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A Bush Is not a Shrub: on the Translation of Beckett's Word Games in *Waiting for Godot*

Beckett's interest in language, words and the things we can do with them is present in most of his works. Linda Ben-Zvi has pointed out that "Beckett has long demonstrated an interest in at least three qualities of sound: pleasure (...), power (...) and ambiguity – the source of the puns and word games so central to Beckett's writing" (Ben-Zvi 1987: 158). In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon are "incapable of keeping silent"; they concentrate on speaking, contradicting each other, asking and answering questions, telling stories, giving orders, remembering the past, aware of the materiality of language, uttering words for the pleasure of pronouncing them. They constantly face communication accidents in which misunderstood words are particularly significant and humour arises from incongruity, from the sense that something is out of place and violates the expectations created by previous words or situations. The presence of language-bound humour in Beckett's work is rooted in an Irish literary tradition, a dimension that has led to studies which propose critical perspectives different from the nihilist conception and the association to the absurd.

Humour, as Anne-Marie Soulier says, is above all a victory of language (see Soulier 1998). It is the sort of victory that tends to cause trouble for translators. As a self-translator, Beckett found solutions for the problems he created. When looking at what he did when transposing texts from French into English (and vice-versa) we notice that great attention is given to phonetic devices, such as music, rhythm, phonic games, but we also find shifts of meaning, changes of tone or loss of entire sections of the text. Beckett didn't translate *Godot* into German,

but he worked very close to the translators Erika and Elmar Tophoven, who mention that their translation “was read out loud to Beckett, who followed the text in the original French, interrupting only ‘if he missed a repetition, an echo or if he wanted to correct the rhythm of a sentence’” (Garforth 1996).

As regards the Portuguese translations of Beckett’s plays, Paulo Eduardo Carvalho has recently analysed the consequences of Beckett’s literary bilingualism and has called for the need of a systematic comparison between the French and English versions of his texts in search of the translation strategies involved. These could then be used, if not as a model, at least as a reference for the translation of Beckett’s work into other languages; this researcher has, to some extent, started this comparative analysis, with regard to the Portuguese translation of Hiberno-English structures and names that refer to the Irish experience.

Wordplay, as I have mentioned, is an important element of any Beckett text in any language. Contemporary translation scholars have given attention to the particular problems involved in the translation of wordplay, and recent studies try to shed light on them, refusing the theoretical notion of untranslatability and exploring the mechanisms, structure, functions and effects of wordplay and the variety of strategies found by translators. As Dirk Delabastita (1996) puts it, much depends on the concept of translation one has in mind, on the degrees of equivalence aimed at, and on the genres and communicative situations at issue. Often wordplay and pun are used more or less interchangeably to mean the same thing; they are also frequently associated to the problematic notion of ambiguity. Delabastita also admits the difficulties that lie in the definition of wordplay and in establishing taxonomies: we must choose between specificity and manageability.

In the course of my research on the translation and reception of Beckett’s four major plays in Portugal (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days* and *Krapp’s Last Tape*) I have registered a common concern among Portuguese translators; when asked about what they considered to be the main difficulties posed by Beckett’s text, José Maria Vieira Mendes, who translated *Waiting for Godot* in 2000, referred to “the various forms of wordplay and ambiguities suggested by English and French”, which he considers “not always translatable”; Inês Lage, who made another translation of *Waiting for Godot* in the same year, points out “the apparent simplicity of the words and the various allusions (translatable and untranslatable) and the significant insignificances”.

Aware of the theoretical concerns involved in this subject, I do not aim in this brief presentation at establishing a taxonomy in which Beckett's wordplay would fit. For the purpose of my analysis, I have identified some textual segments in the French version of *Godot* in which there are specific verbal contexts that might create translation difficulties, namely the presence of phonetic games, of paronymy, misunderstood words and a pun associated to a twisted allusion. I will compare Beckett's translation of these segments into English and look at the way Portuguese translators have rendered them. I am certain that my examples include textual segments which might not be considered cases of wordplay (although characters play with words), but the linguistic situations created are important for the production of humour. I do not have a normative purpose but will rather try to look at the final results and make an attempt to understand them.

