# ON THE CHALLENGES OF CONFUSABLES AS TRANSLATION TRAPS

It is often difficult to find the right word to express a message in our own language. So much the more difficult is it to find the right word(s) in order to render a message in another language, especially when the two languages are so different like English and Romanian. The arguments which are most often set forth are related to polysemy, synonymy and homonymy.

Besides the large number of traps in the English language into which the natives themselves may often fall, there are lots of traps in translating from English into Romanian, or viceversa. In this respect, Bryson's[1] opinion is as funny as true:

"Any language where the unassuming ... word *fly* signifies an annoying insect, a means of travel, and a critical part of a gentleman's apparel is clearly asking to be mangled".

1.1. By way of illustration, one cannot ignore the other meanings of the word fly. Thus, it may seem very interesting to consider the polysemy of fly, especially its figurative meanings in idiomatic phrases such as fly on the wheel[2] 'a person who overestimates their influence', fly on the wall[3] 'an unnoticed observer of a particular situation', or in idiomatic collocations such as a fly in the ointment[4] 'a minor irritation spoiling one's enjoyment of something' and fly in amber 'a curious relic of the past'[5].

In addition to the denotative meanings of the verb fly, its figurative meanings are also obvious in such phrases as fly a kite[6] 'try something out in order to test opinions'  $\rightarrow$  a sonda terenul, a încerca să vadă de unde bate vîntul[7], fly off the handle (fam).'lose one's temper unexpectedly'  $\rightarrow$  a-şi ieşi din sărite/ pepeni/ ţâţâni; a-i sări muştarul/ bâzdâcul/ ṭandăra; a se aprinde brusc; a i se sui piperul la nas[8], fly the nest (fam) 'leave one's parents in order to live on one's own'  $\rightarrow$  a-şi lua zborul, a se descurca singur, a trăi pe cont propriu, fly the pit (humourous) 'to move unexpectedly without paying the rent'  $\rightarrow$  a o şterge, a zbura din colivie[9].

Such expressions are used in both common core English and in functional languages: e.g. a fly-by- night peeson  $\rightarrow$  trecător, pasager; (ec.) insolvabil[10], fly the eagle (pol. Am. E)  $\rightarrow$  a ține un discurs bombastic propăvăduind idei expansioniste[11]. Special attention has to be devoted to words such as flyweight (box)  $\rightarrow$  categoria muscă, and flywheel  $\rightarrow$  volant, which are not collocations but one-word compounds[12].

However, in spite of its polysemy, the word **fly** is not included in dictionaries of troublesome words and phrases. It is worth mentioning, though, as an example of polysemy.

Moreover, I would consider it troublesome in the collocational idiomatic patterns referred to above which may be included among confusables as translation traps.

**1.2.** Confusables cause great problems in translation, being the source of many misinterpretations and translation errors.

Sometimes the difference(s) between confusables may be explained only in terms of collocability. Their meaning becomes clear only in collocations. In this respect, an example may be the pair of confusable adjectives *distressful*, *distressing*: e.g. **distressful circumstances** (involving stress) and *distressing news* (causing stress). The same may hold valid with the pair of adjectives *disordered*, *disorderly* used with the meaning *nearanjat*/ *în dezordine* and *dezordonat*, respectively: e.g. **a disordered shelf**, **a disorderly room/crowd**. Moreover, they can be included in the category of false friends.

Furthermore, a series of confusables such as *discord, discordance, discordancy* may be translation traps[13] because the differences in their meanings are difficult to perceive, and in monolingual dictionaries each of them is explained by using the other two. Thus, it is in a

collocation such as **martial discord** that the meaning of *discord*  $\rightarrow$  dezacord is understood as lack of harmony  $\rightarrow$  lipsă de armonie. The other two words are specific to Am.E. In addition, the noun **discordance** seems to be usually employed in the singular with the meaning of general discord, i.e. difference of opinions, whereas the noun **discordancy** seems to be frequently employed with its plural form meaning controversies and involving repeatedness.

