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Traducirng Comedy

An Analysis of Two English Translations of Enrique Gaspar y Rimbau's *El anacronópete*

In Enrique Gaspar y Rimbau's 1887 science fiction novel *El anacronópete*, comedy presents itself in a variety of guises. One of the central comic elements of the book is the playful way in which the lower class characters, namely the maid Juana and the soldier Pendencia, engage with language. This article will compare Gaspar's *El anacronópete* with two of its official translations, Leyla Rouhi's *The Anacronópete* and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán and Andrea Bell's *The Time Ship: A Chrononautical Journey*, in order to ascertain to what extent the Spanish author's comic touch is preserved in the English translations of Juana's and Pendencia's speech. The maid's and the soldier's use of double meaning, the mondegreen, and code-switching will be the specific focus of our analysis. We will see that, as Salman Rushdie claims, although «[i]t is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation [...] something can also be gained» (1991: 17).

1. Introduction

No one has complete command of any language, regardless of how much they believe that they do. Translation is not only a joy, but also a humbling experience that reminds us that there are still words we do not know, expressions we have never heard, and questions that Google cannot answer (Rouhi 2012: 304)¹

Henri Bergson asks: «What does laughter mean? What is the basal element in the laughable? [...] The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have

¹ For all citations retrieved from Rouhi 2012, Cooperson 2012, Molina-Gavilán/Bell 2012, Gaspar 2012a, and Gaspar 2012b, the indications refer to positions in the Kindle editions.

tackled this little problem» (2008: 9). Spanish author Enrique Gaspar y Rimbau is no exception; his 1887 science fiction novel *El anacronópete* addresses the growing influence of scientific progress in nineteenth-century Europe from a comic perspective. Gaspar was a prolific author and playwright who, as noted by Yolanda Molina-Gavilán and Andrea Bell, two of the novel's translators, regularly addressed «controversial social and political issues of the day such as class struggle, political corruption, middle-class hypocrisy, and feminism» (2012: 379). Via *El anacronópete*, Gaspar distances himself from the «realist and naturalist schools of writing» (ibid.: 84) that dominated the Spanish literary market at the time to produce a work of science fiction – a rarity in Spain even today, where, as noted by Nil Santiáñez in his prologue to the 2000 edition of *El anacronópete*, «Tal género no figura entre los cánones del hispanismo» (2000: 18). This is perhaps one reason why *El anacronópete* never had much success during the author's lifetime. Even today, the book is not well known and has re-emerged in select literary circles due to its status as the first Western fiction to incorporate a time machine, proceeding even the more famous H.G. Wells (cf. ibid.: 6, Molina-Gavilán/Bell 2012: 91).

The plot of the book² follows scientist Don Sindulfo's and his companions' voyage through time aboard the *anacronópete*. The group consists of the archaeologist and polyglot Benjamín, Clara, the object of Don Sindulfo's unrequited affection, her lover, the soldier Luis, her maid Juana, and Juana's lover, the soldier Pendencia. After revealing his invention to the public in a Parisian square, Don Sindulfo, along with the rest of the group, departs on the time machine. As summarized by Molina-Gavilán and Bell, the travellers

[...] take off, most of them unwillingly, in search of more permissive times, the key to eternal life, and, in a particularly Spanish Catholic twist on the Enlightenment spirit, scientific knowledge that will lead to the better appreciation of God's majesty. Along the way, they witness a decisive nineteenth-century Spanish battle, rescue a third-century Chinese

² Gaspar originally wrote his work as a *zarzuela* and then later adapted it to novel form (Molina-Gavilán/Bell 2012: 404).

empress, survive the catastrophic eruption of Mount Vesuvius, and behold the parting of the Red Sea. Finally, they journey all the way back to the origin of the universe itself before their surprising return to the present (2012: 103).

