

FOCUS: THE EFFECTS OF THE TRANSLATOR'S CHOICES

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Introduction

Starting from the assumption that in order to make qualitative statements about any translation text (TT), this text must be compared with the source text (ST), I will examine five translations from Spanish into English of “Borges y yo”, made by graduate students of the Post-Graduate Course In English at UFSC. The following issues will be considered in the analysis of the texts: i) The informational structure of the message as discussed within the context of the Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP); ii) the concept of foregrounding as developed by the Prague School linguists; iii) syntactical and lexical aspects of the choices made by the translators; iv) cases of omissions, insertions and mistranslations as evidenced in the textual record of the Translated Texts (TTs).

Within the FSP framework, developed by the Prague linguists of the 1930s, the issue of word order acquires special status as a function of the communicative intentions of the addresser in the communicative situation in which it appears. Word order is the primary formal means of realizing the Theme- Rheme distributional pattern thus conveying thematic significance.

As Halliday (1985: 39) points out, the Theme is the starting-point for the message; it is what the clause is going to be about, what the speaker/writer selects as his point of departure, the means of development of the clause. So part of the meaning of any clause lies in which element is chosen as its Theme, which is indicated by position: In speaking or writing in English we signal that an item has thematic status by putting it first. The remainder of the message, the part in which the Theme is developed, is called, in the Prague School terminology, the Rheme. Thus the clause, as a message, consists of a Theme followed by a Rheme, which constitutes the non-marked word order.

In the manipulation of the semantic structure of the message, the addresser can assign thematic value to any items in the clause. Thus thematic movement can occur as a result of the process of topicalization that is, the displacement of a constituent to initial position. In the displacement, attention is drawn to the displaced element itself, which becomes a marked Theme embedded in a foregrounded word-order.

The concept of foregrounding, developed by the Prague School linguists, implies an opposition to the conventional use of the devices of the language, which produces “automatized” linguistic realizations. The term refers to the process of pushing the medium to the fore (or foregrounding it) thus removing the automatism of perception. The “de-automatized” form, being felt as unusual, attracts attention to itself and invites the reader to attend to it as new.

The next point in the discussion of the parameters for the evaluation of the TTs, will include cases in which the denotative meanings of the elements in ST have been changed by the translator. Special attention will be given to renderings where omissions and insertions can be found. These will be analysed in the TTs with a view to explaining the motivation underlying their occurrences. As regards mistranslations, two levels will be considered. First, I will discuss mistranslations due to systematic differences; secondly I will examine misinterpretations of textual properties or those due to improper decodification of ST.

For facilitation of description and comparison, the TTs will be numbered using Roman numerals and each line will be sequentially numbered in Arabic numerals.

Thematic structure of ST and TTs

In terms of the thematic organization of the ST, the first thing to call my attention was the opening line, which confronts the reader with a special word order: “Al otro, a Borges, es a quién le ocurren las cosas.” The unmarked place of focus would be at the end of the information unit as follows: “Las cosas ocurren al otro, a Borges.” The way Borges organizes the two componentes of his unit, however, invites the reader to attend to the items “otro” and “Borges”: These items, the “New” items in the unmarked version, are now mapped on to the Theme. The process of topicalization

seems to fulfill in this instance a three-fold purpose: a) highlighting the items “otro” and “Borges” as discussed above; b) adding to the communicative value of the line; c) enhancing the poetic effect of the whole piece. As a consequence of such a manipulation, the issue of duplicity and cleavage which permeates the text is signalled from the very first line by virtue of the foregrounded word order: The “otro” is given prominence, at the expenses of the individual Borges.

The process of topicalization seems to have been taken into account in three TTs, in which the rendering in English was carried out by means of what Halliday (1985: 59) calls Predicated Themes, known by formal grammars as “cleft sentences”:

- I It is to the other, Borges, that things happen.
- II It is to the other man, to Borges, that things happen.
- V It is to the other, to Borges, that things happen.

In these renderings, the items “the other”/”Borges” are marked off and emphasized. This marked organization tends to be contrastive. In the present case, it makes it explicit that these items (‘Borges’, in the three instances) and nothing else acquire the New value of this particular information unit by means of the predicated form, thus drawing attention to the fact that it is to “the other” not to “the self” that things happen. This predication has the function in written English of directing the reader to interpret the information structured in the intended way. Thus irrespective of the qualitative difference in these three translations, they at least seem to have captured the delicate nuances of the ST.

