Chairman’. Below we offer an example illustrating the rendering of such terms in the target text:

(5)	**SOURCE TEXT**	**TARGET TEXT**
	‘I passed some hours studying Pusan’s geography on the sony before showering and imbibing my Soap. I woke late, I think, after hour six. Hae-Joo returned xhausted, holding a bag of pungent *ttōkbukgi*. I made him a cup of starbuck, which he drank gratefully, then ate his breakfast’ (Cloud Atlas 355; our emphasis).	‘Am petrecut câteva ore studiind geografia Pusanului la toşibă şi abia după aceea mi-am facut şi eu duşul şi am îmbibat Siropodoza. M-am trezit târziu, aşa mi s-a părut, după ora şase. Hae-Joo s-a întors epuizat, ţinând în mână o pungă de *ttokbukgi* înţepător. I-am făcut o ceaşcă de nes, pe care a băut-o plin de recunoştinţă, apoi şi-a luat micul dejun’ (Atlasul Norilor 423).

The translator’s choice of brand-for-brand replacements (‘sony’ with ‘toşibă’; ‘starbuck’ with ‘nes’) is not a felicitous one since they are unnecessary in the context of Romanian social, cultural and technological development: the modern reader of *Cloud Atlas* has certainly tasted or heard of Starbucks coffee, knows there is no major difference between a laptop (tablet or TV) manufactured by Sony or Toshiba, therefore the Mitchell’s terms should remain as they are in the original text, since they are significant parts for the general understanding of the text. For the particular blend of words such as ‘Siropodoza’, when used as a counterpart for ‘Soap’, there can be no similarity in terms of form, only in meaning. By not using a word-for-word translation, the Romanian translator’s equivalent stays closer to the original meaning and effect and thus minimizes some, but not all translation losses from the original text. There is a contextual side for Mitchell’s use of the term ‘Soap’ when referring to fabricants and their resources of nutrition: ‘The Six Catechisms preach cleanliness’ (*Cloud Atlas* 188), which means that the usage of the liquid or solid substance is multiple, corresponding to the novel thematic units, Cloud Atlas covering the spectrum from the low to the high of humanity. The World War II stories of Nazis making bars of soap from Jewish corpses is similar to the horrific image Sonmi witnesses, while boarding The Golden Ark of Papa Song. This is by no means a road to ‘Xultation’, but a place where fabricants find their death, consequently being transformed into ‘Soap’ for the general use: nourishment for clones and a powerful drug for the purebloods (e.g. Boon-Sook Kim). Another aspect for considering the translation of ‘Soap’ as ‘Săpun’ is information taken from the current medical background, about humans suffering from a condition called *Pica*. This disease is characterized by an appetite for largely non-nutritive substances, including soap, dirt, chalk, charcoal, and mothballs and there are known to be different variations of Pica, as it can result from a cultural tradition, an

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

acquired taste or a neurological mechanism such as iron deficiency, or chemical imbalance. Therefore, the choice for 'Săpun' is even more obvious in terms of avoiding translation loss, as the English and Romanian background expresses the idea of abusing something which is unhealthy, made from uncertain resources and which can also cause an addiction, two themes most predominant in *Cloud Atlas*.

In terms of freedom vs. fidelity when regarding this particular narrative, the translator finds himself inside an utterly demanding chapter, his mission becoming even more crucial, as he must resort to any lexical inventiveness in order to be able to render into another language these types of deviations from standard and nonstandard present-day usage in writing and speech. Humanity being thrown back in the Iron Age after the outburst of a nuclear bomb, its language also acquires a de-familiarizing peculiarity, reflecting the new environment, the bomb appears to have liberated language from the grammatical chains that used to suppress it: the new language is powerfully alive and appears to have come back to its 'vital' state. The linguistic material is almost worn-out, there are letters that have completely vanished, being substituted by apostrophes which are in such manner used by David Mitchell, that he is creating new and unfamiliar linguistic entities:

(6)	**SOURCE TEXT**	**TARGET TEXT**
	When I was a schooler I was 'fraid of that tick-tockin' spider watchin'n'judgin' us (Cloud Atlas 257)	*Cân' ieream io dă vârsta şcolării, mă temeam dă rotundu-acela mare dă să mişca ş'ticăia-ntruna, că'ceam că să uită la noi ş'ne judecă"* (Atlasul Norilor 306)

When being confronted with such types of word formation, in either English or Romanian, the reader feels an impulse to pause, as the apostrophes sharply cut the rhythm of the narrative. At the same time there are sounds that sometimes come so close to one another that they appear to merge into a single utterance, albeit an almost unreadable one; many times the narrative can leave you short of breath, the stored signifiers linked by '*n"* hastening the rhythm as if the speaker is always on the run: '*Outside Bony Shore was rattlin'n'clackin' an' breakers was churnin'n'boilin' an' a whippoor-will I heard*' (*Cloud Atlas,* 256).

3. Conclusions

This paper approached a number of essential issues concerning translation theory, while trying to apply them to the source text under analysis. We have commented upon the main processes involved in translation, namely analysing the original text, transferring the message and restructuring it in the target language at an adequate level for the audience, by using Lawrence Venuti and Eugene Nida's studies on

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)

fidelity vs. freedom in translation and on the matter of translator's invisibility (in terms of transparency, fluency and authorship, delimiting the translator's role from this perspective). Following the principle of linguistic untranslatability and equivalent effect, identifying the various forms of equivalence, we concluded that, in most cases, the subjectivity of this principle contradicts the methodical and scientific level of translation. Another issue presented in this paper was that of loss and gain, according to Bassnet's *Translation Studies,* and the matter of how language can shift form one genre to another, inside only one narrative.

References

Bassnett, Susan. 2002. *Translation Studies* (3rd edition). London; New York: Routledge.

Hervey, Sándor, and Ian Higgins. 1992. *Thinking Translation. A Course in Translation Method: French-English*. London and New York: Routledge.

Mitchell, David. 2012. *Cloud Atlas*. Sceptre. Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.

Mitchell, David. 2008. *Atlasul Norilor* (translated by Mihnea Gafiţa). Bucharest: Editura Humanitas.

Nabokov, Vladimir. 1941. *The Art of Translation*. 1941. Available at: http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/the-art-translation. Accessed on August 2015.

Nida, Eugene A. 1969. "Science of Translation". *Language* 45(3): 483-498.

Venuti, Lawrence. 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.

Venuti, Lawrence. 2002. *The Translation Studies Reader.* London: Routledge.

BDD-A22792 © 2015 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:09:03 UTC)