TOWARDS MORE OBJECTIVE EVALUATION OF POETIC TRANSLATION[*]

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Evaluating the translation of poetry is a complex and delicate task. Poetic texts deal with language on all its levels — semantic, syntactic, phonetic, and rhythmic, among others. Ideally a poem should articulate all these levels, or at least several of them, in order to achieve a certain set of poetic effects. The translator of poetry must then re-create, using the resources of the target language, the effects of content and form in the original — or, again, at least a good number of them. My object here is to sketch out a methodology for the evaluation of poetic translations, which requires a systematic examination of the different levels of language involved in the poem. To do this we must first define with some degree of precision what we mean when we say that a given element of a translated poem corresponds to a given element of an original poem.

The concept of "correspondence" may be understood on various levels of exactness. Take meter, for instance. Say that I want to translate into Portuguese a given line of English verse with a stress pattern that may be represented as follows (where ˘ stands for an unstressed syllable and / for a syllable with primary stress, and | separates feet):

˘ / | ˘ / | ˘ / | ˘ ˘ | / /

Here we have a line of iambic pentameter with a pyrrhic substitution in the fourth foot and a spondaic substitution in the fifth. One might then say that a Portuguese line corresponding to this English line would be a decasyllable with stresses on the 2nd, 4th, 5th, 8th and 9th syllables.[1] This would be the "strongest" sense of the phrase "line A corresponds to line B," in that correspondence here takes place on the level closest to the actual phonetic reality of the line. If we weaken the sense of "correspondence" a bit we may say that any predominantly iambic Portuguese decasyllable corresponds to any predominantly iambic English pentameter line. Moving on to a higher level of generality, any Portuguese decasyllable might be said to correspond to any English pentameter. But we can think of an even weaker correspondence: if we consider that the pentameter is a relatively long line in English — say, in comparison with a trimeter — and that Portuguese decasyllables and alexandrines are relatively long — in comparison with hexasyllables and heptasyllables — then in a given context we may say that an alexandrine in Portuguese corresponds to an English pentameter, both being "long lines." We may summarize the argument so far as follows:

[1] There is a simplification here, for when we assume that an English iambic foot corresponds to two syllables in Brazilian Portuguese we disregard the differences between the metrical systems of the two languages, in particular the roles played by syllable and stress in each. Nor do we take into account the important fact that certain English meters may correspond, on functional grounds, to Portuguese meters that are formally quite different. See, for instance, Britto (2000), where I argue that the closest Brazilian Portuguese equivalent for English ballad meter may be the heptasyllablic verse of popular *cordel* poetry.

˘ / | ˘ / | / ˘ | ˘ ˘ | / /	˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ ˘ / /
iambic pentameter	iambic decasyllable
pentameter	decasyllable
long line	long line

The first line in the table above represents the strongest sense of "correspondence": to a given stress pattern in English there corresponds an identical sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables in Portuguese. The second is the level on which the English line and its Portuguese translation have the same length and the same general stress pattern, but there is no exact one-to-one correspondence between the syllables of the two lines. On the third level only the number of syllables is the same; and the fourth involves only the vague notion of "long line" as opposed to "short line." We can now define the notion of *loss* in poetic translation more precisely: the weaker the sense in which "correspondence" is taken in a given translation — that is, the higher the level of generality on which it operates — the greater the loss. In the example above, there will be greater loss if the original line is translated as an alexandrine then if it is translated as a decasyllable, for instance.

But in the evaluation of the degree of loss the level of generality is not the sole factor to be taken into account. In the case of translation of the lyrics of a song, for example, musical prosody may require an almost exact match between the stress pattern of the original and that of the translation, so that a translation operating even on the second level of generality in the diagram above might imply an unacceptable degree of loss. On the other hand, in the case of a poem written in free verse correspondence in a weaker sense might be considered perfectly acceptable.

The same reasoning can be applied to other formal elements, as well as to the semantic content of the poem. This will be illustrated in an analysis of my own translation of Elizabeth Bishop's "The Shampoo." Here is the original text:[2]

THE SHAMPOO

The still explosions on the rocks,
the lichens, grow
by spreading gray, concentric shocks.
They have arranged
to meet the rings around the moon, although
within our memories they have not changed.

