

Summary

The aim of this work is to make an analysis of the translation of Djavan's song Esquinas into English. It endeavours to show how the theoretical demands made on translations prove problematic when put into practice,

Dynamic Equivalence

mainly when concerning the translation of songs.

versus Formal

Resumo

É objetivo do presente artigo mostrar, através de uma análise crítica da tradução

Correspondence in the

para o inglês da canção Esquinas de Djavan, como

Translation of Songs

as exigências teóricas que se fazem às traduções se revelam, na prática, problemáticas, principalmente no que se refere à tradução de canções.

Equivalência dinâmica versus correspondência formal na tradução de canções

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The most recent approaches to translating emphasize the importance of giving priority to the preservation of content over the preservation of form, to dynamic equivalence over formal correspondence. This means that a translation must reflect and reproduce the content and style of the author's message, and at the same time sound as natural as possible in the receptor language, so that "the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same

manner as the receptors in the source language."¹

While in theory this seems a reasonable requirement, in practice it is a matter of much debate and controversy. Many factors are involved that cause variation in language, and each language is a reflection of its speakers' culture, perception of reality, and view of the world. The impact that any message has upon an audience is directly proportionate to and dependent on each individual's background and experience, much more in interlingual than in intralingual communication. The response of receptors, moreover, cannot be evaluated apart from a consideration of the type of text or discourse in question and the purpose of the communication.

It is well recognized that different types of texts present different kinds of problems to translators. Within the category *literary*, the translation of poetry has received special attention. According to Theodore Savory (1968): "it is almost the only aspect of translation in which a high proportion of the experts show agreement among themselves; but even so they agree only in the opinion that adequate translation of a poem is impossible. They disagree in the usual way about the best methods by which the impossible may be attempted, as well as in their criticisms and appraisals of the attempts that have been made."²

The general claim about the impossibility to satisfy all the demands for equivalence in poetic language relies on the fact that form and content are intrinsically related and mutually dependent on each other in poetry more than in any other literary genre of text. A song is a kind of artistic expression which has many features in common with a poem — there is

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rhythm, rhyme, figurative use of language, and unconventional order of lexical and syntactic components — which are combined mainly for the purpose of creating impact and arousing sensuous emotion. Furthermore, a song has characteristics of its own because there is also melody. Whatever level of poetic language is used in a song, it is accompanied by music.

Music is a universal phenomenon, and there are different kinds of music and songs associated with different ethnic and cultural groups. A great number of songs is translated into one or more different languages every day. Usually, the melodies are kept intact or only adapted a little bit here and there. Nevertheless, it is amazing to see how much the messages in the songs are changed, to a point that most of the versions are not even considered translations proper. The fact that there is hardly any literature at all about the topic may even lead one to conclude that this is not considered a translation problem. It is usually said that “total liberty” is allowed in the translation of the words in songs. This so-called “liberty”, however, does not appear to be the result of a consensual belief that the messages in songs need not be preserved but rather, a consequence of the difficulty to preserve both form and content in the translation of a song.

The constraints imposed on the translation of a song are even greater than those imposed on the translation of a poem due to the very fact that there is music involved and that words have to be selected so as to “fit” the melodious lines of the song. Consequently, the preservation of the form is given priority and very often the content of the message is lost or changed in varying degrees.

I am going to illustrate the problems related to the translation of songs with *ESQUINAS*; a song

originally composed and written in Portuguese by Djavan, a well known Brazilian composer and singer. An American band called ‘The Manhattan Transfer’ has recently recorded an English version of *ESQUINAS*, together with other Brazilian songs (most of which by Djavan), in an album named ‘Brasil’. For this work, the group won a ‘Grammy’ this year, an award which is as prestigious to music as the ‘Oscar’ is to the movie world.

