Interpreting Fidelity: Gatsby in Translation

Mary Wardle

Abstract

Over the centuries, many metaphors have been used to represent the translation process but, certainly, as far as literary translation is concerned, one of the most apposite images would be that of the translator's work as musical performance and, in particular, as improvisation on a theme associated with jazz. This parallel is perfectly fitting in the case of the multiple translations of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Now that the author's original works have moved out of copyright and into the public domain, we find numerous 'rival' versions translated into the same language, as illustrated by the thirteen different Italian versions or the eight translations into French. This paper asks why we need so many versions, how they came about, and how they differ in their interpretations of the source text.

Keywords

F. Scott Fitzgerald, Translation, *The Great Gatsby*, *Gatsby* in Italian, Translating Metaphor

Özet

Yüzyıllardır çeviri sürecini temsil eden birçok benzetme kullanılmıştır fakat edebiyat çevirisi söz konusu olduğunda en yerinde mecazlardan biri çeviri ile müzik performansı, özellikle de caz doğaçlamaları arasındakidir. Bu paralellik Fitzgerald'ın *Muhteşem Gatsby* romanının çevirilerinde görülmektedir. Yazarın orijinal eserlerinin telif hakkı kapsamından çıkarılıp ortak erişime açılması ile eserin on üç farklı İtalyanca çevirisi ya da sekiz Fransızca çevirisi gibi

aynı dile çevrilmiş birçok "benzer" biçimini bulabiliriz. Bu çalışma, neden bu kadar çok çeşide ihtiyaç duyduğumuzu, bunların nasıl ortaya çıktığını ve kaynak metni yorumlamada nasıl farklılıklar gösterdiklerini sorgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

F. Scott Fitzgerald, Çeviri, *The Great Gatsby*, İtalyanca'da *Gatsby*, Mecaz Çevirisi

There are many different metaphors commonly adopted by critics and theorists to describe the translation process. They include viewing translation as a bridge from one culture or language to another, allowing the reader of the target text to travel to lands that otherwise would be precluded; the translator can be seen as following in the footsteps of the author; as an explorer, entering unchartered territory; as working in front of a mirror, reflecting what she sees for a new audience; as a dog on a lead, with the author of the source text cast in the role of the dog walker – the lead can be longer or shorter according to how far the translation 'strays' from the original. This concept of deviating from the source follows on from the rather common notion of in/fidelity or un/faithfulness in translation that has spawned such pithy phrases as the French 'les belles infidèles' (translations, like women, can be either beautiful or faithful but never both at the same time, *pace* all feminists) or the Italian 'traduttore traditore' (if you are a translator you are also perforce a traitor).

> We can plainly see that many of these images do not reflect particularly favorably on the translation process, tending to emphasize, as they do, the concept of loss or betrayal when transferring content from one linguistic code to another. A somewhat more productive metaphor however is that whereby the translatorial process is compared to an artistic performance with the source text paralleled with the musical score and the translation similar to

the individual performances of that same score by subsequent conductors or musicians. Even though we take the same musical notation as our source text, no two performances will be alike. Developing this metaphor, Umberto Eco observes: "Translators are creative interpreters. Like Muti or Pollini, whose performances are art when they direct or interpret a concerto composed by someone else" (Donati2003).[1]

Translation as Performance

Mark O'Thomas takes the musical conceit one step further and, while his discussion is specifically related to stage translation where each single performance of a play is more easily equated with the execution of a piece of music, I would however argue that his point can be extended to literary production in general: according to O'Thomas, translation can be seen as a jazz performance: both art forms are described as "processes of creativity that respond to pre-existing structures" (60) characterized by "improvisation […] a notion of playfulness, a kind of bold creativity fashioned onto and of an original"(59). He emphasizes the interpretative part played by the performer/translator when reproducing the original text, be it musical or literary. Reproduction here is certainly not a mechanical process: "The starting point for jazz […] is that its translation of a source will always be a creative response to that source rather than a striving to play it in exactly the same way as its author intended or a previous musician has already interpreted it"(57).

The object of this paper, therefore, is to investigate how this interpretative element can be achieved, tracing the translation process empirically through close textual analysis of the source text and the multitude of target texts available in translation to today's Italian reader.

