

A Catalan taste of honey: a process-oriented analysis of *Gust de Mel* (a translation and

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A Taste of Honey (1958))¹

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This paper examines some of the processes involved in translating and staging *Gust de Mel*. Performed by “Teatre de Barcelona” (TdB) (dir. Lurdes Barba) in the translation of Josep Costa at SAT (Centre Urbà de les Arts i l’Espectacle), from November 93 to January 94, this production featured Carme Sansa as Helen, Sílvia Sabaté as Jo, Francesc Lucchetti as Peter, Lamin Cham as Boy, and Emilià Carilla as Geof (in order of appearance).

I would like to start with some preliminary remarks on the title and the approach of this paper. Let us first look at the meaning of “a process-oriented analysis” in my title. By the use of the article “a” I mean that this is only one among many different approaches. By “process-oriented” I am referring to the mental processes or decision-making of the individual translator. However fruitful the investigation of such processes is, when dealing with theatre translation, the analysis of other processes is equally fruitful and arguably more accessible to the analyst, namely, the examination of rehearsals and the changes of the translated playtext undergoes in connection with the staging process. Secondly, I would like to point out that I am following Gideon Toury’s classification of translational norms into preliminary, initial and operational categories.

Preliminary norms relate to matters of selecting a text for translation, whereas the initial norm governs the basic choice a translator makes between adherence to the source text and concern for the prospective new reader. Operational norms concern actual decisions made in the process of translating, [...] [and they are subdivided into] matricial norms, which determine the matrix of a translated text, and textual norms, which determine its actual formulation.²

Let us then first examine the preliminary norms, the reasons why this particular play was staged 35 years after its first production by Joan Littlewood

and the “Theatre Workshop” at the Theatre Royal, London, on 27th May 1958. There were financial reasons: the production of Francesc Lucchetti’s musical “Picadillo i canalons” was postponed because of the lack of funding.³ Besides, there were more personal reasons. Lurdes Barba had long ago seen Tony Richardson’s successful 1961 film adaptation of the play. This impressed her deeply and made her want to stage the play. It must be noted that *Gust de Mel* is the first foreign play that TdB staged (they previously had focused on contemporary Catalan dramatists).⁴ Lurdes Barba has confessed that, at first, she did not know Tony Richardson’s film was based on a play. Indeed, nowadays the film is better-known in Catalonia than the original play, possibly because it has been broadcasted repeatedly on television.⁵ But why was *A Taste of Honey* made into a film in the first place? Edward J. Esche, in a rare paper which deals exclusively with *A Taste of Honey*, points to its “rich stage and publishing history”:

A Taste of Honey has a rich stage and publishing history. It was a success when first performed by Theatre Workshop, in the Theatre Royal at Stratford, London on 27 May 1958; and soon became a ‘smash hit’ when it transferred to Wyndham’s Theatre, London on 10 February 1959. In the same year, the play made the transatlantic cultural leap to New York; it has since never left the theatre as a performance text and continues to receive professional revivals. The play is still in print as a script on both sides of the Atlantic, but it has undoubtedly gained its widest popular dissemination through an adapted film version. American financiers initially offered to back the film if Audrey Hepburn played the leading role of Jo, which is an indication of what a hot cultural property the film was perceived to be. The play text achieved true canonical status in the early eighties with widespread school syllabus selection. The two decade time-lag here is hard for me to explain beyond the obvious observation that the eighties brought us back to problems of mass-unemployment and homelessness [...] [T]he canonisation was completed in the eighties with the publication of student text and accompanying study notes volumes.⁶

Esche goes on mentioning the paradoxically little academic attention the play has attracted in Britain and the United States. In Catalonia and in Spain the play has received so far little critical and popular attention. Joan de Sagarra accounts for the little impact of its first production in Barcelona:

