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Translating Spanish Literature into English: Some cross-cultural pragmatic issues

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Translating a literary text certainly poses many problems. As E. Sapir observes in his enlightening study of culture and translation, «no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached» (1956: 69).

Different techniques should be used in order to avoid social or cultural misinterpretations in the target language, since both the original text (SLT) and its translation (TLT) consist of different linguistic and cultural facts. Thus, as M. Baker states, «the choice of a suitable equivalent (linguistic or extralinguistic) will depend not only on the linguistic system or systems being handled by the translator, but also on the way both the writer of the source text and the translator choose to manipulate the linguistic systems in question» (1992: 18). As I see it, choosing between possible translations is not only a matter of stylistic choice, but a way of transmitting the same pragmatic intention as the original author did, and trying to get the same effects on the readers of the target text.

I have chosen, as a subject for this study, Federico García Lorca's tragedy *Bodas de Sangre*, perhaps his most poetic play. But Lorca's poetic language also reflects the dramatic situation of a society: all the images, connotations, social implicatures, etc. play a decisive role for the interpretation, and hence it is necessary for the translator to bridge the socio-cultural gap between the two audiences.

Needless to say, the function of the text to be translated is of prime importance. When translating dramatic texts, the translator faces the criterion of playability: on the one hand, in a text produced primarily for a reading audience, literalness and linguistic fidelity are the main criteria to follow; on the other hand, a theatre text written for performance will comprise certain factors in order to

make it performable (beyond stage directions and dialogues), which will give rise to inevitable linguistic changes or adaptations (shortening or adding speeches, gesturing, etc...). Very closely related to the primary purpose of writing the translation of a play is the old debate on whether *to take the receiver to the author* (trying to transfer the text to the reader as if the author had written it in the TL; i.e. retaining, as far as possible, the original's style, syntax,...), or *to take the author to the receiver* (trying to communicate the same impression he experienced when reading the original; i.e. aiming at functional equivalence). The translator is hence allowed to choose between a *domesticating* method, reducing the SLT to TL cultural values; and a *foreignizing* method, registering the linguistic and cultural peculiarities of the SLT and showing the subordination of the translator to the SLT (Venuti, 1995: 20).

Along with these lines of reasoning, and among all the translations of *Bodas de Sangre* available, I've chosen to compare one by an academic (Gwynne Edwards) and another by a poet (Ted Hughes); not only because they might be better aware of linguistic and pragmatic nuances, and other effects in the TL; but mainly because they manifest the well-known distinction between reader-oriented and performance-oriented translations, or the translators' attitude towards *domestication*.

Given that translators make interpretative choices based on their understanding of the SLT in order to enable an English audience to comprehend some of the cultural resonances encoded in the play, I will try to point out some of the difficulties and failures in the linguistic and pragmatic equivalence that might be found in the translation of this literary text, and some of the mechanisms of transfer used to attain the same intended message present in the SLT, without losing in the attempt the stylistics of the original.

I will start with those cases in which there is **no direct equivalent** in the TL for a cultural or linguistic item of the SL, and thus the translators choose among a range of strategies. The following examples may serve to illustrate this:

- (1) Aire oscuro el encaje de su **mantilla**. (L, 111)
 Dark breeze the lace/ Of her **mantilla** weaves. (E, 62)
 A dark wind/ Lifts the lace/ Of her **mantilla**. (H, 35)¹

- (2) Hijo, el **almuerzo**. (L, 46)
 Son, your breakfast. (E, 33)
 Take something to eat. (H, 1)

¹ References to the play and its translations will henceforth be indicated using the initial of the author followed by the number of page in which the quotation appears. See *References* for the editions used.

- (3) Hace las **migas** a las tres, cuando el lucero. (L, 79)
 She's **breaking up bread** at three when the morning star's shining. (E, 48)
 She's up at three, with the morning star, **baking bread**. (H, 18)
- (4) El **azahar** te lo voy a poner desde aquí, hasta aquí, de modo que la corona
 luzca sobre el peinado. (L, 92)
 I'm going to put the **orange-blossom** from here to here, so that the wreath will
 crown your hair. (E, 53)
 If I fix the **orange-blossom** from here to here, it will make a crown. (H, 24)
- (5) Vieja, revieja, requetevieja. (L, 49)
 You old woman, you old, old woman, you old, old, old woman. (E, 35)
 Old woman, old woman, you poor old woman. (H, 3)
- (6) ¡**Ea**, que no! (L, 85)
 I said no. (E, 50)
 No. (H, 21)

In example (1), 'mantilla' has been borrowed by the English culture as traditionally Spanish, and it is lexicalised in the TL as a loan-word. The translators have decided, then, to use the loan word instead of looking for a cultural substitution.

