

# **FOR NEWNESS IN THE ENGLISH SUBTITLES OF *TERRA ESTRANGEIRA***

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*"Triste de quem vive em casa,  
Contente com o seu lar (...)"  
Fernando Pessoa*

## **1. Within and beyond language**

One of the most meaningful steps taken by Translation Studies in the last decades was the significant move towards a more reflexive attitude in relation to power differentials. Although this certainly is not a field in which possibilities may be exhausted, translation scholars have dwelled upon it in ways that can broaden our perspectives when dealing with translation, in whatever sense one chooses to take this word. Within this enlarged space of discussion, I would like to pay special attention to matters of cultural interchange which take place via language, but stretch the discussion a little and cross the limits of language itself. By doing so, I intend to reflect on the implications of those aspects which inhabit a space beyond language, but which are also essential for carrying on critical translational practices.

Two works are taken here as informing the basis of my argumentation. Firstly, Sherry Simon's essay dealing with paradigms of cultural difference embodied by translation<sup>1</sup>. Although

Simon's article deals directly with power relations in certain areas of Canada, I regard some lines of her argumentation as very pertinent for the purposes I show here. Secondly, Gayatri Spivak's "The Politics of Translation",<sup>2</sup> for her attempt to call attention to the need to, when translating, attend to the rhetorical nature of every language over its logical systematicity. Again, although Spivak's argument deals with certain areas of study, such as feminist writing and translation, which are not directly related to the purposes presented here, some of the lines informing the basis of her article can add some insights to my discussion.

As an attempt to illustrate, in practical terms, some of the main lines of my argumentation, I want to consider certain segments of the English subtitles of the Brazilian film *Terra Estrangeira* (^1995 Video Filmes)<sup>3</sup>. I intend to observe how a translational practice which confirms to the norms<sup>4</sup> of a given market may erase signs of difference both in the linguistic level and as regards those "beyond language" aspects mentioned above. For my particular purposes here, I will refer to those passages in the film which present Portuguese or Angolan characters interacting with Brazilian ones. By means of these illustrations, I intend to approach two questions: (i) How does language itself come to represent the uncertain spaces of cultural difference?<sup>5</sup> (ii) Following the same token, how could one attempt to keep, even if only partially, cultural and linguistic specificity in the English subtitles of TE? But before presenting any illustration, I must try to show how Simon's and Spivak's argumentation may provide me with support for the discussion I propose here.

## **2. Which Portuguese do they speak?**

In the introduction of her article, Simon (1992) refers to a symbolic account of translation:

Symbolically, translation comes to be the very representation of the play of equivalence and difference in cultural interchange: translation permits communication *without eliminating the grounds of specificity* (159) (my emphasis).

In her discussion, Simon refers to cultural interchanges taking place in Canada, a country in which, according to her, language has been taken to be the “essential sign of difference” (*ibid.*). Here, I want to point to the common ground between Simon’s corpus of study and mine. Although, in a way, I am dealing with a different cultural frame – people from different countries speaking the same language, whereas Simon refers to the bilingual situation of Canada – I argue that what mostly marks cultural differences among the various Portuguese speakers figuring in the film plot is precisely the *languages* they use. In this sense, I want to stress the fact that the Brazilian, Portuguese and Angolan characters of TE do not, in a way, speak “the same language”. For it is common sense that those characters speak different kinds of Portuguese. Yet, the assumption that they communicate harmoniously in an identical language seems to have formed the basis for the English subtitling of many passages of TE. In this sense, the idealised proposal quoted above bears little resemblance with what is actually seen in the translated text, for the “grounds of specificity” have not been maintained, as I will illustrate later on.

I believe it is not very hard to trace the path of what sets the ground for the translational practice which we see in the subtitles considered here. Simon herself (*ibid.*) refers to “the careful tailoring of the translation to writerly canons” (164) when addressing some Canadian literary translations. When looking at subtitles, one can spot similar grounds informing the practice. Easy understanding seems to prevail over attempts to stress difference. Such attempts would certainly demand a certain “rupture with the models of [a]esthetic completion” (*ibid.*). Thus, norms, which, as Simon reminds us, have strong relation with “national traditions”

(ibid.:161), directly mould translational production, subtitling being no exception. In this context, one can ask how then we are to deal with the fact that translation is supposed to be “the materialization of our relationship to otherness, to the experience – through language – of what is different” (ibid.). What are possible implications of conforming to translation norms which virtually deny a more significant approximation to what is different?

