

The Language and Translation of Finnegans Wake

Dirce Waltrick do Amarante*

Abstract:???

For many scholars and translators of *Finnegans Wake* (1939), the last novel by Irish writer James Joyce (1882 - 1941) represents a special case within the field of translation, since the first issue under debate is the text to be translated, that is, the original language of the novel.

To write *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce used a mixture of approximately sixty-five languages and dialects and included in this new language modern and ancient languages, both Eastern and Western, and distorted and disguised many of them, creating in this manner an enormous “puzzle full of guesses and word games.”¹ For this reason, it is not always obvious that English is the novel’s original language, or even more prevalent than the others.

In Umberto Eco’s opinion, “*Finnegans Wake* is not written in English, but in ‘Finneganian,’”² which would be an invented language, even though, according to the Italian writer, the language of Joyce’s last novel does not fit entirely into any of the vast concepts of invented language. According to one of the definitions, ‘invented language’ is one whose lexicon and syntax were at least partially created by its author, such as the case of the Foigny language (cited by Eco). Another example is a language without conventional words, reduced to a sound effect, as occurs for example, with the poems of Hugo Ball, or as it seems to me, in some John Cage poems.

Parting from these definitions, and taking into consideration the fact that Joyce’s syntax is basically taken from the English language, Eco concluded that *Finnegans Wake* is, “to begin with, a multilingual text. Hence, it is equally useless to translate it, for it already has been translated. To translate a certain pun with a German radical G and an Italian radical I, means, at the most, to transform an GI syntagm into an IG syntagm.”³

* Master in Literary Theory and Doctoral Student in Literary Theory.

As we shall see, the mixture of languages is not the only challenge that translators must face when they work with Joyce's last novel.

The complexity of the novel's language is also underscored by the attempt to give it circularity and simultaneity – characteristics motivated not only by stylistic reasons, but also philosophical reasons, since they are based on the theories of Italian thinkers Giambattista Vico and Giordano Bruno. However, while the book is circular as a whole, its parts contain sentences composed in a normal sequence that follows, in a broad definition, the English standard. Even so, we can say that in *Finnegans Wake* the reader encounters “a new language” – “the ‘chaosmos’ governed by its own laws,”⁴ – capable of recording new meanings and experiences of the human mind.

Scholars state that Joyce generally used normative constructions when writing sentences, yet he would insert non-standard words.

In *Finnegans Wake*, a single word can concentrate two or more meanings, and this accumulation of meanings occurs through semantic, phonic, graphic and morphological associations.⁵ Joyce obtained this multiple meanings effect by using mainly two stylistic resources: puns and *portmanteau* words.

Puns are plays on words that have similar sounds yet different meanings, and for this reason, instead of clarifying, they generate multiple meanings. Some examples of puns found in *Finnegans Wake* are: “Maria full of grease,” in the place of “Mary full of grace,” and the expression “making loof,” in place of “making love.”

A *portmanteau* word – a term coined by Lewis Carroll in the book *Through the Looking Glass* (1871) – is a vocable that “packages” two or more words in a single one. In the case of Joyce's *portmanteau* words in *Finnegans Wake*, these words frequently belong to different languages. Some examples are “chaosmos,” originating from “chaos” and “cosmos”; “laughtears”, which conjugates “laugh” and “tears”; and “funferall,” constructed from “funeral” and “fun for all.”

However, Joyce explored more than just words in *Finnegans Wake*: sometimes, the basic construction unit of his language, both in terms of meaning and musicality, is the syllable. The best example of this are the “soundsenses,” vocables formed by an association of several letters. There are approximately ten “soundsenses” in the book and their meanings can only be appropriately deciphered by reading them out loud. An example of a “soundsense” is the noise of thunder that appears on the novel's very first page: (Cd player)

Bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawn
toohoohoordenenthurnuk!

Because of these aspects of the novel's language, it is questionable whether the effort of translating the book actually compensates, or “if it wouldn't be more useful and easy for the actual reader to learn English and learn about Joyce's principles and techniques.”

The translation of *Finnegans Wake* is, however, possible and valid, as demonstrated by Joyce himself, who supported his translators and cooperated on at least three translations of the book: into French, Italian and German.

Of course, when we consider the complexity and nuances of the language in *Finnegans Wake*, we easily understand that a literal translation of the work is not possible, and neither is a translation into standard English. According to Professor Donaldo Schüler, who translated Joyce's last novel into Portuguese, "to translate into a particular language a novel such as *Finnegans Wake*, in which over sixty-five languages are mixed together, is effectively a betrayal. To translate is always to bring another linguistic universe into our own."⁶ Ideally, it would be appropriate to express in the target language the (same) experience that Joyce developed in the source language— "English"— parting from the same premises and attempting to preserve from the original the highest amount of linguistic registers, word plays, allusions, etc.

