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# WHEN TRANSLATING BECOMES A LUDIC ACTIVITY

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Suggesting that translating is ludic can come as a surprise, as for most of us translating involves finding a corresponding word in another language – hardly a ludic process. This article focuses on the translation of works by the OuLiPo, a group of French writers who experiment with the use of constraints in writing. My approach to translation consists of identifying the Oulipian constraints inherent in the source text and adapting them to the target text. This approach implies finding a way, in the translation process itself, of overcoming the constraint without transgressing it, which in turn engages with the imaginative content of translation. I will suggest that the ludic aspect of translation is dual. It consists of the ludic elements derived from the use of constraints effective in the source text and the ludic elements in the act of translating. Translating a work by the OuLiPo indicates this double-edged interaction between constraint and play.

## Common misconceptions with regard to translation

First and foremost, one must reflect on the following questions: what is to translate? What is translation? What is a translator? A common misconception involves defining 'translation' as a mechanical transfer of words from one language into another. This unspecific notion of translation, not always wrong in itself but incomplete, suggests that equivalent words exist between languages. For example, 'a car' is 'une voiture' in French and 'a girl' is 'ein Mädchen' in German. This assumption implies that this works for all words in all languages. However, theorists in the field of translation studies have long agreed that the translating act is neither straightforward nor mechanical. One example of this non-equivalence is the impossible task of finding direct equivalents in English for all the types of chillies used in Mexican cuisine. Another example is the impossibility of knowing whether a child is referring to his/her paternal or maternal grandmother when he or she uses the word 'grandmother' in English, whereas a Danish child has a choice between 'farmor' [paternal grandmother] and 'mormor' [maternal grandmother].

The problem behind the difficulty of translating is equivalence itself. A word in one language often does not have an existing equivalent in another language. A famous example given by Jakobson (Venuti, 2004, 139) is 'cheese' and its difficulty in being translated into Russian, for there is no exact equivalent. The English word 'cheese' includes cottage cheese, which is not included in the Russian word for 'cheese'. Jakobson also points out that translation most often deals with transferring 'entire messages' from one language into another rather than just 'separate code units.' This means that to translate 'cheese' into Russian in a given context, the translator needs to decide whether to use 'cheese' (excluding cottage cheese) or solely 'cottage cheese' in order to fit the context and the message of the source text. Jakobson's own definition of translation foregrounds the idea of making choices when he defines translation as an 'interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language' (Venuti, 2004, 139). Thus translation is not merely a mechanical process, consisting of finding equivalents in another language. It involves linguistic understanding beyond the knowledge of foreign words, as well as the skills to understand and make decisions in a way that is appropriate given context, thereby enabling a message to exist in another language. Snell-Hornby (2006, 21) justly describes Jakobson's idea of 'transfer' as one of the turning points in translation studies, writing: 'What is striking about this model is, however, that it goes further than the traditional systems and sees translation from a semiotic point of view as a transfer of signs, as an interpretation of signs by means of other signs.'

Jakobson allows for meaning to be exceeded by including in his definition all of the transferable elements embedded in a given sign. He touches on these peculiarities by putting into practice the interpretation and transfer process in order to translate the message (Venuti, 2004, 143). A

definition of translation is very difficult to keep concise. The transfer of a message including its meaning as well as its form, sound-patterns, rhythmic and syntactic order, cultural connotations and inscription can take many detours and pathways, which will require the translator to use a number of approaches. Vinay and Darbelnet (1995, 31) draw attention to the creativity involved in translating as 'translators may notice gaps, or lacunae, in the [target language] which must be filled by corresponding elements, so that the overall impression is the same for the two messages.' The last part of their explanation describes the target text as overall equivalent of the source text, and not a word-for-word equivalent.

Jakobson's definition also discards the initial misconceptions with regard to translation, and in fact requires the translator to make a number of linguistic and creative[1] decisions in the light of both the source-text and the target-text language.

**Translating the OuLiPo**

The OuLiPo, or Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, is a group of writers initially gathered around Raymond Queneau and François le Lionnais. The Oulipian works started in December 1960; since then, the group and its activities have been constantly developing. Le Lionnais (1988, 33) claims that the OuLiPo aims to *'découvrir des structures nouvelles et […] donner pour chaque structure des exemples en petite quantité*' (discover new structures and […] for each structure, provide a few examples)[2]. The OuLiPo's work consists of two aspects: one aims to analyse and the other to synthesise. Le Lionnais (1988, 33) clarifies:

> *Il y a deux Lipos: une analytique et une synthétique. La Lipo analytique recherche des possibilités qui se trouvent chez certains auteurs sans qu'ils y aient pensé. La Lipo synthétique constitue la grande mission de l'OuLiPo, il s'agit de découvrir de nouvelles possibilités inconnues des anciens auteurs.*
>
> (There are two Lipos: one which aims to analyse and the other to synthesise. The first Lipo searches for possibilities embedded in certain authors without them realising it. The second Lipo represents the greatest mission of the OuLiPo, which is to discover new possibilities unknown to the previous generations of authors.)

