# How far can a translator go from the original text? Comparison and analysis of two translations of "The HappyPrince," regarding lexical choice, information flow and gender

Ana Cristina Ostermann
**Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina**

## Abstract

No presente artigo analiso comparativamente duas traduções do conto "O príncipe Feliz", de Oscar Wilde, considerando-se três aspectos específicos: escolha lexical, fluxo de informações e gênero. Com este estudo tenho como objetico demonstrar como, neste caso em particular, estratégias que o/a tradutor/a utiliza podem aproximar e/ou afastar a tradução não apenas do texto original, bem como da audiência-alvo. Conforme se pode observar ao longo deste artigo, muitas destas escolhas, principalmente aquelas relacionadas ao gênero, acarretam o que se poderia considerar "danos à tradução", e geram novas modificações as quais o/a tradutor/a fica impelido a praticar. Igualmente significativas são as escolhas lexicais que limitam um texto (originalmente destinado ao público adulto e infantil) ao leitor maduro e com um vocabulário mais apurado.

## INTRODUCTION

How far can a translator go from the original text? That is the question to be raised when we compare and analyse the different paths two translators have taken when translating "The Happy Prince", by Oscar Wilde (1988). And we could answer it by saying that sometimes, as in one of the cases mentioned below, translators seem to go too far.

The two translations studied in this article are one by Otto Schneider (TT1 from now on), whose date of publication does not appear in the book, and another (TT2) published in 1992 — very recent, indeed — and translated by Barbara Eliodora.

The following comparison and analysis of these two translations aim at demonstrating, in terms of lexical choice — register —, information flow, and gender, how much TT1 (Otto Schneider's) has been deviated from the original text, while TT2 (Barbara Eliodora's) has been attached to both source-text and - culture and target-text and - culture.

## 1. REGISTER

The first aspect to be analyzed and compared in the two translations of The Happy Prince is **register**. Register can be defined as "a variety of language that a language user considers appropriate to a specific situation"(Baker, 1992, p. 15).

Lexical choices made by the author might be a reflection of her/his intentions. The analysis of various lexical items in a text can often show that a particular register is characteristic of the whole text. Christiane Nord (1991) claims that if it is required from the translator "the preservation of such features, individual translation decisions have to be subordinated to this purpose"(p. 114). Regarding the recipient orientation of a text, she

goes on, saying that it is also "mainly reflected by the choice of lexic, e.g. by the use of words form particular registers [...]"(p. 115).

Although "The Happy Prince"was written at the end of the last century, Wild's lexical choice does **not** seem to have been of a high register. Perhaps a good reason for this choice was that children were the original intended audience of the tale.

By comparing the two translations under the perspective of lexical choice, specifically register, one can observe that for several words, T1 used a high register. That seems quite strange, because it neither really "reproduces" the author's choice, nor does it become "readable"[1]for part of the intended audience, i.e., the very young readers. T2, on the other hand, seems to have chosen a lower register in her translation. For instance, where in the source text there was "... I can see all the **ugliness**...", T1 translated "... posso ver toda **fealdade**...", T2 decided for a smoother expression: "posso ver todo o **mal**."Although the word "mal"in a first reading could appear to be somehow distant from the original word "ugliness", if we take into consideration the context in which it happens, it seems more appropriate than "fealdade". The latter, besides consisting of a word not very often used in a contemporary Portuguese, does not encapsulate the exact meaning "ugliness"assumes in the extract it appears.

Another good example of this higher register choices made by T1 was the translation for "passion flowers", in the passage in which a girl is talking to her lover about the flowers a seamstress is embroidering in the dress she is going to wear at the "State-ball". T1 translated them as "flores de martírio"which, although being possible to be found as a Portuguese version for this type of flowers, is not a common one. Besides, if we consider that a ball is supposed to be an event of entertainment, the word "martírio"in the expression "flores de martírio"can indeed assume a very marked and contradictory meaning; in Portuguese "martírio"connotes "suffering". T2, in her part, translated it as "flores de maracujá", which is an everyday expression and absolutely unmarked, not connoting any type of feeling, either positive or negative.

