

Literary Dialectal Texts and their Problems of Translation

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One of the countless problems the translator has to face when doing a translation is the problem of translating dialectal texts. To deal with this topic, I have divided my paper into four sections where I try to deal with several aspects all related to translation of this type of text. The first part deals with the debatable question of differentiating between language and dialect. We shall see what is understood by language and dialect, not only from the General Linguistics point of view but, more specifically, from the Sociolinguistic point of view as well. The second part will deal with literary translation and the problems this kind of translation brings about. In the third part I shall attempt to establish the reasons why dialect is used for literary purposes. Finally, I shall be looking at some examples where dialect has been used in two of the translations into Spanish of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. We shall see how successful the translators have been in their attempt to translate the dialect and what techniques they have applied to their respective translations.

One would think that it is very simple to define language and dialect, but in actual practice, it is rather difficult to make a distinction between the two. In principal, following what General Linguistics says, any variations of a language are called dialects, but in everyday terms there is a drastic difference between the two: everything that does not follow the norm is considered a dialect in a pejorative meaning of the word. When defining language, dialect and regional variant, we have to look at, on the one

hand, what Pure Linguistics understands by them, and on the other hand, what Sociolinguistics understands, although the dividing line between the two is very fine. Well-known linguists such as Saussure, John Lyons, etc, see language as a social product and a collection of conventions that permit individuals to exercise the faculty of speech. In terms of dialect their definitions differ. Saussure in his *General Course of Linguistics* says that 'a language has only dialects, none of which has the advantage over the others, and for this reason it habitually splinters. But as communications improve with a growing civilization, one of the existing dialects is chosen by a tacit convention of some sort to be the vehicle of everything that affects the nation as a whole' (1974: 195).

Lyons in his *Language and Linguistics* points out that 'most educated native-born inhabitants of England speak a dialect of English which approximates more or less closely to a particular kind of Standard English but they will speak it with an accent which reveals their geographical or social provenance' (1981: 25). He goes on to say that the linguist uses the term 'dialect' and relates it to the term 'language' by saying that a language may be composed of several dialects, and he does not accept the implications commonly associated with the term 'dialect' in everyday usage. He does not accept that the dialect of a particular region or a particular social class is a debased or degenerate version of the standard dialect. The linguist knows that from a historical point of view the standard dialect is no different in kind from the non-standard dialects. Very often, in everyday usage of the terms 'dialect' and 'language', the distinction between them is based very largely upon political and cultural considerations within a particular community. According to Lyons, for this reason it is often very difficult to draw a sharp distinction between distinct languages and different dialects of the same language.

The other point of view is the Sociolinguistic point of view. Sociolinguistics is considered as a sub-discipline within Linguistics. Language, as we know it, is a social phenomenon that cannot be separated from the social context where it emerges. Sociolinguistics, according to Peter Trudgill, is 'That part of linguistics which is concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon' (1974: 32). In the use of the terms language and dialect, linguistic criteria are of less importance than are political and cultural factors. Language and dialect have to be considered not only linguistically, but also from the social structure and the value systems of a society's points of view. Peter Trudgill adds that 'the correctness and purity of

linguistic varieties and features are social rather than linguistic' (*ibid.*: 20). In the study of language, Sociolinguistics makes a distinction between regional dialects as giving away information about one's association with a particular region, and the varieties of the language considered as class dialects, which are referred to by the term 'sociolect'. Sándor Hervey, Ian Higgins and Louise M. Haywood define sociolects as 'language varieties typical of the broad groupings that together constitute the "class structure" of a given society' (1995: 113). It can be understood from this definition that sociolectal features can convey important information about a speaker or writer, and therefore they cannot be ignored by the translator, who, however difficult they are to convey, must be aware of their existence. To what extent they can actually be 'translated' is something very important, but this will always be secondary to the basic semantic content.

Going back to the main topic of this paper, every translation process, as we know, consists of two aspects: the full understanding of the source text, and the expression of its content in the target language. In the process of understanding the text and expressing it in the TL, the translator is going to be faced with a number of problems, the solution of which will be depend on the problem, and sometimes there will not even be a solution. Let me refer very quickly to the problems the translator can encounter in relation to these two aspects. In respect of comprehension, one of the most frequent and important problems the translator faces is the ambiguity of the ST. Ambiguity occurs in all languages. It is an inherent condition and it occurs as a result of one word having more than one meaning - what we know as polysemy; or two different words with different meanings but written or pronounced the same - homonymy or homophony. Literary texts are liable to ambiguity more than scientific texts. The use of ambiguity in literature is considered by many writers to have an aesthetic value and it contributes to the enrichment of the text. It may occur at the lexical, morphological or syntactic level. In respect of lexical ambiguity, the context or the extralinguistic situation normally make clear which of the meanings of one word is the appropriate to the text, but sometimes this is not the case; either the context does not clarify the meaning of the word or such context is not enough to solve the ambiguity. Very often the knowledge of the culture to which the word belongs to is required. But sometimes, in spite of that, the grade of difficulty is such that the problem remains unsolved. In terms of morphological ambiguity, the translator can be working with languages which, for example, do not use the determiner, as it is the case of Latin or