The Great Gatsby(s)

Although we still read Shakespeare, for example, in his original sixteenth-century English, once we move to versions of his texts in other languages, we tend to find more than one translation, and often

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1   «E» un interprete creativo. Come capita a Muti o Pollini, che fanno arte a loro volta quando dirigono o interpretano un concerto scritto da un altro». Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

numerous translations for each play or sonnet. There are many reasons that contribute to the presence of multiple translated versions of the same original work into the same language and one of the most often quoted is the need to update the language of the target text. While this might be true in certain cases (imagine, for example, 'dusty' eighteenth-century English translations of Dante, no longer 'fit for purpose' in the twenty-first century), this does not explain why there are thirteen unabridged Italian translations of *The Great Gatsby*, a novel that has not yet celebrated its first centenary, a period in which the Italian language has not changed enormously.

The earliest of these translations, by Cesare Giardini, appeared in 1936 in a low-cost, popular series, available through subscription, marketed principally for a female readership. In all the paratexts, we can observe that there is no emphasis on the author or the literary qualities of the book – Fitzgerald was virtually unknown in Italy at the time – published against the backdrop of the Fascist regime when there was a general tendency to underplay the foreign provenance of cultural products such as novels and films. As if to underline the marginal literary value attributed to the text, a number of factors point to the fact that it was translated from an earlier French version rather than directly from the English-language original.[2]

Fernanda Pivano, an Italian writer, literary critic, journalist and translator who did much to introduce American literature to the Italian public in the years after the Second World War, was influential in persuading the publishing company Mondadori to allow her to retranslate the novel in 1950 as she felt that Giardini's earlier translation did not do Fitzgerald justice. This second translation is still in print and very much read today, albeit in a slightly revised version, and Pivano's translation is the one promoted recently as a tie-in for Baz Lurhmann's film of *The Great Gatsby* with a reproduction of the film poster on the dust jacket of the more recent print runs of the book.

Apart from one other translation that appeared in 1989, all the remaining translations, and there are ten of them, appeared once the copyright to all Fitzgerald's works moved into the public domain in

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2   The first French translation, *Gatsby le magnifique*, is by Victor Llona and was published by P. Dupont, Paris in 1926. Cesare Giardini was a prolific translator during the 1930s, often translating French literature and there are many similarities between his version for Mondadori and Llona's translation, not least the title: Giardini's translation is the only Italian version entitled *Gatsby il magnifico*. All subsequent versions opt for *Il grande Gatsby*.

2010.[3] This brings the total to thirteen different unabridged versions to which we must also add a further online open-access version of the first chapters of the book. This abundance of largely contemporary translations can serve as a clear example of the hermeneutic process implicit in all literary translation practice: while all produced and marketed as versions of the same original, no two translations are identical and, in some cases, the difference between versions can be quite startling. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to analyze all these translations in their entirety; it is, however, possible to select a short passage and, through close reading, highlight the interpretative nature of the translatorial act. To return to O'Thomas' metaphor, Fitzgerald's English can be seen as the original melody, with each of the Italian versions as a variation on the theme, each with its subtle rendering of the source and subsequent influence on the target reader.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis can be carried out in a number of ways and when, more specifically, studying translation, different textual units that can be taken as the basis for analysis, from single lexical items (and their morphology) to the entire opus of an author (and its position within the literary canon or cultural panorama). For the purposes of this paper, the close reading will be based on elements within two short paragraphs taken from the first chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, where Nick is narrating his visit to Daisy and Tom Buchanan's house:

> We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale

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3   F. Scott Fitzgerald died in 1940 and, as specified by the Berne Convention, the copyright for his works remained under protection as part of his estate for a further 70 years. After this, from 2010 on therefore, any publishing company is free to either print his works in English or commission and publish a translation into another language. Translations follow the same copyright law as original works and therefore any publishing company now wanting to add *The Great Gatsby* to their catalogue in Italian must commission their own translation as the earlier ones are still covered by copyright.

flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor. (10)

The task here is to look at this passage through the eyes of the translator, to first notice any linguistic or stylistic features that might require further consideration and then hypothesize possible solutions, before adopting one translation strategy over another. Based on extensive research carried out with the assistance of eye-tracking software and Think Aloud Protocols,[4] Göpferich and Jääskeläinen indicate that professional translators read texts differently to monolingual readers, constantly conscious of the task ahead of them, noticing any relevant features for their forthcoming work on the text (2009). The illustration below shows the annotations that a translator might make, circling, underlining and linking any examples of repetition or alliteration, occurrences of lexical items from specific semantic domains (here, for example, words associated with color or sounds), and so forth.