And since the heavens will attend
as long on us,
you've been, dear friend,
precipitate and pragmatical;
and look what happens. For Time is
nothing if not amenable.

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[2] From Bishop (1991).

The shooting stars in your black hair
in bright formation
are flocking where,
so straight, so soon?
— Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,
battered and shiny like the moon.

The poem consists of three six-line stanzas. The rhyme pattern is quite regular: lines 1-3, 2-5 and 4-6 rhyme in each stanza, so that the formula is *abacbc*, *dedfef* and *ghgihi*. Most of the rhymes are perfect, but there are a few off-rhymes: *e* ("us"–"is"), *f* ("pragmatical"–"amenable") and *h* ("formation"–"basin"). The rhythmic structure is not as regular as the rhyme pattern, but it is by no means free. In the three stanzas we have long lines and short lines. Long lines have 4 or 5 feet and are predominantly iambic, so that the number of syllables ranges from 8 to 10. Short lines are always dimeters (mostly 4 syllables). The distribution of short and long lines is variable; the only constant factor is the presence of long lines in the 1st, 5th and 6th positions in each stanza, so that the remaining positions may be occupied by either long or short lines. The structure of the stanzas may then by summed up as LSLSLL, LSSLLL e LSSSLL, where "L" stands for "long line" and "S" for "short line". All these data are summarized in the first table of the Appendix.

Let us examine this table. On the left we have the text of the poem, with primary (/) and secondary (\) stresses marked (unmarked syllables being unstressed). The first column to the right of the text presents the rhyme scheme. On the second column, for each line of verse two numbers are given: the italicized figure on top indicates the number of stressed syllables (which for our present purposes is also taken to represent the number of feet), while the figure immediately below gives the number of syllables. The third column distinguishes long lines (L) from short lines (S). The last two columns of the table sum up elements not yet discussed. The penultimate column points out the alliterations in the poem. The last column would include the semantic and syntactic elements of the text if we had space and time to discuss them. As it is, we will concentrate on the formal elements, and present only a sketchy discussion of the lexical, syntactic and semantic elements in the first three lines of the first stanza, as well as in a passage in the second stanza.

When we translate a poem, we should attempt to reproduce those elements that are most regular in the original, since they are likely to be conspicuous in the source language. Thus in "The Shampoo" the rhyme scheme — the most regular formal element — should ideally be recreated in the translation as closely as possible. The meter is not as regular as the rhyme scheme, so it may not be necessary to reproduce the stress pattern of the original exactly, but it seems important to preserve the opposition between long and short lines. As to the alliterations, they appear to be more significant in the first stanza, less so in the second and somewhat more relevant in the closing two lines of the third. Finally, on the last column of the table we highlight a single lexical effect: the passage in which, against a background of short, run-of-the-mill Anglo-Saxon words, Bishop uses two long, cacophonous, glaringly unpoetical Latinate words, "precipate and pragmatical," achieving a mildly humorous effect reinforced by the off-rhyme with "amenable" on the last line of the stanza. Clearly, this passage is a calculated effect that one should try to reproduce in the translation.

Let us now turn to the Portuguese text:[3]

O BANHO DE XAMPU

Os líquens — silenciosas explosões
nas pedras — crescem e engordam,
concêntricas, cinzentas concussões.
Têm um encontro marcado
com os halos ao redor da lua, embora
até o momento nada tenha mudado.

E como o céu há de nos dar guarida
enquanto isso não se der,
você há de convir, amiga,
que se precipitou;
e eis no que dá. Porque o Tempo é,
mais que tudo, contemporizador.

No teu cabelo negro brilham estrelas
cadentes, arredias.
Para onde irão elas
tão cedo, resolutas?
— Vem, deixa eu lavá-lo, aqui nesta bacia
amassada e brilhante como a lua.

Let us begin with the formal elements, summarized in the second table of the Appendix.[4] We will begin with the most regular of these elements, the rhyme. The general scheme was reproduced in the translation, but the distribution of perfect and imperfect rhymes was not preserved: whereas in the English original there were only three off-rhymes (e, f and h), in my translation there are only two perfect rhymes (a and c). Now we can try to evaluate the degree of loss in the translation of the rhyme scheme. What would be the strongest sense of "correspond" here? Probably an exact reproduction of the original rhyme scheme, perfect rhymes matched by perfect rhymes, off-rhymes matched by off-rhymes.[5] On this level my translation fails to match the original. We then move on to the next level of generality, that on which only the general scheme is observed — i.e., *abacbc*, *dedfef* and *ghgihi*. On this level of generality my translation may be said to correspond to the original exactly. We may also imagine a translation that only attempted to reproduce rhymes a and

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[3] From Bishop (2001).

