

**LANGUAGE-IN-SONG, LANGUAGE-AS-SONG: NEW
PERSPECTIVES FROM BRAZIL ON SONG TRANSLATION
THEORY AND PRACTICE**

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Abstract: Drawing on the field of Brazilian popular music and its internationalization, the work of some key Brazilian and French theorists of song and oral poetry, and on my own translation practice, this essay offers a radical new approach to song translation. I first sketch out an ethics of song translation within the broader political context of postcolonial debates about globalization, cosmopolitanism and intercultural translation. I then examine the language-music relationship and its implications for song translation, not as a matter of compromise between competing criteria of semantic information, form and “singability”, as is sometimes suggested, but rather as a unified, convergent project focused on enacting the composition’s melodic-discursive unfolding in time as movement, as language-in-song. Finally, I explore in some detailed examples how formal and performative challenges might be integrated together in the translator’s approach to questions of inflection, rhythm, time and persona.

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What is at stake when we address the challenge of popular song translation? Let me be clear from the outset what is to be understood by “song translation” for the purposes of this essay. I do not mean simply the text-to-text rendering of a song’s lyrical component into another language, as if it were akin to a poem, an autonomous script whose relationship to musical sound and structure is merely incidental rather than necessary to its meaning. I am not concerned, either, with ancillary uses of translated lyric texts, such as prose or parallel translations to aid scholarly analysis, as recited extracts or surtitles in performance contexts, or as contributions to recording or programme notes, although these kinds of textual translation certainly have their own value and potential, and deserve separate attention. Rather, what interest me here are the possibilities and responsibilities that face the translator, not of lyric texts (to be read), but of *songs* (to be heard).

My starting-point is that the core, defining aspect of popular song is a principle of linguistic-musical integrity: the unique significance and expressive power of song, much more than the mere sum of its constituent parts – music and language –, spring out of the interaction *between* them; and each can only therefore be realized in the presence of the other. As Simon Frith puts it straightforwardly, “in everyday terms a *song* – its basic melodic and rhythmic structure – is grasped by people through its words”, and he cites US songwriter Richard Rogers’ statement of the point: “For never does a song achieve any sort of public unless the words have at some point made a joint impact with the music on the individual and public ear . . . The old defensive and competitive cry of the composer, ‘Nobody whistles the words!’ is simply not true” (Rogers xiv; cf. Frith 159). To recognise and respect that principle demands, I shall argue, that we approach song translation with a corresponding commitment: to recreate – *as song* – a melodic-discursive form which aims in its totality to perform the work of the original, to enact, in a new linguistic and cultural setting, its integral meaning as a musically intoned utterance. The object of the translator’s art is what I shall refer to as *language-in-song*, the real-time event that occurs when words are voiced musically, articulated in the intonational and rhythmic patterns that we recognise as song, in that uniquely hybrid or transitional state between poetic prosody and abstract, sonic form.

As a still incipient branch of translation studies, the treatment of popular song translation has so far failed to grasp that fundamental point in its entirety, or to take it seriously in practice as a methodological principle. In arguing for the need to address this failing, the present essay draws on the cultural field of Brazilian popular music and its internationalization, on the work of some key Brazilian and French theorists of song and

oral poetry, and on my own practice of translation from the Brazilian, post-*bossa nova* repertoire.¹ I first sketch out an ethics of song translation within the broader political context of postcolonial debates about globalization, cosmopolitanism and intercultural translation. I then examine the language-music relationship and its implications for song translation, not as a matter of compromise between competing criteria of semantic information, form and “singability”, as is sometimes suggested, but rather as a unified, convergent project focused on enacting the composition’s melodic-discursive unfolding in time as movement, as *language-in-song*. Finally, I explore in some detailed examples how formal and performative challenges might be integrated together in the translator’s approach to questions of inflection, rhythm, time and persona. In this, as in all areas of translation practice, the translator’s task begins with an intensely concentrated attentiveness to the distinctive nature of the artform (a kind of “close listening”, in the case of song); this prepares us for the act of interpretation where, like the singer of an original artist’s composition, we can make it ours, inhabiting it, enacting it and giving it meaning in a new voice – remembering that, as in some other languages, the Portuguese *interpretar* translates both the English “interpret” and “perform”.

1. Taking the accent abroad: toward an ethics of song translation

You don’t make sense the “Chica Chica Boom Chic”
But it’s meant to chica chica boom chic
That’s all you’ve got to say
Chica chica boom chica chica boom chica chica boom
(Harry Warren/Mack Gordon, “Chica Chica Boom Chic”, 1940)

In her essay “Travelling Songs: On Popular Music Transfer and Translation”, Isabelle Marc approaches the phenomenon of translation as a process by which songs are detached from their source cultures and *incorporated* or *adapted* into the target culture:

There is, thus, a process which implies carrying, bringing, and leading a song, a text, and its materiality (lyrics, melody, instruments, arrangements) across cultures, one in which the primary or source text is actualized, complexly reshaped by the “target” cultural chronotope, a process which can thus be called translation. (Marc 7)

In this process Marc identifies four kinds of transcultural flow: the cultural reception of an imported song in its original version; a musical reprise with completely new lyrics and which bears almost no cultural traces of the original; the translation or adaptation of lyrics, and the emulation of imported musical styles or genres. An assumption appears to be at

¹ For an account of one recent project in collaboration with the London-based singer-songwriter Mônica Vasconcelos, see Treece, “Bringing Brazil’s resistance songs to London”.

work here, as far as the direction and hierarchy of influence is concerned, making the receiving culture the protagonist of the translation process, whose outcome is necessarily the passive absorption of the “imported” song into an international system. I would suggest that underlying this conception of translation, as a uni-directional process of adaptive transformation, is an implicitly globalizing model of musical internationalization.