In the opinion of scholar and Spanish translator Francisco García Tortosa, the translation of *Finnegans Wake* is, however, "a hermeneutic translation, essentially not that different from any other of the same type."⁷ For, if one accepts the premise that two languages are never totally equivalent, one must try to understand the function and meaning of all of the text's linguistic elements and try to find corresponding approximations in another language. However, each language allows for varying types of experimentation, because they each have different resources.

Fritz Senn stated the following on the translation of Joyce's novel:

For having said that *Finnegans Wake* cannot be properly translated, I would go on to say there is no reason why it shouldn't be. Provided that we all know what is going on. For whatever our pontifications about the impossibility - it will be tried. The book remains the challenge for the translator. ⁸

The fact is, a translation of *Finnegans Wake* is always questionable, or, according to Umberto Eco, it is a translation that "at each step says, implicitly, this translation is not a translation."⁹ Paradoxically, in the opinion of the Italian essayist and writer, "for the same reason that it is theoretically untranslatable, *Finnegans Wake* is also – among all – the easiest text to translate because it allows for the highest degree of inventive freedom and does not require the obligation of precision in any form of narration."¹⁰ Joyce himself was not always faithful to the original text in the translations of which he was a part, thus attempting to renew the target language with his own resources.

Partial and complete translations of the novel have been attempted in several languages, which demonstrates in practice that the translation of *Finnegans Wake* is possible and has been done, with more or less aesthetic success. In all of these translations there are common narrative elements and similar levels of meaning, confirming the presence of coincidental readings, and, most importantly, that the translations can in a certain way "provide an opening into the somber world of *Finnegans Wake*."¹¹

In Brazil, the first translation of fragments of *Finnegans Wake* was published in 1962, carried out by Augusto and Haroldo de Campos. They had the following opinion on it:

Translation becomes a sort of free yet at the same time rigorous game, where what matters is not the readability of the text, but, most of all, the faithfulness to the spirit, the Joycean “climate.”¹²

Without a doubt, the translation of Augusto and Haroldo de Campos seems fairly loyal to the Joycean “climate,” even though they only translated fragments, taken from different chapters of the novel.

Almost thirty years transpired between the translation of fragments and the translation of full chapters of *Finnegans Wake*. In 1999 the first chapter of the novel was published, translated in its entirety by Donaldo Schüler, and currently the first eight chapters have been translated. These chapters comprise the first part of the novel, which is divided into four books, or parts, consisting in the whole of 17 chapters.

Schüler held the following opinion about the translation of *Finnegans Wake*:

It is not possible to translate. There is no correspondence between one language and the other. With exception of technical languages: mechanical translation. Literary language goes beyond all subordinations. The decisions of a creative text are unpredictable. Joyce is simply underscoring this process.¹³

Evaluating his own work, Schüler defined his translation in the following manner:

Whoever translates Joyce cannot abstain from the obligation of creating similar aspects to the original language. We distance ourselves frequently from literalness to capture effects that surpass meanings. Joyce is not austere at all. We took great caution not to destroy the jocosity (to not say *Joycosity*). Since in Portuguese we do not have the critical apparatus that formed throughout the decades regarding the original text, we tried to stay within the range of the Portuguese language and of languages that are very close to it when attempting the Joycean verbal game.¹⁴

Finally, I would like to say that in my Masters thesis, defended at the *Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina* in 2001, I proposed a translation of Chapter VIII of the novel, known as “Anna Livia Plurabelle.”

This chapter narrates the dialogue of two washerwomen who, while washing clothes at the bank of the Liffey River – which splits the city of Dublin – talk about the life of Anna Livia Plurabelle, the wife of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker. During the conversation, Anna Livia becomes the Liffey River, or gets confused with it. Other

characters are cited in the washerwomen's gossip, which only ends at nightfall and with their transformation into a rock and a tree.

I chose to translate this chapter because it is, according to scholars, the best known, most translated and perhaps the most accessible chapter of the novel.

The idea of translating it initially emerged as a practical manner to study and comprehend Joyce's narrative and stylistic techniques.

To undertake my version of the chapter I adopted a principle similar to Professor Schüler's: "each text to be translated imposes its own laws. General translation laws cannot be formulated. A translator must learn from the text he translates."¹⁵

In my translation, I attempted to recreate the rhythm of the original text, and not simply reproduce the Joycean rhythm, based on monosyllables – common in the English language but not in Portuguese. In this manner I was able to obtain a Brazilian, or perhaps Latino, rhythm: a slower rhythm, based on longer words than the original ones.

