

LATIN PROVERBS AS A TWO-WAY ROAD OF CULTURAL TRANSFER

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Abstract

Using several examples from different periods of Croatian neo-Latin literature, this paper attempts to demonstrate that proverbs could serve as a means of cultural transfer in two directions – not only from a well-established Latin tradition to other languages under its influence, but also in the opposite way, from a vernacular culture to neo-Latin literature. In the history of European culture the Latin language played a major role in the transmission of Roman and Greek antiquity – neo-Latin literature of various periods, as well as vernacular literatures, operated within the generic frames structured long before their time and these frames were gradually more or less reshaped to fit the changes in the needs and tastes of more recent literary ages. The role of Latin in transmitting literary, scientific, spiritual and other developments throughout the Latinophone world is a well-known fact. Writing in Latin provided poets and scholars with an opportunity to share their ideas with the rest of the Latin-speaking world and, in some cases, it gave them a chance to become a part of the common European heritage. In the same way proverbs or wise thoughts – these representations of knowledge and notions of truth specific to various oral cultures – incorporated in Latin texts by their writers, whether spontaneously or deliberately, were able to contribute to the corpus of Western literature. Without attempting to track their further destiny, this paper points out the possibility of the existence of such cases.

Key words: *proverbs, neo-Latin, Croatian literature, European literature*

'The die is cast' – this ancient Roman saying was attributed to the Roman dictator Gaius Julius Caesar by the Roman historian Suetonius in the 1st century AD. Suetonius narrates how Caesar pronounced his famous *Iacta alea est* after he had led his army across the Rubicon river in northern Italy.¹ The phrase has

¹ Plutarch, in his "Life of Pompey", 60.2.9, wrote that Caesar 'calling out in Greek to the bystanders these words only, "Let the die be cast," [...] set his army across.' Engl. translation by Bernadotte Perrin. This saying can be traced back to the Greek playwright Menander. For further information on this phrase see: "Alea iacta est." *Wikipedia: The*

resounded vastly over space and time and has been adopted into many European languages – always indicating that the point of no return has been passed. Why? When Ceasar and his army crossed the Rubicon it meant that he stepped over the border, thus entering Italy and consequently starting a civil war against the Optimates party – the event that led to great changes in the history of the Roman world and finally to the birth of the Roman Empire.

To take another example, originating from Virgil's 10th Eclogue: *Omnia vincit amor* (*Virg. Eclog.* 10, 69) – 'Love conquers all', we can only confirm the universality of these phrases uttered a long time ago and expressing what we all tend to see as common human notions of truth. No doubt, authors from the past saw the truthfulness and expressivity of these phrases as we do today and they incorporated them into their texts for the same reason. Once uttered and accepted, they became a part of the European cultural heritage.

The role of neo-Latin in sharing proverbs²

In the history of European culture the Latin language played a major role in the transmission of Roman and Greek antiquity, and as a part of it, its sayings and wise thoughts were transferred, too. The important point in the history of this transfer was the appearance of *Adagiorum chiliades tres* by Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536), who published, at the beginning of the 16th century, an expanded edition of his collection of adages (i.e. proverbs and wise thoughts) under this title. The book numbered more than 3000 adages, divided in three parts, each one of them introduced with a proverb: *Amicorum communia omnia* (Among friends all is in common), *Festina lente* (Make haste slowly) and *Herculei labores* (The labours of Hercules). Andrew Taylor in his article "Erasmus – The *Adagia*, and the Assimilation of the Literary Culture of Classical Antiquity" explains how for Erasmus the 'enduring, encapsulated wisdom was [...] commonplace in nature, generally dissociated from any originating authority but subject to contextual application'.³ Erasmus 'underlined the Pythagorean origin of *Amicorum communia omnia* in his expansion of that adage' and, as Taylor puts it, 'argued that this wealth was common property testifying to the amicitia which bound together scholars in the great enterprise of negotiating the classical tradition'.⁴

The *Adagia* of Erasmus were among the defining works of humanism, and the one that confirmed the role of adages as ornaments of discourse. Although neo-Latin literature evolved in accord with the needs and tastes of more recent literary periods, ancient Latin adages remained in frequent use, side by side with

Free Encyclopedia. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 29 Aug. 2016. Web. 3. Sept. 2016. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alea_iacta_est>

² The term 'proverb' is used here for any concise and formulaic expression of wisdom or a wise thought. The word 'adage' is used as its synonym in this paper.

³ Taylor, Andrew, "Erasmus – The *Adagia*, and the Assimilation of the Literary Culture of Classical Antiquity", *Brill's Encyclopaedia of the Neo-Latin World*, Brill: Leiden – Boston 2014, 973-4.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

biblical proverbs. As Christophe Geudens and Toon Van Hal indicated in their paper on early modern vernacular proverbs and the role of neo-Latin, following the course laid by Elisabeth Piirainen, 'neo-Latin may have served as an intermediary for the exchange of proverbs in the different vernacular languages'. The neo-Latin authors in the early modern age used to translate vernacular proverbs in Latin, and thus trigger and promote the spreading of proverbs around Europe.⁵ Thus the Latin language remained the means of sharing among neo-Latin scholars.

