LITERARY PRAGMATICS IN ACTION: EXPLORING SALMAN RUSHDIE'S "MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN"

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of literary pragmatics as a subdiscipline, arguing that pragmatic approaches are crucial for understanding how translators manage the interplay between literal meaning, cultural subtleties, and contextual intent when working with literary texts. Pragmatics, in the context of literature, focuses on how language is used in communication, taking into account context, the speaker's intention, and the relationship between language and its users. "Midnight's Children" by Salman Rushdie is a fascinating work to examine through the lens of literary pragmatics as the text itself is rich in historical, cultural, and linguistic references. Analysing its pragmatics reveals how Rushdie uses language to engage with political, historical, and postcolonial realities. The paper also seeks to examine the Romanian translation of Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" as a case study.

Keywords: pragmatics, cultural context, interpretative choices, literary translation.

1. Introduction

In his essay "Imaginary Homelands", Salman Rushdie (1992) emphasizes the importance of English for him as a British Indian writer, arguing that mastery over the colonizer's language is both a political and creative act. In doing so, he famously revisits the etymology of the word "translation" – from the Latin *translatio,* meaning "bearing across" – and offers one of the most resonant analogies for his own artistic/linguistic project.

> "The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained." (Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* 1991: 16)

Consequently, to be a "translated man", Rushdie suggests, involves more than merely crossing borders geographically, requiring to have undergone a profound cultural and linguistic transformation. Migration, in this sense, is an act of continual self-translation, a dynamic process of carrying one's identity, memory and imagination across multiple landscapes. Thus, Rushdie's work enacts a ceaseless negotiation between the local and the global, the rooted and the itinerant, giving rise to a vibrant, hybrid literary language that acknowledges loss and celebrates renewal at the same time.

2. Towards a "Postcolonial Turn"

In their 1990 edited volume, *Translation, History and Culture*, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere advance what we know today as the "Cultural Turn" in Translation Studies.

Nevertheless, it is not until 1999 when Bo Pettersson speaks with equal assurance of a "Postcolonial Turn", in an attempt to (re)unite postcolonial literature and translation. Pettersson's (1999) analysis underscores that the conceptual and disciplinary boundaries between postcolonial literature and translation have become sufficiently intertwined to warrant a more rigorous and systematic reconsideration of postcolonial translation theory and practice. This convergence not only signals the growing recognition of translation as a culturally and ideologically embedded act but it also foregrounds the translational nature of postcolonial writings, which keeps negotiating between languages, cultures and contested pieces of history.

Over the past four decades, Salman Rushdie's work has evolved into a vital crossroads for both postmodern and postcolonial inquiries. Simultaneously marshalled as evidence either for or against the coherence of postcolonial paradigms, his fictional works, translated into over forty languages, perform a sustained negotiation of identity, language and power. Framing this approach through the metaphors of the "translated man" and "postcolonial literature as translation", and drawing upon both postcolonial and translation theoretical underpinnings, Rushdie may be regarded as a "protean figure of translation" (Crăciun 2019: 89). His oeuvre is conceived as a continuous act of (self)translation, a dynamic strategy to recalibrate asymmetrical structures within hybridized cultural spaces. The analysis will explore the multiple forms of translation operative within his texts, alongside the intricate challenges they present to translators seeking to render his layered narratives into new linguistic and cultural contexts.

Moreover, in the last two decades, Translation Studies, as a discipline in its own right, has underlined the major role that translation has gained in the postcolonial context. Consequently, in their seminal work, "Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice", Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) put forward the idea that postcolonial literature and culture are inherently acts of translation. Rather than approaching postcolonial texts as works merely rendered *in* translation, the scholars advocate for understanding them *as* translation-constitutive of the very processes of cultural and linguistic negotiation that define the postcolonial condition. As briefly stated in the "Introduction" to this reference book, "to speak of postcolonial translation is little short of a tautology" due to the fact that "the word *translation* seems to have come full circle and reverted from its figurative literary meaning of an interlingual transaction to its etymological physical meaning of locational disrupture; translation itself seems to have been translated back to its origins" (Bassnett and Trivendi 1999: 12-13). This perspective echoes Salman Rushdie's (1992) stated viewpoint in "Imaginary Homelands", where he reflects on the diasporic writer's task as one of reconstructing fragmented histories, and identities through the medium of language, itself a form of translation across cultures, memories, and geographies.