The English version of *ESQUINAS* received the title *SO YOU SAY*, inspired by the phrase which is most repeated in the original Portuguese version — *só eu sei* — which means ‘only I know’. There is almost a total phonetic correspondence between the two phrases:

[‘sow yu ‘sey] ‘so you say’
[‘so ew ‘sey] ‘só eu sei’ (‘only I know’)

However, in spite of the phonetic similarity, the meanings of the two phrases are totally different in the two languages. It seems to me that it was exactly the preservation of this phonetic similarity — a formal correspondence — which led the message of the English version to an almost opposite direction due to the shift in perspective:

— In the Portuguese original, the speaker uses the first person singular pronoun to claim, “only I know” (that is, “I am the one who knows all I’ve been through and I am telling you what I have learned”);

— In the English version, the speaker uses the second person pronoun to claim, “so *you* say” (that is, “you are the one who knows and who’s telling me something which I’m not convinced of yet”).

The title of the original version in Portuguese highlights one of the words used in the Brazilian song — *ESQUINAS* — which means ‘corners’ in English. The word is used

figuratively, with an extended connotation of “place where one meets the unexpected and where significative changes may occur.” It actually refers to the “corners” one passes by in the “walks” of life or, more specifically, to the “paths” of love.

I attempted to translate the song *ESQUINAS* into English with the purpose of producing the closest natural equivalent in terms of content of the message, while at the same time trying to preserve the author’s style. I followed the three basic steps suggested by Nida and Taber (1982) namely, *analysis*, *transfer*, and *restructuring*. What follows is a generalized comment of the process which led me to the final version of my translation.

The original song in Portuguese consists of three explicit statements and four complete questions. The first two statements (S1 and S2), followed by English glosses, and then by my translation, are

S1: *Só eu sei as esquinas por que passei*
(Only I I-know the+fem+pl corner+pl by which I-passed)
Only I know all the corners I have passed by

S2: *Só eu sei os desertos que atravessei*
(Only I I-know the+masc+pl desert+pl which I-crossed)
Only I know all the deserts I have travelled through

In order to convey the extended, abstract meaning that is implicit in the original statements, I decided to include the quantifier “all”. I have also substituted “travelled” for “crossed” in the second statement for reasons of semotactic appropriateness.

Each of those statements, in turn, is followed by two types of parallel questions (Q), the first type beginning

with '*sabe lá...*' and the second type beginning with '*e quem será...*'

Q1: Sabe lá o que é não ter e ter que ter p'ra dar?

(You-know there the what is not to-have and to-have what to-have in-order-to-to-give?)

Do you know what it means not to have and yet to have to have to give?

Q2: Sabe lá o que é morrer de sede em frente ao mar?

(You-know there the what is to-die of thirst in front of-the+masc sea?)

Do you know what it means to die of thirst right by the sea?

'*Sabe lá*' is an idiomatic expression in Portuguese which proved to be extremely difficult to translate into English. Questions introduced by '*sabe lá*' are rather rhetorical questions and have, altogether, the following connotations: "can you imagine...", "do you understand..." and "who really knows..." The subject, which is omitted, cannot be easily recovered because it is deliberately ambiguous. It could be either '*você sabe lá*' ('you') or '*sabe-se lá*' (an impersonal 'clitic' — a technical term used by Chomsky meaning "a form that cannot stand alone but must attach to some verb").³ The closest, or rather, "least furthest" natural equivalent in English that I was able to find was "do you know what it means..." for '*sabe lá o que é...*' but I am not totally happy with my selection.

Q1 shows an interesting "play on words" with the verb *ter* ('to have'), and I introduced the adverb "yet" to capture the intended meaning of the original. Q1 immediately follows S1 and it is clear that both are used in a figurative sense. However, an idea occurred to me which can also show some relation between Q1 and the more basic component of meaning of 'corners' in S1 — it is usually in street corners that one is most likely to be

stopped by robbers, and then one is somehow forced to have something in order to give them.

