

UNTRANSLATABILITY IN REGENCY ROMANCES: EXPLICITATION OR IMPLICITATION?

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***Abstract:** The present paper focuses on strategies of translating love scenes in historical romances from English into Romanian. Taking as point of reference Klaudy's (2003) and Mossop's (2017) translational models, I analyse excerpts from the first book in the Bridgerton series, Julia Quinn's *The Duke* and I. Two opposing forces are at work in the translation of romances: explicitation, seen as a universal tendency in translation, and implicitation, dictated by restrictions on translating this particular genre. My analysis indicates that the preferred strategy in the published translation is implicitation.*

***Keywords:** agent, dysphemism, euphemism, instrument, orthophemism*

1. Introduction: Scenes of endearment and the “unacceptable”

The translation of English (historical) romances is a rarely discussed topic. While a lot has been said about romances as a genre (Radway 1984, Fuchs 2004, Ficke 2021, etc.), very little has been said about what makes them such successful candidates for translation and, paradoxically, such bad candidates for imitation in other languages (as pointed out by Paizis 1998: 3). Probably because romances are seen as an inferior genre, placed on “the lower shelf of the literary polysystem”, not much thought has been given to strategies employed in the translation of romantic fiction, in spite of the fact that it sells better than most other genres (Bianchi, d’Arcangelo 2015: 248).

The present paper attempts to remedy this situation, by casting a glance at the translation of what Paizis (1998: 1) refers to as “scenes of endearment” in Regency romances and the strategies that a translator deems appropriate in dealing with such scenes. I have chosen this particular type of text because of the problem it poses to a translator, due to the fact that the language of love scenes is rife with genre-specific figurative language, as well as phrases built on semantic opposition (such as “unbearable pleasure”). As pointed out by Barlow, Krentz (1992: 22), “the language of romance is more lushly symbolic and metaphorical than ordinary discourse”. In order to understand and successfully translate the romance, one needs to understand its coded language and be able to reproduce it in the target language. This is because the readers of romances expect to read coded language, which is associated with a range of various emotions:

In our genre, [...] stock phrases and literary figures are regularly used to evoke emotion. This is not well understood by critics of these genres. Romance readers have a keyed-in response to certain words and phrases (the sardonic lift of the

eyebrows, the thundering of the heart, the penetrating glance, the low murmur of a sigh). Because of their past reading experiences, readers associate certain emotions – anger, fear, passion, sorrow – with such language and expect to feel the same responses each time they come upon such phrases. (Barlow, Krentz 1992: 21)

But what happens when the target culture lacks such coded language? Not only is the translator faced with translating what Davies (2007: 63) has aptly dubbed “the unacceptable”, namely scenes built on what counts in many cultures as tabooistic imagery, but also with creating a new style in their target language. It is, for instance, the case of Polish (Paizis 1998: 10), where “sexual” language had to be coined by Harlequin translators (who adopted a “softened” variety), as there was no such ready-made model in Polish literature. I imagine that such must have been the case of Romanian after 1989, when, after the demise of communist censorship, there was a flourishing market for translated popular fiction romances and new publishing houses (such as “Miron”, which started its publishing activity in 1991) were set up to cater to the tastes of a starving new readership. The collections proposed by these publishers were different from the previous collection (*Romanul de dragoste* - “The Love Novel”) that had been popular during the communist period and which specialized in publishing classic novels, built around love stories (such as Iris Murdoch’s *The Sandcastle*, or Somerset Maugham’s *The Painted Veil*). These new collections specialized in translating “category romances” that were, without exception, built on a pretty similar scaffolding: a conflict between a dark, Byronic, forbidding hero and an inexperienced, beautiful, kind heroine, often resulting in steamy love scenes, an exotic setting (whether contemporary or placed in the past) and a happy ending. This genre was quite new to the Romanian readership.