In some instances we are dealing with cases in which referential meaning depends mainly on the cultural features of a given society. When there is a lexical equivalent, meaning might change slightly, since it depends on a culture-specific context, as in (2), since there is no exact equivalent for 'almuerzo' in English culture, although it could be called a mid morning snack, or even an early lunch. In the case of 'migas', in (3), it is worth mentioning that they were a traditional rural dish, eaten for breakfast, before men left for the fields at about four o'clock in the morning. But this tradition, and the notion of the women having to prepare it, cannot be understood by an English audience. There is a strong case, then, for explaining it or for adding something like 'as she should do'. 'Azahar', in (4), is a flower used as a symbol of purity; and that is why brides used to wear it in wedding ceremonies. The translators need to make this symbolic use clear to their audience, or they will miss the actual symbolic meaning, which is not conveyed by 'orange-blossom'.

Some other items in the SL cannot be lexicalised in the TL. In the case of «*Vieja, revieja, requetevieja*», in (5), English lacks an affix with the same meaning; and therefore, the translator has recourse to a paraphrase, though I do not think that the translation expresses quite the same affectionate attitude. One might say the same about «*¡Ea, que no!*», in (6). The exclamation is used in Andalucía merely to emphasise, and so its omission has, at most, a marginal effect.

Sometimes, the word in the SL has an **implied meaning** which the TL versions fail to capture, as in the following examples:

- (7) Vender, ¡vender! ¡Bah!; comprar **hija**, comprarlo todo. (L, 78)
Sell, sell! No! Buy, **woman**, buy everything. (E, 47)
- (8) Me voy, que pronto llegará **mi gente** del campo. (L, 60)
I'm going. **My family** will be back soon from the fields. (E, 39)
I have to go. **The men** will be back from the fields soon. (H, 8)
- (9) ¿Has visto qué día de calor?– Iban **negros** los chiquillos que llevan el agua a los segadores. (L, 60)
Have you ever seen such a hot day? – The children were **fed up** taking water to the harvesters. (E, 39)
Did you ever know such heat! – The children are **worn out** taking water to the harvesters. (H, 8)

'Hija', in (7), is a common form of address and implies an affection which is not expressed in 'woman'. The term 'mi gente', in this context, means 'family'; however, Hughes has used the word 'men', to point out that it is the men that go out to the fields (whilst women are confined to the house and needlework). And the word 'negros' can have different connotations: it can certainly express a feeling of anger, as Edwards has understood; or being extremely tired, as Hughes' translation implies; but it can also refer to the fact that people in Southern Spain have a darker skin colour due to the warm weather, and thus they turn brown very quickly ('ponerse negro').

We also find an implied meaning in the name of the Bride's lover, *Leonardo*. He is the only character in the play who has been given a name. Lorca tends to universalise the characters, because generic instead of real names give them an archetypal quality (*the Mother, the Father, the Bride, ...*). *Leonardo* being the exception makes Lorca's intention obvious: it is a symbolic name, suggesting the strength of a lion and the fire of passion. *Leonardo* cannot be translated or adapted, and so its connotations are absent in the translation unless, of course, its symbolic meaning has been explained for the TL audience.

