

Relevance and complexities of translating titles of literary and filmic works

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No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality.

Culture, Language and Personality,
Edward Sapir

1. Relevance of the title as a part of the rhetoric of the whole text

Why is it so difficult to translate just one line? That is what anyone could wonder when approaching a translated title of a work that differs very much from the original. That question, will definitely lead to the next one: what lies behind the translation of a title? In order to understand the relevance of this matter, it is essential to understand the relevance of titles in general as a part of the whole body of the text. The title of a fictional work is an integral part of the rhetoric of the whole text, and, since the whole title is unmediated by a narrative voice, it may be, in fact, as close as we come within that text to an *authorial voice*. The primary function of a title is to lure unsuspecting readers, or viewers, into the story presented by the author. Therefore, titles are the most imprecise, capricious and subjective component of the whole narrative.

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2. Functions of titles

Titles can perform a variety of functions. Following Richard Sawyer's classification, they can identify the style or genre, to which the story belongs, whether the work belongs to history, romance, autobiography, and so on. In other cases, they introduce the theme or symbol which will be important for our understanding of the work (for example, titles such as "Tristan e Isolda" and "Romeo and Juliet" will let the reader that they are confronting a love story). Titles can also have a "nominal" role, serving to identify only a certain character or place in the work as exemplified by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* or many other works.

Preferences on titling have changed during the 19th and 20th centuries. In the modern Western History of the novel, the "nominal" title has generally given way to the thematic or symbolic. Gerard Genette names this kind of titles "thematic titles", which bear the "subject matter" of the text. Therefore, titles such as *La Regenta*, *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*, *Wuthering Heights* or *Middlemarch*, were replaced by titles with of more thematic or symbolic nature, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *War and Peace* or *The Awakening*. With the "nominal" title, the author's expressiveness is clearly limited, and that is why nowadays author's resort to thematic or symbolic titles to reveal something of their underlying intent. In the traditional novel the author customarily directed the reader in a rather overt way through an authorial narrator that the reader could trust. The modern author, on the other hand, resorts to narrators whose limited and untrustworthy points of view make difficult the comprehension of the text. As a result, modern writers have had to rely upon rhetorical devices that lie outside the narrative proper, such as the title or epigraph, to communicate 'authoritatively' with the reader. In this sense María Antonia Álvarez Calleja shares Wayne Booth's opinion by saying:

"En todos los contextos en que aparece el título sus implicaciones tienen un fin afectivo o retórico, de ahí que pueda afirmarse que la frase que compone el título es portadora del significado del tema o símbolo central y ayuda a la comprensión del argumento, lo que es más frecuente en la ficción moderna de lo que lo era en el pasado" (Álvarez Calleja, 1994, 60)

Therefore, with the arrival of the century, titles began to be more and more abstract. Due to this new tendency, the translation of that paratextual device, as Gerard Genette has defined it, has become very problematic. The translator must now be able to bring into the target language the often abstract meaning of the original/source work.

Mladen Jovanovic states the importance of the title by giving a psycholinguistic explanation and says that, within the process of language communication, the function of the title is to improve communication and, hopefully, prevent misunderstanding of the text. Therefore, one should be weary when approaching a translation of a

title, because one mistranslation in 300 pages of a book is not fatal, but a bad translation of a title can ruin it. The process of translation of the title is not so different from the process of translating other linguistic utterances, but, the basic dissimilarity falls on the “search” for the title’s meaning.

The book is judged by the cover and the title, because it is an integral part of the rhetoric of the whole text that guides the reader towards the kind of book he/she is confronting. In this sense, there is a remarkable difference that exists between the original author’s conceptualization of the title (paralleled, in this case by the translator), and the perception of it by the reader. Unlike the reader, for whom the title is a beginning point, for the authors of a work it is often the last feature to be added to the text that has been written. Taking into account these considerations, the role of the translator concerning the title is not only to create a semantic transfer, but also to recontextualize it in order to make it appealing to the target language readers. This phenomenon can be defined by Lefevere’s concept of cultural “refraction”, a semi-otic transfer in a broader sense.