[4] As to the distribution of primary and secondary stresses in Brazilian Portuguese poetry, I follow the general guidelines presented in Cavalcanti Proença (1955).

[5] Conceivably, the strongest sense of "correspondence" could be the use in Portuguese of the same sounds that appear in the English original: thus the a rhyme, [ɔks], should also appear in the a position in the translation. But since Portuguese phonology and English phonology are different, the possibility of achieving such a level of correspondence must be discarded from the outset.

c, or just *c*, as well as a translation in unrhymed verse. All these possibilities for the first stanza are summarized in the table below; my actual translation would then be on the second level of correspondence.

abcab'c (*a, c*: perfect rhymes; *b*: off-rhyme)	*abcab'c* (*a, c*: perfect rhymes; *b*: off-rhyme
abcabc	*abcabc*
a(b)ca(b)c	*abcadc*
(ab)c(ab)c	*abcdec*
(abcabc)	*abcdef*

As to meter, we have seen that the original does not follow a strict pattern, so no correspondence was attempted on the first three levels: exact reproduction of stress pattern, reproduction of general metrical pattern, and correspondence as to number of syllables. The target here was correspondence on the fourth level — distribution of long and short lines. The long lines used were the octosyllable and the decasyllable, but for short lines — Portuguese words tending to be longer than English words — the hexasyllable was used instead of the tetrasyllable. An eleven-syllable was the only one with more than ten syllables used, in the penultimate position of the last stanza — incidentally, precisely the place where the original uses an eleven-syllable line. I was able to reproduce the exact distribution of long and short lines in the first and last stanzas: LSLSLL and LSSSLL respectively. In the second stanza the correspondence is not exact: instead of LSSLLL, the translation has LLLSLL. So approximate correspondence was attained on the fourth level, which for this particular poem was taken to be the lowest relevant level. The diagram on page 2 sums up these different levels for line 1 of the last stanza. We may repeat it here:

˘ | ˘ / | / ˘ | ˘ ˘ | / /	˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ ˘ / /
iambic pentameter	iambic decasyllable
pentameter	decasyllable
long line	long line

Let us turn to the third column of the table. There was no conscious attempt to reproduce the alliterations of the original; alliteration is a much less common resource in Portuguese than in English, so that it would be difficult to set up levels of correspondence here. This is one case where the sort of analysis I propose runs into difficulties: when the poetic resource in the source language does not exist, or exists in a quite different form, or is much less prominent, in the target language. Comparison is also made difficult by the fact that alliteration is not used in a regular, systematic way in the original. In any case, it turns out that there is an abundance of sibilants in the first three lines of the first stanza of the translation, much as in the original, and some alliterations in [b], [s] and [l] that to a certain extant match the alliterations in [b], [ʃ], [l] of the original. This result, it should be stressed, is a product either of chance or of the translator's unconscious. Just as fortuitous is the assonance in [e] of the last stanza, particularly on the first line, which does not correspond to anything in the original. (This may perhaps be taken as a sort of compensation for the losses on other levels, an effect created in Portuguese to make up for those in the original which could not be reproduced.) Here, then, I have made no attempt to establish a distinction between various levels.

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As has been said, due to considerations of space I will not undertake a thorough evaluation of the syntactic, semantic and lexical elements. To illustrate the method, we will look at the first three lines in the first stanza and discuss the use of Latinate words in the second stanza. Here are the first three lines in the original and in the translation:

The still explosions on the rocks, the lichens, grow by spreading gray, concentric shocks.	Os líquens — silenciosas explosões nas pedras — crescem e engordam, concêntricas, cinzentas concussões.