Subtitling is no easy task. Technical constraints added to the already complicated fact of dealing with different modes<sup>6</sup> make it a translational practice of particular difficulty. Many times subtitlers face alternatives which open little room for a proper representation of spoken dialogues. Yet, matters of cultural specificity seem to be bound to undergo a certain sort of sacrifice which is many times more accentuated than (technically) necessary. However, I would like to consider the possibility of a compromise. Since translation deals with negotiation, with choices, therefore with losses and gains, I would like to reflect on what may be gained or lost if one dares to break with some expected translational norms. In this sense, the compromise I have in mind subverts some expectations as regards “aesthetic completion”, while allowing for giving second thoughts to the discomfort of facing the unknown. What I am attempting at here is in tune with Simon’s view of translation as a powerful participant “in the generation of new forms of knowledge, new textual forms, *new relationships to language*” (ibid.:160) (my emphasis). But before illustrating my point and positing possibilities for directly addressing the questions I have previously presented, I would like to refer to Spivak’s very appropriate account of the limitation of language.

### **3. More than words**

Spivak’s approach to translation in “The Politics of Translation” (see note 2) considers a three-part model to which I would like to

refer here (at least in some aspects) in order to validate my concerns with the way some speeches were subtitled in TE. Spivak points to the fact that every language's rhetorical nature disrupts, to a certain extent, its logical systematicity (180). In this sense, rhetoric, which works "in the silence between and around words" (*ibid.*:181), may many times disrupt the "clearly indicated connections" of logic (*ibid.*). To these two elements – rhetoric and logic — Spivak sees a third one which comes about when rhetoric is privileged: contingency, "the possibility of randomness" (*ibid.*:187). Since privileging rhetoric may mean breaking the usual systematicity of a language, contingency will always surround a translational practice which follows this path. And here Spivak points to the fact that such an attitude constitutes a "risk" because it abandons the "safe" area of logical systematicity and thus constitutes a "violence to the translating medium" (*ibid.*:180). Nevertheless, accepting the rhetorical nature of a language leads to the awareness that "there is no real translation" (*ibid.*:181) if there is not a construction of a relationship between systematicity and this rhetorical nature.

Spivak's proposal of "surrendering to the text", i.e., listening to its silences, dealing with its rhetorical nature, touches a horny ground and certainly sets many restless. Canons and norms are questioned by this proposal and, as she points out, audience demands are held at bay (*ibid.*). Yet, more often than we are used to thinking, language "can only point at" things (*ibid.*:187), "the rhetoric of the text indicates the limits of language" (*ibid.*:183); therefore, taking good heed of this fact actually becomes a *sine qua non* for a translation committed to signifying differences. For a pure attachment to the logic systematicity of a language may leave out a whole set of aspects which are not conveyed by words, but by the silence involving them. This consideration may lead us back to Simon's concern with keeping the "grounds of specificity", as the rhetorical nature of languages many times defines their boundaries. Perhaps language cannot achieve much more than "pointing at" these boundaries, but then overlooking the matter will not be taken here as a possibility. And

here I borrow Spivak's words when insisting on the need to consider the rhetorical nature of languages over their logical systematicity: "no argument for convenience can be persuasive here" (*ibid.*:181). But let us see how this problematic issue may inform subtitling, and how considering it may help me approach the questions I have posited in the introduction of this work.

#### **4. Newness**

Perhaps the most "dangerous" aspect of listening to the rhetorical nature of languages, as suggested by Spivak, lies in the fact that such a choice means to stress what is strange, different, sometimes even incomprehensible. In fact, the attempt to express what Simon (1992) has called "difference manifest in the very fabric of language" (167) may represent breaking violently with market norms or audience expectations. However, one question posited by Spivak (1993) may lead us to rethink current trends in translational practices, particularly in subtitling: "what is it that you are making accessible" when translating (191)? In this sense, making easy intelligibility the ultimate goal may, many times, sacrifice any sign of difference, no matter how significant it might be for a more approximate cultural representation.

One particular feature in the speeches of TE may serve the purpose of illustrating my point here. Let us consider the following sequence in one dialogue in which a Portuguese character talks with a Brazilian one:

\_ (...) Não ligues, *pá*. O solo foi muito interessante, Miguel.

\_ Não conta pra ninguém, tá legal, Pedro? Fica só entre nós dois, tá? (...)

\_ Que é isso, *pá*. Anime-te, *pá*. (...)

\_ Não, não, tô fora.

