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“ÜGET, MINT A BÜDI BOSZORKÁNY.”  
ISSUES IN THE TRANSLATION OF HUNGARIAN  
PROVERBS AND IDIOMATIC SIMILES

1. Introduction

Linguists, translators, teachers, and students in Translation MA programmes have all experienced that collocated word groups represent a very peculiar part of any language, which are, on the one hand, worth learning and, on the other hand, need special attention when teaching, learning or analysing language and translation. A number of specialists (e.g. Speake 2015, Mieder 2004 and Manser 2002) have collected these linguistic phenomena in a series of scholarly works, making an attempt to establish a taxonomy, or in bilingual or multilingual dictionaries of proverbs and proverbial phrases, to provide possible equivalents in other languages. Comprehensive books and articles have been written by the same authors in which they analysed and explained these word groups from various aspects. The task was not easy at all. Whoever starts to study collocated word groups will very soon realise this field is so vast that any work on them needs to be limited in one way or another. But setting the distinct boundaries of the various categories is also a tough row to hoe.

For this very reason, within the category of collocated word groups, only the translation of some Hungarian proverbs and idiomatic similes will be examined in the present paper<sup>1</sup>, and we leave other sayings, proverbial phrases, adages, idioms, idiomatic expressions, brief lores and catchphrases for a future study. We will restrict our corpus further to proverbs and similes where cultural elements result in translation issues.

Although native speakers and language learners are very much aware of when they use a proverb, scholars are fairly perplexed when it comes to defining it in a proper way. With reference to Haas's systematic review of the history of the definition (Haas 2013:

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19–24), we do not see a need to cover the same issue here. To be straight and clear about our first category of analysis we, however, suggest adopting a minimalist list of the basic characteristic features that proverbs share. Mostly, they are formulated either in a simple sentence (monopartite proverbs) or in a complex sentence with two clauses (bipartite proverbs); they represent a linguistic heritage used by a group of people sharing the same culture; they all have a popular wisdom content based on experience or observation; and they have a catchy form created by various stylistic features such as syntactic parallelism, parataxis, inverted word order, alliteration, rhyme, ellipsis, metaphor, personification, paradox or hyperbole (Mieder 2004: 7).

## 2. Proverbs

In the first section of our analysis, examples from the group of culture-bound Hungarian proverbs will be examined. Each case will be explained in a way to make the meanings clear for non-Hungarian readers. Evidently, these examples may appear as major translation problems as they have a very specific referential scope.

### (1) Nem egy nap alatt épült Buda vára.

Word for word, this proverb means ‘it was not in one day that the castle of Buda was built’ (Buda being the former royal seat of Hungary). More generally, it is used to say that something imposing or outstanding needs time to be created. In Hungarian, there are other proverbs or sayings that may express the same meaning: *Hamar munka ritkán jó* or *Jó munkához idő kell*. In English, we find the proverb *Rome was not built in a day* or *The world wasn’t made in a day*, so the British version goes back in time as far as the creation of the world or the ancient Roman period. An American equivalent of the same proverb could be *Washington City wasn’t built in a day, any more than Rome* (Nagy 2017: 149), which reveals that the Americans have made an effort to distance themselves from their good old European roots and created their own image in imitating the old English proverb.

### (2) Egyszer volt Budán kutya vásár.

This other folk saying related to Buda has become a proverb in Hungarian and is well-known from a Hungarian folk tale about King Matthias Hunyadi, also called Matthias Corvinus (1443–1490), who is said to have been a just and generous king, at least in the

narrative tradition of folktales showing him as a hero. The saying is used as the title of a tale about a poor peasant who managed to sell his dogs for a fortune with Matthias' help. The rich and greedy lords, who envied the peasant and wanted to imitate him, got the reply that there was only a single dog-fair held in Buda, meaning that it was a one-time chance and it will not be repeated. Nagy says that the English equivalent of this saying could be a proverb having a more widely shared cultural element in it: *Christmas comes but once a year* (Nagy 2017: 47). However, the meaning of this English idiomatic phrase is slightly different. As it may have come from an animated short film directed by Dave Fleischer in 1936, it seems to suggest that in the winter holiday season we should focus more on giving than on receiving and that with a little empathy and effort we can help people in need – at least once a year. So, it does not mean 'never ever again', while it shares the meaning of 'once' with the Hungarian proverb. Despite this difference in meaning, we can accept it as a possible equivalent if the context allows thinking of a very special and (almost) single occasion for something to happen.