On the other hand, there are three English nouns used for the Romanian noun **întrerupere: discontinuance, discontinuation, discontinuity.** The first is used with the meaning cessation (întrerupere, încetare): e.g. **business discontinuance.** The second and the third are used in American English. The noun **discontinuation** is related to a breach in one's activity: e.g. **discontinuation of work,** whereas **discontinuity** refers to some gap or break in something (surface): e.g. **major discontinuities** on the surface of the moon[14].

**2.** There are a lot of pairs and groups of words which are easily confused both by natives and by translators because their forms are misleading.

These **confusion-generating forms** may be considered at the phonological level, on the one hand, and at the morphological level, on the other.

**2.1. Phonologically** speaking, there are a lot of words which can be confused because they are 'soundalikes', i.e. homophones:

e.g. brake, break | breik |, breach, breech | britt |, broach, brooch | 'brout |, canvas, canvass | 'kænvos |, cask, casque | ka:sk |, cast, caste | ka:st |, censor, censer | 'senso |, check, cheque | tjek |, chord, cord | ko:d |, council, counsel | 'kaonsol |, cruise, cruse | kru:z |, cubical, cubicle | 'kju:bikol |, curb, kerb | ko:b |, currant, current | 'karont |, curtsy, curtesy | 'ko:tsi |, dependant, dependent | di'pendont |, dollar, dolour | 'dolo |, doolie, dooly | 'du:li: |, enquiry, inquiry | In'kwalori |, faint, feint | feint |, fair, fare | feo |, faze, phase | 'feiz |, flair, flare | fleo |, flea, flee | fli: |, indict, indite | In'dait |, main, mane | 'mein |, maize, maze | meiz |, pail, pale | peil |, pendant, pendent | 'pendont |, pray, prey | prei |, rack, wrack | ræk |, reign, rein | rein |, review, revue | ri'vjo: |, stake, steak | steik |, tail, tale | teil |, vale, veil | veil |, veracious, voracious | vo'rei | os |.

At the phonological level, other pairs of words show **vowel alternation**, **vowel-diphthong alternation**, or **consonant alternation**.

## 2.1.2. Vowel alternation

e.g. amend |ə'mend |, emend | r'mend |, balk |bɔ:lk |, bulk |bʌlk |, billow |'bləo |, bellow |'beləo |, breath |bre6 |, breathe |brið |, collision |kə'lidʒən |, collusion |kə'lu:ʒən |, confidant |'kɔnfidænt |, confident |'kɔnfidənt |, crud | krʌd |, crude |kru:d |, deference |'defərəns |, difference |'difrəns |, desert |'dezət |, dessert |di'zə:t |, don |dɔn |, done |dʌn |, dram |dræm |, drum |drʌm |, expanse |Ik'spæns |, expense |Ik'spens |, fallow |'fæləo |, fellow |'feləo |, feast |fist |, fist |fist |, flutter |'flʌtə |, flatter |'flætə |, mash |mæʃ |, mesh |meʃ |, master |'mæ: stə |, muster |'mʌstə |, meal |mɪ:l |, mill |mɪl |, moral |'mɔrəl |, morale |mə'ra:l |, mute |mjo:t |, mutt |mʌt |, paddle |'pædl |, peddle |'pedl |, parish |'pæri |, perish |'perif |, reward |rɪ'wɔ:d |, reword |rɪ'wə: d |, slather |'slætə |, slaughter |'slɔ:tə |, snooty |'snu:ti |, snotty |'snɔti |, splatter |'splætə |, splutter |'splʌtə |, staff |sta:f |, stuff |stʌf |, warring |'wɔ:rɪŋ |, worrying |'wʌrɪŋ |, warrior |'wɔ:riə |, worrier |'wʌriə |.