Q2 also shows some relation to S2, but the extended meaning is carried much further. The speaker poses a situation in which he is craving for drinking water with the whole sea right in front of him... so much water in the sea but it is not the kind of water that he needs. The sea is a symbol for love in the song: love is supposed to fulfill everyone's needs, but the love that the speaker found was not the kind of love that he needed then.

The next two questions, Q3 and Q4, which follow Q1 and Q2, respectively, can also be considered rhetorical questions. They are rather impersonal and indefinite in Portuguese, and are usually used in contexts where no answer is expected from the interlocutor. Both questions are long and complex constructions, with multiple embedding of relative clauses. The adverbial phrases (or adjuncts) used are foregrounded for focus, since they establish both the place and the circumstance of the events. It is also in these adjuncts that the word *amor* ('love') is mentioned for the first time — the underlying theme of the song.

Q3: E quem será, nos arredores do amor, que vai saber levar que o dia nasceu?

(And who will-it-be, in-the+masc+pl surrounding+pl of-the+masc love, that is-going-to to-know to-take that the+masc day it-was-born)

Whoever will, in the realm of love, know how to handle it — a new day has begun?

Q4: E quem será, na correnteza do amor, que vai saber se guiar?

(And who will-it-be, in-the+fem stream of-the+masc love, that is-

going-to to-know clitic+refl guide?)

Whoever will, in the stream of love, know how to find his way?

Q3 contains the word *arredores* (literally 'surroundings' or 'outskirts'), which is related to *esquinas*, but which now gives a hint as to the real theme of the song. My translation preserved the syntactic word order of the original as well as the intended message, but I had to make some lexical adjustments for the sake of semotactic appropriateness. I also decided to use a dash (—) in order to avoid another repetition of the relative pronoun "that".

The greatest problem with Q4 was the clitic *se* used as a reflexive in *se guiar* (literally "guide oneself"). Since the reflexive is being used anaphorically, the only way to translate it into English was with a pronoun that shows a gender distinction, a solution that does not please many English speakers (This kind of problem does not show up in Portuguese because the pronouns usually agree in gender with the following nouns, and not with the 'possessor'). In my translation, I opted for "find his way", which is more idiomatic in English.

The image of water recurs in Q4 through the word *correnteza* ('stream'), and is carried over to the third and final statement in the song (S3):

S3: A nave em breve ao vento vaga de leve e traz toda a paz que um dia o desejo levou.

(The+fem ship in soon in-the+masc wind it-drifts of light and it-brings all the+fem peace that one day the+masc desire it-took).

The ship will soon drift softly in the wind and bring back all the peace that, one day, desire took away.

S3 is a very marked line in the original — phonetically, syntactically, and semantically marked for focus. The intense repetition of the sound [v] intermingled by [a] and either [e], [ɛ] or [i], results in a very sonorous and yet harmonious combination in the original song. There are four adjuncts in this complex construction. The first three modify the verb *vaga* ('drifts'), and two of them are foregrounded for special effect: *em breve* ('soon') and *ao vento* ('in the wind'). There is a coordination with a transitive verb whose object has a relative clause as attribute. The adjunct of the relative clause is also fronted for focus: *um dia* ('one day'). The kernel sentences in S3 are:

- *a nave vaga* ('the ship drifts') with three adjuncts —
em breve ('soon', indicating near future)
ao vento ('in the wind')
de leve ('softly')
- *a nave traz a paz* ('the ship brings back the peace')
- *o desejo levou a paz* ('the desire took away the peace') with the adjunct — *um dia* ('one day')

S3 also contains a lot of semantic information which is cohesively linked to the previous sentences in the song —

- the uncontrollable stream mentioned in Q4 can now be identified with desire, the passionate love which once took away the speaker's peace. But life goes on and there is hope...
- the ship, which symbolizes the speaker's destiny, will soon meet soft winds and return, bringing back the peace — things will return to normality...

