

HUMOUR MECHANISMS IN TRANSLATING P. G. WODEHOUSE INTO ROMANIAN

LAURA CIOCHINĂ-CARASEVICI¹

ABSTRACT. *Humour Mechanisms in Translation P.G. Wodehouse into Romanian.* The aim of the present study is to analyse the Romanian translation of several instances of Wodehousian humour from the novels *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves*. We shall point to the humour mechanisms that may lead to the untranslatability of humour and to its being lost or destroyed during the translation process. However, this apparent untranslatability is not insurmountable, and humour can actually travel safely around the world.

Keywords: *P. G. Wodehouse, humour mechanisms, untranslatability of humour, travel.*

REZUMAT. *Mecanisme ale umorului în traducerea lui P. G. Wodehouse în limba română.* Studiul de față își propune să analizeze o serie de exemple de umor wodehousian din romanele *Thank You, Jeeves* și *Right Ho, Jeeves*. Vom dezvălui mecanismele umorului care pot conduce la intraductibilitatea acestuia sau la pierderea lui în procesul de traducere. Totuși, această aparentă intraductibilitate nu este insurmontabilă, iar umorul poate într-adevăr călători în siguranță în jurul lumii.

Cuvinte cheie: *P. G. Wodehouse, mecanisme ale umorului, intraductibilitatea umorului, călătorie.*

*When it comes to translating humour,
the operation proves to be as desperate
as that of translating poetry (Diot 84).*

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that translating humour is no easy task. Sometimes it even seems an impossible mission or a “paradigm case of untranslatability” (Vandaele 149). Apart from the difficulties that translation

¹ **Laura CIOCHINĂ-CARASEVICI** holds a PhD in Psychology from the University of Porto and a PhD in Philology from “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. She currently teaches at the Faculty of Letters and at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. Contact address: <lauraciochina@yahoo.com>

implies in general, difficulties which derive from the complexity of the social and cultural world reflected by the source language and the target language, translating humour is particularly demanding, since humour relies mostly on incongruity and surprise, two critical components that are mainly achieved by means of an original play on language. Therefore, the translator has to surprise the reader and make him or her smile or laugh and the anticipation of the eventual absence of the salient manifestation of this aesthetic reaction puts even more pressure on the translator. Regarding the diagnostic function of the physiological correlates of humour, Vandaele notices that “any translation failure will therefore be very visible: it is obvious that the translator has failed when no one laughs at the translated humor” (149).

In regard to the question of untranslatable instances of humour, von Stackelberg asks himself: “Should the translator be allowed to make us laugh at his own ideas rather than at those of the author? We do not think so” (12). We dare to reject this pessimistic acceptance of the untranslatability of humour. Undoubtedly, sometimes humour does appear to be untranslatable, especially when it comes to jokes based on wordplay and linguistic ambiguity, but this limitation does not rule out the translator’s freedom to substitute an untranslatable content for another one which would hold water in the target language. Regarding this, Chiaro points out that

It would appear that translators are often afraid of moving away from the text and replacing an untranslatable joke with another which would work in the target language, even if it is completely different from the original. (...) Even a totally different comment, in place of an untranslatable joke, would often be preferable to translation ‘gaffes’. (85-86)

Referring to the freedom of the translator, Zabelbeascoa considers that it is “a dangerous simplification to presume that (...) the nature of humour must be the same in both source text and its translation” (187). Consequently, it seems that it takes courage and creativity to translate humour. The translator has to tame the words, find new attire for them, extract their hilarious essence and eventually make the reader laugh. This would mean that the translator has the freedom to rewrite the original without being accused of unfaithfulness. However, as Bassnett points out, “What is interesting is that such freedom should be widely accepted in the translation practice of most text types, but that is continually disputed when it comes to thinking about the amount of freedom a literary translator may exercise” (148).