### 2.1.3. Vowel-diphthong alternation

e.g. bath |ba:0|, bathe |beio|, blithering |'bliorin|, blithsome |'blaiosom|, boast |boost|, boost |bu:st|, but |bat|, butt |bat|, butte |bju:t|, chordal |'kɔ:dəl|, cordial |'kɔ:dəl|, compromis |'kɔmprə,mi:|, compromise |'kɔmprə,maiz|, diva |di:və|, dive |daiv|, dobby |'dɔbi|, dobie

|'dəobi: |, dom |dəm |, dome |dəom |, dun |dʌn |, dune |'dju:n |, draught |dra:ft |, drought |draut |, flake |fleik |, flak, flack |flæk |, inhuman |In'hjo:mən |, inhumane |In'hjo:mein |, mod |mɔd |, mode |'məud |, nap |'næp |, nape |neip |, navvy |'nævi |, navy |'neivi |, slop |sləp |, slope |sləup |.

# 2.1.4. Diphthong -vowel alternation

e.g. abate |ə'beit|, abet |ə'bet|, canary |'kə'nɛəri|, cannery |'kænəri|, caper |'keɪpə|, capper |'kæpə|, chafe |tʃeɪf|, chaff |tʃeɪf| |tʃeɪf|, dose |dəʊs|, doss |dɔs|, dray |dreɪ|, dry |draɪ|, dree |dri:|, stable |'steɪbəl|, stubble |'stʌbəl|

#### 2.1.5. Diphthong alternation

e.g. compeer |'kɔm'pɪə|, compere |'kɔmpɛə|

#### 2.1.6. Consonant alternation

e.g. bath |bq:0|, bathe |beið|, blighter |'blaið|, blither |'blaið|, breath |bre0|, breathe |brið|, canal |kə'næl|, channel |'t|ænəl|, censor |'sensə|, censure |'senʃə|, concede |kən'si:d|, conceit |kən'si:t|, deadly |'dedli|, deathly |'de0li|, delude |di'lu:d|, deluge |'delju:d3|, descend |di'send|, descent |di'sent|, device |di'vais|, devise |di'vaiz|, divers |'daivəz|, diverse |dai'və:s|, dither |'di0ə|, ditcher |'ditʃə|, douse, dowse |dəvs|, doze |dəvz|, errand |'erənd|, errant |'erənt|, relief |ri'li:f|, relieve |ri'li:v|

#### 2.1.7. Consonant addition

e.g. bellow |'beləv |, bellows |'beləvz |, clam |klæm |, clamp |klæmp |, chum |tʃʌm |, chump |tʃʌmp |, sand |sænd |, sands |sændz |

Mention should be made that vowel or consonant alternation may be combined with **shift of stress:** 

e.g. canal |kə'næl |, channel |'tʃænəl |, divers |'daɪvəz |, diverse |daɪ'və:s |, desert |'dezət |, dessert |dɪ'zə:t |

**2.2.** At the **morphological** level, a large number of pairs or groups of troublesome words are real traps in translation.

# 2.2.1. N-N pairs

admission, admittance advance, advancement apposition, opposition ascent, assent assent, consent, assurance, insurance barbarism, barbarity base, basis bondman, bondsman boor, bore brake, break breach, breech camouflage, camouflet canal, channel canary, cannery canteen, cantina

cantle, cantling
capa, cape
carton, cartoon
catch-up, catchup
cessation, cession
chord, cord
chum, chump
colleger, collegian
collision, collusion
commandment,
commendation
commissar, commissary
commissionaire,
commissioner

commutator, commuter compeer, compere

complexion, complexity composer, compositor composite, compound conscience, consciousness consummation, consumption contention, contentment council, counsel curb, kerb curricle, curriculum data, dates defendant, defender deference, difference deliverance, delivery deportation, deportment disparagement, disparity dispensation, dispense

diplomat, diplomate disposal, disposition ditcher, dither dobby, dobie doolie, dooly draft, draught drop-off, drop-out emergence, emergency emigrant, immigrant enormity, enormousness enquiry, inquiry expanse, expense expectancy, expectation failing, failure fish, fishes garb, garbage genius, genus groove, grove informant, informer installation, installment intent, intention

