KATRIN IAKIMOVA-ZHELEVA

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Avarice and Humor in Plautus' Comedy *The Pot of Gold:* Translation Procedures and Equivalent Effects

The paper searches for some textual occurrences regarding the distinctive Plautine humor with its prevalent linguistic aspect and particularly wordplays and phrases concerning the concept of avarice in his comedy The Pot of Gold. *By exploring some specific examples, the text brings forward techniques of translation for rendering a comic effect in the first full translation (1915) of the play in Bulgarian by A. D. Pironkov. The purpose of the analysis is to determine whether the translation methods used ensure the preservation of Plautus' comic effect. Some linguistic characteristics of humor are presented based on Cicero's categorization of types of humor. A brief explanation is given of a possible pragmatic instrumentarium for producing humorous impact for a new audience.*

Interest towards classical texts and authors starts to develop in Bulgaria around the 19th century – a time known as pre-liberation period.[1] Latin texts and authors remained fairly unknown with the exception of some *sententiae* and aphorisms.[2] This changed, to some extent, in the early 20th century during the so-called post-liberation period. In the year 1915 the first full Bulgarian translation of the Plautine drama *The Pot of Gold* is

---

[1] This is important to point out so that everyone can have a better understanding of the country's state in the fields of education, language, literature, and overall cultural development. Bulgaria was under Ottoman rule for about 500 years and was liberated in 1878 so the country had to achieve substantial progression in those fields to acquire commensurate state of knowledge.

[2] GERDZHIKOVA (2002: 28).

published, created by Aleksander D. Pironkov – author of books about linguistics, literature, and history.[3] The translation is made from the Latin original according to the translator's own words – something unusual for this period. Most translations were made from mediatory languages due to the lack of trained experts in the Latin language and culture. Another notable characteristic of the translation is that it is in prose and not in verse – again in vogue with the times when the purpose of most translations was to acquaint the reader with the subject and content of texts rather than to preserve their unique style and characteristics.[4] In this sense it may be said that the translation reaches its goal of familiarization. Our concern, however, will be with more than just its content, but rather with the comical aspect of the drama – to what extent and by what means the comic effect is (or is not) achieved.

Distinctive of Plautine drama is the diverse usage of language – alliterations, sound effects, hapaxes, metaphors, chiasms, etymologic figures, idiomatic phrases, etc. This type of humor is defined in Cicero's typology as *facetiae in verbo* or humor in words as opposite of the humor in things or *facetiae in re* (Cic. *De or.* 2, 59, 240). The translation of language specific humor can be very problematic to say the least.

Moreover, speaking about drama translation we should bear in mind the transfer between different media. A comedy is a drama piece which aims at eliciting laughter from the audience by achieving a comic effect. And it should be stressed that the performance of comedy is very different from the reception of its text. The comic effect is lost to a great extent when reading the text of the play written down on the white sheet – the mimics and gestures of actors, their expressions, the tone of their voices, masks, and clothing are no longer in play, as well as the musical aspect of the comedy – the so-called *canticum*, which is about two-thirds of each Plautine play.[5] So inevitably the comic effect of the text – even of the original – would be tuned down and would be only reduced to a verbal manifestation of comicality.

---

[3] GERDZHIKOVA (2002: 29, n. 15).

[4] GERDZHIKOVA (2002: 18).

[5] SIRAKOVA (2019: 2).

Thus, there are two or even three layers that target readers need to overcome in order to get an experience as close as possible to that of the original audience (time, space, media). This can be crucial for realizing the humor.

There are different approaches towards the problems mentioned and with the following examples we will see what methods were used in this first full Bulgarian translation of the comedy *The Pot of Gold* to overcome them.

The plot of *The Pot of Gold* is centered on two young Athenian people and their future marriage. Lyconides wants to marry Phaedria – a poor girl whom he has violated during the Cererian festivities. She got pregnant but her father Euclio doesn't know about this disgrace upon her and his family. The family neighbor – the old and rich bachelor Megadorus, uncle of the young man Lyconides, has also no idea about the problematic situation and wants to marry the girl. Amidst all this Euclio – an infamous miser, has found a pot of gold. The pot was revealed to him by the Lar – the household god, because of Phaedria's good will and pious behavior toward him, so she can have a sufficient dowry. Comic situations revolve around this old miserly man and his horrible character as the plot develops towards a happy end.