The OuLiPo revisits past literature and aims to discover new ones by using as a driving force predetermined constraints. The Oulipian authors choose a constraint, which they observe while writing a poem or a book. For example, the lipogram forbids the use of a certain letter. The constraint itself is not an Oulipian invention, but the Oulipian Georges Perec mastered an e-less lipogram in his novel *La Disparition* (1969). Constraints can be imposed on vocabulary, grammar, narrative rules, versification or fixed forms, all of which the OuLiPo re-use to generate their literature (OuLiPo, 1988, 16). The author turns the predetermined constraint into a challenge to be overcome. The Oulipian author is defined as '*un rat qui construit lui-même le labyrinthe dont il se propose de sortir*.' (a rat, which builds its own maze from which it challenges itself to escape.) (Qu'est ce que l'OuLiPo)

The Oulipo also experimented with translational games. Perec, for instance, wrote fifteen variations on Verlaine's poem 'Gaspar Hauser chante'. Colombat explains (2005) 'le texte original est transformé par des manipulations diverses qui jouent tant sur le fond que sur la forme

[1] Further examples of correcting these misconceptions can be found in translation studies. One of them is Susan Bassnett, who begins her book *Translation studies* (2002, 12) by claiming that translation is still 'perceived as a secondary activity, as a "mechanical" rather than a "creative" process.'

[2] All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

(disposition dans la page)' [the original text is transformed and manipulated as much in its form as in its content]. The OuLiPo's constrained writing and translational experiments bring to the fore their ludic conception of writing, which should also appear in the target text.
Translators of the OuLiPo face a choice: should they approach the language on the page and treat it like any text, transferring the original written text into another language, or should they take into account the role of constraint in their approach? There is no such thing as a unique translation method, and there is no such thing as one unique translation. Thus a multitude of approaches and translations are possible. As the title of this article suggests, I aim to investigate the second approach, that of incorporating constraints in the translation process. To illustrate how translation becomes a ludic activity, I will first provide a case study and then reflect on it, in order to highlight and examine the role of constraint and its link to play in translation.

**Case study**

*Source text*

Voyez valser les saucisses, les salamis, les salaisons, les salpicons. Abject salmigondis ! Et quelle salade ! Venez voir le sabbat des suppôts de Satan qui vessent, les salauds, et qui vomissent. Adorable Suzanne, angélique Suzanne, vas-tu au secours de ces affreux soûlots, de ces silènes, de ces sybarites, de ces satyres ? Veux tu qu'ils te violent ? Sainte-Nitouche aux saillies ardentes de ces soudards, au stupre, tu voles !

*Gloss*

Voyez valser les saucisses, les salamis, les salaisons, les salpicons. Abject salmigondis. Et quelle salade !
*See waltz the sausages, the salamis, the salt meats, the salpicons[3]. Abject hotchpotch! And what a salad/lie !*
Venez voir le sabbat des suppôts de Satan qui vessent, les salauds, et qui vomissent.
*Come see the Sabbath of the fiends of Satan, who fart silently, the bastards, and who vomit.*
Adorable Suzanne, angélique Suzanne, vas-tu au secours de ces affreux soûlots, de ces silènes,
*Adorable Suzanne, angelic Suzanne, do you go to the rescue of these hideous drunkards, of these silenes[4]?*
de ces sybarites, de ces satyres ? Veux tu qu' ils te violent? Sainte-Nitouche aux saillies
*of these sybarites, of these satyrs? Want you that they you rape? Goody-Goody to/ with the protuberances/mating*
ardentes de ces soudards, au stupre, tu voles !
*ardent of these rude soldiers, to the stupre, you fly!*

*Target text*

Visualise and vibrate with the sausages, salamis, salt, and stuffing. Abject salad! And what stupidity! Visit and view the Sabbath of Satan's servants, which vulcanize - squealers - and vomit. Agape Suzanne, adoring Suzanne, do you venture to the service of these alcoholic sadists, these silenes, these sybarites, these satyrs? They vow to violate. Softy with ardent swellings, you vanish to the stupre of these soldiers!

