

AN ANALYSIS OF TWO TRANSLATIONS OF “THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM”

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THIS ARTICLE AIMS AT ANALYSING two translations of “The pit and the Pendulum”, a short-story by Edgar Allan Poe, from a linguistic point of view. To do so, I decided to compare the two translations in terms of collocations, omissions, punctuation and graphological signs, explicitness, register, mistakes, the open choice principle and the idiom choice principle. Poe’s short-story presents many peculiarities typical of his style. Apart from that, the whole text is pervaded by an atmosphere of suspense and terror that is in part a product of the linguistic devices the author has used.

What I have tried to assess through this linguistic analysis is to what extent each translation was faithful to the ST, that is, to what extent the translators have tried to follow Poe’s lexical choices, sentence structure, register, punctuation, graphological signs and overall textual rhythm. I have also tried to see how successful the translators have been in reproducing the atmosphere of suspense, fear and impending danger that I consider a fundamental characteristic of the “Pit and the Pendulum”. In order to facilitate future references to the translations, I have decided to call them Version A and Version B.

Collocation

I will start my analysis with the concept of collocation, which is, according to Mona Baker (1993:47-9):

The tendency of certain words to co-occur regularly in a given language (...) Patterns of collocation reflect the preferences

of specific language communities for certain modes of expression and certain linguistic configurations.

Collocation is a key issue in translation since its appropriate use helps to build up the rhetorical patterns of the TL, and it is exactly the use of these patterns that makes a translated text “sound” more natural and less foreign.

Version A seems to have more instances of marked collocations than Version B, that is, unusual combinations of words that challenge our expectations as readers. Nevertheless, Version B is not entirely devoid of marked collocations, as we shall see. Version B translated “stern contempt” into “severo desprezo”, which sounds odd in Portuguese. Version A found a better solution, opting for “cruel desprezo”.

On another instance, Version A translated “the blackness of darkness supervened” into “caíram sobre mim as *trevas da escuridão*”, while version B produced a much smoother sentence: “e sobreveio o negror das trevas”.

Other odd choices of Version A in terms of collocation are the following:

- “I proceeded for many paces” — “*Fiz vários passos*”.
- “I hearkened to its réverberation” — “*Prestei ouvido ao ricochetear*”
- “my teeth were on edge” — “*meus dentes ficaram embotados*”.
- “damned spirit” — “*espírito danado*”.

Concerning the last two examples, Version B found much better solutions:

- “fazendo meus dentes rangerem, de tão contraídos.”
- “alma penada”.

Version B, in my view, handles collocations in a much better, smoother way than version A, making the text sound less odd to Brazilian ears. Concerning its faithfulness to the ST, I think it does a good job in the sense that the use of collocations familiar to Brazilian readers did not interfere with the frightening atmosphere of the text.

Omissions

An omission is a translation strategy used to avoid redundancies, useless explanations, or odd combinations of sounds. An omission might also be the result of lack of attention during the translation process, or it might be a way out of a difficult piece of the ST. As Mona Baker points out, there is inevitably some loss of meaning as a result of an omission; therefore, the translator should only use it in the last resort, when the advantages of producing a smooth translation outweigh a total faithfulness to the ST (1993/40-42).

Version A seems to use this strategy much more often than Version B, sometimes jeopardizing the meaning of some parts of the text. Many words are omitted, as well as entire sentences, as can be seen below:

- 1 - "Inch by inch — line by line — with a descent *only appreciable at intervals that seemed ages* — down and still down it came!"
— "Polegada a polegada — linha a linha — *operava uma descida*
— sempre mais para baixo — sempre mais para baixo."

- 2 - "There were in all, then, a hundred paces; *and, admitting two paces to the yard, I presumed the dungeon to be fifty yards in circuit.*"
— "Eram pois, ao todo, cem passos".

Concerning the omission of entire sentences, it is difficult to say what might have caused them; it might have been lack of attention, for instance. As for the two examples above, part of the sentences have been omitted, and I would say that it was due to the difficulty of the ST (in example 2, the translator would have to transform yards into meters). Version B also presents some omissions, but they seem to be produced by an attempt to clarify and simplify the text for the target readers.

As Mona Baker reminds us, any omission involves some loss of meaning. Apart from that, the use of particular lexical choices and sentence structure is not done randomly by an author; it contributes, sometimes fundamentally, to the construction of meaning and style. Therefore, translators should avoid, as much as possible, omitting

whatever information from the text, however difficult the translation of that information might be.