A great part of linguistic characteristics aiming at comic effects is related to avarice because the protagonist is a miser. Quite expectedly in most instances Plautus puts these verbal quibbles in the mouth of Euclio himself. Another character speaks also about poverty and Euclio's avarice – the old maid Staphyla. In the following passage she speaks to Euclio:

> ego intus servem? An ne quis aedes auferat?
> nam hic apud nos nihil est aliud quaesti furibus,
> ita inaniis sunt oppletae atque araneis.[6]
> (Pl. *Aul*. 82–84)

---

[6] Quotations from the original are according to The Loeb Classical Library's edition of Plautus.

Да, да пазя къщата, да не би да отнесе некой стените ли?
Защото у нас нема друго, какво да задигнат крадците:
къщата е пълна с нищо и с паяжини.
(Plavt 1915: 9)

Yes, to guard the house so the walls may not be stolen maybe?
Because inside there is nothing else for the thieves to steal:
the house is full of nothing and cobwebs.[7]

This episode portrays the infamous avarice of Euclio, his deranged desire to keep everything he owns and puts all that in contrast to reality, in which he doesn't possess much. Staphyla mocks him exactly about that by asking why he is so upset and worried, what will the thieves take – the house? (*aedes auferat* – an expression, actualised by the usage of alliteration, and reinforcing the comic effect on lexical level). Comism is achieved on two levels: first because of the broken expectation – thieves steal jewelry, money, something of high value, not houses (unless the house is a collective image of things and objects in it, but this is not the case here). Houses themselves would not be of interest to thieves. On second level, comic effect is based on the use of nonsense, namely the idea that a large and massive structure like the house can be stolen as if it was something small like jewelry or a purse with coins. The translator has chosen the 'walls' – the supports that hold the structure – to represent the house. It is possible that in the recipient's cultural-historical environment of his time this might have sounded more natural to the audience than 'to take away the house', or he wanted to avoid the misunderstanding that 'the house' might mean 'everything in the building' and not the house itself.

Staphyla's own words confirm that the house is meant as the object of the supposed stealing because they indicate that there is nothing else inside that might attract thieves: *nihil est aliud quaesti furibus* (literally 'there is no other benefit for thieves'). The word *quaestus* means 'profit', 'benefit', and – important for this case – 'money'. The Bulgarian translator omitted the word *quaestus* and as a result the emphasis in the trans-

---

[7] The literal English translation of passages throughout the text belongs to the author of this paper.

lated text is placed on 'other' (*aliud*) – i. e. there is nothing else – valuable or not, to be stolen, except the walls. This supports to some extent our interpretation of the translator's preference of 'walls' over 'house', as walls are something very particular and not at all tempting, and 'house', as a collective image and a kind of metonymy, can evoke associations with the objects and property inside it. Thus, the intertextual connection of the lexemes is more natural and conveys more precisely the meaning of the source text. It is also possible that the translator wanted to avoid the repetition of the word 'house', given that it already occurs twice within two sentences. Staphyla also specifies what exactly the house is full of (*sunt oppletae*) – emptiness (*inaniae*) and spiders or cobwebs (*aranea/araneum*). The oxymoron 'full of emptiness' is worth noting here, and in Bulgarian an alliteration of [p] sound is present ('*пълна с празнота*'), which, although missing in the source text, can compensate for the lack of such stylistic figure elsewhere in the translation. A. D. Pironkov has chosen the lexeme '*нищо*' ('nothing') – 'full of nothing', which weakens the power of the oxymoron, but is more meaningful – we say, 'full of something', full of specific objects (and 'nothing' is the antonym). In this sense, the word '*празнота*' ('emptiness') in Bulgarian is not so appropriate.

Spiders, which Euclio's house is also full of, are symbols of poverty in the source culture, and of destitution or simply of a lack of something, emptiness. Evidence of this peculiar symbolics could be found elsewhere in Roman literature, e. g. in Catullus (Cat. 13, 7–8):

> … Nam tui Catulli
> plenus sacculus est aranearum

which translates as:

> because your Catullus'
> purse is full of spiders

In Bulgarian, spiders do not have such connotations of poverty, but the word 'cobweb' is perceived as a symbol of bleakness, emptiness, of abandonment, because its presence implies a lack of care, of human presence. In this sense, the Bulgarian equivalent only partially covers

the meaning of the original lexeme and is rather associated with the meaning of the other element of the Latin expression (*inaniae*), and that is why some of its connotations are lost to the reader of the translation.

In all these instances the translator has used a pragmatic equivalence[8] but nevertheless the full comism of the original is not reached.

