

# PROBLEMS IN THE TRANSLATION OF AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE INTO SPANISH

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The first problem with translating Australian literature into Spanish is the notable lack of precedents. Patrick White was translated after his Nobel Prize, but with little market success; Peter Carey's *Bliss* (under the curious title of *Bendito Harry*) has found rather more readers and is soon to be followed by a version of *Oscar and Lucinda*; but whatever else might have been translated is not generally available. More importantly, the lack of any established framework for the reception of Australian literature tends to lead to misunderstandings like, for example, the description of Carey as "a peculiar heir to the work of the twentieth-century British humorists" (*El País*, 8 Jan 1989). The Hispanic image of Australian culture is perhaps as stylized and as limited as the Australian image of Hispanic culture. In this context, translators not only have to invent individual ways of fitting square blocks into round holes, but have to do so in ways that at least minimize misunderstandings.

Because of this difficulty, because of the need to overcome the lack of precedents, and because I happen to teach translation studies in Spain, I coerced several translators into rendering a selection of Australian prose into Spanish, ostensibly to demonstrate that Peter Carey might have inherited something more—or less—than British humour. The work involved has been considerable but not unamusing; the difficulties encountered have given rise to numerous inconclusive discussions, but also to some partial solutions; and the exercise as a whole has been cause for reflection on not only the nature of practical (non theoretical) translation, but also the practical problems of putting two cultures into contact.

## *Some false notions of difficulty*

Modern Spanish has a very highly developed set of active literary registers, sociolects and dialects, of a complexity and richness that make Australian literary language appear falsely simple and direct. This difference presents several problems of evaluation in reception, but in fact means that literary translation into Spanish is relatively unproblematic on the level of language as a system of systems. Since the translator has a wide field to play in, degrees of untranslatability tend not to be where one might expect to find them

With respect to class language and sociolects, Spanish tends to offer an excess of possible translations, making major cultural alterities rather more specific than they should be: “It’s been beaut”, says the Englishman in Michael Wilding’s “The Sybarites”, trying out his first word of Australian after a drinking bout in Sydney; in Spanish, this “beaut” might have been “guay” (a term of modern familiarity, but also used by schoolchildren), “al loro” (specific to Madrilenian bars, but now slightly dated) or “super” (a gallicism occasionally heard in Barcelona bars). But he finally says “Ha sido guapo”, a happy literalism that captures a colonialist division but does not necessarily locate Australia in South America (the colonialism concerned is in fact that of Argentines in Spain): it is a jargon term associated with the would-be artists, Lacanian analysts and architects who inhabit the bars of Madrid, Barcelona and perhaps—so the translation suggests—Sydney. “Guapo” is of far more restricted social usage than “beaut”, but it successfully identifies the difference felt by a visitor who does not perceive social extensions. The narrative function of “beaut” was entirely translatable.

Popular misconceptions of literary untranslatability similarly refer to apparently impenetrable tropes, of which bad puns are the prime example. But cursory comparison of the radically different French and English versions of *Ulysses* should suffice to demonstrate that translation in such cases has more to do with the badness of the pun than the actual words used in its construction. This principle handles most problems presented by the limited literariness of Australian texts. To take a simple example based on graphic form, here is the Brennan’s comment on the public:

— The Poet <sup>does</sup> no business among them  
has

The Spanish version was not difficult to find : “Con ellos el Poeta no tiene nada que v(end)er”. Which even presents a certain surplus value as the end of a book of Australian prose.

The more interesting problems are thus not particularly sociological or literary. In fact, they are far closer to technical translation in that they concern language as a set of names for things. The root of difficulty lies in the fact that certain things are not of universal extension, and may thus be attributed different values.

### *The value of plants and animals*

The banal problems of interlingual contamination are entirely secondary to the use of names as values. When, for example, little Tommy in “The Drover’s Wife” asks “Do you think they’ll ever get kill all the kangaroos?”, possible interference from the fact that the Spanish “canguro” also means “baby-sitter” is relatively minor when compared with popular Spanish misconcep-

tions about extinct species: international propaganda is such that Spanish readers spontaneously interpret the sentence as “Oh no! I hope they don’t kill all those nice kangaroos!”. In this case, implicit value had to be made explicit in the form of “los malditos caguros” (“the bloody kangaroos”); a slight touch locates ideology.

