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Humour in Translingual Writing

MORGANE VERNIER

Jean Moulin Lyon III / Monash University

Abstract

The analysis in this article is based on a comic play that I wrote for PRONTO 2013 (a series of Performed Readings of New Theatrical Offerings, organized by Monash University Student Theatre), entitled *Welcome to Aussieland!*. The comedy is about a French student, Jennifer, who goes on exchange to Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. It is a "double" act of self-translation in that it is strongly inspired by my own experience in Australia, and also in that it was composed in my adopted language, English. This self-reflexive article aims to integrate theoretical and critical material into a discussion on the consequences of the translation of such a work of self-translation into another language. It examines concrete examples drawn from a personal work, analyzing linguistic and cultural difficulties. Since both the success of its comic elements and its cultural identity are anchored in its translingual nature, retaining one would entail sacrificing the other.

Three years in Australia – two of them as an international student – provided me with a plethora of anecdotes and inspiring writing material which I combined into a play, entitled *Welcome to Aussieland!*. It was selected as part of PRONTO 2013 – a series of Performed Readings of New Theatrical Offerings – organized by Monash University Student Theatre. Following the performed reading on 23 April 2013, I realized that the irony which ensures the play is a successful comedy depends on many variables, and that it would probably be, to some extent at least, lost in translation.

Aussieland! relays, in a succession of humorous anecdotes, the adventures of Jennifer, a French student who goes on exchange to Australia. It focuses on how she manages to keep in touch with her relatives and friends left in France – especially her mother – while meeting new people: other international students and locals, such as her housemates. The comic elements of *Aussieland!* are based on the differences between two cultures – French and Australian – and between expectations and actual experiences. The translation of such a text would be a particularly demanding task, not only in light of linguistic issues, but also because of cultural aspects. Indeed, the notion of "culture" as a "fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people" (Spencer-Oatey 3), is embedded in the play and is central to its proper functioning. Other factors that contribute to the humorous dimension of *Aussieland!*, and which must be analyzed when considering its translation, are the paratext and the target audience. Awareness of paratextual elements (Genette), like epitextual biographical details about the author, plays its part in the success of some of the jokes. A different audience from the one present on 23 April 2013 would also most likely result in the loss of humorous elements – as will be examined using reception theory (Holub 1984). An author always produces a text with an audience in mind, which is all the more true in the context of performance art, since a play is written in order to be performed in front of spectators, on whom its successful reception entirely depends. *Aussieland!* was written for Australian university students with the aim of entertaining them by presenting the challenges faced by European students visiting their country. All of this then leads to the question of whether the translation of such a personal work as *Aussieland!*, the direct result of an act of self-translation, is possible at all, without undermining the successful reception of the comic elements present in it.

This article examines how the contexts of production and reception – especially in the case of theatre – contribute to the comic dimension of the play. It looks at how humour is generated in the process of self-translation – cultural differences and misunderstandings can provide fertile ground for comic situations – and how, consequently, translation of the text into another language would involve the loss of both the irony present in it, and the cultural identities of the protagonists of the play and its author. Finally, it comments on the implications involved in the translation of a text which already results from an act of self-translation, and whether its translation should be considered at all.

Translingual writing

Defined in 1976 by Popovič as "the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself" (19), self-translation can also be considered in a metaphorical sense, to describe, for instance, "transnational migrants living as 'translated beings' between multiple cultures, languages, and national identities" (Shread 52). Some writers view "the metaphor of self-translation as a renegotiation of the self" (Saidero 33), while others take the metaphor to the next level, so that "the narration of [a writer's] lived experience is increasingly viewed as an act of (self-)translation" (Wilson, "The Writer's Double" 186). In this sense, translingual writers double as self-translators. Indeed, because they write in their adopted language, not only do they translate themselves into linguistic constructions, but they also create "a space of mediation and renegotiation where transcultural exchange may occur, thereby allowing them to fuse and re-inscribe their multiple identities, selves, languages and cultures" (Saidero 32), which "underscores the link between translation and creative writing" (Wilson, "The Writer's Double" 187).

