

## SIX CASES IN *FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL*

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### Introduction

Every text is unique and, at the same time, it is the translation of another text. No text is entirely original because language itself, in its essence, is already a translation: firstly, of non-verbal world and secondly, since every phrase is the translation of another sign and another phrase. However, this argument can be turned around without losing any of its validity: all texts are original because every translation is distinctive. Every translation, up to a certain point is an invention and as such it constitutes a unique text. (Paz, 1971, *in* Bassnet 1990)

Translation, with the consolidation of its theoretical studies has occupied a different status in the academic circle in the last years.

Translation is no longer generalised as an easy task to be performed by anyone who has the command of a foreign language. The process of rendering one text into another demands much more from the translator. Firstly the command of the target language is paramount, the translator should know and understand how it works. Other aspects such as a good cultural background, creativity, common sense are also required.

Although theorists attempt to establish the requirements for a good translator and consequently a good translation, it is difficult to have a recipe that serves all purposes. As Baker (1992:7) points out:

It is in fact virtually impossible, except in extreme cases, to draw a line between what counts as a good translation and what counts as a bad one. Every translation has points of strength and points of weakness and every translation is open to improvement.

Thus, in order to analyse a piece of translation one has to take into account the various factors that influenced the translator's use of strategies and his/her decisions.

Outside the academia, however there is a great volume of translation work being developed. Probably these translators are not acquainted with such discussions. Most of them base their work exclusively on practical experience rather than on theories of translation or on studies of language.

Baker (1992:4) argues that this is one of the causes for the second-rate-profession stigma that haunts Translation as a distinguishable activity.

...translators will need something other than the current mixture of intuition and practice to enable them to reflect on what they do and how they do it. They will need, above all, to acquire a sound knowledge of the raw material with which they work: to understand what language is and how it comes to function for its users.

In translation of films, specifically subtitling, an enormous amount of variables in relation to language and working conditions, may hinder the process.

In relation to these drawbacks, firstly we have time as one of the main constraints. Usually translators have to render a text in a very short time, what certainly affects the level of quality of the translation. A second point, besides those impositions of time made by distributors, is the number of characters to be allocated in each subtitle and its speed. It is conventioned that for video translations the subtitles should be at most 2 lines long, and that it should not last more than forty seconds. In the cinema the length of the subtitle is increased due to the bigger size of the screen (SET, April 1995). However, if such norms are followed by all the distributors remain to be answered. The low remuneration in this field is also an aggravating factor to some problems found in translations.

Despite all these drawbacks, there are also good examples of successful choices in film translations.

In this paper my aim is to analyse the translation for video of the English film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*<sup>1</sup> in relation to its process. I will try to analyse the translator's choice concerning *style* in relation to: (i) the use and position of adjectives, (ii) the use and omission of pronouns, and also the *pragmatic element* and *play with words*.

### The analysis

The film *Four weddings and a Funeral* was unexpectedly a great box office all over the world in 1994. The film was directed by Mike Newell, and its cast is composed by Hugh Grant and Andie MacDowell (Set, Dec. 1994)

The plot of the film: during a friend's wedding, the Englishman Charles meets Carrie, a very beautiful American woman and they spend the night together. Other three more weddings and a funeral set the scene for their love affair.

The process of translating a text implies in dealing with an array of options. It is entirely up to the translator to choose the best one in accordance with the purpose of the translation and maybe with the demands of, in the case of cinema or video subtitling, the distributors' interests (see Franco, 1991).

It is possible to analyse the linguistic aspects of a translated text, however in this paper, I am not to point out 'errors' in translating, since I believe there is not a final and perfect version of a translated text (or any text). I will look at adequate and inadequate choices. Although I will rely on reference books such as grammars and dictionaries, I will mostly draw my analysis on the usage of language, by consulting native speakers of Brazilian Portuguese, including myself.

I will concentrate on three aspects: style, pragmatic level and play with words as cited above.

### Style

Every piece of text — written or spoken — has a 'style'. What leads people to say 'such and such has style' is the acceptability of each

different mode of writing/speaking in relation to the 'standard language'. So the categorisation of style is varied.

In analysing the styles of *Four weddings and a Funeral*, however, I will consider the five categories proposed by House (1981). They are: (i) casual, (ii) intimate, (iii) formal, (iv) frozen and (v) consultative.

Following these divisions I will try to see if the style is kept or changed in the translation, and what strategies the translator made use of.

### Adjectives

In Brazilian Portuguese, the target language in this study, adjectives are not positioned in a fixed order. However, they often occur after the noun in a sentence. As Cunha (1983:268) rightly explains: 'como elemento acessório da oração, o adjetivo em função de adjunto adnominal deverá portanto vir *com maior frequência* depois dos substantivos que ele qualifica.'

When the opposite case occurs it is then said to be a question of sophisticated style, or that the writer chose to highlight the adjective in that particular sentence.

In the subtitling translation of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* there are two instances where the adjective is positioned before the noun.

