

# TRANSLATING KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *NEVER LET ME GO*

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## **Abstract**

*My paper tries to answer the question whether a translator of post-modern literature should have a background in literary studies in order to deliver a translation both accurate in terms of equivalents and able to go beyond the border of words. This means rendering into the target language not only what the author actually says but also what he intends to say. Two major techniques of post-modern literature are taken into account - understatement and irony, placed at the level of the writer's intentions - what he suggests and not what he says directly. To overlook them in the process of translation is to rewrite the novel and even operate a shift at the level of linguistic register, literary genre and literary trend.*

## **Key-words:**

My paper tries to answer the question whether a translator of post-modern literature should have a background in literary studies in order to deliver a translation both accurate in terms of equivalents and able to go beyond the border of words. This means rendering into the target language not only what the author actually says but also what he intends to say.

Two major techniques of post-modern literature have been taken into account – irony and understatement – in relation with the Romanian translation of the novel *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro (*Să nu mă parăsești* as translated by Vali Florescu FOR Polirom Publishing House). My aim is to interrogate the way translatorial decisions affect the reading warranted by the original text. In other words, I attempt to see whether the Romanian version still reads as a piece of post-modern literature.

Irony is a literary device that goes beyond the literal meaning of words, outlining a new level of significance which is not stated but only implied. Irony threatens authoritative models of discourse by “removing the semantic security of one signifier - one signified” (Hutcheon). Post-modern literature is infused with irony: “Irony is the mother of the text as a

challenging game.” (Lidia Vianu, 2004:27). Understatement comes in close connection with irony (a statement that is restrained in ironic contrast to what might have been said).

The translator should be aware of the presence of these two major devices in the novel in order to preserve them in the target language as well. It is, in fact, the choice he has to make between what Nida defines as formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. On the one hand, formal correspondence consists of a target linguistic item which represents the closest equivalent of a source language word or phrase. On the other hand, dynamic equivalence is defined as a translation principle according to which a translator seeks to translate the meaning of the original in such a way that the target language wording will trigger the same impact on the audience as the original does upon the source text audience. (Nida and Taber, 2003:22)

What is striking about *Never Let Me Go* in terms of language register is its air of informal speech: Kathy tells the story in a familiar, even colloquial manner. What seems to be a trustworthy, honest, unsophisticated account of a woman remembering her childhood and adolescence hides, in fact, a series of linguistic traps of which the translator should steer clear – they are meant for the reader, not for the translator as the latter is always much more than a regular reader. The Romanian version does not sound as informal as the English original, the translator preferring in many cases a neutral, even formal register. Thus, *Tommy would have got a bit of a telling off* becomes *Tommy s-ar fi ales doar cu o uşoară mustrare* in Vali Florescu’s version. The equivalence is only established at the literal level but he loses sight of the overtones which are not part of the literal meaning. Thus, the translator makes a double mistake. Firstly, he overlooks the fact that it is an understatement (all along the text, the phrase *a bit of* is ironically used to a large extent, actually meaning the opposite; it is deeply woven into the texture of the novel, to the point of becoming one of Kathy’s verbal stereotypes). Secondly, *mustrare* does not exactly belong to the informal register. A better translation would be *Tommy ar cam fi fost muştruluit*. Similarly, the informal *pretty* is effectively used as a powerful means of understatement, as in *we were dealing with the fourth donation pretty well* (*facem faţă destul de bine perspectivei celei de-a patra donaţii*). Ishiguro proves to be a master of language – what can be more ironical than describing a forthcoming fourth donation as going *pretty well*? The Romanian *binişor* would manage to render the same idea of sheer terror disguised in normality, all dressed up in a familiar language.