We consider that when confronted with untranslatable humor, the translator should have a great amount of freedom in order to obtain a functional equivalence that could elicit laughter as the original does. Otherwise, the reader will be faced with a *non sequitur*. This is what happens, for example, in the

Romanian translation of a dialogue between aunt Dahlia and Bertie, in another Wodehousian novel, *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit* which is not the subject of the present work but is worth mentioning here. In the context of an extremely intricate scheme, aunt Dahlia wants Bertie to steal a necklace from her own room. Here follows their dialogue in the original and its translation into Romanian:

'So there's nothing to stop you, Bertie.' (...)
'Nothing at all,' I replied cordially. Nothing whatever. You provide the necklace, and I will do the rest. Which is your room?'
'The last one on the left.'
'Right.'
'Left, fool.' (*Jeeves and the Feudal* 120-121)

- Așa că nu mai e nimic care să te împiedice, Bertie. (...)
- Nimic, am replicat eu cu amabilitate. Absolut nimic. Tu pune-mi la dispoziție colierul, iar eu mă ocup de restul. Care-i camera ta ?
- Ultima pe stânga.
- Bine.
- Pe stânga, cretinule. (*Jeeves și spiritul* 155-156)

We can notice that in the original the humorous effect achieved by Wodehouse derives from the linguistic exploitation of the polysemous word „right”, in such a way that when Bertie uses it as an exclamation to show that he accepts the statement about the location of the room (“The last one on the left”), aunt Dahlia interprets his answer as a mishearing and “right” takes on an adverbial value, i.e. the room on the right, hence aunt Dahlia’s correction “Left, fool”. In the Romanian translation this correction is kept (“Pe stânga, cretinule”), but it represents a *non sequitur*, since the reader, although accustomed to aunt Dahlia’s impulsive nature, cannot understand why she would insult him. After all, he agreed with what she said. In the Romanian translation there is no collision between “stânga” and “bine” and no play on the polysemy of the words with which the dialogue is garnished. We can envisage two possible ways of disentangling this translation quandary. One solution would be to leave out aunt Dahlia’s quip, “Pe stânga, cretinule”, but this would mean being unfaithful to Wodehouse. The second solution would be to find a functional equivalence that would work in the Romanian language. This would imply trying to also play on the polysemous vein of words and create some ambiguity that could connect two opposed meanings in the text. If in Romanian “drept” can be used both as an adjective and an adverb, then maybe the dialogue would be more hilarious if it were translated in the following way:

- Așa că nu mai e nimic care să te împiedice, Bertie. (...)
- Nimic, am replicat eu cu amabilitate. Absolut nimic. Tu pune-mi la dispoziție colierul, iar eu mă ocup de restul. Care-i camera ta ?
- Ultima de pe flancul stâng.

- *Drept grăiești.*
- *Stâng, cretinule.*

Of course, restructuring the dialogue into the target language implies adding new words, “flanc” and “grăiești”, but at least in this way the *non sequitur* is removed and maybe the reader will smile.

The analysis of the above-mentioned instance of Wodehousian humor translated into Romanian represents the starting point for the present study in which we aim to examine some of the difficulties that arise while translating Wodehouse into Romanian, namely the two novels that represent the subject of this work - *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves*. Our analysis of the translated versions will be guided by the following questions: What happens with the humor mechanisms that function in the original during the translation process? Do they change, or do they remain the same? If at times they are altered, is this required by the untranslatability of Wodehousian humor? In the next section we aim at answering these questions by analyzing several instances of humor translated into Romanian.

2. Humour Mechanisms in Translating *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves* into Romanian

When it comes to translating humour, the untranslatability is a dilemma that often gives the translator lots of food for thought. Susan Bassnett supplies the translator with a series of guidelines which could make his or her task easier:

(1) Accept the untranslatability of the SL phrase in the TL on the linguistic level.

(2) Accept the lack of a similar cultural convention in the TL.

(3) Consider the range of TL phrases available, having regard to the presentation of class, status, age, sex of the speaker, his relationship to the listeners and the context of their meeting in the SL.

