

The Translators' Take on Three Possible Typos in Jorge L. Borges' Story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how translators tackled the problem given by three possible typos in Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Translations to all major Western languages are considered. The translators' decisions are found to display great diversity. Some of them treat the textual changes in question as mere typos, while others incorporate the changes (be it partially, in full, or even in excess). Borges' role in altering the text can only be assessed indirectly as no hard evidence, such as corrected galley proofs or written accounts, is known to exist. The present findings align well with Sánchez's complementary analysis of the context in which the three textual changes occur and how they indirectly impact the plot. In case they are not mere typos, the changes discussed here could obey Borges' decision to reintroduce a metaliterary element of surprise into the story.

KEYWORDS

Amendments, Jorge Luis Borges, Literary Translation, Metaliterary Interpretation, Short Story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", Typos, Western Languages

INTRODUCTION

Jorge Luis Borges is one of the most acclaimed authors of the twentieth century, and as such his work has been translated to a vast number of languages around the world. Borges was himself a translator, and wrote some important essays on translation. In these, he challenged the notion that translations are necessarily inferior to the original and suggested that there are no "definitive texts". Moreover, some of his short stories convey insights into the nature of language and translation. For instance, Steiner (1975, p. 70) rates "Pierre Menard, author of Don Quixote" (1939) as "the most acute, most concentrated commentary anyone has offered on the business of translation."

The present article draws on translation studies, with their strong tradition of paying attention to how texts are modified in translation. We focus on how translators from Spanish to the other five major Western languages have reacted to three possible typos in Borges' revised (1974) version of his short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (henceforth "Tlön"). We pursue two different but related goals: 1) to assess, with the help of translations, whether those textual changes are typos or deliberate amendments; and 2) to assess translators' reactions themselves. In order to achieve our goals, we also consider other textual details of "Tlön" changed in 1974.

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Although our focus is rather narrow, the examples under consideration will suffice to indicate that translators have taken Borges along many different paths, some of which are irreconcilable with one another. This conclusion is in line with how Alvstad (2019) discusses translations of Borges' short story "The garden of forking paths" (1941). We understand that the differences between translations of "Tlön" are more substantial than those identified by Alvstad. Translation studies scholar Gentzler (2008, p. 117) has likened the labyrinth presented in "The garden" to translation work:

so too does translation involve forking paths, opening up often infinite creative opportunities based upon initial decision. If one decides to translate a word or a sentence in one fashion, that decision sets up a paradigm for the rest of the text; however, if that same word took an even slightly different turn, the resulting text would be correspondingly different.

Given that we cannot know if Borges actually incurred in the three typos, the various translations of "Tlön" will be indirectly assessed on the basis of what they imply for the story's plot. It is in connection with the story's plot that we shall refer to some earlier research; instead, we lack published studies about post-1974 translations of "Tlön." Wherever relevant, we shall also pay attention to whether translators have provided explanations for their decisions.¹

Before comparing them, we shall analyse the translations one at a time, which seems adequate in light of the variety shown by translators' reactions.² Future research may broaden the scope by studying whether some translators were – say – more likely to consider Borges' textual changes as typos after seeing previous translators (including to other languages) reach the same conclusion. Such extension would benefit from examining the translations of "Tlön" and other stories included in the relevant collection, looking for possible influence in terms of translation archaeology (Pym, 1998, p. 5) and exploiting the methods developed to assess indirect translations and retranslations (Alvstad and Assis Rosa, 2015; Assis Rosa et al., 2017).

The structure of this article is as follows. We start by describing the three possible typos found in "Tlön." We then describe how translators reacted to these and other textual changes also dating to 1974. Our preliminary assessment is enhanced by looking at the impact translators' decisions have on the plot.³ Finally, we summarise our conclusions about the textual changes and the translations thereof.

The Three Possible Typos

"Tlön" is one of Borges' most celebrated pieces, and the one its author considered "perhaps my most ambitious story" (1982, p. 222).⁴ It was first published in 1940 in magazine *Sur* and underwent a number of textual changes when it was republished in various book forms over the years. "Tlön" describes how our world is taken over by an encyclopedia about an imaginary planet. The story features a 'narrator' (who is often associated with Borges) as well as a number of his friends, starting from 'Bioy Casares.' In the story's final version, one detects three puzzling textual changes vis-à-vis all previous versions; very inconveniently, these changes resist any obvious classification. The final version of "Tlön" dates from 1974, when the story is included in the first volume of *Obras Completas* (*Complete Works*) (Borges, 1974; henceforth OC1).

