A STEP ON THE GROUND OF LYRICS TRANSLATION

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"When you know the notes to sing you can sing
most anything"
Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*

My long-standing hobbyist's interest in music and
academic's interest in Linguistics for their own sake have been
powerfully reinforced by some readings and activities in a
translation course. I have somehow adopted the music — as —
language metaphor aiming to cope with them as a whole. To
this end, I have also been aware that "the metaphor of music as
language has three principal aspects depending upon whether
the focus is on semantics, on phonology, or on syntax and
grammar"[1]. These remarks must be confronted with the
linguistic definition of translation given by Catford:
"Translation is an operation performed on languages: a process
of substituting a text in one language for a text in another."[2]

This all, at first, may seem rather out of place, However,
our practical intent is to throw light on a specific field within
the domain of translation and music which seems still dark:
translation of lyrics.

A — Do you know English?

B — Ehrm.... I

A — Ah! you do? So, could you translate this song from
English to Portuguese?

The piece of discourse above shows what the majority of people not only lay — ones — believe translation is. In general, translating is taken to be an easy task which requires not more than a reasonable knowledge of both languages in the process and any dictionary available on the shelf. Conversely, for those who either have attempted to come across or have closely investigated it, translating appears to be a much more demanding process in which a series of factors — merely linguistic and extra-linguistic are involved. Because of the amount of knowledge required, a translator always finds difficulties which may vary according to his competence and, particularly according to the sort of text he has in hands.

Moving from the general, to the specific my concern with music derives from a preocupation with English lyrics which are largely but arbitrarily translated within our country, being taken for granted as everyday reality by members of our society. Indeed, my concerns with translation of lyrics have in great part been stimulated by listening to some 'versions' of English lyrics and by trying to apply some techniques and knowledge of translation to make them sound more faithful to the original and, thus, to the requirements of an effective communicative process.

As a starting point we are interested in the role foreign ideologies play in constituting and maintaining these 'local' specific sociological models of and for musical realities, favoured, of course, by our audience and by the administrators of communication and education who nowadays make so many of the decisions about what is to have a hearing and a chance to survive.

Secondly, however, we will glance at song style, language-music metaphor and Universals in Music, aiming at finding some foundation to investigate the steps of the translator of lyrics.

Portuguese 'Versions': A Sample

The process of hearing is a *priori* almost total. In other words music monopolizes the listener's attention, putting him in the defensive. There are, naturally, some 'laws' which govern

reception of the musical message by the audience. Harold Powers suggests that the process of approaching the medium or the receptor is almost always done with an unconscious gesture. He then concludes that the audience is not more than a machine of reacting and that normally and particularly in our case study, it is a machine of applauding.

Actually this problem underlies a very crucial noise which disturbs some ears but that go through most others very smoothly without apparently causing them any damage.

Admittedly, if the song is not Brazilian it is always related to some particular interest, either political, instructive or pragmatic, i.e, how societies use their musical traditions. Moreover we can assume that music is just a small element within a broader sphere which gives it meaning in a context. In this vein, Dane Harwood suggests that "a particular performance in a particular tradition is so because of who is performing and who is listening. Just as a community's convention filter what we hear, so does audience composition."[3]

At this point we have discovered that tradition is, in many respects, a very important element in determining the quality of a lyrics translation. In other words 'versions' — as it is commercially labelled — which are done or even performed by composers who are finely tuned to the original composer or share expectations about what happens musically seem to produce better versions. These expectations and similarities are based on experiences with other performances; other hearings. An example of a good and tuned translation could be applied to Gilberto Gil's version of Steve Wonder's song, "I just called to say I love you". In substituting some concepts specifically related to the American culture such as *Halloween* for a typical Brazilian event *Carnaval*, he manages to produce a very well adjusted and at the same time faithful lyrics.

On the other hand, other translations are produced not based on this tradition but rather on the tradition of the TL performer-singer, i.e. taking account of the sort of song the interpreter traditionally sings. These translations are almost always a distortion of the SL lyrics. This usually occurs due to the fact that the translations are produced by musicians and not by translators. The former, of course, seem to be more and only

worried with the melody they have to maintain, disregarding, then, the text itself and the relation it should have with the original one.

