

THE GREAT GATSBY: AN EXPERIENCE IN THE LEARNING OF LITERARY TRANSLATION

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This work is based on our experience in translating literary texts. It was our first contact with the subject matter, and we had to learn as we went along. Therefore, this paper should be viewed as a learning and working experience, and not as the work of a professional and experienced translator. Anyone who speaks more than one language is always translating; it becomes an unconscious mental reaction. At times we may try to translate just the basic meaning of a text, but this is very different from trying to account for each and every word or sentence of a text. This task becomes even more complicated when the text we are translating is a literary one. We found this, our first attempt, extremely difficult because of all the elements that must be handled and combined in this type of texts.

Our general attitude towards this translation was that we wanted to respect the original as much as possible on all levels: stylistic, cultural, semantic, and syntactic. We assumed that every word, every comma was in its place for a reason, and we had no right to purposely alter the author's style. Our job was not to judge or improve the text, simply to reflect what was in it. This determined the strategy we were to follow. We respected the punctuation at all times; we did not combine sentences, or break up the original sentence structure. We made an enormous effort to try and include everything we found in the original text. We did not eliminate words unless it was necessary in the process of adapting an expression from one language to the other. The few words that we added were meant to make the text more transparent to the reader. In the case of a few personal and demonstrative pronouns, such as <<he>>, <<she>>, <<it>>, <<this>>, we considered it necessary to replace them with the name of the person or thing they represented, in order to avoid confusion. We even chose to maintain the original format of quotation marks, even though they are not normally used in Spanish, because we did not feel this would interfere with the reader's comprehension of the translated text. Since we did not have a particular audience in mind we did not feel it was necessary to change the tone or complexity of the language, so we simply reflected the language the author used originally. All our efforts were focused on respecting the original work.



Our approach to this task was structured in the following way:

- 1.- Read the novel to acquire a general knowledge of the text, the author's style, and the cultural context.
- 2.- Translate the individual chapters we selected as most representative.
- 3.- Underline the difficulties we encountered during translation.
- 4.- Review and polish the chapters we translated.
- 5.- Read an earlier translation of the same text.
- 6.- Compare the solutions that this other translator gave to the difficulties we encountered during our own translation.

The alternate translation we chose is by E. Piñas and it was published in 1971. We could have selected a more recent translation of the novel, but we thought it would be interesting to see if the twenty-four years that separated this version and ours had influenced the results. One of the characteristics of language is that it is constantly evolving and renewing itself. Translations, as with other written works, eventually become outdated; but the question is how long does that process take? In the case of this alternate translation we did not find any real signs that time had influenced the language as compared to our modern version. Perhaps the process takes longer, or depends more on the type of language used in the translation; which in this case is very classical. What we found very different was the syntactic structure, which this translation altered and adapted at will. This reflects freer attitude towards translation, perhaps something typical of that decade, or just the translator's own particular method.

Due to the complexity of the comparison of two translations and the extension of such a work, we decided to limit our study to specific comparisons. In order to make the comparison more effective we decided to present the difficulties with two simultaneous solutions, ours and the other translator's. In this way we could compare at a simple glance two possible answers for the same difficulty. At all times we have stressed the analysis of our translation, since we know how it was developed, something we cannot say about the alternate version. In the presentation of the examples the first term will be the original from the text; the second, in italics, our translation; and the third, the translation given by the professional translator. Although we translated more than one chapter of the novel, again, due to both space and time limitations, we decided to focus on one specific chapter for our analysis. The chapter we considered as representative of the novel was chapter 9, the last one. In this last chapter we found examples of the general difficulties scattered throughout the novel. Also, it summarizes and concludes the text. Therefore, the examples presented are exclusively from chapter 9.

We have divided the examples into a series of categories depending on the cultural significance or grammatical structure of the units we translated. The categories are the following:

- A.- Words related to cultural setting.
- B.- Language used by the character Wolfsheim, a Jewish-German immigrant.

