

ISSN: 1579-9794

The pursuit of difference in translation¹

La búsqueda de la diferencia en la traducción

CARLOS I. ECHEVERRÍA ARRIAGADA
cecheverria@psu.edu

Universidad Chileno-Británica de Cultura and The Pennsylvania State University

Fecha de recepción: 10 de mayo de 2017

Fecha de aceptación: 15 de julio de 2017

Abstract: In contrast to previous work in translation studies focusing on difficulties in departing from the original text and excessive reliance on “direct” translation, this paper addresses the habit some translators display of trying to convey the original textual content and effects in a manner arbitrarily divergent from the source material, just for the sake of difference. After a first approach to the phenomenon, it is shown that it constitutes a futile quest that, by excluding the most obvious target-language options, can result in various problems for the translator. Finally, the paper closes with a recapitulation and some possible directions for future research.

Key words: Translation habits, translational creativity, intertextual divergence, translator training.

Resumen: En contraste con trabajos anteriores en el ámbito de los estudios sobre la traducción que se han centrado en las dificultades para distanciarse del texto original y en la dependencia excesiva de la traducción “directa”, este artículo trata sobre el hábito que muestran algunos traductores de intentar de transmitir el contenido y los efectos textuales originales de un modo arbitrariamente divergente con respecto al material traducido, sin otra meta que la diferencia. Luego de un primer acercamiento al fenómeno, este se caracteriza como una empresa sin sentido que, al excluir las alternativas de la lengua meta que resultan más obvias, puede ocasionar diversos problemas al traductor. Finalmente, el trabajo concluye con una recapitulación y algunas proyecciones para futuros estudios.

¹ This work was supported by a grant from the Universidad Chileno-Británica de Cultura.

Palabras clave: Hábitos en la traducción, creatividad traductora, divergencia intertextual, formación de traductores.

1. INTRODUCTION

These pages originate not only from my interest in language and translation as a linguist, but also, and I would say more importantly, from a pedagogical concern that has grown in me as a translation teacher. Said concern has to do with what I shall call *the pursuit of difference*, a translation habit that, by preventing the translator from using the most obvious target-language options to convey the content² and effects of the original text, can be problematic in various ways, and yet does not seem to have received much attention in the existing translation studies literature. Thus, my goal here is to draw the attention of translation researchers and teachers to this kind of behavior.

The remainder of the text is structured as follows. In section two, I begin by defining and illustrating the phenomenon in contrast with others that are well known in the field of translation studies. In section three, I discuss its futility and possible negative consequences, as well as the responsibility of translation academics in this regard. Finally, in section four, I close with a recapitulation of the main points made throughout the previous sections and with some possible directions for future research.

2. IDENTIFYING THE PHENOMENON

In order to convey the content and effects of the original text, translators often have to provide translations that do not look quite like their source when one examines both texts superficially. Let us consider only one example to illustrate this well-known fact³. Imagine we have to translate into Spanish the English sentence *Don't quote me on that*, used after a statement about which the speaker feels unsure, as is common in everyday English. In this context, using an alternative such as *No me cites sobre eso* (literally 'Don't quote me on that'), despite the correspondence of literal content, would not be convenient,

² Here I use the term *content*, usually associated with Hjelmlev (1961) in linguistics, mainly following Coseriu (1977a, 1990), who defines translation as the reproduction of a textual content in a new language.

³ The translator's need to deviate from the original text has been a commonplace in modern translation studies, having been pointed out and illustrated by scholars of the likes of Catford (1965), Nida and Taber (1969), Jakobson (1971), Margot (1979), García Yebra (1984), Newmark (1988), Delisle (1993), and Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), to name just a few well-known names.

