

Stylistic Analysis in Poetic Translation

Pamela Faber

Volume 34, numéro 4, décembre 1989

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/002714ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/002714ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (imprimé)

1492-1421 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cette note

Faber, P. (1989). Stylistic Analysis in Poetic Translation. *Meta*, 34(4), 805–808.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/002714ar>

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS IN POETIC TRANSLATION

«À mesure que, dans un ouvrage, le caractère de la pensée tient plus à l'expression, la traduction devient plus épineuse.» (Marmontel, Garnier, 1985: 5.)

1. INTRODUCTION

Poetic translation is a difficult enterprise. According to Jakobson (1981: 112), poetry is directly opposed to normal communicative language. The poet demands that the reader work to decipher his message. The translator of poetry must thus make an even greater effort, because he must not only understand the poet's message, but also the exact linguistic and stylistic recourses which have been used to communicate it.

A poem's simplicity can be deceptive. Everyone knows that even the briefest poetry can contain a world of meaning. This meaning can be found at all levels of language and for this reason, the translator must possess sufficient knowledge of the source language to recognize this meaning where it exists, and try to reproduce it, insofar as the structure of the target language allows.

When translating texts whose function is eminently expressive, according to Newmark, the emphasis should be on the source language and the focus, on the writer. The type of language should be figurative and the unit of translation, small. Stylistic markers are key elements to be retained (Newmark 1981: 15). However, even if all these rules are followed, the loss of meaning is usually considerable. This is possibly the reason for W. Lednicki's pessimistic statement that "poetic translations are coffins without any hope for the miracle of resurrection" (cf. Garnier 1985: 7).

A serious poetic translation should, in all cases, be preceded by a detailed analysis that tells us what the poem is all about. This includes a stylistic "inventory" that surveys the means the poet employs to communicate his message. The process is interesting since it calls for a great deal of reflection about language in general, its individual uses, and their possible correspondences in the target language.

As an example of this process, we have taken one of D.H. Lawrence's short imagist poems and translated it into Spanish. First we have made an exhaustive analysis of its meaning as transmitted by stylistic recourses on the syntactic and semantic levels. Whenever possible we have tried to translate these recourses or at least offer some compensation for their loss.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1 Poem: Source Language Text / Target Language Text

Green

- I₁ The dawn was apple-green,
I₂ The sky was green wine held up in
the sun,
I₃ The moon was a golden petal between.
- II₁ She opened her eyes, and green
II₂ They shone, clear like flowers undone
II₃ For the first time, now for the first
time seen.

Verde

- I₁ Verde manzana era el alba,
I₂ Vino verde ofrendado al sol era el cielo,
I₃ En medio, la luna, un pétalo dorado
- II₁ Y ella abrió sus ojos, y verdes
II₂ Brillaron, claros como flores abiertas
II₃ Por primera vez, ahora vistas por vez
primera.

2.2 Rhyme Scheme

First we are going to discuss the meaning inherent in the rhyme scheme, though we haven't been able to translate this level of meaning. "Green" is a short imagist lyric whose theme is the communion between heaven and earth. It has two verses of three line each: I_{1,2,3}; II_{1,2,3}. The number three is also significant of the poem's three protagonists: nature, the woman, and her lover (the poet).

The rhyme scheme is ABA ABA and the rhyme-fellows (A) are: *apple-green*^{adj.} / *between*^{adv.} / *green*^{adj.} / *seen*^{past part.}.

I ₁		apple-green	dawn
3	(moon)	between	
II ₁		green	eyes
3		seen	

The poem's semantic meaning is mirrored in the configuration of its letter A rhyme-fellows. *Seen* modifies the poem as a whole. The poet is describing a past experience. The color green (the eyes of his beloved) is the mirror in which he sees the reflection of Nature. The moon is the bridge connecting the celebration of their love with the dawn.

The letter B rhyme-fellows (B) *sun / undone* appear in another of Lawrence's poems, *Bombardment*:

The town has opened to the *sun*. Like a flat red lily with a million petals She unfolds, she comes *undone*.

In "Green", these rhyme-fellows are in different verses and they are separated by two lines instead of one, but the meaning is the same. *Undone* is almost synonymous with *unfolds*.

