Translation of song lyrics as structure-related expressive device

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Abstract

The paper explores the role of translation as a resource of meaning-making in popular songs. The study material includes three songs presented at the TV show “The Voice Russia”. Although the audience of the show is predominantly Russian, contestants choose to perform these songs in two or more different languages. We argue that in all these cases translation is akin to code switching: it increases the expressiveness of the song by creating various additional meanings (both verbal and musical). The alternation of the original and translated lyrics is usually linked to the general structure of the songs.

Keywords: Translation; song lyrics; song structure; meaning making; multilingual performance.

1. Introduction

The translation of song lyrics or music-linked translation (Golomb, 2005) is a relatively new field of linguistic research. Most studies, so far, have examined the ways songs can be translated. Defining a song as a piece of music and lyrics designed for a singing performance (Franzon, 2008, p. 376), researchers address the issue of making a ‘singable’ target text and describe translation strategies intended “to permit the actual performance in the target language of foreign songs, with their pre-existing music” (Low, 2005, p. 374). Franzon examines the options in song translation and the concept of ‘singability’
from a functional perspective and outlines strategic choices made by lyricists in translating songs. Moving from the assumption that a song has three properties (music, lyrics and prospective performance) and music has three components (melody, harmony and musical sense), he suggests that a song translator may have five options: (1) leaving the song untranslated, (2) translating the lyrics without taking the music into consideration, (3) writing new lyrics to the original music, (4) adapting the music to the translation, and (5) adapting the translation to the music (Franzon, 2005, p. 373).

Some authors address the discussions of whether songs ought to be translated. Two points of view are represented. One stresses the defective nature of translated lyrics arguing that singing in translation is “a weak substitute of the source text which offers the actual words set by the composer, along with their phonic features such as rhymes, vowel-sounds, and their integral meaning” (Low, 2008, p. 2). The supporters of music-linked translation emphasize the importance of singing in the language of the audience to foster understanding. For instance, Low quotes the British opera producer David Poutney who uses a convincing and colorful metaphor to support this point of view: “the sense arrives like a glowing hot coal, straight from the mouth of the singer, and strikes instantly at the head and heart of the listener” (ibid).

While most studies on translation of popular songs focus on monolingual material, Davis and Bentahila explore the role of translation in the creation of song lyrics which feature more than one language (Davis & Bentahila, 2008). They outline a number of ways in which translation can be used to produce bilingual and/or multilingual songs: translation as reiteration, translation as replacement, and translation as transformation (adaptation, imitation, and/or rewriting). They also argue that in bilingual lyrics translation and code switching often serve to produce similar effects, such as the affirmations of identity, stylistics connotations, a means of opening up the lyrics to outsiders, etc.

The contribution of the present paper to the field lies in its focus on the effective word-and-music alignment, specifically on the expressive functions of juxtaposing the original lyrics and translated pieces in a song. We will explore how words and music complement each other via the so-called ‘linguistic transposition’. This concept was introduced by Alice Chik who studied the creation of Cantonies versions of English songs (Chik, 2010, p. 516). The term ‘linguistic transposition’ is used by analogy with the transposition of melodies from one key to another and refers to the creation of a local version of an original song which combines pieces in both languages.

We argue that integrating the original text into the localized (translated) version of the song and/or inserting the translated fragment into the original lyrics may reinforce the expressive potential of the song and create additional meanings. We also dwell on the perception of translated and original texts by the audience and music professionals and examine what indexical (symbolic) meanings can be achieved by language confrontation.

2. Methodology and study material

The paper is guided by the research on music-linked translation and song structure (Appen, & Frei-Hauenschild, 2015; Manuel, 1995). Pop songs appear to have a regular structure which consists of stanzas (verses) and a chorus or a refrain, with the lines fitting into a rhyming scheme that matches the music (Chan, 2009, p. 109). The chorus normally entails a pragmatic contrast to the verses – rhythmically, melodically, lyrically, harmonically and/or dynamically - and it is usually of a greater emotional intensity than the verse.

Androutsopoulos (2010) identifies several forms of language alternation linked to the structure of the song. The most common patterns are switching between the chorus and the verse and between the verses of the song. According to Davis and Bentahila (2008, p. 255), it is quite common for the verses to be translated while the chorus usually remains in the base language. This strategy may be explained by the fact that the refrain (chorus) is usually the song’s keynote feature, the most distinctive and memorable element, which might be difficult to reproduce in another language.

