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## ON THE IMPORTANCE OF MATCHING RELATIONS IN THE ANALYSIS AND TRANSLATION OF LITERARY TEXTS

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### Abstract

In the short story *La Muerte y la Brújula*, by the Argentinian writer J. L. Borges, Lönnrot, detective and ‘puro razonador’, is tricked by his enemy, the ‘pistolero’ Dandy Red Scharlach, and lured to his death in the deserted villa of Triste-le-Roi. The story is cunningly constructed because the trap depends on Lönnrot’s self deceiving belief in his own cleverness and on his desire to impose ‘una explicación puramente rabínica’ on an accidental murder. It is cunningly narrated because, like all good detective stories, it contains all the necessary clues and yet both the reader and the detective allow themselves to be misled. Based on the above, an attempt is made in this article to show that both the construction and the narration of the story exploit a basic psycholinguistic pattern, the *Matching Relation*, a narrative device familiar to most readers from their knowledge of traditional Western European children’s stories.

**Key words:** Translation; Literary Texts; Matching Relations

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## Introduction

In the short story *La Muerte y la Brújula*, by the Argentinian writer J. L. Borges, Lönnrot, detective and ‘puro razonador’, is tricked by his enemy, the ‘pistolero’ Dandy Red Scharlach and lured to his death in the deserted villa of Triste-le-Roi.

The story is cunningly constructed because the trap depends on Lönnrot’s self-deceiving belief in his own cleverness and in his desire to impose ‘una explicación puramente rabínica’ on an accidental murder. Moreover, it is cunningly narrated because, like all good detective stories, it contains all the necessary clues and yet both the reader and the detective allow themselves to be misled.

What I hope to show in this article is that both the construction and the narration of the story exploit a basic psycholinguistic pattern, the *Matching Relation*, a narrative device familiar to most readers from their knowledge of traditional Western European children’s stories.

At this point I would urge anyone who has not read *La Muerte y la Brújula* (*Death and the Compass, A Morte e a Bússola*), to do so in any language before reading any further.

## Matching Relations

One of the marked features of stories for young children, and apparently one of the features which they greatly enjoy, is repetition. If we look, for example, at the following extracts from a very early version of *Goldilocks* (Opie and Opie 1980:264-8), what immediately strikes us is how much is later repeated or is itself a repetition of something earlier and how little of the text is novel or unique:

*“Somebody has been at my porridge!” said the Great Huge Bear in his great rough gruff voice...*

*“Somebody has been at my porridge!” said the Middle Bear in his middle voice...*

*“Somebody has been at my porridge, and has eaten it all up!” said the Little Small Wee Bear in his little, small wee, voice... (ibid:266)*

The Middle Bear repeats word for word what the Great Huge Bear said and the Little Bear repeats word for word what both have said, although he does add a second clause of his own.

One paragraph later we find exactly the same structure: an utterance by the Great Huge Bear, repeated by the Middle Bear and repeated with an addition by the Little Small Wee Bear:

Somebody has been sitting in my chair.....  
 Somebody has been sitting in my chair.....  
 Somebody has been sitting in my chair, and has sate (sic) the bottom  
 of it out! .....

Thus by the time we get to the third complaint, “Somebody has been lying in my bed!” we (and any listening child) can confidently predict the rest of the sequence verbatim, except for the three new words in the Little Small Wee Bear’s utterance:

“Somebody has been lying in my bed!” said the Great Huge Bear in his great rough gruff voice ...

“Somebody has been lying in my bed!” said the Middle Bear in his middle voice....

“Somebody has been lying in my bed and here she is!” said the Little Small Wee Bear in his little, small wee, voice.

These extracts represent extreme examples of what is a very common phenomenon in all written and spoken texts and which Winter (passim) has called the *matching relation*. Winter sees the matching relation as a cognitive process, shared by writer and reader, whereby they “interpret the meaning of a clause or group of clauses in the light of their adjoining characterised by a high degree of repetition between its clauses” (ibid: 92) and this repetition or *constant* functions to place emphasis on the *replacement*, that is, on what is different or new in the second, matched clause, 27 (see Hoey 1987 for a more detailed discussion of the matching relation and its function in narrative texts).

