

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING A TRANSLATOR: ANALYZING ONE OF OSCAR WILDE'S MOST ICONIC PLAYS

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**Resumo:** O quanto as referências históricas e culturais em um texto influenciam sua tradução sem comprometer-la? E se o texto, além de literário, é de uma peça teatral? Este artigo tem como objetivo tentar responder a essas perguntas através de uma análise do texto *The Importance of Being Earnest*, do Oscar Wilde, e uma de suas traduções para o português brasileiro, *A importância de ser prudente* (2014).

**Palavras-chave:** Tradução, Teatro, Oscar Wilde.

**Abstract:** How much can the historical and cultural backgrounds in a text influence its translation without compromising it? And what if the text is not only a literary piece, but also a theatrical play? This article aims to attempt to answer these questions through an analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and one of its translations to Brazilian Portuguese, *A importância de ser prudente* (2014).

**Keywords:** Translation, Theatre, Oscar Wilde.

*Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation. (Oscar Wilde, De Profundis, 1897)*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Two men pretending to be someone they are not, and two women who fall in love with the men's counterfeit persona: that is the basic plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde's comedic satire of the London society in the 1890s. Although it seems simple, the historical background to the plot might present many challenging questions to any translator working with the play. When first reading it, however, a cautious translator of any language will probably find himself or herself dealing with quite the dilemma once they have finished reading the play: *how to translate the name Earnest?* The translation of proper names is quite an issue in literary translation, but, in this specific case, it gains more importance, for the proper name is also present in the title of the play.

An extremely clever pun made by Wilde, this word-play is likely to be lost in many translations due to the difficulty in finding two homophonous words with the same, or least

similar, meanings as the ones in the original text. And, similarly to its title, the entire play requires a careful language adaptation process: it is, ultimately, a satire of the Victorian society – a society that non-British readers might not be familiar with.

Considering this, the purpose of this article, therefore, is to analyse certain aspects and passages of the play, utilizing one of translations of the play into Brazilian Portuguese as backup: *A importância de ser prudente*, translated by Petrucia Finkler and published in early 2014. Along with some important notions on the translation of dramatic texts, this article proposes a discussion on how well this Portuguese version of the play works in transposing the foreign context and how readers might perceive such choices. For this purpose, some of Newark's formulations, regarding the translation of cultural items, presented in *A Textbook of Translation* (1988), are shared in many of the analyses.

## 2. *EARNEST & THE VICTORIAN ERA*

*The Importance of Being Earnest* first opened in London in early 1895, subtitled *A trivial comedy for serious people*. The play, however, is anything but trivial.

A fact just as important as the Ernest/earnest pun is for the reader to be able to place the play in the Victorian England of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a period of prosperity and extremely rigorous social standards, especially for women, of whom a purist behaviour was expected. The British Empire was at its peak. For the wealthy aristocracy, it was a time of high living and parties; the upper class did not work and their income came from inherited lands and investments. For the poor, however, it was a daily struggle for survival against poverty and hunger. Having a name, and a family name, connected with a relevant past had an important role in this society – it was how men proved their worth when looking for a wife.

It is often affirmed that *Earnest* came at a time when Wilde was feeling the pressure of supporting his family, and having to live up to social standards that he had trouble complying with. His personal struggles seemed to be reflected in the play. While married and with children, Wilde was a homosexual, which resulted in his being arrested for “gross indecency” and the play to be shut down less than three months after its opening. Two years later, and once again a free man, he exiled himself in Paris, where he saw his play published for the first time in 1898. From their hypocrisy to their never-ending vanity, Wilde makes fun of this idle society basically through dialogue, in a light-hearted, though hardly simple, manner.

Regarding the plot of the play, it introduces the figure of the *dandy*, which refers to men who are excessively concerned about their appearance, while trying to seem nonchalant about it, and use refined language. Algernon is a rich young man who discovers that his friend, Ernest, is actually called Jack – and Ernest is really the name of a made-up brother he uses in order to get away from his country house and paying bills. Jack also happens to be in love with Gwendolen, Algernon’s cousin, who claims she only loves Jack because she thinks he is called Ernest. Algernon ends up finding himself in the same predicament after pretending to be Jack’s brother and falling in love with his friend’s ward, Cecily. Both women only want to marry men named Ernest. All the while, Lady Bracknell, Algernon’s aunt and a symbol of the Victorian conservatism, seems rather unhappy with either match.

Witty dialogues accompany the reader throughout the entire play as well as Victorian moral standards. As Foster points out, “Wilde accomplishes this essentialization of folly by creating an ‘as if’ world in which ‘real’ values are inverted, reason and unreason interchanged, and the probable defined by improbability” (1956, p. 19-20).

By the end of the play, there is no doubt that it is in fact a social satire, but done so elegantly that the upper class themselves were unable to restrain themselves from laughing and enjoying Wilde’s daring move. The play received glowing reviews and marked the high point of the author’s career.

