

## Successful strategies in drama translation: Yasmina Reza's "Art"

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Volume 51, numéro 1, mars 2006

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/013006ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/013006ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (imprimé)

1492-1421 (numérique)

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Citer cette note

Mateo, M. (2006). Successful strategies in drama translation: Yasmina Reza's "Art". *Meta*, 51(1), 175–183. <https://doi.org/10.7202/013006ar>

### Résumé de l'article

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### RÉSUMÉ

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### ABSTRACT

Yasmina Reza's "Art" has been widely acclaimed ever since it opened in Paris in 1994: the different productions which have followed the French original in more than 40 countries have enjoyed equal success. This success, both among audiences and critics, may be attributed to the play's universal themes, to the tone and richness of its dialogue and to the good acting most productions have displayed. But the fact that the play has been appreciated in so many different countries and languages inevitably implies that translation is also at the centre of its success. This paper analyses two translations of "Art" – Christopher Hampton's English text and Josep M. Flotats's version into Spanish –, which, despite having a similar aim, i.e., making the play function on stage, have followed different translation strategies to make it work in their different target contexts.

### MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

drama translation, successful strategies, performance elements, acceptability, theatre systems

### The reception of the play

Ever since it opened at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1994, Yasmina Reza's "Art" has enjoyed both a box-office and a critical success with all the different productions which immediately

followed the French opening: in Berlin in 1995, London in 1996, New York, Oporto and Madrid in 1998, to name but a few of the large number of countries in which this French play has already been performed in their respective languages, including Letonia and Croatia. This was certainly not the first success scored by the French writer, who started as an actress in the theatre world and soon established her reputation as a playwright winning a Molière Award with her first play, *Conversations après un enterrement*, and being nominated for another with her translation of a stage version of Kafka's *La métamorphose*. "Art" earned her two Molière Awards heading a long list of prizes which have accompanied the play wherever it has been performed.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly then, reviews of the play have several times referred to it as a "rare miracle."<sup>2</sup> A not irrelevant sign of this wonder is the fact that by April 2000 the play had grossed £157 million worldwide and profits only in Britain stood then at £2.6 million.<sup>3</sup> This becomes even more telling if we consider that contemporary drama in translation does not figure prominently in the latter country and that, although modern plays sometimes "have more staying power [than classic works] in the long run" (Vivis 1996: 42), "it is not a common occurrence for a foreign play to be a box-office hit" on British stages (Anderman 1996: 182).

"Art" therefore offers a very good example of the way in which drama may travel through translation between different cultures with equal success and provides us thus with good material to study the factors that determine both the insertion of a play in a target context and the strategies that afford it a favourable reception in the various theatres. This will ultimately help us see the way in which language, culture and performance all intertwine in drama translation.

The success of Reza's play, both among audiences and critics – although some dissenting voices have also been heard in Britain –, may be attributed to the play's universal themes, to the tone and richness of its dialogue and to the good acting most productions have displayed.

The play's story revolves around Serge's purchase of a modern painting for a huge sum of money; his friend Marc cannot believe Serge, whom he has known and loved for 15 years, could possibly have forked out 200.000 francs on "un tableau blanc, avec des liserés blancs" and he reacts by verbally attacking Serge; Yan tries to placate both sides and ends up being himself the target of his two friends' criticisms. This simple plot sparks off a debate not

just about contemporary art and its function and value in modern society but also, and mainly, about the three characters' friendship. In fact, the dissen-sion about art is only one of the reasons for the tensions and conflicts experienced by this male relationship and the plot itself is really an excuse to touch on universal themes: the fragility of human relationships, the failure of our aspirations in life, the conflict between being and perceiving, the value/danger of sincerity, the loneliness inherent to human beings, the power of words. At the Spanish opening in Madrid, which she attended, the author explained that the title "refers to the art of words, the art of keeping up human relationships, friendship" (my translation) but she also said she believes that words are utterly ineffectual since, rather than making relationships closer, they wreck them.<sup>4</sup> The play is also a reflection of the way in which our taste in and knowledge of art may turn out to be "a cruel system of social distinction and class stratification," as João Fernandes wisely points out in the programme of the Portuguese production: Serge has an Antrios while Marc has a figurative painting, which both separates them and draws a distinction between them.

