Phonological Patterns in the Translations of Poe's "The Bells" into Romanian

MARIA-TEODORA CREANGĂ
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

Abstract

Of all translation work in the world at any given time, poetry makes up just a small proportion. And of all theorists in translation, only a few tackled the issue of poetry translation for reasons that need no expatiation. The article below discusses two translations into Romanian of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells," focusing on the approaches and techniques used by the translators in what concerns the transfer of phonological patterns from English into Romanian. The aim is to determine to what extent the target-language texts are faithful replicas in terms of orchestration and aesthetic function, and, whether the outcome has suffered any meaning transformation as a result of the transfer of phonological patterns.

Keywords: phonological patterns, phonological translation, poetic mimesis, alliteration, rhyme, rhythmic patterns, translation techniques, poetry translation, orchestration, mimetic/ analogical/ organic translation.

Introduction

When he published his seminal work, *The Translator's Invisibility*, in 1995, Lawrence Venuti argued:

A translated text, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction, is judged acceptable by most publishers, reviewers, and readers when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original.” [...] The more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text. (1)

But while this “illusion of transparency” (Venuti 1) – as the author calls it – lies at the core of public acceptance both in what concerns literary and non-literary translation, it may crucially depend on the combination of “ingredients” – i.e. approaches and techniques – which are unique to each text-type, genre, and translator. And while some of these are considered as generally acceptable, productive, and well-established both in translation theory and in practice, others have been used by a select few who have ventured the less than accessible realm of poetry translation.

This article discusses the techniques – particularly pertaining to phonological translation – used in two different translations of Edgar Allan Poe's “The Bells” into Romanian, and the aesthetic effects triggered by cross-linguistic and cross-cultural transfer of sound and prosodic patterns. The rationale behind the selection of Emil Gulian's and Dan Botta's translations of the poem lies in two crucial elements: first, their contemporariness – both lived in the first half of 20th-century Romania; second, both were acknowledged translators, as well as poets in their own right. This creates the premises for a comparative study between two Romanian versions of Poe's poem and allows for an investigation of whether there is evidence of meaning transformation via phonetic and phonological patterns, or the translators' contributions in this respect are restricted to aspects pertaining to the musicality or “orchestration” of the TL text and ultimately its fluency.

Principles and Challenges in Poetry Translation

In spite of the fact that any translation is first and foremost an act of communication, not the same view is shared by specialists as regards poetry. Peter Newmark suggests that in poetry translation the communicative function is not primordial - at least not in the traditional linguistic sense:

I am sceptical about the idea that a translator of poetry is primarily communicating – that he is, to his readers in the conventional definition of communicative translation, trying to create the same effect on the target language readers as was created by the poet on his own readers; his main endeavour is to ‘translate’ the effect the poem made on *himself*. A translator can hardly achieve even a parallel effect in poetry – the two languages, since all their resources are being used here in no other literary or non-literary medium, are, at their widest, poles apart. (165)

Whereas audiences may change in time and across cultures, that translators of poetry in particular become interfaces in the process, and that “[a] successfully translated poem is always another poem” (Newmark 165), one cannot accept the idea that translation, whether of poetry or not, can be stripped of its communicative function as this would leave the act of translation without a purpose or *skopos*, as Christiane Nord and other adepts of functionalist approaches to translation argue.

Francis R. Jones adopts Peter Andrews and Richard Stockwell’s less radical perspective pointing out that, in translation, each genre has a well-determined set of conventions that the communicators have agreed on and suggests that it is the poem’s textual features in the SL that ultimately dictate the approach to be embraced in the process of translation:

Poetry is regarded here as a genre of literary text, and genre as a socially defined cluster of communication acts. These have rules that are largely pre-agreed by communicators (poets, publishers, audiences, say), though they may also be negotiated on the spot

[...] Some of poetry's rules might specify its typical textual features [...] Some of poetry's features are sound-based, such as line-length [...] or onomatopoeia [...] Some are syntactic or structural [...] Others are more pragmatic in nature such as ambiguity and multiple meaning [...] or image and metaphor [...]. (1-2)

Thus, poetry translators are not only faced with the challenges of transferring meaning (semantic and/or pragmatic) from one language and culture to another, but also with the challenge of having to choose one of three possible approaches in tackling poetic form: mimetic – using a similar poetic form in the TL, analogical – using a different target text form with equivalent cultural function, or organic – in which the translator, who finds it impossible to reconcile form and content, relies exclusively on his reception of the poem (Holmes qtd. in Jones 5).

