

West Indian Voices in Translation

Orality is one of the main features of Caribbean literature and quite representative of the style of Olive Senior's tales. As short stories are characterized by conciseness, they present a concentration of information that affects both plot, the revelation characters may experience in this very short lapse of fictional time and style since they have to produce in a few selected words every single detail that will make a complete whole, create a specific atmosphere and perhaps even reveal what is irrational about humanity. Thus brevity, which characterizes the genre, entails intensity. Among other devices the voices of Olive Senior's characters and narrators reflect their local and social origin, their sex or professional activities, their age—so many variations which are a challenge to the transfer of subtly meaningful sounds into the Other tongue for the Other ears.

To represent orality and more particularly vernacular orality, authors resort to what I called in an article published in 2005 “phonographologic transformations” (Raguet 2005: 82-83). They take the form of phonetic marks introduced to reflect accents and grammatical alterations affecting words and clauses supposedly replicating the voice of certain ethnic or social groups; thus along with normative forms—acrolectal language—basilects and sociolects are introduced so as to create an *effet de réel* and generate verisimilitude. As a short story is a condensed form, these devices play a central role as they pertain to the making of the character's personality. One has to keep in mind that the genre mostly uses indirect presentation as a means of characterization, hence the major role which may be played by constituents of discourse, applied to various protagonists: readers are

invited to share the characters' traits and discover their nature through their words and thoughts, among other aspects disclosed in the accumulation of details. In such circumstances, we are concerned with *cultural distance*, that is the gap felt between the original culture and the receiving culture, and the translator's aim may be, with the help of his/her work, to extend the domain of the receiving culture so that it does not appropriate the Other, but opens its scope in order to receive the Other with his or her Otherness.

In Olive Senior's stories, *narrative orality* and *dialogues* concentrate information and bring to the fore informative linguistic differences, which undoubtedly pose serious problems of translation, especially because of the stylistic constraints imposed both by the genre and the location. Whether it be prose or poetry, a literary translation is always poetical in the sense that words do not only convey meaning but are also the melodic, rhythmic and harmonious medium resorted to by the poet. When a written work of fiction is converted into another tongue, the translator's task is to transfer meaning and melody and rhythm and harmony; what Henri Meschonnic terms "signifiante": "Signifying rests on rhythmic and prosody through which everything that makes sense and goes beyond the traditional limits of meaning and its linguistic strata is filtered."¹ Moreover, as Maria Tymoczko tries to show, post-colonial literature and translation can both be regarded as a "carrying across"².

¹ "La signifiante est une rythmique et une prosodie par lesquelles passe tout ce qui fait sens, et qui déborde la circonscription traditionnelle du sens, ses niveaux linguistiques". (Meschonnic, 1999, 319, my translation).

² Maria Tymoczko, « Post-Colonial Writing and Literary Translation », in *Post-colonial translation, Theory and practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, p. 23.

When one has to translate diglossic stories in which several lects collide in a very few pages, the major problem is both that of revealing this linguistic conflict and of managing to remain within most readers' reach. This means that, contrary to a larger tendency to *decreolization*, even non-creolophone translators will have to try and creolize their own native tongue and fabricate a new language into which the text is to be brought into a new life. This attempt is a genuine challenge because the texts I have been working on are composed of several layers of orality: the narrator is a story-teller, almost in the tradition of the tall-tale, in which daily concerns and elements of the supernatural constantly merge on the narrative level; on top of that, dialogues introduce the various levels of the local society, each character being identifiable not only by the specificities representative of his/her group and age, but also by his/her idiosyncracies. This implies his/her constantly shifting signs on the various language axes, mostly implying grammatical and lexical transfers. This also leads the translator to decide to adopt French Creole words, phrases and grammatical usage and impose these on his/her readers. This attitude can be debatable since it implies that the "average" reader is a non-creolophone reader, that the selection rests on a desire to keep the original tone (the collective language, understood by all, and the author's voice, whose significance may be difficult to grasp), and aims at rendering this tone in another invented tongue.

The challenge is exceptional because, for once, the translator feels that his/her field of investigation is almost a fallow land, which entails much working on, but will also leave him/her free to plant the seeds of his/her own "creation". Hence the need to be in perfect concordance with the author(s) s/he translates, and the wish to exchange and become in his/her turn a story-teller.

