

Fidelity in Translation?

Raúl Eduardo Narváez*
Universidad de Buenos Aires

1. Fidelity

1.1 Impossible

Translators, we should admit, have always been the target of readership distrust. *Traduttore, Traditore* does a well-known Italian adage state. However, the fact of calling a translator a *betrayed* implies the obligation of asking a question: *betrayed of which values of the text?*

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, also issues a similar statement in a segment of Chapter VI of his *El hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*¹. The text says: *en su primer nacimiento*.

Both statements are, in fact, expressing the belief that fidelity in translation belongs to the region of utopian desires. From this perspective José Ortega y Gasset in his *Miseria y esplendor de la traducción*² states that:

El destino -el privilegio y el honor- del hombre es no lograr nunca lo que se propone y ser pura pretensión, viviente utopía. Parte siempre hacia el fracaso y antes de entrar en la pelea lleva ya herida la sien. Así acontece en esta modesta ocupación que es traducir.

Easy is to infer that the very self-confidence of the statements preclude the idea of introducing any convincing refutation. However, theory insists on that versions should be *faithful to the original*. But the task is not stress-free by the simple fact that a text expresses its meaning in a language belonging to a cultural environment of its own. Translators, despite this factual evidence, aim at rendering a message in a language and cultural environment that are, by nature, strange to it. This goal, which seems contradictory and unattainable, leads to the first of the risks of the adventure of translating, that of performing a valid act of reading. We know that the knowledge of the semantic charge of words will not suffice to validate a cognitive process. It is a must to grasp the value words have as signifiers, in constituting, according to Lacan, *a signifier for another signifier*. Only if this view is taken into account will a valid reading act be performed, that is, one giving the possibility of constructing a version *faithful to the original*.

* Raúl Eduardo Narváez holds the degrees of Doctor en Lenguas Modernas con Especialidad en Lengua Inglesa (USAL), Traductor Público en Idioma Inglés (UBA), Profesor en Inglés (Instituto Superior "Jesús María" A-85), Consultor Psicológico (Inst. Sup. de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales A-1375) and Diplomatura en Psicoanálisis (Inst. Sup. de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales A-1375). He worked as Director de Estudios at Inst. Superior del Profesorado San Agustín (A 757) and he was Prof. Titular at UBA from 1986 to 2016. He published *The Act of Translating* in 2005 (UBA). He was granted two scholarships: one by Colegio de Traductores Públicos de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, and another one by Universidad de Granada, Spain. In 2014, he was awarded a medal as a recognition of his career as an author and a diploma to his vast and prestigious career as both translator and autor by the Colegio de Traductores Públicos de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. In 2015, he was given an award to his career in the Argentine Education System by Instituto Superior del Profesorado San Agustín (A-757). Has participated as a lecturer at national and international level and has published numerous papers about translation.

SUPLEMENTO *Ideas*, I, 3 (2020), pp. 67-72

© Universidad del Salvador. Escuela de Lenguas Modernas. ISSN en trámite

¹ Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, *El ingenioso hidalgo de Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Leipsig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1866, pp. 24,25.

² Ortega y Gasset, José, *Miseria y esplendor de la traducción en Misión del bibliotecario*, Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1967, p. 106.

1.2 Possible

Now, if our objective is to avoid being called a *betrayed*, it will be necessary to submit, once again, the extent of the term *fidelity* to a speculative analysis.

In the beginning of its history, *fidelity* was a synonym for literality, for formal equivalence. That was what Horace had in mind, for example, when in his *Ars Poetica* or *Epistle to the Pisos*, lines 134-135, spoke of the *fidus interpres*, the *faithful interpreter*, namely, the translator who has opted for literality.

1.3 Fidelity and Today's Perspectives

At present, there is a different conceptual perspective due to the emergence of new paradigms that indicate which aspects can prove the fidelity of a translation. It should be considered, for example, the position the translator has adopted, *author-centred* or *reader-centred*, the method selected, the procedures employed, and so on. That is why the act of translating can be defined as *the absolute exercise of freedom and creativity* since it is closely related to the making of personal decisions. For example, if a translator's objective is to translate the poem *Manzanares, Manzanares* by Quevedo it will imply making up his or her mind about whether *to be faithful to the author* or *to be faithful to the reader*. A passage of this poem reads:

<i>Manzanares, Manzanares,</i>	<i>tú que gozas, tú que ves</i>
<i>arroyo aprendiz de río,</i>	<i>en verano y en estío,</i>
<i>platicante de Jarama,</i>	<i>las viejas en cueros muertos,</i>
<i>buena pesca de maridos;</i>	<i>las mozas en cueros vivos;</i>