### 3. A PLAY FOR A READER, A TEXT FOR AN AUDIENCE

Theatre by itself is a translation. What the audience sees when watching a play is really an adaptation, a (singular) reading of a written text that was transferred to a different system; therefore, when watching a theatrical adaptation that was originally in another language, spectators are given a version of the story that has been so dwelt on it is impossible not to think of aspects that might have been overlooked or ignored. Translating is making choices and this process implies gains and losses.

Books can have footnotes, abridged or expanded, for any kind of cultural explanation a reader might need. Plays, however, do not have that luxury. There is no time or place to explain, for example, what marriage meant and how it was conducted in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Adaptations have to be made and, certainly, there will be puns or even simple descriptions, which were originally important but ended up fading from the play. Regarding this difficulty in conveying more while saying less, Newmark affirms that the text is “dramatic, with

emphasis on verbs, rather than descriptive and explanatory” (NEWARK, 1988, p. 172). Zatlín quotes Spanish playwright Caballero on the matter:

[...] the process of staging a play, particularly one that is not a contemporary work from the same country, is a process of translation that inevitably implies betrayal because it is impossible to take a literal approach to a ‘text that belongs to another period or another culture’ (CABALLERO *apud* ZATLÍN, 2005, p. 04).

*Earnest* encompasses both – a text that belongs to another period *and* another culture, making it more of a challenge to the translator. The importance of other aspects of a play – score, costumes, overall scenery – come to life here, where it can wordlessly show the audience its “footnotes”. The *mise-en-scène* concept of *performability*, defended by authors such as Pavis, is particularly useful for this point of view: that the dramatic text can only be comprehended in the context of its enunciation. The translation, in this case, will only be complete and fully understandable when being performed.

Contrary to this concept is the notion of *readability* and how a translator should not have to be concerned about how “playable” their translation will be, but rather focus on the text as a literary piece. Considering so many extralinguistic factors during the process of translation can be, as Bassnett puts it, a “superhuman task” (1991, p. 100).

As Finkler is a stage actress herself, one can only assume her experience on the matter is also a part of her translation. However, nowadays plays are rarely translated for the sole purpose of actually being performed in the theatre; most will live only as a literary piece. It can be assumed that with the expansion of Brazilian theatre groups invested in local plays and the lack of cultural identity with Wilde’s scenario, it is not unwise to say that we are now translating plays, such as Wilde’s, for an audience of readers.

Nevertheless, are these two methods of translation so distinct for us to put them into separate categories? Or are they complimentary, rather than contradictory? Regarding this topic, Nikolarea makes a very bold approach to the debate, merging the two concepts:

[...] the theoretical polarization of *performability* and *readability* is not very convincing when examining the extent to which postulates such as *performability* and *readability* can be applied and compared to the historical functioning of actual translations and theatrical performances. [...] this polarization is a reductionist illusion. Examination shows that, in

practice, there are no precise divisions between a performance-oriented translation and a reader-oriented translation, but rather there exists a *blurring of borderlines* (2002, p. 15, highlighted by the author).

Complementing this vision, Newark states that there should not be differences between an acting version and a reading version of a text (1988, p. 173). Translators should, of course, be aware that their translations have to be able to work well on stage. There needs to be harmony in the lines, in order for the characters not to appear fake or too robotic, as well an awareness that they lines will always be combined with visual elements. At the same time, however, the text cannot be so condensed or simplified in such a way that it might not make any sense on paper only. It is, quite simply, a matter of balance.

In *A importância de ser prudente*, this balance might seem a little off in certain places. The search for solutions consistent with both the cultural inheritance behind the play and adequate vocabulary is tricky, especially when considering the general public as the target audience. Nevertheless, this seems mostly to happen due to a “lack of footnotes possibility” that can be quite bemusing.

#### 4. THE PLAY IN TRANSLATION

In English, the homophonous duo *Ernest* and *earnest* work perfectly. When we turn to Portuguese, however, the choice is not that simple. *Earnest* is more commonly translated as *sério* or *sincero*, but both of these adjectives hardly sound like a common proper name. For this reason, the translator had to try to find another alternative.

Finkler’s solution here is smart: she uses *prudente*, a choice also made by Guilherme de Almeida, the first translator to publish the play in Brazilian Portuguese in 1959. Once a popular name in Brazil, it is also an adjective better translated into English as *prudent*, meaning “acting with or showing care and thought for the future”<sup>1</sup>. While not exactly the same as “resulting from or showing sincere and intense conviction”<sup>2</sup> as *earnest*, it works well with the purpose of the play. The method is also one indicated by Newark:

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<sup>1</sup> “Prudent”. Oxford dictionaries. *Oxford University Press*, 2014. Web. 25 May 2014.

<sup>2</sup> “Earnest”. Oxford dictionaries. *Oxford University Press*, 2014. Web. 25 May 2014.

Where both connotations (rendered through sound-effects and/or transparent names) and nationality are significant, I have suggested that the best method is first to translate the word that underlies the SL proper name into the TL, and then to naturalise the translated word back into a new SL proper name [...] (1988, p. 215).

