

GRAVITY: AN ANALYSIS OF TWO TRANSLATIONS

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Introduction

Stanislaw Baranczak, a contemporary Polish poet, is thought to be one of the best literary translators. He has deserved such esteem not only because of the large range of languages he translates from (e.g. English, German, Russian, Spanish, and Lithuanian), but also because of his ability to deal equally well with Geoffrey Chaucer, the sixteenth century mystic texts, and E. E. Cummings's experiments. His poetry translations (these are also from Polish into English) have caused some critics in our country see him as *the* best translator in the Polish tradition ever, and to call him *marvellous* (Blonski in Baranczak 1994), with emphasis on the original meaning of this adjective.

Baranczak is also a scholar, which is an additional reason to bring in his opinion on literary translation, an object of this paper. According to him, all literary translation is motivated by hubris (Baranczak 1994): translators are insolently confident of the high quality of their products. Even when presenting a new version of already translated texts, all they supposedly intend is to prove they are more competent than the others.

This view of the justification for translating is partial and provocative. We cannot deny, however, that it touches several interesting points: firstly, the concept of competence, which is impossible to disassociate from the concept of quality, and consequently the problem of evaluation. The latter remains especially controversial, since the criteria chosen by individual translators can be based on different principles or theories. Given the complexity of phenomena bound up with translation, it is difficult to seek or demand consensus in this highly subjective

area. Still, some translators and translations are better than others.

Bassnett-McGuire's plea for criteria to evaluate a translation to "be established from within the discipline and not from without" (1991: 10) has inspired my research. Being a linguist, moreover one who herself occasionally translates, I decided to verify whether a linguistic analysis based on a limited selection of elements provides sufficient clues to facilitate evaluation of the quality of a translation. Towards achieving this goal, I will compare two Brazilian translations of David Leavitt's short story *Gravity* to assess which of them is the better.

The scope of the study

Versions A and B of *Gravidade* differ markedly in many instances. A thorough analysis of all of these remains beyond the scope of the present study. I am interested in discussing concisely some aspects of the non-equivalence between the original text and its translations. Specifically, I intend to consider to what extent the translators:

- followed the original text's structure as signalled by punctuation devices;
 - omitted words or expressions;
 - added words or other items to make translations more explicit;
- and
- committed mistakes.

Unlike the first subject, omission, explicitness and mistakes are linked to the issue of lexical choice which, however, will not be dealt with in depth here.

The analysis

Gravidade - Version A was published in 1994 in *Nicolau*, one of the Brazilian literary magazines, where it was read by a friend of mine, a fan of David Leavitt's work. Dissatisfied with the first translator's "carelessness", as she put it, she produced Version B of that text a year later, during her master's course at the Federal University of Paraná.

Although her criticism was rather vague, it contributed to my

preconceived ideas of what Version A's inaccuracies would eventually turn out to be. The analysis that follows, however, will be as neutral as possible to confirm or make me disregard these assumptions.

The following abbreviations will be used:

SL — source language,

TL — target language,

ST — source text, and

TT — target text.

The text structure and punctuation devices

Punctuation devices make the author's voice audible by, for example, signalling emphasis (hyphens, exclamation marks) or marking the pauses (commas, colons, full stops). Thus they point out to the meaning, and help to define the text structure.

The original *Gravity* is composed of a series of paragraphs whose structure was preserved in Version B. In Version A the paragraphs suffered modifications — in one case so drastic that I classify them as examples of disruption of coherence — changing in this way the relationship between different parts of the text.

The opening paragraph of seven sentences was broken-up into two paragraphs of four and five sentences respectively. This is the original beginning:

Theo had a choice between a drug that would save his sight and a drug that would keep him alive, so he chose not to go blind. He stopped the pills and started the injections — these required the implantation of an unpleasant and painful catheter just above his heart — and within a few days the clouds in his eyes started to clear up; he could see again. He remembered going into New York City... (p. 76)

and as modified in Version A:

Theo precisava escolher entre um remédio que poderia salvar sua visão e um outro, que poderia mantê-lo vivo.

Então escolheu não ficar cego. Parou com as pílulas e começou as injeções, que exigiam a introdução de uma dolorosa sonda justamente sobre seu coração, e poucos dias depois aquelas nuvens nos olhos começaram a clarear. Podia ver outra vez.

