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Translating Linguistic Variation: Parody and the Creation of Authenticity

Should the markers of linguistic varieties (accents, dialects, sociolects, class codes, whatever) be translated as such? The question is a chestnut allowing any number of platitudes: yes, whatever is significant should be translated; no, the values of a variety cannot be mapped from culture to culture (Scottish English and French-Canadian Joulal might both be working-class and nationalistic, but they are by no means equivalent); so perhaps, say the literary profound, here we find one of the limits of translatability, if indeed that is what we were after.

Or the binary option: Either you leave the variety untranslated (and lose value) or you render it with a misleadingly equivalent variety (and lose vraisemblance): Why should someone in Scotland speak Joulal?¹

Or the descriptive stance: Such things are rarely translated, so our task is really to say why. Easy answer: translators are not paid enough to solve such problems, and no one really cares anyway.²

Or existential liberation: There is no clear answer to the problem, so the theories fail and the individual translator is free and responsible for whatever they do.³

Here I would like to try something slightly different. It seems to me that in order to say anything remotely intelligent about the translation of variety, we would have to know what varieties are doing in cultural products in the first place. Only then, within a general theory of this particular kind of signification, could we pretend to legislate the pros and cons of translation.

In what follows I will briefly investigate only one possible aspect of the way varieties signify, mostly in English. I wish to call that aspect "authenticity".

¹ Henry Schogt: *Linguistics, Literary Analysis, and Literary Translation*, Toronto, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988.

² John Milton: "A tradução de romances 'clássicos' do inglês para o português no Brasil", *Trabalhos em lingüística aplicada* (Campinas) 24 (1994), pp. 19-33; "The Translations of O Clube do Livro", *TradTerm* (São Paulo) 3 (1996), 47-65.

³ Gillian Lane-Mercier: "Translating the Untranslatable: The Translator's Aesthetic, Ideological and Political Responsibility", *Target*, 9:1 (1997), pp. 43-48.

1. THE NATURE OF LINGUISTIC AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity may be roughly defined as the opposite of parody, if and when we know what parody is.

Consider, if you will, the Monty Python sketch where four Yorkshiremen tell tall tales about the hardships of their youth, of which a concocted fragment might be as follows:

We had to live in paper bag in the road; get oop at free in monin', go down mill, come 'ome an favver'd beat us, and we wuz loocky...

The variety “Yorkshire Working-Class English” is signified by just a few clear variations: “oo” for “u”, h-dropping, irregular omission of the definite article, one or two realia (“mill”), and little else. The Monty Python representation of the variety is wilfully imperfect, not only because of stray items like the pronunciation of the word “father”, which actually owes more to Cockney, but more significantly because the four young Oxonians display minor insecurity about what features really belong in Yorkshire: on a handful of occasions there is slight rhoticity.

A similar analysis might be made of the false Andalusian that many Spanish comedians employ to linguistically lubricate the less intelligent characters in television jokes. What we are dealing with here is not the linguistic variety as such —certainly not the thing a sociolinguist might idealize as extending neatly across a stretch of geography or society— but a functional representation of the variety, shorn to just a few stereotypical elements. The result is considered amusing. Such is parody, at least in one of its more extreme forms.

The use of a variety as parody might thus be described as a wilful reduction of variations to just a few, which are then emphasized through repetition or are played with by being produced inconsistently (thus dissociating them from the subjectivity of the actor as speaker). We know parody is at work when we are made to believe we are receiving only reduced and extreme markers of a truer variety. Indeed, parody would seem to be one of the key ways in which the notion of a coherent variety is projected in the first place.

Authenticity is then the extreme opposite of parody. It is the multiplication of variations beyond anything that the popular imagination can identify, such that a variety is represented in such detail, with such a wide range of finely balanced and accented features, local lexis and faintly non-standard syntax, that the linguistic result must surely be the real thing, if only because it goes beyond the limits of what any analyst could identify as the fixed features of a variety.