The three afore-mentioned textual changes take place in section I of "Tlön," each time that a roman number (referred to the volume of an encyclopedia) no longer reads "XLVI" but "XXVI." This occurs in pages 431, 432 and 433 of OC1.⁵

In their section I all versions of "Tlön" mention the volume XLVI of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* (A-AC) and the subsequent volume XLVII. Prior to 1974, all versions made a second mention to "XLVI" referred to "la Enciclopedia" ("the Encyclopedia"), so the reader could interpret that this generic "Encyclopedia" continued to be A-AC. This is so even though the two volumes XLVI in question corresponded to two different copies of what would be the same encyclopedia (only the second of the volumes XLVI contained a strange article over "Uqbar," contradicting the Tor-Ups contents anticipated on the spine). Also prior to 1974, there were two more mentions (for a total of

four), all in the same section I, to a volume “XLVI,” and in both cases A-AC was explicitly invoked. In sum, prior to 1974 one had to suppose that all (four) volumes XLVI in “Tlön” were from A-AC. The only mystery in the section concerned the article over Uqbar –unknown region or country with its own culture (and with a fantastic literature about planet Tlön).

Since 1974, we still have the first mention to volume XLVI of A-AC (and subsequent volume XLVII), but the next three occurrences of “XLVI” are replaced by “XXVI.”⁶ These textual changes create an uncomfortable situation, for various reasons. First, to our knowledge, no critic (except for the reference in footnote 2) has been explicit about the existence of all three changes.⁷ In particular, no critic has thus far declared that they are typos, which is the only thing that would reestablish the interpretation of the plot prior to 1974. Instead of confronting the changes (and their effect on the plot), critics have implicitly ignored the role played by the discontinuous numbering of the volumes. Second, the three changes in question have continued to be there both in Borges’ lifetime and after his death in 1986. Third, the versions of “Tlön” that have been rendered in other languages since OC1 (and that, after Borges’ death, acknowledge copyright to his widow María Kodama) reflect the three changes in different ways. Fourth, all three XXVIs are missing in the versions of “Tlön” featuring in the reprints (in Spanish or foreign language) of anthologies published outside the axis of OC1. These anthologies include *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (*Anthology of fantastic literature*) (first edition in 1940) and *Nueva Antología Personal* (*New Personal Anthology*) (first edition in 1968). Items third and fourth reflect the international diversity of confusing variants that the reader of “Tlön” presently faces.

The question one would like to answer is whether the three changes are typos or deliberate amendments. It does not seem likely that the problem can ever be solved exhaustively, unless some key documents (e.g. corrected printer’s proofs or relevant written accounts) one day provide hard evidence on Borges’ will one way or the other.

The fact that those three changes have not been corrected after OC1 would suggest that they are not obvious typos. The specialised criticism of “Tlön” has not discussed the problem, with the interpretation of the plot generally proceeding as if the text did not say “XXVI” but continued to read “XLVI.”⁸ If one takes them to be deliberately decided by Borges, the three changes would affect the interpretation of the plot in ways that have thus far not been considered.⁹ One way to improve our evaluation of these changes is to look at how translators reacted to them.

Translations of “Tlön”

Here we analyse how the three textual changes have been tackled since 1974 by translations to the main Western languages (other than Spanish), namely, English, French, Italian, German and Portuguese. We distinguish between the translations proper and the explanations (or absence thereof) given by those responsible. We infer that the translators have deemed the changes from “XLVI” to “XXVI” voluntary amendments or typos. We also mention –but without attaching too much importance to them– the foreign-language versions of “Tlön” that still circulate outside the axis of OC1.