With its brave and fresh approach to questions about modern life and values "*Art* has touched a universal nerve," as *The Times* has put it. This may explain the widespread success of the play, which confirms the norm of acceptability that usually determines the selection of suitable plays to be performed in a target context. Sirkku Aaltonen resorts to Fichter-Lichte's concept of *productive reception* to describe the reasons behind the choice of a certain drama text to be translated and performed in a different culture from the original one, a choice which originates in the target context and "is always based on the needs of the target system and the compatibility of the discourse of the source text with that of the target culture" (Aaltonen 2000: 49). This has led the Finnish scholar to define theatre translation as "an egotistically motivated activity" (2000: 48) since the choice of texts "is most frequently based on how they can serve us rather than a genuine interest in the Other" (2000: 112) and "foreign works selected for translation are those whose discursive strategies are in harmony with codes governing what is thinkable, sayable and writable within the target society" (Briset in Aaltonen 2000: 47). On the other hand, some of the British translators whose views are collected in Johnston's volume on drama translation (1996) claim that it is usually some new and exotic quality in a foreign play, the "otherness" in it, that compels them to choose it as a play for translation.<sup>5</sup> In my opinion, even that otherness has to be somewhat compatible with the target receivers' expectations or else the play will be found too foreign for the immediacy that characterises theatrical reception.

"*Art*"s success in previous countries has certainly encouraged its being selected as a play for production in consecutive places,<sup>6</sup> but this must also have been decided by the fact that the discourse compatibility and harmony required to be chosen are easily met by Yasmina Reza's play in many different cultures, not only because of the universal nature of the themes it deals with but also because its discursive strategies make it accessible to a wide and diverse audience within one and the same context. "*Art*" is endowed with the possibility of different readings and forms of enjoyment: as the Spanish translator and director of the play puts it, "la obra es tan rica que tiene tantas lecturas como lectores o espectadores; [...] un público muy cultivado intelectualmente tiene unas lecturas, y otro menos preparado tiene otras distintas, pero todos obtienen placer" (Josep María Flotats in Villora, 1999: 113).

Behind an apparent simplicity and lightness lies a very elaborate text, both demanding and communicative, with a rich dialogue in which comedy and drama, laughter and emotion, are mixed in the right proportion, appealing to the audience intellectually and emotionally. The comedy springs from apparently trivial comments, from one character's tone offending another, from the irony of the fact that, as in real life, it is the slightest little thing that turns everything upside down and ruins all possibility of communication.<sup>7</sup> The characters address their questions to us through the comic situations that their words create and their naked emotions come through even at the lightest moment, so that a feeling of anxiety seems to be always present. This is why the play has been described both as "a hilarious, sensitive comedy" (*Le Monde*) and as a "dark comedy" (*Financial Times*); according to the Spanish critic Haro Tecglen, "this white comedy is black," which is why "the audience welcomes [the actors] with laughter and says goodbye with emotion" (my translation).<sup>8</sup> The writer herself has framed the question that seems to lie in the background of her plays in a revealing statement: "L'effroi et le sourire dans une même seconde, n'est-ce pas l'essence de la vie?"

The subtle and skilful way in which Reza depicts her true-to-life characters' relationship is accompanied by an almost musical and skilful rhythm in which she plays with the audience's reactions, making them turn their sympathies from one to the other and get involved in the play more in an emotional than in a rational way. This makes "*Art*" a very "physical" play, indeed a very theatrical play – for drama is "the literary form most dependent on speech as a physical, rather than intellectual, activity" (Gooch 1996: 14) – and explains why it is certainly a play to be seen rather than read. The experience in both types of drama reception may be quite different, as Flotats discovered after the play's first night

in Madrid, when, due to the audience's laughter, he found it more amusing than he had on reading it – it had seemed a rather hard piece to him then (in Villora 1999: 116).