The first level of correspondence, a literal translation, is rarely possible in poetic translation. Moving on to the next level, let us see whether the lexical content of the original is at least approximately reconstructed in the translation. The central terms of the clause — nouns and verbs — will be examined first; then we will look at adjectives and adverbs; last, we analyze the syntactic structure, the ordering of lexical items, punctuation, etc. In the lines above, the central elements are the nouns "explosions," "rocks," "lichens" and "shocks," and the verbs "grow" and "spreading." In Portuguese, we have "*explosões*," "*pedras*," "*líquens*," "*concussões*," "*crescem*" and "*engordam.*" The rate of correspondence is relatively high: only the translation of "spreading" as "*engordam*" cannot be said to be literal. As to the adjectives, "still," "gray" and "concentric" are quite literally rendered as "*silenciosas*," "*cinzentas*" and "*concêntricas.*" But the syntactic structure of the original has suffered an important change: in the original "The still explosions on the rocks" is the subject and "the lichens" is an appositive, whereas in Portuguese these positions have changed, even if the overall structure — subject, appositive, predicate — has been preserved. Also noticeable is the difference between beginning the poem with "still explosions" and then identifying them as "lichens" and doing precisely the opposite in the translation. Another syntactic change can be seen in the rendering of "grow by spreading" as "*crescem e engordam.*" The use of dashes instead of commas is also to be taken into account. All in all, we can say that the degree of correspondence in the first three lines is reasonably high; changes are relatively minor and mostly on the level of word ordering and punctuation, rather than on that of lexical items and basic syntactic structure.

Now let us examine the translation of a rather difficult passage in the second stanza, which involves the use of longer and unpoetical Latinate words. Here, once again, a first-level match is simply impossible, for Portuguese vocabulary is overwhelmingly Latinate, so that no contrast between Latinate words and a more basic non-Latinate vocabulary can be conceived. The immediately higher level of generality might involve not the Anglo-Saxon–Latinate contrast of the original, but what is implied by it: a contrast between everyday words and lexical items restricted to formal use. This would perhaps be the lowest level of generality possible here; indeed, Brazilian Portuguese offers vast possibilities of contrast between a colloquial vocabulary and a formal lexicon. However, I was unable to find a solution on this level of generality. The next level might perhaps involve contrasting some subset of the lexicon with some other subset, not necessarily having to do with the colloquial–formal opposition. But the solution I found cannot be placed on this level either; in fact, it belongs on an even more general level: that which considers only the generic category of the resource employed — namely, resources on the level of the lexicon as opposed to that of phonology–phonetics or morphosyntax. I tried to compensate for the

poetic effect of the original which I was unable to reproduce by employing two unobtrusive plays on words: the echo effects between "*dar*," "*der*" and "*dá*" (1st, 2nd and 5th lines), three different forms of the verb "*dar*" employed in quite different senses, and between "*tempo*" and "*contemporizador*" (5th and 6th lines). This is probably the heaviest loss we have come upon so far, in that the level of generality on which the translation operates is quite high, perhaps too high. The loss is compounded by the consideration that a rather conspicuous effect — the presence of cacophonic Latinate words — was replaced by a much more subtle resource — echo effects that perhaps will be noticed only by careful readers. This analysis may be schematized as follows:

lexical effect: Latinate terms vs. Anglo-Saxon vocabulary	_____
lexical effect: everyday vocabulary vs. less common terms	lexical effect: item from vocabulary of colloquial Portuguese vs. item from formal Portuguese
lexical effect: contrast between two subsets of lexicon	lexical effect: contrast between two subsets of lexicon
lexical effect: play on words	lexical effect: play on words

To sum up our discussion:

When evaluating the translation of a poem, first we must determine what are the formal and semantic features of the original. To compare each of them with its counterpart in the translation, we rely on the antithetical concepts "correspondence" and "loss"; the greater the correspondence, or match, between a feature of the original and its counterpart in the translation, the smaller the loss. These concepts may be defined on the basis of the notion of levels of correspondence: the higher the one-to-one match between the components of a given feature of the original and the components of its counterpart in the translation, the smaller the loss. But before we evaluate the degree of loss some additional questions must be considered:

(1) How relevant is the feature in the original? In our example, the metric structure of the original presents a regular pattern, but it does not involve a strict count of feet or syllables. So we conclude that for this particular poem it is sufficient to operate with the looser notions of "long line" and "short line."

(2) Is the maximum degree of correspondence feasible? When the target language lacks exact counterparts for the items in question, a close match cannot be reasonably expected. Such was the case of the contrast between Anglo-Saxon and Latinate words.

