

# A Space of Possibilities: Translating and Analyzing a Sample of *Amintiri din copilărie* by Ion Creangă

**Anca MUREȘANU**

Universitatea „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, Facultatea de Litere și Arte  
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Faculty of Letters and Arts  
Personal e-mail: anca.muresanu@ulbsibiu.ro

*A Space of Possibilities: Translating and Analyzing a Sample of Amintiri din copilărie by Ion Creangă*

This paper aims at analyzing a translated fragment from Ion Creangă's "Amintiri din Copilărie" (Memories of Childhood) using a stylistic approach. The stylistic analysis of a text goes beyond traditional or intuitive interpretation since it combines intuition and a comprehensive analysis of the text. Stylistic analysis is used as an analytical tool to discover textual patterns and their significance. Apart from providing an in-depth descriptive starting point for widely accepted interpretation of the novel, such analysis also recognizes significant features which might not have been noticed by critics. The central point of this study is to assess the stylistic features of the source text and to reveal the extent to which such features are maintained in the target language.

Keywords: stylistic analysis, style, translation, Ion Creangă



”Nu trece mult după asta, și-ntr-o zi, prin luna lui maiu, aproape de Moși, îndeamnă păcatul pe bădița Vasile tântul, că mai bine nu i-oiu zice, să puie pe unul, Nic-a lui Costache, să mă procitească. Nică, băiet mare și înaintat la învățătură până la genunchiul broaștei, era sfădit cu mine din pricina Smărăndiței popei, căreia, cu toată părerea mea de rău, i-am tras într-o zi o blendeală, pentru că nu-mi da pace să prind muște... Și Nică începe să mă asculte; și mă ascultă el, și mă ascultă, și unde nu s-apucă de însemnat la greșele cu ghiontura pe o draniță; una, două, trei, până la douăzeci și noua...” Măi!!! S-a trecut de șagă”, zic eu, în gândul meu;” încă nu m-a gătit de ascultat, și câte au să mai fie!” Și unde n-a început a mi se face negru pe dinaintea ochilor și a tremura mânios... Ei, ei! Acu-i acu. Ce-i de făcut Nică? Îmi zic eu în minte.” (Creangă,

Ioan *Amintiri din copilărie*, București: ed Ion Creangă, 1984, pp.33)

Not long after this, one day, in the Month of May, close upon the Whitsun Moși festival, the Evil One goaded Mister Vasile, the chucklehead, for I cannot think of a better word for him, to have a fellow, Nică, Costache's son, test my knowledge. Nică, who was older than me and rather illiterate, had argued with me on account of little Smaranda, the priest's daughter, whom, with all my sorrow, I had once hustled because she wouldn't let me catch flies... And Nică begins to examine me, and he goes on to examine me, and then starts to score mistakes by the hour on a piece of shingle: one, two, three, up to twenty-nine! "Oh my! The joke went too far", I said to myself; "he hasn't yet finished examining me and when I think of all the



mistakes to come!” And all of a sudden, I started to see red and began to tremble with anger... Well, well! This is it. What do you do Nică?” I asked myself. (my translation).

Any translator is required to understand, reconstruct and transfer the original text into the target text; he/she relies on the wealth of knowledge of the language he/she translates from to transfer word literally from the source language to the target language so as to make an understandable and accurate recreation of that particular work. The task of the translator is to reproduce, in a creative way, the style of the original text through linguistic techniques, which in the target language must be similar to those in the source language to make the reception of the translation close to the way in which the original text is valued (He Weixiang, 2010: 137). Whoever takes upon himself the task of translating Ion Creangă's work is not just dealing with simple words written in a certain space and time but with the cultural aspect of the text. He /she must be also familiar with the Romanian history and culture.

The unique quality of Ion Creangă's style resides in his ability to use the creative force of the vernacular by preserving the regional phonetics, popular sayings and expressions or the easiness of the colloquial speech. Creangă does not copy the folk language but he recreates it and pours it into the pattern of an individual narrative, hence the originality of his work. A perfect example of the complexity of his style is the following fragment, a passage from the first chapter of Ion Creangă's autobiographical novel *Amintiri din copilărie – Memories of childhood* (my translation). The Romanian author restores the story to its primitive aesthetic function, that is, to address itself not to some readers but to an auditorium able to be conquered through all the suggestive elements of the vernacular.

Nu trece mult după asta, și-ntr-o zi, prin luna lui maiu, aproape de Moși, îndeamnă păcatul pe bădița Vasile tântul, că mai bine nu i-oiu zice, să puie pe unul, Nic-a lui Costache, să mă procitească.