> **Evcl.** Quid sit me rogitas? qui mihi omnis angulos
> furum implevisti in aedibus misero mihi,
> qui mi intro misti in aedis quingentos coquos,
> cum senis manibus, genere Geryonaceo;
> quos si Argus servet, qui oculeus totus fuit,
> quem quondam Ioni Iuno custodem addidit,
> is numquam servet. praeterea tibicinam,
> quae mi interbibere sola, si vino scatat,
> Corinthiensem fontem Pirenam potest.
> (Pl. *Aul*. 551–559)

> **Евкл.** И питаш защо, ти, който напълни всички кюшета на къщата ми с крадци; който доведе готвачи от Герион, всеки снабдени с три чифта ръце! Самата Аргус, която беше само очи и която Юнона бе поставила страж на Йо, не може да ги надзирава. Над това още една свирачка на флейта, способна сама да изсмучи коринтската чешма в Пирела, ако течеше от нея вино.
> (Plavt 1915: 41)

> **Eucl**. And you ask why, you, who flooded every corner of my house with thieves, who brought cooks from Geryon, everyone in possession of three pairs of arms! Argus herself, who was only eyes and whom Iuno was stationed as a guard to Io, cannot supervise them. And on top of that – a female flutist, capable of sucking dry the Corinthian fountain in Pirela, if a wine was to flow from it.

The above excerpt contains three mythologems, which Plautus brings forth to achieve a comic effect. Firstly, comism is built on the fact that

---

[8] The terminology used in the analysis is from Koller's classification of equivalence and equivalent effect. The 5-structured typology includes Denotative, Connotative, Text-normative, Pragmatic, and Formal equivalence.

mythological characters or motifs are present in a description of an eve-ryday situation. Mythologems serve as an exaggeration of the danger of cooks and flutist to the old man's possessions: Euclio sees the cooks as Geryon's heirs, with six hands each, which even Argus with all his eyes can't trace. As about the flutist, Euclio is very concerned with her drink-ing capabilities, as she could drink even the Corinthian spring of Pirene on her own.

Geryon is a king-giant who ruled in Spain and who was killed by Hercules. He had three heads and three bodies, therefore six arms.[9] Thus, Euclio puts an emphasis on the thievishness of the cooks, which is hinted at in other lines in the comedy as well. The exaggeration in this case serves to the accumulation of comism.

In the Bulgarian translation a change in the phrase *genus Gery-onaceus* is observed. The phrase is rendered with the name of Geryon alone, that could cause some misunderstanding in readers of the trans-lated text, unfamiliar with the mythological figure, and might redirect them to the toponym or the geographical area with a similar name. In addition, the translator has omitted the beginning (*quingentos coquos* – 'five hundred cooks') of the successive structure of hyperboles, which is also additionally emphasised by alliteration. This leads to weakening the intensity of the episode's comic impact.

The second mythologem is related to the image of Argus, who had a hundred eyes, two of which rested and slept while the rest looked in all directions. Hera placed him as the guardian of the snow-white cow Io, favoured by Zeus.[10] In Plautus' comedy the names of Zeus and Hera are replaced by those of Jupiter and Juno.

This further reinforces the hyperbolised thievishness of the cooks, whom even this mythological creature with hundred eyes cannot guard and keep from stealing. At the phonetic level, the verse is also marked

---

[9] RILEY (1912).

[10] By order of Zeus, Hermes put all the giant's eyes to sleep with his shepherd's whistle (*syrinx*) and his magic wand, cut him down and threw him from a high rock into the abyss, after which freed Io. Hera, on the other hand, placed the hundred eyes of her faithful servant on the tail of her bird, the peacock, on whose feathers they shone like celestial stars. BATAKLIEV (2011: 52–53).

by the alliteration *Ioni Iuno*. In the translation, although different, the sounds [ju] and [jo] are close enough to provoke a reaction, but nevertheless this effect is lost due to the textual distance between the two names. Inaccuracy is observed in the representation of Argus as a female in the footnote, but at least there **is** a footnote explaining the myth. In this way a clarification is given to the reader and some comic effect is reached. Still, a lot of its force is lost due to other omissions because the episode counts on the accumulation of humor with every element added to the hyperbolising structure.

