

**Naming Culture Specifics: Human vs. AI Translation  
(A Case Study of Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter*)<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This is a contrastive study of two translation variants of Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter*, one made by Angela Rodel, the English translator of the novel and the other translated by AI, namely ChatGPT5. This study aims to examine the translation techniques employed in both versions when naming culture specific terms. Our main hypothesis is that AI provides acceptable translation equivalents in some cases but fails when stylistic effects and culture-bound items should be translated. The two research questions we aim to answer are whether the need for human translators will decline in the face of AI development and whether it will be possible to depend only on machine translation. The results show that upgrading the AI can help the translation industry but, in many cases, it cannot replace the human touch in a fiction text.

**Keywords:** *Human translation, AI translation, translation techniques, culture specific terms, stylistic effects.*

**1. Introduction**

Recently, Artificial intelligence has significantly improved both the speed of translation and accessibility of multilingual communication. By applying machine learning and neural networks, AI systems provide almost momentary translations across a wide range of

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languages. This allows global businesses to communicate more efficiently, supports international collaboration, and makes online content accessible to audiences without knowledge of foreign languages. Additionally, from the point of view of translation industry AI tools reduce costs spent for human translation in contexts where absolute precision is not required.

Modern AI translation systems are trained on large corpora encompassing books, websites, technical literature and databases of various texts. With this data-driven approach algorithms recognize linguistic patterns, then they can find repetitive collocations and develop frequency models for formal equivalence. Consequently, AI manages to learn not only basic word-for-word correspondences but also more idiomatic structures and metaphorically charged expressions. Larger databases lead to more faithful and context-dependent translations, especially in globally used languages such as English. Certain languages (Bulgarian among them) present challenges for AI translation due to their complex grammar systems. Features such as free word order, numerous inflections, aspectual specificities and gender-related pronouns are not always adequately handled by AI models.

Translators act as mediators between two naming systems, each grounded in its own worldview. This mediation involves the translator's ability to preserve contextual accuracy while conveying cultural specificity. Translators must therefore decide whether to preserve the sound (formal equivalence), translate the meaning (functional equivalence), or adapt culturally (substitution).

Literary translation does not only convey information but goes beyond this literal transfer by trying to recreate the author's style and tone, and the rhythm of the source text. Fiction is quite often characterized as containing wordplay, metaphor and metonymy, cultural phenomena and subtle emotional connotations, which AI systems fail to capture regularly. While AI is good at providing a rough draft, it cannot replace the creative and interpretive role of the human

translator. Therefore, in this article we claim that the translation of fiction texts remains a field where human expertise is still irreplaceable. Despite their constant upgrade and refinement, we expect that AI models will fail to interpret the cultural subtleties entwined in Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter*. As the novel is abundant in humour, irony, historical and political references, and context-dependent idiomatic expressions, they may not be rendered accurately by AI. This may lead to misunderstanding as, for example, if an idiom is translated literally. It can sound strange even meaningless in the target language if background knowledge of the source culture is not provided.

Our investigation aims to compare the advantages and limitations of AI, namely ChatGPT5, in parallel with the human translation (HT) of a novel. The choice of Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter* as the source text of this research is motivated by both practical and scholarly reasons. On the one hand, there is a published English translation of the book by Angela Rodel, a professional translator who is a native speaker of English but also fluent in Bulgarian. This is significant for the target text, because it guarantees that all stylistic effects, idiomatic usage and cultural subtleties will be rendered in a way that is natural and understandable to the English-speaking audience. By comparing this translation with the AI outputs, the study can explore how AI algorithms can cope with both linguistic competence and cultural sensitivity. On the other hand, *Time Shelter* is an internationally recognized full-length novel, rather than a short story or isolated passage. Its length of narration and complexity enable us to create a large, representative database of excerpts for systematic analysis. The number of examples makes it possible to investigate not only literal cases, such as formal equivalence in idioms, but also more complicated challenges in literary translation, such as metaphor, irony, intertextual references and culture specific items. Fewer or less complex text excerpts would not have offered the same variety of material to reveal tendencies in human versus AI translation.

What is more, the novel's thematic depth and stylistic specificities make it especially suitable for research on literary translation. *Time Shelter* is full of political metaphors, nostalgic imagery and culture specific references, all of which raise particular challenges for translation. Although the focus is on Bulgaria, these themes are not limited to Bulgaria only, especially if we think about the rise of nationalism, the spread of populism and politics driven by nostalgia in recent years. Its international recognition, including the International Booker Prize in 2023, once again proves its relevance for studying how different translators (human vs. AI) render its stylistic flair and cultural specificity.

The book's up-to-dateness is clearly observed in the way it approaches political and cultural phenomena such as Brexit and contemporary debates in the EU about identity and belonging. The "clinic of the past" built in the novel<sup>2</sup> expands from a way of treatment into a political tool, the narrative reveals the risks of turning memory into ideology. Because of this interrelation of literary novelty and socio-political relevance, *Time Shelter* is appropriate for a case study dealing with translation research.