#### 2.2.2. N- N- N groups

cask, casque, casket censor, censure, censer chatelaine, cahteline, chat (up) line chink, Chink, Chinkie courtesy, curtesy, curtsy desert, deserts, dessert discord, discordance, discordancy

2.2.3. Adj. - Adj. pairs alternate, alternative amateurish, amatory apposition, opposition arbitral, arbitrary ashen, ashy auspicial, auspicious balky, bulky blithering, blithesome bored, boring candent, candescent candid, candied capacious, capacitive carefree, careless childish, childlike chordal, chordial classic, classical comic, comical commanding, commendable commutable, commutative comprehensible, comprehensive compulsive, compulsory

congruent, congruous conscious, conscientious consequent, consequential contemptible, contemptuous credible, creditable critic, critical damn, damned deadly, deathly decorative, decorous deductible, deductive defective, deficient defensible, defensive deferrable, deferred definite, definitive degraded, degrading dejected, disjected delighted, delightful denominational, denominative derisive, derisory desirable, desirous digestible, digestive disappointed, disappointing disordered, disorderly disposable, disposed disrespectable, disrespectful dissentient, dissentious dissociable, dissocial distinct, distinctive divers, diverse elemental, elementary emotional, emotive enviable, envious envious, invidious exhausting, exhaustive expedient, expeditious extant, extent fearful, fearsome fiddling, fiddly fierce, fiery fitful, fitted fixated, fixed flagged, flagging forced, forceful forgivable, forgiving gold, golden graceful, gracious grieved, grievous human, humane immanent, imminent impious, impish impractical, impracticable incredible, incredulous indigenous, indigent indistinct, indistinguishable

confused, confusing

ingenious, ingenuous inhuman, inhumane insensible, insensitive intent, intentional laden, loaded leisured, leisurely manly, manish masterful, masterly righteous, rightful seasonable, seasonal sensible, sensitive special, specious unreasonable, unreasoning vacant, vacuous varied, various vindicative, vindictive

# **2.2.4.** Adj. - Adj. - Adj. groups

allusive, elusive, illusive amenable, amiable, amicable barbarian, barbaric, barbarous benefic, beneficent, beneficial civic, civil, civilian congeneric, congenial, congenital continual, continuative, continuous decretal, decretive, decretory depressed, depressing, depressive diffuse, diffusible, diffusive distressed, distressful, distressing effective, effectual, efficient entranced, entrancing, entrenched enviable, envious, invidious explanatory, explicable, expletive fatal, fated, fateful ineffective, ineffectual, inefficient

## 2.2.5. N - Adj. pairs

blight, blithe chilli, chilly cleric, clerical clinic, clinical commode, commodious confidant, confident crud, crude currant, current dependant, dependent dinghy, dingy dope, dopey errand, errant

2.2.6. V - V pairs

adjudge, adjudicate afflict, inflict alleviate, elevate allude, elude appose, oppose attach, attack avoid, evade avouch, vouch boost, boast charted, chartered command, commend decompose, discompose decry, descry deduce, deduct detract, distract disable, disenable distrust, mistrust elapse, lapse enjoin, join endanger, engender implicate, imply induce, induct merge, emerge

fasten on, fasten onto follow up, follow up with fix up, fix up with get down, get down to give over, give over to give up, give up on, give up

go through, go through with

mess around, mess around with, mess with muck about, muck up

approve, approve of become, become of believe, believe in

2.2.7. N -V pairs

advice, advise bath, bathe blighter, blither breath, breathe clam, clamp cloth, clothe cold pack, cold-pack device, devise dispensation, dispense disproof, disprove