En España la obra de Delaney se estrenó en Barcelona, en 1967, si no recuerdo mal, en un montaje de Mario Gas, en el Instituto de Estudios Norteamericanos, que debió de actuar de escudo frente a la censura. Sus intérpretes eran gente que hoy es famosa y que a la sazón nadie conocía: Emma Cohen, Carles Velat, Carles Canut, Cristina Fernández Cubas... Huelga decir que aquel estreno, universitario, apenas trascendió y por consiguiente no originó ningún escándalo, si bien el señor Josep Maria Junyent, tío de mi buen amigo Miquel Roca y a la sazón crítico teatral de *El Cruzado Español*, se cabreó como una mona y escribió una terrible crítica titulada nada menos que ‘Tufaradas de cloaca’ [...].⁷

In 1971, *Sabor a miel* was staged in the Teatro Beatriz, in Madrid, directed by Miguel Narros and featured by Laly Soldevila, Ana Belén, Eusebio Poncela, Nicolás Dueñas and Agustín Ndjambo. Since then, the play has only been staged by drama schools and amateur theatre groups. Why did this play have had so little impact in Catalonia and Spain? For Joan de Sagarra, the play has now, in the nineties, lost the potential for scandal it had in 1958:

El estreno de la obra constituyó un verdadero escándalo. Las gentes respetables no podían tolerar que una chica de 18 años hiciese gala de su manifiesta ‘inmoralidad’. Su obra fue calificada de ‘pura basura’, se la comparó con Françoise Sagan y se intentó retirarla del cartel. Pero por suerte tuvo también muchos defensores —Graham Greene entre ellos— y los *angry young men* y las feministas hicieron de ella una bandera, como hicieron con *Mirando hacia atrás con ira*, la obra de Osborne. Total que *A Taste of Honey* acabó convirtiéndose en un éxito, fruto del escándalo, de la polémica. [...] Hoy, la pieza, la “inmoralidad” de Delaney no creo que escandalice a nadie, ni siquiera a la Conferencia Episcopal. La obra ha dejado de ser un escándalo para convertirse en la triste historia de esa chica sin madre, sin padre, sin marido, y que espera un hijo. [...] La humanidad de los personajes se mantiene como el día del estreno, pero la historia ha perdido fuerza, y sobre todo el lenguaje, que no produce ninguna sorpresa, al contrario [...].⁸

For Lurdes Barba, however, the issues the play touches upon —the loneliness of the individual in big cities, the fragility of bonds, the generation gap as reflected in the daughter-mother relationship— are still valid today.⁹ According to Sílvia Sabaté (Jo), social ostracization and conflicting mother-daughter relationships are more topical than before.¹⁰

In his “preliminary norms”, apart from the reasons why a text is translated within a translation policy, Toury also includes questions related to the “directness of translation”, i.e.: “Is an intermediate (second-hand) translation permitted at all?”¹¹ In the SAT production of *Gust de Mel*, this question is a relevant one. Lurdes Barba saw an amateur Catalan production and became interested in the translation. She was considering using it for her production when she realized, shortly before the summer of 93, that there were some omissions and departures from the original, which were identical to the omissions and variations of the published Spanish translation.¹² Since she intended to start from scratch in her production, i.e. from the original playtext, she commissioned a new translation from Josep Costa, an active theatre director and translator who accepted knowing that he would not be able to attend rehearsals and revise the text. Therefore Costa gave the director and actors/actresses a free hand to make any changes they deemed necessary.¹³

Therefore, the first rehearsals were crucial to determine the criteria which governed the changes introduced in the text and production. First of all, it was important to see whether the director’s concern about the original text persisted.

In other words, what was the “initial norm”? Was the translation (and production) source- or target-oriented?¹⁴ Toury admits that “in practice the decision made will generally be some combination (or compromise between) these two extremes, [since] [...] translation [...] always involves an encounter, if not a confrontation, between two sets of norms”.¹⁵ This confrontation was present in one of the first rehearsals (16-IX-93) when the actors/actresses were reading out the text. Peter, a character who often sings out his replies, after offering to marry Helen sings “Walter, Walter, lead me to the altar”,¹⁶ lines which were given a provisional literal translation by Costa. Francesc Lucchetti (Peter) proposed singing the old popular song “Blanca y radiante va la novia”. Carme Sansa (Helen) reacted strongly against this on grounds of consistency: the production should be either a translation with English songs or a “transposition” (her terminology) with Catalan characters —like “Pere i Elena”— and Catalan or Spanish songs. Her argument was opposed by Lurdes Barba, Sílvia Sabaté and Francesc Lucchetti on the grounds of the audience’s familiarity with the songs. These are “cançons normals”, “super-populars”. As regards characterization, Lucchetti argued:

L'essència de la discussió és aquesta [...] si realment diem de conservar el sentit pel qual estan posades aquestes cançons [...] un “tio” que ve del carrer, un personatge pintoresc i tirat [...] canta unes cançons de moda, de la ràdio d'aquell moment [...] l'efecte que pot colpir és el d'aquestes cançons [...] Jo sempre he estat partidari d'acostar les coses.

Lurdes Barba, always concerned both about achieving a relaxed atmosphere and about efficiency in rehearsals, settled the argument: these musical questions had been handed to the musicians working in SAT. She offered another tentative solution “[sic] Igual es pot fer la música i no la lletra”. Eventually, there was a whole range of solutions, which I go on to account for, as examples of collective translation strategies. Firstly, new music was put to the translated text, for example: “Veig un lloc tranquil, una llar de foc...”.¹⁷ (Francesc Lucchetti had provisionally proposed “Pasaremos la noche en la luna...”) Secondly, the music was just sung to la. Thus, “Walter, lead me to the altar” (p.17) did not become “Blanca y radiante...” but a hummed version of the wedding march. Thirdly, there was omission of the music, as in Peter’s “That wild, destructive thing called love.” (p. 33). Finally, an altogether new song —in keeping with the original music-hall tune— replaced Helen’s

I'd give the song birds to the wild wood
I'd give the sunset to the blind
and to the old folks I'd give the memory
of the baby upon their knee.

[...] [She sings another verse] (p. 13)

El meu millor amic és el little John
 però el meu tresor és l'Stevie Wing
 Entre John i Stevie prefereixo en Sam.
 Són ocells de camp.

Quan els veig venir nets i clenxinats
 amb els seus barrets tots tres tan mudats
 John i Stevie són el meu amor
 però en Sam és el meu tresor.

The words are by Francesc Luchetti, and the music by Walter García. In this Catalan rendering, the intertextual reference to the “baby” was replaced by an emphasis on Helen as a “man mad” woman (p.62), and the way Carme Sansa staged the song pointed to Helen’s vitality.

As regards matricial norms, i.e. norms governing the overall structure of the text, the actors and the director did not change Costa’s script substantially. They only added the definite article to proper names where Costa had left them out, presumably because of lack of time for an overall revision (e.g. on p. 90, twice). They also kept Costa’s criterion regarding the distinction between “tu” and “vostè”, i.e. the formal and informal second person address. Most characters use “tu” reciprocally in their interchanges: Jo-Helen; Helen-Peter; Jo-Peter; Jo-Boy, and Jo-Geof. However, Geof, always addressed as “tu”, addresses Helen and Peter as “vostè”. Thus, Geof’s general respect for conventions is correctly reflected in his language. Another matricial norm was the choice of the central Catalan of Barcelona and of an informal register (Barcelona and its outskirts were probably seen as the industrial equivalent to Northern England). Actors made some changes in terms of informal register, although, in general, Costa’s rendering was colloquial, in tune with the original. The corrections were concerned with register as well as with English interference. Repeatedly, “en realitat” became “en el fons”; “bé” became “au”, “doncs”, or was omitted; and “hola” (expressing surprise) became “vaja”.

