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Music, lyrics and performance in pop song translation

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Abstract

This paper focuses on song translation and on the task that the translator must accomplish when the verbal meaning is influenced and constrained by the simultaneous presence of multi-semiotic codes. I will outline a framework concerning the analysis of pop music translation based on various levels of equivalence between original songs and translated songs taking into account three main aspects: the music, the lyrics and the performance. The discussion will be based on a variety of German versions of evergreens of Italian pop music, thus providing a series of samples for a language pair not yet considered by researchers.

Keywords: translation of multi semiotic texts; pop song translation; translation, adaptation

1. Introduction

Among the several plurisemiotic text-types, such as films, theater plays, comic strips etc., whose meaning is determined by the interplay between different channels of communication and the combination of verbal and non-verbal codes, the translation of musical texts has only recently started to receive attention from translation researchers. One reason for this may be the methodological dares that this study implies, redrawing traditional boundaries such as those between translation, adaptation and rewriting and calling for a multidisciplinary approach (cf. Susam-Sarajeva 2008: 188-9).

Thus, for certain types of translation, other than a linguistic and communicative focus, one should also take into consideration a semiological focus, which implies considering the message composed not only of the linguistic system, but also of other non-linguistic systems. Although not specific to the translation process, the non-linguistic systems must be considered by the translator, given that “overlooking them may be detrimental to the target reader’s holistic perception of the overall semiotic ensemble” (Pérez-González 2014: 120).

From this point of view, according to Nida’s terminology, source and target texts will have to keep a relation of dynamic equivalence in which the relation between the message and the response evoked in the receptors of each culture should be the same. That is to say, on the one hand, the verbal text cannot be translated without understanding how the other communicative elements add to or modify the meaning and, on the other hand, the non-linguistic elements of the message not only constitute part of the meaning but also impose their own laws and conditions on the verbal text: “if the text does not adjust to these conditions it will not fulfill its communicative function on the whole nor will it allow the other systems to do so” (Mayoral, Kelly, Gallardo 1988: 363).

This is the case of song transposition, where the degree and nature of intertextual relations are determined by verbal and non-verbal aspects, given that

a song might be recognized as a translation if it is a second version of a source song that allows some essential values of the source's music and/or its lyrics and/or its sung performance to be reproduced in a target language (Franzon 2008: 376, emphasis in original).

Therefore, an analysis focused on identifying the various levels of equivalence as well as the intertextual relationship between the original songs and translated songs has to take into consideration at least three aspects: the music, the lyrics and the performance.

2. Music

Music generally remains unchanged in the process of song translation, since it represents the 'cage' in which the lyrics – both the source and target text – are embedded. In other words, when translating a song, music cannot adjust to the requirements of the words; on the contrary, it is always the words

