Translating George Bernard Shaw, a linguistic and cultural challenge

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Abstract: George Bernard Shaw, playwright and theatre critic, was an outstanding but also highly controversial figure. In his role as critic, writing for The Saturday Review, he exposed and condemned the weaknesses of Victorian drama, full of melodramatic, biased ideas, typical of the English bourgeois mentality of his time. He was concerned, not only with drama but mostly with the attitude of a hypocritical society. Rosalie Rabal Haddad’s book Shaw, O Crítico/Shaw, the Critic (2009), presents what Shaw understood as good theater and comments on some of his critical texts that show how his ideas prevail and are still applicable today. In this work we intend to show, first, the difficulties met while translating from both Portuguese and late 19th century English and the decisions made by the translators. Secondly, we aim at referring to the process of negotiation of meanings (Eco 2008) and the linguistic and cultural revision resulting from the initial phase of translation, which is understood as a multidimensional process that includes the acts of reading and re-reading, as well as interpreting, based on context of production and reception, creating a text in another language, and finally revising, before coming out with the translated version.

Keywords: George Bernard Shaw; Translation; Cultural dialogue; Linguistic and cultural revision.

Resumo: George Bernard Shaw, dramaturgo e crítico de teatro, foi uma figura notável, mas também altamente controversa. Em seu papel de crítico, escrevendo para o periódico The Saturday Review, ele expôs e condenou as fraquezas do drama vitoriano, repleto de ideias melodramáticas e tendenciosas, típicas da mentalidade burguesa inglesa de seu tempo. Ele estava preocupado, não apenas com o drama, mas principalmente com as atitudes de uma sociedade hipócrita. O livro de Rosalie Rabal Haddad, Shaw, O Crítico (2009), apresenta o que Shaw entende como bom teatro e comenta alguns de seus textos críticos que evidenciam como suas ideias prevalecem e são aplicáveis na contemporaneidade. Neste trabalho, mostramos, em primeiro lugar, as dificuldades encontradas durante a tradução a partir do português e do inglês do final do século XIX, bem como as decisões tomadas pelas tradutoras. Em segundo lugar, referimo-nos ao processo de negociação de significados (Eco 2008) e à revisão linguística e cultural resultante da fase inicial da tradução. A tradução é entendida como um processo multidimensional, que inclui os atos de leitura e releitura, bem como de interpretação, com base no contexto de produção e recepção, criando um texto em outro idioma que é finalmente revisado antes de se obter a versão traduzida.

Palavras-chave: George Bernard Shaw; Tradução; Diálogo cultural; Revisão linguística e cultural.
As part of our research of the last twelve years in the field of Irish Studies, we have set as one of the goals for all projects, the translation of texts – critical, literary, historical, interviews – trying to promote, in this way, cultural dialogue. We understand translation, therefore, as a means to help the transnational process or ‘journey’ of texts from English to Spanish, increasing the number of readers and, at the same time, the possibilities of encouraging intercultural debate.

When we accepted the task of translating Shaw; O Crítico (2009) as part of a shared project between USP, Brazil, and UNLPam, Argentina, we partially knew what we were getting into. It was not a translation from English to Spanish as we were used to, but the translation of the original manuscripts by Shaw in English, plus the sections by Rosalie Rahal Haddad, which contained a comprehensive introduction, and brief summaries – written by the author in Portuguese – at the beginning of each chapter to anticipate the contents of each text. The translation process began with one member of the team working with the Critical Texts by Shaw in English, independently of Haddad’s book, which had been produced completely in Portuguese. The language used by Shaw in his texts was not today’s English, but the one used by a learned writer at the turn of the 19th century, fluent in the use of his language and full of cultural references.