Ele lembrou de certa vez que fora a Nova York... (p. 15, line 1-6).

In common with the choice of words, the text structure depends very much on the author's style. *Gravity* is the only story by Leavitt I have read, so I cannot extensively define characteristics of his style. In this story, he exhibits a certain preference for long sentences, both compound and complex, in which co-ordinate and subordinate clauses are linked/separated by commas, semi-colons and dashes. Appearing in seven sentences in a relatively short text, these last become a stylistic feature.

The translator's decision to interfere in the text structure is usually prompted by a desire to bring the SL text closer to TL readers, especially when there are big cultural differences between the two. If we see a paragraph as something used for our reader's convenience, it becomes obvious that one of the most frequent changes in translated texts is to the size of paragraphs. Some translators seem to think that breaking long paragraphs (and sentences) into shorter ones makes the reading smoother.

This really is the case in the example above. Version A reads better than the same part of Version B:

Theo podia escolher entre uma droga que salvaria sua visão e uma que o manteria vivo, logo ele escolheu não ficar cego. Parou com as pílulas e começou as injeções — estas exigiam a implantação de um incômodo e dolorido cateter bem acima do seu coração — e dentro de poucos dias as nuvens em seus olhos começaram a clarear; ele podia enxergar novamente. Lembrou-se de certa vez que fora a Nova York... (p. 1, line 1-7).

However, if we look at this issue from a wider perspective, we will notice that the overall atmosphere and style of this text has been

changed, altering the meaning intended by the author as I have understood it to be. With shorter sentences the rhythm of the narrative becomes faster losing its reflexive tone, and the dialogues gain extra dynamism.

This can be observed wherever the paragraph structure has been altered in Version A: lines 37 through 40, 64-68, 86-89, 95-98, 111-112, 128-130, and 131-159. The most serious damage, though, happens in lines 70 through 77 that will be analysed in detail later on under the heading of MISTAKES.

Furthermore, the translator does not apply the same strategy of modification throughout the whole text, sometimes creating an impression that his interventions are gratuitous, just for the sake of imprinting his personality onto the text. Dashes are preserved in four cases (Version A — lines 10, 17, 28-30, and 154). In the example from the first paragraph, quoted above, he substitutes them with commas, while in lines 23-24 by a parenthesis. A dash signalling reticence in the sentence

“Mom,” Theo said, “why do you always have to —” (p. 77)

which has a different function, is changed into the ellipsis mark, which seems to be a Brazilian norm because the translator of Version B uses the same punctuation device.

Finally, he introduces dashes in places where they were absent in the original (I do not mean the systematic substitution of the quotation marks in dialogues along the whole translated story by them). In line 16 a dash substitutes a semi-colon:

... Sylvia didn't care; he could see. (p. 76)

... Sylvia não se importava — ele podia ver (p. 15, line 16)

A substitution of a full stop occurs in line 67:

...the nice gift he and his girl deserve.” She smiled, clearly pleased with herself. “Ah, you live and learn.” (p. 78)

...o presente legal que ele e a garota merecem — ela sorria,

visivelmente encantada consigo mesma. — Ah, eu vou vivendo e aprendendo... (p. 15, line 66-68).

The dash exists alongside other punctuation devices, which makes its distinct function self-evident. As Baker (1977:148) vividly explains, it

says aloud what the parenthesis whispers. Both enclose interruptions too extravagant for a pair of commas to hold. [...] It can serve as a conversational colon. It can set off a concluding phrase — for emphasis.

This last usage can be observed in line 16 but it seems redundant there: the emphasized words *see/ver* were already printed in italics.

I would in this case, also rather follow the decision of Version B's author; not to substitute dashes for other punctuation devices. Despite the use of hyphens instead of dashes (which seems — since I have had access only to a typed copy — to be a matter of editing), she respects Leavitt's paragraph divisions and those paragraphs' internal structure. By ignoring Leavitt's decisions on the use of punctuation devices, Version A's translator affects not only the sentence/paragraph surface structure but also the information structure. Full stops, commas, semi-colons or parentheses may force the reader to treat certain elements as complete, separate, or new units of information.

However, such a switch in the focus of information, and, consequently, some loss of original meaning, is more often caused by mistranslation, or omission of some items. They will be dealt with in the following section, together with the case of explicitness.

