# TRANSLATION DIMENSION OF WORDPLAY FROM ENGLISH INTO ROMANIAN

*Gabriela ŞAGANEAN*

*Moldova State University*

The aim of the article is to determine the level of translatability of wordplay (pun) from English into Romanian based on Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in which the writer used wordplay with communicative and social functions: teasing and provoking both characters and readers, amusing the audience by making it laugh at or with the characters.

The corpus of examples proves that wordplay serves to create a communicative effect, be it humorous, attention-getting or influential. However, it is a complex phenomenon, particularly when translating pun from one language to another. This is because it is based upon linguistic structures which differ from language to language. Therefore, it may be difficult to transfer the meaning of puns from one language to another because of the lack of equivalents in the TL.

The study also demonstrates that puns are not untranslatable, and that the effect of a ST pun is possible to be transferred to the TT by providing a corresponding target text pun. When a corresponding pun into the TL is not found, it is replaced with a non-pun and when the translator had no choice and resorted to zero translation, they used editorial techniques to explain the wordplay to the curious readers and future translators.

***Keywords***: *equivalence, homophony,  pun, source text, target text, translation strategies, target text, translatability.*

## DIMENSIUNEA TRADUCTOLOGICĂ A JOCULUI DE CUVINTE
## DIN LIMBA ENGLEZĂ ÎN LIMBA ROMÂNĂ

Scopul articolului este de a determina nivelul de traductibilitate a jocului de cuvinte (calamburului) în literatura artistică din limba engleză în limba română, în baza operei *Aventurile lui Alice în ţara minunilor*, de Lewis Carroll, în care scriitorul a folosit jocul de cuvinte cu funcţii comunicative şi sociale: tachinarea şi provocarea atât a personajelor, cât şi a cititorilor, amuzând publicul şi făcându-l să râdă de personaje sau împreună cu ele.

Corpusul de exemple demonstrează că jocul de cuvinte serveşte la crearea unui efect comunicativ, prin prisma umorului, atragerea atenţiei sau având un caracter influent. Cu toate acestea, este un fenomen complex, în special atunci când traducem jocul de cuvinte dintr-o limbă în alta. Acest lucru se datorează faptului că acesta se bazează pe structuri lingvistice care diferă de la o limbă la alta. Prin urmare, poate fi dificil de transferat sensul jocurilor de cuvinte dintr-o limbă în alta din cauza lipsei de echivalenţi în limba ţintă.

Studiul demonstrează, de asemenea, că jocurile de cuvinte nu sunt intraductibile şi că efectul unui joc de cuvinte din limba sursă poate fi transferat în limba ţintă prin crearea unui echivalent adecvat. Atunci când nu se găseşte un joc de cuvinte corespunzător în limba ţintă, acesta este înlocuit cu un non-joc de cuvinte şi sunt folosite tehnici editoriale pentru a-l explica cititorilor curioşi şi viitorilor traducători.

***Cuvinte-cheie***: *echivalenţă, homofonie, joc de cuvinte,  strategii de traducere,  text sursă, text ţintă, traductibilitate.*

## Introduction

There is a strong connection between creativity and language, since language was created by humans and has a high creative potential, leading to development. Language users add inventive structures to the conventional rules either voluntarily or not. Linguistic creativity regarding pun as a kind of wordplay can bring unusual semantic density to the text, triggering unconventional associative connections and a particular aesthetic effect and acts as figurative, stylistic, and grammatical expressions with a specific humorous effect. The reader gets caught among different thoughts and emotions caused by violating the conventional rules of the language use and expanding its borders.

The aim of this work is to consider the extent to which the meaning of the pun in the original language is kept, changed or lost in the target language. It is frequently stated that the translated versions lose a great deal of their humour since language jokes, mainly puns, are seldom successfully translated. They include a great number of literal translations and direct copies of the English words which not only are humourless, but also hard to comprehend in the target language. According to H.R. Morgan, "humour is the first thing to go in translation" and creativity is what translation of humour demands [1].

## The concept of pun

Pun triggers a humorous effect and is related to the similar or identical phonological representation of words with different meanings and its translation. The pun is a sort of play that explores multiple meanings of a word, or of similar-sounding words, for humorous or rhetorical effect.