Translation of puns and wordplay

Aussieland! is only one of the possible translations of my experience as a French student in Australia. My choice to use the language of the Other, my adopted language (English), was justified by the location of the play (Australia) and by my target audience (English speakers), but also by the malleability of the English language (as opposed to French). From a linguistic point of view, English is very flexible, allowing for the inventive creation of wordplay and collocations of words. Examples of such collocations in my play include "sock-sisters" and "bedmate". The first of these comes up when the main character, Jennifer, makes fun of her friend Sophie who, just like her, was offered a pair of hand-knitted socks by her grandmother, and is not very enthusiastic about it:

> **JENNIFER** *(passing an arm around Sophie's shoulders)*: Aren't you glad that we're going to be sock-sisters?

The second occurs when Jennifer comes across a "share bed opportunity" while looking for accommodation, and expresses her reluctance to ever get a "bedmate". In both cases, the collocations were modelled on pre-existing words – "soul sister" and "roommate", both of which would be hard to translate into another language like French. This is especially true of "bedmate", as the concept of house-sharing is less common in France than in Australia, and French does not distinguish between "roommate" and "housemate" in the first place, making the creation of the French equivalent of "bedmate" more difficult.

It is worth mentioning two other instances of wordplay, which are all the more challenging to translate in that they are built on culturally-marked elements. One is "goon" (cheap cask wine) and the other is "huntsman". Culture-specific items such as these can create translation issues due to "the nonexistence of the referred item [in the target culture] or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the [target audience]" (Aixela 58). The first pun, involving the culturally-specific reference "goon", occurs as Jennifer, reluctant to explain to her mother that she has been drinking alcohol, leaves her sentence unfinished:

JENNIFER: No! I've had a very exhausting weekend, we barely slept, we surfed, we had far too much goo... *(trailing off)*
MOTHER: Too much... goo?
JENNIFER: Yeah... It's an Australian... specialty.
MOTHER: Oh really, that's a weird name. What is it made of?
JENNIFER: Just... grapes.

There are two dimensions to the workings of such jokes: "[they] are composed of linguistic and cultural elements" (Li and Chen 3). Indeed, from a linguistic perspective, the translation into any other language would entail the loss of the wordplay between "goo" and "goon" arising from the phonetic similarity between the two words. Culturally speaking, the situation is also amusing because the mother, a French woman, does not know what "goon" is. Like the mother, it is unlikely that the new target audience of the translated version of *Aussieland!* would possess the cultural knowledge to understand the concept. In translation, it would require an explanation and this would undermine the humorous dimension of the conversation between Jennifer and her mother. It is precisely because – in Newmark's words – "culture specific items can be recognized quickly, since they have a long distance from target language culture", and because they "cannot be translated easily" (32) that the joke functions in the English version. In translation, the passage would probably be suppressed, or the concept of "goon" replaced with a cultural equivalent in the target language using a domesticating strategy – domestication being "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target language cultural values" (Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* 20). In both cases, a cultural element that was integral to shaping the environment of the play would be lost.

The second example of wordplay focuses on Jennifer's misunderstanding of the word "huntsman":

MATT *(gesticulating)*: Oh, damn! There's a huntsman!
JENNIFER: What are you talking about? A hunter?
MATT *(looks at Jennifer, puzzled, momentarily forgetting about the spider)*: What? No, a huntsman! *(turning Jennifer around so that she is now facing the spider)* A huge... bloody... spider!

The phonetic similarity between "huntsman" and "hunter" allows the creation of wordplay, which would be impossible in another language, like French, into which the respective translations of these words are "sparassidae" and "chasseur". However, the passage could be retained despite the loss of the wordplay, since it is made evident from the props and from Matt's line that a "huntsman" is a spider.

