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Theatrical Texts vs Subtitling
Linguistic variation in a polymedial context

Contents

Abstract

This article discusses the problem of translating into Portuguese a sub-standard variety of British English into Portuguese within a polymedial context. The discourse develops its structure according to the channel selected and, since the two main communication channels are written and spoken, it is possible to identify the written and oral modes as two distinct variations. Investigating the way in which the oral mode is represented in the written mode is of particular relevance in subtitling because the two modes appear simultaneously. Different media have different functions requiring different priorities. In the translation process the translator needs to set priorities with different types of discourse imposing different kinds of limitations. So that priorities must be set in different ways.

This article will present a comparative study of three translations rendered for the purpose of theatrical performance and five translations rendered for the purpose of subtitling of Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion and Alan Jay Lerner's My Fair Lady. I will try to understand how the variable "medium" influences the translator's decisions with respect to the kind of linguistic varieties in the translation, ie which limitations were found and which new opportunities opened up.

1   Some specifics of theatrical texts

Following Bassnet's (1990) and Aaltonen's (2003) writings, I will consider theatrical texts as different from dramatical texts in terms of distribution as well as aesthetics and ideologies. We are faced with two different visions of theater translation, which generate two different kinds of translation in accordance with two distinct notions of performability: one is close to the text itself, another to a specific performance style of a given company (Espasa 2000: 52). In a translation intended for performance the expectations of the audience have a great influence on the translator's decisions, in a translation meant for publication, the gender conventions will certainly be much more important in the decisions taken by the translator. When translating or analyzing a translation rendered for theatrical performance, therefore, a number of aspects need to be taken into account as is described below.

1.1   Reception differences

Unlike a reader, who decides when, how, and for how long he/she is going to read, the viewer of a play assumes a passive role in the reception of a unique moment of meaning during the production. This makes it more difficult for the translator to opt for source text oriented strategies and limits his ability to use devices which may compromise the immediate understanding of the discourse and plot.

1.2   Discourse: written to be spoken

A translator's written work will experience an oral dimension on stage, making the conventions of the oral discourse a very important fact to take into account. The impact is much more felt on stage than on the printed page - if the discourse is not familiar to the public, the actual understanding of the plot can be seriously compromised.

1.3   The polysemiotic nature of the final product

When translating for the theater, the translation will necessarily have to take into account other elements besides the text. In fact, the singularity of the theatrical text seems to be due to, among other things, the fact that the theatrical event is text + image + action in real time. It presents itself as different from a dramatical text because it goes far beyond the mere text, and it differs from audiovisual products such as films since it is live communication (Marco 2002: 56). Translators create a product which will experience both a verbal and non-verbal dimension on stage. The rhythm becomes something very important: what is said must be accompanied by gestures, i.e., the action determines as well as emphasizes what is said.

2   Some Specifics of Subtitling

Like theater translation, subtitling also has its own specific aspects, which must be taken into account when translating. It was defined by Gottlieb (1992: 162, 163) as written, additive, immediate, synchronous and polymedial translation, implying a change of (Luyken 1991: 153-158; Rosa 2001: 214):

   a) **Medium:** from speech and gestures to writing;
   b) **Channel:** from mainly vocal-auditive to visual;
   c) **Form of signals:** mainly from phonic substances to graphic substance; and
   d) **Code:** from spoken verbal language to written verbal language.

   Besides, subtitling is a specific kind of translation where other types of limitations must be taken into account:

   a) **Space limitation:** two lines from 30 to 35 characters each;
   b) **Exposure time:** There is an agreement that 6 to 8 seconds is the optimum exposure time for a two-line subtitle and 4 seconds for a one-line subtitle (dictated by three factors: amount of text, the average reading speed of the viewers, the constant minimum interval between subtitles);
   c) **Synchrony with the image** (if a subtitle is retained on screen during a shot or scene change it, will result in an effect known as "overlapping"). Like theatrical texts, subtitles are not an independent product: as audible and visual elements, and

although not translated, they are part of the translation product and influence the translator's options and decisions. We must see image and subtitling as one whole, since without the image or sound subtitles are reduced in their sense.

