Does Homophonic Translation Belong in the Publishing Industry?

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1 Feeding on ecclecticism

Had I been a scholar or a serious researcher, I might have called this chapter "Homophonic Translation: from Pleonasm to Oxymoron", or maybe some other and rather longish name with many prefixes and suffixes in it, but I'm just a professional translator, someone that translates in order to earn money and make ends meet, and I translate texts as a bus-driver drives buses, a hair-dresser dresses people's hair or a house-burglar burgles houses, so I'm going to stay close to my *métier* and try to expose some of the feelings and concerns I've been collecting and revisiting since the first time I was payed for a translation—which was, by the way, a rather awkward experience.

I was then not older than 18 and maybe in my first university year (studying Medicine, which I dropped three years later), and my mother knew this psychoanalyst who came upon a transcript of one of Lacan's lessons, in French of course, and couldn't make sense of it. So there goes my mom—eager as any to fetch her juvenile son a job—and tells him that my French is excellent and really fluent, plus I can dig into psychology or any other psycho stuff easily. And suddenly here I am, sitting in a hole that was either his kitchen or his office or both, trying to deal with a user-unfriendly Olivetti Lettera 23 and this incomprehensible transcript, full of incongruities and flaws and blanks, not necessarily due to Lacan, of course, not to speak of my natural drowsiness—remember I was 18, and growing.

Finally, I came up with something that my first client reluctantly took to be one of Lacan's obscure but nonetheless brilliant pieces of speech. My text surely was obscure as can be, and so full of Gallicisms that it had an unquestionable French flavor. Come

to think of it, this might have been the first contribution of homophonic translation to Lacanian epistemology in Argentina, and God knows what Borgean consequences this motherly insistence in putting her dreamy son on the right path eventually had on Argentine neurosis. In any case, even at this early stage, I learned two things: *a)* translators fees are miserable; and *b)* sound (or let's say hearing) is probably the most essential aspect of the translating process. About Lacan, *hélas*, I learned nothing.

As I said, I got paid such a lousy sum that I swore I would never translate again, at least not for a living. Of course, time passed, and then I had to leave Argentina and forget my accomplishments in obscuring Lacan's teachings over there. In 1976 I settled in Spain, where nobody cared much about Lacan by then and where standard Argentinian exiles fell into one of four categories: *a)* dentists, *b)* therapists, *c)* folk singers or *d)* football players. If you didn't fit into one of them, the only chances left were to become a foreign language teacher or a translator. There is this overspread myth that every Argentinian can speak at least two or more languages besides Spanish. It is only partly true: we can sing or hum the melody of the many languages we heard from our grandparents, but we surely have more trouble with the lyrics. Something similar happens with New Yorkers: they sound Italian, Jewish, Hispanic, etc., sometimes all in one, but they probably are just of Irish or Chinese origin. Well, in our case, and to the more feral ears of the Spaniards, it seems we sounded like sound English or French or Italian teachers. So, if you weren't a dentist or a shrink, your foot tended to miss the ball and you kept falling out of tune, translation was your Shangri-la.

Nonetheless, due to my bad early experience with translation as a means of life, I must say I eagerly tried to get paid for trotting on a football field, but it did not work. Since then, I've translated any old kind of texts, from machinery handbooks and pharmaceutical leaflets to pornography or ads, and on to modern novels, classical essays, books for kids or Elizabethan poetry and drama. I never hit Lacan again, but who knows, right? One of the virtues of translating for the publishing industry is you really don't know what will come next, because you're not always in the position of choosing and rejecting whatever they offer you to do, and this eventfulness and uncertainty draw a certain line between academic or experimental, or even vocational translators, and eclectic professional translators: one can never rest on whatever knowledge one thinks to have apprehended because the next book might require completely knew skills and information. In other words: constant and vivid refuelling of data, terminology, and historical background is never a choice but a need and a pragmatic obligation. You do not study because you like studying but because your peas depend on it.

2 The soundness of sound

Yet, I fear—and regret—that in the standard agenda of professional translators there is very little or no time left for, precisely, *reflecting on translation*. Most of the energy we spend on thinking about our activity goes down the drain of labour relationships, and there's very little left for metaphysics or politics. A great many of the colleagues I know are not—and sometimes don't even want to be—aware of the political and ideo-

logical aspects of translation within the major frame of cultural and language politics. Al least not in Spain. Latin American translators, together with local publishers, are starting to react to the heavyweight economic and ideological guidelines designed and imposed by the overgrown Spanish publishing industry, and this puts forward some interesting controversies about language, Mother Tongue monopoly, how to deal with the many full-grown varieties of Spanish, and so forth.

