

Visible Communities virtual residency - Decolonising translation - Report

Reflections on the virtual residency

Introduction

Being selected for this residency was a highlight of this year for me. Subtle and not so subtle prejudices and biases that pervade written text are something I noticed from quite a young age... from depictions of the blonde blue-eyed girl in stories as angelic and kind versus the black boy as the devil child, to descriptions of the tall, muscular, dark-skinned servant who initially scares every member of the delicate white family he works for, only for them to discover later that he is kind-hearted and childish. Reading postcolonial literature drove the point home even deeper... in a rather immature game of contrasts and easy dichotomies, Africans were often portrayed as illiterate (in what language, one wonders), unintelligent, instinctive, easy to fool, bearing quasi-religious veneration for the white masters.

I started laughing at quite a young age at these ridiculously unrefined interpretations of highly complex relationships that, more often than not, included severe oppression and life-threatening risk, interpretations that refrained from specifying that those Africans (thus reduced with the stroke of a typewriter) were fighting for survival in a corner with very little room to be themselves.

Ridicule. Oppression. Spoliation. Displacement. Colonisation. Enslavement. Rape. Emasculation.

The list of unnamed acts of violence is endless, and they were too often reframed as salvation, education, civilisation, and more, all positives that some authors worked very hard to shine the light on, ignoring the mountains of negatives these peoples were pitched against or rather, crushed by...

Having been awakened to these unfortunate realities as a young girl, I could not erase that knowledge from my psyche, and it was only reinforced by the study of post-independence literature from sub-Saharan Africa as a teenager, which was often part of the curriculum in Cameroon, where I spent part of my childhood years. There was a very specific lens, I realised, that was applied to the examination of the black, the brown, the chocolate milk or *café au lait* characters... mummies, women of disrepute, weaklings, gullible men on the slow side intellectually, instinct-led gentle giants who needed to be monitored, lest their bestial 'nature' take over with drastic consequences.

Then later, I started watching dubbed films or TV series featuring dark-skinned actors to whom random accents that had no solid rationale or significance were attributed (in the dubbed version), accents borrowed from one region of the world to represent a radically different one, the only common denominator being the colour of the skin of peoples in both regions. My professor father encouraged me to develop a nascent interest in some of the hybrid language forms that existed in the

African and American world, and thus helped develop in me an instinctive respect for those hybrid lects that by their very nature, rendered homage to their African roots.

Later on, as a young adult who grew up speaking five languages, I actually took interest in translation as a profession, but aside from certain exercises at university during my training, I came to literary translation much later... and it was even later that I started reading the same stories in one language, then in their translated version.

Traduttore traditore ... translator, traitor - this phrase is commonly referred to in the world of translation, and it reflects quite accurately the idea that no matter how professionally accurate your translation is, no matter how well you know both languages, how closely you follow the rules of translation, there always comes a point when translators have to make a choice that implies some level of interpretation and re-creation of, and potentially deviation from, the source. That makes it easy to critique a translator's work, but as I discovered particularly acutely during this residency, not so easy to propose better solutions.

Before diving into my report, here are a few comments a friend of mine (British author Chris Aslan) made, which relate very closely to the purpose of this residency. His comments prompted further comments from me.

Why is it that authors writing in French or English, for example, from non-Western backgrounds, are almost considered duty bound to deal with 'issues', as if that's all they're good for? Building on that question, it is worth considering how much or how accurately the original authors deal with issues linked to colonisation within their narratives, and if it matters. Can't brown or black authors be allowed to tell the stories they wish to tell, the way they wish to tell them? How easy is it then for these authors to be taken seriously and/or find publishers?

I don't have the answers to these questions, but I find them worth putting out there for your consideration.

The residency

For the residency, I chose to focus on two masterpieces written by post-independence francophone authors of sub-Saharan African origin: Ferdinand Oyono, *Une vie de boy*, and Amadou Hampâté Bâ, *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul*.

I was aiming to come up with a working paper that might end up becoming an article, if possible an article that could be published in an academic journal. I also hoped to come up with a set of guidelines that could be a useful point of reference for other translators working with non-standard language forms (always present in that literature, as they were born in polyglossic post-colonial contexts). I balked at what I dubbed the odd mixture of standard English and Pidgin, “It is truth, sah.”, the existing translation of “*Y en a vérité, Sep.*”¹ in Oyono’s novel, arguing that a Pidgin English translation² would be a more suitable match for the non-standard French used in the original. *Français des tirailleurs*, one of these language forms, features in Bâ’s novel; I now comment further on it.

