# CAPTURING ITAMAR VIEIRA JUNIOR'S *ABONI* SPIRIT

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"O espírito *aboni* das coisas" is a short story by Itamar Vieira Júnior included in his Jabuti-nominated collection, *A oração do carrasco* [The hangman's prayer], published in 2017. The story is written from the perspective of an indigenous character, and draws upon the author's personal heritage as well as research conducted for his PhD in Ethnic and African studies. Centred on the Jarawara people, who inhabit the forests of western Brazil, one of the features that first struck me about this story was Itamar's inclusion of words from the Jarawara language, which appear in the text alongside their Portuguese synonyms. In an email to Nara Vidal, co-organiser of the Brazilian Translation Club, Itamar explained:

> The Jarawara lexicon – and the *Jarawara* language that appears in the story – was intended to bring across the musicality of indigenous speech. Each Jarawara word is preceded by its [Portuguese] meaning. So, NEME means SKY. RIVER, RAIN and WATER are all represented by the same term: FAHA. I used the Jarawara Dictionary compiled by Alan Vogel. JARAWARA means HUMAN.

While perhaps slightly disorienting to begin with, the inclusion of these Jarawara words certainly succeeds in transmitting "the musicality of indigenous speech" – something also communicated through other textual elements, such as the use of repetition and non-standard syntax – and the reader is quickly able to work out how these unknown words are being employed within the text, and understand their meanings. But how to reproduce this in an English translation? This question – and its inherent challenges – was what kindled my desire to translate Itamar's story.

When discussing how best to negotiate these Jarawara words at a meeting of the Brazilian Translation Club, one suggestion put forward was to do away with the explanatory word altogether (i.e. the word in Portuguese in the source text) and just present the reader with the Jarawara word. The argument was that the inclusion of English-Jarawara word pairs might come across as clumsy, and that readers were becoming far more receptive toward encountering terms they might not immediately understand. Yet the way Itamar's text pairs Portuguese and Jarawara terms, which become intrinsically linked in the reader's mind as soon as they have grasped the relationship between the words, is one of my favourite things about the story, and I was determined to carry this through into my translation.

Having decided to maintain these word pairs, the next step was to consider the order in which these words should appear. In the source text, the Portuguese word precedes the Jarawara word, but I quickly realised

that this configuration (e.g. "the sky *neme*", "the sun *bahi*") sounded awkward in English. This is because in Portuguese adjectives usually follow the noun they describe, and, while these Jarawara words are not adjectives, but rather synonyms, they are positioned very much like adjectives in the source text; it is even possible some readers may mistake them for adjectives to begin with (i.e. neme as a characteristic of the sky rather than as the Jarawara word for sky). As a result, placing the Jarawara word before the English word, in accordance with the standard positioning of adjectives, produced a far more convincing reading experience. Two variations of the beginning of the opening line of the story illustrate this point:

- Portuguese adjective order:

  The sun *bahi* grew in the sky neme…

- English adjective order:

  The *bahi* sun grew in the neme sky…

Obviously, altering the word order creates a very slight difference in the English reader's experience, since they are encountering the foreign word before its English synonym, whereas the source language reader encounters the Portuguese word first. However, I believe the reader quickly learns to interpret these words as a single unit, and, when encountering a new Jarawara word, understands that the English synonym will quickly follow.

One unexpected consequence of my decision to preserve the Jarawara words in my translation was that it meant I was sometimes required to depart from the exact meaning of the Portuguese word it was paired with, in cases where this was not something I could reasonably expect an English reader to understand. For example, the Jarawara word *howaraka* is paired with the Portuguese word "aracari", which I would normally have translated as "aracari", a bird with which some English readers may be familiar. However, given the importance of this bird within the text, I felt it was essential that the vast majority of readers be able to visualise it, and so opted instead for the more common "toucan", the family to which the aracari belongs (VOGEL, 2016, p.109, p.264).1 One alternative would have been to add some explanatory information about the aracari within the text, but here I felt that adding an explanation would undermine the strong relationship established between the protagonist, Tokowisa, and the natural world, which is so crucial to the story. Furthermore, it very quickly becomes apparent that the *howaraka* is not a real bird, but a *yama* spirit, and, on this occasion, I concluded that it was more important for the reader to be able to visualise this spirit, with its snow-white plumage and bright red eyes, than for an avid birdwatcher to be able to correctly identify the species.

## REFERENCES

VOGEL, Alan (ed.). *Jarawara-English Dictionary: 2016 Online Edition*. Anápolis: Associação Internacional de Linguística, 2016.