(3) Az ökör csak ökör, ha Bécsbe hajtják is.

'An ox will stay an ox, even if driven to Vienna' – which means that unwise people will never get wiser, wherever they are or whatever experience they gather. The expression *Kutyából nem lesz szalonna* would also render this meaning. Though similar animal-based proverbs exist in English (*Never went out ass and came home horse*, *A bittern makes no good hawk*, *Of a pig's tail you can never make a good shaft*, *What can you expect from a hog but a grunt* or *You can't make a silk purse of a sow's ear* – all quoted from Emanuel Strauss' collection of European proverbs), variants with geographical place names reveal more about the English culture: *Send a fool to France and a fool he will return* or *How much the fool who goes to Rome excels the fool who stays at home*. France and Rome are physically distant places to England and London, just like Vienna to Budapest, and both represent culturally distinguished places, where a fool could learn – but will not. Both English equivalents suggest that fools are born, not made.

Similarly, the proverbs *Rossz szomszédság, török átok* ('A bad neighbour is as great a calamity as a good one is a great advantage,' said Hesiod), *Suba subához, guba gubához* ('If you would marry suitably, marry your equal,' said Ovid) or *Ki a Tisza vizét issza, annak szíve vágyik vissza* (*There is no place like home* or *Home is where the heart is*) could also be placed in this category. As a partial conclusion, we can see that the cultural elements get lost in all cases, and are substituted by another cultural element, which is either more widely known or specifically bound to the target culture.

### 3. Idiomatic similes

The other category of collocated word groups that we aim to examine here is that of idiomatic similes. But before studying evidently challenging idiomatic similes, it is worth mentioning that for linguistic and cultural reasons, translators should be very careful with all kinds of similes, since similes in the target language do not necessarily work exactly as they do in the source language. Certain elements of a comparison may sound very odd as soon as they are transferred into another language. In the Hungarian translation of *The Pillars of the Earth* by Ken Follett, for instance, we can read the following description of a character: “A bőre fehér, mint a hó, a szeme ragyogó zöld, a haja pedig mint a hámozott sárgarépa” (Follett 1989: 6–7). The original sentence, “His skin was as white as the snow on the roofs, he had protuberant eyes of startling bright green, and his hair was the color of a peeled carrot” (Follett 2017: 13), is clearly more detailed, on the one hand, and more precise, on the other hand, about the fact that “peeled carrot” refers to the *colour* of the character’s hair. The Hungarian sentence has two easily recognisable references to colours but the third one does not fit in the list. The reader can only guess that the third colour must be an unusual orange shade of red hair. But neither carrot (‘répasárga’) nor orange (‘narancssárga’) is used for hair colour in Hungarian – unless to name specific shades in contemporary creative hair dying. No wonder that a bit further on a sentence about a youth (the son of the above-mentioned character, which explains the same hair colour) is likely to disturb the reading experience of target language readers whose language sensibility is above average: “A bőre nagyon fehér volt, a haja narancssárga [...]” (Follett 1989: 23). Is it a good excuse for the translator that Follett writes: “He had very pale skin, orange-red hair [...]” (Follett 2017: 35)? Probably the word (*narancs*)*sárgászöld* would have brought this shade closer to the reader’s eyes. The problematic solutions to the translation of the two sentences given above raise problems of equivalence and adequacy and make us wonder how and why a simile gives additional value to an image in one language but fails to work in the same way in the other.

Apparently, when we examine translation problems occurring with similes, beyond linguistic features, we have to consider another crucial aspect. This other key factor is culture, as a great number of similes seem to be culture-related. Of course, some of them are so widely shared in the world that we can hardly discover any specific element in them (e.g. “világos, mint a nap” and “as clear as day”), and are thus non-problematic from the point of view of translation. However, others that are related to a restricted cultural area may be hard nuts to crack in terms of translation.

Hungarian culture is an excellent example for this, as it represents a very small percentage of globally shared cultural knowledge. The following proverbial similes all contain a cultural element, which makes them difficult to translate... and sometimes to understand even for native speakers.

(4) Él, mint Marci Hevesen.