Reza started her theatrical career as an actress and knows how to manage the “reins” of theatre: this is certainly a play for actors, which leads us to the third factor mentioned above as determining the play's success. The good acting that the different productions of the play have enjoyed has certainly contributed to the play's name in the different countries where it has been performed. In Spain, the roles of Serge, Marc and Yvan have been performed by some of our most renowned theatre actors including Josep Maria Flotats, who translated and directed the play himself and whose production of “*Art*,” with its impeccable and well thought-out choreography, delighted Reza.<sup>10</sup>

The acting question seems to have been somewhat problematic in Britain, where the play started off with names like Albert Finney or Tom Courtenay as Marc and Serge and with Sean Connery as the producer, and went through more than 17 recastings in less than five years. This was interpreted by critics of the play in Britain as a commercial formula to revitalise the play – particularly since some of the recastings engaged British and American golden-age TV actors, like former Dallas star Patrick Duffy – and it was thus used by some to criticise the play: “It's a slick commercial formula, but the endlessly substitutable nature of the roles raises questions about how much substance there is to the play.”<sup>11</sup> The recasting problem could, however, be interpreted precisely as a credit to the play, for “*Art*” has attained equally unqualified success in many different places despite the fact that the actors are never the same. As another British critic put it, “In fact, the play has become such a star in its own right that the names of star actors are no longer needed to sell it.”<sup>12</sup>

### Successful translation strategies

Themes which appeal to very diverse audiences, a dialogue which encompasses comedy and drama and allows different readings, and inspired performances in the various productions have all made “*Art*” a worldwide achievement. But the fact that the play has been appreciated in so many different countries and languages inevitably implies that translation is also at the centre of its success. In order to see what translation strategies may have contributed to this in different target contexts and what changes the source text may have undergone in the various journeys, we shall now compare the two translations which have served as scripts for the English and the Spanish productions of the play. What makes a study like this interesting is that we know, before we approach the texts, that they have

already worked in their respective target contexts; in other words, that they have fulfilled the *skopos* (in Vermeer's terminology) they were conceived for. Since both translations had the same purpose – they were meant to be scripts for performance on a stage – we shall study whether the translators have differed in general in the strategies they have used to make the play work in their different target contexts or if, on the contrary, they have taken similar translational decisions to achieve their similar aim.

The English translation was made by the British playwright Christopher Hampton, who has great experience in translation and adaptation: he has translated another play by Reza, has adapted plays by Ibsen and Molière and produced the screenplays of some important films. His target text of “*Art*” is presented as “translated by” in the printed edition, published in the Plays collection of Faber and Faber in 1996, which was also the year of the British premiere of the play at Wyndhams Theatre in London.

The Spanish text belongs to Josep Maria Flotats, a prestigious Spanish actor and director who was educated at the drama school in Strasbourg, France, and is well versed in French drama, both classical and modern. His translation is presented in its printed edition as “Versión, escenografía, producción y dirección de José María Flotats,” since he not only translated but also directed the play, which opened at the Teatro Marquina in Madrid in September 1998, with Flotats himself in the role of Yvan. (This was, incidentally, also the case with the Portuguese translator, who appears in the Oporto programme as responsible for the *tradução*, the *encenação* and the role of *Sérgio*.)

The label used for the English text, “translated by,” and the fact that the copyright of this translation is shared by both the translator and the author – “Yasmina Reza and Christopher Hampton are hereby identified as translators of this work...,” the copyright note reads – may give us the initial impression that this text will be “closer” to the source text – whatever that may mean in drama translation – than the Spanish translation, which, as we have seen, is introduced as a “version.” On the other hand, Flotats has said that he has tried to be absolutely faithful to the source text<sup>13</sup>, although he was given permission by Reza to move the play's setting away from Paris – for the first time ever since the play opened – and located it in Madrid. This is probably the reason why his text is offered as a “version,” together with the fact that this is the term with which stage translations are normally presented. That it cannot be too “far away” from the source text is also indicated by the publishers' curious inclusion of this text in their collection called “Panorama de narrativas,” an example of how translated theatre texts may move from the theatrical system to the literary system and viceversa (Aaltonen 2000: 39) and how the literary

system sometimes incorporates texts originated as stage versions into it (Mateo 2000: 14-15).

Both Hampton's "translation" and Flotats's "version" have worked successfully on the stage, which is only a further indication of the vagueness and confusion in the terminology used in drama translation, for the terms "translation," "version," and "adaptation" are used differently by different translators, scholars and editors, as I have studied elsewhere (Mateo 2000: 8-10). It is probably all based, as Johnston (1996: 65, 66) points out, "on something of a false dichotomy," since "every act of translation for the stage is an act of transformation," so that it is ultimately more useful to study the texts and let them speak for themselves.

