



ON TRANSLATING DECIO ZYLBERSZTAJN'S "THE BENEFACITOR OF SANTA CLARA"

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This intriguing short story, divided into mini-chapters, is taken from Decio Zylbersztajn's collection *Acerba Dor*, published in 2017. It was a lot of fun to translate, and hopefully an equally enjoyable read, but not without its difficulties and dilemmas.

Two important decisions had to be made regarding the addressing of people in the piece, the first relating to protagonist Ivo. Often called "Doutor Ivo" or simply "o doutor" in the source text, I did wonder if this might seem odd to an English-language reader because, of course, our Ivo is a dentist, not a medical doctor. In the UK, at least, it is not customary to refer to dentists as doctors. I have, however, in my translation referred to the character as "Doctor Ivo", for several reasons. In Portuguese, "doutor" does not necessarily refer to someone who is either a medical doctor or holds a PhD, but can be used as a mode of address for anyone with a university degree. As this is not the case in English, it would arguably be incorrect to translate this type of "doutor" as "doctor". That said, while being a dentist gives him the right to be known as "doctor", I also felt that the title suited Ivo's character. In Santa Clara, where he so enjoys his heightened status, his escape from mediocrity, he is not just a doctor but the doctor. As we see in the story, some residents see no other healthcare professional and so it seems natural that Ivo for them would be known as "doctor". We also get the sense that Ivo enjoys this role, it massages his ego and if there is a question mark over whether he should be called "doctor", it seems quite appropriate that he be called it anyway. Nevertheless, I did remove the odd "doctor" here and there from the target text as the ST was rather heavy with them and, in case of any slight confusion, I didn't want to overegg it, although I trust the reader will understand, with context, why this dentist is so continually referred to as a doctor.

The other modes of address that required some thought were "dom" and "dona", which appear on several occasions. I decided to retain the Portuguese words and so 'Dona Antônia' is so named in both the ST and TT. My decision was informed by the notion that the title, a mark of respect more than an actual title, would be recognisable enough to an Anglophone reader as such terms – and their equivalents in other romance languages – have filtered into English-language culture and understanding through other translated works. It is commonplace to leave such a mode of address as is and so that is what I did. Any attempt to get around this satisfactorily, if I did wish to avoid the use of "Dona", for example, in the TT, would have required information not contained in the ST. This is because it did not seem to me that the equivalent of "Dona Antônia" here could simply be "Antônia"; it would be more likely that Ivo would address her as



“Mrs...”, especially as other information in the text sets our story a few decades in the past, but we do not know her surname. A final glance at some other texts translated from Portuguese assured me that using “Dona” – n.b. capitalised – is commonplace in English translations.

Both decisions mentioned heretofore were also motivated in part, or at least partially justified, by the constant desire to avoid domesticating (see, for example, VENUTI 2012, p.277) my translations. This is a story set in Brazil and smoothing out any foreignness for an Anglophone reader – as if “the Anglophone reader” even exists as a homogenous group – would be misleading, counterintuitive to the practice of reading translated literature and unnecessary, to stop short of calling it “ethnocentric violence” (VENUTI, 2012, p.497). As Edith Grossman says, “translation celebrates the differences among languages and the many varieties of human experience and perception they can express” (GROSSMAN, 2010, p.17) and, for me, part of that is leaving in some foreign markers where appropriate and without hindering comprehension or intended effect or meaning, while being wary that “no language, no traditional symbolic set or cultural ensemble imports without risk of being transformed” (STEINER, 2012, p.158).

Another cultural issue, but relating to punctuation rather than the words themselves, regarded how to set out the speech. As is typical of Lusophone literature, Zylbersztajn uses em dashes to denote speech, while standard practice in the UK would generally be to use speech marks. This is by no means an automatic decision; many Anglophone authors shun speech marks and it is common in translations to see speech represented in other ways. I often prefer to render speech in the TT with the same punctuation as the ST, but I did, however, choose to use traditional speech marks in this piece as I could see no particular advantage to maintaining the non-standard representation of dialogue on this occasion, remembering of course that for a Brazilian reader of the ST the dialogue is presented with standard punctuation. This is an example of how an apparent change is in fact deployed to keep something the same, and perhaps what might be termed a dynamic equivalent (VENUTI, 2012, pp.144-145), as the UK reader of the translation will see the sort of speech punctuation they expect, just like the Brazilian reader of the original did.

Naturally, certain individual words also presented dilemmas. One example was “parainfo” which, in the ST context refers to an invited speaker giving a talk at a graduation ceremony. I had already worked the sentence in the TT to include the word “graduation” so I was thankfully able to simply use the translation “guest speaker”. Some research suggested that “commencement speaker” is a term commonly used for the “parainfo” at universities in the USA; however, I preferred guest speaker for its neutrality, rather than rooting the phrase in an American college when in fact the event took place in São Paulo.



I hope you enjoyed reading “The Benefactor of Santa Clara” and this commentary which gives a small window into some of the choices I made during the translation process. I think the story is a very curious one, with multiple themes and allusions, together with intentional contradictions and confusions, which stands up well to re-readings and is open to a number of interpretations.

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