### 2. Literature Review and Methodology

Recent research has focused on important questions about the benefits and limitations of AI-driven translation, particularly in the domain of literary texts where cultural references and stylistic nuances are the most outstanding. Some authors claim that AI-generated translations lose the cultural nuances of the original text (Amini, Ravindran, Lee 2024). Additionally, they consider "ethical and social implications, such as data privacy, bias, fairness, and even job displacement" (ibid.: 741). Neural-based machine translation systems

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<sup>2</sup> Georgi Gospodinov's character, the enigmatic Gaustine, a mysterious therapist, founds a clinic where Alzheimer's patients are treated by recreating the past.

have shown significantly improved results in terms of grammatical accuracy and lexical fluency, but they often fail to preserve subtle cultural specifics that are typically part of literary works. These studies suggest that although machine translation outputs contain technically correct sentences, the results show flattening of cultural nuances, which leads to less authentic experience when reading the target text.

Other studies investigate the crossing points between traditional literary translation practices and innovative AI technologies, thus revealing a detailed account of human-AI collaboration (see Norets, Reinova 2024). Their work suggests that while AI tools can help when dealing with repetitive structures, lexical choices or first drafts, the translator's involvement is changed but it evolves rather than diminishes. By using AI in their work, human translators focus their efforts more on stylistic refinement, cultural transfer and creative interpretation. This exhibits a shift in the translation process from competition between human and machine translation toward collaboration that combine efficiency with inventiveness.

Empirical research offers evidence from literary translation, which shows that human translators outperform AI systems in preserving the emotional tone, the author's style and culture-bound references (Zhang 2025; Phuong 2025). Although AI delivers grammatically correct and semantically accurate translations, the studies note several repetitive shortcomings: problems to present metaphorical specifics, changes in register (making some expressions more neutral), and inadequate rendering of idioms, historical allusions, etc. These findings confirm the view that AI is a useful tool, especially for aiding human translators when preparing drafts, but is not yet capable of replacing human translators in literary settings when it comes to humorous contexts, idiomatic or slang expressions or culturally embedded jokes. AI translations tend to retain the literal meaning and can be reliable for basic comprehension, but its limitations

in transferring deeper cultural or stylistic layers make it inadequate for conveying the full effect of fiction texts.

According to Wang (2023: 437), “some of the best works of literature produced by AI are so impressive that some professional writers cannot even match their grasp of the language”, but there is no convincing evidence that machine translation will fully replace human translators. Therefore, it should not be considered as a substitute but as a tool. Wang argues that the creative and interpretive processes involved in translation go beyond the current capabilities of AI models. Similarly, Norets and Reinova (2024: 1) claim that “...[a]lthough the quality of artificial intelligence systems is constantly improving and neural networks have acquired the ability of self-learning, they are not yet able to create complete artistic images and cannot replace humans in creative activities”. Taken together, these studies reveal unanimity among authors: although AI has changed the speed and accuracy of literal translation, it shows limitations in capturing specific metaphors and cultural nuances, which determines the ongoing need of the human translator-editor.

The current study relies on a database collected for the purposes of the present research. It consists of 178 excerpts, extracted from Georgi Gospodinov’s novel *Time Shelter* in Bulgarian (abbreviated as BG) and their equivalents from the published English translation by Angela Rodel (abbreviated as HT). Then, the same examples are translated by the OpenAI-developed ChatGPT (abbreviated as AI) and a total number of 534 passages is analysed. The parts which are of interest for this research are underlined. Since the selected examples discussed here are considered sufficiently illustrative of the broader tendencies observed, other excerpts displaying similar features are not examined individually in this paper. Adopting a contrastive methodology, this study investigates the divergences between AI and human translation, with a focus on assessing the respective strengths and limitations of machine translation.

To guide the selection of passages, we established a number of criteria: (1) the presence of figurative language, including metaphors, metonymies, and personification; (2) the use of idiomatic expressions, slang, and set phrases; (3) the inclusion of culture specific elements such as historical references, folklore customs and concepts related to cultural traditions; and (4) variation in stylistic register, ranging from neutral formulations to emotionally charged expressions. The Bulgarian excerpts were manually extracted from the original text and aligned with their officially published English translations. In parallel, translations generated by ChatGPT5 were compiled and prepared for systematic comparison. For clarity and consistency, each excerpt was numbered to ensure precise cross-referencing throughout the analysis. The theoretical framework draws on established theoretical models in translation studies, most notably Nida's distinction (1964) between formal and dynamic (functional) equivalence, Vermeer's Skopos theory (1989), and Nord's concept of functional adequacy (1997).

Nida's model is useful as it evaluates whether translations prefer formal accuracy or functional impact, a particularly relevant distinction when analyzing stylistic and cultural nuances in fiction. Vermeer's Skopos theory highlights the importance of translation purpose, which is central to distinguishing between AI's word-for-word translation and human translators' deliberate decision-making. Nord's principle of functional adequacy further refines this approach by underlining the translator's duty to balance faithfulness with the communicative needs of the target audience.

Venuti (1995), on the other hand, enlarges the scope of translation studies by shifting the focus from strictly literal and aesthetic considerations to the cultural and ideological dimensions of translation. He admits that literary translation is always deeply rooted in the relations between cultures. Key concepts in his argument are the terms domestication and foreignization, which explain the translator's decision process either to adapt the text and make it accessible to the

target culture audience or to keep its foreign elements, thus preserving the cultural difference. Venuti's framework introduces the notion of translator visibility, outlining the translator's active role in shaping how literature is perceived and interpreted across cultures.