since, unlike its English counterpart, the Spanish sentence is not conventionally associated with the function of expressing insecurity regarding another statement in the language norm⁴, and hence the original sense could end up not being conveyed as intended. Thus, to use Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) terminology, in this case it would be more sensible to choose a less "direct," more "oblique" translation, such as *No estoy del todo seguro* ('I'm not entirely sure'), for example. Any good translator of course knows about this, regardless of whether or not he is familiar with Vinay and Darbelnet's distinction, or with any technical translational, glottological, or ethnological terminology for that matter. However, it is no secret that many translators, and particularly translation students, have a hard time departing from the original text and tend to rely too much on "direct" translation, a phenomenon that has been a common topic or concern in practical handbooks as well as in theoretical and descriptive studies, mainly due to the fact that it often results in communication failures or in communicative yet normatively incorrect or odd-sounding texts (see e.g. Chamizo, 1999; Cronin, 1995; Cruces, 2001; García González, 1997–1998; García Yebra, 1984, 1995; Granger and Swallow, 1988; Koessler and Derocquigny, 1928; Merwe, 1978; Rodríguez, 1998–1999, 2002; Sewell, 2001; Vázquez-Ayora, 1977; Wright, 1993). What I call *the pursuit of difference* in this context, however, corresponds to a rather opposite kind of situation, in which the translator displays the habit of trying to convey the original textual content and effects in a manner arbitrarily divergent from the source material, just for the sake of difference, a situation that does not seem to have received much attention in the existing translation studies literature.

Of course, the fact that some translations are consciously made rather different from their source texts is certainly a truism; suffice it, in this regard, to remember the case of the so-called *belles infidèles* (see Mounin, 1994; Zuber, 1968). Yet, as far as I am aware, not many authors have made explicit reference to cases where intertextual divergence is itself an end rather than a means – for instance to achieve naturalness in the target language (see Vinay and Darbelnet, 1995), to produce a domesticating text, or even to push a political agenda (see Venuti, 1995) –, which are the cases on which I am focusing here; nor do many translation teachers, at least from what I have been able to observe, seem concerned about the possibility of such differentialist behavior amongst students. Hence my decision to address this subject in these pages.

⁴ I use the term *language norm* following Coseriu (1982).

An interesting study that may serve as a good starting point to illustrate the phenomenon is Bello's (1998, 1999) investigation of the Galician translation of Alfonso X's *Estoria de España*. In this study, Bello shows that the person responsible for the Galician text, while successful in reproducing the original textual content for the most part, constantly avoided using linguistic elements similar to those appearing in the original text, despite the great similarity shared by the two languages, an observation that leads the scholar to describe the translation as being characterized mostly by a "tendencia diferencialista" ('differentialist tendency'), by an "ánimo por la divergencia" (1999: 157) ('divergent attitude'). For example, it is shown that the translator repeatedly uses the conjunction *et* ('and') as an introductory element where the original text features no conjunction at all, and vice versa; and, similarly, that he repeatedly turns pronominal verbal constructions into non-pronominal ones, and vice versa. This is illustrated in the table below:

Examples of constructional divergence between Alfonso X's *Estoria de España* and its Galician translation

| Original text | Translation |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>en este anno otrossi murió</i> | <i>et en este año finou outrossi</i> |
| <i>este rey</i> | <i>et este rey</i> |
| <i>esto fue</i> | <i>et isto foy</i> |
| <i>et fizieron como les el mando</i> | <i>fezerō como llj el mandou</i> |
| <i>et después</i> | <i>depoys</i> |
| <i>fuesse contra los moros</i> | <i>foy contra os moros</i> |
| <i>adormecime</i> | <i>adormeçi</i> |
| <i>fueronse ell et don Rodrigo</i> | <i>forō el et dom Rroy Valasquez</i> |
| <i>arribaron</i> | <i>arribarōse</i> |
| <i>fue su uia</i> | <i>foysse sua via</i> |

Now, I believe one need not look at medieval texts to find this kind of differentialist behavior. Consider an example from a markedly different context, provided by Kussmaul (1995: 19) in his book on translator training. Kussmaul describes a situation in which a group of subjects was somewhat reluctant to use *Desillusionierung* to render the content of the semantically and morphologically similar word *disillusionment* in an English-German translation, in a context where according to the author it would have been better to use *Desillusionierung*, which happened to be the most obvious solution. To try to explain this situation, Kussmaul writes the following:

I would venture the hypothesis that at the root of the subjects' dissatisfaction [with *Desillusionierung*] was their fear of "false friends". They must have learnt that in many cases the formally similar word in the target language leads to "big blunders", and they will most likely have been warned of these by their teachers (ibid.)⁵.