These examples illustrate how self-translation into the adopted language requires the migrant writer to "remak[e] [him]self within the parameters of an alien language" (Besemeres 415). The "goon" joke in particular exemplifies this point, in that Jennifer is meant to speak French with her mother, a language in which this particular form of wordplay is not possible. I have therefore explored the possibilities offered by the English language in combination with the expected unfamiliarity of a French person with the concept of "goon", re-imagining my experience while using the linguistic tools available.

The "goon" and "huntsman" jokes are also based on "dramatic irony", a comedic device which characterizes a situation when "the [spectator] knows something the character does not" (Dornbusch 55). The comic element stems from the cultural distance between the French characters, and the Australian spectators, who know what "goon" and a "huntsman" are. Another eloquent example is Jennifer's discovery of Vegemite (yeast extract spread, a food item unique to Australia, and one that has achieved iconic status). It is only funny as long as the Australian characters, but especially the audience, know what Vegemite is, otherwise, the need for an explanation would undermine the immediacy and the comic dimension of the situation. It can be said that "[m]ultiple POVs [points of view] […] cultural differences […] are all common devices to showcase dramatic irony" (Dornbusch 55). Indeed, translingual writers

work in an in-between space which provides them with fertile ground for using humour, positioning them at a distance from both cultures, and enabling them to detect (and make fun of) cultural differences.

Irony, accent and code-switching in translingual writing

Immigrant or translingual writers are often characterized by their "ability to laugh at [their] own miseries" (D'Arcangelo 93) and their inclination to satirize their own culture. This mode of self-deprecation provides them with "a way of coping with adversity" (Vaid 153) and a means of overcoming cultural differences. Indeed, "studies suggest that speakers choose irony over literal language in order to be funny, to soften the edge of an insult, to show themselves to be in control of their emotions, and to avoid damaging their relationship with the addressee" (Dews et al. 308) – justifications for the use of humour which can all be found, to some extent, in literature written about the migrant experience.

Accent humour, that is humour stemming from the pronunciation of a language that differs from the most common one, is characteristic of translingual works. Indeed, non-native speakers of English often "joke about their own English accents and styles in order to make each party relaxed and free to negotiate their differences" (Canagarajah 138). In the case of *Aussieland!*, the actors performing the reading put on absurdly strong accents, in accordance with the nationality of their character, conferring a caricatured dimension to the play. By allowing the French accent to be portrayed in this way, I aimed to disarm the audience by showing them that I was capable of self-mockery, suggesting that they should do the same, in instances where they may have felt insulted by some comment from the play (Canagarajah 138). This resulted in a very colourful performance, which would be compromised in a French translation, especially regarding the Australian accent. An alternative solution would be for the Australian characters to put on a strong English accent, but that would only make Jennifer sound closer to home when the play is meant to be based on her experience on the other side of the world.

Code-switching is defined as "a widespread device for style shifting in bilingual communities" (Vaid 159). In literature about migration, "the alternate use of two languages or linguistic varieties within the same utterance or during the same conversation" (Hoffmann 110) produces a "creative estrangement effect" (D'Arcangelo 96). Maher remarks that it often indicates something ironic, by commenting on "the values that those particular words […] represent" (143). In *Aussieland!*, Jennifer uses code-switching mostly to talk to her boyfriends, always in an exaggerated, unnatural way:

> **JENNIFER** *(shushing Alice)*: No, he's not! *(looking at Guillaume tenderly)* He's just being adorable... *(to Guillaume)* It's going to be so difficult without you, mon chéri...
>
> **JENNIFER** *(overexcited)*: Hello mon amour!
>
> **MATT**: Bohjoor prahsehs!
> **JENNIFER**: Oh c'est très bien mon chéri. Je suis fière de toi. *(Matt starts panicking)*[1]

The particular role of the French language in *Aussieland!* is to be paralleled with the comment of an Australian character in the play – representative of the general opinion of the English-speaking world – that France is "SO romantic". The juxtaposition of the presupposed romantic language with Jennifer's failed relationships generates some irony regarding the stereotypical romantic nature of Europe. Indeed, as remarked by Wilson, transnational writers predominantly resort to "parody, pastiche, irony, mimicry and similar literary techniques" to disrupt "the truth value of the dominant 'national' discourse" ("Cultural Mediation" 238) – the Australian system of values and preconceived ideas, in the case of *Aussieland!*.

