

**Ideology, subversion & the translator's voice:  
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*Tres Tristes Tigres***

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**IDEOLOGY, SUBVERSION AND THE TRANSLATOR' S VOICE:  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FRENCH & ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF  
GUILLERMO CABRERA INFANTE' S  
*TRES TRISTES TIGRES***

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This paper aims to explore the relationship between ideology and translation practice. More specifically, it seeks to examine how the explicitly stated ideologies of the French and English translators (Albert Bensoussan and Suzanne Jill Levine, respectively) of the Cuban novel *Tres Tristes Tigres*<sup>1</sup> by Guillermo Cabrera Infante are reflected in their translations of the novel's wordplay. Particular consideration is given to how prevailing ideologies at the time of the translations (c. 1970) and how circumstances surrounding those translations (for instance, the involvement of the author as collaborator) may have affected the resulting translation product.

The main issue that emerged in the course of the research was that of ideologically motivated translation, especially in relation to Levine's self-portrayal as 'subversive scribe.' For many translation scholars, the term 'subversive' relates more to translations carried out by feminist translators within the specific context of the feminist avant-garde literary and translation movement in Quebec, Canada in the late 1970s and 1980s. 'Subversive translation' is synonymous with such concepts as 'hijacking' or 'womanhandling' a text and refers to deliberate intervention in the source text by the feminist translator for the purpose of furthering a feminist agenda. The question that became increasingly apparent was whether Suzanne Levine truly translated *Tres Tristes Tigres* in a feminist or 'subversive' manner.

Since the term 'subversive' is so politically charged, the idea arose to compare Levine's translation to a seemingly less feminist one and the French translation by Albert Bensoussan was selected. An analysis was devised that would compare the two texts to see if either translator shows his or her own voice in the translation and to what extent either translation could be

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter the title of the Spanish original text will be interchangeably referred to as either *Tres Tristes Tigres* or *TTT*. The French (*Trois Tristes Tigres*) and English (*Three Trapped Tigers*) titles will always be written out in full. As well, the author's name may, at times, be condensed to GCI.

construed as ‘subversive’. The investigation was limited to the wordplay in the text, firstly, because it is both an integral element of *Tres Tristes Tigres* and a fascinating aspect of language, and secondly, because the particularities of wordplay differ from language to language and would thus be a good measure of the differences between the three texts (i.e. the source text and the two target texts).

In this paper then, I will be combining a comparative microtextual analysis of the French and English translations of the wordplay in the source text with a ‘behind-the-scenes’ look at some of the paratextual elements involved in the translation process. I will examine the circumstances that existed to influence the translators’ strategies and how these may be reflected in the translated wordplay. Ultimately, I would like to ascertain whether the translators’ ideologies are expressed in their respective translations. The first section establishes the groundwork for the study, presenting relevant issues concerning wordplay and its translation. The second section describes the methodology and results of the analysis conducted on the wordplay in the novel. The last section discusses the constraints surrounding the actual translation process and how these may have affected the translation products.

## **ISSUES IN WORDPLAY TRANSLATION**

The notion that wordplay is untranslatable has endured for quite some time. Yet pun-filled texts have undeniably been translated all along; therefore, this belief to be false. However, the pun’s traditional marginalization and the long-standing attitude of its untranslatability have led to a lack of significant investigation into wordplay. Although wordplay has gone hand-in-hand with the development of human language, serious research into the role and function of wordplay in literature has been very recent and studies into wordplay translation even more so. Nevertheless, there are current investigative efforts in post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism and translation studies to fill this void in the academic sphere. In the following sections, I will elaborate on certain issues in wordplay translation as seen through the critical eye of post-structuralist and feminist scholars.

## Post-Structuralism and Translation

It should be noted that the relationship between post-structuralists and translation had a rocky start. This was due largely to the post-structuralist postulation that translation could not exist as an absolute phenomenon because all words and texts acquire their meaning from all other words and texts in the system (i.e. language). Accordingly, textual meaning is elusive and theoretically, no reader or translator could ever truly isolate and control it. This notion presents a special concern for wordplay translation because the duplicitous nature of verbal play is already associative. Post-structuralists see wordplay as resisting definition, classification and especially translation. Of course, translation scholars disagree. They see wordplay translation “as a cline, i.e. a relative rather than an absolute category: translatability is a function of particular textual properties and concrete linguistic or textual conditions rendering puns *more* or *less* translatable” (Delabastita, 1994: 226).