But was it really fear that *disillusionment* and *Desillusionierung* could be "false friends"? In my opinion, this does not seem very likely, since, if such had been the case, one would have expected the subjects to mention their suspicion when explaining their dissatisfaction with the German word, given that the topic of so-called *false friends*, and of linguistic interference in general⁶, is one most advanced translation students are very familiar with. But apparently they did not, as Kussmaul only cites rather vague comments from them: "Well, I don't quite like *Desillusionierung* here, but I can't think of anything better"; "This is a typical case where one has to be satisfied with a solution for the simple reason that one cannot think of a better one" (op. cit.: 18). The hypothesis that I would venture is the same ventured by Bello for the Galician version the *Estoria de España*, namely, that there was some sort of underlying divergent attitude, which nonetheless could be a consequence of scaremongering about things such as "false friends" (see the next section).

In fact, if I may cite my own experience, this is something that I have personally witnessed many times in the classroom as a translation teacher. For example, very recently I gave one of my English-Spanish translation classes a literature paper in which the phrase *societies where the impact of literacy is marginal or restricted* appeared, and most students, as one would have expected, translated *marginal* by its Spanish homograph, which I considered a good translation, since both words, beyond their similar signifiers and the fact of being cognates, mean basically the same and are often used to refer to something's being small or lacking importance. One student, however, asked whether it was not appropriate to try to find another Spanish word, such as *periférico* ('peripheral') or *secundario* ('secondary'), the latter being the one she had used in her version. To this, I responded that those options could have worked too, but that I did not see any reason to avoid using the Spanish cognate in this case. She replied: "I thought that would've been too similar to the original

⁵ According to Kussmaul, similar observations are made by Hönig in a 1988 paper.

⁶ On the notion of false friends in translation studies, see Chamizo, 1999; Granger and Swallow, 1988; Koessler and Derocquigny, 1928. On the notion of linguistic interference, see Blas, 1991; Coseriu, 1977b; Kabatek, 1997; Weinreich, 1968.

text,” which showed that it was not that she thought *marginal* was being used in an abnormal way due to the influence of English or anything of the like, but simply that she did not want her translation to look so much like the original.

It is important at this point to note that intertextual divergence can be sought with different criteria in mind. The translator may simply try to avoid phonetic or graphic similarities between the two texts, which would explain a decision like not using *Desillusionierung* for *disillusionment* or not using *marginal* for its English homograph; but he may also try to deviate from the original text on the semantic level, even while being “faithful” to it for the most part, by using some of the various “oblique” translation techniques that have been described since Vinay and Darbelnet (see Molina and Hurtado, 2002). For instance, the translator may decide, regardless of any phonetic or graphic coincidence, to use lexical units other than those being semantically closer to the units in original text (which would also explain the *Desillusionierung* and *marginal* situations referred above), to turn metaphors into non-metaphors, to turn passive constructions into active ones, or to turn implicit information into explicit information. Moreover, instances of this phenomenon can vary in terms of the degree of differentiation sought by the translator; in other words, some cases can be more extreme than others. The medieval Galician translation mentioned above, for instance, if we agree with Bello on the motivation behind its divergences with respect to the source, would be a highly differential example compared to a translation where the author decided to deviate from the original text only in a few parts. What is constant is the assumption that there is *some* optimum or minimum degree of differentiation from the source to seek when translating.

As to the extent of this phenomenon, both in the classroom and outside of it, it is still to be determined. Nevertheless, I would say it does not seem to be that uncommon, since I have witnessed it in a great many of the translation classes I have taught, where phrases such as *too similar*, *too calqued*, or *too literal* have been a commonplace to refer to rather imitative translations, especially coming from some of the better students, who often want to display their creativity by producing overtly creative translations⁷. Furthermore, I have heard from other colleagues (not many, though) who believe they have

⁷ As is well known, translation, as any expressive activity not limited to word-for-word reproduction of previous linguistic acts, is inherently creative (Gui, 1995; O’Sullivan, 2013). When I speak here of overtly creative translations I am referring specifically to translations that reveal a high degree of divergent or lateral thinking (see Balacescu and Stefanink, 2003; de Bono 1970; Guilford, 1950).

witnessed this habit too, which only makes it all the more important to draw attention to its existence in the field of translation studies, especially amongst translator teachers.