If we now examine the *Goldilocks* extracts we see that in the first, Middle Bear, repetitions only the speaker (and his associated voice quality) is replaced or new information, whereas in the second, Little Small Wee Bear, repetitions there is both a new speaker and some new content.

The interpretative problem for the reader when faced with a matching relation is to decide whether the items are being matched in order to focus on their similarity or *compatibility* or in order to focus on their difference or *contrast*; in other words, whether the replacement, the new content, is to be regarded as pragmatically equivalent, or as pragmatically different.

Many children’s stories are largely structured in terms of a comparison between what happens to one character and what happens to another, or more often to several other characters. (As Sacks 1972) points out three is a better narrative number than two, because if two characters have identical experiences this strongly suggests a norm, measured against which the third is seen as a deviation or a surprise). In Winter’s terms the reader of such stories is expected to see what happens to the first characters as *compatible* and as *contrasting* with what happens to the third character.

Thus in the *Goldilocks* story what happens each time to the Great and Middle Bears is compatible – they share the same minor complaint that their porridge/

chair/bed has been interfered with, whereas the Small Bear, by contrast, has serious complaints: his porridge has been eaten, his chair has been broken and his bed is still being (mis) used.

We can readily call to mind many children's stories with this same basic structure, two matching compatibles followed by a matching contrast – in *Rumpelstiltskin*, (Opie and Opie, 256-9) the miller's daughter has three nights of spinning, two which do not satisfy the king and one which does, and later in the story three days in which to guess Rumpelstiltskin's name, two on which she fails and one on which she succeeds; in the *Three Little Pigs* there are two foolish pigs whose houses are buffed and puffed and blown down, and one wise pig whose house survives; in the *Three Billy Goats Gruff* there are two billy goats who trick their way past the troll and a third who destroys him.

In all such stories, at least in the traditional tellings, the matching is marked by massive repetition and minimal replacement. Thus a child learns from an early age that repetition is an important clue to matching and that the significance of the matching is to be found in the replacement. Children also learn that the significance of the last character and/or the last event, whether the sequence consists of two (*Rose White and Rose Red*), of three (*Three Billy Goats Gruff*), of four (*Mr Nosey*), of seven (*The Seven Little Billy Goats*) or even of twelve (*The Twelve Dancing Princesses*), will lie in the contrast set up with the other(s). If all the characters/events were compatible, the response would be “so what?” – there would be no point to a story in which the wolf ate all the little pigs, or the miller's daughter kept forever spinning with no reward.

In *Goldilocks* we find an added complexity because not only are there three bears whose utterances are matched but also this matching structure is repeated in three episodes and forms a macro-matching relation – in the first two compatible episodes the Little Bear can do no more than complain about the loss of his porridge and the damage to his chair, but in the third episode the culprit is still there, in his bed; thus the third in the macro-series contrasts with the first two and this macro-contrast marks the end of the series of episodes.

### Matching Relations in Literature

The examples used so far have contained a great deal of repetition but matching relations can, as Winter (1986) points out, be realised by the repetition of only a single, minimal, constant, as in his famous example “Buy it, Read it, Enjoy it”. Indeed, although I have never seen it expressed in this way, traditional poetic patterns like rhyme and alliteration are in fact also examples of minimal matching relation structures – in such cases what is matched is the component phonemes of syllables. In the case of alliteration, as we can see, in this extract from *Kubla Khan*, the constant is the initial consonant: Kubla/Khan; dome/decree; river/ran; measureless/man; sunless/sea; whereas in the case of rhyme, the constant is the final vowel (and consonant): Khan/ran/man; decree/sea.

In Xanadu, did Kubla Khan  
A stately *pleasure dome* decree,  
Where Alph, the sacred river, *ran*  
Through caverns *measureless* to Man,  
Down to a sunless *sea*.