In discussing the translation of French erotic literature into English, Mossop (2017) reaches the conclusion that the “neutral” style exhibited by French erotic prose could not be copied in English. By neutral style, he meant the use of lexis that could be employed in any kind of situation (e.g. *lips*, *thighs*, *kiss*, etc.). It turns out that English could mostly use dysphemism (Allan, Burrridge’s 2006: 32; an equivalent for coarse language) and euphemism (coded figurative language), but not much in between, such as orthophemism (ibid.; an equivalent for “neutral” lexis). Consider the following table that sums up these stylistic distinctions:

orthophemism	euphemism	dysphemism
neutral lexis	euphemistic lexis	coarse lexis
e.g. toilet, Jesus, erection	e.g. loo, Lord, pulse of his desire	e.g. sh*thouse, Christ!, c*ck

Table 1. Allan Burrridge’s (2006: 32) taxonomy of contrasting x-phemisms merged with Mossop’s (2017) taxonomy of lexis

Faced with translation loss, a translator attempts to find the right approach and opts for either “defaulting” (resorting to their own personal style in translation), “ventriloquizing” (creating a style that they believe the readership expects), “deferring” (choosing a style dictated by the commissioner of the translation) or “reflecting” (copying the style of the source text). To these procedures, I would add that of “repertoiring”, which covers the situation of an already existing model in the target culture, such as the case of French, which had a

strong inherited genre model to fall back on, when imported romances started being translated in the 70's (Paizis 1998: 5). Below, I sum up an integrated version of Mossop's translational model:

TEXT-CENTERED	TRANSLATOR-CENTERED	PUBLISHER-CENTERED	TARGET CULTURE-CENTERED	READER-CENTERED
REFLECTING	DEFAULTING	DEFERRING	REPERTOIRING	VENTRILOQUIZING

Table 2. An integrated version of Mossop's (2017: 343) typology of styles in translation

The typology proposed by Mossop can be applied to translating love scenes in romances, where the style is a mixture of euphemism and neutral lexis. I intend to check whether the multiple versions I am investigating (three Romanian target texts, one of which is the published version) fit into this model.

2. Explicitation and implicitation in translating love scenes

In order to investigate whether the target texts in my corpus can be identified according to Mossop's (2017) typology, I will make use of two important translational categories: explicitation and implicitation.

When equivalence seems unattainable to the translator, which is to be expected with love scenes, the translator resorts to omission. Indeed, in this case, omission seems to be justified, as Davies (2007: 63) explains: the translator will probably strive for acceptability and prioritize it over faithfulness to the source text. This observation confirms Paizis' 1998 study, which shows that romances translated into French, Greek, and German are the result of both adaptation and omission.

Omission, however, is one of the transfer operations that make up a larger translational category, i.e. implicitation, according to Klaudy (2003: 153). In her view, implicitation is an encompassing category, which can be instantiated either by underspecification (a specific lexical item in the source text is translated by a more general one), by contraction (a phrase in the source text is translated by a shorter phrase), or by omission (the word/phrase in the source text is omitted). Implicitation is the opposite of explicitation, seen as a translational category comprising specification (a lexical item with a general meaning is translated by an item with a more specific meaning), division (one item in the source text is rendered by paraphrase in the target text), addition (words/phrases are added in the target text). While implicitation is sporadic in translation (Klaudy 2003), explicitation is a universal tendency in any translated text, for obvious pragmatic communicative reasons: more often than not, the translator means to make sure that the message of the target text has been fully delivered to the reader, so s/he explicates.

It thus appears that, on the one hand, translating love scenes is an endeavour which often relies on implicitation, while, on the other hand, translating a text in general entails a lot of explicitation. However, English romances translated into French prove shorter, not longer than their source texts (Paizis 1998: 5), which means that the preferred strategy is, at least for French, implicitation.

In order to check what happens with Romanian translated romances, I have selected a few excerpts from Chapter 10 of Julia Quinn's *The Duke and I*. I have

chosen this particular novel because of its tremendous popularity and because of the special style that the author employs in love scenes. As the Bridgerton novels were adapted into a hugely successful Netflix series in 2020, the novels, initially published by “Miron” in 2013, were republished by “Litera” in 2021. The new publisher chose to reprint an unrevised version of the same target text that was printed in 2013 (produced by Gabriela Anca Marin, a regular translator of romances). Chapter 10 is a pivotal moment in the novel, because that’s when the hero (Simon) succumbs to his passionate urges and kisses the heroine (Daphne), against his better judgment.