The third mythologem refers to the Corinthian spring of the Pirene. Pirene is the daughter of Achelous – the god of the largest river bearing the same name in Greece.[11] She faded away after the death of her son Conchreas, killed by Diana, and became a spring in Corinth, named after her.[12] The spring being sucked dry by the flutist is a hyperbole of the reputation of musicians as participants in all banquets, and their addiction to drinking. Ovid in his *Fasti* (Ov. *Fast*. 6, 672–684) also speaks of such a reputation for men of the same profession.[13]

Aleksander Pironkov renders the Latin lexeme *interbibere* (hapax) by a pragmatic equivalent '*изсмучи*' (sucked) which belongs to Bulgarian colloquial style and the common lexical register. Thus, he manages to convey the insatiability of the flutist. The verb '*изсмуквам*' (suck) has a figurative meaning, characterised by a negative emotional coloring 'to drink to the end'. The Pirene spring is given the name '*Пирела*' (Pirela) – it is not clear whether this is due to euphony or some other phonetic feature of Bulgarian language at the time, or to some mistake.

In terms of translation, the complexity of the passage lies in the presence of many mythologems that emphasise Euclio's fear of being robbed. In this case, the translator is faced with two choices. The first one is to keep the mythologems, which will require explanatory notes. The second is adapting them to the recipient's language and culture by replacing them with connotative or pragmatic equivalents to achieve the passage's comic effect. Such equivalents, for example, as far as the flutist is con-

---

[11] Batakliev (2011: 74).
[12] Riley (1912).
[13] Naudet (1833, n. 37).

cerned, might be 'пия като смок' (I drink like a snake) or 'изпивам цяла бъчва / бидон с вино' 'I drink a whole barrel / can of wine').

But there is a danger here – the new expression, although more understandable and natural to the target audience, may not be compatible with the rest of the text and sound out of place. For the most part Aleksander D. Pironkov has chosen to keep the mythologems, but due to the mistakes and the lack of explanatory notes for two of them the humor is mostly lost, and the comic effect is not achieved. Explanatory notes although not ensuring the full comic effect of the original, still will familiarise the reader with the mentioned myths and characters. And people tend to laugh more when the joke is at the expense of someone familiar to them. Rather the reader is left mainly confused and agitated.

> Perii interii occidi. quo curram? quo non curram? tene, tene. quem?
> quis?
> […]
> obsecro vos ego, mi auxilio,
> oro obtestor, sitis et hominem demonstretis, quis eam abstulerit.
> quid est? quid ridetis? novi omnes, scio fures esse hic complures,
> qui vestitu et creta occultant sese atque sedent quasi sint frugi.
> quid ais tu? tibi credere certum est, nam esse bonum ex voltu cognosco.
> hem, nemo habet horum? occidisti. dic igitur, quis habet? nescis?
> Heu me miserum, misere perii,
> Male perditus, pessime ornatus eo:
> (Pl. *Aul*. 713; 715–720)

> Загинах! Отидох си! Умрех! Къде да бегам! Де да не бегам! Чакай, чакай! Кого? Кой?
> […]
> Заклевам ви, помогнете ми. Моля, умолявам, посочете ми човека, който я отне... Вий, които сте облечени в бело, и седите като честни хора... Какво говориш ти там? Вервам те, познавам те по външност, че си добър човек. Що е? Що се смеете? Познавам ви всички; зная, че тук има крадци... Ах, никой ли не ще е взел. Умрех си! Кажи, у кого са? Не знаеш ли? Уви, клетият аз. Погубен съм! Загинах! Ограбен съм.
> (Plavt 1915: 53)

> I perished! I'm done for! I died! Where to run? Where not to run! Wait, wait! Whom? Who?
> […]
> I adjure you all, help me. Please, I beg you, point me to the person, who took her away from me… You, who are dressed in white and who sit like honest people… You there, what are you saying? I believe I know you by face that you are a good person. What is it? Why are you laughing? I know you all; I know there are thieves here… Oh, is no one taken it. I died! Say, who has them? You don't know? Alas, poor me. I am ruined! I perished! I am robbed.

Some features of this Euclian line – a long monologue, only part of which is given here – must be mentioned. This is a specific case of rhythmization of the text, resulting from fragmentation of the monologue, from the short lines containing only a word, from the use of synonyms to reinforce the transmitted idea to the extreme, which causes comism (*Perii interii occidi / obsecro vos ego, mi auxilio, / oro obtestor*) and accumulation of questions. Additionally, this monologue includes the only instance of interaction with the audience in the play. Poverty is ridiculous in antiquity, and wealth is a virtue. This passage can be considered as a culmination in the comic description of the main character, reflected in language peculiarities and style. A more extensive study on the subject could cover these features more fully.

