



Translation and Asymmetry: Denaturalising the Use of English as a Sign in Spanish Women's Magazines

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we will examine a translation phenomenon which emerges from the contact between English and Spanish, two deeply asymmetrical languages in terms of power, and which consists of the constant embedding of English words and expressions in the discourse of Spanish women's magazines. Following Vidal, we consider that these words in English are a translation, since the fact that they are intentionally written in this language provokes some sensations which the readers would not receive if the information was transmitted solely in Spanish. By analyzing real examples of this phenomenon, we will try to denaturalize, in the sense of Barthes, the presence of the current lingua franca in this type of mass media in Spain, a country with a low English proficiency. Thus, we will argue that English is not used in this context for communicative purposes, but for seductive ones.

KEYWORDS : translation, asymmetry, power, ideology.

1. Introduction: a Baumanian liquid world

In the 21st century, the world in which we happen to live has become a global village (McLuhan & Powers, 1989), a space with an essence that lies, as Beck (1999) has it, in the death of isolation. This is a world where everything has become a "contact zone", in Pratt's words, that is to say, a social space "where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (1992, p. 4). To put it in another way, the whole planet is nowadays of necessity a territory of understanding in which the Other becomes a constant presence in the life of the Same, to use Foucault's terminology (2002/1966), creating ineluctable encounters to which there may be two responses: either hospitality, as Derrida (2000) has it, or conflict.

In this context of unavoidable interdependence, the circulation of people and assets has become a constant theme together with the flow of information, discourse, ideologies, and what concerns us here, languages. This paper analyses a linguistic phenomenon that has arisen in Spain in recent years in the so-called glossy women's magazines that has emerged from the contact between English and Spanish, two languages that are highly asymmetrical in terms of power and which are revealed to us as being in conflict for reasons that will be examined, as they are immersed in a relationship of "symbolic violence" as Bourdieu (2001/1998) has it.

2. Object of research

The aforementioned phenomenon consists of the constant introduction of Anglo-American words into a discourse in Spanish that targets a type woman reader who for reasons that will be given probably does not speak English. Various examples are given here of the resultant hybrid language that can be found in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *Elle*, or *Vogue*, among others.

In the first place, a superficial glance at their covers suffices to reveal that English has a strong presence in this type of publication. For instance, in the cover of the Spanish September 2014 edition of *Cosmopolitan*, we can read in large print "I love Style", and immediately below "prendas fashion" [fashion clothes] and "ideas low cost" [low cost ideas]. In the top right-hand corner we also find "belleza cheap&chic: make up, pelo, tips y tratamientos desde 0 €" [cheap&chic beauty: make up, hair, tips and treatments from EUR 0]. Likewise, alongside the arm of the cover girl Olivia Palermo she is referred to as an "it girl". In the case of the July 2012 cover of *Elle*, it can be observed that English words occur in all the expressions highlighted in large print. "Moda SUMMER. El look de las vacaciones" [Summer fashion. The holiday look] is thus found in a strategic position in the bottom left-hand corner. To the left of the model we can also read "Shopping. Last Call: los 25 imprescindibles de low a luxe" [Shopping. Last Call: 25 musts from low to luxe], and to her right "Body a punto. Ponte en forma antes de la playa" [Beach body ready. Get fit for the summer].

The same thing happens inside the magazine, where the presence of

the English language is not only maintained but increases significantly. We have found that this language plays a prominent part in the titles of the sections, the headings and the main body of the texts itself. The following example from the June 2013 *Vogue* edition gives us an idea of the scope of the phenomenon, which permeates all elements without exception.

"Años después de las Hunter llenas de barro de Kate Moss en Glastonbury, la Costa Oeste acoge la gran alfombra roja hipster. Las marcas quieren unir su nombre al del festival. Los fotógrafos de street style no dan abasto. Y las asistentes, pese a la actitud easy going del evento, preparan su outfit hasta el último detalle con mayor o menor fortuna —cuando conviven en un look microshorts, tie dye, chalecos con flecos, sombreros cowboy, Dr. Martens, cropped tops y flores en el pelo, la línea entre lo cool y el disparate puede llegar a ser muy fina."

Before continuing it is to stress that this hybrid language does not actually exist in the Spanish society. What we have here is quite different from the situation of Spanglish in the USA: outside the pages of these magazines it simply disappears. It should also be emphasised that none whatsoever of the English terms and expressions used fill a terminological gap in Spanish as all of them have a widely used equivalent in this language.

