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PRAGMATIC EQUIVALENCE IN LITERARY TRANSLATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HUMAN AND AI-GENERATED TRANSLATIONS

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The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of pragmatic equivalence and compare the choices made by the human translator and AI that influence the degree in which pragmatic equivalence is achieved based on examples extracted from “Of Mice and Men” by John Steinbeck and its Romanian translation.

Keywords: *equivalence, pragmatic equivalence, literary translation, meaning, implicature, coherence, sociolect*

ECHIVALENŢA PRAGMATICĂ ÎN TRADUCEREA LITERARĂ : STUDIU COMPARATIV AL TRADUCERILOR EFECTUATE DE TRADUCĂTORI UMANI ŞI DE SISTEME DE INTELIGENŢĂ ARTIFICIALĂ

Lucrarea își propune să analizeze conceptul de echivalență pragmatică și să compare alegerile făcute de om și de inteligența artificială, și modul în care acestea influențează echivalența pragmatică, pe baza unor exemple din „Of Mice and Men” de John Steinbeck și traducerea sa în limba română.

Cuvinte-cheie: *echivalență, echivalență pragmatică, traducere literară, sens, implicatură, coerență, sociolect*

Introduction

According to Katharina Reiss as cited by Christiane Nord, the focus of literary translation goes beyond transferring the meaning of the source text into the target language. The task of the translator extends to include transferring “the specific way the message is expressed in the source language”; thus, achieving equivalent function and effect in the process of translation [1, p. 99]. A particular emphasis is placed on the pragmatic dimension, i.e. preserving speaker’s intentions, implied meaning, politeness, socio-cultural elements that create the communicative effect of a literary text.

With the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI), it is increasingly becoming a tool used in the process of translation, being constantly trained to produce grammatically and lexically adequate translation. Its ability to transfer pragmatic meaning, though, remains uncertain. The aim of this study is to investigate how AI-generated translation compares to a human translation in terms of achieving pragmatic equivalence in literary translation, using examples extracted from “Of Mice and Men” by John Steinbeck and its Romanian translation by Frida Papadache.

The Notion of Pragmatic Equivalence

The concept of equivalence, according to Mary Snell-Hornby, originated within linguistically oriented schools of translation. It became a central concept in translations studies which redirected translation theory from the old "faithful" vs. "free" opposition toward the idea of a presumed interlingual tertium comparationis. For a considerable period, the terms "equivalence" and "equivalent" were regarded as indispensable to any definition of translation. Equivalence was later sought, depending on each theorist's perspective, either between individual translation units, at the level of the entire text, or at both levels, as in Katharina Reiss's approach [2, p. 15-16].

Werner Koller, cited by Basil Hatim and Jeremy Munday, defines equivalence as a process shaped, on one hand, by various linguistic, textual, and extra-textual factors in the source and target languages that may sometimes conflict, and on the other hand, by the historical and cultural contexts in which texts and their translations are created and interpreted [3, p. 50]. In his survey of the notion of equivalence, he presented a typology of equivalence that included five categories, as cited by Anthony Pym: denotative (focused referential or denotative meanings), connotative (linked to how the original text is expressed), text-normative (concerned with conventional textual and linguistic norms), pragmatic (oriented toward the target audience), and formal (pertaining to the formal and aesthetic features of the source text) [4, p. 72]. A pragmatic perspective sees translation as a process that requires interpreting the text or author's intended meaning in the source language and examining the factors that influence how the translator conveys this meaning in the target language according to the expectations of that audience. The translator must establish the pragmatic meaning and coherence of the source text, and then reconstruct and adapt that meaning within the target-language system [5, p. 146].

According to Mona Baker, pragmatic equivalence refers to achieving similarity in how meaning is used, interpreted, and conveyed in context, ensuring that the target text functions in its communicative situation in a way comparable to the source text [6, p. 217].

The central theory of pragmatics used to illustrate the notion of pragmatic equivalence is the theory of conversational implicature and cooperative principle developed by Herbert Paul Grice. Grice uses implicature to describe what a speaker intends or suggests, as opposed to the literal wording of their utterance. Implicatures rely on inferring a specific speaker's intended meaning in a particular situation. The interpretation of implied meaning stems from the cooperative principle which characterizes communication as a cooperative effort on the part of the participants and from adherence to its maxims: quantity (be as informative as required), quality (be truthful), relevance (be relevant), manner (be clear) [6, p. 223].

Apart from the concept of implicature, Mona Baker also includes the notion of coherence, which is integral to the understanding of pragmatic equivalence, as it is considered especially useful for examining how meaning is constructed and for identifying challenges in cross-cultural communication. She links coherence with cohesion, defining the former as the conceptual connection of ideas within a text, and the latter as the grammatical and lexical ties that make these conceptual relations explicit at the surface

level. According to her, cohesive markers mainly serve to support and, to some extent, guide the interpretation of the text's underlying semantic connections [6, p. 217-219].