**Description of my approach**

This short text was written by Noël Arnaud (OuLiPo, 1988, 172) who was president of the OuLiPo, after Raymond Queneau's death in 1984. At first, this text presents some lexical incongruities and some ambiguities. For instance, 'salmigondis' and 'salade' mean both a food and 'nonsense'/lie (*salmigondis*=as in the glossed 'hotchpotch' and *salade*= informal for 'lie, tall story' as well as 'salad'). The last sentence is also problematic, as it can be glossed in different ways, depending on the interpretation of its internal logic and of the word *saillie* ('protuberance',

[3] salpicon: A kind of stuffing for veal, beef, or mutton, also used as a garnish for vol-au-vents and the like. (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*)
[4] Silène: attendant of Bacchus.

but also 'the act of mating between animals') In fact, the sentence could be logically reorganized in different ways:

E.g.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sainte-Nitouche | aux saillies ardentes | tu voles | au stupre de ces soudards |
| Goody-goody | with hot protuberances | you rush | to being raped by these s. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sainte-Nitouche | tu voles | au stupre de ces soudards | aux saillies ardentes |
| Goody-goody | you rush | to being raped by these s. | who mate ardently |

Another difficulty for the translator working on an Oulipian text is in understanding the constraints used, as they are not always immediately apparent. Once we look beyond the odd stretches of meaning, we notice that all the verbs start with the letter <v>, all the substantives with the letter <s> and all the adjectives with the letter <a>. However, there is more to the text! The text was written following a pre-determined structure VVSSSSASSVVSSSVSVASASVSASSSSVVSSASSV where v=verbs, s=substantives and a=adjectives.

The translation displays the same syntactic and lexical constraints as the source text, as both the chosen Oulipian constraints intervened in the translation process and were not transgressed. I firstly made a list of substantives starting with <s>, verbs starting with <v> and adjectives starting with <a>. In the source text, some lexical fields such as food and orgy, debauchery characters, rape and sex can be identified. The story of the text can be summarised as a Sabbath or an orgy, which a naïve girl, Suzanne, might attend, risking rape by a number of debauched characters. I listed English words related to the lexical fields of the source text. Once the list was established, I started picking words from my list in order to assemble the target text, following the pre-determined structure VVSSSSASSVVSSSVSVASASVSASSSSVVSSASSV. The first line, placing words together according to the lexical field of food, is a case in point:

E.g. Voyez valser les saucisses, les salamis, les salaisons, les salpicons.
*See waltz the sausages, the salamis, the salt meats, the salpicons.*

This becomes in the target text:

Visualise and vibrate with the sausages, salamis, salt, and stuffing.

The first line shows that a very close translation is possible for the various food mentioned, as 'saucisses', 'salamis', 'salaisons', 'salpicons' respectively become 'sausages', 'salamis', 'salt', 'stuffing'. The 'salaisons' [salt meat] are translated as 'salt', but the word is placed in both texts in the middle of the list, thus creating the suggestion of salting the meats listed before and after.

Sometimes the translation cannot be as close to the source text, as with the sentences:

E.g. Abject salmigondis. Et quelle salade
*Abject hotchpotch! And what a salad/lie*

The difficulty lies in the two meaning of 'salade', reinforced by the word 'salmigondis'. Here it is important to keep an element related to the lexical field of food and one to the lexical field of a lie. The translation thus reads:

Abject salad! And what stupidity!

'Salad' in English will refer to the food, and evokes a mix, as a salad can also be mixed salad, while stupidity is slightly different from a lie, but the lie still evokes something which is not worth telling.

This example shows that this approach to translation is not exclusively concerned with meaning. Other aspects such as the initial sounds of each word and the structure prevail and influence the translation because of their central role in the production of the source text. This means that the result derives from the attention and the value given to the constraints behind the production of the source text. Having highlighted and explained the translation, I will now reflect on the approach to translating Oulipian texts, while dissecting the constraints involved in the translation process in order to shed light on the interaction between constraints and play.

**Reflections on the case study**

Constraints take two forms in the translation process. On one hand, there are the Oulipian constraints, and on the other, the constraints inherent to translation.

Looking at the first type, the Oulipian constraints were firstly qualified as the driving force behind writing. Boase-Beier and Holman (1998, 6) claim that 'constraint […] is one of the main sources of creativity.' They come to this conclusion after analysing the observation of the French poet Paul Valéry that 'rules may […] in some cases have creative qualities, suggesting ideas which would never have arisen in their absence' (Boase-Beier and Holman 1998, 7). Boase-Beier and Holman (1998, 6) clarify the interplay between creativity and constraint: the former is 'a response to [constraint], it is enhanced by it.'