A similar problem of axiological weighting might be extracted from the Spanish translation a deservedly popular television series on Australian wildlife, where “red-gums” are described as “gomeros rojos”. This latter term may be understandable in certain specialist circles, but means very little in common Spanish usage, especially since “gomeros” are also the inhabitants of the island of Gomera, in the Canaries, and serve as the butt of local “Irish” jokes. It is hard to imagine why there should be red Irishmen along the inland rivers of Australia. The more obvious “eucaliptos rojos” would have identified the trees without any problem, since eucalypti are found in most parts of Spain and in many parts of Spanish America. But even this latter term cannot name the trees with the sense of identity, affection or admiration that might be latent in an Australian pronunciation or explicit in something like Judith Wright’s poetry. In Spain, the unweighted term is more likely to evoke precisely the opposite values, since local ecological movements campaign against eucalypti, describing them as foreign invaders and pointing out that, thanks to their quick growth and resistance to fire, they are replacing native forests and thus destroying an important part of Spain’s national heritage. Barthes’ early theoretical mythology may well have located zero-degree connotation in “the wood-cutter naming the tree”, but real-world translation can count on no absolutely safe denotative refuge: wood-cutters, like kangaroo shooters, tend to belong to one culture or another.

It is a commonplace when dealing with these problems to cite Hjelmslev’s example of the way different languages carve up semantic space in different ways: the continuum covered by the Danish “trae” and “skov” corresponds to three terms in German (“Baum”, “Holz”, “Wald”), to three slightly different terms in French (“arbre”, “bois” and “forêt”) and, extending the model, to four terms in Spanish (“madera”, “leña”, “bosque” and “selva”).<sup>1</sup> It is a model of a divided world, a world that translation can do little to change. But as might be gleaned from the example of “beaut”/“guapo”, translational equivalence has more to do with textual functions than semantic continua. With respect to names, a more valuable lesson is to be learnt from Quine’s example of synonymy: the peak called “Everest” in Tibet is known as “Chomolungma” in Nepal<sup>2</sup>, and although human endeavour has attested the physical identity of the terms, linguistic translations of the peak can only name one side or the other. The translator has to choose the

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Hjelmslev, *Omkring Sprogteoriens Grundlæggelse*, Copenhagen, 1943, p. 50. The Spanish equivalents are analyzed by Hans-Dieter Rauschner, “Sull'identificazione dei nomi propri nella traduzione automatica”, in *La traduzione: Saggi i studi*, Trieste, Lint, 1973, p. 360.

<sup>2</sup> W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 1960, p. 49; the example was borrowed from Schrödinger's *What Is Life?* and corrected in the French translation of Quine, *Le Mot et la chose*, Flammarion, 1977, p. 87.

point from which the object is to be identified and evaluated, and may thus be able to change that point.

### *Some negotiations of doubt*

Where, in Hjelmslev's example, should one put "the bush"? I assume that the term refers to a kind of forest or at least has something to do with trees. But then, "the bush", with the article, is also a vague geographical notion that identifies, perhaps, virgin land but not desert. Perhaps, but not quite. I can feel what the word means, but I find it hard to make Spanish speakers understand exactly where its semantic demarcations lie. How could "the bush" be translated into a culture where the only uninhabited land is uninhabitable? The French language has a firmly established equivalent, "la brousse", but this is due more to French / English rivalry in colonialist Africa than to any direct interest in Australia. Michel Deguy, for example, chooses to abstain from the established perspective, to change the point of vision: "cette décision d'une lumière en plein *bush* australien".<sup>3</sup> But Spanish colonialism in Africa was more limited; there was not the contiguity of Tibet-Nepal; the translator has to invent. Three basic strategies are available in such cases: (1) leave the term in English, as does Deguy (but not when it appears thirty-four times!), (2) translate it differently according to each particular context, (3) attempt to resemanticize a more general Spanish term through repeated contextualization. In this particular case, the best solution was the latter: the term "monte" (which, without the article, means wood, forest, woodland, scrub, virgin land, etc.) was used again and again until its accrued values were such that it connoted more a state of mind than a geographical exactitude. But even this was a highly situational solution, a necessary fudge, overdetermined by use of the same term, with the article, to translate "Bald Hill" ("el Monte Peludo") in Peter Carey's "American Dreams" and the "Budawang Ranges" ("los Montes Budawang") in Frank Moorhouse's "From a Bush Logbook" (which nevertheless comes out as "De un diario de montaña", a mountain diary).

