

***Pygmalion* and the Latest Slang or Translating Undercover**

Livia-Mara SOCOLIUC

Ștefan cel Mare University, Suceava, Romania

As if I ever stop thinking about the girl and her confounded vowels and consonants. I'm worn out, thinking about her, and watching her lips and her teeth and her tongue, not to mention her soul, which is the quaintest of the lot

George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*, Act III

Abstract:

Translating classical texts raises the issue of rendering not only the lexical and cultural complexities of a different culture but also filling in the age gap for the modern reader no longer aware of certain social standards, connotations, etiquette etc. To what extent do we operate on a text, do we overwrite or remain faithful to the writer? The article compares two versions of the same translation of G.B.Shaw's *Pygmalion*, both authored by Petru Comarnescu. The first translation was published in 1963, while Comarnescu was still alive, and is quite a remarkable one. The second translation was published in 2015, 45 years after Comarnescu's death, with his name on the cover yet with alterations which are at times questionable, if not unprofessional. With the obvious intent of making Shaw accessible to young generations, the editors of the 2015 translation took advantage of the "all rights reserved" stipulation and reshaped it to what they deemed to be a desirable form.

Key-words: updating translation, slang, preserving specificity, dialogue

The very fragment quoted as the motto of the article could be the quintessence/*Ars Poetica* of a translator's work: long hours of endless searching for words, rhymes, sounds, rhythms, and last but not least, meanings.

Shaw's work is indissolubly connected in Romania with the name of Petru Comarnescu. A fine intellectual born in 1905 in Iași, recipient of a PhD at the University of Southern California (*The Nature of Beauty and Its Relation to Goodness*, published in Romanian under the title *Kalokagathon*), Comarnescu was an important figure of his time but he was denigrated in recent years for having collaborated with the former communist secret services. Irrespective of that, his work, not only as a translator, but also as a publicist and literary critic, is impressive and his name can still be found, almost half a century after his death, on re-editions of his translations. Such is the case of the 2015 Litera edition of *Pygmalion*.

Comarnescu's translation of *Pygmalion* was first published in 1963 by *Biblioteca pentru toți* part of *Editura pentru literatură*, with a reasonable introduction by Silvian Iosifescu. The first edition, the 1963 one, was published as such, with no footnotes. They were not considered necessary as Shaw was considered a writer who unveiled the ugly face of capitalism and the social inequities of that period. This is probably why *Pygmalion* was also published in an abridged English version at *Editura Didactică și Pedagogică* in 1971, edition supervised by Virginia Barghel. The short preface acclaims the socialist preoccupations Shaw

had, and mentions that the edition is addressed to highschool students. It is a very instructive edition actually, with plenty of explanatory footnotes referring to vocabulary. I suspect, Shaw's "socialist" touch accounts for the broadcasting of *My Fair Lady*, the screen version, on TV during the socialist regime and his Shaw's 'break' on the literary stage in Romania.

In 1990, almost 30 years later after the first print in Romanian, Comarnescu's translation was re-edited by *Editura Albatros* (20 years after his death), in a critical edition (*Lyceum Collection*) by Horia Hulban, with extended footnotes and critical references. Hulban addressed the young readers with the intention of making Shaw known and shed plenty of information, most useful, I think, concerning the times when it was written. Comarnescu's version of the translation was respected thoroughly, excepting a word or two perhaps, meaningless changes due probably to editing.

Editura Litera proudly re-edited *Pygmalion* in 2015, as part of *Clasici moderni* series, in a commercial edition, with a 1925 Nobel Prize label on the cover, and an illustration representing a most beautiful and graceful, virginally sexy flower girl whom I failed to recognize as Eliza Doolittle. I found, not without surprise, that Comarnescu had somehow managed from beyond the grave to master an updated version of his old translation, 45 years after his death, and 52 years after the first edition, or at least that's what we find out on the front page of the book. Of course, half a century means new target readers, with different perception of language, social norms etc, especially when we refer to a text written almost a hundred years ago. The

2015 Litera version makes radical changes under the umbrella of copyright, with the obvious intention of making the text more appealing, and not necessarily more explicit or reader-friendly.