- C.- Isolated words.
- D.- Small groups of words.
- E.- Long and elaborate descriptive sentences.

A.- WORDS RELATED TO CULTURAL SETTING

In this category we included words whose difficulty was not in the meaning itself, but in the cultural context they reflected. The question we faced was whether to translate them directly or to look for a cultural equivalent in Spanish. After much pondering, we came to the conclusion that American culture was known well enough in Spain so as not to require a cultural adaptation, but simply a translation of terms. The following are the terms we found in chapter 9 that fit into this category:

1.- American Legion - *Legión Americana* - <<American Legion>>

We considered that by translating the term into Spanish it did not lose its meaning, and yet made it easier for the reader to understand. Therefore, we estimate that the alternate term used by the professional translator could have been translated.

2.- World Series - *Serie Mundial* - <<World Series>>

This example follows the same pattern as the model above.

3.- East / West - *Este / Oeste* - Este / Oeste

These terms we translated faithfully from the original considering that the reader would understand their meaning from the context.

4.- Forty-third Street - *Calle Cuarenta y tres* - Calle 34

In this case we respected the original format used by the author because we wanted to follow the original whenever possible. The published translation used numbers and translated it incorrectly. We do not know whether this was an error in translation or a misprint.

5.- \$5.00 - *cinco dólares* - \$5.00

As a way of helping the Spanish reader's understanding of the dollar sign (\$), we preferred to use the written form in the translation. The alternate form, by using the original sign, might baffle the reader.

6.- the Sound - *el Canal* - el Sound

We translated this term because we considered it was necessary for the reader to know its meaning, since it appears very often and depicts the geographical area where the story is set. Had we left the term untranslated, as in the case of the alternate form, the reader would not understand what it is that separates Gatsby from Daisy, in a geographical and metaphorical sense.

7.- West Egg Village - *el pueblo de West Egg* - la aldea de West Egg

The word *pueblo* best reflects the locality of West Egg. The word village, if translated as aldea may gi-

ve the reader the wrong impression of this area. *Aldea* carries the connotation of a small underdeveloped rural location, which in this case it is not; on the contrary, it is a very rich and select district.

8.- prep school - *colegio preparatorio* - colegio

Once again, we tried to respect the original term, specially considering that there is not exact equivalent in the Spanish education system. By eliminating the word *preparatorio*, as in the case of the alternate translation, we would lose the concept that this is not an ordinary school, but one that prepare rich students to enter university.

9.- college - *universidad* - Universidad

In this case we looked for the closest equivalent in Spanish, which did not alter the general meaning. The only distinction we made with respect to the alternate version is that we did not think it was necessary to capitalize the word, since it did not refer to any university in particular.

10.- Miss This or That's - *la escuela de la Señorita no sé Que o no sé Cuanto* - cursos de Miss Tal o Miss Cual

In Spanish we do not use the word Miss when referring to a female teacher. We apply it to beauty contests, e.g. Miss España, Miss Universo, etc. The alternate translation misguides the reader as to the true meaning of the word in Spanish. Consequently, we decided to use a more Spanish expression.

B.- LANGUAGE USED BY THE CHARACTER WOLFSHEIM, A JEWISH-GERMAN IMMIGRANT

The language of this character presented a very peculiar problem in its translation. The fact that he speaks incorrect English, probably due to his Yiddish background, forced us to resolve the dilemma of whether to reflect these grammatical/phonetic errors, or simply ignore them. We chose to reflect them because we considered these errors an important part of the character's features.

The most difficult problem was how to transmit the errors into Spanish. In the case of grammar mistakes we looked for similar equivalents in Spanish, and with the faulty pronunciation we used phonetic errors found in Spanish pronunciation. Although this required a lot of effort on our part, we considered it worthwhile, because it gave a more faithful portrait of Wolfsheim, always respecting the original. Even though the other translator included equivalents for the mispronunciation of words, he did not reflect the grammatical error as we did, losing the foreign element the author gave this character.