Nevertheless, it is bothersome that Prudente is the only non-English name in the play. This brings some uneasiness to readers as it works as a reminder that the play being read is a translation. The adaptation is, of course, necessary for the plot, and while it is important to keep most English and Victorian elements, it might also seem quite odd to read his name along with *Algernon* and *Gwendolen* and others which are clearly in a different language (the part in which Algernon reads one of *Prudente Worthing's* cards sounds particularly unnatural). Perhaps, in this case, a little more alteration would have been necessary, so that the character would not stand out so much – *Cecily*, for example, can easily be adapted to *Cecilia*.

The aforementioned meaning of a marriage back in *Earnest's* setting can be exemplified as well. In a passage where Algernon and his aunt are discussing the passing of Lady Harbury's husband, he says: "I hear her hair turned quite gold from grief" (WILDE, 2011, p. 259), which is quite literally translated to "Ouvi dizer que os cabelos dela ficaram bem louros de tanta tristeza" (FINKLER, 2014, p. 27). Now, there is nothing wrong with this translation, but how understandable is the choice of *gold* (bringing the idea of happiness) instead of *gray* (often used to express sadness) here to Brazilian readers? It might seem just a classical male-oriented joke on marriage views, but it actually represents much more than that. In this situation, meaning is lost.

Marriage, back in Victorian times, was not commonly arranged. However, there was still a lot of social pressure to do so; you were encouraged to marry for "love", but only, of course, as long as your significant other was also a part of the upper class. It was a business transaction; a social obligation – one Wilde himself had to fulfil. The notion of matrimony as the opposite of joy and freedom is quite strong in his work. It is also possible that the use of the word *gold*, associated with wealth, is also a reference to an inheritance. The fact is that these associations are lost with the use of the word "louro". In this case, "da cor do ouro" or "dourados" would seem more suitable.

Another smart choice is made when Cecily says to Gwendolen, "When I see a spade I call it a spade" (WILDE, 2011, p. 310). In Portuguese, using such words would not make much sense. An expression of equivalent meaning, but that in no way resembles the original in terms of vocabulary, is therefore used in the translation: "Tratemos de *dar nome aos bois*" (FINKLER,

2014, p. 93). This adaptation shows a way of engaging the audience without losing the character's original remark.

Something that really catches the attention of the reader – and, unfortunately, not in a good way – is the dialogue between Jack and Lady Bracknell when talking about his political views. In the original, we have:

LADY BRACKNELL (*sternly*)  
 [...] What are your polities?  
 JACK  
 Well, I am afraid I really have none. I am a Liberal Unionist.  
 LADY BRACKNELL  
 Oh, they count as **Tories**. (WILDE, 2011, p. 265-66)

Simply put, a *tory* is a member of the Conservative Party in Great Britain. However, the word has no equivalent in Portuguese. When we take a look at the translation, confusion ensues:

LADY BRACKNELL (*austera*)  
 [...] Qual é sua posição política?  
 JACK  
 Bem, receio que eu não tenho nenhuma. Sou um liberal unionista.  
 LADY BRACKNELL  
 Ah, esses contam como sendo **tóris**. (FINKLER, 2014, p. 39)

*Tóris* is hardly the translation of *tories* – in fact, in Brazilian Portuguese, it does not seem to be a word at all. Most Portuguese texts simply italicize “tory” or “tories” when referring to this particular part of British history and culture. Here, therefore, we have an inaccuracy caused by a literal translation, which might have been caused by lack of research. Readers have no way of knowing what Lady Bracknell actually means; not even that she is referring to political parties and not something else (a metaphor, for example).

Anyone unfamiliar with British politics of that time is unable to immediately catch Wilde's clever joke with the Liberal Unionist Party and its position towards the Home Rule for Ireland Bill (it should be noted that Wilde was Irish, not English). That, however, does not excuse a word choice that keeps readers from understanding, at the very least, what is being

said in a more practical sense. Using the word *conservadorista* might have been better, in this case.

## 5. FINAL REMARKS

*The Importance of Being Earnest* has a very specific setting and, therefore, can be a little difficult to translate. The manoeuvres needed to keep the cultural barrier from damaging the comprehensibility of the dramatic text are considerable and the text requires an extensive knowledge of the Victorian Age from the translator. As no translation is a perfect equivalent of its original, but rather, as most theories state, a new original, some of the more specific jokes and puns might be lost, but it is important for the translator to know that a more literal approach is not always best: it confuses the reader or the audience when there is something that they cannot relate to.

It is also important to remember the balance between written text and play; while one can rely on footnotes and brief explanations (however condemned this practice can be to some editors), the other requires bolder interferences on cultural aspects.

The reading is, of course, much more enjoyable to someone who does have knowledge of the social background surrounding the play. Be that as it may, the translation does not keep the reader from laughing and being entertained by the play; it might just seem, as Wilde himself put it, a little more *trivial*.

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