Boston University

OpenBU http://open.bu.edu

African Studies Center Papers in the African Humanities

1991

# Maybe heaven, maybe the sky, but definitely up: lingering over words in translating historical texts

https://hdl.handle.net/2144/42104

*"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."*

**MAYBE HEAVEN, MAYBE THE SKY, BUT DEFINITELY UP:
LINGERING OVER WORDS
IN TRANSLATING HISTORICAL TEXTS**

*By David Henige*

**AH Number 11 (1991)**

*Copyright 1991 by the author.*

This paper was presented at a November 1989 Workshop on Translation, held at Boston University, as part of the project on "African Expressions of the Colonial Experience."

Publication of this paper was made possible by an interpretive research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

**African Studies Center
Boston University
270 Bay State Road
Boston, MA 02215 USA**

# MAYBE HEAVEN, MAYBE THE SKY, BUT DEFINITELY UP:
# LINGERING OVER WORDS
# IN TRANSLATING HISTORICAL TEXTS*

*By David Henige*

*University of Wisconson — Madison*

> Although the French edition is brought out by someone who thoroughly knows both languages, there are far too many places where he has translated too narrowly, word by word, So I am compelled to rewrite whole passages in order to form them for the taste of the French audience.[1]

Like snowflakes, no two translations are alike. Unlike snowflakes, no two translations can be alike. Since articles seem to be the only part of speech that (normally) can have only a single meaning, the odds that two translators would render a hundred-word passage identically are only a little less than the proverbial monkey(s) recreating the corpus of Shakespeare. In literary studies this is often seen as a positive virtue, allowing translators' creative instincts full rein on the premise that even the original author, presumably him/herself a creative type, would not object strenuously to such a variety of interpretations.

Putting such a best face on matters does not often work quite so well for historians, who generally assume that their sources were trying to say one thing and one thing only, even while they recognize that determining what that is — and even more, what it means — is not always easy. In the following discussion of some issues of translation, I include no African examples. In mentioning this obvious fact, I do not

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the "Translation of Words and Images" Seminar held at Boston University in December 1989 under the aegis of the African Expressions of the Colonial Experience Project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

[1]Karl Marx to Nikolai Danielson, 28 May 1872, in Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (41 vols.: Berlin, 1956-74), 33:477.

feel the need to defend it beyond pointing out that the issues involved — ignorance (in the best sense), tendentiousness, anachronism, lack of context, and lack of commensurateness — apply to attempts to translate any document emanating from another time and culture. Translation is sometimes treated as a mechanistic concept, requiring little more than a handful of dictionaries and a lot of time. Each of these is necessary, but neither is sufficient.

A few years ago I had occasion to question an interpretation of an incident described by Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in his account of his travels across parts of the southeastern United States and northern Mexico in the 1530s. Cabeza de Vaca wrote that he and his companions had been "espantados" on encountering a village of Indians in which many of the inhabitants were blind owing to clouded eyes. An anthropologist dedicated to convincing the world that there had been millions on millions of Indians at contact had argued that Cabeza de Vaca's account constituted clear evidence that a smallpox epidemic had raged throughout the New World in the 1520s and killed a large portion of these putative Indians. While this person did not translate Cabeza de Vaca directly and so failed to offer his own rendering of "espantados," it seemed to me crucial to understand why Cabeza de Vaca had used this term and just what he meant by it.[2]

Consulting several modern Spanish dictionaries, I learned that "espantado/a" can mean "startled," "alarmed," "surprised," "astonished," or "astounded." Consulting a dictionary compiled much closer to Cabeza de Vaca's time than to our own, I found a similar range of connotations and meanings. The next move was clearly mine — to decide just what I thought Cabeza de Vaca had in mind. The field was not entirely open, for I could imagine no circumstances in which Cabeza de Vaca would have been "startled," at least if he thought of that term in the same way I do.

Could he have been "alarmed?" Certainly; if he recognized the symptoms of smallpox and if he had himself — an unlikely event — escaped the disease's ravages while in Spain, then he could have intended "espantados" to mean "alarmed" and to mean it because he realized that the Indians had had smallpox. But, then again, he saw the effects of smallpox, not the active disease, so why the alarm? And why did he not speak of the universal hallmark of smallpox, the pock marks, instead of a very rare side effect, blindness? In short, it seemed to me unlikely that Cabeza de Vaca was "alarmed" when he saw the blind Indians.