Puns are ancient rhetorical devices with multi-functional effects, some of them being brevity and humour. They are language phenomena combining certain contexts, in order to provide two meanings at the same time. Puns have a long history starting from Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs that were originally based on punning, and the Roman playwright Plautus who was famous for his word games. Punning has been considered as an essential concept behind alphabets and writing. They were found in ancient Egypt, for developing myths and interpreting dreams. The Hebrew Bible also contains puns. In ancient Mesopotamia scribes used punning to represent words in cuneiform, whereas the Maya used puns in their hieroglyphic writing. A pun means playing with words, producing a humorous effect caused by two or more meanings of a word. Names of fictional characters often imply puns. A pun is a word game that differs from other plays on words (like rhymes, anagrams or spoonerisms) in phonological representation of similar or identical looking words.

In the *Webster's Third International Dictionary* a pun is "a humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest different meanings or applications, or of words having the same or nearly the same sound but different meanings: a play on words" [2]. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines it as "use of words that have more than one meaning and makes people laugh" [3]. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* a pun is "the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect" [4]. These and other definitions have in common *a play on words* and *humour.* Therefore, puns challenge the readers to violate the law of the nature and to put together two realities that normally cannot coexist. Moreover, punning makes language more concise and funny, leaving deep impressions on the readers.

D.Crystal describes wordplay in the following manner: "We play with language when we manipulate it as a source of enjoyment, either for ourselves or for the benefit of others. I mean 'manipulate' literally: we take some linguistic feature – such as a word, a phrase, a sentence, a part of a word, a group of sounds, a series of letters – and make it do things it does not normally do. We are, in effect, bending and breaking the rules of the language. And if someone were to ask why we do it, the answer is simply: for fun" [5, p.73]. Wordplay requires the readers to use background knowledge and challenges them to 'solve' the puns. Wordplay can be based on pronunciation, spelling, morphology, vocabulary or syntax.

### Techniques of Translating Wordplay

Comparing various translation studies on puns, untranslatability seems to have stronger reasons. This happens because puns are not balanced. They oscillate between concrete facts and nonsense, between dramatic and humorous situations, between raised and lowered status. Besides, wordplay translation has always been hard because of the double meanings together with the phonological and semantic features that cannot easily be kept when transposing into languages belonging to different families.

Therefore, some scholars state that all cognitive actions can be rendered in any existing language, whereas the others believe that wordplay needs to be ignored in order to keep the context invariant. It seems to be a common belief that puns can be understood only in their original form and solely by the native speakers. As a result, they are believed to be untranslatable, unless the source and the target language have the same cultural meanings and linguistic structures. However, such parallels between languages are very rare. A divergent point of view arises from some scholars who state that almost all puns can be translated. Some studies on pun translation in the field of literature show that the translators succeed in translating wordplay while upholding the play on words *and* the sense. Therefore, written wordplays can actually be translated into another language.

Other researches reach the conclusion that it is a question of coincidence whether the target text translations contain the essential technical, textual and functional aspects as the source text wordplays.

A. Veisbergs writes about the semantic and structural transformation the authors experience for the sake of creating wordplay and the techniques needed for a successful translation: "Several translation techniques are: the use of an equivalent, loan translation, extension, analogue transformation, substitution, compensation, loss of wordplay, and metalingual comment. The considerations of these techniques also point up a number of priorities to weighed in individual cases, as well as some of the constraints under which translators have to operate. The author starts from the assumption that translators should strive for equivalent effect" [6, p.155].

In her book *Translation and Translation Studies: Introduction to Translation* (2001), the researcher and translator A. Hurtado Albir defines five literary translation techniques. Among them there are: adaptation

(where one cultural element is replaced by another typical of the receiving culture; here the most important thing is the actual meaning of the message, not its words); amplification (which adds new linguistic elements in the target text, using a paraphrase to explain a word that has no equivalent in the target language); elision (which involves removing items so that they do not appear in the target text and improve the stylistic quality of the translated work); borrowing (which uses a word or expression with no modification, if taken from a third language, or a familiar expression, or an untranslatable expression) and compensation – the technique that is used for translating wordplay. In the last case a piece of information is moved to another location in the text to enhance the effect [7, p.273].

D.Delabastita wrote special articles to study the translation of puns, starting from the point that the main problem in translation of puns is not achieving the equivalence with SL in terms of structure, feature, semantics and pragmatics. But these problems can be solved using certain strategies: pun to pun translation (they may differ in form or semantic structure); pun to non-pun translation; pun to irony, repetition, alliteration; omission of the pun; copying the original pun without translating it; non-pun to pun translation, to compensate for previous losses; insertion of a new pun, also to compensate for previous losses; use of footnotes or endnotes [8].