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4   Eye-tracking software monitors the translator's eye movements between any combination of printed text, screen and keyboard that might be used for the task, while Think Aloud Protocols (TAP) are used in empirical research as another data-collecting methodology: the translator is required to express in words everything that 'passes through their mind' as they undertake a specific translation task. These words are then transcribed and make up the TAP.
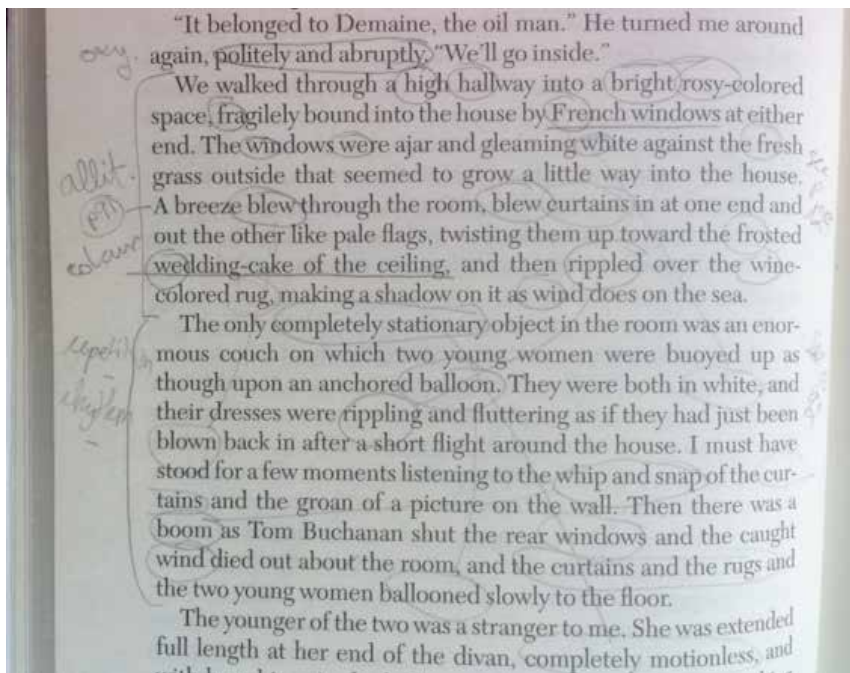
A translator's annotation of the extract from *The Great Gatsby*

Even if we take a small fragment of this text, the opening phrase of the third sentence, for example, "*A breeze* **blew** across the room, […]", then mark the basic components of the phrase (the subject is in italics, the verb in bold and the adverbial phrase is underlined) and then compare it with the thirteen different Italian versions, we can notice choices that affect a number of linguistic elements:

T1. *Una brezza* **soffiò** nella stanza,

T2. Nella stanza **spirava** *un vento leggero,*

T3. **Spirava** nella stanza *un soffio leggero,*

T4. *Una brezza* **spirava** nella stanza;

T5. *Un alito di vento* **soffiò** nella stanza,

T6. *Una leggera brezza*

T7. *Una brezza* **soffiava** attraverso la stanza:

T8. Nella stanza **spirava** *una brezza*

T9.   *La brezza* **soffiava** <u>attraverso la stanza,</u>

T10. *Una leggera brezza* **attraversava** <u>la stanza,</u>

T11. <u>Nella stanza</u> **spirava** *una leggera brezza*

T12. *Una brezza* **soffiava** <u>attraverso la stanza,</u>

T13. **Soffiava** *una leggera brezza* <u>attraverso la stanza,</u>

One of the most obvious variations between the different versions is the syntax which is more elastic in Italian when compared to the rather more rigid word order we tend to find in English. From a grammatical point of view, we can observe a functional shift (T10) whereby the English adverb 'through' has become the Italian verb 'attraversava' or 'crossed' and also two examples (T1 and T5) of the simple past – the breeze blew (once) – whereas all the other translators opt for the imperfect – the breeze was blowing. T9 also chooses the definite article (the breeze) where the other twelve prefer the indefinite (a breeze).