Omission, explicitness and mistakes

Even professional translators apply from time to time the strategy of omitting a word or expression contained in the ST. It is believed (Baker, 1992), they do it to avoid redundancies, or unnecessary explanations. Sometimes, a translator can add naturalness to a combination of sounds by skipping an item that is, in his/her opinion, not essential to the development of the translated text.

All these justifications could be seen as imprecise, but at this point

I accept them as reasonable. What I am interested in, however, are the cases of omission which cause damage to the text, and which result from insufficient linguistic competence, carelessness or just lack of attention during the process of translating.

Because of the consequences they leave in the TT, some omissions cannot be called by such a euphemistic name. Therefore, even a benevolent critic has to use the word *mistakes* instead. In my opinion, the difference in classification depends on the source of inaccuracy, a conscious or subconscious choice. From the position of a reader, however, it is often difficult (or irrelevant) to define the character of this choice, so I will be dealing with examples illustrating both phenomena together.

I would also like to comment in this section on examples of explicitness, or rather over-explicitness, the other side of the coin of omissions. Rather than omit, in the case of explicitness, a translator includes in the TT items which were not contained in the ST, labelled by Costa (1992: 143) as *oversignalling*.

First, let us look at an example in which, in Version A, the translator omits an adjective, whilst Version B's translator becomes over-explicit:

...harlequins with *tiny* rhinestones in the corners ... (p. 76)

...uns óculos-gatinho, com pedras brilhantes nos cantos... (p.15,
line 10)

...uma armação colorida com pequenas pedrinhas de strass nos cantos... (p.1, line 12)

Brazilian Portuguese diminutives can stand for English adjective phrases very well, so we would expect to have *tiny rhinestones* translated into *pedrinhas de strass* or *pedrinhas brilhantes*. Surprisingly, the first translator opts for *pedras*, i.e., too little information, and the second for *pequenas pedrinhas*, i.e., too much.

In the following sentence:

...he gasped, astonished at the precision around the edges of things,
the *legibility*, the hard, sharp, colorful landscape... (p. 76),

the translator of Version A has chosen

... ele arfou levemente, atônito com a precisão nos contornos das coisas, a *legibilidade de tudo*, a dura, nítida e colorida paisagem..., (p. 15, line 11-12),

which is an instance of explicitness. In Version B, which seems to be more faithful to the original, we find only a *legibilidade*.

This faithfulness impedes B's translator to omit an item, which is skipped by A's translator in

... she cleaned out the plastic tube implanted in his chest, inserted a sterilized hypodermic and slowly dripped *the bag* of sight giving liquid into his veins... (p. 76)

... limpava o tubo de plástico implantado no peito dele, inserindo uma seringa hipodérmica esterilizada para pingar nas veias do filho o líquido salvador da visão (p. 15, line 20 - 21).

She translates this part like this:

... ela limpava o tubo de plástico implantado no seu peito, inseria uma agulha hipodérmica esterilizada e vagarosamente deixava gotejar em suas veias *o frasco* de líquido salvador da visão (p. 1, line 26-29).

What was actually dripping into the veins was the liquid, so both the original and Version B use unexpectedly metonyms, clarified immediately in the rest of the sentence. Version A's translator, on the other hand, produces a more logical image, certainly accepted by the readers. At the same time however, he transforms simple coordinate clauses into subordinate ones, interfering in Leavitt's style again.

In turn, he becomes over-explicit in another part of this sentence. Probably trying to avoid the ambiguity of Portuguese pronouns *seu/suas*, he translates *his veins* into *veias do filho*, while *peito dele* standing for *his chest* seems to be a better choice and could be *per analogiam* extended to *veias dele*.

Sometimes adding in translation items absent in the ST cannot be

qualified as oversignalling. In the same sentence, both translators complement the Portuguese adjective *hipodérmica* with *seringa* and *agulha* respectively. These complements are still necessary in Portuguese, despite the obvious context of injections, reinforced by the verb used in both translations. In English, the original adjective *hypodermic* has already lost this grammatical form and has become a noun that carries the meaning of needle or syringe (*Collins Cobuild* 1987).

Changes to the following examples have a more serious character: they become a problem. Although they sometimes involve omissions and/or instances of adding items to the text, I classify them as mistakes. I am sure the translator of Version A did not understand what Leavitt says in the next four quotations.