Patterned switching between languages in particular sections of a song provides additional resources for meaning making. According to Appen and Frei-Hauenschild, meanings are more or less assigned to certain formal models, and song forms provide “an impetus for interpretation on the semantic, symbolic, and functional levels” (Appen, & Frei-Hauenschild 2015, p. 2).

In this paper, we examine three multilingual songs presented at the TV show “The Voice Russia”: “Le temps des cathedrales” performed by Ivan Vabischevich and Vasily Turkin in Russian and French, “Une vie d’amour” performed by Yana Rabinovich and Andrey Tsvetkov in the French and Russian languages, and “A Yiddische Mame” performed by Maria Katz in Russian, Hebrew and English. All three performances use the ‘linguistic
transposition’ pattern. The original lyrics and their English translations were drawn from the websites http://lyricstranslate.com and https://yiddishlyrics.wordpress.com. The fragments of the songs performed in Russian were transcribed and translated into English.

We compare the verbal and musical fabric of the songs and examine how language alternation is linked to the song structure. We analyze the symbolic/indexical meanings conveyed by different languages in multilingual performances and show how the juxtaposition of translated pieces and the original lyrics (or vice versa) reinforces the expressiveness of popular songs. To find out what the audiences think of such performances, we study the relevant comments of “The Voice Russia” TV viewers on Internet forums. To reveal professional opinion on the issue, we analyzed discussions of the jury related to multilingual songs and conducted a short online survey of pop music professionals.

3. Analysis

Popular songs as items of mass consumption are always audience oriented. “The Voice Russia” is a vocal contest where the winner is selected by the TV-viewers and the jury. They both decide who will proceed to the next round of the show and who will eventually win the competition. Since the show is broadcast in Russia, most of the TV-viewers prefer the songs to be performed in Russian. The jury, who represent professional point of view, are usually in favor of singing in the original language1. Yet, the combining of the original and translated fragments in a signing performance is not just a way to satisfy both parties. ‘Linguistic transposition’ helps to reinforce the expressive potential of the song and the patterns of language alternation are usually connected with the structure of the song.

In our material, we identified three types of linguistic transposition: (1) switching to the original language in the final chorus of the song, (2) alternating between the original and translated fragments in different verses of the song, and (3) incorporating translated fragments into the first verse and the final chorus of the song. These patterns are further illustrated by three multilingual songs performed in different episodes of “The Voice Russia” (Series 1–4).

3.1. Switching to a different language in the final chorus

This pattern of language alternation draws upon the conventional function of the final chorus. The format of popular songs is closed, linear and goal-oriented, and their melodies (and/or harmonies) are directed “toward an expressive climax which usually occurs shortly before the end of the song” (Manuel, 1985: 166). Switching to a different language in the final lines of the performance highlights the climax of the song and reinforces its overall expressive meaning.

This pattern was used in the performance of the Russian-language version of “Le temps des cathedrales” from the internationally famous musical “Notre-Dame de Paris” by Ivan Vabischevich and Vasilii Turkin in one of the battles rounds of Series 2 (2013). The original song consists of two verses, each followed by two choruses with different lyrics. The contestants performed the two verses and 3 choruses in Russian to ensure a better understanding of the French musical by the Russian-speaking audience. However, in the final chorus they switched to French – the original language of the musical:

(1) Chorus 3 (in Russian)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Russian</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prishla pora piratov i poetov</td>
<td>There came a time of pirates and poets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrachnih pirov</td>
<td>Of somber feasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnavalov na krovi</td>
<td>And carnivals on blood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prishla pora zakatov i rassvetov</td>
<td>There came a time of sunrises and sunsets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dnei i nochei</td>
<td>Of days and nights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dlya stradaniy i lyubvi</td>
<td>For suffering and love</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 A more detailed analysis of professional and public views on language choices in “The Voice Russia” is presented in Aleshinskaya and Gritsenko (2016).
Chorus 4 (in French)

Il est foutu le temps des cathédrales  The era of cathedrals is over
La foule des barbares  The mob of barbarians
Est aux portes de la ville  Is at the doors of the city
Laissez entrer ces païens, ces vandales  Let these pagans, these vandals enter
La fin de ce monde  The end of this world
Est prévue pour l'an deux-mille  Is envisaged for the year 2000
Est prévue pour l'an deux-mille  Is envisaged for the year 2000

As we see, the Russian text is a loose translation of the original lyrics. By inserting the fragment in French from the original version of the musical, which is recognized internationally, and rendering the final chorus in a distinct and climactic manner, the contestants were able to amplify the expressiveness of the signing performance. The use of linguistic transposition was much appreciated by the audience who burst into applause.

