

Lacunae and uncertain limits in Australian culture, with suggestions on their translation into Spanish

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If it can be assumed that everything that can be translated thereby lacks cultural specificity, the items that most resist translation may be considered good markers of the substantiality and limits of a culture.

The proposition might take time to sink in, but I suspect it could be of interest for arguments concerning cultural regionality, beyond identity as a question of presupposed sovereignty and closed frontiers. With respect to the translation of Australian literature, I have attempted to apply this idea by asking “how much of Australia fits into Spain?” (Pym 1989), assuming that whatever did not fit during the rendering of some ten short stories into Spanish was likely to be an index of Australian cultural specificity. The succinct answer to that mostly ethical question was “too much”, since effective solutions were found for almost all the ostensible translation problems and the only available conclusion was thus that Australian identity has no flourishing specificity. This might be a fashionable finding, but it is not highly satisfactory, especially if you are Australian.

As a second approach to this problem I would like to focus on translation difficulties that can be attributed to a lack of room not in the target culture, but to lacunae in the source culture. That is, from the personal perspective of a teacher of translation in Spain, I am interested not in my knowledge as a native informant for my students and colleagues, but in my ignorance of my own culture, and especially in how that ignorance functions as part of being Australian. More generally, I am interested not in what Australia knows about itself, but in what it ignores or has forgotten about itself, and what must thus perhaps be left undetermined or underdetermined in translation.

I shall consider a few examples, make a few confessions, and argue that the regionality of Western cultures—Catalan, Spanish, Australian or whatever—is partly based on the need to remember that something has been ignored or forgotten.

The need to forget

Although we have impressive techniques and technologies for improving memory, we have none for improving forgetting, which is supposed to come naturally. As much as

Freudians might suggest that there is nothing benignly natural about forgetting, scholars of cybernetic Nature tell us that ecological systems can generate too much knowledge for their correct functioning and thus develop mechanisms for putting information aside or storing it in what colourful ecology describes as “cosmic attics”, places where certain items can be kept out of circulation and yet be made available when and where they are really needed. If cultural systems can be seen in the same cybernetic light, a good part of our universities could probably be described as “academic attics” where expert knowledge is kept so as not to disrupt the everyday circulation necessary for participative social life. From outside the attic, one merely perceives the lines along which this information has been severed from quotidian awareness, vaguely figuring its absence as an ideal and inaccessible place. I unthinkingly assume that, for each of the many doubts I encounter in Australian literature, there is an expert or a specialised dictionary somewhere—in some university, in some dusty attic—that can provide a definitive answer. In fact, I assume this to be so for every text I translate. I assume that a perfect understanding of each original is always theoretically possible, or as least as possible as the perfect translation that is my necessarily unattainable goal. George Steiner has described this as a kind of initial leap of faith on the part of the translator, but I prefer to see it as an often rather naïve assumption of infinite expertise. In principle, academic attics allow us to believe that everything in the texts we read or translate is potentially meaningful, albeit not for us in the here and now of our reading or translating. This assumption is problematic because what we effectively understand rarely corresponds to what we set out to understand. The difference has consequences for translation.

Which text are we to translate? The perfect text ideally concretised by attic experts, or the text as it exists and functions within the source culture? Or perhaps a pragmatic compromise, by paraphrasing what we know and simply leaving out the hard bits? Confronted by the lacunae that Ingarden long ago saw as the source of a vitalist literariness, is the translator then simply to ignore them or plaster them over, as if everything were already fully known, as if nothing had ever really been forgotten?

We need to forget. Readers in the source culture need to forget. And yet someone, somewhere, needs to remember that we have forgotten, so that someone, somewhere, might retrieve what is needed from the attic.

Hence the basic question I would like to address: Is translation ideally a retrieval process, finding out and filling in what lesser readings have forgotten, or should it attempt to reproduce the lacunae as they exist in source-culture memories? More importantly, how might retrieval refrain from killing texts through over-translation, and how might the reproduction of lacunae refrain from incomprehensibility as a similarly negative limit?

I would like my examples to speak for themselves.

