TRANSLATING SOCIOLECTS

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ABSTRACT

Translating sociolects is seen by many translation scholars as paradigmatic of the problems of translation. However, theories of translation which discuss the translation of literary sociolects are often hampered by a latent prescriptivism, both on a textual and meta-textual (ideological) level. This paper will show how the theory also misses an important textual function of sociolects, an illocutionary force which in certain texts helps to foreground different forms of plurilingualism, and will illustrate this with an example from Baudelaire's translations of E.A. Poe. What will become clear is that even though the way literary sociolects are translated does indicate the translator's ideological stance, considerations of the textual functions of literary sociolects should precede questions regarding the translator's ideological responsibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1.Translation Criticism

When discussing translation and translations the questions which arise tend to reach far beyond the source and target texts. As translation theory or translation studies broadens its perspective beyond the word, phrase, sentence and text, its questions about the product and the process (the *what* and the *how*) of translation are now complemented by a third type of question: *why?* Why does a certain text get translated and others not? Why does one translation "work" (i.e. why do a number of people accept it as a valid transformation of a foreign text) and why are some translations rejected by the target audience? Why do certain translations become better known and more influential than the source text?

This type of questions have called linguists and translation scholars out into an open field where several other disciplines from the social and cultural sciences contribute, and where philosophical and ideological considerations are never far off. Gideon Toury and the Tel-Aviv school, which followed in the footsteps of Even-Zohar, made an important step in this direction. Their Polysystem Theory is now said to have entered

> "a new phase in which extraliterary factors such as patronage, social conditions, economics and institutional manipulation are being correlated to the way translations are chosen and function in a literary system." (Gentzler 1993: 120)

In translation, it is realized, one needs to take into account both the polysystem to which the source text belongs, and the polysystem by which the target text is accepted or rejected.

It is clear, then, that a discussion on the problems involved in translating literary sociolects needs to take place in a broader, meta-textual perspective,

because literary sociolects are acts of socio-cultural signification which carry with them all the determinations inherent in the polysystem of the source text, whether they be linguistic, ideological or poetic. On the other hand this paper also hopes to show that there is little point in moving towards a broader perspective if there is a gap in our understanding of the textual function(s) of literary sociolects.

It now also seems appropriate to answer a more general question: What are we doing when we are discussing both the textual and the meta-textual *why's* of a translation, i.e., what's the name of the field are we in? The French translator and translation scholar Antoine Berman does not hesitate to call this ill-defined field "Critique de la Traduction" or Translation Criticism. It would seem, however, that "criticism" is a dirty word for many linguists and scholars of translation, considering that even though this is often the core of their activities, most of them resist using the name. Nevertheless, since discovering that Berman's description of Translation Criticism corresponds closely to the approach I have taken in the research which encompasses this paper[1], I have adopted the term Translation Criticism to broadly describe my work so far.

1.2. Criticism and Rewriting

An important realisation, which informs many current approaches in translation theory, is the fact that translation itself can be seen as an act of criticism. The activity of translating is no longer considered a neutral activity, objectivity in translation is impossible, and scholars are coming to accept

> "the peculiar position occupied by translation vis-à-vis another type of metatext (a work derived from, or containing another existing text): literary criticism itself." (Bassnett-McGuire 1980: 9)

The basis for this idea is found in Derrida's theory of writing and d*ifférance,* and it has influenced the work of translation scholars from all sides of the spectrum. This view of translation is essentially positive and in its capacity of being a continuation of a "trace", translation is now seen as

> "an empowering act, a nourishing act, an act of affirmative play ... that ensures a literary text's survival." (Gentzler 1993: 192)

Lefevere also resists the distinction between different types of meta-text by calling acts of literary criticism, translation, editing, anthology writing, even historiography, in sum, any activity which in some way forms a "comment" on another text, instances of **rewriting** (Lefevere 1992). Together with Bassnett, he defines translation as

> "one of many forms in which works of literature are 'rewritten', one of many 'rewritings'." (Bassnett and Lefevere1990: 10)

[1] Berman defines and refines his model of Translation Criticism in "Pour une Critique de la Traduction" (Berman 1995)

The significance of this definition of translation for translation studies as a discipline is noticed by Berman who defines the new field of study as