A proper translation of wordplay demands the translator's decision whether to give up equivalence on the autofunctional linguistic level or not. Thus, the translator cannot predict if the text will have a loss or a gain. So, this uncertainty about the result makes the translators hesitate about going on the lexico-syntactic level and they prefer a safer variant. It is considered that puns based on Graeco-Latinisms with related equivalents in the SL and the TL are easier to be translated. If its goal is just to provoke laughter, it can be compensated by another pun with a different but related meaning, whereas puns focused on the sense have to be rendered in both senses in the TL. These principles can help the translators deal with puns.

**Contrastive Analysis of Pun Translation**

Our corpus is based on the novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its translation into Romanian by B. Popescu that provides enjoyment for the readers, but also problems for the translators. Carroll's language is full of humour, nonsense and wordplay, which many scholars believe untranslatable because of structural and typological dissimilarity of the source and target language, whereas treating wordplay as a phenomenon requiring textual solution increases translatability. If translators reflect about wordplay functions, they will find efficient techniques to translate them.

Our examples are puns based on *homophony*. The English pronunciation can be pretty weird. Some words sound the same but have different meanings. The pronunciation of a word in English may not be the same as its spelling. English has many vowel sounds, many silent letters, and lots of words that come from many other different languages. As a result, there are also lots of homophones in English. However, homophones are often used intentionally in wordplay in order to create puns and to deceive the reader or to suggest multiple meanings.

Nevertheless, homophones may consist of units longer than words, such as phrases that are pronounced similarly as other words or phrases. At this point, an interesting example was found in the Mock Turtle's memories. The units "*tortoise*" and "*taught us*" have similar pronunciation. Thus, the Mock Turtle does not make a distinction between them, while Alice is aware of the two different significations. *"Why did you call him **Tortoise**, if he wasn't one?" Alice sked. /"We called him Tortoise because he **taught us**" said the Mock Turtle angrily.*

The tortoise is "a slow-moving typically herbivorous land reptile of warm climates, enclosed in a scaly or leathery domed shell into which it can retract its head and thick legs" [4]. It is pronounced ['tɔ:təs], whereas *taught us*, which is formed of the Simple Past form of the verb *teach* and the first person plural pronoun *us*, is pronounced as ['tɔ:t ʌs]. The difference is only one sound. That is how the writer played with these homophones, creating humour and ambiguity for the target readers.

However, in Romanian there is no *tortoise*. The translator found another pun, replacing the animal with a bird – *privighetoare* (in English the back translation is *nightingale*) and two verbs *privea* and *veghea* that share similar sounds to this bird.

*"Dar de ce-i ziceați așa? Că doar nu era **Privighetoare?**", întrebă Alice. /"Îi ziceam **Privighetoare**, fiindcă ne **privea** și ne **veghea**".*

Another example of pun based on homophony is in the third chapter where the Mouse tells Alice his history. The pun results from the homophony of the words *tale – tail*, both pronounced [teɪl]. *"Mine is a long*

*and sad **tale**!" said the Mouse, turning to Alice, and sighing. "It is a long **tail**, certainly," said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse's tail; "but why do you call it sad?"*

In the Romanian translation, the Mouse does not say anything about *tale* or *tail*. He only says: "*It is long and sad.*" Although, Alice thinks he is referring to his tail. *"Mi-ai promis, ţii minte, că-mi spui **povestea** ta (...)/- E lungă şi tristă!", zise Şoarecele, întorcându-se şi oftând adânc. -"E lungă, într-adevăr," zise Alice, măsurând din ochi, cu uimire, **coada** Şoarecelui, "dar de ce spui că e şi **tristă**?"*

The aim of wordplay translation that is being playful and humorous was reached with the help of the descriptive adjectives that refer to *tale* and not *tail*, preserving the intentional ambiguity. Therefore, there is no homophony in the Romanian version, yet the wordplay was still kept by means of compensation.

A similar example, as illustrated above, is in the tenth chapter, also in the conversation between Alice and the Mock Turtle. The words "*porpoise*" and "*purpose*" are mainly identical in pronunciation ['pɔːpəs], the difference being only in one sound. Although, in Oxford Dictionary *porpoise* is defined as "a small toothed whale with a low triangular dorsal fin and a blunt rounded snout" (is has some common features with dolphins), whereas purpose is "the reason for which something is done or created or for which something exists" [3].

*"Why, if a fish came to me, and told me he was going a journey", I should say "With what **porpoise**?"* – *"Don't you mean **purpose**?" said Alice.* Here Lewis Carroll's example is clearly based on the words *purpose* and *porpoise*. Most translators would take this pun as untranslatable.