Ten examples of minor lacunae encountered when translating Australian texts into Spanish

apple trees:

Although Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife" is set in a landscape repeatedly described as "bush, bush, bush" (q.v.), this bush seems to be composed not of peculiar native plants, but of "apple trees". The text says so. But I must have read the story four or five times without asking myself if the setting was really a kind of Australian bush full of European apples. Words are consumed quickly when you read your native language, just as fruit tends to be eaten before you ask where it came from. The question only arose when I saw "manzanos" (apple trees) in the Spanish translation. I checked my source text (not the original, but close enough: the 1902 edition of *The Bulletin Story Book*): sure enough, "apple trees". I now suspect they are not real apple trees; the reference is most probably to the "apple gums" mentioned in my dictionary, although I can't remember having ever identified the species. Should I know exactly what these "apple trees" are? Did I ever know? Do Lawson's other readers know? Suggestion translation: "eucaliptos manzaneros" (apple eucalypts), to arouse the reader's imagination, at the risk of slight surrealism.

boggabri and cotton pear:

Patrick White talks about "the stench of crushed boggabri and cotton pear" (in "Down at the Dump"). Reference to these mysterious plants is no doubt bound to stir deep memories in people of White's time and place, but it simply leaves me as perplexed as "apple trees". Am I exceptionally ignorant? Was I born in the wrong part of Australia? An adequate dictionary will give a rough idea of "boggabri", but to little avail, since its function as a proper name is to identify a specific context and thus has to be rendered as "bog(g)abri" in Spanish. Although Georges Mounin has used such transposed proper names as indices of untranslatability, I believe that they are mostly banal solutions to quite banal problems involving indigenous objects. "Cotton pear", however, is a peculiarly descriptive proper name, more demanding on the translator in that it should tell us something about the plant it names. I mention this particular example in order to pay passing homage to the information services of the State Libraries of Western Australia and New South Wales, both of which impressively looked for "cotton pear" at my mother's request, without success. Research could no doubt have been pursued further (probably into varieties of chenopodiaceous shrubs), contacting the author in the last instance, but if the best of Australian bureaucratic attics cannot locate the meaning of a term, to what extent should the missing information be considered part of Australian culture? And if the information is meant to be missing, how should it be

translated? I must admit that I was not sure enough of “cotton pear” to reject “acanto” (prickly thistle) when suggested as a make-do. However, thinking the problem through in the present context, I would probably now risk a literalist barbarism like “pera algodonsa” (cottony pear), and once again let Hispanic readers set it where they will.

Breath-o’-Pine:

“‘Yairs... yairs...,’ said Mr Hogben, speaking into the telephone which his wife kept swabbed with Breath-o’-Pine.” (Patrick White, “Down at the Dump” again). Although I can remember Breath-o’-Pine as a product of the ‘sixties and don’t recall having seen it since then, I can’t really say if the brand existed before the ‘sixties, if it ever really disappeared, or if our household simply started to buy something else. Suggested translation: some general telephone-cleaning product Spaniards remember as of an era prior to the invasion of multinationals (but surely there were multinationals in the 1960s?), preferably a disinfectant that smells a bit like a hospital (although Spanish hospitals mostly smell more like homely kitchens). Awaiting tenders.

bush (the):

As a general term, there can be little doubt that “the bush” refers to the mythologised space of a broad negation of the city. But it has been repeated so often and everyone is supposed to be so aware of what it means that no one ever bothers to explain its exact boundaries. Does “the bush” include desert? (Most people say no.) Does it necessarily exclude farmland? (Most say yes.) So, logically, most Australians might be expected to qualify it as habitable land which is uninhabited or not yet habited. The term thus conceals a frontier concept, difficult to render into Spanish, the language of countries where uninhabited land is either uninhabitable or no longer inhabited. It is probably as hard to translate “the bush” into Spanish as it is to find a good English word for Juan Rulfo’s “Paramo”. And then there are questions of movement and size. If one “goes bush” (which virtually means disappearing from civilisation, geographically or metaphorically), does one necessarily go to “the bush”, geographically or metaphorically? (No, perhaps because desert areas are covered by the verb; but then, one can “go bush bashing”, usually with a four-wheel drive, and this requires at least minimal vegetation.) If I remember correctly, when I first went to school I had to walk through about two miles of “bush” (without the article), but I certainly didn’t “go bush”, and the land I walked through could not really be “the bush” because there was a suburban school at the end of it. Moreover, as the suburbs extended, what I called “bush” gradually became a sequence of “vacant blocks”. With or without the article, the term seems to disappear with its frontiers.

How should one then translate “the bush”? Strangely enough, French has a fairly well established equivalent, “la brousse”, no doubt because of the contiguity of French

and British colonialism in Africa, where there is still quite a lot of “bush”. But Spanish colonialism in Africa was more limited and no corresponding term seems to have been adopted. The translator thus has to select or invent.