Aixelá (1996) introduces four main strategies for handling culture specific items in translation – conservation (preserves of the culture specific item in the target text using a borrowing or transliteration), substitution (replaces the culture specific term with a more familiar item in the target culture), deletion (omitting entirely the culture specific item from the target text) and amplification (adding explanatory material to clarify the cultural reference for the target audience). The intersection of the two theories is the association of conservation and amplification mostly with foreignization, while substitution and deletion are related to domestication. Taken together, these models offer a solid foundation for contrasting AI outputs and human translations, allowing us to assess both linguistic accuracy and cultural resonance.

In unison with previous research, we hypothesize that AI will provide acceptable lexical and grammatical translation equivalents in most cases but will fail when stylistic effects, slang words, metaphors, set phrases, occasionalisms and culture specific terms should be translated. The two research questions we aim to answer are whether the need for human translators will decline in the face of AI development and whether it will be possible to depend only on machine translation.

### **3. Data analysis**

In this section we have included examples with culture specific terms (also called culture-bound items), in which translators face a dilemma: whether to preserve foreignness in the TL or to adapt the ST so that to achieve accessibility by the target audience. There is no one-size-fits-all answer, but tendencies could be outlined through strategies



such as conservation, substitution, deletion or amplification (Aixelá 1996), as well as through Venuti's (1995) two approaches: to make the text more familiar and natural to the target culture (domestication) or to keep the original cultural flavour even though the target text may sound strange to readers (foreignization).

In the following passage, both the human translator and AI attempt to render culinary and cultural markers from the Bulgarian original, yet they take different approaches in balancing familiarity and foreignness.

BG	HT	AI
<p>128. К. поглежда към порцията ми с лек сарказъм: не ти ли е много соц? По-скоро е пресолено, отвършам, опитвайки кебапчето от едро смляно месо като тогава, тук-там с костици, от които може да ти отиде някоя пломба. Лютеница, варен боб и препържени картофи – светата троица на гарнитурата.</p>	<p>K. looks at my plate with slight disdain: isn't that a little too Soc? Actually, it's a little too salty, I reply, biting into to one of the sausages of coarsely ground meat just like the ones back then, with little bits of bone here and there that could do a number on one of your fillings. Ajvar, boiled beans, and overfried potatoes – the holy trinity of side dishes.</p>	<p>K. looked at my plate with slight sarcasm: Isn't that a bit too socialist? More like too salty, I replied, tasting the coarsely ground meat kebabche, just like back then, with tiny bone fragments here and there that could cost you a filling. Lyutenitsa, boiled beans, and fried potatoes – the holy trinity of garnishes.</p>

Actually, it's a little too salty, I reply, biting into to one of the sausages of coarsely ground meat just like the ones back then, with little bits of bone here and there that could do a number on one of your fillings. Ajvar, boiled beans, and overfried potatoes – the holy trinity of side dishes. K. looked at my plate with slight sarcasm: Isn't that a bit too socialist?

More like too salty, I replied, tasting the coarsely ground meat kebabche, just like back then, with tiny bone fragments here and there that could cost you a filling. Lyutenitsa, boiled beans, and fried potatoes – the holy trinity of garnishes.

In (128), the human translation (HT) opts for partial domestication as the abbreviation “Soc” for the Bulgarian *соц* (the short for “socialist”) softens its ideological implication and makes it colloquial, almost slang-like in English. Similarly, *кебапче* is generalized as “sausage”, which makes the text more accessible to the target audience but diminishes its cultural specificity. HT’s choice of “ajvar” is also significant as this Balkan salsa is related to, but not identical with, *лютеница*. Using ajvar partly preserves the cultural flavor because the term is more familiar to the English-speaking audience exposed to Balkan cuisine. However, this substitution alters the specifically Bulgarian reference. HT’s rendering of “overfried potatoes” literally corresponds to the original *препържени картофи* and adds a local touch of informality.

The AI translation applies foreignization by keeping terms closer to the Bulgarian source. Instead of the short version “Soc”, it uses the full form “socialist”, making the ideological reference explicit, but sacrificing the colloquial tone. The cultural item *кебапче* is transliterated as “kebabche”, retaining the foreign term and the specific Bulgarian context. Similarly, *лютеница* is transferred or in other words conserved as “lyutenitsa,” rather than substituted with “ajvar”. This technique maintains the authentic tone but can lead to misunderstanding on the part of the readers unfamiliar with the Bulgarian cuisine. By calling potatoes simply “fried” instead of “overfried”, the AI translation avoids an awkward and unexpected collocation and maintains readability at the same time. However, “overfried” is the literal equivalent of the original and although it sounds unnatural, should be preferred to the conventional phrase “fried potatoes”.

On the whole, the human translation gives precedence to accessibility for English-speaking readership, often at the cost of cultural precision, while the AI translation prioritizes authenticity, preserving foreign terms even if they may leave readers at a loss, confronting them with unfamiliar cultural references. Both translations reflect Venuti's dichotomy: the first leans toward domestication, the second toward foreignization.

The next example contains the title „Записки по българските въстания“, a foundational Bulgarian literary and historical text by Zahari Stoyanov, but the two translations approach it differently in terms of accuracy and accessibility.