Taking into account the pragmatic aspects allows the translator to transfer the full communicative effect of the source text ensuring that the target-language reader experiences the text in a manner functionally equivalent to the source-language audience.

An Analysis of Pragmatic Equivalence in Literary Translation: Human vs. AI-Generated Translations

First published in 1937, "Of Mice and Men" is a story which centres two labourers, Lennie and George, who work on ranches in California as itinerant workers in hopes of someday being able to afford their own piece of land. The language employed by John Steinbeck varies between Standard English and the sociolect of the uneducated labourers of that time used in the dialogue, which presents a particular pragmatic difficulty in translation. The colloquial character of the sociolect illustrated through lexical and grammatical irregularities influences the process of inferring the intended meaning. Additionally, the pragmatic effect of the sociolect will have to be recreated by using equivalent means in the target language, taking into account the time and place in which the story is set, so that the target language audience can perceive the text in a similar way as the source text is perceived by the original intended audience.

The following analysis applies the theoretical concepts to a literary text, examining how pragmatic meaning is rendered in translation. Focusing on implicature and rendering of the social dialect as a socio-cultural element, it compares human and AI translations to identify where the intention and communicative effect of the original text are preserved, altered, or lost, and, thus the degree to which the pragmatic equivalence is achieved. Examples from "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck were analyzed, comparing the human translation by Frida Papadache with AI translation provided by ChatGPT.

EN: "*Why.... he.... just quit, the way a guy will. Says it was the food. Just wanted to move. Didn't give no other reason but the food. Just says '**gimme my time'** one night, the way any guy would.*" [7, p. 53]

RO Version 1 (Human translation*): „Păi... de... plecă şi el, cum pleacă oricare. 'Cea că nu-i convine mâncarea. Vrea şi el să se vânture... N-a zâs n'ica decât de mâncare. Într-o seară, cică: „**Daţi-mi socoteala**", cum face orişicare.*" [8, p. 21]

RO Version 2 (AI translation): „*Păi… el… pur și simplu a plecat, așa cum pleacă un tip. Zice că era mâncarea. A vrut doar să se mute. N-a dat niciun alt motiv în afară de mâncare. Într-o seară a zis doar: "**dă-mi plata**", așa cum ar face orice tip.*" [9].

In this example, the expression *gimme my time* requires particular attention, as it cannot be rendered literally. The context of usage provides the translator with the information needed to infer the intended meaning. The exchange between the characters happens in the process of hiring at the ranch, and the line explains why the previous worker left, so the expression, in this instance, implies the idea of receiving payment for the completed work. Both the human translator and the translation provided by AI managed to render the intended meaning correctly. However, if we consider the additional task

of rendering the sociolect, we can see that the degree to which pragmatic equivalence is achieved differs. In the source text, the expression's colloquial character is illustrated through the informal phonetic contraction *gimme* (give + me, where /v/ is omitted in speech). As Romanian cannot replicate the same contraction, the human translator compensates for the gap through lexical means, using the slightly old-fashioned word *socoteala*, recreating the pragmatic effect of the original. Another aspect where the translations differ is the rendering of the implied second person in the imperative construction. The relationship between the characters (worker and supervisor) informs the decision of the human translator to use *daţi-mi*, the polite form of address in Romanian, which reflects the social hierarchy in the interaction and further contributes to the preservation of the intended pragmatic meaning. However, as AI was not able to consider this particular aspect, it fails to produce a fully pragmatically accurate translation.

EN: "*Then why don't you let him answer? **What are you trying to put over***?" [7, p. 56]

RO Version 1 (Human translation): „*Atunci de ce nu-l laşi să răspundă el? **Pe cine vrei ,mneata să tragi pe sfoară***?" [8, p. 25]

RO Version 2 (AI translation): „*Atunci de ce nu-l lași să răspundă? **Ce încerci să impui**?*"[9]

In the example above, the intended meaning of the utterance *What are you trying to put over?* can only be inferred using the context, as the implicature does not coincide with the meaning of the phrasal verb *put over* which is "to communicate an idea in a clear manner". The question uttered by the boss in an exchange with George is meant to convey distrust, because earlier the boss tried to ask Lennie about his skills. As Lennie is intended to have a cognitive disability that could potentially jeopardize their employment, it was agreed that George would speak to their employer. The human translator conveys this pragmatic meaning of distrust through the idiom *a trage pe sfoară*. This choice also preserves the colloquial register, contributing to the pragmatic equivalence in rendering the characters' sociolect. The use of *'mneata*, an informal, spoken variant of *you*, further adds to the pragmatic effect in translation. The AI translation, on the other hand, fails to achieve not only the pragmatic equivalence, but the semantic one as well. The lexical choice of the word *a impune* does not reflect accurately the literal meaning of the phrasal verb, nor the contextual implicature.