I started by stating openly that one aspect of decolonising translation was recognising the importance of, and avoiding descriptions or even conceptions of, the language (tirailleur French) as deficient, broken French etc. I also find it important to recognise that some of the rationale behind that form of French may be what another Francophone author, Kourouma³, described as “trying to write French while continuing to think in one’s mother tongue”. Kourouma goes on to say, “It’s a process which for African peoples whose languages are not written represents a means of intellectual liberation. In the French that has become the national language, they find a “maternal home”. It is not possible to be completely free without a language in which one can fully express oneself. This process is a step on the road to freedom for African peoples of oral literary heritage.” This view reframes one’s perception of the purpose for which authors may have used *français des tirailleurs*.

Is this change of perspective on the aim of putting on display French infused with their characters’ African mother tongue, French tailored to the concepts and forms of their mother tongue, enough to “decolonise the translation”? Could the translation in English then reflect this choice by adapting English to the grammatical and syntactic forms of the African mother tongue?

¹ Sep stands for <chef > chief.

² I suggest <Na truth, massa> or <Na truth, chief> as viable alternatives.

³ Ahmadou Kourouma.

I selected certain excerpts of each novel where the translation caused me some discomfort or at least raised some questions. A few specific examples follow.

Example 1: I was initially shocked by a very animal-like description of Bâ's stepfather's reaction during a specific incident, because I felt that it was dehumanising, and I wondered if the colonising wasn't already embedded in the original writing.

Professor Jeanne Garane, who translated *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul*, made this very useful comment, which helped change my perspective:

"I think that if you reread what Bâ says about Tidjani and pay close attention to the language he uses and the circumstances surrounding Tidjani's rage, Bâ is in no way colonizing his stepfather by comparing him to a wild animal, but is rather describing the depths to which he had been made to stoop by his mistreatment on the part of the colonial system which tried to destroy him."

(See the table below for details.)

FR source	EN version	Comments	Options
<p>Toute fureur retombée, tel un fauve dompté, Tidjani s'approcha de lui.</p> <p>Instinctivement il se mit au garde-à-vous, la main droite à la tempe comme il l'avait vu faire aux gardes, aux tirailleurs et aux spahis. Puis il tendit l'arme et les cartouchières en disant en français : "Pardon, ma coumandan. . ."</p>	<p>The fury dissipated and like a wild animal who had just been tamed, Tidjani walked toward him. He instinctively stood at attention, his right hand raised to his temple, as he had seen the guards, infantrymen, and Spahis do. Then he handed him the weapon and ammunition and said in French, "Pardon, ma coumandan!"</p>	<p>Difficult to decolonise this translation, with the original text and its description of a human being as one led by animal-like instincts (e.g. fauve dompté/wild animal tamed). Decolonisation here would encompass much more than just rendering 'tirailleur French' in 'English'... which leads me back to my question, <i>why decolonise, what does that mean, how do we do that without deviating significantly from the original text?</i></p> <p>The translator keeps the français des tirailleurs as in the original, so the phrase loses the impact it would undoubtedly have on the francophone reader, because to the English-speaking reader, there is no indication that the register of language is remarkable or unusual in any way. Rather, the translator mirrors the original text and calls this phrase French, which gives a sense of normality to the dialogue.</p> <p>My only suggestion would be highlighting the nature of the 'French' spoken by Tidjani. It seems really difficult here to convey some of the obvious points of deviation (from standard FR) in the French text (viz. the wrong gender used for the word 'commandant') in the English translation without getting lost in unnecessary details. For ex. unlike French, English nouns are not gendered.</p>	<p>... and said in <i>his infantry man's French</i>, "Pardon, ma coumandan!"</p>

Example 2: About my suggestion that Pidgin English could have been used to render some of the tirailleur French text, rather than standard French), followed by Prof. Garane’s comment.