> "un espace plus vaste, celui de la *translation*. Cette translation n'advient pas qu'avec la traduction. Elle advient aussi par la critique et de nombreuses formes de transformations textuelles (ou même non textuelles) qui ne sont pas traductives." (Berman 1995: 17)

1.3. Ideology[2]

The expansion of the field of translation studies does, as I have already mentioned above, not just involve the new status of translation as a from of rewriting, but also refers to the fact that translation is seen on a broader plain of culture and ideology. Translation is not just a mode of cultural survival, but one by which one culture absorbs, rejects or adapts aspects of another. In the words of Abdulla

> "This means that the choices made by the translator, although on the surface primarily linguistically oriented, are actually based on criteria that lie beyond the immediate stringencies of language and are located on the level of culture, identity, and ultimately ideology." (Abdulla 1999: 13)

After George Steiner, whose description of translation as a "hermeneutic motion" involving four stages of trust, penetration, incorporation and restitution (Steiner 1992) set the tone in the 1970s, there is now a considerable group of scholars who advocate approaches which Hatim lumps together under the name "Cultural Studies" (Hatim 1999: 204). A typical statement of this group of translation scholars would be the following:

> "Translating can never be simply communication between equals because it is fundamentally ethnocentric." (Venuti 1996: 93)

Venuti sees translation as an instrument of power, the process of translation as a fundamentally violent and ethnocentric activity. It does not seem surprising, then, that Cultural Studies is accused of overpoliticizing the problem of translation, as is shown by Baker's statement that Cultural Studies has a tendency to "foreground the undesirable side of ideology and to suggest that it is deliberate or planned" (quoted in Hatim 1999: 201).

However, within Cultural Studies there are differences of opinion as to how exactly this ideological aspect of translation should be dealt with and accounted for. Lefevere, for example, agrees with the ideological basis, but adds poetics to his description of the translation process:

> "... rewriters adapt, manipulate the originals they work with to some extent, usually to make them fit in with the dominant, or one of the

[2] I here follow Abdulla's definition of ideology as "a set of ideas characteristic of a certain social group which help to legitimate its dominant power within society" (Abdulla 1999: 1)

> dominant ideological and poetological currents of their time." (Lefevere 1992: 8)

At the beginning of the 21st century, translation theory has arrived at a point where it can no longer limit itself to the text alone, because by studying past translations and re-translations translation scholars have come to realize that considerations of ideology can no longer be left aside. All that remains is to point out that this implies that theories of translation which try to prescribe models for translation and understanding translation will inevitably also be culture and period-bound, and that any form of prescriptivism is therefore out of place. As Gentzler puts it,

> "By avoiding a predefinition of what a translation "should" be, and looking at actual translations in a real cultural context, it becomes clear that aesthetic theories of literary transfer and even pair-bound "objective" descriptions of linguistic possibilities do not account for various factors which clearly influence the translation product." (Gentzler 1993: 127)

In other words, as a direct consequence of the nature of translation, Translation Criticism should try to avoid aesthetically (or, for that matter, ideologically, economically or politically) motivated dos and don'ts, standards and prescriptions if it wants to give an adequate account of the problems in translation. Even though the evaluative nature of criticism makes this almost impossible, the translation critic should at least be aware that no pair-bound definition, no dichotomy and no static model is going to account for the aspects involved in translation without ever being overturned.

2. LITERARY SOCIOLECTS AS PARADIGMATIC OF THE TRANSLATION PROCESS?

2.1. Ideology and Patronage

Gillian Lane-Mercier has written extensively on discourse in the novel and her views on literary sociolects and their translation have been increasingly influenced by concerns of ideology. It is interesting to note that this evolution runs parallel to her involvement in a Canadian state-sponsored translation project which re-translates Faulkner into French using variations of Quebecois for some of the "non-standard" parts of Faulkner's dialogue -- "le parler des *country whites* du Mississippi" (Lane-Mercier 1995: 81). In an article that discusses this project Lane-Mercier says that the research group's choices in translating these literary sociolects reflect

> "...[the group's] appartenance socio-géographique et présuppose un positionnement idéologique et axiologique à l'intérieur des hiérarchies du polysystème littéraire et sociolinguistique français." (Lane-Mercier 1995: 88)