[1] "Bonjour princesse!" [Hello princess!] in a strong Australian accent.
"Oh it's very good darling. I'm proud of you."

Other instances of code-switching occur when English speakers try to speak in French to Jennifer. This ongoing joke – a sarcastic comment on the common belief of English speakers that a foreigner appreciates their attempts to speak his or her language – illustrates perfectly how it is possible to soften criticism with humour. While this joke would also function in a French translation, the intended effect on the audience – making them realize how they sometimes sound to foreigners – would be lost, since a French audience would most likely identify with Jennifer's experience rather than with the English-speaking characters of the play and they already know how English speakers sound to them.

The importance of paratextual elements in humour creation

It is vital that humour be employed cautiously in order to be efficient; because "joking involves a violation of norms, knowledge of linguistic and cultural norms is essential in order to know what would constitute a transgression" (Vaid 156). The contexts of the production and reception of a "joke" are determining factors in deciding its success. Knowledge of paratextual elements – whether they be epitextual or peritextual – can influence the reception of a text: "those who know [the paratext] do not read in the same way as those who do not" (Genette 266). Such considerations led me to delete one passage that was present in the original draft: immediately after Jennifer's arrival in Australia, she calls her mother, convinced that she is not in Melbourne since the weather is much colder than expected. The original joke hinged on the fact that Europeans are often very surprised to see so many Asian people when they first arrive in Australia:

> **MOTHER**: But you've not even left the airport yet, how can you have an opinion on Australia already?
> **JENNIFER**: But... *(wailing)* I'm in China! *(pause)*
> **MOTHER**: What are you talking about?
> **JENNIFER**: I'm telling you, no surfers here, just Asian people. *Every-where*. It's gotta be China!

This was of course meant to satirize the misinformed expectations of Europeans, but would be perceived as a racist joke by Asian Australians, who are part of the target audience. Further reflections on the reasons for the deletion of the "China" joke led me to the conclusion that paratextual elements – like the nationality of the author – are crucial in the acceptance or rejection of a joke. Indeed, joking about people of Asian descent living in Australia may be deemed acceptable if the objects of the joke happened to be the tellers too. An illustrative example would be the comedy *Phi & Me*, which I saw as part of the Melbourne Comedy Festival a few months before writing my own play. This play – about a second-generation Vietnamese Australian boy living in Melbourne with his mother – was a complete success: it was written, staged and played by a Vietnamese cast and crew. Here, a joke which could be considered hostile mockery was received as amusing, as it was uttered in a self-deprecating context. Walker comments on how "self-deprecation is ingratiating rather than aggressive; it acknowledges the opinion of the dominant culture – even appears to confirm it – and allows the speaker or writer to participate in the humorous process without alienating the members of the majority" (Walker 123). And thus, by showing to the majority that they can laugh at themselves, those uttering such jokes are able to satirize the majority without being perceived as aggressive. This is illustrated in *Aussieland!* by the "Sartre" joke, which occurs immediately after Veronica – a fictional member of Monash University staff – delivers the welcome speech for international students, concluding with a quote from French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre:

> **VERONICA**: […] I would like to conclude with this quote by Jean-Paul Sartre, which is very close to my heart: "The more sand that has escaped from the hourglass of our life, the clearer we should see through it." *(The students' faces crumple in confusion, Veronica smiles politely and leaves)*
> […]

> **LENNART**, *a Luxembourgish exchange student (to Jennifer)*: So... did you get that last thing about the hourglass?
> **JENNIFER**: Not really... They always like to end up with a quote that no one understands to add some deeper meaning to their speech.
> **LENNART** *(smiling at Jennifer's comment)*: I guess so, plus, Sartre is a Frenchman.
> **JENNIFER**: So?
> **LENNART**: You know, French people are always pretentious and speak weird shit.