3   Linguistic varieties and their rhetoric purpose

Translators have been facing the problem that a target language may not have adequate resources to provide for an equivalent target text, e.g. when the source language reflects the close relationship between the speaker/medium/context in which it is used. The literary use of a dialect raises important questions to the study of translation, not only because it is specific of the source language system, but also because it is always embedded in the source text with a pragmatic and semiotic significance. The creative use of linguistic varieties in literary dialog contributes to inform the reader about who is speaking and under which circumstances he/she is speaking, showing itself as a textual resource which defines the sociocultural outline of the character in addition to his/her position in the sociocultural fictional context. It is also an element which leads to a stratification of the participants in the dialog, since the speakers tend to associate, based on extra-linguistic factors, higher prestige to the standard variety (officially established as the correct language use) and, consequently, tend to downgrade all other varieties which are culturally associated with peripheral geographic spaces and lower sociocultural status. It is important to realize that the literary recreation of a linguistic variety may be based on a previous selection which results from different mediations, leading Olga Brodovich to label it as "scenic dialect" (Brodovich 1997: 26). When analyzing the selection of sub-standard features, we must bear in mind that "intelligibility" and "readability", ie the consciousness that target system speakers have of the linguistic variation and the way the text is displayed are fundamental concepts. The degree of linguistic mimicry is dependent on the aesthetic, narrative, thematic or stylistic objectives, and also on the function that the author has given to his recreation. When recreating linguistic varieties, the author, as well as the translator, resorts to sociolinguistic stereotypes which they know to be part of the public knowledge, i.e., those which are associated to a subcode easily understood by the public. This is why it is important to discuss the translators' decision to recreate the original, or not, and the way he/she chooses to do so, in view of the fact that this decision can modify, or even subvert, the work's system.

4   Methodology of the study

The choice of *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* as a corpus to be analyzed in this article was motivated by the fact that the use of a substandard variety of British English is central to the plot. It is therefore vital that the target text portrays the difference in discourse; otherwise the audience will not understand the plot.

For the purposes of this study, a parallel corpus was created with all Eliza's speeches of the first two scenes. Only Eliza's speeches were selected and only as a speaker of 'cockney', since it is not the purpose of this study to analyze idiolect speech markers or the character's evolutionary process. The analysis of the parallel corpus was made semi-automatically, using a computer system available on the market called *Systemic Coder*[1]. The comparative

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[1] For the purpose of this article it was used the version 4.5 of the computer program Systemic Coder, designed by Michael O'Donnell of WagSoft Linguistics software. The program is available on http://www.wagsoft.com/coder/.

appreciation of all the percentages made it possible to identify the procedures and different translation strategies which are discussed here:

5 Presence and meaning of the sub-standard variety in Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion and Alan Jay Lerner's My Fair Lady

	Less prestigious varieties			Prestigious varieties
	Substandard		Oral	Standard
	Social	Regional		
Pygmalion (1938 film script)	51%	0%	33%	16%
Pygmalion (1957 published book)	46%	0%	37%	17%
My Fair Lady (1956 published book)	51%	0%	32%	17%
My Fair Lady (1964 film script)	48%	0%	33%	20%
Pygmalion (1938 film script)	55%	0%	34%	11%

Tab. 1: Percentages of the less prestigious and prestigious literary varieties in the non-translated sub-corpus.

Table 1 shows the percentages of the prestigious and less prestigious literary varieties in the non-translated sub-corpus. As we can see, all the source texts show a high percentage regarding the recreation of less prestigious varieties (social sub-standard variety and oral register) as opposed to the lower expression of the standard variety. As was mentioned before, sub-standard features (in this particular case, "cockney"), are representative of a low sociocultural group, denoting the character's social peripheral status and low educational level. Its presence serves the communicative purpose of indirectly distinguishing the character, showing that she belongs to a lower social class.

Concerning textual-linguistic features, we can easily see by the numbers presented in Table 2 the preference for graphic features instead of lexical or morphosyntactic ones. These regularities seem to confirm Page's research, when he says "[g]rammar and syntax are, apart from the most obvious differences, less readily absorbed by the casual listener, and are used relatively little by writers. Much more extensively used are devices for suggesting non-standard pronunciation" (Page 1988: 57).

