

COLLABORATION IN MAKING SINGABLE TRANSLATIONS OF SONGS

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ABSTRACT: This article begins with general, theoretical issues on singable translations before discussing a specific project, which has produced singable translations into English of about fifty songs penned by the Brazilian singer and popular composer Noel Rosa. The theoretical issues focus on Peter Low's 'Pentathlon Principle' (2005, 2008, 2017), a set of procedures developed by the author to guide translators who venture into song translation. Throughout the paper, we comment on particular difficulties faced by the authors while translating a group of Noel Rosa songs into English as 'singable translations', and how we overcame them.

KEYWORDS: Noel Rosa; Singable Translations; Pentathlon Principle; Brazilian Popular Music; Samba.

1. Collaboration and Song

In most human endeavours it is normal for two or more people to work together. Most work is done by teams. Many books are created by collaboration, for example when sporting stars tell their stories to journalists. So are many songs (e.g. Rodgers & Hammerstein, Lennon & McCartney—or, to give a Brazilian example, Tom Jobim & Vinicius de Moraes, the authors of 'The Girl from Ipanema' (among other classics). This paper will argue that collaboration is a particularly useful approach to translating songs.

In translation practice generally, it is not uncommon for two people to collaborate, either in professional agencies or privately (see for example Cordingley & Manning, 2017). In a typical case, one is a habitual user of the source language, who can explain what the text means—we can call this the SL person. The other a skilful user of the target language, who can make the new text sound natural in that target language—we can call this the TL person.

Here are two famous cases of collaboration in translating poetry. When the Persian poetry of Omar Khayyam was translated by the English poet Robert Graves, it was acknowledged to be a collaboration. Graves, though very learned, did not claim to be an expert in classical Persian, and so both translation and commentary are also credited to his collaborator Omar Ali-shah. Neither man could have done so well by himself – they certainly outdid the well-known English version of Fitzgerald.

When the Ukrainian poems of Taras Chevchenko were translated by the French poet Eugène Guillevic, it was a different kind of collaboration. Guillevic didn't know Ukrainian, but knew the related language Russian. So he worked chiefly from a Russian version of the

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poems. Perhaps we could call this relay-translating, but if he discussed details with the Russian translator, in person or by post, we could call this collaboration.

Translating is a particularly good activity for collaboration, because the very nature of the task requires two sets of knowledge (two languages), and two dissimilar procedures: decoding and recoding. It follows that any translated text can always be criticized by reference to two dissimilar criteria: in sense–transfer and naturalness. This is true even when a single translator or interpreter does them both.

With a collaborating team, there is division of labour and there is discussion, for example one day they may discuss the semantic details of the source text (ST), with the SL person dominating, and then the next day choose to focus on the target text (TT), with the TL person viewing it as if it were originally written in the TL. In addition, translators often encounter tricky phrases where TL options need to be generated before a final choice is made. If there is a team of two, one may excel at brainstorming options, and the other may be better at selecting the optimal one.

The present article, however, focuses on song-lyrics, and on making translations that can be sung in the TL, making them by teamwork. There are many challenges in singable translating. We agree with Christiane Nord that the standard to be met in all translating is “adequacy or appropriateness with regard to the *skopos*.” (Nord, 1997, p. 33). And the goal of making a TT to be sung to a concert audience can be called a complex *skopos*. Its requirements are more numerous than (say) translating a song-lyric for mere reading—for which translators create a written text and need not think about syllable-count or the openness of vowels. A good and useful system, sometimes called the Pentathlon Approach (Low, 2005, 2008, 2017), names five criteria: physical singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm and rhyme. Now we do not deny that the challenges involved have often been met by solo translators; we simply claim that there are some which a collaborating team can surely handle better. Given the multiple criteria and the knowledge and skills required, we do not think many translators are perfectly equipped to do it alone. Collaboration has not been much discussed in the translation literature, yet it is certainly demonstrated in the work of Apter and Herman, co-translators of various operas and co-authors of *Translating for singing*.