By making use of our freedom, in this case it should be decided whether the two seasons mentioned, *verano* and *estío*, will be reduced to one, to *summer*, the name in force nowadays or whether the translation will try to reproduce the two references according to the fact that at that time, in Spain, the seasons of the year were five and not four. Reference to these five seasons can also be found in Chapter LIII of *El hidalgo Don Quijote de La Mancha*. The text reads:

*Pensar que en esta vida las cosas della han de durar siempre en un estado es pensar en lo escusado; antes parece que ella anda todo en redondo, digo, a la redonda: **la primavera sigue al verano, el verano al estío, el estío al otoño, y el otoño al invierno, y el invierno a la primavera.***

In the English version online of Goodreads Inc site³ it has rightfully been included only the reference to *summer* because in the original the allusion to the seasons has but one objective, that of claiming that in life "*anda todo en redondo*", in a circular course. That means that fidelity has been achieved since the version does not at all betray the message of the original.

*To think that the affairs of this life will always remain in the same state is a vain presumption; Indeed they all seem to be perpetually changing and moving in a circular course. **Spring is followed by summer, summer by autumn, and autumn by winter,***

Let us remember that in Spain during the 15th century, the seasons were four: *otoño*, *invierno*, *primavera* and *verano*. However, as *primavera* covered many months, from January to June, with the passing of time it was divided into two, *verano* for temperate days and *estío* for the days of intense heat. For this reason in *Manzanares, Manzanares* it is read "*en verano y en estío*". In an attempt to

³ Goodreads Inc site: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/116997-to-think-that-the-affairs-of-this-life-always-remain>. Fecha de consulta: 15/01/2018

reproduce the contents in a version constructed for this instance, I translated the two seasons as "*in spring and in summer*" since the objective of the author was to point out that that was observable phenomenon during those seasons. Although two seasons are mentioned as in the original, the names correspond to those used nowadays on the grounds that there is functional correspondence that evidences fidelity to the textual content.

*Manzanares, Manzanares,
arroyo aprendiz de río,
platicante de Jarama,
buena pesca de maridos;
tú que gozas, tú que ves
en verano y en estío,
las viejas en cueros muertos,
las mozas en cueros vivos.*

*Manzanares, Manzanares,
Small stream, apprentice to river
Speaking voice of Jarama
good fishing for husbands, here.
you who enjoy, you who see
in spring and in summer,
old women in dead leathers,
young ladies in leathers really lively.*

1.4 Fidelity and Sacred Texts

Which principles should prevail when translating sacred texts, such as those of the Bible?

In the case of the Bible, for being the divine word, fidelity demands extreme accuracy in the transmission of content, which does not imply having to opt for literality.

Let us have a brief look at the Spanish version of the word "**Padre**" in the "**Padre Nuestro**". In the original, in Aramaic, there appears *Abba*, which means "*papa, papito, padre*". It is the first word that a child utters, together with *IMMA*, mother. That is what the Talmud states in Berakoth 40. But, resorting to our capability of making use of our freedom, which will be the best choice for the case, "*papa*", "*papito*" or "*padre*"? In our country, when addressing their father, children, as a rule, call him "*papá*", "*papi*" or even "*pa*". Many adults also use these vocatives or even the familiar "*viejo*" or "*vieja*". However, translators have rightfully opted for "*Padre Nuestro*", and for "*Our Father*" in the English versions, in consideration of all that that can be said of the "ABBA-*Padre*", analysis which is beyond the specific subject of this presentation. My aim here is to highlight the autonomy a translator enjoys to attempt being faithful to the original and so render the broadest range of semantic dimensions.

The translation into English of the segment that follows the vocative "*Our Father*" in the Bible known as the King James Version reads: *Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name*. If rendered into contemporary English the segment would read: *Our Father who are in heaven*. As that version would be grammatically wrong, from a reader-centred approach, we could say "*Our Father who is in heaven*" or elliptically "*Our Father in heaven*". Conversely, *King James Version*, in an attempt to be as near as possible to the original, offers a version where fidelity is directly related to their intended goal.

Returning to the subject of the translation of diminutives, to contrast the level of fidelity reached, an analysis of some versions in Spanish of the passage *Matthew 15: 26-27* will be helpful. It will allow us to verify essential differences in all of them. According to the version offered by *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* published by the *Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society* of New York Jesus said to the Canaanite woman:

²⁶ En respuesta, él dijo: *No es correcto tomar el pan de los hijos y echarlo a los **perritos***". ²⁷ Ella dijo: "*Sí, Señor; pero en **realidad los perritos comen de las migajas que caen de la mesa de sus amos***".

