

SORTING THROUGH “NEW AND IMPROVED” VERSIONS OF J. K. ROWLING’S *SORTING HAT*

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Abstract: Starting from Pym’s (2004) notion of translational progress in retranslation, the present paper will compare various versions of a well-known children’s poem from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. One of the tools I employ in this kind of evaluative endeavour is Delabastita’s (1993) slightly revised model of pun translation.

Keywords: ambiguity, idioms, puns, retranslation

1. Introduction: retranslation

“Ye’re a wizard, Harry!” is what Hagrid tells Harry Potter in the first book of the famous *Harry Potter* heptalogy and, reading these words, the translator realizes that he has his work cut out for him. Register shifts and all kinds of wordplay seem to be the hard nuts to crack when translating these books and, as implied by Davies (2003), the translator must himself do a wizard’s work when attempting to tackle culture specific items in the books of J. K. Rowling. But can good translational wizardry be evaluated properly? The present paper takes a stab at answering this question by looking at three versions of the *Song of the Sorting Hat* in the first book of the heptalogy.

The existence of more than one version of a source text raises the question of retranslation. Dealing with retranslation – or to use Pym’s term, “multiple presentation” – might be done by considering the two approaches proposed by Pym (2004) himself: either the first version (let us call it TT1, i.e. the first target text) is seen as a genuine “pseudo-original”, a reference point for all versions to come, or TT1 is just an imperfect first attempt and all subsequent versions appear as further attempts to improve upon it:

- (1) Pym’s (2004) model applied to retranslation

TT1 = pseudo-original	TT1 = inferior version
TT1 > TT2, TT3... TT 100	TT1 < TT2 < TT3 ...< TT100

The “pseudo-original” approach treats the first version as an almost sacred text, a text that can never be surpassed by any other variant, whereas the second approach, i.e. the “translational progress” approach, looks upon the first version as a mere

first go at the source text, whose success can never be equal to that of the versions to come. This paper aims at checking the validity of the two approaches by establishing some criteria of evaluation that might shed light on this matter. My intuition is that the two approaches are not necessarily opposites especially when it comes down to children's literature, because a first version, no matter how imperfect, might always remain the favourite one, as it will always have emotional capital for the reader. On the other hand, translational progress seems to be a vague notion. What counts as criteria in measuring progress in a translation? How does one evaluate worth in a translation? These are all questions to ponder.

2. Transcreation and pun translation

I have chosen J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* as the source for the corpus of my paper not just because of its genre and style, but also because the book has already been translated into Romanian twice and because the history of its Romanian versions is intriguing: while the first version of the books was signed in 2001 by a teenager (Ioana Iepureanu), who grew up while the books were being written and who translated them as soon as they were published, the second version was produced much later (2018) and was signed by a coordinated group of established translators (Florin Bican translated the first book), who had the privilege of having read all the books in the heptalogy. By that moment, the *Harry Potter* series had already become a world-wide phenomenon, already a classic in children's/young adult literature. The second version appeared as a natural, necessary recalculation of the original.

Of the first book in the series, my interest was kindled by *The Sorting Hat Song*, as it seems to embody all the features that define the *Harry Potter* books: it is full of wit, it has musicality, it is funny, it alternates the informal register with the formal one, and, most importantly, the informal tone is associated with the use of idioms, so as to create puns that serve as reinforcement for the message conveyed by the song. All these features pose serious problems to a translator and I believe that they can be taken as starting points for establishing a set of criteria that might help one perform a (re)evaluation of the existing target texts.

