

Rewriting for the Spanish Stage

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Abstract: In the course of my research on translations of English drama into Spanish, I have dealt with a variety of target texts considered, and many times labelled, "translations" or "versions". In most cases the translator presents a play originally written in English to the Spanish audiences in their own language. There are some translators who are allegedly faithful to the original, some others who claim they have "adapted" the play to a stage or audience, and there is a small group of so called translators who rewrite the original and make the play their own.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss those instances of rewriting in the light of the results of a large scale research work, just completed this year, in which I have studied 150 translations of English drama into Spanish. A case in point is Alfonso Sastre's version of Langston Hughes' play Mulatto. This "version" poses questions related to the very notion of equivalence in translation and brings to the fore the questions of rewriting, or as Milan Kundera puts it, the "demon of rewriting" which affects literature and, more specifically, theatre.

I shall discuss this notion of rewriting in relation to the concept of adaptation and translation, always in the context of foreign theatre texts presented in a different culture and language. The way this process of rewriting is undertaken and the "methods" used by certain playwrights when rewriting a play will also be discussed. The status of the original text and other translated texts will also contribute to clarify the way rewriting takes places and the extent to which this way of importing plays may affect the reception of certain playwrights in the Spanish theatrical system.

In this paper I would like to consider the idea of rewriting in the context of translations of English drama into Spanish. I intend to show that some target texts, which are considered and even labelled translations, when studied closely, may rather be judged rewritings of source texts.

But the term rewriting may be understood at least in three different ways. To rewrite, according to the Collins English Dictionary is "to write material again, especially changing the words or form"¹. In this sense any translation, adaptation

1. McLeod, W.T. (ed.) (1989) *The New Collins English Dictionary & Thesaurus*, London, Collins, p. 858.

or manipulation may be a rewriting and thus it could take place between languages or within the same language (inter or intralinguistic). Linked with this first basic meaning is the literary notion of rewriting as using somebody else's work -topic, plot and/or characters- to write one's own. According to this notion most literature is made up of such products. As Terry Eagleton says in his book *Literary Theory*: "all literary works ...are 'rewritten', if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them, indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a 're-writing'"². The third meaning would apply to what Milan Kundera calls the horror of rewriting, the demon of rewriting which possesses some translators and makes them forget that the work they are rewriting is not their own³ (1986: 85). When I speak of rewriting I am referring to this third notion, to literary products which have been manipulated by translators or other professionals possessed by the demon of rewriting and whose products are presented under the name of the source author not acknowledging their intervention: that of the rewriter. A case in point is the Spanish version by Alfonso Sastre of the play *Mulato* originally written by the American playwright Langston Hughes⁴.

Before I go on to explain why I consider the Spanish version of *Mulato* a clear instance of a translator possessed by the demon of rewriting and the product of his activity a non-acknowledged rewrite rather than a translation, I would like to point out that I reached such conclusion in the work done for my doctoral dissertation where I intended to study the way English drama had been translated in Spain in the last five decades⁵.

The corpus used in such research consists of 150 translations⁶, published,

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2. Eagleton, T. (1983) *Literary Theory*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p. 12.
 3. Kundera, M. (1986) "Homage to Translator", in M. Kundera *Jacques and His Master*, translated by Simon Callow. London, Faber & Faber, 85-87.
 4. The following target and source texts have been used:
Hughes, Langston (1964) *Mulato*, versión libre de Alfonso Sastre. Madrid, Escelicer, colección Teatro n° 412 (extra).
Hughes, Langston (1968) *Mulatto. A Tragedy of the Deep South*. New York, Midland Book Edition.
 5. Merino, R. (1992) *Teatro inglés en España: ¿traducción, adaptación o destrucción? Algunas calas en textos dramáticos*. Vitoria, Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Facultad de Filología, Geografía e Historia, Universidad del País Vasco (PhD dissertation).
 6. I use here the term translation in its functional sense. According to Theo Hermans "a (literary) translation is that which is regarded as a (literary) translation by a certain cultural community at a certain time" (Hermans, T. (ed.) (1985) *The Manipulation of Literature. Studies in Literary Translation*. London-Sydney, Croom Helm Ltd., p. 13).

and most of them performed, in Spain from the 1950s to the 1990s. These target texts were studied using a four-stage scheme. In the first stage the full corpus of plays was taken into account in order to analyse all non-textual information in the edition of the plays. In the second stage about two thirds of the corpus, that is, around 100 target texts and their corresponding source texts, were compared on a macrostructural level finding, as a result, clear translation strategies used by translators. The most extreme examples of the strategies found were studied in depth in the microstructural and systemic stages (third and fourth stages respectively). Among those four plays chosen for the comparative microtextual analysis and systemic study was *Mulato* for it had become an outstanding example of one of the main translational strategies found in the second macrostructural stage: the strategy of addition.