If we move on to equivalence above word level, one can notice that the play is full of **idiomatic expressions** which are a defining feature of the popular registers in Spanish, and sometimes of Lorca's own literary idiolect. For some of the fixed expressions in the text, the translator has used an idiom or expression of the TL with the same meaning, as in the examples under (10) below. For some others, the translator could not find a match in the TL, and so he paraphrases the meaning of the ST idiom, as in (11):

- (10) Que me cabía todo el campo en la boca. (L, 112)
The whole world was mine. (E, 62)

Pero se me calienta el alma... (L, 99)
But it makes my blood boil... (E, 56)

Un hombre hermoso, con su flor en boca, (L, 47)
A beautiful man, tasting the fulness of life, (E, 33)
Por mí, que reviente. (L, 68)
For all I care, he can burst. (E, 43)

(11) Tu hijo vale mucho. (L, 58)
Your son's precious. (E, 38)
La tela es de lo que no hay. (L, 107)
The material is wonderful! (E, 60)

Ella es de cuidado. (L, 69)
That one needs watching. (E, 43)
Pero quien la conozca a fondo no hay nadie. (L, 57)
But there's no one knows her really well. (E, 38)

In some other cases there is an equivalent expression in the TL, but the translator does not use it and carries out a literal translation, as we can see below, in (12), since 'una espina en el corazón', 'por todo el oro del mundo' and 'como un toro' are fixed expressions in Spanish; and English has obvious effective equivalents for the three of them ('to be smarting from a disappointment', 'not for all the tea in China', 'as strong as an ox'):

(12) ...Una **espina tengo en el corazón**, y es la huertecilla esa metida entre mis tierras, que no me quieren vender **por todo el oro del mundo**. (L, 77)
...There's just **one thorn in my heart**, and that's that little orchard stuck between my fields, and they won't sell it to me **for all the gold in the world**. (E, 47)

¿Y es justo y puede ser que una cosa pequeña como una pistola o una navaja pueda acabar con un hombre, que es un **toro**? (L, 47)
Is it fair? Is it possible that a thing as small as a pistol or a knife can put an end to a man who's a **bull**? (E, 34)

The second alternative may, even so, be inadvisable, since the actual meaning may be hidden and consequently, not understood when reading the TLT. Thus, in «*Mi hijo la cubrirá bien*», there is no way an English speaker could interpret the utterance 'my son will cover her well' as it should be. Hughes, by contrast, translates it in a more appropriate way:

(13) Mi hijo **la cubrirá bien**. Es de buena simiente. (L, 117)
My son will **cover her well**. He's of good seed. (E, 65)
As bulls go, my son will be a **good worker**. (H, 39)

The paragraphs that follow will analyse some pragmatic features which are manifested at **discourse level**. Some of these will be grounded in the textual data (deploying conventionalised usages of the pragmatic force of utterances, according to the social rules of both the source and the target language); others in the importance of context in cultural behaviour (the rural Spain of the beginning of the 20th century and culture-specific contexts such as ceremonies, popular songs, etc).

As regards the social rules of a language, the notions of **politeness and indirectness** of speech styles vary within cultures. The transfer of the norms of one community to another may lead to pragmatic failure and to the judgement that the speaker is in some way being impolite or rude. Translating quite literally, instead of making the TT more truthful to its ST, might change the illocutionary force (and therefore the effect) of a given speech act. Using negation in Spanish and English, for instance, might produce a different illocutionary force of the same act. Let's consider the following examples:

(14) ¿No tomamos algo? (L, 82)

Will you take something? (E, 49)

A little something? (H, 19)

(15) ¿No andáis satisfechos de tanto saludo? (L, 131)

Aren't you pleased with all these good wishes? (E, 70)

You must be giddy with all these toasts and blessings and congratulations.
(H, 45)

(16) ¿Por qué no compráis tierras? El monte es barato y los hijos se crían mejor.
(L, 122)

Why don't you buy land? The mountain's cheap and it's better for bringing up children. (E, 67)

Buy some land here. The mountain's cheap. And it's an excellent place for bringing up children. (H, 41)

In (14), in the Spanish realisation of the offer, the use of the interrogative structure with negation, presumes an affirmative answer, since the negative is a conventional formula; and it shows an intention of close relationship. In English, however, translating this negative form would provide a stronger implicit force and seem not even to hold out the chance of accepting the offer (assuming a negative answer); and therefore both translators have adapted it to an affirmative question. In (15), Edwards' translation makes the sentence seem to imply that the Bride and the Bridegroom are not happy with the guests greeting them; whilst in Spanish it does not convey any pragmatic effect (it just assumes they are pleased about it). The suggestion in (16) also adopts a conventionalised form; but the English counterpart expresses a stronger force, that might change

the meaning implied in the Spanish suggestion and sound like a reproach, as in Edwards. Both, then, are the same speech act, but the English form is too forceful to be polite. Hughes, by contrast, adapts it, reformulating the indirect speech act as a clear suggestion.