#### **2.2.8.** The pairs of groups which are less frequent are the following:

- \* Adj.- N:Cambrian, Cambric; directional, directory; duff, duffer; fair, fare; fallow, fellow;
- V- Adj.: decouple, decuple; collide, collied; disparage, disparate; leer, leery; drowse, drowsy;
- ❖ V N: applaud, applause; avenge, revenge; broach, brooch; caper, capper; chafe, chaff; commandeer, commander; concede, conceit; cruise, cruse; descend, descent; keep away, keepaway;
- Adj. Adj. Adj. Adj. groups: lone, lonely, lonesome, alone;
- ❖ N N Adj.: adherend, adherent, adhesive;
- ❖ N N N- Adj Adj.: dud, dude, duds, duddy, duddish;
- ❖ N Adj. N: diagnosis, diagnostic, diagnostics;
- N Adj. Adj.: descendant, descendent, descendible; maniac, maniacal, manic; dough, doughty, doughy;
- ❖ N Adj.- N- N: desert, deserted, deserts, dessert;
- ❖ Adj.-N- Adj: cameral, cameralist, cameralistic; disputable, disputant, disputations;
- \* Adj. Adj. N: civic, civil, civilian;
- ❖ Adj. V-en: complected, completed; drab, drub;
- \* Adj. V Adj. Adj.:dilatate, dilate, dilative, dilatory;
- \* Adj. N- V: agape, gap, gape;
- \* Adj. V- N Adj: loath, loathe, loathing, loathsome;
- ❖ N V- Adj. Adj.: dot, dote, doting, dotty;
- ❖ Adj.- N- Ádj- Adj.: dull, dullard, dullish, duly;
- ❖ Vt Vi/ Vi Vt: avouch, vouch; decompose, discompose;
- ❖ N V- N: commandant, commandeer, commander;
- V-V-V: assure, ensure, imsure;
- \* V-V-V-V: raise, rise, rouse, arise, arouse;
- ❖ V-N-N: ascend, ascent, asssent;
- ❖ V-N-Adj. -N: dodge, dodger, dodgy, doge;
- V-Adj.- N-Adj.:dump, dumpish, dumpling, dumpy;
- Conj-N-N: but, butt, bute;
- ❖ V-V-N: billow, bellow, bellows;
- Adj.- Adv.: light, lightly; mere, merely;
- \* Adv. -Adj.: readily; ready;
- Adj.- Adv. Adv: outward, outwardly, outwards;
- Adv.- Adv.: alternately, alternatively; altogether, all together; exceedingly, excessively; especially, specially; first, firstly;
- ❖ Adv.- Adv. Adv.: at last, lastly, last of all.

- **2.2.9.** There are pairs of troublesome adjectives which may be real traps for translators, i.e. the adjectives getting the suffix **-al** or **-ic**:
  - **e.g.** clasic, classical, clinic, clinical, comic, comical, critic, critical, economic, economical, electric, electrical, ethnic, ethnical, magic, magical, tactic, tactical, topic, topical; capitalist, capitalistic, modern, modernistic, pessimist, pessimistic, sadist, sadistic.
- **2.2.10.** There are differences between past participle forms such as **certified certificated**, **packaged packed**, not to mention the basic differences between such forms as **drunk drunken**, **or sunk-sunken**. They are usually pointed out when discussing the differences between pairs or groups such as **gold-golden**, **rot-rotten**, **wood wooded wooden**, and **wool-woolen- wolly**.
- **3.** Culture specific confusables are some of the greatest translation traps. Some examples of such confusables are:

assure - ensure - insure, cafe - cafeteria, canteen - cantina, carline - car line, centenary - centennial, cheveret - chevret - chevrette, chilli- chilly, commisar - commisary, commissionaire - commissioner, commutator - commuter, comprehansible - comprehensive, council - counsel, dobby- dobie, dom-dome, doolie - dooly, dragon- dragoon.

The explanations concerning the cultural differences are given either in brackets, like the indications of grammatical status, modality, register, variety of English, or as a cultural note. For example:

**council** |**'kaonsəl** | **n.** (+ *sing*,/ *pl.* v.) 1. a group of people appointed or elected to make laws, or to take decisions: The matter was debated in the Security Council (fig.) There was a family council to decide what to do with the land: **consiliu**. 2. (*esp.* BrE) the group representing local government in a town: The council have told them to clean the streets: **consiliu local/municipal**. 3. **be on the council**: to be an elected member of it: Her husband is on the council: **a fi membru (ales)** în **consiliu**.