It is somewhat contradictory to notice that Version A, a much more literal translation, presents more omissions than Version B. The translator might have wished, through these omissions, to simplify confuse passages, but if that was the case he does not seem to have attained his goal. In terms of style and mood, these omissions do not improve Version A at all.

Punctuation and graphological changes

Punctuation devices, like conjunctions, indicate how different parts of the text relate to each other. In written language, marked information structure is often signalled by means of topography or punctuation devices. Both translations analysed changed significantly the overall punctuation structure of the ST. Poe's style seems to include very long sentences, or many small clauses linked by commas or semi-colons. Version B tried to adopt a Brazilian Portuguese punctuation style, transforming commas or semi-colons into full stops.

As for the use of graphological signs, both versions seem to have changed dashes into commas; in terms of italics, Version B is much more faithful to the ST than Version A, which is again contradictory since Version A is a much more literal translation (as shall be seen later on).

The changes made in terms of punctuation can be seen as negative since they interfere with one of the features of Poe's style (long sentences). Concerning the use of italics, the words the author chose to emphasize with the aid of this device probably highlight some important idea or event. The omission of the emphasis in these cases implies change of meaning.

Explicitness

There is a general tendency to raise the level of explicitness in translations, that is, to increase the level of redundancy in the TT. Over-explicitness, or over-signalling, as Walter Costa points out, "(...) occurs in most writing, especially when the writer wishes to convey his or her message as clearly as possible, following the received

cultural norms.”(1992:143). According to Blum-Kulka (in Baker 1993:212):

It might be the case that explication is a universal strategy inherent to the process of language mediation, as practised by language learners, non-professional translators and professional translators alike.

Version B, more simplified, presents more instances of explicitness:

- “without being aware of *the fact*”
- “sem perceber *exatamente o lugar em que me encontrava*”

- “Down — steadily down *it crept*.”
- “Descia — cada vez mais descia *a lâmina*.”

Version A also presents some examples of over-explicitness, but due to an excess of emphasis that pervades the whole text, as in the following example:

- “In other conditions of mind”
- “Em qualquer outra situação moral”

Since I am interested in the issue of faithfulness to Poe’s style and to the text’s atmosphere, I see both Version A’s tendency to be over-emphatic and Version B’s attempt to create a “readable”, less complex text as potential sources of danger. The translator who decides to add emphasis to or to simplify the ST runs the risk of ending up with a TT devoid of important characteristics of the original.

Register

Register is a variety of language that a language user (in our case, a translator) considers appropriate to a specific situation. Version A uses a much higher (more formal) register than Version B, and therefore sounds more old-fashioned and sometimes even strange. This might be explained by an attempt to be faithful to the ST, which is very marked in terms of register and style. Comparing Versions A

and B, we can find examples of the use of different registers in the translation of the same stretches of the ST:

- “glance”— “relancear”
- “blackness of eternal night”
- “negror da noite eterna” (A)
- “trevas da noite eterna” (B)
- “a wrapper of coarse serge”
- “um fato de sarja ordinária” (A)
- “uma vestimenta da sarja grosseira” (B)
- “in the appearance of (...)”
- “no aspeto dessa (...)” (A)
- “na aparência desse (...)” (B)
- “the friction of cloth”
- “o atrito da tela” (A)
- “o rasgar de uma fazenda” (B)

(Notice that in Version B, in spite of the use of a more usual register in the translation of “cloth”, the word “friction” is translated erroneously as “rasgar”. Version A found a better solution with the choice of “atrito”)

Mistakes

A mistake in translation is the choice of a wrong word in terms of meaning, one that conveys a partially or totally different meaning from the original word. Mistakes in translation are caused by several reasons, which include lack of time, lack of linguistic knowledge, misreadings, lack of revision, or even bad printing. Comparing the two versions, we can find many mistakes, some grosser than others.

