

## The Poetics of Silence in the Translation of Samuel Beckett's "Comment dire" / "What Is The Word" into Spanish

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### Abstract

"L'écriture m'a conduit au silence," admitted Samuel Beckett to Charles Juliet in *Rencontres avec Samuel Beckett* (21). 'Comment dire,' his last written poem, was first published in 1989 and summarises a lifetime exercise of self-expression beyond the limits of language and time. Indeed, it was originally written in French only a year before Beckett died, devoid of a great deal of his communicative abilities. Thus, this poem represents a sort of literary testament (Carriedo 50) resonant of both his literary career and personal life. In fact, its misleading austerity reveals a challenging area of work for the translator to draw on the original text to create his/her own poetic interpretation. In Spanish-speaking countries, Beckett's poetry has not been given as much prominence as his other works. However, there is evidence of three translations of 'Comment dire,' which thereafter demonstrates a surprising interest in Beckett's late poetic production: Laura Cerrato's 'Cómo decir' (1990), Loreto Casado's version within *Quiebro y Poemas* (1998), and Jenaro Talens' own interpretation in *Obra poética completa* (2000). The main objective of this paper is to comment on the essential convergences and disparities found in these translations and therefore to identify mutual sources of interest in Beckett's original poem. I will also observe the predominant strategies they have chosen in translating 'Comment dire' on the basis of two fundamental parameters: creative freedom and respect for Beckettian standards founded on the poetics of silence.

**Keywords:** Samuel Beckett, *Comment dire*, poetic language, Spanish translations, silence.

## La poética del silencio en la traducción de “Comment dire” / “What Is The Word” de Samuel Beckett al español

### Resumen

“L’écriture m’a conduit au silence” (“la escritura me ha conducido al silencio”), admitía Samuel Beckett a Charles Juliet en *Rencontres avec Samuel Beckett* (21). ‘Comment dire,’ su último poema, fue publicado por primera vez en 1989 y resume un ejercicio vital de auto-expresión más allá de los límites del lenguaje y del tiempo. Ciertamente, fue escrito originalmente en francés tan solo un año antes de que Beckett falleciera, desprovisto de gran parte de sus habilidades comunicativas. Por lo tanto, este poema representa una suerte de testamento literario (Carriedo 50) que atestigüa tanto su carrera literaria como su vida personal. De hecho, su confusa austeridad revela un desafío para el traductor, que deberá basarse en el texto original para recrear su propia interpretación poética. En los países de habla inglesa, la poesía de Beckett no ha ocupado un lugar tan preeminente como el resto de su obra. Sin embargo, hay evidencia de tres traducciones de ‘Comment dire,’ lo que al mismo tiempo demuestra un sorprendente interés en las últimas producciones poéticas de Beckett: ‘Cómo decir,’ de Laura Cerrato (1990), la versión de Loreto Casado, ‘Queibros y Poemas’ (1998) y la interpretación de Jenaro Talens en *Obra poética completa* (2000). El objetivo principal de este artículo es comentar las principales convergencias y disparidades encontradas en estas traducciones y, a continuación, identificar fuentes comunes de interés entre los traductores con respecto al poema original de Beckett. Al mismo tiempo, observaré los procedimientos fundamentales que han elegido a la hora de traducir ‘Comment dire’ basándome en dos

parámetros: la libertad creadora y el respeto a los estándares beckettianos cimentados sobre la poética del silencio.

**Palabras clave:** Samuel Beckett, *Comment dire*, lenguaje poético, traducciones al español, silencio.

Le silence, l'espace affreux et captivant...  
Charles Baudelaire, "Le Gouffre"

## 1. Introduction: the Poem and its Context

### 1.1 The Poem

"Comment dire" ("What is the Word") is Samuel Beckett's last original poem. The difficult times that Beckett was personally undergoing when he wrote this poem are crucial to understand its peculiar structure and philosophical depth. Indeed, it was originally written in 1988, only a year before Beckett died. During the last months of his life, Beckett had already suffered an aphasia attack and had been admitted to a medical retirement home, devoid of a great deal of his communicative abilities and trying to regain speech after the stroke. As his official biographer James Knowlson relates, the poem "was written in French in the hospital after regaining full consciousness, then finished in the home. The spidery handwriting is very moving, precisely because Beckett is rediscovering words again" (615). Certainly, French was the language Beckett considered most appropriate to express himself at the time. One of the indicators is precisely the choice of popular verse instead of the more neutral and erudite methods of his early poetry written in English (Cerrato, *Génesis de la Poética* 55),<sup>2</sup> essentially characterised by the abundance of rhetoric formulations and archaic figures. Gradually, Beckett was able to develop a writing founded on the absence of words in an adopted language, French, which provided him with a unique transparency and the ignorance required to face the darkest places of his mind (Díaz, n.p.), and this is something he managed to do especially in his last poem.

