

TRANSLATING VIDEO GAMES INTO ROMANIAN: YAY OR NAY?

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Abstract

It is a shared view among Romanian video gamers that translating computer games into Romanian would considerably decrease the value of the game highly reducing its impact on the market.

This statement relies on the results of a survey applied to a sample of 113 gamers with an age range from 19 to 22. The statistic study sums up three extra and in-game factors that support the gamers' preference for upholding English. Making use of Gideon Toury's (1995) terms, the first factor refers to historical contextualization, namely Romanian post-communist orientation towards the Anglo-American culture. The second factor refers to the lack of prior successful game translations: a high percentage of respondents assert that the use of deficient translation patches has caused them the loss of the game. Following and completing Christiane Nord's model of functional perspective analysis (1991/2005) on the extra and intertextual factors that influence the translation of a source text, the third series of factors taken into consideration refers to the translation context and to the target audience.

This paper is concerned, therefore, with the linguistic and functional examination of various challenges that the cyber games translatability may raise. The author intends to determine what translation strategies may be used in order to fully convey the pragmatic message and functionality of a video game. The study is complemented with a contrastive analysis of examples from the linguistic corpus of one video game.

Keywords: video gaming, video game localization, cultural sensitivities, translation challenges and strategies, functional translation

1. Introductory premises - RPPGs' opinion

Each video game tells a story under the form of a multi-layered interactive text which has to be adapted in order to attract audiences from different regions or countries. Video game localization implies transforming the game software and hardware, changing graphics and content, and / or adjusting parts of the game in order to suit different cultural sensitivities. An important part of the localization process is translating the text of all layers of the video game – such as manuals, “read me” files, site, dialogues, spoken utterances, written graphic art, user interface, etc. Mistranslations, exactly like game bugs, distort the fictional story of the game and interrupt the players' experience, reducing the game impact on the sales market.

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The common belief of Romanian active gamers is that translating video games into Romanian would significantly decrease the game value and practice. This statement relies on the study of the results of a questionnaire applied to a sample of 113 Romanian Role Playing Gamers (RRPGs) with an age range from 19 to 22 years. Out of the 113 answers, more than 98% consider that translating video games would reduce the impact of the game. Even more, 39% of respondents state that the use of deficient translation has caused them the loss of the game. The other 61% have not used translation patches yet. Another recurrent argument that favours the use of English in video games and reflected in 68% of the answers is that playing on international servers subtly shows that in developing fictional worlds, people can work together regardless of their nationality, age or sex differences. On the other hand, more than three thirds of the survey participants share the acknowledgment that non-speakers of a foreign language would better accomplish the in-game objectives if games were in Romanian.

2. Factors that favour SL

According to the statistic study of the questionnaire, the summing up of answers shows that there are three extra and in-game factors that support the gamers' predilection for source language (SL), i.e. English, preservation.

Making use of Gideon Toury's (1995) terms, the first factor refers to historical contextualization. More specifically, the post-communist orientation towards the Anglo-American culture is obvious in Romania. I personally consider a specific group of the Romanian X generation as "the Cartoon Network age group". In the 90s cartoons were not translated into Romanian. Therefore, children of those days used to watch cartoons in English. This practical fact proved to have a lot of benefits in terms of foreign language acquisition, as it was a fun way to learn English: "no teacher, no homework, and no responsibility". Thus, Romanian young adults have unconsciously practiced the "learning by doing" methodological principle of acquiring a foreign language. Similar to some extent to cartoons, video games also target young people. Focusing on the game, teenagers also learn English without realizing it. On the other hand, video games use an environmental type of discourse and the "language of video games" has to some respect limited linguistic resources.

The second factor refers to the lack of prior successful game translations. Statistically speaking, more than 97% of the survey respondents claim that translation patches and add-ons bring along a loss in the originality and charm of the game. According to the survey, in-game aspects that are not accurately conveyed in Romanian refer to voices that do not match and to the use of incorrect semantic correspondents for idiomatic game terminology, such as: actions to perform, names of characters, in-game tips, interface menu. Out of the 39% of respondents who have used translation patches more than three thirds complain that the Romanian version contains incomprehensible, archaic, confusing lexical items and that jokes, puns and other English linguistic idiomaticisms lose their meaning. Nevertheless, 57% of the subjects show empathy towards gamers that do not know English and theoretically accept the idea of game translation. For these gamers among which I include children who have not yet acquired English language skills I do consider that an acceptable Romanian version of video games should be provided, regardless of the supplementary production costs.

Following and completing Christiane Nord's model of functional perspective analysis (1991/2005) on the extra and intertextual factors that influence the translation of a source text, the third series of factors taken into consideration when discussing the translatability of cyber games refers to the translation context and to the target audience. 17% of the respondents intuit that translating video games requires specific skills. Translating video games implies thus at least a four folded task. Firstly, that of a writer who conveys the main story. Secondly, according to Bernal Merino (2007) the task of a software programmer who deals with the cryptic game source code. Thirdly, the task of an actor, if dubbing is used. And last, but most importantly, the translator should be an active and experienced gamer himself.

3. Approaches to translating video games

I argue in this presentation that proper linguistic, pragmatic and contextual approaches from both bottom-up and top-down perspectives could fully convey the entire gaming experience and interaction into Romanian. It is obvious that the multi-layered interactive type of text makes the translation of video games different from any other type of language transfer.