3. HARMLESS FUTILITY?

Although it is undoubtedly true that translators often need to move away from the original text to some extent and get rather creative, there can be no doubt that, the fundamental goal of translation being to convey (some of) the content and effects of a text in a new language⁸, there is no valid reason to set any degree of deviation from the original text as a universal ideal for translating, insofar as there is no universal correlation between the degree of divergence achieved in a translation with respect to its source, by any criterion, and the quality or effectiveness of that translation. A translation can be markedly uninventive and imitative of the original (within the possibilities of the target language, of course), and yet be an excellent translation; this is precisely why Newmark (1988: 72), in an attempt to fight the “universal negative connotations of and prejudices against literal translation” he believed to exist, said “we must not be afraid of literal translation, or, in particular, of using a TL word which looks the same or nearly the same as the SL word”, and even went as far as to claim that “a translation can be inaccurate, [but] it can never be too literal”⁹. Thus, the

⁸ This may seem like a controversial thing to say, especially to scholars adhering to the German functionalist school of translation studies, who have conceived the original text (as any other text) merely as an information offer (see Nord, 2007; Reiß and Vermeer, 2013). However, if one has any respect for the common usage of the word *translation* as a term for interlingual mediation, one cannot overlook the fact that no translation can be said to occur unless *some* of what the source language text conveyed as a semiotic entity is also conveyed by the target-language text. The key word here is *some*, as the use of italics suggests. As Coseriu (1977a: 236) points out, the degree of intertextual invariance, including semantic, will be different for each translation, depending on the receiver, the translated text, and the purpose of the translation; and this notwithstanding the fact that Coseriu defines translation as the reproduction of a textual content in a new language. In this connection, an interesting distinction is that made by Viaggio (2006) between translation, as the impartial reproduction of a message in a new language, and interlingual mediation, as something that includes translation but can be “something more, something less and something other than ‘translation’” (op. cit.: 7).

⁹ Here Newmark is not saying that literal translation is always the best choice, which would clearly be false; his point is rather that there is nothing *inherently wrong* with it. A similar and interesting opinion is that expressed by García Yebra (1985: 157), who, opposing those who display a rather negative attitude toward linguistic calque – like for example Brang (1969: 392), who uses the term *unsichtbare Fremdwörter* (‘invisible foreign words’) in reference to it –, argues for the validity of this expressive mechanism, going as far as to say that “una traducción bien ceñida al original viene a ser una

pursuit of difference in translation, as defined here, must be regarded as an entirely futile quest, at least as far as the fundamental goal of translation is concerned.

Nevertheless, futility alone is not a sufficient reason to really worry, since a differentialist translation can also be a fairly good translation, especially if its purpose is rather informative. What is, in turn, worthy of concern is the fact that, as has already been suggested, pursuing any arbitrary degree of intertextual divergence when trying to render the message of a text in another language is not always an innocuous practice, and can actually be the source of various problems. Indeed, not only can such a practice lead to totally gratuitous difficulties in the translation process, making the translator waste energy in an absolutely pointless pursuit; it can even result in the underuse of frequent target-language elements having an equivalent or close match in the source language, a phenomenon that may cause the text to be perceived as oddly written¹⁰, and, more worrisomely, result in undesirable semantic deviations. Of course, the underuse of linguistic elements – a phenomenon Castillo (2005: 140) and Kabatek (2006: 481) actually believe to have occurred in the Galician translation of the *Estoria de España*, mentioned in the previous section –, being a statistical phenomenon, is often not easy to pinpoint; but the problem of semantic deviation, on the other hand, is one I have clearly witnessed many times in the classroom. For example, not too long ago one of my classes was working with an article titled *The game of demonizing Putin*, and, although the majority of the group had no problem to use the very common Spanish word *demonizar*, which being semantically and morphologically similar to *demonizing* is used in basically the same way, one of the students whose version we examined that day chose *distorsionar* ('to distort'), an option that, clearly, was unjustifiably inaccurate compared to the English word, especially for a title. And what was the answer when I asked him why he had not used the obvious option *demonizar*, or even the similar and also very common *satanizar*? Simply: "I didn't want to calque the original that much."