BG	HT	AI
135. Вдясно, досами стадиона, <u>имаше малка хвърката конница</u> като извадена от „Записки по българските въстания“ или по-точно от екранизацията ѝ.	To the right, next to the stadium itself, <u>there was a small band of cavalry</u> taken straight out of <u>Zachary Stoyanoff's 1884 Pages from the Autobiography of a Bulgarian Insurgent</u> , or rather, the movie version of that book.	To the right, near the stadium, <u>a small cavalry troop</u> <u>appeared</u> as if taken straight from “Notes on the <u>Bulgarian Uprisings</u> ” – or rather, from its film adaptation.

The HT of excerpt (135) includes an explicit rendering of some additional information: “Zachary Stoyanoff's 1884 Pages from the Autobiography of a Bulgarian Insurgent”. This version provides the author's name – Zachary Stoyanoff<sup>3</sup>, the year of publication – 1884, which are not present in the original, and the published English title of

<sup>3</sup> The name of the author, Zachary Stoyanoff, is adapted according to the older Anglophone tradition as the translation was published in 1913 by Leopold Classic Library. In the contemporary transliteration system, it should be presented as Zahari Stoyanov.

the book translated by M.W. Potter. The advantage of this version is its clarity and precision achieved through amplification, giving the target audience detailed bibliographic information. Though the translation of the title transforms it into something closer to a literal description rather than a recognizable cultural item, still it already exists in the Bulgarian literature translated into English so it should be cited as it is in cases of specific reference.

The AI opts for a literal rendering, which is more concise: Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings. This is closer to how the title is informally referred to in English-language literature and achieves a balance between accessibility and faithfulness. It captures the cultural-historical weight of the original while remaining stylistically smoother within the narrative. However, it does not mention the author's name and year of publication, which may slightly reduce historical specificity, especially for readers unfamiliar with Zahari Stoyanov as a symbol of Bulgarian national identity. Both translations show deletion of the modifier "хвърката" (lit. "flying") in collocation with "конница" (lit. "cavalry") which makes a historical reference to the Flying Cavalry, a unit of around 200 insurgents led by Georgi Benkovski that operated during the April Uprising (in April 1876). This modifier is considered inaccessible as a culture specific term to the target readership in both translations, therefore it is omitted.

Along the spectrum domestication – foreignization, the HT reveals domestication by deleting "хвърката" and providing the adapted title of the book, which is closer to substitution. But it leans toward foreignization through explicitness and amplification of cultural detail, even if it risks overburdening the reader. The AI translation tends to use domestication, because it also omits "хвърката" and presents a more readable and naturalized equivalent of the title that integrates smoothly into the text but with less contextual reference.

In excerpt (145), the Bulgarian original ironically quotes the highly formulaic language of congress transcripts from the Communist

era published in Работническо дело, the official newspaper of the Party (the Bulgarian Communist Party). Both English translations attempt to reproduce this mixture of fake solemnity and satire, but they diverge in their approach to culture specific terms.

BG	HT	AI
145. И всички аплодисменти накрая звучаха като „бурни и нестихващи ръкопляскания и викове слава на...“, както пишеше в безкрайните конгресни стенограми, <u>публикувани в</u> <u>„Работническо дело“</u> <u>някога.</u>	And all the clapping at the end sounded like “wild and unabating applause and cheers of glory to . . .” as they put it in those endless transcripts of party congresses <u>published in</u> <u>Worker’s Deed daily back</u> <u>in the day.</u>	And all the applause at the end sounded like “thunderous and uninterrupted ovations and cries of glory to...” as recorded in the endless congress transcripts <u>once</u> <u>published in</u> <u>“Rabotnichesko</u> <u>Delo.”</u>

In the HT “wild and unabating applause” is used as an effective attempt to convey the exaggerated tone of бурни и нестихващи ръкопляскания, while “cheers of glory” matches the ideological grandeur of the original викове слава. The newspaper title is translated as “Worker’s Deed daily”, which is a solution corresponding to substitution, where a culture specific item is replaced with a more transparent equivalent in the target language. While the phrase Worker’s Deed makes the metaphorical meaning of the Bulgarian title accessible, it strips away the historically loaded connotations of Работническо дело as a symbol of Communist propaganda. The English phrase sounds strange, and it lacks the historical value of the Bulgarian newspaper title. Moreover, the addition of the colloquial expression “back in the day” introduces a domesticating tone and a

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colloquial flavour, softening the tone and making it more understandable for the contemporary English-speaking audience.

By contrast, the AI translation opts for “thunderous and uninterrupted ovations and cries of glory to...”, which captures the pompous rhetoric of the original with more idiomatic force than HT’s “wild and unabating applause”. It retains the title “Rabotnichesko Delo” in transliteration, which aligns it with conservation, where the foreign term is preserved in the translation to maintain the cultural specificity. The result is a text that carries more authenticity and cultural reference, signalling its historical importance. However, the retention of the foreign title reveals a certain willingness to confront readers with unfamiliar cultural markers, thus making the passage less immediately accessible but more faithful to its location in time.

In terms of stylistic register, the HT tends to use domestication, adapting idioms and style to be more familiar to English readers, but at the cost of precision in culture-bound collocations (“Worker’s Deed daily”). AI chooses foreignization, preserving the ideological register and cultural markers (e.g., “Rabotnichesko Delo”), making the historical context more visible, though less “comfortable” for readers. This comparison illustrates the compromises made when choosing between substitution and conservation in the translation of culture specific terms: HT risks to some extent the cultural resonance, preserving the text’s accessibility, while AI demands more from readers by staying closer to the original.

