

# THE BEGINNINGS OF TRANSLATIONS INTO ROMANIAN<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This paper proposes an analysis of language awareness issues as resulting from the brief comments that accompanied the translations carried out from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, period that concludes the modernisation of the Romanian language. At first, translators mainly dealt with Greek originals and they often express the difficulty to transpose Greek words into Romanian because of the structural difference of the two languages. Once Greek was substituted with Romance languages such as Italian or French, translators started introducing a large number of borrowings, realizing the ease of adapting Romance words to the specificity of Romanian. To be however sure that no mistakes were to be made about the meaning of these new terms, they used a significant number of glosses to explain them. A general characteristic of all translators during this period is that they constantly complained about the poorness of Romanian and wished to enrich it. Finally, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, translators had a well-established language to work with and expressed their awareness in debates or writings that contributed to the formation of the present-day Romanian language.*

**Keywords:** Romanian translations, 18<sup>th</sup> century, loanwords, modernisation

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## 1. Introduction

The idea of this paper came within the framework of a research project on the 18<sup>th</sup> century Romanian translations. The project implies the analysis of a considerable number of manuscripts (as most of these translations circulated only in manuscript copies) and we found that most translators were complaining about the huge difficulties they met in accomplishing their work. We are therefore briefly analysing the language awareness issues as resulting from the brief comments that accompanied the translations carried out from the second half of the

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18<sup>th</sup> century to the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, period that concludes the modernisation of the Romanian language and the establishment of an adequate vocabulary in all fields.

## **2. The Historical and Linguistic Context**

In order to clarify the context they were working in some historical and linguistic mentions should be made. Since ancient times until 1860, the Romanian territory had been divided into three independent principalities, Moldavia, Wallachia, and Transylvania. Little is known about the Romanian language before the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as the first written document available is a letter from 1521. This is an information note from a Wallachian merchant to a Transylvanian judge about the movements of the Turks on the Danube and the fact that it is written in Romanian shows there were no significant language differences between the principalities. The very few secular documents available before the 18<sup>th</sup> century do not permit a deeper analysis of the language in use. On the contrary, there are numerous examples of what became the literary language in all the three Romanian principalities under the influence of the Church. The Romanian Orthodox Church used Old Church Slavonic, then Greek, as cult language, which strongly limited people's access to the meaning of the service. Conscious of the necessity to make understandable the religious message, the high priests encouraged translations into Romanian so that, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, all major cult books, including the whole Bible, had a Romanian version with the contribution of scholars from all three provinces. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Moldavia and Wallachia were under the Ottoman Empire that imposed Greek rulers sent from Constantinople in 1711 (Moldavia) and 1716 (Wallachia). They came with their secretary and their chancelleries and the official court language switched from Church Slavonic to Greek. This meant a huge progress of the Romanian language as it diminished the Church influence and imposed a new cultural model. Greeks were very interested in education and cultural development, which was somehow hindered on their national territory but could almost freely manifest in the Romanian principalities. Thus they were in permanent contact with the emigration colonies in Venice and Vienna and brought to Bucharest and Iasi books printed there, mainly translations of western works that ranged from science to literature. In their turn, they were passed on to the Romanian noblemen who started translating them into Romanian. As a result, the accent switched from religious writings to secular texts and scholars who were translating Western European books started feeling the need for a specialised vocabulary to keep up with sciences, literature etc. At the same time, the fact that Transylvania was under Austrian occupation was a progress factor as Maria Theresa and Joseph II promoted education and encouraged young

Transylvanians to study in Austria, Germany or Italy and they came back with new and modern ideas.

The period between 1750 and 1860 is generally called the modernisation period of the Romanian literary language. It is a period characterised by a large number of linguistic changes triggered by the influence of Western European Enlightenment that brought about an increasing interest for secular texts, for science and education and therefore the need for the formation of a scientific terminology and of a proper language to be used for literature. The only way to achieve this goal was through the translation or elaboration of foreign texts. Translating became the main preoccupation of noblemen, scholars and clergymen, in an effort to provide Romanian schools with high level scientific books and to connect the Romanian readers with European literature. Whatever the origin and preoccupation of the translators, they all seemed to face the same difficulties they often verbalised in the forewords of their works.