In trying to eliminate some characteristics particularly related to the SL context, he considers just the text itself as the supplier of some ideology, for instance. However the problem of ideology as any other message is not only present in the text, but also in the melody. The melody is really closely related to the theme. It has an extra-musical value within the lyrics, revealing, thus, cultural and other values. For these reasons it is useless and naive the translator's attempt of erasing the traits of the SL culture taking only account of the text itself.

Let us not go further in this discussion: Instead, let us take a look at an English lyrics which was recently translated and has been largely commercialized around Brazil.

"Too Young"
by Sid Lippman & Silvia Dee

1   They try to tell us we're too young
2   Too young to really be in love
3   They say that love's a word
4   A word we've only heard
5   but can't begin to know the meaning of
6   And then we're not too young to know
7   This love will last though years may go
8   And then someday they may recall
9   We were not too young at all

"Em flor"
(version) by Ronaldo Bastos

1   Não são sinceras as razões
2   De quem insiste em não lembrar
3   O sentimento em flor
4   O despertar do amor
5   Não se apaga mais dos corações
6   Amor nenhum tem tal poder
7   de provocar recordações
8   Bastou se ver mais uma vez
9   Para sentir que não passou

In evaluating the translation above, we can take advantage of its first line — "Não são sinceras as razões" and state that the TL lyrics is not sincere, i.e, it is not faithful to the original in any way.

Before going deeper into the text, it seems necessary to make clear the concept of 'version'. According to Bassnett, versions are included under the head of 'interpretation'. She quotes Lefevere and says that: "he calls 'versions' when the substance of the SL text is retained but the form is changed".[4]

As a matter of fact, in this very case, the original text lost its meaning. The TL lyrics comes up with a text whose substance is entirely different from the SL lyrics. It does not have a logical and mental structure within its lines, but it is just a combination of words joined by a physical and superficial device — rhyme — razões (1.1) with corações (1.5); flor (1.3) with amor (1.4), and not by its internal and cultural value — its message; its content.

Beginning with the title we can see that it is made up of words which do not fit into the theme of the whole text, of its message. As to the importance of the title as well as to its function Barthes states that:

> "Every title thus has several simultaneous meanings, including at least these two: (i) what it says linked to the contingency of what follows it; (ii) the announcement itself that a piece of literature .... is going to follow..."[5]

In fact, the title of the original in its 'enunciating and deitic function' refers to the lovers which are confronted with the society (they) under the circumstances of love/age. In the translation, on the other hand, the 'youth' is attributed to the sentiment itself which is "em flor" (1.3), and then it is mixed up with *o despertar do amor* (1.4). In the following line, however, 'this love' is already mature enough in the sense that, "Não se apaga mais dos corações" (1.5), but it is not able yet to "provocar recordações" (1.7). From now on the lyrics assumes definitely a nostalgic and lyric mood which is not present in the original.

Other features of the lyrics — if not the lyrics itself — are very much opposed to the original as well as to the concepts of 'version' and even 'interpretation'. Indeed, the translator has created another text and has inserted it into the SL melody. The outcome, however, is neither faithful to the original, nor to the TL context, for he keeps the original melody that — as it was suggested above — has also an extra musical value. In other words the outcome of whatever process it is can not be taken either as an original Brazilian song or as a translated one, a 'version'.

Therefore, the "razões" and the arbitrary criteria for the production of these 'versions' are not "sinceras" and are very questionable. So, we can already assume that this is not the fair and clear way for the lyrics translator.

Psychological And Linguistic Approach

The musicologyst Harold S. Powers once claimed that "apparently as people live so they sing".[6] This statement can be taken as a strong form and as an obstacle in our search for universals in music. In fact, this statement is as strong as Whorf's linguistic relativity hipothesis that language constrains culture rather than reflects it. Both statements because of their similarity sound radical and many studies in the areas of sociolinguistics particularly have already damped them. On the other hand, however, the similarity found in the statements above opens up a space for validating the music-as-language metaphor. Actually, today, the main focus of interest in this connection is in the putative abstract structural similarities of both, language and music.

Nevertheless, some musicologysts seem not to have noticed this link and insist on the importance of song style as a reflection of 'social identity', being, then, against any consideration of music sound outside of its cultural context.