Moreover, translating children's literature involves more than rendering a text from one language into another, since a lot of other factors need to be taken into consideration. The term *transcreation* has been lately used to refer to the translation of text, image, and sound of a children's book into a target language. If creative wordplay and assonance or alliteration are involved, straightforward translation is out of the question. One needs to "transcreate" the text, i.e. to translate, adapt and transform it for the young readers, especially when this text is a cultural phenomenon as is the case of the *Harry Potter* series:

When you are a global brand, translation isn't enough. You need to make sure you speak to your audience using the right cultural nuances too. We call this dual focus 'transcreation'. The idea of 'branded translation' or 'transcreation' involves changing both words and meaning of the original copy while keeping the attitude and the desired persuasive effect. (Pedersen 2014: 69)

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone fully qualifies as a text that needs to be not just translated but "transcreated", since, as observed by Gustavsson Kralik (2014), this first book of the heptalogy is the one most likely to be read

aloud and was initially meant to be read by/to 10-year olds. When discussing evaluating criteria for several target texts, I believe that the technique of transcreation should definitely be considered.

Last, but not least, since *The Sorting Hat Song* contains a whole range of puns created by instances of idioms reinterpretable as literal phrases, Delabastita's (1993) model of pun translation should also be taken into consideration. Here is my own take of Delabastita's pun translation model: a) equivalence (pun - pun) b) paraphrase or omission (pun - non-pun) c) compensation in kind (pun - punoid) d) compensation in place (non-pun - pun) e) direct copy f) transference (calque) g) editorial techniques.

Below one can find a selection of fragments from the *Sorting Hat Song*, where I have underlined the idioms turned puns:

(2)

<p>“Oh, you may not think I’m pretty, But don’t judge on what you see, I’ll <u>eat myself</u> if you can find A <u>smarter</u> hat than me. You can keep your bowlers black, Your top hats sleek and tall, For I’m the Hogwarts Sorting Hat And I can <u>cap them all</u>. There’s nothing hidden in your head The Sorting Hat can’t see, So try me on and I will tell you Where you ought to be.[...] So put me on! Don’t be afraid! And <u>don’t get in a flap!</u> <u>You’re in safe hands</u> (though I have none) For I’m a <i>Thinking Cap!</i>”</p>	<p>eat (one’s) hat A humorous action that one will allegedly take if something very unlikely happens.</p> <p>smart stylish or elegant in dress or appearance</p> <p>cap something (<i>British English</i>) [<i>informal</i>] to outdo; excel</p> <p>Someone who is in a flap is in a state of great excitement, worry, or panic. [<i>informal</i>]</p> <p>To put on one’s thinking cap (<i>British English</i>) [<i>informal</i>] to ponder a matter or a problem</p>
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On the right column of the table under (2) a brief explanation of the idioms employed by the author in the poem is given. As repeatedly underlined in the literature, an idiom is a fixed expression with a non-compositional meaning (Moon 1998, Ashby 2006), i.e. a fixed expression whose overall meaning cannot be computed, or composed out of the individual meaning of its parts. Because idioms are semantically opaque, their meaning can be learned from a dictionary entry. There are, of course, degrees of opacity. One idiom might be more opaque than the other. Compare, for instance, “eat one’s hat” to “put on one’s thinking cap”. While the former is pretty opaque and only the use of dictionary or larger context might help retrieve its meaning, the latter is easier to decode, even in isolation. This particular feature of idioms makes them as a class of linguistic items that are difficult to acquire by language learners and difficult to render in translation (Baker 2011). The fact that Rowling employs so many such idioms in her books is one of the reasons why their translation might prove difficult. To complicate matters, the idioms underlined in the *Sorting Hat* poem under (2) are used with a double meaning. In this text, the underlined phrases are characterized by what Van Lancker and Canter (1981) have so aptly dubbed “ditropic ambiguity”: the phrases

preserve their non-compositional (opaque) meaning, but are re-invested with compositionality (i.e. they can also be read literally, thus becoming transparent). This superimposition of meanings (compositional and non-compositional) results in a special category of puns.