An extreme example —to stand opposite the Monty Python sketches— might be a Ken Loach realist film where half-mumbled tones drift in and out of the viewer’s sense-making range. One can only assume that the language not wholly decoded signifies locality: only that particular language, precisely because not fully understood, can really be the authentic variety of that time and place. Such would be the aesthetics of detail. If you want a map to look precise, make the lines wavy not straight, suggest there is more information conveyed than could possibly interest the receiver of the information. In cheap abundance shall we create the value of the language offered. The code of the product will be, if all goes well, received as authentic.

There is a certain aesthetics of authenticity, even when we know it is achieved by subtle artifice. There is even real pleasure to be found in the tension between the known (what we understand of this speech) and the unknown (that which is understandable only to authentic beings, a community from which authenticity excludes the receiver). There is something of the pleasure Barthes⁴ described as the “grain of the voice”, as when listening to a tenor whose imperfections of tone make the song all the more human. Or again, authenticity is in the appreciation of palimpsests, in knowing that the age of parchment or paper adds rather than subtracts from the value of the words read. In all such areas, the known receives added value from the details that remain in some way undecoded.

2. NORMS AND DIVERGENCE

Parody and authenticity are two extreme cases. They have been simplified here because lifted out of context. Of course, things are not quite that simple.

If we look at the Monty Python sketch, we find a series of situations in which these same actors use various varieties of the south, near the upper reaches of Estuary English. So when we plough into the Yorkshire parody, it is parody largely because of the abrupt nature of the jump. Similarly, at a key point in the Ken Loach film *Land of Freedom* (1995), the English of the actors gives way to the Spanish of a local village meeting, where the speakers stumble looking for words, or repeat, or look around for support, all in ways more compatible with “real villagers” than with the clean dialogues of the intellectual brigade fighting an ideological Civil War. Authenticity, like parody, is created in the rapid shift away from an established norm, specifically the norm set up in the course and rhythm of the particular cultural product in question. Here we are dealing with syntagmatic shifts, not just true or false representations. Passing points:

Minor shifts of this kind are happening all the time. Whenever an element is felt to be “typical” of a variety, there is parody at work. Similarly, wherever a culture is at stake, many minor items mark out the values of authenticity. For example, as a born-and-bred Australian I am not ashamed to admit to numerous expressions in Australian literature that I do not fully understand.⁵ Worse, on a cursory reading of literary texts, one would not really notice such things. In fact, it was only when coordinating translations into Spanish that I became aware of my ignorance, and thereby of the workings of authenticity. (And yes, it is possible to translate items you do not understand: an Australian “boggabry” plant, in Patrick White, quite happily flourishes as a “bogabri” in Spanish, and God has not said a word.)

When such shifts happen in text, toward either parody or authenticity, we might expect the norm itself to become slightly less illusory. We might become aware of the Estuary English, or of the clean speech of professional actors. In the case of authentic-

⁴ Roland Barthes: *Le Plaisir du texte*, Paris, Seuil, 1973; *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, Paris, Seuil, 1977.

⁵ For the confessions, see Anthony Pym: “Lacunae and uncertain limits in Australian culture, with suggestions on their translation into Spanish”, Kathleen Firth and Susan Ballyn (eds.): *Australia in Barcelona*, Barcelona, Univ. de Barcelona, 1993, pp. 27-37.

ity, this would certainly seem to be the case. In the case of parody, though, the opposite could well be true. Indeed, if the apparently deviant variety is parodied (Yorkshire, Andalusian), the operative reference norm could well become even stronger as an illusory standard.

The norms we are referring to here are those established within individual cultural products or genres of products. As such, they would seem to operate in relative independence of the varieties actually used by receivers. Millions of Australians, for example, consume American and British television series without ever asking why the English spoken in those products is not Australian. Indeed, the truly alienating effect was in the 1970s, when Australian English became a regular option for television commercials and serious television drama produced in Australia itself. That is, Australians were taken aback by the use of their own broader varieties in communicative situations that had previously been occupied by the more British end of the cultural continuum.

