



(EN)GENDERING TRANSLATION(S): THE LANDING ON THE MOON (1969)

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To Isabel Oliveira Martins
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At a time when, just over half a century on, the exploration of Mars seems to herald a new "space age", this position paper, or short chronicle, seeks to share some passing thoughts and brief notes inspired by undoubtedly one of the major scientific, technological and epic events of the 20th century: the landing on the Moon (July 1969). Albeit in a light-hearted, practical and atheoretical vein, we will be touching upon some topics for further elaboration and debate among scholars and students specifically or primarily involved in translation matters.

As is well known, Neil Armstrong's historical statement immediately after leaving "Apollo 11" has been variously transcribed as "(...) a small step for man, a giant leap for mankind" or "(...) a small step for a man, (...) [my emphasis]." (Associated Press n. pag.)¹ So before translating this sentence into Portuguese (or any other target language), one must try to establish with as much technological accuracy as possible whether what Armstrong actually said up there on the Moon does coincide or not with what we heard down here in the Earth and also how did

¹ Two chapters of Jane E. Barry's novella, *A Spaceman Came Calling* (2019), written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the moon landing, bear the titles "One Small Step" (pp. 92-101) and "One Giant Leap" (pp. 102-115).



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the media at the time register and transcribe what Armstrong (allegedly) said. This tender and fragile relationship between (mis)recording, (mis)quoting and (mis)translating raises, of course, questions of '(un)faithfulness' which any translator must attend to in order not to 'betray' the original.

Throughout this rather delicate process, Neil Armstrong's own views and comments must obviously be taken into consideration, since all verbal authorship implies, after all, even if oral and 'uncopyrighted', some sort or form of authority. What did Armstrong say, upon returning to Earth, about what he had said, meant or intended to say?² Should there be any discrepancies, which version should one translate and on what grounds and criteria? Does the translator's need (indeed duty!) to choose and ultimately decide somehow incorporate and enact that age-old debate in Translation Studies, of 'letter' vs. 'spirit'?

Furthermore, this issue is certainly not (it never is...) a purely linguistic and translational one, involving as it does deontological principles and practices, pragmatics, semantics and even a touch or hint of Gender Studies. In fact, if we take Armstrong's expression "for a man", we are bound to think he meant himself, whereas "for man" (whether capitalized or not) would suggest "the human species"

² "Although no one in the world heard the 'a' some research backs Armstrong. In 2006, a computer analysis found evidence that Armstrong said what he said he said. Peter Shann Ford, an Australian computer programmer, ran a software analysis looking at sound waves and found a wave that would have been the missing 'a'. It lasted 35 milliseconds, much too quick to be heard. The Smithsonian's space curator, Roger Launius, looked at the evidence and found it convincing. NASA has also stood by its moon man. 'If Neil Armstrong says there was an 'a,' then as far as we're concerned, there was 'a,' NASA spokesman Michael Cabbage said shortly before the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission. Armstrong, who died (...) at age 82, maintained until the end that there was a lost word in his famous words from the moon." (Associated Press n. pag.)



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or "mankind", a word which, incidentally, turns up later in the same sentence; hence, if "man" equals "mankind", the translator must ponder on how to avoid a possible semantic redundancy or lexical repetition.

But, one may ask, what about woman(en)?³ Broadly and metaphorically speaking, is not this 'dilution' of the female gender into mankind a bit like restoring to Adam his original spare rib, thereby daringly reversing God's action⁴ and, as some cultural critics and analysts might argue, thus perpetuating male-dominated and hegemonic strands of thought, modes and patterns of discourse? In the words of Anderson and Zinsser,

"In Europe, where so many languages are gender-based, criticism has focused on the oppression of language itself, which places the male first. The masculine pronoun always precedes the feminine; feminine endings are classified as 'weak' and are added to a male root. The male article subsumes the female: children are still taught that if a group consists of one hundred women and one man, the masculine pronoun should be used." (p. 427)⁵

³ It may not be amiss to recall here Valentina Tereschkova's orbital flight (1963), only two years after Yuri Gagarin's (1961), and six years before Neil Armstrong's, Edwin ('Buzz') Aldrin's and Michael Collins's all-male expedition.

⁴ As George Steiner puts it, "Before the Fall, man and woman may have spoken the same tongue, comprehending each other's meaning perfectly. Immediately after, speech divided them." (p. 43)

⁵ The intricate connections between language, translation, gender and women's studies is, of course, a topic far beyond the scope and purpose of this paper, which simply aims at celebrating the momentous 'moonmark', not just landmark, of 1969; however, following Karen Bennett's generous suggestions, we will list below, at an introductory level, some unquoted titles by Godard, Simon and Von Flotow.



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Finally, even accounting for inverted commas, translation notes and such-like resources, what space do(es) translation(s) leave for neologisms (Can non-existing words or expressions be translated?) and how should gender marks be sensibly handled in our current trans/postgenerational age? In terms of the source language, for instance, would it make at all sense to replace "mankind" with "(wo)mankind", "humankind" or even --- if in doubt --- "(who)mankind"? Likewise, in terms of the target language ("humanidade"), the truth is that, etymologically speaking, the female gender is still rendered invisible... But would any linguist, lexicographer or translator, seriously consider the coining and translation of "mulheridade" or, playing a little with the unacknowledged subtleties and unexplored possibilities of Anglo-Portuguese phonetics, "Womanidade"?

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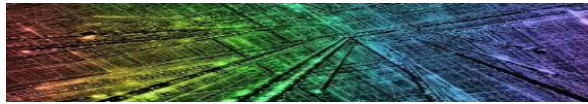
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BIONOTE

Miguel Alarcão (1959-) holds a BA in Portuguese and English Studies (1981), a MA in Anglo-Portuguese Studies (1986) and a PhD in English Culture (1996), awarded by NOVA - New University of Lisbon, where he lectures as Associate Professor. He was also Colloquial Assistant in Portuguese at the University of Birmingham (Late 1980s), Director of the Central Library (2001-2009) and Co-Coordinator of the Faculty's earliest research group on Medieval Studies (1999-2004). Author of *Príncipe dos Ladrões: Robin Hood na Cultura Inglesa (c. 1377-1837). 2001* (out of print) and *This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle': breve roteiro histórico-cultural da Idade Média inglesa (Séculos V-XV), 2014*, plus 5 co-editions and around 80 articles in *Festschriften*, proceedings and academic journals.



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ABSTRACT

At a time when, just over half a century on, the exploration of Mars seems to herald a new "space age", this position paper seeks to share some passing thoughts and brief notes inspired by one of the major scientific, technological and epic events of the 20th century: the landing on the Moon (July 1969).

KEYWORDS:

The landing on the Moon; Neil Armstrong; "Apollo 11"; The space age; Translation and Gender.

RESUMO

Numa altura em que, passado pouco mais de meio século, a exploração de Marte parece anunciar uma nova "era espacial", este curto ensaio visa partilhar algumas ideias soltas e breves notas inspiradas por um dos maiores e mais épicos acontecimentos científicos e tecnológicos do século XX: a chegada à Lua (Julho de 1969)

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

A chegada à Lua; Neil Armstrong; "Apolo 11"; A era espacial; Tradução e Género.



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