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Human Translator's Future in the Digital Age

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to highlight the translator's role nowadays, an era when software applications utilize artificial intelligence. Even if AI translation tools make professionals' work faster and more profitable, in most situations they cannot do completely their work. For exemplification, we use ChatGPT for translating into English three paragraphs from the Romanian fairy-tale *Tinerețe fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte* (En.: *Youth Without Old Age And Life Without Death)*. We shall notice that a computer program cannot understand a cultural context and, therefore, it cannot equate correctly certain words, idioms and sayings found in a source language. Being related to factual situations that emerged within a people's culture, they do not have a direct equivalent in a target language.

Keywords: AI translation tool, cultural cue, language vocabulary, literary translation, non-standard style,

1. Introduction

The translation process is known to be a complex one since the translator has to perceive the author's intention. If the author is anonymous, the same professional must have a comprehensive overview on a people's collective memory that favours the oral transmission of folk narratives -*i.e.* fairy-tales and legends- from person to person, from generation to generation.

Then, besides the fact that a translator should be creative to a certain extent, s/he must also have a deep understanding of the source text before beginning the translation. Only in this way the professional succeeds in filtering the source text through the language and culture of the target text. For this reason, in case of literary texts, a translation made with the help of a computer program -that makes use of artificial intelligence- has nothing in common with literary creation and literary translation process based on the translator's reconstructive imagination.

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In the last decades we have seen how computing systems evolved due to the significant improvements made in software. However, as well as humans who learn from information, these computer programs have to be trained to learn from information. Thus, they will gradually become more efficient and use better the information stored in memory systems. In other words, new ”breakthroughs” (see Toon 2024, 65) are required given that for a correct message rendering into a target language just the storage of words and phrases is not enough. These computer programs, created by humans, still have to learn to go beyond the simple word-for-word translations so that they may understand the morphosyntax of the complex sentence structures and the shades of meaning that words and phrases acquire in a context. By extension, they need ”to have an understanding of the wider subject matter, operating over different time spans” *(Idem*, 60) so that they may know how to localize events occurred in a historical time, sometimes less known, and to recognize the references to the cultural and geographical space where the source text was created.

Even if AI translation tools do not always select the most relevant and correct words and phrases, it is obvious that the whole translation process ”becomes more *technified*” (Amparo 2008, 92, *author's emphasis*). In this context, translators from various specialized fields wonder how they can benefit from these new technologies by adjusting them to their individual needs.

2. Particularities of literary translations

Generally speaking knowledge of AI translation tools -based on translation memories- is useful in specialized translations only if they comprise predominantly short sentences and the terms are monosemous. These tools help a human translator save a great deal of time when translating specialized texts and even business letters that include a high degree of repeated terms and text segments that have previously been translated (sentences with idiomatic meanings, common phrases).

When it comes to literary translation things are significantly different. ‘Literary translation’ refers to those translations “made of ‘literary’ originals, whereby the translators are expected to preserve or to recreate somehow the aesthetic intentions or effects that may be perceived in the source text” (Delabastita 2011, 69). This process involves deviations from standard rules. It is a complex process through which the translator has to rethink the fictional universe and to identify the linguistic environment and the epoch when the literary text was written.

The main difference between literary translations and specialized ones lays in the fact that the last ones cover real world scenarios that are fact-oriented and event-oriented while the first ones cover the world of human imagination. Doing literary translation is a difficult task since literary texts are less predictable than specialized ones. In fact, “what makes literary texts special is that they are often characterized by a remarkable, vocal multilayeredness and deliberate ambiguity” (Taivalkovski-Shilov 2019, 695). Literary texts enact complex linguistic repertoires: due to the protagonists’ manner of speaking, often unconventional, a plurality of voices and a mixture of

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stylistic registers may be found in these creative works. For this reason language is polyphonic[i].

Language complexity also lays in the fact that it is ”holistic and multimodal” (Everett 2018, 230), *i.e.* it involves the individual’s manner of behaving as a whole: ”intellect, emotions, hands, mouth, tongue, brain” (*Ibidem*). Moreover, language demands access to cultural information and unspoken knowledge since the same individual produces ”sounds, gestures, pitch patterns, facial expressions, body movements and postures” (*Ibidem*) as different aspects of the same language.

All in all, literary texts do not have a primarily informative purpose but an expressive value, aiming to ”provoke emotions and/ or entertain rather than influence or inform” (Jones 2009, 152). Being written with the intention of creating some effect on the readers, they need ”the eyes of a mindful translator rather than the predicable strings of computer-generated close matches” (Katan 2015, 7). It is the human translator -and not an AI translation tool- who is conscious that each language sums up ”a collective art of expression” (Sapir 2004, 125) that conceals ”a particular set of esthetic factors: phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic, morphological” (*Ibidem*) that cannot be completely shared with another language. Any author has as background the esthetic resources of his/ her native language; this is a starting point for anyone to create unique phrases and sentence structures that are not recorded in a translation memory.