Translation to English

Of all translations consulted for this article, Andrew Hurley’s English rendition (Borges, 1998) is the only one to explicitly judge (one of) the changes from “XLVI” to “XXVI.” It does so by inserting a note in the place where in OC1 we have the first occurrence of “XXVI,” which Hurley replaces with “XLVI.” The note indicates that, for him, “XXVI” is a “typo.” Although he does not clarify this again for the next two occurrences of “XXVI” in OC1, the fact that Hurley also replaces these with “XLVI” would imply that all (three) changes of “XLVI” to “XXVI” are considered by him to be typos. In any case, Hurley does not explain how he has reached the conclusion that the first occurrence of “XXVI” is a typo.

Hurley’s translation of “Tlön” greatly affects the context of OC1 in question. It eliminates the uncertainty about whether the changes from “XLVI” to “XXVI” are voluntary, opting for the

alternative of deeming them typos. Hurley's explicit position that "XXVI" is a typo is unique among all translators here considered; the fact that we are given no explanation about his decision constrains the latter's significance.

Since 1974 there have been many other publications of "Tlön" in English. Unlike Hurley's case, those other versions reproduce pre-1974 translations which are thus not based on OC1. Although the 2007 edition of *Labyrinths – Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New Directions; 1st ed.: 1962) claims that it "corrects misprints and other minor errors" from the original (p. xxi) –including James Irby's translation of "Tlön"–, this does not concern the OC1 textual changes. Regarding anthologies, Borges (1981) and *The World Treasury of Science Fiction* (Little, Brown, 1989) use Alastair Reid's translation (originally in *Ficciones*, Grove Press, 1962), while *The World Treasury of the Short Story* (Houghton Mifflin, 1986) opts for Irby's 1962 rendition. *Book of Fantasy* (Xanadu and Viking, both from 1988), which is the version in English of *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, claims to adopt Irby's translation but in fact sticks to Reid's version.

Translation to French

Unlike Hurley, the current French translation of "Tlön" respects all three changes from "XLVI" to "XXVI" present in OC1. This French version is linked to the one originally made by Paul Verdevoye. Verdevoye already published it in 1947 in the magazine *Licorne*. The translation then featured in *Fictions (Fictions)*, Gallimard, 1951. It is difficult to understand the exact process through which this translation ended up being included (with modifications) by Gallimard in Borges (1993).¹⁰ The process used to update the translation on the basis of OC1 was not mechanical: the fact that other changes were rejected would suggest that the three XXVIs were accepted consciously (and thus not taken to be typos). We notice the following changes that were rejected:¹¹

1. Where OC1 changed to "hateful" (432, line 4), Gallimard continues to read "*abominable*".
2. where OC1 changed to present tense: "admiten" ("admit") and "causan" ("cause") (435, line 15), Gallimard sticks to the imperfect preterite: "admettaient" and "entraînaient".
3. Where OC1 changed to "*Salto Oriental, 1940.*" (440, line 20), Gallimard sticks to "*1940. Salto Oriental*".
4. Where OC1 ended the phrase with a full stop: "correntoso." ("strong-flowing.") (442, line 14), Gallimard sticks to the colon ("torrentueux:").

The current French translation of "Tlön" thus respects –apparently, by a conscious decision– the changes from "XLVI" to "XXVI." By aligning with OC1, it is in contrast with Hurley's translation; however, it stops short of explicitly stating that "XXVI" is a voluntary change by Borges, instead of a typo.

Translation to Italian

There are two relevant translations of "Tlön" to Italian. The earlier of these translations goes back in time and continues to be published after OC1. It is due to Franco Lucentini, initially published by Einaudi in *Finzioni (Fictions)* in 1955. It was thereafter published by Mondadori in 1974 in *Finzioni*, and in *Tutte le opere (Complete Works)*, 2 vol., edited by Domenico Porzio. In the 1988 reprint of *Finzioni* (which we use here as a reference: Borges, 1988), Lucentini (p. 138) defends himself from the objections to his translation for being "too literal, too close to Spanish," and redoubles the bet: "Looking at it now I have retouched it here and there, in order to increase its literality and its supposed hispanicism."¹² The reason why we consider Lucentini's translation is that he claims to have revised it in 1988;¹³ it is however unclear whether he takes into account OC1, as we shall see.