This whole debate, however, may actually be a misconception. Post-structuralists and translation scholars are involved with the same linguistic and textual issues and that “the most intractable translation problem, wordplay, [is] a major concern of post-structuralism, as well as a prominent feature of its discursive method” (Davis, 1997: 24). Furthermore, post-structuralist theory can serve as a useful tool in translation studies because it encourages a different assessment of the ways in which meaning and language are interconnected and how they function within the processes of translation. From this perspective, translation can no longer be seen as a straightforward ‘transference of meaning.’ A translation is not simply an object that is taken out of one linguistic or cultural box and reassembled to fit a different linguistic or cultural box. It is a “performative act” in which the translator actively participates in the creation of meaning (Davis, 2001: 58). The choices the translator makes will reflect his or her personal and ideological background because translation is essentially a political act. In a sense, post-structuralist theory gives the translator creative license.

## **Feminism and Translation**

Feminist translators adopted post-structuralist notions and practices of textual and linguistic deconstruction to break free from the patriarchal allocation of meaning and create a language that was ‘gynocentric’; one that expresses women’s realities from their own perspective (von Flotow, 1997: 48). One common denominator in both the post-structuralist and feminist camps is the use of wordplay as an instrument in their efforts to deconstruct mainstream language and ideology.

In the era of avant-garde feminist literature in North America and Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, wordplay was a widespread tool used to deconstruct patriarchal ideologies, and to demonstrate women’s abilities to be creative, intelligent and politically conscious. The comical nature of verbal play could make the experience of reading such literature both entertaining and enlightening. However, ‘feminist wordplay’ can be difficult to translate, precisely because of its language and culture-specific references. The translator would have to creatively find or invent puns that reflect the insistence on the female while also deconstructing the elevated status of the male. Thus, the question of translatability arises once again. Nevertheless, feminist translation scholars insist that it is important to (re-)read the source text from a feminist perspective and to voice that perspective in their ‘re-writing’ of the text. It is anticipated that in the long run, this candid subversion of texts in translation will not only lead to translators’ visibility as authors in their own right, but also to the breakdown of the conventional notions of translation as faithful reproduction of an all-powerful original.

## **Translation and *Subversion***

For the purpose of this paper, a feminist literary definition of ‘subversion’ has been adopted. That is, the intentional manipulation of textual elements to emphasize feminist intervention in the source text. The reason for applying this particular definition is that in *The Subversive Scribe* Suzanne Jill Levine utilizes the term ‘subversive’ to refer to herself as a translator and to describe her translation of *Tres Tristes Tigres*. It is thus necessary to examine whether her usage matches

that of the feminist translators, and more importantly, whether her translation of *TTT* actually follows this principle.

Although Levine calls for intervention in the text, she does not cite many instances where she actually takes such invasive measures. A close reading of *The Subversive Scribe* reveals that many of her 'subversions' are limited to innovatively translating the wordplay and orality of the original into communicable renderings in English. In fact, Levine's own definition of 'subversion' appears to be the following:

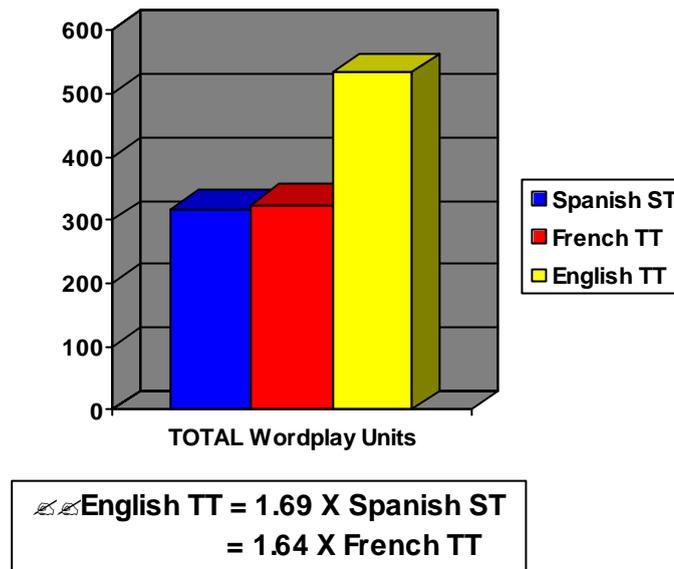
The bringing forth of a "substratum" is implied in the concept of subversion, in which translation betrays in the traditional *traduttore, traditore* sense but also it makes evident a version underneath that becomes explicit, a latent version implied in the original [i.e. a sub-version] (Levine, 1991: 7).