How does anyone live if they ‘live like Marci in Heves’? The meaning of this simile has become altered during the centuries, and thus an average contemporary Hungarian speaker would say that they live very well. Few Hungarians could tell that this idiomatic comparison originates from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and refers to Márton Zöld, a(n) (in)famous *betyár* (‘highwayman’), who located himself mainly around Heves village and county, and became very popular during the 19<sup>th</sup> century because he had never committed blood crime, “only” stole from the wealthy. A more thorough reading about the topic, more precisely the documents displayed in the Hungarian National Archives, reveal that the proverb originally meant ‘live well but shortly’ as Marci Zöld was hung in 1816 at the age of twenty-five.

So if anyone wants to translate it into English, they must look for a historical figure – if not an outlaw – who lived a good but short life. In an American context, the Irish-American Riley, popularised during World War I, may be an equivalent, as in *He is living the life of Riley* (Nagy 2017: 142). This expression is, for example, used in a contemporary article written by H. Freeman on the actress J. Aniston: “By contrast, the similarly aged, similarly divorced and similarly dating George Clooney was depicted as a merry bachelor living the life of Riley” (Freeman 2016).

Another possibly equivalent idiom can be *to live in clover*, where clover, the commonly used name for plants having three leaves (the genus *Trifolium*), stands for faith, hope, and love. In certain cultures, including Hungarian and Anglo-Saxon, the fourth leaf of clover is the symbol of luck. Since it is the result of a fairly rare gene mutation, anyone who stumbles upon one is considered lucky. So it must be an easy and pleasant life that the idiom refers to.

It seems quite usual that the meaning of the second part of an idiomatic comparison fades away and it serves only to reinforce or emphasise the first part. This is the case with the following example:

(5) Olyan messze van, mint Makó Jeruzsálemtől.

Though Hungarian native speakers know it means that something is very far away, nowadays mostly in a figurative sense, most of them probably understand it this way because they think that Makó, a town in Southern Hungary, is referred to here, and it is indeed far away from Jerusalem. However, we know from Gyapay et al. (1983) that the comparison originates in a legend of Medieval History. Tóth also presents the results of his research on the local history of Makó (Tóth 2008: 561) and tells us more or less the same legend: Béla III (1148–1196), King of Hungary, wanted to emulate King László I (1046–1095), and thus prepared for a journey to the Holy Land. Unfortunately, his death prevented him from doing so but he bequeathed by his last will a good amount of money to his second-born son, András II, provided that he would spend it on a crusade to protect the Holy Land. András II set off for the long journey only twenty years later in 1217. According to the legend, he had a crusader called Makó who, being a good Christian, could hardly wait to see the Holy Land. Once, having bent his elbow all through the night, he woke up with a start and thought he had reached his destination, while he was only sleeping on board of an anchored vessel in Spalato (Split), Dalmatia. (By the way, the settlement currently known as Makó was originally named Felvelnök and had not been called Makó before the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.)

In English, we can use the collocation *be a mile and a day away* for distant places but it does not seem to be used in a figurative sense. Depending on the context, we may think of having *a moving goal* or *chasing a rainbow*, though these solutions emphasise the incapability to reach one's goals or the futility of all efforts.

(6) Úgy otthagya, mint Szent Pál az oláhokat.

This is another obscure idiomatic simile of unknown origin (Sárközi 2005: 569) with the meaning 'to leave somebody or something all of a sudden'. Several speculations have been published to explain where it comes from. One of the most plausible ones is given by Bencze (2005: 106), whose statement is based on *750 magyar közmondás* (Paczolay 1991), without tracing back the related biblical story. In fact, saint Paul fleeing the Jews of Thessalonica under favour of the night in fear of being arrested is related in the *New Testament* (The Acts of the Apostles 17: 5–14). As a local explanation, Bencze also cites a droll folkloric anecdote from Transylvania about the Wallachians, who arrived in the village of Vasláb and wanted to decorate their church with a portrait of Saint Paul, but the painting resembled the adjudicator of the neighbouring village so much that it got

stolen and then repainted several times. Without knowing where the portraits went, the Wallachians finally understood that Saint Paul did not want to become their protector.

