

“*El juego es el jugo*”: A Practical Course in Literary Translation Russian-Spanish

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ABSTRACT

While translator education and professional training have experienced a steep growth in terms of teaching centers and innovative practices, problem-solving based and profession-oriented approaches to the training of literary translators remain scarce. This tendency is certainly related to the reduced economic impact of literary translation in the language industry, and on conceptualizations of literary translation as an endeavor that lends itself better to traditional instruction. As a result, pedagogical proposals for literary texts have traditionally not benefitted as much from advances in Cognitive Science and Expertise Studies as, for example, localization courses. And yet, literary translation offers a wealth of opportunity to practice transferrable skills that empower translation graduates to work in a number of positions in the language industry. The present paper offers a theoretical justification, a content outline and a set of practical procedures for a literary translation practice course in Russian-Spanish translation based on socio-constructivist translation pedagogy and Expertise Studies. I introduce a *ludic approach* to the training of future literary translation professionals, linking well-established practices in experiential learning to the dimensions of play and simulation that literary texts foster. The outlined course and the different procedures are based on the premise of using a ludic approach to promote deliberate practice, self-reflection and inquisitive thinking among trainees, and so the material is easily applicable to other fields of specialization.

Keywords: Literary translation, ludic approach, translator training, problem-solving, task-based learning.

1. Introduction

The development of Translation Studies as an academic discipline, together with the upsurge of Translation departments across a variety of Western countries in the last two decades (Caminade & Pym, 2001), has fueled the publication of a number of works laying out the foundations of translator education and training. Translation pedagogy, a field of practice that borrows from Linguistics, Cognitive Science, Pedagogy and Second Language Acquisition is then a relatively young yet growing concern in Translation Studies (Kelly, 2005; Kiraly, 2000; Kussmaul, 1995; Colina, 2005, González-Davies, 2004). Most of the advances in this direction have focused on the relationship between theory and practice in translator training, as well as on the need to apply realistic, student-centered approaches whereby trainees can develop skills to be further enhanced throughout professional practice. This has granted general industry needs a paramount importance in curriculum design, but not so much to literary translation.

Heavily relying on the construct of *translation competence* and its sub-competencies (Kelly, 2005), curricula have been designed to foster problem awareness and problem solving in courses based on differentiated areas of professional practice, such as Sci-Tech-Med Translation, Software Localization or Business and Legal Translation. Setting aside a discussion about the artificiality of such a distinction, arguably, one that often bears scant resemblance to actual market demands, literary translation has traditionally been bypassed

by pedagogical advances in the field, relegating it to a more traditional instruction on the grounds that literature imposes particular constraints and requisites. Also, the small impact of literary translation in the language industry has not generalized a professional approach to it in the classroom, where students oftentimes consider literary courses an ornament to their resumes or the last trace of a vocational track soon abandoned in pursuit of more profitable endeavors. However, literature is a sector in the industry that, yet small, produces job opportunities, not only as a literary translator, but as an editor or professional proofreader for publishing houses, for specialized and popular publications, or in the wider context of multifarious language services.

Moreover, the commonplace depicting literary translation as a craft for the happy few anointed by creativity has been proven wrong by cognitive science, as creativity requires the same underlying cognitive processes as those needed for any other kind of successful information processing (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999; Vartanian, Bristol & Kaufman, 2013). Then, a new pedagogical approach is called for in an attempt to problematize the particular problems literary texts may pose.

2. Problem-solving and Transferable Skills

The empirical turn in Translation Studies (Snell-Hornby, 2006) and the ever-increasing borrowing from Cognitive Sciences and Expertise Studies lead Translation scholars to pay special attention to the translation process in the learning environment as a way to garner insights into the development of translator skills, especially of those transferable skills that could be diversely applicable to an array of situations in a mutable language industry landscape (Pym, 2005; Shreve, 2000; Kelly, 2005). But, how can the skills needed to translate literature be transferable if it is precisely the uniqueness of the literary text what poses the biggest challenge to the translator trainee? In this case, attention must be brought to the specific types of problems encountered in literary texts, i.e., to the technical difficulties creative writing poses as well as the mishaps entailed by a language use that is particularly divergent from established norms or orthodox interpretations of a given literary tradition. To that end, I propose a problem-based curricular design for a practical literary translation course Russian-Spanish with theoretical underpinnings on Socio-Constructivism, Game Theory, Translation Pedagogy and Cognitive Science.

