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**THE ISSUE OF EQUIVALENCE OF APHORISM IN THE ENGLISH
TRANSLATIONS OF SHOTA RUSTAVELI’S “THE KNIGHT IN THE
PANTHER’S SKIN”¹**
(using an example of one aphorism)

Abstract:

Shota Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* stands as a pinnacle of medieval Georgian literature is revered for its profound cultural and literary significance. With over 160 manuscripts and translations into 58 languages, including English, the epic's reach extends far beyond its Georgian origins. This research delves into the intricate task of translating aphorisms from Rustaveli's epic into English, focusing on the works of Marjory Scott Wardrop, Venera Urushadze, and Lyn Coffin.

Analyzing one aphorism, *ოდეს ტურტა გაიეფდეს, აღარა ღირს არცა ჩირად* (odes turpa gaiepdes, aghara ghirs artsa chirad [When the lovely is cheapened, it is no longer worth even dried fruit]), we examine how each translator renders Rustaveli's concepts and idiomatic expressions into English. While Wardrop opts for a direct translation, Urushadze and Coffin employ more artistic and idiomatic approaches.

By evaluating translation strategies and linguistic nuances, we underline the challenges and complexities inherent in translating aphorisms, shedding light on the delicate balance between linguistic “fidelity” and cultural resonance. Through this exploration, we gain deeper insights into the artistry and decision-making processes involved in translating aphorisms, ultimately enriching our understanding of cross-cultural literary exchange.

Key Words: Corpus linguistics, Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, Translations.

1. Introduction

Shota Rustaveli is a 12th-century Georgian poet who wrote one of the outstanding medieval literary epics, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. This work is the peak of expression of the Georgian spiritual culture. Its text has reached us in the form of more than 160 manuscripts. The identity of the Georgian nation in world literature is associated with *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, “like the

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identity of the Helladians is associated with Homer, that the English with Shakespeare, that of the Spanish with Calderon and Cervantes, that Rustaveli is for Georgians” (Balmont, 1933).

The epic's topicality and importance have long passed Georgian borders and aroused the interest of foreign readers. It has been translated into 58 languages, and several translations of the epic in the same language have been made by different authors. This research aims to analyze one aphorism in the English translations of the epic.

The Knight in the Panther's Skin was translated into English at different times by five translators. First, the epic was translated by an English Kartvelologist, Marjory Scott Wardrop. It took her about twenty years to translate it. Marjory Wardrop studied the Georgian language and got acquainted with the Georgian culture. This prosaic translation was published in London in 1912 after Marjory Wardrop's death.

Venera Urushadze, the only Georgian translator of the epic into English, made the second translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. Her translation was first published in Tbilisi in 1968. This translation is poetic.

The third translation, by English philologist, writer, translator, and Kartvelologist Katharine Vivian, was published in London in 1977. The poem's main text is translated in prose, whereas its prologue and epilogue are translated in poetic form.

The fourth translator of the epic is an English historian, translator and Kartvelologist Robert Stevenson, whose translation was published in New York in 1977. This translation is made in the form of rhythmic prose.

An American writer and translator, Lyn Coffin made the most recent translation of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. It was published in Tbilisi in 2015. The translation is poetic, and its English word-for-word translation is made by Dodona Kiziria and Gia Jokhadze.

This research is based on the English translations by Marjory Wardrop, Venera Urushadze, and Lyn Coffin. It aims to evaluate the quality of the poetic translation of one aphorism from *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. Therefore, we will analyze the poetic translation and the word-by-word translation by Dodona Kiziria (2024, p.c.).

This research, which employs contemporary methodologies, was grounded in the multilingual parallel corpus of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* known as Rustaveli Goes Digital (<https://rustaveli-goes-digital.de/>)

2. Methodology

This study employs a comprehensive methodology to examine the equivalence of aphorisms in English translations of Shota Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. The methodology integrates various approaches to ensure a thorough analysis grounded in contemporary linguistic and translation studies.

Firstly, a corpus of English translations, including works by Marjory Scott Wardrop, Venera Urushadze, and Lyn Coffin, is compiled using digital resources and online dictionaries. This corpus

is then aligned with the original Georgian text, enabling systematic comparative analysis of linguistic and stylistic features.

Drawing on concepts from functionalist and descriptive translation studies, this research investigates the translation strategies employed by each translator, shedding light on the decision-making processes involved. Cultural and literary analysis contextualizes the translations within broader socio-cultural frameworks, considering the interplay between language, culture, and translation.

