

Translation and censorship in Franco's Spain: negotiation as a pathway for authorization

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Abstract

During Franco's dictatorship in Spain (1939-1975) and even a few years after, both native writings and translations were subject to control by means of a censoring system in charge of looking after the ideological uniformity of the nation. The censorship boards had to review the books submitted and then give their verdict concerning the advisability of the work in question. Among these verdicts one possibility was the banning of a publication on the grounds that it constituted an offence to any of the taboo topics of the time (mainly sex and religion). This situation sometimes led the most audacious publishers to negotiations with the Administration; cuts, rephrasing, changes in parts of the book and other procedures were used in exchange for the authorization of the novel, negotiations that were more or less successful depending on the nature of the transgression and on the relationship of the publisher with the censor. This paper gives a brief outline of the way in which this book controlling system worked and focuses on the different kinds of negotiations spotted during the examination of censorship files corresponding to translations of the last years of the dictatorship (negotiations undertaken with a view to profit) and thus shows how closely linked translation and power can be in a nationalistic environment.

1. Translation, Negotiation & Censorship

The activity of translating is one that has typically been associated with impartiality and consequently viewed by many scholars as a non-neutral task. As Peter Fawcett put it, "translation in all its forms is frequently the site of a variety of

power plays between the actors involved” (Fawcett 1995: 177). These power plays may imply that the society in which translation takes place is dominated by a controlling political regime determining the way in which this is carried out. Censorship of written material is in these cases the usual political arm employed in order to legitimize this control, and the possibility of negotiating in such a context will precisely depend on the definition of its boundaries. Following Umberto Eco, negotiation is “a process by virtue of which, in order to get something, each party renounces something else, and at the end everybody feels satisfied since one cannot have everything” (2004: 6).

Under Franco's regime and specially during the last years and beyond, the activity of negotiating was intermingled with those of translating and censoring: we can trace examples of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring among censors, government officials, publishers, writers and translators that confirm that after the Law of Press and Print of 1966 it was possible to negotiate in a climate where censorship was still operative. Negotiations thanks to which, in the best of the cases, a novel would be authorized and published, something virtually unthinkable a few years earlier. The Spanish society was changing and the policies governing translation and censoring started to bear it in mind.

In order to understand why this change was possible and how it took place, we offer under the following heading a brief outline of the censoring mechanism used at the time.

2. The Francoist system of censorship in the last years

The Law of Press and Print issued in Spain in 1966 came to replace the legislation that had been operative in the country since the victory of the nationalist party after the Civil War. The main visible head of this change was the Minister in charge of the Ministry of Information and Tourism, Fraga Iribarne. This

Law changed how the system of censorship had been working until then because after it the control was based mainly on two procedures: the *previous consultation* or *prior censorship*, which could result in a positive or negative report about the book under review, and the *archiving* ("*depósito*") of the printed work in the aforementioned Ministry, without the need of a censor's judgment. The latter could, however, mean the sequestration or confiscation of the book by the authorities if, once on the market, it was believed that its distribution should be avoided. Thus, while granting the permission of book production to go ahead without the regime's direct supervision, *archiving* could result in significant economic loss for publishers.

While *archiving* and *previous consultation* were designed to facilitate the distribution of printed material, another meaningful change in the law was its redefinition of "*silencio administrativo*" or *official silence*. This formula was used by censors when they had certain objections to the content of a work but still foresaw benefits in authorizing its publication. By legally declaring silence, the authorities did not explicitly approve of a given book or support its moral content; they simply abstained from blocking its commercial distribution.

Concerning the topics writers and translators were cautious of when working, there were some specific fields which often generated taboo material during the years Spain was ruled by Franco: these were mainly sexual morals, political beliefs, the use of improper language and religion. However, in general, the application of censoring criteria varied depending on the degree of ideological conviction of the Minister in charge and this fact led sometimes to the exercise of self-censorship on the part of the writers and translators and at the same time paved the way for negotiations and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring among the different agents involved in the processes of translating, editing and censoring, as we are about to see.