The Bulgarian original in (143) puts together on the historical stage some stereotypical roles: Thracian rulers, fertility goddesses, Proto-Bulgarian khans, Slavic concubines, and a number of Ottoman soldiers (османлии, еничари, кърджалии).

BG	HT	AI
143. В основата на всяка възстановка били тъкмо професионални	It was precisely professional actors who made up the backbone of every reenactment. There	It was precisely professional actors who formed the foundation of every

актьори. Непрекъснато трябвали я тракийски цар или богиня на плодородието, я <u>прабългарски</u> <u>скулест хан</u> , а блондинките моментално се превръщали в славянски наложници с дълги бели роби. Имало роли за всички – <u>османлии, еничари,</u> <u>кърджалии...</u>	was always a need for either a Thracian king or a fertility goddess, or even <u>a Proto-Bulgarian khan</u> <u>with dramatic</u> <u>cheekbones</u> , while all the blondes were immediately transformed into Slavic concubines in long white robes. There were roles for everyone – <u>Ottomans, Janissaries,</u> <u>bandits</u> . . .	reenactment. They were constantly in need of either a Thracian king or a fertility goddess, or <u>a chiseled Proto-</u> <u>Bulgarian khan</u> , while blondes were instantly transformed into Slavic concubines in long white robes. There were roles for everyone – <u>Ottomans,</u> <u>janissaries,</u> <u>brigands...</u>
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Both translations preserve this imagery but diverge in tone, register, and lexical choices. In the HT the opening “There was always a need...” is accurate as it uses the existential “there” construction to express the Bulgarian impersonal непрекъснато трябвали (lit. “constantly needed”). The choice of “Proto-Bulgarian khan with dramatic cheekbones” is significant, because “dramatic” introduces a slightly ironic or theatrical note, which aligns with the satirical undertone of Gospodinov’s text. However, the rendering of кърджалии as “bandits” weakens the historical specificity, but strengthens their real occupation. The Kardzhalii were members of armed groups in the late Ottoman Balkans, a term with a precise cultural and historical connotation that is partly lost in the generic “bandits”.

AI’s translation uses “They were constantly in need...”, which is incorrect as the subject “they” wrongly refers to the professional actors in the previous sentence, while the impersonal Bulgarian construction indicates a situation. The phrase “a chiseled Proto-Bulgarian khan” is

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effective due to the metaphorical use of “chiseled” suggesting both physical strength and sharpness of facial bones. It is closer to the connotation of *скулест* than “dramatic” but the underlying ironic tone of the author is lost. In the closing list, “brigands” for *кърджалии* is more historically and culturally appropriate than “bandits”, since “brigands” are members of a gang that ambushes and robs people in forests and mountains during the Balkan uprisings, as well as irregular fighters in English historical discourse. The rendering of “janissaries” with a lowercase “j” breaks the spelling rule, but it does not obscure the meaning.

The HT makes the cultural references smooth with more general and accessible terms (e.g., “bandits”), which shows a tendency toward domestication. The AI relies on conservation, which is an element of foreignization, by preserving cultural specificity through historically loaded vocabulary (e.g., “brigands”), but at the same time flattens the ironic tone of the author.

The Bulgarian original in (138) refers to a socialist-era children’s song, starting with the line *Небее-то като от коприи-на, това-а е моята...*, a fragment, which carries strong cultural memory and ideological connotation, as such songs were deeply rooted in the Bulgarian socialist education system.

BG	HT	AI
138. <u>Небее-то като от коприи-на, това-а е моята...</u> запя някой от импровизирана сцена, но гласът му така си остана самотен и човекът млъкна неловко.	<u>A sky made of silk so grand, that is my fair homeland...</u> Someone started singing a socialist children’s song from the improvised stage, but no other voices joined in and he awkwardly fell silent.	<u>The sky as soft as silk, this is my...</u> someone sang from an improvised stage, but his voice remained alone, and he awkwardly fell silent.



The translations differ in how they handle the cultural reference and the tone of awkwardness. The HT expands the line “A sky made of silk so grand, that is my fair homeland...” by inserting “fair homeland”, which enhances the patriotic tone implied in the original. What is more, it preserves the song’s meaning by providing a literal, straightforward translation and creatively maintains the rhyme and rhythm of the original. It also explicitly identifies it as “a socialist children’s song”. This amplification provides contextual information that clarifies the cultural allusion for the target audience unfamiliar with children’s songs from the socialist times. The effect is explanatory and ensures that the ideological background is not lost.

The AI translation gives a more literal rendering: “The sky as soft as silk, this is my...” with no attempt to keep the rhyme and to add context. It preserves the fragmentary nature of the song, however, without mentioning any reference to its socialist origins, the cultural significance for readers outside Bulgaria is obscured. This version employs conservation of form but deletion of cultural explanation, leaning toward foreignization that gives precedence to authenticity over accessibility. Thus, in stylistic terms, the HT domesticates the reference, turning it into a familiar patriotic style, while the AI foreignizes the translation, preserving the ambiguity, which requires the reader to infer the meaning from the wider context.