With regard to requesting behaviour, interactional styles can also vary along levels of directness and amount and type of request modifications, as can be seen in (17).

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| (17) ¿Se queda usted aquí esta noche? | [...] Debía usted quedarse. (L, 120-121) |
| Are you staying here tonight? | [...] You ought to stay! (E, 66) |
| Will you stay here tonight? | [...] Then stay with us. (H, 40) |

It is said that English speakers are rather more polite and indirect in their requesting behaviour. However, as shown in Edwards' translation, the request sounds more direct than the original version. «¿Se queda Ud. aquí esta noche?» shows conventional indirectness in requesting; and the essential condition for the act, «*Debía usted quedarse*», conveys respect and social distance. By contrast, the English 'you ought to stay!' sounds like a straight order. The face-threatening act is very obvious and the translator should have adapted it to a less abrasive speech act, such as 'I think you should stay' or, as in Hughes' version, 'Then stay with us'.

Appropriate politeness values can also be expressed through the use of the marker *please*. It occurs more often and in more contexts in English than do equivalent markers in Spanish. In Edwards' translation, however, I have not found any adaptation to English values in this sense. He does not add a single marker (either for requesting, thanking, or apologising); and this alters the realisation of speech acts in the target culture. In the two examples which follow, in (18) and (19), the English speech acts sound less polite than they should. Both examples confirm what Levinson says: «Even where there are underlying universals, as seems to be the case in the construction of polite expressions, there is considerable room for cross-cultural misunderstanding» (1983: 376):

- (18) Prepara las bandejas de trigo. (L, 118)
Get the trays of wheat ready. (E, 66)

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (19) —¿Quieres un refresco de limón? | —Do you want a drink of lemon? |
| —Con el agua bien fría. [...] | —With the water really cold. [...] |
| —El refresco, ¿está frío? | —The drink. Is it cold enough? |
| —Sí. (L, 66, 68) | —Yes. (E, 42-43) |

In other instances the translator makes the force of the utterance clearer and more explicit, as in (20), where the translators adapt the greeting to conventionalised routine formulae in English:

- (20) ¡Que sea para bien! (L, 118)
 Good luck for the future. (E, 66)
 I hope they will be very happy. (H, 39)

On a few occasions, the translator conveys a stronger illocutionary force by other means, as in Hughes' rendering of «*¡No cubras de flores la boda!*». Given the contextual assumptions available in the text, he interprets the utterance with a stronger tragic force, and adds a touch of darkness by using 'to bury': «*Don't bury the wedding in flowers*» (H, 56).

The **context** in which an utterance occurs is of great importance in cultural behaviour, for it determines the range of implicatures² that we derive from it. Without understanding the context, we cannot appreciate the whole message and sense of the text.

Some elements of the original context are shared by both the source and the target cultures, and implicatures can easily be inferred. The tragedy of *Bodas de sangre*, for instance, is foreseen from the beginning, and we can infer the presage of death from several passages, as in (21). This is also the case with the importance given to the notion of *self-respect*, under (22), as in many other examples throughout the play, in which the metaphor applies equally in ST and TT, implying the need to follow social conventions (in this case, to arrive at one's wedding with purity of body and soul):

- (21) La navaja, la navaja... Malditas sean todas y el bribón que las inventó. [...] ¿Cómo no voy a hablar viéndote salir por esa puerta? [...] (L, 46, 48)
 The knife, the knife... Damn all of them and the scoundrel who invented them.[...] How am I not going to speak seeing you go out of that door? [...] (E, 33-34)

- (22) Mi hijo es hermoso. No ha conocido mujer. La honra más limpia que una sábana puesta al sol. (L, 78)
 My son's handsome. He's never known a woman. His name's clearer than a sheet spread in the sun. (E, 48)

At times, however, the interpretative tools necessary to understand the play are not provided by the situational information offered in the text. When it comes to this, the translator faces a major difficulty: there is a certain amount of culture-specific knowledge that cannot be deduced from the text alone. This information is implicit in the original version and can easily be inferred by readers who are aware of the space-time context. The translators may, then,