3. Negotiations or “the game of the possible”¹

Censorship was not passively “suffered” by Spanish publishers and they developed strategies and negotiations to counter its effects. A possible classification of those tactical manoeuvrings could be the following:

On one hand, we can refer to the kind of negotiations that could be termed as “internal” negotiations or “ploys” because they took place between publisher and translator or writer (in this case mainly regarding domestic productions) and they had the purpose of deceiving the censorship mechanism. They were a means of subterfuge which could take different forms:

- resubmission of the same book with another title
- resubmission of the same book with another cover
- resubmission of the same book with another translation (these first three could be found at the same time or separately)
- prior softening of the translation
- change in the declared print run

On the other hand, we have the “external” ones, i.e., negotiations which actually involve the presence of at least one representative of the censorship mechanism, something which is clearly traceable in the censorship files examined and which marks them as “real” negotiations (as it has been seen, the previous ones could also be considered as ploys on the part of the publishers). The following types have been observed:

- permission to publish a book subject to cuts before translating it
- agreement to subsequently soften the translation
- change in the imprint for a foreign one
- permission to publish a book abroad in its complete form, without cuts or changes

-strategies designed to reach the least number of readers possible: permission to publish a book for a small audience, in a foreign language, or to publish it but not to perform it (in the case of plays).

Far from being exhaustive, this classification is a good example of how, within the narrow bounds of a censorship mechanism, negotiating could still be possible and effective.

3.1. “Internal” negotiations or “ploys”

a) Resubmission of the same book with another title

This strategy implied that the publishing house had already submitted to previous consultation a certain book and that it had received a negative outcome, being denied its publication. Therefore, in order to confuse the censors, they decided to translate the title in a different way with the consent and help of the translator and submit it again. Most times the change of title was effective and it actually deceived the censors, who did not recognize the book before reading it and opened a new file number for the supposed “new” book. However, by doing this, the publishing house was risking the possibility that the censors, after examining the book, understood the ploy and, consequently, decided to deny the book once more.

An example of this kind of strategy is the case of Harold Robbins' *The Betsy*.² When this book first entered the Spanish censorship mechanism, in 1973, it was already in a Spanish version, since it had been translated to this language in Argentina and it had been entitled *Betsy* there. Due to its sexual ingredients and the lack of morality it depicted (something common in Robbins' novels), it was banned at the time. A few months later, the publishing house (Luis de Caralt) resubmitted it, this time with a different title that had nothing to do with the original one: *Los ejecutivos* (*The executives*). Now the book

was authorized, not only because the title had changed, but also because both the cover and the translation were different (see next sections).

b) Resubmission of the same book with another cover

Staying with the same example, it has to be signalled that *The Betsy* is not the best illustrative example of how this strategy was used in isolation; looking at the covers of the book, we see that the cover of the Argentinian edition featured the headlights of a car, in a reference to the plot of the novel which features a car named Betsy. Therefore, this picture did not represent anything that could be considered offensive according to the taboo topics of Franco's regime. The cover that was submitted later, however, depicted the silhouette of a naked woman, something that was obviously much more delicate at the time. Such a reflection leads us to conclude that in this particular case, had the book not been accompanied by a new and completely harmless translation, the change in the cover would have not had its desired effect. It was probably due to the change in the translation that the publisher dared to include that cover. The typical change of cover in any other example would have been the opposite, substituting a controversial picture with an inoffensive one. Still, we have presented this example so that a link with the other two strategies can be established that shows how operating together was more effective than planning something unaided by other strategies.

c) Resubmission of the same book with another translation

Again staying with the same example, this was one of the most effective strategies when resubmitting a book that had been previously banned. On this occasion, the previous translation had been banned because too many cuts would have been needed in case of publication since the novel was too explicit.

Hence, it was more advisable to simply block the circulation of the book than to mutilate. The new translation was commissioned from a Spanish translator who received clear indications by the publisher to soften the most controversial passages and to adapt the text to the prudish morals of the time. Consequently, the result was a Spanish version with fewer pages than the original and a version much more innocent regarding sexual aspects, i.e., a version much more in accordance with what the censors would approve. Thus, the book was authorized without further problem.

In the specific case of *The Betsy* by Harold Robbins, it has been clearly stated that it was precisely the combination of the three strategies that guaranteed the publishing house that their efforts would be rewarded. Being aware of this, the publishers did not hesitate to negotiate in order to achieve their objective.

d) Previous softening of the translation

Since both publishers and translators were aware of the difficulties some books would encounter when confronted with the censors' judgment, it became common to practice self-censorship when translating novels into Spanish. In this way they were ensuring that the book in which they had invested would be eventually put on the market. Subsequently, they paid special attention to those passages and topics they knew by former experience were going to be revised with zeal by the official readers, and changed them into a "softer" version that could be approved without resistance on the part of the censors.