The terms that create problems are thus often the most obvious or common, in fact the terms that are the least clearly defined in the source text. Most Australians would feel that they know what a "drover" is (as in Lawson's "The Drover's Wife", or Murray Bail's story of the same title), but would have trouble declining the term according to the Spanish words for men who work with cattle (but either own them or are "vaqueros", cowboys), men who work with sheep (basically "pastor", shepherd, implying a permanent residence), and men who wander around working on ranches, but specifically on the pampa of South America. The solution in this case was to stick to "ganadero" (grazier, stock-farmer, cattle-dealer) and to insert a phrase explaining that the man in question was an itinerant worker who did not own stock, thus quietly condemning to narrative irrelevance the distinction between cows and sheep.

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Deguy, "Légende pour une photographie absente", *Poèmes II, 1970-1980*.

Do we know exactly what our words mean? Can we identify “the stench of crushed boggabri and cotton pear”? Which years are associated with “Customlines” and “Breath-o’-Pine”? What is meant by “There’s some boys Sherry knows with a couple of Gs”?<sup>4</sup> Translation is often a negotiation of details that are mysteriously only half-known in the source culture. Recourse is thus sometimes necessary to strategies rarely repeated in the text-books: when in doubt, guess or leave it out. I must admit that was not sure enough of “cotton pear” to reject “acanto” (prickly thistle); “Breath-o’-Pine” became “Centella” (a product remembered by Spaniards who also remember “customes”), and as for “Gs”, they have become “coches” (cars), but will probably disappear if not confirmed.

Maximum difficulty tends to ensue from what is most traditional and most fleetingly accepted in a specific cultural location. *Ulysses* is not difficult because it is literary, but because it is a compendium of cultural presuppositions and assumed values operative in a very particular time and place. The examples I have cited, like almost all those I could cite, come from Australia’s past and have been covered over or consecrated with a history of indistinct usage, distancing their exact meanings from modern readers, be they Australian or Spanish. A counter-example may be found in a passage from David Ireland entitled “Our Culture” (in *A Woman of the Future*), basically a list of sixty-four contemporary Australian professions and places of work. At least minimum translatability was possible for all but one of the items mentioned, including “knighted public servants” (“funcionarios ennoblezidos”), “towing engineers” (“ingenieros de grua”), “riding schools for young ladies” (“escuelas hípcas para señoritas”), “pizza huts” (which exist with the same name in Madrid and Barcelona), “taverns” (“pubs” connotes the necessary modernity), “the token job” (“trabajillo”) and “multiple choice betting” (“apuestas informatizadas”). Significant textual expansion, corresponding to considerable doubt, was necessary for “racing touts” (“corredores de apuestas de las carreras de caballo”) and “park watchers” (“gente que pasea por los parques con asiduidad”, since “miradores”—“watchers”—are also belvederes). There are of course several semantic transformations here, and a constant risk of overtranslation. But what is most surprising is that almost everything produced by modern Australian culture finds at least some correlative in modern Spanish culture. The one exception was “brick cleaners”, which is easy enough to say as “limpiadores de ladrillos” (cleaners of bricks), but is inevitably associated with the people who are now cleaning the façades of blackened buildings in polluted Spanish cities, preparing for 1992. The translator in this case did not believe that there could possibly be a market for second-hand bricks (masonry stones perhaps, but not bricks), and the necessary explanation would have been so long as to destroy the fundamental rhythm of the text. As is implied by Zipf’s law, cultural specificity is indicated by the distribution of long and short names for things.

How much of Australia can be fitted into Spanish? My initial answer is: too much. Despite David Ireland’s attempt to reveal the diversity and creativity of a decaying consumerist society,

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<sup>4</sup> These examples are from Patrick White’s “Down at the Dump”.

translation suggests that history is moving towards necessary convergence, and misunderstood specificity will eventually give way to maximum translatability. Some might see this as the goal of translation, compatible with universal comprehension, peace, or a glimpse of God. But when a Spanish “pizza hut” translates an Australian “pizza hut”, the choice between Everest and Chomolungma is annulled, the quantitative equivalence is exact, and cultural placelessness is perhaps all that can result.

### *Restitution: sentences and women*

But there are also readers, and the reactions of readers as the final moment of translation. It is here that the source may be recreated as a place, no matter how inadequate the linguistic details of the translation. Two comments from Spanish publishers are perhaps worth recording. According to the first, Australians seem frightened of elaborate sentences and don't love language; according to the second, male Australians seem constantly uneasy with women.

It is possible that these reactions reflect unconscious criteria used in the selection of the translated texts. It is also possible that they tell us something about Hispanic culture, about the Islamic roots of never-ending Spanish sentences, about why Cela's love of language should deserve a Nobel Prize, and perhaps about a traditional *machismo* that has accepted feminism as a correlative of democracy and European modernity. But can such comments also reveal some basic truths about Australian culture? By creating new moments of reception, translations at least make such questions possible.