Pygmalion is a challenging text in itself, difficult to translate in any language as any text containing dialectal speech will be. Comarnescu obviously enjoyed the challenge since he tried his hand on Twain, too. Eliza Doolittle, proud speaker of unintelligible Cockney, sounds a lot like a Romanian flower girl, "florăreasă", with a low social status, nothing resembling the elegant owner of a flower shop nowadays. Other characters in the first act borrow the Moldavian dialect, the choice being probably motivated by Comarnescu's background (he was born in Iași). Nonetheless, Comarnescu's translation is quite faithful to the original and denotes thorough understanding of the language he translated from. I'll have to say the "improved" 2015 version takes interpreting the text a bit too far, and makes linguistic compromises for the sake of sounding more interesting to the ears of modern readers who, just as Clara, are only interested in a text written in "the latest slang", as Mrs. Eynsford Hill points out in the 3rd act: "*MRS EYNSFORD HILL: Only, Clara is so down on me if I am not positively reeking with the latest slang. Good-bye.*" (Act III)

I will embark upon a short comparative incursion into the first act to prove my point. Some minor changes can be noticed from the very beginning of the first act:

Original version	Comarnescu 1963 version	“Comarnescu” /Litera 2015 version
Torrents of heavy summer rain.	Șiroaie de ploaie repede de vară.	Ploaie torențială de vară
Cab whistles blowing frantically in all directions.	Din toate părțile se aud fluierături disperate după birji.	Din toate direcțiile se aud fluierături disperate după trăsurii.
...one man ..., who seems wholly preoccupied with a notebook in which he is writing busily.	...un bărbat ...părînd cu totul absorbit de cele ce înseamnă mereu într-un carnețel.	...un bărbat ...părînd cu totul absorbit de cele ce notează încontinuu într-un carnețel.
The church clock strikes the first quarter.	Orologiul bisericii bate primul sfert.	-

One can easily notice Comarnescu’s version is very neat and faithful to the original text to a large extent. I might even say that the fact that Comarnescu’s version has a certain lexical time patina, makes the translation sound more realistic and in harmony with the period when the action in the play is supposed to have happened. This opinion seems not to have been shared by the editors of the 2015 version. They obviously try to bring the text to modern times, and adapt the translation using the idiomatic preferences of the young generation. Thus “șiroaiele

de ploaie repede” (beautiful translation of “torrents of heavy rain”) becomes “ploaie torențială”, “birja” becomes “trăsură”, ”a însemna” becomes ”a nota”, and the church clock simply doesn’t strike at all, although it did back in 1914 and also in 1965 when *church* was not even a desirable word to use in a text published under the communist censorship.

The warm up being done, the editors become more and more asserting in re-shaping Comarnescu’s translation. The first time Eliza and Freddy meet, still unaware of the lifetime connection they will have later, she scolds him for not watching his way and knocking over her flower basket: “*Nah then, Freddy: look wh’ y’ gowin, deah.*”. Comarnescu translated it in 1963 “*Ce nu-ți caști ochii pe unde calci, Freddy?*”, the dialectal touch in Eliza’s speech being suggested in Romanian not by the use of a Moldavian dialect or any other, as in the case of other characters (THE BYSTANDER from SELSEY), but by the use of an idiomatic expression, “a căsca ochii”, for ”watch where you are going, will you” The 2015 “Comarnescu” version made it even a bit clearer to the modern reader: “Ei, alo, Freddy, holbează și tu felinarele pe unde calci!” (still Comarnescu’s version!). “Iartă-mă” says Freddy in 1963. Later, in 2015, he reconsiders his positions and he says “Pardon!”. That’s how “Sorry” from the original text evolved. At the end of the first act, we find a puzzled Freddy uttering in the rain “Well, I’m dashed!”. Comarnescu transposes poor Freddy’s state of mind: “Asta-i bună!”. The 2015 version puts a sign on him “Ei, bine, am rămas de fraier!” The reason why “Asta-i bună!” no longer complies to the linguistic expectations of a modern reader escapes my power of judgement.

On further reading, we find that the body of the original translation is obviously preserved, yet the translator(s) responsible with the 2015 version, seem to enjoy operating on the the original translation, (for which Editura Litera has “all rights reserved”), translating from

translation into what they deem as a more acceptable text for a modern reader.

Original version	Comarnescu 1963 version	“Comarnescu” /Litera 2015 version
very wet round the ankles	ud learcă la picioare	ud până la glezne
There’s not one to be had for love or money.	Nu poți găsi nici una, oricât ai da.	Nu găsești, nici dacă plătești.
It's too tiresome.	Asta-i bună!	Asta-i prea de tot!
helpless	papa-lapte	neajutorat
with next to nothing on	cu aproape nimica pe noi	aproape dezbrăcate
dashes off	se repede	se năpustește
Ow, ccz ye-ooa san, is e?	Va sa zică-i odrasla mățăluță?	Aoleu, al matale e?