Another deviation from the informal register is in the rendering of *that really got people going* as *motivul pentru care ceilalţi nu se mai puteau opri* (instead of *motivul care îi ţinea pe ceilalţi în priză*, for example). The shift to formality triggers a loss in fluency and

easiness of what is supposed to be an oral account abundant in colloquialism and clichés. Every now and then, the unsophisticated familiar language puts forth words that seem insignificant at first sight, but which turn out to be of vital importance later on. Such is the case with *some form of medical* (translated as *un examen medical*); *some* is dropped in the process of translation as the translator must have considered it too conversational and, consequently, unimportant. Yet, the determiner *some* has to be translated (*un soi de examen medical*) as it subversively understates what will become clear for the reader only chapters later. It also introduces an atmosphere of insecurity and it covers a horror that the reader gradually begins to feel. This is part of a larger pattern of suspense which Ishiguro uses, namely making the truth clear in a gradual manner by veiled yet suggestive language and situations. Similarly, *she'd a good mind to talk*, rendered as *are de gând să ne vorbească*, overlooks a tiny yet important word, i.e. *good*. The word has a two fold function: it understates the idea of determination and it places the discourse into informality once more.

However, there are times when the translator gets the feeling of irony and does his best to render it into the target language (for example *She was angry all right. – Era neagră de supărare*). Yet, most often than not, he fails to transfer the irony into the target language, the resulting text being almost an autonomous literary work. Such is the case with *Sometimes I get so immersed into my own company* rendered as *Uneori sunt atât de adâncită în singurătate*. *My own company* does not imply loneliness but self-sufficiency, rejection of otherness and finally lack of love-interest as a way of self-fulfillment, a typical feature with the post-modernists. The translator should have performed here a literal translation and not a creative interpretation: *Uneori sunt atât de preocupată de propria mea companie*. Failure to capture irony into the target language goes hand in hand with loss of the informal register of Kathy's account. Instead, he decides for a translation that operates a number of modifications that might eventually transfer the text from the literary trend it belongs to in English literature.

Another important aspect of informality is represented by connectives whose function is to achieve the conversational ease of an oral discourse. Indeed, everything that might at first sight seem like “junk” words, is in fact, part of the language manipulation aiming to induce into the reader the feeling of “comfortable reading experience” (Lidia Vianu, 2004:15). This speaker-related information that can be inferred from the way a message is formulated is called “tonal register” (according to Sándor Hervej, 1995: 122), i.e. the tone that the speaker takes – familiar in our case. The translator should assess this tonal register on a politeness scale and therefore he should make correspondingly translation decisions. Vali Florescu

decides for more formal substitutes: *actually* – *dar adevărul este că*; *despite being* – *în ciuda faptului că*; *mind you* – *însă e adevărat*, *that time* – *la ora respectivă*.

All these seem unimportant small details but they are part of the puzzle of the post-modern novel. The author does not leave anything at random. Everything is cleverly premeditated, traps are set for the reader and language is at its most subversive. So, it is a major mistake for the translator to turn colloquial clarity into a level of formality which does not go hand in hand with the post-modern text. Consequently, inappropriateness or inconsistency in register can spoil the translation.

Besides the tonal register, the translator should heed key-words. The text is interspersed with such key-words, forming a meta-text with a life of its own. They are so powerful and charged with meaning (or devoid of meaning?), that the reader is likely to remember them long after he finishes reading. Most of these words are unambiguous and they need not be looked up in dictionaries. Yet, the translator has to pay attention as their proper translation is of vital importance for the novel. Once more, he should apply the rules of dynamic equivalence.

What Ishiguro actually does is to take a fantastic story and deliberately deconstruct it into a level of banality and then claim it as normal. Language undergoes the same procedure, only in reverse: words that look familiar and might seem easy to translate, in fact resist translation as there is more to them than what the dictionary states.

Here is a list of some of the key-words and their Romanian versions given by Vali Florescu:

<b>English</b>	<b>Romanian</b>
guardian	paznic
deferral	amânare
carer	îngrijitor
donor	donator
student	elev
complete	a (se) sfârși
gallery	galerie
Cottages	Căsuțe
Exchanges	Schimb

One of these key-words, and probably the worst translation, is *guardian* (*paznic* in Romanian). According to the dictionary, a guardian is a person that guards, watches over or protects or in law terminology, one who is legally responsible for the care and management of the person or property of an incompetent or a minor. The translator operates a shift from the language of education to the sphere of coercion (in Romanian *paznic* is mainly related to the world of prison). The misinterpretation of the lexical meaning leads to an erroneous translation. These guardians also teach children different subjects and it becomes obvious that *guard* is rather synonymous with *protect*. Better translations would be *educator*, *pedagog* or even *profesor*.