The selection of the excerpts in Chapter 10 was made according to a criterion that I have borrowed from Klaudy’s 2003 study on explicitation and implicitation: obligatoriness. As pointed out by her (2003: 160), both explicitation and implicitation occur in translation (a) either because the translator cannot help resorting to the respective transfer operations, (b) or because the translator strategically chooses to employ them. When transfer operations are obligatory, it means that there is parametric variation between the source and the target language. For instance, in the translation of English definite noun phrases, a Romanian translator will have to employ implicitation (by contraction) and translate the noun phrase (definite article + noun) as one item (noun+enclitic article). Conversely, an English translator will have to perform explicitation (by division) when translating a Romanian definite article. When transfer operations are, however, used strategically, it means that the translator has a (stylistic) choice: for instance, the report verb *say*, which is frequently used in English narratives, can be translated into Romanian either as a general verb of saying (*a spune, a zice* - “to say”), or as a specific verb of saying (*a răspunde* - “to answer”, *a se răzoi* - “to sneer”, etc.). Thus, the translator can opt either for equivalence, or for explicitation (by specification). It turns out that the tendency is for translators to choose explicitation over equivalence in such cases (Vişan 2022).

Considering the criterion of obligatoriness, the first two examples I analyse here are of phrases which can be translated strategically, while the next example contains linguistic material where transfer operations can be seen as [+obligatory]. Let us consider the first set of examples:

2.1. Strategic transfer operations

Source Text	Target Text 1	Target Text 2	Target Text 3
"Oh, my God, Daphne," he moaned, his hands biting into <i>the soft curve of her buttocks</i> , pulling her closer, needing her to feel <i>the pulse of desire</i> that had pooled in <i>his groin</i> .	-Dumnezeule, Daphne, a gemut el, Ø trăgând-o și mai aproape, dorind ca ea să-i simtă <i>pulsul dorinței</i> Ø. (translated by Gabriela Anca Marin, published in 2013 by “Miron”)	-O, Doamne Dumnezeule, Daphne, gemu el, în timp ce mâinile îi frământau <i>rotunjimile îmbietoare</i> , trăgând-o mai aproape, dorind s-o facă să simtă <i>pulsația dorinței</i> care îi cuprinsese <i>vintrele</i> . (unpublished translation by Nadina Vişan, 2022)	- Doamne, Daphne, a murmurat el, în timp ce mâinile, încleștându-se în <i>carnea molatică a feselor ei</i> , o trăgeau mai aproape, mânate de nevoia ca ea să simtă <i>iureșul dorinței</i> care se adunase în <i>membrul lui</i> . (unpublished translation by professional romance writer, 2023)

Source Text	Back Translation	Back Translation	Back Translation
"Oh, my God, Daphne," he moaned, his hands biting into the soft curve of her buttocks, pulling her closer, needing her to feel the pulse of desire that had pooled in his groin.	"God, Daphne," moaned he, pulling her closer, wanting her to feel the pulse of his desire.	"Oh, God, Daphne," moaned he, while his hands were molding her appealing curves, pulling her closer, wanting to make her feel the pulsing of the desire that had overwhelmed his groin.	"God, Daphne," he murmured, while his hands, clenching on the soft flesh of her buttocks, were pulling her closer, driven by the need that she should feel the rush of desire that had gathered in his member.

Table 3. Coded figurative language – euphemism (*pulse of desire*), neutral language – orthophemism (*buttocks, groin*)

The example in Table 3 contains an instance of euphemism, rendered by all three target texts through a similar strategy: they all opt for figurative language. The lexeme *desire* is translated by an equivalent noun in Romanian (*dorință*). Lexical variation is resorted to for the head noun *the pulse*, which is rendered as *puls* “pulse”, *pulsație* “pulsation” or *iureș* “rush”. TT3 changes the image of intermittent pulsation in *pulse of desire* with an image of rapid fluidness (*rush of desire*), which creates semantic cohesion with the verb “to pool”, used in the last part of the excerpt. This strategy might count as a form of compensation, without, however, diminishing the euphemistic force of the phrase.

Strangely enough, it is not the euphemistic material that the published translator has trouble with, but the orthophemistic one (the “neutral” lexemes *buttocks* and *groin*.) This is probably because a literal translation into Romanian can easily produce comic effects. In the case of *buttocks*, the translator may choose from a list of available lexemes such as: (a) *buci*, which is the equivalent of “(bottom) cheeks,” but which sounds coarse and would qualify more as a dysphemism than as an orthophemism; (b) *fese*, the more neutral equivalent for “buttocks;” (c) *posterior, șezut, dos*, which would be an instance of metonymy, translated as “(one’s) behind”. It appears that TT1 considers the mentioning of body parts “unacceptable” and strategically opts for omission. TT2 hesitates between *posterior apetisant* (“appealing posterior”) and *rotunjimi îmbietoare* (“appealing roundness/curves”) as possible versions and ultimately opts for the latter version in order to avoid creating comic effects. Thus, TT2 compensates by translating an orthophemism through a euphemism, which may be seen as a form of explicitation, if one considers an orthophemism as the unmarked variant and the euphemism or the dysphemism as the marked variants in a lexical paradigm. As for TT3, which is the target text produced by a Romanian native-speaker, who is also a published author of English romances, the phrase is translated as *carnea molatică a feselor* (“the soft flesh of her buttocks”), which counts as an instance of equivalence, with the exception of *curve* translated as *carne* (“flesh”), which is a generalization and counts as an instance of explicitation.