Textual changes were more numerous, particularly the correction of Spanish words and turns of phrase, but less significant for the overall meaning(s) of the play. For example, in scene 1 “banyar-se” was changed to “dutxar-se” on grounds of credibility. In Catalonia, economical flats are more likely to have a shower than a bath. Other changes were idiosyncratic, a result of the actors’ occasional forgetfulness, and were overlooked later on by the actors themselves. These individual changes were not substantial. However, let us focus on the ending of the play, where minor textual and intonation matters are potentially significant. In the final scene, Jo is about to have her baby just after Helen has ordered Geof to leave. When Jo tells Helen the baby may be black, Helen is shocked, says she needs to get herself a drink and concludes, with reference to the baby: “We’ll call it Blackbird and put it on

the stage. Ta-ta, Jo, I shan't be long." (p. 83). The ending is potentially open-ended. It is not at all clear whether Helen will return or not. Therefore, critical accounts of the play as a comedy take too much for granted.¹⁸ During rehearsals, Carme Sansa rightly discussed with Lurdes Barba the possibility that Helen might not return. Even though the director knew of productions—Richardson's film included—where Helen's return is explicated, she preferred to leave the ending ambiguous. In English, "Blackbird" echoes a popular song of the 20s, and "ta-ta" is very informal. There being no straightforward Catalan equivalent for these two terms, the informality of the utterance—which, in contrast with the fact that Helen is leaving Jo, however briefly, maintains the ambiguity of the ending—could be compensated for by Sansa's intonation. After some debate among actors, her final rather solemn intonation made it clear that Helen would not return, in contrast with the music at the end of the performance, with the words "I will return..."

I have mentioned above the role of music in *Gust de Mel* in connection with characterization. Another function it has is that of separating scenes from one another. Although in Littlewood's production there was a jazz trio,¹⁹ the stage directions only read "Music", with no mention of the type of music or of its role. In this case, the solution offered went beyond matters of text translation. Walter García, a musician working for SAT, brought together different versions of "A Taste of Honey", the song that names the play. For the beginning of the play, a version by "the Beatles" was used, and the fragment chosen, the beginning of the song, read "A Taste of Honey, tasting much sweeter than wine. I'll dream of your first kiss..." which, for the audience that understands English, will be related to Jo's hopes at the beginning of the play. In contrast, Helen's "I shan't be long" (no trigaré gaire) has to be read against a female jazz voice singing the end of the song "I will return. I'll come back for the honey and you.", which, to my mind, compensates for Sansa's unambiguous intonation of her final lines.

These are only some instances of the active role director and actors played in the collaborative translation of *A Taste of Honey*. "The central fact about collaborative translation is that only rarely is it between equals."²⁰ Although I have decontextualized this quotation from a book on poetic translation, I am using it here to introduce the question of status in theatre translation and production. There was some correlation between the relative status of translator, director and actors and the changes introduced in the playtext. Josep Costa's status as a theatre director is better-known than his work as a translator. Translations by J. M. de Sagarra, for example, do not undergo such extensive revision. Besides, as I mentioned before, Costa gave the production team explicit permission to revise the text. I have also mentioned Carme Sansa's strong reaction against the adaptation of songs, which was eventually considered. She also has a feeling for Catalan and a strong personality.

Therefore, most textual changes were hers. Something else has to be mentioned, however. She was combining rehearsals of *Gust de Mel* with a television production, and she did not have much time to study. Consequently, some of these changes were idiosyncratic and/or changed from rehearsal to rehearsal. Francesc Lucchetti, also with much theatrical experience, and a playwright himself, made most of the changes to do with register. His were, for instance, the changes from “hola” to “vaja”, and the various different substitutes for the constantly repeated “bé”. Lurdes Barba’s changes were the omission of a few lines —no more than three per cent of the whole play— to speed up the action in the production. When she was not confident enough about some Catalan expressions, she relied on Sansa’s and Lucchetti’s judgement. She did not want unnecessary changes, however, and four days before the opening night, she made the actors revise their lines, some of which had been altered in previous rehearsals. Sílvia Sabaté’s knowledge of English qualified her for the interpretation of difficult passages. And she had commented many of them personally with Costa. Emilià Carilla’s concern was not with the text, he told me, but with its interpretation. It is not surprising, then, that his changes consisted in gestures accompanying the text. Lamin, with a much shorter role, did not question the text, but acknowledged the corrections made by the director.

According to Toury, translational norms can be reconstructed from the translated product. However, in theatre at least, these are difficult to infer just from actual performances and published texts. A more exhaustive analysis of theatre translation (as opposed to drama translation) has to be based on the translated dramatic text and on its theatrical dimension, as reflected in recorded rehearsals and performances, which involve a focus on the process, as well as on the final product.

