

MAXIMUM VISIBILITY: THE ‘CELEBRITY TRANSLATOR’ IN BRAZIL

MÁXIMA VISIBILIDADE: O ‘TRADUTOR CELEBRIDADE’ NO BRASIL

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Although the phenomenon Venuti (1995) calls the translator’s invisibility reveals much about the global literary polysystem, the opposite also occurs, yet this perspective is much neglected. This paper presents three cases from Brazil that reveal different facets of this curious market dynamic: (1) an Agatha Christie novel in which the translator, Clarice Lispector, figures as prominently as the author in the paratext; (2) a high-profile Brazilian Portuguese version of Tolkien’s *Beowulf*, *i.e.*, a market-motivated revivification of indirect translation; and, (3) *Tradutores*, a series by the publishing house Hedra that showcases translations by renowned Lusophone writers. This survey demonstrates the complex web of factors involved in foregrounding the translator in Brazil, which may also be at play in other national and international systems.

Keywords: Literary translation. Translator’s visibility. Translation in Brazil.

Apesar de o que Venuti (1995) chama de invisibilidade do tradutor revelar muito sobre o polissistema literário global, o oposto também acontece, mas esta perspectiva contrária é muito negligenciada. Este artigo apresenta três casos brasileiros que revelam diferentes facetas desta curiosa dinâmica mercadológica: (1) um romance de Agatha Christie no qual a tradutora, Clarice Lispector, tem tanta proeminência paratextual quanto a própria autora; (2) uma versão brasileira de muito destaque da tradução de *Beowulf* feita por Tolkien, ou seja, uma revivificação da tradução indireta motivada pelo mercado; e (3) *Tradutores*, uma série da editora Hedra que traz traduções feitas por renomados escritores lusófonos. Esta pesquisa demonstra a complexa rede de fatores envolvidos na visibilização de um tradutor no Brasil, fatores os quais podem também ocorrer em outros sistemas nacionais e internacionais.

Palavras-chave: Tradução literária. Visibilidade do tradutor. Tradução no Brasil.

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Introduction

In 1995, Lawrence Venuti brought to light the importance of understanding and questioning how literary translators are often forced into a secondary role, with their labor purposefully hidden from readers through the consistent use of domesticating translation strategies. Although Venuti's concepts have been criticized by scholars like Pym (1996) and Delabastita (2010), they have also been popularized among translation scholars worldwide, having proven useful for analyses in a number of contexts. Despite its utility, however, this paradigm cannot explain the full range of translation behavior seen in the literary marketplace, probably because, in all fairness, Venuti's focus is on Anglophone cultures. Research has shown that the situation is not so simple or binary, and translators can be made quite visible for a number of reasons.¹

Very little has been reported about the translator's visibility in the Brazilian literary polysystem, despite the fact that translation is squarely at the center of the market in this country. As in other parts of the globe, Brazilian literary translators have been neglected on the most basic level, often going uncredited in published translations. Moreover, plagiarized translation is so common in Brazil that scholar Denise Bottmann has dedicated a blog called "Não gosto de plágio" ["I don't like plagiarism"]² to exposing the many cases of it, revealing a complex web involving important publishing houses, nonexistent translators credited with the work of others, and so forth. The abundance of such cases has made the invisibility phenomenon an attractive perspective for national researchers.

However, not much has been said about the role of certain translators who have been spotlighted or even overexposed due to their importance in national or international literary systems. Their value as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) and significance in the world republic of letters (Casanova 1999) has carried the Brazilian market down an interesting path (even if by no means unheard of on a worldwide scale): the development of the national 'celebrity translator'. Three cases will be presented to demonstrate different aspects of this dynamic: (1) a national literary figure whose name is featured on the cover with the same prominence as the internationally renowned author she translated; (2) a translation by an international literary figure that, based solely on the marketability of his name, is transposed to a third language, despite the availability of recent direct translations of the work in question; and, finally, (3) an entire editorial project dedicated to translations by celebrated writers.

¹ For example, Cleary (2014), Coldiron (2012) and Maier (2007).

² Available at: naogostodeplagio.blogspot.com

Case one: Clarice Lispector

Clarice Lispector (1920–1977) is among the most famous Brazilian authors of the 20th century. She began her career writing short stories for newspapers and in 1943 published her first book, *Perto do Coração Selvagem*, which was highly acclaimed and followed by many others. Her writings cannot be classified in a single literary genre due to their unique and innovative characteristics, although her style has often been compared to that of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Before Lispector's debut, Brazilian literature was almost exclusively regionalist in scope, and the novelty of her style attracted much attention. In the 1970s Lispector lost her job with the *Jornal do Brasil* and began translating French and English literature as a source of income. Some of the writers she translated were Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, Anne Rice and Agatha Christie, who will be examined here.

