

AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION: THE CHALLENGE OF DUBBING
A WORLD CLASSIC
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ABSTRACT

The universal stage classic *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Paris, 1897) consists of 2 570 lines written in alexandrine couplets where the rhyme scheme alternates a combination of French Classic and Romantic theatre. From the standpoint of audiovisual translation, the difficulties involved in preserving the idiosyncratic features of verse and rhyme in the original play and in the film by Rappeneau become extremely interesting aspects of the whole linguistic transfer. The language-based analysis of the complete audiovisual work , following the several translation procedures involved and bearing in mind discursive and pragmatic modifications involved in the French>Spanish translation for dubbing purposes points at a number of interesting observations in the domain of translation itself.

KEY WORDS: Audiovisual Translation, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Dubbing, Verse, Rhyme.

RESUMEN

La obra teatral de *Cyrano de Bergerac*, se estrenó en París en 1897, y está basada en la vida del personaje real *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Se trata de una obra de gran belleza estética ya que está compuesta por un total de 2.570 versos y se dispone en pareados de alejandrinos, alternando las rimas según los cánones del teatro clásico y romántico francés.

Resulta de interés para la traducción audiovisual, y más en concreto para el doblaje, la dificultad para mantener en el trasvase lingüístico la idiosincrasia del verso y rima de la obra teatral original y de la versión cinematográfica dirigida por Jean-Paul Rappeneau. El análisis lingüístico de la obra audiovisual en su totalidad, según el tipo y procedimientos de traducción utilizados, y teniendo en cuenta las modificaciones discursivas y pragmáticas de la fase de traducción en el doblaje del francés a español, arroja interesantes resultados desde el punto de vista de la traducción.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Traducción audiovisual, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, doblaje, verso, rima.

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1. *CYRANO DE BERGERAC*: THE PLAY

The stage play *Cyrano de Bergerac* first premiered at the Parisian Théâtre de la *Porte Saint-Martin* in 1897. Of great aesthetic beauty, the play consists of 2570 lines (1400 of which are spoken by the main character Cyrano) written in alexandrine couplets where the rhyme scheme alternates a combination of French Classic and Romantic theatre.

The play's resounding success earned recognition for its author Edmond Rostand, a young poet and a brilliant playwright from that period. Based on the life of historical figure Hercule Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, the original French play is generally regarded as an indispensable title in the history of theatre. An enduring success since its earliest stage productions down to the present time, Rostand's play has ultimately turned into a classic of world literature.

The plot tells the story of a man whose love is unrequited and who is himself unable to come to terms with a prominent physical flaw on his face — an extremely large nose: so much so, that his self-consciousness about his appearance prevents him from declaring his love. All he can do is write love letters and attribute his own words to young, handsome Christian, who also loves Roxane but lacks the power of speech to woo her. Fortune does not smile upon the protagonist, but since he is a generous person, he conceals his feelings in order neither to upset the woman he loves nor to betray his rival's trust. Cyrano embodies the values of freedom, sensibility, pride and courage, but also human shortcomings like being unable to accept oneself with one's virtues and flaws and the fear of rejection and ridicule.

Realistic and romantic, the play is considered surprisingly modern for the setting of seventeenth-century Paris, with its "affected ladies" and tough swordsmen living under the reign of Louis XIII. It is not meaningless in this context that Rostand should have chosen to make Cyrano a French national hero who fights against the Army of Flanders, which somehow underscores the latent social conflict.

Long-nosed and quarrelling Cyrano's story of doomed love is truly universal, so that this literary classic has caught the attention of both literature and film. Versions may differ in their respective storylines, yet the narrative foundation remains the same: the love and attraction experienced by the physically unattractive man for the most beautiful lady.

Cyrano de Bergerac has in short become an obligatory fixture in French literature (more particularly in theatre) whose narrative has grown into a universal myth.