2.2. Plurilingualism and the implicating effect of sociolects

Lane-Mercier's definition of sociolects is partly founded on Barthes' views put forward in an essay called "La division des langages" (Barthes 1984: 119-133). Barthes' idea is that sociolects are an integral part of the life of every language because language is not "*univoque*" (in the sense of signifiers and signifieds being in the same unchanging relationship) but heteroglot or plurilingual. This view is related to Bakhtin's idea of plurilingualism or heteroglossia in the novel, which refers to the fact that "no word relates to its object in a *singular* way", but that words are constantly in living interaction with their linguistic, social, historical and ideological surroundings (Bakhtin 1981: 276).

According to Barthes, sociolects have not always been properly treated by authors, critics or translators because literature and linguistics generally treat them as being peripheral to the central standard language form, just like dialects or idiolects:

> "le langage social reproduit par la littérature reste *univoque* ... le langage observé est monologique ... le résultat est que les morceaux de langages sont en fait traités comme autant d'*idiolectes* -- et non comme un systéme total et complexe de *production* des langages." (Barthes 1984: 123)

This essentially positive view of sociolects and plurilingualism in general as a productive, life-giving force is not how Venuti, to take one example from the Cultural Studies group, would qualify the status of sociolects. Indeed, Venuti holds a center-periphery view of language that corresponds to the hierarchical power relationships which pervade it. When discussing the place of non-standard utterances, Venuti speaks of "standard dialects" which hold sway over "minor variables" (Venuti 1996: 91). Following Lecercle he calls these minor variables the "remainder" and claims that it is this remainder which makes up the historical and social dimension of language. The problem for translation is that

> "... the linguistic variations released by the remainder do not merely exceed any communicative act, but frustrate any effort to formulate systematic rules." (Venuti 1996: 91)

which would mean, again, that whatever conclusion he arrives at regarding the translation of sociolects, it will be difficult to develop a general description.

The problem with any discussion of literary sociolects is also that their nature is such that it becomes impossible to discuss them without being implicated in the debate:

> "Le caractère principal du champ sociolectal, c'est qu'aucun langage ne peut lui être extérieur: toute parole est fatalement incluse dans un certain sociolecte. Cette constrainte a une conséquence importante

> pour l'analyste: il est lui-même pris dans le jeu des sociolectes." (Barthes 1984: 127)

Translation scholars and translators alike, then, are inevitably "pris dans le jeu" not only on an ideological and economic level, but on a linguistic and textual level as well.

As I have shown in the previous subsection, Lane-Mercier's position in this debate is not only ideologically determined but also influenced by her participation in a system of patronage, which Lefevere defines as "... the powers (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing and rewriting of literature" (Lefevere 1992: 15). This would mean that Lane-Mercier's position in the debate on translating sociolects can not be neutral. What is more, it is now clear that even on a textual level neutrality is elusive in a discussion of literary sociolects.

2.3. A working definition of literary sociolects

These implications have not prevented Lane-Mercier from developing a satisfying and "neutral" definition of what a literary sociolect is:

> "the textual representation of "non-standard" speech patterns that manifest both the socio-cultural forces which have shaped the speaker's linguistic competence and the various socio-cultural groups to which the speaker belongs or has belonged." (Lane-Mercier 1997: 45)

However, in her description of the way in which sociolects function, within a text as well as outside of it, Lane-Mercier's neutrality wanes as she attributes to literary sociolects an essentially violent, disruptive force:

> "Just as literary sociolects give visibility to the plurilingualism that disrupts and invalidates the supposed unity of national languages and dominant ideologies, they perturb the supposed unity of narrative discourse, introducing discursive ruptures and discontinuities that "imitate" or transform real-world linguistic and social phenomena." (Lane-Mercier 1997: 47)

This concern with the "disruptive" aspect and the "violence" which is contained in sociolects prevents Lane-Mercier from paying due attention to the textual function of literary sociolects as elements that actually help sustain a text's coherence. That this is the case especially with one particular kind of text is the subject of the next section.