As regards TT IV, a re-arrangement of the thematic structure which, to say the least, reduces the communicative power of the whole sentence: “Things happen to the other, to Borges.” No apparent motivation seems to support such a procedure, which was consistently followed in other parts of the TT IV. For example, the rendering of ST 3 “de Borges tengo noticias por el correo” was “I have news from Borges through the mail”. The omission of ST 21-22 “todo lo pierdo”, unjustifiable at textual level and not made up for elsewhere, might suggest complete disregard for the process of topicalization on the part of the translator, either for lack of perception or for inability to deal with it in the English language. Except for TT V, which tried to keep the same thematic structure, a general inconsistency was observed in the TTs as regards the process of topicalization, having the effect of diminishing the poetic effect of the translations, which tended towards an automatized word order.

Syntactical and lexical aspects of the choices in TTs

A curious instance of the syntactical aspect of the choices made by the translators can be found in the rendering of ST 6:

... el otro comparte esas preferencias, pero de un modo vanidoso que las convierte en atributos de un actor.

The analysis of this sentence makes it evident that the clause “que las convierte en atributos de un actor” functions as an expansion of the preceding item “modo vanidoso”. Thus it is this “modo vanidoso” which has the power of changing the nature of the shared preferences, turning them into attributes of an actor. Among the English translations, however, only TTs I and V kept the same clausal relationship in the following rendering: “... in a vain way which turns them into the attributes of an Actor.” This translation thus seems to be in accordance with the textualization in ST. The other three renderings, however, display a change in the relationship holding between the clauses. TTs II and IV show a cause/consequence formulation:

- II ...in such a vain way that they are turned into an actor’s attributes;
- IV ... in such a vain way that they are converted into an actor’s attributes.

The changing, according to these translations, is seen to be caused by the intensity of the vanity, which has the transformation as its natural consequence.

III, in its turn, also displays a distortion of the relationship in the ST but in a different way: “...in a vain way he transforms them into an actor’s attributions.” According to this translation, it is the other - “he” that is made into the conscious agent of the deliberate transformation, a view which misses the character of unavoidable and unintentionality of the changes in the nature of the preferences: because the other is naturally vain, this vanity naturally affects his relationship with the facts - the preferences- which become, by virtue of the other’s status, the attributes of an actor. In other words, dimensional differences are felt to be natural and are accepted by the self.

As regards lexical choices made by the translators, an examination of the renderings of the unmarked verbal expressions “me demoro” and “para mirar” (ST 2) might suggest hasty decisions:

- I I delay myself to look at
- II I get delayed to look at
- III I take my time to look at
- IV I take a long time .. to stare at
- V I take time to watch

III and V seem to have captured the pace of the Spanish verb “me demoro”: here the rhythm of the action might be considered to be a function of its purpose - to look at the world from a dimension which excludes concerns with both time and factual reality, which seems to be confirmed by the expression “ya mecánicamente”. One possible suggestion derived from these choices is the existence of a space of reflection interposing itself between the act of looking and the universe being looked at. The solution in IV imparts a negative evaluation on the action, made explicit in the item “long”, besides presenting a case of mistranslation due to the wrong selection of the verb: “To stare at”, which conveys the idea of attentive observation not implied in the ST, is incompatible with the expression “ya mecánicamente” discussed above. As can be seen, the textual record itself provides the

clues for the tracing of the rationale behind the actual choices made by the translator.

Cases of insertions, omissions and mis-translations

As regards both insertions and omissions, what is at stake is the extent to which the change made by the translator in the denotative meanings of elements in ST is motivated or not, that is, if it is justifiable in terms of systematic, textual, pragmatic or cultural constraints. By examining the rationale underlying their occurrences, it is possible to evaluate both the procedures and the resulting products matching them against the ST.

An interesting case of insertion can be seen in the renderings of ST 9: “Nada me cuesta confesar...” In the Spanish version, the item “nada” has thematic prominence in a linguistic environment permitted by the system. In English, however, systematic constraints would make it difficult to follow the same pattern. This can be felt in the choices made by the translators of the five TTs examined. In trying to find a solution, they produced the following TTs:

- I It is no effort for me to confess...
- II It does not bother me to confess...
- III It costs me nothing to confess...
- IV It is easy for me to confess...
- V I can easily confess...

The five solutions involved the insertion of several items in the English renderings, a process which, by producing wordier phrases, also produced a diminished impact when comparison is made with the ST line. Differences, however, can be felt among them. The topicalization in V, for example, does not seem very convincing, although it gets the closest to the concision and strength of the original textualization as the insertions do not outnumber the items in the ST. As for the other solutions, though wordier than V, the focus on the naturalness of the yielding of the individual to the writer is kept, the entity being accepted as the better part of the divided self. What remains to be evaluated is the different choice each translator made for the translation of the verbal form “cuesta”. The four alternatives emphasize different aspects, among which the solution in III bears a nice resemblance with the ST in that it follows the same rhythm and almost the same concision of the sounding of the ST: “Nada me cuesta confesar...” - “It costs me nothing to confess....”

