

## A SHORT NOTE ON TRANSLATING SEXTUS EMPIRICUS TO PORTUGUESE

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**Abstract:** This paper is a proposal for dialogue about the possibility of thinking “skeptically” the way we translate skeptical literature, mainly Sextus Empiricus’ works.

**Keywords:** *Translation; Skepticism; Sextus Empiricus.*

**Resumen:** Este artículo es una propuesta de diálogo sobre la posibilidad de pensar “escépticamente” la forma en que traducimos la literatura escéptica, especialmente las obras de Sexto Empírico.

**Palabras-clave:** *Traducción; escepticismo; Sexto Empírico.*

οὔτε γὰρ πρέπει τῷ σκεπτικῷ φωνομαχεῖν (PH 1.207)<sup>1</sup>

Would it be possible to build a theory of translation based on Sextus Empiricus’ works? Is it possible that Sextus’ thoughts on the nature and foundations of language allow us to advance some kind of Skeptical theory of translation? Does the idea of a Pyrrhonic translator make any sense?

Advanced in the above mentioned way, the very question looks like a paradox, since it would imply that we could (and maybe should) find one positive doctrine from the thoughts of one Skeptical philosopher and her works. In this case, our problem would be better formulated as the following question: how to extract one theory from the works of a philosopher mainly concerned precisely with the refuse to assume any theory?<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays (and since Schleiermacher), whenever one talks on theories of translation, we can gather or classify these theories in two basic tendencies, i.e. in two different and opposed poles. So, on the one hand there is the tendency to “domesticate”<sup>3</sup> the foreign text, adapting it to the vernacular expressions. On the other hand, in the opposed pole there is the tendency of “*foreignization*”, which

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<sup>1</sup> “Pois não é apropriado para o cético lutar acerca de expressões” (trans. Brito & Huguenin). “It is unbecoming for a Sceptic to fight over phrases” (trans. Annas & Barnes).

<sup>2</sup> So, we are back to one of the oldest problems about interpreting skeptical literature...

<sup>3</sup> Venuti’s (1995) expression.

intends to force the vernacular expressions to support one foreign vocabulary and syntax.

Now, if there are two theories of translation, maybe in some sense they are mutually exclusive, and in such a situation what would Sextus Empiricus do? Would he suspend the judgement? In this case, would suspending judgement necessarily imply one refuse to engage in the activity of translating?

These questions on translating can be considered as part of more embracing questions about language which are quite challenging for the Skeptics, for how can they speak, write (or translate, in our case), without compromising themselves with some positions on the very activity they are engaging in?

But by one close reading of *Against the Professors* and mainly of *Against the Grammarians* perhaps we could find some clues which could indicate one choice, one decision not only about these two tendencies of translating, but also about the very Skeptical position on language and writing.

On this theme, there are lots of interesting papers on the topic of the language of the Skeptics and some of them deserve to be mentioned here.

Thus Marcondes<sup>4</sup> shows that the notion of “commemorative (or mnemonic) sign”, understood as minimal unity of signification, can be considered in *Against the Logicians* as one of the few positive doctrines defended by Sextus.

Desbordes<sup>5</sup> argues that Sextus defends (maybe explicitly, maybe implicitly) not exactly positions, but some “points of view” (points de vue) that could support a certain conception of language which would anticipate the current non representationalist theories of language and of sense.

Marchand<sup>6</sup> argues that Sextus utilizes lots of different strategies of writing in his effort to conciliate his own task of composing philosophical works with Pyrrho’s aphasia. And these strategies, which have as their main purpose to produce the effect (or pathos) of suspending judgement, constitute some kind of Skeptical or Pyrrhonic style of writing, and maybe it could serve here as a criterion for taking one position regarding the above mentioned problem of the tendencies of translation.