3. How to translate a title

The translation of titles has been classified by different authors. In that sense, Doyle states three categories, going from “*literal*” translations, through “near-literal” ones, to “liberal” or “free” translations. But it is necessary to define what it’s meant by *literal* since there are many authors who believe that the so-called “literal translation” does not exist. Exact linguistic equivalents are by definition nonexistent, because of the obvious reasons that no two languages have the *exact* same phonology, same syntactic structures and same vocabulary. The word *literal* is merely a heuristic device, and it has to be used if it is a convention in the meta-language of Translation Theory.

The first category, so-called literal translation, consists of three sub-categories. The first one refers to those “nominal” titles we mentioned above, exemplified by Borges’s *Evaristo Carriego*, which maintains the same title in English. Not only because names are untranslatable, but also because leaving its original title adds the connotation of exoticism that will appeal to the interest of the target language reader. Therefore, the exact same title has different, linguistic and cultural value in the target language. In the second sub-category we find the titles that incorporate foreign phrases or words, such as Carlos Fuentes’s *Terra Nostra*, where the translator chooses to leave it as it is in order to echo the effect in the original. And the third sub-category is dedicated to titles, which are retained in English. Fernández Santos’s *Extramuros* keeps the same Spanish word in English because translating it to “*Outside the walls*” or “*On the Other Side of the wall*” would connote militarization, a theme that does not exist within the plot of the story. Similarly, in Gustavo Sainz’s *Gazapo* the translator opts for leaving the title as it is because he considers it untranslatable due to the word’s polyphemy. The word “gazapo” can mean, as specified in the flap

of the novel's cover, "Young Rabbit", "Sly astute man (colloquial)", "big lie, a whooper" and "something cacophonous or indecent or vulgar" (it is interesting to point out the fact that among all the definitions that the translator gives for the word in Spanish, he does not include the more frequent meaning of "mistake").

The second category contains near-literal translations, which are the most numerous. They occur when there is a possibility of a *word by word* translation, that is to say, if the title renders itself to linguistic transparency. For example, Cortázar's *La Vuelta al Día en ochenta Mundos* was translated into Spanish as *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds*, where no connotations gets lost in the target language. García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*, translated as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, falls also included into this category. We also include here those translations which reflect just a slight change, considered necessary by the translator. For example, Carlos Fuentes' novel *Gringo Viejo* was translated with the added article *The Old Gringo* in order to avoid the colloquial despective sound of "old gringo" within the anglosaxon culture. We also find translations that add whole phrases, like Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo: A Novel of Mexico*. Why did the translator choose to add that sentence? One of the reasons is probably the intention of connoting exoticism which adds even more value to it. We should also notice that the connotations that the name "Páramo" conveys within the whole meaning of the story are lost; as we know, a "páramo" is a dessert place and the translation, unavoidable, loses that play with the word. Therefore, the translator added that sentence in order to replace for the lost meaning.

I believe that these kind of literal translations, *mot à mot*, are, somehow, untrustworthy. As Phyllis Zatlin points out, they sometimes can work just fine, for example, Manuel Puig's *Bajo un manto de estrellas* sounds perfect in English as *Under a Mantle of Stars*. But at other times they do not work because titles are more likely to be allusive than descriptive, so that an apparently simple title may reveal far more than it seems at first sight. For example, the play *Bajarse al Moro* was mistranslated as *Going down to Marrakesh*, and the idea of "going on the run", familiar to most of the Spanish audience, is lost.

The final category is devoted to liberal, free translations. With some of them the audience can easily guess which work they are referring to, like Puig's *La traición de Rita Hayworth* as *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, and Fuentes's *Una familia lejana* as *Distant Relations*. On the other hand, and we arrive here to the "far end of the spectrum", sometimes with the translated title it is impossible to guess what the original title was, because the translator could not carry across effectively the meanings. Therefore, the translator needs to find his own way to transmit the same effect that the original title provokes in the source audience, he must seek fidelity elsewhere: "Faithfulness as the strict adherence to the original version must transcend the constraints of 'verbatim ac litteratum' tenet" (Doyle, 1989, 44). In the relationship author-translator, this is the instance where the creative side of the translator is most closely paralleled to that of the author, the translator as creator. Fidelity must be achieved by the translator through different means. For example, in the translation of Borges's *El hacedor* as