The remaining possibilities — "surprised," "astonished," and "astounded" — are merely three points along a continuum and could be treated *en ensemble*. To me (and to Cabeza de Vaca?) "astounded" implies an extreme reaction, as though a confidently expected event or situation had turned inside out in practice. I could not conceive that Cabeza de Vaca had expected *not* to see any blind Indians, and so I could

---

[2]David Henige, "Primary Source by Primary Source? On the Role of Epidemics in New World Depopulation," *Ethnohistory* 33 (1986): 296.

not imagine him being "astounded" when he did. This left "surprised" and "astonished," the first a somewhat mild reaction, the second more severe. I chose the second.

Why? Because, in part at least, it was to the advantage of my argument that Cabeza de Vaca be more than merely surprised. By my line of reasoning, it was not smallpox at all, but either trachoma or a form of congenital cataracts, both of which create symptoms similar to those he described. Moreover, I argued, if Cabeza de Vaca was actually describing smallpox — and wittingly — there was little reason for any form of surprise since the disease was fully endemic in early sixteenth-century Spain. In other words, of the five choices available to me, two seemed unlikely in any context, one seemed possible but required a series of implausible premises, and the remaining two offered a choice in degree that forced me to choose between them on the only grounds remaining — my own predispositions.

Beyond the translation of that single word, undoubtedly part of the text I was studying, was the matter of the circumstances under which that text was created. In this case it was a matter of memory more than anything else. Cabeza de Vaca wrote his work several years after his alleged encounter with the blind Indians, and the work as a whole is exceedingly peculiar in many ways. It exists in four, very different, versions and in one of these Cabeza de Vaca went so far as to claim that he had successfully cured much of the blindness, had in fact operated as an extraordinarily effective "medicine man" for several years during his wanderings. This circumstance added a dimension that was less translation than interpretation (to the degree that the two procedures can be distinguished) and led me to suspect that the entire incident was a fable or a parable and that our modern translations/interpretations of "espantados" really do not matter very much.

But of course one way in which they do matter is in determining the legitimacy of modern hypotheses that would have Cabeza de Vaca describing smallpox or some other killer disease that could have provided the agency required to account for such huge depopulation. Virtually no matter how we regard the truth/falsity of Cabeza de Vaca's account, his use of "espantados" militates against any such interpretation, and so its translation provides a second line of defense, as it were, against accepting such claims.

## Twentieth-Century Landlubbers and Fifteenth-Century Sailors

Remaining in the realm of the concrete but broadening the discussion a bit, let me mention a few of the problems endemic to translating and understanding the testimony of the sources for Columbus's first voyage to the New World. The so-called *diario* of this voyage was first edited and published in 1825 and since then there have been numberless translations, the most recent and best published in 1989. The diario is an

exceedingly important, perhaps in some ways excessively important, historical source. As a result it has been treated in any number of ways — as scripture, as revelation, as justification for modern theories of the man and his itinerary — but seldom as text *per se*.

Before discussing some of the results of this, we need to understand something of the text itself. Most importantly, it is not the very log of the voyage, but is at least a third-hand transcription made anywhere from thirty to sixty years later by Bartolomé de las Casas, a fervent admirer of Columbus and an even more dedicated critic of Spanish treatment of the Indians. Moreover, some four-fifths of the diario text is admitted paraphrase, with the remainder couched in terms suggesting either that it is the verbatim testimony of Columbus, that Las Casas thought it to be so, or that he wished others to believe that it was so.[3]

We have then a strangely and ominously hybrid text, with no other known copies, no antecedents, no successors. To complicate matters further, the holograph version shows many signs of haste and doubt. There are over one thousand changes to the text, as well as some two hundred marginal notes. While it is all but certain that the diario text itself is in the hand of Las Casas, it is less certain that these emendations and additions are his alone. The paleography of the text is frequently problematical; in addition to apparent errors in tense, gender, and agreement there are many places where the handwriting itself is so poor as to permit more than one interpretation of a word or phrase that cannot be resolved by recourse to context.