A few more examples are worth being discussed, such as the words/ expressions in bold below:

> ST:     ...for the loveliest of the Queen's **maids-of-honour**...
>
>          ...to the local **newspaper**...
>
>          ...**on the top of the church steeple**...

TT1:   ...que a mais bela dama de honor da rainha...

...para a gazeta local...

..**no cimo do campanário da igreja**...

TT2:   ...para a mais bela das **Damas de Honra** da Rainha...

...para o jornal local...

...**no topo da torre da igreja**...

If we look at the source-text and compare the two translations we can once again notice the "marked"choices T1 makes in his translations. First of all, it is important to mention that having "maides-of-honor"in social events is not a common habit in the Brazilian culture, except for weddings in specific religions and regions in the country. However, probably due to the different cultural influences Brazil has gone through, almost anyone knows what they are. So if you refer to "damas de honra"— as T2 chose in her translation — it is not hard to associate it with what the expression really means. Nevertheless, the same can not be said about "damas-de-honor", which, although being graphically very similar to "damas de honra", might sound unfamiliar to a great number of people in a first reading. And the same can be said about the T1's translations for "on the top of the church steeple"and "newspaper". The selections "no topo de campanário"and "gazeta"respectively, are of a totally different register, i.e., although it is not hard for an adult reader — probably the same can not be said about a child reader — to understand both, they do not consist of the most frequent choices in usage in everyday life, or else, they do not sound as natural and habitual as "church steeple"and "newspaper"do in English.

Through the examples above it is possible to observe T2 has seemed to remain closer to the target text **and reader**. Because of the lower register TT2 becomes a more appropriate text to a young reader. The high register in TT1, on the other hand, would probably make it difficult for a Portuguese-speaking child to understand many of the words in the fairy tale.

## 2. INFORMATION FLOW

A second aspect compared in these two translations that also demonstrates how TT2 has been more closely attached to the source text and target-audience concerns **information flow**.

Information flow has to do with the linear arrangement of sentences, which "has a role to play in processing information and organizing sentences at text level"(Baker, 1992, p. 120). And one way of explaining the interactional organization of sentences is to suggest that a clause consists of two segments. Halliday (1976) names the first segment as **theme** and the second, **rheme**. Theme is what the clause is about, while rheme is what the speaker says about the theme, fulfilling the communicative purpose of the utterance.

The selection of an individual theme of a given clause in a given text is not in itself particulary significant. But the overall choice and ordering of themes plays an important role in organizing a text and providing a point of orientation for a given stretch of language.

In the tale "The Happy Prince,"one finds a lot of sentences that start with the pronoun "he"referring to the Swallow. The pronoun "he"in those several sentences is generally a conflation of subject, actor[2] and theme, what would consist of an  unmarked organization[3]."As such, it should not be problematic for the translator. In this text, however, the series of homogeneous themes, although being unmarked, provides a point of orientation and a method of developement for some of its parts. In fact, the high frequency of "he"as theme helps to maintain a sense of continuity and a coherent point of view.

Nevertheless, this pattern might not be reproduced very naturally in Portuguese, since written Portuguese rarely uses independent pronouns, and in Portuguese, verbs are inflected for person and number. This means that the combination of pronoun plus verb, such as "he said", is rendered by an inflected verb as theme in Portuguese. It is important to bear in mind that while these inflected verbs do carry the same information as an English pronoun-plus-verb combination, the effect of placing them in theme position is not the same. The impact of a series of **he**'s in theme position is not the same as the impact of a series of verbs inflected for the third person, such as "saw-he", where it is difficult to discern a theme line as clearly as in the pronoun-plus-verb combination.