Slavonic languages. Another problem could be the lack of gender, which can lead to difficulties of comprehension of the text; or the lack of punctuation, etc. And finally, the syntactic ambiguity which can also occur through lack of punctuation leading to misinterpretation or misunderstanding. It can be very difficult to translate a text where ambiguity has been used intentionally. The difficulty appears not only because the different meanings of the text may not be perceived, but also because they may not be reflected or expressed in the TL. The translator, in both processes of comprehension and expression, should bear these three linguistic levels in mind. In respect of expressing the content of the original text or ST in the TL, the translator is not going to be exempt from problems either. The translator should translate everything the ST contains without adding or omitting anything, and keeping, when possible, the stylistic equivalence. Here, we can also talk about ambiguity, but this time on the part of the translator due, on some occasions, to the wrong word order that makes the understanding of the TT difficult for the TL reader. In order to avoid this kind of ambiguity the translator should, to a certain extent, write better than the writer of the SL text, or, at least, express and write the TT in a clearer and more intelligible way. According to Valentín García Yebra, 'el traductor no puede permitirse pequeñas erosiones. Los descuidos son en él menos excusables que en el autor. El autor tiene que atender más al "qué" que al "cómo" de su escritura. El traductor no tiene que buscar el "qué". Se lo da junto y organizado el texto original. Sólo tiene que preocuparse de expresarlo en la lengua terminal del mejor modo posible' (1994: 19). Another problem the translator can be confronted with is the impossibility of expressing in the TT the full content of the ST without partial loss. It is not wise for the literary translator to take for granted that everything which has been well understood is going to be well expressed and reflected in the TT. A literary message not only consists of intellectual elements but of sensitive and volitive elements which make it even more difficult when the message is going to be transferred into another language. As a conclusion of this section it could be said that the translation of literary texts, as well as the original writing, is an undertaking with great value from the content and from the stylistic point of view but it is always considered a risky undertaking, limited and achieving a relative success. This can be applied, too, to one type of literary texts which contain an added difficulty: the use of dialect. Dialect has been used in literature for a long time. If we look at any language, we usually find that, of several variants which were originally used indiscriminately, one came to acquire the status of educated norm,

while the rest of them began to be considered as substandard or dialectal departures from that norm, and ceased to be employed as the normal means of literary expression. From this time on, dialects survive mainly in speech and they owe their existence to the simple fact that a great part of the population talk more than they write. By no means are dialects dead, and the importance of this for literature is that they are immediately available as literary material whenever the dialectal environment becomes sufficiently interesting to attract the attention of writers and the reading public. This, of course, means a change in literary tastes, a breaking away from more conventional style and themes to more familiar and homely ones. It was only in the fourteenth century that mention started to be made of the different forms in which English was spoken in different parts of the country, and until about the middle of the fifteenth century dialects continued to flourish in literary use. Between 1500 and the beginning of the seventeenth century, there was a cooling down period in the use of dialect in literature. The vast majority of literary works were written in standard English. It was in the early years of the seventeenth century when a new trend started in respect of using dialect in literature - a trend which would definitely come into its own in the following century in two respects: the introduction of speakers of dialect among other speakers within the novel, at first with humorous intention but later with a deeper appreciation of the characteristics of those who naturally used this type of speech; and the use of dialects in their own right, in prose and verse, in order to create a distinct dialect literature and give to a local form of speech the standing of a literary language. The eighteenth century writers attempted all this with great success. Dialect began to be read and appreciated by readers who, before, would have remained indifferent to something written in it (Craigie, 1921). So, we can see how, little by little, dialect was making its way through and being used in literary texts. Dialect literature is a difficult task for the writer, and, as we will see later, for the translator. If, for one moment, we forget about the translator and we focus on the writer, we could say that not all writers can overcome successfully such a difficult task. The disadvantage lies partly in the writers themselves, partly in the limitations of the topics they can deal with, in which the use of the dialect vocabulary is appropriate, and partly, as well, in the limitations of the audience; outside certain audiences the dialect can lose part of its effect or may fail altogether. The writer has to take a risk and the success in using dialect for literary ends depends upon the reason why dialect has been used and its reflection within the piece of work. According to Sumner Ives 'A literary