This information on the process of translating and staging *Gust de Mel* was obtained by regular attendance to and audio/video recordings of rehearsals from September to November 93. I must say I am really grateful to the whole production team. They were all very friendly, especially Lurdes Barba, and they did not resent my presence in rehearsals, my questions, or my ever-present tape-recorder and video-camera. I decided to record rehearsals because of my interest in the processes involved in translating and staging a play. In my opinion, recording was less obtrusive for the actors than interviewing them after the performances, and relatively more objective. Another very important reason for recording rehearsals was the aural and visual elements in theatre, which create meaning on the stage, whether supplemented by verbal interaction or not. Besides, the recordings of two rehearsals with an audience allowed me to record, however unrepresentatively, their laughter in reaction to the humour in the play. This is only one means of evaluating the immediate impact of a play. Other means include detailed analysis of critics’ reviews, questionnaires (handed out to some seventy-five members of the audience)

and of students' translations of a scene, in order to see what difficulties they encountered and their suggested solutions. All this is part of my future research, however, and is beyond the scope of this paper.

NOTES

1. The title of this paper is a paraphrasis of Margaret Rose's "An Italian kind of Alaska", an essay on the Italian translation of Harold Pinter's *A Kind of Alaska*, in *The Pinter Review: Annual Essays 1991* (Tampa, Fl.: the University of Tampa Press).
2. For the sake of brevity, the quote is Romy Heylen's summary in her *Translation, Poetics, and the Stage: Six French Hamlets*, (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 11; based on Gideon Toury, *In Search of a Theory of Translation* (Tel Aviv: the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 1980), esp. «The Nature and Role of Norms in Literary Translation», p. 50-62.
3. Josep Escarré, «El SAT abrirá la temporada 93-94 con una pieza de Gombrowicz», *La Vanguardia*, 22-VII-93. The article provides a general background to the management of SAT.
4. Teresa Sesé, «Carme Sansa y Sílvia Sabaté dan sabor a *Gust de Mel*», *La Vanguardia*, 6-XI-93.
5. Most reviews of the SAT production mention Tony Richardson's homonymous film.
6. Edward J. Esche, «Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* as Serious Text: a Semiotic Reading» in Adrian Page (ed.), *The Death of the Playwright? Modern British Drama and Literary Theory*, (Basingtoke & London: Macmillan, 1992) p. 67-81.
7. Joan de Sagarra, «Aquellas 'tufaradas de cloaca'», *El País*, 13-XI-93.
8. Joan de Sagarra, *ibídem*.
9. Teresa Sesé, *ibídem*.
10. Marta Cervera, «Carme Sansa protagoniza 'Gust de Mel' en el SAT», *El Periódico*, 7-XI-93.
11. Toury, *op. cit.*, p.53.
12. Shelagh Delaney, *Sabor a miel [sic] Comedia en dos actos. Versión española de Adolfo Lozano Barroy* (Madrid: Escelier, 1971).
13. It is a curious coincidence that Delaney's original playtext underwent collective revision in the production of Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop. See John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1988) (1962), p. 131-32.
14. Toury, following Itamar Even-Zohar, refers to these options as *adequate* and *acceptable* translations, *op.cit.* p. 55. I prefer to use the more neutral labels "source-oriented" and "target-oriented".
15. Toury, *ibídem*.
16. Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey*, (London: Methuen, 1959), p. 18. References to the English text are to this edition and will be included in brackets in the main text.
17. Shelagh Delaney, *Gust de Mel, versió catalana de Josep Costa, estiu 1993*, unpublished script, p. 15. Subsequent references will be included in the main text in brackets. Another example is "Getting to know you, getting to know all about you..." (p. 65).

18. See Esche, *op. cit.*, p. 69, 73-74 and 78. See also note 12 above, where the Spanish translated play text is labelled a comedy.
19. See p. 5 in the English playtext.
20. Burton Raffel, *The Art of Translating Poetry*, (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), p. 129.

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