T6 omits part of the phrase, choosing to translate 'the breeze blew the curtains,' removing Fitzgerald's repetition of 'blew' and his reference to the room. Vocabulary is also an interesting element to analyze here: there are a number of different variations for the noun 'a breeze' (T2 light wind; T3 light breath; T5 a breath of wind; T6, T10, T11 and T13 a light breeze). The expression chosen in T5, 'alito di vento' – a breath of wind – alters the register of the text, making it more poetical, almost biblical: there are echoes of the words used in Italian for the breath of life ('alito di vita') that God blows into Adam in Genesis.

Where the English presents an alliteration 'a <u>b</u>reeze <u>b</u>lew,' some translators manage to recreate the effect through a strategy of compensation, in other words (in this case quite literally), moving the alliteration to a different location within the same phrase: ('<u>s</u>offiò nella <u>s</u>tanza' or '<u>s</u>pirava nella <u>s</u>tanza un <u>s</u>offio').

We can also notice the changes brought to the punctuation of the phrase: the comma of the original has in some cases been maintained, in others it has either disappeared or been converted into a colon or semi-colon. Systematic changes to punctuation, with a cumulative effect across the whole novel, will inevitably alter the prosody and rhythm of the text.

Each translator will be alerted to different features of the original and operate a variety of strategies in their attempt to integrate them into the target text. In widening our gaze to the two paragraphs reproduced above, it might be useful to concentrate our attention on two separate issues, repetition and metaphor, although we must point out that no individual elements can ever be analyzed in isolation from the rest of the text. As Kelly reminds us, "[t]he translation process is not linear, but a constant coming and going between factors at macro- and micro-level, governed by an overall macro strategy" (16).

Again and Again – The Translation of Repetition

If we limit ourselves to the analysis of this one novel, it is already clear that Fitzgerald makes extensive use of repetition as a stylistic device to both create rhythm and allow themes to emerge in his writing. Compared to the time when the only resources available were hardcopy concordances (where they existed), the identification of repetition is now greatly facilitated by the use of digital texts that allow us to trace individual words or expressions throughout the work or across an author's entire oeuvre. To illustrate this, we can quickly discover that there are three occurrences of the word 'breeze' in *The Great Gatsby*.

The first is here in our passage, setting the scene as Nick enters Tom and Daisy's house: "A breeze blew through the room […]". The second occurrence in chapter six is again linked to Daisy "A breeze stirred the grey haze of Daisy's fur collar" (86), while the third time we encounter the word, in chapter seven, the similarities are even more striking: "The room, shadowed well with awnings, was dark and cool. Daisy and Jordan lay upon an enormous couch, like silver idols, weighing down their own white dresses against the singing breeze of the fans" (92).

There is a clear parallel with our passage from the first chapter but an element of reversal has now been introduced: the room that had been 'bright' and 'rosy-colored' is now 'dark and cool,' Daisy and Jordan while still sitting on their 'enormous couch' are no longer giving the impression of 'fluttering' around the house but are rather 'weighing down their dresses.' Whereas the breeze was natural in the first passage, it is now produced artificially by the fans. The contrast is made increasingly explicit if we notice the way in which this later scene is introduced: instead of "A breeze blew through the room," we now

have "Through the hall of the Buchanans' house blew a faint wind" (91) where the syntax has been altered with what, for English, is an unusual reversal of verb and subject. This, as well as contributing to the poetic quality of the writing, also draws attention to itself, inducing the reader to slow down and notice the artifice.

The penultimate paragraph of chapter eight, describing the pool shortly after Gatsby's death, presents similar intratextual echoes (or ripples, to maintain Fitzgerald's lexis) that any translator should pick up on:

> There was a faint, barely perceptible movement of the water as the fresh flow from one end urged its way toward the drain at the other. With little ripples that were hardly the shadow of waves, the laden mattress moved irregularly down the pool. A small gust of wind that scarcely corrugated the surface was enough to disturb its accidental course with its accidental burden. The touch of a cluster of leaves revolved it slowly, tracing, like the leg of transit, a thin red circle in the water. (129)

Just as the breeze had blown the curtains "in at one end and out the other" (10), here the water flows "from one end […] toward the drain at the other;" where we had "rippled" and "rippling" we now have "ripples;" "fresh," "shadow" and "wind" are all repeated from the earlier extract; "accidental" is repeated within this passage.