Version A

- “exaggeration”— “exageração” (no such word in Portuguese)

- “a condition which lasted long”
- “uma condição que não durou muito tempo”
(here the translator conveys exactly the opposite idea)
- “I still lay quietly”
- “Permaneci deitado tranquilamente”
(there was no tranquillity in the character)
- “upon resuming my walk”
- “recomeçando meu passeio”
(conveys idea of leisure, which is not the case at all)
- “just *below* the margin”
- “justamente *acima* das bordas”
(again we have the opposite idea)
- “the other objects in the *cell*”
- “os outros objetos da *célula*”
(literal translation producing an obvious mistake)

Version B

- “low *framework* of wood”
- “numa espécie de *andaime* de madeira muito baixo”
(lexical choice conveys wrong ideational)
- “the idea that it had *perceptibly* descended”
- “a idéia de que havia, *imperceptivelmente*, descido”
(again mistake producing opposite idea)
- “Forth from the *well*”
- “Vindos da *parede*”
(translator mistook well for wall)

Open choice principle and idiom choice principle

In translated texts one can usually distinguish the presence of two antagonistic principles: the *open choice principle* and the *idiom choice*

principle. According to Sinclair (*in* Costa 1993:146), the former “is a way of seeing language text as the result of a large number of complex choices, [where] the only restraint is grammaticalness.” The latter “is that a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-constructed phrases that constitute single-choices, even though they might appear to be analysable into segments” (*ibid.*).

In the two versions I have analysed it is very clear that each translator followed a particular principle, resulting in different collocations, insertions, omissions, lexical choices, etc., and consequently characterising the translation as marked or unmarked, literal or dynamic. Considering its overall pattern, Version A follows the open choice principle and is a more literal translation, in the sense that, as Costa says, “idioms and natural collocations [occur] only when there is a one-to-one correspondence between the two languages involved” (1993:147).

For instance, Version A literally translates “drove the blood in torrents upon my heart” into “levou o sangue ao coração, em torrentes”. Version B comes up with a somewhat better solution, even though not ideal either: “acelerou violentamente o sangue em meu coração”. In another instance, Version A translates “trembling convulsively in every fibre” into “tremendo convulsivamente em cada fibra”, again a literal translation, while Version B produces “a tremer convulsivamente”, which sounds better.

Still in Version A, we can find another example of a very literal, odd translation: “I might as well have attempted to arrest an avalanche!” becomes “Teria também tentado deter uma avalanche”, which is not only literal but also changes the meaning of the sentence. Version B, clearly informed by the idiom choice principle, comes up with a much more adequate translation: “Mas isso seria o mesmo que tentar deter uma avalanche”.

Version B, therefore, is in general a much more dynamic translation since “in it the idiom choice principle of the TL is imposed, idioms and collocations are adapted to the TL’s norms and instances of ST where the open choice principle [is] at work are cut down to size” (Costa 1993:147). At the very beginning of the short story, Version B opts for “zumbido” as a translation of “hum”, while Version A opts for “sussuro”, which conveys an entirely different idea.

Other examples of dynamic translation in Version B (as opposed

to Version A):

- “at right angles to the wall”
- “formando um *ângulo reto com a parede*”(B)
- “em *ângulo direito contra a parede*”(A)

- “and fell violently *on my face*”
- “caí violentamente *de bruços*”(B)
- “caí violentamente *com o rosto no chão*”(A)

- “my nerves had been unstrung” (109)
- “meus nervos estavam *à flor da pele*”(B)
- “meus nervos estavam *abalados*”(A)

Conclusion

One of my first questions concerning the two translations of “The Pit and the Pendulum” was how the translators would deal with (or reproduce) Poe’s style, which is very marked in terms of punctuation, register, lexical choices, word order, and so on. As I said before, Version A is, generally speaking, a much more literal translation, informed by the open choice principle, and this might be due to a wish on the part of the translator to be faithful to the author’s hallmarks.

Version A is also much more emphatic than Version B, maybe in an attempt to maintain the atmosphere of suspense and terror of the short story. The translation uses a high, formal register, and sounds old-fashioned, probably for the same reasons mentioned above, but also because it was originally done in the 1950s or 1960s.

Version B, on the other hand, seems to be less concerned with Poe’s style than with being idiomatic. As a consequence it is smoother, sounds more natural and reads better than Version A. The translator in Version B had probably a greater concern with his readership, since he tried to make his text conform to the rhetorical patterns, collocations, lexical choices, etc., of modern Brazilian Portuguese.

As a reader I would undoubtedly classify version B as a more elaborate translation, in which even the lay-out of the pages and the letter type used helps to make the reading smoother. Nevertheless, I

have a feeling that translator B had Version A in his hands when he produced his later version of "The Pit and the Pendulum" (from which he seems to have "borrowed" many ideas), which, if true, must have made his work much easier.



WORKS CONSULTED

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