Edward Sapir's ON LANGUAGE in Romanian Translation

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Any new Romanian version of a classic work in Linguistics is a highly auspicious cultural event and it goes without saying that it should be hailed accordingly. Edward Sapir (1884-1939)'s *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (1921), skillfully turned into Romanian by Teodora Ghivirigă, an academic born and bred in the city of Iaşi, stands out from the crowd of recent translations in the field of Humanities as downright momentous. Ranking 46th in the Lingua Collection of Casa Editorială Demiurg, this 2016 complete version is based on the 1921 Harcourt Brace edition (New York) but it actually offers much more than just the text. On the contrary, it is the king-size paratextual side of this book which substantiates and legitimises it as a cultural object and testifies to the translator's thoroughness.

A comparative glimpse on the original and the translated text serves to highlight, among other aspects:

- the book's motto, a famous quote from Sapir, which happens to coincide with the motto of the publishing house;
- the reader-friendly fully detailed Contents in the Romanian version (even though the original does not display subtitles);
- pages reproduced from the original version and interspersed throughout the volume (*e.g.* on page 66 we have the cover page of the 1921 edition; on page 192, the first page of chapter *Language, Race and Culture* of the 1921 edition mirrors the translated one);
- a supplementary index (by Alexandra Ioniţă);

- the *allographic* apparatus, as Gérard Genette calls it, namely the commentaries added to the text without authorial sanction.

The allographic import is entirely the translator's "fault", from the Translator's Note to the many footnotes meant either to clarify this or that extinct or rare language or to further instruct the reader (*e.g.* p. 28 translator's note on Athabaskan; p. 43 translator's note on Sioux; p. 58 Letonian, Chinese; p. 60 Welsh; pp. 61-62 Sanskrit; p. 73 Eskimo; p. 162 translator's note on Chaucer; on pages 76, 77, 84, the translator's notes are even longer than the author's text etc.). All these notes fulfill a number of functions, among which that of lag compensation (*e.g.* given the 95 years between the publication of the original text and that of the Romanian version, the translator needs to explain that "towards the middle of the last century" should be read as the nineteenth century – p. 125) or of reading incentives. Generally speaking, the translator's footnotes are so rich that they go beyond the three main functions identified by Rodica Dimitriu in a recent study (2009), namely the *explanatory function*, the *prescriptive function* and the *informative function*. Rather, they can afford designating, identifying, describing, connoting, being genuine *documentary sources*; they are a proof of the translator's thriving agency and a confirmation of the (translator's) paratext as an *constructive, indispensable mediation* (Elefante, 2012).

The Translator's (somehow ironically and misfittingly called) Note (pp. 9-22), too, is a highly subjective space which enhances the translator's visibility.[1] Here, the readership finds out the context which led to this translation (the oustanding project project came up in 2014, on the 130th anniversary of Sapir's birth, which sparked off a renewed enthusiasm in his works), many bio-bibliographical details about the author, as well as the challenges the translator faced when transposing the text into Romanian. Sapir's contact with the foreign languages he later, as a founder of descriptive linguistics, studied and described (Hebrew, German, Native-American languages), his connections with mentors such as the ethnologist and linguist Franz Boas and his activity at universities from Philadelphia, Chicago, and finally at Yale, are carefully brought into focus in this introductory part. It is also here that we find out interesting minutiae such as the fact that Sapir was also a poet besides being an anthropologist and a fundamental linguist, the fact that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was not really the result of a direct collaboration, or the reasons why during his lifetime, at least on the American stage, he was outshone by fellow-linguist Leonard Bloomfield.