2. VERSIONS AND FILM ADAPTATIONS

This is one of the most often performed plays in theatres across the world since its original opening in Paris up to the present time. It has been translated into numerous languages: Spanish, English, Italian, Russian, Polish, Japanese¹, Chinese, Hungarian, etc. Only in France there have been more than 15 000 stage productions of Rostand's play.

Additionally, the play was very soon adapted for the silver screen (the earliest film version goes back to 1900), and there are moreover a number of TV adaptations and even operatic renderings since 1899. The first 1900 cinematic version, a silent movie, was starred by Constantin Benoît Coquelin, the same actor who had performed the part of Cyrano during the play's opening night in Paris. In successive years, the story would continue to undergo film adaptations (1909, 1911, 1925, 1945, 1950, 1960 and 1990).

Jean-Paul Rappeneau's 1990 screen version *Cyrano de Bergerac*, which constitutes the subject of our study, was highly acclaimed by the critics and continues to appeal to film audiences despite the passage of years. Rappeneau set out to endow his cinematic retelling with such visual dynamism and narrative tension as would make viewers forget the original text's theatrical source.

Gérard Depardieu's performance of the film's leading part would catapult him to stardom. Indeed he received an Oscar nomination in the Best Actor category—an unusual accolade for a non-American production. The film moreover harvested eleven Cesar Awards (handed out by France's *Académie des Arts et Techniques du Cinéma*) after being nominated for no fewer than fourteen. Other outstanding distinctions include four BAFTA Awards as well as the Golden Globe to the Best Foreign Film and the Best Actor award at the 1990 Cannes Film Festival.

In writing their screen adaptation, Jean-Paul Rappeneau and Jean-Claude Carrière painstakingly followed Rostand's literary work, so that most lines in the original text were preserved in the cinematic version. Also the character roles, both principal and secondary, faithfully stick to the play's cast. Even so, and since the film had to be more realistic than the theatre play, the scriptwriters decided to get rid of a number of expressions, mythological allusions and purple passages that would have been unintelligible for contemporary viewers: a strategy that involved a rewriting of Rostand's verse. Paradoxically enough, however, the film's credibility largely relied on the characters speaking in verse.

¹ In 1931 it premiered in Japanese translation at Tokyo's Imperial Theatre.

Regarding versification, the French screenplay is written in rhyming alexandrine lines, just like the original stage play, while the Spanish translation transforms them into hendecasyllabic verses² where each line features a caesura as if consisting of two half-lines. While discussing the screenplay's metrics at the Cannes Festival, Jean-Paul Rappeneau told journalists covering the event:

We believe that these wonderful rhyming dialogues —the sudden lyrical surges, the alexandrine lines cut into two, three, four or even five groups of lines—make for some kind of dizzying, acrobatic table-tennis match that will constitute the key to the film's success.

Although rhyme is deliberately sought in both the original and the dubbed versions, synchronicity-related demands occasionally cause it to become imperfect, while only rarely does it vanish altogether. More particularly, in the two languages involved rhyme becomes strained or even non-existent in such lines as have been added or reshaped by the scriptwriters —those, in other words, that were not originally written by Rostand. This observation proves how difficult it is to recreate a scene under the constraints of preestablished rhyme schemes and metrical patterns. Again according to Rappeneau:

French poetry is based on numbers, and the key number here is twelve. If we had gone to the opposite extreme —if we had forcefully reproduced every line, every pause and systematically hammered into our text the famous twelve feet scheme, the film would not hold together. It would collapse, murdered by the metrical system. Basically we wanted for the verse to be there without being there, so that it builds up some kind of low-keyed music score that runs through the film, but with occasional departures from the pattern. True: I was looking for some kind of music— a sound, a harmony.