Between 1959 and 2006, *Waiting for Godot* has had six different translations staged in Portugal, of which two have been published. I will concentrate on three of them. The first translation I quote was made by António Nogueira Santos for the first Portuguese performance of the play, in 1959; this translator tried to produce a text that would fit the conventions of the target language, which is clear, for instance, in the use of some Portuguese idiomatic expressions or in the naturalization of geographical names. In 1993, Mário Viegas translated, directed and performed a new version of the text; in general terms, this translation tries to explore the comical effects produced by language and stage situations, a choice clearly assumed by Viegas and recognized by the critics. In 2000, José Maria Vieira Mendes made a new translation of the play; the "old age" of the 1959 translation ("unspeakable nowadays", in the words of the new translator) was one of the reasons pointed out for this new version; the English was the source text but the translator also had an eye on the German and French texts, besides the *Theatre Notebooks*; in the end, two texts were produced: the performance version and a revised text which was published.

The first example I have chosen has to do with the tree. The scene of *Waiting for Godot* is briefly described at the beginning of the play – "Route à la campagne, avec arbre. Soir" (Beckett 1959: 9); "A country road. A tree. Evening" (Beckett 1965: 7) – and at the beginning of act two – "Même endroit. (...) L'arbre porte quelques feuilles" (Beckett 1959: 79); "Same place. (...) The tree has four or five leaves" (Beckett 1965: 57). The tree is a crucial element: its leaves signal the passage of time from

one act to the other; it is important in the dialogue about hanging; it dots the spot where Godot is supposed to meet them. The type of tree is discussed in the text, originating an ambiguous answer from Estragon and a phonetic game to discuss its nature; as with other elements that are recaptured along the play, the tree will be discussed again at the end, with the same words:

Vladimir – Il a dit devant l'arbre. (*Ils regardent l'arbre.*) Tu en vois d'autres?
 Estragon – Qu'est-ce que c'est?
 Vladimir – On dirait un saule.
 Estragon – Où sont les feuilles?
 Vladimir – Il doit être mort.
 Estragon – Finis les pleurs.
 Vladimir – A moins que ce ne soit pas la saison.
 Estragon – Ce ne serait pas plutôt un arbrisseau?
 Vladimir – Un arbuste.
 Estragon – Un arbrisseau.
 (...)
 Vladimir – (...) Seul l'arbre vit.
 Estragon (*regardant l'arbre*) – Qu'est-ce que c'est ?
 Vladimir – C'est l'arbre.
 Estragon – Non, mais quel genre?
 Vladimir – Je ne sais pas. Un saule. (Beckett 1952: 17, 132, underlines added as below)

Vladimir – He said by the tree. (*They look at the tree.*) Do you see any others?
 Estragon – What is it?
 Vladimir – I don't know. A willow.
 Estragon – Where are the leaves?
 Vladimir – It must be dead.
 Estragon – No more weeping.
 Vladimir – Or perhaps it's not the season.
 Estragon – Looks to me more like a bush.
 Vladimir – A shrub
 Estragon – A bush.
 (...)
 Vladimir – It's the tree.
 Estragon – Yes, but what kind?
 Vladimir – I don't know. A willow. (Beckett 1965: 14, 93)

In French, the word game is based on the phonetic similarity at the beginning of the words *arbuste* and *arbrisseau*; in the English version, Beckett also used a phonic device, based on the position of sounds within the words: *shrub* restructures the design of the word *bush*, with the order of the sounds reversed and an extra phoneme added in the middle. He

also kept the ambiguous reference to the tears, suggested by the nature of the tree: a (weeping) willow.

The first Portuguese translator made an attempt to reproduce the French solution, which in phonetic terms was not difficult due to the similarity of both Romance languages; however, the shorter length of Portuguese syllables and the wider semantic distance between them weakened the result:

Vladimir – Ele disse que era em frente da árvore. (*Os dois dirigem o olhar para a árvore.*) Vês mais alguma sem ser aquela?
Estragon – Que árvore é?
Vladimir – Parece um choupo.
Estragon – Mas o que é feito das folhas?
Vladimir – Deve estar seca.
Estragon – Acabaram-se as lágrimas.
Vladimir – Ou talvez não seja a estação.
Estragon – Parece mais um arbusto que uma árvore.
Vladimir – Uma árvore.
Estragon – Um arbusto. (Beckett 1959)

Estragon still makes an ambiguous reference to the tears, but the tree first suggested is not, from a semantic perspective, the most adequate choice for this purpose and, at the end of the play, it has changed into an even more inadequate species, a cork-tree:

Vladimir – A árvore.
Estragon – Que árvore é?
Vladimir – Não faço ideia. Talvez um sobreiro. (*Ibidem*)

The next translator, Mário Viegas, chose the word *chorão* whose double meaning better serves the ambiguity of the reference to the tears, but at the end, again, a different tree is suggested (a fig-tree); as far as the pair of words chosen to discuss whether it is a tree or not, there is a higher semantic equivalence than in the previous example, but there is no phonetic game between them; as a sort of compensation, this translation creates a new horizontal homophonic game between the words *morta* and *moita*:

Vladimir – Ele disse em frente da árvore. Vês mais algumas?
Estragon – O que é?
Vladimir – Não sei. Parece um chorão.
Estragon – Onde estão as folhas?