EN: "*Now **he's got his eye on us**. Now we got to be careful and **not make no slips**. **You keep your big Rapper shut** after this.*" [7, p. 58]

RO Version 1 (Human translation): „*Acu' **e cu ochii pe noi**. Acu' trebuie să băgăm de seamă **să nu facem boacăne**. **Să-ţi ţii fleoanca aia, să nu mai fii gură spartă**.*" [8, p. 26]

RO Version 2 (AI translation): „*Acum **ne-a pus ochii pe noi**. Trebuie să fim atenți și să **nu facem niciun pas greșit**. **Ține-ți gura mare** după asta.*" [9]

In this instance, the human translator manages to achieve a high degree of pragmatic equivalence as the effect of the original sociolect used by the characters was successfully recreated through Romanian idioms and highly informal everyday spoken lexis like *boacăne* or *fleoancă*, the latter additionally carrying a derogatory connotation. Given the context of the dialogue where George is angry because by speaking to the boss Lennie

almost lost their jobs, the choice of the translator is particularly appropriate in preserving the pragmatic effect. The word *rapper* needs specific contextual inference, since dictionaries explain the word currently as "someone who performs rap music" [10] or as a slang word "a person who chats or talks freely" [11]. Considering the existence of the English expression *keep one's mouth shut* and the context, the translator could correctly infer the intended meaning and translate accordingly. Here two expressions with equivalent meaning were used, which might be seen as unnecessarily redundant, but do not hinder the overall translation outcome. On the contrary, they strengthen the effect as pragmatically this choice serves to reinforce the warning and emphasize George's anger. The expressions chosen by the AI, on the other hand, are more neutral, failing to convey the social nuances, and, thus to achieve a similar pragmatic effect as the original. Furthermore, the translation of the reference *ne-a pus ochii* is pragmatically misleading, since the pronoun refers to the two characters Lennie and George, but the original *his* refers to their employer. The expression *ține-ți gura mare* is unnatural, and should have omitted the word mare for a smoother result in translation.

EN: "*Well –**she got the eye***." [7, p. 63]

RO Version 1 (Human translation): „*De… **îi joacă ochii după bărbaţi***." [8, p. 31]

RO Version 2 (AI translation): „*Păi—**are privirea aia***." [9]

In this example, the intended meaning of the expression *she got the eye* can be inferred from the context as it is intended to describe a married female character in the story who is perceived by the male characters as having a flirtatious behaviour. The human translator chose a metaphorical colloquial expression that not only manages to convey the implicature, but also contributes to the overall equivalent communicative effect in translation, as it serves as a means to render the character's sociolect. The AI version of the translation is more neutral and less explicit than the version provided by the human translator, leaving the reader to infer the meaning from the context. Additionally, the informality of the language employed by the character is preserved only through the informal version of the demonstrative pronoun *aia*, which functions as a deictic marker rather than as a semantic clarifier. All in all, the AI version of the translation is more ambiguous and the achievement of the pragmatic equivalence relies entirely on the reader's inferential competence, while the human translator explicitly disambiguates the intended meaning.

EN: "***I ain't got no people**, George said. I seen the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time.*" [7, p. 78]

RO Version 1 (Human translation): „***Io neamuri n-am**, zise George. Am văz't io p-ăi care umblă să muncească singuri pe la ferme. Nu le e bine. N-au nici o plăcere. Cu vremea se ticăloşesc. Nu se mai gândesc decât la bătaie până la urmă.*" [8, p. 45]

RO Version 2 (AI translation): „***Nu am pe nimeni**, spuse George. Am văzut oamenii care umblă singuri prin ferme. Asta nu-i bine. Nu se distrează deloc. După mult timp devin răi. Vor să se certe tot timpul.*" [9]

In this instance, the utterance *I ain't got no people* cannot be translated literally and should be inferred from the context. The word people does not suggest general mean-

ing of human beings, but specifically implies the existence of a familial relationship, since George is not completely alone as he has Lennie as his travel companion. The human translator explicitely disambiguates the intended meaning using the colloquial word *neamuri*, which additionally serves as a means to render the character's sociolect. To strengthen the equivalent pragmatic effect, the translator also uses the informal fist-person pronoun *io*, and the spoken contracted form *n-am*. In contrast, the version provided by AI, although not a literal translation, does not have the context to render the precise implicature. It also neutralizes the sociolect, thus failing to achieve pragmatic equivalence.

Conclusions

Comparing the translation versions provided by AI and those provided by the human translator, we can conclude that AI translation managed to render the semantic meaning to a variable degree of success, but failed in most cases to achieve a satisfactory level of pragmatic equivalence. This was primarily due to its inability to correctly infer implicatures, reproduce the sociolect of the characters, or accurately translate deictic expressions. One reason might be that AI translated the examples mainly within the immediate linguistic context outside of broader pragmatic aspects, such as character hierarchies and the story's social and physical setting, in the way a human translator would. In contrast, the human translator was able to use those clues and other linguistic and extralinguistic knowledge to achieve a high degree of pragmatic equivalence in translation, and provide a more accurate rendering of the communicative effect of the original.

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