### **3. Three Principalities, One Language**

The first issue to be dealt with regards the language intellectuals were translating into, the awareness of the existence of one single language for all the three principalities. Despite the division into different political entities, the consciousness of belonging to the same people was very present among Romanians, enhanced by the fact that the language they spoke was a Romance language, while the languages of the surrounding countries belonged to entirely different language families. Their identification with their language led to a constant tendency towards unity and cancellation of the few regional differences, promoted by most noblemen and intellectuals. They wanted to develop a rich and expressive language for all the Romanians and the collaboration between them had always been close. The translators of the 18<sup>th</sup> century were aware that their works would not be read only in the province where they were produced and were generally free of very regional lexical elements. At the same time, the regional variations (phonological or morphological) did not interfere with the understanding of the text and sometimes did not even allow the identification of the origin of the translator.

When starting their endeavour, the translators were very much concerned with finding a beautiful and regular form of the language they were translating into, this automatically leading to the same results in all three provinces. However a question could arise regarding the name they gave to their language, a name which was not always the same. Such

differences could suggest they were not aware of the fact that all Romanians spoke the same language. We can, however, prove the contrary by explaining where this difference came from and the motivations behind the use of the different ways of calling their language.

After reading numerous texts produced in Wallachia and Transylvania during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we could notice they bear the information that they were translated into “Romanian”<sup>2</sup>. This comes rather natural, as that was how the people and their language were called in those provinces. A different situation however is that of Moldavia, a stronger state with a stronger awareness of its identity, where people used to define themselves and their language as “Moldavian”<sup>3</sup>. The difference, however, is only in the name and it is probably related to a political preference rather than a linguistic one. Thus, Bishop Amfilohie of Hotin, who translated from Italian some schoolbooks destined to the Princely School of Iasi, capital of Moldavia, asserts that he turned them into “Moldavian”<sup>4</sup>. Other clergymen from Iasi, however, translators of religious texts meant to be used all over the Romanian Orthodox world, used the term “Romanian”<sup>5</sup>. The Moldavian nobleman Alecu Beldiman, interpreter of various literary texts, continually alternates the two terms (“Romanian” and “Moldavian”) without any perceivable difference in the language he uses, thus supporting the observation that the translators of the time considered the two words as synonyms, indicating rather the origin of the translator than a different language version. Moreover, when the translator was not satisfied with either of the two terms, a more general syntagmatic phrase was used, namely “the language of the Romanians”<sup>6</sup> or “our language”<sup>7</sup>, thus voiding it of any regional connotation.

#### 4. Translations from Unrelated Languages

During the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century translations can be split into two major categories: religious texts and Enlightenment scientific and literary works. For the first category there was a well-established tradition that allowed translators to carry out their work without significant difficulties. On the contrary, the intellectuals who attempted to translate scientific or literary texts were not as fortunate. They discovered that Romanian did not have

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<sup>2</sup> Cf., for instance, ms. 3551 BAR from 1731, ms. 2489 BAR from 1763, ms. 3720 BAR from 1769, ms. 3161 BAR from 1788, ms. 5805 BAR from 1803, etc. The abbreviation BAR stands for Biblioteca Academiei Romane (Romanian Academy Library) in Bucharest. Quotations regarding the manuscript descriptions are reproduced after the catalogue provided by Gabriel Ștrempel.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. ms. 3698 BAR from 1761-1768, ms. 4241 BAR from 1766, ms. 3102 BAR from 1793.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. ms. 1627 BAR or *De obște gheografie*, translation by Amfilohie Hotiniul, Iași, 1795.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. ms. 3107 BAR from 1705, ms. 2769 BAR from 1814, ms. 2740 BAR from 1827.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. ms. 2866 BAR, copy of 1808 (Moldavia).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. ms. 5499 BAR, copy of 1818 (Transylvania), ms. 588 BAR, copy of 1812 (Moldavia).

a vocabulary able to present science notions or to express feelings of non-religious nature and that their language had a reduced capacity to create new words. Thus, the purpose of the translations, beyond the presentation of new meanings and notions, was defined by the Wallachian monk Macarie as “to be generally useful to the Romanian language”<sup>8</sup>.

At the beginning of the modernisation period, most secular translations were from Greek, the lingua franca used as an intermediary for Western European works. Lacking words and notions, Romanian scholars had no choice but to borrow them from Greek. However, they were well aware of the difficulties they were running into because of the huge structural differences between the two languages. One quote resumes well the problems all of them were facing. Thus, asking the readers to bear with him, the monk who elaborated a work by a high noblemen, mentioned that he translated Greek into “Romanian meaning, as well as it could be done and as much as the language could get close to the original”<sup>9</sup>.