“Comment dire” summarises a lifetime exercise of self-expression beyond the limits of language and time. According to Lawlor and Pilling’s edited version of Beckett’s *Collected Poems* (474) the French original holograph, dated 29.10.88, was published in a limited edition facsimile by *Minuit* in 1989. There is evidence from Cohn’s own research (383) that Beckett’s translation into English of “What is the Word” was posthumously published in *The Irish Times* (25-27.12.1989) and in *The Sunday Correspondent* (31.12.1989), in *The Beckett Circle* (Spring, 1990) and also in *As the Story Was Told* (New York: Calder, 1990). Considering these facts, it could be argued that “Comment dire” represents a sort of literary testament that synthesises Beckett’s whole literary career (Carriedo 50). As a matter of fact, even its title recalls one of the greatest dilemmas traditionally existing in the Beckettian process of artistic creation: the impossibility of expression beyond the boundaries of ignorance and uncertainty. Interestingly, one of the major issues in “Comment dire” is its misleading austerity, which eventually reveals a complex exercise of self-expression and intimacy focused on transcending the limits of language and unveiling an ultimate hidden meaning. For this reason, this poem constitutes a challenging task for the translator to draw on the original text to create his/her own literary translation, based on the linguistic apprehension of the poet’s veiled purpose.

## 1.2 “Comment dire” Translated into Spanish

In Spain, Beckett’s poetry has not been given as much prominence as his narrative and dramatic works. His presence in Spanish-speaking countries is partial and the history of publications is fairly irregular. However, there is evidence of three translations into Spanish”, revealing a surprising interest in Beckett’s late poetic production. These translations were accomplished by Laura Cerrato, who published her version in the journal *Común Presencia* (1990); Loreto Casado, who included her translation in the collection *Quiebro y Poemas* (1998); and Jenaro Talens’ rendering in the volume *Obra poética completa* (2000). Apart from the methodological features that build upon different interpretations proposed by these academics, each of these versions shares the common title “Cómo decir.”

My main objective is to comment on the convergences and disparities found in these translations with the purpose of

identifying mutual sources of interest for these authors in Samuel Beckett's original poem. I will specifically analyse how Beckett's poetry has been received by the three authors who translated the original French version into Spanish by analysing the predominant strategies they have chosen. My intention is to closely examine their lexical variations on the basis of Beckett's late poetry, denuded of attributes and rhetorical devices. Most importantly, I will analyse whether they successfully convey the major features of the poetics of silence, "where statements are reduced to a minimum, and fragmentation and disaggregation increasingly accentuate until the demarcation of the poetic voice results almost imperceptible" (Margarit 21). Although I will also consider some technical aspects concerning methodological and linguistic features in the three versions, my attention will be mostly centred on the adherence or non-adherence to Beckett's poetics of silence, taking two specific parameters as a reference: creative freedom or literalness on the part of the translators and respect for Beckettian standards in relation to rhythm and musicality.

### 1.3. "Comment dire" and the Poetics of Silence

Beckett is the author of many narrative works where speech is eventually reduced to babbling and the disruption of syntax. His writing is a double testimony of the unstoppable retraction of language and his eternal faith in using his words to transcend the limits of his communicative abilities. The poet's voice is enshrined within this unstable balance between the absence and the presence of language and eventually resists the onslaught of all instrumental and pragmatic discourses. Before analysing the Spanish translations of the poem, its main features and the methodology that I followed, it is pertinent to comment on several facts concerning its primary characteristics, its structure and, more specifically, the complexity of the aforementioned poetics of silence: how it is defined, what importance it held throughout Beckett's poetic development, and how it is ultimately reflected in "Comment dire."

First of all, the poem consists of fifty-two lines<sup>3</sup> and a coda that repeats the title, thus being far from an orthodox arrangement if the reader adjusts to the conventions of the literary canon. In fact, it is

not divided into stanzas and each line has only between one and four words with only ending dashes or ‘traits de disunion,’<sup>4</sup> as Beckett used to call them (*Collected Poems* 474) rather than the standard French “traits d’union.” Moreover, the poem includes no punctuation other than the aforementioned dashes.

At Reading University Library, holographs and typescripts of “Comment dire” are described in *Beckett at Reading: Catalogue of the Beckett Manuscript Collection at the University of Reading*: “Thus there are, in all, seven drafts of the poem from its inception to its completion, placed chronologically by Beckett in this exercise book” (11). The first phrase of the first draft of “Comment dire” is “mal dire” (‘to say badly’) and, as Cohn argues, “the subsequent broken phrases seem to echo Beckett’s actual aphasia — curt, abrupt and repetitive” (382). Cohn paraphrases some of the repetitions of “comment dire” as they seem to interject a succession of different thoughts:

(1) Folly of what is the word (2) in view of seeing what is given, what is the word (3) in view of seeing what is given here, what is the word (4) see fading to seem to need to glimpse, what is the word (5) and where, what is the word (8) there ‘afaint afar away over there’, what is the word in view of all this folly of wishing to believe having glimpsed what far away what, what is the word (8) what is the word. (383)

