Retranslation as a Necessity for the 21st Century Reader. *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats – T. S. Eliot*

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Keywords: *retranslation hypothesis*; *21st century retranslation*; *21st century reading trends*; *T.S. Eliot*; *Romanian translation*

1. Introduction

The problem of retranslation becomes an extremely interesting subject of discussion for translators when the cultural context changes (together with the individual emotional context that we all hold around ourselves). Culture can be defined as being a part of multiple social dimensions. For example, Burnett Tylor defines it as "the most complex whole" that includes knowledge, beliefs, laws, rules, traditions and any habits and capabilities that man has as a member of a society (Tylor 1871: 1). Here, the frame of reference is considerable. On the one hand, Burnett's definition has a classic and traditional foundation. On the other hand, contemporary times demand that we embrace the semiotic concept of culture that Geertz presents. According to him, man is an animal suspended in these "webs of significance", woven by individuals themselves, and these webs constitute one's culture (Geertz 2014: 14). Naturally, there is also a psychological dimension of culture, that can bring us the following definition: culture consists of psychological structures that help the individual fashion his behaviour (Goodenough 1961: 522, 1999). For us to discuss retranslation in the 21st century, I do not believe that only one definition will suffice. Could we immobilize the concept of culture in a single paragraph that describes its component or its functions? Culture is such a complex realm and, when it comes to the individual level, so personal, that we would have to take into account all the definitions laid out so far. There is however one certainty: change is a phenomenon that will happen no matter how we choose to define culture. Causes that lead to cultural changes are numerous, and this paper's aim is not to find and define them, but to uncover the reasons for which the idea of retranslation should be adopted and accepted by the translators and readers communities, even if there might be some arguments that would make us believe otherwise–such as: in the Western world, the marketing charm of a retranslation could be seen as having a strictly consumerist value (Paloposki and Koskinen 2010);

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in Turkey, early republican readers believed that retranslation is a waste of labour and time (Koçak and Yağcı 2019).

2. Facets of retranslation

The retranslation hypothesis (Berman 1990: 1–7) shows us that translation is an incomplete act which can only evolve by being retranslated in the future. Because the source-text is immortal, only the translation can age and must be replaced with a fresh one. The value of the source-text cannot however be argued against. It does exist and it will always do. What we can do is change the translation, the interpretation of the translator, who is influenced by numerous factors, such as personal opinions and social, historical, cultural contexts. Another angle we can look at this is the following: retranslation is an improved version of the translation on which the former is built (Robinson 1999: 1). Although retranslations have been labelled as "a waste" (Almberg 1995: 926), they strengthen the *liaison* between the reader and the contemporary use of language, for the larger audience will appreciate more a retranslation which aims to respect the standard language in a certain time frame. Even if there exists the argument of the first translation as a valuable resource, nothing will hinder us from appreciating them both, each for its own substance.

Retranslation is built upon two fundamental elements: failure and *kairos*[1]. This said failure refers to the impossibility to reach the perfect, complete, and final translation. The translator knows that the translation is never a finite product and that, *au contraire*, it finds itself in a continuous shift, just as language. Here is the failure, double-natured: on the one hand, it represents the translator's incapacity to translate a text, and on the other hand, it is the act of resisting the perfect translation. And only then does retranslation end the failure. But *kairos* too dictates the birth of a new translation because it signifies the auspicious moment for a retranslation to appear. This moment (when the retranslation is expected to appear) is marked by a tear in the opposition to "the great retranslation" (Berman 1990: 5–6). However, does this not mean that translation is caught in a vicious circle? If a retranslation becomes the translation of reference itself (the translation that needs to be rejuvenated, that which is believed to be incomplete), do we not then have a chain of translations-retranslations-translations? Somehow, the two elements involved in this process (translation and retranslation) are interchangeable and they can become, at any moment, the other. Perhaps this is, in the end, an advantageous chain, for it enriches contemporary culture, it enlarges the palette of translations, which gives the reader the freedom to choose.

