

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SHORT-STORY TRANSLATION: "THE SISTERS"

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I. Introduction

ACCORDING TO THE COLLINS COBUILD ENGLISH Language Dictionary (1987:1555) translation '*is a piece of writing or speech that has been translated from a different language*'. This definition does not help if the word 'translated' is not translated to the reader. However much dictionaries try to explain the act of translating, its definition seems to be beyond the sentence. The above cited explanation does not seem to wholly embody the complexity of a translator's work. As Bassnett (1980) states, the translator not only faces problems with the lexical selection of a target language (TL), but also with the interpretation of a source language (SL) text. The translator must work with the SL text so that the TL version approximates the SL version in terms of meaning, style and form. Bassnett also claims that "exact translation is impossible" (p. 22) due to a series of factors such as different cultures, societies and linguistic systems, amongst others. On the face of it, it is possible to suggest that the SL text considerably constrains the TL text and, therefore, that the translator's work to achieve a desirable similarity is an extremely complex task.

The question of similarity leads us to consider translation equivalents. Mason (1984, in Costa, 1992) proposes that "Translation equivalence occurs when a SL and a TL text (or item) are related to

(most of) the same relevant features" (p.134). This proposition could lead us to believe that the SL text is an autonomous and partly independent work, while the TL text on the one hand can be seen as autonomous but, on the other hand, it is dependent on the original text. This dependency lies principally in the existence of an SL message in a textual form and, therefore, problems can arise when the translator tries to convey such messages into another reality. In addition to the choice of a suitable equivalent, the translator also faces problems of non-equivalence. Baker (1992) suggests that the translator will have to use different strategies in order to overcome such difficulties (cf., for example, chapter 2).

Considering the aforementioned views of translating and translator, it might be useful to mention Coulthard's (1992) definition of a translator as being a mediator between a group of "interested readers" and an inaccessible text. This translator will take the original text and try to "re-textualize" it, even into the same language, to "ideal readers". By 'ideal readers' Coulthard refers to the reader created in the translator's mind, a reader with knowledge of certain facts, experiences, opinions, preferences, and linguistic competence. With this reader in mind, the translator makes decisions regarding "content, expression, sequencing and rhetorical devices" (p.9).

With the idea of re-textualization in mind, this analysis will now turn to the process of translating literary texts.

II. Literary translation

The main objective of this paper is to examine, comparatively, a short story by James Joyce, "The Sisters" and a published translation of this short-story into Brazilian Portuguese, by O'Shea (1992).

Durisin (in Bassnett, 1980) argues that a translator of literary text is concerned with the artistic procedures and the cultural-temporal context in which they are inserted. It seems reasonable to assume that Durisin's ideas refer to the difficulties a translator can

face during the artistic process of re-textualization. A literary text cannot simply be reduced to a message; this text has embedded structures, in which all components of such structures have a specific value and function and can be seen aesthetically. We could view re-textualization as being almost a work of art.

Cardoso (1991) seems to share Durisin's ideas when she points out that language is not only an instrument of communication, it is also the artistic material that is manipulated. The linguistic signs, the signifier and the signified, become one. Their individual sounds constitute an overall rhythm. The rhythms and sounds can express telling meanings. These meanings are part of a connotative language and such connotation is a particular feature of each language. Cardoso (*ibid.*) also states that in a literary text, sounds, meanings and structures cannot be separated. These elements come together as one and help convey the message. However, even if a translator can come close to rendering the message, s/he will not completely succeed as regards to the sonorous characteristics, special connotations, figures of speech, and specific structures, which are part of the meaning and do not encounter an identical parallel cross-linguistically. The passage from one language into the other involves such changes, but these changes have to be carefully considered so that they do not affect tone, style and historical context which, in conjunction with the meaning, form the total structure.

On the basis of the above considerations regarding literary translation, let us first turn to Joyce's work, namely "The Sisters" in *Dubliners*, so that we can become acquainted with his work and later on analyze the translated text (TT).

III. James Joyce and "The Sisters"

"The Sisters" is the opening story of the book *Dubliners*, which consists of a collection of short-stories published in 1914. *Dubliners* revolves around the everyday lives of men, women, and children in the Irish capital of Dublin during the late Victorian period. The

stories explore human emotions such as self-hatred, vanity, disillusionment and loss with a style of 'scrupulous meanness' which displays a sense of parody and comedy. Gottfried (1992) claims that Joyce has a satiric aim which can be noticed through his works because "there lay the indifference of style, or more exactly a 'paralysis' of style" (p.154). This symbolic paralysis refers to an arrest imposed from within by the Dubliners' deficiency of impulse and power. Their paralysis is more often expressed in a weakening of their impulse and ability to move in the right direction, eastward, which means release. Joyce depicts a moral paralysis by portraying the frustrations, degradations, and lack of orientation through the failure of the Dubliners to pass the outskirts of Dublin, or by the restriction of their movement, altogether either to the city or to some narrow area within it.