FR source	EN version	Comments	Options
<p>Le commandant est là-bas, au sommet de la colline où il trône comme un grand aigle des airs, mais ici, dans la vallée, je suis comme l’hippopotame qui ravage les rizières. Ici, c’est moi qui commande, et non le commandant.” Et il ajoutait, dans son “français des tirailleurs” (appelé français <i>forofifon naspa</i>): “Allez, <i>travadjé travadjé!</i> (Travaillez!) <i>Simon mon cochon, moi cochonner vous comme y faut!</i>”</p>	<p>The commandant is up there on top of the hill, where he is perched like the great eagle of the skies, but down here in the valley, I’m like the hippopotamus that rips up the rice fields. Here, I’m the one in command, and not the commandant.” Then he would add in his “infantry man’s French”, (called French <i>forofifon naspa</i>): “Get to work! <i>Travadjé travadjé!</i> (Work, work!) Otherwise, you pigs, I’ll pigwhip you good!”</p>	<p>The translator had to make choices. But there is no mention of the fact that the word that is used to mean ‘work’ is mispronounced. The next threatening sentence again is translated in a way that does not convey the unusual nature of the phrase used (<i>moi cochonner vous comme y faut!</i>) or the non-standard <i>français des tirailleurs</i> syntax, and the sentence starting with ‘moi’, all clear markers that this is not grammatically correct standard French.</p>	<p>“<i>You work! You work! If you no work, me beat you lak pig, me beat you good!</i>”</p> <p>I could also go full Pidgin English, even though it is not native to the region; I do believe it’s a valid equivalent: “<i>Wok! You! Work na! If you no work, a go beat you lak pig dem, a go beat you good!</i>”</p>

Prof. Garane: “My reaction to your reading of my translation of *forofifon naspa* would be that I deliberately chose not to use a Pidgin that had developed in a different historical context. [...] I could consider reevaluating that decision for *Oui Mon commandant!*, and I thank you for the suggestions.”

Example 3:

FR source	EN version	Comments
<p>Dans les rues bondées de la ville, où déambulaient des militaires et des gens vêtus des costumes les plus variés, on entendait parler à peu près toutes les langues soudanaises, saupoudrées de mots ou d’expressions françaises assaisonnées “façon locale” et que l’on appelait alors non pas “petit nègre” mais “moi ya dit toi ya dit.”</p>	<p>In the crowded streets of the city, where ambling soldiers rubbed elbows with people dressed in a wide-ranging array of clothing styles, one could hear all the Sudanese languages being spoken, with a sprinkling here and there of French words and expressions accented with “local flavour”. In those days, this was not called “petit nègre” but, rather, “moi ya dit toi ya dit,” or, “me say you say.”</p>	<p>Here, I would suggest drawing from a previous translation highlighting that the French used here is non-standard French and offering an equivalent in English. Easier said than done.</p> <p>I also believe <i>forofifon naspa</i> (which sounds quite related to Bamanan-kan or Bambara, one of the main languages spoken in Mali where the story is set) ought to be explained a little bit (both in the French original and in the English translation).</p> <p>In an online discussion group between scholars/students at Michigan State University, I found the following comment made by a person of Senegalese origin: “In my opinion “Forofifon naspa” is one Pulaar or Bambara term used by Amadou H Bâ”.</p> <p>I agree with the above comment. To me, decolonising translation could also mean highlighting meaning-making contributions from local African languages, to ensure that they are not lost in translation.</p>

As a result, while I initially proposed alternatives or slight changes that made the translations seem more accurate, more appropriate, more relevant to me, two or three short excerpts took me days to analyse, and I then started to realise how humongous this task would be. As I explored alternative options, I realised very quickly that they were not necessarily much more satisfactory than the choices of the original translators.

A few key questions follow. They helped me reduce the vastness of this project of decolonising translation a bit more, to more manageable sizes, and examine the task at hand without being completely overwhelmed. I have attempted to answer them, often quite tentatively, with great humility, with the upfront avowal that every answer is work in progress and will certainly evolve with time. At this point, I also want to acknowledge how much I gained from the discussions with my fellow residents; my answers below include some of the reflection that came from their contributions, as well as a discussion with Prof. Garane.