Is this definition truly compatible with the feminist or post-structuralist one? Feminist translation scholar Isabel Garayta argues that Levine misleads her readers by using language from feminist revisionist theory to seemingly advocate (feminist) intervention in the text, when in fact she only wants a licence to play with language. The entire process has a high potential to backfire on Levine since she is essentially reaffirming the authority of the original (Garayta, 1998: 68-69). The question ultimately remains whether Levine truly translated *Tres Tristes Tigres* in a subversive manner. To answer this question, an extensive microtextual analysis of the wordplay in Chapters 16-18 of the Spanish, French and English versions of *TTT* was conducted and a comparison between all three was carried out.

### **WORDPLAY ANALYSIS IN *TRES TRISTES TIGRES***

The purpose of the analysis was to determine whether alterations were made to the source text wordplay in either of the French or English translations of Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Tres Tristes Tigres*, what kind of alterations, and whether these could be construed to be ideologically motivated. A short section of the text was selected that contained a large number of wordplay, and all instances of wordplay were catalogued for all three texts. The wordplay units were then classified into categories by type, according to Bernard Dupriez's *A Dictionary of Literary Devices* (1991). Lastly, the findings of each version were compared against the others to see if

any alterations were made between the source text and the target texts, if any trends appeared and whether any significant difference arose in terms of the translators' strategies. The following are the results of the analysis.



The obvious inference that can be drawn is that, while the difference between the Spanish source text and the French target text is negligible, the difference between both of these and the English target text is quite significant. The English text contained 1.69 times the amount of wordplay in the Spanish source text and 1.64 times the wordplay of the French target text.

### Translator Strategies

Adopting the wordplay translation strategies outlined in Delabastita (1996: 134) as a basis of measurement, the French and English translations of TTT were analysed to explore what trends might appear. For this portion of the analysis, the focus was primarily on the translations of the 'original' 316 wordplay units catalogued from the source text. However, what really stood out was the enormous difference between the additions of completely new puns, or the transformation of non-punning text into puns. As shown in the table below, the French translation

only has a total of 21 such cases, whereas the English version had a total of 241 (about 11 times as many).

FRENCH:	ENGLISH:
?? 206 pun ↯ pun (65%)	?? 217 pun ↯ pun (68.7%)
?? 92 pun = pun (29%)	?? 76 pun = pun (24%)
?? 13 pun ↯ non-pun (4%)	?? 14 pun ↯ non-pun (4.4%)
?? 2 pun ↯ Ø (0.6%)	?? 10 pun ↯ Ø (3%)
?? 15 non-pun ↯ pun	?? 113 non-pun ↯ pun
?? 6 Ø ↯ pun	?? 128 Ø ↯ pun

What could be extrapolated from these findings is that the French translator, Albert Bensoussan produced a very straight-forward, direct translation of the wordplay in *Tres Tristes Tigres*. He made few modifications to the original text, and these were certainly not significant enough to suggest that he showed his ‘own voice’ in the translation. Ultimately, Bensoussan abided by his own stated position on translation; that is, respect for the source text and its author, respect for the ‘Other’ and respect for the target language reader (Bensoussan, 1999: 40-42). On the other hand, Suzanne Jill Levine clearly showed her own voice in the translation. There were numerous additions and alterations to the source text wordplay, which were far beyond the quantity that would account only for compensation or clarification. Levine’s translation of *Tres Tristes Tigres* also appears to be in accordance with her stated ideological position. Certainly, the quantity and types of alterations suggest an enrichment of the source text content, producing an innovative afterlife. However, the analysis only examined the textual elements. As will be shown in the discussion, a number of constraints in the actual translation situations of both translators had an effect on the outcome of the translations.

## DISCUSSION: BEYOND THE ANALYSIS

One of the most important factors affecting both the French and English translations of *Tres Tristes Tigres* was the collaboration of the author on the translation project. Bensoussan recounts the challenging experience of working with Cabrera Infante: the two of them worked arduously

day and night on the translation, only taking short breaks to eat, sleep and have the occasional coffee. Bensoussan describes Cabrera Infante as a tyrannical taskmaster, who compelled him to labour at a frenetic pace on this challenging text that he equates to a “verbal Himalaya” (Bensoussan, 1999: 48). As well, he claims that Cabrera Infante was fiercely controlling and possessive of his text.