Joyce's stories are all narrated in a realistic manner, with the goal of criticizing and exposing a culture that Joyce despised because he considered it in a state of paralysis. He wished to show his country "a chapter of [its] moral history" in the paralyzed features of Dublin, to what he called an "indifferent public" (Gottfried, 1992:153).

"The Sisters" relates life, death and retrospective views within an ordinary experience, which Joyce depicts without illusion. Riquelme (1990) states that "The Sisters involves paralysis literally" (p. 123). A priest dies of paralysis and the whole story revolves around 'paralyzed' conversations and actions, demonstrating the inertia that Joyce rejected.

IV. The analysis of the corpus

Although a number of different aspects of analyses could be developed regarding this short story, the focus of the present analysis will be on equivalence and omission.

a) non-equivalence

The first sentence of "The Sisters" presents a character thinking about a situation whose meaning the reader cannot be certain of, and which is sustained during a few more lines, when the reader comes to understand the significance of the word *stroke*:

There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke.

Não havia esperança para ele desta vez: tratava-se do terceiro derrame.

The same does not happen in the TT due to the lack of an equivalent. In English, the word 'stroke' also refers to sound of striking of a clock, fact that does not happen with the TL (Brazilian Portuguese), and that in the ST may lead the readers to think about a clock, an arterial injury or even a lightning. In the TT the reader is immediately informed of the situation but this early revelation does not affect the whole structure, it only shortens the suspense.

Another example of non-equivalence happens with the following expression:

...Tiresome old red-nosed imbecile!

...Velho imbecil, nariz de batata!

In this example the translator had to choose an offensive expression to retain the mood of the boy, the narrator of the story. If the translator had translated *red-nosed* as *nariz vermelho*, the Brazilian reader could relate it with 'cold' and this would change Joyce's tone completely. The translator opted for a translation that refers to the size of the nose, which somehow, may be visualized considering that a nose, when is red, seems to be bigger than its normal size.

Concerning the same example, we can notice that the word *tiresome* was not translated. The option *velho chato imbecil*, in fact,

would not suit the ordinary use of the Brazilian Portuguese reader; whereas in *tiresome old fool!* and *velho chato*, seem to be more appropriate.

b) omission

I would now like to demonstrate some examples of omission. The character *Mr. Cotter* is addressed twelve times in the ST, four times as *Mr. Cotter* and the others as *Old Cotter*. The translator did not translate *Mr.* as *senhor*, instead, he kept the title *Mr.* whenever it appeared:

How do you mean, Mr. Cotter? asked my aunt.

...O que o senhor está querendo dizer, Mr. Cotter— perguntou minha tia.

but he omitted *Old* twice:

...Old Cotter looked at me...

...Cotter olhou para mim...

...What I mean is, said old Cotter...

...O que estou querendo dizer — respondeu Cotter...

As we read the story, we notice that the boy does not like *Mr. Cotter* and when the words are the boy's, the translator is successful with such omissions because, otherwise, the readers would encounter the friendly reference *velho Cotter*.

Other omissions occur frequently causing no change in meaning and therefore not affecting the overall structure:

...I have my own theory about it...

...Eu tenho minhas xxx (omission) teorias sobre o assunto...

...two candles must be set at the head of a corpse...

...duas velas tinham que ser colocadas ao lado xxx (omission) de um defunto...

On the other hand, the next omissions were more significant:

...I noticed how clumsily her skirt was hooked at the back...
...Reparei xxx(omission) que sua saia estava alfinetada nas costas...

The word *clumsily* in the ST gives us an idea of a lack of dexterity, which is associated with an old woman, reinforcing the idea of paralysis and also helping to form a caricature, a common feature of Joyce's style. However, the translation shifts the action to the boy, showing his ability of observation and does not focus on the old woman.

Another omission refers to the structure of a paragraph. The translator merges two paragraphs into one. The first of these paragraphs relates the narrator's dream and his thoughts concerning this dream. It is followed by another paragraph which takes the action in another direction:

...I felt that I had been far away, in some land where the customs were strange — in Persia, I thought... But I could not remember the end of the dream. In the evening my aunt took me with her to visit the house of mourning.

...Tive a sensação de que havia estado numa terra distante, onde os costumes eram estranhos — Na Pérsia, pensei... Mas não conseguia lembrar o final do sonho. À noitinha minha tia levou-me para a visita de pêsames.

It seems that the translator's choice makes the actions more dynamic because he joins different actions, places, and moments. In the ST it seems more static, confirming Joyce's paralyzed narrative.

c) semantic equivalence

Let us now look at some details concerning semantic equivalence in relation to the use of idioms. Since an idiom is an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words, its translation requires from the translator the knowledge of a language that is peculiar to a person or group. When the narrator describes *Mr. Cotter*, he wants us to share his bad impressions as regards to this man:

...I felt that his little beady black eyes were examining me, but I would not satisfy him by looking up from my plate. He returned to his pipe and finally spat rudely into the grate...