3.2. Switching between the verses of the song

In another battle round of Series 2 (2013), while performing the international hit “Une vie d’amour” by Charles Aznavour in French, contestants Yana Rabinovich and Andrey Tsvetkov chose to sing the second verse of the song in Russian translation:

(2) Verse 1 (in French)

Une vie d’amour  A life of love
Que l’on s’était jurée  That we vowed to each other
Et que le temps a désarticulée  And that the time mutilated
Jour après jour  Day after day
Blesse mes pensées  Wounds my thoughts
Tant des mots d’amour  So many words of love
En nos cœurs étouffés  Suffocated in our hearts
Dans un sanglot, l’espace d’un baiser  In a sobbing, the space of a kiss
Sont restés sourds  They stayed deaf
À tout mais n’ont rien changé  To everything but they couldn’t change anything

Chorus 1 (in French)

Car un au revoir  Because a goodbye
Ne peut être un adieu  Cannot be a farewell
Et fou d’espoir  And crazy of hope
Je m’en remets à Dieu  I rely on God
Pour te revoir  To see you again
Et te parler encore  And to speak to you again
Et te jurer encore  And to swear to you again

Chorus 2 (in French)

Une vie d’amour  A life of love
Remplie de rires clairs  Filled with clear laughters
Un seul chemin  Only one way
Déchirant nos enfers  Tearing our hells
Allant plus loin       Going farther
Que la nuit           Than the night
La nuit des nuits     The night of nights

Verse 2 (in Russian)
Vechnaya liubov’       Eternal love
I vremya bez kontsa    And time is endless
I vnov’ i vnov’        And again and again
Pechalyatsya serdtsa   Hearts are blue
Ot gor’kih snov        Because of bitter dreams
I proschal’nih slov    And words of farewell
Eto navsegda           This is forever
S toboyu i so mnoi     With you and me
Liubov’ beda           Love, misery
Nachertani sud’boi     Are inscribed by fate
Na ruke tvoei          On your hand
No mi ne verim ei      But we don’t believe it

Chorus 3 (in French)
Des aubes en fleurs    The blossomed dawns
Aux crépuscules gris   In grey vespers
Tout va, tout meurt    Everything leaves, everything dies
Mais la flamme survit  But the flame survives
Dans la chaleur        In the heat
D’un immortel été      Of an immortal summer
D’un éternel été       Of an eternal summer

Chorus 4 (in French)
Une vie d’amour        A life of love
Une vie pour s’aimer   A life to love each other
Aveuglément            Blindly
Jusqu’au souffle dernier Until the last breath
Bon an mal an          Good year bad year
Mon amour              My love
T’aime encore          To love you again
Et toujours             And forever

Translated lyrics were incorporated by the performers to reinforce the contrastive focus. The original version of the song presumes a continuous build-up of sound and emotion from the verse to the chorus, and there is a distinct contrast between the verse and choruses in terms of the intensity of sound. By inserting the Russian fragment into the second verse and combining it with less intensive instrumentation, the performers emphasized the contrast between the first and second verses and shifted attention from music to meaning. The subsequent switch back to French in the final choruses of the song helped to create a more intensive and emotional sound, which made the climax of the song.
3.3. Switching to different languages in the first verse and the final chorus of the song

This pattern of linguistics transposition is illustrated by the performance of the famous song “A Yiddishe Mame” by Maria Katz in the second quarterfinal of Series 4 (2015). The song was originally written in Yiddish, which is not understood by the Russian audience. There is also an official English language version of the song, but it is less popular than the one in Yiddish. Maria Katz presented a new interpretation of this song by performing it in three languages – Russian, Hebrew and Yiddish:

(3) Verse 1 (in Russian and Yiddish)

A Yiddishe Mame  
My yiddishe momme

Drugoi takoi na svete net  
There is no one else like her in the world

A Yiddishe Mame  
My yiddishe momme

So mnoiu riadom stol’ko let  
Has been by me for so many years

Ti zabyla pokoi, posedela golova  
You have forgotten peace, your hair is grey

Slovno s detstve, ti gladish rukoi  
Like in the childhood, you stroke

Shepcheshe nezhnyie slova  
Whisper tender words

Verse 2 (in Yiddish)