However, according to the version *and Evangelios Concordados de A. Codesal Martin* the dialogue is as follows:

²⁶Él le contestó: "*Deja que primero se sacien los hijos: porque no está bien tomar el pan de los hijos y dárselo a **los perros***". ²⁷ Ella le contestó: "*Sí, Señor; mas también **los perros comen, bajo la mesa, las migajas de los hijos, que caen de la mesa de sus señores***".

Finally, in the version of La Biblia Latinoamérica. Editorial Verbo Divino. XIV Edición⁴ the passage reads:

²⁶ Jesús le dijo: “No se debe echar a los **perros** el pan de los hijos.” ²⁷ La mujer contestó: Es verdad, Señor, pero también los **perritos** comen las migajas que caen de la mesa de sus amos.”

In the time of Jesus mangy street dogs were called **KUON**. They were hungry dogs, which fed on any food they could find in the streets. Household pets were called with the diminutive KUNARION. Jesus used the word KUNARION in this opportunity. If translated by “perrito”, the Spanish-speaking community, for certain, will tend to think of the size of the animal, of the tenderness it evokes. That is not the focal point of the passage. What it highlights is that the Canaanite woman is considered a member of the family, one member of the community. That is why, perhaps, a version more faithful to the original would be achieved by translating “kunarion” by “perros de nuestra casa”. Then, the text would read:

²⁶ No debe echarse a los **perros de nuestra casa** el pan de los hijos. ²⁷ La mujer contestó: Es verdad, Señor, pero también los **perros de nuestra casa** comen las migajas que caen de la mesa de sus amos.”

In the versions in English these different options are also verified. In the King James Version the passage reads:

But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to the dogs.

In *The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures* the passage includes the reference to “**little dogs**”. It reads

Κύριε,	βοήθει	μοι.	26	ὁ	δὲ	
Lord,	be helping	to me.		The (one)	but	
ἀποκριθεὶς	εἶπεν	Οὐκ	ἔστιν	καλὸν	λαβεῖν	26 In
having answered	said	Not	is	fine	to take	answer he said: “It is
τὸν ἄρτον	τῶν	τέκνων	καὶ	βαλεῖν	τοῖς	not right to take the
the bread	of the	children	and	to throw	<u>to the</u>	bread of the children
κυναρίοις. 27	ἡ	δὲ	εἶπεν	Ναί, κύριε,		and throw it to little
<u>little dogs.</u>	The [woman]	but	said	Yes, Lord,		dogs.” 27 She said:
καὶ γὰρ	τὰ	κυνάρια	ἔσθιει	ἀπὸ	τῶν	“Yes, Lord; but really
also for	the	<u>little dogs</u>	is eating	from the		the little dogs do eat
ψιχίων	τῶν	πιπτόντων	ἀπὸ	τῆς	τραπέζης	of the crumbs falling
crumbs the (ones)	falling	from the	table			from the table of their
τῶν κυρίων	αὐτῶν. 28	τότε	ἀποκριθεὶς			masters.” 28 Then
of the lords	of them.	Then	having answered			

2. Concluding Observations

Finally, consistent with what has been stated, I conclude that translators faithful to the original will be those who, by making absolute use of their freedom, decide which direction will take their operating movements validated by accepted theoretical concepts. The authorised interpretation of the meanings in the original will give a translator the chance to make the choices which will draw the desired fidelity near according to a previous intended objective.

Ortega y Gasset becomes relevant here when stating that *la traducción no es la obra, sino un camino hacia la obra [...] un aparato, un artificio técnico que nos acerca a aquella sin pretender jamás repetirla o sustituirla.*

⁴ Editorial Verbo Divino, *La Biblia Latinoamérica*, Madrid: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1995, p. 49

Such categorical assertion, no doubt, offers the fit and proper space to say, with conviction, that *Il traduttore*, then, *non e traditore*.

3. References

- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, *El ingenioso hidalgo de Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Capítulo VI, Leipsig: F. A. Brockhaus.
- Goodreads Inc site, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/116997-to-think-that-the-affairs-of-this-life-always-remain>. Fecha de consulta: 15/01/2018
- Codesal Martín, Andrés, *Evangelios Concordados*, Sevilla: Apostolado Mariano. "s.f."
- Ortega y Gasset, José *Misión del bibliotecario*, Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1967.
- Horacio, *Epístola a los pisones*, Barcelona: Bosh-Casa Editorial, 1961.
- Narvárez, Raúl Eduardo, *The Act of Translating*, Buenos Aires: UBA, 2005.
- American Bible Society, *The Holy Bible, King James Version*, New York: American Bible Society, 1869.
- Editorial Verbo Divino, *La Biblia. Latinoamérica*, Madrid: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1995.
- Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, *The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures*, Nueva York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1985.
- Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, *Traducción del Nuevo Mundo de las Sagradas Escrituras*, Nueva York: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1987.