George Bernard Shaw, playwright and theatre critic, was an outstanding but also highly controversial figure. In his role as critic, writing for The Saturday Review, he exposed and condemned the weaknesses of Victorian drama, which was, in the words of Laura P. Z. Izarra, “full of melodramatic, biased ideas, typical of the English bourgeois mentality of his time” (qtd. in Haddad, 10). He was concerned, not only with drama but mostly with the attitude of a hypocritical society. Rosalie Rahal Haddad’s book Shaw; O Crítico develops, in a conclusive way, Shaw’s ideas of good theatre and an open-minded society by presenting and commenting on a series of his critical texts that make evident how his ideas prevail and are still today applicable.

In this article we present firstly, the difficulties met while translating from both Portuguese and English, late 19th century English, and the decisions made by the translators. Secondly, it is our aim to refer to the process of negotiation of meanings (Eco 2008) and the linguistic and cultural revision resulting from the initial phase of translation. Translation understood as a multidimensional process, which includes the acts of reading and re-reading, as well as interpreting based on context of production and reception, creating a text in another language and finally revising, before producing the translated version. Coming from a tradition of translators as competent readers of a foreign language, we followed Márvara Averbach’s idea of “a first instrumental reading which should help the translator determine the important features of the source text, what matters, what should be kept and what could be left aside”. (Averbach 19)

That first intensive reading was done by the English to Spanish translator. Her work was exhaustive and included an extensive list of doubts and future decisions to make. The negotiation phase had already begun. What should be done, for instance, with names of plays? Did all plays or other reference names have a direct translation into Spanish? If they did not, or some had a direct translation and others did not, how should they appear in the Spanish version? There were many things to consider and possible options to render the texts into Spanish, so during our first meetings we reached certain basic agreements. One was to keep all
names of literary works in English and provide the Spanish ones of those whose translation was confirmed, as a footnote, containing a Translator’s note (“N. del T.” in Spanish). This was a formal aspect of our work but at the same time a necessary one to organize the translated version, as the original contained not just a few but numerous cultural references of this sort and others.

Agreements regarding the important features of the source text that should be kept in the translation were also made; we understood that Shaw’s texts were based on strong arguments presented in frequently long paragraphs. The tone with which the arguments had been presented had to be kept, too, as much as possible. If not, we would be losing a relevant aspect of his powerful work. Shaw’s essays had been written in a language, which is not contemporary English, thus some of the words he used are today considered archaic or perhaps its use, nowadays, is not the common one as it can be seen in the examples that follow. Those words were checked to make sure that we were following Shaw’s line of thought. The next are some examples of those cases taken from Shaw’s original texts in English and from our decisions for the Spanish version in Haddad b (2019):

1. Expression ’TO WIT’ meaning ’THAT IS TO SAY’:
   I will even go as far as to promise the Examiner my support if he will introduce this limitation for part of the year, say during Lent, so as to make a close for that dullest of stock dramatic subjects, adultery, and force our managers and authors to find out what all great dramatists find out spontaneously: to wit, that people who sacrifice every other consideration to love are as hopelessly unheroic on the stage as lunatics or dipsomaniacs… (Shaw 188-189 emphasis by authors)

   Incluso, llegaría a prometerle mi apoyo al Evaluador si llegara a introducir la restricción durante parte del año, por ejemplo, durante la Cuaresma, como para hacer una temporada cerrada para el más aburrido de los temas dramáticos del repertorio tradicional: el adulterio, y obligar a nuestros productores y autores a averiguar lo que todos los grandes dramaturgos averiguan espontáneamente: es decir, que las personas que sacrifican toda consideración para amar son irremediablemente no heroicos sobre el escenario como lo son los locos o los dipsomaníacos… (Haddad b 340-341 emphasis by authors)

2. Old or rare use: The word TAPU for TABOO:
   He is therefore compelled to maintain the present compromise of a partial tapu (Shaw 189 emphasis by authors)
   Por lo tanto, se ve obligado a mantener el compromiso actual de un tabú parcial (Haddad b 341 emphasis by authors)