### *The context*

The English and the Spanish translations of "Art" show a different global strategy as regards the play's contextualization, Hampton having kept the French setting and Flotats having moved it to a Madrid environment, as has already been mentioned. This probably answers the different audiences' expectations since, while it is quite common in England to adapt foreign classics to a British or an Irish context, not moving the context seems to be the norm there for contemporary plays, particularly in the case of European ones (Anderman 1996: 181-183); in Spain, however, it is not at all uncommon today to set foreign plays in a familiar context, either by transposing the whole play or by inserting the occasional political, cultural or social reference, which the audience can easily identify, in the characters' speeches. This once more shows that "[t]heatre texts, perhaps more than any other genre, are adjusted to their reception, and the adjustment is always socially and culturally conditioned" (Aaltonen 2000: 53).

The English text has transferred all the names that appear in the play, not just those of the three characters, together with the places mentioned, the French quantities, wages and money, the references to French food and drink and all the cultural references, including one to Paul Valéry, that cannot have the same connotations in England as in France, in the target context probably being identified just as a well-known contemporary French poet – his image in France as the rational, symbolist poet, the intellectual *par excellence*, being lost to the British public.

The only adaptations regarding context Hampton has made are those which are necessary for the audience's understanding: thus, "Beaubourg" is made clearer by replacing it with its more specific name "the Pompidou"; measurements (that of Serge's painting, or Yvan's weight) are adapted to the English system, probably because measures are a deeply ingrained concept in people's minds and culture and

it would require an extra, unnecessary, effort on the part of the audience to take them in; and those cultural references which are not necessarily French – or which do not function in the text as such – are made more familiar to British receivers: "sparastrap" becomes Elastoplast, "otorhino" is replaced with the common way of calling this medical profession in England – "ear, nose and throat" –, "tes manières des curé" are now described as "behaving like a vicar," the title of Seneca's book (quoted in French in the source text) now appears in the Latin original – both because it is the way in which it is known in Britain and because it would be linguistically and contextually absurd to refer to it in French in the English performance –, and the stationery articles Yvan has to deal with in his new job have been replaced with others more easily identified in the target culture. These slight adaptations certainly do not detract from the coherence of the play's setting, which otherwise remains French – for instance, in the characters' eating olives as an appetizer at home. This French environment would, nevertheless, not be felt as too unfamiliar by British audiences and is, in any case, not strongly marked either, which may be another reason why Hampton decided to keep it in his target text.

The names in the Spanish text are consistent with the play's new setting in Madrid. Thus, the characters have received Spanish names which are equivalent to the source text's, Sergio, Marcos and Iván, and the other names mentioned in the dialogue have been translated bearing in mind their connotations in it: those which could have similar undertones in the Spanish context have been transferred (like the painter's, since Antrios would also sound unknown, foreign and artistic in Spain); and those which were too French or had to convey a special association have been adapted so as they can function in a similar way in the Spanish context: thus, Yvan's stepmother and mother are now respectively called Maria Luisa and Mercedes, names which might certainly be associated with older – rather than with younger – women today; Yvan's mother's cleaning-lady, madame Romero in the French text – which is reminiscent of the fact that these jobs are often taken on by Spanish or Portuguese women in France – is now Herminia, an old-fashioned, maybe lower-class, name; the posh people Marc mentions with irony as Serge's new friends have names with similar connotations in the Spanish context: "los Rópez, los Galicia-Lépice, Hugo Salazar"; finally, Yvan's psychoanalyst has changed his name from Finkelzohn to Hoffermyer, another German sounding name but more easily identified as such by Spanish audiences, so that the humor in it is more immediately conveyed.

The places in the text have also been adapted to Spanish ones which could be regarded as functional

equivalents, so that not only has Paris become Madrid but, accordingly, the Centre Pompidou ("Beaubourg" in the source text) is now the Reina Sofia (Madrid's main museum of contemporary art), the Handington gallery has been transferred – most private galleries have English names in Spain too, probably for commercial reasons – and the humour created in the source text with Carcassonne and Cavaillon (in Serge's ironic comment as to which of them is featured in Marc's figurative painting) is now conveyed by means of a reference to an important historic city, Toledo, and to Teruel, a town which is practically unknown to most Spaniards (as Cavaillon would be to the French).

