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On Translating The Nicaraguan Dialect

Because of the political situation, Nicaragua, and Central America in general, have recently attracted the attention of US citizens. This attraction stimulated the interest in what one may call "the Central American chic," that is the general trend that focuses in the tragic Isthmus. In previous centuries, a passage to the Pacific drew the explorers; the meager gold, the conquistadores; the coastal plains, the English and US planters, the US marines, the Inter-American security, the protestant missionaries, the souls in the clutches of heathen Rome. In recent lusters, all these motivations have given way to a new one, the curiosity that draws political scientists and humanitarian sympathizers who want to see a new society born under Sandino's sombrero. Along with the numerous volcanoes, the recently gained literacy, the towel and toilet paper shortage, and the sweltering heat, US travellers bring back other impressions, including the Nicaraguans' cordial loquacity and their many poets. Among the latter they may have found Ruben Darío, the greatest Spanish poet, a Modernista, the post-Modernista Fr. Azarias Palais, the surrealist Alfonso Cortés, the neo-Romantic José Coronel Urtecho, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Fr. Ernesto Cardenal. The first three poets, now dead, do not pertain to the following jottings because Darío cannot be translated into English, and Fr. Palais and Cortés did not write in the local dialect; a few tips are addressed to those who may wish to render into English Coronel Urtecho, P.A. Cuadra, Fr. Cardenal, and other contemporary poets who stress the Nicaraguan speech in their verses.

Since this local language forms part of Castillian, one must consider two difficulties that arise upon translating Spanish into English. The first one stems from the many cognates that both languages share. Since one belongs to the Neo-Latin and the other to the Germanic, certain Latin root words acquire in English an erudite or affected tone absent from Spanish. Therefore, the translator should ascertain the original's flavor and recreate it, preferably with an Anglo-Saxon term, e.g., "facilidad" should become "ease" rather than "facility," which might suggest something else. An example in this regard shows the pitfalls cognates can cause. When Fr. Merton died, Fr. Cardenal, his disciple and friend, wrote an elegy wherein he contrasted Fr. Merton's spiritual life and death to the empty existence many people led and ended with "jubilación en Miami," "retirement in Miami." A famous US poet rendered it as "jubilation in Miami," and missed the point entirely since the "jubilación" did not bring "júbilo," "glee," or "joy," or "merriment," etc. into the poem in question. Another hindrance originates from the Spanish preposition "de," which means "of" or "from." In English, an apostrophe and an "'s" convey the possessive genitive meaning more efficiently than the cumbersome "of."

These remarks only pertain to translating Spanish into English, and they do not delve into certain idiosyncracies of the Nicaraguan dialect that complicate the rendition. As with other Central American languages, except for Panamanian, Nicaragua has many archaisms, pronouns and idioms long extinct in standard Castillian. This antiquated nature appears in the second person. In correct Spanish there are five, "Usted" and "Ustedes," singular and plural polite forms, "tú" and "vosotros," singular and plural intimate, and "vos," rarely used now in standard speech and only in addresses to popes, archbishops, bishops, emperors, kings, and princes. A highly formal pronoun, "vos" has become the common informal second person singular in Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and Central
America, and it has replaced “tú”, the appropriate pronoun, cognate with English “thou,” now archaic. Since the misuse of “vos” for “tú” has only a parallel in the English “thee”, still spoken by religious groups in the XIX century, and even thou sounds affected now, the translator should find a vernacular form that interprets the original tone. Thus a poem by the young bard Luis Rocha entitled “¿Te acordás?” could become “D’you remember?,” even with the contraction, because the colloquial question in correct Castillian should say “¿Te acuerdas?”, addressed to “tú”. The homey “D’you remember!” carries through the shortened “acordás” verb, keeping the interrogative’s demodic tone.

The grammatical snags become less cumbersome in time. Other obstacles, however, keep plaguing the translator until he finds ways to overcome them. The most troublesome originates from the lack of a Nicaraguan dialect dictionary. The standard works, (Tana de Gámez, Simon and Schuster International English/Spanish Spanish/English (1973) and Edgar Allison Peers Cassell’s Spanish Dictionary (1960), do not define Nicaraguan terms, and when they describe synonyms from standard Castillian and better known dialects, they provide only vague words. Therefore, one must consult Spanish lexicons and encyclopaedias. The Diccionario de la lengua española by the Real Academia de la Lengua (1922), although very thorough, does not register incorrect or all dialectal terms. In contrast, the Enciclopedia universal ilustrada europeo-americana (1903?-1933), commonly referred to as the “Espasa-Calpet,” often defines the words, lists dialectical synonyms, and, on many occasions, even illustrates the item, providing the scientific names of plants and animals that other sources ignore. Every good university library has an Espasa-Calpet. In small colleges, one finds other encyclopaedias such as Diccionario enciclopedico Salvat (1942), the Enciclopedia Sopena, both Spanish, and the Mexican U.T.E.H.A., which is invaluable for American matters, particularly for pre-Columbian antiquities.