In vasser in fayer  
In water, through fire

Volt zi gelofn far ihr kind  
She would have run for her child

Nisht halten ihr tayer  
Not to hold her dear

Dos iz gevis di gresten zind  
Is surely the greatest sin

Chorus 1 (in Yiddish)

Oy, vi gliklekh un raykh  
How lucky and rich

Iz der mentsh vos hot  
Is the one who has

Aza shayne matuneh geshenkt foon Got  
Such a beautiful gift presented from God

Nor ayn altichke Yiddishe Mame  
Like an old yiddishe momme

Mame Mayn  
Momme of mine

Verse 3 (in Yiddish)

A Yiddishe Mame  
My yiddish momme

Es gibt nisht besser oif der velt  
It doesn’t get better on this earth

A Yiddishe Mame  
My yiddish momme

Oy vey vi bitter ven zi felt  
How bitter when she is missing

Vi shayn in likhtig iz in hoiz  
How nice and bright it is at home

Ven di mame iz do  
When momme is here

Vi troyerig finster vert  
How sad and dark it becomes

Ven Got nemt ir oif Olam Haboh  
When God takes her to Olam Haba

Verse 4 (in Yiddish)

In vasser in fayer  
In water, through fire

Volt zi gelofn far ihr kind  
She would have run for her child

Nisht halten ihr tayer  
Not to hold her dear

Dos iz gevis di gresten zind  
Is surely the greatest sin
Chorus 2 (in English)

Oh I know that I owe what I am today
To that dear little lady so old and gray
To that wonderful yiddishe momme
Momme of mine

The overall meaning of the song is created by the carefully thought-out progression of fragments in different languages. The performance starts in the local lingua franca (Russian) which sets the intimate tone and conveys the main idea of the song. The fragment in Russian provides an introduction which, according to Hennion, “serves both as a signal to the listener, enabling him to recognize the song immediately, and as a foretaste, making him want to listen to the rest. The ‘intro’ reveals enough to suggest the mood: sound, rhythm, type, etc.” (Hennion, 1983, p. 165).

The switch to Yiddish for the most part of the song (until the final chorus) emphasizes the authenticity of singing performance and indexes performer’s ethnic identity. The use of English in the final chorus connotes modernity (up-to-dateness) and helps to globalize the message of the song.

3.4. Professional and popular opinion on language choice in singing performances

Analysis of TV viewers’ online comments concerning the issue of translation in song lyrics reveals different points of view. Most of them approve the translation of song lyrics into Russian as it ensures understanding (“It is very good that they sing in Russian”). Some comments, however, indicate a strong attachment to singing the original language of the song (“One should always sing in the original”) and show low tolerance for mistakes (grammatical inaccuracies and/or signing with the accent, etc.). The jury and pop music professionals see Russian translation as contextually appropriate (“In Russia we should sign in Russian” (Pelageya, coach)), although their personal preferences may lie with the original lyrics (“I think such mixing spoils the overall impression” (Ivan, musician)).

Apparently, both TV-viewers and pop music professionals see the ability to sing in the original language as a necessary skill and a sign of professionalism.

4. Conclusion

Translation of song lyrics has never been about lexical precision. Its aim is to convey the message of a song in a different language by matching words and music, i.e. by integrating the verbal component of a song into its rhythm and melody. In multilingual performances based on the so-called linguistic transposition, semantic equivalence of the original and translated lyrics is even less relevant. The meaning-making function of translation is preserved but it transcends the verbal domain and spreads to the domain of musical aesthetics.

In terms of the content, translation into Russian (the native language of the audience) fosters understanding and ensures the empathy of the listeners. Singing in the original language is usually symbolic: it helps to preserve the original flavor of the song and reinforces its emotional effect by reviving pleasant memories connected with the singing performance.

The alternation of the original lyrics and translated fragments is connected with song structure. The meaning-making process is manifold: in addition to verbal meanings (denotative and connotative/indexical/symbolic), musical meanings can also be created. Language juxtaposition can highlight the climax of the song; reinforce the contrast between the verses and/or between the verse and the chorus, and serve as an emotional introduction conveying the message of the song.

References