Proverbs in a text

In order to illustrate some specific points we will adduce several examples from Croatian literature. The first is the 17th century historian and polymath Paulus Ritter Vitezović (1652-1713). In his Latin verse epistles he addressed various persons, mostly those from the territory of the Holy Roman Empire. Although he used only a limited number of proverbs, many of them can be traced back to their ancient origins in works of classical Greek and Roman authors. For example, the elegiac couplet *Vidimus et quoties Monachum malè dogma secutum, / Pelle sub agnina delituisse lupum* (Vitezović I. 9, 125-126)⁶ refers to the proverb stating that beneath a lamb's skin often lurks a wolf. This thought, today inseparably incorporated in the European phraseology, was first attested in its literary form in Classical antiquity in the fable named "The wolf in sheep's skin", written by the Greek author Aesop (c.620-564 BC). The same thought can be found in the Bible too, in the Gospel of Matthew: *Attendite a falsis prophetis, qui veniunt ad vos in vestimentis ovium, intrinsecus autem sunt lupi rapaces.* (Matt. 7.15) meaning 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.'

In Vitezović's verses we can see how adages could be treated in neo-Latin literature. His couplet *Vel fors candorem quocunque errore notavit? / Errare est hominis. Fare, quid istud habet.* (III. 41, 7-8)⁷ contains the adage *Errare est hominis* – 'It's human to err.', but we see no signs that would point to citing someone else's words. Although proverbs were generally marked in neo-Latin literature, sometimes their insertion in a text is not indicated at all. The idea that it is human to err was recorded in more or less similar form in many different

⁵ Geudens, Christophe – Van Hal, Toon: "The use of proverbs in the Neo-Latin World. Did Neo-Latin function as an intermediary for phraseological exchange between the vernacular languages?", oral paper and handout at the *International Congress of the International Association for Neo-Latin*, Vienna 2-7 August 2015. See also: Tournoy, Gilbert – O. Tunberg, Terence, "On the margins of latinity? Neo-latin and the vernacular languages", *Humanistica Lovaniensia – Journal of Neo-Latin Studies*, vol. XLV – 1996, 134-174.

⁶ Jovanović, Neven – Stepanić, Gorana – Moretti, Violeta. "Ritter Vitezović, Epistolae, TEI XML Edition." *Open Science Framework*. Web. 3. Jun 2016. <osf.io/bcqzm>.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

Roman authors such as, among others, Cicero⁸, as well as in early Christian authors like Hieronymus⁹ and Augustin. The latter referred to this proverb saying in one of his *Sermons* "To err was human but to remain in error because of passion is diabolic."¹⁰

A deliberate attempt to share folk wisdom

The next Croatian author to be mentioned wrote several works aiming to preserve and share the treasure of vernacular adages. In his *Fabulae ab Illyricis adagiis desumptae*, Đuro Ferić (1739-1820), born in the Dubrovnik Republic, translated various vernacular proverbs into Latin, but he went even further and, in the manner of Aesop and Roman Phaedrus, created Latin fables based on them. The book was published in Dubrovnik in 1794. His other book dedicated to adages, entitled *Adagia Illyricae linguae fabulis explicata*, is still unpublished, but the sheer volume of his work illustrates the amount of effort invested in the recording of vernacular proverbs. We have chosen several examples from the published book. The first is *Junačka mati prva zaplače* or, in Latin, *Flet prima mater, cui sit audax filius*. In English, the meaning is 'A hero's mother cries first.', expressing the idea that the mother of a brave man is the first to lose her son. It can be found in various Croatian online collections of proverbs and wise thoughts¹¹.

The next proverb to serve as an example is much more common: *Ne mogu biti i vuci siti i kozlići na broju. / Nequeunt esse et lupi saturi, et haidi integro numero*. A loose translation could be 'It's impossible for both the wolves to be satiated and none of the goats missing', which corresponds to the English *You can't eat your cake, and have it too*. To give another example from Ferić's fables, we choose *Nijedna tuga samodruga / Calamitas nunquam unica advenit*, meaning 'Calamity never comes alone'. In contemporary Croatian it has a different form – *Nesreća nikad ne dolazi sama*. – but the underlying concept and literal meaning is the same. This proverb is used widely today, in Croatia as well as all over the European cultural sphere. Is it because the neo-Latinists used to read Ferić's fables and share this proverb among themselves? The answer is certainly negative. Although Ferić wrote that he was translating 'Illyric', i. e. Croatian, proverbs into Latin, this adage is attested as early as the 5th century BC, where it appears in one of Euripides' tragedies. The fact that an adage that originated from classical antiquity is found among his vernacular ones points to one of the features of

⁸ *Cuiusvis hominis est errare, nullius nisi insipientis in errore perseverare* (Cic. Phil. 12. 5).