The references to food and drink are either replaced with Spanish functional equivalents – eg. the Lyonnaise restaurant has now become Galician, so that the allusion to the former's typically fatty food can be maintained –; or they are transferred – like olives, which would be equally common in a Spanish home –; or neutralised by means of a descriptive phrase – at Yvan's, Marc now asks for "un agua con gas" (which stands for the source text's Perrier), which is nonetheless a curious adaptation since it would not be a common request at somebody's home, common though it is as a drink in Spanish public places.

Cultural references and presuppositions have generally been made to function in the new Spanish setting of the text, having been adapted or maintained depending on the distance between the French and the Spanish cultures in each instance: measurements have been transferred, as has the reference to bridge, a game which has the same upper-class connotations in Spain; on the other hand, quantities and money have been adapted to the Spanish system, so that the price of the painting is now equally inordinate but is expressed in pesetas – with the same register, however, as in the original: "vingt briques" are now "cinco kilos" (Spanish colloquial for "million") –; an interesting and well thought-out adaptation is that of hours, since the time when the characters meet to go to the cinema or dine somewhere is no longer eight o'clock, which would be unusually early in Spain, but half past ten<sup>14</sup>; as in the English text, the stationery goods have been replaced with more familiar ones, while the names of homeopathic remedies have been transferred in both target texts, homeopathy having the same connotations for French, British and Spanish audiences; finally, as opposed to the strategy adopted by Hampton, Flotats has replaced Paul Valéry with San Juan de la Cruz, an adaptation in which the translator seems to have given priority to the two writers' position as important poets in their respective literatures and to the humour created by the way in which Marc refers to them ("Je me fous de ce que dit Paul Valéry!", "¡Me la trae floja lo que diga San Juan de la Cruz!"), over

the precise, very different, function each of these poets fulfils in their own culture.

As regards the play's contextualization, therefore, we can see that the Spanish text has made use of the strategy of naturalization, "in which the Foreign becomes replaced by recognisable signs of the Self" (Aaltonen 2000: 55). In the English text, however, no effort has been made to disguise the French origin of the play in this respect. But some naturalisation or acculturation – which "removes the cultural anchorage and eliminates or minimises the relationship to any specific culture" (Aaltonen 2000: 55) – always seems to take place in theatre translation, and it has been mainly through language that the English translator has somehow acculturised the text.

### *The language and the humour*

If we compare the language in both target texts we can see that, as in the source text, it is natural, fluent, colloquial and up-to-date in both. The two translators have captured the main features of Reza's dialogue, such as the mixture of formal and informal register the characters use to be ironic and the characteristic presence of repetitions and parallelisms which are often the essence of the humour in it. But there are also some slight differences between these two texts.

The Spanish translation certainly shows a very natural conversational style, frequently resorting to common phatic expressions and interjections, adapting the French idioms to Spanish idiomatic expressions and making use of up-to-date colloquial terms and phrases, all of which make it sound like a genuine conversation between friends most of the time. It has also kept the formal register the characters sometimes use to offend one another or to show their dislike for something/someone – eg. in Serge's description of Marc's fiancée Paula (p. 78) or in Yvan's mother's definition of her son's decision to get married, "tu proyecto de actividad conyugal" (p. 53) – and it displays most of the source text's repetitions, sometimes just with a slight variation to make the dialogue more natural in Spanish and at other times even at the expense of this, which shows that the translator has tried to convey the author's play with language as part of the essence of her humour and characterization. The tone normally matches that of the source text too, so that the characters are ironic, offensive, abrupt, blunt or emotional when they are so in the original. The importance of the way in which things are said and how we may actually say something quite different by simply changing our tone, so crucial to "*Art*," thus comes through in the Spanish text.

However, a closer comparison between the Spanish and the French text also shows that, in



general, the source text's language has been toned down in the translation since the translator has, on occasion, neutralised familiar terms – using “viejo amigo” for “vieux pote,” “gobernar” for “emmerder,” or “dinero” for “le fric” – and has normally translated the source text's derogatory and vulgar terms into terms which are also colloquial in Spanish but certainly less strong or offensive: thus, “connard” and “con” have become “cretino” and “imbécil”; Yvan's stepmother, whom he considers “une salope,” is now “una cerda,” an undoubtedly colloquial and offensive term which becomes quite humorous in the context, but much less derogatory than the original; and the common French interjection “Merde!” has been literally translated into “¡mierda!” when other words would now be commoner with that function in Spain, particularly in men's colloquial register.