For Levine, the circumstances of her translation of *Tres Tristes Tigres* were in many respects quite similar to Bensoussan’s. The difference is that she never claims to have had any particular difficulty with either Cabrera Infante or the translation of the text. Upon their first meeting in 1969, Levine and Cabrera Infante hit it off immediately as they discussed similarities in their childhood experiences, their common fascination for comics, wordplay and humour, and even bandied back and forth with the puns in *TTT*. Levine accepted the job of translating *Tres Tristes Tigres*, which was no doubt quite a demanding task, especially with all the alterations and additions required by GCI. The project took almost two years to complete, during which time Levine and Cabrera Infante were in constant correspondence about the translation of the wordplay and Cuban cultural references into English. The most critical point that she conveys in *The Subversive Scribe*, although it may be to her own detriment as a translator (and especially as a female translator), is that despite her persistent efforts to find creative alternatives to the seemingly untranslatable puns and Havanan colloquial speech, she always turned to the author for approval. That is, the ‘close collaborations’ between Levine and Cabrera Infante on the translation of *Tres Tristes Tigres* meant that he had a big hand in the decision-making process. Although Levine did the majority of the brunt work, ultimately, Cabrera Infante had the final say.

A quick glance back at Bensoussan’s account of his experience shows that Cabrera Infante insisted on being in charge of the project at all times and refused to relinquish control:

*Guillermo Cabrera Infante es [...] un autor tirano, envidioso de su texto hasta el punto de pretender haber engendrado la traducción francesa, y también la que publicó Suzanne Jill Levine en los Estados Unidos. Por lo tanto hay que entender la mención «traducido con la colaboración del autor» como la reivindicación de esta loca paternidad. [...] Desde entonces siento por Suzanne un cariño tanto piadoso como el que se siente hacia una compañera de harén [...] reclusa y explotada, sometida y rechazada, objeto de placer y de desagrado del amo (Bensoussan, 1999: 47).*

This is an unusual, if not degrading, comment and it demonstrates that Cabrera Infante was extremely controlling. Thus, perhaps it was not Levine who sought his approval, but rather Cabrera Infante who demanded to review and approve all of her work. Bensoussan's comment also suggests that there was a certain level of sexual tension between Levine and Cabrera Infante, though Levine never openly acknowledges this in her own book. Nevertheless, there is an undercurrent of sexual politics running throughout *The Subversive Scribe* as will be discussed next.

Translation scholar Isabel Garayta begins her PhD dissertation by stating that “many female translators today refuse to sit quietly in the parlor or behind the text” (Garayta, 1998: 1). A fundamental question that has arisen throughout this paper is whether Levine sits quietly behind the male authors that she has traditionally translated, or does she show her own voice in the translation. The topic of gender politics is completely unavoidable in this discussion for three main reasons. Firstly, Levine is a female translator who has translated mainly Latin American male authors whose texts have tended to be misogynistic. How does she deal with these kinds of circumstances? She tells us in *The Subversive Scribe* that she enjoys working in close collaboration with these authors, but does she feel totally comfortable in that scenario or does she sense a certain tension at having to translate texts that portray women in an unfavourable light? Secondly, the answers to these questions are not explicitly answered in *The Subversive Scribe*. Instead, the book bears a subtext that alludes to issues of gender politics. Lastly, the term ‘subversive’ in the title of the book (and repeated throughout) is reminiscent of feminist activism in literature and translation. The term refers to feminist interventionism that involves conscious, even blatant, manipulation of a text to deconstruct patriarchal language and show the female voice.

Focusing solely on Levine's discourse in *The Subversive Scribe*, Garayta examines how Levine perceives and portrays herself as a female translator of Latin American male authors (especially Cabrera Infante), as well as the underlying issues that arise from this self-portrayal: questions of authorship, agency and sexual politics. She raises some very valid points, especially highlighting the fact that Levine's text is an oxymoronic vacillation between flaunting her creative verbal skills and proclaiming an ideological affiliation with post-structuralist notions of

translation, and betraying that portrayal of a strong, independent woman by implying that the author's participation raises the status of the translation to that of original. Garayta's main arguments are as follows:

1) "Levine's empowerment of the translator is limited to finding creative equivalents for the Spanish words, ideas and phenomena she is translating, and to exercising a license for playing with language; it does *not* extend to creating new readings" (ibid.: 68, emphasis in original).