In fact, Lispector was credited with only two Christie translations: *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (*Cai o Pano: O Último Caso de Poirot*) and *Unfinished Portrait* (*O Retrato*), a semiautobiographical narrative published under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott. Both books were published in Brazil by Nova Fronteira, most likely in the 1970s. *Cai o Pano* was published in 1977, but the year of publication of *O Retrato* does not appear in the copy used in this analysis. Although the date of this translation could not be determined from external sources, the paratext indicates the 1970s, because an internal flap of *O Retrato* advertises the second edition of *Assassinato no Expresso do Oriente*, which was published in the 1970s.

The cover of *O Retrato* (Figure 1) features an extremely unusual paratext: the translator's name appears in very large font – approximately as large as that of the author's (whose pseudonym is clarified as the more bankable Christie) – although in an outlined rather than solid form, mirroring the style of title.



Figure 1. Cover of Clarice Lispector's translation of *Unfinished Portrait*, entitled *O Retrato* (n.d.).

This kind of layout was not common in that period, when translators were rarely granted the honor of appearing on a book cover. In fact, even today it would still be highly unusual for a translated novel. Furthermore, other translations published by Nova Fronteira in the 1970s did not follow this format – apparently Lispector was the only translator credited on the cover of that specific Nova Fronteira collection, clearly demonstrating her status.

The emphasis given to Lispector's name opens doors for much speculation, particularly because a microstructural analysis (based on Lambert and van Gorp, 1985) of this particular translation indicates no clear traces of Lispector's style as a writer, which, on the other hand, are present in her translation of *Curtain* (for more information on this subject and actual language usage examples, see Hanes 2015).

It is important to point out that respected authors such as Lispector have the privilege of drawing inspiration from their own original work, and tend to do so in their translations. In fact, it has already been demonstrated that Lispector's translations are at least partially characterized by her own idiosyncratic style. In a study of Lispector's translations of Edgar Allan Poe, Gonçalves (2006) points out that she does not follow the text formally, but retells it in a more colloquial tone, adding her style to that of Poe's. Gomes (2004) reports that Lispector made it clear that she was very careful about her translations, trying to use a colloquial tone whenever possible. Such colloquial language, however, does not occur in *O Retrato*, which is written in a considerably higher register, contrasting with the informality of *Cai o Pano*.

The translational approach in *O Retrato* could perhaps be explained by an obscure page of Brazilian literary history, *i.e.*, a time when acclaimed authors would, for the right price, sign their name to translations they did not produce. The practice of ghost translation in Brazil has been documented previously. Using readily verifiable sources (specific titles, dates and general information), Bottmann (2014) reports that authors such as Jorge Amado and Nelson Rodrigues, most likely due to their bankability, 'lent' their names to translations produced by Brazilian publishers. And according to Ferreira (2013), Clarice Lispector was also among this group of authors who did not necessarily translate everything they signed:

it is said in the circles of Clarice's critics that perhaps not all the translated works which carry her name were actually translated by her. It is suspected that this is due to the common practice among writers of selling their names and signing off on translated texts during the 1960s and 1970s, whether for merchandising (editorial) or financial motives. We believe it was no different with Clarice, since her signature could serve to legitimize the quality of a translation due to her importance as a writer, in addition to helping her financially during difficult times. (Ferreira 2013, p. 176, my translation)³

³ "ronda no discurso da crítica clariciana que, talvez, nem todas as obras cuja assinatura da tradução tenha o nome da escritora tenham sido realmente traduzidas por ela. Isso deve-se à prática, comum entre os escritores, conforme se suspeita, de venda do nome para a assinatura de autoria de textos traduzidos, durante as décadas de 1960 1970, seja por uma questão mercadológica (editorial), seja por uma questão de ordem financeira do próprio intelectual. Acreditamos não ter ocorrido diferente com Clarice, visto sua assinatura poder servir como legitimadora da qualidade da tradução, devido a sua importância como escritora, além de ter auxiliado financeiramente a intelectual em tempos difíceis." (Ferreira 2013, p. 176)

Of course, short of an admission from Editora Nova Fronteira or a missing page of Lispector's diary, the origin of *O Retrato* cannot be definitely established. However, strong evidence exists of such practice in the publishing industry, and the stylistic differences between Lispector's two Christie translations prevent this hypothesis from being dismissed.