Example 1			
Sl	A far l'amore comincia tu (1976) Interpreter: Raffaella Carrà Music/Lyrics: Daniele Pace, Franco Bracardi	Liebelei (1977); Interpreter: Raffaella Carrà German lyrics: Gerd Thumser	Tanze Samba mit mir (1977) Interpreter: Tony Holiday German lyrics: Tony Holiday
1	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah
2	A/ far/ l'a/mo/re/ co/min/cia/ tu	Ich/ ken/ne/ Her/zen,/ die/ sind/ aus/ Stein	Du/ bist/ so/ heiß/_/ wie/ ein/ Vul/kan
3	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah
4	A/ far/ l'a/mo/re/ co/min/cia/ tu	Je/doch/ ich/ könn/te/ nie/ herz/los/ sein	Und/ heut'/ ver/bren/ne/ ich/ mich/ da/ran
5	Se/ lui/ ti/ por/ta/ s'un/ let/to/ vuo/to	Es/ ist/ so/ herr/lich/ sich/ zu/ ver/lie/ben	Je/der/mann/ nennt/ dich/ Sweet/ La/dy/ Sam/ba
6	Il/ vuo/to/ da/glie/lo in/die/ tro a/ lui	Es/ ist/ ein/ Wun/der,/ wenn/ es/ ge/schicht	Je/der/ sieht,/ dass/ du/ kein/ Kind/ mehr/ bist
7	Fa/gli/ ve/de/re/ che/ non/ è un/ gio/co	Es/ ist/ so/ herr/lich/ sich/ zu/ ver/lie/ben	Die/ bun/ten/ Lich/ter/ dreh'n/ sich/ wie/ Feu/er
8	Fa/gli/ ca/pi/re/ quel/lo/ che/ vuoi	Und/ ist/ ein/ Wun/der,/ wenn/ es/ ge/schicht	Wenn/ du/ die/ Welt/ rings/ um/her/ ver/gisst
9	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah
10	A/ far/ l'a/mo/re/ co/min/cia/ tu	In/ dei/nen/ Au/gen,/ da/ war/ ein/ Glanz	Du/ bist/ so/ heiß/_/ wie/ ein/ Vul/kan
11	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah	Ah/ ah/ ah/ ah
12	A/ far/ l'a/mo/re/ co/min/cia/ tu	Das/ füh/lte/ ich/ schon/ beim/ ers/ten/ Tanz	Und/ heut'/ ver/bren/ne/ ich/ mich/ da/ran
13	E/ se/ si at/tac/ca/ col/ sen/ti/men/to	Es/ ist/ so/ herr/lich/ sich/ zu/ ver/lie/ben	Rock'n/ Roll,/ Cha/ Cha,/ Mam/bo/ und/ der/ Boogie
14	Por/ta/lo in/ fon/do ad/ un/ cie/lo/ blu	Wer/ kann/ denn/ wis/sen, was/ mor/gen/ ist	Das/ ist/ jetzt/ al/les/ für/ mich/ vor/bei
15	Le/ sue/ pa/u/re/ di/ quel/ mo/men/to	Es/ ist/ so/ herr/lich/ sich/ zu/ ver/lie/ben,	Die/ gan/ze/ Welt/ tanzt/ heu/te/ die/ Sam/ba
16	Le/ fai/ scop/pia/re/ sol/tan/to/ tu	Weil/ es/ ein/ Zau/ber/trank/ im/mer/ ist	O/lé/ o/lé,/ wir/_/ sind/ da/bei
17	Scop/pia/ scop/pia/ mi/ sco	Und/ der/ Him/mel/ ging/ auf	Tan/ze/ Sam/ba/ mit/ mir
18	Scop/pia/ scop/pia/ mi/ scop/pia il/ cuor	Und/ der/ Him/mel/ ging/ auf/ für/ mich	Sam/ba,/ Sam/ba/ die/ gan/ze/ Nacht
19	Scop/pia/ scop/pia/ mi/ sco	Und/ der/ Him/mel/ ging/ auf	Tan/ze/ Sam/ba/ mit/ mir,
20	Scop/pia/ scop/pia/ mi/ scop/pia il/ cuor	Und/ der/ Him/mel/ ging/ auf/ für/ mich	Weil/ die/ Sam/ba/ uns/ glück/lich/ macht
21	Lie/be/ Lie/be/ Lie/be/lei	Lie/be/ Lie/be/ Lie/be/lei	Lie/be/ Lie/be/ Lie/be/lei
22	È un/ di/sa/stro/ se/ te/ ne/ vai	Was/ kann/ schö/ner/ sein/ für/ uns/ zwei	Mor/gen/ ist/ sie/ viel/leicht/ vor/bei
23	Scop/pia/ scop/pia/ mi/ sco	Denn/ der/ Him/mel/ ging/ auf	Tan/ze/ Sam/ba/ mit/ mir
24	Scop/pia/ scop/pia/ mi/ scop/pia il/ cuor	Denn/ der/ Him/mel/ ging/ auf/ für/ mich	Sam/ba,/ Sam/ba/ die/ gan/ze/ Nacht

that have to be adapted to the musical score, whose rules and peculiarities define metrical lines and the prosodic features of the target text in terms of verse segmentation and syllable-count. Furthermore, the words chosen in the target language should be easily combined with each other and pronounced sequentially (e.g. avoiding unwanted pauses or separations) but, at the same time, clearly for the target audience. A careful attention to these structural aspects is crucial in order to create a correspondence between new words and pre-existing music with the scope of making the lyrics singable.