(4) Consider the significance of the phrase in its particular context - i.e. as a moment of high tension in the dramatic text.

(5) Replace in the TL the invariant core of the SL phrase in its two referential systems

(the particular system of the text and the system of culture out of which the text has sprung). (31)

Apart from bearing in mind the above mentioned guidelines, the translator could also benefit from the theoretical models yielded by humour studies. Thus, if the translator were aware of the mechanisms which underlie the functioning of humour, certain translation problems could be solved out more easily and more efficiently.

Next we will analyse the Romanian translation of some instances of humour extracted from the novels *Thank You, Jeeves* and *Right Ho, Jeeves*. Our goal will be to

point out the main translation problems and the changes undergone by certain humor mechanisms during the translation process. We will focus on three cases: when humor was lost in translation, when the humor mechanisms in the original version of the two novels were successfully maintained in the target language and when they were changed so as to obtain a functional equivalent in the translated version. Alternative translation solutions will be suggested whenever possible.

With regard to the loss of humor during the translation process, we will analyse two dialogues extracted from the novel *Thank You, Jeeves*. The first one is a conversation between Pauline Stoker and Bertie:

'You know, Bertie, steps should be taken about you.'
 'Eh?'
 'You ought to be in some sort of a home.'
 'I am,' I replied coldly and rather cleverly. 'My own. The point I wish to thresh out is, what are you doing in it?' (*Thank You* 79)

- Știi, Bertie, ar fi cazul să facem ceva cu tine.
 - Hă?
 - Ar trebui să te afli într-un soi de cămin.
 - Sunt, am replicat eu glacial și destul de spiritual. Într-al meu. Chestia pe care vreau s-o subliniez e: ce faci tu în el? (*Mulțumesc* 84)

In this dialogue Wodehouse plays on the polysemy of the word "home". Pauline is referring to a home for the mentally ill, while Bertie's perspective triggers a different script, that of a house, i.e. his home. In the Romanian version the humor mechanism, namely disclosure humor, underlying Bertie's quip is lost since the translator failed to find a word that means both a house and a madhouse. The word "cămin" could mean an old people's home, but not a lunatic asylum, therefore we consider that a possible solution would be to substitute the term "cămin" for "casă", since the latter better alludes to "casă de nebuni" ("madhouse"), to which Pauline is actually referring. Also, the verb "a se afla" should be kept and not replaced with "a fi". Thus, the original shape of the first script is better maintained and prepared for the drastic change caused by the new meaning of the word "casă". Consequently, we suggest the following translation:

- Știi, Bertie, ar fi cazul să facem ceva cu tine.
 - Hă?
 - Ar trebui să te afli într-un soi de casă.
 - Mă aflu, am replicat eu glacial și destul de spiritual. Într-a mea. Chestia pe care vreau s-o subliniez e: ce faci tu în ea?

The second dialogue in which we consider that humour was lost while being translated takes place between Bertie and Constable Dobson of the Chuffnel Regis police force:

'I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir. I thought you was the marauder.' (...)
'Quite all right, Constable. Quite all right. Just going for a stroll.'
'I understand, sir. Breath of air.'
'You have put it in a nutshell. A breath, as you astutely observe, of air.
The house is quite close.'
'Yes, sir, just over there.'
'I mean stuffy.'
'Oh, yes, sir. Well, good night, sir.' (*Thank You* 94)

- Fără-ndoială, domnule, îmi cer scuze. Am crezut că sînteți hoțul. (...)
- Nu-i nimic, domnule polițist. Nu-i nimic. Mă duc să mă plimb puțin.
- Înțeleg, domnule. Luați o gură de aer.
- Da, ai zis-o pe scurt. Iau o gură – așa cum ai remarcat tu foarte ager –
de aer. Casa e destul de aproape.
- Da, domnule. Chiar acolo.
- Vreau să spun că e cam sufocantă.
- O, da, domnule. Ei bine, noapte bună, domnule. (*Mulțumesc* 100)