Similarly, although again it is not usually conceptualised in these terms, the whole phenomenon labelled ‘intertextuality’ by literary critics is another example of matching, but in this case the matching is not physically realised – instead the reader is expected to deduce and supply the matched text.

Sometimes, as in the headline I reproduce below from the front page of a recent supplement on Denmark in the *Folha de S. Paulo*, it is interpretatively sufficient to pick up the reference and note the minimal change of a single word:

Há algo de *sadio* no reino da Dinamarca

At other times, as in Borges’ post-modern detective story, *La Muerte y la Brújula*, which I propose to discuss in more detail below, the reader is expected to match a whole set of relations, conventions and events. We know from other sources that Borges was an admirer of G. K. Chesterton and Conan Doyle, but even without that knowledge most readers read the opening of the story as prefiguring yet another triumph by clever Father Brown/Sherlock Holmes amateur (Lönnrot) over a bumbling detective (Treviranus). Most readers realise only too late that Borges has exploited the genre to mislead – Treviranus in fact guesses right every time but his suggestions are disregarded by both the reader and Lönnrot.

### Matching Relations in *La Muerte y la Brújula*

In some texts the matching is made more apparent than in others. The sensitive analyst does not need even to read *La Muerte y la Brújula* in order to discover that it is, at least in part, organised in terms of matching relations: a casual flicking of italics and separated from the surrounding text by spaces:

1. La primera letra del Nombre ha sido articulada
2. La segunda letra del Nombre ha sido articulada
3. La ultima de las letras del Nombre ha sido articulada

This immediately suggests that, whatever else the story is about, it will contain a series of matched events, and to the perceptive analyst this implies that the third may be different from, and in contrast with, the first two – not only is it “La ultima ...” but is significantly not “La ultima letra” but “La ultima *de las* letras”. Once sensitised to this matching, we discover that the story reports three matched murders. There is patterning in the dates:

1. El primer crimen ocurrió el día tres de diciembre
2. El segundo crimen ocurrió la noche del tres de enero
3. El tercer crimen ocurrió la noche del tres de febrero

and in that all the victims are Jews:

1. Dr Marcelo Yarmolinsky
2. Daniel Simon Azevedo
3. Ginzberg/Ginsburg/Gryphius

Further examination reveals that the first two victims were murdered in exactly the same words:

una puñalada profunda le habia partido el pecho

and that there is matching even in the place of death: North, West and East, representing “os vértices perfectos de un triángulo equilátero y místico”:

1. en el Hôtel du *Nord*
2. en el más desamparado y vacío de los huecos suburbios *occidentales*
3. taberna de la Rue de Toulon, en el *Este*

What should we make of this matching? Our experience from reading the kind of children's story mentioned above would lead to expect two compatible and one contrasting murder and that is what we seem to have. The first two victims are murdered in the same way, with the same type of weapon, found wearing similar clothes along with a matched but incomprehensible phrase that is a member of an indefinite series: first, second... By contrast the third “crimen” may not even have occurred – Treviranus suggests it may have been merely a “simulacro” – there is no body, just a blood stain and, even more significantly, this time the phrase explicitly, refers to “La *ultima* de las letras”.

However, as we know, Lönnrot rejects the overt and familiar pattern of three, sets out to discover the fourth in the series and finds instead his own death.

Lönnrot's problems began when he rejected Treviranus's suggestion that Yarmolinsky was murdered by mistake in favour of “una explicación puramente rabínica”. His strategy was to look for patterning in the events or circumstances of the death. The announcement of this strategy in the newspaper allowed Scharlach to pattern two further murders with the first one; in other words, the whole trap was created through matching certain chance features of the first murder post hoc with those of the later ones.