We agree with Vidal in that we consider this phenomenon to be one of translation, and share her opinion that these words and expressions in English "are a translation, because the fact that they are intentionally left in this language creates connotations that [the Spanish public] would not perceive if they had been rendered in Spanish" (2012, p. 1030; emphasis in the original). The fact is that although dictionaries maintain the contrary, "lipstick" is not the same as "pintalabios"; or at least not in this context. Neither do "jeans" transmit to us the connotations that "vaqueros" do. Those who draft these texts in Spanish, or rather from Spanish, are translating without knowing it. And we translators do the same when we retain words from the original in English when we are commissioned to translate a text of this kind into Spanish.

In view of the foregoing, it is clear that in this paper our starting point is a wide conception of translation such as that defended by Bassnett (1980) and Tymoczko (2007), among many others. We therefore consider that we are concerned with a translation phenomenon which is at the same time interlinguistic and intralinguistic, and for reasons that we shall see below, also intersemiotic.

3. English and Spanish: asymmetrical languages

Although we have contextualised this phenomenon in a landscape dominated by globalisation, this is not in itself sufficient to explain its emergence. In fact, the current *lingua franca* is scarcely apparent in a Spanish context with the exception of advertising and the magazines being analysed. Likewise, the Spanish population has one of the lowest levels of knowledge of English in the European Union, which moreover falls drastically in adult age brackets which is precisely

where the target public for these magazines is to be found. If we wish to understand the *reason* for this phenomenon we need to begin by analysing the current world situation of the English language.

Due to the consolidation of the United States as the leading world power in all conceivable senses and fields since the end of the Second World War, English has become the international code for communication *par excellence*. This is so to such an extent that the language of Shakespeare is also that of the economy, politics, business, academic discourse, industry, science, technology, the cinema, the catwalk, and many other fields. Furthermore, it is the official language of all world organisations of political and economic importance, and in the immense majority of these is also used as the working language.

In short, nowadays English is the language of power and therefore the language with power. As Crystal (1997) points out, the various societies perceive it as the language of progress that allows a person fluent in it access to success. From this perspective Spanish and English show themselves to be two languages in conflict in the sense that the latter is clearly in a position of dominance that the former lacks. In this relationship English is the "major language", as Deleuze and Guattari (2005 [1987]) have it, and Spanish the "minor language" that is not supported by power; its speakers are much less likely to be listened to. For historical and social rather than linguistic reasons therefore, in the current world context English has the privilege of being the "legitimate language", to use Bourdieu's (1995/1982) terminology, that belonging to the dominant community, the authorised language that creates authority (*ibid.*) which must be adopted if one is not to be doomed to silence.

From this perspective the massive presence of English in the pages of Spanish magazines no longer seems natural, innocent, and innocuous, and we begin to glimpse that the *little black dresses*, the *musts* and the *it-girls* conceal an ideological use of the language that needs to be denaturalised to use Barthes's (1957) term. This is precisely what we propose here.

4. English as a tool for seduction

The key to the use of this translating strategy is to be found in the "symbolic capital", in Bourdieu's (1990) terminology, that is associated with English and which in the words of Brian Lennan confers upon it "powers of legitimation and consecration" (2010, p. 29).

This is the explanation to its presence in the content we are analysing here: its capacity to seduce the Spanish public by the activation of positive references that are accumulated in the collective unconscious and are associated with this language. It is in its power to evoke certain worlds, situations, concepts, values, and emotions that its true power of seduction lies. The thing is that languages also connote, not only words. In this way English becomes a tool that seeks to involve the emotional rather than the rational side of those receiving its message. Hence, English is used in the context of Spanish magazines as a symbol which through its "second level meanings", as Barthes (1957) has it, gradually shapes the discourse that these magazines wish to produce. In other words, they contribute to the construction of a certain "public narrative" on the 21st-century woman, as Baker (2006) has it, a modern, cosmopolitan, and victorious woman that pays particular attention to her physical appearance and with whom potential buyers wish to identify. English therefore cooperates with the remainder of elements such as colours, shapes, the actresses

and models chosen, and many more factors so as to create an ideal of beauty, success, and happiness which is in short what these magazines sell and what their consumers purchase. As an example, in the March 2013 cover of *Elle* we can observe that all the words inserted in English are related to the concepts of exclusivity, modernity, and success to which we are referring. We read "*Beauty VIP*", "*Las ciudades más in*" [the coolest cities] and "*Shopping: Grandes HITS en clave low*" [Shopping. Great HITS at a low price].

5. Conclusion

In the light of the aforementioned, we can conclude by saying that speaking is never neutral, as Irigaray has it (2002/1985), and naturally translation never is either. This is why in the globalisation era, in which we translators are key components in the interchange of informative, cultural, and ideological flows worldwide, beginning to analyse our work in ethical terms becomes especially peremptory. We should reflect on *what* we do when we translate, as with our work we turn into socio-political actors whose actions entail consequences that always transcend purely linguistic parameters.

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