> "From the point of view of its social function the primary effect of music is to give the listener a feeling of security, for it symbolizes the place where he was born, his earliest childhood satisfactions, his religious experience his

> pleasure in community doings, his courtship and
> his work ...."[7]

This view is counter — argued by some other
musicologysts, including Erickson who stresses that:

> "The attempt to explain song in terms of some
> universal unlinear process of social evolution for
> all that such dimension can be shown to exist —
> is to over simplify an understanding of this most
> human behaviour."[8]

After all this, my argument is that universals in music are
not to be found in specific musical structure, but in a more
abstract and cognitive level. In her article "Universals in Music:
A perspective from cognitive Psychology", Dane Harwood
points out that the universals come from a 'general human
information-processing system'. According to this study,
music is seen as both an individual and a cultural phenomenon.
If now we assume that culture is something individuals learn
about themselves and their world and that men must
communicate their experience to each other, establishing in this
sense a 'universe of discourse', we will be able to conclude that
musical behaviour is universal. Accordinly, Dane concludes
that: "while the specific nature of a musical universe of
discourse varies from society to society, its presence is common
to all".[9]

As far as the psychological approach is concerned, we will
be interested in what men have in common in perceiving,
remembering, understanding and using musical information
for their cultures as a whole.

> "... no one has convincingly demonstrated that
> there is some thought or idea, expressible in
> some language, that cannot be expressible in
> another."[10]

Actually, I have tried to suggest a point of view not nearly
so pessimistic as the ones which take SL songs as untranslatable
into the TL context. Instead, what we really want is to provide
the translator with the assumption that the traits which go

beyond the text, at the level of the musical universe are readily translatable into the TL context, for in our view the audience — if not culturally — it is psychologically equipped with the necessary tools to grasp and manage the meaning and the message of the SL song.

So far we have said nothing directly about the role of the translator with regared to the text itself. Let us turn now to the linguistic aspect of the text and follow the steps of the translator of lyrics, pointing out to the constraints which stand in his way but also pointing out to some way out. To this end, let us consider the diagram below which attempts to display the whole process that involves translation of lyrics
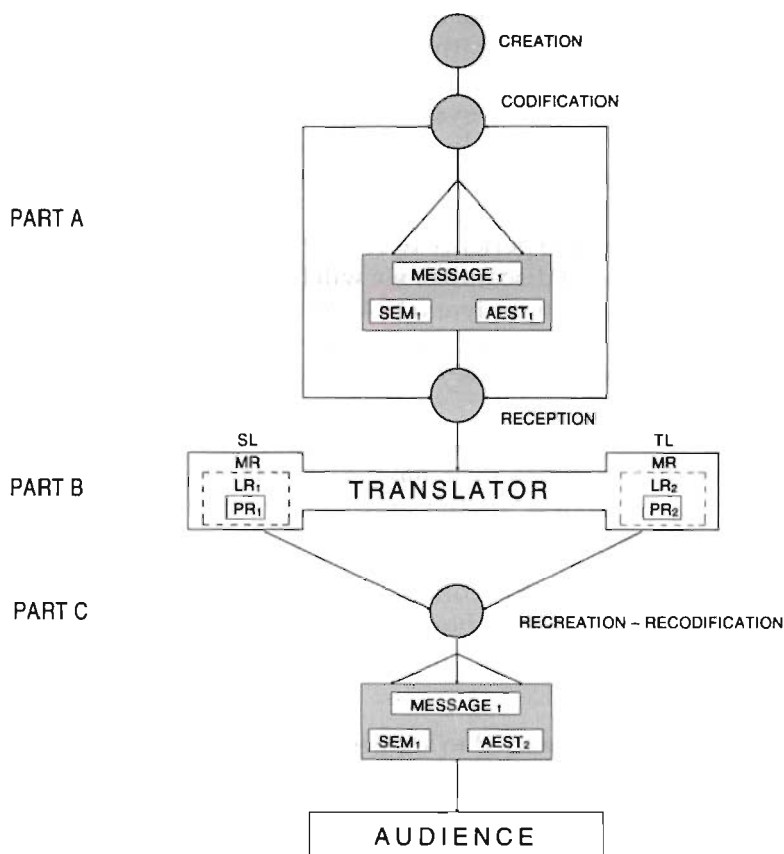
Part *A* of the diagram above shows the process of communication between the addresser and the addressee in the ordinary instant of creation and reception of any musical message. At each level of communication it is usually possible to distinguish two main aspects of the message. On one hand, there is the semantic aspect agreeable with a certain repertoire of universal signs; on the other hand, there is the aesthetic aspect which is the expression of the variables, the different codification, that the signs may eventually assume.

