

### Voices in translation

Published fiction implies discourse has assumed a written form shaped by the author's speech and voice, whereas oral presentations have a dually-oriented existence: on the level of the individual utterer through his/her own voice and on the social level through speech. In literary works, when transferred to paper, voiced speech materializes and becomes what is known as "orality"<sup>1</sup> in fiction—not only limited to the representation of language, but extending to any more or less audible "voiced" expression. The oral tradition as studied by Paul Zumthor in his structural essay on medieval poetry, foregrounds the vocal dimension of certain written texts in the sense that behind the words there is a voice, an utterance emanating from a body, therefore granting the work its dramatic energy. Such features apply to any poetic fictional writing, and the concept of "orality" is rooted in the interconnection between speech, voice and discourse. This form of orality is one of the main features of Caribbean literature, therefore how can the many voices perceived in an original be kept in a different linguistic system addressed to a different culture, since it relies most often on the nature of enunciation, on lexical and syntactic features, deeply marked by a closely structured frame making its environment?

So, I propose to investigate the limitations imposed on the language of translation by social, cultural and linguistic preconceptions when a work of fiction is received as belonging to a specific geographical sphere commonly labelled *exotic*.

(social norms)

My examples will be taken from English Caribbean Literature translated into French, because in these works, the presence of Creole is at once a help and a hindrance, especially for sociological reasons. French colonists have imposed the use of Creole on the slave population, perhaps as a working tongue, though it is also present in written form in prayer books and poems, dating back to the early times of slavery, namely the 17th century. Now, as a translator and a translation studies professor I must discern two distinct phenomena that

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<sup>1</sup> Maximilien Laroche used the word *oraliture* in French, first coined by Ernst Mirville in 1974 in *Le Nouvelliste* in a French-creole speaking context in Haïti. We can consider that Caribbean writing is directly affected by creole oral tradition inviting the active participation of body and voice. In terms of translation, it implies the translator has not only to transcode meaning, but to give a body and a voice to his/her text in the cultural context.

cannot be mixed up: on the one hand a language widely spoken in a specific community—a community's voice, and on the other hand an original tool, a creolized tongue invented by a writer—his/her voice. Historically speaking, when French colonists settled in Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1635<sup>2</sup> (the year when the *Académie Française* was founded by Richelieu), their tongue was not standardized yet: there was no standard French language to impose in the colonies, thus a local tongue developed, which is still equally spoken by all social groups present in the French Caribbean, excluding the *Metropolitans*, of course.

On the other hand, the original language fabricated by French speaking Caribbean contemporary authors<sup>3</sup> is the result of what we would term *une langue métisse*, a mixed-language, deriving from the important interbreeding which has taken place in the French Caribbean throughout centuries. This *langue métisse* is often spoken by or related to characters belonging to the lower social classes<sup>4</sup>, which gives it a rather ambiguous status, whereas the upper classes are referred to in more standard French, so the reader's reception is invited to be biased. Hence the creation of an impression of clichéd *exoticism* through these voices, in a very negative sense of the word—i.e. *estrangement*. So, how can such a precious tool be used by translators? How may the cultural environment affect their semantic and syntactic choices?

(Cultural norms)

Caribbean culture is far from being homogenous, its complexity is rooted in extremes: the insular specificities of microcosms and the continuous exchanges between islands and with the mainland. This affects the language of fiction in which colloquialisms and exoticism meet, a striking mixture of familiarity and originality. Hence the temptation for French translators to reproduce these, to transform what pertains to everyday language and culture into exotic emblems<sup>5</sup>. In other words, the translator is faced with the problematics of an antagonistic relation between the alien and the familiar and his/her task might be restricted to

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<sup>2</sup> Between 1635 and 1680, Black and White people were in equal numbers on these islands under French rule.

<sup>3</sup> Like Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, Gisèle Pineau or others.

<sup>4</sup> Mainly prostitutes, drunks, cane-field workers.