Given this state of affairs it is little wonder that modern interpreters and translators of the diario have had a field day playing games with it. Generally, and regrettably, modern translators of the diario have most frequently been drawn from the legion of modern students of Columbus's route through the Bahamas and on to Cuba and finally to Hispaniola. Each has had an interest — often an intensely personal interest — in what the diario seems to say. Consequently it has, like Proteus of old, greeted different eyes with different images. The list is virtually endless and by no means ended, but I will discuss here only a few words and passages that have been held to bear directly on the activities of Columbus the Navigator.

In the midst of the Bahamas, the diario tells us (in Columbus's own words if we care to take it at its declaration), Columbus "cargué las velas," that is, did something with the sails of his ship in response to some stimulus, which appears to be unrecorded. Alas, the Spanish verb "cargar" has meant, at various times and places, both to "unfurl" the sails and to "clew up" sails. In short, it has had opposite meanings. The question becomes: which of these meanings to apply to the diario text at this point? Earlier in the entry for the same day Columbus used the term in such a

---

[3]David Henige, *In Search of Columbus: The Sources for the First Voyage* (Tucson, 1991), 11-101.

setting that it must mean that he unfurled his sails in order to catch the wind to the maximum. Does it mean the same here?

Unanimity on the matter dissolves — indeed, never quite managed to exist. Those who would place Columbus in a particular place in the Bahamas are quite certain that to be there, and to get to where they want him next to be, he had to unfurl his sails this time as well. Others are equally certain that Columbus was somewhere else and therefore could only have furled his sails because he wished to stay there rather than move on. Columbus never says any of this, the diario never says any of this, but modern translators often say this for him.[4]

In fact, bereft of modern predilections, there is no way in which we can determine what Columbus meant to say on this occasion. Consulting one dictionary of nautical terms would provide one or another of the competing possibilities. Consulting several such dictionaries will demonstrate to the intending translator only the need for caution. It seems to be a case where neither lexicography nor context can provide definitive answers. Yet no translation has refrained — could refrain — from choosing one or the other and in only a few instances have translators/editors indicated the nature of the problem in their annotation.

The term "golpho" presents a similar problem. The diario records the use of this term twelve times in all, each of them while Columbus was somewhere in the New World. In one of these, recorded some three months after the discovery, the diario has Columbus refer to some weeds he encountered, which he compared to similar weeds "en el golpho quando venía al descubrimiento." Most modern commentators have translated "golpho" in this instance as "sea" or "mid-sea" in the belief that Columbus was referring to the Sargasso Sea in the mid-Atlantic. However, another student of Columbus's first voyage has recently argued that Columbus really meant to imply "gulf" in the more usual modern sense of the word and that his further implication was that these weeds and this gulf were not only on the way to the New World but must have been in the immediate vicinity of the discovery itself. He then goes on to argue, on the basis of this lexico-geographical hypothesis, for his particular choice of landfall.

There are serious problems with this argument. It overlooks, for instance, later testimony by several members of Columbus's crews that certain mutinous behavior on board, which they all attribute to having occurred from three to five days before the discovery, had occurred "en medio golfo." In these cases the context is unambiguous and "golfo" can only mean "sea," however much this conflicts with modern connotations of the term. Recourse to several nautical dictionaries would show the same — for instance, the Indian Ocean was occasionally referred to as a "golfo" in the sixteenth century. Moreover, the Spanish verb "engolfar" still means "to reach mid-

---

[4]*Ibid.*, 265-68, and sources cited there.

sea" and appears to be a relic of an earlier and more common definition of the word "golfo" from which it stems.

Even the best and most cautious translation of the diario illustrates the problem in defining Columbus's usage. Of the twelve appearances of "golpho/golfo," Dunn/Kelley translated six as "gulf," another three as "midsea," two as "channel," and the twelfth as "expanse of water."[5] To a degree these translations derive from the translators' notions of where Columbus was when he used the term and this of course results in several slightly circular pieces of reasoning. But even if it could be demonstrated (and it cannot) that they are correct in localizing Columbus in every instance, it would show only that Columbus himself was inclined to use certain terms more diversely than we would prefer.