The many challenges come not only from the *skopos*, but also from the nature of texts. Some of the problems found in song translation may be common to other forms of interlingual translation, such as metaphor. But some are found rarely outside songs and poems, such as rhyme and phonic effects like assonance (ultimately, these are oral texts, complemented by musical sounds). Other problems are more frequent in song-texts than elsewhere, such as colloquial language, even slang. In addition, there may be cultural and historical allusions; there may be puns or other forms of humour; there is often an emotional charge in the words or the subtext. Translators should not miss meanings that are present but not actually stated, what some linguists call the implicature (Baker, 2011, p. 235), where a song may say, for example, “you lost your taste for water” but implies “you

drank too much alcohol.” This makes an uncommon cluster of problems which would surely defeat many novices and many computer translating systems.

Working as collaborators gives a strategic advantage for decision-making. The two can work together to understand the exact character of the song-lyric (is it cheerful, angry, satirical, ironic, deeply felt or what?) and to identify its salient features: the elements that will absolutely need to come through in the TT. (Again, good solo translators can do this thinking, consciously or otherwise, but an overt discussion can often do it better.)

When it comes to the recoding, some *skopos* thinking is needed. Various problems arise with this *skopos*, which is the creation of a good text to sing in the TL. The TT needs to satisfy more than the common two criteria of sense and naturalness – indeed we can count five (plus a sixth one, when the song is part of a large work, such as an opera or musical, and therefore must be integrated with other elements of it).

Sense-transfer is of course a criterion in almost all translating tasks. Semantic fidelity matters. We think, however, that accurate transfer of meaning is less important with songs than with informative texts. However, we do care about sense: other people may choose to invent new lyrics in their languages, *replacement texts*—but that is not translating, because no meanings are transferred. What faithful translators hope to offer the hearers is the real verbal and cultural content of the source, without cheating, as far as is possible. Good translators are ferriers, they want to ferry or transport the real merchandise across a linguistic border.

As for naturalness, that is what we find in translations which don't seem to be translations, which could have been created in the TL. This criterion is particularly important in songs, because song lyrics need to communicate directly to the audience, and usually do this by means of everyday words. When we look at song-translations published in English long ago, we tend to find them unnatural—and we note that singers avoid them.

But there are also three further criteria that are particularly important in song translation, namely rhythm, rhyme and singability, which can be tested using the Pentathlon Approach. Rhythm is an important one, since a song-translation needs to coincide rhythmically with the pre-existing music. And rhyme counts too: it is often desirable for a singable translation to rhyme, though this may vary with the specific song or with the traditions of the target culture. Clumsy rhymes can spoil a TT.

As for singability, we use this term to focus on the use of phonetic options that match the physical needs of a singer's voice. Here we choose a narrower definition of singability than that used in the fine studies of Johan Franzon (2005, 2008). Not every sentence is easy to sing – not if it contains, for example, consonant clusters or tongue-twisters. The best singable translations win praise from singers for choosing good open vowels for long notes. And indeed this criterion is best judged by people who frequently sing in the target language.

Those five criteria could be viewed as five different judges or experts whom translators must satisfy. While some have compared the task to juggling, our favourite metaphor of the pentathlon comes from athletics: the person must compete well in five

dissimilar events, and try to achieve a high score overall. Anything weak or imperfect ‘loses points’. The notion of a ‘high score’ is helpful in evaluating the translators’ choice. The best translations are those that ‘lose no points’, or very few. There are at least five kinds of weakness that should be avoided if possible, for example tongue-twisters (loss of singability), howlers (errors of sense), archaisms (lack of naturalness), wrong stress on words (false rhythm) and very forced rhymes.

We have suggested above that collaboration is a particularly useful approach to translating songs, one that may work efficiently and produce good results. Although some solo translators are well equipped for the task, a pair of dissimilar collaborators may be better equipped. Ideally, the collaborators will have different, complementary linguistic and cultural skills. It is desirable that these translators, in addition to language skills, should also have some knowledge of music, the more the better. Skill in singing helps too, of course.