What if, instead, we could conceive of translation as a reciprocally transformative act in which, as much as it is “actualized” or reshaped by its new setting, the song’s interpretation in another language has the potential to alter and expand the foreign listener’s sonic and cultural universe? Such an approach, in giving greater weight to the creative agency of translation, would follow the spirit of Martin Stokes’s argument in favour of a shift away from the language of musical “globalization”, with its emphasis on assimilation and absorption, toward thinking in terms of musical “cosmopolitanism”, thus inviting us

[...] to think about how people in specific places and at specific times have embraced the music of others, and how, in doing so, they have enabled music styles and musical ideas, musicians and musical instruments to circulate (globally) in particular ways. The shift of emphasis is significant, and, in my view, highly productive. Most importantly, it restores human agencies and creativities to the scene of analysis, and allows us to think of music as a process in the making of “worlds”, rather than a passive reaction to global “systems”. (Stokes 6)

1930s Brazil offers us two contrasting points of departure for reconsidering the politics of song translation, precisely at the threshold of the Brazilian music industry’s emergence into both the national and international markets and their mass media systems. Noel Rosa’s samba composition “Não tem tradução” (“It’s untranslatable,” 1933) took up a theme that was already a topic of controversy in Brazil, having been satirised in Lamartine Babo’s 1931 comic nonsense foxtrot “Canção para inglês ver” (“Song for English eyes”): the fashion for using foreign words and phrases in everyday speech, following the arrival of sound cinema, the “talkies”. For Rosa the topic is an opportunity to make an eloquent defence of popular cultural authenticity, which for him was located in the speech and song of Rio de Janeiro’s hillside working-class neighbourhoods, the *morros*, by this time already semi-mythologised as the “roots” home of *samba* tradition:

A gíria que o nosso morro criou
Bem cedo a cidade aceitou e usou . . .
Essa gente hoje em dia que tem a mania da exibição
 Não entende que o samba não tem tradução no idioma francês
 Tudo aquilo que o malandro pronuncia
 Com voz macia é brasileiro, já passou de português
 Amor lá no morro é amor pra chuchu
As rimas do samba não são I love you

(The slang our hill invented/ Soon got accepted and used downtown . .
./ Those folks today with their craze for showing off/ Don't understand
that samba's untranslatable into French/ Everything the hustler says in
his smooth voice is Brazilian, it's gone beyond Portuguese/ Love up
there on the hillside is loadsalove/ Samba doesn't rhyme with *I love you*)²

Faced with other powerful pressures from the international media market place, then, Rosa's anxieties around the "foreignization" of Brazilian culture were voiced in terms of the untranslatability of the *samba* idiom and of the popular sensibility it represented.

By the end of the decade, however, an alternative, more optimistic view of the potential for musical cosmopolitanism, and for song translation between Portuguese/Spanish and English, was emerging around the success of Carmen Miranda on Broadway and in Hollywood. In the context of the Good Neighbor policy and its promotion of a kind of soft diplomacy of inter-cultural exchange between the US and the South American continent, from 1939 onward stage and screen performer Miranda played a key role as an artistic ambassador, performing a sequence of characters and songs that depicted folklorised Brazilian and Spanish American identities for easy consumption in the English-speaking North. Back in Brazil and elsewhere in the continent, her commercial success abroad made her the target of several, arguably contradictory strands of public criticism: while some on the conservative nationalist right resented the focus she gave to the "black" *samba* tradition as a symbolic face of Brazilian culture, others attacked her for having become too "americanized", while still others accused her of misrepresenting distinct national cultures and traditions and conflating them into a generic "Latin" type (Shaw/Conde; see also Shaw).

Besides the spectacular visual and choreographic dimensions of these performances of Latin Americanness abroad, danced in her famously extravagant costumes and hats, Miranda's interpretation of those identities to her US audiences was also mediated through the sung word, in a playful but calculated exploitation of code-switching, code-mixing and interlingualism across Portuguese, Spanish and English. Of course, linguistic confusion or incompetence, deliberately exaggerated by Miranda in press interviews, was a powerful device for exoticising the Brazilian Bombshell's foreign attractiveness, with her heavily accented, garbled English rendering unintelligibility as a charming, erotically appealing marker of naïve, newcomer ignorance, obliging her to compensate by communicating through more expressive bodily and facial gestures. But in the particular case of the sung word, this interlingual slippage also offers some suggestive insights into

² When provided to assist the non-reader of Portuguese, literal prose lyric translations are placed beneath the original in this format. Song translations offered as examples of translation practice will be set alongside the Portuguese.

how, in considering the journey abroad of song-in-translation, musical and speech inflections might need to be examined together, as a single entity.

One of Miranda's first experiments with code-mixing along these lines was Al Dubin and Jimmy McHugh's "South American Way", composed for the 1939 stage show "Streets of Paris". The song was adapted to a *samba* rhythm by Miranda's backing group Bando da Lua, with Portuguese lyrics added by Aloysio de Oliveira, and this version appeared in Miranda's first US-made film, *Down Argentine Way* ("Serenata Tropical", 1940). Alongside the markedly local, Afro-Brazilian inflections of the Portuguese theme – the street cries of a vendor hawking traditional dishes such as *vatapá*, *caruru*, *minguzá* and *umbu* – some English lyrics were retained. But rather than glossing the cultural significance of those mouthwatering Afro-Bahian delicacies, the English words instead shifted the listeners' attention from food to dance, tempting them, not so much to taste the Latino sensibility as to feel it, as mood and movement, rhythm and rhyme – indulging, in the process, now familiar stereotypes of indolence and inebriation:

Ai, ai, ai, ai
Have you ever danced in the tropics?
With that hazy lazy
Like, kind of crazy
Like South American Way

Along with the easily grasped exclamation "Ai, ai, ai, ai", the key to that transition between "tropical" and North American sensibilities, between Portuguese and English, was Miranda's mispronunciation of *south* as *souse*, which gave rise to an amusing and suggestive equivocation, since in US English a "souse" is both a pickled food and a drunkard. The melodic-thematic refrain, "South(se) American Way", thus playfully incorporated Miranda's phonetic "error", voiced as a single musical and linguistic *accent*, at the heart of the song, in its dramatic performance of inter-cultural communication.