The latter example also illustrates another feature of this translation: maybe due to that desire to be “absolutely faithful to the text” – or to make up for the transposition the play has suffered – the translator has sometimes been too literal and on occasion even the victim of calques and false friends: thus, “un rat d'exposition” – Yvan's ironic definition of Serge, which plays with expressions like “rat de bibliothèque” or “rat d'hôtel” in the source language – has been literally translated into “rata de exposiciones,” while the play on words in Spanish would be with “ratón de biblioteca,” the feminine term “rata” being very offensive when used to describe someone; “atterré” and “réception” have become “aterrado” and “recepción,” when the meaning of those words in their contexts would correspond to Spanish “estupefacto/atónito” and “banquete” respectively; “tu presencia vil” has replaced “ta présence veule,” which actually means “weak, flabby” rather than “vile” so that the Spanish text is more negative here; “une gorgone” has been translated into “una gorgona,” although this word denoting a mythological creature does not have the alternative value as an offensive term it has in French (it would however sound like an insult, and maybe even rather comical, because of its phonetics and the strangeness of its use). The most consequential example of an excessively literal translation is that of “aimer” into “querer” and “amar”: in the source text, Marc and Serge use that French verb both to talk about Serge's feelings for the painting he has bought and for Marc's feelings for Serge, so that “aimer” has in both cases the meaning of “liking, feeling affection for.” The Spanish translation is in one case rather unnatural or exaggerated – we never talk of “amar” a painting – and, in the other, it adds some sexual connotations to the relationship between the two friends which are not necessarily present in the source text.<sup>15</sup>

In general then, although it does use very colloquial language and exploits the possibilities the

language offers to keep the tone, the emphases and the humour of the dialogue, the Spanish text turns out to be somewhat less negative and on occasion less colloquial and natural than the French text. (I must, however, point out that this is only my impression on *reading* the text, since the dialogue came through as perfectly natural when *watching* the Spanish actors' performance of the play.)

The toning down effect of the Spanish text becomes particularly noticeable when we compare it to the English translation, which creates, in fact, the opposite impression. The English text also shows very natural language, adapting idiomatic expressions, using very communicative phrases and interjections, departing from the exact semantic content of the French text and adapting the syntax for the sake of a natural speech style whenever necessary. Although it has also kept the mixture of formal and informal register, occasionally inserting a formal term where there was none in the source text, the English translation is, actually, often more colloquial and features words which are nearer the taboo end in the English context than the corresponding French ones would be in France. A few examples may suffice: “You're taking the piss” for “Tu te fous de moi!,” “I'm pissed off” for “ça m'emmerde,” “bugger off” for “on fout le camp,” “Where the fuck is he?” for “Qu'est-ce qu'il fout?,” “bloodiest” for “infernale,” “I absolutely piss on” for “je vomis,” “we don't give a fuck about you!” for “Toi, on s'en fout!” or “You fuck up our evening” for “Tu nous fous la soirée en l'air!,” all of which show a more vulgar register than the French text and certainly more so than the Spanish colloquial translations chosen for those expressions.<sup>16</sup> The tone of the insults is sometimes also more derogatory than in the other two texts: “a little arselicker” for Fr. “un petit courtisan” and Sp. “cortesano,” “old fruit” for Fr. “mon pauvre vieux” and Sp. “pobrecito mío,” “that arsehole” and “that bastard” for Fr. “ce connard, con” and Sp. “cretino, imbécil.”

To sum up linguistic strategies, both translations have kept quite close to the source text while bearing in mind the natural language and cohesion in the text, so that the very few additions, reductions, deletions or variations in meaning applied to the characters' speeches always seem to have been made with the purpose of making the texts clearer to their respective audiences, of achieving a more natural style in the target language in question, of conveying the same tone intended in the source text or, in the case of some additions in the Spanish translation, of occasionally giving more emphasis to some words or ideas<sup>17</sup>. The latter text, however, has made one consequential deletion by removing the inverted commas in the title – “Art” > *Arte* – both in the printed version and in the programme and bills of the performance, which may have been due to the

translator's thinking they merely functioned as a title indicator and not perceiving any connotations in them. The irony that the French and the English audiences may guess at the beginning of the production is hidden to Spanish receivers of the play. These may certainly discover it at the end, once the word has been debated throughout the performance, but with no help or indication from the graphic representation of the play's title.