Of these varieties, many are strongly based on deeper melodic and prosodic variations rather than on shallow lexicographical marks: migration, both vernacular and European, creolization, social and class tensions, phonic and cultural diversification have contributed to change what the primal ear perceives from birth, the plain music of speech. Homophony, therefore, is at the root of communication—which doesn't mean understanding—and homophonic translation (we finally got there) is at the very root of transporting and loosing and reshaping meaning. I would even go on to say that musicality or sound, if you want, is the raw material, the bodily or carnal matter speech, literature and, therefore, translation are made of. Examples are everywhere and of many kinds.

We translate animal language by means of onomatopoeic sounds: English dogs say "woof woof" or "arf arf", Spanish dogs, "guau guau", Italian dogs "bau bau", French dogs "ouaf ouaf". Note they come always in pairs, to denote iteration. Small kids even identify and name the different species after the sounds they make. This method is not exclusively infantile: ancient Greeks called the foreigners 'varvaros', barbarians, from "var, var", which is how their gibberish sounded to Greek ears. Not to speak of the marvellous coinage of concepts based on misunderstanding the Other. Cases like 'lunch', which seems to be the English version of the Spanish "el once", the meal they used to take by the end of the morning, or 'Yucatán', which meant "I don't understand" (or maybe, as some say, "Welcome") in ancient Mayan, or Canada, meaning 'town', or even Montevideo, a name made out from a cartographic reference—Monte VI de E a O (6^{th} Hill from East to West), make clear that communication is largely based on misunderstanding and translating sound without meaning, i.e., regardless of meaning.

In this sense, it is my belief that interpretation always stresses our fears towards the Other by previously interposing one's own ideological debris, whereas homophony happily welcomes the Other's spontaneous expression, because of its intuitive and imitative nature.

Literature is full of cases of radical homophony. Poe, whose technical worries were more modernistic than romantic, was on the verge of using, for the sake of homophonic plausibility, a parrot instead of a raven in his masterpiece of composition—we can easily imagine the effect a poem called "The Parrot" would have had on the audience: Quoth the parrot "Neverrmorre"! Poe provides us with another resounding example of what hermeneutic translation can do to a poem: true it is that "The Bells" is not one of his best accomplishments, but any Spanish translation of his expressionistic search makes it even duller (mine included: I also translated Poe's poetry); where the last lines of the original say:

Keeping time, time, time,
As he knells, knells, knells,
In a happy Runic rhyme,
To the rolling of the bells—
Of the bells, bells, bells—
To the tolling of the bells,
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells—
Bells, bells, bells—
To the moaning and the groaning of the bells.

My own translation, along with many others, goes:

Al compás, compás, compás
del jolgorio que dimana
como un rúnico rimar
del tolón de las campanas,
las campanas, las campanas,
del doblar de las campanas,
campanas, campanas, campanas,
campanas, campanas,
del lamento y el clamor de las campanas.

How much better it would have been to translate:

del din don de las campanas,
el din don, din don, din don,
el doblar de las campanas,
su din don, din don, din don,
din don, din don;
el din don y el clamor de las campanas.

3 Homophony & Peas

But at that time my homophonic conscience was not fully developed. Maybe that is the reason, or one of them, why I had the nerve to take on the task of introducing strong homophonic features in the translation of Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. In 2011 Media Vaca (Half Cow), a publishing house from Valencia, Spain, asked me if I would be interested in translating Carroll's second Alice book. They had read my eclectic and at times strongly homophonic translation of John Lennon's *In His Own Write* and *A Spaniard in the Works* (*Por su propio cuento*, Global Rhythm, Barcelona, 2009), and my work with the Sonnets and poetry of Shakespeare or Poe, and thought I could offer a suitable translation to match with Franciszka Themerson's wonderful illustrations. Themerson had created feverishly her singular drawings as sort of therapeutic balm during the London bombings by the Nazis after having fled from Poland, and my publisher was really fond of them, so I was struck with a double responsibility.

In any case, I had to set myself to work. On the one hand, Lewis Carroll is a classic, which means that every new translation of one of his works has to find its place and make its way among many others, some of them already canonized and rooted in the minds of thousands of readers. On the other hand, the fact that classics are regularly revisited opens a wide and wild territory to unexplored translation strategies and conceptions. Not only in my own translations for the cultural and publishing industry, but also in my classes at the Literary Translation Master in Pompeu Fabra University, I have always stressed the need to detach translation techniques from what I call the 'Hermeneutic Anxiety Syndrome' (HAS) or fear of not fully understanding a text, which seems to affect both academic and professional translators *da per tutto*—not to speak of publishers or critics. In my experience, and with poor old Lacan's approval, partial homophonic translation has been a solid and creative way of resisting this undertoad while rendering results, in my opinion, paradoxically closer to the ultimate meaning of the original than many HAS translations.