Qualitative analysis techniques, such as close reading and interpretation, are applied to scrutinize individual aphorisms and their translations, identifying patterns and nuances. Through comparative evaluation, the study assesses the quality and effectiveness of each translation in conveying Rustaveli's concepts and expressions in English.

This interdisciplinary methodology offers a systematic framework for analyzing aphorism equivalence in English translations of Rustaveli's epic, drawing on insights from linguistics, translation studies, cultural studies, and literary analysis.

3. The definition of the Aphorism

Aphorism is a Greek word and denotes an idea expressed briefly, flexibly, and in a stylistically complete way (Macharashvili 2004). As Merriam-Webster's dictionary explains, an aphorism is 1. a concise statement of a principle; 2. a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment: ADAGE; 3. an ingeniously terse style of expression: aphoristic language (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aphorisms>). Numerous research works have been dedicated to aphorisms and aphoristic speech, and diverse definitions of aphorism have been offered. In Georgia, the issue of aphorisms has been studied by Parnaoz Ertelishvili, who notes that "An aphorism is a didactic expression of general nature given in the form of a single sentence (the didactic content is expressed directly)" (Ertelishvili, 1958: 165). Cosmin Konstantin Baias, Professor of the Polytechnic University of Romania, has written an article, *The Aphorism: Function and Discursive Strategy*. In this article, he discusses the meaning of aphorisms and notes: "In common language, the aphorism is an original thought, spoken or written by an author in a concise and memorable form" (Băiaș, 2015: 2268). The introduction to *Webster's New World Best Book of Aphorism* defines it as follows: "These words spoken by names – some familiar, some strange – are an eternal legacy; when they were originally spoken or written, the author certainly had little idea that his/her verbiage would last into eternity" (Douglas, A. & Strumpf, M., 1989). In his work titled *The World in a Phrase: A Brief History of The Aphorism*, James Geary outlines five essential principles governing the nature of aphorisms: 1. It Must Be Brief - conciseness is a requirement; 2. It Must Be Personal - a personal touch is crucial; 3. It Must Be Definitive - it should present a definitive statement; 4. It Must Be Philosophical - it should carry philosophical significance; and 5. It Must Have A Twist - an element of surprise or twist is necessary (Geary, 2005: 8-20).

To enhance coherence and create a smoother flow between the definitions provided, we can revise the passage as follows:

The term “aphorism,” derived from the Greek language, embodies the art of succinctly conveying ideas with stylistic completeness. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary elaborates on this, defining aphorism as a concise statement of principle, a terse formulation of truth or sentiment, and an ingeniously terse style of expression. These definitions underscore the multifaceted nature of aphorisms, which have been subject to extensive research and analysis across various contexts.

In the realm of aphoristic studies, scholars have offered diverse perspectives on the nature of aphorisms. Parnaoz Ertelishvili, in his exploration of aphorisms in Georgia, characterizes them as didactic expressions of general nature, typically delivered in a single sentence. Similarly, Cosmin Konstantin Baias, in his work *The Aphorism: Function and Discursive Strategy*, emphasizes the originality and memorability of aphorisms, highlighting their concise and impactful form.

The introduction to *Webster’s New World Best Book of Aphorisms* further contextualizes the enduring legacy of aphorisms, portraying them as timeless expressions that endure beyond their initial utterance. James Geary, in *The World in a Phrase: A Brief History of The Aphorism*, delineates five essential principles governing the nature of aphorisms, emphasizing their brevity, personal touch, definitive nature, philosophical significance, and element of surprise or twist.

By interlinking these definitions and perspectives, we comprehensively understand the richness and complexity inherent in aphoristic discourse. Through their concise yet profound expressions, aphorisms serve as vehicles for transmitting timeless truths, philosophical insights, and cultural nuances across diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes.

4. ოდეს ტურფა გაიეფდეს, აღარა ღირს არცა ჩირად (*odes t’urpa gaiepdes, aryara yirs artsa tʃirad* [When the lovely is cheapened it is no longer worth even dried fruit**]).**

In the aphorisms of *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*, Rustaveli expresses specific ideas and moral rules. Hence, in order to assess the quality of the translations, we should focus on the equivalence of the style of expression of the aphorisms. By discussing one aphorism, the given paper attempts to evaluate the precision of ideas and functional adequacy of the English versions of the aphorisms in the works of various translators. We will start the research by discussing one aphorism, which has different equivalents in the translations under analysis. On behalf of a rose, Rustaveli says: *When the lovely is cheapened it is no longer worth even dried fruit*. The sense of this aphorism is: *If something beautiful becomes available to everyone, it will lose its value*.