An example of omission can be found in TT III, in the rendering of ST 13-14: “Poco a poco voy cediéndole todo.” For comparison sake, the five translations into English will be listed below:

- I Little by little I’ve been giving him everything...
- II Little by little I give him everything...
- III Little by little I will surrender...
- IV Little by little I give him all that I have...
- V Little by little I yield everything to him...

An analysis of the textualization in ST suggests a gradual, slow and yet all-permeating dominance of the persona of the writer over the self, which both the expression “poco a poco” and the verb form “voy cediéndole” reflect. The choice of such lexical items might be said to be motivated as they support the idea of a duplicity which began as a cleavage and, in a crescendo, takes over the whole text until the culmination in the last line: “No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página.”

A similar analysis of TT III reveals a significant change reflected in the verb form: here the use “will” carries the taking-over by the persona to a future dimension thus denying the gradual and already on-going process. Furthermore the omission of the complements to the verb “surrender”, that is, the what is to be surrendered and the who it is to be surrendered to, might suggest the existence of a blank, if not at the informational level, at least at the level of the function of the motivated repetition. As it is foregrounded, the reader is invited to attend to it. Again and again the duplicity and the dominance of the persona are stressed thus unifying the whole text under its title “Borges y yo”: the item “Borges” in initial position is given thematic value, which, from the very beginning, suggests the final outcome. All this is lost in III.

As regards mistranslations, TT III displays problems at the structural level. The section I refer to is a rendering of ST 21- 22, which reads as follows:

ST Así mi vida es una fuga y todo lo pierdo y todo es del olvido, o del otro.

TT III Thus, my life is an escape and I lose everything and all is forgetfulness, or for the other.

The structuring in English is ungrammatical as it shows an internal incongruency in the adding of the items “for the other”, which bear no cohesive tie to the rest of the sentence. What remains to be thought of is to what extent such ungrammaticality reflects misinterpretation of the ST. This can not be detected from the textual record.

Finally, the translations of the title deserve some attention. Of all TTs, four favoured the choice “Borges and I”, while one of them opted for “Borges and me”. The latter, which might suggest a situation of partnership, does not seem to capture the atmosphere of breakage permeating the text. The former, not for quantitative reasons of course, appears to be more appropriate in that it implies the existence of two separate entities thus supporting the duplicity which culminates in the blurring of boundaries of the last line: “No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página.”

Final comments

What I have tried to do in these brief reflections is an exercise in translation criticism. My discussion has concentrated in problematic points in the TTs. These, I believe, offered possibilities of probing into the nature of

translation itself, while offering a chance of discussing textual properties and functional concerns which lie at the very core of the process.

The TTs examined did not prove to be, as they stand, good translations of Borges's text. This ST is a composite of various levels of exploration of the possibilities of the language, from the phonetic to the lexical level. The concision, precision, and rhythm present in it were hardly achieved in the TTs. Each one had, of course, its felicitous moments. A final version would spring from a combination of the best solutions found in each separate TT and from sensitivity to the tone of the ST as a whole.

A final word remains to be said concerning the five translators of the TTs examined in this study: although they are all proficient users of English they are non-native speakers, which might affect in one way or another the nature and quality of the translations produced. In the present case, the translators are non-native speakers of both Spanish, the ST language, and English, the TTs language. The implication is that delicacies at linguistic, contextual and cultural levels might be likely to be neglected despite the conscious and ever-present efforts on the part of the translators.

REFERENCES

- Halliday, M.A.K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1985.
- Mukarovski, Jan. "Standard Language and Poetic Language". In *A Prague School Reader on Aesthetics, Literary Structure and Style*, trans. Paul L. Garvin, Georgetown UP, 1964. See his discussion on foregrounding.