Among dialectical lexicons, Francisco J. Santamaría’s Diccionario de mejicanismos (1974) has helped a little to translate Nicaraguan poems. Unfortunately, it delves into the Mexican dialect and in order to benefit from its definitions one must then transform the Nahualt term used in Mexico to the word common in Nicaragua, where a modified Nahualt was spoken in the XVI century. Among other differences, the initial syllable dropped out; thus, the Mexican “guajolote” became the Nicaraguan “jolote,” (“pavo” in Standard Castillian, meaning “turkey”). Among other changes the x, originally pronounced sh, became s or j; the common diphthong hui, pronounced wee, changed to gii, pronounced gwee, and so on. In spite of these transformations and the difficulties they cause, Santamaría provides definitions and scientific names that can lead to the English words one needs.

In similar fashion, any dictionary of Salvadoran, Honduran and Costa Rican terms can prove useful to translate the Nicaraguan dialect. For instance, Alberto Membreno’s now classic Hondurenismos (3rd. ed., 1982) contains words used in Honduras and Nicaragua. Unfortunately, the work is dated; it was published in 1895, reedited and enlarged in 1897, and reprinted in 1982, unchanged. Moreover, as in the case of Mexican terms, the Honduran words mutate into something quite different in the Nicaraguan dialect, again in the first syllable or syllables, notably in plant and bird names.

The flora and fauna nomenclatures effect the hardest translating problems to solve. As mentioned before, the problems result form inadequate Spanish/English dictionaries. But a little effort can lead the lexicographer into an English name, usually from the British Antilles, that represents the Nicaraguan plant or bird with an image. This aspect cannot be disregarded because many contemporary Nicaraguan poets, notably P. A. Cuadra and Fr. Cardenal, constantly recreate the nature that surrounds them. Very often the tropical vision evoked by the translation may become accessible to the reader when he
can find a description in an English lexicon. In spite of this, many prominent translators leave the Indo-Hispanic names, alluring and exotic to be sure, but useless to the English speaker who may want to see a red-bean tree or hear a painted bunting.

The fauna, especially fowl, proves more difficult to translate than the flora. For some reason Nicaraguan trees and four-footed animals have their names registered in Spanish/English dictionaries. The colorful birds, however, still wait for the Noah that labels them before they can journey to the US literary shores. In all fairness, the problem in translating their names begins with the Spanish names, often confusing and misleading. Sometimes one finds three names or more for the same bird in one country. This happened because the explorer or the conqueror encountered a fowl that reminded him of some Spanish one, and he promptly misnamed the American bird with a Peninsular appellation. For example, “gorrión,” corruption of “gorrión,” or sparrow, was probably the first name applied to the hummingbird. The misnomer must have originated from the small size both birds share, so that “gorrión,” or “gorrión,” served to designate the hummingbird. The second noun came into being when the conqueror’s offspring struck roots in the New World, and watched the fowl’s habits and called it “picaflor,” “flowerpecker,” a more descriptive and poetic denomination. The third designation, the Indian and most authentic, survived both the conquistador’s and the criollo’s, and reasserted itself with a melodious ring, stressed by the accent on the last syllable, “colibrí.” In view of the misleading nature of the conqueror’s names, the translator should follow the criollo or the native label in order to find the accurate English word.

To accomplish this, one first checks out the Spanish term in Simon and Schuster’s dictionary. If the translated word seems too vague, or inaccurate, one looks into Santamaría’s Diccionari de mejicanismos, in order to secure a scientific label. If this fails, one proceeds to the Espasa-Calpet, which with its general orientation, might provide the technical tag. With this tag, one goes on to ornithological handbooks, usually printed and illustrated in the US. L. Irby Davis’ A Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Central America (Austin, Tx: UTP, 1972) with plates by F.P. Bennett Jr., has many scientific and English names, but it lacks the corresponding Spanish. Hugh C. Land’s Birds of Guatemala (Wynnewood, Pa.: Livingston Publishing Co., 1950), although thorough, does not index the many Spanish names, and without the scientific one the translator has to leaf through three hundred pages to find the local designation. Moreover, since the Guatemalan Spanish dialect has a heavy Mayan influence, Land’s field guide does not help much to translate Nicaraguan, which has borrowed from Nahualtl. Because of this, Ernest P. Edward’s Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico (Sweet Briar, Va.: Ernest P. Edwards, 1972) has proven the most useful. In addition to illustrations by Murrell Butler, Ernest P. Edwards, John O’Neill, and Douglas Pratt, it has Spanish descriptions by Miguel Álvarez del Toro, and Spanish names in the index.