We are going to present the examples we found of Wolfsheim's language flaws using capital letters to point them out within the sentences. As can be seen, except in example 4, the alternate translation did not make any attempt to reflect Wolfsheim's faulty speech.

1.- This has been one of the most terrible shocks of my life TO ME I HARDLY CAN believe IT that it is true AT ALL.

Este ha sido uno de los sobresaltos más terribles de mi vida PARA MÍ yo no CASI puedo creer lo que es verdad EN ABSOLUTO.

Ésta ha sido una de las más terribles impresiones de mi vida. Apenas puedo creer que sea cierto.

2.- I hardly know WHERE I AM when I hear about a thing like this and am completely KNOCKED DOWN AND OUT.

Yo casi no sé DONDE ESTOY cuando oigo una cosa como ésta y estoy completamente DERRIBADO Y ELIMINADO.

Cuando oigo una cosa como ésta, no sé lo que me pasa, pero me siento desconcertado por todos lados.

3.- FIRST time I saw him was when he COME into Winebrenner's poolroom ... He hadn't EAT anything for a couple of days.

PRIMERA vez que le vi fue cuando ENTRA en la sala de billar de Winebrenner ... No había COMIENDO nada en un par de días.

La primera vez que le vi fue cuando entró en la sala de juego de <<Winebrenner>> ... ¡Hacia dos días que no comía.

4.- ... and when he told me he was an OGGSFORD I knew I could use him GOOD.

... y cuando me dijo que era un OSFORD supe que le podría usar BUENO.

... y cuando me dijo que había estado en <<Oggsford>>, supe que podría convertirle en hombre de provecho.

5.- We were SO THICK LIKE THAT in everything...

Eramos muy juntos como así...

En todo estuvimos tan unidos como esto...

C.- ISOLATED WORDS

In this section we worked with words that represented a semantic, but not a syntactic problem due to their short length. Some of the examples we looked at had several meanings in English and many possible translations into Spanish. The difficulty was in finding the appropriate word that best reflected the exact meaning in that specific context, without changing the original structure, whenever possible.

1.- endless drill - *desfile continuo* - interminable exhibición

2.- kept out - *alejaban* - impedían el paso

3.- detective - *detective de la policía* - detective

4.- adventitious authority - *autoridad adventicia* - espontánea autoridad

5.- set the key - *marcó la pauta* - dió la tónica

- 6.- coroner - *juez de primera instancia* - juez
- 7.- unmoved eyes - *ojos de indiferencia* - extrañados ojos
- 8.- old sport - *viejo amigo* - camarada
- 9.- sqwak - *click* - chirrido

In examples 3 and 6 we expanded the words in Spanish in order to better define the original word in English. The term <<detective>> may be interpreted in two ways, private or police. We chose to use the term *detective de policía* to clarify the meaning of the original text for the Spanish readers. In the case of <<coroner>>, we expanded the Spanish definition, because there is no one term that is an exact equivalent in that language. In English the term <<coroner>> refers to a judge with specific responsibilities. Thus, we looked for the Spanish equivalent of a judge with a similar occupation. We considered that a simpler and easier translation, as used in the alternate version, would omit this detail. In the rest of the examples in this group, the versions offered by the alternate translation were not better or worse than ours, simply different, that is why we did not comment on them.

D.- SMALL GROUPS OF WORDS

This group entails items which not only presented semantic, but syntactic and grammatical difficulties as well. In order to translate these expressions we had to interchange grammatical categories, look for semantic equivalents and adapt the syntax, although not all the examples required all three transformations. In the case of idiomatic expressions transformations are useless, and we had to look for a completely new equivalent.