\_ (...) Isto é assim, o que é que tu queres? Isto é um sítio em que vem gente de todo lado, *pá*, dos brasíis, das angolas, das guinés, o que é que tu queres? É assim, *pá!* (...)

\_ É, *pá*. Estás com um bom humor hoje!

\_ Eu tô ótimo. Tô ótimo. (...)

The subtitles are as follows:

The solo was great.  
But don't tell anyone.  
It'll be our little secret. (...)

Come on, Miguel (...)

There are folks from everywhere:  
Brazil,

Angola, Guinea...  
That's how it is. (...)

You're in a great mood!  
I'm fine.

As it can be seen from the subtitle segments above, the vocative *pá* was completely erased. This procedure results in a uniform English which fails to point to the Anglophone audience<sup>7</sup> the fact that the speakers, while speaking “the same language”, do not share the same regionalisms in their speeches. In this particular dialogue,

which introduces both characters to the audience, the maintenance of the vocative could work as a possible way to make the Anglophone audience aware of the multiculturalism of the dialogue. Although it can be argued that the development of the plot will make the distinction clear, I understand that the “very fabric” of the language could approximate the subtitles to the rich linguistic features intended by the filmmakers. In this sense, I advocate here something in tune with Simon’s (1992) account of translation as the means to “represent modes of creation, mechanisms for engendering new meanings and *forms*” (160) (my emphasis). The maintenance of the vocative (in its original form - *pá*) in the subtitles would probably intrigue the Anglophone audience, but its presence in the dialogue is what partially marks the difference for the Portuguese-speaking audience as well. The negotiation process would then guarantee some gain in terms of cultural representation, whereas implying some loss of comfort on the part of the Anglophone audience; but then we can go back to Spivak’s question quoted at the beginning of this section. Something like “*Come on, pá*” instead of “*Come on, Miguel*” in the subtitles would threaten the logical systematicity of the English language, but would make the multiculturalism of the dialogue at least a little more visible. The rhetorical nature of the Portuguese character’s speech would be translated via the untranslatability of the vocative. But this untranslatability would be underscored as a mark of difference, not disguised under a plain uniformed English which fakes a cultural homogeneity which the characters do not share.

The same argument may be used to advocate the maintenance, in the English subtitles, of some hybrid<sup>8</sup> constructions used by the Angolan characters of the film. Not addressing questions of what such a hybridity (in the original speeches) might imply in political terms, my point here is to approximate the subtitles to the spoken dialogues: the maintenance in the subtitles of a feature *actually present* in the dialogues.

Let us consider the following dialogue:

- \_ Qual é o problema, pá?
- \_ Qual é o problema? (...)
- \_ Unbivalê. Anhaunbitê.
- \_ O que é que estão praí a dizer? A pergunta é simples, meu, viram o brasileiro ou não?
- \_ Não vimos ninguém.

The English subtitles are as follows:

- \_ What's your problem? (...)
- It's a simple question:  
have you seen the Brazilian?
- \_ We saw no-one.

Some of terms used by the Angolan speakers in the dialogue above sound probably as much strange for a Portuguese speaker as for any Anglophone person who is unfamiliar with them. However, a person relying on the English subtitles to watch the film may have the mistaken impression of understanding some dialogues more easily than a Brazilian Portuguese speaker, for instance, who “listens to” the dialogues. Again, easy intelligibility is maintained to the detriment of any attempt at cultural representation, or at least an attempt to “point at” the fact that multiculturalism is a crucial aspect in the dialogues presented here. Something not only present in the content of the words, but also very vivid in the sheer presence of some terms meant to stress difference. Borrowing some terms used by Simon (*ibid.*), “linguistic overlay” and “plurilingual cohabitation” (169) could perhaps work as a means to signify difference, to stress the rich multicultural nature of TE in its subtitles (in this particular

case, actually maintaining the plurilingual cohabitation materially present in the character's speech, since the terms "unbivalê" and "anhaunbitê" are not even Portuguese). Thus, the strangeness felt by the Brazilian audience, for instance, could, at least to a certain extent, be experienced by Anglophone audiences as well.

### **5. Desconcertante mutação<sup>9</sup>**

Back to my initial questions. How does language itself come to represent the uncertain spaces of cultural difference? In different manners. In its regional variations, but also in the variations within the variations, in a sometimes non-retrievable miscellaneous composition. As a Portuguese speaker who watches TE may feel, cultural difference can be represented somewhere beyond semantic content. The non-understanding of some terms do not halt the construction of meaning; yet the presence of these same terms is not dispensable. They refer us to that space beyond language mentioned by Spivak, to the contingency which translation is expected to point at, not hide in the search for convenience.