As a linguist, Sapir is deemed Saussurean especially on account of his constantly describing language in its systematic, arbitrary, conventional character. His essentially holistic perspective does not preclude patterns, though he occasionally denies or rephrases them. In his work *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*, Sapir sometimes employs informal definitions; as a matter of fact, in defining language, he is poetical and

[1] *Cf.* Balaţchi: the translator's paratext = "un espace éminemment (inter)subjectif, beaucoup plus visible que n'est le texte traduit." (2015: 74).

scientifically rigorous at a time. This is but one of the difficulties the translator had to face, besides the long complex sentences, the aphoristic force of most statements, the propensity towards synthesis and compression, towards metaphors and irony. Even political correctness becomes an issue and the translator needs to justify the choice of "indieni" instead of "amerindieni" to render the recurrent *Indians*.

But perhaps the greatest challenge of all was oscillating terminology used by Sapir. Terminology counts among the major difficulties of the translating process in the field of Humanities, and the fact that the original does not display a systematic range of vocabulary risks annihilating the imperative of coherence which should prevail in this type of translation. We can see clearly, by the end of the Translator's Note, that this is more a preface than a note, and one which allows for tension resolution (*résolution d'une tension*) (Sanconie, 2007: 174) between translator and text.

The translator also confesses at this point having practised literality in transposing the text into Romanian, but we feel this is not accurate. Just by looking at the motto of the book and at one of Sapir's maxims translated in the Translator's Note, the very opposite transpires:

Language is the most massive and inclusive art we know, a mountainous and anonymous work of unconscious generations.	MOTTO: Limba este cea mai extraordinară şi mai atotcuprinzătoare artă pe care o cunoaştem, opera uriaşă şi anonimă a activităţii inconştiente a nenumărate generaţii.
All grammars leak.	Nici o gramatică nu este perfectă. (p. 20)

The aphoristic force, irony and metaphor mentioned in the Translator's Note are indeed inherent to the author's style and are visible from the very first lines (see below an example from the Preface to the 1921 edition):

The perspective thus gained will be useful, I hope, both to linguistic students and to the outside public that is half inclined to dismiss linguistic notions as the private pedantries of essentially idle minds.	Perspectiva astfel obţinută va fi, sper, de folos celor care studiază limba, dar şi publicului nespecialist care este cît de cît dispus să respingă unele concepţii despre limbă ca pe o paradă de erudiţie a unor minţi fără ocupaţie. (p. 23)

The various aphorisms throughout the book are carefully transposed in the target language: *...the classification of languages has generally proved a fruitless undertaking. It is probably the most powerful deterrent of all to clear* *thinking*. / "...clasificarea limbilor s-a dovedit, în general, o întreprindere sterilă. Este probabil cel mai puternic inhibitor al gîndirii limpezi." [p. 125]; *Every language can and must express the fundamental syntactic relations even though there is not a single affix to be found in its vocabulary*. / "Fiecare limbă poate şi trebuie să exprime relaţii sintactice fundamentale, chiar dacă nu există un singur afix în tot vocabularul său." [p. 126]; *...classifications, neat constructions of the speculative mind, are slippery things*. / ... "clasificările, ca edificii ordonate ale gîndirii speculative, sînt înşelătoare." [p. 141]; *Languages are in constant process of change, but it is only reasonable to suppose that they tend to preserve longest what is most fundamental in their structure.* / "Limbile sînt într-un constant proces de schimbare, dar putem face presupunerea rezonabilă că au tendinţa de a păstra mai mult ceea ce este mai fundamental în structura lor." [p. 141]; *Language exists only in so far as it is actually used—spoken and heard, written and read.* / "O limbă există în măsura în care este folosită – vorbită şi auzită, scrisă şi citită." [p. 149]; *The uneducated folk that says* Who did you see? *with no twinge of conscience has a more acute flair for the genuine drift of the language than* ***its*** *students.* / "Oamenii needucaţi, care spun *Who did you see?* fără nici un sentiment de vinovăţie, au un simţ mai ascuţit al direcţiei reale în care merge limba decît cei care o studiază." [p. 155]. The Romanian versions of these maxims are all indicative of target-orientedness rather than literalness, although a certain obedience to the original is discernible as far as the syntactic corset is concerned.