Rappeneau furthermore respects the original play's five-act sequence, while the arrangement of scenes in the film matches the plays, even though the total number of lines in the screen version is somewhat smaller in the movie. There are a few instances where specific scenes within an act are either brought forward or postponed in the screenplay following requirements posed by the

² The translator's intention was to replace the alexandrine verse by eleven-syllable lines, since the latter happens to be the most common verse type in Spanish classical poetry (sonnets, quatrains, tercets, etc, at least in the so-called *versos de arte mayor*, i.e., longer than 9 syllables). As a result of demands posed by rhyme and phonetic synchronicity, however, there are a number of thirteen-, fourteen- and even fifteen-syllable lines.

audiovisual production. According to comments by Jean-Claude Carrière, once again made during the 1990 edition of the Cannes Film Festival,

I wrote myself a fair amount of alexandrine lines «after the manner» of Rostand. I have even boiled down two pages of Rostand's play to six lines. It is a literary exercise that is more about osmosis than pastiche. The ultimate proof is that when I finished the job, I didn't really know whether a given verse was Rostand's or mine.

According to the director's statements, on the other hand, before rewriting Rostand's play for the screen, he deemed it necessary to research into the previous film versions. For this reason, he held private screenings with his collaborators of all three preexisting sound films, although he additionally discovered Augusto Genina's silent version from 1925, which eventually became his main source of inspiration. In Rappeneau view, many people identify themselves with Cyrano and "just like in *Beauty and the Beast*, the blue prince is inside the character, in what is not seen; Cyrano is like a fairy tale: that's what it is, to cut a long story short: a tale."³

The challenge involved in adapting for the big screen one of the French literary classics—an "untouchable" text for purist scholars—meant a huge test for Rappeneau. The Spanish-dubbed version of *Cyrano de Bergerac* was greatly lauded by critics, while audience success confirmed this perception: "while voice actors are always forgotten and their contribution to cinema is often deprecated, in this particular case, and as far as the Spanish version of the original movie is concerned, we have to express our congratulations on the translation and dubbing of the film's dialogues, which are in no way inferior to the original voice track, despite the difficulties involved in switching the rhyme from one language into another without being detrimental to literary quality."⁴

During the film's opening at Cannes, screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière made the following statement:

Cyrano is a universal hero. He is just as worldwide-famous as Tarzan. All countries have appropriated this character as their own national hero. His only flaw, a physical one for which he is not responsible, allows him to express his great moral value. Without his nose, Cyrano would just be an insignificant worldly character. We always say that it takes a tank for a love story to

³ The complete interview with Jean-Paul Rappeneau may be accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8D3Mr3Zxmj8> [Latest access on 22 December 2014]

⁴ <http://www.filmaffinity.com> [Latest access on 17 June 2012]

overcome all obstacles. For Cyrano, the main obstacle —his fundamental tragic conflict – is in himself: it lies on his own face (...).

Hernández Les (2005: 127-128) argues that those who write film adaptations of literary works should not simply be scriptwriters, but moreover possess several other equally remarkable skills. To illustrate his point, he refers to the example of Jean-Claude Carrière, whom he describes as one of the best scriptwriter-adaptors: “at no time does he challenge the structure of the texts he is drawing from, since he preserves the five acts and the alexandrine verse in Rostand’s original play (...)”.

3. TRANSLATING THE SCREENPLAY: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

In order to approach the Spanish translation of Rappeneau’s original screenplay of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, we shall have to bear in mind such factors as influence this kind of dubbing-oriented renderings, like for example dependence on synchronicity (phonetic, plot-based and performance-bound) and isochrony, sound-arrangement code (ON, OFF, etc.), and Frederic Chaume’s paralinguistic code (2004).

Regarding the translation’s procedural patterns, it will be relevant to ascertain their level of gain or loss, the amount of information included or missing in the target text, the degree of acceptability (or equivalence), the need for the latter and, last but not least, the degree of similarity to the original text. We shall follow the system proposed by Hurtado (1995), where mainstream ideas on translation quality assessment are contemplated and supplemented by additional categories of analysis that we consider necessary in order to attain the goal of evaluating the quality of professional audiovisual translation.