The translation of *groin* seems to be posing problems of its own. TT1 again chooses to omit translating a neutral body part term, while TT2 chooses the only possible version that wouldn’t sound coldly technical: the rarely used pluralia tantum noun *vintre* (“groin”). This, again, makes this target text sound more poetic than the original. As for TT3, the term employed is an orthophemism, but may also

count as an instance of metonymy: *membrul lui* (“his member”). Considering the fact that the translator manages to preserve the “neutral” quality of the lexeme, this instance may count as a form of equivalence.

It would be interesting to have a look at the French version for this excerpt. Consider Table 4:

Source Text	Target Text 4	Back translation
"Oh, my God, Daphne," he moaned, his hands biting into <i>the soft curve of her buttocks</i> , pulling her closer, needing her to feel <i>the pulse of desire</i> that had pooled in <i>his groin</i> .	Daphné ! gémit-il. Ø Il la plaqua contre lui avec ivresse, conscient qu'elle ne pouvait plus, désormais, ignorer <i>son désir</i> qui se pressait contre <i>son ventre</i> . (translated by Cécile Desthuilliers, published by “J'ai Lu”, 2008)	“Daphne!” he moaned. He pinned her against him with intoxication, aware that she could no longer ignore his desire, which was pressing against her belly.

Table 4. The French Target Text – an instance of adaptation

A comparison with the French version reveals that the French translator resorts both to implicitation by omission (the phrase *the soft curve of her buttocks* is eliminated) and to modulation: the point of view in the excerpt is changed, it is not the hero's hands that take action, but the hero himself, and the heroine seems helpless against the hero's *désir* (a shortened euphemism for *the pulse of his desire*, also an instance of implicitation by contraction). Moreover, there's no mention of the hero's *groin*, rendered through modulation as the heroine's *ventre* (“belly”). These subtle changes in the French target text paint a slightly different picture: the hero is in control, while the heroine is pictured as helpless.

Table 5 contains another excerpt that poses similar translation problems:

Source Text	Target Text 1	Target Text 2	Target Text 3
He moved with <i>agonizing slowness</i> , stopping before he <i>bared her</i> to give her one last chance to say no.	S-a mișcat cu o <i>încetineală</i> <i>agonizantă</i> , s-a oprit o clipă Ø ca să-i dea posibilitatea să spună nu... (translated by Gabriela Anca Marin, published in 2013 by “Miron”)	Se mișcă <i>încet</i> , <i>cât de încet putea</i> , oprindu-se o clipă înainte să îi <i>dezgolească pieptul</i> pentru a-i mai oferi încă o dată ocazia să spună nu. (unpublished translation by Nadina Vișan, 2022)	S-a mișcat <i>chinuitor de încet</i> , oprindu-se înainte să îi <i>dezgolească sânii</i> pentru a-i da o ultimă șansă de-a spune nu. (unpublished translation by professional romance writer, 2023)
Source Text	Back Translation	Back Translation	Back Translation
He moved with <i>agonizing slowness</i> , stopping before he <i>bared her</i> to give her one last chance to say no.	He moved with an <i>agonizing slowness</i> , stopped for a moment to give her the possibility to say no...	He moved slowly, as slowly as he could, stopping for a second before he <i>bared her chest</i> so as to offer her one more time the opportunity to say no.	He moved <i>agonizingly slowly</i> , stopping before he <i>bared her breasts</i> so as to give her one last chance to say no.

Table 5. Coded language – euphemism (*her*), semantic mismatch (*agonizing slowness*)

In Table 5, the phrase *agonizing slowness* is translated literally by TT1, while both TT2 and TT3 feel the need to reformulate: TT2 resorts to explicitation by repeating the manner adverb *încet* (“slowly”), while TT3 preserves the length of the phrase, but converts the noun phrase into an adverb modified by an intensifier: *chinuitor de încet* (“agonizingly slowly”). In choosing a manner adverb over a noun phrase, both TT2 and TT3 opt for a more fluid language, but also for a degree of translation loss, as the unlikely combination between the adjective *agonizing* (usually collocating with the noun *pain*) and the noun *slowness* is lost in translation.