In the above example the original song text is compared with two different German versions, the first being performed by the Italian showgirl Raffaella Carrà, and the second by the German Schlager-singer Tony Holiday. The three texts present the same structure and form of verse segmentation: an introduction to each strophe is made up of four lines (1-4 and 9-12), in addition to two strophes, each consisting of four verses (5-8 and 13-16), and a refrain formed by eight lines (17-24). The original text and the two German transpositions entirely overlap even when it comes to syllable-count. In order to facilitate the pronunciation while singing, the lyricists/translators for the two German versions resolved by using short words (mostly mono- or bi-syllables), avoiding words longer than three syllables. Always for reasons of singability, they also made use of words ending with vowels, including inflected verbs (kenne, könnte, fühlte, verbrenne, tanze), adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions (nie, so, zu, da, wie, vorbei, heute, dabei), inflected articles, pronouns and adjectives (die, du, ganze, sie), exotic nouns and interjections (Lady, Samba, Cha-Cha, Boogie, olé). Therefore, the choice of words was carried out by the two German lyricists/translators not on the basis of the meaning conveyed by the lyrics but rather on the basis of those structural features of the words, which would make them compatible with the musical score.

Thus, when referring to music, the translator's (hard) task is that of finding singable words combined in singable phrases in the target language and to accord them to the musical score, taking care – at the same time – of the intonation, rhythm and phrasing to make the verses clear to the target audience while singing (cf. Low 2005, 193-194).

3. Lyrics

Considering lyrics as a constitutive part of a song, which concurs – together with the music – to its overall effect on the audience(s), they play a significant role not only in terms of (verbal) significance, but also regarding those expressive and structural features that eventually occur in the text – e.g. metaphors, similes, hyperboles as well as rhymes, alliterations and so on. Nevertheless, all these aspects are not necessarily kept unchanged during the translation process.

For instance, whereas in the translation of other text-types semantic accuracy is paramount, the constraints of song translation inevitably imply a certain degree of flexibility or manipulation of the sense: “thus a precise word may be replaced by a near-synonym, a narrow term by a superordinate term, a particular metaphor by a different one which functions similarly in the context” (ibid: 194).

Example 2		
SI	I giardini di marzo (1972) Interpreter: Lucio Battisti Music/Lyrics: Lucio Battisti, Mogol	Gärten im März (1974) Interpreter: Lucio Battisti German lyrics: Udo Lindenberg
1	Il carretto passava e quell'uomo gridava "gelati"	Ich sah weg, wenn der Eiswagen kam und verschloss meine Hände
2	Al ventuno del mese i nostri soldi erano già finiti	Nach den ersten drei Wochen war unser Geld schon zu Ende
3	Io pensavo a mia madre e rivedevo i suoi vestiti	Ich dachte an Mutter und ich sah sie in meinen Gedanken
4	Il più bello era nero e coi fiori non ancora appassiti	Im verschlissenen schwarzen Kleid mit verblühenden Blumen
5	All'uscita di scuola i ragazzi vendevano i libri	Nach dem letzten Schultag verkauften die Schüler die Bücher
6	Io restavo a guardarli cercando il coraggio per imitarli	Ich wollt' es genauso wie sie tun, doch ich war zu schüchtern
7	Poi sconfitto tornavo a giocare con la mente e i suoi tarli	Wieder gab ich auf und von neuem begann ich zu zweifeln
8	E la sera al telefono tu mi chiedevi: "perché non parli?"	Und abends am Telefon fragtest du: „warum sprichst du nicht?“

In example 2, the German version aims to reproduce the suggestions evocated by the original lyrics. To achieve this goal, the lyricist/translator adopts translation strategies, which can vary from one line to another, e.g.:

- the literal translation of an entire line (8) or of only part of it (2, 3 and 5);
- the replacement of an expression or metaphor by a near-equivalent expression in the target language, without altering the meaning (2, 5, 6 and 7);
- the replacement or removal of some elements (adjectives, adverbs, etc.) in the target line slightly altering the meaning (4);
- the use in the target line of single keywords of the original text, embedding them into a new context (1).

