

TRANSLATING for the THEATRE: TRANSLATION or ADAPTATION?

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Abstract

Traduire pour le théâtre, c'est-à-dire traduire un texte dramatique pour des comédiens et des spectateurs, requiert de la part du traducteur qu'il traduise – donc qu'il adapte – le texte source à la culture réceptrice (spécificité culturelle et religieuse, tabous, etc) d'une part, et à la langue cible elle-même, d'autre part. Traduire un texte américain ou allemand en arabe algérien n'est pas la même opération que traduire ce même texte en français, par exemple.

Translating plays presents a number of problems quite different from those encountered in translating poetry or fiction. These problems derive from the fact that we are dealing with a specific genre. Theatre is meant to be performed; that is, its language is specific in that it is written to be performed by actors on the stage. The theatrical text is only a sort of manual for actors, a sort of how-to-do things on the stage. When novelists write fiction, they have in mind the kind of readership they are writing for. Whether the product is, say, a novel or a short-story, fiction-writers will be applying the canons and tenets related to the genre itself. Playwrights also have in mind the kind of "readership" they are writing for. But theirs is not a readership; rather, it is an audience. Spectators will be seeing the plays and listening to the actors. They will be using their visual and auditory senses.

A play is not a text as such; it is and should be above all a speakable, actable text. Actors will bring it to life; it is they who will make it theatrical. Therefore translators should bear in mind that they will be translating for both actors and audience. Besides, there is the question of immediacy. In fiction for instance, the reader is at several removes from the world of the text: the written language to be decoded, comprehension, imagination, and finally the writer's universe. Here, in case of difficulties, the translator can always explain using footnotes or add short informations within the text. There is no such thing in theatre for there is an *immediate contact* between actors and audience. We are here dealing with *phonos* as it were, as opposed to *logos*(1).

Thus translators would have to focus on actability on the one hand and immediacy on the other. Translators should make sure that what they are rendering is speakable and actable on the stage, taking into account the length of their sentences, and the kind of vocabulary they are using. In other words, avoid situations in which the actors will have difficulty memorizing their speech-parts. As to immediacy, the task is to make sure that what is said is clear enough and does not necessitate any further explanations.

After the theatre genre itself, we now have to refer to the sort of theatre we intend to translate: is it Classical or Modern? And again, realistic, symbolistic, expressionistic, absurd, etc...? Here translators will have to make a close study of the text with its formal and stylistic qualities. They will be acting as critics of the text. One does not encounter the same problems in translating say, Beckett into Spanish or Arabic as Shakespeare. Classical theatre often makes ample use of rhymed speech and poetry. The task is even greater in this case. One has to render both meaning and musicality.

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I have selected some examples taken from the plays of Harold Pinter and Eugène Ionesco to illustrate a particular point.. It is the kind of theatre that best illustrates on the stage the human tragedy of language, showing us human beings in their prison-house, illustrating thereby Heidegger's celebrated phrase: « language is the house of Being ». Thus language becomes the battle-ground between self-centered, dehumanized individuals trying to understand each other. Although these works are to some extent successfully rendered into French and English respectively at the level of language *per se*, it is not the case for names, places and other cultural references.

In his translation of Pinter's *Old Times*, Eric Kahane kept all the literary, artistic and the toponymic references of the original. Thus Pinter's characters would now on the Parisian stage speak French and claim they have read the poems of Yeats on long evenings in London. Just as they would mention the Brontës, the Scottish popular singer McCormick, etc... What this translator forgot to do was to « de-foreignize » the play, that is to de-territorialize(2) the text only to accommodate it in the culture of the recipient language:

ANNA (parlant de Kate): Mais quand je l'ai connue, Elle était *tellement* timide, timide comme une biche, vraiment... J'avais attribué cela à son éducation de fille pasteur, et à vrai dire elle me faisait beaucoup penser aux soeurs Brontë.

ANNA: ...Nous dévorions le tout et ensuite, plutôt plus souvent que moins, nous restions debout la moitié de la nuit à lire du Yeats (...*guzzled up the lot, and then more often than not sat up half the night reading Yeats*).

Elsewhere the translator also half-rendered an American song since he kept parts of it in English:

ANNA (chantant):

- Blue moon, I see you standing alone...

DEELEY (chantant):

- Ceux qui parlent d'amour...

ANNA(chantant):

- savent-ils qu'un jour
Malgré mes serments
J'ai pris un amant ?

DEELEY (chantant):

- Two for tea...
... You for me....

(ANNA - singing-):

You are the promised kiss of springtime...