Translators were also painfully aware that sometimes they were forcing the language. Greek is easily enriched by structural calques, while Romanian rarely accepts such a method. With no other model available, there was no choice but to use them. For instance, the Greek word χρονολογική (= chronology) becomes “cuvântare a anilor” (= wording of the years) after χρόνος (= time) and λόγος (= word, reason); the Greek αντίρητον (= reply) becomes “împotrivă la cuvânt” (= contrary to saying) after αντι (= against, contrary) and ρητό (= saying); the Greek σύμμαχος (= ally) is translated as “împreună luptător” (= together fighter) after συμ (= with, together) and μάχη (= fight)<sup>10</sup>.

Despite adopting this solution, all translators felt that it was not appropriate and the problem did not regard only translations from Greek but also from German or Russian. However it was very little they could do in absence of a more suitable model. Instinctively, however, they were trying to find in their originals words similar in form and morphologically adaptable to Romanian that could be used as simple loanwords. As a result, Romance origin words, in their turn borrowed by the vehicular languages, were introduced into Romanian, even if sometimes they had an altered form.

<sup>8</sup> Ms. 2043 BAR from 1777, note by the translator Macarie from Cernica Monastery, ff. 787<sup>v</sup>-788<sup>f</sup>. The original quote of our translation is: “...spre folosul cel de obște al limbii rumânești”.

<sup>9</sup> Ms. 107 BAR from 1762, note by copyist Rafail from Secu Monastery, ff. 299<sup>v</sup>-300<sup>f</sup>. The original quote of our translation is: “tălmăcirea de pe greceie spre înțelesul rumânesc, pre cât s-au putut a să alcătui și a să apropia voroava”.

<sup>10</sup> The examples are extracted from ms. 5846 BAR (*Istoria veche*, translated by Constandin Cocorăscu), ff. 30<sup>f</sup>, 47<sup>f</sup>, 160<sup>f</sup>.

## 5. Translations from Romance Languages

As soon as scholars learnt and could translate directly from western languages, mainly French and Italian, they started introducing a huge number of loanwords and correcting previous ones. Actually, because of this process, Romanian has multiple etymology words, simultaneously introduced by different translators from different languages that ended with having the same form or only accentuation variations<sup>11</sup>. In order to make sure that the new words are understood, quite often translators decided to practice a system already in use, namely that of interpolating explanations to detail the meaning of the foreign word introduced. Translating a science book from Italian, bishop Amfilohie of Hotin introduces a huge number of loanwords and uses a consistent number of explanatory interpolations: Thus mentions such as the following are common: “comete au stele cu coadă” (= comets or tailed stars), “uranologie ori învățătura pentru trupurile cerești” (= uranology or teaching about heavenly bodies). Interesting enough, he sometimes does the opposite, including first the explanation and then the corresponding loanword: “pentru soare ori eliografie” (= about the sun or heliography)<sup>12</sup>.

Romance origin loanwords were easy to adapt to the Romanian morphology and phonology, independent of the original language (French or Italian or even Latin). However, in many cases the meaning of the new words could not be inferred so that a reverse process could also be noticed, that is to provide the familiar Greek equivalent as an explanation for the Romance word or calque<sup>13</sup>.

The need for a massive introduction of loanwords is mentioned and justified by most translators that complain about the poorness of Romanian at that time. Constandin Cocorăscu notes that “there are some things and some words very difficult to bring to Romanian”<sup>14</sup>. The same idea is reiterated by Bishop Amfilohie: “It is very difficult for other languages that do not have enough words to be able to express the same meaning as the original. That is why we have left Greek and Latin words as they were, so as not to ruin their meaning, but enhanced it, explaining the prohibited word with many words, in the very same place it is used.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The concept was first detailed by the linguist Alexandru Graur in 1960 and it is now generally accepted.

<sup>12</sup> The examples are extracted from ms. 1627 BAR (*Gramatica fizicii*, translated by Amfilohie of Hotin, 1780-1790), f. 4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> This procedure is often encountered in the translations carried out by Vlad Boțulescu in 1763-1764.

<sup>14</sup> Ms. 5846 BAR (*Istoria veche*, translated by Constandin Cocorăscu, 1767-1768), f. 405<sup>v</sup>. The original quote of our translation is: “Sunt unile lucruri și unile vorbe care foarte cu greu să aduc la limba rumânească.”