	Textual-linguistic features		
	Morphosyntactic	Lexical	Graphic
Pygmalion (1938 film script)	28%	42%	51%
Pygmalion (1957 published book)	26%	41%	48%
My Fair Lady (1956 published book)	28%	36%	49%
My Fair Lady (1964 film script)	22%	42%	43%
Pygmalion (1938 film script)	37%	40%	49%

Tab. 2:   Percentages of the textual-linguistic features in the non-translated sub-corpus

6 The target texts: normalization and innovation

Concerning the target texts, Table 3 shows the percentages of the less prestigious and the prestigious varieties.

| Medium | Title | Date | Less prestigious variety | | Oral | Prestigious variety |
| | | | Substandard | | | |
			Social	Regional	Oral	Standard
	Pygmalion (average)		50,7%	0%	34,5%	14,7%
	My Fair Lady (average)		49,5%	0%	32,5%	18,5%
Public TV	*My Fair Lady*	1987	14%	0%	35%	52%
Public TV	*Pygmalion*	1994	15%	0%	32%	54%
DVD	*My Fair Lady*	1994	11%	0%	29%	60%
Private TV	*Pygmalion*	1995	56%	0%	36%	13%
Private TV	*My Fair Lady*	1996	84%	0%	33%	26%
Theater	*Pygmalion*	1945	74%	21%	40%	4%
Theater	*Pygmalion*	1973	55%	0%	34%	13%
Theater	*My Fair Lady*	2003	31%	0%	42%	26%

Tab. 3:   *Comparative analysis of the percentages of the less prestigious and prestigious literary varieties in the non-translated and translated sub-corpus*

If we look to the columns concerning the social and standard varieties, we will realize that they seem to be directly correlated: translations which exhibit high percentages in social variety (subtitles broadcasted in private TV and theater translations) also exhibit the lowest percentages in standard variety; the opposite is always verifiable, for example in the translations broadcasted in public TV. Translations portraying substandard discourse seem to denote a strategy of acceptability and, valuing the public's expectations, seem to try to be closer to the target culture discourse. On the other hand, the choice for standard discourse allows us to conclude that there was a very strong concern for adequacy towards the written register. As regards the category of regional variety, which is recognizable in one of the translations oriented for performance, it is apparent only by the indistinction between [b] and [v] (a peculiar characteristic of the Portuguese northern dialect). This does not occur very often; because it would introduce a strong regional dimension which absent in the source text.

Let us now look more closely at Table 4 which shows the textual-linguistic features of identified in the target texts.

| Medium | Title | Date | Textual-linguistic features | | |
			Morphossyntactic	Lexical	Graphic
	Pygmalion (average)		30,3%	41%	49,4%
	My Fair Lady (average)		25%	39%	46%
Public TV	*My Fair Lady*	1987	1%	32%	48%
Public TV	*Pygmalion*	1994	7%	40%	51%
DVD	*My Fair Lady*	1994	7%	29%	49%
Private TV	*Pygmalion*	1995	2%	25%	43%
Private TV	*My Fair Lady*	1996	3%	23%	49%
Theater	*Pygmalion*	1945	28%	41%	86%
Theater	*Pygmalion*	1973	20%	53%	52%
Theater	*My Fair Lady*	2003	9%	64%	17%

Tab. 4:   *Comparative analysis of the percentages of the textual-linguistic features in the non-translated and translated sub-corpus*

All translations show high percentages in the graphic features category, which portrays certain characteristics of oral discourse, e.g. ellipsis. This may point to the fact that this is a kind of feature central to the plot, but it is also very characteristic of a lower social class discourse. In translations oriented for performance, the high percentages seem to be justified by the fact that they will be converted into phonetic markers on stage, an important aspect that might explain the fact that percentages are much higher in this case than in subtitling.

There is also a high percentage of features in the lexical category, which is not only characteristic of the lower social class discourse, but also contribute to the comic effect present in the source texts. Lower percentages (in fact the lowest) seem to be in the morphosyntactic category, which shows much higher rates in the source texts. This kind of feature would, in fact, not only contribute to make it more difficult to understand for the viewer and/or spectator, but it also might be interpreted as a result of a lacking mastery of the language by the translator.