Case two: J.R.R. Tolkien and indirect translation

In 2014, publishing house Martins Fontes released a new bilingual edition of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* featuring a new prose translation in Brazilian Portuguese by Ronald Eduard Kyrmse. This translation came as a surprise, considering that in 2007 publishing house Tessitura had released a carefully produced verse translation of *Beowulf* by scholar Erick Ramalho that was reprinted in 2011. However, the motive for the Martins Fontes' edition is evident on its cover: it is marketed as a J.R.R. Tolkien product (Figure 2).

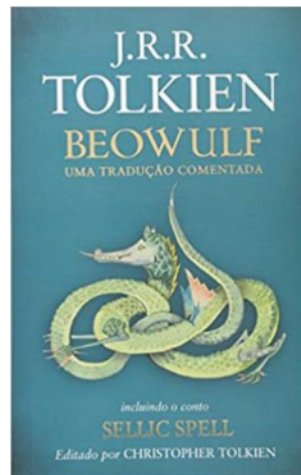


Figure 2. Cover of Martins Fontes' translation of *Beowulf* (2014).

Beowulf is an Old English epic poem whose authorship and date of composition (possibly between 700 and 750 AD) remain unknown. The West Saxon dialect in which it is principally written is practically incomprehensible for modern English speakers. Hundreds of different English translations have been released, including one by J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973).

Tolkien's fantasy novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* have been translated into more than 30 languages (including Brazilian Portuguese) and have sold more than 50 million copies worldwide. However, Tolkien's career was foremost academic: an illustrious scholar at the University of Oxford, his interests included translation practice and medievalism. His commented translation of *Beowulf* was finished in 1926, but never published. His son, Christopher, edited the work and it was finally published in 2014.

Two elements attract special attention in the Martins Fontes's *Beowulf* translation. The first is related to the paratext: based on Tolkien's prominence in the cover design, naive readers might believe that he is actually the author of the story. Christopher Tolkien

is credited as editor on the cover, further cementing the impression of a “Tolkien product”. Thus, there is little doubt that this translation was produced to exploit the large Tolkien fan base. This is all the more evident in light of Ramalho’s recent translation, which had already fulfilled the market demand for Brazilian monolingual readers. Of course, it could be pointed out that this is a bilingual commented translation, but it is the status of the commentator, rather than the commenting itself, that makes this publication appear relevant. As an illustration of this point, upon the translation’s release, literary critic Reinaldo José Lopes wrote a review in the major newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* entitled: “*Beowulf* translation reveals Tolkien’s narrative mastery” (Lopes 2014, my translation).⁴

The second aspect of this translation that must be considered is that, due to Tolkien’s importance and visibility, a critical modern translation taboo was broken, *i.e.*, the use of indirect translation. Tolkien had translated from Old English to Modern English, which, according to Jakobson (1959), should be classified as an intralingual translation. Taking this classification into account, and considering that Tolkien’s Modern English text was used to produce the Brazilian Portuguese text, indirect translation is definitely at play. Indirect translation is a thorny issue, considered by many to be an obsolete approach, even though in recent years scholarly interest in the topic has been renewed, thus revealing its complexity. This case in point demonstrates that consensus about traditional “best translation practices” may be a secondary consideration when the market is the driving force. Rosa, Pieta and Maia (2017) point out that power relations between languages, cultures and agents in the world translation system should be considered among the possible causes of indirect translation. These power relations are apparent here, which highlights the importance of the international book market and the cultural industry in the viability of indirectness.

This case also shows that the practice of indirect translation can involve aspects that contradict the now traditional notion of the translator as a predominantly invisible agent. The original text’s authorship (in this case unknown) was obscured or, one may even say, reassigned to Tolkien the translator due to his worldwide status as Tolkien the author. The translator was thus foregrounded rather than invisible, while both the text and its origins were eclipsed by the celebrity translator.

Case three: the Hedra series *Tradutores*

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the recently founded publishing house Hedra began releasing a new collection called *Tradutores* (Translators), which comprised re-editions of decades-old translations of canonized world literature by illustrious Lusophone translators.⁵ The notoriety of most of these translators was due to their concomitant careers as authors. Thus, this case demonstrates a curious situation in a much broader spectrum, *i.e.*, a multi-volume editorial project driven by celebrity translators.