3. Human translator’s role in the context of intercultural communication

During the translation process a computer program cannot identify the quasi-synonyms, the subtle variations of a word meaning or the stylistic hybridity given by the language stratification. In fact, automation in translation may cause inevitable losses in the expressive function of language. These reasons prove that the quality of a final literary translation is linked to the competence of the human translator. This professional knows that a search for words’ equivalence in dictionaries and other on-line documentations is not always a good solution. Having free will, s/he knows better how to make choices regarding the words, phrases and the appropriate word order in a target text. Therefore, automation in translation will not lead to the exclusion of humans, especially when texts of aesthetic value need to be translated.

When it comes to translating fairy-tales the process becomes more complex because their linguistic and cultural identity is more prominent. Most of them start with the traditional opening sentence *A fost odată ca niciodată; că de n-ar fi, nu s-ar mai povesti* (En: *There was something that happened long time ago; if it had not happened it would not be told*). This suggests atemporality -an unknown realm full of magic and populated by fanciful beings- that leaves a mark even in the source language. Then, fairy-tales capitalize on a rich heritage, deeply rooted in a people’s culture and memory, such as popular beliefs, customs. Additionally, the individuals’ idiolects -influenced by their native language, social status, geographical location- give spontaneity in the dialogues between protagonists. For this reason, what was said and written in a source language may not have the same impact in a target language.

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In the following we use ChatGPT, an AI translation tool that gives quick versions in a target language. We intend to translate from Romanian into English three paragraphs from *Tinerețe fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte* (En: *Youth Without Old Age And Life Without Death)*, a story from the Romanian folklore collected by Petre Ispirescu.[ii] We will notice that, in the target language, the grammatical structure of sentences is quite correct: the verb tenses and the non-finite verbs are well rendered; the verb patterns in the if-clauses related to hypothetical scenarios and the subjunctive mood used in fixed expressions are also identified. As regards the lexis, the computer program finds the suitable correspondents for idioms and phrases used with their denotative meaning and frequently encountered in everyday speech.

The computer program, created and fed with information by humans, also knows to resort to cultural adaptation when it deals with cultural realities belonging to a source language: for instance, *Făt-Frumos* symbolizes a courageous young man in Romanian folklore. *Făt* means "young boy, son". In the fairy-tale, "Făt-Frumos" was the son of an emperor and of an empress; so, the noun *Prince* is used in the target language. Then, *Frumos* is not equated as *Beautiful*, but *Handsome* since the imperial son was good-looking and very attractive. In this way, a cultural reality from a source language -*Făt-Frumos*- is replaced by a cultural reality from a target language: *Handsome Prince*[iii].

However, the English versions are not always accurate since the computer program cannot understand a cultural context: a source language has colloquial idioms and sayings that do not exist or do not have an exact equivalent in a target language, many of them being based on cultural cues. Then, there are situations when one word has one meaning in general language, but a totally different one in fairy-tales, fact that may be confusing even for a native speaker. Additionally, non-standard styles are intentionally used such as dialects where archaisms are present. In the given examples, we will notice that the computer program does not archaize the text to suggest the reference to outdated times; on the contrary, it updates the text in order to make it acceptable to the reader of the target language and culture.

Example no. 1

ST: „Făt-Frumos, îmbrăcat ca *un viteaz*, cu *paloș*ul în mână, călare pe calul ce-și alesese, își luă ziua bună de la împăratul, de la împărăteasa, de la toți *boierii* cei mari și cei mici, de la ostași și de la toți slujitorii curții, carii, cu lacrămile în ochi, îl rugau să se lase de a face călătoria aceasta, ca nu care cumva *să meargă la pieirea capului său*; dar el, dând pinteni calului, ieși pe poartă ca vântul, și după dânsul carăle cu merinde, cu bani și vreo două sute de ostași, pe care-i orânduise împăratul ca să-l însoțească." (https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Tinerețe_fără_de_bătrânețe_și_viață_fără_de_moarte, last visit: 23.09.2025, *our emphasis*)

TT: "Handsome Prince, dressed like *a brave knight*, with a *sword* in hand, riding the horse he had chosen, bid a good day to the emperor, to the empress, and to all the great and small *nobles*; from the soldiers and from all the servants of the court, who, with tears in their eyes, begged him to abandon this journey, lest *he should go to the ruin of*