However problematic as far as the politics of cultural representation and US-Latin American international relations were concerned, Carmen Miranda had therefore discovered how accent (as both musical and linguistic inflection) could be a powerful resource for the act of cultural translation in song performance. She explored this in two further compositions, both by Mack Gordon and Harry Warren, for the 1941 film *That Night in Rio*. In "I, Yi, Yi, Yi, Yi (I Like You Very Much)" the English first-person pronoun *I* is repeated six times in Miranda's "Latin" inflection, with a double effect: it both transmutes into the ecstatic interjection "Ay!" and exploits the semivowel's sonic force, expressing erotic attraction and excitement as a musical pulse. A further variation plays

interlinguistically on the Spanish and English homophones *si* and *see*, allowing Miranda to formulate a new idea:

I, I, I, I, I, I like you very much
I, I, I, I, I, I think you're grand
You see that when I feel your touch
My heart starts to beat, to beat the band
I, I, I, I, si, si, si, si
I, I, I, I can see see see
That's you for me

In “Chica Chica Boom Chic”, meanwhile, the core melodic-thematic idea is a non-lexical, onomatopoeic vocable, which Miranda uses to scat the percussion instruments’ groove, as rhythm, song and heartbeat all in one:

O meu ganzá faz chica chica boom chic
P’rá eu cantar o “Chica Chica Boom Chic”
Com a canção do “Chica Chica Boom Chic”
meu coração faz chica chica boom chic
(My shaker goes chica chica boom chic/So that I sing the “Chica Chica Boom Chic”/ With the song of the “Chica Chica Boom Chic”/ my heart goes chica chica boom chic)

As the song progresses and all those listening are invited to join in, any pretence at a more discursive lyrical theme or meaning seems to be abandoned, and intelligible language explicitly gives way to the semantically empty sonic phrase “Chica Chica Boom Chic”:

E para terminar chica chica boom chic [And so to end chica chica boom chic]
vocês devem cantar o “Chica Chica Boom Chic” [you’ve got to sing the “Chica Chica Boom Chic”]
Boom chic boom boom boom boom
You don’t make sense the “Chica Chica Boom Chic”
But it’s meant to chica chica boom chic
That’s all you’ve got to say
Chica chica boom chica chica boom chica chica boom

We could say, then, that while such songs seem to argue, like Noel Rosa’s “Não tem tradução”, that cultural sensibilities are linguistically untranslatable, in Carmen Miranda’s mispronunciations, code-mixing and scattng, something important nevertheless paradoxically does get “carried across”, and that is precisely the *foreignness* of her accent or idiom. This suggests that, when we ask what exactly is translated as songs move from one audience, language or culture to another, the question is likely to be approached quite differently if we give due importance to the performance of language-as-song.

In seeking to steer a course between *untranslatability* and *assimilation*, we could also learn from Carmen Miranda’s performance of mispronunciation and code-mixing in song by considering the work of translation as inhabiting a zone of contact and dialogue, that of *ambiguity*, where slippage, doubt, equivocation can give voice to the singularity of the Other, rather than silencing it. Speaking of the challenge of inter-cultural communication in

the field of anthropology, across Amazonian and Western cosmologies, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro invites us to conceive of this translational slippage, not as a merely negative condition, a deficit, but as the *sine qua non* of anthropological knowledge:

To translate is to install oneself in the space of misunderstanding and inhabit it. Not in order to undo it, which would be to suppose that it never existed but, rather to the contrary, to empower it, opening up and expanding the space that was imagined not to exist between conceptual languages in contact – a space which misunderstanding concealed. Misunderstanding is not what prevents relational connection, it is that which underpins and drives it forward: a difference of perspective. To translate is to presume that there has always been and always will be misunderstanding; it is to communicate through difference, instead of silencing the Other by presuming an originary univocity and ultimate redundancy – an essential similarity – between what he and we “were saying”. (Viveiros de Castro 90-91)³

2. Knowing the form – language v music or *language-in-song*?

Before we can consider the translator’s task in practice, we need to ask: where does the meaning of a song reside, and how can we do justice to its simultaneously musical and discursive character? Within European popular music and song translation studies, even the most promising approaches to this question fall disappointingly short of the challenge. In “Songwriters and song lyrics: architecture, ambiguity and repetition”, for example, Keith Negus and Pete Astor claim to offer “an alternative approach to the popular song as entity . . . against a prevailing preoccupation with lyrics as semantic statements and poetic forms” (226). Yet for all this, “songs” seem implicitly to be treated here as synonymous with their lyrics alone, and what Negus and Astor characterize as the “architecture” of song is never seriously related to the compositions’ musical structures, as if words and melody somehow inhabited parallel non-communicating vessels. The questionable choice of architecture as a metaphor for song structure is significant (“analogous to how a building is composed of joists, floors, beams, poured concrete pillars, walls and floors that are filled in” [229]), for it cannot begin to make sense of the dynamic nature of the discursive-melodic-rhythmic interactions and inflections of language-in-song, or of their unfolding in time. After all, buildings do not “move”!

Song translation theorists Peter Low and Johann Franzon come closer to recognising the dual character of the song-form, which Low defines as a “verbal-musical hybrid” (Low, “When Songs Cross Language Borders” 229). In the context of a discussion of ethical concerns about appropriate terminology for designating “translations” as distinct from “adaptations” or “replacement texts”, Low observes in passing that “the relative

³ The translations from Portuguese and French texts that follow are the author’s.

importance of music and words varies greatly” (237). Disappointingly, however, the topic merits no more than a footnote citation (Gorlée), which serves merely to name the supposed variation in importance as a distinction between “musicocentric” and “logocentric” approaches. We are left with this dilemma, apparently, in which the musical and linguistic dimensions of song must remain as antagonistic components of an unstable hybrid genre, with no prospect of their being examined or understood in interaction with each other.