Another Romanian word which fails to carry the same meaning as the original is *îngrijitor* for *carer*. According to the dictionary, *carer* refers to the care of people with disabilities by unpaid relatives or friends. *Îngrijitor* does not imply benevolence or voluntary work but rather professional obligation. The term *carer* should not be confused with a care worker, or care assistant, who receives payment for looking after someone. Thus, the word creates a distance between a donor and its carer in the Romanian version. It is a culture-bound word (there is even an organization called Carers UK in England). According to Venuti, “the translator must be a person who can draw aside the curtains of linguistic and cultural differences so that people may see clearly the relevance of the original message.” (1995: 104) The translator has to resort to a cultural equivalent, and as voluntary work for the sick does not exactly have a modern synonym and Romanian lacks a reference in the contemporary world, he may employ a term mainly used during the war and having the same connotations as in English: *soră de caritate*.

There are scenes in the novel which are simply smothered with irony. Such an episode is found at the end of chapter three. What the author does is to play with the idea of identity (he does it all through the novel, actually), by drawing an ironic parallel between I/us and you (the rest). The translator has to pay special attention to this game of identities. Even if Romanian language does not usually allow the excessive use of pronouns, be they in the Nominative, Accusative or Genitive case, the translator should resort to them whenever he can in order to render what the original understates (namely that there is a thin line between *us*, the clones, and *you* and that, as a matter of fact, the novel is not about clones but about human condition). In *it doesn't really matter how well your guardians try to prepare you*, it is not redundant to translate both pronouns in order to emphasise this mirror game. In Vali Florescu's version, only the second *you* is translated.

Another translation problem is raised by the division of the educational system at Hailsham: *Infants*, *Junior* and *Senior*. They form an inner structure within the universe of the novel, with no exact correspondent into the real world. The translator is inconsistent in his choices: he translates the first one and borrows the other two. These pseudo-cultural borrowings do not turn out to be the best technique. According to Sándor Hervey (1995: 23), “The translator resorts to cultural borrowing when it proves impossible to find a suitable indigenous expression in the TL for translating the SL expression.” Yet, the vital condition for the success of a cultural borrowing is that the textual context should make the meaning clear and it does not. Moreover, it sounds awkward in Romanian: *eram la Junior 4*. The first question that comes to mind is what the use of this detailed division is. It is obvious that the author is striving for a sense of chronology, of order, of logic. He wants to be crystal clear. The translator should operate on a similar level, and domesticate somehow the terms. Instead, he proves to be inconsistent: *Bebeluși*, *Junior*, *Senior*. The worst translation of the three is to equate Infants with babies, although at some point it becomes clear that the children are five years old or more. A more logical translation would be *Grădiniță*, *Juniori* and *Seniori*.

My conclusion is that the translation of the novel stops short at the literal level without digging into the deeper layers which irony and understatement allow for. This is mainly because the translator lacks a literary background. The translator should start from the premises that the post-modern writer does not encourage creative reading. “Reading must be careful, observant of every little word” (Lidia Vianu, 2004: 39). Consequently, creative translation is out of the question. Imprecise translation is as bad. The translators of post-modern literature face a problem which they will not encounter when translating literature from an earlier period: they have in front of them a novel written in a clear, accessible language, “a language that rejects sophistication, welcomes familiarity, cleans words from far-fetched associations or encoded symbols” (Lidia Vianu, 2004: 15). Yet, the problem resides in the language. The word is clear, but the meaning should be guessed. The translator should delve into this very simplicity in order to get to the core of the meaning and render it to the reader who does not have access to the source text because of the language barrier. He continuously faces the problem of interpreting and translating words from which one feels estranged.

Understatement and irony are rather placed at the level of the writer’s intentions - what he suggests and not what he says directly. To overlook them in the process of translation is to rewrite the novel and even operate a shift at the level of linguistic register, literary genre (every now and then, the Romanian version transfers this post-modern dystopia to a science

fiction story) and literary trend. The result is a translation which is, to a certain degree, foreign to the original novel.

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