As a central driving force in Gaspar's novel, comedy presents itself under a variety of guises. Indeed, Santiáñez points out, «El humor es un ingrediente importante de *El anacronopete*. La novela de Gaspar no es sólo una entretenida novela de aventura, también es una narración en no pocos momentos divertida» (2000: 11). One of the central comic elements of the book is the playful way in which the lower class characters, namely the maid Juana and the soldier Pendencia, engage with language. Leyla Rouhi, another of the novel's translators, elaborates:

The lively servant girl Juanita [...] subject[s] significant historical events to a particularly entertaining take that stresses her rural background [...]. She is at times aided and abetted by the Andalusian soldier Pendencia; [...] she and Pendencia provide in their reactions an amusing yet practical foil to the rigid, humorless approach of Don Sindulfo and Benjamin (2012: 272).

This article will compare Gaspar's *El anacronopete* with two of its official translations, Rouhi's *The Anacronopete* and Molina-Gavilán and Bell's *The Time Ship: A Chrononautical Journey*, in order to grasp to what extent the Spanish author's comic touch is preserved in the English translations of Juana's and Pendencia's speech. According to Susan Bassnett in *Translation Studies*,

What is generally understood as translation involves the rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL) so as to ensure that (1) the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and (2) the structures of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible but not so closely that the TL structures will be seriously distorted (2002: 12).

In the same vein, Umberto Eco defines «the idea of translation as a process of negotiation (between author and text, between author and readers, as well as between the structure of two languages and the encyclopedias of two cultures)» (2003: 34). This «process of negotiation» requires the translator to adopt a certain position when addressing the text. In *Teorie target-oriented della traduzione poetica*, Gioia Angeletti points out,

Il traduttore è [...] impegnato in una attività di *decision-making* per poter mediare tra le due culture e trovare il giusto equilibrio tra licenza assoluta e rigorosa letteralità, tra versione «brutta fedele» e versione «bella infedele» (2004: 18).

In our analysis of the two English translations³ of *El anacronópete*, we will assess how the translators mediate between these two alternatives. In other words, we will investigate to what extent they adhere to Gaspar's literal meaning at the expense of his comic spirit, or conversely, to what extent they preserve the author's comic spirit at the expense of faithfulness to the original text. To this end, we will study the translations of three different aspects of Juana's and Pendencia's speech: double meaning, the mondegreen, and code-switching. For each category, we will provide an example from both Juana and Pendencia, beginning with the original Spanish version and followed by Rouhi's and Molina-Gavilán's and Bell's translations.

2. Double Meaning

In analyzing the translations of two examples of double meaning in Gaspar's novel, we will notice that the goal of the translators has been to preserve Gaspar's

³ Considering the novel's lack of popularity, it is interesting to note that two English translations appear in the same year. In his introduction to Rouhi's translation, Michael Cooperson explains that this was entirely accidental: «Shortly after Prof. Rouhi completed the final draft of the present translation, it came to my attention that another translation was in the works, this one by Yolanda Molina-Gavilán and Andrea Bell» (2012: 249).

comic spirit in the English language while remaining as close as possible to the original sense of the text.

In our first example, we encounter Juana's use of double meaning when the group is observing «la batalla de Tetuán con el orden cronológico invertido» (Gaspar 1887: 86) by virtue of travelling backwards in time:

- Observen ustedes – proseguía don Sindulfo – como lo primero que se advierte es que los cadáveres se incorporan.
- Es verdad – asentía Benjamin. – Y luégo disparan sus fusiles.
- Y después cargan.
- ¿*Cargan*? Porque serán sabios – argüía la Maritornes, no desperdiciando ocasión de zaherir á su victima (id.).