In this passage, I am parodying the speeches exchange students are often given by host universities, which sometimes contain philosophical comments about the nature of the experience they are about to live. This could be interpreted as being ungrateful criticism; however, the quote is by Sartre, a French philosopher, and through Lennart's remark I allow the joke to backfire on my own culture. By demonstrating my ability to satirize my own culture, I make it possible to laugh also at Veronica – the Australian speaker representative of the majority – for being equally pretentious and speaking nonsense. When considering the translation of *Aussieland!* into French, I would be criticizing my own culture in front of a French audience, thus the self-deprecatory comment about the French being proud would probably be interpreted in a negative way, causing the loss of the joke about formal university speeches too.

It appears from the previous example that the audience is just as important in determining the success of a text – especially in the case of a play, which is performed. Reception theory, an audience-oriented approach which was introduced in the 1970s by Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss, tackles the decisive role of the reader – in our case the spectator. Holub defines this theory as "a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader" (xii), where the text is considered "as a function of its readers" (148). This theory may be examined in parallel with Wolff's "intended reader", "one that the author has in mind for his/her work" (Holub 152), which is very close to Eco's Model Reader, a reader who is "strictly defined by the lexical and the syntactical organization of the text: the text is nothing else but the semantic-pragmatic production of its own Model Reader" (Venuti, "Translation, Intertextuality, Interpretation" 170). If a text is always written for a specific reader or spectator, it seems reasonable to think that its translation for a new target audience might undermine the reception of some elements, particularly of the humorous and cultural types. A different public means different rules regarding what can and cannot be done.

There is another passage which I decided to delete – a reference to World War II and Franco-German relations. After Lennart's comment on French people, Jennifer turns to the other person sitting next to her – Greta, a German girl:

> **JENNIFER**: You don't hate French people, do you?
> **GRETA** *(looking confused)*: The war's been over for over 50 years now...

It was objected to me that the joke could offend German spectators, because World War II was still too recent an event. However, it should be mentioned that the third party who made this remark was French, and belonged to an older generation than my target audience and me. Thinking about it again, I would consider including the joke in a future version of *Aussieland!*. While it might not function in a French translation of *Aussieland!* targeting a French general public, the joke could be acceptable for Australian university students, who have both psychological and spatial distance from the consequences of the war on Franco-German relations, the object of the joke, since their lasting effect was not as intense in Australia as it was in France.

The two passages I deleted show that paratextual information – the identity of the author, the situational context of composition – is just as essential to the success of a text as the context of reception – the Model Reader, the target audience. The significant roles of the paratext and the audience in the reception of a text can be exemplified by looking at how my friends and relatives – who possessed more paratextual knowledge of my life in Australia and

the context of composition of *Aussieland!* – experienced the play in a different way, and were able to detect more comic elements, than the rest of the audience. An eloquent example is the introductory narratorial comment stating, "For purposes of comprehension, conversational exchanges in French have been translated into English, but be assured that it was done very professionally"; those who did not know that I am doing translation studies probably did not see the humorous dimension of this comment.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined how some aspects of humour are generated in translingual writing, basing my analysis on *Welcome to Aussieland!*, a comedy I wrote in English, as a native French person living in an Australian cultural environment. It was noted that the flexibility of the English language is not a feature common to all languages, and that this means linguistic puns might be lost in the translation process. However, the most problematic issues are undoubtedly the cultural elements, which are essential components of the play. Not only do they contribute significantly to its humorous dimension, but they also act as identity markers – of the play, of its protagonists, and of its author. While deleting them completely would not compromise the cultural identity of the play, its comic aspect would be severely damaged. It is likely that "translating" these cultural items – if possible at all – would mean following a domesticating strategy, replacing them with target-language cultural equivalents that would most likely lead to the distortion of the cultures represented, without actually guaranteeing that the humorous facet of the text was successfully reproduced.

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