Our case study requires an understanding of the constraints (the first letters to be used for substantives, adjectives and verbs and the structure of the text). Their application to the translation process leads to the production of the target text. Briggs (2006, 48) reminds us that the lipogrammists before the Oulipian authors had observed that 'what cannot be written generates everything that *is* written.' The apparent restrictions of the structure and lexis enabled the target text to be written, respecting the set constraints.

With regard to the second form, Boase-Beier and Holman (1998) and Briggs (2006) define translation as a 'constrained activity.' They measure the weight of the source text language as an apparent constraining burden for the translator who is to rewrite the source text in another language. Briggs (2006) sheds light on the use of constraints and what they can achieve, while drawing a parallel between translating and Oulipian writing. Briggs (2006, 44) observes that:

> For both kinds of writing [translation and lipogramme] the constraint is crucial: at once limiting and enabling, it is only by circumscribing what the writer can do that writing (that is, the particular kind of writing in question) gets started in the first place.

Writing becomes possible as it is enabled by the initial restriction, with the writer discovering the possibilities made available by the constraint. The translator devises an approach which respects the constraint and makes those possibilities appear: in this case study, the listing of substantives starting with <s>, adjectives with <a>, and verbs with <v>, was the approach or method established prior to the translation process.

Hjelmslev (1966, 66-67) defines language as 'put together like a game – chess for example or a game of cards…', because of the existing (and here also emphasized) constraints involved in the production of language:

> Like different games, different languages have rules that are totally or partially different. These rules govern the way in which one may or may not use a particular element, or piece, or

> card. They limit to a certain extent the possible combinations, but in language, as in chess, the number of possible combinations, the number of possible signs that can be formed, is immense.[5]

Hjelmslev's metaphor brings to the fore the role of 'play', defined by Huizinga (2002, 28) as 'a voluntary activity or occupation executed with certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted, but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life"'. The 'rules' here are the constraints involved in translating the source text, which requires the translator to overcome them by being creative. Although the target text is not a word-for-word translation of the source text, it keeps the forms of the global message or story, as well as the starting sounds of the three grammatical categories (verbs, substantives and adjectives).

'Translation', the title which I gave to my target text, remains an issue to be addressed. If one were to compare my target text with the source text, one might object that the former is not a translation of the latter. As suggested in the opening paragraph, the definition of 'translation' has led to misconceptions and heated debates. Word-for-word translation versus free translation has been an issue dividing many translators, until the recognition of the notion and role of creativity in the process of translating. This debate or choice faced by translator is illustrated in the last paragraph of Jakobson's essay. He discusses two possibilities for translating the formula 'traduttore, traditore' [translator, betrayer]. While 'the translator is a betrayer' would be accepted as a translation of the Italian, Jakobson regrets its lack of rhymes and 'paronomastic values', thus suggesting 'to change this aphorism into a more explicit statement and to answer the questions: translator of what message? betrayer of what values?' As well as giving an example, Jakobson raises the questions around the definition of translation (Venuti, 2004, 143). More recently, Clive Scott (Perteghella and Loffredo, 2006, 42) declared that:

> Translation transforms the ST [source text] as percept into the ST as concept. In such circumstances, we cannot desire to be accurate about, or faithful to, the ST. We can only desire that the ST continues to live its literariness differently, in a sequence of constant self differentiations, of constant perceptual renewals.

Given the broader definition of translating as a transforming act, translators have begun to explore creative landscapes, once forbidden by restrictive definitions of their activity.

Having discarded the misconceptions surrounding translation, the use of Jakobson's definition of translation as 'an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language' was a starting point to anchor my task of bringing translation and play into a different proximity with each other. Jakobson brings to the fore the notion of 'interpretation' in the translation process while Scott defines translating as a transforming act. Those definitions of translation free the translator from the inappropriate and unfruitful comparative exercise between source text and target text. Creativity is enabled through the use of constraints. The Oulipian works and their translation illustrate the role of constraints in the production of language. Using a number of constraints, including the choice of first letters for all nouns, adjectives and verbs and the set order of the structure, Arnaud's text was still able to convey some meaning, but that was not his first priority. Thus, the aim of the target text would be to re-use the constraints decided by the author and adapt their use in the translation process, and to provide the reader of the target text with an

[5] Quoted in English by Ehrmann, Jacques and Barry Lydgate, 'On Articulations: The Language of History and the Terror of Language' *Yale French Studies.* 39. 1967, 9-28

Oulipian text. Both forms of constraints appeared to be permissive, thanks to the ludic elements involved in the interaction between constraints and writing.


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