Both texts, too, have captured the humour in the play and conveyed it through the same means: the characters' absurd but true-to-life insistence on words and ideas in their arguments, the dialogue's playing with the tone in which things are said, exploiting the ambiguity of certain interjections, overturning the audience's expectations and logic – "Quand je dis pour moi, je veux dire objectivement" (p. 212) –, and referring to cultural concepts and everyday situations, like the all too familiar complications in the arrangements of Yvan's wedding. Each target text has sometimes adapted the content or the linguistic means of a humorous speech in order to be able to convey the humour in it: thus, the Spanish translation has inserted some variation in Yvan's two comical successive instances: – "Ah bon? ... 'Ah bon!" (p. 222) > – "¿Ah, sí?... – ¡Ah, ya!" (p. 55); and the English text has replaced the content of Marc's ironic remark on Serge's superlative suffix in "modernissime" with a comment on his use of the adverb "incredibly." Puns and ironic remarks on another character's speech have also been adapted by taking advantage of each language's possibilities.

The main difference then between the effect of humour in each of these target texts probably comes from what we have seen regarding the tone of the language used in them: the Spanish text has toned down the negative part of the dialogue, which has in turn enhanced the comedy of the speeches, while the opposite happens in the English text, in which the increased negative tone of some of the comments the characters make sharpens the contrast between the humorous situation and the darker side of the play. This may explain why my own personal impression when watching the productions in London and Madrid was that there was more laughing from the audience in the Spanish theatre and that, while both performances mixed humour and emotion, the English characters turned out as slightly more aggressive. It may also explain why Flotats was surprised to see that his own audiences found the play more amusing than he himself had when he had first read it.

### *The performance*

This takes us to the last aspect I would like to briefly comment on here, that of the performance of the

play. In the theatre, "[t]he translation is a voice among voices" (Boswell 1996: 146) and the meaning of the verbal signs is – has to be – complemented by the other performance elements of the production (Mateo 1995). Yasmina Reza's play does not contain any stage directions for the actors' gestures, movements or tone, which leaves the way open for the director's and performers' interpretation. The rhythm of the words and the silences between the speeches are all too important in this play for which both productions have chosen an austere and classical dramaturgy.

Flotats, in particular, has tried to underline the value of words and the relationships between the characters by making white the main feature of his production; everything is white: the light, the costumes, the sparse furniture; the white of the painting is thus magnified to the size of the whole stage so that the audience's attention can focus on the characters' words and emotions. This Spanish director conceived of Reza's work as a classical play and decided to escape realism by having the actors not use the set – they never sit down on the suite on stage –, avoiding everyday gestures and placing the fight between the characters off stage, as in French classical drama (Villora 1999: 116). This may again have helped to detract slightly from the tenser moments in the play, together with Flotats's insertion of a stage direction indicating that the characters "laugh" at a given moment (p. 68) – something which is open to interpretation in the source text – and his decision to replace one very tense silence between a speech by Marc on friendship and a comment by Serge stating that they are at the end of a fifteen-year relationship with an added remark<sup>18</sup> by Yvan ironically insinuating that Marc is not completely sane. Flotats thus shows that he has integrated his translation in the overall theatrical event, incorporating his own view of the play together with all the performance elements at the director's disposal into his decisions in order to make his text work in Spanish theatre houses.

### **Conclusion**

There is not a single reading of a theatre text since its reception is the result of the combination of the diverse readings made by the various participants in the production, playwrights, directors, actors, etc, all of whom make their meaning constructions and determine audience reception. As the study of these two translations of "*Art*" has once more shown, when a play goes across cultural and linguistic borders, the translator also intervenes and his decisions, which are both personal and mediated by the cultural and theatrical norms of the target context where his text will be inserted, will apply new elements to the new reception. The English and the



Spanish translations of Reza's play have illustrated different strategies regarding context and language and slightly different readings by the translators too, despite the fact that both were intended for the stage. A similar aim has here been achieved through different translational decisions, since the cooperation required in the theatre between the audience and what they hear and see from the actors on the stage implies that this aim will probably always be attained differently in different theatre systems. In any case, if "the translator must be primarily responsible for ensuring that the source work functions in the context of the conventions, expectations and possibilities of the target theatre" (Johnston 1996: 62), we must certainly here conclude that the translation strategies adopted in these target texts of Reza's play must have achieved that feeling of complicity which is the essence of the theatrical experience, for both have worked successfully in their respective contexts.