...Percebi que seus olhos pequenos e negros, redondos como uma conta, examinavam-me mas recusei-me a dar-lhe qualquer satisfação e mantive os olhos cravados no meu prato. Ele se voltou para o cachimbo e, passado algum tempo, deu uma cusparada nojenta na lareira.

The translator's interpretation successfully passes on to us the disgusting image that the boy holds of *Mr. Cotter*.

The translator is a sensitive interpreter of certain idioms:

*...You couldn't tell when the breath went out of him...
...Não deu nem pra perceber o momento em que ele deu o último suspiro...*

*...We wouldn't see him want anything while he was in it...
...Não deixamos que nada faltasse pra ele depois que sofreu o derrame...*

*...When all is said and done, no friends that a body can trust...
...Nas horas difíceis o que vale são os amigos...*

It is possible to identify in these examples the translator's careful maintenance of the meaning.

d) paralysis

As previously mentioned, Joyce's style is 'paralyzing', and in this story he demonstrates 'paralysis' not only physically, but also and principally through language. We can notice this in the following dialogues:

...No, I wouldn't say he was exactly... but there was something queer... there was something uncanny about him. I'll tell you my opinion...

...Não, não vou dizer que ele era lá muito... mas havia algo estranho... havia algo de misterioso nele. Na minha opinião...

...— I wouldn't like children of mine, he said, to have too much to say to a man like that.

— How do you mean, Mr. Cotter? asked my aunt.

— What I mean is, said old Cotter, it's bad for children. My idea is: let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be... Am I right, Jack?

...— Eu é que não deixaria um filho meu — disse ele — ter muita conversa com um sujeito daqueles.

— O que o senhor está querendo dizer, Mr. Cotter — perguntou minha tia.

— O que estou querendo dizer — respondeu Cotter — é que não é bom para criança. Eu acho o seguinte: devemos deixar o menino correr e brincar com meninos da idade dele... Não estou certo, Jack?

This dialogue goes a little further in its preservation of a certain kind of vagueness; it is a pointless talk, with no clear explanation

of the subject about which the characters are talking. At this point, the translator, in the TL, maintains the same kind of vagueness which further contributes to the idea of 'paralysis'.

The other dialogues in the story are between the sisters, one at a time, and the aunt. Vagueness is also present and is reinforced by the mourning scene. What is worth considering in the dialogues is how the sisters use language:

...God knows we done all we could...

...Deus sabe que fizemos de tudo...

...She's wore out...

...Está esgotada...

...It was him brought us all them flowers and them two candlesticks out of the chapel.

...Foi ele quem trouxe essas flores e as duas velas da capela.

... Ah, there's no friends like the old friends...

...É, nada como a gente ter velhos amigos...

...The duties of the priesthood was too much for him...

...As obrigações da vida de padre eram pesadas demais para ele...

The translation of these sentences does not correspond to the grammatical deviations which characterize the sisters' social and cultural positions. Both sisters use various grammatical dialects in the ST, but the translator makes them speak without this characteristic in the TT. This 'correction' seems to affect the readers' view of the *sisters* because they are not mentioned before and there are no other references to them in the story. The only contact that the readers have with them is through the dialogues, and it is through these dialogues with such mistakes that the readers can feel the certain kind of inability contained in the text. Such inability together with the dead paralytic priest combine to reinforce the feel-

ing of 'paralysis'. However, the translator does not make use of this characteristic of the ST. Instead, he prefers to demonstrate the sisters' lack of ability in a weaker form. For instance, the translator maintains the use of repetitive words:

...and then *laying him out* and then *the coffin* and then *arranging about* the Mass...
 ...e depois *vestimos ele* e depois *o caixão* e depois *marcamos missa*...

and also presented translations indicating a simple way of speaking:

...they couldn't find him anywhere...
 ...*eles não conseguiram descobrir* onde ele tinha se metido.

V. Conclusion

It seems that the translator has managed to maintain Joyce's style on the whole. He makes equivalent choices, in general, in the word and grammatical levels, and also succeeds in keeping the semantic level, which appears to be of utmost importance in Joyce's work. The author of the SL text exposes a kind of stagnant society through an ordinary event, making use of colloquial elements to preserve the aesthetic effects in the dialogues. The translator could make the reader feel not only the literal 'paralysis' of the priest, but also the paralysis of society, actions, thoughts, and language in conformity with the ST.

As a whole, the translator does not reduce the story to its message, in spite of his choice concerning *the sisters'* dialogues; he is able to re-textualize, maintaining Joyce's style, tone, and also the historical context.

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