2.4. Investigating the textual function of literary sociolects: an example

2.4.1.. The illocutionary force of literary forms

Some of the greatest texts in literature are those which discuss the relationship between literature and its "media", especially language and text. There is, for instance, Borges' wonderful text "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote"* in which Borges uses exactly the same extracts of a text to illustrate the ungraspability of authorship and the similarity between comment, criticism, rewriting and even translation. Extracts of a text which talk about language in this self-reflexive or self-referential way can be said to have an illocutionary force, in the sense that they say something about language by using a particular form of language. In other words, these extracts are a "performance of an act *in* saying something, as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something" (Austin 1962: 99). Or, returning to Borges, the locutionary force his text is its act of saying something about text, language and authorship, and the illocutionary force is that it does so *in* saying something, i.e. in featuring identical parts of a text.

What is more, it seems that it is precisely these self-reflexive texts which are most difficult to translate:

> "... whenever language moves on the illocutionary, rather than the locutionary level, the level of effect rather than that of communication, it threatens to become an aporia for translators." (Lefevere 1992: 58)

2.4.2. the illocutionary force of literary sociolects

One such a text is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug". It is a story at the heart of which lies a concern with plurilingualism and its consequences for people's attitude to language and their ensuing capacity to decode. The main theme of the story is, in fact, the decipherment of a code which then allows the characters to find a treasure, and the three protagonists all speak a different sociolect which illustrates their different attitudes to language, to understanding the problems which arise during their search and, finally, their ability (or lack of it) to decode.
Michael Williams describes "The Gold Bug" as follows:

> "At its center ... lies Poe's recognition of the instability of the arbitrary relationship between word and referent, and, as a consequence, the contingency of meaning upon conventions of use and context." (Williams 1991: 151)

The foregrounding of this plurilingualism is sustained by the many misunderstandings that result from the characters' different sociolects, and it is this illocutionary effect which makes this text a good example. The most prominent of the sociolects used is that of Jupiter, the slave, who speaks what I have previously called a Creole, but which is in fact a sociolect, since it does not derive from a meeting of two languages, but is a non-standard variety of 19th-century North American English. This is Poe's rendition of black American slave language, which I will henceforth call N.A.S.V., North American Slave Vernacular, in variance with Lavoie, who, in her discussion of its occurrence in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* decided to adopt Labov's term Black English Vernacular (Lavoie 1994: 116) -- which seems inadequate in a British context.

Poe's illustrious French translator Charles Baudelaire chose not to translate Jupiter's speech into any non-standard form of French, as he explains in a note:

> "Le nègre parlera toujours dans une espèce de patois anglais que le patois nègre français n'imiterait pas mieux que le bas-normand ou le breton traduirait l'irlandais. En se rappelant les patois figuratifs de Balzac, on se fera une idée de ce que ce moyen un peu physique peut ajouter de pittoresque et de comique, mais j'ai dû renoncer à m'en servir faute d'équivalent." (Le Dantec 1951: notes 1070-1071)

Ironically perhaps, Barthes, who would probably not agree with Baudelaire's decision not to look for any other equivalent, has the same conception of Balzac's use of literary sociolects as "un indice pittoresque, folklorique ; ce sont des caricatures de langages" (Barthes 1984: 121), and Lane-Mercier states that

> "... traditionally novelists have employed non-standard linguistic patterns to achieve comic relief, picturesqueness, or the illusion of sociolinguistic and cultural realism." (Lane-Mercier 1997: 46)

2.5. Investigating the translation of literary sociolects

2.5.1. Implications for "The Gold Bug"

The N.A.S.V. is not the only sociolect which Baudelaire neutralizes by not adopting a non-standard French variety. As I have shown in a previous paper, all three characters in this story speak a different sociolect, although the slave's is definitely the most prominent. By not retaining the differentiation established by the use of sociolects in the source text, the target text blurs the distinctions between all three characters -- and thereby eliminates the foregrounding of the text's main focus, which is language and our attitudes towards it.

Moreover, the French translation of Jupiter's N.A.S.V. becomes most problematic where its illocutionary force its at its strongest. This is the case with the many misfired speech acts (or simply: misunderstandings) which occur between the characters throughout the text. These misunderstandings, as I have already mentioned, have a well-defined function and mainly occur between Jupiter and the narrator, whose speech shows that he belongs to the urban upper middle class, and which Williams describes as "little more than a series of clichés and formulaic expressions" (Williams 1991: 155)

The following dialogue, for instance, takes place when a confused and excited Jupiter is answering to the narrator's inquiries about his master's health:

> *Narrator: -- ...* what does he complain of?