The first one is in a scene where Charles asks how his acquaintance's girlfriend is. It is a casual situation in English, but the way it was rendered into Portuguese sounded very formal. Therefore, the style was changed, see the translation:

How's that gorgeous girlfriend of yours?  
Como vai sua linda namorada?

The second instance takes place in the second wedding. Again there is Charles and a group of friends and ex-girlfriends, and the kind of relationship among the characters can be described as casual. The position of the adjective in the Portuguese translation besides being formal also 'sounds strange' due to the number of syllables of this specific adjective. So one of the girls in the scene says:

He told me he had this interesting journey around India with vomiting Veronica.

Ele me contou sobre a interessante viagem à Índia com Verônica Vômito.

Here, we can see the translator's decision in changing the style. Firstly it could be reasoned as a direct transference of the position of adjectives in English into Portuguese. Nonetheless, if s/he had simply used "Como vai sua namorada linda?" and 'ele me contou sobre a viagem interessante à Índia' would not have done any better. A second reason for keeping such structure in Portuguese could be the number of characters conventionally allowed per subtitle, so preventing the translator from making changes in the whole structure such as 'como vai aquela sua namorada linda?' or 'ele me contou sobre uma super viagem de vocês à Índia'.

It is also noteworthy the fact that in the first instance, it was not possible to keep the alliteration (*gorgeous girlfriend/linda namorada*) in the translation. Whereas in the second one (*vomiting Veronica/Verônica vômito*), not only the equivalence was maintained but also the play with sounds.

Still related to adjectives and style, I observed the translation of two adjectives that do not occur frequently in everyday language in Brazilian Portuguese. The adjectives *lovely* and *glamorous* respectively translated as *encantadora* and *glamourosa* are not correspondent in usage. While in English they are widely used, in Portuguese these adjectives usually occur in the written form. They may even sound old-fashioned and too formal in Portuguese.

Once more, in discussing the reasons for such choices one could relate the interference of cognate words (*glamorous* and *glamourosa*), but how to explain *lovely* for *encantadora*?

One imaginatively can say that the woman is described as 'encantadora' because she is the bride. So there would have been an attempt to associate the formality of the wedding ceremony to the word. However, it may simply have been a choice made under the pressure of time.

### Use of Pronouns

One formally learns rules to the use of pronouns of Brazilian Portuguese at school. However, such norms are rarely applied in everyday written texts, let alone in spoken ones.

If one tries to speak according to the rules, in an informal situation, she will certainly be labelled as pedantic and showing off, since s/he will not be following the sociolinguistic rules conventionally established for that community.

In the subtitling of the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* some instances of mismatches in the use of pronouns are found.

There is a scene when the main character Charlie is listening to Carrie report how many men she slept with. So, such intimacy presupposes an informal type of language. Nonetheless, the expected intimate dialogue is translated into a formal kind of language. The use of the 'pronome oblíquo' in the Target Language text denotes a greater distance between the characters, what does not occur in the Source Language text. See the examples:

I won't do that.

Não o farei

I hate him

Eu o odeio

It does seem probable that the translator in *retextualising* (see Costa 1992) this piece of text had the explicit intention of making it more formal. S/he likely made use of 'pronomes oblíquos' either due to limitation of number of characters in the subtitle, or not to change the whole structure for a sentence like 'Eu odeio esse cara'. In such sentence the translator would have changed the pronoun for a demonstrative pronoun + noun.

Still in relation to register-loaded choices there is an example of the pronoun 'sua'. In an informal context 'sua/seu' are only used when the person to whom they are speaking to is present. If the speaker is talking to somebody about somebody else s/he usually makes use of *dela/dele* (see Nicola & Infante 1992, Cunha 1983). In the translation below, the register was once more altered, when the structure *he*

*played* was nominalised.

I'm trying to remember what position he played.  
 Queria lembrar sua posição.

The three instances cited above are related to the tenor category defined by Halliday (1978) as the relationship established between the writer (or in this case the translator) and the reader.

Baker (1992) points out that to obtain the tenor of discourse is not an easy task at all, in that it is related to the culture values. She (ibid.) explains that 'it [getting the tenor in discourse] depends on whether one sees a certain level of formality as 'right' from the perspective of the source culture or target culture'.

One more example related to maintaining or changing the tenor of discourse is the formulaic expression of greeting someone. In this particular scene of the film, the two characters are intimate and meet by chance. Both are represented as having a very modern and informal lifestyle. Therefore, the subtitle translation is not adequate in this context:

It's nice to see you  
 Prazer em vê-lo.

Nice to see you  
 O prazer é meu

It is noteworthy saying that the function in the sentence, that is greeting, is conveyed. However, the value is doubly changed, namely, the use of 'Prazer em...' plus the pronoun, which characterise a very formal and sophisticated way of speaking.

### **Omission of Pronouns**

A very often used strategy in Translation is omission. Obviously, there is always some loss when such strategy is adopted. Nevertheless many a time they are necessary or even essential to the flow or clarity of a text. Thus, the translator should try to balance very carefully what to omit.