Irony is also well preserved in translation: *When I say, for instance, "I had a good breakfast this morning," it is clear that* ***I am not in the throes of laborious thought****...* / "... este clar că nu sînt **în chinurile unei gîndiri foarte elaborate**..." [p. 32].

Sapir's extensive use of metaphor is yet another trial: language typology is explained in geographical terms (*When we come to English, we seem to notice that the hills have dipped down a little, yet we recognize the general lay of the land*. / "Cînd ajungem la engleză, simţim că dealurile au devenit mai domoale, dar recunoaştem aceeaşi configuraţie a terenului." [p. 123]; *Language is the medium of literature as marble or bronze or clay are the materials of the sculptor.* / "Limba este mediul literaturii tot aşa cum marmura sau bronzul sau lutul sînt materialele sculptorului." [p. 203] and they are equally poetic in Romanian.

Sometimes words are added: *We readers of many books...* **/** "Noi, cititori educaţi şi cu lecturi bogate..." [p. 150]; *The way is now cleared for a serviceable definition of langu*age. / "Prin aceste clarificări am deschis pînă acum calea pentru o definiţie solidă a limbii."; chapter two: *The Elements of Speech* / "Elementele constitutive ale vorbirii". At other times, they are omitted: *But we have traveled a little too fast.* / "Dar **poate** că am înaintat puţin cam repede." [p. 32]; *in the lap of a society* / "în societate" [p. 25]. Nevertheless, the translation is generally engaged in close observation of the deductive strategy and the *feeling-tone* [încărcătura emoţională a cuvintelor, p. 52] of the English text.

Although Sapir confessed his intention was not to deliver a very "scientific" course, his book on *Language* does contain a number of concepts (*e.g.* composition, affixation, reduplication, internal vocalic or consonantal change, in chapter IV. *Form in Language: Grammatical Processes / Forma în Limbă: Procesele Gramaticale*) and the translator's effort to maintain a coherent terminological configuration is decidedly commendable.

Duly warned by the Translator's Note that not all of Sapir's tenets expressed in *Language...* were equally long-standing (we assume she means the tabular statement of grammatical processes in chapter V *Form in Language: Grammatical Concepts / Forma în Limbă: Concepte gramaticale* or the set of distinctions between analytic, synthetic and polysynthetic languages), the reader will enjoy Sapir's analogies (*e.g.* speaking versus walking), his concern with the psychological profile of languages (English versus German, Indo-European languages versus other families etc.), his colourful description of the human speech organs which lionises the nose (chapter III *The Sounds of Language / Sunetele limbii*), his discussion of (uneducated) accusative *who* vs. *whom*, his rejection of the theory of borrowing, his splendid demonstration of how a phonetic law (*umlaut*), meaningless in itself, may eventually transform large reaches of the morphology of a language (chapter VIII *Language as a Historical Product: Phonetic Law / Limba ca produs istoric: Legea fonetică*), ultimately his highly synthetic style: *Incidentally we have observed that one language runs to* ***tight−knit synthesis*** *where another contents itself with a* ***more analytic, piece−meal handling*** *of its elements...* [p. 123].

With the possible exception of a logical error (*We now come to the difference between an "inflective" and an "agglutinative" language. As I have already remarked, the distinction is a useful,* ***even a necessary, one...*** **/** "Am ajuns acum la diferenţa dintre limbile „flexionare" şi cele „aglutinante". Aşa cum am remarcat, distincţia, deşi utilă, **nu este neapărat necesară**..." [p. 128]), this Romanian edition of Sapir's *Language...* is impeccable and all chapters are read with great interest and enjoyment. The last two pages of the book contain the bibliography used by the translator in her research. In short, it seems fitting to acknowledge that Teodora Ghivirigă's work on Sapir's *Language...* is a good example of work on/with language(s) in general.

Edward Sapir, *Despre limbă: o introducere în studiul vorbirii*,
translated by Teodora Ghivirigă,
Casa Editorială *Demiurg*, Iaşi, 2016, 228 p.

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