The idiosyncratic nature of the text that we are discussing frequently constrains the Spanish translation in order to achieve rhyme and metrical pattern, so that the translator needs to resort to a number of translation procedures in order to underpin his proposals.

According to the translation type used, we shall distinguish between a literal and a non-literal translation to signal procedures close to or removed from literality. In this we will be following the standards proposed by Newmark (1991), who includes among the non-literal procedures transference, loans, naturalization, cultural equivalence, functional equivalence, descriptive equivalence, synonymy, direct translation, transposition, modulation, accepted standard translation, label, compensation, reduction and expansion and adaptation, either justified for operational purposes or unjustified through the

translators’s whimsical or erroneous choice (it may also be termed recreational or innovative translation).

We next provide an illustrative example of literal translations where we highlight in small capitals those terms that provide a literally accurate or approximate rendering of the source text. Notice that the highlighted terms belong to the ending of every half-line, since they are responsible for the rhyme—a key factor given the special features of this audiovisual text. In the left-hand column we can read the involved excerpt in its original version (OV), while on the right there appears the corresponding translation for dubbing (DV).

Exact word-by-word translation. Example (1)

OV	DV
CYRANO Travailler sans souci de gloire ou de fortune, À tel voyage, auquel on pense, dans la lune !	CYRANO Despreciar con valor la gloria y la fortuna,... viajar con la imaginación a la luna!

Table 1

Approximate literal translation. Example (2)

OV	DV
CYRANO Regarde-moi, mon cher, et dis quelle espérance Pourrait bien me laisser cette protubérance.	CYRANO Mírame bien amigo y dime qué esperanza... podría tener con esta protuberancia.

Table 2

Let us now provide a few examples of non-literal translations. Departure from word-by-word renderings in such cases can be justified on a number of grounds: poetic renderings produced by adherence to rhyme and/or metrics; synchronicity-related changes (lip sync, kinetic synchrony, plot-based synchrony, etc.); linguistic reasons (the absence, for example, of a specific term in the TL or the fact that it may be misleading); the understanding that certain fragments from the ST could make only a small contribution to the dubbed text, and so forth.

In the left-hand column we have reproduced the example from the original version (OV) by highlighting in small capitals the term or expression affected by the translation procedure in question; in the right-hand column there appears the corresponding piece of dialogue in the dubbed version (DV).

Assessing gain and loss is key to our analysis, since in the specific case of audiovisual translation —and more particularly in professional script translation for the purpose of dubbing— both can be pertinent and enriching occurrences. Omission or undertranslation, for example, may be necessary in order to preserve rhyme and metrical pattern in the target text (which are in turn essential features in the source text).

Undertranslation. Example (3)

OV	DV
CYRANO Et vous toucher, Monsieur, au dernier vers. LE VICOMTE Non! CYRANO	CYRANO Voy a heriros, señor, en el último verso. EL VIZCONDE ¡No! CYRANO
Non? Ballade du duel qu'en l'hôtel bourguignon...	¿No? Balada del duelo que en tono perverso...

Table 3

Here the French term *vers* has been translated as “verso”, a Spanish word that rhymes with “perverso” (perverse) in the target text. Thus we find a mistranslation in the benefit of rhyme: *hôtel bourguignon* becomes “perverso”. Differing rhyme effects can furthermore be observed in the OV and the DV, whereas the omission of the term *hôtel bourguignon* clearly serves the purpose of facilitating rhyme with an element in the previous phrase. The sound code (ON) for this dialogue, as well as the fact that it is framed in a close up shot, allow for the actor’s mouth to remain visible at all times, so that the translator must carefully stick to lip sync and isochrony and ultimately choose between providing the culture-bound French term *hôtel bourguignon* or attaining rhyme: the translator’s work is clearly constrained by factors involved in audiovisual translation.

The other general procedure, overtranslation, is likewise common in the translated script. The left-hand column features an illustration from the original version (OV), while on the right we have reproduced the corresponding dubbed version (DV). Small capitals have once again been used to mark the term or expression that has undergone expansion or overtranslation.