As part *C* of the diagram suggests the translator will receive the message as a summing up of semantic and aesthetic information which he will have to recode and recreate for another audience. It is true that it is quite possible due to the university of the signs, i.e, due to the dual side of the message. The lyrics under this process is supposed to appear with another form but carrying the original message at its semantic level.

Nevertheless, as part *B* indicates, there are some constraints concerning rhythm standing in the way of the transference of the message. The first problem relates to the two distinct rhythms — LR1 ≠ LR2 — which distinguish English and Portuguese systems in one more aspect. Furthermore, being lyrics similar to poetry, the translator will have to cope with the poetic rhythm — PR1 ≠ PR2 — that the words play along the lines. Indeed, each sound produces a phonosemantic effect and, thus, plays a relevant stylistic role in the lyrics. Besides all differences in rhythm, the translator will have to face an existent melody — MR = MR — which can be neither shortened nor elongated. In other words he will have to adjust the words into the melody, keeping the message contained in the original SLM = TLM.

As a matter of fact, it seems that the melody stands as an obstacle in the translator's way or as an excuse for 'bad translations'. Conversely, we consider — as it was already argued — lyrics as a text. In this vein we assume that "…. fazer um texto significa trançar palavras. Se fazemos um texto para cantar, então as palavras vão ser combinadas com sons."[11] Moreover, we believe that the melody and the interpreter, particularly — through some vocal devices — shoud provide a place for the text within the melody rather than distort the

original message for the sake of the integrity of the melody. In fact, both text and melody are quite significant and meaningful; the melody exhales the message through emotion at an more abstract level of the communication, but it is in the text, along the lines, where we find the driving point of the objective communication — the basis for cultural orientation.

Along with this point we could add that: "When you know the notes to sing you can sing most anything". This utterance is part of the speech of the character Maria performed by Julie Andrews in the memorable film 'The Sound of Music' — Noviça Rebelde in Portuguese. In this film she teaches some children how to play with the musical notes and to insert the words they wish in the melody. Her sucessful lesson, to some extent, very simply and apparently non-scientifically confirms what has been discussed so far.

We have established at this point a firm social, psychological and linguistic basis from which we can proceed to consider the translator as a socially involved element. Besides this, the metaphor of music as language and the process of translation itself seem to converge, for — as far as the psychological aspect is concerned — it is an established fact that music as an entity is universal and its understanding is common to human in general. Based on this we can now assume that music as language; as code can be undertaken the process of translation and, adjusted by the translators' tools, can fit and transmit the message of the original into the TL context.

Translating Lyrics — an Exercise

It is true that some lyrics can be managed outside its context more readily than others whereas others others are more closely tied in with a cultural context as to represent more difficulties to the translator. Accordingly, Eugene Nida says "... it is quite impossible to deal with any language as a linguistic signal without recognizing immediatly its essential relationship to the context as a whole."[12](p. 14) This problem has much to do with the subject matter of the lyrics. If for example the lyrics is about a general theme like the one presented in the discussion of 'versions' the translator does not

necessarily find many difficulties and can cope with the message very easily as follows:

Too young
Tão jovens

1   They try to tell us we're too young
     Tentam dizer que somos jovens

2   Too young to really be in love
     Tão jovens para o amar

3   They say that love's a word
     Dizem que o amor é um som

4   A word we've only heard
     Um som que só ouvimos

5   but can't begin to know the meaning of
     mas que não podemos saber o que vem a ser

