

Graduate Program in Translation
College of Humanities
University of Puerto Rico
Río Piedras Campus

TONGUE TEASER

(a translation of *Embocadura*

by Rubén Ríos Ávila)

by

Yuisa Buxeda Vázquez

presented in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the

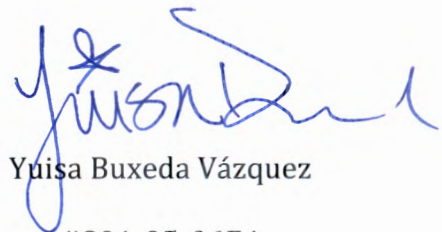
M.A. Degree in Translation

Spring Semester 2014



M. Charlotte Ward

Advisor



Yuisa Buxeda Vázquez

#801-95-0674

TONGUE TEASER

Yuisa Buxeda, 2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Translator's Preface	pg. 5
Bibliography	pg. 18
Translated Title of Work	pg. 21

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Introduction

My beginnings as a translator came about in the unlikeliest of ways: through my first love, photography. My father bought me a camera when I was 11 years old, and my perspectives were forever altered beyond that point. I loved working through the lens, constantly creating new little worlds, manipulating different lights and angles, interpreting my thoughts and ideas into visual form. My mother at the time was well into her career as an avant-garde, experimental artist and performer, so my entire life was exposed to many varying art forms and creative modes of expression.

Growing up in the early 80s in New York City also helped shape my own personal fusion of cultures, as I remember longing for those endless summer nights back in Puerto Rico, walking alongside my mother down slushy Bleeker Street during the dead of winter. In our little apartment, located on 35 Grove Street, I would often put on my favorite uber-tropical, off the shoulder "Le Lo Lai" flowered dress, close my eyes, and think about the palm trees and white sandy beaches in Ocean Park, even though it was 35° Fahrenheit outside. I suppose I was feeling as if I wanted to somehow translate that laid back, island-style "vibe" I had experienced in Puerto Rico, to the gritty, fast-paced life of Manhattan.

Many years later, once again living in Puerto Rico, and having graduated with my bachelor's degree in photography, I quickly realized that I needed to have an economic backup, because the "starving artist" situation was not an option after having given birth to my daughter. I had always been, and still consider myself an extremely creative person. However, it was by pure chance that I stumbled upon the

world of translation. Due to my partial upbringing in New York and my education at an all-English preparatory school in San Juan, and because I now had a child to take care of, I began thinking about changing my visual translations into written translations. Searching for my creative voice, yet again, I completely delved into this new fertile landscape of words, resources, and thought processes.

Why Embocadura/en boca dura?

When it came time to select a text for the translation thesis, it was important for me to work on something that was creative, thought provoking, and modern, but relatable to the general public. I suppose, upon further analysis, I also wanted to keep a certain voice present throughout, as well as choose something that included a solid commentary about our current world, expressed in a way that could resonate with a vast audience. Because of my early artistic influences and upbringing, I have always embraced the urban scene as a whole, through its art, music, and, ultimately, its language, which is why and how I eventually arrived at *Embocadura*, by Rubén Ríos Ávila.

About the Author

Rubén Ríos Ávila received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Comparative Literature at the University of Puerto Rico, graduating in 1974, and received his PhD in Comparative Literature from Cornell University in 1983. He worked as an Assistant Professor at Brown University from September 1980 to May 1983.

Ríos Ávila has been an active professor at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus, since August 1983, a career spanning some 30 years, where he headed the Comparative Literature program. He has been a Visiting Professor at Harvard, Emory, and Notre Dame, among other universities, and is currently a Visiting Professor at New York University, in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese.

Ríos Ávila participated in weekly presentations on a daily, locally produced television show in San Juan, Puerto Rico, called *Cultura Viva*, where he would present and narrate his “*embocaduras*,” eventually compiling many of them to make his published version come to fruition.

Aside from *Embocadura*, he has also published *Puerto Rico desde el cielo*, in 1995, and *La raza cómica: del sujeto en Puerto Rico*, in 2002.

Professor Ríos Ávila also specializes in Lacanian theory and Queer Studies, and has published works on contemporary Caribbean authors, cinema, and cultural criticism, often dealing with postcolonial conjectures.

Description and Analysis of the Text

In choosing this book of short essays, I was well aware of its social commentary, biting satire, and contemporary themes, but overall I was interested in tackling Ríos Ávila's unusual solid voice. I knew this would be extremely challenging because of the concise nature of the essays, but also because these were originally short pieces written to be narrated by the author for the local television show known as *Cultura Viva*.