Lucentini's 1988 translation does not incorporate the changes from "XLVI" to "XXVI." Neither does it introduce the change in OC1 to "hateful" (432, line 4), insisting with "*abominable*". This

suggests a certain inertia in this translation, although not necessarily the judgement that “XXVI” is a typo. Regarding the other three changes considered for the French version, two items are consistent with OC1: “ammettono” (“admit”) and “infondono” (“cause”) (present tense) concerning item b, and “tumultuoso.” (full stop at the end) concerning item d. However, these choices by Lucentini were there before 1974. Item c (“Salto Oriental, 1940”) does realign towards OC1, but only partially as it lacks the italics and the full stop at the end. Overall, it is not clear that Lucentini cared much for OC1 when revisiting his earlier translation of “Tlön” for its 1988 printing.

The most recent Italian edition of *Finzioni* (Borges, 2003), “trad. e cura di” (translated and edited by) Antonio Melis, greets Lucentini’s translation from the flap, “almost fifty years apart.” However, Melis’ translation also detaches itself from its predecessor when it introduces “Tlön” by referring to “un’enciclopedia pirata” (“a piratical encyclopedia”) and “labirinto ordito da uomini” (“labyrinth concocted by men”) (instead of “una enciclopedia plagiaria” and “labirinto ordito dagli uomini” in Lucentini, respectively). With the expression “almost fifty years apart,” Melis seems to dismiss Lucentini’s 1988 claim that the latter has revised his text. Melis presents *Finzioni* “in a new version, which takes into account the variants and additions introduced in the second edition, from 1956: it will be enough to remember that three new stories were included.”

Two questions are in order here. First, Lucentini claims that he has revised his version in 1988, but there is no evidence that he considered any version in Spanish published after 1944 (the year of the first edition of *Ficciones* in Spanish, featuring “Tlön”). That is, his revision from 1988 might respond not to the editorial changes introduced by Borges in successive editions but to new ideas from Lucentini about the same text from 1944. In any case, Lucentini sticks to the same list of stories that he initially translated (which always includes “The approach to Al-Mu’tasim,” despite the fact that Borges eliminated this story from *Ficciones* in 1956). The “three new stories” mentioned by Melis are never considered by Lucentini, not even in 1988. Second, Melis’ *Finzioni* incorporate –beyond the novel Italian phrases proposed for “Tlön” and advertised from the flap– the “variants and additions” from 1956. In updating *Finzioni* vis-à-vis Lucentini, Melis emphasises the role of the 1956 edition in Spanish (as opposed to the version of 1974). It is possible that the final OC1 edition of *Ficciones* does not bring substantial changes for Melis, or rather that it is problematic to him in some (undisclosed) fashion.

One problem with “Tlön” are obviously the three changes from “XLVI” to “XXVI.” Melis simply ignores them, without explicitly calling them typos. It is probable that Melis deems them so, given that his translation respects all four changes in OC1 that we have referred to above as items a-d. In particular, we read “ammettono” e “causano” (present tense) concerning item b, “Salto Oriental, 1940” (as with Lucentini, respecting the order of the terms but neither the italics nor the full stop) concerning item c, and “in piena.” (full stop at the end) concerning item d.

We conclude that the two Italian translations affect the context of OC1, by opting for “XLVI” and ignoring “XXVI.” This could be due in Lucentini to a deliberate inertia of the translation, while in Melis it could rather imply the judgement that each “XXVI” is a typo. Even so, in contrast with Hurley, none of the Italian translators is explicit about his decision.

Translation to German

The German version of “Tlön” goes back to 1959, when the story was translated by Karl August Horst; Gisbert Haefs revised the translation during the 1980s (here we follow the version in Borges, 2000a). The German translation has been modified in response to OC1. It incorporates “XXVI” each of the three times that this number features in OC1, and goes beyond that: it also replaces by “XXVI” the only occurrence that is left of “XLVI” in OC1. Therefore, in one go, all four old XLVIs become “XXVI.” Accordingly, volume “XLVII” becomes “XXVII” –a number never seen throughout the history of “Tlön” in Spanish. Implicitly, Haefs treats as a typo not each “XXVI” but the only “XLVI” that survives in OC1 (and also “XLVII”). If there were any doubt that Haefs read OC1, let us add that he stuck to the latter concerning items a-d.