Consequently, the translator who aims at rendering all the wealth and subtleties of the language is confronted with the task of first making out and then preserving these differences, as in the following example:

<p>In the pale moon glow, for she was afraid to bring the lamp to the door lest it attract her neighbours, she saw a bearded and hairy stranger with a countenance that would frighten children. She could discern nothing of family in this person and for a moment feared that it was in fact a stranger come to do her harm. But from the familiar way he came into the house she knew that it was he.</p> <p>“So you came?”</p> <p>“What yu expect?”</p> <p>“Don’t yu have friend?”</p> <p>“Fren a dawg.”</p> <p>“Is friend yu run away with from here.”</p> <p>“Ol lady, that time so long ago it long like from here to moon.”</p> <p>“The Country of the One Eye God” (19)</p>	<p>À la pâle lueur de la lune, elle n’avait pas pris la lampe de peur d’attirer l’attention des voisins, elle vit un inconnu barbu et chevelu dont la mine aurait effrayé un enfant. Elle ne lui trouva aucun air de famille et craignit, l’espace d’un instant, qu’il s’agisse vraiment d’un inconnu venu lui faire du mal. Mais, voyant avec quelle familiarité il entra dans la maison, elle sut que c’était lui.</p> <p>– Alors tu es vini ?</p> <p>– T’attendais quoi ?</p> <p>– Tu n’as pas des amis ?</p> <p>– Les amis, c’est des chiens, ça.</p> <p>– Ce n’est pas un ami avec qui tu t’es escampé d’ici ?</p> <p>– La mère, c’est loin-loin tout ça, loin comme d’ici à la lune.</p> <p>(traduction inédite)</p>
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This short extract from “The Country of the One Eye God”³ presents a narrative section and a dialogue between a country grandmother and her nineteen year old grandson, sought by the police as a murderer, rapist, hitman, thief with a price on his head; it epitomises the diglossic nature of Olive Senior’s speech in which two tongues are confronted—an acrolectal form of English sometimes scattered with what Jacques Coursil names *the mute tongue*,⁴ the basilect representative of each character’s local origin, his/her vernacular lect. Here the narrative passage selected may seem quite normative, the style is very hypotactic, the tone rather formal thus creating, with the help of stylistic tools, the imbalance that will lead to the final crisis, but some forms reveal its being Jamaican acrolect, like: *lest it attract*, an archaic form preserved in vehicular Jamaican English and not to be read as highbrow English, or *countenance* simply meaning both face and appearance. With economical means, Olive Senior circumscribes the situation and foretells the conflict to come between the two protagonists, starting with impossible communication. The French translation partially attempts to render something similar in the choice of *mine*, which can be both modern and old usage, but has nothing to compare with the English, while the first element mentioned—*lest it attract*—is neutralized in French, thus levelling the discrepancy the condensed original attempted to introduce in a very few words. This type of process corresponds to a homogenization of the text. One of the solutions lies in *compensation*—that is the displacement of the archaic rendering onto another clause; it can be a grammatical form like, for instance, the choice of a subjunctive imperfect, which may sound quite unusual in the present context, but does correspond to the hypercorrect French spoken in the French Antilles, or, a lexical

³ This is a 10-page story.

⁴ See « L’Éloge de la muette », 1996.

form, which will make up for what was impossible to provide in the originally concerned clause as in the following example: *la cuisine accotée à l'arrière de la maison* to translate the quite pedestrian *the kitchen attached to the house at the back*. So an easy solution offered to the translator to keep the condensed character of story writing is to consider the functionality of language and reproduce with other means the original balance. In other sections of the text, the reader is informed of the geographical location because lexical landmarks foreground the location, words like *yam*⁵, *bissy*⁶, introduce an element of *foreignness* for an English-speaking reader not familiar with the West Indies; there, the translator has to work out an efficient strategy so as to maintain fluidity while keeping obstacles that delay immediate understanding, but introduce otherness. *Yam*, for instance, has an exact equivalent, *igname*, which is not to be mistaken for *patate douce* (*sweet potato*)—here the translator's knowledge of the local culture is challenged—whereas *bissy* could either remain obscure if the word is kept as such to create *foreignness*, as is the case in English, or be somehow explained in a periphrasis.

