

Esperanto, a gateway to lesser known cultures
 Uncovering the phraseological wealth of Basque
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On behalf of the Buchanan Committee I wish to thank prof Fiedler, for her interesting lecture which gave us a surprising insight into the phraseological use of Esperanto, a phenomenon which most people do not immediately associate with a language which is often thought of as a plain code for interlingual communication. In this context I should remind this audience of the successful masterclass in Esperanto language and literature organized at the Foresight Centre of this University in March this year, in particular the enlightening public lecture given by prof Duncan Charters on the artistic value of the Esperanto translations from Spanish of Cervantes' *Don Quijote* and poetry by García Lorca. For just a few minutes I want to take you back to the Iberian Peninsula and, as an extension of what prof Charters showed us, illustrate the potential key role of Esperanto in giving small cultures a better chance to have their voices heard in this globalizing, and increasingly monotonous, world. What I mean is the unique capability the Esperanto speech community has to open the doors to the phraseological treasures hidden in lesser known languages, and mediate these to a worldwide public. I will give you a few examples from Basque, the oldest and non-Indo-European language spoken in the coastland of the Bay of Biscay. The material derives from work done on a Basque-Esperanto proverb collection which is being prepared for publication next year (WJ).

1. **Keyword 1: Familiarity**

A common (Christian) cultural background is found in the following proverb of biblical origin, which reads in Esperanto:

- (1) *Neniu estas profeto en sia urbeto.* (Ktl 1716 < Zam 1167)
 'No one is a prophet in his own town.'¹ (No prophet is accepted in his hometown)

of which the Basque equivalent is very similar:

- Bsq *Gizona, santu izateko, herriz aldatu behar.* (GG 5838)
 'For a man to be a saint, he must move to another place.'

The Esperanto translation from Basque would read:

¹ A gloss enclosed in single quotes contains the author's non-native reflection in English of a foreign language input. It does not represent an acknowledged translation of the original.

(2) *Por ke viro sanktiĝu, necesas ke li transloĝiĝu.* (WJ 351)

The adequacy of (1) and the use of almost identical lexical material in (2) means that (2) does not qualify as an improvement of (1), but it could be used by Basque Esperanto speakers as a close variant of the proverb in their mother tongue structure.

2. Keyword 2: Irony

The following example with Esperanto as my point of departure is more interesting. “The grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence” is probably a rather recurrent mindset in different cultures. Zamenhof gives the following option in Esperanto:

(3) *Ĉio transmara estas ĉarma kaj kara.* (Ktl 236 < Zam 1120)
‘Everything from overseas is nice and lovely.’

A close semantic match in Basque is:

Bsq *Auzoko artoa, etxeko ogia baino hobea.* (GG 1691)
‘The neighbour’s maize is better than the bread at home.’

The source of the Basque form is the name of a farm in Upper Navarre. The Spanish, English and Latin equivalents given by GG are all entirely different and have no farming background. The Basque expression would be in Esperanto:

(4) *La maizo de la najbaro estas pli bona ol la hejma pano.* (WJ 88)

GG also has:

Bsq *Kanpoko ogia beti askoz goxoago.* (GG 8299)
‘The bread from elsewhere is always much nicer.’

An Esperanto translation from Basque could read as follows:

(5) *La pano de l’ najbaro ĉiam estas multe pli bona.* (WJ 520)

The Spanish equivalent in GG has a farming background as well, but uses entirely different concepts (the neighbour’s goat milk).

What (3), (4) and (5) have in common is that their message is ironical, implying something like “This is my statement, but, mind you, the reality is different”. The nice thing about (3) is its rhyme, which is lost in (4) and (5). On the other hand, the farming background

in the latter two seems to be more in line with the traditionally agricultural society in the Basque Country. But, even if the Basques have no colonial history which could have made the ‘overseas’ reference prone to proverbial application, many poverty-driven people emigrated to the Americas in the past two centuries, and from this experience some proverbs did arise with just such an ‘overseas’ reference. However, the six cases registered by GG do not glorify the promised land, but contain a direct warning *not* to emigrate, e.g., the following example from Biscay:

Bsq *Ameriketan be, urrea urrun.* (GG 739)

‘In the Americas too, gold is far away.’