In sum, the German translation affects the context of OC1, even if it respects the three textual changes from “XLVI” to “XXVI.” The reason is that it homogenises the numbering (as was the case –although around a different value– in Spanish prior to 1974), failing to respect the remaining occurrence of “XLVI” (and the associated “XLVII”) in OC1.

Translation to Portuguese

The versions of “Tlön” in Portuguese are somewhat recent. The Brazilian translation by Carlos Nejar (Borges, 1999) accepts the textual change “XXVI,” but only for the last of three occurrences in OC1. There, one reads about the character ‘Carlos Mastronardi’: “Entró e interrogó el volumen XXVI. Naturalmente, no dio con el menor indicio de Uqbar.” (“He came in and studied the volume XXVI. Naturally, he did not encounter the slightest sign of Uqbar.”) (433). If this were the only mention to “XXVI” (as Nejar wants), “Naturalmente” would have the simplest of explanations: how could Mastronardi come across the article about Uqbar if he does not even examine a volume with the number XLVI on it? Note, in this regard, that XLVI is the number used by Nejar for the only volume that includes the article about Uqbar, namely, the volume owned by Bioy. The trivial explanation implied by Nejar’s translation differs from that required by either OC1 or any previous version of “Tlön” in Spanish. In Spanish, prior to OC1 (i.e. in the absence of XXVIs), the reason for Mastronardi not finding that article would be that the volume he examined was a normal one, not an anomalous copy like Bioy’s. In OC1, ‘Uqbar’ could never be found in the volume XXVI consulted by Mastronardi because, with the exception of Bioy’s A-AC copy, entries starting with the letter U would be reserved for volumes XLVI and XLVII.

In Portugal the version by José Colaço Barreiros (Borges, 2000b) was published soon afterwards. The translator does not respect any of the three OC1 changes from “XLVI” to “XXVI.” Colaço makes this decision without declaring the occurrences of “XXVI” to be typos. He probably deems them so, given that his translation tackles all four OC1 changes considered under items a-d. In particular, we read “admitem” (“admit”) and “causam” (“cause”) (present tense) concerning item b, and “forte torrente do rio.” (full stop at the end) concerning item d.

Josely Vianna Baptista offers an even more recent translation of “Tlön” to Portuguese, in the *Antologia da literatura fantástica* (*Anthology of fantastic literature*), Cosac Naify, 2013. We do not consider it here because it is based on a version in Spanish prior to OC1. Unlike those responsible for translating *Antología de la literatura fantástica* to Italian in 1982, who went back to the original sources (mostly not in Spanish) prior to translating, Baptista uses as her source the texts as they appear in Spanish in the second edition of 1965 (irrespective of whether they were themselves translated to Spanish from foreign languages). Borges had said about the Italian edition: “No debieron elegir un libro de autores que se distinguen por sus transcripciones y citas infieles. Por *misquotations*.” (“They should not have chosen a book by authors who distinguish themselves for their unfaithful transcriptions and quotations. For *misquotations*.”) (Bioy Casares, 2006, p. 1562).

In sum, the Portuguese versions alter the context of OC1. Colaço’s translation does not respect any of the three textual changes from “XLVI” to “XXVI.” And while Nejar’s translation respects one of the occurrences of “XXVI” his idiosyncratic way of translating ends up (marginally) affecting the plot, as it results in a rather trivial explanation for the incident in question.

Implications for the Plot

The plot of “Tlön” is quite complex, so we shall only indicate some of the implications derived from the above translators’ decisions.¹⁴

In the cases of the translations to English and Italian, as well as Colaço’s Portuguese version, the XXVIs are treated as typos. In terms of the plot, this implies that there is an unusual copy (owned by Bioy) that contains the entry ‘Uqbar,’ possibly inserted in A-AC by the international conspirators behind Tlön.