3. Unusual collocation of “CLEAN” as adverb meaning completely:
   I have once more shared with Ibsen the triumphant amusement of startling all but the strongest-headed of the London theatre critics clean out of the practice of their profession. (Shaw 182 emphasis by authors)
   …y una vez más compartí con Ibsen la diversión triunfal de escandalizar a todos
menos a los críticos más firmes del teatro londinense, ya completamente alejados de la práctica de su profesión. (Haddad b 328 emphasis by authors)

4. Spelling of the verb SHOW as $\text{SHOW}$:
It is true that dramatists do not write their plays with a view to shewing me off to the best advantage by writing only what fits my style of criticism… (Shaw 114 emphasis by authors)

Es cierto que los dramaturgos no escriben sus obras para jactarse y mostrar que escriben sólo lo que concuerda con mi estilo de crítica (Haddad b 213 emphasis by authors)

5. Archaic use of the word RETAINER as SERVANT and the word $\text{SMOTE}$ as HIT or STRIKE as:

He instantly sallied out with two retainers; smote the critic hip and thigh; and then through himself as an insulted public man… (Shaw 113 emphasis by authors)

Inmediatamente salió con dos de sus empleados; golpeó al crítico con toda su furia; y luego se mostró como un hombre público ofendido buscando la empatía de su ciudad…(Haddad b 210 emphasis by authors)

In reference to the work of the literary translator, Averbach is right when she says, “it is clear that when facing an author whose most noticeable writing style is syntactic complexity, the translator must reproduce that strategy as much as s/he can […]” (77). Syntactic complexity in a well-known writer such as Bernard Shaw, and especially in his critical works, appears to have a direct relationship with the ideas he wants to convey, with opinions and thoughts and a particular view on art.” (Averbach 77) When presenting his critical ideas he applied syntactically complex structures which reinforced his forceful arguments. In our opinion, Shaw’s way of introducing his arguments was purposefully aimed at addressing a ‘competent audience’. To achieve this, we can see that his critical texts present features such as long sentences divided by semi colon, and repetition of structures within a sentence, what makes the text sometimes difficult to read and follow.

For the translators, Shaw’s strategy implied a double challenge: on the one hand, we had to deal with the semantic complexity of his message without simplifying it to an extent in which Shaw’s style could be lost. On the other, we had to handle the long sentences he used to support his ideas and criticism in the best possible way so as to give it a phrasing that could still be read and understood without losing track of what was being said.

As way of example, we show the following fragment from “An Old New Play and A New Old One” (Shaw a 45) in which we used both transposition (switching of grammatical categories, change in the word order) and adaptation (different things with loosely equivalent cultural functions) following what Vinay and Darbelnet (qtd. in Pym 12-16) considered in the list of procedures to achieve “natural” equivalence. We believe we have reached a certain balance between the length of text to translate, the possibility to follow the ideas the writer wanted to convey (in our understanding) and the writer’s particular style to convey the ideas in writing:
Stage craft, after all, is very narrowly limited by the physical conditions of the stage representation; \textit{but when one turns} over the pages of \textit{The Second Mrs. Tanqueray}, and notes the naive machinery of the exposition of the first act, in which two whole actors are wasted on sham parts, and the hero, at his own dinner party, is compelled to get up and go ignominiously into the next room “to write some letters” when something has to be said behind his back; \textit{when one follows} Cayley Drummlle the confidant to whom both Paula and her husband explain themselves for the benefit of the audience; \textit{when one counts} the number of the doors which Mr. Pinero needs to get his characters on and off the stage, and how they have finally to be supplemented by the inevitable “French windows” (two of them); and \textit{when the activity} of the postman is taken into consideration, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that what most of our critics mean by mastery of stage craft is recklessness in the substitution of dead machinery and lay figures for vital action and real characters. (Shaw 45-46 emphasis by authors)