The Romanian translator decided to keep the fidelity of the source text and to provide the equivalents into the target language with no change. So he wrote: "*Dacă un peşte ar veni la mine şi mi-ar spune că pleacă într-o călătorie, l-aş întreba "Cu ce **delfin**?"* – *"Nu cumva vrei să spui - Cu ce **scop**?"*

He added, though, some footnotes, where he makes sure the reader would understand this instance of homophony. However, footnotes are mostly for teenagers or adults. It is quite possible that children will neither understand the pun while listening to the story, nor read the footnotes to comprehend the pun. They will just pass over and forget about it. So this fragment of Romanian text has no humorous effect and the pun becomes useless.

There was another moment in the story when Alice was puzzled, and while the Mouse was speaking, he notices her absent-minded. *"You are not attending!" said the Mouse to Alice severely. "What are you thinking of? I beg your pardon," said Alice very humbly: "you had got to the fifth bend, I think?" I had **not**!" cried the Mouse, sharply and very angrily. "A **knot**!" said Alice, always ready to make herself useful, and looking anxiously about her. "Oh, do let me help to undo it!".*

In this case we deal with the pair of homophones *not* and *knot*, both pronounced [nɒt]. The first element of this pair is used with an auxiliary verb to form the negative. The second element of the pair is a polysemantic noun, which in our case signifies "a fastening made by looping a piece of string, rope, or something similar on itself and tightening it" [4].

In one of the Romanian translations, the equivalent for "*not*" is *nu* and for "*knot*" is *nod*.

*-"Ba nu!" Strigă Şoarecele, ascuţit şi foarte serios./-"**Banu?**"! Spuse Alice, gata să sară în ajutor, şi uitându-se cu frică în jurul ei – "Lasă-mă să te ajut să-l cauţi!"*

Thus, as there is no homophony between them, the translator needs to find another pair of words to keep the humour and to justify Alice's reply. He introduces the pair of homophones *ba nu – banu*. However, the meaning in English is lost i.e. Alice offers her help in looking for a coin and not for undoing a knot.

Let us not discard the fact that the term *homophone* may also apply to units shorter than words, such as letters or groups of letters that are pronounced as another letter of group of letters. Such an example was found in the dialogue between the King and the Hatter.

*"I hadn't begun my tea – not above a week or so – and what with the bread-and-butter getting so thin – and the twinkling of the tea". "The twinkling of the what?" said the King. "It began with the **tea**," the Hatter replied. "Of course twinkling begins with a **T**!" said the King sharply.*

In English, *tea* and *T* are both pronounced [tiː]. The King is confused, as he does not understand that the Mad Hatter refers to the *tea-party* and not to the letter *T*. When listening to the story, this sentence can be misunderstood, but only when reading, the meaning is recognizable and the pun can be understood properly.

In Romanian, the things are a little different. The translator attempted to keep both the *tea* and the *T*; so he makes some changes within the dialogue: - "*Abia dacă mi-am început ceaiul de-o săptămână-două şi ba cu pâinea cu unt care se tot subţia... şi cu clipocitul ceaiului.../ - "Clipocitul cui? spuse Regele. / -"Am început cu **ce**..." - răspunse Pălărierul./ -"Bineînţeles că clipocit începe cu **C**", spuse Regele tăios.*

The Hatter tries to say that *It began with the tea*, that is *Am început cu ceaiul* but he is interrupted by the King and the only sounds he manages to utter are *ce,* which coincide with the Romanian pronunciation of the letter *C.* So, the translator allows the target reader to receive the effects intended by the author, sacrificing the fidelity of the text. This technique puts the functional relevance of the pun at the top of priorities. This causes misunderstanding and justifies the King's fury. Carroll's text abounds in puns.

Here is another one, but unlike the previous example, the process is inverted, that is from an example of homophony, the translators reached to an instance of polysemy. In the source text, the dialogue between Alice and the Duchess looks like this: *"Which would not be an advantage," said Alice, who felt very glad to get an opportunity of showing off a little of her knowledge. "Just think of what work it would make with the day and night! You see the earth takes twenty four hours to turn round on its **axis**". –"Talking of **axes**," said the Duchess, "chop off her head!"*. Here, the two meanings of the word *axes* – one related to the movement of the Earth, and another – as a tool for cutting, cause confusion in the reader's mind. The Romanian translator does not touch the noun *axes* either, but, at least, he keeps the wordplay, using the verb *a răsuci*. We consider this strategy a relevant one as it preserves the pun and it achieves the intended effect from the original text.  – "*Pământul are nevoie de douăzeci şi patru de ore ca să se **răsucească** în jurul axei sale. /Că tot veni vorba de **răsucit**," zise Ducesa, "**Răsuciţi**-i gâtul!"*  This is only one out of many examples which demonstrate how ridiculous the powerful characters in the story are. The author makes fun of the Queen because she permanently orders somebody's execution, but in fact nobody is executed.