These snippets, or "weekly interventions," had to capture the audience enough to keep them wanting more, and keep them coming back, week after week, to hear what else Ríos Ávila found interesting enough to comment on, about our oft-perplexing, present-day human existence. His approach was refreshing and candid as he took the daily routine in a different direction, managing to cover subject matters ranging from newspaper articles, to the importance we give to pop culture references, to racism as manifested currently in our society, all the while peppering them with personal episodes, both hilarious and alarming.

Because of its short, easy-to-read format, yet smart and current social critiquing exhibited through varying themes and current-day struggles, Ríos Ávila's voice is an important one that should be available for other readers to appreciate outside of Puerto Rico. While not everyone knows the San Juan *Cuidacarros* ("The Carsitter") as a personal anecdote, there certainly should be versions of this character in most big cities throughout the world. Ríos Ávila discusses concepts and events that are all relatable; they are ponderings that can be placed pretty much in

any city or urban jungle and anyone, from anywhere could be interested in the subject matters discussed in *Embocadura*.

Decisions, Cultural Complexities, Lexicon, and More

Having been reared between two entirely different worlds, New York City and Puerto Rico, I am well aware of the dichotomies that exist within our environments. Working on the translation of *Embocadura*, I managed to identify many images related to and/or garnered from my own personal files of familiarities and wide range of observations stemming from these two opposing, yet curiously relatable places. In many ways, this combination of cultures melded within my psyche helped when it came time to make decisions pertaining to the words chosen in order to express Ríos Ávila's work.

It is important to note that certain English words and well-known phrases are normally used in Puerto Rico and are already part of our daily jargon. Although most people here speak in Spanish, it is normal to sprinkle our Spanish conversations with English expressions. This is actually regarded as a modern-day phenomena known as “Spanglish,” or as defined by *Merriam-Webster*, “Spanish marked by numerous borrowings from English; any of various combinations of Spanish and English.”

In this regard, Ríos Ávila's' work sounds very realistic, because he speaks as we do, as we would. There are multiple instances in these essays where an English phrase or word will pop up, fitting perfectly within the sentence, without skipping a

beat. For example, in *Cuando allá se pase lista*, he writes the word “wow” in italics in the middle of a sentence, recognizing that it is in fact a foreign word for Spanish speakers, yet flowing seamlessly along as if nothing were out of place (“one of these things, is not like the other...”). I believe he did this in order to emulate how we have come to express ourselves here in Puerto Rico and how the English language does affect our surroundings and thoughts, even though in some instances it is purely on a subconscious level. I am sure he probably also did it in order to show the juxtaposition of our realities, and how we simply incorporate English words naturally as we speak, think, and express ourselves. We are, after all, a combination of different cultures that have been mashed and meshed together throughout 500 plus years of history. It is almost a natural occurrence and an innate part of us at this point.

Translating the Title

One of the biggest challenges for me was translating the title of this book. Ríos Ávila was quite savvy and jocose when he chose *Embocadura*, because in Spanish it can mean a number of things, such as the mouth of a river or a passage that narrows, mouthpiece (of a flute or trumpet), tip (of a cigarette), bit (of a bridle), flavor (of wine or food), or a proscenium arch (common form of theater structures located over the stage), according to *Word Reference* (www.wordreference.com). The Real Academia Española has more than twelve definitions for *embocadura*, just to “up the ante” and further exhibit how many ample, yet opposing, options I had to work with.

When the time came to think about the translation of the title, I tried to embrace as many of those definitions as I could within the English version. As translators, we are well aware that in many cases an exact word or phrase simply does not exist, and must face our inevitable limitations as such.

My original idea was to go choose the obvious translation for *Embocadura*: Mouthpiece. I in fact handed in my thesis proposal with “Mouthpiece” as the original title of my work. However, “Mouthpiece” only covered two of the meanings in Spanish (mouthpiece : 1. something placed at or forming a mouth: 2. a part [as of an instrument] that goes in the mouth or to which the mouth is applied), and even included a new one in English (3. one that expresses or interprets another’s views). After doing my research, asking opinions, and giving it much debate, I decided upon “Tongue Teaser.” This decision did not come easily or without prolonged polemics, because what most people would never know is that Ríos Ávila took his skill of wit to a whole other level when he chose *Embocadura* as the title of his book, cunningly playing with the word and its multiple concepts in Spanish. He even wrote an essay titled “*Haciendo embocadura*,” making allusion to how difficult it is for large things to pass through narrow openings, especially when wishing for that wide, ample passageway, as a large ship entering a small bay would, yet somehow ending up getting stuck in the process. If I was going to keep it creative, yet attempt to capture as many definitions as possible, I had to find something that could somehow relate to some (or most) of the meanings in Spanish.