Dreamtiger something is lost, the meaning of “re-creator”, but something is gained, because the English version in a synthesized word (something that it is not possible to do in Spanish): it includes the form “dream” - as we know, Borge’s novel refers to the creator of dreams-and the form “tiger” -that completes the title with its symbolic mythological meaning, so recurrent in the novel. The translator did not like the options such as “The Creator” or “The Maker”, because the form “Dreamtiger” is definitely more poetic and more expressive. Another example is Puig’s novel *Boquitas Pintadas* translated as *Heartbreak Tango: A Serial*. In this case, the translator, Susan Jill Levine, collaborated with the author in the process. She also brilliantly translated Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s novel *Tres Tristes Tigres* as *Three Trapped Tigers*, in order to keep the tongue-twister play of the original title.

4. Translation of titles according to Jakobson’s functions of language

Cristiane Nord, on the other hand, proposes a different classification of the translation of titles based on the structuralist functions of language communication proposed by Jakobson. What she really shows, in fact, is a classification of titles in general, as Sawyer does, but relating them to the translation process. Following this methodology in order to translate a title it is necessary to look at the functions that it performs in the source culture and then apply them to the target language translation as we know there are six functions, the first three ones are considered to be so basic that every single title must fulfill them, while the rest are secondary:

- *Distinctive function*: Each title has to be distinct with regard to the culture-specific title corpus it belongs to. In order to achieve this function in the translation, a title must be a unique name unmistakably identifying, the co-text, i.e. the target text. For example, the movie *Bad Girls*, was translated as *Cuatro mujeres y un destino* so as to assimilate it to a very similar translated title which was a great success in Spain, *Dos hombres y un destino* (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*). It is important to mention that in this case the distinctive function was not quite fulfilled, since the title does not fully differentiate the two movies. Similarly, we could mention how Luis Rafael Sánchez referred to Wilde’s translation, *La importancia de llamarse Ernesto* to write his own book *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos*. We could consider the latter a refraction of Wilde’s story. The translation of Wilde’s work into Spanish is also problematic, as we will see later.
- *Phatic*: Each title must be appropriate to attract the attention of its culture-specific audience and, if necessary, to be remembered over a certain period of time. It establishes an initial contact with the audience. The expression “pulp fiction”, for example, only appeals to those who are familiar with the American culture, where it refers to a 50’s and 60’s genre of cheap novel in the United States. By

leaving the original English title in Spanish, the phatic function, achieved the connotative meaning of the title, fulfilled by the title is lost, so the attention must be called through other means (later I will explain this phenomenon that is taking place nowadays in Spain, where more and more titles are being left untranslated). Laura Esquivel's title of the novel *Como agua para chocolate* also fulfills, as well, this function since that expression used in the title is an idiomatic expression widely known by Mexicans, that means that something is about to explode, like the characters of the novel. Even the author of the novel said herself that the English translation *Like Water for Chocolate* does not make any sense because that idiomatic meaning is lost. Interesting as well is the fact that even from Mexico to Spain that connotation is lost, since that idiom seems to have a very specific regional use. In these cases when should find a better way to carry out the translation, for example, by rendering idiom by idiom using the more general one "estar a punto de desbordar" or something similar. The "translation" within the same language actually took place with the translation of the British book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The title was translated into American English as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* on the assumption that most American readers know nothing about the history of alchemy and think of philosophy as dull.

