

With what purpose ?

Though now in happy retirement and no longer a paying member of AFLS, I still, courtesy of Tim Pooley (to whom all praise for taking over a job that was getting harder and harder), get to see the *Cahiers*, and my eye was caught by Penny Sewell's article on translating Nathalie Sarraute,¹ and in particular her comment on "considering the purpose of the translation".²

Yes indeed, I thought as I turned over another spadeful on my allotment, the would-be translator must consider the purpose of the translation as also the purpose of the source text, and then how far the two are the same, similar, parallel or divergent,³ and (though I do not aim as high as Penny) my mind turned to a real-life problem which not so long ago I attempted to resolve. A kind and generous friend had suggested I might try writing something for the short story competition organised by the Bibliothèque municipale of Mantes-la-Jolie for the 2001 festival « Blues-sur-Seine », and though I didn't win,⁴ the exercise of writing was interesting and set me some nice teasers.

One of the first things they will tell you in the creative writing classes is "Write about what you know", and what I know is aging musos in seedy Northern dives. So, my story for a blues festival would naturally depict blues musicians, and naturally also would be shot through with references to their songs, if only to comply with the competition rules, which specified that each story entered had to include the words *fleuve, cœur, diable, Robert Johnson*.

My first problem therefore was whether to leave references in English, assuming a readership sufficiently familiar with the blues canon but possibly alienating any others, or to translate and thus either break the flow by a halting translation or lose the blues-familiar readership by a translation too far from what they remembered. I went for compromise, using sometimes passing allusion,

¹ "You pays your money and you takes your choice" : translating Nathalie Sarraute's *Les Fruits d'Or* into English" *Cahiers* 9.1 (Spring 2003) : 19–30.

² Page 19.

³ A political harangue aims to persuade; its translation by a historian of another culture would seek to convey the objective meaning.

⁴ Readers who wish to judge for themselves will find the full text at <http://www.be-blues.com/nuke/modules.php?name=Downloads>, under « nouvelles ». The songs available under « MP3 » include one composed by me and my version of an old standard.

Bon, voilà l'autre qui se lamente qu'il a loupé le train du soir⁵

and sometimes both the original and my own, as far as possible idiomatic, translation, trying to weave the two into the rhythm of my text:

Il s'est fait plaquer plus souvent qu'à son tour : "My baby left me", « Ma poupée m'a quitté », air connu. En a plaqué pas mal aussi : "rambling", la bougeotte qui a été si souvent chantée.

But where I met a real puzzle was with an English sentence almost proverbial, said typically and traditionally to aspiring musicians, with wounding or ironic intent, to indicate that their chances are slim of making it to the big time: "Don't give up the day job".

I was going to quote the original. As well as asking the purpose of source text and translation, translators must also decide if their translation admits to being a translation or if it will pretend to stand on its own.⁶ Here my situation was out of the ordinary in that I was writing in French about an English context and wanting to keep the reader aware that it was an English context. A quotation in English, therefore, flanked by an explanation of its import. But an explanation, a gloss, is weak, as anyone knows who has had to explain a joke in another language.⁷ I needed something in French that would convey the same impact. And part of the impact of my original sentence is that it comes from a common stock of sayings; the difficulty is that French has no equivalent.

From culture to culture, there are many examples of missing equivalents. Some cultures distinguish *s'il vous plaît* and *je vous en prie*, others combine both into *bitte*.⁸ Some, like English, lack the second. What can one say in English where in French or Spanish one says « Bon appétit » or « ¡ Que aproveche ! »? Certainly not "enjoy your meal", unless one is a *waitron*⁹ acting in a professional capacity. The music scene in France — not that I know it well — is not the same as in

⁵ An approximate allusion to "How long has that evening train been gone".

⁶ The translator of a novel, a poem, or a song presumably hopes their work will stand on its own. The historian referred to above acknowledges that the harangue is translated.

⁷ For example, "Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana", or « Qui trop embrasse manque le train », or perhaps — *sauf votre respect* — « tempête en décembre, t'en chies en janvier ». See also footnote 11 below.

⁸ I say *cultures*, not *languages*. I have been struck by the use of *s'il vous plaît* for both in Belgium.

⁹ This is an epicene term I have come across to replace *waitress/waiter*.