In this particular instance of humour the script oppositeness elicited by the polysemous word “close” – “near” and “stuffy” – is lost in the translated version where the adverb “aproape” and the adjective “sufocantă” do not yield two opposed scripts that are compatible with the setting of the humorous dialogue which Wodehouse meant to construct. Therefore, the translator should have searched for a polysemous word that could have conveyed a similar hilarious message in the target language. The solution we suggest may seem far-fetched, since it puts some extra words in the mouth of Constable Dobson, but it conveys a script oppositeness, while also retaining one script from the original version, i.e. the stuffiness script, and moreover, it preserves the stereotype about policemen's doubtful intelligence. Here follows our translation solution:

- Fără-ndoială, domnule, îmi cer scuze. Am crezut că sînteți hoțul. (...)
- Nu-i nimic, domnule polițist. Nu-i nimic. Mă duc să mă plimb puțin.
- Înțeleg, domnule. Luați o gură de aer.
- Da, ai zis-o pe scurt. Iau o gură – așa cum ai remarcat tu foarte ager –
de aer. Casa e destul de închisă.
- Da, domnule. E bine să fiți prevăzător.
- Vreau să spun că aerul e cam închis.
- O, da, domnule. Ei bine, noapte bună, domnule.

In this suggested translation the word “închisă” is the ambiguous element meant to signify both “stuffy” and “locked”, but Constable Dobson's views, which are limited to the universe of his profession, filter out this meaning and retain only the meaning “locked”.

With the exception of these few situations in which humor was lost in translation, the Romanian version of the two novels analyzed in this work,

Thank You, Jeeves and *Right Ho, Jeeves*, are a balm to the reader's spirit. There are far too many examples that we could quote in order to illustrate how wonderfully Wodehouse's humorous morphological, syntactic and lexical universe found its expression in the Romanian language due to its translator, Carmen Toader. Here we will only analyse some instances of humour in which specific humour mechanisms were successfully preserved or changed in order to obtain a hilarious functional equivalent in Romanian.

Thus, in the translation of the novel *Thank You, Jeeves* the translator succeeds in achieving a ludicrous effect by preserving the Bergsonian humour mechanism which posits that humour is obtained by introducing an absurd variation in a ready-made formula (Bergson 51). This is what happens in the case of Bertie's own coinage of a biblical teaching. Here follows the original version and its successful translation:

'I am not drivelling. This animal yaps all day and not infrequently far into the night. So Mrs. Tinkler-Moulke has had the nerve to complain of my banjolele, has she? Ha! Let her first pluck out the Pom which is in her own eye,' I said, becoming a bit scriptural. (*Thank You* 16)

- Nu deviez de la subiect. Animalul ăsta latră toată ziua și nu rareori până noaptea târziu. Deci doamna Tinkler-Moulke a avut tupeul să se plângă de banjoul meu, nu-i așa? Ha! Mai bine să-și vadă potaia din ochiul ei, am spus eu, devenind nițeluş biblic. (*Mulțumesc* 16)

Also, in the translation of the novel *Thank You, Jeeves* the translator preserves the mechanism of distortion humour and thus succeeds in conveying a humorous cross-talk based on a mishearing that twists the reality of the words:

'I can confide in you, can't I, Bertie?'
'Of course.'
'I knew I could. That's the comfort of having been engaged to a man. When you break it off, you feel such a sister.'
'I don't regard you as a blister at all,' I said warmly. 'You had a perfect right...'
'Not blister. Sister!'
'Oh, sister? You mean, you look on me as a brother.'
'Yes, a brother. How quick you are.' (*Thank You* 44-45)

- Pot avea încredere în tine, nu-i așa, Bertie?
- Bineînțeles.
- Știam eu. ăsta-i avantajul când ai fost logodită cu un bărbat. După ce rupi logodna, te simți ca o rudă cu el.
- Nu te consider deloc o bubă! am spus eu cu înflăcărare. Aveai tot dreptul să...