## Skies Without Angels, Heaven Without Clouds

As the previous examples illustrate, in every language there are all too many words that have contingent and alternative connotations, leaving us with the hope that context will prove efficacious enough to determine particular meanings. Sometimes the differences, and therefore the consequences, are great — for instance, between a commonplace and easily defined physical object and a religious doctrine, which might spring from the real object but which, in symbolizing it as well, inevitably carries a great many more implications for the study of *mentalités.*

In the Romance languages the same word ("ciel," "cielo," "céu," etc.) can be translated either as "sky" or as "heaven" (not to mention as "ceiling" or "roof"). The implication apparently is that, if there is a heaven, it is not only "out there" but "up there" as well. Here again Columbus's diario, or more properly translations of it from a Romance language (Spanish) to a non-Romance language (English) provides a useful microstudy of the fundamental precariousness of translation.

In the diario the word "cielo" appears 33 times, but almost always in two specific contexts. In several cases, usually on the trans-Atlantic legs of the journey, it is used as part of reports about atmospheric conditions. Modern translators have invariably rendered these references as "sky" and it would be hard to take serious exception to this. Even more often, however, Columbus used the term to refer to where he thought the Indians believed that the Spanish "came from," based on their reactions. Here, in contrast, modern agreement has not yet been reached. To illustrate this lack of consensus, note that Samuel Eliot Morison translated the very first

---

[5]For the contexts of the various uses of "golpho" or "golfo" see Oliver Dunn and James E. Kelley, *The* Diario *of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492-1493* (Norman, 1989), 83, 87 (twice), 149, 151, 231, 247, 307, 325, 327, 329, 341.

appearance of this species of "cielo" as "sky," whereas Dunn and Kelley prefer "heavens," and B. W. Ife opts for "heaven."[6]

However, the translations of Dunn and Kelley and of Ife both exhibit a high degree of internal consistency. Dunn and Kelley always translate "cielo" as "heavens" when Columbus is referring to his purported understanding of the Indians' gesticulations (for they could have been no more than that to him). In contrast Ife prefers "heaven" for each of these occasions. On the other hand, Morison, as ever the epitome of unconcerned inconsistency, translates the various appearances of "cielo" rather haphazardly. His choice of "sky" noted above was actually a departure from the "Heaven" he had used in the same passage in his biography of Columbus published earlier.[7]

This revealing pattern of translation tells us much about the translators, perhaps something about Columbus, but nothing at all about the Indians, who in all of this have been cast much too far into the discursive abyss ever to be retrieved. In translating "cielo" as "sky," at least on this occasion, Morison of course was being the least problematic. If the Indians were actually pointing skyward, which seems to be the case, then to translate "cielo" as "sky" is to do no more than match such gestures with commensurate words. Whether intentionally or not, Dunn and Kelley have staked out an ingenious middle ground. It would seem that they had the same idea as Morison, but expressed it somewhat more colloquially and ambiguously, inasmuch as "heavens" must be regarded as a secularizing pluralization of the religious notion of h(H)eaven. Thereby they allow their readers perhaps to retain a slightly greater degree of doubt than is necessary — if they do mean to imply nothing more than sky. That is, it is unclear whether Dunn and Kelley themselves believe in heaven (or in Heaven), whether they believe that Columbus thought that the Indians did, or whether they believe that the Indians did indeed have some notion of an afterlife lived in a paradise whose general location was upward.

Ife, on the other hand, takes a stand that is ambiguous in quite a different way. He translates "cielo" as "heaven" in all the relevant instances in the text itself, only to observe in a footnote on this first occasion that "[i]t should not be forgotten that 'cielo' also means 'sky,' " thereby adding uncertainty to the question by interposing himself without resolving, or attempting to resolve, the implications of his interposition.

These three modern translations of the diario's "cielo" (which might not have been Columbus's usage at all since, as we have seen, the diario was only the end result

---

[6]*Columbus, Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyage of Christopher Columbus*, ed. S. E. Morison (New York, 1963), 68; Dunn/Kelley, *Diario*, 75; Columbus, *Journal of the First Voyage (Diario del primer viaje), 1492*, ed. and trans. B. W. Ife (Warminster, 1990), 33. To round things out nicely, in his recent translation Robert Fuson uses "Heaven." Robert H. Fuson, *The Log of Christopher Columbus* (Camden, ME, 1987), 79.