The translation of this particular poem can, thus, be seen as a real challenge, since an accurate rendition into a target language will have to attempt to capture both the register and the playfulness of the source language. In this text, the use of puns has a clearly defined role: the Sorting Hat is not so much a braggart as a persuader. It needs to convince the children to try it on, so as to perform its duty of distributing each child into the house that best fits his/her personality. Thus, the use of puns in this text has both a rhetorical and a pragmatic function. It is part of the linguistic strategy employed by the Sorting Hat in its desire to fulfill its magic duty. It goes without saying that a good translator will have to find solutions and, hopefully, accommodate the puns into the target text s/he will produce.

So far, I have established that there are at least three important features that the source text has: first and foremost, the poem is extremely musical and its short verse and rhyme need to be preserved. Secondly, there is a clash between the informality of the beginning and the end of the poem, which comes in opposition with the middle of the poem (omitted here). Last but not least, the jocular tone and the rhetoric of the text are reinforced by the use of puns. Let us peruse the versions provided in the tables below and assess the degree of success with respect to these three features:

(3)

SOURCE TEXT	TARGET TEXT 1 (TT1)	BACK TRANSLATION FOR TT1
THE SORTING HAT	JOBENUL DE SORTARE	THE SORTING TOP HAT
<p>“Oh, you may not think I’m pretty, But don’t judge on what you see, I’ll <u>eat myself</u> if you can find A <u>smarter</u> hat than me. You can keep your bowlers black, Your top hats sleek and tall, For I’m the Hogwarts Sorting Hat And I can <u>cap them all</u>.</p> <p>There’s nothing hidden in your head The Sorting Hat can’t see,</p>	<p>S-ar putea să nu fiu deloc arătos, Dar nu vă încredeți în ce vedeți, Vă promit să dispar din lume, De-ntâlniți unul mai isteț ca mine! Eu sunt faimosul joben de sortare În case, la școala faimoasă, Și, vai, cum întrec în splendoare O pălărie, mult prea frumoasă! N-aveți nimic în cap, cum bine se vede, Istețul joben de sortare o știe prea bine,</p>	<p>I might not be good-looking at all, But do not trust what you see, I promise to disappear from this world, If you meet anyone more intelligent than me! I am the famous sorting top hat In houses, at the famous school, And, wow, how I surpass in splendor A hat, much too pretty! You’ve got nothing in your heads, it’s obvious, The intelligent sorting top hat knows it well,</p>

<p>So try me on and I will tell you Where you ought to be.[...]</p> <p>So put me on! Don't be afraid! And <u>don't get in a flap!</u> <u>You're in safe hands</u> (though I have none) For I'm a <i>Thinking Cap!</i>"</p>	<p>Hai, încercați-mă toți, cât mai repede, În ce case veți fi, să vă zic, în fine. [...] Încercați-mă, nu vă temeți, Și de mine nu vă feriți, Căci eu, oricine și orice ar zice, Gândesc și sortez bine, amice!</p> <p>(Translated by Ioana Iepureanu, 2001, Editura Egmont)</p>	<p>Come on, all of you, try me on as soon as possible I'll finally tell you in what houses you'll be. [...] Try me on, don't be afraid, And don't avoid me, For, no matter what anyone would say, I think and I sort well, my friend!</p>
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(4)