⁴ “Tradução de “Beowulf” revela maestria narrativa de Tolkien”

⁵ An article about the collection’s release published at *Folha de São Paulo* is available here: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ilustrad/fq0212200008.htm>

The collection includes Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, translated by Portuguese poet Manuel Maria Barbosa du Bocage (1765–1805); Henry Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*, translated by Portuguese author Eça de Queirós (1845–1900); Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, translated by Brazilian journalist João do Rio (1881–1921); and Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, translated by canonized Brazilian author Machado de Assis (1839–1908) (cf. Figure 3).

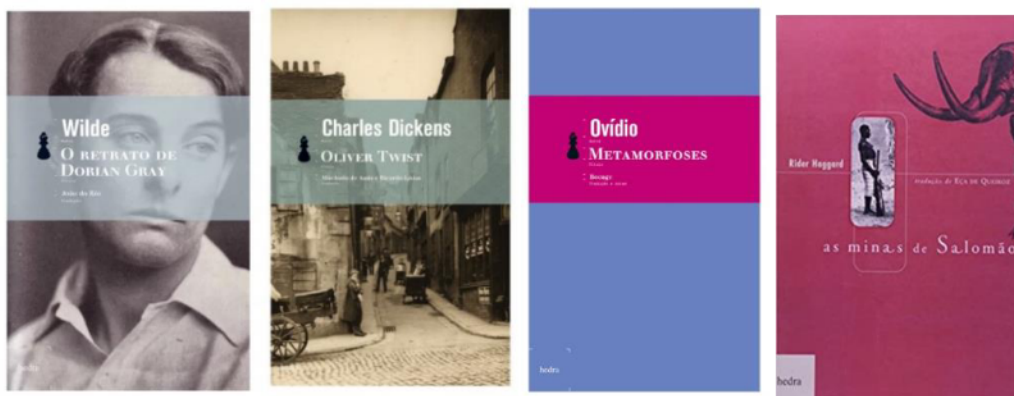


Figure 3. Covers of Hedra’s *Tradutores* collection

The year of death of these translators is sufficient to indicate the historical and linguistic distance of their translations from contemporary Brazilian readership. However, these translations were clearly not reissued due to their readability, but rather to the pens that produced them, *i.e.*, their perceived literary merit. It should be pointed out, however, that Hedra’s stated focus is neither mainstream literature nor high profitability: their website⁶ makes it clear that their mission is the dissemination of literary works in line with their political and sociological worldview, exemplified by the main tabs in their home page: anarchism, indigenous thought, and classics. Even though, on the one hand, Hedra’s self-constructed image should not be accepted uncritically, the profit motive, on the other, could not simply be considered an overriding explanation of Hedra’s motives for publishing this collection, as would be the case for other more commercially-oriented publishing houses.

Machado de Assis’s text deserves particular attention for at least two reasons, the first being that the acclaimed author never actually finished the translation in question. In 1870, as a not yet famous, but respected literary critic and political analyst, Assis was invited by the recently founded newspaper *Jornal da Tarde* to translate Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. Assis’ acclaim as a writer would come considerably later, after his first novel was published in 1881. *Oliver Twist* was published in a newspaper and, therefore, in a serial format. The series never went beyond the book’s 26th chapter, and no explanation for the actual cause of the interruption is available, even though Assis appears to be the party responsible, as pointed out by Sousa (1955). Over a century later, Hedra’s solution was to find a contemporary translator to conclude Assis’ work. Translator and author Ricardo Lísias was hired to conclude the translation and to explain, in a lengthy introduction, why this enterprise was undertaken. Lísias explains the relevance of Assis’ translation from a

⁶ Available at: <https://www.hedra.com.br/#home>

scholarly perspective both for translation and literary scholars, dwells on the peculiarities of Assis' style, and shares his own strategies for producing a harmonious text.

The work is also interesting because it is an indirect translation from a French source text (a translation by A. Gerardin made in 1864 and published by the Librairie de L. Hachette in Paris). Of course, translating through French in late 19th century Brazil was hardly a novelty due to that language's prestige among the intelligentsia. At that point France was the center of culture and refinement to Brazilians, while English was still decades away from its current status as *lingua franca*. However, what is surprising is that in the 21st century, an indirect translation, a practice highly marginalized in book markets worldwide, including Brazil, was considered relevant for publication due to the significance of the translator. This clearly parallels the previously described Tolkien translation, with indirectness overlooked when a celebrity is involved. However, Lísias states that, for his part of the translation, the source text was mainly the original English, even though the French translation Assis used as his source text was regularly consulted in his quest for a more homogenous text.