In the sentence:

They endured this procedure silently, Sylvia sitting on the side of the hospital bed she'd rented for the duration of Theo's stay — his life he sometimes thought — watching reruns of *I Love Lucy* or the news, while he tried not to think about the hard piece of pipe stuck into him, even though it was a constant reminder of how *wide and unswimmable the gulf was becoming between him and the ever-receding shoreline of the well* (p. 76-7)

the metaphor of the gulf is neither common nor easy. It cannot be interpreted, however, as

...como se tornava mais largo e intransponível aquele golfo entre ele e as costas da praia conhecida (p. 15, line 26-7).

The mistake is caused by the misunderstanding of the word “well” in this context, and not paying enough attention to the definite article preceding it. This translation absolutely makes no sense, which can be detected even by a reader lacking access to the original text.

The translation of

And Sylvia was intricately cheerful (p. 77)

into

Mas Sylvia se mantinha meticulosamente cuidadosa (p.15, l. 27-8)

is also a mistake because it completely changes the original meaning.
Another example of linguistic incompetence we can see in

Sylvia honked her horn at a truck making an illegal left turn (p. 77)

translated into

Sylvia apertou a buzina em forma de chifre para um caminhão, e fez um contorno ilegal para esquerda: (p. 15, line 47-8)

which the translator could have easily avoided by opening an English-Portuguese dictionary. The dictionary, however, would not help him solve the problem of the inappropriate reference; the restrictive clause *making an illegal left turn* referring to *Sylvia* instead of the *truck*.

The last problematic fragment I want to comment on is either an illustration of lack of attention or a way out of difficulties in translating some words or expressions:

...She smiled, clearly pleased with herself. "Ah, *you live and learn.*"

"You live," Theo said.

Sylvia blinked. "Well, look, here we are." She pulled the car into a handicapped-parking place on Morris Avenue and got out to help Theo, but he was already hoisting himself up out of his seat, using the door handle for leverage. "I can manage myself," he said with some irritation. *Sylvia stepped back.*

"*Clearly one advantage to all this for you,*" Theo said, balancing on his cane, "*is that it's suddenly so much easier to get a parking place*" (p. 78)

— ela sorria, visivelmente encantada consigo mesma.

— Ah, eu vou vivendo e aprendendo...

— *Você vive* — Theo disse.

comprehension of two fragments of text difficult. I believe, however, that these mistakes simply originate in lapses of attention during typing. In the first case, there is a verb missing, in the second one a conjunction. In the quotations below I include the missing items in parentheses:

...alguma coisa pesada o bastante para impressionar, no entanto, tão frágil que também pudesse (fazer) você sentir muito por isso (p. 5);

and

...Seria assegurar-se de (que) ele estava lá, vivo, de que ainda não havia escapado... (p. 6)

Lastly, I would like to discuss an instance of lexical choice which is the same in both versions, and, in my opinion, inadequate. In the original we read:

...Then she picked up the big bowl and tossed it to Theo, like a *football* (p. 79).

Misled by this false cognate, both translators chose *bola de futebol* as its equivalent. Unfortunately, they do not take into consideration some aspects of the situation described above, as a consequence of cultural differences. First, there are contrasts between sports disciplines: what is called *football* in the USA has nothing to do with the Brazilian, and worldwide, understanding of this word. Brazilian football is called *soccer* in American English.

Therefore, in consequence, the ball Leavitt refers to in the story is oval (similar with the crystal bowl?), and quite rarely kicked but rather thrown and carried. That image is reinforced by the verb *to toss*, as far as I know, impossible to be divorced from the use of one's hand/s, also involving an attempt to throw without rotation and make catching easier. Contrary to a football, a *bola de futebol* is supposedly never touched with hands (except for goalkeeper's). So, what the simile used by Leavitt provokes in an American reader, is not obtained in a Brazilian context, a typical difficulty of the interpersonal aspect of text (Coulthard in Costa 1992). Therefore, I think it would be

Sylvia piscou:

— Bem, olhe, aqui estamos nós.

Ela enfiou o carro num estacionamento para paraplégicos da Morris Avenue, e saiu para ajudar Theo. Mas ele estava guinchando a si mesmo do assento, usando a manivela como se fosse uma alavanca.