The two translations being compared here present two different choices concerning this matter of information flow, regarding the pronoun "he"as theme. T1 seems to have decided not to preserve the thematic patterning of the original text. In fact, a series of independent pronouns in theme position, in some situations in Portuguese, might be unnatural.

T2 instead, has kept the translated independent pronoun in the theme position. In fact, most sentences in the text that start with the pronoun

"he"have been maintained unaltered in terms of position in the Portuguese translation. This choice, indeed, although unnatural at first sight in written Portuguese, does make the information flow smoothly in the text, providing it with a sense of continuity, which usually constitutes one of the most important characteristics of a fairy tale, such as in the extract below:

ST:   **He passed** over the river, and saw the lanterns hanging to the masts of the ships. He passed over the Ghetto, and saw the old Jews bargaining with each other [...]. At last, **he came** to the poor house and looked in. The boy was tossing feverishly on his bed, and the mother [...]. In **he hopped,** and laid the great ruby on the table beside the woman's thimble. Then **he flew** gently round the bed, fanning the boy's forehead with his wings [...].

TT1: **Atravessou** o rio, e viu as lanternas que pendiam dos mastros dos navios. **Passou** sobre o Gueto e viu os velhos judeus negociando entre si [...]. Por fim chegou à casa pobre e espreitou. O pequeno agitava-se febrilmente no leito, e a mãe [...]. **Entrou** e colocou o grande rubi sobre a mesa, ao lado do dedal. Depois **voou** docemente à roda da cama do pequenino, refrescando-lhe a fronte com as asas.

TT2: **Ele passou** pelo rio e viu as lanternas penduradas nos mastros dos navios. **Passou** pelo gueto e viu os velhos judeus negociando uns com os outros [...]. Finalmente **chegou** na casinha pobre e olhou lá para dentro. O menino estava a se virar febrilmente na cama, e a mãe [...]. **Ele pulou para dentro** e depositou o rubi ao lado do dedal da mulher. Depois, **voou** suavemente em torno da cama, abanando a testa do menino com as asas.

The maintenance of the pronoun "he"as theme in TT2 does not become unnatural, since it is not always translated in this manner. Rather, it does, in fact, allow a smooth flow of information, showing a greater closeness to the genre involved.

## 3. GENDER

The last and perhaps the most striking aspect studied in these two translations is gender. Baker (1992) defines "gender"as "a gramatical distinction according to which a noun or pronoun is classified as either masculine or feminine in some languages"(p. 92). This distinction applies to nouns which refer to animate beings as well as those which refer to the inanimate ones. Determiners, adjectives, and sometimes verbs (as in the case of Arabic) usually agree with the noun in gender as well as in number.

English does not have a grammatical category of gender as such: nouns in English are not regulary inflected to distinguish between feminine and masculine. Nevertheless, English does have a category of person which distinguishes in the third-person singular between masculine, feminine, and inanimate (he/she/it).

According to Baker, "gender distinctions are generally more relevant in translation when the referent of the noun or pronoun is human"(ibid). One has to take into considerations, however, that the subject of this article is a fairy tale — in which animals and inanimate objects are personified and incorporate human features. In this case, the gender distinctions are not arbitrary, and that is why Lyons (1968), for instance, suggests that what is important in communication is the pronominal function of gender rather than the category of gender in general. The pronominal function of gender reflects a genuine, non-arbitrary distinction between male and female.

As an antecedent to this idea, Roman Jakobson (1959) points out that

> ...nos gracejos, nos sonhos, na magia, enfim, naquilo que se pode chamar de mitologia verbal de todos os dias, e sobretudo na poesia, as categorias gramaticais têm um teor semântico elevado... Mesmo uma categoria como a de gênero gramatical, que tão amiúde foi tida como puramente formal, desempenha papel importante nas atitudes mitológicas de uma comunidade lingüística. (p. 70)

Perhaps the most interesting aspect about the translations of "The Happy Prince"is the way the translators have dealt with the matter of gender, by coming closer to or moving farther away from the original text in their translations. In the tale there are relationships involving flirtation and love. In a chronological order, first the Swallow falls in love with the Reed; then the Reed flirts with the wind; finally, the Happy Prince and the Swallow end up the story loving each other. In the English text, the Swallow is pronominalized with "he", and so is the statue of the Happy Prince, while the Reed is pronominalized with "she". There are other, non-grammatical reasons, no doubt, for the author's choice of those genders for these different characters mentioned before, since in English, by themselves, "swallow"and "reed"do not necessarily imply a definite gender.