Not long after this, one day, in the Month of May, close upon the Whitsun Moși festival, the Evil One goaded Mister Vasile, the chucklehead, for I cannot think of a better word for him, to have a fellow, Nică, Costache's son, test my knowledge.

The paragraph opens with the temporal phrase Nu trece mult după asta. Ion Creangă uses it to assure the fluency of the narration and to note the passing of time. Within this construction, the adverb mult underlines a vague, indefinite time. The first part of the sentence contains other three temporal constructions și-ntr-o zi, prin luna lui maiu, aproape de Moși which work together to accomplish a certain gradation;

Creangă starts from a more general time to narrow it then to a certain day – the Whitsun Moși festival. One of the terms that raised some difficulty in the process of translation is the word Moși. Usually, if translated as such, its English equivalent would be “ancestors”. But it is not in this sense that the author uses it. It refers to a festival held in commemoration of the dead and it takes place on Whitsaturday, the occasion being the great Whitsuntide fair (sărbătoarea Rusaliilor). Further on the author uses other term related to the religious life – păcatul. Being the subject of the verb îndeamnă, Ion Creangă personifies the noun offering it a certain status: it takes us back to the original sin. By eating the apple, Adam and Eve committed the greatest sin and God banished them from Paradise. Ever since then, the word păcat has been given negative connotations. That is why I have chosen to translate it not by sin – which would have been the obvious choice – but by a compound noun the Evil One to stress the personification of the noun.

Ion Creangă is known for his extensive use of diminutives such as bădița, Smărăndița. In Romanian bădița names a person that is felt as being closely related to the speaker, somebody familiar. An English equivalent may be the word “brother” or “old man”. However, neither of these two terms are suitable as English equivalents because, on the one hand, “old man” is too vague – it can refer to an old person or it can be used derogatorily, “gaffer” – and on the other hand, the term “brother” is even farther away from that of the original since Vasile – the teacher – is not a relative of the family. Knowing that Vasile is Nică's teacher, the word Mister seems to be the most appropriate, taking into account that as a pupil, one cannot refer to his master unless he uses a proper, polite term.

A popular writer, Creangă cannot help himself but use archaic and colloquial words. An example of the kind is the verb i-oiu zice. This form holds a special place among the other Romanian forms of the Future. It implies certainty to the highest degree. “Oi zice” correspond to “voi zice” (I will say/tell). What is the difference? The explanation has a historical nature. The presence of “voi” proves that, in the beginning, “voi zice” (I will say) meant “voiam să zic” (I meant to say). Later on, its future meaning was predominant. However, the initial shade of will did not disappear. This shade – in time left on a secondary position – explains today the meaning of “oi zice” (am să zic, dacă voi avea plăcerea).

In the process of translation one notices that the grammatical features in one language do not match those in another language identically. A particular grammatical voice or tense is not always translated the same way. In his familiar colloquial style, Ion Creangă chooses an obsolete form of the passive-reflexive voice - să mă procitească (to test my knowledge). The

English language lacks this voice and an appropriate alternative may be the use of a causative verb such as have (have+person+verb) with the meaning of “to give someone else the responsibility to do something.

Nică, băiet mare și înaintat la învățătură până la genunchiul broaștei, era sfădit cu mine din pricina Smărăndiței popei, căreia, cu toată părerea mea de rău, i-am tras într-o zi o blendeală, pentru că n-ami da pace să prind muște...

Nică, who was older than me and rather illiterate, had argued with me on account of little Smaranda, the priest's daughter, whom, with all my sorrow, I had once hustled because she wouldn't let me catch flies...

If the previous sentence introduced another character from the Memories – Nic-a lui Costache, this fragment develops his portrait. We learn that Nică is older than the author and not very bright. To emphasize his rather non-existent knowledge, Ion Creangă resorts to one of his rare metaphors – the lack of metaphors in Ion Creangă is characteristic for this story-teller, pre-eminently popular and pre-eminently epic – this time having a negative connotation: înălțat la învățătură până la genunchiul broaștei. A word-for-word translation – Nică whose knowledge was up to a frog's knee – would perplex the target reader unless an explanation is provided for him. What the storyteller wants to emphasize through this expression is Nică's inadequate education: “pâna la genunchiul broaștei” means “very little” (the distance from the ground to the frog's knee is very small). To render the same idea, I have chosen the expression rather illiterate since a word-for-word translation would not have conveyed the same meaning. Yet mention should be made about the adverb of degree which appears in the translated version. Rather used as a pre-modifying adverb for the adjective illiterate holds a special position in that it is used with adjectives and adverbs displaying unfavorable qualities. Rather is part of a group of adverbs that have a similar meaning, such as “fairly”, “quite”. But unlike “rather”, “fairly” expresses approval and it is usually combined with adjectives and adverbs that suggest a good state of affairs and “quite” being even stronger than “fairly” is used when one makes a favorable comment. That is why I have preferred the English adverb rather over its synonyms which would have been unable to render the unfavorable connotations of the adjective.