Rather, Low and Franzon share three related assumptions about the song-form and, consequently, about the challenge of its translation: first, song-texts alone are the domain of semantic meaning or “content”, while the music, by default, provides an abstract formal structure (“In this paper, the term ‘song translations’ will be applied to texts where there is extensive transfer of material from the ST, with a reasonably high degree of semantic fidelity” [Low, “When Songs Cross Language Borders” 231]); second, in song translation, the textual and musical components inevitably exist in a state of competitive tension with each other and with other structural and performative elements, imposing a set of mutually incompatible choices on the translator:

Assuming that a song has three properties (music, lyrics and prospective performance) and music has three (melody, harmony and musical sense), a song translator may have five options in theory: not translating the lyrics, translating the lyrics without taking the music into consideration, writing new lyrics, adapting the music to the translation, and adapting the translation to the music (or combinations of these). (Franzon 373)

And third, as a result, the best possible outcome that can be hoped for is a compromise in balancing those competing criteria (“In song translating. . . compromises and trade-offs are not optional but essential” [Low, “When Songs Cross Language Borders” 230]). Indeed, in his “Pentathlon Approach” to song translation, Low elaborates this principle of compromise as modelled on the five-event Olympic sport, whose players are never overall champions of any single category but can aim only to reach the best average level of achievement, as a sum total of them all. Evaluation of a song translation is to be made, then,

[...] according to the balance the translator achieves between five major criteria: singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm and rhyme. Attaining an optimal compromise between those five criteria requires a sixth element: flexibility to negotiate losses of accuracy in each of them in order to gain a best overall balance as a whole. (Low, “The Pentathlon Approach to Translating Songs” 194)

At the centre of this struggle for compromise between rival criteria is the notion of a “fit”, in the manner of a Procrustean bed, between lyric and melody, which are imagined to stand in a hierarchical relationship to each other, as semantic content in relation to musical form,

the former preceding the latter in significance and order of elaboration. According to Low, the translated target-text should create the illusion that the melody was invented to be adapted to it, even though “it was really composed to be adapted to the source-text” (185).

The rather pessimistic approach to song translation outlined above strikes me as at odds, not only with the performance and experience of popular song, but also with what we know to be the practice of its composition; this at the very least, as Oscar Hammerstein suggests, does not conform to any single model or sequential order, although more typically in the US context familiar to him it was the lyricist who followed the composer of the melody:

Sometimes the words are written first, sometimes the music. Sometimes two or more collaborators lock themselves in a room and write words and music at the same time. The kind of songs, the individuals involved and the conditions under which they work dictate the process. . . . the lyrics for most of the popular songs and musical comedies in our country today are written after the music. (Hammerstein 274)

Describing a similar procedure in twentieth-century Brazilian songwriting, Luiz Tatit offers us his compelling account of how the lyricist’s skill was

[...] to formulate phrases or expressions which, in union with the melody, would at one and the same time become a possible manner-of-speaking [*dizer*] and a persuasive manner-of-singing [*cantar*]. The melodies of traditional *sambas* were born already rooted in oral language. The melody created from the instruments’ harmonic base came together with this same root at a later stage, when the lyricist (who was sometimes the actual author of the melodic component) would intervene to reveal the intonational sources that were implicit in the melody-writer’s creation. The appropriate lyric was precisely that which presented the melody as a manner-of-speaking. (Tatit, “Reciclagem de falas e musicalização” 257)

Speaking of the work of lyricist Vinicius de Moraes in collaboration with composer Baden Powell, Tatit identifies the point of convergence between their songs’ words and their melodies as lying in the inflections of everyday speech; experimenting with a variety of “linguistic clips” for the same melodic sequence, the partnership would end up with “intonational units”, simultaneously musical and verbal phrases, which would form the composition’s core, and its communicative “truth”, its power as a convincing musically voiced utterance, as language-in-song (259).

This understanding of the songwriting process should provide us with a more productive starting-point for the translator’s work. Lyrics can of course be the bearer of semantic information but, I dare to argue somewhat counter-intuitively, this should not necessarily be considered their primary function, at least not in contradistinction to the song’s musical content, its melodic and rhythmic movement, which actually enacts so much of the drama, narrative or feeling that we experience when we listen. As José Miguel Wisnik suggests, we should therefore turn on its head the supposed hierarchy between text and

melody as “content” and “form”, respectively. Instead, “the music is not a *prop* for truths which are to be told by the lyrics, like a passive screen onto which a figurative image is projected; perhaps the contrary is actually more often the case, where the lyrics appear as a vehicle which bears the music” (Wisnik 11).

In *song* translation, then, rather than viewing Low’s elements of singability, sense, naturalness, rhythm and rhyme as competing for supremacy in an endless state of tension, we could approach them more optimistically with a view to their *convergence* in a unified project. Instead of prioritizing the transmission of semantic information, lyric translations could focus instead on those *interactions* that uniquely generate meaning in song: between the sonic, melodic, prosodic, rhythmic and phonological features that are shared by, and overlap in, speech and vocalised musical sound. We could consider the melodic-discursive “diction” of song, not as a static “architecture”, but as a dynamic cycle of intonational phrases, of musically voiced utterances, which together give bodily movement and presence, in real time, to the drama they enact, unfolding thematically, melodically and rhythmically all at once. Often, the nucleus of the song’s linguistic-musical movement, the “key” to its melodic-discursive meaning, is found in the opening theme. Let us consider an example, the Jobim/Moraes composition “Garota de Ipanema”.

In this song, the musical-thematic core takes the form of an intersection and tension between two motional axes: a young woman’s dance-like walk and, following her, the fascinated gaze of a male spectator. Linked by the drama of desire, these two dimensions, the dance and the gaze, are wedded together in a rhythmic-melodic cell that is as simple as it is expressive: three adjacent notes organised metrically as a proparoxytone or dactyl (— · ·), in which the accented beat (the significant syllable) is followed by two weaker half-beats. The insistent reiteration of this cell (in descending registers after the first four repetitions) seems to unite the girl’s rhythmic swing (as she passes fleetingly across the spectator’s field of vision) to his ecstatic contemplation of her, as he is left mesmerized by the grace and poetry of her movement.

<i>Olha</i>	<i>linda</i>	<i>graça</i>	<i>-nina</i>
<i>Que coisa</i>	<i>Mais cheia</i>	<i>É ela</i>	<i>Que</i>
<i>Mais</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>me-</i>	

The unfolding of the song dramatizes the paradox of erotic longing, which lingers voluntarily suspended at the threshold between desire and its satisfaction, between the passive gaze of the spectator and the animated movement of its object, who seems to approach but then moves away, autonomous and self-sufficient. The dancing, syncopated

rhythm, the oscillating repetition of the melodic figure and the subtle tension created by harmonic dissonance hold this state of erotic desire at a point of imminence, of dynamic suspension, which enacts the essence of the present tense, of the becoming of time. These are the elements which my translation below attempts to convey.