The French translation deems voluntary all three XXVIs in OC1. Their impact on the plot is considerable. Volume XLVI of A-AC suddenly becomes XXVI in Bioy's hands. Given that both volumes end with entry 'Upsala' (Bioy's volume also adding four apocryphal pages on 'Uqbar'), one question is how A-AC could now be printed in about half the number of volumes it was printed before. A-AC's volume XXVI might just be what the story calls an 'ur,' i.e. something created out of outright suggestion and/or expectation (1974, 440). Embarrassed for not finding the entry 'Uqbar' in A-AC and/or having misplaced his unique copy of A-AC with such entry, Bioy might have engaged in an ur-like creation of volume XXVI.¹⁵ Although we are informed that Bioy and the narrator later checked that –excluding the article on 'Uqbar'– the contents of the two volumes (i.e. the initial XLVI and Bioy's XXVI) were the same (1974, 432), they might have reached this conclusion by only comparing a limited set of entries that happened to feature in both volumes.

The translations discussed so far in this section correspond to the two possible interpretations of what Borges himself had in mind. The two options are reasonable. Even if the French translation appears to be somewhat sloppy (by disregarding the four OC1 textual changes listed under items a-d), it still supports the idea that all three XXVIs were deliberate decisions by Borges. In this case, relative to pre-1974 texts, the reader of OC1 (and of the French translation) may enjoy a version of "Tlön" that involves an exciting example of 'ur' (in A-AC's volume XXVI). We extend this idea in the next section.

The German translation treats the only OC1 occurrence of "XLVI" as a typo, so that there is no surprise about the number "XXVI" when Bioy finds his volume. In this translation, the plot is comparable to the case when all three XXVIs are treated as typos. Finally, the remaining (Nejar's Portuguese) translation respects only the last occurrence of "XXVI," arguably because this textual change is not so controversial. The other two XXVIs are treated as typos. Nejar's translation highlights the circumstance that, to the extent that their decisions were deliberate, the main concern of the four translators discussed at the beginning of this section (the English, the Italian and the other Portuguese) would be how to deal with the first two XXVIs. The final "XXVI" is less consequential; however, by respecting only this occurrence, Nejar's translation introduces a rather trivial twist to the original plot.

A Metaliterary Interpretation

The idea that the textual changes in OC1 are voluntary decisions by Borges (as fully endorsed by the French translation) can be further studied in connection with some metaliterary games earlier attempted in "Tlön." Interestingly, these games –featuring in the postscripts of the story's first two editions– were already outdated by the time "Tlön" appeared in the second edition of *Ficciones* (1956).

Following the story's two sections there is a "*Posdata de 1947*" ("*Postscript of 1947*") which is dated in the future –the text having been initially published in 1940, in line with the inscription that closes the core of "Tlön" (in its current form, "*Salto Oriental, 1940.*"). As some (Rodríguez Monegal, 1978, p. 333; Blanco, 2003) have demonstrated, the game was rather complex. Both in the first edition of "Tlön," in magazine *Sur*, and when the story was soon afterwards published in *Antología de la literatura fantástica*, the postscript said that the story's text was a not exact reproduction of the one published; perplexingly, the text contained a description of the copy (i.e. magazine or anthology) which coincided with the one the reader had in her hands.

Olea Franco (2006, p. 265) proposes: "Ideally, future editions of "Tlön" should have projected the postscript into the future to create a self-reference that simulated two texts and two differentiated times: the original and the modified one; for example, by including it in *Ficciones* in 1951, dating the postscript to 1958, and saying that the text was reproduced as it appeared in *Ficciones* of 1951." Olea Franco appropriately constrains his contribution to the realm of the "fantastic" and abstains from "the multiple epistemological and philosophical implications" (p. 259). His proposal for 1951, however, has the innocence of not considering another important facet of "Tlön." As is widely acknowledged, this story can be interpreted in political and ideological terms, in light of the fact that towards 1940 Hitler was devastating Europe with the acceptance of Stalin. In this regard, the direct mentions in the text to "nazism," "antisemitism"

and “dialectic materialism” are not gratuitous. The editorial “updating” proposed by Olea Franco, and dismissed in life by Borges, would not only dilute the international context in which “Tlön” –with an admirable sense of the period– inscribes itself but also, once World War II was over, would turn the story into a rather open and violent attack on Argentina’s Peronism (in power in 1946-55). It is not that Borges endorsed the latter regime, but his response to domestic politics would be delivered by means of fresh output. That is, Borges’ response to Peronism would not consist in mechanically recycling an earlier piece, and more specifically, in giving “Tlön” a new meaning at the expense of the original one.