Rouhi explains in a footnote that in Spanish, Gaspar plays on the double meaning of the verb «*cargar*, which means 'to load' yet can also mean, in slang, 'to bug or bother.' In all likelihood, Juana is referring to how tiresome and annoying scientists have been to her» (Gaspar 2012a: 3328). Rouhi translates this sentence in the following way:

- «Watch,» Don Sindulfo continued, «how the first thing we see is the corpses sitting up.»
- «Right,» agreed Benjamin, «and then they shoot their rifles.»
- «And then they load.»
- «They are full of shot? They must be scientists,» said the maid, not losing a chance to insult her victim (ibid.: 1363).

In her translation, Rouhi transposes the comical sense from Spanish into English by substituting Gaspar's play on the word «load» with a play on the words «full of shot». She uses this term to refer both to the ammunition in the rifle, and, by virtue of its proximity to the English colloquialism «full of shit» – meaning someone that is «completely wrong, false, or worthless», according to the *Cambridge Dictionary of American Idioms* – to the bothersome quality of the scientist. With this substitution, Rouhi has maintained Gaspar's comic spirit by incorporating double meaning into her translation, but at the expense of the orig-

inal wordplay. In compensation, she has provided the explanatory footnote to which we referred above. Molina-Gavilán and Bell take a different approach:

«Observe,» continued Don Sindulfo, «how the first thing one notes is that the dead bodies arise.»
 «True,» agreed Benjamin. «And then they fire their muskets.»
 «And then they load.»
 «*Load*, as in *burden*? Well then, they must be sages,» retorted the Maritornes, not wasting any opportunity to bring her victim down a notch (Gaspar 2012b: 1524).

We can see how Molina-Gavilán and Bell have arguably remained closer to the original text in finding a solution that plays on the original term as opposed to introducing a new term, like Rouhi has done. They choose to play on the double meaning of the word «load», which in English is a synonym for *burden*, just as «cargar» in Spanish can also mean ‘to bug’ or ‘to bother’. Yet while one may refer to someone as a «burden» in English, we do not hear «load» in reference to a person. This is why Molina-Gavilán and Bell needed to explicitly state the synonymous nature of the words «load» and «burden», otherwise the joke would have been incomprehensible. The structure of the two languages between which the translators must negotiate, does not permit a literal translation that simultaneously maintains Gaspar’s joke. Both translations thus substitute his original wordplay with an equivalent closer to the English language.

Pendencia provides us with the second example of double meaning when he responds to Juana, who is lamenting the fact that she is being forced to travel backwards in time:

– ¡El demonio del sabio! – decía la Maritornes. – Pues ni que fuéramos cangrejos para andar hacia atrás !
 – ¡Digo! Y tú que eres tan echada para adelante (Gaspar 1887: 55).

The play is on the words «atrás» and «adelante», which – as Rouhi’s footnote explains – Pendencia reappropriates in order to refer to Juana as being «driven» (Gaspar 2012a: 3313). Rouhi provides the following translation:

«This devil of a scientist!» said the maid. «Damn it, we're not crabs, to walk backward!»
 «Exactly! And what with you being such a forward girl,» said Pendencia (ibid: 930).

With regards to Pendencia's accent, denoted in the Spanish text by Gaspar's substitution of «eres» with «erez», Rouhi elaborates:

At times Gaspar does not even insert «said Pendencia,» in exchanges with this character, as the transcribed accent identifies him right away. In the English version, I have chosen to convey this in a number of ways, depending on the context: I have inserted «said Pendencia» for clarity when needed, highlighted the register of his speech where English allows for a particularly apt equivalent, and on occasion included a footnote to draw attention to a playful pun (Rouhi 2012: 292).

We can see that Rouhi has opted for the first and third solution in her translation of this particular example: she has added «said Pendencia» as compensation for omitting the transcription of his accent in the sentence, and with regards to Gaspar's wordplay, in her footnote she explains, «There is a pun here in the original Spanish: *echada para adelante* means 'driven,' but literally – that is, translated word for word, it means 'thrown forward'» (Gaspar 2012a: 3312). The explanatory footnote is necessary since even though Rouhi's translation maintains Gaspar's original play on the words «backward» and «forward», the English connotation is slightly more pejorative than the Spanish one; we may note that in English we are more likely to associate the word «forward» with a negative connotation (for example, as synonymous with «presumptuous, impertinent, or bold»⁴) as opposed to Gaspar's positively connoted «driven». Molina-Gavilán and Bell take a different approach. They write:

⁴ The definitions of «forward», «upfront», «mondegreen», and «code-switching», which will be cited in the article, have been retrieved from *Dictionary.com Unabridged*.