Here were the questions I asked myself and shared with my fellow residents and Prof. Garane, followed by my proposed answers to those questions; in the background, the underlying question that threads through this report is, **“What is ‘decolonising translation’ and what does that look like practically? What’s the point?”**

1. **Is it possible to translate post-independence francophone literature from sub-Saharan Africa in such a way as to retain the broader meaning associated with the original text when the languages of interaction are no longer those of the former coloniser and the mother tongues which were colonised, and when the specific linguistic devices used by the author cannot easily be replicated in another tongue?**

The short answer is yes, and no, and the end translation will by no means be perfect and perfection isn't the aim. A few additional questions may help along the way.

2. **What was the author’s intention when using those forms of language? To what end?**

Retaining the broader meaning associated with the original text presupposes having some understanding of the author’s intention. Without understanding, a scene that is intended as a journalistic report, portraying what was happening at the time as historically accurately as possible **without condoning it**, could be completely misunderstood.

3. **How are power relations (i.e. power and resistance to that power) between coloniser and colonised conveyed through the use of these language forms?**

I found it essential to highlight that Pidgins and ‘broken’ forms of standard Western languages were not just used in literature to convey the idea that the colonised were not fully literate in the language of the coloniser, but also to highlight the importance of **acting subservient** when facing the coloniser to avoid conflict and its consequences, as the use of these language forms would reinforce colonisers’ sense of superiority, acting as a shield to the colonised.

4. **How do we work with the unavoidable shift that translation brings, whilst being careful to respect something of the spirit of the original text and highlighting any influence of formal colonial constructs and power relations conveyed through this use of language in the original text? Can we and should we then strive to come up with a target version that neither betrays the original text and its meaning, nor fails in its mission to decolonise translation?**

With great difficulty, would be my immediate answer, and I’ve happily come to the conclusion that even though the translators of these two books that I chose did not necessarily make the choices I would have made, they made choices, and their choices were justified and made sense to them.

5. Does the mission of decolonising translation imply doing away completely with the spirit of the original text if necessary? Can we still call that translation, then?

Doing away completely with the spirit of the original text would not be translation anymore, but a completely different exercise. Such an exercise has value but is not the goal, is it? We are dealing with the colonial past, the polyglossic present, and taking into account that some language choices have been made and others have to be made. We have to be aware of the audience, of ideologies and positions, and there are so many decisions to be made that can be open to various interpretations. I don't see any point in doing away with the authors' mindset and the spirit of their text.

6. Is co-construction the answer?

As above, I see little point in rewriting the original text, but to a certain extent, every translation includes and involves some level of co-construction, within reason. Prof. Garane commented: "I do not believe in altering an original (to the extent that a translation is not already an alteration of an original). I felt that my attempted decolonizing gesture was the very translation of the text itself, since it should have been translated years ago. I explain the process in my introduction concerning the way in which I came to translate this text. I think that A.H. Bâ has been clear about his views on the power of words and I do not feel that I would have the right to deliberately alter what he wrote."

Conclusion

We could potentially add to/improve existing/current work on decolonised translation practice informed by the interaction between postcolonial theory and translation. At this stage, my conclusions are that:

- we can only approach such a task with humility, knowing that it is a complex, multi-layered task often impeded by our own inner questions and struggles about our identities, our rapport with languages, especially for people from the global majority with their post-post-colonial past;
- collaborative work with others can only be positive and enlightening;
- we need to examine and re-examine previous translation work, step back from our initial judgments about the translator's work, where possible investigate the author's intentions, and engage in conversations with the translator about their work and choices;
- even what might look like failure to decolonise translations is a win, as the exploration of these questions intrinsically contains a blessing and an opportunity for growth and healing for us as translators of post-post-colonial heritage, and for everyone else as well;
- decolonising translation could also mean highlighting meaning-making contributions from local African languages, to ensure that they are not lost in translation, and I include in the terms 'African languages' an example from Bâ's novel, *forofifon naspa*, the term he uses when referring to *français des tirailleurs*. This term sounds quite related to *Bamanan-kan* or *Bambara*, one of the main languages spoken in Mali where the story is set. I felt that this link could have been explained a little bit in Bâ's novel (both in the French original and in the English translation).

My final comment, also my most significant takeaway from the exchange with Professor Garane, is the rhetorical question, "**What if any attempt to decolonise translation started with dialogue about the translation choices made, weighed against the intentions of the author, and bearing in mind the social and political context the story is set in?**"