² Implicatures are pragmatic inferences by which we come to understand what the speaker means or implies.

need to add or manipulate some information to make their message more explicit, as we can see in (23), in which the social message is clear (the role of a woman in that society is to stay at home and worry only about her husband):

- (23) Por eso me caso. Y me encerraré con mi marido, a quien tengo que querer por encima de todo. (L, 99)
And so now, I am getting married. I shall shut myself **away with my husband**, and love him **alone**, above everybody and everything else. (H, 28)

Catholicism is also strongly institutionalised in that context, but it is not explicitly expressed in Lorca's text; therefore, the translators make a minor adjustment in the discourse, adapting the most routine of the formulae, as shown in (24):

- (24)—Adiós, mujer. —Adiós. (L, 60)
—God be with you, woman. —God be with you. (E, 39)
—God bless you. —Yes, God bless. (H, 8)

Likewise, the circumstances of composition of Lorca's play also have a bearing on its literary meaning. The plot is based on a true story, a newspaper fragment which told of a family vendetta, where the daughter of one family ran away with the son of the enemy family. It appeared in all Spanish newspapers of the time, so the audience of the 30s and 40s probably knew it well. English audiences lack this background knowledge. Edwards provided this information in his introduction; but there is no introduction in Hughes' translation, and therefore, no reference to this fact. Hughes also makes stage directions in general much shorter, and as a result, much of the information contained in them, together with its connotations, is lost.

Finally, I would like to devote some lines to what I consider the most formidable challenge to the translator: the **poetry** of *Blood Wedding*. We could say that the difficulties in translating Lorca's poetry arise not just from phonic effects that are intricately interlinked with meanings, but from the conscious choice of words to express a complex set of ideas and emotions. The translators have to reflect the stylistic features of the poems, but these poems are full of symbolism as well and, in this regard, have an effect on the audience that the translators also need to achieve.

In Acts I and II the poetry takes the form of popular Spanish songs: *copla del cortejo de bodas*, *copla de la criada*, *canción de las hilanderas*, *canción de cuna*, etc. In order to enable an English audience to understand those songs appropriately, the translators should have provided some sense of the context of performance of traditional Spanish folklore, because the simple translation of the songs is insufficient for the reader of the TT to realise the social effect

of scenes such as the 'cortejo de boda' (i.e. people singing as they walk to the ceremony). In Act III the dialogue itself is often in verse. For brevity's sake, I will not reproduce any passage, but it is essential to say that the original text is usually characterised by vowel assonance (the last word of alternate lines has the same two vowels, one stressed, the other unstressed: *catedrales / escaparse / valle / aire / sangre*). Since English cannot easily achieve this effect, Edwards has used rhyming patterns in some cases and free verse in others, trying to remain close to the original (in the number and length of lines, the syntactic structures, etc.). Hughes tries a different approach to metre in order to reproduce the pragmatic effect of the SLT. But his version generally exhibits great irregularity in the length and number of lines, so we could say that the effect-translation principle when applied to prosodic devices is not very satisfactory.

As a conclusion, Edwards' translation seems literal in the sense that it has been adjusted to the TL's grammatical and lexical system, but not to its pragmatic system. We can perceive an intention of reproducing the words of the original, since he follows, as far as possible, what he finds on the semantic, syntactic and lexical levels of the SLT, but he could have been bolder in trying different approaches in order to find equivalents that would make the dialogue more acceptable and more familiar for an English-speaking audience. Hughes, in contrast, tries to attain that kind of pragmatic effect in the English reader, although he uses some licences that are highly disputable.

Nevertheless, both achieve a considerable grade of communicability of content, since the translated versions maintain the sense and the connotations of the symbols used in the original version and make their readers aware of the tragic effect of the source text, with little loss of the intended meaning and emotions suggested by Lorca; and to that extent, their versions cannot be faulted. In this sense, cross-cultural variation arises only from the fact that the language used by the characters in the play reflects their social status and their rural extraction. Recapitulating, neither of the translations is the *ideal* one: there are many paraphrases, implied meanings that are missed, omissions, etc. But in cross-cultural translations, we have to bear in mind that not only extreme fidelity is impossible, but complete functional equivalence is also impossible.

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