The outline suggested by Cohn may well summarise Beckett’s determination, first and foremost, to express his own search for words and, secondly, to conclude his literary career by pondering on the limits of language. Additionally, “in this last text Beckett presents the product as a production process: an attempt to write a single sentence” (Van Hulle 99). His hesitant search for what needs to be said is emphasised by a vacillating rhythm back and forth which could represent the individual’s uncertainty towards the existence of things, their equivalence with words and his inability to match both and eventually elaborate a cohesive discourse. With respect to the metrics of the poem, Marjorie Perloff alludes to the importance of prosody and its essentially visual function in “Comment dire”:

The 'look' of the poem is thus ambivalent, and it is this ambivalence that characterizes Beckett's view of lyric throughout his career. Poetry, especially poetry as dense, dramatic, rhetorical, and rhythmically compelling as Yeats's later lyric was a touchstone, a source of pleasure (...). But Beckett's own 'folly for to need to seem to glimpse what where' demanded a less bravura, indeed a more interrogative mode. (226)

Indeed, as Shane Weller confirms, the metrics in "Comment dire" does not adjust to the parameters of the traditional literary canon since the poem "constantly resists identification and nominalization" (165) and gradually intercalates the words "glimpse," "seem," "what," "where," "over," "afar," "away," "afaint," "permutating the same word set" (Perloff 226). In a way, it could be said that this is the last poetic utterance of a dying human, so it could be argued that it cannot be ascribed to any canonical metrical scheme. At least, no critics or academics have, to date, ever attempted to discern a conventional rhythmical pattern for the piece in an edited volume or specialised publication. In fact, as Weller comments, this poem could be "too easily mistaken for something else, for which the accepted term would be prose" (167), but within which category Beckett once included the "various paradigms of prosody" based on a certain absence of perception of "the new thing that has happened, or the old thing that has happened again" (Qtd. from *Disjecta* 70; originally written by Beckett in "Recent Irish Poetry," in 1934).

Additionally, Carriedo provides a wider definition of the poem in connection with the difficult circumstances in which it was written:

"Comment dire" is presented as a serial poem, babbling and unfinished. It has a recurring cadence which does not exclude a progression based on minimal variations and exiguous brushstrokes, in a step back-step forward dynamic which never stalls (...) thus reflecting two aspects around which most part of the Beckettian production orbits: what and how to see, and what and how to say (...). (50)

Interestingly, Beckett wrote ‘Keep! for end’<sup>5</sup> when he signed the poem (*Collected Poems* 474) in order to make sure that this was his final creation, hence culminating a lifelong writing project now reduced to the minimal expression of words. As early as 1937 Beckett sent a letter, dated 9 July, to his German friend Axel Kaun, in which he had originally confessed his need to shake and violate the language to the extreme in order to obtain the vision of his innermost thoughts, transcending the formalisms of English and denuding the words of rhetorical artifice:

It is indeed getting more and more difficult, even pointless, for me to write in formal English. And more and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. Grammar and style! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask. It is to be hoped the time will come, thank God, in some circles it already has, when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused. (518)

Beckett’s ultimate objective, then, was to reach a scenario beyond words and grasp the authentic expression within the author’s own poetic willingness to express himself, an objective made evident in all his literary production and eventually confirmed fifty years later in “Comment dire.” Not surprisingly, during the 1970s, he had admitted that “l’écriture m’a conduit au silence” (‘writing has driven me to silence’) (Juliet 21). In Van Hulle’s words, this poem “is a sort of testament presenting the creative process as an integral part of Beckett’s works, and his entire *oeuvre* as an unfinished ‘work in process’” (104). At this last stage of his life, he was possibly more aware than ever of the significance of minimalism and silence in all his literary production. It was specifically in the poetic genre where he most frequently made use of pauses, suspensions and intervals. Although Beckett himself never defined silence (de la Motte 205), it turned into a recurrent motif in his poetic production which would appear more frequently in his mature period, especially in one of the *mirlitonades*: “silence tel que ce qui fut/avant jamais ne sera plus”

(Beckett, *Collected Poems* 211). Certainly, as de la Motte explains, in this poem Beckett confronts two opposing silences that are mutually exclusive: a first, absolute silence existing before the creation, and a consecutive silence appearing after the existence of words, resigned and sterile, in pursuit of destruction (205).

Laura Cerrato conducted a detailed study on the process of composition of “Comment dire” by a genetic analysis of the original manuscripts at the University of Reading.<sup>6</sup> Her analysis of the folder MS 3316, dated 29.10.88, containing the original manuscript of “Comment dire” eventually revealed significant differences with respect to *mirlitonrades*.<sup>7</sup> While Beckett followed a process of depuration and decomposition when he wrote the *mirlitonrades*, in “Comment dire” “he tries to reach a certain degree of articulation where both language and the physical ability to write are missing” (Cerrato, *Génesis de la poética* 144). Similarly, Carriedo argues that the idea is to transcend the limits of language and to unveil what is hidden behind, while also exploring its possibilities by assuming the risk of facing emptiness once the meaning is neutralised. From this moment on, the poem can eventually be written (54). Both Cerrato and Carriedo agree that Beckett undertakes the adventure of significance by depriving the language of all rhetorical resources, elaborating an expressive system very similar to the original babbling. In other words, it is a literature “devoid of words” (Cerrato 55), lacking rhetoric and wordiness.