However, in languages as different as Spanish and English, the translator often must renounce rhyme in order to better transmit content and other pertinent aesthetic features.

García Yebra (1983: 141) speaks of the translation of rhyme as one of the most difficult problems in translation theory:

Si hay para la teoría de la traducción un problema insoluble, es precisamente éste: si se debe traducir en verso o en prosa las obras poéticas versificadas en el original.

He admits that a verse translation, except when the source and target languages are very similar, omits much of what is stylistically pertinent in the original text.

2.3 Source Language Text: 1st Verse

The first verse consists of three juxtaposed sentences of similar syntactic construction:

- 1₁ The dawn was apple-green,
2 The sky was green wine held up in the sun,
3 The moon was a golden petal between.

In order to translate this or *any* verse, it is necessary to analyze its meaning and syntactic structures. A translator, like any competent general, must marshal his forces and decide on a certain strategy and that strategy invariably depends upon the kind of source language text, the two languages involved, and which is more important, content or form.

In poetry, where form is meaning and meaning if form, the translator must analyze the significant structures of both levels and decide which ones can be translated. It is like going to market with a shopping list and only a limited amount of money. One cannot buy everything, but must make choices, thinking in terms of priorities.

The dawn (I₁), *the sky* (I₂), *the moon* (I₃), three nouns of homophoric reference, are all the subjects of their respective sentences and belong to the same

lexical field. The same verb, *was*, is repeated in each line. The imperfect tense emphasizes the descriptive tone of the verse and the temporal distance of the poet. This repetition, as well as the consistent use of homophoric nouns, is characteristic of *The Book of Genesis*. In this case, the poet, like God, is the author of an act of creation, the poem. In his mind's eye, he is also recreating the past as he visualizes it in his memory.

The three attributes, *apple-green*, *green wine*, and *a golden petal*, belong to the earth, and the three subjects to the sky. The distribution of the first verse is symbolic of part of the poem's message, earth's union with heaven. In line I₂, *green* indirectly modifies the subject, *sky*, through the metaphoric relation between *sky* and *wine*. The wine is held up so that it will shine in the sunlight. The past participle, *held up*, necessarily implies an agent. The gesture of lifting a cup of wine is one of celebration and refers to the poet's perspective in relation to the experience which he is reliving and which he is describing/creating. This gesture that celebrates the beauty of the dawn, reflected in the eyes of the beloved, is repeated in the second verse where *The Book of Genesis* becomes *The Songs of Solomon*.

The temporal perspective of the poet is reflected in the verb, *was* (I_{1,2,3}). This repetition underlines the fact that the poet in the present (*now*, II₃), is describing a past event and recoloring it in the emotional depth of his remembrance. *The moon* in crescent form (*a golden petal*) is the bridge connecting *her eyes*, compared with flowers, to the sky. The position of the preposition *between* is significant because it marks the cohesion between the two verses, a union which is reinforced as well by the rhyme *between/green*.

2.4 Target Language Text: 1st Verse

The most striking elements in this verse are the semantic and syntactic parallelisms. *Dawn/alba*, *sky/cielo*, and *moon/luna* (celestial phenomena) are opposed to *apple/manzana*, *wine/vino*, *petal/pétalo* (things associated with the earth). The only real problem insofar as the semantic translation has to do with the attributes of the three homophoric nouns:

apple-green (noun converted to adjective + color-adjective) *green wine* (color-adjective + noun) *golden petal* (color-adjective + noun)

The components of the three attributes add up to three color-adjectives and three nouns, although one of the nouns functions as an adjective. Only in the first line do their position and function vary. Although Spanish does not possess the same conversion process which in English allows nouns to function as adjectives, *apple-green* can be translated as *verde manzana* in order to maintain a certain stylistic equivalence. *Green wine* must be translated as *vino verde*, the adjective in postnominal position, so as not to create an unwanted parallelism with *verde manzana*, that would leave the reader in doubt as to whether it was

green wine or wine-shade of green. *Golden petal* translates as *pétalo dorado*.