The euphemistic effect of the verb phrase *bared her*, where the pronominal direct object *her* may be seen as a truncation for *her breasts* (or as an instance of totum pro parte metonymy), is also lost in translation: TT1 chooses to omit the verb phrase, and resorts to implicitation by omission, while TT2 and TT3 choose to explicitate, by restoring the missing noun (*piept* (“chest”), *sâni* (“breasts”)).

2.2. Non-strategic transfer operations

The example I have selected below may count as an illustration of contexts where the Romanian translator may be tempted to stray from the natural flow of their target language: I am referring to the many instances of text in Chapter 10, where the hero is the agent of the action expressed by dynamic verbs, but the author chooses to use an instrument subject instead. The choice made by Julia Quinn, namely, to replace agent subjects with instrument subjects in this love scene, is deliberate. The agency of the hero is shifted upon his body parts: it is not the hero that kisses the heroine, but his lips; it is not the hero that touches the heroine, but his hands, and so on. This is a scene where the hero acts against his will, driven by his passion for the heroine. I have counted here 7 agent subjects and as many as 18 instrument subjects. By contrast, the marital love scene in Chapter 18, where the heroine takes action and “forces” herself on her unsuspecting husband, abounds in agent subjects (as many as 30 agent subjects and only 6 instrument subjects). This stylistic strategy would, however, be awkward in Romanian, which, just like French, differs from English with respect to subject realization. Consider the example in Table 6:

Source Text	Target Text 1	Target Text 2	Target Text 3
<i>His hands</i> cupped her cheeks, holding her steady so that he might drink in the sight of her.	I-a cuprins obrajii în palme, Ø îmbătându-se cu imaginea ei. (translated by Gabriela Anca Marin, published in 2013 by “Miron”)	Îi cuprinse fața în palme, încercând s-o domolească pentru a-și umple sufletul de imaginea ei. (unpublished translation by Nadina Vișan, 2022)	Simon i-a cuprins fața cu mâinile, ca să o țină strâns și să o soarbă din priviri. (unpublished translation by professional romance writer, 2023)
Source Text	Back Translation	Back Translation	Back Translation

Table 6. Instrument Subjects translated as Agent Subjects

As expected, due to parametric variation between English and Romanian, all three target texts replace the instrument subject with agent subjects. This may count as an instance of obligatory explicitation, where a more specific subject is replaced by a general subject. The semantic role of agent is usually associated with the syntactic function of subject, thus the item fulfilling this role is assigned the Nominative case in canonical sentences, counting as the unmarked variant. As one can see, other instances of strategic explicitation can be identified, as is the case of the lexically realized subject (Simon) in TT3. By the same token, TT1 strategically opts for implicitation by omission, and eliminates chunks of the source text.

3. Conclusion

My investigation has traced instances of non-obligatory, strategic instances of explicitation and implicitation in the translation of love scenes in a popular Regency romance. Of the three Romanian target texts analysed here, the only target text that exhibited a large amount of implicitation was TT1 (80.76%), compared to TT2 (38.46%) and TT3 (26.08%). Conversely, TT1 resorted to 19.23% instances of explicitation, compared to TT2 (61.53%), and TT3 (73.91%).

As for obligatory, non-strategic explicitation (such as subject realization by an agent/instrument in the target language), both TT1 and TT2 were pretty close (27.77% and 22.22%, respectively). TT3 proved to be the odd one out, formally copying the style of the original to a much larger extent: out of the 18 instrument subjects identified in the source text, TT3 translated 15 tokens by equivalent instrument subjects, which amounts to 83.33%. Interestingly enough, but not unexpectedly, the French translation turned all 18 instrument subjects into agent subjects.

If one rethinks these percentages in terms of Mossop's (2017) typology in Table 2, one may conclude that TT3 is the most style-sensitive of the target texts discussed here, identifying it as "reflecting" in style, while TT2 appears as "ventriloquizing." It seems that TT1 is either "defaulting," or "deferring," but deciding which type fits it best would require a quantitative analysis of a much larger number of excerpts translated by the same translator. Finally, the French translation counts as "repertoiring", as it seems to resort to an already familiar pattern based on modulation.

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