Después de todo, el arte escénico se encuentra muy limitado por las condiciones físicas de la representación teatral; pero \textit{cuando uno avanza} en la lectura de \textit{The Second Mrs. Tanqueray} y advierte la organización ingenua del planteo en el primer acto, en el cual dos actores importantes son desperdiciados en roles de embusteros, y el héroe, en su propia cena con invitados, se ve obligado a levantarse e ir ignominiosamente a la habitación contigua para “escribir algunas cartas” cuando se debe hablar algo a sus espaldas; \textit{cuando uno sigue} a Cayley Drummlle, el confidente con quien tanto Paula como su esposo se justifican para beneficio del público; \textit{cuando uno cuenta} la cantidad de puertas que el Sr. Pinero necesita para que los personajes entren o salgan de escena, y cómo éstas tienen que ser finalmente suplementadas por las inevitables ‘puertas ventanas’ (dos); y \textit{cuando se tiene en cuenta} la actividad del cartero, resulta imposible evitar llegar a la conclusión de que lo que la mayoría de nuestros críticos entienden por dominio del arte escénico es la osadía de sustituir un mecanismo muerto y figuras comunes por una acción vital y personajes reales. (Haddad b 126-127 emphasis by authors)

The next is an example of a sentence too long, even to be read silently, as it contains several subordinate clauses headed by the preposition FOR, separated by commas:

In London, I understand, a “leading man” can get about £25 a week (discounted by a few weeks’ gratuitous rehearsal) \textit{for} physical qualifications no better than those of an average ranker in a smart cavalry regiment, \textit{for} a degree of personal address and “style” just sufficient to bear the criticism of the Stock Exchange, \textit{for} as much habituation to the mechanical routine of the stage as an office-boy could acquire in a few months, \textit{for} a stage manner almost as dreadful as the “bedside manner” of an undistinguished suburban doctor in general practice, \textit{for} a degree of personal comeliness which, through certainly more ravishing than that of the average dramatic critic (who is cut off from the aid of the make-up box), is resistible by a heroine of no more than ordinary strength of mind, and \textit{of the art of making and undertrained voice resound penetratingly in the nose.} (Shaw 112 emphasis by authors)

Según tengo entendido, en Londres un “actor protagonista” puede ganar alrededor de
£25 por semana (sin contar unas pocas semanas de ensayos gratuitos) por aptitudes físicas que no superan las de un soldado raso promedio en un regimiento de caballería elegante; por un nivel de modales y “estilo” personal lo suficientemente bueno como para tolerar la crítica de la Bolsa de Valores; por habituarse a la rutina mecánica del escenario como la que un cadete podría adquirir en unos pocos meses; por unos modos escénicos casi tan espantosos como “el modo de tratar a los pacientes” de un médico mediocre de los suburbios; por un nivel de encanto personal el cual, si bien ciertamente es más deslumbrante que el del crítico teatral promedio (que está desprovisto de la ayuda de la boletería), es resistible por parte de una heroína que no supera la capacidad mental promedio, y por el arte de lograr que una voz carente de entrenamiento resuene penetrantemente en la nariz. (Haddad b 207 emphasis by authors)

Translating cultural related terms represented further challenges. According to Eco, “translating is not just a process of transferring from one language into another, but between cultures and encyclopedias. A translator must not take into account only the linguistic rules but also the cultural elements in their broader sense” (Eco 208). In terms of Peter Newmark, (qtd. in Pym 32) we had two options: either to follow a semantic approach, according to which the formal values of the source text would be kept as much as possible, or a communicative approach, which would look forward to the needs of the new addressee, and would try to adapt to those needs. We considered that the semantic approach would be the most appropriate one, as the idea was to immerse the reader into Shaw’s world and mind in order to interpret his criticism towards the weaknesses of the Victorian theatre of his time. Newmark, had advocated semantic translation especially when working with what he called authoritative texts, and we considered Shaw’s essays to fall into this category.