dialect is an author's attempt to represent in writing a speech that is restricted regionally, socially, or both' (1950: 137). The dialect characters within the literary work are created in order to speak a language that has unconventional features of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Writers develop their dialect from their observations of many people speaking it. From the total linguistic material available, they select those features that seem to be more representative of the sort of person they are portraying. These features they generalize so that the literary dialect is likely to be more regular in its variants than the actual speech which it represents. What Ives called 'eye dialect' forms is a technique that occurs with reasonable frequency in the writings of most authors using dialect in their works. Coming back to our main point, the translation of dialectal texts, it is important for the translator or anyone who attempts the interpretation of literary dialect, to know, first, something about the speech of the author. Otherwise, it is impossible to arrive at valid conclusions. Another important point worth noting for the translator is that the speech of 'dialect' characters is already in contrast to the speech of educated characters. In the representation of the speech of educated persons, the author simply follows the traditional method of representing such speech. However, in the representation of social restricted varieties, the author gives as many clues as he/she is able to within the limitations of the conventional alphabet and the restrictions imposed by the author's sense of artistic fitness. In short, the translator will have, first of all, to decide how important the passages in dialect are in the ST - for which, of course, he/she will have to be very familiar with the ST language and culture. Then he/she will have to make the decision whether dialectal speech is to be used in the TL version. Finally, if the decision has been in the affirmative, another delicate decision will have to be made in respect of which form of TL dialect is to be used - for which, it will also be necessary for the translator to have a good knowledge of the various TL dialectal variants. Let us now look at a couple of examples from Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* - Shaw was interested in both language and spelling and his main use of non-standard language is through cockney - and let's see how the translators of the two translations I have looked at have reflected the dialect in their respective Spanish renderings: Floreal Mazía's translation (Shaw, 1966) and Julio Broutá's (Shaw, 1983). The English text is that published by Penguin Books, pp.15&16.

THE FLOWER GIRL: Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah.

F. Mazía:

LA FLORISTA: Vamo' Freddy. A ver si mira' dónde pone' lohpie'.

J. Broutá:

LA FLORISTA: ¡Anda, pasmao! ¡Vaya con el señorito cegato! Nos ha amolao el cuatro ojos.
¡Ay, qué leñe!

As we can see, both translators have made an attempt to translate the dialectal speech of the flower girl, but there are a few differences in the way they have used dialect. It seems to me that the dialect used by F. Mazía is more an Andalusian way of speaking or, for that matter, the way a non-standard speaker from the South of Spain speaks. Whereas in Broutá's translation the translator tries to portray the flower girl as a typical girl from Madrid; to be precise, the typically 'chulo' kind of register. The two translations have things in common, like the omission of consonants to indicate substandard language. In Mazía's translation, the omission is the final 's' which is very prominent and it is indicated by an apostrophe, as well as the aspiration of the 's' in the example 'lohpie'. The 's' of 'los' is assimilated to the next consonant, 'p', and the 's' hardly sounds, becoming an aspirant. This is a very typical feature of the Spanish used in the South of Spain, the Canary Islands and South America. In Broutá's translation, we see that the translator has omitted consonants to show a kind of substandard language - words like 'pasmao' for 'pasmado', and 'amolao' for 'amolado' - but, strictly speaking, this is a colloquial register, rather than dialectal. As I see it, Broutá's rendering is almost standard Spanish, whereas Eliza Doolittle's language is clearly remote from standard English. Moreover, he has added to the original 'Where are you going?' an implication of being fed up which is totally unwarranted by Liza's 'deah' - not only does he say 'Nos ha amolao el cuatro ojos', but he even adds one further exclamation, '¡Ay, qué leñe!'. One wonders whether this is a reflection of the well-known Spanish habit of using a lot of words either to say the same thing or to say nothing at all!

Second example:

THE FLOWER GIRL: Ow, eez, yə-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan y' d-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now

bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than ran awy
athaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me f'them?

F. Mazía:

LA FLORISTA: ¡Ah, eh su hijo!, ¿eh? Bueno, pueh si
usté' hubiese cumplido con su deber de madre, él no
le habería 'ruinado la' floresuna pobre chica para
despuéh 'caparse sin pagar. ¿Me lah pagará usté'?

J. Broutá:

LA FLORISTA: Anda, ¿conque es hijo de usted,
señora? Bien. Pues mire: podrá usted pagarme las
flores estropeás. No se figure usted que a mí me las
regalan.

In the original, this is the most typical passage where cockney is used, to the extent to which Shaw adds 'Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London'. I would say that Mazía's translation has again been much more faithful to the original than Broutá's. A few interesting things to point out are that he continues to omit the 's' in final position, for example in 'la' for 'las', and to represent this omission by an apostrophe - which is also used to show the omission of any other consonant, for example 'habería 'ruinado' for 'habría arruinado'. Also, as we saw before, whenever final 's' is assimilated to the next word and it becomes almost an aspirant, it is represented by 'h', for example 'pueh si' for 'pues si', 'lah pagará' for 'las pagará'. All this shows that the translator has made an effort not only to reflect the dialect but also to represent it phonetically. On some occasions, in order to show the substandard register, he has joined words together to the point of possibly making it difficult for the reader to understand at first sight, for example in 'la' floresuna pobre chica' for 'las flores a una pobre chica'. In general, I would say that this translator tried as much as he could to be faithful to the original, both by not adding new sentences and by reflecting the register of the SL in the way it would be said by a non-educated girl, in this case from the South of Spain. The overall effect intended on the reader is well reflected, whereas I would not say the same about the other translation, which has translated only half of the original and has changed the other half. In this translation, the flower girl gives one the impression of being rather more cross than appears in the original text, and, as we have

already seen, she expresses herself in the sort of colloquial register which is not unusual among educated speakers.

Summing up, it can be said that many techniques can be used in an attempt to solve the problem of translating dialectal texts. Possibly none of them is fully satisfactory, but, however, what is totally inadmissible is that whatever the technique adopted by the translator, he/she should prove unfaithful to the semantic content of the original.

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