This is very true. In the early stages of *The Subversive Scribe* Levine advocates the ideological shift in translation studies toward post-structuralist deconstruction of the authority of the source text via the notion of intertextuality, while in the latter parts she shows that her own definition of 'subversion' as uncovering latent meanings in the source text only serves to re-establish its authority. Levine is undermining her own abilities as a translator as well as her earlier association to the post-structuralist camp.

2) "[It] is not on the sexual politics of the author, the source text, or even the translator herself that Levine's attention focuses, nor is sexual politics an area about which she ultimately hopes to enlighten her readers" (ibid.: 73).

I am again in agreement with Garayta. One of the most problematic aspects of Levine's text is that it suggests the need for an examination of gender politics, especially given her close relationships with the authors, GCI in particular. At times she even adopts the "misogynist gaze"<sup>2</sup> of the male author and uses outdated sexual metaphors in her own discourse and self-portrayal. How is it that she does not find her relationship to Cabrera Infante unusual? There are instances where Levine does demonstrate a timid yearning for achieving a more feminized perspective, yet she holds back and the reader is left wondering why that is.

3) "It is a small step from describing an author's enthusiastic participation in an individual translation project to that of tendering that participation and approval as validation or 'authorization' of the translator's work, thereby implicitly demoting the translator's work. [...] Levine casts the author as mentor, teacher and figure of authority and herself as uninitiated student and follower, or perhaps apprentice-learner" (ibid.: 77-78, emphasis in original).

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<sup>2</sup> Garayta, 1998: 86.

Once again Garayta raises a very valid argument. The tone with which Levine describes her close collaborations with Cabrera Infante is almost too familiar, too personal. She does not take a step back to analyse her situation from a theoretical perspective. She does not consider what implications this might have for future female translators and translation theory in general. However, from a different standpoint, I think that Levine's position at the time of the translation was a difficult one. She was a young female translator who was presented with the opportunity to collaborate on the translation of *Tres Tristes Tigres* as her first professional translation project. Given that she and Cabrera Infante got along immediately, it is difficult to ascertain retrospectively whether she would have even entertained the possibility of turning down the offer. Levine herself says that she welcomed the chance of working with GCI. Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on whether she feels differently about their collaboration now.

Since Levine published *The Subversive Scribe* a full 20 years after the translation of *Tres Tristes Tigres*, she had the perfect opportunity and vehicle to express her concerns or discomforts at having worked alongside a male author on a text full of misogynist undertones, but she did not take advantage of it. It may be understandable why she did not fully 'subvert' those aspects of the text with a demanding and controlling author that was insistent on reviewing her work. As well, if she looked up to Cabrera Infante as a mentor, then she probably would have felt too intimidated to pursue a feminist revision of the source text. It is not understandable, however, why she would not openly elaborate on any tensions that may have existed between them at the time.

In Levine's defence, it is worth noting that not all feminist translators criticize her for not deliberately 'womanhandling' the text, or avoiding the issue of sexual politics. For example, Lori Chamberlain contends that collaborative efforts on translations such as that between Levine and Cabrera Infante should be welcomed if they are both cooperative and subversive. As well, Chamberlain reads in Levine's text an open questioning of "what it means to be a woman translator in and of a male tradition," something that Garayta either does not observe or does not consider to be sufficient from a feminist perspective (Chamberlain, 1992: 71).

The fact is that Levine's relationship to Cabrera Infante was not one of equal status. Not only did she look up to him as her mentor, but there was also an existing power differential based

on their ‘unequal positions’ as author/translator and male/female (ibid.: 71). In *The Subversive Scribe* Levine admits to her own self-betrayal, “having fallen under the spell of male discourse, translating books that speak of woman as the often treacherous or betrayed other,” but without actually working to deconstruct this ‘male discourse’ (Levine, 1991: 181). It is evident that Levine could have more candidly discussed the obvious sexual politics existent in her collaboration with Cabrera Infante. However, at the time of the actual translation, there were a number of constraints that worked against the possibility of her producing a truly feminist version of *Tres Tristes Tigres*, not least of which were the prevailing patriarchal ideologies. Ultimately, it may be Levine’s language, especially her definition of the term ‘subversion’ that has led to so much confusion and criticism.

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