England.¹⁰ The very concept of *gaffer tape*¹¹ seems unknown to French musos, and their fads, ties, worries, and preoccupations do not impinge on the general consciousness as they seem to in this country. The heart of the problem is thus to concoct a sentence which will have the some of the same proverbial glibness and which will produce a similar effect. It is obvious but worth stating again that the purpose of an utterance is to produce an effect; for a translation to produce a corresponding effect (assuming that to be the purpose of the translation — it may not be in all cases)¹² it need not necessarily say the same thing. To return to the example just cited: if, striding along the Wolds Way, we pass a couple sitting to picnic, the same effect of conviviality that one might produce beside a GR¹³ by saying « Bon appétit » might be achieved by something such as “Lovely grub!”, “You’ve earned it”, or “Nice spot for it”. So one does not here need to translate too closely, if indeed that were possible. Were I to wish to elicit from a French muso the information that an English counterpart would offer in answer to “what’s your day job then?”, the thing to say would be « qu’est-ce que tu fais dans la vie ? ». The concept of ‘day job’ as opposed to the real work¹⁴ of belting out the blues does not seem to exist, and we have instead an idea of *life* as where one has to earn a living,¹⁵ something that happens while one is making other plans.

Then, the resonance of an utterance is more too than its cultural echoes.

Don't give up the day job

has a trochaic rhythm that comes trippingly off the tongue, and the equivalent found for it should have a comparably pleasing easy flow. It should be easy to say, a textual feature important, but too often ignored.

So, there are difficulties of content and constraints on form. The purpose is plain, but we are not tied by meaning. Where do we start?

¹⁰ I deliberately leave out of consideration Brittany and the other Celtic nations.

¹¹ “Why is the Force like gaffer tape? — It has a dark side and a light side, and it holds the universe together.”

¹² As in the case of our supposed political harangue (which may have more than one intended effect).

¹³ *Sentier de grande randonnée* for the desk-bound.

¹⁴ *Hé oui, on mouille la chemise.*

¹⁵ « *On perd sa vie à la gagner* », as they say (which can only be translated as “you have to waste your life earning a living”).

The undergraduates I taught as novice translators, often also the graduates, including the native French speakers with whom I tackled advanced *version*,¹⁶ tended to an approach too often linear, proceeding word by word, and frontal, seeking for each word a direct equivalent.¹⁷ They literally seek to *trans-late*, to carry across. An indirect approach is more likely to produce satisfying results. The trick is to scout around for a way in, running through synonyms or antonyms of the expression to translate until a target language equivalent comes to mind, then following associations back. The universe mediated by one language never corresponds point for point to that of another, but they will intersect somewhere, and instead of trying to batter through, the wise translator looks for such a way in. In this case, it is a question of hunting for a key concept, an idea or expression that, in the culture of modern France, might sum up or stand for the world of work. *Boulot*, suitably argotic and mildly disparaging, I reject. After all, coming off stage after an energetic set, or facing an unresponsive audience, one might well say « c'est du boulot ! ».¹⁸ The word does not mark sufficiently the gulf between the workaday world of daylight (or half-light, for shift workers) and the magical twilight of performance. Nor will *métier* serve. Not everybody has one after all,¹⁹ and the aspiring guitarists of our example may be, quite likely are, unskilled workers. *Charbon* as in *aller au charbon*,²⁰ is by far too argotic, but, in the same order of things, it seems to me that *usine* might well fit, as standing metonymically for the archetypal workplace that may be supposed for these young or not so young hopefuls. So, given that the familiarity implied by the original will select the *tu* form in French, I arrive at « Laisse pas tomber l'usine ». Which, it seems to me, is the kind of thing that might be said if the given situation were transposed to a French-speaking context. Moreover, it is a hemistich (« Laiss' pas tomber l'usin' »), and rhythmically satisfying. The passage ran thus:

(...) l'autre (...) il a eu un travail, un vrai, avouable, un de ceux où on se rend au même endroit à heure fixe, dans la journée, et tous les jours, avec

¹⁶ *Version* for them, *thème*, like the case under discussion, for me.

¹⁷ The sort of approach that produces *« ils se plient en arrière » when « ils se mettent en quatre » is expected. Legend has it that even professionals may transform for example « la sagesse normande » into Norman Wisdom.

¹⁸ Or, more authentically, « putain, c'est du boulot ! ».

¹⁹ Readers might like to attempt to convey in English, « Hé oui, traducteur, c'est un métier » with its overtones of apprenticeship to be served and skills to be learned. "Translation is an art"?

²⁰ See Alphonse Boudard & Luc Etienne, *La Méthode à Mimile* (Livre de Poche 3453; first published Paris: La Jeune Parque, 1970): 148–149.

une paie qui tombe tous les mois. Et sûrement pas pue-la-sueur dans une usine, comme on feint de croire des débutants maladroits, quand après un tour de chant plutôt désastreux dans quelque pub des quartiers ouvriers, ils quittent la scène sans se faire applaudir, contents quand les gens dans la salle ne reprennent pas tous en chœur le vieux refrain “Don’t give up the day job”, « Laisse pas tomber l’usine », façon réputée spirituelle de dire que tu n’as pas d’espoir de percer un jour.

The test of a translation is, does it do the job? Not the least part of the translator’s task is identifying the jobs to be done.

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