The song is better known to English-speaking audiences, of course, in the version by American lyricist Norman Gimbel, which was first heard as “The Girl from Ipanema” in Astrud Gilberto’s 1964 recording. In Gimbel’s rendering, aside from the prosaically descriptive opening (the girl is “tall and tan and young and lovely”), which replaces and eliminates the topic of the male gaze, the song’s rhythmic organization undergoes a drastic transformation, in which a binary, iambic metre (— ·) takes over: “Tall and **tan** and **young** and **lovely**, the **girl** from **Ipanema** goes **walking**”; in effect, this crucial detail of the translation exchanges the graceful, Brazilian-accented swing of the original for a more pedestrian (dare we say Anglo-Saxon?) gait. At the same time, the syntactic arrangement of the lyric in Gimbel’s translation shifts the points of semantic and melodic-harmonic coincidence away from those of the original: as a result, English words of secondary significance such as “when”, “one” and “like” often occupy accented, higher-pitched places in the melodic phrase, so as to undo the “magical” effect that the words *graça*, *passa* and *balanço* had in the original. Finally, the exclamation “a-a-ah” at the end of the verse (and simply repeated in the second verse) vocalizes in an explicit and rather banal fashion a pleasurable reaction to the girl’s passing by, whereas in the Portuguese version the spectator has yet to externalize any such emotional response; this is held back until the third verse, with its new, impassioned melodic-discursive theme, as he begins to understand and come to terms with the separation between them. The process of comprehension is completed with a final echo (“Ah, se ela soubesse”) in the fourth verse, as in an almost epiphanic insight the individual desire of the male gaze is transcended by the woman’s beauty so as to become a universal aura of enchantment. Disappointingly, in Gimbel’s version this quasi philosophical reflection is replaced by a more conventional expression of unrequited love.

Garota de Ipanema
(Jobim & Moraes)

Olha que **coisa** mais linda
Mais cheia de **graça**
É **ela**, menina,
Que vem e que **passa**
Num doce **balanço**
A caminho do **mar**

The Girl from Ipanema
(Trans. Norman Gimbel)

*Tall and **tan** and **young**
and **lovely**, the **girl**
from **Ipanema**
goes **walking**, and **when**
she **passes** each **one**
she **passes** goes “**a-a-ah**”.*

Ipanema Girl
(Trans. David Treece)

Oh, was there **ever** a loveli-
-er sight, or more **graceful**
That **girl**, she’s the **one**,
Here she **comes**, going by **now**
And swaying so **gently**
On **down** to the **sea**.

Moça do corpo dourado Do sol de Ipanema O seu balançado É mais que um poema É a coisa mais linda Que eu já vi passar.	<i>When she walks she's like A samba that swings so cool and smays so gentle that when she passes each one she passes goes "a-a-ab".</i>	Body so golden, a child of the sun of Ipanema, Her swing makes me smile, It's all poets dream of, I've seen no-one lovelier Walk by to the sea.
Ah, porque estou tão sozinho? Ah, porque tudo é tão triste? Ah, a beleza que existe A beleza que não é só minha, Que também passa sozinha.	<i>Oh, but I watch her so sadly, How can I tell her I love her? Yes, I would give my heart gladly But each day when she walks to the sea She looks straight ahead not at me</i>	Why do I feel so alone now? Why does this sadness surround me? Why does her beauty confound me? All she needs is to live, just to be, As she walks so alone, and so free.
Ah, se ela soubesse Que quando ela passa O mundo sorrindo Se enche de graça E fica mais lindo Por causa do amor.	<i>Tall and tan and young and lovely, the girl from Ipanema goes walking, and when she passes I smile But she doesn't see</i>	Oh, if only she knew how That walk full of grace Turns the world into laughter, A magical place That becomes even lovelier Because of love.

3. Time, the body, performance and persona

In its failure to grasp the core linguistic-musical dynamic of “Garota de Ipanema”, Gimbel’s version illustrates the challenges for translation in addressing two arguably essential features of song’s distinctive expression of human experience: its capacity to enact the instantaneous passage of time, and to make present the living, speaking subject in performance, as both body and persona. Stéphane Hirschi’s central thesis, in *Chanson: l’art de fixer l’air du temps*, is that the French song tradition is “*l’art d’une fugacité éternisée*” (the art of an eternalized transience), in which the singing voice and body resurrect life’s fleeting instants, as if in a series of individually or collectively breathed *petites morts* (22, 52). It is precisely around these themes of temporality and corporeality that Hirschi makes a crucial distinction between songs, on the one hand, and poems set to music:

The song setting . . . thus introduces a *becoming*, a perceptible temporality, the beat of time, above and beyond the inscription that poetic writing sketches out on the space of a page. In this logic of listening without any possible turning back, the function of musical structure is to breathe a dynamism into textual evocations. . .

It is indeed this *bodily* (or at least vocal) *setting*, against a background of metaphorical agony, which radically distinguishes poetry and song in the recording age, even if certain poems accept (call for, perhaps) this form of temporal incarnation. (70-71)

Hirschi’s notion of a suspended present or *becoming* in song can be found in several examples from the Brazilian repertoire, which for the purposes of translation demand particular attention to the question of their linguistic-musical diction. The Jobim/Moraes

co-composition “A Felicidade” (Happiness), an explicit hymn to the theme of *tempus fugit*, is musically and thematically structured around, and derives its force from, a movement between the transience of joy, and an eternity of sorrow, between verse and refrain. Because of the length and melodic freedom of the phrasing in the verses, the rendering into English of the song’s successive images of ephemeral experience can be achieved with relative ease, by making the most of the analytical flexibility of the language. The refrain is a greater challenge, however, as its binary formulation “Tristeza não tem fim/ Felicidade sim” expresses the central concept of the song in such a concentrated fashion. Above all in the extended rising tone of the second syllable, the melodic suspension of the phrase seems to symbolise simultaneously the postponement of onward, progressive time and the eternity of suffering. To match this melodic-discursive theme I have suggested the English formulation “How **long** . . . must sorrow last?”, followed by its rhyming counterpart “When joy so soon is past?”