We can also look at retranslation from the angle of its *rapprochement* to the source-text. Could we state that the retranslation is valuable only when it is characterized by a diminution of the original's significance so it can appeal to the target readership (Robinson 1999: 1)? What dictates this *rapprochement* (between the translated text and the source text), taking into consideration that language is a living 'organism', changing permanently, similar to the translator and the reader. As Montaigne wrote in his "Essays" in 1580, "I now, and I anon, are two several

[1] In Greek, *kairos* means qualitative time. It is the opposite of *chronos*, which means quantitative, sequential time.

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persons". The translator must ask himself: "What do I make of this text?" (Gambier 1994: 415) and, following this path of subjectivity, create the translation. So, there is the presumption that translations are different, way before we can write a literary or linguistic analysis of the translated text, for translation is done by a human being, subjected to change.

To conclude this section, we can agree that a retranslation can be done with the purpose of helping the language in the source-text adapt better to the language in the target-text, just as it is in the case of Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, whose two recent retranslations into Romanian I will discuss in the following section.

3. Short translation analysis

I will compare the two retranslations of the first poem in Eliot's poetry book, "The Naming of Cats". I will also present a study conducted with the help of 50 of my students. My short analysis and the study are meant to prove that the 2015 retranslation (compared to the 2009 retranslation) is more successful due to its method of cultural transplantation. The translator of the former discusses his choices in the preface to the book, stating that he struggled for a long time to find some sort of equivalence to the cultural elements in Eliot's poems, because English culture and Romanian culture are quite different when it comes to (he exemplifies) train stations. In the end, he made the entire translation in one year and he chose not to translate, but to make a transplant of the cultural elements of the ST into the culture of the TT[2] (Bican 2015: 9). So, he completes a 'transplant-translation', arguing for it with the help of Schleiermacher's advice: "'Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him" (Schleiermacher 1977: 74). These two translation paths are also discussed by Newmark (1988) in terms of semantic translation and communicative translation. The former takes into account the semantic value of the ST and compromises the meaning when the translator considers it necessary (at the same time, respecting the author's central position), and the latter takes into consideration the naturalness of the TT language, to offer the public a final product easy to 'digest'. It appears that Bican managed to find the middle path between the two, although he states that the focal point of his retranslation is the contemporary reader (Bican 2015: 11). Nevertheless, the author watches from somewhere in the background, like a resolute supervisor of the 'transplant'.

There are visible differences between the two retranslations, that can fall into two categories: (1) the translation of names, and (2) the translations of idioms, popular sayings and cultural expressions. It is interesting to follow the way in which T1 flows as closely to the text as possible, even if that sometimes means compromising the naturalness of the Romanian language. For example:

[2] I will use ST for 'source-text', TT for 'target-text', T1 for the 2009 translation, T2 for the 2015 translation, and BTBT for 'back-to-back translation', which is meant to offer the English reader who does not know Romanian a *mot-à-mot* translation into English.

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TS: All of them sensible everyday names.
T1: Toți și-ar dori − de purtat − așa nume. (BTBT: All would want to wear such names).
T2: Nume pentru toată ziua, practice și fără fițe. (BTBT: Names for all day, practical and without fuss).

It is clear that the meaning in T2 differs greatly from the meaning in T1. However, the style is what makes T2 more impactful: the word 'fițe' (BTBT: airs and graces) is a colloquialism, not usually used in literary and poetic contexts. The nuance of the word 'sensible' does not intersect with the humorous use of 'fițe'. However, as you will notice in the study in the following section, such familiar forms and colloquialisms are more appreciated by students. The possible reasons for this are discussed in the final section. Here is another example of cultural transplantation, this time regarding the names of the cats:

TS: First of all, there's the name that the family use daily, / Such as Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James, / Such as Victor or Jonathan, George or Bill Bailey.
T1: Primul, pentru uzul familiei, potrivit rânduielii, / Precum Peter, Augustus, Alonzo sau cum e / Victor sau Jonathan, George sau Bill Bailey. (BTBT: The first, for the use of the family, according to custom, / Like Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or how is / Victor or Jonathan, George or Bill Bailey).
T2: Mai întâi are un nume pentru uz cotidian, / Ca s-o strige toți ai casei: Mițo, Mișule, Tomițe, / Aurele, Geto, Fane, Bombonico, Marian. (BTBT: First has a name for use quotidian / To be called by all of house: Mițo, Mișule, Tomițe,/ Aurele, Geto, Fane, Bombonico, Marian).