3. Literary pragmatics and the pragmatic translator

The intentional or performative dimension of a text has been conceptualized in various ways, along time, by translation theorists, text linguists and pragmatists alike. Translation scholars have outlined a range of *functions* that texts are expected to fulfil, often in alignment with the primary communicative purpose of language within them. Text linguists, such as de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), emphasize the "intentional" quality of texts - their inherent orientation toward reaching an audience and eliciting a response. More recently, pragmatists and systemic functional linguists have sought to identify the evaluative patterns (or the underlying "point") highlighted through a text

(notably, Thompson and Hunston 2000, Martin and White 2005). Arguably, all these approaches converge on a common concern: understanding how texts exert an effect upon a given state of affairs. It refers, in a broader sense, to the fact that the act of writing and/or publishing a text can be regarded as a "text act" endowed with illocutionary force and capable of generating perlocutionary effects in the world (Hatim and Mason 1990: 76–92, Hatim 1998: 73).

Any pragmatic approach to translation inevitably requires a framework for understanding text acts, taking into consideration that both practitioners and theorists must account for how original texts and their translations function in terms of their intended meaning and actual impact. When the translator's goal is to replicate the function of the source text in the target language – despite cultural and linguistic discontinuities – the task involves rendering the performative force of the text rather than simply its linguistic content. Similarly, translation analysis must view such texts as interventions capable of influencing or reshaping particular discursive or social contexts. It is essential, however, to maintain the conceptual distinction between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, both in theoretical discussions and translational practice. In most cases, translators prioritize the illocutionary dimension embedded within the text, often regarded as more reliable and recoverable than the author's original intentions or the unpredictable responses of readers. Unconstrained by the practical demands faced by translators, the theorists enjoy greater freedom in conducting a pragmatic analysis of the bi-text. In this way, the translation critic can explore the illocutionary shifts between source and target texts, articulating the rationale behind interpretive choices and their implications. Meanwhile, when translators explicitly frame and justify their decisions, they offer readers insights into how the performative function of the original text is reconfigured in the translated version – shedding light on the dynamic between the source text act and the target text act.

Pragmatic constraints, much like phonetic, morpho-syntactic and lexical ones, can prove equally unbridgeable. As Reiss and Vermeer (1984: 91) insightfully point out nearly thirty years ago, the *skopos* of a text inevitably undergoes transformation in the process of cross-linguistic transfer. Pragmatic analysis plays a crucial role in shaping the more localized decisions made by both the translator and the theorist. Nevertheless, both must remain aware that a pragmatically "faithful" replication is ultimately unattainable, given the inherent variability of contextual factors. Just as phonemes, morphemes, and even textemes differ across languages, so do the pragmatic forces embedded within them (though closely related languages may exhibit a high degree of functional convergence).

These challenges become particularly evident when considering authors like Rushdie, whose work, altogether with its translation, carries meaning and cultural weight even among audiences who may have never engaged with them directly. Consequently, any pragmatic account of the bi-text, especially for translational purposes, must consider how the text engages communicatively with both its source-language and target-language readers. Theories such as Grice's *Cooperative Principle* (the idea that speakers follow, exploit, or flout conversational maxims – quantity, quality, relation, and manner) and *implicature* (Grice 1967:91), Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Leech's (1983) *politeness* frameworks, as well as Sperber and Wilson's *Relevance Theory* (1986: 95) provide valuable insights for understanding the interpersonal dynamics encoded in the source text. These models also provide analytical tools for translation scholars seeking to trace interpersonal correspondences across the bi-text (while

remaining focused on the potential relationships inscribed in the textual fabric) rather than those arising from actual reader interactions. From the 1970s onwards, pragmatic theories of communication have sought to expand the traditional "code model" of linguistics, which viewed communication as a simple transfer of encoded messages from sender to receiver, with little regard for context or implicit meaning. While a text meaning to its readers is primarily semantic, any analysis of how a text communicates – such as the balance between explicit and implicit information, and the interaction between text (author, implied author, persona, narrator) and readers – must be pragmatic. It is obvious though that the above mentioned theories, initially developed for face-to-face communication, also apply to textual exchanges. Despite differences between direct interaction and textual communication (the latter being more unidirectional and rigid), both share essential similarities. As Hatim (1998) notes, texts, like people, engage in interpersonal interaction:

> "More specifically, Hoey [. . .] focuses on the means by which writers establish a dialogue with their readers, anticipating their reactions and building this into the constitution of their texts. It is this dialogic nature of the written text which has particularly caught the attention of Literary Pragmatics: of course, speech is more personally evaluative than writing, but some speech can be as analytic and objective as any written text designed with these communicative aims in mind. By the same token, it is argued, writing can be casual and unceremonial and always capable of interacting with human beings more fundamentally than any speech [. . .]" (Hatim 1998, 86)

All texts, regardless of genre, establish a relationship with readers, shaped by how they manage explicit and implicit meaning. This interaction – framed by principles like relevance, politeness, and clarity – varies widely, as readers respond differently according to the context and their personal expectations, leading to a well acknowledged aspect, i.e. no communicative strategy is universally effective. At the intersection of cooperation, relevance, politeness, and interest, the translator serves as a pragmatic mediator. This role is far from neutral, demanding a load of cultural awareness. As Fawcett (1998) specifies, a text aim is to offer information - *Informationsangebot* – that can never be identical across languages or cultures. Without paying attention to interpersonal and pragmatic nuances, any translator risks miscommunication or alienating their audience:

> "We need presupposition, of course, because without it we would not get out of the house in the morning; but it poses acute problems in translation. Most Hungarians do not have to be told that Mohács was the site of a military defeat, just as most French people do not have to be told about a certain military difficulty at Alésia. A writer in these languages can call up powerful complexes of knowledge and feeling very economically. Transfer these to another culture, however, and the presupposed supply of information may not be there. The problem then becomes one of assessing the likely state of affairs and the possible solutions, with each step of the way fraught with difficulties". (Fawcett 1998: 120)

4. Sampling the literary pragmatics approach to translation. Case study: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Upon its publication in 1981, *Midnight's Children* disrupted established literary conventions with its bold narrative form and stylistic innovation. Garnering critical acclaim, it received the Booker Prize and was later distinguished as the most outstanding

novel to win the award in its first quarter-century. Beyond its accolades, the novel marked a turning point in Anglophone fiction, particularly for its inventive manipulation of the English language in the postcolonial narrative. More than a singular achievement, it gave rise to a new literary lineage – a work that echoes its fusion of historical consciousness, linguistic hybridity and narrative daring. Bhabha (1984) praises the distinctive brilliance and the unsettling excess of Rushdie's work, which stems from the fact that he embraces English as a language that has been decentred and redefined. To Bhabha (1984), Rushdie exemplifies a *postcolonial aesthetics* in which English no longer belongs exclusively to its colonial origins, but is (re)appropriated, hybridized and made to speak in new, subversive registers (Bhabha 1984:108)

Within the polyphonic architecture of *Midnight's Children*, the protagonist Saleem Sinai deploys an intricate web of linguistic metaphors to mediate the ontological dissonance engendered by his temporal coincidence with India's decolonial birth. His self-construction is filtered through a semiotic lens, wherein grammatical constructs – such as "adverbs and hyphens" or "dualistically combined configurations" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*: 285) – become vehicles for articulating a fractured, hybrid subjectivity suspended between historical rupture and personal contingency. Counterbalancing this semiotic density is Padma, his corporeal and narratological foil, whose portrayal may be viewed as unlettered and it pragmatically foregrounds the disjunction between elite epistemologies and vernacular reception. Her bewilderment in the face of Saleem's abstract discourses functions not merely as comic relief, but as a metatextual commentary on the limitations of linguistic excess in rendering lived experience intelligible to the subaltern. Accordingly, Saleem confesses: "this is why hyphens are necessary: actively literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*: 286).

While Saleem Sinai predominantly articulates his narrative in what may be identified as standardised English, his speech consistently slips into an array of divergent linguistic registers, having as effect a radical *deterritorialisation* of language (Pilapitiya 2008: 8). This linguistic fluidity mirrors and reinforces the inherently disjunctive and episodic structure of his tale. The much cited (and debated) metaphor of *chutnification* not only encapsulates the chaotic sedimentation of historical memory within the text, but it also gestures towards the novel's stylistic heterogeneity. It signifies a deliberate amalgamation of idioms, tonalities and vernacular inflections – a semiotic bricolage through which Rushdie constructs an idiom that is at once disruptive, generative, and resistant to formal categorisation. Salman Rushdie has also proven, in a creative and original way, how far English can be Indianised. Indianisation, as well as hybridisation, represent traits in his works functioning as an integral part of his own linguistic experiments. The achieved popularity may derive from the use of English as an innovative language, the unique representation of history the use of magic realism (as opposed to Euro-centrism of master discourses), or his desire to capture and render the spirit of Indian culture, altogether with its diversity and multiplicity.