Likewise, Margarit claims that “Comment dire” condenses Beckett’s ideas and represents a sort of culmination of his *Ars poetica*. From this inverse path, it could be possible to reformulate the conception of all his poetry. This poem paradoxically expounds a poetic programme in the aftermath of Beckett’s literary production. The reader’s objective, then, would be to learn to read a fading literature which gradually turns into silence, neutral and retreating into itself. Its main achievement is the apprehension of a deeply fragmentary voice whose limits will be its own contraction (29). In other words, the poet, unable to express himself because he is neurologically limited, wonders about the recovery of his ability to talk and, meanwhile, elaborates a metatextual commentary within the poem, re-semanticising his whole poetic production (200).

Therefore, it could be claimed that “Comment dire” represents the reenactment of each individual’s linguistic ability and, at the same time, becomes an ultimate effort to embrace the fluctuating words before they are reduced to nothing(ness). The poetics of silence builds upon a naked poetry where minimalism is driven to the extreme, thus creating an archetypical demonstration of isolated words striving to articulate a whole linguistic formulation. As Kusters puts it: “it is the essence of paradox as well as the essence of Beckett’s endogenous poetry: a seeming contradiction, words seemingly unsaying each other, speaking against each other (*contre-dire*), speaking not only of the unspeakable but speaking, generating the unspeakable itself” (102). The poem, in short, is an everlasting refinement of self-expression where Beckett goes beyond the limits of language. Silence perpetually struggles with the author’s necessity to speak, although time and decay have eroded his abilities to communicate. While an unstoppable flood of words used to fill the pages of his novels, the poet now struggles for the continuity of his speech in a battle between his compulsion to say and the devastating advance of silence, which breaks through nothingness like the floating speaking voice in *Not I*; maybe soothed and more hesitant this time, but equally mesmerising and reckless. In the 1953 novel *The Unnamable*, the omniscient voice rebelled against the stiffness of silence: “I feel nothing, know nothing, and as far as thinking is concerned I do just enough to preserve me from going silent” (300) and “No, I am speechless. What would happen to me then? Worse than what is happening?” (301). All in all, the poetics of silence does not defend silence. Actually, it vindicates the poet’s last utterances and a language surfacing from emptiness which outlines a poetic experience on the limits of the ‘I’, transcribing an extreme tension and a radical lucidity. It is poetry located beyond the limits of modernity, in a pure fundamental background where an unrestrained speech strives to survive. Mostly, it is an ascesis of language, a reduction of shapes, phonemes and sounds to their minimum form of expression. In the same place where silence once empowered its own solemnity, an uncontrollable speech now endures its never-ending performance.

In the following section, a comparative analysis of the lexical choices will be decisive in detecting mutual sources of interest for the

translators of “Comment dire” and will ultimately lead to decide on their adherence or deviation with regard to the poetics of silence. Other aspects such as the presence of pauses, the use of indeterminate nouns and a progressive rhythmical cadence, will also be a matter of concern in order to determine whether the translations adjust to the parameters of literalness and creativity, and the Beckettian standards as regards rhythm and musicality.

## 2. The Translation of “Comment Dire” into Spanish

### 2.1 Samuel Beckett’s poetry in Spanish

In the Spanish-speaking world, Beckett’s poetry has customarily remained unknown outside academic circles. Both in Spain and Latin America his poetic production has been overshadowed by other works. In this respect, Casado affirms that Beckett’s works have been widely read, but have been barely listened to (121). Actually, it seems that the musicality of his work has not been a matter of interest for many Spanish translators. In fact, his presence in Spanish culture is partial and the history of publications is quite irregular. Certain aspects concerning the country’s political and cultural life have negatively contributed to the diffusion and permanence of Beckett in Spain since his name was known in literary circles (Fernández-Quesada, “Pasado y presente” 2008). Along with his most recognised novels and short stories, the publication of the first translations of Beckett’s works was crucial in Spain, limited during the 1950s to drama and within the scope of some specialised journals (Fernández-Quesada, “Introducción” 27). At the same time, we cannot ignore the endeavours of countries such as Argentina and Mexico, where the first Spanish translations of Beckett’s works were also published. In fact, the first Spanish translation of *Waiting for Godot* was published by Pablo Palant in Argentina in 1954. Despite the attention paid to the translation of Beckett’s plays and narrative works, and the publication of some poems translated by Jenaro Talens during the 1960s and 1970s, Beckett’s poetry would not begin to receive a certain response in Spain until the 1990s. The translations published from the 1990s onwards demonstrate an increasing interest in the poetry of the Irish

author, therefore finding their own space in the Spanish cultural realm. *Barcarola* journal (Albacete, Spain) devoted a monograph to him and a selection of his poems, some of them unpublished in Castilian until 1990. The 1990s had just started and were already bringing new perspectives for the translation of Beckett's poetry to the Hispanic world. In 1990, Cerrato published her translation of "Comment dire" in Colombia and Margarit's translation of *mirlitonnades* was published in 1992 in *Beckettiana* journal, in Argentina. In Spain, the *mirlitonnades* were translated by Tomás Salvador González in the journal *El signo del gorrión* (no. 3, 1993), and Loreto Casado published the volume *Quiébro y poemas* (1998), which contains the translation of both the *mirlitonnades* and the *poèmes* written in French (1937-1976) as well as a critical essay by the translator. In 2000, Jenaro Talens published *Obra poética completa*, a compilation of Beckett's poems in English and French translated into Spanish with the translator's commentary. Furthermore, there is a short collection of poems entitled "Muestrario poético de Samuel Beckett," translated by José Luis Reina Palazón for *Barcarola* journal in 2014.