This stretching of meaning can also be taken to extremes, up to writing new lyrics in the target language, referring to the source song through criteria other than that of verbal significance.

Example 3	
Tu sei l'unica donna per me (1979)	Alles, was ich brauche, bist du (1979)
Interpreter: Alan Sorrenti	Interpreters: Alan Sorrenti
Music/Lyrics: Alan Sorrenti	German lyrics: Michael Kunze
Dammi il tuo amore	Ich brauch' keinen Urlaub,
Non chiedermi niente	Ich brauch' keine Partys
Dimmi che	Denn es ist
Hai bisogno di me	Ganz egal was ich tu'
Tu sei sempre mia	Ich brauch' keinen Whisky
Anche quando vado via	Auch keinen Psychiater
Tu sei l'unica donna per me	Alles, was ich brauche, bist du
Quando il sole del mattino ci sveglia	Seit du fort bist habe ich mich verändert
Tu non vuoi lasciarmi andare via	Denn ich kann mich über nichts mehr freu'n
Il tempo passa in fretta	Und alle meine Freunde
Quando siamo insieme noi	Reden dauernd auf mich ein
È triste aprire quella porta	Sie sagen ich soll dich vergessen
Io resterò se vuoi	Das wird nicht möglich sein
Io resterò se vuoi	Allmählich seh' ich ein

In example 3, source and target text have in common the structure and form of verse segmentation as well as syllable-count and tempo. They are even linked by the same broad subject area, that of love. The Italian text, however, portrays the relationship between two lovers and their desire to stay together, whereas the German transposition presents the suffering of a lover resulting from the end of a relationship.

Thus, if we consider the verbal meaning as a flexible component of the artistic message, this could be, in some cases, even abandoned without a significant cost. Whether the source text should be translated, adapted or entirely rewritten, will be determined by its end-purpose, taking into account the prospective target audiences and their "ability to comprehend and appreciate the song in the limited time (perhaps less than three minutes) during which they are hearing it" (ibid: 186).

The matter is not very different in relation to the maintenance of rhythmic issues eventually present in the source text, such as alliteration, assonance, consonance and rhyme. Here translators need to assess whether such features are crucial for the overall effect of the translated song or if their omission (e.g. of rhymes) would rather represent a minor loss for the target text (cf. Low 2008: 6).

Example 4			
Il tempo se ne va (1980)		Es bleibt die Zeit für keinen steh'n (1980)	
Interpreter: Adriano Celentano		Interpreter: Adriano Celentano	
Music/Lyrics: Toto Cutugno, Cristiano Minellono, Claudia Mori		German lyrics: Fred Jay	
Quel vestito da dove è sbucato	A	Dieses Kleid - also, ich würde sagen -	A
Che impressione vederlo indossato	A	Hat bisher deine Mutter getragen	A
Se ti vede tua madre lo sai	B	Wenn sie dich drin heut' Abend erblickt,	B
Questa sera finiamo nei guai	B	Ist sie wahrscheinlich nicht sehr entzückt	B
È strano ma sei proprio tu	C	Ich weiß, dass du schon vierzehn bist,	C
Quattordici anni o un po' di più	C	Wenn es auch unbegreiflich ist	C
La tua Barbie è da un po' che non l'hai	D	Man wird eben aus dir nicht mehr schlau	D
E il tuo passo è da donna oramai	D	Und dein Gang ist schon der einer Frau	D
E intanto il tempo se ne va	A	Es bleibt die Zeit für keinen steh'n	A
E non ti senti più bambina	B	Noch gestern warst du meine Kleine	B
Si cresce in fretta alla tua età	A	Und heute wirst du angeseh'n	A
Non me ne sono accorto prima	B	Und man bewundert deine Beine	B
E intanto il tempo se ne va	C	Es bleibt die Zeit für keinen steh'n	C
Tra i sogni e le preoccupazioni	D	Die Jahre reichen sich die Klinke	D
Le calze a rete han preso già	C	Und du bist reizend anzuseh'n	C
Il posto dei calzettoni	D	Mit rotem Lippenstift und Schminke	D