Jupiter: -- Dar! dat's it! -- him neber plain of notin -- but him berry sick for all dat.
Narrator: -- *Very* sick, Jupiter! -- why didn't you say so at once? Is he confined to bed?
Jupiter: -- No, dat he aint! -- he aint find nowhar -- dat's just whar de shoe pinch ...
(Mabbott 1978: 811)

Jupiter doesn't know the expression "confined to bed " and answers a question, which involves the verb "to find", indicating that Legrand has been looking for something that he hasn't found anywhere yet. This misunderstanding is precisely the kind of contrast which underlies the respective characters' use of language, and thus has the double effect of being "difference in sociolect" and "consequence of difference in sociolect" at the same time.

Admittedly, it would be difficult to make the transfer into French without making major adjustments, but as he has made clear from the beginning, Baudelaire did not even try:

Narrator: -- *...* Mais de quoi se plaint-il?
Jupiter: -- Ah! Voilà la question! -- il ne se plaint jamais de rien, mais il est tout de m℘me malade.
Narrator: -- Bien malade, Jupiter! -- Eh! que ne disais-tu cela tout de suite? Est-il au lit?
*Jupite*r: -- Non, non, il n'est pas au lit! Il n'est bien nulle part: -- voilà justement ou le soulier me blesse. (Le Dantec 1951: 69)

The misunderstanding is transformed into a "happy" or successful speech act. The remarkable thing here is also that Baudelaire chooses an unidiomatic expression by translating "the shoe pinch" into "le soulier me blesse" -- in French the idiomatic expression would be "C'est là ou le bât blesse" (*Petit Robert 1993*). However, these are inconsistencies which belong to a different order and which need a wider scope than this paper to be dealt with, so I will not go into them any further at this point.

A similar case of misunderstanding occurs just a few lines further, when the narrator interrogates Jupiter, who seems to believe that Legrand has been in some way infected by the unusual kind of beetle he has found on the beach, and that this is why he is acting so strange, walking around as if looking for something:

Jupiter: -- De bug -- I'm berry sartain dat Massa Will bin bit somewhere bout de head by dat goole-bug.
Narrator: -- And what cause have you, Jupiter, for such a supposition?
Jupiter : -- Claws enuff, massa, and mouff too
(Mabbott 1978: 812)

A case of talking at cross-purposes, this becomes, in French,

Jupiter: -- Du scarabée ... -- Je suis sûr que massa Will a été mordu quelque part à la tête par ce scarabée d'or.
Narrator: -- Et quelle raison as-tu, Jupiter, pour faire une pareille supposition?
Jupiter: -- Il a bien assez de pinces pour cela, massa, et une bouche aussi
(Le Dantec 1951: 71)

a misfired speech act, but not one resulting from the characters' difference in sociolects, which prevents Jupiter from understanding the expression "to have cause for" as "to have claws", but from the fact that in the French text, Jupiter suddenly decides not to listen to the narrator and talk nonsense.

More examples can be given, but neither time nor space permits me to present them in this paper. A full analysis of "The Gold Bug" and "Le Scarab—e d'Or", which will become a part of my Ph.D. thesis in process, shows that Jupiter's role in the English text is completely different from that in the French text. I hope the examples above are enough to illustrate that in "Le Scarabée d'Or" three things happen because of Baudelaire's decision not to use a non-standard varieties of French for the sociolects which appear in "The Gold Bug". Firstly, on a locutionary level, the linguistic distinctions between the characters disappear, which means that in the French text, if the characters misunderstand each other, it is not because of *how* they are saying something, in other words it is not because of the sociolect they use, but because of *what* they are saying. Secondly, as a consequence of this transformation, the illocutionary force of these misfired speech acts is lost: instead of having misfired speech acts which help to foreground the problematic confrontation between sociolects, we now have misfired speech acts which come about because one of the characters talks nonsense. Thirdly, as a combined result of the previous, the main theme of the story, namely the importance of attitudes to language and context for our ability to decode, is much less prominent in the French version.