As Gallego Roca notes, poetry translated into Spanish has a strong theoretical nature nowadays because it has inherited a rich historical legacy founded on the exploration of new linguistic parameters. From the 1980s and 1990s onwards, the catalogues of well-known publishing houses based in Spain such as *Hiperion*, *Visor*, *Pre-Textos*, *La Veleta*, *Renacimientos* and *DVD* have become the main reference sources when elaborating a comprehensive analysis of poetry translated into Spanish during the last decades of the twentieth century until today. Nowadays, the contribution of poetry translated into Spanish to the advancement in the field of poetic language history is becoming decisive (24). Gallego Roca claims that the translation of poetry into Spanish benefits from the relevance of the history of literary translation and, at the same time, the poet who writes in Spanish is looking for suitable models to face the paradigm of nonsense within his own existence. This is performed through the exploration of the syntactical possibilities of subjectivity (39). Alternatively, poetry written in Spanish has been transcending its own linguistic and methodological limits in the task of translation during recent years. Alluding to Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* (1923), Gallego

Roca reaffirms the idea that the translator's main task would signify an expansion of the linguistic limits of the source language (40), essential when unravelling the obscure simplicity in the verses of authors who served as inspiration to Beckett and who have also been translated into Spanish, such as Baudelaire and Bukowski.

The fact that Beckett's poetry has been translated into Spanish should not be considered a superfluous matter, but instead a fact which reveals a growing interest in the author, not only as a novelist and a playwright, but also as a poet. Thus, the promotion of Beckett studies in Spain has experienced a renewed surge of interest and, at the same time, it signifies a creative exercise in the transference of the author's "writing of silence" from its original French to the complexity of the Spanish language. Indeed, Newmark notes that "creativity at its most intense is in translating poetry, where there are so many important additional factors: words as images, metre, rhythm, sounds" (*About Translation* 9). Having already stressed the poetic patterns of "Comment dire", further discussion follows regarding the analysis of how these have been perceived and transferred by Cerrato, Casado and Talens.

## 2.2 The Translators

In his edited anthology *The Poet Itself* (1960), the American poet Stanley Burnshaw declared that "since poetry cannot be poetically translated, the most satisfactory procedure is to provide the non-linguistic reader with a lexical and contextual commentary" (qtd. in Weissbort 12). This is precisely how Cerrato, Casado and Talens approached their respective translations of "Comment dire," preceded by a foreword where they dissert on Beckett's poetic development. Although none of these preliminary essays provides much information about the methodological procedures they followed in translation, there is enough theoretical content on how they apprehended Beckett's poetry, which may tentatively reveal their approach to his last poem.

Laura Cerrato was the first to translate the poem for *Común Presencia Journal*, in 1990. She is a retired English Philology lecturer at the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* at University of Buenos Aires. She

was in charge of the Samuel Beckett Seminar and edited the *Beckettiana* journal.<sup>8</sup> In her preliminary essay, entitled “Samuel Beckett: una poética del balbuceo y de los límites” (‘Samuel Beckett: A Poetics of Babbling and Limits’), she emphasises the similarities between the words in the poem and a person’s last utterances, thus reflecting Beckett’s aforementioned writing project based on transcending the limits of language.

Loreto Casado also comes from the academic world. A retired professor, she holds a PhD in French Philology, and has translated the works of Eric Satie, Louis Aragon, Sami Nair and Eric Rohmer, among others. Aware of the scarce fame Beckett’s poetry has traditionally had in Spain, she has unravelled the obscure simplicity of his verses in an understandable manner for the Spanish reader. Casado has stated that in her own process of translation she basically focused on the rhyme of the poem, which is mostly retained in her version. The edition in *Quiébro y poemas* ends with an epilogue entitled “¿Cómo decir? Decir mal. Seguir diciendo” (‘How to say? To say it badly. Keep saying’). This essay suggests that she has reached the same conclusions as Carriedo, Van Hulle and Margarit insofar as this poem represents and summarises Beckett’s ultimate writing project: “all his literary work is the portrait of a physical and spiritual reduction of himself towards the essential, almost vanishing” (126), eventually reflecting how tired he was of thinking about his own reflections and about language.