3. Towards a Ludic Approach to Literary Translator Training

The seminal book by Johan Huizinga *Homo Ludens* (1950) was one of the first works addressing play as the driving force in the development of Western civilization, considering that it is "extremely active all through the cultural process and that it produces many of the fundamental forms of social life" (1950:173). This conceptualization of play as the kernel of competitiveness and rituals, poetry, religion, and social conventions, would be later taken up by human evolution theorists (Bruner et al., 1976) and even by philosophers interested in ethics, who found in play a concept that defines how humans sublimate animal violence in an agonistic sense of life (Aranguren, 1987). Also, from an epistemological viewpoint, game and, especially, playfulness, irony and ingenuity devalue reality and make it paradoxically

apprehensible in an escapist movement; we experience the environment by playing with it (Marina, 1992). We even play with concepts, assigning qualities of one concept to the next one according to our physical experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)⁸.

The pedagogical relevance of games and simulation, of play as a developmental fulcrum, was already highlighted in the foundational texts of Pedagogy (Piaget, 1951/2013; Vygotsky, 2007) and has been bolstered in the last decades by works on simulated and grounded cognition. These works reveal that it is through actual simulation of our own experience and that of others that human mind processes information and apprehends experience (Clark, 1998; Bergen, 2012; Oberman & Ramachandran, 2007). In this vein, role play and real-life scenarios have been introduced in learning environments in recent times. Translation pedagogy has not been an exception in this regard (Kiraly, 2000, 2003; Colina, 2003), and the learning potential of play and games has been explored in translator training in interesting and thought-provoking ways (González-Davies, 2004; Cronin, 2005).

3.1 Applicability of the Ludic Approach to Translator Training

Language, often considered as a set of rules subject to combinatorial strategies (*cf.* Chomsky, 1996), presents itself as an extraordinarily enticing playground for literary authors, which can also be learnt in terms of game (Rinvoluceri, 1984). As Bruss (1977) points out in her work on literary games, the literary phenomenon can be understood as a game between authors and readers that goes beyond the conventional notion of literature as a beautified representation of emotional states and social relationships. The playful literary text comprises two players that partake in equal conditions either in a cooperative or non-cooperative game, depending on the strategy adopted by the player making the first move, that is, the author. These players create the meaning at once and can reach several equilibria, that is, they can both reach the same level of information, throughout the process, as it is the case in the varied possible readings of *Hopscotch*, by Cortázar (Bruss, 1977; Morris, 1994; Charles, 2014). The game in literary works is the actualization of a new aesthetics, that of the beauty of strategy (Bruss, 1977:169). This statement parallels Iser's theory of aesthetic response in that literary texts do not yield a transmission or an unequal exchange, but pose their openness to be tied in again by the reader: "the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader" (Iser, 1978:21). This conceptualization brings us to the Barthian concept of writerly texts and to the movement of postmodernism (Parker, 2004; Maus, 2001).

Postmodernist literature represents the revisiting of a literary tradition after the exhaustion of modernity and its breakup forces. This return to the tradition is not innocent, however, but informed of an ironic distance that sheds new light on topics, leitmotifs and structural devices that nourished that tradition (Eco, 2001). This ironic, playful approach is the most suitable for literary games as it makes the rules of the game explicit and yields the preeminent position of the author to favor the active engagement of the reader. This reader has to be, on her part, active and, ideally, close to that one depicted by Nabokov (Nabokov, 1980): a deliberate reader, aware of the fabricated nature of literary artifacts, with a sharp eye for detail and eager to disentangle the intricacies and structural patterns devised by the

⁸ See Shapiro (2010) for a review of the main theoretical tenets and implications of embodied cognition.

author, that trickster. In other words, a corvial attentive to the strategies her opponent may hold up his sleeve.

That definition of a reader neatly applies to some of the desirable skills to be developed by a literary translator. If constructivism shifted the learning process agency from teachers to students in a dialogic generation of meaning –that transforms, builds knowledge– (Kiraly, 2000; Washbourne, 2014), postmodernism and game theory applied to literary translation go along in bringing the translator to the forefront, together with the author. The study and translation of literary texts conspicuously featuring particular takes on Spanish and Russian language traditions together with explicit examples of literary devices would allow trainees to tackle technical instantiations from a task-based perspective. Tasks are games themselves: games subject to a twofold set of rules, those governing literary works and those particularly applicable to translation, that is, those governing translation-specific strategies that refer to the relationship between source and target texts, commission constraints or cross-cultural issues.

This approach may prove instrumental indeed in further practice given that, as González-Davies states, transfer skills are based on “problem-spotting and problem-solving, encouragement of creativity and self-confidence as translators, improvement of mental agility and thinking skills, self-monitoring, awareness and use of strategies, ability to decide on degrees of fidelity according to translation assignment and text function” (González-Davies, 2004:41).