Hermeneutic anxiety is grounded on the widespread belief that a text does not only say something but, translating literally from Spanish "quiere decir" (and many other languages, like French "ça veut dire"), wants or desires to say some other thing. Nevertheless, this semantic twist goes unperceived—at least by Spanish speakers, surreptitiously inoculating us with the fear of not being able to understand the meaning *desired* to convey by the text. The text appears to have thus a will of its own which would transcend its mere carnality. The bias towards a subjective craving or aspiration of texts or pieces of speech can best be unveiled if we come to think of a situation where we confront the author of a poem or of an abstract painting or a Sonata and say: "Yes, it probably is very nice, but what were you trying to say?" Nearly all of them will answer: "Just what I said, just what there is there". Henri Meschonnic puts it nice and clearly when he states that "rhythm is meaning", and here we could replace rhythm by sound, flesh, matter, being.

My point is that the anxious approach can never reach the 'real' thing, it gets trapped in the imaginary fear of being deceived by the Real (of Lacan's Real, why not) and cannot escape from the symbolic structure that it concocts in order to defend itself from reality. But translation deals with reality, must deal with the Real. It must deal with sounds, with forms, with atoms and molecules, with textures, with light, with shadows, with smells and flavours. Translators should avoid trying to understand what they have not listened or touched. Understanding in translation must come through the senses. We must let our senses make out sense.

But let's get back to Alice's looking glass. After much talking with the publishers, an adorable and patient couple, and more than one crisis, I decided to gently and smoothly turn Carroll's most significant and sonorous names into Spanish sounding names, and to let this wave of homophony ride loosely through the text, without any obligation or constraint. My purpose was not to force homophonic translation but rather let it happen naturally. Thus, in due time, Humpty Dumpty (already translated into Spanish as Humpty Dumpty, Pepín Cascarón, Zanco Panco, among many others) became, in my version, "Humpe Dante", which reads like "Un Pedante", A Pedant. This discovery triggered my boldness and I went on to call Tweedleedee and

Tweedleedum "Toledín y Toledón", which bears Castilian echoes, and not happy with that, transformed the wicked Jabberwocky into the not less wicked (and somehow more crazed) "Jabierloqui"".

Here is Carroll's poem followed by my translation, published in 2013 [1]:

JABBERWOCKY

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that
catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And, has thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

1. Carroll, Lewis, *A través del espejo*, Valencia, Media Vaca, 2013.

Jabierloqui

Fritarde, cuando el fángil dongo
Regila y hurza en la porlapa,
Mindebles van los gorobobos
Y el pigorrante achala.

«Vigila, m'hijo, al Jabierloqui!
¡Que no te muerda con sus zarpas!
¡Evita al pájaro Yoyobi
Y al furbio Baitezampa!»

Él empuñó su espada albosa
Y en busca fue del vilenemigo;
Al pie de un Árbongo reposa
Y aguarda pensativo.

Estando en frondos pensamientos,
El Jabierloqui dejó el bosco
Con malhodor, echando averno
Y espurnas por los ojos.

¡Uno y dos! ¡Uno y dos! ¡Y tris tros!
La albosa espada entraba, entraba.
Lo remató y cabalganó
Con la cabeza a casa.

«¿Has muerto al Jabierloqui, m'hijo?
¡Ven a mis brazos, muchachombre!
¡Feliciloor! ¡Albricia, albricio!»,
Exclamoteó de goce.

Fritarde, cuando el fángil dongo
Regila y hurza en la porlapa,
Mindebles van los gorobobos
Y el pigorrante achala.

The poem has probably as many translations as some of Shakespeare's most memorable Sonnets. And some of them, at least in part, try shyly to resort to homophony. Why so? Because meaning is faintly absent here ... or so they think. Of course, meaning is hauntingly present in the poem, nestled in sound, in rhythm, in primal emotions. And that is precisely what I tried to put into my version: matter that does not want to say anything, that plainly *says* it.

This story has a coda. In 2015, Nórdica, another publishing house from Spain, in this case a much more visible and market oriented one, got in touch with Media Vaca, and then with me, to negotiate the use of the rights of the translation. Both my former publishers and I agreed to it, got paid fairly, and the moral of all this is that not

one but two different editions of a homophonic translation of Carroll's *Looking Glass* belong in the mainstream publishing industry and the book market. Homophonic translation sails—and hopefully—sells on!