To achieve this goal, we resorted to a “gloss translation”2, which would be closest to the original structure, with attached comments to give readers a better understanding of the culture and custom of Shaw’s time. Also, form and content were reproduced as faithfully as possible to allow the target language reader to know more about manner of thought and means of expression of the social context of the source text. Thus, we resorted in the Spanish version of the text to two different types of footnotes: the ones already present in the text in Portuguese which we directly translated into Spanish; and the ones added to bridge cultural gaps between the source language text and the target language text, which might not be clear for prospective Spanish readers and that we also identified as Translator’s notes. Some of the former – Examples 1-5 below – appeared in the Portuguese version and there were others we had to expand because the case was different for Portuguese and Spanish, as Example 6 below can show. The name of the play by Oscar Wilde had been translated in different ways to Portuguese and to Spanish; as we believed that the Spanish reader not acquainted with Wilde’s works would need further details, we included them here between “[...]”. For instance, Example 7 groups in a footnote a series of three social organizations of Shaw’s time which aimed at helping workers, especially women workers. Finally, example 8, shows in a footnote a series of names of plays alluded in the text which had not been translated in previous chapters and which we could confirm had been translated into Spanish.

Examples:

1. N. del T. The Second Mrs. Tanqueray / La Segunda Señora Tanqueray. (Haddad b 118)
2. N. del T. The Case of Rebellious Susan / El Caso de la Rebelde Susan (Haddad b 119)

3. N. del T. Charlie's Aunt / La Tía de Carlos. (Haddad b 146)

4. N. del T. Ghosts / Espectros. (Haddad b 159)

5. N. del T. You Never Can Tell / Lucha de Sexos (Haddad b 379).

6. N. del T. The Importance of Being Earnest / La Importancia de Llamarse Ernesto. Shaw se refiere al hecho de que el protagonista de la obra utiliza una identidad falsa, Ernest, cuando está en el campo. Este sustantivo, Ernest, es homófono en inglés de la palabra “earnest” que significa prudente, serio, sincero. [El autor juega con estas dos palabras, su pronunciación y sus significados en el desarrollo de la obra.] (Haddad b 120)

7. N. del T. Organizaciones de la época, del tipo del Ejército de Salvación. (Haddad b 330)

8. N. del T. Se consignan las obras que no hubieran sido mencionadas con anterioridad y estuvieran traducidas al español: Enrique IV; Timión de Atenas; La Escandalosa Sra. Ebbsmith; La defensa de la Sra. Dane. (Haddad b 347)

This was the procedure followed to bridge cultural gaps between the source language text and the target language one. In this sense, footnotes provided explanations for the reader to understand references made by Shaw either related to culture, politics, to names of different personalities, places, organizations, etc. Footnotes served, as well, to clarify certain aspects, which can be considered partly linguistic-phonological, to be more accurate, and partly cultural since they make reference to certain plays by William Shakespeare, and more specifically to certain key parts to be played by actors. In the chapter devoted to theatre directors, in which Shaw provides a series of rules a good director should follow, he refers to the notes a director might take while observing the actors rehearse the play.

Shaw devotes two paragraphs to exemplify these notes and which include pronunciation difficulties, wrong articulation of words, movements on the stage, how actors look, among others, but also notes that show the competence or incompetence of a director. We have included a series of footnotes in the Spanish version to show what actors said during a rehearsal and what and how they should have said it. We have considered that it was more economical to keep in our translation the phrases or sentences in English and show what and how a speech should be delivered in a footnote. Readers, we assumed, would be able to notice the difference, if not linguistically at least visually, no matter whether they might know English or not. This would offer a smooth reading of the whole text, providing the reader with a general idea of what Shaw wanted to say about how to proceed in the relationship director-actors/actresses-performance. We started with a footnote indicating our choice for this section followed by others with the specific information regarding plays and excerpts selected by Shaw and being analyzed by the potential director.