⁹ *Errasse humanum est* (Hieronymus Epist. 57. 12).

¹⁰ Who referred to this proverb saying in one of his *Sermons* "To err was human but to remain in error because of passion is diabolic." *Humanum fuit errare, diabolicum est per animositatem in errore manere* (August. Sermones 164. 14).

¹¹ The pages do not cite the sources, so it was impossible to confirm whether they were taken from Ferić's book or collected them from contemporary oral sources.

proverbs and sayings – when recognised as 'truthful' by the majority, they are adopted to form a natural part of a particular culture.

There is still research to be done before we can identify the range of sharing the vernacular proverbs among Croatian neo-Latinists and the contribution of 'Illyric' proverbs to the whole of European proverbial corpora. The question of how much Ferić managed to become a part of this tradition and whether his translation of these proverbs into Latin made them any bit more available to a broader readership still has to be answered. So far we can say with certainty that he tried to do so as he chose Latin as the means of promoting the treasures of popular culture. The evidence comes from his Latin verse epistles to foreign scholars working on folk poetry Michael Denis and J. von Müller in 1798, and to M. Cesarotti in 1804 (printed in 1997), drawing their attention to 'Illyrian' folk treasure¹².

Several reasons might have blocked the road of cultural transfer of proverbs recorded by Ferić. Just to give an example of how uneven his possibilities to share this treasure were compared to his contemporaries from more powerful cultures and languages, we will introduce a well-known name from the other end of Europe – the English Christian mystic William Blake (1757-1827). His work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793) includes the 'Sayings of the Devil', which are not proverbs from an oral folk culture but his own inventions. Here are some of them: *The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom; You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough; Opposition is true Friendship*, etc. – ideas which are frequently quoted today.

In comparison to Ferić, Blake had many obvious advantages – he wrote in English and was English, which provided him with a much broader range of readers (the usage of Latin was rapidly decreasing at the time).

The game of reinterpretation

My last example is quite recent and shows how proverbs can be fruitful material for reinterpretation, in this case when given a comic twist. In his 1990 musical release the controversial Croatian rock composer Franci Blašković of the *Gori Ussi Winnetou* band sings: *Mens sana in malvasia Istriana*. Blašković is notorious for his multilingual lyrics, combining local Croatian and Italian dialects with Croatian and Italian standard languages as well as various other idioms, thus creating an intriguing linguistic mixture. Comical impression is just one of the effects it attains, dwelling on the edge of rudeness but never losing his sharp wits. In the afore-mentioned Latin adaptation of an adage Blašković paraphrases the verse from Juvenal's Satires *Mens sana in corpore sano* (*Juv. Sat.* 10, 356), replacing 'a healthy body' with 'Istrian malvasia' (a variety of grapes an vine

¹² "Ferić, Đuro." *Hrvatska enciklopedija*. Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža. Web. 3. Sept. 2016: <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=19288>.

typical of Istria, where Blašković comes from). So instead of 'A healthy mind in a healthy body' Franci gives us 'A healthy mind in homemade wine.'

Another famous quotation, this time from Caesar¹³, *Gallia pacata est.* – meaning that the Roman province of Gaul has finally been pacified, that is, brought under Roman rule – has been reinterpreted by the same author into *Histria špakata est.* *Špakata* is a local word meaning broken, and with this he draws on Caesar's sentence to aptly comment on the contemporary political situation in Istria, divided among Croatia, Slovenia and Italy.

The adduced example is here just to give a hint of how an old saying can be reinterpreted and given a new meaning. Will it ever spread to a community broader than just the Istrian county, or Croatia? Not likely. The force that gives strength to sharing a cultural good is lacking here. Amidst the vortex of globalisation the huge opportunities of receiving are not matched by equal opportunities of contributing. One end of cultural transfer seems to be blocked.

Conclusion

Adages could serve as a means of cultural transfer in two directions – not only from a well-established Latinist tradition to other languages, but also in the opposite direction, from a vernacular culture to neo-Latin literature. How much exactly they have managed to do so still remains to be explored. One of the examples given in this paper shows that some effort to share vernacular proverbs using the Latin language has been done. As for the cases of reinterpretation of old proverbs, as in Blašković's case, they represent a vivid addition to the already existing corpora of proverbs and sayings, probably doomed to die soon enough with hardly any chance to resist, being buried under the evergrowing pile of pop-culture products.

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¹³ From the letter in which he informed the Roman Senate of his victory over Vercingetorix in 52 BC.

Tournou, Gilbert – O. Tunberg, Terence, "On the margins of latinity? Neo-latin and the vernacular languages", *Humanistica Lovaniensia - Journal of Neo-Latin Studies*, vol. XLV – 1996, 134-174.