	-za não
	----- -ste-----
	tem
Tri-	fim
Tristeza não tem fim Felicidade sim.	<i>How long must sorrow last When joy so soon is past?</i>
A felicidade é como uma gota De orvalho numa pétala de flor Brilha tranqüila Depois de leve oscila E cai como uma lágrima de amor	<i>Happiness is like a drop of dew Clinging to the petal there, above So still, you see it glimmer It barely seems to shimmer And falls just like the tear we shed for love</i>
Tristeza não tem fim Felicidade sim.	<i>How long must sorrow last When joy so soon is past?</i>
A felicidade do pobre parece A grande ilusão do carnaval A gente trabalha o ano inteiro Por um momento de sonho Pra fazer a fantasia De rei ou de pirata ou jardineira Pra tudo se acabar na quarta-feira	<i>The poor man only gets his glimpse of happiness That fleeting day when carnival comes round For twelve long months you labour Just so that you can savour The dream that lives for a moment While you pretend to be A king, a pirate or a Casanova Then Wednesday comes and all your joy is over</i>

Tristeza não tem fim Felicidade sim.	<i>How long must sorrow last When joy so soon is past?</i>
A felicidade é como uma pluma Que o vento vai levando pelo ar Voa tão leve Mas tem a vida breve Precisa que haja vento sem parar	<i>Happiness is like the lightest feather That's carried by the breeze upon the air It glides without a sound And then falls floating to the ground It only lives while there is breath to spare</i>
A minha felicidade está sonhando Nos olhos da minha namorada É como esta noite Passando, passando Em busca da madrugada Falem baixo, por favor Para que ela acorde alegre com o dia Oferecendo beijos de amor	<i>This happiness of mine seems to be dreaming Deep within my darling's sleepy eyes It's like the night that's moving Towards the light of dawn Soon the sun's going to rise So whisper softly as a dove Then she will wake tomorrow smiling sweetly With kisses poised like offerings of love</i>
Tristeza não tem fim Felicidade sim.	<i>How long must sorrow last When joy so soon is past?</i>

In the Alcyvandro Luz and Carlos Coqueijo composition “É preciso perdoar” (You must forgive), meanwhile, the passage of time is evoked as a threshold moment, the imminence of romantic loss, as anticipation turns to the certainty of abandonment. Musically and intonationally, this instant of transition is suggested by an extended opening tone, voiced as the semantically empty vowel “Ahhh” and held suspended against the pulse of a tonally ambiguous chord, in a kind of limbo. Initially indeterminate in its meaning, it is only when the extended monotone gives way to a melodic figure that this phoneme is revealed to us as, in fact, the beginning of an entire utterance: “A madrugada já rompeu” (literally, “dawn has broken”). Dramatising the very threshold of time, the passage from night to day, the final syllable of the phrase (“rom-*peu*”) brings us full circle, returning to the preterite finality and eternity of our original extended tone. Arguably this is the core, structuring feature of the song, its linguistic-melodic nucleus: an endless, inexorable return, in the rhyming end-vowels of each line, to the “place” and “time” of loss and formless solitude. At its second iteration, marked by the tonic syllable of ‘abando-*nar*’, the pattern moves up into a higher register, leading momentarily to a tense cycle of emotions (anger, resentment, the admission of error, of self-deception), only to fall irresistibly back into inertia, into the inescapable void where “agora a dor sou eu” (literally “now the pain is me”):

A madrugada já rompeu você vai me abandonar eu sinto que o perdão você não mereceu eu quis a ilusão	<i>Ah, morning light's just broken through soon you'll leave me all alone, I'm sorry it was so, there's no forgiving you I wished the dream was true</i>
---	--

agora a dor sou eu

now pain is all I know

A different experience of time – as repetition – is dramatised in the musical and linguistic structures of “Construção”, Chico Buarque’s nightmarish vision of the disempowering, dehumanising impact of capitalist alienation on an anonymous building worker. In each of three successive iterations of the song’s drama, the worker is forced to live out, again and again, a daily ritual of mechanical actions that lead him from his family farewells at the beginning of the day to a tragic fall – or leap, perhaps – from the construction site into the urban thoroughfare below. Buarque uses a powerful, rigorously organised musical-linguistic structure to enact the dreamlike unreality of the worker’s laboured existence, as it unfolds in the grip of a system beyond his control. This is a syntactic model, followed nearly identically in every one of the seventeen lines, consisting first of an action in the preterite tense (*amou/ beijou/ atravessou/ subiu*), which is then (in most but not all cases) rendered uncanny by a counter-factual subjunctive clause (“*como se fosse. . .*”). Reiterated in different registers, this syntactic model is also structured according to a strict prosodic pattern: eight identically pitched rapid syllables of equal duration, followed by a further six identical syllabic beats in the rising and falling arc of the subjunctive clause, and a final, falling proparoxytone with a three-beat antepenultimate stress.

-se a
fos- . úl - -
se . 1- 2- 3 -ti-
A-mou da-que-la vez co-mo . . -ma
· · · · · · · · · · ·

The overall effect is that each mechanically punctuated action seems to be precipitated, with ever-increasing dramatic momentum, into a hallucinatory state where (reinforced by the substitution of one final proparoxytone for another in the second and third reprise) dream overflows into nightmare and builds inexorably towards the final catastrophic outcome.

