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Translating Cultural and Historical Coordinates in Ion Creangă's Memories of My Boyhood

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Abstract

With this paper, we shall analyze the complex and difficult process of rendering into the TL the cultural and historical elements specific to the SL especially when the text involved belongs to a classic of Romanian literature i.e. Ion Creangă, which tries to evoke the local colour by using lexical and syntactic structures from the everyday language.

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Ion Creangă, one of the most outstanding Romanian classics, is a major representative of Moldavia and his finest achievements reflect, above all, the social, historical, ethnic and temperamental features of his native region, Humulești, thus completing the cultural mosaic of a nation. Together with other famous writers such as Mihai Eminescu, I. L. Caragiale, Ioan Slavici, George Coșbuc, Mihail Sadoveanu, Lucian Blaga, he dominated the Romanian literary scene in the last decades of the 19th century.

As G. Călinescu considers, with *Memories of My Boyhood*, Creangă tries "(...) to symbolize the destiny of any child: to gladden and to sadden his parents and little by little to get the same way as all others. (...) Creangă describes the childhood of the universal child." (Călinescu, 1993: 481).

In the four parts that make up the *Memories*..., Creangă presents the evolution of a young man from his first years of life up to the very moment when he was to leave his native village. The spell of the *Memories* lies in its picture of village life, traditional customs and in its recording of Moldavian speech patterns in the 19th century. Family life, childish pranks, methods of school teaching, church festivals, carolling on festive days, country fairs, the beauty of the countryside, everything is brought back with a quiet nostalgia tempered by wisdom and humour.

Creangă's local and peasant language poses serious and diverse problems to the translator. Among the lexical issues, special mention should be made on Creangă's use of numerous terms related to rural life and system (such as

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names of tools belonging to a primitive agricultural system), to coinage, weights and measures, to church service, religious rites, superstitious or social standing.

Ana Cartianu's choice of translating Creangă's most representative literary work is indeed admirable but, at the same time, we may ask if her translation manages to fill the gap and overcome time and space boundaries between the two fundamentally different communities.

Since we are trying to establish the translator's difficulties that he has to cope with in terms of cultural and historical coordinates, it is important to point out a few aspects related to the translation process and the principles that a translator has to keep in mind.

One of the first writers who formulated a theory of translation was the French humanist Etienne Dolet. He wrote a short outline of translation principles entitled *La manière de bien traduire d'une langue en autre* ("How to Translate Well from One Language into Another") and he established five principles for the translator: the translator's full understanding of the original author's sense and meaning, his perfect knowledge of both the SL (source language) and TL (target language), the avoidance of word/word rendering as well as the use of forms of speech in common use and the appropriate choice and ordering of word so as to produce the correct tone are the five most important elements which contribute to the quality of a translated text. (E.Dolet apud Susan Bassnet, *Translation Studies*, 1991: 54). In the first study of a translation's process, published in 1791, Tytler set up three basic principles according to which "*a translation should give a complete transcript of the idea in the original work, should have all the ease of the respective original creation and the style and manner of writing should be the same character with that of the original.*" (Tytler apud Susan Bassnet, *Translation Studies*, 1991: 63).

As it may be easily observed, the difficulties with which the translator has to cope with when rendering a literary text from a SL into TL are not few. Out of the numerous and various difficulties, those in terms of cultural and historical coordinates are the ones in which the present paper will focus on.

The characters' social status comes to underline the differences normally existing between the two cultures under discussion i.e. between the English culture and the Romanian one. If the characters of the English 19th century novel belong to the classes of aristocracy and bourgeoisie, those of Creangă's writings belong to peasantry, situation which highlights the translation difficulties that Ana Cartianu had to overcome in terms of cultural coordinates.

All this is due to the fact that English, although familiar to the notion of peasantry, could not and cannot be aware of all 19th century Romanian social realities. As a consequence, the difficulties that the translator had to overcome, when rendering Creangă's *Memories of My Boyhood* from Romanian into English were mainly due to such factors as: "(...) *the lexical gaps in the TL, the different symbolic values of the objects, actions etc, in the SL and the existence of a number of specific, aesthetically motivated elements closely related to the rituals, archetypes or myths of the SL culture.*" (Kohn, 1983: 82).

Being aware of his role in the cross-cultural relationships, the translator had thus to detect all these "particular elements" in Creangă's story and then try to find the most appropriate strategy to render them in the TT (target text). Sometimes, as suggested by Levitchi, when speaking about the category of *realia*, translators may either preserve the original word and switch the code, providing them explanatory footnotes or try to give an equivalent in the TL which can also be accompanied by some footnote explanations. For instance, in Ana Cartianu's translation of Ion Creangă's *Memories of My Boyhood*, a culture specific element such as *hore* is rendered into English by *horas*, preserving the Romanian word to which the plural inflection -s is added and giving an explanatory note: "*horas = a Romanian country dance, danced in a circle*".

When it comes to such words as *Săptămâna Luminată*, *Cârneleagă sau săptămâna hârții*, *Plugușorul*, *Buhaiul*, *obiceiul de a ciocni ouă de Paști*, *Vodă*, *sarmale*, *colivă*, *găluște*, *turte cu julfă*, *vărzare*, *alivenci*, *poale-n brâu*, the translator chooses other possible variant, giving their equivalents in the TL, and then adding some further explanations:

Săptămâna Luminată = The Enlightened Week = the week before Easter;

Cârneleagă sau săptămâna hârții = the Carnival Week = the week between Christmas and Epiphany when meat is allowed even on the fast days (Wednesdays and Fridays);

A se duce cu plugușorul = to take the New Year's plough = a peasant custom which can be described as follows = a group of children goes from house to house and offers good wishes for the new year;

Buhai = a bull drum = an instrument consisting of a bottomless wooden tub, the upper aperture covered with sheepskin. A strand of horsehair passes through a hole in the middle. When pulled, it makes a noise like the roaring of a bull.

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