In order to elaborately illustrate the bottom-up perspective at a micro lexical level I have focused firstly on all instances of interjections found in the original source text of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It is a story that plays with logic and fantastic happenings, tackling children's genuine and quick ways of perceiving reality changes, of dealing with adulthood in times and spaces where everything seems natural, where anything is possible. Some of these literary features are conveyed in the Hdo Adventure video game, *Alice in Wonderland, The Incredible Adventure*, the extended version, which has not been translated into Romanian yet. It is a clever game and a grand adventure for teenage fans of Lewis Carroll's book. For book readers, the storyline seems familiar and the gameplay is easier to follow. For instance, the **authorial intention**: to entertain and capture three little girls' imagination is also preserved in the game. This intention is transposed into Alice's very first words: "what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations" (Carroll, 2000:1-2):



Interjections, seen as pragmatic markers of the discourse, belong to the factor *lexis* in Christiane Nord's model of analysis. It is a well-known fact that, in Saussurian terms the interjection lacks the 'signified' component of the linguistic sign (Dominte, 1971:172), not having a clear referent. Interjections do not denote, but suggest inward feelings, being surface expressions of inner desire, feeling, appeal, and the like. It is observed in the source text that Carroll's subtle and original linguistic creativity stands out even at this 'minimal level' of interjections through rhymes and rhythms - as in example (1) below -, nonsense imagery - as in examples (2), (3) -, and puns - as in example (4) - that include interjections that can represent translation challenges:

- (1) "Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day!"
- (2) "Oh my ears and whiskers"
- (3) "Oh my dear paws! Oh my fur and whiskers!"
- (4) The dialogue between Alice and the Caterpillar, where Alice complains about changing sizes so very often:

Alice: "(...) only one doesn't like changing so often, *you know*.'
'I DON'T know,' said the Caterpillar."

It is observed that the **conversational functions** of interjections prevail in the semantic study of interjections in *Alice's Adventures*, the source text. According to Ameka, interjections should be differentiated according to the language function they perform (1992:259). Following Jakobson's taxonomy, interjections can be divided into: referential, expressive, conative, phatic, poetic and metalinguistic. For instance, the above source text examples are:

1. (1), (2), and (3) **expressive** because they bring about information about the speaker's inner state;
2. (4) **phatic**, because it is associated with the contact factor, verifying the functionality of the communication channel.
3. The following example, extracted from the video game, contains a **conative** interjection – *hey* - that directly focuses on the addressee:



Secondly, I have carried out a contrastive analysis referring to the translation strategies used by Romanian professional translators for the specific case of interjections in translations into Romanian of *Alice's Adventures*. In order to extract and generalize the most recurrent and suitable translation strategies for interjections, I have compared two versions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that stand out in terms of subtlety and intuition, namely Frida Papadache's (1976) and Mirella Acsente's (2007) translations. Although separated by a historical and socio-cultural distance of over two decades, the two versions prove to have similarities in the translation behavior in what concerns the translation strategies for interjections. They support Toury's statement that translator's choices "tend to manifest *regularities*" (1995:56, my italics) in "recurrent situations of the same kind" (ib.). Following Andrew Chesterman's (1997) detailed threefold taxonomy of translation strategies, the most frequently used strategies are :

- (1) the selection of the most appropriate target correspondent,
- (2) different degrees of omission, and
- (3) unit shift.

Nevertheless, cases of (4) borrowings, (5) explicitation, (6) interjection class change, (7) use of semantically related correspondents, or (8) literal translation (+/- graphic change) are also frequent.

The **case study** of the **interjections** used in the **2009 video game** shows that the game **resumes** the original source interjectional terms. Interjections are surface expressions of inward, deeper thoughts and feelings. In order to understand the meaning an interjection conveys in a source language, the reader should firstly translate it into the source language itself. Hence, translating interjections into a target language would imply understanding the deeper levels of their meanings, and conveying them into a target language through a second level of contextual and pragmatic translation process. According to the above-mentioned translation strategies, the most suitable ones suggested for the case of interjections used in the video game are:

Type of interjection		ST Example	1 st level of translation: Contextual translation in the SL	Suggestion of potential correspondents	Translation strategies (A. Chesterman (1995))
Expressive	simple	Aaargh!	Used to express a complaint	1. Vai !; Aoleu ! 2. Vai, Doamne !; Vai de mine !	1. replacement with a target correspondent; 2. unit shift
		Bother!	Used to express annoyance or mild irritation	Of!	replacement with a target correspondent;
		Huh?!	Used to express interrogation, surprise	Ce?! / Poftim?!	Unit shift
		Oh!	Used to express surprise	Oh ! / O!	Literal translation (+ / - graphic change)
		Phew!	Used to express relief	Pfiu !	Shift with an etymologically related correspondent, of the same PIE origin
	Phrasal interjections	Oh my goodness! Oh my goodness!	Used to express strong emotion, such as fear, surprise	Vai de mine! Vai de mine!	Unit shift: English repeated compound interjection to Romanian interjectional phrase
Oh bother!		used to express mild irritation or impatience	Of, Doamne!; Ei / Na belea! (+ a very domesticated version)	replacement with a semantically and functionally similar target correspondent	
Conative Hortative [+human]	primary	Hey!	Used to attract attention	Hei!	replacement with a target perfect correspondent
	secondary	Let's... !	used to express an incentive, a suggestion	Hai (să) ... !	There is no interjection in the S text, but an interjectional element appears in the TT

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, in this presentation I have argued that in the game transfer from English into Romanian as a TL all etymologic, phonetic, graphic, semantic, syntactic, functional, communicative and contextual features of the source game have to be taken into account, in order to maintain the same effect and force of the original text. This has been illustrated in this presentations for the micro level of interjections.

The high degree of concreteness in term selection in the case of interjections translation from English into Romanian highlights the productive idiomatic potentials of the Romanian language, in both target texts and possible translation of video games.

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