Christine Raguet
Université Sorbonne nouvelle - Paris 3

Translating Culture: an Ethical Question
OUTLINE

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Preparing the Ground

Translation with its double allegiance to the foreign text and the domestic culture, is a reminder that no act of interpretation can be definitive for every cultural constituency, that interpretation is always local and contingent, even when housed in social institutions with the apparent rigidity of the academy. In such settings, translation is scandalous because it crosses institutional boundaries: not only does translation require scholarly research to move between languages, cultures, and disciplines, but it compels the scholar to consider constituencies beyond the academy—for example the global dominance of English. (Venuti, 46)
Domesticate / Foreignize

*The Playboy of the Western World*, John Millington Synge (1907):

*The action takes place in a shebeen… (note: old country house)*

—> l’action se déroule dans pub de campagne
(adapts => domesticates)

*Poteen (= home made whisky)*

—> whisky de contrebande (= illicit whisky)
(adapts => domesticates)
- the general concept of *loyalty* to the various parties concerned
- the acceptable degree of freedom in the translating process
  (…)
- (…) the argument about the translator’s invisibility
  (my italics)

The *habitus* is a system of dispositions acquired through implicit or explicit training, which functions like a system of generative schemes, and it generates strategies, which can objectively conform to the objective interests of their authors without having been expressively conceived with this end in view.

(L’*habitus*, système de dispositions acquises par l’apprentissage implicite ou explicite qui fonctionne comme un système de schèmes générateurs, est générateur de stratégies qui peuvent être objectivement conformes aux intérêts objectifs de leurs auteurs sans en avoir été expressément conçues à cette fin.) (my translation)

Cultural Distance, Ethics and Translation

*Internal cultural distance*: introduction of foreign words, cultural references, vernacular, various lects, etc.  
—> create relative unintelligibility

*External cultural distance*: between original and translation  
- either be treated as folklore when the translator resorts to ready-made picturesque images  
- or take an exotic turn, in the negative sense of the word, that is to propose clichés which are often derogatory;  
- finally it may play on the enunciative level when the translator fabricates a discourse in its own right

Positive result when attempting to ‘enlarge the sphere of a culture’

(my translation / my italics)
Creation and Ethics

- firstly: meaning = ‘signified’ no longer the central concern
  —> significance.

- secondly: otherness not a deviation from a norm
  —> one of the diverse constituents of culture.

- thirdly: no power relation from a dominating culture
  —> over a dominated culture.
Antoine Berman’s deforming tendencies

- Rationalization
- Clarification
- Expansion
- Ennoblement
- Qualitative impoverishment
- Quantitative impoverishment
- Homogenization
- The destruction of rhythms
- The destruction of underlying networks of signification
- The destruction of linguistic patterning
- The destruction of vernacular networks or their exoticization
- The destruction of expressions and idioms
- The effacement of the superimposition of languages
- Rationalization: ‘recomposes sentences and the sequence of sentences, rearranging them according to a certain idea of discursive order.’

- Clarification: its ‘corollary’; it ‘particularly concerns the level of “clarity” perceptible in words and their meanings.’

- Expansion: it often corresponds to overtranslation.

- Ennoblement: its aim is elegance.

- Qualitative impoverishment: privileging designation over images

- Quantitative impoverishment: ‘refers to a lexical loss’

- Homogenization: turns the diverse and disparate into uniformity
- The destruction of rhythms: rhythmic elements may be destroyed by reorganizing the original arrangement.

- The destruction of underlying networks of signification: it corresponds to ignoring networks of signification.

- The destruction of linguistic patterning: affects the sentences in their structure, like the regular use of a certain kind of subordination.

- The destruction of vernacular networks or their exoticization: an author’s tongue can always be regarded as polylingual.

- The destruction of expressions and idioms: if an idiom is replaced by an equivalent, it is an act of ‘ethnocentrism’.

- The effacement of the superimposition of languages: in a novel, there may be several different linguistic forms or several standard languages; their effacement reduces the initial tension to nothing.