Amou daquela vez como se fosse a última/ o último/ máquina
Beijou sua mulher como se fosse a última/ a única
E cada filho como se fosse o único/ o pródigo
E atravessou a rua com seu passo tímido/ bêbado
Subiu a construção como se fosse máquina/ sólido
Ergueu no patamar quatro paredes sólidas/ mágicas/ flácidas
Tijolo com tijolo num desenho mágico/ lógico
Seus olhos embotados de cimento e lágrima/ tráfego
Sentou pra descansar como se fosse sábado/ um príncipe/ um pássaro
Comeu feijão com arroz como se fosse príncipe/ o máximo
Bebeu e soluçou como se fosse um náufrago/ máquina
Dançou e gargalhou como se ouvisse (fosse) música/ o próximo
E tropeçou no céu como se fosse (ouvisse) um bêbado/ música
E flutuou no ar como se fosse um pássaro/ sábado

E se acabou no chão feito um pacote flácido/ tímido/ bêbado
Agonizou no meio do passeio público/ náufrago
Morreu na contramão atrapalhando o tráfego/ público/ sábado

For the translator, I would argue, in order to do justice to this overall dramatic effect, the priority ought to be to recreate the song's prosodic, syntactic and melodic integrity rather than to attend to this or that detail of lexical accuracy. This is my approach in the following version where, instead of Buarque's subjunctives and interchangeable final proparoxytone adjectives and nouns (which are difficult to reproduce in English), in order to suggest the idea of an illusory existence in the grip of inexorable forces, I use variations on the formulation "just like he knew" together with end phrases such as "had to be"/ "seemed to sing"/ "yearned to be":

He made love one last time just like he knew it had to be
He kissed her one more time just like it always had to be
And kissed his kids that time just like he knew it's meant to be
And crept across the street, and that's the way it had to be
He climbed the tower of steel just like he knew it had to be
And raised up four strong walls just like it always had to be
He put them magic'ly together like it had to be
And in his eyes the dust and tears meant that he couldn't see
He sat down for a rest that Saturday, it had to be
And ate his rice and beans just like a feast, and he a king
He drank and sighed, a castaway was all he'd ever be
He danced and cried, the music in his head it seemed to sing
And stumbled drunkenly just like he knew it had to be
And floated in the sky just like the bird he yearned to be
And limply hit the ground just like he knew it had to be
He breathed his very last there in the street for all to see
He died and stopped the traffic like it always had to be

If, as I have suggested, a central function of language-in-song is its performance of the speech act in musical, and experiential, time, then its other major achievement is to materialise, as *voice* and bodily presence, the subject of the song, its persona. As Paul Zumthor argues in his introduction to oral poetry, in song the voice shakes off the restraints of ordinary speech so as to use its full resources and expressive freedom:

Spoken, language makes voice its servant; sung, language exalts the power of voice but, in so doing, speech is magnified – although at the price of some obscured meanings and a certain opacity of discourse: speech is magnified less as language than as affirmation of power . . . In the *spoken* the physical presence of the speaker is more or less attenuated; it tends to blend into the circumstances. In song, it is affirmed, claims for itself the totality of its space. (Zumthor 141-142)

In this bodily materialization of the voice, where the dynamic inflections of word and melody are elided and speech becomes intoned as song, lyrical performance makes our humanity *present* with a special intensity. Luiz Tatit says something similar in his study of Brazilian songwriting, *O Cancionista*:

The voice which speaks . . . foreshadows the living body, the breathing body, the body which is there, at the moment of singing. Out of the speaking voice emanates the most ordinary oral gesture, that closest to human imperfection. It is when the artist seems to be a person. It is when the listener also feels himself to be something of an artist. (Tatit, *O Cancionista* 15)⁴

But what person, or *persona*, is it that comes into being in song performance, and what qualities of the song-text's language can contribute to its aura of authenticity, both in the original composition and in its translated form? We could start by building on the distinction made by Simon Frith (183-202), and elaborated further by Philip Auslander, between three levels of identity at play in song performance, all of which may be present simultaneously: we may hear a singer's personally expressive identity, as "themselves", the real human being standing before us; but the pop singer also typically enacts a *performance persona*, i.e. her star personality or image, in the manner of a film actor, and a *song personality*, the character that each individual lyrical drama constructs as its voice and subject of enunciation.

In *bossa nova*, at least as performed by the first generation of its Brazilian proponents from the 1950s onward, I would argue that a defining feature of the genre is the tendency for both real and performance personalities to be backgrounded, almost to the point of invisibility (or inaudibility), so as to "give the floor" to the voice of the song itself (whether the subject of erotic longing or separation, the initiator of playful or argumentative conversation, or the voice of philosophical wisdom and teaching). Perhaps it can be said that the understated minimalist performance style of João Gilberto, with his perfectly refined diction and almost prayer-like concentration, has paradoxically evolved into a star persona of its own. Nevertheless it is striking how, when heard in comparison with, and sometimes alongside, the English-speaking vocalists who have covered the *bossa nova* repertoire, such as Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald or Sting, the voices of Brazilian artists such as Gilberto and Tom Jobim sound discreet, muted even, as if aware that their role is to enable the song to "speak for itself", as it were, while in the case of their US and British counterparts, the star personality comes to the fore, competing with and even overwhelming the song persona.⁵ No doubt the individual artists' expressive resources,

⁴ For a summary account in English of Tatit's theory of song, see Tatit, "Analysing popular songs".

⁵ Listen, for example, to *Sinatra/Jobim: The Complete Reprise Recordings*. Universal 60252745955. 2010; *The legendary João Gilberto: the original Bossa Nova recordings*. World Pacific. CDP 7 738912. 1990; Tom Jobim with Sting. *How Insensitive (Insensatez)*. Antonio Brasileiro. Columbia B00002413Q. 1994; Ella Fitzgerald. *Ella Abraça Jobim – Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Antonio Carlos Jobim Song Book* Pablo Records CD 2630-201 D 1991.

including melodic improvisation, resonance and vibrato, attack, dynamic contrast and glides, play a major role in explaining this difference, remembering that these are all features largely absent from the *bossa nova* singing style.

But it is also worth examining the contribution of the English lyric translations in helping to shape a certain vocal *accent* or inflection, and its corresponding song persona. Indeed, the question of linguistic and cultural accent – what are the consequences for a song’s interpretation if performed in an English version but by a Brazilian rather than a native speaker US or British vocalist? – merits a separate study of its own. But we can briefly examine how the treatment of, for example, vowels, rhyme and assonance in English song translations might have a bearing on the degree to which the enactment of the song persona and drama are likely to be convincing.