<sup>5</sup> This could be termed « the Texaco Syndrom », after Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*. « Texaco », the place where the story takes place and around which it is articulated, is a very well known district of Fort de France, situated on the sea-shore; formerly belonging to the port of commerce, it harboured the oil market. Nowadays its industrial activity has vanished but the place is still there, well-known to all the *Martiquinçais*, but completely alien to anybody else—“Texaco” only evoking the American oil company. In other words, in this novel, the *Martiniquais* can easily recognize the cultural textual web but they may get lost in the text, which may become *exotic* to them for cultural reasons—Chamoiseau's writing is certainly more easily understood by the Metropolitan literary circles than by the inhabitants of Texaco. In other words, non local readers will deem *exotic* all allusions to the *real*, but will sometimes feel closer to the fictional.

the destruction or the exoticization of the textual webs of the vernacular. As Maria Tymoczko tried to show post-colonial literature and translation can both be regarded as a “carrying across”<sup>6</sup>. For her, the writer is transporting a culture when the translator is expected to be transporting a language. Nevertheless translators cannot be expected to transport the language without being burdened with a mixture of cross-cultural elements and completely foreign cultural elements. This is due to the fact that all textual elements are *fixed* whereas cross-references vary according to the receiving audience; as a consequence, cultural disjunctions cannot be muted or obscured, but they cannot be foregrounded either.

Then for the general reader the unknown, which happens to reflect local life, becomes simply *exotic*. Thus we can say that *exoticism* is generated by the distance that exists between fiction in the original language and its translated form. There is something opaque in a literary work, something that lies beyond comprehension; here it pertains both to the problem of identity, with its geographical and ethnic roots, and the problem of creativity, more concerned with its linguistic rendering. In point of fact translators are taken into the maelstrom of this problematic since they have to translate a Caribbean cultural identity which is still in the making, and in which concepts such as *home*, *exile* and *diaspora* are essential, and cannot tolerate monolithic *totalizing discourses* (Basnett in *Caribbean Women Writers: Identity and Gender*, 39).

To represent orality and more particularly vernacular orality, authors resort to what I called in an article published in 2005 *phonographologic transformations* (Raguet 2005: 82-83). They take the form of phonetic marks introduced to reflect accents and grammatical alterations so as to create an *effet de réel* and generate verisimilitude<sup>7</sup>, but the border line between a faithful representation of a spoken tongue and the author’s desire to manipulate language cannot be drawn easily. In this context it seems difficult to establish a clear and rigorous typology; one of the reasons lies in the blurring of the reading process encumbered and thickened with disconcerting forms, which generate a gap between the reading act itself and understanding. During this shifting process, what can be characterized as almost an interpretative void, a host of possible misinterpretations prompted by a strong comic impulse may take shape, since what is impossible to grasp at once may become laughable—hence the difficult task of producing in translation a similar situation inviting both empathy with a different fictional community and the necessary distance for comprehension and appreciation.

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<sup>6</sup> See “Post-Colonial Writing and Literary Translation”, in Bassnett and Trivedi, 19-40.

<sup>7</sup> These alterations affect words and clauses supposedly replicating the voice of certain ethnic or social groups; thus along with normative forms—acrolectal language—basilects and sociolects pertain to the enunciation.

In such circumstances, we are concerned with *cultural distance*, that is the gap felt between the original culture and the receiving culture, and the translator's aim may be, with the help of his/her work, to extend the domain of the receiving culture so that it does not appropriate the Other, but opens its scope in order to receive the Other with his or her Otherness.

(Linguistic norms)

The problem raised by translation in such situations is the absence of a norm. During the translating process, my contention is that the translator should stick to a certain geographical and cultural area with which s/he is familiar, even though such a choice is entirely subjective.

Standard English speakers can generally understand the representation of a local variant of English despite its sometimes disconcerting grammatical rules. This often led French translators to choose what is known as *Petit Nègre*, a sort of broken French, which conforms to stereotypes, to translate this local language. Locality is thus rendered by a mixture of derogatory forms, making the narrators and speakers sound ridiculous.