This latter point should explain why cultural products generally do not have to be recast when they move between English-speaking countries. True, the thick Scottish English of *Trainspotting* was dubbed into thinner Scottish English for the United States, but that was because of semantic loss, not because of what the variety signifies as norm. One might even think of this phenomenon as an effect of genre: the reference variety of the individual cultural product is the one that one would expect from similar works. Thus, with particular product genres, British comedy, Hollywood films, Australian suburban soap operas or Jamaican reggae each create some kind of neutral standard when they are in their own variety.

This leads us to a general hypothesis: *Non-standard varieties are used in cultural products in order to create distance between sender and receiver, and this distance may be in two dimensions, either towards parody or towards authenticity.* Or to personalize the issue: in cases of parody, sender and receiver side with each other in order to distance a devalued third person, whereas in authenticity they side with each other in order to distance an upwardly valued third person (the value here residing precisely in a degree of active non-comprehension).

3. WHY TRANSLATE MARKERS OF VARIETIES?

The answer to our original question is now deceptively easy. When translators are confronted with the markers of a variety, the thing to be rendered is not the source-text variety (such things, by definition, do not move, and translation is in any case the *re-placement* of the base source-text variety, by definition). The thing to be rendered is the variation, the syntagmatic alteration of distance, the relative deviation from the norm. If those shifts can be rendered, as is usually the case, then the markers may be said to have been translated, and no complaint should ensue.

To that extent, any target-culture markers, including those that are calques from the source or other cultures, could do the trick. The only thing one need really watch for is the modulation of parody and authenticity, and the relative value of respecting their difference.

To take a perennial test case, the rendering of the seven varieties proclaimed in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* need not be a case of deciding which target-culture

variety is the closest to slavery, or which is the most backwoods-bound,⁶ as if the class and regional differences of colonial society were those of all society. It might more productively be a question of grasping when parody is at work (as often seems to be the case of the character Jim) and then introducing elements that mark parody (including, in this day and age, elements borrowed straight from the Black American Vernacular, as calques rather than translations, in corresponding or compensatory position). Alternatively, when the thing to be rendered falls within the dimension of authenticity, the translator's task is paradoxically all the easier: one need only judiciously sprinkle the text with elements that should remain relatively unknown to the target receiver, and the unknown is common to all cultures.

Note that here we are not rejoining arguments for "foreignizing" translation, which has been an imperialist ploy for distanced intellectuals since at least the time of Schleiermacher. We must first recognize that source texts can also be foreignizing, that the dynamics of parody and authenticity exist before the translator enters the scene, and that the challenge is to carry on or thwart, if one will, that which has already begun. Indeed, if the ethics of foreignization were carried out consistently, from beginning to end of a translation, then the foreign would simply become the base norm for that product, making the rendering of authenticity, if and when it surfaces in the source, almost impossible. The intellectual's elitist respect for the other might thus risk killing the workings of the work. That may be a gain, yet it is often also a loss, of readership if nothing else.

4. PRESCRIPTIVISM AT LAST?

I seem to have told translators how to translate. That might be an occupational hazard of all translation teachers. In this case it certainly comes from no great degree of ideological rectitude beyond the task in hand. In fact, if translators do not choose to render syntagmatic variety shifts, that is certainly their business and I, for one, will not be at all upset (for obvious reasons: translators are mostly not paid for such work; receivers do not know what they are missing anyway; our contemporary interculturalures have reached no clear directive on the issue... none of which is remotely close to noble existential dilemmas).

What worries me more is the general paradigm of representation that continues to obscure the issue. Few satisfying answers will ever come if we continue to pretend that cultures can be equivalent, or if we continue to proclaim eternal difference and nothing else. Even fewer solutions will ensue if we consider translations to be entirely unlike non-translations, as if there were nothing to be learned from the realm of straight discourse analysis or monolingual television-watching. There is a real danger in an independent Translatology or Translation Studies. No, this should not be prescriptivism for translators. Our complaint is more directly with the scholars, of translation and otherwise, who have opined, described, or washed hands, mostly without asking what variations are doing in cultural products in the first place.

⁶ Cf. Ferran Romero: "The Translation of American Varieties in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*", <http://www.fut.es/~apym/Hucktrans.html>, 1998.