Qu’est-ce que la signifiance? C’est le sens en ce qu’il est produit sensuellement
Roland Barthes, Le plaisir du texte

Victor Segalen (took notes for a treaty on exoticism between 1904 and 1918) speaks of ‘The perception of diversity’
Edouard Glissant in his theory of ‘The Poetics of the Diverse’ declares:

to write in the presence of all the world’s languages does not mean to know all the world’s languages. It means that in the present context of multiple literatures and of the relation of poetics with the chaos-world, I can no longer write in a monolingual manner.

Introduction to The Poetics of the Diverse.

It may also evoke Jacques Derrida’s work: Le monolinguisme de l’autre, Paris: Galilée, 1996.

Jean-Louis Cordonnier coined the word *Ouvertude* (*Openity*): a translator ‘open’ to the foreign is working in a movement which ‘aims at being permanently active and which devotes its energy to spreading out between cultures’ (Cordonnier: 153).

He also coined the word *Fermetude* (*Closity*) to represent the act of ‘submitting translation to the idea it has of its own limits in face of foreign cultures and of the hermeneutic capacity of its readers’.
A Practical Demonstration

“(...) We was moved, but there was a boy who get sick with the cough. He woulda dead, but she tell us what to make. A tea of shado beni and other bush. We all laugh, laugh in relief when she spoon the stuff to he lips. He bitter face and the flutter of he hands trying to push the taste away. He first sign of fight in days....”

“Kakashat,” she said another time. “For sugars and blood pressure and growths....”

“Zootie. You wouldn’t know it unless you had wisdom. It stings when you touch it. But in a tea it could save you life when you body won’t give up it water....”

Mother never deliberately explained to me her past, but I learned anyway. Of lagahoos, and douens, and other spectres of long-ago meaning.

“Soucouyant,” Mother said aloud to herself one day. “I saw one in the morning. A morning thick with burnt light. I walking a narrow path of dirt, you see, my ankles painted cool by wet grasses....”


—(...) On a été déplacés, mais il y avait un garçon qui est tombé malade de la toux. Il aurait pu être mort-mort, mais elle nous a dit quoi faire. Un thé de charon bénï et d'autres herbes. Nous avons tous ri, ri de soulagement quand elle lui a mis une cuillérée de ça dans la bouche. Il a fait son visage grimacer et il a agité les mains pour essayer de chasser le goût. Son premier signe de lutte depuis des jours...

— Le kakashat, dit-elle une autre fois. Pour le sucre et la tension et les tumeurs...

— L’ortie brûlante. Tu n’allais pas pouvoir la reconnaître sans savoir. Elle pique quand tu la touches. Mais en thé, elle peut sauver ta vie quand ton corps refuse de laisser sortir son eau.

Manman ne m’expliquait jamais délibérément son passé, mais je l’apprenais quand même. Les lougawous et les dwen et les autres spectres aux significations d’antan.

— Soucougnant, se dit un jour manman à haute voix à elle-même. J’en ai vu un le matin. Un matin imprégné d’une lumière brûlée. Je marchais sur un étroit sentier de terre, tu vois, mes chevilles peintes de fraîcheur à cause des herbes humides.

Story of an Alzheimer mother born in Trinidad before the Second World War and her son.

In her speech, *the mute tongue* surfaces:
(In an article entitled ‘L’éloge de la muette’ [In Praise of the Mute Tongue], Jacques Coursil develops the idea of a tongue, stifled throughout centuries, which is still disregarded and which mainly concerns the private sphere in everyday usage.)

‘il a fait son visage grimacer’ <= ‘faire quelque chose faire / faire quelqu’un faire’
‘He woulda dead’ —> ‘Il aurait pu être mort-mort’
‘you wouldn’t know it’ —> ‘Tu n’allais pas pouvoir la reconnaître’

*chadon béní, kakashat, ortie brûlante, lougawous, dwen, manman.*