(3) How desirable is an exact match? There may be cases when it seems better to rely on functional rather than formal correspondence. This point, which I believe is extremely important, has not been discussed here, because the poem we analyzed does not present an example of it. Once again I refer the reader to Britto (2000).

I have presented here no more than a preliminary sketch of a method; many details remain to be spelled out. Still, I believe that my proposal amounts to a promising way to arrive at less subjectivistic forms of evaluating poetic translation, relying on more objective data and making it possible to quantify value-judgments expressed through such concepts as "correspondence" and "loss."

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/ / \ /		*4*			
The still explosions on the rocks,	*a*	8	L	[s] , [ʒ], [z]	
/ /		*2*			
the lichens, grow	*b*	4	S	[z], [g], [r]	
/ / / /		*4*			
by spreading gray, concentric shocks.	*a*	8	L	[s], [g], [k], [r]	
/ /		*2*			
They have arranged	*c*	4	S	[r]	
/ / / / /		*5*			
to meet the rings around the moon, although	*b*	10	L	[m], [r], [ð]	
/ / \ / /		*5*			
within our memories they have not changed.	*c*	10	L	[ð], [m], [r]	
/ / \ /		*4*			
And since the heavens will attend	*d*	8	L		
/ /		*2*			
as long on us,	*e*	4	S		
/ /		*2*			
you've been, dear friend,	*d*	4	S		
/ \ / \		*4*			
precipitate and pragmatical;	*f*	9	L	[p], [t]	precipitate, pragmatical
/ / /		*3*			
and look what happens. For Time is	*e*	8	L	[t]	
/ / / \		*4*			
nothing if not amenable.	*f*	8	L	[n]	amenable
/ / / /		*4*			
The shooting stars in your black hair	*g*	8	L	[b]	
/ /		*2*			
in bright formation	*h*	5	S	[b], [f]	
/ /		*2*			
are flocking where,	*g*	4	S	[f]	
/ /		*2*			
so straight, so soon?	*i*	4	S	[s]	
/ \ / / / /		*6*			
— Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,	*h*	11	L	[l], [ʃ], [b]	
/ / \ /		*4*			
battered and shiny like the moon.	*i*	8	L	[b], [ʃ], [l]	

/　　　　　\　　　　/　　　　　/		4			
Os líquens — silenciosas explosões	a	10	L	[ʃ], [s], [z]	
/　　　　　/　　　　　/		3			
nas pedras — crescem e engordam,	b	6	S	[ʃ], [k], [s], [g]	
/　\　　　/　　\　　　/		5			
concêntricas, cinzentas concussões.	a	10	L	[k], [s], [ʃ],	
/　　　　/　　　　/		3			
Têm um encontro marcado	c	6	S	[t], [k], [d]	
/　　　　/　　/　　　/		4			
com os halos ao redor da lua, embora	b	10	L	[k], [l], [d]	
/　　　/　　/　　/　　　/		5			
até o momento nada tenha mudado.	c	10	L	[t], [m], [n], [d]	
\　　　/　\　　　　/　　　/		5			
E como o céu há de nos dar guarida	d	10	L	[k], [d]	dar ↕
\　/　　/　　　/		4			
enquanto isso não se der,	e	8	L	[k], [d]	der ↑
/　　　/　　　/		3			
você há de convir, amiga,	d	8	L	[k]	
\　　/　/		3			
que se precipitou;	f	6	S	[k], [p], [t]	
/　　　/　　　　/　　/		4			
e eis no que dá. Porque o Tempo é,	e	8	L	[k], [d], [p], [t]	dá　tempo ↕
/　　/　　\　　　/		4			
mais que tudo, contemporizador.	f	10	L	[k], [t], [d],	con*tempo*rizador
/　/　/　　/　　　/		5			
No teu cabelo negro brilham estrelas	g	10	L	[e]	
/　\　/		3			
cadentes, arredias.	h	6	S	[e]	
/　/　/		3			
Para onde irão elas	g	6	S		
\　/　　　/		3			
tão cedo, resolutas?	i	6	S	[e]	
/　\　　/　　/　　　/		5			
— Vem, deixa eu lavá-lo, aqui nesta bacia	h	11	L	[e], [v], [l], [b], [s]	
/　　/　\　　/		4			
amassada e brilhante como a lua.	i	10	L	[s], [b], [lʸ], [l]	