- 1.- clustered open-mouthed - *apiñados y boquiabiertos* - arremolinados, boquiabiertos -
- 2.- as he bent over - *al inclinarse* - al inclinarse.
- 3.- served up in racy pasquinade - *el asunto se convertiría en una animada farsa* - no tardaría en ser representado en un sabroso vodevil.
- 4.- with determined eyes under that corrected brow of hers - miró ... *con determinación bajo aquellas cejas corregidas* - con ojos decididos, bajo aquellas borrosas cejas.
- 5.- At first I was surprised and confused - *Al principio me encontraba sorprendido y confuso* - *De momento me sorprendí*, lleno de confusión.
- 6.- it grew upon me that I was responsible - *crecía en mí un sentimiento de responsabilidad* - me dí cuenta de mi responsabilidad.
- 7.- and taken baggage with them - *llevando equipaje* - llevándose equipajes.
- 8.- I wanted to get somebody for him - *quería encontrar a alguien que le acompañara* - quería encontrar a alguien.

9.- you've got to try hard - *tienes que hacer todo lo posible* - debes procurarlo de veras.

10.- when he handed the bonds over the counter - *cuando entregó los bonos en el mostrador* - cuando pasaba los bonos por el mostrador.

11.- What you'd know about that, hey? - *¿Qué te parece eso? - ¿Qué le parece?*

12.- I should have known better than to call him - *tenía que haberlo pensado antes de llamarle* - debí comprender que no era conveniente llamarle.

13.- to the bitter end - *hasta el último suspiro* - hasta el amargo final.

14.- It shows up well - *Quedó muy bien* - Se ve todo bien.

15.- it just shows you - *lo explica todo* - [not translated].

16.- at a nod of her head - *con sólo decirlo* - [not translated].

For instance, example 2 grammatically is a verb in past tense preceded by an adverb. which we changed into a reflexive infinitive preceded by a proposition. In example 4 we had to change <<determined eyes>>, an adjective and a noun, for *con determinación*, which is a preposition plus a noun. Besides this grammatical change, we had to make a semantic adaptation of <<brow>>, because in Spanish the expression requires a plural form. Plus, we eliminated the prepositional phrase <<of hers>>, since the Spanish language does not demand the use of pronouns in such cases, making a syntactic transformation as well. Example 7 presented a similar dilemma. It required a change of verb tense, from a past participle <<taken>> to a present participle *llevando*. Later, we eliminated the prepositional phrase <<with them>>, because, as we explained before, it is not necessary in Spanish.

Since examples 9, 15 and 16 are idiomatic expressions, they could not be either translated or transformed, as with the other examples. In these cases we chose Spanish expressions that best fit the meaning of the English idioms.

Once again, we omitted any comments on the alternate translation because, although we considered our versions more accurate, this is strictly a subjective point of view. In some examples, there was only a minimal variation in the syntactic structure of the sentence, in the grammatical category of the words, or in their semantic adaptation.

E.- LONG AND ELABORATE DESCRIPTIVE SENTENCES

The importance of these examples is that they reflect, better than any others, the style of the author. What we were most interested in was preserving this peculiar style. To do so, we maintained the original punctuation, and always tried to find semantic equivalents in order to sustain the images the author created. The syntactic structure within the sentences was more difficult to reflect, due to the obvious differences between Spanish and English. But in some cases, we managed to copy the structure of the origi-

nal very closely.

Although the meaning of the alternate translation is more or less the same as ours, it did not try to respect the author's style. There were changes in punctuation, some words were added or eliminated, some lines were combined, and the original syntactic structure was not respected.

1.- Those who went farther than Chicago would gather in the old dim Union Station at six o'clock of a December evening, with a few Chicago friends, already caught up into their own holiday gaities, to bid them a hasty good-by.

Los que viajaban más allá de Chicago se reunían en la vieja y oscura Union Station a las seis de alguna tarde de diciembre, con algunos cuantos amigos de Chicago, ya contagiados de su propia alegría festiva, para darles una apresurada despedida.

Las que iban más lejos de Chicago se reunían en la vieja y oscura <<Union Station>> a las seis de la tarde, despedidos por unos cuantos amigos de Chicago ya metidos en el alegre torbellino de las fiestas.

2.- When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows, and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air.