The SL expert needs to really understand the source-text, and this means knowing or discovering the relevant details of the song’s social and literary context. Even a ‘native’ speaker of the SL may misunderstand a song-text—few would master all the unusual words, historical allusions, ambiguities, or ironies. Even a common word can have a depth of meaning or emotion, and a simple-sounding song may actually have a lot of subtext, so much so that only a part of that subtext can be transferred in the TL; but unless the translators understand it well their TT will not be optimally faithful to the source, and their TTs will not be able to do in the TL what the songwriter did in the SL.

Ideally both collaborators should be frequent users of both languages. The TL expert, however, needs the specific skills of a wordsmith, so as to generate a good TT that fits the music and lends itself to good performance in the TL, and that singers may want to sing. Some experience in rhyming is desirable, and so is a good sense of the kind of natural verbal phrases make for an effective song, even a passionate one.

With any kind of collaboration, the teamwork can bring benefits in quality control. This is certainly true in the case of making singable translations. It is good to judge a draft TT by a set of five questions:

- Singability—Is it easy to sing?
- Sense—Have I grasped the essential meaning?
- Naturalness—Does the target-language seem natural or not?
- Rhythm—Do the words fit well with the rhythm?
- Rhyme—Does the translation rhyme enough?

Those five questions can be put differently:

- Singability—What would singers say?
- Sense—What would truly bilingual people say?
- Naturalness—What would native speakers say?
- Rhythm—What would dancers, for example, say?
- Rhyme—What would people with good ears say?

The two collaborators can discuss these questions, and may usefully seek further advice, especially from singers.

2. The Noel Rosa project

Now let us report on a specific collaboration. Some eight years ago Lauro Meller, a Brazilian academic with expertise in popular songs, believing that Brazilian music deserves to be better known internationally, conceived a project to translate a body of songs into English. He approached Peter Low, a native speaker of English who had written articles on the theoretical issues of song-translation, and had often translated into English from French. Their discussion resulted in the choice of songs by Noel Rosa (1910–37), an innovative songwriter of Rio Janeiro, whose work was popular, accessible... and no longer under copyright. This provided a large corpus of songs from which to choose. We hoped this might result in a bilingual edition and in many songs being performed and heard in English. Some were performed already in 2023, and the book (and e-book) has now appeared: *Noel Rosa, the Master of Samba, in Singable Translations / Noel Rosa: Traduções cantáveis do mestre do Samba*¹. Noel Rosa proved a good choice, because, unlike some songwriters, he made the words an important part of his songs, notably his satirical ones. He even wrote a song in the form of an auction: ‘*Quem dá mais?*’ (‘What am I bid?’). Many hearers of his songs might enjoy dancing to their rhythms, but those unfamiliar with Portuguese would totally miss their lively verbal content.

A key part of Meller's work was identifying the key songs in a corpus of well over 100—with a special focus on those that are famous in Brazil. Then, in the early stages, he provided prose translations of the lyrics, into English, one by one. These focused on meaning, with no concern for rhythm or rhyme, and were conceived only to be useful working drafts. Meanwhile Peter Low, a New Zealander, bore the onus of manipulating the English phrases. He knew that his unfamiliarity with Portuguese was not ideal, though his knowledge of two sister languages (French and Spanish) was of some use. A key part of his work was adapting and enhancing those prose translations.

Both collaborators knew how the original songs sounded—there was a good compilation of recordings from the 1930s, re-mastered into seven CDs. There were also three volumes of sheet music, edited by Almir Chediak, which accurately transcribed the song-texts and printed the melodies with the words underlaid. Low found these very useful, because they indicated downbeats and prominent notes (though he did sometimes add or subtract a syllable in English). These resources enabled us to focus on the linguistic and social problems of the songs.