(DEELEY - singing-) :

*And someday I'll know that moment divine,
When all the things you are, are mine !*

(ANNA - singing -):

*I get no kick from champagne,
Mere alcohol doesn't thrill me at all,
So tell me why should it be true -*

DEELEY:

That I get a kick out of you?

ANNA: (Singing)

*They asked me how I knew
My true love was true,
I of course replied,
Something here inside,
cannot be denied.*

DEELEY (singing):

When a lovely flame dies...

ANNA (singing):

Smoke gets in your eyes...

It is quite astonishing to imagine two English characters speak French and sing in a sort of half-translation, that is both in English and French a song that is known the world over in ...English with a particular rhyme pattern.

Elsewhere again we find another strange rendering:

DEELEY: - Ce qui me tracasse, c'est la pensée de votre mari en train de piétiner sur place, tout seul dans sa villa immense, subsistant au jour le jour avec quelques oeufs durs, et pas même foutu de parler anglais comme tout le monde (*What worries me is the thought of your husband rumbling about alone...and unable to speak a damn word of English*).

Anna is married to a non-English speaker and live together in Sicily. Harold Pinter alludes to the communication difficulties Anna must find with such a husband. He therefore ought to speak some English. We should perhaps now try to visualize the scene and ask a few questions. How come do they speak French and English in London since the translator kept the city of London as the *topos*? Second, how can Anna have a husband who cannot understand English when she now speaks French on the stage? What does she speak then: English, French or both? One can imagine the difficulty of the Parisian audience at this stage. What the translator forgot was that Anna, Kate and Deeley cannot at the same time be English and speak French. Otherwise we are led to believe that they are in fact English but only speak French on the stage to unable us to understand the play, and nothing else. Is that what the British audience would feel? Certainly not. What Kahane produced was a cheap Pinteresque play saleable to non-English speakers, a sort of soap-opera(3). This translation and therefore the French on-stage performance is full of such weird co-habitation between names, places and languages.

The same problem occurs in Edward Albee's French translation of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Jean Cau performed in Paris in 1964. The French actors had to act as the Americans Martha, George, Nick and Honey in French but in the same *topos* as the original, that is an American University campus. If naming sometimes is not problematic, the name Honey is. It is used rather ironically inasmuch as it is both a term of endearment as well as the substance, honey itself:

NICK: Tu es mon petit minet, Honey?

HONEY: Je suis un petit minet, Honey.

GEORGE: Honey mimi minet!

...

NICK: Je t'en prie, Honey!

The last case, that of the English translation of Ionesco's *La leçon* is quite interesting. In this play the professor asks his student the following intriguing question,

- Comment dites-vous Italie en français?

and as the student cannot answer, he adds:

- C'est pourtant bien simple: pour le mot Italie nous avons le mot France, qui en est la traduction exacte.

Let us now see how the English translator rendered this:

- ...Just tell me now, how you say Italy in French?

-...For the word 'Italy', we have in French the word 'France', which is an exact translation...

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It is quite obvious that the translator has missed the subtlety beneath the apparently tautological juxtaposition of *italie* and *France*. In fact what Ionesco meant was that Italy for instance is to an Italian what France is to a French citizen, that we all identify with our own country, language and culture. How can we imagine the British audience's reaction for instance before the phrase « Italy in French? » since to begin with the word 'Italy' is already (in) English? This is *the* case where total transformation, i.e. adaptation reaches its full sense, precisely what Ionesco was advocating in this play.

Theatre is the stage of orality. A weak translation may pass unnoticed in fiction but not in drama. Language must be rendered the way natives speak it, and it is because of this that drama translation often rebels against fidelity more than fiction or poetry. Whether one calls it transformation or adaptation, it is only fair given the limitations imposed by the genre itself. Translation is transformation no matter how insignificant that is. And in theatre transforming, adapting, « de-foreignizing » is the only key to the beleaguered and beguiling question of fidelity, especially for non-related theatres. I am thinking of translations from say, European/American to Algerian. If these remarks may not be a major problem between British or American and French cultures given the more or less common heritage (Graeco-roman and Judeo-Christian), then what about translating these plays into Arabic?

There is here a double problem. Not only is Standard Arabic unspoken in Algeria - we would therefore have to translate into Algerian Arabic in the case of Modern theatre- , but also realize that somehow European/American cultures cannot simply be translated/transposed on the stage. They have to be 'de-territorialized', that is ridden of their alienness to the Algerian audience. Deeley, Kate, Anna could not be English and speak to us in our mother tongue while in London. That would simply sound preposterous, just as would be the case say, for Alloula's veiled women or turbaned peasants to speak English to the British audience while in Oran. Just as we cannot imagine Martha, George, Nick and Honey speak Arabic while in an American campus room. What we should perhaps think of doing is to 'appropriate' or 'nationalize' these sorts of plays: de-localize the *topos* and de-foreignize the characters. Both place and characters should sound familiar to the audience. At any rate, translated literature has always played a major role in literary evolution throughout the ages(4). In fact national literatures often renew themselves via translation.