In the above example the target text perfectly reproduces the rhyme scheme of the original: eight-line strophes with rhyming couplets (AABBCCDD) and an eight-line refrain with alternate rhymes (ABABCD). On the other hand, in example 5, the German text reproduces only the rhyme scheme of the refrain (AABCCD), while the translator abandoned the rhymes for the strophe lines, paying greater attention to semantic and lexical accuracy.

Example 5			
Il mio canto libero (1972)		Unser freies Lied (1974)	
Interpreter: Lucio Battisti		Interpreter: Lucio Battisti	
Music/Lyrics: Mogol, Lucio Battisti		German lyrics: Udo Lindenberg	
In un mondo che	A	Hier in dieser Welt,	/
Non ci vuole più	B	Die uns nicht mehr will	/
Il mio canto libero	C	Bist du wie ein neues Lied	/
Sei tu	B	Für mich	/
E l'immensità	D	Tief in deinen Augen	/
Si apre intorno a noi	E	Grenzenloser Raum	/
Al di là del limite	F	And're Dimensionen	/
Degli occhi tuoi	E	Eröffnen sich	/
Nasce il sentimento	A	Neue Impressionen	A
Nasce in mezzo al pianto	A	Neue Emotionen	A
E s'innalza altissimo, e va	B	Nie gekannte Zärtlichkeit ist erwacht	B
E vola sulle accuse della gente	C	Wir hören nicht, was manche Leute sagen	C
A tutti i suoi retaggi indifferente	C	Wir sagen nichts, wenn manche Leute fragen	C
Sorretto da un anelito d'amore, di vero amore	D	Wir gehen einen anderen Weg, den Weg uns'rer Liebe	D

The choice of whether or not to retain in the target lyrics rhythmic features, such as rhymes, is therefore closely related to a careful analysis of the source song with a focus on the match existing between original words and music, keeping always in mind that the end-purpose of a singable translation is ultimately to be sung.

Therefore, when referring to lyrics, the impact of translated songs will depend as much on the structural and stylistic peculiarities of their texts as on the careful strategies of their translators.

3. Performance

As mentioned above, songs constitute a complex semiotic event, their textuality being articulated on two different levels, the verbal and the musical one, in close dialogical relationship with each other. Other extra-textual aspects are added to these two levels, which are linked to the song interpretation and execution (e.g. instrumental music performance, singer's voice timbre and tonality, singer's vocal interpretive palette, etc.), each of them contributing to the generation of the meaning and to the final effect on the audience(s).

Among the various performance-related aspects, there are a few that should even affect the modalities of lyrics transposition from one language/culture to another.

One of them is linked to the identity of the performer(s) of the source and the target song. Each singer, indeed, should be classified in one or more genres, each with specific characteristics, he/she has his/her own personal singing style, prefers some topics over others, prefers texts with certain language registers, etc. Therefore, if the target song is meant to be performed by the same artist of the source song, in most cases, lyricists/translators will retain some of the specific characteristics linked to the musical genre in the target lyrics, as well as the same topic and the same register of the source text. If, conversely, the target song is meant to be sung by a different interpreter, its lyrics should be adapted to the performative features of this particular artist.