In the three cases that will be presented, the omission of pronouns jeopardises the meaning of the sentences:

Scarlett, you're blind  
Scarlett, está cega.  
Thanks Tom. You're saint.  
Obrigado. É um anjo.

She's a pretty girl the one you can't take your eyes off.  
Ela é linda. Não tira os olhos dela.

In the first case, the name Scarlett in the source text is used simply to demonstrate the other character's surprise. In the Portuguese translation it becomes the subject and gives the impression that Scarlett is blind. I say impression because obviously the audience has the image as an aid to repair this kind of inadequate translation.

Likewise in case two the audience will have to presuppose that Tom is a saint, a good person, and not anybody else. Observe that the name and the pronoun 'you' were omitted. In the last example, the descriptive sentence becomes imperative. The commentary becomes an order. Naturally, the constraints of subtitling translation are not put aside, however the change of meaning could not have been overlooked here.

### **The pragmatic level**

Bassnet (1990:23) argues that 'to impose the value system of the SL culture onto the TL culture is dangerous ground (...). Some concepts, usage of language, habits are not shared by the two cultures, hence they do not have direct equivalence. So, it is dangerous to try to translate the words or sentences without taking into consideration the value and function in both languages'.

In English, the signal for politeness is expressed through certain fixed expressions that are used very frequently and mechanically. Thus, apologising by the use of expressions such as 'sorry', 'forgive me' or others for asking permission, are part of everyday speech. Whereas in Brazilian Portuguese the notion of politeness rests on the intonation or gestures or smiles or even on the use of diminutives.



See the translation below:

Perhaps you'll forgive me if I turn from my feelings to the words of another splendid bugger, W.H. Auden.

Vou passar dos sentimentos às palavras de outro fantástico pilantra, W.H. Auden.

or

Bernard and Lydia I shall now ask if you freely undertake the obligation of marriage.

Bernard e Lydia aceitam espontaneamente as obrigações do casamento?

In the examples just presented above I have to say that they were successful choices in that the translator was able to establish the equivalence between two languages that differ largely concerning the expression of politeness and formality.

### Play with words

*Four Weddings and a Funeral* can be classified as a comedy, so in order to make some comic scenes, the screenwriter resorted to the play with sounds and meaning of certain words. This playing with words takes place in two distinct scenes. The first scene is when the priest, very nervously, confuses the words to be said in the wedding. Obviously, these mistakes are meant to be funny and a special flavour is added to the scene by the actor who is a famous comedian. The second scene occurs during a conversation between David, who is deaf, and the girl who is interested in him, Serena. She is trying to learn the deaf alphabet and naturally makes a lot of mistakes. Recurrent patterns of poetry such as rhyme and assonance were then adopted as we can see below.

In poetry there are perfect rhymes as in *confess-express, conspire-desire*, but as Boagey (1977:14) explains 'English is not a language that lends itself easily to rhyme, as some languages do', so not a great array of options is left to the poet who wishes to play with the sounds of words. So, alternatives had to be found and assonance is one of them. Assonance is an imperfect rhyme, since it does not correspond completely. In assonances the vowels agree, but the conso-

nants do not, e.g. *soon-mood*.

In a) the rhyme in English was translated for an assonance in Portuguese. The equivalence at the denotative level would not be possible, in that the translation would lose its comic aspect.

a) goat/ghost  
manco/santo

The choice *manco/santo* was kept by the translator even when the words were changed in the original

b) spigot/ghost  
manco/santo

In example c) the translator had to base his/her decision on two aspects: to find a word to rhyme with *legítima* that at the same time could be comic and collocate with wife. Note that the number of syllables was also kept in *legítima* and *ridícula*.

c) awful/lawful  
ridícula/legítima

In this scene the girl Serena takes the letter *n* for *m* and produces an assonance in the original. In the translation the assonance was kept and the denotative meaning was slightly altered.

d) mice/nice  
ótico/ótimo

It is evident the preoccupation in maintaining the idea of confusion in the same scene mentioned before. In letter e) the translator opted for rendering an unacceptable expression in English *tols of nistakes* for words that do not collocate in Portuguese *conde de erros*. So the idea that Serena is making mistakes in using the alphabet for the deaf is clear as well as funny to the audience.

e) conde de erros/monte de erros

tols of nistakes/lots of mistakes

### Final Remarks

In this paper I tried to analyse the choices made in the subtitling translation of the video version of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, based on the following topics: style, pragmatic level and play with words. It was not my purpose either to be critical or to make judgmental comments, but first of all it was my intention to discuss some options that were at the translator's disposition.

Film translations are the target of severe criticism that generally stems from a superficial analysis of the translation.

In this present study I decided to classify adequate and inadequate choices, but as often as possible taking into consideration the work conditions of the translators, the demands made by video distributors and the length of the subtitle supposedly followed by translators and mainly the problem of equivalence between English and Portuguese.

Such analysis does not envisage teaching how to translate, but it simply aims at discussing some current problems found in film translation.



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I. Director: Mike Newel, England, Play Art Distribution, Subtitles by Video Company, coloured, 16mm, duration:1h56

de