**Conclusions**

The concept of *pun* has many definitions, but after having investigated many sources, a common idea is that it can be defined as a figure of speech consisting of an intended confusion of similar words or phrases for rhetorical and/or humorous effect. Puns are language phenomena which comprise formal similarity and meaning dissimilarity. They are rhetorical devices used in conversation, literary works, riddles, and jokes, and they have a strong expressive power. There are some discrepancies between linguistic meanings; therefore, wordplay shows oppositions on various levels (homophony, polysemy, syntactic structure, etc.).

The translation of wordplay can be affected by several linguistic and extra-linguistic phenomena. The lexical differences between languages as wordplay is a play on form, the similarity between the forms implies less effort to reproduce the original pun. Structural differences and similarities between the languages indeed affect the process and result of translation. The relative importance of original or reproduced wordplay is a function of the relative importance of form. The translator's own knowledge of the source language culture(s) and literature(s): literary and cultural references can only be perceived if the translator knows the source. The richer their cultural development is, the more creative their translation decisions are. The translator's mastery of the target language and rhetorical skills: only mastering their native language and knowing how to deal with wordplay, a successful translation will be performed with a great effect on the readers.

Wordplay is translatable in any language, because every language has polysemantic words and languages function as a set of signs which can be combined in many ways. Translation is a challenging and creative process, through which the translator is expected to accomplish particular functions: to render humour, to create ambiguity, to provoke social interplay, to show the linguistic skills of a character, to invite the readers to reflect on words and context, to stimulate the brain towards social construction of meaning, to convey the information more efficiently, to make the utterance more impressive, memorable.

However, the translators are brought in front of the problem of translating apparently untranslatable puns, keeping their intended effect. They have to find creative solutions, though they encounter many difficulties, and to render the pun from the source text into the target text successfully.

When dealing with wordplay, the readers cognitively select and adjust their contextual assumptions. Thus, puns play an important role in language, offering colour and humour. If a joke is not translated as a joke, the translation is bad. Therefore, humour is translatable, if treated with suitable approaches and practical criteria for success.

The analysis of our examples shows that several strategies are employed by the translators once faced puns in the source text. However, a priority in translating a pun is to come up with something like an equivalent to the original in sound and meaning. Then compensation follows, and finally footnotes, which at least are better than a complete omission, but of little value in translating puns. The majority of puns have been adapted easily and successfully keeping the writer's intention.

It is true that sometimes puns need to be replaced because of certain cultural circumstances and the entertaining allusions are lost, but if the translator adopts efficient techniques and appropriate examples, his work will be successful and shining. Translators must work with puns, because they are challenging, enjoyable and long-lasting throughout generations.

**Bibliography:**

1. MORGAN, H. R. *Subtitling for Channel 4 Television.* In: Gambier, Yves & Henrik Gottlieb (eds). 2001, p.161-165.
2. *Webster's Third International Dictionary*Disponibil: **-**https://www.merriam-webster.com/. [Accesat: 19.12.2021]
3. *Oxford English Dictionary* Disponibil: -*https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com /* [Accesat: 19.12.2021]
4. *Collins English Dictionary* Disponibil: **-** https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english [Accesat: 19.12.2021]
5. CRYSTAL, D. *A dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, 6th edition, 2008.
6. VEISBERGS, A. The Contextual Use of Idioms, Wordplay, and Translation. In*: Traductio. Essays on Punning and Translation*. / D. Delabatista, St. Jerome Publishing, 1997, p.155-176.
7. HURTADO ALBIR, A. *Translation and Translation Studies: Introduction to Translation*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2001. 695 p.
8. DELABASTITA, D. *Introduction. In Wordplay and Translation. Special Issue of the Translator. Studies in Intercultural Communication*, 1991, 2.2., p.87-151.
9. JOSEP, M. *The translation of wordplay in literary texts*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Castello, Spain, 2011.
10. STUART, S. Deconstructing the Pun. In: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1987, p.326-334.
11. ZIRKER, A., WINTER-FROEMEL, E. Wordplay and Metalinguistic/Metadiscursive. In: *European Journal of Humour Research,* 2015, no5(1), p.99-101.
12. ŻYŚKO, K. *A Cognitive Linguistics Account of Wordplay*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

**Data about author:**
*Gabriela ŞAGANEAN*, PhD Associate Professor, Faculty of Letters, State University of Moldova.
**Email**: g_saganean@yahoo.com
**ORCID**: 0000-0001-7772-2405

*Prezentat la 28.03.2022*