Metaphorical transfer may be described as involving two-domain or cross-domain mappings expressed through different types of conceptual metaphors. Interpretive tasks of this kind remain a challenge for AI, because it relies primarily on statistical models and pattern recognition. By contrast, human translators draw on cultural understanding and lived experience, which allows them to perceive the undertone of the source text and select suitable lexical units needed to preserve its integrity in the target language. Since the translation of metaphors often demands creativity and cultural adaptation rather than formal equivalence, human intuition continues to exceed the machine

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translation results. The title of Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter*, the source of our database, is itself a metaphor, a metaphor for the impossible desire to take refuge in the past. It is also a neologism in Bulgarian as it is in English, deriving from the phraseological units "bomb shelter" and "time capsule" (in Gospodinov's words). Its ambiguity is intriguing: sheltering from time, and sheltering within time, both attractive but unfeasible.

The Bulgarian excerpt in (21) plays with the metaphorically and emotionally charged word *зарязани* (abandoned/ dumped), explicitly emphasizing its innate, almost brutal implication by calling it *касапска дума* (lit. "butcher's word"). The contrast between its colloquial use for love relationships and its etymological connotation creates both irony and intensity.

BG	HT	AI
21. Къде отиват всички онези започнати и недовършени истории, прекъснати връзки, които още кървят, <u>всички зарязани любовници</u> , „зарязани“ – думата не е <u>случайна, касапска дума</u> .	Where do all those familiar and unfinished stories go, those severed connections that still bleed, <u>all those dumped lovers</u> ; “ <u>dumped</u> ” – <u>this word isn't a coincidence, a garbage word</u> .	Where do all those started and unfinished stories go, the severed connections that still bleed, <u>all the abandoned lovers</u> – <u>abandoned</u> ” – <u>the word is no accident, a butcher's word</u> .

The HT renders the line as “dumped lovers; ‘dumped’ – this word isn’t a coincidence, a garbage word”. This choice adopts the colloquial English term “dumped” used for breaking up which captures the everyday use of *зарязан* in a love relationship context. It exemplifies what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define as the conceptual metaphor EMOTIONAL PAIN IS PHYSICAL DAMAGE, where abstract experiences (like emotions) are understood and expressed in terms of more concrete, bodily experiences (like injuries). A “garbage word” is a cultural substitution of *касапска дума*; it continues the metaphor and

wordplay<sup>4</sup> created by dumped lovers. The pun<sup>5</sup> is based on the polysemy of “dump”, namely its two meanings: 1. to put down or drop something in a careless way; 2. to suddenly end a romantic relationship (Cambridge Dictionary<sup>6</sup>). The HT solution helps the target audience to grasp the original play on words expressed by зарязани meaning both “abandon, dump”.

The AI uses “abandoned lovers – ‘abandoned’ – the word is no accident, a butcher’s word”, in which “abandoned” is more formal and less colloquial than “dumped”, and it loses the connection with the explicit metaphor of butchery. A “butcher’s word” is a literal rendering of the harsh metaphor касапска дума, however “abandoned” and “butcher’s word” are not semantically related, which makes the literal translation inappropriate.

The metaphor in (38) В мрежата вреше и кипеше stands for a high activity, chaos and uproar. It can be translated literally as “boiling and bubbling”.

BG	HT	AI
38. В мрежата вреше и кипеше. Това, което виждах по	The Internet was going nuts. What I had seen on the news and on the	The internet was boiling over. What I saw in the news and

<sup>4</sup> “Wordplay” is adopted here as a cover term for a playful use of language (Merriam-Webster Dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wordplay>) that relies on multiple meanings, sounds or structures of words. It encompasses all forms of linguistic play – puns, double entendres, spoonerisms, palindromes, anagrams and creative ambiguity (see Crystal 2001; Delabastita 1996) – in order to express humour, wit, poetic effect or intellectual amusement.

<sup>5</sup> “Pun” is a kind of wordplay that usually uses a word in a humorous way “as to suggest two or more of its meanings or the meaning of another word similar in sound” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pun>), i.e. it relies on homonymy (more specifically homophones) or polysemy.

<sup>6</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dump>.

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новините и на улицата, беше многкратно умножено по сайтове и социални мрежи.	street <u>was magnified</u> <u>many times over on</u> <u>websites and social</u> <u>media.</u>	on the streets <u>was</u> <u>multiplied tenfold</u> <u>across websites and</u> <u>social media.</u>
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The HT version “The Internet was going nuts” conveys the idea idiomatically, using the colloquial expression “going nuts”, which is charged with emotional energy. The AI’s The internet was boiling over is close to the original metaphor but slightly more formal than the original presupposes.

The metaphorical use of “многкратно умножено” in беше многократно умножено по сайтове и социални мрежи is correctly understood as amplification in both HT and AI translation. In the HT “was magnified many times over on websites and social media” expresses the idea more precisely due to the broader sense of “magnify”, meaning not only to multiply but also to enlarge. In AI’s “was multiplied tenfold across websites and social media”, “multiplied tenfold” is only quantifiable. Both work, but the HT is a bit more dramatic. As a whole, the HT is more conversational and idiomatic, while AI’s version sticks literally to the original metaphors, especially with “boiling over” and “multiplied tenfold”.

Translating occasionalisms is one of the most problematic tasks for a translator, requiring creativity and cultural knowledge (Nedelcheva 2021, 2023). However, in some cases it is a matter of word-formative rules, for example Georgi Gospodinov’s neologism минала (the plural of минало lit. “past”), a word that is only singular in Bulgarian, is rendered as “pasts” (the plural of “past”), which is also usually singular in English, in both HT and AI translation. The same strategy for forming occasionalisms as in the source language is applied to the target language not only in (38) but also in (169).