It is obvious that T1 and T2 treat the translation of names differently. We already know that Bican did not translate, but transported the English cats in Romania, where they became one with popular culture. In Romania, names such as Mița, Mișu, Tomiță, Aurel and Geta are well-known for their traditional value. Peter, Augustus, Jonathan and Bill Bailey mean nothing for the Romanian reader. If we assume that the reader can be 'split' into two layers, we could say that the first layer that reads the text is the Romanian one. We cannot have a foreign culture standing on empty ground, so we build it on top of the already existing mother/root culture. So, this is the first encounter with the text (we can call it 'the emotional layer'). Next, the second layer meets the translation (we can call it 'the intellectual layer'), which consists of the foreign culture (here, the English culture), built on top of the "root" culture. Only now does the reader realise what those names mean in English, but first they have to pass through the emotional layer, which is usually stronger and more complex than the intellectual one. This is why I believe that the second translation appeals to all types of Romanian readers, even to those whose English intellectual layer is not as developed as it is for those who study and interact with the language on a daily basis. T2 also has the tendency of using slang or informal language:

TS: But above and beyond there's still one name left over.
T1: Dar peste toate-i un nume lăsat la urmă abia. (BTBT: But over all is a name left behind just).
T2: Da' pisica mai are un nume-n dotare. (BTBT: But the cat still has a name in endowment).

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TS: And that is the name that you never will guess.
T1: Iar numele acesta în veci nu-l veți ghici. (BTBT: And the name this in ages not it you will guess).
T2: Și nu i-l ghicești nici în ghioc, nici în cărți. (BTBT: And not it you guess neither in shells, nor in cards).

The two examples above show us that T2 uses slang. Idioms such as 'a avea ceva în dotare' (to have something, to possess something), and 'a da în ghioc' and 'a da în cărți' (guessing somebody's future using shells or cards) are well-known collocations in Romanian, especially in the rural area. They are meant to have a comedic effect, not just in translation, but also in conversation. Here, T1 stays as close to the text as possible, using neutral phrases, such as 'a lăsa la urmă' (to leave something for last) and 'a nu ghici ceva în veci' (to not be able to guess something). They do not have any humoristic effect on the reader, but they respect the ST and for that we can consider T1 as being rather traditional in comparison to T2.

However, the two translations intersect when it comes to the gender of the cat. In the ST we have clues that the cat is a male: 'the cat himself', 'his name', 'his mind', 'his tail', 'his whiskers'. The two translators (T1 and T2) seem to be convinced that the cat is female (a strong reason for this is that the noun 'cat' is feminine in Romanian, 'pisică'). In T1 we find, besides the use of the word 'pisică': 'adâncită-n meditație' (BTBT: deepened in meditation), and in T2 we find 'prăvălită-n visare' (BTBT: fallen in dreaming); the affix *-ă* tells us that we have a feminine adjective of a feminine noun. So, this seems to be where the two retranslations meet, but this meeting is not decided by their style or their choice of words, but only by the nature of the Romanian language. Moreover, T2 intentionally uses grammatical mistakes, such as: 'Nume care le poartă decât un pisic' (BTBT: Names that them wear only a cat). The correct grammatical form would be 'pe care' (instead of 'care') and 'doar' (instead of 'decât', which is a negative polarity item). Another example is 'Cum crede unii oameni' (BTBT: How believe some people), where the verb 'a crede' (to believe) has the third person singular form, instead of the third person plural (because 'oameni' is the plural form of the singular 'om'). Bican himself explains his choices in the foreword to Eliot's poetry book: "I had to adjust the style so that the counterpart of the original cats can achieve a local aura"[3] (Bican 2015: 11). In this case, is the 2015 translation received better than the 2009 translation? The survey below will answer this question.