Example 6	
Piove (Ciao ciao bambina) (1959)	Ciao ciao bambina (1959)
Interpreter: Domenico Modugno	Interpreter: Domenico Modugno
Music/Lyrics: Domenico Modugno, Dino Verde	German lyrics: Glando
Ciao, ciao, bambina	Ciao, ciao, Bambina
Un bacio ancora	Du darfst nicht weinen
E poi per sempre	Für dich wird wieder
Ti perderò	Die Sonne scheinen
Come una fiaba	In all den Jahren
L'amore passa	Wirst du erfahren,
C'era una volta	Dass man aus Liebe
Poi non c'è più	Sich selbst belügt
Cos'è che trema	Ciao, ciao, Bambina
Sul tuo visino?	Dein Herz wird frei sein
È pioggia o pianto?	Die schönen Stunden
Dimmi cos'è	Werden vorbei sein
Vorrei trovare	Es ist zu Ende
Parole nuove	Reich mir die Hände
Ma piove piove	Ciao, ciao, Bambina
Sul nostro amor	Auf Wiedersehen

In the above example the Italian and German version, which are both interpreted by the Italian singer and songwriter Domenico Modugno, describe the same topic (i.e. the end of a love affair) and use a simple language that does not require particular interpretative efforts by the audience(s). Such an easy understandable language is a characteristic trait of Modugno's songs as well as of most Italian love songs (Sanremo-songs) from the 50s and the 60s.

The song presented in example 7, on the other hand, is, in its original version, a nonsense song intended to be provocative and to break old and entrenched structures and stereotypes of Italian Musica Leggera from the 70s. Like in certain other songs by Rino Gaetano, behind the catchy rhythm lies a mordant critic of the vices of his time. The German version, instead, performed by the Schlager-singer Wolfgang Petry, acquires the features of an easy-listening song with a light-hearted text, typical of the repertory of this artist, presenting the comical misadventures of two lovers in a narrow car.

Example 7	
Gianna (1978) Interpreter: Rino Gaetano Music/Lyrics: Rino Gaetano	Gianna - Liebe im Auto (1978) Interpreter: Wolfgang Petry German lyrics: Karin van Haaren, Hans-Ulrich Prost
Gianna, Gianna, Gianna sosteneva tesi e illusioni	Gianna, ich wär' gern mit dir allein, lass uns ins Grüne fahr'n
Gianna, Gianna, Gianna prometteva pareti e fiumi	Oh Gianna, Gianna, Gianna, dahin wo wir zwei schon einmal waren
Gianna, Gianna, aveva un cocodrillo e un dottore	Mhhh, Gianna, ist das Auto auch sehr klein, ich kenn' da einen Trick
Gianna non perdeva neanche un minuto per fare l'amore	Gianna, Gianna, ich drück' diesen Knopf, dann sinken wir zurück
Ma la notte la festa è finita	Donnerwetter, das darf doch nicht wahr sein,
Evviva la vita	Das Ding muss doch gehen
La gente si veste	Ach Mensch, was ist das denn?
Comincia un mondo	Na, lass uns mal sehen
Un mondo diverso	Was da wohl kaputt ist,
Ma fatto di sesso	Das ging doch noch gestern
Chi vivrà vedrà	Ganz wunderbar

Therefore, referring to performance-related features, some extra-linguistic aspects, such as the identity of the performers may, in many cases, constrain the lyricists/translators' work, forcing them to reproduce or to abandon in the target text specific peculiarities related to song genres, interpreters' singing style, typical topics, language use, etc. and thus influencing the choice between lyrics translation, adaptation or rewriting.

4. Conclusion

As shown in the examples above, songs are plurisemiotic texts whose lyrics have a special status in that their overall semiotic ensemble as well as their success may depend to a large extent on their musical features and on other performance-related aspects rather than their linguistic content alone. Therefore, to handle the form of a singable song, translators must not only operate on the verbal text but also focus their attention on the non-linguistic systems that contribute to giving the meaning to the song and which follow their own laws and conditions on the lyrics. The translator must, thus, decide which elements are to be retained and which ones are to be left aside not forgetting that these decisions will have an impact on the entire song, from rhythm and line structure, to rhyme scheme, and even to the song content. Furthermore, the choice of whether to translate, adapt or rewrite a song text is linked to the attitudes and expectations of the target audience(s) in order to reproduce the song's original success in a new cultural and linguistic environment.

Hence, the role played by translation in the context of musical performances can enrich our understanding of what translation might entail, how far its boundaries can be expanded and also how it can relate to other forms of expression.

Works Citation

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