It has been argued that a major challenge to song translation is posed by the strategic difference in approach to prosody between the Germanic languages, whose internal rhythmic structures are based on the interplay between long and short syllables, and the tradition in the Romance languages of working with syllable counting and terminal rhymes (Wagner). Nevertheless, I do not think that this necessarily constitutes an insuperable problem for song translation from Portuguese to English, and I believe that more serious attention to the treatment of rhyme and assonance could be productive.

An instructive example is Norman Gimbel’s version for Sinatra of the Chico Buarque/Tom Jobim composition “Sabiá”, whose theme of exile, although voiced explicitly as a drama of existential longing, has also widely been interpreted politically in the context of Brazil’s post-1964 dictatorship.⁶ A remarkable aspect of the original is the predominance of a terminal rhyming vowel in /a/ or /ax/ (the difference between the final oxytone syllable of “sabiá” and “voltar” being negligible, due to the soft pronunciation of the Brazilian “r” in this position). Out of twenty-eight lines, no less than fifteen end in this sound, not to mention a further ten occurrences in internal rhymes. Without doubt, this phonic feature, in combination with a slow-paced, but meandering, endlessly modulating melodic theme, accounts in large part for the lyrical intensity of the song, in its agonised longing for home. Yet, in Gimbel’s version, which in many other respects gives a fine account of the original lyric, there is barely any trace of assonance, and no echo of the song’s plaintive yearning, as breathed so insistently in that repeated /a/. The result is that, in place of the lyricism of the original, and the existential limbo of its subject, we are left

⁶ See Lorenzo Mammi’s account of the song in Mammi/Nestrovski/Tatit.

with a song persona who is prosaic and literal in his promise to “go back”, while his destination is a concrete rather than symbolic place, devoid of any aura:

Sabiá (Chico Buarque/Tom Jobim)	<i>The Song Of The Sabia</i> (extract) (trans. Norman Gimbel)
Vou voltar Sei que ainda vou voltar Para o meu lugar Foi lá e é ainda lá Que eu hei de ouvir cantar Uma sabiá Vou voltar Sei que ainda vou voltar Vou deitar à sombra De uma palmeira Que já não há Colher a flor Que já não dá E anunciar o dia	<i>I'll go back, I know now that I'll go back, that my place is there, And there it will always be, there where I can hear the Song of the Sabia. I'll go back, I know now that I'll go back, I will lie in the shadow Of a palm that's no longer there, and pick a flower that doesn't grow. that may bring me to the new day.</i>

In the Jobim/Moraes composition “Insensatez”, the challenge of the song persona is of a different order: who is the subject of the enunciation? who is talking to whom? In Norman Gimbel’s translation for Sinatra, recorded by other Anglophone artists such as Sting under the title “How Insensitive”, the I of the song laments the end of a love affair with a touch of self-pity, aware that his emotional indifference and insensitivity ruined the romance, but concluding that this was somehow an inevitable course of events beyond his control, leaving him perplexed and alone with his regrets: “What was I to do/ What can you do/ When a love affair is over?”

However, the Portuguese song title should really lead us onto much more serious terrain than this; “insensatez” is equivalent, not to “insensitivity”, but to “folly”, “madness”, “senselessness”. In other words, it is good reason and sanity that are at stake, and as such the title invokes one of the key themes in the repertoire of Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes, which is a kind of amorous wisdom or rationality, through which the tensions and conflicts of individualism and egotism are overcome in the harmonization of the Self, the Other and the World (Treece, *Brazilian Jive* 75-84). The failure of the affair is therefore an unforgivable error of existential, catastrophic proportions, and its consequences are correspondingly disastrous. But the perpetrator is not the song’s lyrical subject, speaking of his regrets, as Gimbel’s version suggests; in fact there is never any mention of an “I”. Instead, addressed throughout as *you*, he is the *object* of an accusatory voice of reason (which could equally be his own conscience, perhaps), holding him to account and consigning him to an irrevocable destiny of rupture and solitude.

The linguistic-musical expression of this argument is a tightly integrated structure combining: 1) an obsessively reiterative melodic figure revolving around a narrow, chromatic set of intervals; 2) a descending harmonic movement, and the restatement of the theme in ever lower registers, and 3) a dense sequence of rhymes, assonances and lexical repetitions (built around the keywords “coração”, “amor”, “razão” and “perdão”) that is suggestive both of the incontestable logic of the song’s “sentimental education” and the inexorable pain which must follow the lesson of experience. It is not the unimaginative repetition of entire lines or verses, as in Gimbel’s version, which is called for in the translation, then. Instead, as I have proposed in my own version below, our aim should be to recreate the composition’s extraordinary unity of melodic, syntactic and phonic elements, its discursive-musical integrity as language-in-song.

<i>Insensatez</i> (Jobim & Moraes)	<i>How insensitive</i> (Trans. Norman Gimbel)	Senseless (Trans. David Treece)
A insensatez, que você fez Coração mais sem cuidado Fez chorar de dor o seu amor Um amor tão delicado. Ah, porque você foi fraco assim Assim, tão desalmado. Ah meu coração, quem nunca amou Não merece ser amado.	<i>How insensitive I must have seemed When she told me that she loved me How unmoved and cold I must have seemed When she told me so sincerely Why? She must have asked Did I just turn And stare in icy silence What was I to say What can you say When a love affair is over?</i>	How can you explain these tears of pain? Why so heartless, so uncaring? The fragile love you had, you made her sad, Left her all alone to bear it. Tell me what it was, made you so weak, Too weak to love another. You, who never dared, and never cared, Don’t deserve to have a lover.
Vai meu coração, ouve a razão Usa só sinceridade Quem semeia vento, diz a razão Colhe sempre tempestade Vai, meu coração, pede perdão Perdão apaixonado Vai, porque quem não pede perdão Não é nunca perdoado	<i>Now she’s gone away And I’m alone With a memory of her last look Vague and drawn and sad I see it still All her heartbreak in that last look How, she must have asked could I just turn and stare in icy silence? What was I to do What can you do When a love affair is over?</i>	Listen to me now, I’ll tell you how To be true to her forever If trouble’s what you sow, you have to know That you’ll harvest stormy weather Beg her to forgive you, to forgive And life will be worth living But leave this love behind, you’ll never find Another love who’s so forgiving

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