Other studies have noted that the magic of the postscript was lost when Borges did not bother to update the futuristic note involved (e.g. Rodríguez Monegal in Borges, 1981, p. 347). The three textual changes discussed here, in case they are not mere typos (as supported especially by the French translation), could result from Borges’ decision to reintroduce an element of surprise into the story.

CONCLUSION

The present analysis has revealed that the translations of “Tlön” to major Western languages display great diversity. The only translator to explicitly speak of a typo (Hurley, the first time that “XXVI” occurs) does not provide us with any explanation about the assessment made. The two Italian translators considered here (who state that they have done or revised their work after 1974) continue to use the variant “XLVI,” in contrast with the final version of “Tlön” in Spanish (included in OC1). The circumstances surrounding these two cases are strange: Lucentini’s translation appears to be based on a much earlier version in Spanish, and Melis’ translation –which does partially respect OC1– is introduced in connection with the 1956 edition of *Ficciones* (perhaps to avoid reference to the three textual changes in question). In line with those translations to English and Italian, one of the versions in Portuguese (Colaço’s) also sticks to the pre-OC1 use of the variant “XLVI.” Instead, the current French and German versions of “Tlön” dismiss that any of the XXVIs is a typo, even to the point (in the case of the German translation) of using this variant to replace the only “XLVI” that had survived in OC1. The remaining version in Portuguese (Nejar’s) occupies an intermediate position, accepting the OC1 variant “XXVI” in a rather partial manner.

For a more in-depth analysis, we have looked at some effects that each translation has on the story’s plot. There are two possible interpretations of what Borges himself had in mind. The first interpretation is mirrored by those translations that deem the XXVIs to be typos. The second interpretation is adopted by the French translation. The two options are reasonable. Even if the French translation appears to be somewhat sloppy (by disregarding some OC1 textual changes while at the same time taking all three XXVIs on board), it supports the idea that the latter are deliberate decisions by Borges. If so, the reader of OC1 and of the associated French translation may enjoy a more complex version of “Tlön,” involving a more important role for the mental processes imported from planet Tlön. (We have argued that Borges might have come up with these ideas many years after some of the story’s early metaliterary games had become outdated.) Finally, while not presuming all XXVIs to be typos, the German and (Nejar’s) Portuguese translations do deviate from OC1 in ways that are not particularly exciting.

Our general results reflect the interrelation between the two assessments pursued here, namely, that of the three XXVIs and that of translators’ reactions to them (and some other textual changes). Moreover, the translations display some more idiosyncratic features, such as whether a given translator is explicit about the verdict reached. By gathering and discussing a substantial body of evidence, this article has shown that the three textual changes in question cannot *a priori* be deemed typos. It is desirable that future translation and criticism of “Tlön” will attach importance to those uncomfortable and significant textual changes.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In the present case such explicit attitudes are scarce; however, even in the absence of explanations, concrete acts of translation can be interpreted.

² Such variety implies that not all translations can be deemed “literal,” in spite of the uncertainty surrounding the nature of the three textual changes in question. Albeit in a different context (focussing on style), MacAdam—who has translated Borges—argues in favour of “literal” translations of this writer that preserve the “excentricities” of the original (2013, 27’26’’).

³ In addition, Sánchez (2022) looks at the context in which the three changes in question occur, reporting that the nature of other textual changes over the period 1940–1974 suggests the possibility that those three changes have been deliberate. He also discusses in much more detail the impact the changes to OC1 (and post-OC1 translators’ reactions) have on the story’s plot.

⁴ All translations to English are ours, except where stated otherwise.

⁵ In the following, all page numbers without explicit references correspond to OC1.