As emphasised above, matching is a textual phenomenon, but the interpretative decision, that is, whether to treat the variable as compatible or contrasting, depends on the perceiver/reader. As we have seen, the third “crimen” is in someways significantly different from the first two, and the patterning is beginning to falter: there is no body and no real evidence that the man suspected

of being murdered is Jewish, indeed even the overt patterning insists that the series is complete – *La ultima de las letras...* However, matching relations require an ‘all-or-non’ assignment; either there is compatibility or there is contrast. Thus, when faced with items which are *partially* compatible, the reader must either ignore some of the differences and prioritise the similarities or concentrate on the differences and ignore the similarities.

In terms of the trap he is setting, Scharlach’s skill at this point is to introduce a new factor, “*el día hebreo empieza ai anocheecer, y dura hasta el siguiente anocheecer*” which implies a sequence of four. This convinces the “pure reasoner” to ignore the deficiencies of the third matching, to classify the third “crimen” as compatible with the first two and thus to wrongly predict on the basis of “*la secreta morfología*” that a fourth ritual murder of a Jew will occur in the villa Triste-le-Roi on the night of March 3rd. Lönnrot’s fatal mistake was to classify the first three murders as compatible and then to assume that the fourth would be compatible too.

Of course, as the whole matching system was a trap, the only necessary match in the final murder is the place, the villa of Triste-le-Roi: Lönnrot, apparently not a Jew, dies two days before the predicted day, shot and not stabbed and without ever discovering the secret of the tetragrammaton. His only success was that

previó el último crimen.

### Matching Relations in Translation

In so far as matching is a feature of the meaning of the original text, one would argue that it should, whenever possible, be translated. Matching at the phonological level seems to be the most problematic. If we return to the five lines of *Kubla Khan* quoted above we notice, in addition to the line and rhymes and alliteration already mentioned, a mid-line rhyme, assonance, and rhythmic matching in the first four lines. It is obviously impossible in such a case to maintain all the matching in the translation, and thus the translator is forced to choose. In the first, published, translation none of the matching is maintained

Em Xanadu, o Kubla Cão  
Mandou construir soberbo palácio;  
Lá onde corria o rio sagrado Alph  
Através de cavernas ao homem insondáveis  
Até desaguar em tenebroso mar. (Marques 1956, p. 17)

In the second, a joint production by postgraduate students in the English programme at UFSC, there is an attempt to maintain one of matching features, rhyme, although the matching now holds together different lines – instead of the original rhyme scheme *abaab*, we have *aabbb*. However, it proved impossible to also maintain the other matching features.



Em Xanadu mandou Kubla Khan fazer  
 Um majestoso palácio do prazer  
 por onde Alph o rio sagrado seguia  
 Por cavernas que o homem não media  
 Até uma lagoa sombria

Theoretically lexico-grammatical matching of the kind we find in *La Muerte y la Brújula* should normally be much easier to maintain. Sadly, however, a translator may not always notice all the subtleties of matching which an author has carefully placed in his text, and thus anyone who reads in translation may be denied some of the textual clues available in the original.

For example the Italian translation of *La Muerte y la Brújula* obscures a matching contrast by rendering “La ultima de las letras” as “L’ultima lettera”, while the identical formulation of the first two deaths in the original, “una puñalada profunda le habia partido el pecho”, though maintained in the English translation, in which Borges himself participated, is lost in both the Portuguese and Italian translations:

uma punhalada profunda partira-lhe o peito  
 uma punhalada profunda rachara-lhe o peito

una profunda pugnata gli aveva squarciato il peito  
 una pugnata profunda gli aveva trafitto il petto

Careful readers of the Spanish original will notice that Borges alternates the words “rombo” and “losange” for the shapes which Lönnrot was supposed to notice on the paint shop sign and the harlequin’s costume and to interpret as confirming evidence of the four-part matching relation and which recur in the windows of Triste-le-Roi. The English translation standardly substitutes “diamond” for both words; the Italian uses both “losanghe” and “rombo” but unsystematically, while the Portuguese translation, although both the cognates “losango” and “rombo” exist in Portuguese, uses only “losango”.