<sup>15</sup> Ms. 1627 BAR (*Gramatica fizicii*, translated by Amfilohie of Hotin, 1780-1790), ff. 1<sup>r</sup>-1<sup>v</sup>. The original quote of our translation is: “...fiind foarte cu greu altora limbi cari n-au cuvinti îndestul ca să poată deodată a zice și a

The impressive number of translations carried out during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century brought to light many problems the Romanian language had to deal with and made intellectuals aware of the necessity to have a literary language with a coherent set of norms for morphology and phonetics. In parallel with the publication of the first grammar books, they started to correct and improve their translations, as proven by Alecu Beldiman's mention at the beginning of his reviewed translation: "There have been more than 20 years since I translated this history but, either because of the little experience I had in translating at that time, or because of the whims of the copyists, as everyone wanted to create, to add or to reduce something, it is now in a pitiful state. This is why I was forced to take it up again to correct it, improving it as much as I could."<sup>16</sup>

## 6. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century

At the turn of the century, vocabulary remains the main concern of the translators, but they set themselves a new goal, that of showing that Romanian can stand next to the culture languages of Europe. Two voices dominate the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, those of two fine intellectuals, one from Moldavia, Gheorghe Asachi, and one from Wallachia, Ion Heliade Radulescu. Asachi translates the libretto of Bellini's *Norma* and is happy to notice that the Romanian sung choral parts harmonized very well with the Italian arias. Heliade however criticizes his colleague for not having introduced enough loanwords and provides himself a translation of the same text to show how it should have been done. Moreover, at the end of his translation, Heliade inserts a kind of dictionary of the neologisms he used as well as a list of Italian words he chose not to use, because of adaptation difficulties. The main difference between the two translators is their attitude. Asachi intends, and to a certain extent he even succeeds, to prove the literary capacity Romanian had reached, while Heliade considers Romanian inferior and wants it to turn to Italian as a model. Asachi looks for a flowing verse that even if simpler and closer to spoken regional language, is easy to follow and understand. His language is natural and connects to the tradition; it rejects exaggerated innovation and does not intend to break with the past. Heliade adopts a higher register that abounds in

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cunoaște tîlcul aceluiași cuvînt. După cum și noi aice multi cuvînti grecești și lătinești le-am pus însuși acele ca să nu stricăm simțirile lor, dîndu-le numai din putere vocabularului, adică din carte care tîlcuiește cu aceeași limbă cuvîntul, orarișcare simțire de cunoștința lor cu multi cuvînti și întru acelaș loc unde s-au scris."

<sup>16</sup> Ms. 428 BAR (*Istorie lui Tarlo și a prietenilor lui*, translated by Alecu Beldiman, 1823), f. 1<sup>v</sup>. The original quote of our translation is: "Sînt mai bine de 20 de ani de cînd am tîlmăcit istorie aciasta, dar sau den puțina deprindere ce am avut la tîlmăciri în vreme acee, sau den caprităile acelor ce au prescris-o, voind fieștecare a mai întocmi ceva, a adaoge sau a scăde, o adusă întru o stari vrednică de rîs. Pentru acee de iznoavă am fost sălit a o lua în condeiu, a o îndrepta, întocmindu-o în cît mi-au fost prin puțință. Din început scoposul meu n-au fost a da vreun cuget înnalt pentru mine, ci a zăbăvi și a mulțami pe cetitorul meu."

neologisms that make the text less readable. He has a good language intuition and part of his proposed new words are accepted by the literary language that later spreads them so as to enter regular vocabulary.

The two scholars finally make peace and agree on a common moderate view on language that would be promoted as a language model and would be at the basis of Heliade's grammar book. The discourse on translations ends in 1840, when the cultural magazine *Dacia literară* (= Literary Dacia) funded by Iasi intellectuals states that translations do not make a literature and urges writers to produce original literature, considering that language had evolved to a stage that allowed such an endeavour.

## 7. Conclusion

The first translators in the 18<sup>th</sup> century mainly dealt with Greek originals and they often express the difficulty to transpose Greek words into Romanian because of the structural difference of the two languages. Once translations from Greek were substituted with direct ones from Romance languages such as Italian or French, translators started introducing a large number of borrowings, realizing the ease of adapting Romance words to the specificity of Romanian. To be however sure that no mistakes were to be made about the meaning of these new terms, they used a significant number of interpolations to explain them. A general characteristic of all the translators during this period is that they constantly complained about the poorness of Romanian. Finally, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, translators had a well-established language to work with. However they continued to have contrasting views on how the language should look like and expressed their awareness in debates or writings that contributed to the formation of the present-day Romanian language.

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