The fact that the translator(s) who adapted Comarnescu’s work chose to modify phrases that were not problematic to begin with, not to mention obsolete, raises the question of utility/futility of the act. There are situations in which the change is shocking or

even hilarious. Let’s take for instance, the way THE MOTHER, that is Mrs. Eynsford Hill, the epitome of polite behavior and exquisite speech, urges her daughter not to intervene in her discussion with THE FLOWER GIRL.

Original version	Comarnescu 1963 version	“Comarnescu” /Litera 2015 version
Please allow me, Clara.	Te rog lasă-mă, Clara.	Te rog, Clara, scutește-mă!” [Please, Clara, spare me!]
Do hold your tongue, Clara.	Lasă, Clara.	Tacă-ți gura, Clara! [Shut your mouth, Clara!]

Comarnescu manages here quite well to render the ladylike composure and self-restraint of Mrs. Eynsford Hill’s choice of words. No exclamation mark is used by Shaw or Comarnescu. The Litera translator(s) turns the poor lady into a bossy woman with quasy-abusive language and adds an exclamation mark to set things straight.

The cherry on the top of this *undercover* translation, as I called it in the title, seems to be the following description, where

we can find some sort of a drug squad officer, “polițai de la droguri” [Narcotics copper] at the beginning of the 19 th century.

Original version	Comarnescu 1963 version	“Comarnescu” /Litera 2015 version
<p>THE BYSTANDER (inapt at definition) It's a —well, it's a <i>copper's nark</i>, as you might say. What else would you call it? A sort of <i>informer</i>.</p>	<p>CETĂȚEANUL (greoi la definiție): Ista, ista-i un fel de <i>copoi</i> cum s-ar zice. Cum ai mai putea să-i zici_Un fel de <i>informator</i>.</p>	<p>CETĂȚEANUL (incapabil să definească): Ei, cum să vă zic io, un fel dă...Un fel dă <i>polițai de la droguri</i>. Cum să-I mai zici altfel_ Un fel de <i>ciripitor</i>.</p>

This is one of the instances when one wonders if the translator(s) of the 2015 Romanian edition even bothered to read the whole text or find out about the time and social context of the period it belongs /refers to. Had they done so, they might have felt compelled to look up the term ‘nark’, a slang term which indicates a “police decoy or spy” (the Concise English Dictionary), an informer, as the intra-textual text suggests. Moreover, the rendering of informer from the original text as slang ‘ciripitor’ [snitcher] by Litera does nothing but confuse the reader, who might not be aware of the its meaning and even if they do so, they will be puzzled by the logical improbability, as a Narcotics copper is not an informer/snitcher but has other informers work for him.

In general, the alterations are mainly applied to dialogues, which were spiced up with updated slang phrases, whereas longer paragraphs or settings of the scene are left as such, which makes me think that what they did with the 2015 Litera edition was a mere lift up of an aging translation.

To the lovers of Shaw's works, this abrupt bringing up to date of the text, by means of its translation is somehow an impiety. Comarnescu's translation managed to render quite elegantly the scent of a time unknown to the young readers today and has not been, in my opinions, neither surpassed, neither improved by its "adaptation" by Litera, *mutatis mutandis*. It is up to the readers to decide what version they like in the end. It's a bit hard to keep a stiff upper lip when you compete with best sellers in a commercial world. After all diversity is the spice of life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BANTAȘ, Andrei and CROITORU, Elena (1998): *Didactica traducerii*, București, Teora.

BOIA, Lucian, editor (2014): *Dosarele secrete ale agentului Anton*, București, Editura Humanitas.

DIMITRIU, Rodica (2002): *Theories and Practice of Translation*, Iași, Institutul European.

FOWLER, H.W. and FOWLER, F.G. (1993): *The Concise English Dictionary*, adapted from The Oxford Dictionary, București, Prietenii Cărții.

GROȘU, Monica (2008): *Petru Comarnescu, un neliniștit în secolul său. Studiu monografic*, București, Colecția Biblioteca Tânărilor Scriitor, Casa Cărții de Știință.

- SHAW, George Bernard (2016): *Pygmalion*, Wisehouse Classics.
- SHAW, George Bernard (1963): *Cezar și Cleopatra*, București, Biblioteca pentru toți.
- SHAW, George Bernard (1990): *Pygmalion*, București, Editura Albatros.
- SHAW, George Bernard (1971): *Pygmalion*, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.
- SHAW, George Bernard (2015): *Pygmalion*, București, Editura Litera.