In such cases, three general strategies are available: a) leave “bush” as it is, thus introducing yet another anglicism into Spanish; b) use a different term for each contextual appearance, hopefully capturing referential nuances; or c) use the one term repeatedly, in many different contexts, until it acquires a value over and above its normal usage. When translating a series of short stories in which “the bush” was mentioned some thirty-four times, the latter strategy was the most adequate. And the most adequate (though not ideal) candidate for the job was “monte” (in the sense of wood, forest, woodland, etc.), used again and again until it means more than it says.

Experts will no doubt quibble. But I have since found independent justification: Virgilio Moya, a Spanish colleague concerned with political translation problems, refers to “muchachos que se han echado al *monte*” to render “boys in *the bush*”, an expression used by black Zimbabweans / Rhodesians to describe their freedom fighters / terrorists in the days before that frontier, too, was forgotten.

Commonwealth:

A deservedly obscure text called *Antipodes: L'Australie, Paradis Socialist*, written by a certain Ferri-Pisani and published in 1934, begins with the following sentence: “Le Commonwealth (ou République) d'Australie date du 1er janvier 1901.” One supposes that the implied French reader would find the English term “Commonwealth” more exact and perhaps of more exotic value than the French “République”, although the underlying “res publica” could be rendered quite adequately as “common wealth” and etymological equivalence might yet remained unchallenged. When I first read the sentence, I found it fair. But hadn't something been forgotten? Not by the Frenchman, who was translating across difficulties yet to be manifested. No, something had been forgotten by his belated Australian reader. In 1975, the fact that Australia called itself a Commonwealth and not a Republic meant that its Governor-General could dismiss a freely elected government. Some Australians now believe that “République” is worth much more than “Commonwealth”. Suggested translation into Spanish: “Commonwealth (supuesta república)”, lest we forget the difference.

drover:

Most Australians feel that they know what a “drover” is (as in Lawson's “The Drover's Wife” and latter-day homonyms). But I have considerable trouble defining the term with respect to Spanish words like “vaquero”. I know that a drover is not a “cowboy”, but why? It took me some time to remember (or discover) that drovers also (exclusively?) work with sheep. The term might then perhaps be rendered in Spanish as

“pastor” (shepherd) or “ganadero” (cattle-owner/grazier), but appears to be at once more and less than these: the term excludes ownership and includes movement from place to place (although there are fringes of doubt around even these aspects). In this sense, the economies and social structures of Hispanic culture would seem never to have produced drovers, and thus have no exactly corresponding term. The rather unhappy solution to this problem was to insert the phrase “uno de estos ganaderos trashumantes” (“one of those itinerant sheep/cattlemen”) with the first appearance of the term, thereafter using the simple word “ganadero” and trusting that contexts and the reading imagination would retain the necessary disambiguation and perhaps re-create the doubts surrounding what Australians think they know about their archetypal bush-workers (but do drovers have enough vegetation around them to really be in “the bush”?).

Gs (a couple of):

“We’re going down to Barranugli pool Thursday. There’s some boys Sherry knows with a couple of Gs. They’ve promised to take us for a spin after we come out.” Or so says a teenage girl in Patrick White. Now, what are “Gs”? The context suggest cars, but although I recognise initials like “FJ” as referring to classic Australian models (all “Holdens”, made by General Motors), I cannot locate a model likely to be called a “G”. I wrote to my mother about it; she unhelpfully reminded me that horses are called “gee-gees”, ignoring the fact that it is difficult to go for a spin on a horse. Suggested translation: Although I initially accepted “coches” (cars), I now prefer something like “dar una vuelta en sus ‘ges’” (go for a spin in their ‘G’s), suggesting that the unknown term must be a culturally specific mode of mechanised transport, since it could not really be anything else.

George the Greek:

“The commercial travellers who buy fish and chips at George the Greek’s...” (Peter Carey, “American Dreams”). This innocent-looking name could be rendered as “George the Greek”, “George el griego”, “Jorge el griego”, “Georgios el griego”, and so on in successive combinations. But only when my students confronted me with this series did I become aware that the Australian George was probably really a Greek Georgios. Here, clearly, the translation should neither restore originality nor hispanise fish-and-chips: “George el griego” is obligatory, to indicate that Australia largely means forgetting where you came from.