When one has to translate Caribbean diglossic texts in which several lects collide in a very few pages, the major problem is both that of revealing this linguistic conflict and of managing to remain within most readers' reach. This means that, contrary to a larger tendency to *decreolization*, even non-creolophone translators will have to try and creolize their own native tongue and fabricate a new language into which the text is to be brought into a new life.

If French translators can introduce French Creole words, phrases and grammatical usage, they can also find solutions in the authors of the *mouvement de la créolité*, but they will soon discover that their texts seem to move and slide, to *erase themselves*, to reappear in different forms which open the way to various readings. Obviously French translators cannot and are not expected to operate on a similar level. Even if one accepts the process of reciprocity in translation, it should not go as far as mimicking. When I speak of *reciprocity*, I allude to the late French translator and theorist, Antoine Berman (*L'épreuve de l'étranger*, 293-4), who tried to show that a work of fiction and its translation are reciprocally engendered because all translations are *a priori* present in all originals, since each work of fiction is in itself a web of translations (semiotically speaking), and is also meant to be *translatable*, that is *worth being translated*, *possible to translate* and *aiming at being translated* to reach its

final stage of plenitude. Therefore, from the very beginning a work of fiction is meant to give a voice to trans-textual operations.

Henceforth translations create paradoxical situations: when I translate Jamaican English into French, there are elements that sound and look familiar to French *Metropolitans* but which should not be recognized as belonging only to the familiar continental culture because in the Caribbean they have another meaning and function.

For instance, very simple lexical questions arise, like: how can I translate *gizzada*? Will I keep the word for its *exotic* sound to the French ear, which means that nobody will understand, or will I translate it as *tarte-coco*, resorting to *agglutination*?

Hence the creation of what I would term *distanced familiarity* when the reader should be surprised by what is unnatural to him or to her. One has to find tricks to render these and I often try to fabricate words (as you may see on the hand-out).

If you look at the short extract from “Ascot” by Olive Senior, you will note that grammatical shifts are compensated lexically in French; many words evoking the Jamaican locality are rendered by creole forms (ti-manmaille, vacabon, coutelas, étik, chabin, etc.), some other direct equivalences are proposed like “fils-dehors”, creolized additions like “garçon-là”, meant to reproduce the music of the sentence. Altogether the jubilatory dimension of the text has been the main concern during the translating process.

As a conclusion, we can say that quite provocatively, the sacred notion of legibility is willingly threatened through various enunciative devices in order to destabilize readers, to summon their attention and make them “hear” the stories, situating rhythm at the centre as Meschonnic attempted to demonstrate: “rhythm is order, mathematical proportion, measure. Thus, it is harmony, from microcosmic structures to macrocosmic ones, whose metrics, originally, lies in celebration until it forgets and is nothing more than the metrics of itself.” (Meschonnic 1995: 361)<sup>8</sup> If the translator concentrates on semantic interpretation, he or she will propose to reveal *the meaning of meaning*, which may deprive the translated text of its initial mystery and close the doors to personal discovery. Moreover, when writing concentrates on crises, on epiphanies, on moments of revelation, when plot as such is secondary, there is no meaning to be fished out, creativity rests on the conflation of voices the

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<sup>8</sup> (My translation): (rhythm is) “ordre, proportion mathématique, mesure. Et par là une harmonique du microcosme au macrocosme dont toute métrique est la célébration, originellement, jusqu’à ce qu’elle l’oublie, et n’est plus que la métrique d’elle-même.”

translator is invited to hear and reproduce in his/her turn; the translator's creativity rests on stylistic choices for the simple reason that the literary value and interest of a story depends more on the senses than on sense: ever since Humboldt demonstrated the sensory character of the mediation between sound and concept, we have known that language has the central and unique function of fabricating this link between sounds, constructs and their manifestation in our minds.

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