For the purposes of this study, we will highlight an expression from the monologue, which refers to the audience of the performance. Euclio's address to the audience functions as specific stylistic device for provoking comism. Along with his requests for help towards the spectators, his suspicions are added:

> quid est? quid ridetis? novi omnes, scio fures esse hic complures,
> qui vestitu et creta occultant sese atque sedent quasi sint frugi.

which translates literally as:

> What's happening? What are you laughing at? I know you all, I know there are many thieves here,
> who hide with clothes and chalk and sit as if they were honorable.

The expression *qui vestitu et creta occultant* hides a distinct cultural reference. The Romans used to whiten their togas with chalk, clay or by fuller's treatment. Plautus alludes to white clothes that cover bad manners.[14]

Aleksander Pironkov renders it simply as 'dressed in white' in his translation. It is unclear to what the expression is referring without explanatory note. Also, the translator shuffled some sentences, restructured the sequence of lines trying to both preserve the comic situation, and make the speech fluent to the receiving audience. Thus, the above-mentioned phrase precedes Euclio's suspicion that there are thieves among the spectators, and the cause–effect connection is lost ('the thieves' are dressed in white clothes to hide their identity). However, the translator tried to preserve it as much as possible by comparing people dressed in white to honest people ('You, who are dressed in white and who sit like honest people'). On the one hand, this transformation establishes the symbolic link between the whiteness of the garment and the kindness and honesty of the people who wear it, and on the other hand, it hints on the fact that they are not in truth honest at all. Based on such an interpretation, the expression refers to the sentence 'I know there are thieves here...' and to some extent succeeds in preserving the connection of the source text.

No doubt, achieving humor through linguistic means and preserving this humor in translation is a difficult task. The Bulgarian translation failed in transferring the comic undertones of the original and furthermore, failed in explaining culturally specific linguistic phenomena to the reader, and familiarising him with them in order to fully grasp the intensity of the accumulated humor. Even using pragmatic equivalence, which in most instances is the best method when searching for equivalent effect, proves to be insufficient or inadequate in translating comedy. The target culture might lack for any equivalent of the phrase in question. With adding the specific topic of avarice, the task may become nearly impossible. The translator is left with the choice between preserving content and losing comism – maybe explaining it with a footnote – or, using totally different expression, even creating a new one him-

---

[14] RILEY (1912).

self/herself. Struggling to understand the jokes, and the essence of comic momentes prevents the audience from perceiving the inherent humor, and therefore from laughing, which is the very aim and function of comedy.

Primary sources

CAPPS 1916   E. CAPPS (ed.): *Plautus I: in four volumes.* The Loeb Classical Library. London – New York 1916.

PIRONKOV 1915   Al. PIRONKOV (prev.): *T. M. Plavt. Garne*. Sofiya 1915.

STOYANOVA 1992   P. STOYANOVA (prev.): *M. T. Tsitseron. Za oratora*. Sofiya 1992.

Secondary sources

BATAKLIEV 2011   G. BATAKLIEV: *Antichna mitologiya*. Sofiya 2011.

GERDZHIKOVA 2002 V. GERDZHIKOVA: *Retseptsiya na antichnata literatura v Balgariya ot Osvobozhdenieto do kraya na Parvata svetovna voyna*. In: A. Nikolova (ed.): Prevodna retseptsiya na evropeyskite literaturi v Balgariya. Tom 3. Klasicheska literatura. Sofiya 2002, 17–36.

NAUDET 1833   J. NAUDET: *Théâtre de Plaute. Tome deuxième: La marmite – Les deux Bacchis.* Traduction nouvelle, accompagnée de notes par J. Naudet, Paris 1833.
                  http://remacle.org/bloodwolf/comediens/Plaute/marmite.htm. 2021. 08. 16.

RILEY 1912   Th. H. RILEY: *The Comedies of Plautus*. London 1912.
                  http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0119.phi003. perseus-eng1:intro.subject. 2021. 08. 16.

SIRAKOVA 2019   Y. SIRAKOVA: *Izgubeniyat v prevoda smyah: iztochnitsi i tehniki na komichnoto v dramata na Plavt „Tri moneti"*. In: L. Ilieva – P. Mollov – M. Ninova (eds.): Ot lingvistika kam semiotika: traektorii i horizonti v izsledvaneto na komunikatsiyata. Sofiya 2019, 454–463.