[7]S. E. Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1942), 1:367.

of an unknown chain of transmission, which ended with Bartolomé de las Casas, who probably firmly held that the Indians had at least an inchoate sense of an earth-earned paradise) encapsulate all too aptly the almost irresoluble difficulties translators can face in confronting even single words. It is probably unlikely that any of the translators in question deliberated long on their choices in this instance, beyond establishing their own criteria for internal consistency. Yet the question is not without its allure.

Choosing "sky" is obviously the least problematic "solution" to the impasse. After all, whether or not the Indians shared in our peculiar notion of heaven — hardly a likely contingency — the sky was as real to them as it was to Columbus. In choosing "heavens" to represent "cielo," Dunn and Kelley were either very ingenuous or very ingenious because doing this deals with the two horns of the dilemma by finding a third horn to grab onto. Ife's less ambiguous "heaven," whether then ambiguated by a gloss or not, is clearly the least appropriate choice, for it appears to assure readers unhesitatingly that Columbus thought that the Indians had some notion of a place, whether heaven or not, from which wondrous beings emerged, even though Columbus was later to reiterate several times that the Indians had "no religion."

In this instance it is not a straightforward case of choosing from among similar meanings (as with "espantados") because the possible choices are neither similar nor commensurate. The differences between "heaven" and "sky" are so great ontologically that the fact that they happen to share the same word in Romance languages amounts to no less than an emphatic anachronism reflecting a time when, for most people, the sky was merely the visible manifestation of an eternal dwelling place called heaven.

The earliest interpreters of Columbus's voyages seem, no doubt more naturally, to have been certain the "cielo" meant "heaven." In the biography of Columbus purportedly written by his son Ferdinand, the word is also rendered by "cielo."[8] Las Casas, who also, remember, transcribed the diario, rewrote the passage when he came to insert it into his *Historia de las Indias* in such a way as to suggest that he at least was certain that the Indians believed that the Spanish had in fact appeared from a place in the sky called Heaven.[9] For Las Casas of course this would merely have been one more sign that the Indians were eager and able to be proselytized, a vehement debate in which he was prominently involved at the very time he was writing the *Historia*.

It so happens that the matter of the meaning and message of "cielo" in other early chronicles of the Discovery has recently received some attention from literary critics, intent on placing the study of these sources more firmly into the framework of recent literary-critical metatheorizing. Rolena Adorno confronts the matter in her study of the work of Cabeza de Vaca, who wrote — several times — of his seven-year

---

[8]Fernando Colon, *Le* Historie *della vita e dei fatti di Cristoforno Colombo*, ed. Rinaldo Caddeo, 2 vols., (Milan, 1930), 1:172.

[9]Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, ed. Agustín Millares Carlo, 3 vols., (Mexico City, 1951), 1:208.

odyssey across the southwestern United States and northern Mexico. Along the way Cabeza de Vaca made a claim (although in only one of his four versions) very similar to that of Columbus: "Porque todas las cosas que ellos no alcanzan ni tienen noticia de donde vienen dizen que vienen del cielo." This can be translated as: "because all the things which [the Indians] do not understand or have information about from where they came, they say that they came from *cielo*." Adorno translates "cielo" as "sky," but there is more to the matter, since the choice of translation has its own agenda in this case. Adorno proceeds to argue that "'coming from the sky' continues to have a magical connotation. . . . *Nevertheless* the sense of the premonition of intuition of Christianity through the interpretation of the concept of 'heavenly' or divine in the Christian sense *must be set aside*." This is because, she concludes, "Cabeza de Vaca makes no such claim and is careful to give us as *precise a meaning as possible* to the notion of sky origins."[10]

Would that this were true. Without disagreeing with Adorno's implied argument that the Indians in question could have had no sense of a Christian-like heaven, we can only disagree sharply with her claim that Cabeza de Vaca's very syntax forces us ineluctably to this conclusion. How "precise" could Cabeza de Vaca have been without abandoning the use of the multivalent "cielo" or glossing it in some fashion? Adorno is probably right to suggest that "hardly were [the Spanish] seen as heavenly visitors long awaited," but this can never be more than a retrojected inference unless it can be based on other factors than an assured but idiosyncratic and contextually unauthorized translation of "cielo" as "sky." Offered the choice between "sky" and "heaven" Adorno prefers the former on no other ostensible grounds than the fact that this supports a larger argument she is in the process of advancing about the implications of Cabeza de Vaca's activities and the way he chose to describe them. This larger argument by no means requires such a translation; in fact, it may suffer a loss of credibility for having recruited it so impudently.