A fundamental feature of Ion Creangă's language resides, undoubtedly, in the abundance of archaic and regional words that have a Moldavian phonetic aspect: sfădit, i-am tras o blendeală. It will be very difficult if not impossible for a non-speaker to grasp the meaning of such verbs unless he/she is familiar with the Romanian folk and regional words.

Și Nică începe să mă asculte; și mă ascultă el, și mă ascultă, și unde nu s-apucă de însemnat la greșele cu ghiontura pe o draniță; una, două, trei, până la douăzeci și noua...

And Nică begins to examine me, and he goes on to examine me and then starts to score mistakes by the hour on a piece of shingle: one, two, three, up to twenty-nine...

Ion Creangă's phrase has a simple structure that perfectly renders the popular language. When a character fulfills a number of actions, these are linked in phrases made up of short sentences, most of the time, main clauses. As with regard to the relationship between clauses we should mention the prevalence of coordination over subordination. Just like the common speaker, Ion Creangă uses mainly main clauses connected by “și” or “iară”. The conjunction și connects not only the parts of a phrase but also two or more phrases being thus a sort of universal coordinating conjunction. When analyzing Ion Creangă's language, we should mention some of the morphological deeds that contribute to its popular character. It is undeniable that, in narrative passages, the author manifests an obvious inclination towards the so-called historical present. Most of the time, the story-telling begins with past tense only to continue then with the present, the change being unnoticed by the reader. If this phenomenon happens unintentionally in everyday speech, this does not hold true in the case of writers. They resort to this stylistic procedure to invigorate the narration, to get the events closer to the present moment. However, in the case of Ion Creangă this frequent use of the present with a past meaning has also a strict linguistic cause: in Ion Creangă's time, the Moldavian speakers did not know the Past Tense, and the historical present is, in fact, its equivalent. The first verb in the row, the verb that sets up the tone of the action is “to begin” – începe. Since the main clause expresses a demand, it asks for a subjunctive in the subordinate clause: să mă asculte - to examine me. This verb repeats itself several times: și mă ascultă el, și mă ascultă... This repetition of the verb accompanied by the coordinate conjunction and uttered with the proper intonation renders sometimes not just the objective time, but the reaction of sensibility towards an action which, due to its unpleasant consequence, seems endless. The absence of an adverb of time does not show the exact temporal limits of the action. As we can see, the verbs are separated by means of the conjunction și and commas. Placing them into seclusion, Creangă makes sure that each word gets its deserved attention. Since the use of the historical present intertwined with past tense is an element of foregrounding, anyone who attempts to translate Creangă's work should be able

to render it as accurately as possible into the target language. The absence of an adverb of tense allows the translator to render the same present tense into English even if the action is viewed from a past perspective: begins, goes on. Since the repetition is a stylistic device that characterizes Creangă's style, I have chosen to render it in English with the help of a phrasal verb – "to go on", with the meaning of "to continue doing something as before": he begins to examine me, and he goes on to examine me. The less pleasant results of the examination are introduced by the apparently negative phrase unde nu. This phrase helps the author obtain a certain intonation. The pick of the intonation coincides with the stressed syllable of the verb începe. The phrase announces events that are impressive due to their length. The idea of length is associated with that of intensity, increasing thus the emotional load of this fragment. Usually, the sentence introduced by unde nu, describes very important consequences for the future development of the narration. Unfortunately, the English language lacks such phrase forcing the translator to use a different word altogether. Since the relative adverb unde possesses, in such constructions, a rather temporal meaning, I have chosen the temporal adverb then.

...,„Măi!!! S-a trecut de șagă”, zic eu, în gândul meu;” încă nu m-a gătit de ascultat, și câte au să mai fie!” Și unde n-a început a mi se face negru pe dinaintea ochilor și a tremura mânios... Ei, ei! Acu-i acu. Ce-i de făcut Nică? Îmi zic eu în minte.