A songwriter usually has an audience in mind: it might be all the speakers of the language, or it may be a limited in-group who would fully understand the subtext (including slang words and allusions). But a song-translator always has a different audience in mind, hearers who are located in another time, place and culture, and are unable to receive the

¹ (2025) Bilingual edn. Natal: EdUFRN

words in exactly the same way. There is a need to bridge that gap, at least to an acceptable degree.

Many song-texts have specific cultural terms that are part of the social context of the songs, and that can be hard to transfer into the culture of a different language. One example is proper names. For the title '*Cidade-mulher*' we chose a title including the subtext: 'City of Woman: Rio'. But we realised that the names of city districts (Vila, Salgueiro etc.) would mean little to non-Brazilians. When we considered certain recurrent words in these songs—*samba*, *favela*, *mulata*—we quickly decided to retain these very Brazilian terms, to help retain the songs' link with Rio. That was more important than maximum clarity in English.

Some terms may be so embedded in particular time and place that they have no good equivalent in the TL. For the term '*malandro*', for example, we considered English words like 'hustler' and 'rascal' before thinking that 'spiv' is probably the closest, semantically. Yet that word is now rare in English. We know that the options we chose are not always perfect, but we hope they work for most listeners. Some other words risked being too obscure for English-speaking singers and audiences, and so we opted for intelligible words that rendered only some of the sense.

The word '*judeu*' caused some head-scratching. We thought the obvious English word 'Jew' might offend, but might be required for fidelity. Then some research revealed that in 1930's Rio the reference was less precise than that—not all money-lenders were Jewish. So we lost nothing essential when we translated it as 'money-lender', and once as 'shark'.

A different issue is tone. The repeated phrase "*Que se dane, que se dane!*" is vulgar, but it was hard to assess how vulgar or offensive was it when Rosa put it into a song, and to choose an English phrase that corresponded well. We ended up with a split translation: "What a bummer! What the hell". A similar case was the slang phrase "*Por causa duma marvada que roubou meu coração*". We deemed it acceptable to use a phrase that is non-standard, yet meets the criterion of naturalness: "ever since that no-good woman done reduce my heart to dust".

Song-translators also need to have a certain tolerance for imperfection and trade-offs, in order to acquire some elbow-room (juggling is required, and you can't juggle if you wear handcuffs). One value of collaboration is that, when considering two or three phrases, all possible but imperfect, the two minds can discuss which option to take. Often a slight tweaking makes possible a gain in overall points. Solo translators also have frequent internal debates, of course, but with collaboration the debates can be overt. Some might argue that the TL expert should have the casting vote.

As for trade-offs, this implies a compromise where one accepts losing one or two points on one criterion in order to score well on a different criterion. For example, one may translate the word for apple with the word 'pear'—not an identical fruit—which is much easier to rhyme in English. However, my collaborator may argue that an imperfect rhyme would be a better option. At times we may have to look for a third option.

In the next five paragraphs we discuss examples of tricky points by reference to the five ‘pentathlon’ criteria of singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm and rhyme:

A major issue in singability is vowel-sounds. In making versions of Noel Rosa, we found fewer vowel problems than expected, because his songs are usually conversational, with a limited compass and few long notes. We were pleased, near the start of *‘Século do Progresso’*, to place the word ‘party’ or a long high note, even if that meant rearranging the sentence. But we accepted the possibility of choosing an inferior vowel, if that helped in another way. Any cluster of consonants is certainly bad (except perhaps in Slavic languages). Fortunately, English accepts them more readily than French or Italian. One of our draft versions described a lady's jewels as “nothing but trinkets” (*“não passavam de pinóias”*). But the consonants TTR juxtaposed in that phrase would be very hard to sing clearly. We changed it to “really imitation”, with a little loss of meaning.