Ríos Ávila was not only crafty enough to choose the word *embocadura* for the title of his work, but when they printed the book, he continued his savvy word-play by highlighting the “*Em*” on the cover so that it could also read as “*En*,” for “*En boca dura*,” which in English literally means, “In a hard mouth.” In addition, I learned that having a “hard mouth” actually refers to “a horse that does not obey or is difficult to control” because it doesn’t feel the bit. I believe his sly and sharp sense of working with words and language really came through here, as he was able to subtly warn his readers in Spanish, or those who were paying attention, that he would, in fact, be commenting with a cutting, often sarcastic delivery, thus the *boca dura* / “hard mouth” reference.

There are also set, established references in English when it comes to the word “tongue,” as in someone who is “sharp-tongued,” which means “tending to say very critical things to people: harsh or bitter in speech or language,” according to *Merriam-Webster* (www.merriam-webster.com), and therefore completely fits into my idea within a possible concept for “tongue teaser,” or someone who “teases with a sharp tongue.”

It can also fall under the idea of a tasty morsel of food or delectable wine that leaves you wanting more. Often, when someone writes a thought-provoking piece, it may “leave you wanting more,” as in wanting more pleasures, more solutions, more answers, more clues, or just about anything you might want more of. In this regard,

quite possibly, the essay or commentary made by Ríos Ávila provokes that same feeling of “wanting more,” but with different connotations.

Continuing my investigation into these complex decisions, I became fascinated and/or obsessed by Suzanne Jill Levine’s phrase “curious mistranslations,” as I came across it, and often asked myself when I made this “executive decision” to change the title of the work if I was, in fact, doing so; if I was the one creating the “curious mistranslation.” I must confess that while doing research for the phrase “tongue teaser” I came across a wide array of meanings and definitions, ranging from food bits (“Sexy wine and sexy food tongue teaser “ by *The Flying Winemaker*), to tongue twisters (“How much wood would a woodchuck chuck?”), to “small, discreet, and vibrating” products. In spite of this, a choice had to be made, and “Tongue Teaser” works on many different angles and stands on its own. In this regard, I think I prefer the phrase “creative infidelity,” as Levine so eloquently describes in her article, “Borges on Translation,” about how “each literature, each culture, each era appropriates according to its own deforming mirror,” and this is an absolutely inescapable reality at times, as a translator.

Could there be better, more precise versions of the title? Possibly. However, “Tongue Teaser” fits the bill because it makes your mind race with multiple, possible meanings, and ultimately, this is what Ríos Ávila sought when he came up with his title: He wanted to leave us wanting more.

Just as a little morsel of food or taste of wine would “tease your tongue,” *Embocadura* manages to provoke a certain kind of sensory examination and evaluation through writing.

Specific Translation Difficulties

The biggest challenge in terms of translating, and the one that presented the most difficulties because of the specific jargon used to depict the different, creative ways which we have come up with to describe all of the varying racial features among our island’s melting pot, was the essay “*Aquí todos somos blancos.*” This essay was complicated on many levels because racial themes are often extremely tricky as is, but more specifically because of the distinct, localized vocabulary. For example, there is no translation that I could find for the word *javao*, which is actually a very common word in Puerto Rico, used to describe a light-skinned black person who has prominent Caucasian or white features, such as green or blue eyes and light hair, or vice versa. There are other words, such as *jincho* and *chinito* that do have translations, but possibly do not hold the same connotations in English that they do in Spanish, or, more specifically, Puerto Rican Spanish.

Another issue was making the decision as to whether or not the words *blanquito* or *negrito* should be changed and/or translated in this essay. It is important to point out that in Puerto Rico there are some very specific connotations with these two words, and Ríos Ávila does everything he can in order to explain their meanings and undercurrents. However, as I continued to do research and investigate these terms, it was apparent that these words, along with their

implications and nuances, would be almost impossible to truly be comprehended by anyone outside of the local Puerto Rican environment. According to my research, it really comes down to a cultural setting, where the word *negrito* could most easily be compared to the use of the word “brother” among African-Americans, which may have affectionate connotations and/or carries the “sense of kinsman, fellow member, or simply someone who is related by common interests or ties” (*english.stackexchange.com*).