First, let’s see the whole strophe:

36.878 ვარდსა ჰკითხეს: „ეგზომ ტურფა რამან შეგქმნა ტანად, პირად?
მიკვირს, რად ხარ ეკლიანი? პოვნა შენი რად არს ჭირად?“
მან თქვა: „ტკბილსა მწარე ჰპოვებს, სჯობს, იქმნების რაცა ძვირად:
ოდეს ტურფა გაიეფდეს, არღარა ღირს არცა ჩირად“.

(vardsa hk’itxes: „egzom t’urpa raman ſegkmna t’anad, p’irad?
mik’virs, rad xar ek’liani? p’ovna ſeni rad ars tʃ’irad?“
man tkva: „t’k’bilsa mts’are hp’ovebs, sdzobs, ikmnebis ratsa dzvirad:
odes t’urpa gaiepdes, aryara yirs artsa tʃirad“).

This aphorism is preceded by the answer of the rose to the following question:

36.878. ვარდსა ჰკითხეს: ეგ ზომ ტურფა რამან შეგქმნა ტანად, პირად?
მიკვირს, რად ხარ ეკლიანი?
(*vardsa hk'itxes: egzom t'urpa raman fegkmna t'anad, p'irad?*
mik'virs, rad xar ek'liani)

[“The rose was asked: Who has made you so beautiful?
Why do you have thorns?”]²

The difficulty of obtaining the rose is also expressed in the form of a question:

„პოვნა შენი რად არს ჰირად?“.

(“p’ovna jeni rad ars tj’irad?“)

[“Why is it so hard to get you?“].

The answer of the rose refers to the above-mentioned question and expresses the idea that whatever is hard to obtain is valuable:

მან (ვარდმა) თქვა: „ტკბილსა მწარე ჰპოვებს, სჯობს, იქმნების რაცა ძვირად:

ოდეს ტურფა გაიფედეს, არღარა ღირს არცა ჩირად“.

(*man tkva: „t'k'bilsa mts'are hp'ovebs, sdzobs, ikmnebis ratsa dzvirad:*

odes t'urpa gaiepdes, aryara yirs artsa tjirad“.)

[She (The rose) said: “sweetness is only known through bitterness, whatever is expensive, is better:

when the lovely is cheapened it is no longer worth even dried fruit“.]

The final part of the verse – “**when the lovely is cheapened it is no longer worth even dried fruit**” ([**ოდეს ტურფა გაიფედეს, არღარა ღირს არცა ჩირად**“]) (**odes t'urpa gaiepdes, aryara yirs artsa tjirad“.**) is an aphorism. It expresses the connection between the cause and the result. Rustaveli raises the following issue: if something beautiful becomes available to everyone, it will lose its value as a result. This information structure is essential for Rustaveli: first, the topic is given, the issue is raised, and, finally, the result of the process is given.

The above-mentioned aphorism is given in different versions in the English translations of the poem. Below the following examples are analyzed³:

36.878. „ოდეს ტურფა გაიფედეს, არღარა ღირს არცა ჩირად“.

36.858. (M.W.) when the lovely is cheapened it is no longer worth even dried fruit.'

36.868. (V.U.) Thus speaks the rose that is only a soulless, inanimate flower.

36.887. (L.C.) When the lovely is cheapened, it is not worth a fig anywhere.'

² These examples have been translated into English by the author of this paper.

³ The abbreviations mean the following: **M.W.** – Marjory Wardrop, **V.U.** – Venera Urushadze, **L.C.** – Lyn Coffin, **D.K.** – Dodona Kiziria.

858 36/13 (D.K.) when the lovely is cheapened it is no longer worth even dried fruit.* (The last phrase could also be understood as whatever is rare is better/The rarer the better).

In Marjory Wardrop's translation, the word „ტურფა“ (**t'urpa [lovely]**) is given in the form of the lexical unit “**lovely**” i.e. beautiful, attractive, wonderful, great (<https://dictionary.ge/ka/word/lovely/>). From the viewpoint of equivalence, the Georgian lexeme „ტურფა“ (**t'urpa [lovely]**) is transferred by its denotational equivalent “**lovely**”. The first part of the aphorism which mentions the cause and is given directly in Wardrop's translation, and Rustaveli's concepts (“lovely“, and “cheap“) are preserved. The information structure is also preserved. However, the second part of the aphorism i.e. the result, is given in the direct translation. Wardrop gives the direct version “**dried fruit**”, which does not reflect the idiomatic expression used in the aphorism.