The problems mentioned above lead us to question translating as a creative or re-creative craft but at the same time also question the model for translating and writing are dialectically related. Translating involves rewriting, ie a process that dislodges the author as authority. In doing so translating strikes deep into the politics of writing as well as into the sacredness of authorship. Yet we should perhaps here try to remember that this notion of authorship is not very old since it goes as far back as the Neo-Classical Age. The ideological opposition between original and translation, between author and translator has in fact been established to *safeguard Authority*(5). This false divide had therefore led literary studies to see the writer as *creator* and the translator as *medium*. The problem lies not in translation as such but rather in the delineation authority/translation(6).

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In fact, this divide between original and translation came because translation reproduces the *logos of the other*. Hence the need to safeguard Authority and Identity. However what has been forgotten is that translation contributes not only to literature or art for our purpose, but can also contribute to a *theory of writing*. Because writing implies a transformation of language, and because it is deconstructive, translating has been denied that very function it has always assumed. On the other hand, because translating is writing as such, it establishes a dialectical relationship between itself and writing; this relationship then eliminates or evacuates the false opposition between writing and translating(7).

Indeed and as Derrida has rightly shown, writing, reading and translating are transformations. Any writing thus is a transformation of readings, that is re-writing and/or counter-writing. Writing can make no claim of faithfully 'translating' truth, reality and history, but only produce an 'approximation' of the human inner world as well as the world around us. Why then raise the fallacious 'metaphysical' question of fidelity ?

Fidelity in translation is an imposture, an ideological, historical fallacy. It is it that prevents translators from being free, the way playwrights and writers are when they sit to work. In the name of fidelity, translators have been regarded as *deceivers* or *traitors*, that is untruthful, unfaithful to their master-models. I am using these terms with an avowed intention, that of attempting to show how fallacious they are. This neo-platonic view of a translation as a mere copy of the original is itself a utopia since there is no such thing as a perfect translation (in the sense of a twin copy). This very idea is oxymoronic in itself. Perfect translation means perfect re-writing of the original in another tongue, a re-creation *ab ovo*. Why should translators be summoned to be faithful to the original? Are writers/authors faithful to anything, to any previous model? certainly not, since they cannot be judged against any model: *they* are the model or are *the proprietors* of these models. It is perhaps high time we questioned these very notions of fidelity and authorship.

Notes :

¹ I am using 'phonos' in the Derridean sense of 'centered on sound/speech), i.e. the 'spoken word' in contra-distinction to *logos* (written word).. Cf Derrida's use of the terms *phonocentrism* and *logocentrism* in his *Positions*, 1972.

²G.DELEUZE & F.GUATTARI, *Mille plateaux*, 1980.

³ And this is what actually occurred. Lemarchand reports on the Parisian impressions of Pinter's play *The Caretaker* (I haven't been able to find comments on *Old Times*): « ...Les lourdes ou méchantes plaisanteries qui ont accueilli l'entrée de Pinter sur la scène française », in *LE FIGARO LITTERAIRE*, 22-28 Sept. 1969.

⁴ England produced *Robinson Crusoe* thanks partly to the English translation of *Rissalat Hay Ben Yaddhan* around 1708, that is shortly before Defoe's novel as formally acknowledged by P.G.Adams in his *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, 1983. Before that, the translation into castilian of the Arabic *Maqamat* gave birth to a new genre hitherto unknown to European readers: the picaresque. This same picaresque was later introduced in Germany and France via French and German translations : cf. RANDALL, D.B., *The Golden Tapestry: A Critical Survey of Non-Chivalric Spanish Fiction in English Translation(1543-1657)*, 1963 . The examples abound. See also.M.WATT, *Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, 1972. and EVEN-ZOHAR, I., " The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem ", in HOLMES, J.S. et al, *Literature and Translation. New Perspectives in Literary Studies*, Leuven, 1978, pp.117-27.

⁵ Indeed right until the 17th century, there was no difference between original writer, imitator and translator. The Authorized Version otherwise known as King James Version was translated by 47 scholars directly from the Hebrew and Greek and completed around the year 1611. Is it an unfaithful copy of the original ? On the contrary, this is a case where a