Piss off, you bastards:

Such are the words uttered by fly-shooing Belle, the narrator’s decadent friend and self-confessed slut in Frank Moorhouse’s “From a Bush Log Book”. The words do not

appear to be particularly offensive (they rate only three stars in Michael Swan's five-star system), but they are unmistakably vulgar when uttered by a woman. To translate them, one should ideally take an unmistakably vulgar Spanish woman into the monte (cf. bush) and see how she shoos away flies. But there are very few places in Spain with enough flies, and apparently no mid-strength Spanish taboo words that can be used in such an apparently trivial situation. Experiments with real Spaniards and imaginary flies gave results ranging from "¡Largo, cerdas!" (abrupt, forceful, but suggesting that pigs can fly) to a probably too neutral "¡Largaos, asquerosas!", passing through various versions of the unfortunately long "¡La leche con las moscas...! ¿Por qué no se largarán de una puñatera vez?" and the ultimately accepted and equally untranslatable "¡Joder con las moscas!". The unsatisfactory nature of these results reveals the extreme subtlety and specificity with which taboo words imbricate with situation. The words themselves are quite translatable and not particularly Australian, but their contextual value is very difficult to convey. Their source-culture function, despite all empiricism, is to deny translation.

racing touts:

A passage from David Ireland entitled "Our Culture" (in *A Woman of the Future*) lists sixty-four Australian occupations and places of activity, including "knighted public servants" ("funcionarios ennoblezidos"), "towing engineers" ("ingenieros de grúa"), "taverns" (the Spanish "pubs" connotes the necessary modernity), "multiple choice betting" ("apuestas informatizadas") and "pizza huts" (translated as Spanish "pizza huts"). As can be seen, at least minimum translatability is generally possible, if not always exact. From the perspective of target-culture space, specificity is indicated when the Spanish becomes significantly longer than the English: "park watchers" become "gente que pasea por los parques con asiduidad" (in order to avoid the ambiguity of "miradores", at once watchers and belvederes); and "brick-cleaners" are conveyed as "gente que limpia ladrillos de segunda mano" although, as far as I know, there are no brick-cleaners in Spain, since the recycling of building materials is more or less limited to masonry stones. From the perspective of source-culture space, however, I had quite a different problem with the expression "racing touts", which I recognised as having something to do with horseracing, but I couldn't say exactly what (although God knows I've lost enough money on Australian horseracing... is this why I lost?). The Collins dictionary, a masterpiece of economy, now informs me that the "tout" in question is "a person who spies on racehorses so as to obtain betting information to sell". This seems quite reasonable, although I suspect that race-track usage refers to a more general range of devious activities, and that this usage is somehow not of my generation (which tends to win not by spying but by applying system theory). And David Ireland's narrator, Alethea Hunt, is surely more of my generation than his? Something is wrong, but I

can't say what and I can only feel guilty. (Just as one feels guilty about losing money at the races, as if it were an entirely individual fate.) In this case, the best solution is no doubt to bet on the dictionary definition, with as much economy as possible but on the border of paraphrase as bad over-translation: "gente con información secreta para apostar en las carreras de caballos". To do any less would be to say nothing; to do any more would be to transform translation into sociology, and literature simply doesn't have room for it.

The uncertain limits of what I thought I had forgotten

The above examples all deal with the problem of limited or vague understanding as part of the source text. But they lead to quite different translation strategies, to different kinds of solutions. I think this pragmatic heterogeneity is an important part of translation, and indeed of transcultural relations in general. Although I can say that, in theory, the above solutions can be classified as transpositions, substitutions or modulations (broadly corresponding to the three strategies described for "the bush"), they are of a variety and moral complexity obviously far richer than any terminological trinity. Although I consider it important that textual lacunae be translated as such, although I would defend the above translations as ethically superior to their general alternatives (pretending to know what you don't, or never finishing), my own practice as a translator and teacher of translation is clearly not as elegant as the terms of debate, since I do feel guilty about incomprehensibility and am thus prepared to risk over-translation (as was the case with "tout"). In this area, valid solutions are rarely generated by normative principles; there are very few absolute distinctions; most limits are uncertain.

Since translation is always potential exchange, these uncertain limits can potentially be made to work both ways. And yet there is a peculiar asymmetry here. Although I can translate a certain Australian specificity into Spanish, I find myself generally unable to translate from Spanish into anything specifically Australian.

Part of my work as a translator, by no means the least enjoyable part, has been the rendering of fifteen or so children's books from Spanish and Catalan into English. But into what English? Ideally, my language should probably be that of the target public, readers (listeners) aged between four and ten. One hopes there are young English-speaking boys able to say something like "¡Anda! ¡Qué sitio más bueno para jugar a los trenes!" when their father takes them to see a big train station for the first time. But how should I know what they say? What is the equivalent for this "¡Anda!"? Where should I find it? How did I arrive at the translation: "Wow! What a great place to play trains!"?