The features listed and exemplified below may serve as an evidence-based mechanism, considering the original text and its Romanian counterpart.

Example 1:

Source text:

*And in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little **dia-lamps** burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in the Punjab, with the green flames of blistering paint and the glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest **dias** in the world. (Midnight's Children:*82*)*

Target text:

*În toate oraşele, comunele şi satele **lămpile** mici luminează de pe pervazul ferestrelor, din pridvoare şi de pe verande, pe când trenurile ard în Punjab, cu flăcările verzi ale vopselei scorojite şi cu şofranul orbitor al combustibilului incendiat, de parcă ar fi cele mai mari **torţe** din lume.* (*Copiii din miez de noapte*, 2007:114)

This passage marks a crucial narrative juncture in *Midnight's Children*, where the synchronous emergence of Saleem and Shiva parallels the declaration of Indian independence, a moment that intertwines the personal with the national in an act of symbolic over-determination. The chromatic evocation of saffron and green overtly references the Indian tricolour, anchoring the scene in the iconography of statehood. Yet, it is the recurrence of the term *dia* – designating a modest oil lamp - that most effectively encapsulates Rushdie's layered semiotic strategy. Initially, *dia* is introduced in tandem with its English gloss ("the little dia-lamps"), a gesture that reflects the novel ongoing oscillation between vernacular authenticity and Anglophone intelligibility. In its subsequent appearance, *dia* adopts an English plural inflection, standing autonomously to signify the burning trains in Punjab – "the biggest dias in the world" (*Midnight's Children:* 82, 128, 306). In Romanian, this culture-specific item is neutralised, and, therefore, loses its cultural impact upon the readers. This syntactic mutation enacts a moment of linguistic hybridity wherein the term is both preserved and transformed. Through such transformations, Rushdie's language resists closure, operating instead within a fluid space of cultural translation and semantic instability.

Example 2:

Source text:

*"Tomorrow I'll have a bath and shave: I am going to put on a brand new kurta, shining and starched, and **pajamas** to match. I'll wear mirror-worked slippers curling up at the toes, my hair will be neatly brushed (though not parted in the centre), my teeth gleaming... in a phrase, I'll look my best. ('Thank God' from pouting Padma.)".* (*Midnight's Children*: 75)

Target text:

*Mâine o să fac baie, o să mă bărbieresc şi o să-mi pun o hurta nou-nouţă, strălucitoare şi scrobită, precum şi o **pijama asortată**. O să port papuci cu modele simetrice şi răsuciţi la vârf, o să mă pieptăn cu grijă (dar fără cărare pe mijloc), dinţii or să-mi sclipească… bref, o să arăt cât se poate de bine. („Slavă Domnului", mormăie Padma cea ursuză.) (Copiii din miez de noapte*, 2007 :104*)*

The syntactic and narrative contexts surrounding the term *pajamas* in the source text clearly suggest its reference to the traditional loose-fitting linen or cotton trousers commonly worn by men in North India. As such, the term operates within a culturally specific semantic field that is misaligned with the interpretation imposed by the Romanian translator, whose rendering fails to capture the regional and gendered nuances embedded in the original usage.

Example 3:

Source text:

"Finally, he returns to his hotel room, his clothes soaked in red stains, and Naseem commences a panic. 'Let me help, let me help, Allah what a man I've married, who

*goes into **gullie**s to fight with **goondas**!' She is all over him with water on wads of cotton wool.* (*Midnight's Children*: 22)
Target text:
*Într-un târziu, se întoarce în camera de hotel, cu hainele pline de pete roşii, iar Naseem intră imediat în panică. — Stai să te-ajut, stai să te-ajut, Allah prea milostiv, pe cine-am luat de bărbat, pe unul care se duce te miri unde, să se încaiere cu **golanii!** Se aferează în jurul lui, cu apă şi tampoane de vată.* (*Copiii din miez de noapte*, 2007 :34-35)

In this example, the ideal reader of the English text instantly perceives two borrowings (*gullies* and *goondas*), whereas, in the Romanian version, the reader finds none of them. The narrative context makes it evident that the linguistic origin of the term in question is not English, but rather Hindi-Urdu, where *gālī* (f.) – phonetically anglicised in the text – signifies a narrow lane or alley. This localised meaning, distinct from any potential English homonym, is deeply embedded within the socio-historical fabric of the Indian subcontinent. Crucially, its invocation here is not arbitrary but symbolically loaded, gesturing toward the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of April 1919, which occurred during the Baisakhi festival in Amritsar, following the British colonial ban on public gatherings (Collett, 2005). In this context, the term *gālī* functions not merely as a spatial descriptor but as a conduit of historical memory, embedding the topography of colonial brutality within the novel's linguistic texture.