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his own head; but he, spurring the horse, dashed out the gate like the wind, and after him followed the carts with provisions, money, and about two hundred soldiers, whom the emperor had arranged to accompany him." (https://gptforwork.com/tools/translate, last visit: 23.09.2025, *our emphasis*)

- In the Middle Ages, European communities that are far apart from each other did not have identical hierarchies. These hierarchies are related to the positions that community members had in the army or in the administrative organization of a territory. For this reason, the words attributed to them do not have direct equivalents in a target language. For instance "dressed like *a brave knight*, with a *sword* in hand" is grammatically correct but the message conveyed is changed to a certain extent. In Wallachia and Moldavia, the noun *viteaz* referred to a landlord who received special military assignments from a sovereign. The meaning of the equivalent found, *knight*, is a little bit different: in countries from Western Europe, *knight* was related to a man, usually of noble birth, who served his sovereign in battles; the sword was part of his wearing armour. So, the computer program did not perceive the cultural context and it offered a distorted version of the phrase from the source text. A more suitable rendering could have been "dressed like a *brave man*, with a *broadsword* in hand", *broadsword* being the equivalent to the Romanian *paloș*.
- The computer program also found an incorrect equivalent for *boier*. In Medieval Europe, the members of the aristocracy located in distant geographical areas were called differently. Firstly, in Western Europe *nobility* was related to people of high birth and high social status and *gentry* (not "small nobles" as equated by the computer program) was related to people ranked just below nobility. Secondly, in some regions from Eastern Europe -including Wallachia and Moldavia- a *boyar* was a member of the old aristocracy. Therefore, "all the great and small *boyars*"[iv] is the phrase to be fit in the context.
- The computer program offered a wrong translation for *să meargă la pieirea capului său*, namely *he should go to the ruin of his own head*. The noun *ruin* refers to the state of being severely damaged and it has nothing in common with the idea of embarking on a dangerous journey. Therefore, "he should do something at his peril" is a better version. This conveys in the target text the meaning of the idiomatic expression found in Romanian folklore: doing something recklessly that could be very dangerous.

Example no. 2

ST: „– 'Să-ţi trăiască calul, Făt-Frumos', îi mai zise ea, 'ca un *năzdrăvan* ce este, căci de nu era el, te mâncam fript; *acum însă m-ai mâncat tu pe mine*; să ştii că până azi nici un muritor n-a cutezat să calce hotarele mele până aicea; câţiva nebuni carii s-au încumes a o face d-abia au ajuns până în câmpia unde ai văzut oasele cele multe'." (https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Tinerețe_fără_de_bătrânețe_și_viață_fără_de_moarte, last visit: 23.09.2025, *our emphasis*)

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TT: " 'Long live your horse, Handsome Prince', she said to him, 'for he is quite a *rascal*; if it weren't for him, I would have eaten you roasted, *but now you have eaten me instead*; you should know that until today no mortal has dared to tread my boundaries up to here; a few fools who dared to do it barely made it to the plain where you saw the many bones'." (https://gptforwork.com/tools/translate, last visit: 23.09.2025, *our emphasis*)

- In the English version, the word *rascal*, related to a dishonest person, does not even get closer to *năzdrăvan*. In Romanian, *năzdrăvan* has one meaning in general language, namely acting playfully or mischievously with somebody. Then, in fairy-tales *năzdrăvan* means being endowed with supernatural powers. For this reason, the correct equivalent is *enchanted* or *bewitched*.
- A word-for-word translation is given for *acum însă m-ai mâncat tu pe mine*. In certain Romanian contexts, *a mânca* is the short form of the idiom *a mânca pe cineva (fript sau de viu)* meaning to destroy somebody completely. Consequently, instead of rendering the phrase as *now you have eaten me*, the action verb *to defeat* may replace the verb *to eat* so that the English version sounds more appropriate: *now you have defeated me*.

Example no. 3

ST: „Se urcară în sus şi văzură palatul *strălucind* astfel, de *la soare te puteai uita, dar la dânsul ba.* Trecură pe deasupra pădurii şi, tocmai când erau să se lase în jos la scara palatului, d-abia, d-abia atinse cu piciorul vârful unui copac şi dodată toată pădurea se puse în mişcare; urlau dobitoacele, de ţi se făcea părul măciucă pe cap. Se grăbiră de se lăsară în jos; şi de nu era doamna palatului afară, dând de mâncare puilor ei (căci aşa numea ea lighionile din pădure), îi prăpădea negreşit." (https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Tinerețe_fără_de_bătrânețe_și_viață_fără_de_moarte, last visit: 23.09.2025, *our emphasis*)