Relating to Dimitrova's suggestion (1997: 63) and its application by Leppihalme (2000: 227), it seems appropriate to organize the literary dialects and pronunciations we intend to analyze in a continuum from minimum to maximum prestige.
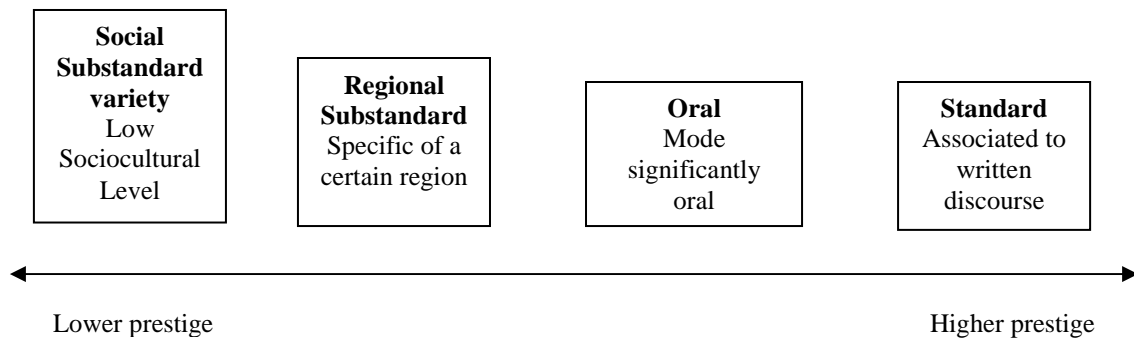
Social Substandard variety Low Sociocultural Level	**Regional Substandard** Specific of a certain region	**Oral** Mode significantly oral	**Standard** Associated to written discourse

Lower prestige ← → Higher prestige

Fig. 1:   Continuum of prestige concerning linguistic variation

This scale presents the standard variety as extremely prestigious and associated with high sociocultural-level speakers as well as formal and written forms of discourse. Gradually decreasing values are related to the oral discourse and substandard varieties, associated with low socio-cultural level speakers. Following Dimitrova, the target texts' deviations will imply a movement to the right on this scale, confirming the law of growing standardization (Toury, 1995: 268) as well as the translation universal of 'normalization'. Following Cronin (1996), Brisset (1996) and Rosa (2004), in specific historic moments the sociocultural target context can motivate the activation of certain equivalence norms, which will imply an opposite movement on this scale, i.e., from right to left.

Let us now again consider the percentages of all varieties in the translated sub-corpus. With respect to the subtitles broadcasted by public TV it can be shown that some substandard units are recreated as oral or standard units, denoting a normalization strategy. Within the above spectrum, the movement would be from left to right. We are lead to the conclusion that the effort of keeping a high level of standard written Portuguese might be motivated by the conditions of the public channel which defines itself as public service. If we take into account that both translations prefer to use lexical features than grammatical or graphical ones, we can assume that the translators are conscious of the importance of the sub-standard discourse in this play, but want to preserve a high degree of written discourse. This seems to confirm Hickey's remarks (2000: 58) that the stereotypes used in this kind of recreation show the most

detached linguistic characteristics, i.e. features that speakers use more consciously. Also, people are, normally, more conscious of open classes (namely lexis) than of closed classes (grammatical structures, sound systems). This can also be an indication of an awareness for dealing with an audiovisual product. By presenting a graphically less marked subtitle, the audience is expected to note linguistic differences from visual and audible output (e.g. Eliza's clothing). Public subtitling shows to be aware of the fact that graphic features make subtitling attract the viewer's attention.

Another extra-textual factor appears to be very important to a TV channel, i.e. that legibility matters to the public. The audiovisual text addresses a very diverse audience with with different cultural sensitivities, degrees and reading skills. Hence subtitling which constantly presents graphic features, might not be easily readable to everyone, especially to the younger (10-15) and older (55-80) population, who are the target audience of a film broadcasted at 2 p.m. like *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*.

This does not apply to the remaining translations, which seem to portray a movement from right to left, denoting strategies which contradict the growing trends for standardization and the translation universal of normalization. The choice for sub-standard discourse may be interpreted to be an effort for achieving adequacy in oral register of the source text as well as adequacy of the target cultural oral discourse of theater translations.