Despite Cabeza de Vaca's failure to do so, there are in fact a number of ways in which he (or the author of any other text using "cielo") could have indicated unambiguously that he intended "heaven" when he used "cielo." For instance, he could have mentioned god, St. Peter, angels, or hell. Or he could have capitalized the word, which would have left as little doubt then as now. In the presence of any of these, translators would be as justified in deciding that the original author meant "heaven" as they are in choosing "sky" whenever Columbus was referring to weather conditions.

In the absence of such telltale indicators, however, there is no easy alternative — that is, a choice that is always clear and always justifiable. Perhaps in these circumstances the best procedure would be to choose one translation ("sky" would have

---

[10]Rolena Adorno, "The Negotiation of Fear in Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios*," *Representations* 33 (Winter 1991): 183-84, with emphases added; cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Berkeley, 1991), 174n64.

to be the best); use it throughout unless god, hell, angels, etc. are mentioned; and (most important) explain in whatever detail is deemed necessary just what operative epistemological principles are involved. While such a procedure will hardly ensure that we come closer to the mind of the observer, let alone the minds of the observed, it does ensure that we do not arbitrarily attribute to the authors of texts certain beliefs about themselves and about others that are capable of being demonstrated by nothing more than a translator's unexplained decision.

### Can Concavity be Convexity?

This equivocality is again demonstrated in Dunn and Kelley's translations of the word "angla," which appears eight times in the diario, these being, among other things, the first known appearances of the word — borrowed from the Portuguese, "angra" — in Spanish. From all accounts the term meant in Spanish just what it did in Portuguese, "a large bay." Dunn and Kelley, though, translate it four times to mean this, a concavity in the shoreline, and another four times to indicate just the opposite, a promontory or cape. As usual, in none of these cases does context provide certain justification; rather it is a matter of being certain — too certain? — that Columbus was where there is now a promontory rather than a bay. In this consistent inconsistency Dunn and Kelley are far from alone. In eight other English and French translations, "angla" is rendered in more than twenty different ways![11]

In the entry from 14 October we read that Columbus was detained by a "marea." Normally "marea" means a tide, or possibly a current. On this assumption proponents of one landfall island or another have used this datum to localize Columbus at various points and have, as part of the exercise, located an unusually strong current or tide there for him to encounter. However, in the Spanish dictionary closest in date to 1492, we find "marea" defined in only one way: "a western wind."[12] If that happens to be what Columbus meant, then all traces of his location are automatically obliterated: while a current or tide is not ubiquitous, wind is, or can be.

### Agreeing to Disagree

Among secular saints, Columbus ranks high and his rank will only rise in some quarters during the next few years. A mini-series recently shown on American television portrayed Columbus as a beleaguered visionary who counted among his many virtues an abhorrence of slavery, a precocious anticipation of modern fatherhood

---

[11]David Henige, "Edited . . . and Not Precipitated: Three Recent Editions of Columbus' *Diario*," *Terrae Incognitae* 22 (1990): 103-06.

[12]Antonio Nebrija, *Vocabulario de Romance en Latín (transcripción crítica de la edición revisada por el autor, Seveilla, 1516)*, ed. Gerald J. Macdonald (Philadelphia, [1973]), 130. For a modern discussion of the term and its correlates, see Eleuterio F. Tiscornia, "Almariarse < Marearse + Almadiarse," *Revista de Filología Hispánica* 4 (1942): 383-86.

styles, an ecumenism among bigots, and a rabid missionary zeal. But this was only the latest salvo — the sacralization of Columbus has a much longer history.

Textually this apotheosis can be encapsulated in just a single word, which appears in the diario in the entry for 7 October. At the time Columbus was apparently under pressure either to return to Spain or to shift course from the remorseless westward line he had set. Among those urging him to turn to the southwest was Martín Alonso Pinzón, Columbus's rival for control of the expedition. In this entry we read that Colombo "acordó dexar el camino del gueste," a deviation in course that had the most lasting effects on the nature of the settlement of the New World — otherwise the fleet would have landed in the Carolinas.