The translation of *was* (I_{1,2,3}) presents another problem concerning the equivalence of stylistic effect in different languages. In English, repetition is a stylistic recourse that is used to emphasize key elements within a text. In Spanish, however, this sort of repetition becomes redundancy. Thus an overly faithful translation of this recourse can make the Spanish TL text sound aggressive and clumsy (Vazquez Ayora 1977). To avoid this, we have left the verb elliptical in line I₃.

As we have already mentioned, the past participle *held up* implies an agent. The gesture is one of celebration, a toast, an offering to the sky. The Spanish translation should include as many of these characteristics as possible. For this reason, we have chosen *ofrendado* as the best equivalent.

Between (I₃) is emphasized because of its terminal position both in the line and verse and also because of its rhyme with *green*. It acts as a nexus between the two verses and represents the moon's position between *the sky* (I₂) and *her eyes* (II₂).

The Spanish translation *en medio* is far from being stylistically equivalent because of the absence of rhyme and structural correspondence. However, this loss of meaning can be attenuated by placing *en medio* at the beginning of the line and separating it from *la luna* with a comma. The importance of *en medio* is then marked by its position at the beginning of the line, and the middle position of *la luna* is the graphological correspondence of the line's semantic meaning.

2.5 Source Language Text: 2nd Verse

The second verse also forms a sentence composed of two clauses coordinated by the conjunction *and*. It differs from the first verse in that it contains three caesuras (II_{1,2,3}) and two enjambments (II_{1,2}, II_{2,3}).

This difference in form is parallel to the semantic difference between the two parts of the poem. In this verse, the poet shows us the mirror in which he has seen the reflection of heaven and earth (verse I). The enjambments and the caesuras join as well as juxtapose different elements of the poem. The resulting effect is the multiplication of possible connotations and a corresponding intensification of meaning.

The enjambment in lines II_{1,2} emphasizes *green* as a stylistic deviation (i.e., its unusual position as a modifier). It modifies *eyes* and *they* at the same time and also forms a parallelism with *apple-green*.

The caesura (II₁) tells us that both *clear* and *green* refer to *they* (II₂). *Clear* (II₂) possesses connotations of liquidness and luminosity that coincide with those of *eyes* in the second verse as well as those of *dawn*, *moon*, *sun*, and *wine* in the first.

In the second verse, the verbs are in the past tense. *Opened* (II₁) and *shone* (II₂), transitive and intransitive respectively, are the only action verbs in

the poem. *Opened* is anterior to *shone* inasmuch as its position in the poem, but the real temporal order is ambiguous, because of the subjective character of remembrance.

Both verbs are symmetrical to the past participles *done* and *seen*. All four verb forms are in opposition to *now* (II₃), adverb which marks the poet's distance with respect to the events he is describing. From this perspective, we can better understand the repetition of *for the first time* (II₃) and its meaning within the context of the poem.

The enjambment of lines II_{2,3} (*flowers undone for the first time*) separates a phrase that normally would not be divided and creates syntactic ambiguity. *For the first time* can thus modify only the past participle *undone* or the entire nominal phrase, *flowers undone*.

Since flowers obviously only bloom once during their life cycle, both cases are references to the Garden of Paradise, where the first flowers of the world bloomed for the first time.

The poet's presence is manifest in the adverb *now* (II₃). The experience which he is describing is his creation and as such, the intensity of its beauty appears to him as an unexpected revelation. In the last line of the poem, he is gazing at it, seeing it in its totality for the first time.

The repetition of *for the first time*, framed between *now* and *seen*, is an important stylistic recourse that produces a variety of connotations. Its sphere of reference does not only include the flowers, but the total poetic experience.

Lawrence sought to capture the beauty of the present in his poetry, but here the present is not the action described. Rather it is the poet's act of creation through the process of remembrance.

2.6 Target Language Text: 2nd Verse

Line II₁ of the translation begins with the conjunction *y*. The reason for this addition lies in the different forms of stylistic acceptability in the source and target language. Spanish uses more connecting words than English. According to Vazquez Ayora (1977: 111):

El español es una lengua cuyo estilo literario se expresa por un complejo enlace de los elementos a todos los niveles.

This conjunction creates a stronger union between the two verses and emphasizes the vision of the poem in its totality, which is an integral part of its meaning.