When it comes to the dialogue itself, the linguistic and cultural gap between the old peasant lady and the young ruffian becomes quite obvious, as shown in the example: her words and coarse accent reflect the simplicity of poorly educated country people whose everyday language is basilectal; his words are tainted by urban life in the Kingston ghettos and sound aggressive. To denote the discrepancy, the author resorts to stylistic devices such as phonographologic transformations, the introduction of Creole lexis, syntactic modifications (dropping of determiners, no verbal inflection, simplification of morphemes corresponding to a minimal reduction necessary for a language to remain understandable). Now, in

⁵ A tuberous root different from the sweet potato known as *yam* in the US: *igname*

⁶ “The tree *Cola acuminata*, and its nut, valued for medicinal use”: (explained in the translation: *une infusion de noix de cola sucrée*)

French phonographologic transformations are not common, but rather lead to the introduction of Creolized lexis implying a certain type of pronunciation, as in *Bondyé (Lawd)* or in *Mondyé (Gawd)*, or the erasing of such obstacles, a form of levelling. Syntactic transformations cannot be acceptable since they do not correspond to any acknowledged form, and the three translators who have worked on these stories in a research group on Caribbean translation have decided to favour lexical or phonetic adjustment to grammatical mutations, as in *vini*, which reproduces the local pronunciation and is the accepted spelling in Creole, or *escampé*, a creolized form, or *loin-loin*—duplication being a Creole way of marking emphasis and the superlative, or the addition of *ça* to a clause (usually spelt *sa* in Creole), almost a verbal tic meant to punctuate the flow of words and to enhance the falling tone at the end of the sentence. In other passages the presence of weird words like *bull buck*⁷ or *duppy conqueror*⁸, enhances cultural gaps within a same language as each author has his/her own *language-culture*. A *language-culture* is a tool originating in the mother tongue, which is made of individual elements of education, of one's environment, of one's personal experience—all these pertaining to the person's own culture and being reflected in his/her writings.⁹ In this specific situation, the translators have opted for a periphrasis peppered with Creole words—a solution inserting an element of strangeness with unknown words and an element of familiarity with snatches of standard speech.

⁷ = *bull bucker*: a man who thinks he is strong enough to butt a bull: *grand major* (in fact *major* is a derogatory word meaning both *strong and with magic powers*)

⁸ “A belligerent or bullying person; a derisive epithet often coupled with bull-bucker”: *pourfendeur de soucougnants* is a compound made of an archaic and derisive term often attributed to Don Quixote, when he tries to kill virtual enemies; *soucougnants* are spirits.

⁹ Meschonnic, 1997, p. 412.

The narrative voice is a good field of study, especially in these stories in which the diegesis stems from child narrators whose observation of life and language is naïve. One of the most striking examples is “Ballad”, a story told by Lenora, a young girl fascinated by a dubious character, Miss Rilla. Her narrative voice is sprinkled with the language of adults so that translating becomes quite tricky since her utterance corresponds to a subtle superposition of voices; it also participates in the construction of the girl’s own voice in her maturing process as a narrator since she is attempting to acquire adult language through experiences of life; consequently her observations are nourished by what she overhears among grown ups. Moreover, one of the key elements of this story lies in its tone, which constitutes the ironical backbone of the simple plot: the life and death of a rather immoral woman seen by a naïve girl only as a model of generosity and goodness, which she also is.

Now, the story’s essentials lie in its enunciation, as a result, the translator is mainly involved in a creative narrative process just as the original author, because he or she belongs to another culture and as such also takes experimental steps to bring about the transferred image of the original—neither a replica, nor a similar text—but a new product for a new readership that does not look like the original, and does not sound like it. The translated text is another version of the original, because “a translation always takes place in a continuum, never in a void, and there are all kinds of textual and extratextual constraints upon the translator” (Bassnett & Lefevere: 123). “The continuum” may be understood as the whole process of translation, from the birth of the original text, to its selection for another version in another tongue, via all the movements to and fro in the “translating field”. It includes all stages of writing and composing for various cultures.