Quando arrancamos entrando en la noche invernal y la verdadera nieve, nuestra nieve, comenzó a extenderse a nuestro lado y a chispear contra las ventanas, y las débiles luces de las pequeñas estaciones de Wisconsin pasaban, una fuerza salvaje y penetrante de repente llenaba el aire.

Quando salíamos a la noche invernal y la verdadera nieve, nuestra nieve, empezaba a allombrar el recorrido y a centellear por las ventanillas, se notaba en el aire una aguda y excitante sensación.

3.- That's my Middle West - not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns, but the thrilling returning trains of my youth, and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark and the shadows of holly wreaths thrown by lighted windows on the snow.

Ése es el Medio Oeste que yo conozco - no el del trigo ni las praderas ni los pueblos suecos perdidos, sino los emocionantes regresos en tren de mi juventud, y las farolas y cascabeles de trineos en la oscuridad helada y las coronas de acebo en las ventanas iluminadas que forman sombras en la nieve.

Ése es mi Oeste; no el trigo, las praderas o las perdidas ciudades suecas, sino los emocionantes trenes de regreso de mi juventud, los faroles en las calles, las campanillas de los trineos sonando en la helada oscuridad, las luces que proyectan sobre la nieve las siluetas de las coronas de acebo colgadas en las ventanas de las casas.

4.- Even when the East excited me most, even when I was most keenly aware of its superiority to the bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio, with their interminable inquisitions which spared only the children and the very old - even then it had always for me a quality of distortion.

Incluso cuando más me entusiasmaba el Este, incluso cuando más me daba cuenta de su superioridad frente a los aburridos, desparramados, e hinchados pueblos más allá del Ohio, con sus interminables indagaciones de las que sólo los niños y los ancianos se libraban - incluso entonces el Este tenía para mí un aire distorsionado.

Incluso cuando el Este llegó a excitarme más, incluso cuando me hallaba más agudamente advertido de mi superioridad sobre las aburridas y tediosas ciudades de más allá de Ohio, con sus interminables inquisiciones, de las que solamente se salvan los niños o los muy ancianos, incluso entonces, el Este no dejaba de tener, para mí, una extraña cualidad de distorsión.

5.- And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes - a fresh, green breast of the new world.

Y al elevarse la luna más y más las casas inesenciales comenzaron a desvanecerse hasta que poco a poco me di cuenta de la vieja isla aquí presente que en una época floreció a los ojos de los marineros holandeses - el fresco, verde pecho del nuevo mundo.

Y mientras la luna iba ascendiendo, las banales casas se desvanecieron, hasta que, gradualmente, percibí la vieja isla que antaño floreciera para las pupilas de los marineros holandeses; un fresco y lozano pecho del nuevo mundo.

In our translation course we learned that there is no such thing as a perfect translation. Some texts may be easier to translate than others, and some languages may be more closely related to one another, but the exact equivalent of a translation is impossible. The truth is that even the best translation will always be a bad version of the original, and some texts lose so much in this process that some people would classify them as untranslatable. But the solution is not to avoid translation; we simply have to look for the best alternative. In our opinion a good translation is the one that reproduces the contents of the text, and best reflects the style, getting as close the original as possible.

In studying the subject matter, we found that there have always been two mayor trends in translation; one offered faithful, even literal versions, and the other preferred a much freer reconstruction, sometimes adaptation, of the original text. Either of these tendencies, if taken to an extreme, are bad. In the end each translator must decide what method he will follow, just as we have.

One of the things that surprised us most was the wide number of possible translations that any given word might receive. If the unit of translation were to be a sentence, or a paragraph, the possible versions could be infinite. This flexibility that language possesses accounts for the numerous translations that could be developed from the same original text; even the same translator must often choose from several possibilities that come to him, so he too could offer us several alternate translations. What this means is that, in general, the different versions of an original text are not necessarily better or worse, just diffe-

rent. Therefore, we consider our work simply another of the many possible translations of the text; and open to comments and criticism, just as we did with the alternate version we studied. All translations, including ours, have room for revision and improvement.

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