This point of view is shared by Newmark who suggests that poetry translation is often a matter of prioritizing content over form, or the other way around, but adds that this should not depend exclusively on the features of the source language text and that this is an informed choice based on the translator's "theory of poetry." In this case, he further argues, it is the responsibility of the translation theorist to draw attention on the possibilities available to the poetry translator (165-166).

As far as the process is concerned, Newmark identifies three distinct stages in the translation of a poem. First, there is the choice of TL poetic form which should be as close as possible to the SL text, which typically includes observing aspects related to rhyme and rhythmic pattern. Second comes the processing of the figurative meaning and of the concrete images of the poem. Finally, there is a rewriting process that focuses on the sound-effect in the TL, which is crucial in producing a similar aesthetic effect: "Emotionally, different sounds create different meanings, based not on the sounds of nature, nor on the seductive noises in the streams and forests, but on the common sounds of the human throat" (165).

The idea that phonetic and phonological patterns are meaning generators, in the sense that they contribute to the

emotional-aesthetic value of the poem is not exactly new in the literature. As early as the late 1960's, Geoffrey Leech argued in favour of a linguistic approach to poetry, suggesting that phonic devices such as alliteration, assonance, and consonance, alongside rhyme and rhythmic patterns may be used in such a manner as to generate sound symbolism and onomatopoeic effects. He even classified sounds according to "such dimensions as hardness, softness, thinness, sonority" (98). In his view, English consonants may display various degrees of hardness, with plosives /b/, /d/, /g/, /p/, /t/, /k/ and affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ at the top of this spectrum as they require considerable force of articulation on the part of the speaker. By contrast, nasals /m/, /n/ and /ŋ/ as well as liquids /l/ and /r/ require less effort on the part of the speaker and are therefore "soft" consonants. Thus, the former group may be associated with strength and brutality, whereas the latter will most probably be part of sound patterns suggesting calmness and softness. On the other hand, vowels are grouped into sonorous and thin. For example, mid-open and open vowels like /ɑ:/ and /ɒ/ suggest booming sounds, therefore are considered to be sonorous, whereas features such as vowel frontness and closeness, like in the case of short /e/ and short /ɪ/, may be associated with quick, thin, light, or bright objects. By contrast, back vowels like short /ɒ/ and short /ʊ/ tend to be associated with slow, dark objects (Leech 97-98).

Although this phonological analysis is quite documented, one cannot help arguing that such one-on-one correspondence between sounds or sound patterns, on the one hand, and meaning, on the other hand, may be regarded as mere examples and can hardly be generalized. Firstly, such correspondences are largely subjective in the sense that interpretations of patterns may turn out to be different for different members of the same readership. A more extensive study based on vaster language corpora and broader audiences would probably shed more light on the matter. Secondly, they are subjective in the sense that such interpretations are crucially dependent on the context. By context, I mean the poem itself as well as its author, cultural and contextual factors involved. Thirdly, they are subjective because they are applicable to English.

It is quite unlikely for a translator to produce a mimetic transfer – in the sense defined above – as other languages may or may not share this symbolism on a sound level, and the translator may be forced to identify phonetic or phonological equivalences that match the source culture features and recreating sound patterns in the target language may not always be possible:

[...] the effects of sound may be to some extent universal, and so recreating sound in the target text is at least one possible way of attempting to recreate the effect on the reader or hearer. [...] But there is a separate issue here. Even if such recreation were possible [...] how far is it the task of the translator not merely to recreate the effect but also to give the reader or hearer a view of the original? [...] It is possible to aim for the preservation of, say, a Modern Greek poem, the alliteration of a Classical Chinese poem or the meter of a German one. The extent to which such preservation is possible will always be limited by the phonological and other grammatical structures of the target language. (Lodge 265)

Indeed, while the source and target language may not (fully) share the linguistic or cultural features that would allow the extensive use of phonic mimesis in the translation of a poem in the sense suggested by James S. Holmes, one may still find evidence of phonetic and phonological equivalence between the source and target languages that may be exploited to produce a similar aesthetic effect in both languages.

A Case Study

In what follows, I will discuss two different approaches to translating one of Poe's most representative poems in terms of auditory imagery and orchestration, the manner in which the translators– Gulian and Botta – have chosen to recreate the phonological patterning in Romanian, and how successful their endeavor was in terms of aesthetic value and meaning transformation.