Oh my! The joke went too far”, I said to myself; “he hasn't yet finished examining me and when I think of all the mistakes to come!” And all of a sudden, I started to see red and began to tremble with anger... Well, well! This is it. What do you do Nică?” I asked myself.

The popular character of Ion Creangă's language also manifests itself in the extensive use of certain figures of speech such as the exclamation. It is a direct expression of wonder in all its numerous and diverse nuances, nuances that range from bare admiring satisfaction to utter indignation. The exclamation is a feature specific to the common language, irrespective of culture or environment. That is why the language of the common people uses the exclamation in a completely spontaneous way as opposed to the literate, governed – due to the environment where they were born and trained – by the rules of a certain social discipline.

When translating, one should acknowledge that each word that makes up a text has meaning only in the context in which it occurs. A single word or unit taken out of the context has no meaning except the dictionary one. The expressive power of words depends

on their cultural meaning. The concept of cultural context becomes obvious when one has to translate, for example, archaic expressions: S-a trecut de șagă. Such expression cannot be translated word-for-word since it would not make sense for the target reader. When translating such expressions one has to keep in mind that the story-teller is a playful child who recalls events from his childhood and who will not use pompous words. Taking into account that șagă means “joke”, “prank”, “quip”, “pun”, I have found the translation The joke went too far much more appropriate to the historical context and to a child's way of talking than other possible English equivalents such as “the plot thickens”, “the shots start flying” or “it gets really hairy” which sound more as neologisms rather than plain, ordinary folk language. A similar translation was offered by Ana Cartianu in her translation *Memories of my Boyhood* (1996) – “Well I should put an end to this joke”. However, even if her translation managed to convey the meaning expressed in the source text, it failed to transfer the exclamation mark – an important element for creating foregrounding – which can make a difference to meaning in the target language.

The relative adverb unde is also present, introducing an independent clause. Having a rather temporal meaning, the adverb leads to a slight discrepancy between the form and the content. We can add to this the contradiction between the negative aspect (since unde is followed by nu) and the affirmative aspect of the sentence. Nevertheless, we have the intonation, perfectly identical with that of an exclamatory sentence. All these particularities – each having a stylistic value – offer the construction an extraordinary expressive force. This time, unde nu stresses the beginning of an action and as such, an English equivalent can be all of a sudden.

A characteristic of Ion Creangă's dialogue – having its origin in the popular language – is the strong connection that exists between replies. Indeed, the author as well as his characters uses to introduce certain lexical elements from the prior reply of his or her collocutors into their answer: Ėi, ei! Acu-i acu. Ce-i de făcut Nică? This is the so-called rhetorical question and as such, it does not expect an answer.

A translation is not merely a transfer from the source language to the target language. A translation needs to reproduce not only the meaning of words and sentences but also the correct meaning of the original work. A good translation reads as if the text had originally been written in the target language. The first step to accomplish this task is to understand the style of the original text so as to render similar stylistic effects in the target language. In the process of translation, one can understand the style of a particular writer by first reading and then by analyzing the text proper. The analysis of the linguistic structure can sometimes be

enlarged by a literary analysis as well. Creangă uses certain literary devices (foregrounding, extensive use of epithets, exclamations and interjections, semantic repetitions, cultural references) meant to reproduce certain psychological effect on the reader's mind and anyone who attempts to translate his work should render them as accurately as possible in the target language. Creangă's work has also been problematic for a translator who, unlike the reader, is bound to understand the cultural context and to convey that understanding in the translated version.

The article is meant to show how a translator may grasp the concept of style and how the analysis of stylistic factors works in the process of translation.

#### Primary sources:

Creangă, Ion. *Amintiri din copilărie. Povești și Povestiri. Memories of Childhood. Tales and Stories*, București, ed. Ion Creangă, 1984.

#### Secondary sources:

Cartianu, Ana. *Memories of my Boyhood*, Sibiu, ed. Polsib, 1996.

Iordan, Iorgu. *Studiu introductiv la Ion Creangă. / Introductory Study to Ion Creangă*, București, ed. Ion Creangă, 1970.

Mihăilescu, Clementina. *Stylistics*. Sibiu, ed. Universitatii Lucian Blaga, 2013.

Tohăneanu, Gheorghe I. *Stilul artistic al lui Ion Creangă / The Artistic Style of Ion Creangă*, București, ed. Științifică, 1969.

Weixiang, He. *The Style of Literary Works in Translation, în Perspectives. Studies in Translation Theory and Practice*, vol.4, issue 1, pag. 137-144.