As an instance of this softening technique we may cite the case of another of Harold Robbins' novels. This author became famous for his formula in which he combined sex, money and power and also for the dissolute way of life of most of the characters in his novels. As a result, his books were prime targets for censorship. In the case of his novel *The Inheritors*, in

Spanish translated as *Los Herederos*, one of the censors considered that “even if the narration had been previously self-censored,” it still presented some problems in certain passages that needed revision. Thus, the same censors were acknowledging the fact that some previous softening had been exerted that was nonetheless not completely effective. It was uncommon for the censors to take notice of the fact that the translation had been changed because this was a ploy carried out ‘behind their back’ but in this particular example the change must have been so obvious that the ploy became evident. Yet, instead of considering the softening of the translation as an offence or a subterfuge worthy of punishment, they encouraged this kind of activity with their behaviour, since those changes were what they looked for in order to offer the market books that did not contradict the regime’s morals and principles. The book was finally authorized but with changes, making the negotiation strategy this time less effective than in other examples, but still more effective than no change, which would have resulted in a ban of the book.

e) Change in the declared print run

This procedure was routinely carried out by the publishing house when they knew a particular novel was about to encounter problems with the Administration. It consisted of declaring a small number of copies when the novel first entered the censorship system and then changing that number to a bigger one once the book had been approved for publication, thus trying to confuse the Administration and claim that they had already spent a lot of money on a larger number of copies.

An illustration of this manoeuvring is the novel by Jacqueline Susann, *Once is Not Enough*. The publishing house Grijalbo initially declared their intention of publishing 8,000 copies of Susann’s novel. The history of this book with the censors is an intricate one – something which will allow us to cite it as an

example of other strategies later on – but in brief we can say that once the novel was finally authorized, the publishing house decided to print 50,000 copies of the book in question, a much larger quantity than the original estimate. Since the change in the number to be printed was so evident, the censors noticed the increase and asked the publishing house to stick to what they had originally declared. Nevertheless, since some other negotiations had been carried out in the meantime between the censors and the publisher, the final print run was the 50,000 which the publishers had intended all along.

3.2. “External” or “real” negotiation

a) Permission to publish a book subject to cuts before translating it

The usual procedure when a novel was presented to the censors was to submit it in an already translated version. Nevertheless, sometimes, the publishing house decided to present it in the original language and then act accordingly to the censors' verdict after they had read the original manuscript. This was the case of Joseph Wambaugh's *The New Centurions*, a novel which depicted the difficulties of police work in Los Angeles, California, in the early 1960s. The publishing house, Grijalbo (once again)³ presented the English book to the censors. After reading it, they decided that the novel could be published only if some cuts were made in some passages they specified in the file before translating it into Spanish. These cuts mainly concerned the frequent swear words and coarse language used by the characters. The publisher agreed to those cuts and when the translation was done, the language the policemen employed had been deprived of much of its characterizing force; however, both the publisher and the translator gained something with the negotiation: the publisher and the translator lost the battle of an accurate translation, but

in exchange saw how their book was published. The censors gained their battle in softening the offensive material but at the same time were losing ground in allowing the publication of books that a few years earlier would have simply been banned.

b) Agreement to subsequently soften the translation

Sometimes the censors had different opinions concerning a novel's advisability and they issued contradictory verdicts that forced them to eventually reach a consensus so that the publisher would abide by only one unique decision. The first submitted translation of Erich Segal's *Love Story* was one that did not please the censors much. It was a translation that had been done in South America and it was considered unsuitable for the Catholic morals of Francoist Spain: the young American couple had premarital relationships, used swear words all the time and confessed a disregard for the devotion of the Catholic religion; these characteristics made it a perfect candidate for erasures. However, someone in the Administration considered that since the novel had been a huge success abroad, the book might be allowed in the hopes that it would be profitable also in the Spanish market. Thus, the censors agreed that the first edition of the novel could appear with the translation untouched, but they negotiated with the publishing house that the following editions of the book would present a softened version of the translation. The fact that *Love Story* had become an international bestseller had, as it has been seen, a lot to say in the final decision of the censors, and it illustrates how market imperatives were slowly starting to override the ideological principles of the dictatorship.