Vladimir – Deve estar morta.
 Estragon – Acabaram-se as lágrimas! Não seria antes numa moita?
 Vladimir – Num arbusto.
 Estragon – Numa moita.
 (...)
 Vladimir – É uma árvore.
 Estragon – Mas de que género?
 Vladimir – Não sei. É uma figucira. (Beckett 1993)¹

The third translator explored the phonetic similarity between the Portuguese words *arbusto* and *buxo* (which sounds closer to the English word *bush*); from a semantic perspective, this pair of words is closer to Beckett's version in both languages, more than the contrast *árvore* / *arbusto* made by the first translator. Vieira Mendes goes further to attribute the tears to Vladimir when Estragon calls him *chorão*, thus clarifying the ambiguity of both French and English originals; he's the only translator to keep the nature of the tree until the end:

Vladimir – Ele disse ao pé da árvore. (*Olham para a árvore*) Estás a ver outra?
 Estragon – Que árvore é que é?
 Vladimir – Não sei. Um salgueiro.
 Estragon – Então e as folhas?
 Vladimir – Deve estar morto.
 Estragon – Não sejas chorão.
 Vladimir – Ou então ainda não é a estação dele.
 Estragon – Parece mais um arbusto.
 Vladimir – Um buxo.
 Estragon – Um arbusto.
 (...)
 Vladimir – É a árvore.
 Estragon – Está bem, mas que tipo?
 Vladimir – Não sei. Um salgueiro. (Beckett 2001: 21-22)

In the second example, there is a horizontal wordplay between two French paronymous words. For a moment, Estragon considers the possibility of leaving Vladimir but he quickly gives it up and states his reasons: “Etant donné la beauté du chemin (un temps) et la bonté des voyageurs” (Beckett 1952: 20).” In the English version, paronymy was impossible to maintain through literal translation and it was replaced by repetition: the first word used is an element in the structure of the other.

¹ The translation by Mário Viegas was never published, so I'm quoting from a typed script.

The same happens in two of the Portuguese translations we are considering, a solution that was not difficult to attempt and which provides a good equivalence to the English:

Estragon – (...) When you think of the beauty of the way and the goodness of the wayfarers. (Beckett 1965: 16)
Estragon – Considerando a beleza do caminho. E a bondade dos caminhantes. (Beckett 1959)
Estragon – Tendo em conta a beleza do caminho. E a bondade dos caminhantes. (Beckett 2001: 24)

In spite of this possibility offered by the Portuguese language, Mário Viegas introduced another word, which imposes an important semantic shift, for the idea of summer holidays present in the word *veraneantes* was totally absent from both French and English versions: “Estragon – Dada a beleza do caminho e a bondade dos veraneantes” (Beckett 1993).

The third example has to do with the presence of misunderstood words with the consequent comical effects. It occurs at the end of the play. The hanging attempt has failed, Estragon has lost his belt and his trousers are loosened. Vladimir tells him to redress himself and the opposite French words *relève* and *enlève*, which differ only in the initial syllable, are called for the dialogue:

Vladimir – Relève ton pantalon.
Estragon – Comment?
Vladimir – Relève ton pantalon.
Estragon – Que j'enlève mon pantalon?
Vladimir – RE-lève ton pantalon.
Estragon – C'est vrai. (Beckett 1952: 133-134)

In English, the game stands on the use of the verb “to pull” with the adverbs *on* and *off*:

Vladimir – Pull on your trousers.
Estragon – What?
Vladimir – Pull on your trousers.
Estragon – You want me to pull off my trousers?
Vladimir – Pull ON your trousers.
Estragon – (...) True. (Beckett 1965: 94)

In both languages, an order is not understood because Estragon misunderstands a morphologic element that is present in Vladimir's speech.