«That devil of a scholar!» said the Maritornes. «We couldn't go backwards even if we were crabs!»
 «True. Specially you, who've got so much up front» (Gaspar 2012b: 1151).

In contrast to Rouhi's solution, they have rendered Pendencia's accent in English by truncating the word «Especially» to «Specially», thereby providing a comparable equivalent and thus eliminating the need for an explanatory «said Pendencia». However, whereas in Gaspar's original sentence and Rouhi's translation the play is on an aspect of Juana's character (whether she is «driven» or «forward»), in Molina-Gavilán and Bell's translation it is on the nature of Juana's body. Had they used the term «upfront» – meaning to be «honest; candid; straightforward» – they would have provided a similar translation to Rouhi's; however, by referring to Juana as someone who has «got so much up front», they provide a comment on Juana's large bust size. Although this seems like a significant departure from Gaspar's original joke, a comparison with another interaction between Juana and Pendencia reveals that it is in line with Pendencia's sense of humour. In one example, by virtue of going back in time without applying to their bodies the «fluido de la inalterabilidad» (Gaspar 1887: 80) which would prevent them from aging backwards, Luis, Pendencia, and their band of soldiers have been «reducido[s] á la condición de tiernos parvulillos» (ibid.: 94). Juana, cradling the «microscópico Pendencia» in her arms, asks:

¿Ya no tienes una gracia para tu Juanita? [...] Y el bribón del asistente, como si aún quisiera darle una prueba de su travesura, le mordió el vestido por la parte en que á los niños de su edad se les sirven los alimentos (ibid.: 95).

Thus, although Molina-Gavilán and Bell have altered Gaspar's original word-play, in their translation they have nevertheless conveyed Pendencia's affinity for Juana's breasts, an element that pervades other parts of Gaspar's novel. We can therefore note that while Molina-Gavilán and Bell may seem less faithful to Gaspar's text than Rouhi, it is reasonable to argue that their choice is predicated on a translation of Pendencia's character as opposed to the literal meaning of his words.

3. The Mondegreen

We shall now address how the translators deal with Juana's and Pendencia's use of the mondegreen, meaning «a word or phrase resulting from a misinterpretation of a word or phrase that has been heard». In this section, we will note how while both translations may seem to be equally faithful to the original at first glance, a closer examination reveals that slight differences allow us to consider one as more accurate than the other.

Juana provides us with the first example of a mondegreen when she defends her conviction that the soldiers are invincible and will eventually reappear, even though they «desaparecieron en el espacio» (Gaspar 1887: 166) after being ejected from the time machine by Don Sindulfo:

- No, esta vez los hemos perdido para siempre.
- ¡Quiá! Si ellos son como el ave *Félix* que según cuentan renace después de hecha *cecina* (ibid.: 172).

Juana mistakes «Fénix» for «Félix» and «ceniza» for «cecina» (Gaspar 2012a: 3346), to which Gaspar draws our attention through indicative italics. Rouhi translates this in the following way:

- «No, I'm afraid this time we've lost them for good.»
- «Not a chance! They're like that bird Felix that stories say comes back to life after it's been made into rashes» (ibid.: 2548).

The misinterpretation of «Phoenix» is maintained in English as it is in Spanish, and just as Gaspar provides the variant «cecina» instead of the correct «ceniza», so Rouhi substitutes the word «ashes» for «rashes». Molina-Gavilán and Bell take a similar approach. They translate:

- «No, this time we've lost them forever.»
- «Huh! Those guys are like that bird, the *Felix*, that they say gets reborn after being burned to *asses*» (Gaspar 2012b: 2583).