Ultimately, of course, we return to the fact that matching relation is a cognitive relation and thus the textualisation of it is simply an extra clue to the reader – it would be possible for both Lönnrot and the reader to match the murders (and, of course, for Treviranus to deny the matching), even if there were no textual repetitions. Indeed, although the series beginning “La primera letra” is, in a real sense, part of the *story*, that is, it is available to Lönnrot in exactly the same form as it is to the reader, the identicalness of the cause of death is only part of the *discourse* (Genette 1980). In other words, this time the identicalness lies in the authorial description “una puñalada profunda le habia partido el pecho” – nobody says or writes it in this form to Lönnrot, and it is therefore only part of the telling and as such not available to Lönnrot.



## Concluding Remarks

Writers often argue violently over whether a translation can improve on the original; this certainly seems possible in terms of the realisation of matching relations.

As part of a course I gave recently at UFSC we produced a group translation of a children's story, *Mr Nosey*, another text that is markedly structured in terms of matching relations. There are four characters in the story, Mr Chips, Mrs Washer, Mr Brush and Mr Herd who, on successive days, mount an escalating attack on Mr Nosey's nose, in order to convince him to stop being "so nose-y". All the attacks are strongly matched and the pattern is as follows (lower case is used to mark repeated items and upper case to indicate that a superordinate item is standing for a matched action, ie GOing stands for walking/going). Thus:

The NEXT DAY Mr Nosey was GOing PLACE when he heard somebody NOISEing.  
 "I wonder what's going on here", he thought to himself and APPROACHed and LOOKed.  
 ATTACK right on the end of Mr Nosey's nose.  
 "Oh dear *I am* sorry!" said PERSON who was DOing PLACE  
 .....  
 PERSON AMUSED  
 The plan EVALUATION OF SUCCESS

One sample realisation of this pattern is:

The following day Mr Nosey was walking past the laundry when he heard somebody laughing on the other side of the wall.  
 "I wonder what's going on here", he thought to himself and, standing on tiptoe, he looked over the wall.  
 SNAP! went a clothes peg right on the end of Mr Nosey's nose.  
 "Oh dear *I am* sorry!" said Mrs Washer who was hanging up clothes on a washing line on the other side of the wall.  
 .....  
 Mrs Washer chuckled to herself.  
 The plan was working.

As I stressed above it is not necessary for there to be over textual matching through repetition in order for a reader to perceive the relationship. Nevertheless, in our translation we took great care not simply to maintain but even, in places, to increase the repetition.

Thus, NEXT DAY which was realised in the original as "following morning", "following day", "next day" and "following day" was translated on each occasion as "dia seguinte"; GOing which on the first three occurrences was "walking", "walking" and "going" became "passava"; AMUSED which in the first three occurrences was "chuckled", "chuckled", "grinned a broad grin" became "deu uma risadinha"; and EVALUATION OF SUCCESS, "The Plan had begun", "The Plan

was working”, “The Plan was working very well indeed” and “The Plan had worked” became “O Plano tinha começado a funcionar”, “O Plano estava funcionando”, “O Plano estava funcionando muito bem mesmo” and “O Plano tinha funcionado”.

One of our reasons for emphasising the repetitions in this translation was that children seem to prefer a telling which makes the matching clear. After producing a draft with which we were happy, we test-marketed it on our children. It was fascinating to discover one 6 year old suggesting an improvement to the text. The first three townspeople in the original are introduced as:

Mr Chips, the town carpenter  
Mrs Washer, who ran the Tiddletown laundry  
Mr Brush, the painter

and we translated these phrases as:

Seu Madeira, o carpinteiro da cidade  
Dona Lavínia, a lavadeira de Tititópolis  
Seu Pincelino, o pintor

The little girl asked “Por que não é ‘Seu Pincelino, o pintor *de Tititópolis?*’”  
Why not indeed! We changed the text.

**Acknowledgment:** Mike Hoey first introduced me to this story. We have since jointly and singly used it in narrative courses in England and abroad and it would be difficult to decide how much of this analysis is mine and how much his.

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