SOURCE TEXT	TARGET TEXT 2 (TT2)	BACK TRANSLATION FOR TT2
<p>THE SORTING HAT</p> <p>"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty, But don't judge on what you see, I'll <u>eat myself</u> if you can find A <u>smarter</u> hat than me. You can keep your bowlers black, Your top hats sleek and tall, For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat And I can <u>cap them all</u>. There's nothing hidden in your head The Sorting Hat can't see,</p> <p>So try me on and I will tell you Where you ought to be.[...]</p> <p>So put me on! Don't be afraid! And <u>don't get in a flap!</u> <u>You're in safe hands</u> (though I have none) For I'm a <i>Thinking Cap!</i>"</p>	<p>PĂLĂRIA DE SELECȚIE</p> <p>Poate nu par prea frumoasă Dacă mă judeci după față,</p> <p>Dar <u>mă înghit</u> dacă găsești O pălărie mai isteță. Nu-s un joben înalt, lucios, Nici o gambetă tuciurie, Da'n Hogwarts eu repartizez: Sunt cea mai <u>tare</u> pălărie! Nimic nu poți, oricât ai vrea, În capul tău s-ascunzi de mine.</p> <p>Probează-mă și am să-ți spun Cărui cămin vei aparține.</p> <p>[...] Curaj! Hai, nu te mai codi, Mă pune-acum pe scăfărlie <u>Ești pe mâini bune</u> (deși n-am), Căci sunt o super pălărie.</p> <p>(Translated by Florin Bican, 2018, Editura Arthur)</p>	<p>THE SORTING HAT</p> <p>I might not look too pretty If you judge me by my appearance, But I'll swallow myself if you find A more intelligent hat than me. I am not a glossy top hat, Nor am I a black bowler, But in Hogwarts I call the shots: I am the toughest hat of all! You can't, no matter how much you'd want to, Hide something in your head from me. So try me on and I'll tell you To what house you'll belong.</p> <p>[...] Courage! Come on, don't hesitate, Put me on your pate. You're in good hands (although I've got none), For I'm a super-hat.</p>

Ioana Iepureanu's version (TT1) attempts to render the musicality and the jocular tone of the original, but her translation suffers from expansion (it is much longer than the source text) and not half as musical. More than that, puns are completely omitted, which means that the pragmatic strategy of the source text is dismissed. There is also an instance of mistranslation: the lines "There's nothing hidden in your head/The Sorting Hat can't see" are translated as: "N-aveți nimic în cap, cum bine se vede./Istețul joben de sortare o știe prea bine." In this case, the translator mistook the second verse for a main clause, when in fact the second verse is a restrictive relative clause whose connector ("that") has been deleted. The informality of the tone is preserved, although, probably due to loss of puns, this target text sounds much blander and less marked than the source text.

Florin Bican's version (TT2) is flawlessly musical, flawlessly informal. It manages to be at least as jocular and funny as the source text. However, with respect to pun translation, it manages to translate three out of five instances, two of which are equivalents ("sunt cea mai tare pălărie" for "I can cap them all"; "eș ti pe mâini bune" for "you're on safe hands"). The most opaque idiom turned pun ("I'll eat myself") is transferred through what Delabastita has identified as 'direct copy': "mă înghit". The non-compositional reading of "eat one's hat" is lost in this version.

The version in the table under (4), which I will henceforth refer to as TT3, was produced in the aftermath of my classes on poetry and pun translation and is the result of much pondering over retranslation and translation strategies with respect to linguistic innovation:

(5)

SOURCE TEXT	TARGET TEXT 3 (TT3)	BACK TRANSLATION FOR TT3
<p>THE SORTING HAT "Oh, you may not think I'm pretty, But don't judge on what you see, I'll <u>eat myself</u> if you can find A <u>smarter</u> hat than me.</p> <p>You can keep your bowlers black, Your top hats sleek and tall, For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat And I can <u>cap them all</u>. There's nothing hidden in your head The Sorting Hat can't see, So try me on and I will tell you Where you ought to be. [...]</p>	<p>PĂLĂRIA <u>CU-MINTE</u> Poate-ai să spui că nu-s frumoasă, Dar nu te lua după aspect!</p> <p><u>Mă-ntorc pe dos/mă-nghit cu fulgi</u> de vezi cumva Ca mine una mai mintoasă!</p> <p>Joben, melon sau panama, <i>Le dau la toate clasă,</i> Căci asta e menirea mea Și Hogwarts e-a mea casă! Iar dacă-ncerci să <u>te ascunzi</u> <u>Pe sub vreo altă pălărie</u> Îți <u>furi căciula</u> singur, vai!</p> <p>Căci te ghicesc și dintr-o mie Și-ți spun pe loc unde-ai să stai. [...]</p>	<p>THE MIND-FULL HAT You might say I'm not beautiful, But don't consider my looks! I'll turn myself inside out/ eat myself whole if you see A more mind-full hat than me!</p> <p>Top hat, bowler or panama, <i>I outclass 'em all,</i> For I was meant to do so And Hogwarts is my home! And if you try to hide Under a different hat You'll steal your own cap, alas!</p> <p>For I'll figure you out among a thousand And immediately tell you where you'll be. [...]</p>