c) Change in the imprint for a foreign one

When the content of a novel was considered too immoral to be published in the country and the novel was accordingly banned,

there still existed the possibility of resorting to its publication outside the state, even if printed by a national publisher. Taking up again the example of Jacqueline Susann's *Once is Not Enough*, we find that the censors thought this book should be banned due to the numerous erotic passages that made it almost pornographic. However, the censors and the publishers reached an agreement: the book could be published outside the country and the imprint should read Grijalbo-Mexico. In this way, the pernicious content was distanced from the target culture and readers were given the impression that both the translation and the printing had been done in Mexico and not in Spain. The publisher was pleased with this option since at least he could see the book on the market, albeit not on the national one. The censors, for their part, were pleased to see the immoral writing far from their bookstores. This strategy is closely linked to the next one.

d) Permission to publish a book abroad in its complete form

In the same way as happened with the change in imprint, this strategy allowed the publishing house to publish a controversial book in its complete form, but only if it was published in another country. This was usually done together with the change in the imprint so that the overall impression was given that a South American country (mainly because of the sharing of a common language)⁴ had commissioned a Spanish publisher to print a particular book for its publication there. This was also the case of Susann's *Once is Not Enough*. It was common that after the publisher received permission to publish the book abroad without cuts, they tried to publish the book in Spain similarly, for which they waited a while before resubmitting the novel in the hopes that the outcome would be an affirmative one.

e) Strategies designed to reach the least number of readers possible

The three strategies previously mentioned under this heading have been grouped together because the heading clearly summarizes the purpose of the three: to make the book in question as accessible to readers as possible. No specific examples are provided here but we know of the existence of this tactic because publishers spoke about these negotiations after the dictatorship had ended and it is for sure that in some cases these strategies took place. The first one, the permission to publish a book in a luxury edition for a small audience, had the component of price as a leading parameter; luxury printing placed those books beyond the reach of the general public and at the same time far from the minds of the poorly trained in life, according to the censors' principles. Consequently, the further apart they had those readings from them, the better, in case they were to misinterpret their content.

If the publishing house was allowed to publish a book in a foreign language such as English or French it was because only very few and literate people would have access to it, and these people were supposedly educated people who would be able to distinguish between pernicious influences and those that were not. It is important, however, to note here that there were many difficulties in publishing in other languages spoken in the country, i.e., Galician, Basque and Catalan.

Last but not least, works banned for the stage were however authorized for publication, since reading a novel is a solitary experience while the theatregoing public constitutes a potential riot or demonstration if the work is controversial (Pérez 1984: 22).

4. Final reflections

As it has been seen throughout this article, the different agents involved in the processes of publication, translation and censoring were playing what Janet Pérez (1984) had rightfully called “the game of the possible”. Post-1966 legislation left some legal voids that opened up negotiating spaces for publishers and stimulated behind-the-scenes manoeuvring in order to publish profitably even if not in harmony with the moral principles of the regime. This led to a situation where negotiations became a very common procedure, negotiations which sometimes were carried out behind the censors' back and sometimes with their participation and their consent. As time went on, publishers became less afraid of direct contact with the censoring mechanism, something illustrated by the fact that some of the negotiations could coexist in the same file, as it has been shown. Whatever the agents involved and whatever strategies were undertaken, what is clear is that power and translation are closely linked, especially in a nationalistic environment such as the one under Franco in Spain.

Notes

¹ We use here the title of an article written by Janet Pérez (1984) concerning the use of techniques of dissent on the part of Spanish writers under Francoist Spain.

² This and the rest of the examples used throughout the article to illustrate the different negotiation strategies observed are taken from a catalogue of narrative material originally written in English and translated into Spanish between 1970 and 1978 compiled by the author of this article as part of her doctoral research.

³ Juan Grijalbo was a very prolific publisher at the time and several instances of direct correspondence between him and the censoring Administration have been found when studying the censoring files.

⁴ After the Civil War, many publishers decided to go into voluntary exile in South America and re-established their businesses there, with the result that the main publishing houses ended by finally having a

Spanish branch and also affiliates in the American continent. This fact greatly facilitated the interchange of printed material between the two markets.

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