- Nu bubă. Rudă!
- O, rudă? Adică mă vezi ca pe un frate?
- Da, ca pe un frate. Ce ager ești! (*Mulțumesc* 48)

It is worth nothing that in the Romanian version of the above mentioned dialogue, the translator, apart from managing to create a humorous mishearing, also preserved the semantic area of the words used in the original (“sister”/“rudă” and “blister”/“bubă”).

Script oppositeness based on the polysemy of words is another humour mechanism successfully preserved in the Romanian translation of the two novels analyzed in the present work. Just one example, a conversation between Pauline Stoker and Bertie, extracted from the novel *Thank You, Jeeves*:

- ‘I always esteemed you most highly.’
- ‘You did what? Where do you pick up these expressions?’
- ‘Well, I suppose from Jeeves, mostly. My late man. He had a fine vocabulary.’
- ‘When you say “late”, do you mean he’s dead? Or just unpunctual?’
- ‘He’s left me. He didn’t like me playing the banjolele (...).’ (*Thank You* 44)

- Întotdeauna ți-am purtat cea mai înaltă stimă.
- Ce-ai făcut? De unde culegi expresiile astea?
- Păi, presupun că mai ales de la Jeeves. Servitorul meu dispărut. Avea un vocabular rafinat.
- Când zici “dispărut”, vrei să spui că a murit? Sau că nu mai știi nimic de el?
- M-a părăsit. Nu i-a plăcut că exersam la banjo. (*Mulțumesc* 47-48)

In the original version of this dialogue, the word “late” conveys three meanings: *having recently occupied a position* (the meaning intended by Bertie Wooster), *no longer alive* and *delayed*, the last two meanings being the ones suggested by Pauline Stoker. We can notice that in the Romanian version of the dialogue the translator found a polysemous equivalent for “late”, namely “dispărut” with two meanings: *no longer alive* and *vanished without trace*. Thus, apart from creating a humorous ambiguity, the translator also managed to preserve one meaning present in the original. However, the meaning intended by Bertie, *having recently occupied a position* is lost and consequently the degree of ambiguity is reduced. Moreover, Jeeves did not vanish without track, but handed in his notice, therefore this translation solution, “dispărut” is successful only up to a certain point, beyond which it is unfaithful to the real action of the novel. This is the reason why we suggest that “dispărut” be substituted for “plecat” which can have three meanings, as in the original, while also preserving two meanings conveyed in the English version, namely *having recently occupied a position* and *no longer alive*. Thus, the degree of ambiguity is not diminished,

and the translation solution cannot be considered to incur accusations of unfaithfulness to the action of the novel. Here follows the suggested translation:

- *Întotdeauna ți-am purtat cea mai înaltă stimă.*
- *Ce-ai făcut? De unde culegi expresiile astea?*
- *Păi, presupun că mai ales de la Jeeves. Servitorul meu plecat. Avea un vocabular rafinat.*
- *Când zici "plecat", vrei să spui că a plecat dintre noi? Sau că e plecat cu sorcova?*
- *A plecat din serviciul meu. Nu i-a plăcut că exersam la banjo.*

The last translation example that we will analyse is an instance of humour where the hilarious effect was successfully preserved in the target language although the humour mechanism used in the original version was changed. We chose to analyse the memorable eyebrow-raising episode. In this episode, extracted from the novel *Right Ho, Jeeves*, Wodehouse varies an automatic formula, namely the British expression "to be in good form", by introducing in its structure an uncanny element which has been repeatedly used in the depiction of a previous scene. A Bergsonian humorous contrast is thus achieved:

I shot a glance at Jeeves. He allowed his right eyebrow to flicker slightly, which is as near as he ever gets to a display of the emotions. 'Hullo?' I yipped. 'Let me in, blast you!' responded Tuppy's voice from without. 'Who locked this door?' I consulted Jeeves once more in the language of the eyebrow. He raised one of his. I raised one of mine. He raised his other. I raised my other. Then we both raised both. Finally, there seeming no policy to pursue, I flung wide the gates and Tuppy came shooting in. 'Now what?' I said, as nonchalantly as I could manage. 'Why was the door locked?' demanded Tuppy. I was in pretty good eyebrow-raising form by now, so I gave him a touch of it. (*Right Ho* 233)

