



ON TRANSLATING JULIANA DINIZ'S SHORT STORY "PERPÉTUA"

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In this commentary, I, Nati Russo, explain my translation processes, focussing on syntax and semantics. I praise the work of Juliana Diniz. Your short story "Perpétua" is captivating, and being given the opportunity to work on its English translation has been very special. I thank Ana Cláudia Suriani da Silva, Elton Uliana, and Nara Vidal, the coordinators of the BTC. Ana Cláudia, thank you for your Portuguese lessons and Brazilian literature and culture lessons at UCL. Elton, thank you for your translation support over these past few months and for introducing me to several translation strategies that I include in this commentary.

Syntax

Diniz writes with a syntactic flow that makes engaging and direct storytelling, gently yet swiftly leading readers through to the tragic, macabre climax of "Perpétua". It is a beautiful literature.

Sentences of many clauses build up the visual scenes that dominate the story's plot – and in a rhythmic format, too, often with multiple clauses joined by commas. Yet, this way of structuring sentences is not so common in English. My exchanging commas for connectives allowed for a flow that full stops and semi-colons do not permit. One example is "when [Perpétua] was still unaccustomed to being surrounded by so much water that washed up against her life and watered down her thoughts". An enticing alternative verb choice raised in the November BTC workshop by translator Aline Littlejohn was that the water "marooned" her life, however I used the semantic choices above so as to regain the lyricism that had been so natural in the Portuguese original owing to its pauses with commas – alluding to the lapping motion of water.

Alongside lyricism, concision is a characteristic innate to English literature: I joined clauses, engaging with the translation technique significance with a different linguistic approach, to describe Perpétua "hearing during the watch-out of a night's light sleep the sound of fishes". Such contracting of the Portuguese also emphasises the "stench of death" at the end of the story, which Diniz writes as "um cheiro fétido, cheiro de morte". Overall, though, my translation counters the general pattern that Portuguese passages contain 7-13% more words than English passages, as mentioned in the workshop.

I sometimes used the em-dash to give timely pauses to the text – especially in the first half of the story, during which the scene is set with care. Here, stylistic linguistic repetition gives Diniz's work a soft texture, and I thought it poetic to use the em-dash on two occasions before the narrator takes us back to where



Perpétua has come from, in paragraphs 1 and 4: “She’d never understood why only she could hear the movements of the fish swimming beneath the surface – she who was born in the arid backlands, watching cattle languish from thirst year after year.”

It was gratifying to hear in the workshop that my work effectively translated the changes of emotion throughout the story, and one moment where I especially worked with syntax to do this was when Perpétua, nervous, “preferred to believe that [her husband] had succumbed to sexual temptation, that he carried the scent of another woman’s perfume.” Where the Portuguese has a full stop, I used a comma that in English denotes an increasingly tense atmosphere through a faster narrative flow. I also enjoyed making the creative imagery of the perfume, which leads us on to...

Semantics

While thinking up English equivalents for Diniz’s words, it was useful for me to always remember the flexibility of language.

Ana Cláudia Suriani da Silva noted in the workshop that the translation of images may require more creativity than other elements of the source text. The vivid imagery that makes Diniz’s narrative so thrilling sometimes only required a literal translation into English, and it is the translator’s responsibility to recognise this: “She had awoken from a dream within a dream, covered in sweat, sensing the currents shake the foundations of the house as if the river was simmering.” At other times, I gave more precision to scenes (a prominent characteristic of English literature), such as when “a pele áspera” turned into “his rough palm caressing her womb made infertile under the water’s curse.”

Translating “igarapé” was harder because it is already such a nuanced term in Diniz’s story, originating from Old Tupi and referring specifically to a river tributary in the Amazon rainforest. Whilst the beauty of the Tupi word was lost in the English text, I gave the word a functional translation as “the river of the forest”, contextualising the river and accentuating that the narration comes from a Brazilian perspective – using the word “rainforest” would only result in the domestication of the translated story (pulled towards an Anglophone point of view) and exoticise the text. Similar efforts to localise my translation include the boatman’s dialogue, which I was inspired by translator Elizabeth Thomas’s suggestion in the workshop to make it more colloquial.

No translation can be consistently sensitive to the sonorous and rhythmic depth of the original, however I worked with explicitness change if a longer, literal translation could gain impact if shortened: “– the colour of a tragedy.” I also opted for “sentence structure change” to prevent too many pronouns initiating phrases



– Portuguese has the fortune of the occult pronoun, so verbs start phrases instead (CHESTERMAN, 1997, pp. 94-97). When “She saw... For a moment she... There was no water within her that could line her eyes with tears. She returned home...”.

To compensate for rhythmic losses and give the narrator’s voice in the English translation more fluidity, I repeated the adjectives “indifferent”, “resigned”, and “hindered” in different instances, so they resonated throughout. I also evaluated the tones that words of the story’s semantic field carried, with the “peixes” themselves being translated as both “fish” and “fishes” depending on their implied size and collectiveness/individuality. An introductory reference to “peixes submersos” became “fish swimming”, whilst the candiru “fishes” were translated thus for their “miudinho” size. The word “bicho” called for a passionate, emotionally heavy translation of the “bichos insidiosos e endemoniados” being “insidious and demonic beasts” to Perpétua’s mind’s eye, but a more indistinguishable, distant “creature with beady eyes like a cobra” tattooed onto Miguel’s drowned and infested body.

The presence of Brazilian proper nouns (such as Ceará, Manaus, and Amazonas) required an explicitness change when Perpétua and Miguel “headed for the state of Amazonas.” Including “state” was significant for notifying the English reader that “Amazonas” isn’t just the Amazon rainforest. This “explicitness change” then likely frames previous references to Manaus and Ceará in the category of cities/states themselves – to me (CHESTERMAN, 1997, pp. 94-97), notifying the reader that Perpétua had “arriv[ed] in ‘the city of’ Manaus” in the very first sentence would dim the suspense Diniz has created.

Finally, I felt faith in “Perpétua” remaining title and main character of my translation, given that all stories in *O Instante-quase* are named after their female protagonists, and given how the reader can infer meaning from English words ‘perpetual’, ‘perpetually’ (DINIZ, 2016). Keeping accents on “Perpétua” and “Ceará” also glittered the translation with Portuguese orthographic detail, rightfully reminding the reader of the work’s Brazilian identity.

Thank you for reading!

REFERENCES

CHESTERMAN, Andrew. *Memes of translation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1997.