The Bulgarian sentence (169) contains an expressive abstract noun *скорошност*, which functions almost like an occasionalism<sup>7</sup>, a derivative of the adjective “*скорошен*” (lit. “recent”). Both translations convey this idea but apply different suffixes.

BG	HT	AI
169. Но все пак най-изумителното за мен не е годината и нейната <u>скорошност</u> , а конкретният ден.	But still, the most mind-boggling thing for me is not the year and its relative <u>recency</u> , but the specific day.	Yet, the most astonishing thing for me is not the year and its <u>recentness</u> , but the exact day.

The excerpt introduces the abstract noun *скорошност* rendered as recency in the HT and recentness by AI. Both ways of word-formation are acceptable as they follow the rules for building derivative abstract nouns in English, namely adding a suffix such as -ment, -ion (and its variations like -ation, -sion, -ition), -cy, -ity, -ness, -ance, -ence, -ship, and -th. Very slight differences can be found in the denotation of recency and recentness; the former focuses on time proximity, while the latter emphasizes the quality of newness rather than its effect (Collins Dictionary<sup>8</sup>).

The HT renders *най-изумителното* as “the most mind-boggling thing”, which a colloquial and idiomatic choice, reflecting spoken English. “Mind-boggling” effectively captures the sense of amazement and exaggeration implied by *изумително*, preserving the lively, subjective tone of the original. “The most astonishing thing” used by AI is more formal and literary than “mind-boggling”, giving the text a less

<sup>7</sup> Occasionalisms or nonce words are created by an author for a particular occasion, often in a literary, media, or expressive context. These are not part of the standard lexicon and are made up for a single use or limited context. They are often coined for emphasis, catching the reader’s attention, naming something that lacks a conventional word, etc.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/recentness>

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playful tone. It reads smoothly in English but loses some of the vividness and emotional charge of the original.

From the perspective of theoretical framework, the HT leans toward domestication through substitution, giving preference to accessibility and idiomatic expression (“mind-boggling”), preserving the stylistic nuance. The AI relies on foreignization and employs conservation, preserving literal structures (“the most astonishing thing”, “recentness”, etc.) but producing a less natural, slightly stiff phrasing in English.

Set phrases, and more specifically idioms, occupy a prominent place in translation studies because they require careful selection of lexical and syntactic units in order to preserve both meaning and communicative function across languages. In the excerpts that follow, the aim is not to classify the set phrases according to their degree of idiomaticity, but rather to demonstrate whether the HT and AI renderings in the target language employ idiomatic equivalents.

The Bulgarian original in (171) uses the set phrase *ухилени до уши*, which is rendered in both HT and AI translation as “grinning from ear to ear”. When there is literal correspondence in the set phrases across languages, finding the equivalent is feasible even for AI. However, when there are some differences, they lead to failure on the part of machine translation (see 36).

BG	HT	AI
171. И навираше в камерата черно-бяла снимка на двамата, снимани пред колата и <u>ухилени до уши</u> .	And he thrust at the camera a black-and-white photo of the couple standing in front of the car, <u>grinning from ear to ear</u> .	And he shoved into the camera a black-and-white photo of the two of them, <u>grinning ear to ear</u> in front of the car.

BG	HT	AI
36. <u>Миналото расте</u> <u>като репей.</u>	<u>The past grows like a</u> <u>weed.</u>	<u>The past grows like</u> <u>burdock.</u>

In example (36), the two translations diverge in terms of word preference and cultural nuance. The HT “The past grows like a weed” is a set phrase in English, where “weed” stands metaphorically for something invasive that spreads uncontrollably. This choice, however, generalizes the Bulgarian репей (lit. “burdock”), thus the plant’s specific cultural symbolism is lost. By contrast, the AI version, “The past grows like burdock”, preserves the literal reference but produces an expression that lacks metaphorical mapping in English, where “burdock” is rarely used figuratively. The symbolic force of репей, more specifically its association with sticky burrs that cling to clothing in the same way as the past clings to us, is retained in the AI’s rendering but it becomes inaccessible to the English readers who are unfamiliar with the plant. In this way, HT provides the corresponding idiom in English, while AI maintains formal equivalence at the expense of the appropriate idiom, which results in a less convincing, word-for-word effect.

Translating slang words could be seen as problematic because some of them are not included in standard dictionaries. What is more, Gospodinov uses some old-fashioned ones related to the 1980s which are no longer operative nowadays. However, the analysis of the database shows that AI is quite successful when translating slang words and phrases as it draws information not only from dictionaries of standard language but also from the Urban Dictionary<sup>9</sup> and different vocabulary sites. In excerpt (174) the slang verb запецвам is rendered similarly in both translations – “get stuck on something” (HT) and “got stuck” (AI).

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.urbandictionary.com/>

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BG	HT	AI
174. Имаше няколко думи, които не помнеш, и като разказваш <u>и запечнеш нещо</u> , ти ги из-броявах...	There were a few words you never remembered, and when you'd be telling a story <u>and get stuck on something</u> , I'd list them off for you . . .	There were a few words he couldn't remember, and when he was telling a story <u>and got stuck</u> , I would list them for him...