“The Bells” is a symbolic journey from the silver bells in the first stanza, suggesting joy, playfulness, and happiness, through the golden bells of young adulthood and the brazen bells of maturity, and, eventually, to the dark, grave sound of the iron bells in the last stanza associated with grief and death. The phonological structure of the four stanzas presents the reader with four distinct sound patterns to convey different feelings in each of them despite the constant, obsessive repetition of the chorus “Bells, bells, bells” throughout the poem, which one would expect to create a similar rather than different aesthetic effect. In other words, the phonic mimesis in this case is an elaborate combination between the recurrence of the bells and the phonological patterning that creates sharp emotional contrasts from one stanza to the next.

Thus, the auditory symbolism in the first stanza arises from a combination between vocalic sounds – short /ɪ/ or diphthongs gliding towards short /ɪ/ – and alliteration – consisting mostly in the repetition of voiceless plosives such as /t/, /k/ as well as the voiceless fricative /s/. The sharp contrast created by associating thin vowels and hard voiceless consonants like the ones mentioned here produce a ludic – almost onomatopoeic – effect in this part of the poem:

How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
 In the icy air of night!
 While the stars that oversprinkle
 All the heavens seem to twinkle
 With a crystalline delight; (*The Complete Tales and Poems* 954)

In his preface to Poe’s translated poems, Gulian argues that although “... there are multiple ways in which they can be rendered, following a close analysis of the sound effects in the original poem, I have reached the conclusion that it was impossible to render them in Romanian using the same sound groups” (*Poemele lui Edgar Poe* LVII, my translation). Indeed, Gulian’s translation of the first stanza clearly betrays the translator’s struggle to re-create the original auditory effect by his use of unusual – even

unnatural in Romanian, one may argue – onomatopoeia (“cling-cling” and “tiling, tiling”) and by breaking the original rhythmic pattern supported by the use of monosyllabic words in the second verse quoted here. As a matter of fact, Gulian was strongly criticized at the time by one of his contemporaries, Vladimir Streinu, in his *Pagini de critică literară*, for his use of transposition as a translation technique and the insertion of these culturally-bound elements from English into Romanian in such a crude manner (351-373). In Gulian’s translation, the same verse is deviant in terms of the number of syllables – there are only seven syllables in English but thirteen in the target language version – which disturbs the rhythm, an iconic feature of the original poem. Moreover, the second verse no longer rhymes with the last in the fragment but becomes a blank verse. It is also clear that the translator has made no compromise in preserving the use of the vowel /i/ despite its slightly different quality in Romanian, /i/ being more close and front than short /ɪ/ in English. As concerns the use of consonants, Gulian preserves the plosives /k/ and /t/ as well as the recurring /s/, while the rhyme – i.e. the latter part of a syllable composed of the peak and the coda - /ɪŋkl/ in words such as “tinkle” and “oversprinkle” is replaced by /iŋg/ in “cling,” “înting,” “ning,” and “tiling.”

Cum ei clipest, cling-cling, cling-cling,
 În ghița din aerul subțire al nopții!
 Când toate stelele cer înting
 Și licăririle apoi ning,
 Sclipind cristalin: tiling, tiling; (*Poemele lui Edgar Poe* 15)

On the other hand, Botta’s approach to translating Poe’s “The Bells,” seems to have reached a balance between form and verse structure, on the one hand, and message or contents, on the other, resulting in a far more reader-appealing and better-known Romanian version of the poem. The harmony of the translation lies in the choice of semantic units that are already culturally embedded in Romanian, as well as in the simplicity of alliterative structures:

the plosive /k/ is consistently combined with the liquid /l/ and sound groups like /esk/. Although a rarer occurrence, the voiceless affricate /tʃ/ adds to the overall auditory effect similar to that of silver bells while also contributing to the preservation of Poe's original rhyme. As regards rhythm, Botta's choice of rising rhythm, although not fully faithful to the rhythm in English that combines rising and falling patterns, contributes to the effect of playfulness in this stanza:

Cum clinchesc, clinchesc, clinchesc,
În văzduhul nopții reci,
De când stele ce clipeșc
Sus pe cer, din ochi clipeșc
Cu descântul lor de veci; (Poe, *Scrieri Alese* 668)

With the second and third stanzas, the complexity and intricacy of the English poem progress while the phonetic repertoire expands. Thin front /ɪ/ is gradually replaced by front /e/ followed by increasingly central and back vowel phonemes like the diphthongs /eə/, /aɪ/ and /aʊ/, which determines a dramatic shift in the tone of the poem, from playful and light to solemn and grave, culminating in the last stanza with vowels like short /ɒ/, short /ʊ/ and a diphthong gliding towards back /ɔ/.