Other Difficulties

When I began working on some of the essay titles, I noticed that it was necessary to keep the tone as such: sometimes comical, sometimes a bit imprecise, sometimes sober, and oftentimes critical. It was important to translate Ríos Ávila’s work in a way that could be easily read, yet had a strong vision and/or rendering in its process. It was important to give all English speakers a sense of being able to somehow relate to the overall locution of the book, regardless of where they are from or what city they live in, and, hopefully, this has been transmitted through the translations.

Additionally, I struggled through the initial process of choosing what essays I would be working on, venturing to pick as many varying subjects as possible. I suppose I also wanted to keep things “snappy,” and change subjects as seamlessly as I could, attempting to pull it off, as Ríos Ávila managed to do so on the television show. In terms of Ríos Ávila’s work, he was always extremely adept at creating a very particular, peppy language geared for television audiences. In this case, when it

came to the translation process, this element definitely influenced my style, as it gave me the room for certain poetic and/or creative choices, when a literal or exact translation simply was not available. I often improvised or decided use an equivalent phrase in English, thinking about my readers, and how they could relate to the subject at hand. We all know as translators that sometimes we must push those boundaries without altering the content, because of the level of difficulty imposed by a set text. This, in return, allowed for a greater concept development in terms of bringing the text to life in English. One must think about one's target audience as the writing takes place, and make an effort to put everything in a clear, concise context, all the while creating something relatable to the public, in order for them to make some sort of connection with the text.

Another challenge was translating the oral nature of the text, and having to write in a way that felt as if what you were reading was being spoken to you on the spot, redacted in such a way that made it feel as though someone were conversing with you. Often his writing allows for this direct approach, because Ríos Ávila in many cases seems to be writing to "you," as if you were sitting at a table, having a conversation at a dinner party with him, or "you" sitting on the couch in your underwear watching *Cultura Viva*. In other words, the writing had to sound a bit light, relaxed, and approachable, yet full of zingers and creative criticism, whenever necessary.

No translation can ever be a perfect replica of the original. As Borges said, "There is no such thing as a definitive work," and that is something we must take into consideration when translating someone else's compositions. Nothing can ever

be entirely precise, but it is always challenging to attempt to cover as much ground as possible.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On-line Sources

english.stackexchange.com

www.linguee.com

www.mediatakeout.com

www.merriam-webster.com

www.oed.com

www.onlineslangdictionary.com

www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com

www.rae.es

www.spanishcentral.com

www.tmz.com

www.urbandictionary.com

www.wordreference.com

Books and Dictionaries

- Acosta-Belén, Edna, and Carlos E. Santiago. Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006.
- Agathocleous, Tanya. Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century: Visible City, Invisible World. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Andreatta, Susan, and Gary Ferraro. Elements of Culture. California: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013.
- Ayala, Cesar J., and Rafael Bernabé. Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Dumitrescu, Domnita, and Gerardo Piña-Rosales. El español en los Estados Unidos: E Pluribus Unum? Enfoques Multidisciplinarios. New York: Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española, 2013.
- Eco, Umberto. A Theory of Semiotics. Indiana University Press, 1976.
- Hualde, José Ignacio, Antxon Olarrea, Anna María Escobar, and Catherine E. Travis. Introducción a la lingüística hispánica. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Neulip, James W., Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach. California: Sage Publications, 2011.
- Puri, Shalini. The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Remeseira, Claudio Iván. Hispanic New York: A Sourcebook. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Ríos Ávila, Rubén. *Embocadura*. San Juan: Editorial Tal Cual, 2003.
- Ríos Ávila, Rubén. *La raza cómica del sujeto en Puerto Rico*. San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2002.
- Sánchez Korrol, Virginia E. From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Simon & Schuster's International Dictionary English/Spanish, New York: Prentice Hall Press, 2005.

Stavans, Ilan. Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003.

Thomas, Lorrin. Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City (Historical Studies of Urban America). Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Articles

Leone, Leah Elizabeth "Displacing the mask: Jorge Luis Borges and the translation of narrative." Iowa: University of Iowa, *Iowa Research Online*, 2011. *ir.uiowa.edu*

Levine, Suzanne Jill. "Borges on Translation." *www.academia.edu*

Rourke, Lee. "Why Creative Writing is Better with a Pen," *The Guardian*. *www.theguardian.com*

Public Forums/Blogs

"Terrifically Twisted Tricky Tongue Teasers" (roller chat/public forum) *www2b.abc.net.au*

"Use of 'brother' in non-family and non-religious contexts" (a question and answer site for linguists, etymologists, and serious English language enthusiasts) *english.stackexchange.com*