**Cultural note** In British English **council** is used for local government authority. It is not very common in the US, where the system of local government varies from state to state. That is why the Americans use the collocations: **city council, town council, county council.** 

**counsel** |'kaonsəl | n. 1.(law) a lawyer (in Britain a barrister) defending someone in law court: Neither of the parties were represented by counsel (= neither of them had lawyers). The judge called the defence counsel to set forth evidence: avocat. 2. (formal, or literary) advice: The president took counsel from some clever specialists: sfat. 3. to keep one's own counsel: to keep one's opinions, or intentions secret: He had been known to be a man who used to keep his own counsel: a nu-şi spune secretul, a nu-şi face cunoscute planurile, intențiile.

**comprehensible** |,k>mprI'hensəbəl | adj. (to) (formal) that can be made out: It was a short, comprehensible speech appreciated by everybody. This document is comprehensible only to specialists; care se poate înțelege, inteligibil, clar.

**comprehensive k>mprI'hensIv adj.** 1. thorough, minute: There had been comprehensive inspection of the whole factory. This article gives a comprehensive knowledge of the subject: **minuțios; cuprinzător, vast.** 2. (no comp. BrE.) (of education) teaching pupils of different abilities over the age of 11: She goes to the local comprehensive (school).

**Cultural note.** The comprehensive system, introduced in 1965, replaced the old system of grammar schools and secondary moderns, which took pupils depending on whether they had passed or failed an exam called the eleven-plus. Over 80% of British pupils attend comprehensive schools.

Children are often put in groups according to their level of ability at a comprehensive: We didn't want to send our son to a public school, we thought of the local comprehensive.

**4. To conclude**, besides the explanations referring to the differences in meaning between confusable words, a dictionary of troublesome words or confusables is very useful for giving indications about usage, pronunciation, spelling, the contextualizations being as essential as their translation because they reinforce the meaning and show how words are used in context

Last, but not least, an index of Romanian words and phrases corresponding to the English confusables is of a great help to the 'end-users'.

An ideal to touch is for such a 'beneficient' act of writing a book of *confusables as translation traps* to be 'beneficial' to the 'next-users' too.

#### NOTE

- [1] Bryson 1990: 2.
- [2] Reference is implicit to Aesop's fable of a fly sitting on the axletree of a moving charriot and saying 'See what a dust I raise' (Knowles 2006: 261).
- [3] It may also occur as a modifier, e.g. a fly-on-the-wall documentary used with reference to 'a film making technique whereby events are merely observed and presented realistically with minimum interference rather than acted out under direction (ibidem).
- [4] It was originally used with biblical allusion to Ecclesiastes 10:1, 'Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour' (ibidem).[5] Allusion is made to the amber -trapped fossilized bodies of insects. "The image was given a
- [5] Allusion is made to the amber -trapped fossilized bodies of insects. "The image was given a different slant by Michael Crichton's thriller *Jurassic Park* (1990) and the Spielberg film based on it, in which the DNA essential to the recreation of dinosaurs was retrieved from the animal's blood supposedly fossilized with the insect that had fed from it" (ibidem).
- [6] This meaning is derived from the historical sense 'raise money on credit'. Thus, the sense of testing public opinion about "one's creditworthiness gave rise to the current figurative usage". (ibidem)
- [7] Nicolescu et al. 1982: 116.
- [8] Nicolescu et al. 1982: 116.
- [9] Nicolescu et al. 1982: 116.
- [10] Leviţchi and Bantaş 1999: 342.
- [11] Nicolescu et al. 1982: 117.
- [12] Levițchi and Bantaș 1999: 343.
- [13] Croitoru 2004: 112.
- [14] Croitoru 2004: 111.

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\*\*\*Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (1992) UK: Longman Group Ltd.

#### **ABSTRACT**

What are the challenges to be faced by learners of English when translating troublesome words, collocational patterns and idiomatic phrases into Romanian? The entries included in Confusables as Translation Traps with their contextualizations and Romanian equivalents may give you a clue about this.