Examples:
9. Expresiones such as “pleecemin” “reel and ideel” “he not Ee,” (body text)

N. del T.: Se infiere que Shaw podría referirse a una pronunciación particular del término “policeman” que significa “policía”.

N. del T.: Se infiere que Shaw podría referirse a una pronunciación particular de la expresión “real and ideal” que significa “real e ideal”.

N. del T.: Se infiere que Shaw podría referirse a una pronunciación particular del término “he” sin el sonido inicial, que significa (Haddad b 267)

10. “Tibbeeynottibeethat iz,” cuando el actor debería decir “To be? Or NOT to be? THAT is the question” (body text)

N. del T.: Se refiere a la pronunciación y articulación de las palabras en la conocida frase de Hamlet “Ser o no ser, esas es…” (footnote)

11. “Become to Dunsinane,” cuando actor debería decir “Though Birnam Wood BE come to Dunsinane.” (body text)

N. del T.: El pareado pertenece a Macbeth “I will not be afraid of death and bane, Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane”. (footnote)

12. “Lo here I lenthee thishar pointed sword,” indican que las consonantises consecutivas deben estar articuladas, como en “lend thee” y “sharp-pointed.”

N. del T.: Esta línea pertenece a Ricardo III: “Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword.” (Haddad b 268)

So far, we have offered a sample of the main difficulties found while translating, from English to Spanish, George Bernard Shaw’s critical texts included in Shaw, O Crítica, together with the decisions made by the translators in some of the cases. To complete our task, we also had to translate the “Preface” and the “Introduction” from Portuguese to Spanish, task which in itself also implied a challenge. We used our knowledge of written academic Portuguese, which had come along the years through reading literary critical texts, and by using this knowledge of the language to translate, on occasions, into Spanish, articles and/or papers for journals with good results, plus our knowledge of translation strategies. Once both translation phases had concluded we started the matching, re-reading and revising phase. It was at this point that we came across the numerous footnotes included in the Portuguese version of Shaw, O Crítica, which were not part of the isolated “Critical Texts” by Shaw, and we proceeded then to both translate and include them in our Spanish version. This phase was carried out together with a third translator of our team, decision which proved highly necessary and beneficial to make. We had different views regarding certain meanings in the original text in English which
was sometimes reluctant to help! Working as a team helped us understand and clarify several points we had, perhaps, misunderstood in our first readings.

Likewise, reading the comprehensive “Introduction” provided by Haddad in her book, once this text was in Spanish, shed light on the final revision process. We were ready, then, to revisit our translation once more, and to polish it, not without a good deal of discussion and negotiation among the members of the team, but with more certainties. The multidimensional process we had envisioned as part of our project was developed carefully, devoting to it the necessary time before coming out with the translated version. Shaw, O Crítico appeared in early August 2019, published by EDUNLPam, Argentina, the National University of La Pampa Publishing House, both as an open access e-book which can be read or consulted online and as a traditional print book of limited edition. Before reaching the very end, a word must be said about the choice of the title, which was another important decision we had to make, since dropping the article which appears in the Portuguese translation implied for us presenting Shaw as critic, and not in his role of writer, and also added the crucial elements of being analytical, controversial, fundamental, and radical in his appreciations and thoughts, features which are intrinsic aspects of his personality which define his self as well as his works.

Shaw, O Crítico (2019) is the result of a long translation project which is now subject to further assessment by other readers who will say, in the end, if our work was worth the effort or not. We have shared our strategies, decisions, doubts and choices; we have applied the theoretical knowledge picked up along years of steady work in the field; however, once more we feel that each new translation is an exercise to raise our own awareness of which could be the best possible answer “when confronting problems for which there are no established solutions, where significant creativity is required.” (Pym 4)

Notes
1 The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art was a London weekly newspaper for which GBS was a regular contributor.

2 Gloss translation: a kind of translation in which the translator attempts to reproduce the form and content of the original or source text as literally and meaningfully as possible.

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