4. Survey

I asked 50 students[4] to read the original poem ("The Naming of Cats", part of *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*) and the two retranslations, and to answer a few questions in relation to their reading habits and their opinion on the two poems. Of the 50 students, 49 are between 18 and 24 years old, and one is between 25 and 34 years old.

[3] Translated from Romanian into English by C. Botîlcă.
[4] The initial survey was conducted with the help of 41 students. The results I have now do not differ greatly in terms of preference for the 2015 translation.

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To find out more about their poetry reading habits in both languages, I asked them how often they read poetry in English and in Romanian. 78% answered that they read English poetry "very often" and "often", and 86% answered that they read Romanian poetry "extremely often", "very often" and "often". One student confessed to never reading poetry in Romanian. Their answers could motivate the conclusions of this survey because the final percentages (showing their reading habits) are high, although not surprising at all, considering that they all study philology at the university, so expecting poetry to be part of their reading list is justified.

	extremely often		very often		often		rarely		never	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
How often do you read poetry in English?	0	0	26	13	52	26	22	11	0	0
How often do you read poetry in Romanian?	2	1	36	18	48	24	12	6	2	1

The following questions referred to their opinions on the two retranslations. 90% answered that they liked the 2009 translation (30% – "neither like nor dislike", 56% – "somewhat like", and 4% – "very much like"). One student said he/she did not like it at all, and four students said they did not like it very much. For the 2015 translation, 94% answered that they liked it (26% chose "neither like not dislike", 38% chose "somewhat like", and 30% chose "very much like"). Only one student said he/she did not like it at all, and two students answered they did not like it very much. The results say that T2 was received better than T1 in terms of readers' pleasure.

	very much		somewhat		neither like nor dislike		not very much		not at all	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no
How much did you like the 2009 version?	4	2	56	28	30	15	8	4	2	1
How much did you like the 2015 version?	30	15	38	19	26	13	4	2	2	1

To find out their future interest in these translations, I also asked them which one of the two books they would be more interested in reading. Of the 50 students, 10 answered that they are interested in both versions. However, the final results show us that 76% want to read the rest of the 2015 retranslation (the rest of the poems in the book), while 42% answered they would be interested in the second one. But why did they make these choices? What was their reasoning? I asked them

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what they liked and what they disliked about the two retranslations. The general answers about the 2009 translation were centred on: (1) like: the elegance, the accuracy, and the coherence of the translation; (2) dislike: the lack of Romanian collocations, of a personal touch, and the sombreness of the translation. For the 2015 translation, the answer revolved around: (1) like: the modern approach and the humour; (2) dislike: the archaic language, and that it strayed from the original.

Their answers refer to two elements: (1) language, which creates (2) style. It appears that Bican's effort is appreciated by young readers of the 21st century. Most of the students want to read the rest of the book, which shows their interest and their pleasure in reading the style of the translator.

5. Contemporary tendencies

Eliot's poetry is, nevertheless, challenging. To attract more readers in these modern times, publishing houses such as Faber & Faber and Touch Press launched mobile and iPad apps so that young people can communicate and interact with the poem "The Waste Land". The iPad app aims to bring back to life 20th century poetry by familiarizing the reader with the said poem, with new interpretations and adaptations, and with an interactive interface (Kelly 2001: np). These apps show us that the past can be brought into the present via new and innovative technologies. Why could we not do the same for retranslation?