— Posso me arranjar sozinho — ele disse com alguma irritação, balançando em sua bengala. — E é muito mais fácil sair daqui do que conseguir vaga num estacionamento (p. 15, line 67-77).

The second part of this hypothesis is rather improbable because the translator nicely handles the expression “you live and learn” by translating it into an analogous Portuguese expression. Unfortunately, he uses the pronoun “eu” as an equivalent form for “you”, which destroys a parallelism between this and the next sentence. Thus, it is necessary to introduce italics to try to recover a little of the effect created by the parallel use of pronouns in English.

Further on, he omits two whole sentences (maybe an oversight):

Sylvia stepped back.

“Clearly one advantage to all this for you,” Theo said,

which leads to a fusion of two paragraphs, a lesser evil perhaps. However, he breaks the first paragraph in such a way that the coherence between the two is disrupted. As a result, the hero’s irritation is not caused by his mother attempt to help him get out of the car (as in the original), but rather by the fact that he cannot stand firmly. So the reader misses one of the most significant moments in the whole story.

Moreover, the omission of the second sentence aggravates the problem of lack of coherence between the two paragraphs, so that even a reader guided by the Gricean cooperative principle (Baker 1992: 225) has difficulties in making sense out of the sequence of sentences in the second paragraph above. Again, the son-mother relationship, focal to the story, is erased for Brazilian readers.

At the beginning of this article I promised impartiality, so I cannot leave unsaid that I detected in Version B two mistakes that make

better to translate the word in question into, simply, *uma bola*, and to try a more technical verb as equivalent to *toss*.

This last issue enters the category of equivalence at word level, proposed by Baker (id.). Being one of the most important in the field of translation, it requires methodical examination, which will remain as a goal for a future inspection.

Concluding remarks

After having analysed, from a linguistic point of view, the two translated versions of *Gravity* by David Leavitt, I discovered that neither of them is devoid of inaccuracies. This shows how complex translation is and, on the other hand, how efficient in establishing quality of a literary text a linguistic analysis can be.

Since the inaccuracies acquire the form of gross mistakes in one of the versions, I am able to answer the question of superiority of one over the other: Version B is the one. According to the criteria I selected, I have concluded that the meaning produced by this version is closer to the ST, and that the author's style has been better preserved compared to Version A. Such conditions satisfy demands made by different theoreticians of translation (such as Nida or Catford) on its practitioners.

The author's style, however, marked by long sentences and peculiar punctuation, when translated is not very smooth to read. Despite this, B's translator is concerned with her Brazilian readership and manages to follow the rhetorical patterns and lexical choices of contemporary Brazilian Portuguese.

At this point two reservations should be made: that I am not a native speaker of Portuguese, and that I have obviously read the original text. Both of them transform my findings into less objective ones. Let me refute these reservations, at least partially.

In common with many other researchers working in the area of the English language, I am not a native speaker of this language. Neither their capacity nor mine to evaluate the quality of English texts seems to be hindered by this fact. As for objectivity, a rather utopian concept, the criteria to be applied in analyses are established beforehand to help in the difficult task of putting our personal preferences aside.

On the other hand, I am aware that my having read the original text may blur the perception of the efficiency of the translations to convey the meaning intended by the author. To solve this problem, we can drip into our veins a little of sight-giving liquid in the form of complementary studies of relevance to the subject of equivalence; such points as collocation, register, modality, etc. It would also be useful to compare the findings of professional reviewers of translated works with the actual reception of these works among the lay audience. Especially so, as in the case of literary translation, their voices are much more interesting to the publishing houses, the only providers of income for literary translators.

To conclude, I want to say that hubris as a motivating force is revealed as double-edged, negative and positive at the same time. Blinded by it, Version A's author, a contemporary Brazilian writer, allowed publication of his precarious translation. Ironically, his attempts to *improve* the original structure, and his — maybe not conscious — conviction of the compensatory value of his qualifications as a writer betrayed him. I do not think he questioned his linguistic competence enough either.

In spite of these shortcomings, it is necessary to acknowledge his pioneering role and contribution to the process of translating *Gravity*, as well as his influence on the follower. She, convinced of her ability to translate *Gravity* better, produced a good text. Despite her self-assurance, she remained sufficiently competent to recognise, and modest to respect, both Leavitt's intentions and the Brazilian readers' needs. Was she then less arrogant or more socially and theoretically aware?

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