As the poem unfolds, the translators' struggle to observe the source-language orchestration becomes more evident. In the last stanza, Gulian opts for a poetic discourse in which the dominant vowel is /o/ in words like "grohăit," "monoton," "roboții," "cu toții" (*Poemele lui Edgar Poe* 18), etc., a vowel that is far less open than the English short /ɒ/ and closer in this respect to /ʊ/, suggesting mourning, death. As a matter of fact, the vowel /o/ becomes the phonetic structure of the stanza, recurring almost obsessively – with only occasional disruptions – in combination with a wide range of consonants supporting it, as the examples above suggest. On the other hand, Botta opts for the use of /u/ as in "un sunet izbucnit," "care sună, sună, sună," "să ne pună," "Și el tună, tună, tună," etc., which is far more close and back than short /ʊ/ in English. The use of central close /i/ and central mid-close /ə/

– sometimes used in alternation – as in “Ce solemn gânduri cântă,” “Melancolicul comând,” “Se simt mândri să ne pună” (Poe, *Scrieri Alese* 670) are a welcome variation. The gloomy atmosphere is thus supported not necessarily by a vowel, but rather by a common feature of a group of vowels: all of them range between mid-close and close and between central and back.

In terms of consonants, the final stanza abounds in nasals in sequences like: “At the melancholy menace of their tone,” “In that muffled monotone,” as well as in the repetitive “Keeping time, time, time/ In a sort of Runic rhyme,” “And who tolling, tolling, tolling/.../ Feel a glory in so rolling” where nasals combine with plosive /t/ or approximant /r/ only to add to the gloomy, onomatopoeic effect of the poetic discourse. In the final part of the stanza, liquid /l/ becomes dominant in the repetitive “bells, bells, bells” and “knells, knells, knells”, only occasionally interrupted by the alliterative structure “In a sort of Runic rhyme” that recurs towards the end of the poem (*The Complete Tales and Poems* 956).

Both translators attempt to preserve auditory imagery by relying heavily on a restricted number of consonants and preserving the obsessive repetition of key-words in Romanian. But while their techniques are largely similar, the choice of lexical items – and implicitly of alliterative patterns – create a slightly different aesthetic outcome. Gulian, for example, alternates alveolar /t/ with nasals /m/ and /n/: “rămân în clopotnițe,” “singuri cu toții,” “Monoton” (*Poemele lui Edgar Poe* 18) etc., in such a manner that it is quite difficult to determine which of these holds the dominant position, as is the case of the alliterations in the original poem. Botta opts for the preservation of plosive /t/ and nasals /m/ and /n/ with the slight observation that /t/ tends to be dominant in the first part of the stanza (“De ce spaimă te-nspăimânt,” “patetic freamăt,” “Din gâtlejul lor dogit”) whereas nasals /m/ and /n/ are more noticeable as the backbone structure in the middle part (“Cei ce sună, sună, sună/ Melancolicul comând/ Se simt mândri să ne pună”) (Poe, *Scrieri Alese* 670).

On the other hand, there are notable differences in the approach of the translation of the two key verbs used by Poe in

relation to the bells: the first half of the stanza sees the bells “rolling” whereas in the latter part they “toll.” The former term is clearly associated with thunder rolls, whereas the latter with the long heavy sound produced by the mourning bells. Gulian substitutes the sound of bells “rolling” and “tolling” with “clopote monodice de mort,” “...trag ca roboții/ Singuri cu toții,” “toacă de mort,” “...pietre urnește /Rostogolit...,” “bolovănește,” “rostogolește,” “ropote,” “Rostogol de clopote” (*Poemele lui Edgar Poe* 18-19). Whereas these may be a valid solution as they preserve the semantic message of the poem, they are markers of poetic creativity rather than of translation proper. In this sense, Gulian re-writes rather than translates; he tends to use the technique of explicitation via semantic equivalences and eventually re-creates auditory images instead of relying on phonic mimesis in the translation process.