In private channel subtitling we can identify the use of what is called "eye-dialect"- the orthography is altered so that it can be closer to the oral register of the source text, implying a higher acceptability by the audience. In the case of subtitling, where the source and target texts appear simultaneously, the translators may not escape the fact that someone or today even the majority of viewers understand the source language, thus facing up the risk of what Gottlieb called "feedback effect" (Gottlieb 1994: 105). Although the inclusion of oral or sub-standard features in writing can be interpreted as bad translations (Lefevere 1992: 70), the contrary may today be equally valid – an audience who understands the source text is normally very critical of subtitles which do not represents the specific discourse characteristics of the original. It can therefore be concluded that this may be an attempt to produce an accurate and adequate translation of what is found in the source text. This tendency is more pronounced in public TV than in private channels which may indicate that subtitles aired by a private TV channel may be less motivated to uphold the standard.

The translations commercialized by DVD confirms Schröter's (2003: 110) conclusions that DVD subtitles are less condensed than those presented on TV, i.e., subtitles on DVD follow the order and content of the original more closely, and consequently the translation can be rendered much faster. Presenting a more normalized text seems to contradict the difference between private and public companies as far as translation strategies are concerned. However, the fact that the translator's native language was not Portuguese might lead us to conclude that the translator's poor linguistic knowledge might be reasonable for the extra-linguistic factor determining discourse normalization.

Since choices between using standard or sub-standard discourse need to be made in both media, we may conclude that the medium is not a relevant variable; nonetheless, there is a difference between the two media in the kind of features - as well as in the rate of their recurrence - that are used to distinguish the discourse as sub-standard.

Taking into account all cases were grapho-phonetic features are used to differentiate the discourse as sub-standard shows certain regularities as specific of each medium. In the case of subtitling the apostrophe indicating the fall of a vowel is the primary grapho-phonetic feature used, which confirms that the translator is well aware not only of the strange effect that this kind of feature will have but also of the fact that it will influence the rates of legibility. On the other hand, theater translations use other additonal kinds of grapho-phonetic features like the change of the vowel quality, monothongization, metathesis, nasalization of the vowel at the beginning of the word, etc (Fig. 2).

SUBTITLING	THEATER TRANSLATIONS
- Apostrophe indicating the fall of a vowel Se 'tá pior é sinal que 'tá quase a parar. [Se está pior é sinal que está quase a parar]	**- Change of the vowel quality** Iagora quim é q'mas paga? [e agora quem é que me as paga?] **- Monothongization** Dâxo lá falare. [Deixe-o lá falar] **- Metathesis** Num foi pru male. [Não foi por mal] **- Nasalization of the vowel in the beginning of the word** Tome lá as fulôres por seis pences e inté pode lebar o cesto! [Tome lá as flores por seis pences e até pode levar o cesto]

Fig. 2   Examples of graphical features present in subtitling and theater translations

A possible motivation for this may be found in the technical limitations discussed above - all the translators work with stereotypes in their search for formal mimicry; nevertheless, in subtitling, factors like exposure time, legibility and readability become very important. In the cases presented here, it seems that the translators decided for features easy to read and to understand, which would not attract the public's attention.

This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the kind of lexical and morphosyntactic features that the translators opted for. However, translations oriented for performance always presented higher percentages in these categories. Different studies (Aaltonen 1997; Mateo 1995) have already shown us that theater translation tend more to the extreme of acceptability than to adequacy. As discussed before, the oral discourse must be acceptable to the target culture's oral discourse conventions, and since it is ephemeral, it must outlive any resistance to a foreign culture. As expressed by Mateo "complete understanding of a play is possible only if information supplied by the text and knowledge of the audience supplement each other" (Mateo 1995: 23). The moment of communicating is too fast to allow for any 'noise' on the channel like unfamiliar linguistic structures or vocabulary. The fact that the source text is completely erased from stage, i.e., that the public does not have access to the source text (unlike subtitling), can explain the high frequency of substandard features. If in subtitling these can be seen as unnecessary redundancies in relation to the audio output, in theater they will certainly be an important element of the plot and a form of comic in the production – after all both plays are comedies.

7   Concluding remarks

It seems that the initial hypothesis is supported by the results of the study - different media call for different translation strategies not only relative to the constraints they require but also because different functions lead the translator to set different priorities and to realize them in different ways.

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