Finally, these two translations of "Art" also show that, in drama translation, the text is one element among many: when read, Flotats's dialogue comes out as slightly less natural than those of the source text and the English translation, but the Spanish translator seems to have conceived of his text as one component of the whole theatrical process, in which kinesic and paralinguistic signs complement the verbal text. Integrated in his excellent production, Flotats's text has touched Spanish audiences much in the same way as the other two texts were received by their respective theatregoing public.

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#### NOTES

1. The Evening Standard Award for best comedy 1996 and the Lawrence Olivier Award for best comedy 1997 in London; the Theater Heute for best foreign play 1996-7 in Berlin; the Drama Circle Critics Award 1998, the Fany Award 1998, the Tony Award for best play 1998 and the Ace Award for best dramatic comedy 1998 in New York; and in Spain, no fewer than ten awards, including the Premio Unión de Actores, Premio El Ojo Crítico by Radio Nacional de España and five Max Awards by the Sociedad General de Autores de España.
2. *Die Welt* described it as "a miracle. A comedy of the highest school" (quoted in the book's blurb) and Jose María Pou, one of the Spanish actors, said to *El País* at the play's first night in Madrid: "What has happened with *Art* worldwide is a rare miracle which had not been seen with any other show for many years" (*El País*, 29 September 1998, p.44) (my translations).
3. See Robert Stringer, "Artful reincarnation for Duffy" in [http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/dynamic/hottx/theatre/top\\_review.html](http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/dynamic/hottx/theatre/top_review.html), 7 April 2000.
4. Interview in *El País*, 2 October 1998, p. 46.
5. See Gooch and Boswell in Johnston, 1996: 13, 150.
6. Although this has precisely been cause for suspicion and reticence in some places too, as Ricardo Pais, director of Oporto's Teatro Nacional S. João, acknowledges he initially felt when António Feio, the Portuguese translator, suggested the play to him.
7. Flotats, 1999: 8, in the Prologue to his translation.
8. *El País*, 1 October 1998, p. 42.
9. *Le Figaro*, 2/10/97, quoted in the theatre programme for *La Traversée de l'hiver* of the Avignon Festival, 2000.
10. *El País*, 2 October 1998, p. 46.
11. Patrick Marmion, in "Painting a sorry picture," [http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/dynamic/hottx/theatre/top\\_review.html](http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/dynamic/hottx/theatre/top_review.html), 10 November 2000. This critic's negative comments on the play show that critical reception in Britain seems to have been somewhat mixed: "the play only goes skin deep [...] Even if [it] is meant only as a frivolous 90-minute squabble between three grown-up kids, Reza's tone is too arch and conceited for this trio. Reza's characters are exposed as glib contrivances, making only a handful of trite and fatuous points about male friendship and art."
12. Robin Stringer (see footnote 3).
13. See *El País*, 29 September 1998, p. 44.
14. Serge's characterising precision in remarking on the exact time of Yvan's late arrival – "huit heures douze" – is maintained in the adapted form "las diez y treinta y nueve."
15. The English text has also translated "aimer" literally into "love," which would not be unnatural in English in the case of the painting but which, as regards the feelings between the two male friends, may also add at least some ambiguity.
16. "¿Me estás tomando el pelo"; "me cabrea"; "nos largamos"; "¿Dónde se habrá metido?"; "infernál"; "vomito"; "¿Tú no pintas nada!"; "Nos has fastidiado la noche," respectively. The Spanish text also includes some rude words like "Qué gilipollez" or "¿Pero qué coño estará haciendo?," but they are all fairly common in everyday informal conversation nowadays and would not be considered taboo. Only on one occasion has this text turned out more vulgar than the French one, translating "je me fous de..." into "me la trae floja."
17. This translation has also added some punctuation marks here and there: a few exclamations which do not appear in the source text, probably to make the intonation clear to the reader, and some curious inverted commas in certain colloquial expressions, which might seem to indicate that the translator finds those phrases a bit too colloquial ("que le zurzan," "malos rollos"), which would nevertheless be rather strange, considering all the other informal expressions used in this target text.
18. This is the only addition of a speech in this translation, which, like the English text, shows the same number of speeches, and in the same order, as the source text.

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