There are some other divergencies between the two translations, however. In the HT the second person ("you") in "There were a few words you never remembered..." addresses the other character in the passage, as though the narrator is in a direct communication. This creates a sense of closeness and immediacy and preserves the dialogic sense of the original. The tone is conversational and natural in English, especially with "list them off for you".

AI uses "he" in "There were a few words he couldn't remember...", shifting the focus away from direct address, which makes the sentence more descriptive and distanced. Correspondingly, the tone is slightly more neutral and formal than the first version, especially with the phrase "list them for him", which sound less idiomatic than "list them off for you". The effect of the personal interaction between the narrator and the addressee is lost and the translation sounds as reporting rather than recreating an intimate memory. Overall, the HT is closer to the source text in tone and personal interaction, while AI is more neutral and loses some of the emotional charge.

The HT embodies dynamic equivalence and adaptation by preserving conversational tone and the emotional proximity of the original. AI reflects formal equivalence and conservation, rendering the content literally, but the target text is deprived of some stylistic flair and intimacy.



In (175) the slang adjective *мижав* is used in collocation with *светлина*, which is translated as “dim light” in both versions.

BG	HT	AI
175. Изгряването на неона <u>сред мижавите светлини на уличните фенери</u> явно е било стряскащо и затрогващо, <u>после бързо става тривия.</u>	The rise of neon <u>amid the dim light of the streetlamps</u> clearly must have been shocking and moving, <u>then it quickly became trivial.</u>	The emergence of neon <u>amid the dim streetlights</u> must have been shocking and touching, <u>but it quickly became trivial.</u>

The two translations are quite close in lexical choice, a small difference is found between AI’s “touching”, which is a closer emotional equivalent of *затрогващо*, more personal and affective than “moving”. An interesting case is the translation of the borrowing *тривия*, which is defined as a collective term for various curious but insignificant facts, which are used in show business when composing questions for entertainment programs such as quiz shows<sup>10</sup>. The word, however, shares a common root with “trivial” meaning “ordinary”, “commonplace”. This equivalent is correctly chosen in the two versions to correspond to the source text meaning. On the whole, AI reveals no failures when slang words or borrowings should be translated.

### Conclusions

Although this article discusses only a few excerpts of the database collected from Georgi Gospodinov’s *Time Shelter*, they are representative of the other examples found in the book, which allows us

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<https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A2%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%8F>.

to outline some tendencies in the AI translation when it is applied to literary texts. One of the most prominent features of AI in literary translation is that it leans toward literal translation, which could be sometimes a positive and in other cases a negative feature. On the positive side, this approach ensures faithfulness to the denotation of the source text, but it can often produce unnatural or awkward phrasing. As AI systems cannot consistently capture pragmatic and cultural nuances, the result is exactness in which fluency and literary effects are lost. AI tends to use a neutral tone, which is an advantage in technical or informational contexts, where objectivity is expected. Yet, fiction relies on intensive emotions, dramatic variation and stylistic changes, consequently AI's neutrality flattens emotional expressions and diminishes the narrative's impact.

AI has shown unexpected strengths in rendering slang words, even some outdated ones. This could be explained with the pattern recognition of AI models, which enables it to map colloquial expressions into their closest equivalents in the target language. Nevertheless, AI fails with culture specific or generational slang, particularly when words are polysemous or carry irony. Without the cultural awareness possessed by human translators, AI may either mistranslate slang literally or replace it with a neutral synonym, which leads to the loss of stylistic and social nuance. In the case of cognitive metaphors, which are universal and conventionally used, AI performs quite well. These metaphors are present in large training corpora and are easily reproduced in idiomatic form. Problems appear when AI encounters less common or culturally embedded metaphors, then it translates them literally and produces confusing results inaccessible for the target audience.

With set phrases and idioms, AI shows mixed results as well. Frequently used idiomatic expressions, which have their equivalents in the target language, are translated smoothly, because they appear in training data. However, idioms that carry culture specific meanings or

whose equivalents vary depending on context are more problematic, e.g. (36). While some idioms are handled well by AI, many others expose its lack of interpretative ability typical for a human being and the fact that statistical patterns cannot replace pragmatic understanding.

We expected occasionalisms to be perhaps the greatest challenge for AI, because they are creative or context-specific coinages and, therefore, remain outside the scope of standard AI training corpora. However, the occasionalisms found in the database allowed AI to translate them literally preserving the intended meaning of the author. The same does not apply to song lyrics and rhymed expressions. Human translators can infer meaning from context and create equally inventive equivalents in the target language. AI, by contrast, still tries to render them literally, stripping them of their stylistic innovation and literary playfulness, areas where human intuition and creativity remain indispensable.

The database of this article has revealed that the human translation follows the Anglo-American tradition and favours domestication, while AI applies mostly foreignization, as it is probably set in the training corpora, and thus it manages to preserve partly cultural otherness. In literary translation, there is often a preference for additional explanation when trying to preserve the author's fictional world, something that we find in the human translation, but not in ChatGPT-translated texts, which brings misinterpretation and lack of accessibility on the part of the readership. The results of the research show that although the quality of artificial intelligence systems is constantly improving and neural networks have acquired the ability of self-learning, they are not yet able to create complete artistic images and cannot replace humans in creative activities and pragmatic awareness.

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