Whereas in informative translating the detailed meaning of a ST is crucial, with songs we sometimes we sacrificed points on sense, so as to gain on other criteria. One example is the song beginning *“Minha Viola”*—5 syllables, on the notes G-F#-E-D-D. The obvious English “My Guitar” has only three syllables. Putting two notes on ‘My’ sounded awkward, so instead we added a fourth syllable, an adjective absent from the source: “My Old Guitar”. Losing a point by adding that short neutral word was justified not semantically, but because it solved a rhythmic problem. The weak ending of *‘viola’* we simply tied into the second syllable of ‘guitar’, to make a longer D. In the song *‘Festa no Céu’*, which is a fantasy, it was more important to retain the light-hearted tone than to translate closely. Thus the phrase *“botar seu colarinho”* became “properly knot his tie”, and *“a vaca de porta-seio e corpinho”* became “the cow with a satin bodice and double bra”. Semantically these are imperfections, but they do not weaken the song, in our opinion, since we felt that they were suitably ‘Noelesque’—they met our aim of retaining the spirit of Noel Rosa. On several occasions we discussed altering a proper name. In the case of *‘Dona Araci’* (a fictional name), we first tried “Oh Mrs Randle” (name picked to rhyme with ‘handle’) before selecting ‘Senhora Randle’, thus making her a more Brazilian person. It would not be acceptable to change a non-fictional name like Getúlio Vargas.

Naturalness is highly important in songs. It matters in most translating, of course, but song-texts are oral texts and need to communicate instantly to the ear. Knowing this, songwriters tend to use common words, and song-translators should do the same. We certainly wanted our TTs to seem to have been written in easy natural English. It would be silly to render the common verb *‘melhorar’* with its cognate ‘ameliorate’, when the common English is ‘improve’. But a rare word can be chosen at times, provided the text stays fairly clear. For example our phrase “to play batucada and excellent samba” is adequate for *“matéria de samba e de batucada”* (though few English listeners would know that a *‘batucada’* is a group of percussionists). We tried to preserve the Brazilian nature of the songs while also making the TT sound natural and communicate well—and these two considerations sometimes conflict.

As for question of rhythm, we envisaged the rhythm of the translated songs to be the same as the originals, usually a samba beat. But we claimed some flexibility with the syllable–count, even in these songs with few melismas: we tweaked the number of syllables in a line, subtly, by doubling or slurring – and only if that worked with the strong stresses usually found in English. A case in point is the opening phrase “*Quando o apito*”, sung as 5 syllables, with the downbeat on the 4th. The literal English “When the whistle” has only 4. What we chose was “Whenever the whistle”, which has 6 syllables, including a short one sneaked into the third note.

The question of rhyme has led to some unusable song-translations, partly because some translators felt obliged to retain the same quantity and quality of rhymes as found in the SL. This meant a loss of sense and/or naturalness, and placed undue constraints (a bit like handcuffing themselves!). In the case of Noel Rosa, rhymes are frequent and seem to flow easily in his Brazilian Portuguese. But we claimed a right to flexibility in English. We sometimes accepted a half–rhyme or none at all. Once we rhymed ‘ice’ with ‘bike’ (to keep the right meaning), and rhymed the word ‘party’ with ‘starry’. Those options were certainly imperfect, and inferior to the ST rhymes. On another occasion we strayed from sense, introducing the word ‘armadillo’ to rhyme with ‘cigarillo’, acceptable surely in the fantasy song ‘*Festa no Céu*’. And since that translation had to end with the word ‘fools’, we threw in the rhyming word ‘mules’. After all, songwriters and other rhymesters are known to choose some words chiefly for their sounds. The most important word to rhyme is the one that ends a verse, the word that clinches it in a satisfying way. But let it not be said that we didn't *seek* perfection. In all those examples we would admit that points are lost. But imperfections are good if they make possible a better overall score.

Let us say in conclusion that this project may be viewed as a successful example of collaboration. The output is singable English versions of nearly fifty songs, now published in four groups: observations of Rio, characters of Rio, Rosa the serenader, and Rosa the satirist. Some now are being performed in English. We think our project constitutes a strong suggestion to any song-translators seeking to recreate the meaning and feeling of a group of songs: they would do well to consider working as collaborators.

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