In Portuguese, however, the word for "swallow"(andorinha) carries the feminine article "a", and is consequently pronominalized with "ela"(with corresponds to "she"in English). That becomes a constraint for a translator

since the author's choice was to make it a male bird. The alternatives these two translators found are the following:

ST: One night there flew over the city a little Swallow. His friends had gone away to Egypt six weeks before, bu he had stayed behind, for he was in love with the most beautiful Reed.

TT1: Uma noite, voou por cima da cidade uma andorinha. As suas amigas tinham partido para o Egito havia seis semanas; ela porém se atrasara, enamorada como estava de um junco muito gracioso.

TT2: Certa noite voou por cima da cidade uma Andorinha macho. Seus amigos tinham voado para o Egito já havia seis semanas, mas ele ficara para trás, porque estava apaixonado por uma lindíssima Haste de Junco.

T1 changed the gender of the bird giving it a female gender. T2, on the other hand, seems to have found an interesting solution for the constraint the Portuguese language imposes on "swallow", by coining it, when first mentioned, "Andorinha macho"(or male swallow, in English). From then on, in the sequence of the story, whenever referring to the bird, T2 pronomminalized it with "he", as in the ST; when wishing to use anaphoric noun[4] for it, she used "Pequeno Passarinho"[5] (little bird), instead of persisting with" Andorinha macho", since the latter would become a redundant, overwrought expression to refer to a character whose sex has already become familiar to the reader.

The same thing happens to the Reed in the tale. Translated into Portuguese, it takes a masculine article in front of it, and makes it hard to escape from pronominalizing it with other than "ele"(he). Wilde, however, in the ST, makes it a female character.

Again, the translators found (or did not find at all) different solutions for the problem:

ST:   [...]for he was in love with the most beautiful Reed. He had met her early in the spring [...].

TT1: [...]enamorada como estava de um junco muito gracioso. Conhecera-o nos princípios da primavera [...].

TT2: [...]porque estava apaixonado por uma linda Haste de Junco. Ele a conhecera no início da primavera [...].

By choosing to translate "reed"as "junco", T1 had no option other than persisting with the pronominalization "ele"(he) and the use of articles and adjectives in the masculine. When selecting "haste de junco"as a

translation for the same character, T2 instead was able to be "loyal"to what really seems to have been a choice made by the author.

This deliberate decision on the T1's part becomes still more evident as such, mainly when we look at some other anaphoric nouns which refer to the Reed, and which clearly characterize it as a female character, such as "wife"and "lady-love". They are translated as "esposo"(husband) and "amado"(a male beloved in Portuguese).

One could say that the problems mentioned above might have arisen from language constraints. Nevertheless, it becomes hard to explain in the same way the different translations made for "wind", which is a character the Swallow believes the Reed to be flirting with:

ST:  [...] and I am afraid she is a coquette, for she is always flirting with the wind.

TT1: [...] e receio que seja um pouco leviano, pois está sempre a flertar com a brisa.

TT2: [...] e tenho receio que seja muito coquete, pois está sempre flertando com o vento.