The song ends with more repetitions of the line *só eu sei* ('only I know'), which gives unity and cohesion to the message all along in the song.

I have also noticed that most of the lines in the original end with the syllabic sounds [e] or [a], either followed by the glide [y] or by the fricatives [x] or [s]. These sounds are also found in the great majority of the words, with [e] sometimes changed to [i] or [ɛ], both front vowels. Of course, the translation which I made does not reflect these phonetic features. Since my aim was to preserve the message,

I had to sacrifice the equivalence in form. Interestingly enough, the English version — *SO YOU SAY* — did manage to reproduce many of these formal features and phonetic equivalences, but for that reason, it changed the message completely. My translation also has an additional problem — some of the lines contain more syllables than would "fit" the melody, but I believe that with some effort it can still be sung except for line 6.

Through this experiment, I have been led to agree with de Beaugrande (1978), who stated,

whatever demands for equivalence one makes upon a translation, they cannot all be completely satisfied. For example, it is necessary in order to maintain an equivalence of sound patterns (rime, for instance, and onomatopoeia) to disregard some demands for syntactic or semantic equivalence, and *vice versa*.⁴

On the other hand, in spite of the difficulties and constraints, I still believe that the translator is the only one who can build the bridge between the minds of authors and the minds of readers who do not share the same linguistic and cultural background. □

Translation of the Song: *ESQUINAS*

CORNERS

| | |
|---|---|
| Only I know | Do you know |
| All the corners I have passed by | What it means to die of thirst right by the sea |
| Only I know | Do you know |
| Only I know | Do you know |
| Do you know | Whoever will |
| What it means not to have and yet to have to have to give | In the stream of love |
| Do you know | know how to find his way |
| Do you know | The ship will soon drift softly |
| Whoever will | in the wind and bring back |
| In the realm of love | All the peace |
| Know how to handle it — | That one day desire took away |
| A new day has begun | Only I know |
| Only I know | All the corners I have passed by |
| All the deserts I have travelled through | Only I know |
| Only I know | Only I know |
| Only I know | |

Appendix A

ESQUINAS (Djavan)

Só eu sei
As esquinas por que passei
Só eu sei
Só eu sei
Sabe lá?
O que é não ter e ter que ter p'ra dar
Sabe lá
Sabe lá
E quem será
Nos arredores do amor
que vai saber levar
Que o dia nasceu
Só eu sei
Os desertos que atravesssei
Só eu sei
Só eu sei

Sabe lá
O que é morrer de sede em frente ao mar
Sabe lá
Sabe lá
E quem será
Na correnteza do amor
que vai saber se guiar
A nave em breve ao vento
vaga de leve e traz
Toda a paz
que um dia o desejo levou
Só eu sei
As esquinas por que passei
Só eu sei
Só eu sei

Appendix B

SO YOU SAY (Djavan / Amanda MacBroom)

So you say
it's a feeling I'll get over someday
So you say
So you say
I should try
Just to let the flame inside me die
I should try
So you say
Against the wind
With my face turned to the empty side
of loneliness
Midnight black and blue
So you say
That the world will keep on turning
So you say
So you say
Tell me why
All the stars have lost their mystery now
Tell me why
Tell me how
Where love has been

The taste of wine
seems to linger on like distant perfume
And all of the memories
carelessly left behind
Ghosts and lies
They haunt me wherever I go
So you say
That the pain of love will pass away
So you say
So you say
Before goodbye
I look for the fire behind your eyes
But they're cold as ice
I hear in your voice
The echo of love that's gone by
Now I cry
I'll love you for all of my life
So you say
it's a feeling I'll get over someday
So you say
So you say

NOTES

- ¹ Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1982) 24.
- ² Theodore Savory, *The Art of Translation*, New and enlarged edition (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968) 75.
- ³ Noam Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge*, the Managua Lectures (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988) 18.
- ⁴ Robert de Beaugrande, *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translating* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1978) 91.
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