Since I was dealing with dramatic texts the need for a unit which could account for the specificity of drama as well as be operative in dealing with the comparison and description of plays was felt. I established what I called "réplica" in Spanish and "utterance"⁷ in English as the basic minimal structural unit that can be found in drama, either in its written form or when it is performed on the stage, screen or television. Thus defined the utterance consists of both levels of theatrical language, dialogue and what is not dialogue: the frame⁸. The name of the character and all stage directions and comments that are not to be verbally presented on the stage but rather performed are part of the frame and the words to be spoken by the actors are part of the dialogue. Each utterance is clearly indicated on the page by the name of the character which tells us when the turn for the said character to speak (and move) has come. Defined in this way the utterance enables us to analyse drama (theatre, cinema and TV) taking into account its full specificity and the twofold nature of dramatic language. Traditional divisions of drama such as acts or scenes can be analysed and described in terms of utterances and even dramatic works which do not use traditional divisions are still always presented by means of recognisable utterances.

Establishing the utterance as a unit for the description and comparison of

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7. The English term "utterance" does not fully coincide in meaning and connotations with the Spanish "réplica", other English equivalents might be considered, for example, the term "turn" suggested after my talk at the *Translation and Rewriting* Conference by Prof. J. S. Petöfi.
 8. This term was used by Juliane House in her book *A Model for Translation Quality Assessment* Tübingen, Gunter Narr, 1981.

dramatic texts⁹ was paramount when attempting the analysis of such a large corpus of plays for, without it, the comparison and description of drama to be studied would have been almost impracticable.

The Spanish edition of the play *Mulato* is an acting edition published in a collection devoted to both Spanish and foreign plays. The reference to the Spanish performance and the fact that the name of the target author, Alfonso Sastre, was mentioned in the front page together with that of the source author, Langston Hughes, anticipate the hypothesis of an acting edition of a translation of the acceptable type. After counting utterances in both source texts and target texts of the corpus and comparing the results, in the macrostructural stage of the study, it became obvious that the majority of acting editions were to be found around the acceptability pole, showing two major strategies: addition or deletion of utterances. This global results also showed that *Mulato* was in the very extreme of addition with 224 more utterances when compared with its original. The deletion extreme was occupied by the translation of the play *Busybody* by Jack Popplewell, 917 less utterances than the original, and a reading edition of the play *Passion* by Edward Bond (a translation of the adequate type) was in the centre of the scale showing the same number of utterances in both source and target texts.

In the microstructural stage both extreme cases of addition and deletion were submitted to close textual comparison in order to find which processes had taken place and in what ways either deletion or addition strategies had been effected. Before attempting this close comparative study of texts, an intermediate process of pairing source and target text utterances was felt necessary to establish equivalent ST utterances for each TT unit of this type. This process revealed that phenomena of addition were concentrated and did not only occur at the level of individual utterances but in higher structural divisions such as scenes or episodes. A division in episodes was done showing that the beginning of the first act was completely new and so were the beginning and end of the second act. The plot of the original play was seriously changed with addition of a new character. I also discovered other strategies at work. There were many deletions of utterances and even complete episodes in such a way that the effect of addition of new material was heightened. These two strategies come together in another phenomenon that occurs fairly often in this translation: substitution. Certain utterances, and episodes, have been deleted and substituted by new ones. Both processes of deletion and

9. See: Merino, R. (1992) "La réplica como unidad de comparación de textos dramáticos traducidos" in: *Actas de los IV Encuentros Complutenses Entorno a la Traducción*, Madrid, Instituto Universitario de Lenguas Modernas y Traductores, Universidad Complutense de Madrid (in print).

substitution showed that the global comparison of number of utterances in both ST and TT reveals just the general strategy of addition which, after this process of pairing utterances, is not only corroborated but highlighted. The microstructural comparison of source and target texts showed that addition, deletion and substitution processes took place also within the unit utterance, affecting sentences and phrases.

The main character, Robert, the Mulatto of the title, acquires a new personality in Sastre's Spanish text. He is not introduced to us through his parents, Colonel Norwood and Cora the black servant, like in the English text; the episode that is added right at the beginning of act I in the Spanish version shows a proud character that challenges the non-written rules of the white people in the south of the United States. At the beginning of act II a new character is introduced, Helen, daughter of a white landowner who shares with Robert love and understanding in a dialogue which is not in the original text. The second scene of act II in the English text is deleted and, instead, we find a few episodes that precede a completely different end of play. In the original, Robert, after having killed his white father, runs away and finally seeks refuge in his father's house. Seeing that there is no chance of escaping, he makes the choice of killing himself before he is captured. In the Spanish version he is persecuted by the white landowners with their dogs and is found alive and finally hanged. This manipulation of the plot and characters has been effected by means of adding, deleting and substituting scenes, episodes and utterances, but also characters (6 have been deleted and 3 added). What is left of the original play is so little and is so much framed by a different plot and characterisation that it acquires the status of quotations. It would be better to say that the Spanish text is a new play written by Sastre and based on a previous dramatic text by Hughes which the Spanish playwright uses and quotes from. But Sastre did not acknowledge his authorship over the text, he did not want to subscribe the rewrite of Hughes' text, he was possessed by the demon of rewriting.