(6) *Ankaŭ en Ameriko foras la oro.*

In all cases, the ‘overseas’ reference — here, explicitly ‘the Americas’ — carries a semantic content which is the *contrary* of (3), but, thanks to the missing ironical illocution, they eventually carry the same message, i.e., “I warn you, the grass isn’t any greener on the other side of the fence (the ocean)”.

3. Keyword 3: Abstraction

One of the expressions on today’s agenda was the famous medieval Latin *De gustibus (et coloribus) non est disputandum*, which is in Esperanto:

(7) *Pri gustoj oni disputi ne devas.* (Ktl 2084 < Zam 262)

There is no accounting for tastes. (GG 2536)

The Latin source in GG is matched to two Basque versions of which one is not very convincing, and the other one reads:

Bsq *Gustatzen zaionarentzat, akerraren adarraren salda baño oberik ez.* (GG 436/6155)

‘If you like it, there is nothing tastier than goat horn soup.’

What strikes us here is that the abstraction in Latin has a very down-to-earth translation in Basque (there is no trace of a literal translation!), once again with a reference to the rural society of the past. If we take the Spanish version of (7), which is *Sobre gustos no hay nada escrito* ‘There is nothing written about taste’, as our point of departure, we are referred to as many as 25 Basque equivalents, among which some 10 are not very convincing, but 15 are, and perhaps some of them would qualify in Esperanto as picturesque variants of (7), e.g.:

(8) *Al ŝatanto nenio pli bongustas ol kaprokorna supo.*

Other candidates are listed in the Appendix.

We find in Basque a wealth of proverbs predominantly focussing on human beings in their natural environment. Among these we may find candidates that could be added to the existing stock of Esperanto proverbs and thus provide us with fresh, expressive variants of existing proverbs or even entirely new expressions suitable for global application.

What makes Esperanto so receptive in terms of enrichment by proverbs? I can think of a few factors, but I'm sure prof Fiedler can come up with more:

- Openness of Esperanto speakers to other cultures, not excluding minorities.
- Psychological freedom to invent (speakers are not constrained by unwritten rules: see Appendix).
- Syntactic flexibility, facilitating the creation of rhyme structures by appropriate word order adaptations.
- Semantic flexibility, facilitating inputs from different cultures ('bread/maize' or 'overseas', abstractions or 'goat horn soup').
- No sensitivity to small structural changes which would immediately disqualify the intended variant in a national language e.g., in (6) *Pri la gustoj oni disputi ne devas* is an alternative to *Pri gustoj oni disputi ne devas*, but 'There is no accounting for **the** tastes' is not an acceptable alternative to 'There is no accounting for tastes'.

Literature

- GG Garate, Gotzon. 1998. *27173 Atsotitzak/Refranes/Proverbs/Proverbia*. Bilbao: Bilbao Bizkaia Kutxa Fundazioa. 'GG #' is proverb number # in this collection.
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APPENDIX

De gustibus (et coloribus) non est disputandum – some variations on the theme
in acceptable Esperanto versus questionable non-native English

Batek arrosaren kolorea maite, bertzeak usaina. (GG 1291) vowel rhyme
Tiu ŝatas de l' roz' la koloron, la alia la odoron. full rhyme
'Some like the color of a rose, others like the smell.'

Beleari ere eder zaio bere boza. (GG 2341)
Eĉ korvo ŝatas la propran voĉon.
'Even a raven likes its own voice.'

Eder edo itsusi, zein begik ikusi. (GG 3228) full rhyme
Iuj belas, iuj hidas, laŭ l' okuloj kiuj vidas. full rhyme
'Beautiful or ugly depends on the eyes that see (it, him, her).'

Oilazkoa nork bere erara erretzen du. (GG 10443)
Ĉiu rostas kokinidon siamaniere.
'Every person roasts a chicken his/her own way.'

Bakotxak bere sainduari otoitz. (GG 11895)
Ĉiu preĝas al sia sanktulo.
'Everyone prays to his/her own saint.'

Txori bakoitzari eder bere habia. (GG 12663)
Ĉiu birdo ŝatas la propran neston.
'Each bird likes its own nest.'