Botta uses equivalence as a key technique in his translation of the two key terms. He matches the English verb “to toll” with the Romanian verb “a suna” and the English verb “to roll” with “a tuna.” This association presents two distinct advantages: firstly, the semantic association between bell tolling and thunder rolling is clear and straightforward, and the translator is alert to Poe’s subtle use of metaphors. Secondly, the phonological structure of the English words reflects in the phonological structure of their target-language equivalents. In other words, they are minimal pairs in the sense that “toll”/təʊl/ and “roll”/rəʊl/ as well as “sună”/sunə/ and “tună”/tunə/ differ by only one phoneme, with huge implications on the phonological pattern of the verses both in English and in Romanian.

Conclusions

The key aim of this study has been to focus on the approaches and techniques used by different translators of Poe’s “The Bells” into Romanian – particularly in what regards the phonological structure of the poem – and determine the extent to which one can identify common, “universal” aspects in their work, on the one hand, and

whether there are any instances of meaning transformation that can be identified in the target-language texts.

To limit the influence on the target-language poems of such variable external factors as the social-cultural and temporal context, the study has focused on the work of Gulian and Botta – two writers and translators contemporary with each other. Despite their similar background, the study has revealed that the two are in fact quite different in terms of the approaches and techniques they use. Gulian is what Holmes calls an organic translator (qtd. in Jones 5). He is essentially a re-creator, one who filters the source-language poem through his own cognitive and poetic experience, dissects the text and then re-creates it. He uses phonic mimesis to the extreme, introducing into Romanian elements that are not culturally embedded only to replicate the orchestration in the source language. He even uses explicitation – a technique that some would consider deviant since it is common in the translation of all text types except poetry.

Dan Botta is the “faithful” translator – well, as faithful as he can be! – paying attention to phonological patterns. He actively seeks phonological equivalence but certainly not at the cost of semantic or cultural compromise. He is, in Holmes’s words, the analogical translator (qtd. in Jones 5) on an active search for cultural, semantic and phonological equivalences but who uses mimetic translation whenever the two cultural and linguistic systems allow it, without being tempted by any exaggerations.

At this point, it becomes evident that although Gulian and Botta can be described as different in terms of their approaches to translating poetry, both use in fact a range of techniques some of which are common. For example, Gulian may be a dominantly “organic” translator where Botta is the master of equivalences, while both practice mimetic phonological translation to various extents. This suggests that poetry translation involves a complex mix of techniques allowing translators to approach poetic texts in an infinite variety of ways.

As concerns the issue of meaning transformation via the use of phonological translation, there are several aspects that need

pointing out. If we refer to mimetic translation as a technique meant to preserve phonological structures across languages whenever this is culturally possible, one can argue that while this is achievable between English and Romanian, it definitely has its limitations. These may be due to the fact that while the two languages use similar phonetic apparatuses, Romanian also includes a number of sounds that English lacks, such as /i/ in “întuneric.” Furthermore, as pointed out here, the quality of some sounds that apparently exist in both linguistic systems is different. This is the case of /u/ in Romanian and /ʊ/ in English. The realization of alveolar /t/ tends to be softer in Romanian, whereas in English it is often strongly aspirated. All these apparently insignificant contrasts between the source and target language phonetic systems may have resulted in slight changes in the reception of the poem by the two audiences. Fortunately, the translation of poetry – more than any other genres in literature – does not depend on the use of one but of several techniques, each of which has its role in a translator’s pursuit to preserve meaning. At phonological level, meaning is associated with the music or the so-called orchestration of the text. However, regardless of the extent to which this orchestration is preserved, the analysis above suggests that it is the translator’s ability to embed the source language phonemic patterns into the target culture that ultimately leads to the success of his/her endeavor.

Works Cited

- Jones, Francis R. “The Translation of Poetry.” *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies*. Ed. Kirsten Malmkjaer and Kevin Windle. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. e-book.
- Leech, Geoffrey. *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. London: Longman, 1969. Print.
- Lodge, Ken. “Phonological Translation and Phonetic Repertoire.” *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 13.2 (2003): 263-276. Print.

- Newmark, Peter. *A Textbook of Translation*. Harlow: Longman, 2005. Print.
- Nord, Christiane. *Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997. Print.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Scrieri Alese*. Trans. Emil Gulian and Dan Botta. București: Univers, 1979. Print.
- Poemele lui Edgar Poe*. Trans. Emil Gulian. București: Fundația pentru Literatură și Artă “Regele Carol II,” 1938. Print.
- Streinu, Vladimir. *Pagini de critică literară*. Vol. 1. București: EPL, 1968. Print.
- The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. London: Penguin, 1982. Print.
- Venuti, Lawrence. *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.