For his part, Jenaro Talens is also a well-known poet, essayist and translator. He has worked widely on the translation of various prominent authors, including William Shakespeare, Herman Hesse, T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney. He was also professor of Hispanic Literature, Comparative Literature and European Studies at the University of Geneva. His version of “Comment dire” belongs to the volume *Obra poética completa*, published in 2000. In a preface entitled “Cómo decir. La poesía de Samuel Beckett” (‘How to say. Samuel Beckett’s poetry’), Talens starts his dissertation by alluding to the homonymous poem, mentioning that Beckett employed a circular poetic trajectory with “Comment dire” by a sort of return, as if lured to his Joycean origins, “like a final salute to a largely neglected father before the definitive farewell” (33). In general terms, the three scholars are actually accomplished translators, aware of Beckett’s

literary development and possessed of the necessary skills to translate this poem with all the lexical and semantic formulations it conveys.

### **2.3 Comparative Analysis of the Three Spanish Versions of “Comment dire”**

The poem starts with the word “folie” (‘folly,’ ‘madness’), literally translated as ‘locura’ by Cerrato, Casado and Talens. Newmark argues that “the translation of poetry is the field where most emphasis is normally put on the creation of a new independent poem, and where literal translation is usually condemned” (*Textbook of Translation* 70). However, literalness is a common phenomenon generally existing in these versions, maybe due to the huge similarity between the source language (henceforth SL), French, and the target language (henceforth TL), Spanish, for they are Romance languages with similar lexicon and syntax. Also, it must be considered that the poem is bound to literalness in itself, since its structure and lexicon are very simple and it lacks significant rhetorical devices. Furthermore, as Weissbort puts it, “French is a language with a more even distribution of stresses or word-accent than English, which tends to have stronger stresses and is much more monosyllabic” (81).

Incidentally, Casado did not know the former translation by Cerrato, published eight years before. However, both versions are very similar, since their lexical choices are analogous and they maintain the characteristic pauses, silences and repetitions found in the source text (henceforth ST). Far from deleting these rhetorical devices, both remain faithful to them and simply acknowledge their existence. Ideally, certain sounds and combinations of sounds can evoke specific representations of metaphysical concepts in the reader’s mind. The translators, aware of the existence of these mental images, skilfully maintain the original pattern of the poem when adapting its verses to the TL. In fact, when comparing some fragments of the original with these translations, it is easy to detect an identical poetic arrangement. Both texts, Cerrato’s and Casado’s, have the same number of lines (fifty-two) and even the same number of words in each line (between one and seven). The first ten lines of the poem might well serve as an adequate sample of the concordance of these translations with respect to the ST:

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folie –	locura –	locura –
folie que de –	locura de –	locura que –
que de –	de –	que –
comment dire –	cómo decir –	cómo decir –
folie que de ce –	locura de este –	locura que se lo –
depuis –	desde –	desde –
folie depuis ce –	locura desde este –	locura desde lo –
donné –	dado –	dado –
folie donné ce que de –	locura dado lo que de –	locura dado lo que de –
vu – (Beckett, <i>Collected Poems</i> 226)	visto – (Cerrato 11)	visto – (Casado 117)

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Overall, the lines of the poem are almost identical and the linguistic patterns are equivalent. However, there are sixteen specific lines where different lexical choices are encountered, thus undergoing shifts or transpositions (Vinay and Darbelnet) “involving a change in the grammar from SL to TL” (Newmark, *Textbook of Translation* 85).<sup>9</sup> For instance, line two (“folie que de”) is translated as ‘locura de’ by Cerrato and Talens. This is a clause composed by a noun (‘locura’) and a preposition implying the alleged origin of this folly (‘de’). Conversely, Casado advocates for ‘locura que.’ formed by a noun (‘locura’) and a relative pronoun (‘que’) starting a subordinate clause which is undetermined, since a dash finishes the line where a noun should be placed to complete the sentence and give it a whole meaning; *e.g.*, “locura que [inquieta]” or “locura que [amenaza]”. If we adjust to the lexical and semantic parameters of the ST, Beckett leaves most of the sentences incomplete. In this sense, they all faithfully follow the ST. However, in order to compare the versions here as allegedly linked to the Beckettian poetics of silence, it shall be considered that “the soul of poetry lies in the use of language in a figurative, metaphorical mode of expression that transcends traditional semantic limitations of language” (Landers 97). For this reason, I find it particularly interesting to comment on the semantic implications of their lexical choice with regard to the syntactic formulas they have proposed, for there are five occurrences of this phenomenon in both translations:

Beckett, ST (1989)	Cerrato (1990) and Talens (2000)	Casado (1998)
(2) folie que de	locura <b>de</b> -	locura <b>que</b> -
(3) que de -	<b>de</b> -	<b>que</b> -
(5) folie que de ce-	locura <b>de</b> este -	locura <b>que</b> se lo -
(20) folie vu tout ce ceci-ci que de -	locura visto todo este esto (de) <sup>10</sup> aquí <b>de</b> -	locura visto todo este esto aquí <b>que</b> -
(21) que de -	<b>de</b> -	<b>que</b> -

Actually, observing Beckett’s own translation of the ST into English might clarify whether these could actually be prepositional or adjectival prepositional noun phrases:

Beckett, ST (1989)	English translation (1989)
(2) folie que de -	folly <b>for</b> to -
(3) que de -	<b>for</b> to -
(20) folie vu tout ce ceci-ci que de -	folly seeing all this this here -
(21) que de -	<b>for</b> to -