Moreover the translated text (the dubbing script) features a series of gains with regard to the original screenplay. In this case, the use of additional information becomes a necessary translation procedure.

Overtranslation. Example (4)

V.O.	V.D.
<p>CYRANO Faudra-t-il que je fasse, ô Monarque des drôles, Une plantation de bois sur vos épaules?</p>	<p>CYRANO ¿Tal vez será preciso, Monarca estrambótico, que mi bastón te zurza un tatuaje caótico?</p>

Table 4

The choice of translating *plantation de bois* as *bastón* (“baton” or “rod”) is motivated by a peculiar fact: during the scene a tapping sound caused by wood is audible in the film’s composite track and justifies the use of the word *bastón*, which otherwise provides a correct equivalence for the metrical scheme. Kinetic synchronicity is thus achieved in a way that further contributes towards the rhyme effect in combination with the use of the Spanish words *estrambótico* (“bizarre”) and *caótico* (“chaotic”). The connotations of the French phrase *La plantation de bois sur vos épaules*—an expression copied by Rostand in a letter addressed by Cyrano to Montfleury—is completely lost in the Spanish translation.

Transposition. Example (5)

OV	DV
<p>DE GUICHE On me croira parti et ce soir, sous le masque. Laissez-moi revenir vous voir, chère fantasque!</p>	<p>DE GUICHE Me esconderé allí, y esta noche enmascarado,... Dejad que venga a veros, ángel amado.</p>

Table 5

In this sequence we find an example of the procedure named transposition, deliberately used by the translator in order to find a matching rhyme with the following line, since a more literal translation would have failed to achieve that goal. Thus the original *sous la masque* (preposition + article + noun) has morphed in the dubbed version into the past participle *enmascarado* (“masked”), which suits the required purpose. We may well posit that the procedure employed is indispensable in the context of this translation.

Modulation. Example(6)

OV	DV
<p>CYRANO Gros homme, si tu joues... Je vais être obligé de te fesser les joues!</p>	<p>CYRANO si actúas...Te juro que vas a probar mi estaca! ¡Vaca,</p>

Table 6

Here we find two instances of modulation: in the first one, the translation *gros homme* introduces a semantic shift by its rendering as *vaca* (“cow”) in the dubbed version —a Spanish word that accomplishes rhyme with the following verse, which also includes the modulation of the original expression *te fesser les joues*. The latter was translated as *probar mi estaca* (“try my stick”): a semantic shift which does not disrupt the story either in any degree. Here is therefore another instance of a readjustment driven by rhyme and line length requirements. The shooting code (a close up when the word *vaca* is being pronounced), as well as the ON sound code, jointly determine lip sync in translation and isochrony in the utterances by the character of Cyrano de Bergerac.

Rearrangement of discourse elements. Example (7)

OV	DV
<p>RAGUENEAU Vous avez mal placé la fente de ces miches: Au milieu la césure- entre les hémistiches</p>	<p>RAGUENEAU Ese adorno está mal, le falta levadura. Entre los hemistiquios se pone la cesura</p>

Table 7

In the dubbed version the terms *hemistiquios* (“half-lines”) and *cesura* (“caesura”) have swapped places with regard to the original sentence, once again accomplishing rhyme by using the same elements yet in a different order. Compensation in this case is not motivated by semantic reasons, but rather by the need to reproduce the rhyme scheme. The rearrangement of discourse elements in translation goes to show the reason why the translator resorts to such a procedure —the need to produce rhyme.

Adaptation. Example (8)

OV	DV
DE GUICHE On me croira parti et ce soir, sous le masque. Laissez-moi revenir vous voir, chère fantasque!	DE GUICHE Me esconderé allí, y esta noche enmascarado,... Dejad que venga a veros, ángel amado.

