Balzac Retranslated

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Abstract

Literary translation is probably the trickiest type of translation that exists: hardly ever do you hear a critic say that the translation of a book is "good". In the best of cases, people pretend that, even though they have been reading a translation, they were in fact reading Balzac, or Dostoevsky, or any other author of universal renown. For those who are able to read the original text, the translation is more often than not rejected as "inaccurate", "stylistically inadequate", "loose", "overly free", "not doing justice to the original", or simply "bad". James Payn even claimed that Balzac "is not translatable, or when translated is not readable" (67). Yet Balzac *was* translated and retranslated many times in a variety of languages and in many ways. In this paper, the word *retranslation* will be used for the realisation of a new translation from the original source language into a target language in which a translation already exists, and *relay translation* for translations done from a translated source. As for the term *translation,* it will be extended, in the sense that Patrick O'Neill gives this term (6), to include *adaptations* such as movies, TV series, or even graphic novels, in any language, because adaptations, whatever the medium, are subjected to the same constraints as translations, creating effectively a new "language" to transfer the author's story and message. Thus, this paper will focus on how Balzac's novels have been extended when translated and/or adapted to other media, taking in consideration Roulet's Discourse Analysis parameters (2001 44), that is, the *hierarchical* constraints related to the text structure; the *linguistic* constraints related to the syntactic or lexical norms of the language or linguistic variety that is being considered; and the *situational* constraints of the receiving culture. To do so, we will analyse the hierarchical constraints of translating, retranslating or adapting Balzac's *La Cousine Bette*; the linguistic constraints related to the translation of gender in Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*, or to the translation of accents and other oral features in various novels; and finally we will analyse the situational constraints related to translating Balzac into English in the Victorian era, and into Chinese at the turn of the 20th century. We will see that, from these parameters a new, prismatic view of Balzac's creations will emerge, embodying the dialogue that translators and retranslators enable between cultures.