In the Romanian translation this Bergsonian mechanism is changed. In order to convey the hilarious message of the variation "I was in pretty good eyebrow-raising form" the translator resorts to a phrasal verb ("a se pricepe la"), which does not allow too much uncanny variation. However, since the translator adapts its semantic content to the eyebrow-raising pattern, she succeeds in obtaining a humorous effect:

Am aruncat o privire spre Jeeves. Și-a lăsat sprânceana dreaptă să tremure nițeluș, adică cel mai vizibil fel al lui de a-și manifesta emoțiile.
 - Da? am chelălăit eu.
 - Lsă-mă să intru, naiba să te ia! s-a auzit vocea lui Glossop de afară.
 Cine a încuiat ușa asta?

L-am consultat încă o dată pe Jeeves prin limbajul sprâncenelor. El și-a ridicat una. Eu mi-am ridicat una. El și-a ridicat-o pe cealaltă. Eu mi-am ridicat-o pe cealaltă. Apoi amândoi ni le-am ridicat pe amândouă. Într-un final fiindcă nu părea să existe vreo alternativă, am deschis larg porțile și Tuppy s-a năpustit înăuntru.

– Ce mai e? l-am întrebat cât am putut de dezinvolt.

– De ce era încuiată ușa? s-a interesat Glossop.

Deja mă pricepeam binișor la chestia cu sprâncenele ridicate, așa că i-am servit o mostră. (*S-a făcut* 262)

One possible way in order to preserve the Bergsonian humour mechanism mentioned above would be to find a Romanian equivalent for the British “to be in good form” and vary it uncannily in the context of the eyebrow-raising pattern. We venture to suggest the following solution: *Eram deja într-o formă sprâncenoasă de invidiat, așa că i-am servit o mostră*. Is it far-fetched? Is it wrong? How can we be sure that humour is translated well? How many readers out of all those who read a certain humorous novel smiled and how many laughed heartily? How many did not smile and did not laugh at all? These are questions to be answered in future studies focused on the reception of humorous fiction. Until then, let us be optimistic and believe that humour can travel safely around the world due to its translators.

WORKS CITED

- Bassnett, Susan. *Translation Studies*. Routledge, 2002.
- . *Translation*. Routledge, 2014.
- Bergson, Henri. *Le rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*. Editions Alcan, 1924.
- Chiaro, Delia. *The Language of Jokes*. Routledge, 1992.
- Diot, Roland. “Humor for Intellectuals: Can It Be Exported and Translated? The Case of Gary Rudeau’s *In search for Reagan’s Brain*.” *Meta*, 34(1)/1989, pp. 84-87.
- Vandaele, Jeroen. “Humor in Translation.” *Handbook of Translation Studies, Vol. 1*, edited by Yves Gambier and Luc van Doorslaer, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010, pp. 147-152.
- Von Stackleberg, Jürgen. “Translating Comical Writing.” *Translation Review*, 28/1988, pp. 10-14.
- Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville. *S-a făcut, Jeeves*. Translated by Carmen Toader, Polirom, 2004.
- Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville. *Mulțumesc, Jeeves*. Translated by Carmen Toader, Polirom, 2006.
- Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville. *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*. Arrow Books, 2008.
- Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville. *Jeeves și spiritul feudal*. Translated by Carmen Toader, Polirom, 2008.
- Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville. *Right Ho, Jeeves*. Arrow Books, 2008.
- Wodehouse, Pelham Grenville. *Thank You, Jeeves*. Arrow Books, 2008.
- Zabelbeascoa, Patrick. “Humor and Translation – An Interdiscipline.” *Humor*, 18(2)/2005, pp. 185-207.