Venera Urushadze's translation is different in this regard. The functional meaning of the aphorism is preserved. It should be noted that the equivalent of „ტურფა“ (**t'urpa [lovely]**) is „ვარდო“ (**vardi [rose]**). This is proved by the previous lines, hence, the translator preserves a unified position. In V. Urushadze's translation, the equivalent of “dried fruit” is an “inanimate flower”. The translator does not use the Georgian idiom and, instead, applies the concept of the inanimate flower, thus describing the Georgian idiom in an artistic way.

As we have mentioned above, Lyn Coffin's translation is based on the word-by-word translation by Dodona Kiziria. Therefore, it is reasonable to analyze the latter translation prior to the analysis of Lyn Coffin's version.

D. Kiziria repeats Marjory Wardrop's text of the aphorism, however, to make it more clear, she explains the meaning in brackets (“The last phrase could also be understood as “whatever is rare is better”). The aim of this definition is to clarify the meaning of the aphorism and make it easier for the reader to find its equivalent.

The first part of the aphorism in L. Coffin's translation is identical to that of Wardrop's and D. Kiziria's. However, in the second part, the equivalent of dried fruit is “not **worth a fig**”. This idiomatic expression is found in the English language and means *insignificant, unnoticed* (<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/not+worth+a+fig>). The translator has applied a good strategy. On the one hand, she preserves the original meaning of the aphorism. On the other hand, she finds its idiomatic equivalent. In Lyn Coffin's translation, one can feel Rustaveli's idea as well as the creative capacity of the English language.

The database of Georgian idioms and proverbs pays special attention to the above-mentioned aphorism and its English equivalent: „ოდეს ტურფა გაიფდეს, აღარა ღირს არცა ზორად“ (**odes t'urpa gaiepdes aryara yirs artsa t'jirad**) – *What we obtain too cheaply we esteem too lightly; it is only dearness which gives everything its value* (<https://idioms.tsu.ge/?p=17875>) (Paine 1776-77) This English expression belongs to Thomas Paine (1737-1809), a political figure, philosopher, and revolutionary of English origin who lived in the USA. This expression is found in his book *The American Crisis*. The meaning of Paine's expression “What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value.” is similar to Rustaveli's aphorism. However, in Rustaveli's aphorism, there is a relation between cause and effect. This

relation is also given by the poem's translators. Perhaps, the three translators were familiar with Paine's expression, but none of them used it, probably because they did not want to violate Rustaveli's information structure.

In the database of Georgian idioms and proverbs there exists a distinct idiom, „წირად არ ღირს” (**tjirad ar yirs** [It's not worth it]). The English equivalents for this idiom are the following:

წირადაც არ ღირს (tjiradats ar yirs) - Be of no value; be worthless; not to be worth a damn (thing); not be worth a pin; not to be worth a farthing; Not to be worth a bean; Not to be worth a do it; Not to be worth a tinker's damn; Not to be worth a plugged nickel, Not to be worth a red cent. [Good examples but the main one is not worth its actual value].

The translation of idioms represents a formidable challenge for translators. It involves the intricate task of capturing the essence of idiomatic expressions from the source language and conveying them appropriately in the target language. This complexity arises from the fact that idioms often carry cultural nuances and context-specific meanings that may not have direct equivalents in the target language.

In the book *Idioms Organizer*, John Wright asks if it is possible to translate idioms. The straightforward response to this query is negative. Idioms pose a challenging aspect where languages exhibit significant differences. While there are instances when idioms can be translated from one language to another, this is often an impractical task. Wright is against the word-for-word translation: “It is important that you are very careful if you have to translate idioms. Never translate an idiom word for word. You must translate the whole expression. Sometimes, you will be able to translate the English idiom into an idiom in your own language. However, there may be no idiom and you may just have to explain the meaning” (Wright, 1999: 10).

In examining the translations of Rustaveli's aphorisms, mainly focusing on Lyn Coffin's rendition, we uncover intriguing insights into the interplay between linguistic fidelity and creative adaptation. Coffin's choice to use the idiomatic expression “worth a fig” instead of the literal “dried fruit” showcases a nuanced approach to capturing the essence of the aphorism while ensuring its resonance in the target language. This strategic adaptation not only preserves the original meaning but also imbues the translation with English's natural flow and idiomatic richness.