- *Metatextual*. Each title has to conform to the genre conventions of the culture it belongs to. Miguel de Unamuno's novel *San Manuel Bueno Mártir. Cómo se hace una novela*, would be one of the most obvious examples of novels that fulfill this function. The English version only keeps the first part, the second has been eliminated. Therefore the obviousness of this function is lessened. Gerard Genette defines this category as self-referential, exemplifying it with M. Smullyan's title of the novel *What is the name of this book?*
- *Descriptive or referential*. If any piece of information is intended to be transmitted by the title, it has to be comprehensible to the respective addressees with their culture-specific world knowledge. It describes the text or any of its intratextual or extratextual arguments. This function is especially relevant for translation because the cultural background of the target language audience may differ from the source language culture. Therefore, by translating literally *All the President's Men* as *Todos los hombres del presidente*, the direct reference to the line in *Alice in Wonderland*, "All the king's men", gets lost. In the case of the movie *The War of the Roses*, the Spanish translation *La Guerra de los Rose*, inevitably loses the direct reference to the war between the royal families York and Lancaster during the 14th century in England. In this translation, therefore the referential function is not fulfilled. I consider it impossible, as well, to translate Borge's *El hombre de la Esquina Rosada*, because one can not translate the reference to the 19th Century Argentinian dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas.
- *Expressive*: Any evaluations or emotions expressed in the title have to be judged in relation to the value system of the culture in question. A title fulfilling this function communicates the reader/audience an opinion or evaluation about an

explicit aspect. This evaluation is based on the system of values of the source culture. In many cases this implicit expressivity is not included in the translation, for example, *Some like it hot* translated as *Con faldas y a lo loco*. But in spite of this loss, the title was quite successful in Spain. And Wilde's work *The Importance of being Earnest* translated as *La importancia de llamarse Ernesto* inevitably, once again, loses the pun with the word "Earnest". That word in the English title can be either a name or, more likely, and adjective meaning "passionate", the opinion that the Irish author expresses with the original title.

- *Appellative or operative*: Any appellative intention has to take into account the culture-specific susceptibility and expectations of the prospective readers. The intention is to call the attention of the audience. Since this function must be reflected in both SL and TL, the translator must look for something that is going to be commercially successful. For example, the literal translation "El hijo de Rosemary" would not fulfill the appellative function with the connotations of exorcism in Polansky's *Rosemary's Baby*. The translation *La Semilla del Diablo* was needed in order to reflect this idea.

5. The specific cases of movie titles

In reference to movies, the reasons for choosing a specific translation are basically commercial. Sometimes for marketing reasons the title is left untranslated on its own (*Aladdin*), or added between brackets as a literal translation (*Toy Story (Juguetes)*). This phenomenon can be explained in reference to the marketing of promotional products related to the movie, such as T-shirts, cups or anything with the logo of the movie. Some other times, this translation between brackets is not literal, and this is what the author calls "parallel translations", for example *Mrs Doubtfire (Papá de por vida)*.

In many occasions the translation of the title of the movie has nothing to do with the original one, due, again, to commercial reasons. Therefore, the concept of "fidelity" is questioned here. Where can we find the limit between functionality and fidelity? Some of these titles, being so different from the original, have achieved a certain mystical quality. We can speak then of "traiciones muy fieles", for example *The Seven Year Itch = La tentación vice arriba*. In some titles there is a pun with words that inevitably gets lost in the translation, for example *Le thé au harem d'Archimedes = El teorema de Arquímedes*. But some other times we also find puns created in the SL title, *Fight before Christmas = Y en nochebuena...j Se armó el Belén!*

Literal translation in titles, can be dangerous, as was mentioned before. The movie *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman* was translated into Spanish as *El ataque de la mujer de 50 pies*. So the Spanish audience would be expecting to see a monster with 50 extremities, not a giant woman! From this point of view, "fidelity" can be defined as a reflection of the culture and stylistic position of the original text, always taking into account the possible restrictions of the target language and culture.

From these different perspectives, we can conclude that in spite of the different classifications of literary titles, everyone agrees that the translation of a title should render the same effect in the target culture as it does in the source culture. But, especially due to the relevance of the title with respect to the whole text, the title's translation process is as delicate as the rest of the text.

Since titles are so dependent on the rest of the text and, especially nowadays that they tend to give essential information for the proper comprehension of the text, the translator does not have much freedom to change the title, being forced to let some connotations be lost in the process. Hence, although sometimes there's a mistake obvious and avoidable, in general, I feel that what people like to criticize as bad translations is, in fact, the result of a serious process of evaluation and decision. Titles are a very important part of a work of art (in any of its forms of expression) and, at the same time very difficult to translate. The fact that we are dealing with works of art, makes it necessary for the translator to do his best in order to remain faithful to the original author and her or his work.

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