Just like Gaspar, Molina-Gavilán and Bell indicatively italicize the misinterpreted words, the latter of which they transform into «asses» as opposed to Rouhi's «rashes». Yet, due to the disparity between the two languages, neither translation incorporates the term «smoked meat», «cecina», and thus neither can be deemed literal. Nevertheless, Rouhi is the only one who in compensation again refers to Gaspar's original joke with an explanatory footnote. Pendencia's written love-letter to Juana makes similar use of the mondegreen. Gaspar writes:

«Mi coracon es pera, Y a esto y acui coma tullo asta la merte ilo es Roce Gomec.» Juanita, acostumbrada al estilo epistolar de su soldado comprendió que aquello quería decir: «Mi corazón espera. Ya estoy aquí. Coma (ó sea la puntuación escrita.) Tuyo hasta la muerte. Y lo es Roque Gómez» (1887: 50).

Pendencia's letter is a transcription of what he believes to be the correct spelling of the words he uses. Rouhi translates the unintelligible part of the latter example in the following way:

«My hart ah weights. A am no hear comma yorz til deth andsois Roce Comec» (Gaspar 2012a: 861).

while Molina-Gavilán and Bell provide us with:

«My hart a waytz. Im all redy heer coma yorz til deth Rokego mez» (Gaspar 2012b: 1086).

Both translations take Gaspar's cue and substitute Pendencia's incorrect Spanish with incorrect English, while preserving the core meaning. Only a closer analysis permits us to state that Rouhi is arguably more faithful to Gaspar's original sentence: while Gaspar's and Rouhi's Pendencia spells out existent though incorrectly-used words in his misspelling of «espera» («awaits») – Gaspar's «pera» is Rouhi's «weights» – Molina-Gavilán and Bell do not manage to retain this

additional play on words in their translation.⁵ We can thus see that while both translations may seem equally faithful at first glance, an analysis of details suggests that Rouhi provides a closer translation.

4. Code-Switching

A third common practice of both Juana and Pendencia is code-switching, known in linguistics as «the alternate use of two or more languages or varieties of language, especially within the same discourse».

A specific type of code-switching is intra-word switching, a term that, according to Tom McArthur, is used when the switch occurs «within a word boundary» (McArthur 1998), like in the title of our article. Juana gives us another example of intra-word switching when she feigns to speak Latin upon addressing the senator in Pompeii in the year 79 in the following way:

– *Dominus vobiscum* – le dijo al senador. – *Brindo para que usiam reventatur como un perri de una indigestionem de morcillam. Salutem y sarnam* (Gaspar 1887: 191).

In order to obtain a comic effect, Gaspar applies Latin suffixes to Spanish words. Rouhi interprets this sentence in the following way:

[...] said to the senator:
«*Dominus vobiscum*. I toastum to you cacking offus like a dogus that has gotus indigestionem from poisonedem blackem puddingem» (Gaspar 2012a: 2798).

⁵ Both translations, however, incorporate a wordplay that is missing from Gaspar's original text: while «coracon» is not an actual word in Spanish, Rouhi's and Molina-Gavilán and Bell's substitution, «hart», is.

Molina-Gavilán and Bell admit that «Gaspar challenged our wits [...] when, again thanks to Juana, we had to translate a Spanish phrase disguised as Latin into an English phrase disguised as Latin» (2012: 547), and as we can see, they apply an approach similar to that of Rouhi:

«Dominus vobiscum.» she told the senator. *«A toastus so that you may blowem up like a dogus from blood sausegem indigestibus. Salutem and scabiesum»* (Gaspar 2012b: 2807).