⁶ Balderston (2017, p. 145) reports that two manuscripts of “Tlön” are preserved. They date to *circa* 1940. Only the second (Borges, 2010) is known to contain the pages corresponding to the story’s section I (Balderston, 2017, p. 145). Concerning the first mention to “XLVI” in “Tlön” –i.e. the only one to appear in OC1– it is corrected in the second manuscript: a compressed L is inserted after X (and before VI) at the same time that the L initially written in the first position is crossed out (in a somewhat slanted way). This part of “Tlön” is also available in a third incomplete manuscript (discussed in Balderston, 2020, p. 24), which respects the correction on “XLVI” from the previous manuscript. The third manuscript was written after the story’s submission to *Sur* (published in May 1940). We know this because it contains two variants that were first published in *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (December 1940): 1) “Bioy había adquirido su ejemplar en uno de tantos remates.” (“Bioy had acquired his volume in one of many auctions.”) (432, line 16), missing in *Sur*; and 2) “Esmerdis” (432, line 27), instead of “Smerdis” in *Sur*. Given that the third manuscript of “Tlön” is numbered after that of another Borges’ story in the same notebook (“Examination of the work of Herbert Quain”), it should also date from after “Examination” was submitted to *Sur* (published in April 1941). Balderston (2020, p. 24) objects to this idea because, prior to 1941, “Tlön” and “Pierre Menard” –also numbered after “Examination”– had already appeared in *Sur*. It is worth noting that the manuscripts in question are from after those two stories’ submissions to *Sur*. We have just shown this for “Tlön.” As for “Pierre Menard,” its manuscript dates from between submissions to *Sur* (published in May 1939) and to *The garden of forking paths* (published in December 1941). The reason is that, on the one hand, this manuscript reads, as in *The garden*: “En vano he procurado reconstruirlas. [...] podría exhumar y resucitar esas Troyas...” (“In vain have I tried to reconstruct them. [...] would be able to exhume and revive those Troys...”) (450, lines 15–22), whereas in *Sur* we read: “Me dijo [...] que un muerto siga requiriendo atenciones...” (“He told me [...] that a dead man continues being looked after...”). On the other hand, the manuscript of “Pierre Menard” misses the final “Nîmes, 1939,” included in *The garden*.

- 7 The only other scholar who has mentioned the problem is Barcia (2000, p. 72); in passing, a footnote there refers to one single occurrence of “XXVI” (when there are actually three) and without any proposal on what to do about it. Given the shortage of explicit critical references to “XXVI”, let us mention the blog <http://notasomargonzalez.blogspot.com/2016/08/>, where, as in Barcia, there is no concrete proposal.
- 8 Riberi (2003, p. 207) follows the text of OC1 and mentions only the variant “XXVI.” Since the article is in English, when quoting from the story Riberi decides to report the page numbers of OC1 alongside the corresponding ones in Hurley’s translation to English. The excerpts chosen do not include the number of the A-AC volume in question; in case they did, Riberi would have had to face the problem that, even if that English translation uses OC1 as a source, Hurley explicitly reneges of “XXVI” to go on with the old “XLVI.”
- 9 As mentioned earlier, the exception is Sánchez (2022).
- 10 Referring to the latter publication, Parodi (2000) explains that one of Borges’ wishes, acknowledged by the editor Jean-Pierre Bernès, was to amend the existing translations. However, according to Parodi, this is the wish that is the furthest from being fulfilled, possibly because the original plan involving team work eventually gave way to the activities of Bernès alone.
- 11 Of these four changes, only the former two are registered by Martino’s (2014) attempt at a critical edition of “Tlön.”
- 12 Lucentini’s desire to stay close to Spanish, and his dislike to translate “in good Italian” (p. 138), are surprising. As is the fact that, according to Borges (1967, Introduction), existing translations of his work to English distort the original text by using this language’s Latin register at the expense of its dominant Germanic register. The parodic example given by Borges is that of translating “habitación oscura” as “obscure habitation,” which introduces a pedantic tone that is absent in the original, instead of translating the expression more naturally as “dark room.” The German translator has taken the opportunity of OC1 to retouch the style of “Tlön,” visibly tapping more into this language’s Latin register –a decision even less understandable, owing to historical-linguistic reasons, than in English.
- 13 The copyright still corresponds to Einaudi “by special arrangement with the Estate of Jorge Luis Borges.”
- 14 See Sánchez (2022) for more details.
- 15 White (2003, p. 53) makes a connection between the ‘ur’ phenomenon and Borges’ favourite encyclopedia, namely, the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.