### *Can money move translations?*

Just as literature is not written in order to gain grants and literary books are not bought just because they are cheap, literary translations are not undertaken because governments decide to assist such projects. But subsidized culture can influence certain movements in the prose of the world. The Australia Council's Literature Board “provides assistance for the translation and/or publication of works by Australian authors by overseas publishers”. The Spanish Ministerio de Cultura has almost exactly the same export-oriented policy. The French Centre National des Lettres, on the other hand, provides grants for translations into French and published in France. The Catalan Servei del Llibre is similarly import-oriented, buying at least 300 copies of anything translated into Catalan. This means that it is possible (though not strictly legal) to receive double subsidies for translations of Australian texts into French and Catalan, single subsidies for Australian texts into Spanish, and nothing for French or Catalan texts into English. But are such unscrupulously commercial calculations of any cultural importance?

The Literature Board's justification of its translation policy is impeccably commercial: "The intention of these grants is to broaden the overseas market for Australian literature and to increase royalty payments to Australian authors".<sup>5</sup> There are at least two problems with this reasoning:

—Firstly, if all foreign translations were subsidized, the entity "Australian authors" would still probably receive far less assistance than would be the case if the same sums were given as direct grants to writers. The justification is only valid to the extent that initial subsidies may lead to an unsubsidized foreign demand for Australian literature. But I am unaware of any case in which such a strategy has worked. Indeed, I suspect that the strategy is necessarily compromised by the publication of, for example, historical Franco-Australian oddities by cultural associations in Paris. The pitiful history of Australian literature in Spanish tends to suggest that effective market impetus has little to do with translation policies and is in fact more likely to result from international literary prizes (concretely, the Nobel and Booker prizes). But even then it takes more than money to create local demand.

—Secondly, it is not easy to define the intended beneficiaries of this policy. It is simple enough to refer to "Australian authors" as a social group and to "Australian literature" as a thing, but there is no one criterion of birth, nationality, education, language or textual content that can delimit everything that is felt to belong to these categories. It is possible to demonstrate the Peter Carey is not exclusively indebted to British humorists, but difficult to do so without referring to writers born overseas, living overseas or writing about non-Australian subjects. As Hilde Domin has remarked, writers cannot be organized into national soccer teams fighting for the honour of their country.<sup>6</sup> From the perspective of the writer, the borders of Australian literature, like all modern literatures, are so open that it is slightly absurd to sell it as a home-grown product.

I believe that the only possible commercial justification for translation grants is that some money might just find its way into the pockets of literary translators. An average translator can get at least \$400 a day for oral conference work, but Spanish literary translators, who might do about five pages a day, are rarely paid more than \$10 a page. This means that full-time literary translators have to work quickly, with habitually sloppy results. Only academics, for whom translating is a more a hobby than an economic necessity, can afford to be interested in problems of detail. I have been lucky enough to work with academics. But in the real world of commerce, good translators are rarely appreciated for what they are worth, and their problems do not enter into the declared intentions of national translation policies.

Of the numerous factors that may explain the existence of these different policies, perhaps the most interesting hypothesis concerns the question of national cultural identity. Why should Spain and Australia (along with Canada) want foreigners to read their literatures? Why should the French and Catalans not be so interested in exporting their texts? I suspect that the answer is not

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<sup>5</sup> From information provided in December 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Hilde Domin, *Wozu Lyrik heute? Dichtung und Leser in der gesteuerten Gesellschaft*, Munich, Piper, 1968, p. 195.

be found in market calculations, but in the relative degrees to which the cultures concerned may be considered unified and centralized. No one doubts that the centre of French culture is Paris, or that the centre of Catalan culture is Barcelona. The function of these literatures is to bring the world towards these centres. But Spain, having recognized that it has four official languages and seventeen quite different political regions, can only find its centre by having its texts received abroad. (It is half-jokingly said that “Spaniard” is a foreign word for a foreign nationality: the people of Spain call themselves Galician, Basque, Catalan, Aragonese, Andalusian, etc., and what we call the Spanish language is in fact Castilian.) The case of Canadian culture is similarly marked by multiple internal divisions and complicated by a long open border with the United States. Is it then any accident that Australia, at the same time as it debates its status as a multicultural society, should attach more than commercial importance to exporting its literature? It is in the eyes of the foreigner that we seek cultural unity, that we want to see who we are. One might think the fitting Australia into Spanish might be to the benefit of the receiving culture. But, in a more profound sense, translations of Australian literature also exist for Australians.