<p>So put me on! Don't be afraid! <u>And don't get in a flap!</u> <u>You're in safe hands</u> (though I have none) For I'm a <i>Thinking Cap!</i>"</p>	<p>Deci, <i>capul sus! Pe cap mă-ndeasă</i> Și – chiar de n-am – <u>ești pe mâini bune.</u> Fii sigur c-ai s-ajungi în Casa <i>Ce-n minte drept are să-mi sune!</i> (Unpublished translation by Nadina Vișan, 2019)</p>	<p>So, hold your head high! Put me on your head! And – even I've got none – you're in safe hands. Be sure you'll get in the House That will sound right in my mind!</p>
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In the version under (4), I have underlined the instances of fixed expressions used both non-compositionally and compositionally. I have marked with italics those fixed expressions that are not necessarily puns, but are in the line of a similar semantic field and reinforce the message of the poem. Some of them are additions to the original, i.e. instances of compensation, to use Delabastita's typology. My intention was to use compensation as a strategy, in an attempt to recapture wit by means of a metaphorical connection between the idioms used, i.e. "maintaining an equivalent pattern at textual level" (in accordance to the technique discussed by Rizzato, 2019: 152). One such instance of compensation is translating the title of the poem ("the sorting hat") as "pălăria cu-minte" ("the mind-full/mindful hat"), which unwittingly echoes a solution found by Jean François Ménard, the French translator, ("le choixpeau magique"). We both used an additional pun as an instance of "compensation in place".

According to the typology proposed by Delabastita (1993), it appears that both TT1 and TT2 opt for "omission", although TT2 manages to preserve some of the instances of puns through "equivalence". While TT2 under-translates the puns of the source text, TT3 might be guilty of over-translation. With respect to musicality, both TT2 and TT3 appear to toe the line, while TT1 manages only partly to render the musicality of the source text. Interestingly enough, all three versions seem to deal with the register features successfully, as all of them preserve the informality of the first and last part of the poem, yet TT2 seems to be the most informal version.

3. Conclusion

In light of what studies on retranslation have revealed, starting with Berman (1990) and continuing with Pym (2004), I believe that neither the "translational progress" nor the "pseudo-original" approach should be dismissed, but nor should they be seen as opposites. As shown above, evaluative approaches are useful to a degree. However, a survey conducted among some fifty third-year students revealed that, although aware that TT1 did not observe the stylistic features of the source text, they still referred to this version as "their favourite one", simply because it was the version they were emotionally attached to.

It is clear that each of the versions presented above has its own merits: TT1 is the "pioneer" translation, beloved by many generations, in tune with their young minds. TT2 is the work of an expert, using equivalence in an inspired and eloquent fashion, playing with language in a creative manner that might be said to rival the original. TT3 is the work of the scholar who attempts to recover loss in translation

and experiment with translational strategies, while benefitting from previous versions. Each of these versions is rife with gain and loss, as is the case with any literary translation.

Does knowledge of the theory really help TT3 or does it merely prompt the translator to overcompensate? Will TT1 continue to be a pseudo-original for generations to come? Will TT2 top and topple TT1, rightfully usurping its place? Which of these three versions is an instance of proper transcreation? These are questions that might still be in need of answer. However, what seems clear is that delving into the world of alternative texts that mirror and challenge each other is progress in itself and might pave the road for future, new, and improved, retranlations.

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