6   And then we're not too young to know
     Porém não somos tão jovens pra saber

7   This love will last though years may go
     que apesar dos anos o amor ficará

8   And then someday they may recall
     E sim depois eles vão lembrar

9   We were not too young at all
     que não fomos nunca jovens assim

The lyrics above is to a certain extent easily manageable, particularly because of its diction. The original is almost a entirely substituted for a text in Portuguese; there is almost straightforward word for word substitution: hear — ouvir/young — jovens, etc. On the other hand, however, other words and sentences were changed in order or substituted by other equivalent words and expressions, maintaining the original meaning: "to really be in love" (1.2) — para o amar, for instance. In this very case, the substitution was done for the sake of meter, (although we are not caring a lot about meter, we tried to maintain as much as possible close to the original) for

"really" would be translated as *realmente* what would make the line too long and not so easily adjustable into the melody. For this reason, we have omitted the adverb "really" and changed the verbal expression "to be in love" by the verb "o amar" in the context functioning as a noun. For this particular reason other words were changed as well: "Word" for "som"; "then someday" (1.8) for "sim depois" and finally "at all (1.9) for" "assim" rather than *absolutamente*.

As far as the message is concerned, the TL text carries the same logical game between society — represented by the pronoun *they* an the young lovers — represented by the pronoun *we*, in their attempt to have their love accepted and allowed.

We think one can find in the translation above truth in content i.e, it is faithful to the original and also accessible to the audience. As to performance — singing — we also believe the interpreter ought to be able to resort to some vocal devices to insert the text into the melody. Other changes and adaptations — we know — must be done in a work which should join both translators and musicians.

The discussion of the subject matter entails the problem of language varieties in lyrics whose degree of difficulty is quite related to each specific genre. Rock music, for instance, will offer the translator many difficulties since he will have to understand and translate some slang, dialects and particularly idiolects which are part of the author's own language and have an aesthetic function in the lyrics. As to dialects, Catford agrees that they may present translation problems:

> "When the TL has no equivalent dialect the translator may have to select one particular TL dialect, create a new 'literary' dialect of the TL or resort to other expedients."[13]

the same, according to him, happens with registers, styles and other varieties. In other words, translatability will depend on the existence of equivalent forms in the TL language.

Moreover, the pragmatic aspect represents a crucial problem in translating lyrics. The translator may also get

worried with the notions of physical and chronological distance which separate both texts. As Bassnett suggests:

> "The greatest problem when translating a text from a period remote in time is not only that the poet and his contemporaries are dead, but the significance of the poem ..."[14]

One crucial feature concerning this sort of translation is that the translator will always approach the text either by choosing to retain or to replace the form of the SL text. Sometimes, however, the text cannot have its form replaced, for this would involve shifts in the register and thus shifts in the semantic properties of the lyrics, in the message as well as in the relation it has with the subject matter and, of course, with the melody and the audience.

As an example of the difficulties due to varieties and particularly as an attempt to show how a modernization of register would imply in a change not only of the message but also in different religious interpretation, let us consider the translation of Hallelujah [15], a spiritual folk song of the 18th century:

1   Come thou fount of every blessing

      vós   graça

      tu

    Vem Senhor fonte de toda benção

2   Tune my heart to sing thy grace

    Adapte   vossa

    Afine   sua

    Sintonize

    Toca meu coração pra cantar tua graça

3   Streams of mercy never ceasing
     Rios   mercê
     Córrego   clemência
     Corrente   compaixão
     Torrente   misericórdia
     _____
     Derrama teu contínuo perdão

4   Call for songs of loudest praise
     Invoca   hinos   clamoroso exaltação
     Convoca cânticos espalhafatoso aplauso
     Proclama canções   glorificação
     Ordena   elogio
     Chama
     _____
     E clama por cantos de alto louvor

5   Teach me some melodious sonnet
     Instrui-me com algum melodioso soneto
     _____
     Ensina-me um som harmonioso

6   Hallelujah, Hallelujah
     _____
     Aleluia, aleluia

7   Sung by flamming tongues above
     Proclamada por flamejantes idiomas do alto
     Entoada   brilhantes
     Louvadas   intensas línguas
     _____
     Cantadas por fervorosas vozes do céu

8   Praise the mount, I'm fixed upon it

    Glorifica   Eu estou seguro a ele

    Louva

    Exalta

Sinto-me seguro no monte do teu louvor

9   Mount of thy redeeming love

No monte do teu amor libertador

10   We are on our journey

               jornada

               caminhada

               viagem

Estamos   rumo a ti

Besides the difference between the syntax of English and Portuguese, we have been much concerned with diction, with register, with meaning. Moreover we have relied upon the observation that: "two effects — meaning and rhythm — can hardly be simultaneously rendered in a foreign language"[16]. For this reason, we suspect we have not cared the way we should to the rhythm. In other words, we have sacrificed in part the rhythm of the lyrics in order to balance and achieve sound and particularly sense.