As is well-known, the Skeptical style is based on ordinary language, i.e. the linguistic usages commonly accepted in a certain community. Accordingly to Sextus:

καὶ πάλιν ὅταν λέγητε τὸν βαρβαρισμὸν παράπτωσιν ἐν ἀπλῇ λέξει  
παρὰ τὴν συνήθειαν, ἀνταπορήσομεν λέγοντες ποίαν φατέ πολλῶν  
οὐσῶν, καὶ ἢ ἂν εἶπητε, ταύτη φήσομεν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀκολουθεῖν.  
κοινῆς οὖν οὐσης ἀπορίας οὐκ ἄπορος ἢ παρ’ ἡμῶν ταύτης ἐστὶ  
λύσις. τῶν γὰρ συνηθειῶν αἰ μὲν εἰσι κατὰ τὰς ἐπιστήμας αἰ δὲ κατὰ  
τὸν βίον. καὶ γὰρ ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ὀνομάτων τινῶν ἐστὶν ἀποδοχὴ καὶ  
ἐν ἰατρικῇ ἐξαιρέτως, καὶ ἤδη κατὰ μουσικὴν καὶ γεωμετρίαν, ἔστι  
δὲ καὶ βιωτικὴ τις ἀφελῆς συνήθεια τῶν ἰδιωτῶν, κατὰ πόλεις καὶ  
ἔθνη διαφέρουσα. ὅθεν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ μὲν τῇ τῶν φιλοσόφων

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<sup>4</sup> Marcondes (1999).

<sup>5</sup> Desbordes (1982).

<sup>6</sup> Marchand (2011).

στοιχήσομεν, ἐν ἰατρικῇ δὲ τῇ ἰατρικωτέρᾳ, ἐν δὲ τῷ βίῳ τῇ  
συνηθεστέᾳ καὶ ἀπερίττῳ καὶ ἐπιχωριαζούσῃ (M 1.231-233).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while translating Sextus' works, we should pay attention to the ordinary usages of language as close as we can, meaning that we need to adopt local linguistic habits, taking care to embrace traditionally recognized expressions. So, could it serve as a starting point for grounding one answer for our primary question? Would the choice to pay close attention to the ordinary usages and follow them support the choice of one tendency instead of another? And if the answer is "yeah", should we follow the domestication or the foreignization tendencies?

Now in a first glance, maybe it looks like that the adoption of the domesticating perspective makes more sense. So the translator's task would precisely be transporting the original text to our language, submitting the foreign text to the linguistic universe of the final reader. If this is the case, then the translator must look to be clear, readable, and these are the very features that Sextus Empiricus attributes to the ordinary usages considered as minimally cult in any community of speakers.

In one domesticating perspective, accordingly to Venuti, the translator's task is going to be well accomplished when she is invisible, diaphanous, or when the text translated does not anyway look like a translation, but as a text originally written in the target language. Having in mind this clear, diaphanous and translucent style, following Desbordes, since Sextus tries to write in a way that he can make clear not exactly the phenomena but what is said about these phenomena<sup>8</sup>, then "le scepticisme est un effort infini pour déminer le langage, le faire pure transparence où n'interviendrait plus aucune volonté étrangère à ce qui doit se dire"<sup>9</sup>.

While translating a text with a long and colorful history of reception, bear in mind and follow the ordinary usages embraces not only the style of the final version of the translation, but also implicates considering the experience accumulated by other translators, in vernacular as well as in Latin. So we think that paying attention to the ordinary usages lead us to pay attention to the *status quaestionis* on Sextus' works, it lead us to recur to the stock of solutions proposed by other interpreters or translators, because maybe they have faced the same problems that we had. By its turn, recurring to this stock of solutions usually means engaging in a very careful, rigorous and systemic process of comparing and paralleling.