As can be observed, his choice in the English translation is ‘for’ instead of ‘from’, as might be deduced from Cerrato’s version (‘locura de,’ ‘locura de este’). According to *Collins English-Spanish Dictionary*, ‘for’ is a preposition meaning “intended to reach” or “directed or belonging to.” Therefore, both Cerrato’s and Talens’ version on the one side, and Casado’s interpretation on the other, might be deemed appropriate on this occasion from a semantic point of view: the two first propose a nominal clause with an embedded prepositional phrase (‘locura de amar,’ ‘locura de este’) and the second suggests a subordinate clause which complements the noun (‘locura que,’ ‘locura que se lo’). Nevertheless, the strong position of the relative pronoun in Casado reinforces the idea of incompleteness and impotence on the speaker’s part.

Additionally, lexical omission is encountered. In lines 27 and 31, Cerrato and Talens suggested ‘locura de querer creer entrever qué’ and ‘de querer creer entrever qué dónde,’ respectively. By contrast, Casado omits the preposition ‘de’ and suggests a succession of

infinitives: ‘locura querer creer entrever qué’ (line 27) and ‘querer creer entrever qué dónde’ (line 31). This succession of verbs in the infinitive diverts from the original syntactical arrangement of the ST, but is in close connection with one of the parameters Casado emphasized most when translating this poem, that is, rhythm, as she herself recently admitted in private correspondence.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, in three lines, Talens’ version differs from Cerrato’s and Casado’s versions. These may be considered as minor differences, but they are actually relevant considering the lexical simplicity of the poem. The divergences are found in lines 5, 43 and 49: “locura de lo,” “todo esto esto de aquí” and “locura de querer creer entrever en ello qué,” respectively. The addition of “en ello qué” on the part of the translator in line 49 is the only feature that makes this version freer and autonomous, since it does not allude to a literal translation from the original line (“folie que d’y vouloir croire entrevoir quoi”). However, it may be difficult for the reader drawing on an interpretation of this original line to come up with a translation into Spanish which suggests ‘en ello qué’ instead of simply ‘qué,’ as in Cerrato’s and Casado’s renditions. If we adjust to the third parameter observed in this analysis —authorial distance from the reader— it could be affirmed that Talens, while making an effort to bring the poem closer to the Spanish reader, eventually distances it from the conciseness and austerity which characterise Beckett’s poetic style. In this sense, it could be suggested that Cerrato’s and Casado’s versions adhere more to Beckettian standards, especially the latter, who seems to be more mindful of the harmonious concatenation of phonemes and syntactic constructions.

### 3. Conclusions

Translating “Comment dire” is a challenging experience due to the technical procedures, epistemological development and philosophical symbolism it conveys. In particular, a faithful translation into Spanish from the Beckettian French requires accuracy due to the possible ambiguities that might arise in the TL. Technical aspects concerning translation procedures, such as syntactical transposition and lexical addition and omission, could lead to ambiguity regarding

each translator's interpretation of specific lines. However, the pauses and silences are respected and the unrhymed verse is maintained, therefore remaining faithful to the drained and aching cadence of the original poem. In this turmoil of unchained words, Cerrato, Casado and Talens render an accurate representation of Beckett's exhaustion nearing the end of his life not only with their adaptations of the poem but also with their analyses and dissertations on the genesis of Beckett's willingness to negate silence in his literature. In general terms, the reader, even if unfamiliar with Spanish, can easily observe that the rhythm in all translations is congruent in their essential musicality and also in their original lexical simplicity, which conveys the idea of a kind of naked poetry devoid of unnecessary artifice. The syntactical arrangement, the lexical choices and the rhythmical patterns are respected, although each translator adapts the original poem to the idiomatic features of their TL. On the whole, the comparative analysis of these versions satisfactorily confirms that they should be considered appropriate adaptations of "Comment dire," since they all adjust to technical and literary parameters, and, most importantly, pay tribute to the poetics of silence.

Surprisingly, Cerrato's translation was unknown to Casado, even in the revision of the translation she recently completed in 2019. Despite this, Casado's version (only eight years posterior to Cerrato's) is very similar, revealing that the ST in French allows for an almost literal translation into Spanish, while considering the phonological and rhythmical patterns of the poem and the lexical repetitions encountered in the comparative analysis. In the end, these are the elements a poem builds upon to bring full shape to the poetics of silence in the manner of Beckett. This is something that Loreto Casado successfully attempted. Her translation actually succeeds in keeping the reductionist essence of the poem. Although it should be considered that minor syntactical and lexical variations have been encountered, all versions are almost identical, although several paradigms concerning the lexical and methodological aspects characteristic of each version are worth mentioning. First, Cerrato's version contains some words which are notably used in the Spanish spoken in South America or Spanish turns of phrase such as "allá." These peculiar items, which might call the attention of the reader at a glance, convey a challenge for a literature historian, for he or she

would be expected “to observe the poetic translation into Spanish as a whole where it is illegitimate to make distinctions between peninsular and Latin-American renderings of the same poem” (Gallego Roca 29).