Old Possum's Book for Practical Cats contains poems initially written for children (for the author's godchildren) inspired by Eliot's passion for Sherlock Holmes, and by his admiration for Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll–however, words such as 'ineffable' or 'inscrutable' might open a different conversation. The poetry book itself was a source of inspiration for Alan Rawsthorne, who staged six of Eliot's poems in 1954, and for the famous adaptation made by Lloyd Webber in 1981 (Sutherland 2016: np). So, it is natural that the reader should have certain expectations from a poetry book meant for children, expectations such as: (1) the voice/tone, which should be maternal or playful, (2) the style, which should provide clarity with the help of phrases that sound natural in the TL, (3) the content, which should either be a lesson or an amusement to the reader. The retranslations of Eliot's poems at the beginning of the 21st century should meet these expectations.

And yet there is the question: is the fact that we are going toward a flexible translation the result of a general reading trend? Kate Nash Literary Agency conducted a study with regards to people's reading choices according to what they see on the book cover. Nash found that in 2019 people were more attracted to mysterious covers, with dark graphic elements that spark interest. In 2020, Nash found that people were more interested in light colours and graphic elements that bring them peace, comfort, and laughter (Evans 2020: np). Could it be that this preference was 'transplanted' into the written text, especially that the current pandemic considerably changes our emotional layer? Perhaps our reading choices are made according to our emotional desires and needs. Nash's study shows us that preferences differ from one social and cultural context to the other, and now, in 2020, these are blurry and uncertain.

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Moreover, the format of our reading material changed. Not only is it slowly being replaced by digital devices such as eReaders and audiobooks, but nowadays quarantine does not allow us to move freely from one library to another and borrow the books we want, so we choose to read them electronically. This is the stepping-stone of the 21st century, I believe: the fact that the physical environment shapes our reading habits (Roberts and Foehr 2004: 112); and what is this this physical environment if not our own homes? This is completed–on top of the normal generational gap–by a generational abyss that seems to replace it. Youth movements constructed around *positivity* (death-positivity, body-positivity, acne-positivity) are all signs of a steady metaphorical revolution that seeps into all cultural cracks, including translation. I am not saying that 'translation-positivity' can become a trend, but it is certainly one of the domains where radical change could happen and *is* already happening. Why could we not also accept modern translations when we find that they spark the interest of the young generation (Blackberry and Ng 2017:196)? Today's tendencies are shifting, and translators, writers, and teachers alike have to take into account the modern reader because he/she is the one who establishes the value of the text.

6. Conclusions

The conclusion is that, regardless of how we define culture and translation, they are both characterised by a certain fluidity that cannot be stopped. They change due to so many factors: external (cultural, social, literary shifts) and internal (personal preferences), and the public also changes and adapts to what surrounds it. It appears to be a vicious circle, where reader/translation change each other and affect each other. But this does not mean that the tension between the old and the new has to be seen as a threat to the modern man, because they can coexist without bothering a certain type of readership that has different tastes.

We are not forced to read something that does not give us a sense of pleasure, something that makes us feel nothing, because we first welcome the text with our emotional layer, and only after that with the intellectual one. This is why the 2015 retranslation of Eliot's poem was better received by young readers. So, retranslation is not only necessary, but also welcomed by the public. The translator has to know what public segment the translation is for, and also what retranslations are already on the market. Nonetheless, a retranslation like Bican's will definitely spark a greater interest for such texts.

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Abstract

Retranslation has been thoroughly analysed in the past century, in terms of completion (Berman 1990), improvement (Robinson 1999), and personal understanding (Gambier 1994), especially in a social context undergoing major cultural changes. While it is somewhat difficult to define culture (Geertz 2014, Goodenough 1961 and 1999, Tylor 1871), we can try to outline the contemporary need for retranslation, need which stems from a change in the 2020/2021 reader's behaviour. One such example is T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. In this paper, I discuss two recent Romanian retranslations of this book, as well as their impact on a group of 50 Romanian university students whose English knowledge is at a B2-C1 level. This short study aims to provide a general layout of today's reading and retranslation landscape, starting from the premises offered by the two Romanian retranslations and by the students' preferences.

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