In spite of the information Edward provides, in order to translate P. A. Cuadra’s Siete árboles contra el atardecer (Seven trees in the sunset), I had to consult a natural scientist on some bird names. Ornithologists and botanists, all poets at heart, respond with lively interest to translators that seek their aid. Finally, when the texts and scholars mentioned cannot lead to the desired English terms, one can leave the original words underlined. Perhaps the imaginative reader can hear an onomatopoeic sound in güis, pronounced guis, or visualize a watchmaker in relojero, or a widow in viuda.

With trees the translator runs into more readily solved crises. Even so, one has to try beyond the standard lexicons, such as Simon and Schuster’s International English/Spanish Spanish/English, that only translate some plant names or describe the trees briefly. For instance, Simon and Schuster does not define elequeme. In the Espasa-Calpet I found
that in Venezuela the *elequeme* is known as *bucare*, that its scientific label is *Erythrina velurina*, that it gives shade to coffee plants, etc. Simon and Schuster only defined *bucare* as a “shade tree.” Since this laconic explanation could refer to a royal palm, an oak or a maple, I consulted Vernon H. Heywood’s and Stuart R. Chant’s *Popular Encyclopaedia of Plants* (Cambridge: C U Press, 1982). In spite of an index with scientific and common labels, this work did not list *elequeme* or *Bucare*. In despair, I perused a few books in the science stacks. Among the dozen or so examined, two stood out: Edwin A. Meinninger’s *Flowering Trees of the World for Tropics and Warm Climates* (N. York: Hearthside Press Inc., 1962) had delightful photographs, and melodious “native” names, but it did not register any English ones. Fortunately, Samuel J. Record’s and Robert W. Hess’ *Timbers of the New World* (New Haven: YUP, 1943) yielded the desired quest. Although it only had a few black and white illustrations, it more than compensated this lack with a comprehensive index nominorum in Latin, Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. Among the latter appeared *elequeme*, *gualiqueme* in Honduran dialect, next to a plethora of denominations from the British Antilles, Belize, and Guyana. The search had lasted four days but it was worth it because a visual image could be conveyed to the reader through the English “red-bean tree.” This choice followed the scientific label, *Erythrina*, latinized word from the Greek erythros, “red.” On the other hand, I remembered that the *elequeme*, known also as *pito*, “whistle,” as well as *gualiqueme* was a joy to watch at the end of the dry season in late April, when children plucked the scarlet blossoms to whistle through them, competing with the hummingbirds, eager to suck the blossoms’ nectar.

Other scientific works can assist the translator in rendering into English the Nicaraguan dialect, rich in poetry and poor in dictionaries. For instance, some years ago, a book on the flora of the Mayan region provided names such as “golden May bloom” and “Barbados pride,” terms necessary to translate one of Fr. Cardenal’s poems.

In addition to these aides, the translator needs an enduring interest in exotic birds and plants, and patience. Whoever undertakes the rendition must not yield to the frustration caused by inadequate dictionaries. He must be ready to search into scientific volumes that may register the right term needed to render the poetic image into English. Someone may ask why should one strain so much just to translate the name of an animal or tree about which the reader might not care at all. This attitude is exclusively the audience’s right. The translator should only worry about producing a rendition as accurate and comprehensible as possible. If the English speaker chooses to ignore the fowl or tree, that is fine. On the other hand, the translator has done his job, and if the reader checks out the English name in a Webster or a Wagnall, then the former can repeat with satisfaction Pindar’s verses:

...Under my arm,
inside the quiver are
Many swift darts that
sound loud to wise men. (0 2.83-85)

A final observation concerning the Nicaraguan poets remains. Since they often cite other authors without quoting the work, one also has to strive to obtain the original words in order to translate them into English. When the quotations are from the Bible, the Douay version is the safest, since the King James and other protestant ones do not coincide with the Catholic texts that the Nicaraguan authors consult. When the verses come from Pound, called *Ezra* by P.A. Cuadra, a good concordance should even out the difficulty. In other instances the job becomes more demanding due to the Nicaraguan
poets’ idiosyncracies. For instance, José Coronel Urtecho started a poem in what appeared to be an Indian Language. After several readings a káí led me to believe that Coronel Urtecho had transliterated a Greek text into the Latin alphabet. After a transliteration back into the original, I found out that the locus classicus was in the Odyssey of Homer, who was very fond of polysyndeton and wrote many a káí, “and,” in his epics.

P.A. Cuadra only quotes Nahualtl works in the original. Since this language, although still spoken, lacks English translations and available dictionaries, one has to find a Romantic anthropologist, who in the late 60’s may have picked up Nahualtl on his way to Huautla, in order to experience the magic mushrooms with la Maria Sabina ... If one fails to encounter such a helper, then the Nahualtl remains and one should curse the idea that possessed one to translate such Nicaraguan poets, when one could be writing essays on “Salinger’s search for the Absolute through Zen,” or “Rod McKuen’s concern for agapé.” There are always markets in the U.S. for that kind of article.

K.H. Anton