The most reasonable translation, both contextually and lexically, of this phrase is: "he agreed to abandon the course to the west." However, with a very few exceptions this translation has not been favored. Instead, we are told that Columbus "determined" or even "resolved" to change course, as though he was actually resisting pressure instead of acceding to it. If this had been the case Las Casas had ready to hand either "resolvió" or "determinó;" instead he chose the reactive "acordó." These translations uphold the image of a strong leader maintaining both his vision and his authority against great odds. In doing so they clearly betray the text by subordinating it to a popular image of Columbus, one not in fact very well borne out by the source created by, ironically, one of his greatest admirers.

### Why Single Words Matter

How much agonizing over single words is enough? How much too much? This is not an easy question to answer, but it does not seem that in these cases I have devoted undue attention to the particular words in question. What they mean, what they might have meant, is crucial to understanding the texts in which they appear. Obviously, translators/editors cannot approach every word in quite this fashion, nor continually explain to readers why they have chosen a particular word or phrase in one language to render its counterpart in another. But sometimes, and occasionally rather more than sometimes, they have an obligation to do just that. One thing this implies is that translators of historical documents must be more than translators, they must be historians in a position to understand why, when, and how it matters.[13]

In this respect, I think it no accident that "espantados" is an adjective. My impression is that translators tend to be more concerned with nouns than with any other part of speech. For instance, translators of the diario of Columbus's first voyage to the New World have given far more thought to which kinds of flora and fauna Columbus was describing than to the manner in which he described them. This emphasis strikes

---

[13]For a study which argues for a new departure almost entirely on the basis of the appropriate meaning of the Spanish *yuca*, see Robert Langdon, "Manioc, a Long Concealed Key to the Enigma of Easter Island," *Geographical Journal* 154 (1988): 324-36.

me as misplaced. Despite some of the examples I have addressed, nouns are in many ways the easiest forms of speech to translate since they frequently have the advantage of meanings that are attachable to known items.

This is not at all true for adjectives and prepositions. Adjectives hardly ever have single fixed and unambiguous meanings, and this is particularly so when they refer to impressions. Above all other parts of speech, adjective bespeak — if we could only understand them — the state of mind of their users, and inevitably they are even more protean than that state of mind. Sensitive and defensible translations of adjectives require more than a dictionary, more than several dictionaries. They demand a thorough acquaintance with the writing style and the persona of the author, and these are elusive goals. Columbus, for instance, frequently wrote as if he were a modern realtor, and to treat his use of descriptive terms in the same way as that of someone known to be dour and matter-of-fact in expression is surely to fall wide of the mark all too often. But to appreciate this requires a close familiarity with the writing of Columbus, as well as with the character of whatever he was describing — no mean task in either instance.

In almost every language, it seems, prepositions provide the most ample opportunities for confusion. Many of the most common of them require a great deal of context in order themselves to be clear in their own language. But if that context is itself the product of tendentious interpretation, then the circle of self-confirmation can be ineluctably complete. There are numerous cases in Columbus's journal where the terms "de" and "por" are contextually susceptible to different, even to opposite, translations, depending entirely on the meanings given to the words around them in the text. The efforts to deal with these in the voluminous literature on the matter serve merely to underscore the difficulties.

Finally, we come to verbs. Languages like Arabic, which provide by means of prefixes, infixes, and suffixes many different permutations of basic verb forms emphasize how many nuances verbs can acquire. This is true not only for meanings and connotations, but even more true for tenses. There does not seem to be a widespread awareness today of the crucial differences between the preterite and the pluperfect, for instance, in fashioning a temporal narrative sequence that is unimpeachable. Whether this failing also existed in the work of source-texts becomes one of the translator's knottier problems.