As we have seen, this approach equalizes translators and authors, and considers literary translators as creative writers in good standing that generate their own oeuvre (Berman, 2009). This assumption, shared by practitioners (Sáenz, 2013), is still somewhat challenging to trainees who often bring to the classroom a number of received beliefs about craft and authorship that may go back as far as 19th century Romanticism and Muse-inspired creativity. Thus, creative writing teaching techniques are borrowed as a way to lay out the foundations of creative language use and strengthen trainees’ self-concept as literary translators (Kiraly, 1995; Gross, 2003). In this regard, this curriculum proposal is deeply indebted to Ann Pattison’s literary translation workshop “Painting with words” (Pattison, 2007), which represents a valuable pedagogical tool to facilitate translator trainees’ learning of the technical resources and the audacity required by creative writing: “(...) both translators and writers are craftpersons whose activities converge in a number of areas. They process the same raw material, words, and have the same tradeperson’s tools in the toolbox – a ‘termbank,’ a whole range of stylistic devices and other tricks of the trade” (Pattison, 2007: 91).

Translated literature belongs to the tradition of the target language (Sáenz, 2013; *cfr.* Even-Zohar, 2012). However, the translator, as a creative writer working with two languages, two cultures and two traditions, finds herself at an aesthetic crossroads (Raffel, 1988). Therefore, I propose to look into the canonical works in the two traditions (Bloom, 2014) in search of varied aesthetic proposals that can provide “blueprints” (Lefevere, 1975) to better inform trainees’ decisions and strategies.

4. A Practical Course in Literary Translation Russian-Spanish

4.1 Prerequisites

Given its advanced nature, this course requires a high level of proficiency in both Russian and Spanish. Prior knowledge of both Russian and Spanish literary traditions is also required, as well as knowledge of the major works and currents within those and other literary traditions, especially those of Western countries having an impact in Russian and Spanish language literatures, for example the French literary tradition. Therefore, this curriculum proposal is designed for a doctoral seminar or a highly specialized master's degree course, where trainees have already acquired a solid cultural and literary background by means of wide reading and, ideally, experience as cultural and language mediators.

4.2 Learning Outcomes

- Develop awareness about literary translation as a creative writing activity that entails problem-solving and combinatorial acumen and so can be understood in terms of game.
- Develop writing skills applicable to a variety of literary work, as well as to other text types using to the same textual features.
- Develop literary translator trainees' self-concept as writers.
- Analyze influential literary works in Spanish and Russian language tradition in order to identify their particular aesthetic proposal.
- Analyze influential literary works in Spanish and Russian language traditions, recognize the translation challenges they pose and generate strategies to tackle them.
- Criticize and defend their own translations and those of others.

4.3 Content Outline

Being a problem-based curricular design, the content of the course is divided and sequenced according to technical writing and translation issues. Trainees are exposed to an array of literary problems that have already been solved in their source and target traditions and are encouraged to analyze, interrelate and extrapolate them in order to be able to apply them in further practice. In other words, they are furnished with the strategies and the information display usually encountered in their game setting. Therefore, topics do not follow a chronological order, nor are they laid out according to author, genre or literary movements, but grouped according to their usability as instantiations of particular literary problems.

Contents are divided in five interrelated sets, beginning with the presentation of narratives, their fictional nature and the technical complexities of traditional realist novel. Especial attention is paid in this set to structure, verisimilitude and the different layers of "reality" deployed. In the following sections I will outline the main learning points based on relevant aspects of the literary traditions at hand, and will indicate the potential authors whose work would be used for practicing purposes

- The narrative device

- o Tolstoy, Augusto Monterroso
- The deceptive naturalist nature of "traditional" novel, the *feulliton* and the farce
- o Tolstoy, Gogol, Galdós, Eduardo Mendoza, Jorge Ibargüengoitia
- The rules of the game, structural patterns
- o Andrei Biely, Bioy Casares, Rulfo, García Márquez
- Short Stories
- o Pushkin, Chekhov, Cortázar, Borges, Augusto Monterroso

The second set goes one step further and presents modernist and postmodernist readings of some of the cornerstone features dealt with in set one. These are hybrid texts that play with register and tone and recur to humor and external, often literary references to unveil their heteroglossic nature. They are also avant-garde texts rich in playful devices and even nonsensical, alienating literature that yields an abstract aesthetic experience.

- Changes in Register: hybrid texts
 - o Nabokov, Cabrera Infante, Juan Goytisolo, Dostoevsky, Generación Nocilla, Macedonio Fernández
- Metaliterature
 - o Nabokov, Bulgakov, Borges, Cervantes
 - Modernism and *Las Vanguardias*, nonsense
 - o Maiakovsky, Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, Alberti, Gómez de la Serna, Cortázar

Set three examines different levels of intertextuality, both diachronically, in the case of the translation of well-established classics and the varied possible readings that may inform a contemporary translation (which most probably will not be the first one), and between literary traditions, when the main influence in a source text comes from the target tradition.