The translation *she/ella* is a small example of the problem of pronoun translation, especially in Lawrence's poetry in which the repetition, contrast, and configuration of pronouns is often an important stylistic recourse. The translator is often obliged to choose between an overemphasis of this recourse (explicit pronoun translation) or its virtual invalidation (translation in the ending inflexion of verb). In

this case, an explicit translation is justified, because of the importance of the relation man (poet)/woman (his beloved) to the meaning of the poem. The possessive adjective *her/sus* is also explicitly translated for the same reason.

The structure of lines II_{1,2}, *green They shone clear/verdes Brillaron claros*, is essentially the same in both languages. The pronoun *they* is necessarily implicit in the verb inflexion. However, there is another more serious lack of equivalence. The word order of this phrase is a stylistic deviation in English that is not present in the translation, due to the greater freedom enjoyed by sentence elements in Spanish.

A possible solution would have been to put *verdes* in a more distinctive position in respect to *ojos* and *brillaron*, but then, *verdes* would not have been the last word in line II₁. This would not have translated the poem's significant word configuration.

Georges Mounin (1971: 184) states that a stylistic deviation in the source language should be translated for another such deviation that produces an equivalent effect in the target language. But this solution is rarely if ever viable, since clear stylistic equivalences between different languages are rare. For now, there is no direct correspondence between different stylistic deviations or between the effects these produce.

Actually, one of the most difficult problems in the translation of poetry is the collocation of adjectives. According to Epstein (1980), non-restrictive modifiers (i.e., practically all adjectives in poetry) lose part of their original expressivity if there is a change in the surface structure of the discourse, where the modifier is. The adjective is a sign within the value system of the poet and as such, can produce different effects depending upon its position in the text (Epstein in Greenbaum *et al.*, eds. 1980: 226).

The difficulty lies in translating this value system manifest in the SL text to the target language which obviously cannot have the same structure. For this as well as for other stylistic features, there are unfortunately no ironclad rules or for that matter, any rules at all.

The prepositional phrase *for the first time* is translated as *por primera vez/por vez primera*. Repetition in Spanish, at least on the level of surface structure, does not normally produce the same stylistic effect as in English. The definite article has also been eliminated in the translation in order to avoid a difference in register.

The translation *seen/vistas* produces an unavoidable loss of meaning. In Spanish, *seen/vistas* is no longer the last word of the poem, thus losing its quality as the unveiling force behind the sudden revelation to the author of his own creation. Also its required grammatical concordance with *flores* eliminates the possibility of reproducing the referential ambiguity in the original text in which *seen* not only modifies *flowers undone*, but also the poem in its totality. In Spanish, the translator has no choice but to choose the first of these possible interpretations, thus conserving the grammatical symmetry with *abiertas* (II₂).

3. CONCLUSION

Our purpose has been to demonstrate the complexity of translating any poem, even an apparently simple one such as "Green". Obviously, the first step in the translation process is a detailed analysis or exegesis of the source language text. In poetry, this is especially important. If the translator wishes to limit the inevitable loss of meaning involved in literary translation, he must make an evaluation of the significant structures on all levels of the text and try to find their equivalent in the target language.

PAMELA FABER

Universidad de Granada, Granada, Spain

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- EPSTEIN, E.L. (1980): "Non-Restrictive Modifiers: Poetic Features of Language" in Greenbaum *et al.* (Eds.): *Studies in English Linguistics for Randolph Quirk*, London, Longman.
- GARCIA YEBRA, V. (1983): *En Torno a la Traducción*, Madrid, Gredos.
- GARNIER, G. (1985): *Linguistique et traduction*, Caen, Paradigme.
- JAKOBSON, R. (1981): *Selected Writings III*, in S. Rudy, (ed.), Paris, The Hague, Mouton.
- MOUNIN, G. (1971): "Un poème et cinq traductions" in G. Mounin, (1976): *Linguistique et traduction*, Brussels, Dessart & Mardaga.
- NEWMARK, P. (1981): *Approaches to Translation*, London, Pergamon.
- VAZQUEZ AYORA, G. (1977): *Introducción a la Traductología*, Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press.