The children's language most available to me is obviously that of the five-year-old somewhere within myself. When I am engaged in translation, the voices I hear come

from an Australian childhood, with Australian accents. Sometimes, when a book-parent speaks to a book-child, the voice I first translate into is my father's, and I'm sure I recall more or less exactly what he said or would have said in the situation concerned. But as soon as the words are to be written, they must be severed from any explicit regionalism because, obviously, the young boy in the train station and the father who takes him there have to speak English in many countries; they cannot be Australian. I find myself recalling a forgotten language, then castrating its belonging. The international English I am forced to use means that writing, translating, kills my regional childhood.

I wanted to say "Gee!", but balked, uncertain as to its entire neutrality. Hence ultimate retreat to the relatively unmarked "Wow!". But does anyone still say "Wow!"?

If I remember the literature I read or had read to me as a child, no one in those books really spoke the language we Australians used. At the time, the book-children in our house were more likely to be saying Englishy things like "Gosh!" or "Golly!", although I do seem to recall that young book-Australians were supposed to exclaim a Cockneyish "Cor!" (equally a corruption of "God"). I half identified my being Australian with the fact that books never spoke like "me 'n me mates". It was then no problem to study English literature and learn the symbolics of flowers and trees that I am still unable to identify. Which is perhaps also why it took me many years to accept that books where Australians do tend to talk like Australians might yet be literary.

There is a whole language of childhood designed to age slowly in books and never enter living mouths in the street or home. Although it doesn't shock me to read "¡Caramba!" in Spanish, I don't think I have ever heard it spoken by any remotely young Spaniard. When asked to translate the above "Wow!", my Canarian students delighted in such specificities as "¡Chacho!", or insisted on something like "¡Qué sitio más guay!", unaware that the successfully printed word should sell beyond the Canaries and for more years than the resistant but ephemeral "guay" is likely to last. The economies of publishing, if nothing else, mean that book-children should not talk like regional children. And all children are regional. Perhaps the neutralized no-man's-land language I now translate into is just as normal as book-language ever was. But what then do I seek from the five-year-old within me?

Half-forgotten words slip from my mouth—with all due doubt as to their Australian peculiarity—as I converse with my now four-month-old daughter. There are of course a series of baby-nouns that I am surprised to find are not universal: a "dummy" (chupete) is called a "pacifier" in American and Canadian English, but something within me insists on calling it a "dum-dum". That is almost certainly not especially Australian (I don't know), but there is something about "quityawinjin!"—more comprehensibly transcribed as "quit your whinging"—that comes closer to the mark, although the latter verb is simply "informal" in my dictionary. And what about "biteez", meaning

“dangerous, not to be eaten or touched”, as if everything potentially harmful were able to bite, like a dugite? This, I suspect, is indeed Australian. But the most frustrating aspect of such expressions is never being sure of how specific they are or might be to my childhood. One usually discovers the limits of regionality through transgression, like the Australian temp secretaries in London who proverbially ask for “durex” (an Australian brand of transparent adhesive tape) and receive condoms. If one never dares to ask, the frontiers remain mysteries, forgotten, if ever known.

Translation is one way of asking such questions. That is why over-translation should be avoided as much as possible, so that questions may at least be asked before all answers are presumed to be given.

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Within translation theory, the notion of translating lacunae is by no means stupid or gratuitous. Accepting that, as Catford puts it, “the discovery of textual equivalents is based on the authority of a competent bilingual informant or translator” (1965: 27), one must then confront numerous cases in which the authority or competence of the informant is open to question. If I should now present myself as an overtly incompetent informant, it is obviously to suggest that this situation is not as rare as is theoretically assumed. But how might one then proceed?

It should be remembered that Quine’s strategies for determining the relative indeterminism of translation require that the informant be at least capable of giving an affirmative or negative response to a proposition. But here, in the above examples, I find that my own responses are very much “yes and no”, both at once. In such situations, Quine’s strategies cannot even get started. And yet the indeterminism we are concerned with is not as absolute as cases where, as has happened in the translation of myths (Pym 1990), native informants preserve sealed attics by answering “yes” to every question or by systematically replying “it’s *ungud*, it belongs to the dreaming”. Although much Australian Aboriginal literature is available, such answers have led to meanings being forgotten, perpetually hidden or carried to graves, replaced by layers of facile exoticism.

Western cultures, defined by frontiers which are asymmetric, penetrable and expansive, do not want to keep their identity markers secret and will not respect the secrecy of other identity markers. Questions are thus asked again and again. Such might be the essence of Western regionality: there must always be at least the possibility of knowing both the self and the other. It is then within this need to know that lacunae become socially necessary. Hence the possibility and importance of recognising and conveying cultural lacunae; hence, also, the importance of translation as a mode of

recognising and, where possible, conveying their uncertainty as darkness within our enlightening imperialism.

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