Both translations follow Gaspar's logic by applying Latin suffixes to English words while maintaining the core meaning of the Spanish sentence. Variations in interpretation of the core sentence, like Rouhi's use of the term «black pudding» and Molina-Gavilán and Bell's use of the term «blood sausage» to translate «*morcilla*», create disparities between the two translations, as does each translator's individual choice of which word to endow with a Latin suffix, and which Latin suffix to employ (i.e. «*toastum*» vs. «*toustus*»⁶).

They are faced with a similar task when translating Pendencia's French. During a walk in Paris, Don Sindulfo suddenly finds himself face to face with the soldier, who addresses him in the following way:

– *¿Me da vu de la candel?* - le dijo éste disponiéndose á encender su chicote en el *medianito* del aturdido zaragozano y traduciendo en lengua de Racine su patrio estilo cordobés (Gaspar 1887: 48).

Here, Pendencia employs two types of code-switching and a mondegreen. First, we may recognize intra-word switching in the word «*candel*», which sounds as though Pendencia is employing the Spanish word for candle, «*candela*», but with a French accent; second, he demonstrates intra-sentential switching – that is, when the switch occurs «within a clause or sentence boundary» according to McArthur – by alternating between Spanish and French words (i.e. «*da*» and

⁶ It is interesting to note that while Gaspar does not superimpose Latin on the Spanish verb «brindar», in both English translations the verb «to toast» is altered.

«vu» respectively); and lastly we can isolate the mondegreen, as exemplified by his transliteration of the French «vous» into «vu».

Rouhi provides the following translation:

«Vous will donnez me de la light?» said Pendencia as he set out to light a cigarette butt in the face of the stunned Zaragozan and translated his native Cordoban style into the language of Racine (Gaspar 2012a: 835).

while Molina-Gavilán and Bell provide us with:

«Me da vu de la candel?» asked Pendencia, preparing to light his cigar stub from the flustered Zaragozan's own 'medianito' and translating his Cordoban vernacular into the language of Racine (Gaspar 2012b: 1064).

According to Angeletti, translators have to make a «scelta tra «domestication» e «foreignization» [...], ovvero se sia giusto riscrivere il modello secondo la cultura d'arrivo [...] o rispettare l'estraneità dell'originale e mantenerla nel *target text*» (2004: 13). By virtue of translating the Spanish part of Pendencia's remark into English, Rouhi opts for «domestication», providing us with a result that merges English and French. Molina-Gavilán and Bell, on the other hand, opt for «foreignization»; by respecting Gaspar's textual indication that Pendencia translates his «Cordoban vernacular» into French, they leave the sentence as is, omitting English entirely. However, as they do not provide an explanatory footnote, they run the risk that certain Anglophone readers who cannot distinguish between French and Spanish will not understand the joke. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that Molina-Gavilán and Bell have found an appropriate solution that allows for both the retention of Gaspar's comic spirit as well as absolute fidelity.

5. Conclusion

Bassnett states «It is an established fact [...] that if a dozen translators tackle the same poem, they will produce a dozen different versions» (2002: 35). In our

assessment of Rouhi's and Molina-Gavilán and Bell's translations, we have outlined two different solutions to a variety of linguistic structures. In observing the extent of each translator's adherence to or departure from the original text, it is next to impossible to ascribe a consistent pattern of faithfulness to the source as our respective translators move through the text, as each new puzzle is cause for an independent interpretation. In compensation for losing a given pun or other untranslatable linguistic structure, Rouhi and Molina-Gavilán and Bell sometimes offer solutions which include word games the author never intended. It is thus evident that both translations prioritize the text's comicality; each translator therefore oscillates between degrees of faithfulness to the original text insofar as her solution retains Gaspar's comic spirit, even if it is at the expense of an original joke.

Salman Rushdie claims «It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained» (1991: 17). In spite of unavoidable deviations from the original, Rouhi's and Molina-Gavilán and Bell's translations have provided us with a key to a rich and intelligent text that would otherwise be completely inaccessible to non-Spanish speakers.

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