These problems, in my opinion, are a more than sufficient reason for translation teachers to be aware of the phenomenon and warn future translators

especie de calco prolongado" ('a translation that is well aligned with the original can be considered a sort of prolonged calque').

¹⁰ This phenomenon has been called *divergence interference* by Kabatek (2013: 147), and is the counterpart of what said scholar calls *convergence interference*, i.e., the interferential overuse of target-language elements, a phenomenon that has received much more attention in the existing literature (see also Coseriu, 1977b; Echeverría, 2016; Kabatek, 1997).

about it. Unfortunately, however, not only do I think most translation teachers have never paid attention to the existence of this habit, but I also think sometimes they actually promote it in the classroom, even if inadvertently. This may occur, naturally, if the teacher displays a negative attitude toward the overt imitation of the expressive ways of the original text in general¹¹; but it may also happen simply because he requires students to always provide overtly creative translations in order to help them free themselves from the structures and patterns of the source language and thus prevent interference from occurring, or because he condemns the use of some target-language elements that are problematic due to being extrinsically related to interference phenomena¹². It may even happen because the teacher, when recommending necessary changes to students' translations, does not actually explain the problem of their versions or simply does not do it properly.

Thus, it is important for translator trainers to be careful not to accustom students to pursue any arbitrary degree of difference with respect to the original text when translating. If one wants to train future translators to be able to come up with creative translations and be better prepared to avoid source-language interference, which, undeniably, is a totally commendable goal for a translation teacher to have, it is important to explain, on the one hand, that source-language interference is not the same as source-text influence, which is an inherent aspect of translation, and, on the other hand, that overt translational creativity, albeit in some cases necessary, is not something a translator should display in every bit of his translational output. Moreover, if the goal is to avoid abnormal uses of certain target-language elements, efforts should be directed at making students actually learn when and how to use those elements, not at simply eradicating all of their uses. Finally, if there is a problem in a student's translation, one should always explain what the problem is exactly, even if it seems obvious. And, of course, these remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, when it comes to the authors of articles, books and guides on translation, since they also can have an important role in shaping, directly or indirectly, the attitudes and habits of future translators.

¹¹ Apparently this was the case of Newmark's teachers, since, immediately after saying we must not be afraid of literal translation or of using target-language words resembling source-language words, this scholar concisely adds: "At school and university I was told I must never do this" (1988: 72).

¹² Consider for example the case of Spanish *-mente* adverbs, which, though no doubt a historically Hispanic word class, are often overused in English-Spanish translation due to imitation of the use of *-ly* adverbs in English (see Echeverría, 2011; García González, 1997–1998; Rabadán, Labrador, and Ramón, 2006; Ramón and Labrador, 2008; Rodríguez, 2002; Vázquez-Ayora, 1977).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My main goal in this paper has been to draw the attention of translation researchers and teachers to the habit of trying to deviate from the ways in which the original text conveyed its content and effects when translating simply to accomplish the goal of intertextual difference. Of course, these pages are merely prefatory, as evidenced by the references to anecdotal experience, so research providing more systematic observations would definitely be valuable. What is the real extent of this habit? What are its conditioning factors? In what contexts does it tend to occur? In what language pairs? Does directionality play a role? To what extent do language and translation teachers favor its emergence in the classroom? What tend to be its practical consequences? These are questions that may be dealt with in future studies.

As to the detection of the phenomenon in empirical research, an obvious possibility is to continue to analyze real translations and identify any divergent elements that could be taken as intentional and arbitrary and then to formulate hypotheses about the motivations behind them based on readily available contextual information, as for example Bello does with the Galician translation of the *Estoria de España*. However, such a methodology, being rather speculative in nature, is certainly not free of limitations, so it would be wise to complement it with other forms of inquiry. Thus, for instance, future research endeavors might want to consider the use of think-aloud protocols¹³, or, back to translator training, direct observation of both translation students' and teachers' behavior, for example observing classes and asking questions about students' decision processes, teaching practices, etc. This way, future research could contribute to the detection, description, and explanation of this habit from the perspective of process-oriented translation studies, or, at least, to the identification of some of the practices that are suspect of favoring its emergence.

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¹³ But see Bernardini, 2001 on issues with this method in the field of translation studies.

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