2.5.2.. Implications for Baudelaire's ideology

The question at hand now is: what does this tell a reader of "Le Scarabée d'Or" about Baudelaire's ideological position as a translator and more precisely, which conclusions would a scholar concerned with Baudelaire's ideology arrive at when reading "Le Scarabée d'Or" and "The Gold Bug"?

Perhaps for an attentive reader, Baudelaire's ideological position has already become clear from the moment s/he reads the note in which Baudelaire dismisses Poe's use of N.A.S.V. According to Berman, the presence of this note means that Baudelaire is not doing anything wrong: "Le traducteur a tous les droits dés lors qu'il joue franc jeu" (Berman 1995: 93). On the other hand, the move from sociolect to neutral speech would certainly not fit in with Berman's ethics of "foreignizing" translation which aims to "… recevoir l'Autre en tant qu'Autre".(Berman 1985: 88). Baudelaire clearly does not consider Poe's use of sociolect as something new or ideosyncratic enough that it

should be kept, and so his translation is the exact opposite of what Berman defines as a “good” translation:

> “Indépendamment du fait que tout oeuvre est liée à des oeuvres antérieures dans le polysystème littéraire, elle est pure nouveauté ... La visée éthique, poétique et philosophique de la traduction consiste à manifester dans *sa* langue [the target language] cette pure nouveauté en préservant son visage de nouveauté.” (Berman 1985: 89)

For Venuti, Baudelaire’s decision would also be ranked with ethnocentric and “bad” translations, since for him

> “Good translation is minoritizing: it releases the remainder by cultivating a heterogeneous discourse, opening up the standard dialect and literary canons to what is foreign to themselves, to the substandard and the marginal.” (Venuti 1996: 93)

Finally, Lane-Mercier states the need to relativise both Berman’s and Venuti’s “dualistic” conceptions of translation (Lane-Mercier 1997: 60). However, and this should suffice as comments from potential readers, she does seem to agree with Berman’s point about the bona fide note-writing translator:

> “The ethical aim of translation *per se,* as initially postulated by Berman, is in this way displaced to qualify the fundamentally ethical orientation of the two choices open to any translator: to conceal or acknowledge the transformations performed, together with their ideological underpinnings and the meanings they suppress or create.” (Lane-Mercier 1997: 64)

In the final analysis, what this discussion shows is that translation is primarily a question of choice, but that it is difficult to decide whether choices are made out of ideological considerations or not. Did Baudelaire choose not to translate Jupiter’s sociolect by a non-standard variety of French because doing so would not correspond to his poetical standards, or was it simply too difficult for him to find a suitable equivalent – these are questions which have to be answered simultaneously on a textual and a meta-textual level. Firstly, by building up a mass of critical evidence one can point to certain patterns in Baudelaire’s behaviour as a translator, and deduce from these examples which strategies he tended to use. Secondly, by looking at meta-textual factors like, for instance, the way Baudelaire introduced Poe in France as a reflection of himself, a soul-mate, these examples and patterns can then be placed and explained in that broader context.

2.6. Conclusions

Having returned to authors writing on ideology and translation, I am left with the feeling that something is missing from the way literary sociolects have been dealt with in translation studies. Lane-Mercier talks about literary sociolects as paradigmatic of translation:

> “Given the cultural stereotypes, identity constructions and power relations reflected and refracted by literary sociolects, their translation can be seen as paradigmatic of the manner in which a “violent”, meaning-producing aesthetic, ideological and political *engagement* is required on the part of the translating subject -- one which is grounded in an ethics of translation and which requires a certain type of visibility.” (Lane-Mercier 1997: 45)

In my view, the choice whether or not to translate a literary sociolect by a non-standard variety of the target language can indeed be seen as a clear indicator of the ideological position of the translator. This, however, does not make literary sociolects paradigmatic of the problems in translation which involve issues of translatability -- not any more than, say, the translation of proverbs or metaphors -- but makes the translation of literary sociolects paradigmatic of the current trend in translation studies which sees translation as an ideologically determined activity -- a view with which I agree, but which I would like to see combined with a more text-based, applied approach. I hope I have been able to show that before referring to matters of ideology, translation studies would be helping itself and translators alike in trying to pin down first what happens in the text, before focusing on what happens outside of it.

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