Example 4:

Source text:
*Having let off steam, I must leave my mother to worry for a further moment about the curious behaviour of the sun, to explain that our Padma, alarmed by my references to cracking up, has confided covertly in this Baligga this ju-ju man! this green-medicine **wallah!** -and as a result, the charlatan, whom I will not deign to glorify with a description, came to call.* (*Midnight's Children*:45)
Target text:
*După ce m-am descărcat, trebuie s-o mai las niţel pe mama să se minuneze de comportamentul curios al soarelui, ca să explic că Padma noastră, îngrijorată de trimiterile la crăpăturile pe care mi le sesizasem pe trup, i s-a destăinuit lui Baligga ăsta – acestui vraci, acestui **wallah** al leacurilor verzi! — şi ca urmare şarlatanul, căruia nu vreau să-i fac hatârul de a-l descrie, a venit în vizită.* (*Copiii din miez de noapte*, 2007 :65)

Salman Rushdie's use of the word *wallah* reflects his commitment to linguistic hybridity and cultural specificity, emblematic of his broader narrative strategy. Borrowed from Hindi and Urdu, *wallah* denotes a person associated with a particular task (such as *chai-wallah* for tea vendor; *ayah-wallah* for maid) and functions within the novel to anchor characters within the socio-linguistic landscape of postcolonial India (Lambert, 2012). Notably, the Romanian translation of the novel preserves the term *wallah*, signalling its untranslatable cultural resonance and reinforcing Rushdie's intent to foreground Indian idiom within English literary language.

Rushdie's use of slang – especially Indian is also to be noticed in the table below, which was preserved in Romanian as well:

Source text	Target text
In which the viceroy, Wavell, understood that he was finished, washed-up, or in our own	*şi…) în care Wavell, viceregele, a înţeles că era terminat, la pământ sau, ca să folosim un cuvânt*

expressive word, ***funtoosh,…****(p.44)*	*expresiv de-al nostru,* ***funtoosh.*** *(p.65)*
And also, 'Eleven years, my Madam, see if I haven't loved you all, Î Madam, and that boy with his face like the moon; but now I am killed, I am no-good woman, I shall burn in hell! ***Funtoosh!****' cried Mary, and again, 'It's finished; funloosh!' (p.203)*	*— De unsprezece ani, domniţă, vă slujesc şi vă iubesc pe toţi, domniţă, şi pe băiatul cu faţa ca o lună. Dar acum s-a zis cu mine, nu mai sunt bună de nimic şi o să ard în focurile iadului!* ***Funtoosh!*** *S-a terminat; funtoosh! (p.272)*
'Wife,' he intoned gravely, while Jamila and I shook with fear, 'Begum Sahiba, this country is finished. Bankrupt. ***Funtoosh.*** *(219)*	*„Nevastă", a intonat el grav, pe când Jamila şi cu mine tremuram de frică, „begum sahiba, ţara asta e la pământ. Pe ducă.* ***Funtoosh****" (293)*

Table1. The use of slang preserved in translation

This innovative use of slang is meant to function as a bond between the narrative texture and national ideology/identity, asserting thus the legitimacy of non-standard Englishes and emphasizing the novel's central concern with all those fractured identities altogether with the complexities of a new-born nation.

5. Conclusion

The task of the translator inevitably involves navigating the subtleties of communicative intent, where fidelity to the text transcends literal transcription. Pragmatic adequacy requires a sense of awareness that meaning often resides not solely in lexical content but in what remains unsaid, i.e. implied, inferred, being contextually embedded. As Chernov (1991: 29) claims, translators are frequently compelled to adjust the surface structure of a message, through supplementation, omission or structural realignment in order to preserve its deeper resonance. Levy (2000: 156) frames this approach as a "minimax strategy", wherein optimal communicative impact is achieved with the most efficient means possible.

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