Appendix

Source text: Borges Y Yo

1 Al otro, a Borges, es a quien le ocurren las cosas. Yo camino
2 por Buenos Aires y me demoro, acaso ya mecánicamente, para
3 mirar el arco de un zaguán y la puerta cancel; de Borges tengo
4 noticias por el correo y veo su nombre en una terna de profesores
5 o en un diccionario biográfico. Me gustan los relojes de arena,
6 los mapas, la tipografía del siglo XVIII, las etimologías, el
7 sabor del café y la prosa de Stevenson; el otro comparte esas
8 preferencias, pero de un modo vanidoso que las convierte en
9 atributos de un actor. Sería exagerado afirmar que nuestra
10 relación es hostil; yo vivo, yo me dejo vivir, para que Borges
11 pueda tramar su literatura y esa literatura me justifica. Nada me
12 cuesta confesar que ha logrado ciertas páginas válidas, pero
13 esas páginas no me pueden salvar, quizá porque lo bueno ya no
14 es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o de la
15 tradición. Por los demás, yo estoy destinado a perdeme,
16 definitivamente, y solo algún instante de mí podrá sobrevivir
17 en el otro. Poco a poco voy cediéndole todo, aunque me consta
18 su perversa costumbre de falsear y magnificar. Spinoza entendió
19 que todas las cosas quieren perseverar en su ser; la piedra
20 eternamente quiere ser piedra y el tigre un tigre. Yo he de quedar
21 en Borges, no en mí (si es que alguien soy), pero me reconozco
22 menos en sus libros que en muchos otros o que en el laborioso
23 rasgueo de una guitarra. Hace años yo traté de librarme de él
24 y pasé de las mitologías de arrabal a los juegos con el tiempo
25 y con lo infinito, pero esos juegos son de Borges ahora y
26 tendré que idear otras cosas. Así mi vida es una fuga y todo
27 lo pierdo y todo es del olvido, o del otro.
28 No sé cuál de los dos escribe esta página.

In Borges 1974, *Obras completas*

Translated text I: Borges and I

1 It is to the other one, Borges, that things happen. I walk
2 through Buenos Aires and I delay myself, maybe even
3 mechanically, to look at the arch of a hall and the grillwork
4 on a gate; I have news from Borges through the mail, and I see
5 his name in a list of professors or in a biographic dictionary.
6 I like hourglasses, maps, the eighteenth century typography,
7 etymologies, the taste of coffee and Stevenson's prose; the
8 other one shares these likes, but in a vain way that turns them
9 to attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say
10 that our relation is hostile; I live, I let myself live, so

11 that Borges can contrive his literature and his literature
12 justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he got
13 certain valuable pages, but these pages cannot save me, maybe
14 because the good belongs to nobody, not even to the other one,
15 but to language or tradition. Besides, my destiny is to lose
16 myself, definitively, and only some instant of myself could
17 survive in the other one. Little by little, I've been giving
18 him everything, though I know his wicked habit of falsifying
19 and magnifying. Spinoza realized that all things want to keep
20 their selves; the stone wants to always be a stone and the
21 tiger a tiger. I will remain in Borges not in me (if it is
22 true that I am somebody), but I recognize myself less in his
23 books than in many others or in the laborious chord of a
24 guitar. Years ago I decided to get rid of him and I crossed
25 from the mythology of the suburbs to the games with time and
26 infinity, but these games belong to Borges now, and I will have
27 to imagine other things. So, my life is a running away and I
28 lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to the
29 other one.
30 I do not know which one of the two writes this page.

Translated text II : Borges and I

1 It is to the other man, to Borges, that things happen. I
2 walk through Buenos Aires and get delayed perhaps mechanically
3 to look at the arch and the door of an entrance hall; I have
4 news from Borges by the mail and I see his name on a list of
5 teachers or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses,
6 maps, the typography of the eighteenth century, the taste of
7 coffee and Stevenson's prose; the other shares these
8 preferences, but in such a vain way that they are turned into
9 an actor's attributes. It would be too much to say that our
10 relationship is hostile. I live, I let myself live so that
11 Borges can weave his literature and this literature justifies
12 my existence. It does not bother me to confess that he has
13 achieved some valid pages, but these pages cannot save me, may
14 because the good no longer belongs to anyone, not even to
15 the others, but to language or tradition. Besides, I am bound
16 to get lost, definitively, and only an instant of myself will
17 outlive in the other. Little by little I give him everything
18 though I know his habit of faking and magnifying things.
19 Spinoza thought that all things want to preserve their own
20 beings; the stone wants to be a stone forever and the tiger a
21 tiger. I will remain in Borges not in myself (I doubt I am
22 still somebody) but I recognize myself more in other books
23 than in his, more in the laborious tuning of a guitar. It has

24 been years since I managed to get rid of him and I changed
25 from the suburban mythologies to the games with time and the
26 infinite, but these games belong to Borges now and I will have
27 to imagine some other things. Thus, my life is a running away
28 and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion or to
29 the other.
30 I do not know which of us is writing this page.