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<sup>7</sup> "E, novamente, quando dizem que o barbarismo é um erro em uma palavra particular contrária ao uso, replicamos perguntando de qual [uso] falam já que são muitos, e, como quer que respondam, a esse [uso] diremos que seguimos. Assim, [embora] a aporia nos seja comum, a solução não é aporética para nós. Pois alguns usos são para as ciências, outros, para a vida comum. Pois, na filosofia, são aceitos certos nomes, e na medicina especialmente, e ainda na música e na geometria, mas também há um uso simples que pertence à vida das pessoas comuns, que difere entre cidades e etnias. Assim sendo, na filosofia, por um lado, nos submetemos ao [uso] dos filósofos, mas na medicina, por outro lado, ao dos médicos, e, na vida, ao uso simples, corriqueiro e local." (trans. Brito & Huguenin).

"Again, when you say that a barbarism is a lapse against ordinary usage in a single word, we will create an impasse in return by asking which of them you mean, since there are many, and whichever you say, we will say that we follow this one as well. Although the impasse, then, is common to us both, its solution on our side is impasse-free. For some usages apply to the sciences and some to ordinary life. So, in philosophy there is an acceptance of certain terms, and in medicine especially, and in music and geometry besides, but there is also an everyday, unsophisticated usage of regular people, differing among cities and peoples. Hence in philosophy we will be in line with the usage of philosophers, in medicine with medical usage, and in ordinary life with the one that is habitual, plain, and local." (trans. Bett).

<sup>8</sup> Sexto, PH 1.20: ὁ οὐκ ἔστι τὸ φαινόμενον ἀλλὰ τὸ περὶ τοῦ φαινομένου λεγόμενον.

<sup>9</sup> Desbordes (1982).

This process, *mutatis mutandis*, is very similar to a procedure proposed by Ezra Pound:

the proper method for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual comparison of one 'slide' or specimen with another.<sup>10</sup>

No doubt, the main version we use for comparing and paralleling our Portuguese translation is the Latin translation of Sextus' *Against the Professors* made by Gentian Hervet (a.k.a. Gentianus Hervetus) in the very beginning of Modern period and published in 1569, in one edition which had also the Latin translation of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* made by Henri Estienne (a.k.a. Henricus Stephanus). It is well-known that this edition became very celebrated and was one of the main responsible for the recovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern times, making this philosophy be one of the major trends which influenced thinkers as *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, *Michel de Montaigne* and *Renè Descartes*<sup>11</sup>.

Hervet's Latin translation allowed us to solve lots of aporiae we faced while working on our Portuguese translation of Sextus, including some aporiae that demanded taking philosophical and conceptual decisions. One example is concerned to the way we translated different occurrences of the Greek verb "εἶμί". For instance, when we were translating *Against the Rhetoricians*, whenever variations of the sentence "οὐκ ἄρα ἐστὶν ἡ ῥητορικὴ" appeared, in his translation Hervet added the predicate "τέχνη", which was not explicit in the Greek text but could be tacitly understood, generating the Latin version: "*non est ergo ars rhetorica*", hence our Portuguese version: "a retórica, portanto, não é uma arte". On the other hand, in his English translation R. G. Bury opted for one ontological solution which we are not sure about ("rhetoric does not exist"), since this formulation seems quite dogmatic for a Skeptical philosopher.

It was very surprising and satisfying to know that Hervet's Latin translation would confirm that the predicative solution for occurrences of the Greek verb "εἶμί" in sentences without an explicit predicate were not only usual, but were available for translators of Greek since the beginning of Modern age. This finding seemed to corroborate Kahn's thesis on the usages of the Greek verb "εἶμί".

Hervet's translation offered lots of other solutions, especially concerned to the translation of some terms and idiomatic expressions, as well as concerned to phrasal connectors, or the elements which link words, sentences or phrases (conjunctions).

But let us leave the detailed exam of these solutions for another occasion, since we don't want to deform our text making it be even more uninteresting, looking like one Grammar class, like those that Sextus himself attacked. In short, doing as Sextus did, let us avoid the "infinite verbiage" ("verborragia infinita" = "ἀπειρολογία")<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Pound (1991), p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> See, on this subject, Popkin (2003). See also Floridi (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Sextus, PH 2.151.

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