From the translator's point of view, the first task is that of noticing that a repetition has in fact occurred and then deciding whether to replicate it or not. The repetition may be part of the author's individual style, or used to create a hypnotic rhythm, to render a sense of monotony, to link events or characters, and so on. Expressing his point of view on the fate of repetition in the hands of translators, not only as a literary critic but also wearing his hat as a much-translated author, Milan Kundera is particularly eloquent on what he calls the synonymizing reflex:

> […] if the word "sadness" appears twice in the same paragraph of the original text, the translator, offended by the repetition […] will be tempted to translate the second occurrence as "melancholy."

> […] the translator must keep faith with the author and at the same time remain himself; what to do? He wants (consciously or unconsciously) to invest the text with his own creativity; as if to give himself heart, he chooses a word that does not obviously betray the author but still arises from his own initiative. […] I write "author" and the translator translates it "writer"; I write "writer" and he translates it "novelist"; I write "novelist" and he translates it "author"; where I say "verse", he says "poetry"; where I say "poetry", he says "poems." (108-9)

This practice is particularly apparent in the translation from source texts in languages that present a high frequency of repetition towards those that tend not to: indeed, some languages are more 'forgiving' in this respect than others. As Musacchio points out "the issue of repetition is particularly relevant for translation into languages such as Italian where it is normally avoided for stylistic reasons unless it gives rise to ambiguity" (89) and, therefore, a translator into Italian may well opt to use a synonym or paraphrase 'out of respect' for the target language convention rather than adhere to the stylistics of the source material.

Although this tendency to create alternative forms of expression may appear marginal if restricted to one or two occurrences in a whole book, if that book is *The Great Gatsby*, where repetition is a crucial stylistic device, then Kundera's conclusion resonates all the more forcefully: "This practice of synonymization seems innocent, but its systematic quality inevitably smudges the original idea."

To Put It Differently – Translating Metaphor

As a rhetorical figure, metaphor appears on Jakobson's vertical axis, a product of language's associative nature and, together with the horizontal, syntagmatic axis along which he places metonymy, it forms

one of the principle features of poetic language. Within this scheme, simile is viewed as a more explicit form of metaphor and is often treated as a close equivalent or sub-category of metaphor: "Both metaphor and metonymy can be subdivided into other figures (simile is a type of metaphor; synecdoche is a type of metonymy) but the distinction between the two modes remains fundamental, because it is the product of the fundamental modes of language itself: it is how language works" (Hawkes 78-79). There is, however, increasing research into the (not always) subtle differences between metaphor and simile:

> Simile, unlike metaphor, refers directly to encoded concepts, and the form prompts the hearer to actively consider points of comparison, which can lead to interesting and varying effects. The fact that simile is more concerned with the terms of comparison means that, for example, more intricate analogies can suit the simile form better, whilst those which intend to convey vehemence or emotive force can be more effective as metaphors. (O'Donoghue129)

In our passage, Fitzgerald introduces a metaphor, "towards the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling." The problem facing the translator here is twofold. The first is the immediate and more general choice between maintaining metaphor with its elliptical characteristic, on the one hand, and, on the other, making the meaning more explicit by opting for a simile which, as O'Donoghue suggests, can shed light on 'more intricate analogies.' To avoid unusual collocation or opaque language, there is a tendency among translators to remove any 'strange' lexical combinations or make explicit what was implicit in the original, sometimes appearing to miss the point that the originality or opaqueness were conscious choices by the author for the readers of the source text. These normalizing choices by translators can also be compounded by the fear that readers (or editors) may blame the 'odd' language on them rather than attribute the non-standard forms to the original. But linguistic originality is very much a feature of Fitzgerald's writing, as Ruth Prigozy reminds us in her introduction to one edition of the novel:

> […] Fitzgerald's use of colour is often jarring when linked with the objects described. [There are] other small elements of style including recurring ambivalent descriptive phrases and oxymorons which suggest the ambiguities at the heart of the novel, like Jordan Baker's 'charming, discontented face'. Another repeated pattern is the linking of nouns with unusual adjectives, like 'triumphant hat-boxes', and the frequent incongruity of subject and verb, like the wreck of the car which 'crouched' in Wilson's garage. (xxxi)

The second problem facing the translator here is more specifically culture-bound but will equally affect the choice between simile and metaphor: the ceiling is described as a "frosted wedding-cake," a reference to cakes with elaborately iced decorations, a cultural image familiar to American readers who will therefore understand the metaphor and automatically picture the ornate, white stucco relief patterns associated with grandiose 'aristocratic' homes decorated in the Baroque style. This association is not so immediate for an Italian reader especially one from the first decades following the publishing of Fitzgerald's novel. Wedding ceremonies in Italy did not usually include such decorated cakes and the target audience would therefore not share the same world knowledge as the readers of the original text. More recent readers in Italy would be more likely to understand the reference having now seen possibly hundreds of Hollywood films with such cakes and, in some cases, having witnessed their inclusion at wedding receptions in Italy.

In the light of all this, it is interesting to notice how the various translators deal with the metaphor. Side-stepping what appears to be some degree of confusion between the different meanings of 'frosted' ('icy/cold' as opposed to 'iced/decorated') in one or two of the translations, almost half (six out of thirteen) have chosen to substitute the metaphor with a simile, leading the reader of these translations a little more by the hand, as it were, than Fitzgerald did with his original readership. The translations are numbered in chronological order, as before, and appear with an English gloss of the translation below in square brackets.

T1. verso il soffitto, torta di nozze impolverata di zucchero ghiacciato

[towards the ceiling, a wedding cake dusted with iced/frozen sugar]
    (metaphor)

T2. verso il soffitto ornato come una torta nuziale

[towards the ceiling decorated like a wedding cake] (simile)

T3. verso la nuziale torta gelata del soffitto

[towards the frozen wedding cake of the ceiling] (metaphor)

T4. verso la torta nuziale glassata del soffitto

[towards the iced wedding cake of the ceiling] (metaphor)

T5. in direzione della smerigliata torta nuziale del soffitto

[in the direction of the shimmering wedding cake of the ceiling]
    (metaphor)

T6. verso gli ornamenti del soffitto, simili a una torta di nozze

[towards the decorations of the ceiling, similar to a wedding cake]
    (simile)

T7. verso la torta nuziale glassata del soffitto

[towards the iced wedding cake of the ceiling] (metaphor)

T8. verso il soffitto simile a una torta nuziale glassata

[towards the ceiling (which was) like an iced wedding cake](simile)

T9. verso il soffitto simile a una torta di nozze glassata

[towards the ceiling (which was) like an iced wedding cake](simile)

T10. verso quella torta nuziale glassata ch'era il soffitto

[towards that iced wedding cake that was the ceiling] (metaphor)

T11. verso il soffitto ornato come una torta nuziale

[towards the ceiling decorated like a wedding cake] (simile)

T12. verso il soffitto adorno come una torta nuziale

[towards the ceiling decorated like a wedding cake] (simile)

T13. verso la torta nuziale del soffitto

[towards the wedding cake of the ceiling] (metaphor)

Once again, we should stress the cumulative effect of such textual intervention when extended to other linguistic features, rhetorical devices and cultural references, especially in the case of a novel such as *The Great Gatsby* that speaks to the contemporary reader across both time and geographical locale.

Conclusion

The concept of 'voice' is one very close to Fitzgerald's heart and it cannot be a coincidence (and, even less likely, a lack of vocabulary) that makes the author repeat that very word fifty-eight times – alongside eleven occurrences of 'voices' – in *The Great Gatsby*. And when reading the translations of his work, we might argue, it is precisely Fitzgerald's voice that we should be able to hear. Through a close reading of the text we can see how the author creates a musicality, an underlying tune, the principal melody, that is then picked up in the different translations. Here we find a rich texture of sounds and echoes, intertextual motifs that the reader can delight in. None of these translations can exist without Fitzgerald's original work but none is identical to the source text: it is the very nature of translation that makes each new version into a variation on the splendid original theme.

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