Translated text III: Borges and I

1 To the other, to Borges, is to whom things happen. I walk
2 through Buenos Aires and take my time, perhaps mechanically, to
3 look at the arch of an entrance hall and at the grillwork on
4 the gate. From Borges, I have news through the mail and I see
5 his name on a professor's roll or in a biographical dictionary.
6 I like hourglasses, maps, XVIII century typography, etymology,
7 coffee's taste and Stevenson's prose; the other shares these
8 preferences, but in a vain way he transforms them into an
9 actor's attributions. It would be exaggerated to affirm our
10 relationship is hostile; I live, I let myself live, so that
11 Borges may weave his literature and this literature justifies
12 me. It costs me nothing to confess that he managed to produce
13 some valid pages, but these pages can't save me, maybe because
14 what is good belongs to nobody, not even to the other, but
15 only to language and to tradition. Besides, I am fated to lose
16 myself forever, and only a small fragment of me will survive
17 in the other. Little by little I will surrender, although I
18 recognize his perverse habit of falsifying and magnifying.
19 Spinoza understood that all the things wish to remain as they
20 are, the stone wants to be forever a stone and the tiger, a
21 tiger. I will stay in Borges, not in myself (if I am anybody),
22 but I recognize myself less in his books than in many other
23 ones or than in the laborious sounds of a guitar. For years I
24 have tried to free myself from him and passed from the
25 mythology of the suburbs to the games with time and infinite,
26 but these games are Borges' now and I have to imagine other
27 things. Thus, my life is an escape and I lose everything and
28 all is forgetfulness, or for the other.
29 I don't know which of us writes this page.

Translated text IV: Borges and I

1 Things happen to the other one, to Borges. I walk through the
2 streets of Buenos Aires and take a long time, mechanically
3 perhaps, to stare at the arch of an entrance hall. I have news
4 from Borges through the mail and I see his name in a list of
5 teachers or in a biographic dictionary. I like hourglasses,

6 maps, 18th century typography, etymologies, the taste of coffee
7 and the prose of Stevenson; the other shares these preferences,
8 but in such a vain way that they are converted into an actor's
9 attributes. it would be exaggerated to state that we have a
10 hostile relationship; I live and let myself live, so that
11 Borges can plot his literature and this literature justifies
12 me. It is easy for me to confess that he has obtained some
13 valid pages, but these pages cannot save me, perhaps because
14 the good does not belong to anybody, not even to the other, but
15 to language and tradition. Besides, I am fated to get lost
16 forever, and just an instant of me could survive in the other.
17 Little by little, I give him all that I have, although I know
18 his wicked habit of falsifying or magnifying. Spinoza
19 understood that all things want to remain in their being; the
20 stone longs to be eternally a stone and so does the tiger. I
21 shall remain in Borges, not in myself (should I be somebody),
22 but I recognize myself less in his books than in the laborious
23 strumming of a guitar. I tried to get rid of him a long time
24 ago, changing from suburban mythologies to playing with time
25 or infinity, but these games now belong to Borges and I have
26 to think of something else. Thus, my life is an escape and
27 everything belongs to oblivion or to the other.
28 I do not know which of the two writes this page.

Translated text V: Borges and me

1 It is to the other, to Borges, that things happen. I walk
2 through Buenos Aires and take time, already almost
3 mechanically, to watch the arch and the door of a hall; from
4 Borges I hear through the mail and I see his name on a list of
5 professors or in a biography dictionary. I like the sand
6 clocks, the maps, the 18th century typography, the taste of the
7 coffee and Stevenson's prose; the other shares these
8 preferences, but in a vain way which turns them into the
9 attributions of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say
10 that our relationship is hostile; I live, I let myself live,
11 so that Borges can forge his literature and this literature
12 justifies me. I can easily confess that he got some
13 worthwhile pages, but these pages cannot save me, maybe
14 because the good work belongs to nobody, no even to the other,
15 but to language or to tradition. Besides, I am destined to
16 lose myself, definitely, and just some instancee of me will
17 be able to survive in the other. Little by little I yield
18 everything to him though I know his mean habit of falsifying
19 magnifying. Spinoza used to believe that everything wants to
20 persevere in their beings; the stone eternally wants to be a

21 stone and the tiger a tiger. I will stay in Borges, not in me
22 (if I happen to be somebody at all), but I recognize myself
23 less in his books than in many others or than in the laborious
24 tones of a guitar. It has been years since I was able to get
25 rid of him and I passed from the suburban mythologies to the
26 games with time and the infinite, but these games belong to
27 Borges now and I will have to think of something else. Thus
28 my life is an escape and I lose everything and everything
29 belongs to forgetting or to the other.
30 I do not know which of the two is writing this page.