TT: "They climbed up and saw the palace *shining* like this; *you could look at it from the sun, but not at it.* They passed over the forest and, just as they were about to descend to the palace stairs, they barely touched the tip of a tree with their foot, and suddenly the entire forest began to move. The beasts were howling, making your hair stand on end. They hurried down; and if the lady of the palace hadn't been outside, feeding her chicks (for that's what she called the creatures from the forest), they would surely have perished." (https://gptforwork.com/tools/translate, last visit: 23.09.2025, *our emphasis*)

- The computer program did not perceive the difference between two words attributed to distinct phenomena. One is expressed by the verb *to shine* related to the sun that sends smoothly rays of light towards the earth heating it. The other one is expressed by the verb *to glitter* related to the reflected light of an object, this light being scattered in multiple directions. In the fairy-tale, the depicted palace reflected light sent by the sun rays. For this reason, the use of the present participle *glittering* must have been the suitable choice.

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- The Romanian saying *la soare te puteai uita, dar la dânsul ba* is a hyperbole meaning outstanding beauty. The computer program rendered it erroneously by offering a word-for-word translation that results in nonsense in English: there is no being on this earth that looks from the sun towards a palace. The computer program wrongly takes *de la* as a prepositional phrase. In Romanian folklore *de* could be a conjunction that links two sentences. The idea found in the source language is the following: "it would have been easier to look at the sun but not at that palace."

It is known that artificial intelligence is a result of our human evolution; it is a result of our technical and scientific progress. This technology has been developed by humans "using a combination of our intelligence and our unique tool-building capabilities" (Toon 2024, 256). However, an AI translation tool is not perfect: it has not been "trained" enough by software professionals to understand the intricacy of the language vocabulary and the diversified cultures of peoples. Being "led astray by the information that it is learning from" (*Idem,* 105) these translation errors may range from minor misinterpretations to notable ones, depending on the text complexity. Consequently, the revision and correction of any translation is fundamental especially when a human translator takes advantage of a version offered by a computer program. In the end, any target text must flow naturally, be cohesive and render the source text meaning accurately while considering cultural and linguistic nuances.

If a computer program cannot perceive correctly the meanings of certain words, phrases and sayings, many of them colloquialisms, the human translator is able to "wander" (see Cronin 2013, 25) between languages and cultures and finally s/he tries to give an adequate version of a source text. This professional is conscious that geographical and temporal distances increase the difficulty in helping the target reader understand the linguistic and cultural realm of the source text.

This is all the more true in case of translating fairy-tales. Linguistic and translational skills are not sufficient since the translator has to make known to the target reader the cultural environment in which the source text emerged. Therefore, s/he accepts a cultural immersion: s/he seeks information about the history, customs and traditions of the source language civilisation in order to understand a people's way of thinking and what favoured the appearance of a masterpiece. In this way, the text message is rendered correctly and made known to a reader with a different cultural horizon

4. Conclusion

A natural language is not a homogeneous space. On the contrary, it is the ground for a multitude of dialects, registers and idiolects. This thing is mostly noticeable in stories belonging to the folklore genre. These complex literary texts require a certain degree of adaptation and recreation in a target language. For this reason, the translator faces challenges since the linguistic transfer is hindered by geographical and temporal distances that separate two languages.

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As a mediator between a source text author and a target text reader, the translator's task is to recode the text message in a different culture. For doing this properly, this professional must know that languages do not have completely equivalent vocabularies. Since AI translation tools are not able to select correctly certain words and phrases they are not about to make the translator's profession redundant. There is no computer program to perceive the intricacy of a language vocabulary and, implicitly, the cultural heritage of the people who speaks that language. Moreover, just the human translator is able to do a stylistic review so that the target text flows smoothly. These tasks, especially in relation to cohesion and coherence, cannot be performed by an AI translation tool.

If a translator chooses to make use of AI translation tools, s/he must exercise caution since the translation quality must not be diminished. A professional knows that misinterpretation of the meaning of words and phrases leads to inaccurate conveyance of source text message. This brings to the dissemination of incorrect cultural information in the target language.

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[i] This idea was brought into discussion by Bakhtin when he analysed Dostoevsky's novels. According to Russian philosopher their main feature consists in "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Bakhtin 1984, 6-7).

[ii] Under this name, the Romanian fairy-tale was firstly published in 1872 in *Legende sau basmele românilor* (En.: *Legends or Romanian Fairy-tales*). Petre Ispirescu's version will be taken over, with minor grammatical and expressive changes, in more than 30 printed editions from 1872 to the present day.

[iii] In English there is another equivalent for *Făt-Frumos*, namely *Prince Charming*, *charming* being related to attractiveness as well.

[iv] In time, the boyars differentiated into great boyars (owners of large properties and holders of important positions in administration) and small boyars (owners of small properties and holders of less important positions in administration).

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