The fact that the play was published under the name of the original author, presented as a version of a foreign play, and that it functioned as a translation both at the time of the performance and publication, leads one to believe that what is left of the original play in the Spanish text is actually the product of a process of translation.

But it may not necessarily be so. Another translation into Spanish of the English play *Mulatto* had previously been published in Argentina¹⁰. This translation, in line with most Argentinian translations of plays, had virtually the same number of utterances and, after close comparative study of source and target texts, was revealed as a translation of the adequate type, very close to the original. A

10. Hughes, Langston (1954). *Mulato*, versión castellana de Julio Galer. Buenos Aires, Quetzal.

comparison of this translation with Sastre's version yielded similar results in terms of utterances added, deleted and substituted. Since the Argentinian translation faithfully renders the original, wherever Sastre's text deviates from the original it also deviates, in turn, from the Argentinian text. Those episodes, scenes and utterances of Sastre's text which seemed to be equivalent to the English original were compared with their Argentinian counterparts. The results of such comparison Spanish target text-Argentinian target text were quite revealing. The parallelism was almost complete except for words or expressions belonging to the Argentinian variety of Spanish which seem to have been systematically substituted in Sastre's text. In fact, even some misinterpretations found in the Argentinian translation were also in the Spanish edition of the play¹¹. After this comparison of both Spanish texts a new hypothesis was outlined, namely, that Sastre's so-called version could very well be, not a rewrite of the original but rather a rewrite of a previous Spanish text published in Argentina. If this is proved it would not be the only case. The use of existing translations to make new ones is a common practice and, specifically in the field of drama translation there are obvious cases such as José Luis Alonso's version¹² of Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* which is nothing but, again, a non-acknowledged rewrite of a previous Argentinian translation¹³.

Having established that Sastre's *Mulato* is but a rewrite, possibly of an already existing Argentinian translation, we could come back again over the different types of rewritings. The Collins English Dictionary definition is still valid as an objective description of the process and the two other kinds of rewrites (acknowledged and non-acknowledged) are clearly exemplified by Milan Kundera in his essay "Homage to Translator". There he wonders whether Stravinsky's

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11. The term "campus" (page 4) in the ST is rendered in the Argentinian translation as "colegio" (page 13) and in Sastre's version as "escuela" (page 24). The Argentinian translator Julio Galer may have either misinterpreted the term "campus" or used the term "colegio" in the English sense of the word "college". Nevertheless the fact that Sastre writes "escuela" proves that he may have been rewriting from the Argentinian text and therefore he could only understand "colegio" as the Spanish equivalent to "escuela": primary or secondary educational institution.
 12. Miller, A. (1980) *Panorama desde el puente*, adaptación de J.L. Alonso. Madrid, MK Ediciones, colección escena nº 17.
The source text used is:
Miller, A. (1987) *A View from the Bridge, All My Sons*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, Penguin Modern Classics (1st edition 1961).
 13. Miller, A. (1956) *Panorama desde el puente*, traducción de Jacobo Muchnik, y Juan Angel Cotta. Buenos Aires, Jacobo Muchnik Editor.

Pulcinella is a rewriting and he very definitely denies such a label for Stravinsky's work, arguing that "in it, Stravinsky assumes his full authorial authority... He doesn't hide behind Pergolesi" (1986: 85), something which, by the way, do not do the so-called translators of *Mulatto* and *A View from the Bridge*. Kundera explains that his own play *Jacques and His Master* is a variation, even an homage to Diderot and that he used Diderot's character and novel *Jacques le Fataliste* acknowledging the debt in the same way as Shakespeare who "as much as anyone, rewrote other people's work. But he didn't adapt them; he used a work as a theme to make his own variation, of which he was sovereign author"¹⁴ (1986: 15). And this is precisely what the translators I have spoken of haven't done, they still want to hide behind the name of the original author and present the play as a foreign play, they have not acknowledged their participation in the product they sign just as translators.

It is at least unfair to original authors to have their works rewritten when they are supposed to be translated from one language to another, and it is not fair for the audience who expect a product by a foreign author to get something which has been neither announced, nor asked for. It is, in sum, a fraud to give rewrites wrapped up as original translated products no matter how difficult, boring or badly paid translating might be. Translations, adaptations and rewrites are different products of different activities all of them equally worth respect in so far as each one is presented as such irrespective of the status and power of either source or target authors in their respective cultures or systems.

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14. Kundera, M. (1986) "Introduction to a Variation", in M. Kundera *Jacques and His Master*, translated by Simon Callow. London, Faber & Faber, pp. 9-19.