How could one attempt to keep, even if only partially, cultural and linguistic specificity in the English subtitles of TE? I believe that a subversive translation, valorising the multilingual nature of TE in the subtitles, even when this implies "unexpected combinations"<sup>10</sup> in the linguistic level, would be more suitable than pseudo-uniformity. The question may be raised, suitable for whom? Suitable for what? And here I dare to sketch an answer. Suitable for, even if confined to a prototypical attempt, pointing at the presence of difference, at the intermingling multicultural elements featured in the film dialogues. The subversion is risky indeed, as Spivak (1993) has pointed out – there is no easy path to escape logical systematicity and head for contingencies (180). But a new attitude towards how far subtitles can go in terms of representation

of film dialogues may be welcome in a time when new “paradigms of difference and hybridity” are being continuously fostered (Simon, 1992:173). This could probably be taken as too precarious a form of dealing with the most complex matter of interlingual cultural representation, but I would rather see it as an initial step towards new attempts to signify difference in screen translation. The translation of the more superficial layers of TE speeches, along with a certain disregard for the silences and differences in the film, do little justice to a film meant to discuss migration, intercultural exchange, the Portuguese language, foreignness, “losing countries”<sup>11</sup>.

Possibilities are not to be exhausted here. Discussions on subtitling demand more than a couple of aspects to be carefully analysed before any sensible conclusion may be drawn. However, the idea of adopting new linguistic combinations as a means of maintaining, or at least signalling, cultural differences seems to me most appealing. Rushdie may be right in his belief that newness enters the world via unexpected combinations. Perhaps the result may be labelled as another form of what Spivak has called *translateese* (*ibid.*:182). But a translateese which points at the limitations of translation, points at the boundaries, and does not pacifically contribute to a homogeneity which bears little resemblance with reality.

## Notes

1. Simon, Sherry. (1992) “The Language of Cultural Difference: Figures of Alterity in Canadian Translation”. In: Venuti, L. (ed.) *Rethinking Translation – Discourse Subjectivity, Ideology*. (159-176) London/New York: Routledge.
2. Spivak, Gayatri C. (1993) *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York/London: Routledge.

3. Henceforth TE.

4. I am taking the term *norms* here in the sense suggested by Toury (1995): “between these two poles [relatively absolute rules and pure idiosyncrasies] lies a vast middle-ground occupied by intersubjective factors commonly designated *norms*” (54) (emphasis in the original). Here, I refer particularly to his definition of *initial norms*, i.e., those which set up sanctioned practices to be followed by translators, such as the adherence to norms coming from the source text (and system) – adequacy - or to norms generated in the target text (and system) - acceptability. As extensively demonstrated in Venuti (1995), Anglo-American publishing market has largely opted for the second stance.

5. This very same question has been posited by Simon (1992). In her article, Simon points to the fact that this question also worked as the basis for Bakhtin’s theory of literary representation (172). Here, however, it will lead to considerations regarding the subtitling of TE.

6. I am using the term *mode* here as proposed by Halliday for one of the types of interaction defined as social action (see Halliday 1994).

7. I see the need for emphasising that my reference to Anglophone audiences here subscribes to Venuti’s study in *The Translator’s Invisibility* (1995). I do not intend to refer to all members of such a certainly heterogeneous audience as unable to grasp some of the cultural references present in the speeches analysed here. And although Venuti’s study refers mostly to the American scene, I will assume certain general similarities as regards the degree of acquaintance with the various forms of the Portuguese language spoken in the film on the part of other English speakers. I am entirely to blame for any mistaken assumption in this sense.

8. I am using the notion of hybridity here along the lines suggested by Bhabha (1995) in *The Location of Culture*: “it is the space of *intervention* emerging in the cultural *interstices* that introduces *creative invention* into existence” (09) (my emphasis).

9. I am borrowing this phrase from the cover of the published script of TE (Thomas, D., Marcos Bernstein & Walter Salles, 1996): “...uma história de jovens brasileiros despaisados num mundo em desconcertante mutação” (the excerpt is not signed).

10. The expression has been used by Rushdie (1996) when describing his stylistic approach in the writing of *The Satanic Verses*.

11. This phrase has featured in the introduction for the published script of TE (Thomas, D., Marcos Bernstein & Walter Salles, 1996) in reference to a phrase by Fernando Pessoa which permeated the idealisation of the film: “viajar, perder países”. The introduction is not signed.

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