Moreover, the comparison between Rustaveli's aphorism and its English counterpart attributed to Thomas Paine sheds light on the universality of certain philosophical concepts across cultures and periods. While Paine's expression shares thematic similarities with Rustaveli's aphorism, the nuanced cause-and-effect relationship inherent in Rustaveli's original text underscores the depth of its philosophical inquiry. This distinction underscores the importance of context and cultural specificity in fully apprehending the underlying messages conveyed by aphoristic expressions.

Furthermore, the exploration of Georgian idioms and proverbs adds another layer of complexity to the translation process, highlighting the inherent challenges in conveying cultural nuances across linguistic boundaries. The diverse array of English equivalents for the Georgian idiom “წირად არ ღირს” (**tjirad ar yirs**) underscores the richness and variability of language,

underscoring the translator's responsibility to navigate these complexities with precision and sensitivity.

In the light of these findings, it becomes evident that the translation of aphorisms involves more than just linguistic accuracy; it requires a keen understanding of cultural context, philosophical nuances, and the intricacies of language itself. By delving deeper into these aspects, translators can strive to capture the essence of the original text while ensuring its relevance and resonance in the target language. This nuanced approach to translation not only enriches the reader's experience but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the cultural and philosophical heritage encapsulated in aphoristic expressions.

5. Conclusion

If we evaluate the quality of the translation of this aphorism, we will conclude that Venera Urushadze and Lyn Coffin have selected the correct strategy. Both have preserved the main idea of the aphorism. Besides, Lyn Coffin has used a set expression and a natural English idiom, “**worth a fig**”. Marjory Wardrop’s translation of the second part of the aphorism, which applies the collocation of “**dried fruit**”, might seem unnatural for the target language speakers and confuse the reader.

As for Dodona Kiziria’s word-for-word translation, the explanation given in brackets has enabled Lyn Coffin to make a correct choice.

The examples above have proved that the lexical fund of English idioms offers diverse means for adequately translating idiomatic expressions. Analysis of the English idiomatic expressions revealed the Georgian aphorism's equivalents. Therefore, direct translation of these lexical units will diminish the aphorism's artistic value.

Upon evaluating the translation strategies employed by the translators for the selected aphorisms, several conclusions can be drawn:

Marjory Wardrop opts for a word-for-word translation, which results in the loss of the main concepts that convey the central idea of the aphorisms. In the analyzed examples, the concept of aphorism is not clearly associated with Wardrop, suggesting a lack of a consistent translation strategy for aphorisms.

Venera Urushadze demonstrates an effective strategy by artistically translating an idiomatic expression into English, using the concept of “an inanimate flower”. The choice of the “rose” as a defining factor allows the translator to replace the idiomatic expression “**არღარა ღირსარცა ზირად**” (**aryara yirs artsa tjrada**) with the concept of an inanimate flower, creating a decipherable translation.

Dodona Kiziria's explanation enables Lyn Coffin to employ a suitable strategy, translating the Georgian idiomatic expression into a corresponding English one. This approach preserves the idiom's content while reflecting the linguistic and expressive features of the English language.

The analysis of instances involving the translation of aphorisms within the text provides a structured and insightful approach, offering a window into the intricate process of linguistic and cultural transfer. This exploration is a crucial step in comprehending the multifaceted nature of rendering aphorisms from one language to another, allowing for a systematic examination of the diverse strategies employed by each translator.

At its core, this scrutiny extends beyond a mere linguistic examination. It ventures into cultural nuances, acknowledging that translating aphorisms is a complex task. Translators are confronted with the challenge of preserving the word-for-word meaning of the expressions and capturing the cultural resonances embedded within them. The selected strategies become a lens through which the translators negotiate the delicate balance between linguistic fidelity and cultural richness.

In delving into these examples, we uncover the intricate interplay between language and culture. It becomes evident that each translator grapples with a unique set of choices influenced by linguistic considerations and their interpretation of the cultural context. Translating aphorisms, therefore, becomes a dynamic process that goes beyond finding equivalent words; it involves conveying the essence of the expression within the cultural milieu of the target language.

This scrutiny also highlights the broader implications of translating aphorisms. It is not a mechanical task but a thoughtful decision-making process. In their role as cultural mediators, translators play a pivotal role in preserving the essence and impact of these concise, culturally embedded expressions. The examples under examination show the translator's artistry and strategy in navigating the complexities of language and culture, showcasing the nuanced decisions to ensure that the translated aphorisms resonate authentically in the target language.

Exploring these instances enriches our understanding of the challenges inherent in translating aphorisms. It emphasizes the need for translators to be proficient in the languages involved and culturally sensitive, recognizing that the true success of a translation lies in its ability to capture the spirit of the original expression within a new cultural framework.

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