Regarding the homogeneity of the co-authored translation, even though only an in-depth micro-level analysis of the text would provide richer insights, Lísias provides some clues for his readers, clarifying in the introduction that he made a conscious attempt to produce a harmonious style, emphasizing expressions and vocabulary common to Assis' translation and in his own texts. The final result is that, even though Assis' part of the translation has been updated to comply with contemporary spelling and punctuation, the antiquated language transports readers to another time.

The desire to preserve Lusophone cultural memory is most likely one motivation for Hedra's *Tradutores* series. To better understand how an outdated translation could be considered a viable literary product, it is necessary to understand the general relation between Brazil, Lusophone literature, and the Portuguese language. Currently, the most prominent space in Brazilian booksellers is generally reserved for literature translated from Anglophone texts, with national authors receiving a much smaller share, which also generally follows in music, cinema and other media. However, names such as Machado de Assis and José de Alencar are still quite prestigious: their works are a permanent part of school curricula and are a constant topic in university entrance exams. Thus, most of the population with intellectual aspirations reads them at some point. As a result, the 19th century Portuguese used in these books is often considered the 'ideal' Portuguese from a supposed 'golden era'. Thus, marketing literature translated by these authors is not as problematic as might be expected.

Final considerations

For scholars and professionals accustomed to analyzing the translator's invisibility, these cases may be useful to show how different the market can be in countries where translation plays a central role in the production and distribution of cultural goods. From a polysystemic perspective, since translated literature occupies a central position in Brazil, it seems worthwhile to investigate whether this centrality is connected with the

consistent involvement of celebrated literary figures in translation, as well as why translations by celebrated authors have sold well.

The Clarice Lispector translation was quite paradoxical in that the name of the “translator” was quite visible on the cover, although previous micro-level analysis indicates that another unnamed and invisible worker probably produced the text. This concept, the “pseudo-celebrity translation”, has yet to be researched, and could be considered a subdivision of the controversial realm of pseudo-authorship. Along with other techniques of discourse analysis, the register markers used in Hanes (2015) could be used to identify the correspondence between an author’s style and a translation with his or her name on it. This could be particularly useful in Brazil, considering that pseudo-celebrity translation is reported to have been a common practice in a not-so-distant past (which may also have occurred in other countries). The point here is not moral judgment upon the author’s use of ghost translators, which could most likely be ascribed to financial considerations or a marketing strategy, but rather to describe the breaking of a taboo by important world literature figures in connection with the history of translation.

The recent legitimization of indirect translation (an otherwise marginalized translation practice) with the author’s fame would seem ‘reasonable’ from a marketing perspective. However, the motivations behind recent commercialization of indirect translations in the Brazilian book market still requires more systematic investigation in a larger corpus, since, at first glance, the reasons for this practice could range from simple financial interests to the nobler intent of preserving and disseminating intellectual contributions from canonized writers.

In some respects, Brazil could be considered a culturally dependent country, even in post-colonial times. The fact that half of the authors / translators in Hedra’s *Tradutores* series are Portuguese rather than Brazilian shows an important deference to the country’s European colonizers, despite the fact that Brazilian Portuguese has diverged from its European counterpart for quite some time. However, the Tolkien case indicates a more recent and perhaps more complex phenomenon: globalized Anglophone cultural colonization and its far-reaching reverberations. Brazilians currently value Anglophone (particularly American) culture in much the same way that French culture was valued in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The indirectness of the Tolkien *Beowulf* translation was considered irrelevant, as was the fact that a direct scholarly translation had recently been published. Due to the success of film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, the publishers exploited the marketability of Tolkien’s name. This cinema-to-literature market cycle can be observed repeatedly in Brazil, where many literary works are ‘(re)discovered’ after film adaptations are released. This translation may thus be a highly unusual product generated by an unexpected combination of elements in the Brazilian cultural polysystem, which raises questions about similar cases in Brazil or abroad.

One final aspect that warrants further research is the relationship between celebrity and ‘ordinary’ translators. The extreme visibility of translations by celebrated personalities such as authors or politicians might further detract from the visibility of professional translators, devaluing their expertise and promoting unfair competition between prominent figures and professionals who, despite their competence, may never enjoy the same market results. Hopefully, the cases introduced in this study will help

broaden current discussion about the translator's visibility in different cultures, encouraging researchers to uncover further data about celebrity translators and the attribution of credit, while further deepening insight into the visibility-invisibility paradigm.

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