With all this background information, a possible translation could be the idiomatic expression ‘forsake someone without rhyme and reason’. We know of two literary occurrences of the Hungarian proverb. One of them – a variant with “vojnyikok” instead of “oláhok” – is in *Indul a bakterház* by Sándor Rideg, which has not yet been translated into English. The other can be found in *Törökországi levelek* by Kelemen Mikes: “Ma nyolcadnapja, hogy itt a telet kitelevén, elhagya kéd bennünket, mint Szent Pál az oláhokot, és a császári városban lévő székiben visszahelyezteté kéd magát” (73). In the English translation done by Bernard Adams, we can read this: “Today is the eighth day since, winter being over, you left us as St Paul the Wallachians and resumed your seat in the imperial city” (Mikes 2016: 56). This solution can be explained in two ways. Either Adams, who tends to opt for a foreignising strategy many times in his translations, left the key elements of the comparison untouched so that the reader could get immersed in the Hungarian culture, or he kept it as a reference to the biblical story, which could be detected by all educated readers.

(7) Üget, mint a büdi boszorkány.

This idiomatic comparison is very little known and used in contemporary Hungarian but is an interesting one as the word *büdi* can be misleading. We have to scrutinise old sources to understand its original meaning. The article ‘boszorkány’ in Czuczor and Fogarasi’s (1862) dictionary of the Hungarian language mentions the collocation “böjti (helyesebben, büdi) boszorkány”. Another dictionary (Bárczi and Országh 1959–1962), again in the article ‘boszorkány’, gives several synonyms of ‘run’ collocated to ‘witch’ („jár-ke, futkos, nyargal, üget, mint a böjti (v. büdi) boszorkány”), from which we understand that it means ‘to be in one hell of a hurry’. At least, *witch* and *hell* belong to the same semantic field. For the adjective *büdi* there are two possible explanations. None of them allow us to understand it as ‘stinky’. It can either be a dialectic distortion of the word *böjti* (‘Lenten’) or refers to Búd, a village in the old Hungarian county of Abaúj/Szabolcs. In fact, the inhabitants of Tiszavasvári, formed from two communities, one of which was Búd, acclaim the expression as their own cultural heritage.

Jókai uses the collocation *büdi boszorkány* without a verb in his lesser known novel on ancient Hungarian history, *Bálványosvár* (1883). The story takes place in the early Middle Ages when paganism and Christianity clash in Transylvania. One of the female

characters reveals an ancient superstition of not opening the window after sunset because the “büdi” witch may come in the room and exchange the baby in the house with her own. (“De ugyan hová gondoltál, hogy kinyisd az ablakot naplemente után? Az kell, hogy bejöjjön a büdi boszorkány, elcserélni a gyereket, elváltani a magáéval.” In English translation: “But what did you think to open the window after sunset? Do you want to let the witch of Búd enter and exchange the babies, swap yours for her own?”) The novel has not been translated into English, and thus no “official” translation of the collocation exists. Neither has *Ál-Petőfi* by Krúdy (1922) been translated into English, in which we can find another occurrence of the collocation: “Kettőnk közül az egyik pedig gonoszabb a büdi boszorkánynál” (“One of us two is more wicked than the witch of Búd”) (101), says Amanda in Chapter 9. Whether we would encounter the witch of Edmonton, Belvoir, Warboys, Salem or a Pendle witch in an Anglo-Saxon context, we leave to future translators of these literary texts.

The examples of the proverbs and idiomatic similes given above represent a large class of similar language elements and form part of an even larger category of collocated word groups. Because of their specific linguistic features and especially due to the cultural elements they contain, they represent a challenge to translators. Proverbs and proverbial similes open a window on the given culture. Most of the Hungarian examples include folkloristic or historical elements, the original meaning of which is fading away. Anglo-Saxons, apparently, tend to use more universal cultural elements to express (approximately) identical meanings. Furthermore, translation solutions depend on a number of factors, of which the context is only one. Consequently, a translator should not translate proverbs and idiomatic similes on the basis of bilingual dictionaries but should consider all available – maybe less evident – equivalents as well. Of course, the first choice they have to make concerns their translation strategy. If they opt for a foreignising approach, the source culture will be revealed for the target readers. If they choose the domesticating strategy, elements of the target culture will be dominant, which is more reader-friendly for a native readership. Bilingual readers, however, are in a privileged position in either case to appreciate the cultural aspects of a text and its translation.



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