This process is rendered to a certain extent more readily in songs than in a poem. This occurs — we stress once more — because of the melody and the interpreter.

The translation of "Hallelujah" produced above illustrates some of the complexities involved in the translation of a text. Actually, our major concern in this particular translation was to decide whether we should maintain the archaic language — pronouns — or to render it modern. This choice however is closely associated to the tone and the message of the lyrics as

well as to the sort of audience — in this case religious — it is directed at. For this reason we tried to produce a translation using a register which may be adopted by different religious services and cerimonies as a whole.

From the lyrics translated one can see that much effort was devoted to the selection of the lexical items. They should carry the message of the original and all the references to faith and God while attempting to relate the American world of the 18th century to the one of the contemporary audience. To this end, we established a vertical set of items which go from the more archaic — formal style — to the modern and informal, i.e. the one which is religious, but particularly manageable in the TL context — Brazilian churches.

The pronouns with archaisms were either replaced by a lexical item, "thou" (1.1) for "senhor" or by modern and colloquial forms of them "thy" for "tua"/"teu", for instance in (11.2-8). These forms are indeed quite suitable and in use within our church repertoire.

Along with the discussion of the lexical choices and shifts, we have made some deviations from the original form, attempting to enshort the distance between both texts and especially reach the audience as a whole. It is worth noting that this is actually some thing which the church is worried with and much of what has been composed recently, reflects this preocupation. An example of this is the verbal form "Tune" (1.2) translated as "Toca", the nominal group "flamming tongues" (1.7) which was translated as "fervorosas vozes" which may seem to be high and archaic register but it does fit into the church repertoire. It should also be noted that the repetition of the phoneme /y/ is very meaningful for the content. Other examples are found in the translation of "songs" (1.4) which was neither translated as *música* for it would not be suitable nor as *hinos* for it has been avoided lately. Instead, we translated as "canto" in order to balance time and context. The same happens to "call" (1.4) translated as "clama" and not *invoca* or simply *chama*. The use of one form in detriment of the other would be very relevant in determining the roles that God and the audience play when facing one another. Still we find a change in the last line of the lyrics: "We are on our journey" which was translated as "Estamos rumo a ti". This was done

for the sake of the SL meter and mainly for adjusting the line to the tradition of the TL church repertoire.

Notes

1 Alan Lomax, *Folk song Style and Culture*. (Washington: 1959), p. 129.

2 J. C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (London: University Press, 1965), p. 1.

3 Dane L. Harwood, "Universals in Music: A Perspective from Cognitive Psychology" in *Ethnomusicology*. Journal of the society for Ethnomusicology, vol. XX, 3, 1976. Hereafter quoted as Danem, p. 305.

4 Susan Bassnett — Mc Guire, *Translation Studies* (New York: Methuen & Co, 1980) p.82. Hereafter Bassnett, p. 30.

5 Barthes.

6 Harold S. Powers, "Language Models and Musical Analysis" in *Ethnomusicology*. Journal of the society for Ethnomusicology XX, 1, 1980.

7 Lomax, p. 129.

8 Erickson quoted in Steven Feld "Sound Structure as Social Structure" in *Journal of the society for Ethnomusicologis* XIX, 3, 1984, p. 403.

9 Dane, p. 103.

10 Gleitman & Cleitman (1970) quoted in J.R. Edwards, *Language and Disadvantage* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), p. 50.

11 J. B. Martins, *Antropologia da Música Brasileira* (São Paulo: Obelisco, 1978), p. 51.

12 Eugene Nida, *Towards a Science of Translating* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964), p. 83.

13 Catford, p. 87.

14 Bassnett, p. 14.

15 H. Wiley Hitchcock editor, *Music in the United States: A Historic Introduction* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974), p. 99.

16 Sergio Bellei "*The Raven* by Machado de Assis" in *Ilha do Desterro*, n° 17, 1° semestre de 1987.