When translating this section of the text, the first Portuguese translator played with the referential vagueness of the Portuguese verb *puxar* used without an adverbial element that appears only at the end of the dialogue:

Vladimir – Puxa as calças.
 Estragon – O quê?
 Vladimir – Puxa as calças.
 Estragon – Para baixo?
 Vladimir – Não, puxa as calças para CIMA!
 Estragon – Ah, é verdade. (Beckett 1959)

Mário Viegas created a similar situation based on the Portuguese verb *levantar*; Estragon does not understand the order not only because it lacks the adverbial element but also because of the verb which, with reference to the trousers in this particular situation, sounds strange in Portuguese:

Vladimir – Levanta as calças!
 Estragon – Como?
 Vladimir – Levanta as calças!!
 Estragon – Levanto as calças?!
 Vladimir – Levanta as calças!!
 Estragon – Ah! É verdade. (Beckett 1993)

José Maria Vieira Mendes went further and created an incomplete speech-act: without the verb, Estragon does not know what he is supposed to do with his trousers until Vladimir tells him to put them on; he does not simply misunderstand the order for in fact he misses more than that:

Vladimir – As calças.
 Estragon – O quê?
 Vladimir – As calças.
 Estragon – Queres as minhas calças?
 Vladimir – VESTE as calças.
 Estragon – (...) Tens razão. (Beckett 2001: 124)

In the last example we find the twist of a philosophical maxim, a device that, along with allusions and misquotations from other authors, is common in Beckett's writing. At the beginning of act two, Vladimir and Estragon look around and notice that things have changed a little bit since the last time; Estragon then considers that: "On ne descend pas deux fois dans le même pus" (Beckett 1952: 84).

The French version presents a reverberation of Heraclitus's sentence, "You cannot take a bath twice in the same river"; the use of the verb "descendre" is explained by the phonetic resemblance between the French words *pus* and *puît* (into which one can hardly descend twice...); but the word *pus* introduces a scatological shift in the philosophical maxim and, therefore, a feeling of strangeness is associated to the lapidary sentence.

In the English version, the allusion to Heraclitus is harder to detect, but the sentence keeps the reference to the pus, presented in more general and abstract terms: "It's never the same pus from one second to the next" (Beckett 1965: 60).

As a general truth, this sentence still sounds unexpected and strange. Portuguese translators have been sensible to such strangeness and, to some extent, tried to clarify this section of the text.

Nogueira Santos keeps the notion of the perpetual flux of time, but presents the pus as a substance one steps on, putting it in a definite context, in more (say) sanitarially correct terms: "Nunca pisamos duas vezes o mesmo pus" (Beckett 1959).

Vieira Mendes did differently: he went back to Heraclitus's sentence and presented it in a version that is clearer than its formulation in the French text, with no type of wordplay: "Nunca nos banhamos duas vezes no mesmo pus" (Beckett 2001: 81)

Again, Mário Viegas did something different and totally eliminated this part of the dialogue from his text.

The examples presented, though not exhaustive, seem enough to outline a few topics related to the translation of such verbal games. We notice that, in spite of some different results, there is a general tendency to follow the translation model provided by Beckett either in the French or in the English version, even when it was not assumed as the source text from the beginning. There are cases, however, in which there is no attempt to reconstruct the linguistic situation, in spite of the existence of a good equivalent in the target language, as we saw in Mário Viegas's translation of "wayfarers".

We can confirm that the translation of wordplay is an important indicator of the norms adopted in the translation process; translators who adopt adequacy as their initial norm look for solutions which reconstruct certain features of the source text in the target language; this is the case with Vieira Mendes who, in the first example presented, looked for a phonetic resemblance between the source and the target language for his choice of words (in the case of the translation of the word *bush*).

Non-domestication was one of the norms adopted throughout his text, noticeable also in the translation of geographical names and references to currency.

On the other hand, having adopted acceptability as an important concern, Mário Viegas felt a greater freedom to ignore linguistic features of the source text and the solutions suggested by Beckett's translation, even in cases when they would prove to work in Portuguese. His *Godot* was assumed (and perceived by the critics) as a text that explored and insisted on comical situations, both explicit and potential in Beckett's text; this helps explain a lot of his choices, more than the impossibility of finding good equivalents. This particular translation, which includes several instances of transposition of verbal material into other theatrical languages, calls for the discussion of certain notions, namely those of adaptation and recreation, often associated to drama translation.

Moreover, the specific conditions in which performances have occurred might help us understand the decisions made during the translation process: it is clear that, in 1959, the first Portuguese translator was constrained by extra-textual norms that led him to adopt solutions like the last one presented, with regard to *pus*. We confirm that the translation of wordplay is not simply a matter of playing with words; besides the linguistic questions, when considering what is "gained" or "lost" we must also bear in mind the agents involved and the historical circumstances under which each translation and theatrical production took place.

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