On the other hand, Casado seems to be the translator who is most concerned with the rhythmical and phonological features Beckett originally presented in his poem. Her version is perhaps more lyrical and creative, since she has adapted the Spanish language to the paradigms and musicality of the Beckettian verses in French, aware as she is of the musical patterns of the poem. Her concern for the metrics and her willingness to respect the phonological aspects might not completely adhere to literalness, but it eventually allowed her to trace the rhythmical nuances in this poem, thus measuring the gravity and solemnity which captivates the reader in each verse: for instance, the Spanish words “qué,” “allí,” “esto,” resonating in the mind like mesmerising echoes of the poet’s voice. Finally, Talens’ version is closer to the reader because it tries to perform a colloquial approach to the semantic complexity of the poem, but it fails in being less rigorous and respectful regarding the original text.

In all, the idea is to transform silence from a barren ground into a breeding ground for words that struggle for existence where it seems that there is nothing left to say. In this respect, the translator attests to words blending like secret steps in the darkness, going nowhere, waiting for no one. These words are inflections of desire in the limit of an omniscient nothingness in which they “croire entrevoir” (‘seem to glimpse’) things as subjects spotted on a plane located far from here, far from themselves, beyond nothing and anyone.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The research for this project was funded by CEI Patrimonio, University of Almería.

<sup>2</sup> Original in Spanish. All quotations in this language have been translated by the author of this article.

<sup>3</sup> In *A Beckett Canon*, Cohn notes that “Comment dire” consists of fifty-three lines (383). Actually, both the first edition of the poem by

*Minuit* and the version published by Lawlor and Pilling in 2012 consist of fifty-two lines.

<sup>4</sup> These dashes are placed at the end of each verse, except the final one.

<sup>5</sup> Van Hulle notes that Cohn's translation of these words is 'Weep! for end,' but the transcription 'Keep! for end' "seems equally plausible, as this deliberately unfinished text seems to be conceived as the last" (104).

<sup>6</sup> The Samuel Beckett Collection, the world's largest compilation of resources relating to Samuel Beckett, can be found at the Beckett Archive in Reading.

<sup>7</sup> The *mirlitonades* are short poems, similar to *haikus*, written by Beckett between 1976 and 1978, a decade before "Comment dire." Simple in structure but intense in content, these minimalistic pieces represent the poetic idiosyncrasy predominant in both Beckett's literary career and in his personal life.

<sup>8</sup> *Beckettiana* is the journal of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. It is the only journal in the Hispanic world dedicated to Samuel Beckett and it was first published in 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Apart from syntactical transpositions, there are certain instances of American vocabulary in Cerrato's version. Since she is Argentinian, she translates the adverbs "là" and "là-bas" as 'allí' and 'allá,' respectively, instead of Casado's 'aquí' and 'allí.' This is a very common lexical choice in South American countries. "Aquí" indicates the place where the speaker is situated, while "allí" implies a more distant location. Similarly, the DRAE (*Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy*) explains that 'allá' indicates a less circumscribed place than the one 'allí' denotes. For this reason, 'allá' permits certain degrees of comparison which 'allí' rejects: "más allá" ('further'), "muy allá" ('beyond'). Thus, it is surprising the fact that Talens, a Spanish author, has advocated for "allá allá" instead of having used Casado's "ahí" and "allí."

<sup>10</sup> The preposition "de" was introduced by Talens to this line as well as to others in the translation: (16) "esto de aquí" (17), "todo este esto de aquí" (31), "de querer creer entrever qué dónde."

<sup>11</sup> In an appendix where she revisited her own translation of "Comment dire", twenty-one years after it was published, Casado stated that nowadays she would advocate for different lexical choices

from those she adopted for in 1998. It is important to remark that Cerrato's version is still unknown for her, so, again, Casado has not considered the former translation to give shape to her own translation, although this revisited text is similar to the one by Cerrato regarding some lexical choices. In the transcription of the original poem published by *Minuit*, there is a typo which appears on page 118 in *Quiebros y poemas*. In line 43 of the poem, "tout ceci-ci" is written instead of "tout ce ceci-ci." "Maybe — Casado affirms — the confusion between both lines (the original and the one published in *Quiebros*) was due to seeking poetic logic in the repetition of 'tout' ('vu tout ceci'/'tout 'ceci-ci'), by an effect of rhythm" (Casado "Comment dire" n.p.).

Most importantly, Casado comments on the importance of 'lo' ('ce' in French) in lines such as "locura que se lo" and "locura desde lo". Today, she would translate 'ce' as 'este o esto' instead of 'lo,' because the construction resulting from the succession of verses 'desde lo dado,' 'dado lo que de visto' 'locura dado todo lo visto' is not actually a concatenation as she formerly thought. The explanation is clear: each line or verse is followed by a dash. This grammatical articulation with 'lo' that she suggested in 1998 is also valid in translation, but after having translated other works by Beckett, she has reflected on the dynamics of his poetry, founded on the repetition of the same lexical combinations. Thus, the same words are constantly reproduced throughout the poem: "ce," "ceci" ('este,' 'esto'). With these changes, her translation would be even more similar today to that by Cerrato and Talens.

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