This discussion can lead only to another, and immensely troublesome, issue: the differences between the lexical and grammatical competence of the author and that of the translator. Several points need to be made here. The first is that it is at least likely that the translator will have a more explicit sense of the formal distinctions between "good" and "bad" grammar and lexis than most authors of historical documents — certainly than Columbus — and this putative difference needs to be held in mind constantly. Then too, the authors of historical texts were probably monolingual (Columbus was not and this is part of the problem in translating him) and

by definition the translator is not, and this too will occasionally matter. Third, the linguistic history of an author is directly relevant. A translator can hardly treat Columbus's Spanish, his third language, in quite the same way as, say, the Spanish of Las Casas, who prided himself on the elegance and the perfection of his written and oral discourse. Yet it is Las Casas who paraphrased most of the only copy of Columbus's journal now extant. Here — and no doubt in other cases as well — it becomes the question: how much of the author, and how much of any intermediaries, remain in a particular text, and why and how does it matter when translating it?

While several of the characteristics of the diario of Columbus's first voyage are probably atypical, looking at it helps to remind us of the importance of being able to empathize with the authors whose work we propose to translate. Or, if not to empathize, at least to appreciate and anticipate the mores in which the author was likely to operate. Unavoidably, this implies a good deal of comparing and testing; for instance, by determining verb tense use in known situations in order to posit personal norms of discourse, it is possible, if necessarily with a degree of uncertainty, to apply this knowledge to circumstances for which there are no corroborating accounts.

## Necessary but Uneasy Bedfellows

It might be apropos to include some discussion of the inevitable but often implicit tensions between the roles of faithful translating and careful copy-editing. In a real sense the two tasks are incompatible, as again recent translations of Columbus's diario illustrate. Only in 1989, with the appearance of Dunn and Kelley's edition/translation, did we have any serious attempt to render Columbus/Las Casas as they rendered themselves. As noted above, the diario is a difficult text, marked by unusual spellings; arcane and obsolete nautical terms; semantic deadends; and numerous solecisms, lacunae, and contradictions. Before Dunn and Kelley's edition (and no doubt in many future translations as well) editors routinely took the liberty of making the diario's text flow smoothly, efficiently, elegantly — and utterly incorrectly.

The copy editor's role in dealing with translated texts is a difficult and largely unrewarding one. He or she cannot ignore the translated source text completely, for there is no *prima facie* assurance that all remaining anomalies formed part of the original text and did not result from lapses on the part of the translator. Yet in every case a copy editor can only suspect and must query the translator, perhaps to the point of becoming a nuisance. Yet there is no real alternative since by definition a translated text is a joint product, so that a copy editor is seeking to protect two authors rather than just one.

Translators must ensure that copy editors are allowed this role and do whatever they can to facilitate it. For instance, a translator might submit an extra copy on which certain words or passages are circled or marked "[*sic*]," thus telling the copy editor that, however strange it might look, the translator explicitly intends that it be that way. Doing this would reduce a copy editor's — and by extension the translator's — work

and at the same time ensure better quality control since no copy editor will be able, unaided, to apprehend all the nuances familiar to the translator.

### Policemen Without Laws

Although this paper has taken a rather unsystematic approach to its subject, I hope that at least one point is clear enough: every translation is the result of *at least* as many decisions as there are words in the text. Many of these decisions require extensive research; sympathy for, even empathy with, the author, the text, and the context; and a lambent sense of unsatisfaction. The last springs solely from the fact that no amount of heroic effort can ensure that the first two qualities are sufficient onto themselves. No matter how much thought students of Columbus's first voyage devote to wondering just what he meant when he wrote "cielo" (always assuming, if only for the sake of argument, that he, and not someone else, used that word), they can never be sure, no matter which modern translation they consult.

In most cases this is by no means the fault of the translators, who in cases of obscure texts like the diario (and what historical text is not obscure in some ways?) can at best gain a sense of a balance of probabilities, based on evidence that will *always* be inadequate to the task. This uncertainty is not a function of translation *per se*; surely all editors of the diario, whether the edition involved a translation or not, has put his or her own interpretation on what Columbus meant by "cielo," even as they went about their work. In their own minds they either conjured up a picture of a bright blue tropical sky or one of an angel-ridden paradise, simply as they transcribed the word. The difference is that translators must try to expose every one of these cruxes to the critical scrutiny of readers. In this sense, like Gilbert and Sullivan's policeman, a translator's lot might not a happy one, but like Gilbert and Sullivan's policeman, the translator is a useful, in fact a vital corollary to the orderly conduct of scholarly inquiry.