In the following example the study of the incipit of the story will be helpful:

<p>Teacher ask me write composition about The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Meet and I write three page about Miss Rilla and Teacher tear it up and say that Miss Rilla not fit person to write composition about and right away I feel bad the same way I feel the day Miss Rilla go and die on me. “Ballad” (100)</p>	<p>Le Maît’ L’école m’a demandé de faire une rédaction sur La Personne La Plus Inoubliable Que J’aie Connue et j’ai écrit trois pages sur Miss Rilla et puis Le Maît’ l’a déchirée ; il a dit que Miss Rilla c’est pas une personne comme il faut pour écrire une rédaction sur elle et tout de suite j’ai commencé à me sentir mal pareil que le jour quand Miss Rilla est allée mourir comme ça sans rien me dire. (traduction inédite)</p>
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A standard English speaker is immediately struck by the a-grammatical syntax of Lenora, the narrative “I”/eye, but knows from the first word that the narrator is a school child and may interpret her voice as that of a poorly educated pupil. As a matter of fact hers is a typically childish rural Jamaican voice and the reproduction of a-grammaticality in French is an impossible task: translation norms do not tolerate such practices. Moreover, here we are faced with a simplified basilectal form of Jamaican Patois—a more readable fabricated form¹⁰—which has no direct equivalent in French. Consequently, the translators have tried to invent a childish form of French influenced by Antillan creolisms like the introduction of *pareil que* or the addition of *comme ça*. In other words, they have

¹⁰ For instance in current Jamaican Patois all pronouns have only one form : *me*, *him* (referring to males and females), *it*, *yuh*, *dem*. Nouns form their plurals by adding *dem*: man → *mandem*, compounding is much developed and colourful. Conjugation is simplified, double negatives are frequent, etc. Jamaican Creole is said to have formed between 1660 and 1700 and it might be a mixture of Mandingo and Guinea Coast English Creole (among other explanations).

operated both on lexis and grammar. Another noticeable point is the almost total absence of punctuation marks in English in the whole story except for full stops, certainly the only constraint respected for the sake of clarity, whereas all other marks which may be regarded as optional have been avoided. Punctuation not only affects meaning, but imparts musicality and rhythm to the text, revealing its oral dimension. If it is generally admitted that the more punctuation marks will be used, the closer to orality a narrative is, it does not imply that the absence of punctuation marks excludes orality. In the present story, as in several others in this collection, this trait is characteristic of child-talk, and foregrounds the emotional situation in which the young narrator is placed, as he or she delivers his or her speech almost breathlessly. Besides, it complements a hypotactic structure also reflecting the unsophisticated output of oral delivery. In the French translation, this specificity can be *loan* (or *calque*) borrowed from oral speech in the narration as well as in the flows of words freely delivered in dialogues, or in free indirect speech. This was the choice of the translators in the collection. Moreover the overall effect is enhanced by the jubilatory manipulation of the language on the author's part, which is to find the utmost form of its expression in the voice that the mind's ear is supposed to hear. Consequently, the translator's creativity is at work and also twice removed as it fabricates new layers of texts aiming at reproducing heteroglossy, heterology and heterophony, appealing to the senses in order to invite new responses from the readers.

Quite provocatively, in these stories, the sacred notion of legibility is willingly threatened through various enunciative devices in order to destabilize readers, to summon their attention and make them "hear" the tale, situating rhythm at the centre as Meschonnic attempted to demonstrate: "rhythm is order,

mathematical proportion, measure. Thus, it is harmony, from microcosmic structures to macrocosmic ones, whose metrics, originally, lies in celebration until it forgets and is nothing more than the metrics of itself.” (Meschonnic 1995: 361)¹¹ If in such restrained productions the translator concentrates on semantic interpretation, he or she will propose to reveal *the meaning of meaning*, which may deprive the translated text of its initial mystery and close the doors to personal discovery. Moreover, when writing is concentrated on crises, on epiphanies, on moments of revelation, when plot as such is secondary, there is no meaning to be fished out, creativity rests on the conflation of voices the translator is invited to hear and reproduce in his/her turn; the translator’s creativity rests on stylistic choices for the simple reason that the literary value and interest of a story depends more on the senses than on sense: ever since Humboldt demonstrated the sensory character of the mediation between sound and concept, we have known that language has the central and unique function of fabricating this link between sounds, constructs and their manifestation in our minds.

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¹¹ (My translation) : (rhythm is) “ordre, proportion mathématique, mesure. Et par là une harmonique du microcosme au macrocosme dont toute métrique est la célébration, originellement, jusqu’à ce qu’elle l’oublie, et n’est plus que la métrique d’elle-même.”

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