Table 8

The translation of the original expression *chère fantasque* by the Spanish one *ángel amado* (“beloved angel”) involves a semantic variation by comparison with the source text, although thanks to this variation the rhyme effect is successfully achieved. At the same time, the translator is constrained by the ON sound code at the exact point when the actor pronounces the line’s last portion, where the rhyme is embedded in the word *amado*. Therefore we are in front of a clear example of an adaptation which is justified by rhyme yet unwarranted in terms of semantic content.

Example (9):

OV	DV
CARBON Tous plus nobles que... plus nobles que des filous. Parlant baston...	CARBON Más nobles que... Más nobles que el acero malhablados...

Table 9

Here is a justified adaptation of the original phrase *parlant baston*⁵, which is rendered as *malhablados* (“foul-mouthed”). The translation here is not governed by rhyme, since neither in the original French text nor in the Spanish dubbed version are the respective words involved in the rhyme pattern. The character who utters these words, Carbon, uses the term *baston* in reference to heraldry matters in the dialect of Gascony. The awkwardness in achieving rhyme is a deliberate expedient employed by the author in the original sequence

⁵ Coarse and rude speech that represents the opposite of careful standard French. The use of vulgar language is for these characters a mark of identity.

(likewise reflected in the dubbed version), since the character quoting these lines does not properly know the poem used to introduce the theatre troupe and hesitates as to the correct pronunciation of the verses. The ON sound code, together with the close-up shot, have an important bearing on the translation work.

Example (10)

OV	DV
DE GUICHE Avez-vous lu le Don Quichotte? CYRANO <p style="text-align: right;">Je l'ai lu.</p> Et me découvre au nom de cet hurluberlu.	DE GUICHE ¿Habéis leído Don Quijote? CYRANO <p style="text-align: right;">Sí,</p> Y me quito el sombrero ante hidalgo tan noble.

Table 10

What we have here is an adaptation of the French term *hurluberlu*, meaning “eccentric, nutty” in a colloquial register, into the Spanish phrase *hidalgo tan noble* (“such a noble gentleman”), which provides neither the style nor the meaning of the original adjective, so that the adaptation is unjustified from the point of view of content. Rhyme and metrics, once again, may support the choice, apart from the fact that, the sound code being ON, the translator must spare phonetic synchronicity and isochrony. We may however observe that the first pairing of lines fails to reproduce rhyme in the dubbed version. The translator conveys the feeling of being incapable of finding a Spanish adjective that rhymes with *sí* (“yes”) in this particular sequence while fulfilling the requirements of argumentative synchrony.

After an in-depth analysis of both the original and the translated script, we may conclude that the study of verbal transfers contributes interesting information. Contrastive linguistic analysis of the French original and the Spanish dubbed version has allowed us to illustrate the translation techniques involved in the transfer of the rhyme scheme. The translated script succeeds in steadily preserving rhyme despite such constraints and conditioning factors as play a part in the rhymed translation. The focus on script excerpts where the resulting rhymed translation departs from a literal rendering points at the existence of a number of translation procedures like cultural and functional equivalence, transposition, modulation, compensation, reduction and expansion. We may likewise establish that, with regard to the source text, there are both gains and losses.

Following a quantitative analysis, we may state that the original French text consists of about 11,500 words, of which 60% have been literally

transferred, whereas 40% underwent a non-literal transfer by resorting to several non word-for-word translation procedures.

Our analysis of gains and losses produced in the process of translation, on the other hand, detected 946 non-translated words, which amounts to a 20.5% loss in the Spanish script. By contrast, as many as 994 words were found in those stretches of text where translation departed from a literal strategy, involving a 21.6% gain in the dubbed text by comparison with the original screenplay.

We were able to ascertain that demands posed by the rhyme scheme largely account for the translation procedures employed in the Spanish version. There is no doubt that such was the main goal of the translator in keeping with the demands of the text's style, so that we may postulate that rhyme is clearly the pivot point on which the dubbing-targeted translation of this particular text hinges.

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