- Translating a Classic
 - o Fernando de Rojas, Tolstoy, Pushkin, Lope de Vega
- When the influence comes from the target Literature
 - o The impact of *Don Quixote* and picaresque in Russian Literature
 - Platonov, Dovlatov, Bulgakov, Dostoevsky, Cervantes
 - o The impact of Russian Literature in late 20th century Spanish novel
 - De Azúa, Dostoevsky, Zúñiga, Turgenev

Finally, the fourth set analyzes the formal devices of prose poetry such as rhythm, period and pace, and their syntactical implications. Classical meters in Russian and Spanish are also examined, with close attention to their differences.

- Poetic prose and free verse (syntax and rhythm)
 - o Nabokov, Turgenev, Sánchez Ferlosio, Lezama Lima, Cernuda
- Classical meter in Russian and Spanish
 - o Pushkin, Tyutchev, Lermontov, Garcilaso de la Vega, Quevedo

4.4 Potential Procedures

As already stated, this curriculum proposal is task-based on the grounds that it is through deliberate practice that expertise can be developed in a task domain (Shreve, 2006). These activities are presented according to a design combining both communicative and transformational designs that also encompass text function (Kelly, 2005; González-Davies, 2004). Thus, an eclectic method of instruction is generated based on trainees' inputs. Here is an outline of potential procedures:

Ongoing Publishing Cycle Project: Trainees are asked to adopt the main roles played by agents in the publishing world; namely, the author, the translator, the editor, the literary agent, the publishing house manager and the book reviewer. Trainees rotate in their roles so all of them play each role throughout the course, working with texts in the content outline. The Ongoing Publishing Cycle Project is part of the professionalization of trainees and intends to promote creative writing skills, self-awareness and peer-reviewed assessment. It is based on Pattison's workshop "Painting with words" (Pattison, 2007).

Translation criticism: Based on Berman's methodology for translation criticism (2009), trainees are assigned to write a critical essay on an already published translation to foster their critical reading and empower them to generate educated assessments and judgments on translation valid in an academic setting.

The Sleuthhound: Trainees are asked to play a detective game following the structural patterns of a given text to come up with the general design of the work. Then, they are assigned to devise a text in their target language with the same "structural template and effects" themselves. Finally, they are assigned with the translation of a structurally complex text, renditions are to be workshopped.

"Have you practiced so long to learn to read?:" Given the aforementioned relevance of intertextuality, trainees are asked to actively read major works in both, source and target language traditions, to identify echoes, influences and references between them. Then, they quiz each other about them.

Professional Portfolio: Considered as a final project, trainees are assigned the elaboration of a professional portfolio with different translations of texts of their choice. They are also asked to include a brief market research report analyzing the possibilities of publication of those texts in the publishing industry. The professional portfolio is intended to be a professional statement of purpose for trainees to join the professional market.

Design a Workshop: Each of the trainees has to impersonate a facilitator and lead a workshop on an assigned translation as to make them aware of the rudiments of one of the most widely accepted pedagogical tools in literary translation learning. It also promotes problem spotting.

All by itself: Trainees actively workshop their own (blinded) translations of a text whose author is unknown; based on Maier's workshop proposal: "When multiple translations of a work are presented without introductory information about either the author or the translator, the reader is drawn into the act of translation itself. The goal is to have the reader dancing rather than marching, motivated not by a belief in an ultimate universal deciphering but by the acceptance of an individual, contextual reinterpretation" (Maier, 2003:166).

5. Conclusions

This curriculum proposal draws on translation pedagogy, Postmodern Theory and Game Theory, as well as on some of the tenets of Cognitive Science, in an attempt to bring literary translation to a more realistic, student-centered training, both aware of market requirements and literature-specific challenges.

The applicability of this course, however, is limited in that it is extremely demanding in terms of prerequisites. That is why it is meant to be implemented at higher levels of graduate education, such as doctoral seminars, specialized master's tracks, such as those offered at the University of East Anglia, or even for practitioners, as a tool for their continuous training and education, as a considerable number of practitioners have not received formal training.

The scope of this design could be easily enhanced by fostering collaboration with other agents in the field, such as well-established practitioners and writers; publishing industry representatives or creative writing departments faculty members, who could provide workshops and seminars to further underpin content and tasks development. Problem-solving being central to content development, it is understood that trainees can integrate their own creative problem-solving processes –and those of others– within the wider frame of translation and professional strategies, thus generating a learning space where creativity fostering and professional empowerment meet.

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