However, by emphasizing rhythm (accent, rhymes, alliterations, assonances), I left out other aspects of Joyce's work, even though I did appreciate its semantic aspects, and in particular *portmanteau* words. I also tried to preserve the dialogue between the different languages. This dialogue is infinite and endless, and for this reason I agree with Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, who stated that translation, especially that of *Finnegans Wake*, "never assumes the static apparatus of the definitive, but remains in movement, an open and constant attempt."¹⁶ An attempt, perhaps, to reach the unreachable –the whole.

I now invite you to listen to a fragment recorded on CD of my version of "Anna Livia Plurabelle," preceded by the original text and followed by Professor Donaldo Schüler's version, in order to highlight the different options that translators have:

Anna Livia Plurabelle: Cap. VIII, p. 203

...he plunged both of his newly anointed hands, the core of his cushlas, in her singimari saffron strumans of hair, parting them and soothing her and mingling it, that was deepdark and ample like this red bog at sundown. By that Vale Vowclose's lucydlac, the reignbeau's heavenarches arronged orragend her. Afrothdizzying galbs, her enamelled eyes indergoadng him on the vierge violetian. Wish a wish! Why a why? Mavro! Letty Lerck's lafing light throw those laurels now her daphdaph tease song petrock. Maass! But the majik wavus has elfin anon meshes. And Simba the Slayer of Oga is slewd. He cuddle not help him himself, thurso that hot on him, he had to forget the monk in the man so, ...

...ele mergulhou ambas suas recém-ungidas mãos, o cerne do seu pulso, no curso do cabelo cantamarino açafão dela, dividindo eles e suavizando ela e mesclando ele, aquilo era escuro-profundo e amplo como o pântano vermelho no pôr-do-sol. Por aqueles

lucydoslagos do Vale Vowclose, os ceute-arcos do arco d'íris arranjados ao redor dela. Amaryellows afrodisizyarcos, seus esmaltados olhos indigoinstigando ele à beira da violetação. Desejo um desejo! Por que um por quê? Mavro! Aquela luminosa faixa agradável de luz de Letty Lerck lauraando agora sua tãotola caçoante-canção petrárquica. Maass! Mas as mágicas ondas têm mille uma armadilhas. E Simba o Matador do seu Mar é lascivo, ele mesmo não pode evitar, aquele desejo ardente sobre ele, assim teve que esquecer o monge que habitava o homem,... (Dirce Waltrick do Amarante)

...ele afundou suas recém-ungidas mãos, o cerne do pulso, na caudalosa corrente de seus singimari cabelos, partindo-os, tranqüilizando-a, misturando-os, isto se deu na escuridão e na Vermelha amplidão do crepúsculo. Junto ao lucylado no Vale de Vaucluso, as arrongeadas cores do arco-iris a orangeavam. Afroginosos galbos, seus olhos esmaltados, índigo-envolventes, virginais, violáceos. Desejo um desejo! Por que o por quê? Moura! Dos sorrisos pendentes nos leves lábios de Letty Lerck aos de Laura laureando sedutores dáfnicos a Petrorca. Música! Maass as mágicas ondas ondeiam mil mechas red ondas Siva-Simbá sangra-singra libidinosos líquidos. Como deter cuchilos, o calor era tanto, teve que olvidar o monge no homem,... (Donaldo Schüller)

Notes

- 1 Gonzales, Jose Carnero. *James Joyce y la Explosión de la Palabra*. Sevilla: Publicaciones da la Universidad de Sevilla, 1989, p.04.
- 2 Joyce, James. *Anna Livia Plurabelle*. Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1996, p. VI, VII.
- 3 idem, p. VII
- 4 Blades, John. *How to Study James Joyce*. London: Macmillan, 1996, p.,155.
- 5 Gonzales, Jose Carnero. Op. Cit., p. 147.
- 6 *Folha do Povo*. Campo Grande, May 20, 2001.
- 7 Tortosa, Francisco García. P.110.
- 8 Senn, Fritz. "Joycean Tranlatitudes: Aspects of Translation", in BATES, Ronald and POLLOCK, Harry J. *Litters from Aloft*. Tulsa: The University of Tulsa, p.48.
- 9 Bosinelli, Rosa Maria Bolletieri. Op. Cit, p. V.
- 10 Idem, p. XI.
- 11 Tortosa, Francisco García. Op. Cit., p. 116.
- 12 Campos, Augusto and Haroldo de, *Panaroma de Finnegans Wake*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1971, p. 21,22.
- 13 *Folha do Povo*, May 20, 2001, Palavra Boa, p. 04.
- 14 Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake/ Finnicius Revém - Capítulo 1*. São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2000, p.25.
- 15 *Folha do Povo*, May 20, 2001, Palavra Boa, p. 04.
- 16 Campos, Augusto and Haroldo de. Op. Cit., p.21.