In this case, the author does not choose a specific gender for the wind — there are no referents or anaphoric nouns which could give a clue for that. Still, however, it seems that the first translation there is for "wind"in Portuguese is "vento", which in this language carries a masculine article. There seems not to exist any apparent reason for translating it as "brisa", since if this specific type of wind — very gentle — had been the intention of the author, he would probably have characterized it as such (selecting the word "breeze", for instance). The choice for the translation of "wind"as "brisa"[6] in Portuguese seems to be a very marked one, because the latter carries a female gender, and the former, a male gender. This way, since T1 has given "reed"a male gender, it would form a "heterosexual" relationship — match with "brisa", which , in Portuguese, is a female character. Although Wilde does not make explicit whether the wind is a male or female character, T1 seems to be somehow forcing the translation and distancing it from Wilde's fairy tale, by making use of this option. This fact leads us to believe that there might have been an attempt (consciously or not) to "regularize"— from a biased perspective — the relationships of flirtation and love established in the text, by transforming them into heterosexual ones.

To summarize these relationships in the ST and the two translations can be comparatively represented in the following way:

| ST | TT1 | TT2 |
|----|-----|-----|
| Swallow (he) - Reed (she) | Swallow (she) - Reed (he) | follows genders found in the ST |
| Reed (she) - Wind (unknown) Swallow (he) - Prince (he) | Reed (he) - Wind (he) Swallow (she) - Happy Prince (he) | |

## CONCLUSION

By analyzing these three translation aspects — lexical choice, information flow and gender — which might have become a problem for the translators, and comparing the solutions given in these two Portuguese versions, I believe that T2 has kept translation closer to the original text and intended audience.

There are certainly reasons for saying so. First, considering that "The Happy Prince"belongs to the fairy tale genre, by choosing a much higher register than the original, T1 seems to have ignored perhaps the most important audience of the text — children.

Secondly, the way T2 has dealt with information flow, regarding theme and rheme in the sentences might have been a more appropriate choice. As a fairy tale, the source-text is characterized by being full of characters' speeches and a lot of action. The decision on translating some *hes* in the theme position in Portuguese, although initially unnatural in the target language, ended up providing the target text with a greater sense of continuity and a more coherent point of view.

Thirdly and finally, considering that the object of study in this article is a piece of literature, we have to keep in mind that the choices made by Wilde. while writing "The Happy Prince"were probably not random. In this sense, recreating the whole story with genders that differ from chosen by the author (with the exception of the Prince), as T1 has done, produces a text open to entirely different interpretations.

## NOTAS

[1]I take here Random House Webster's (1992) definition of "readable", i.e., easy or interesting to read.

[2]See M. A. K. Halliday (1985), An introduction to functional grammar, London: Arnold (especially chapters 2 and 3).

[3]Vasconcellos, M. L. (1993, October). Theme/Rheme in some translated texts. Paper presented at the Open Seminar, UFSC, Florianopolis, SC.

[4]See "anaphoric nouns" in Hallyday, M. A. K. and Hasan, R. (1976), Cohesion in English. London and New York Longman.

[5]The noun "passarinho" (or little bird) is also a superordinate to swallow.

[6]"Brisa" (or breeze) is a hyponym for "vento" (or wind) in Portuguese.

## WORKS CITED

BAKER, M. In other words: a course on translation. London, Routledge, 1992.

JAKOBSON, R. Lingüística e comunicação. (I. Blikstein & J. P. Paes, Trans.). São Paulo, Editora Cultrix Ltda, 1959.

NORD, C. Text analysis in translation: Theory, methodology, and didactic application of a model for translation-oriented text analisys. (C. Nord & P. Sparrow, Trans.). Atlanta, Rodopi, 1991.(Original work published 1988).

Random House Webster's. Electronic Dictionary and Thesaurus. College Edition, Version 1.0, 1992.

WILDE, O. "The Happy Prince", Lord Arthur Savile's crime and other stories. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books Inc., 1954.

————, "O príncipe feliz", Os mais brilhantes contos. (O. Schneider, Trans.). Editora Tecnoprint, s.d.

————, "O príncipe felix", Histórias de fadas. (B. Eliodora, Trans.). Rio de Janeiro, Nova Fronteira, 1992.