

Creole and Translation*

(Créole et traduction)

While all languages present translation problems ('non-equivalence' of vocabulary, incompatibility of different grammatical systems, and so on), the problems are intensified in the case of creoles by the existence of so-called diglossic situations (See '**Diglossia**', link: <http://creoles.free.fr/Cours/anglais/Diglossia.pdf>). The 'birth' of creoles during the era of European colonisation in the seventeenth century is relatively recent and there is little doubt that the links between them and their source languages, which is mainly French in French creole areas, have still not quite been severed.

In order to have a better grasp of the translation problems connected with diglossia, it would be useful, first of all, to cite a definition of translation and J. Dubois' definition seems quite acceptable in terms of giving an initial rough idea:

*Translation is the expression in another language (or target language) of what has been expressed in a source language with semantic and stylistic equivalence preserved.*¹

Everything revolves around these two terms "semantic" and stylistic" and the question in this case is whether there are actually two languages available in diglossia. It is worth briefly mentioning the English/French translation specialists, Vinay and Darbelnet,² who noted that the translations of bilingual speakers are not the same as those of monolingual speakers living in their monolingual domain. Taking a Canadian and a French translator as respective examples, they wrote that the French translator is able to identify suitable equivalents immediately (familiar reality) and would know, for example, that the motorway sign 'slow' should be rendered by the verb 'ralentir' ('to slow down') rather than by 'lentement' ('slowly') and that 'slippery when wet', which would be translated literally by the Canadian as 'glissant si humide', should be rendered as 'ralentir par temps de pluie' ('slow down when raining') or 'chaussée glissante' ('slippery road').

The aim of this introductory comment quoted above from the two authors is to make one think about what translation really is. It is not a matter of simply repeating the original text in another language but of searching for stylistically acceptable equivalence by taking the cultural context into consideration which can, of course, lead to important 'adaptations'. From this point of view, it may not be so much the bilingual, native speaker of the original or source language who is considered the best translator but rather the native speaker of the target language, brought up within the context of the target audience's language, who is undoubtedly quasi-bilingual but who is, above all, imbued with the culture of the target language and capable of manipulating linguistic signs and connotations in the target language.

Vinay and Darbelnet emphasise the fact that translation also, above all, presents technical problems and that 'one cannot suddenly become a translator just because one is bilingual' (p. 24). It is in this sense that we present the problem of the diglossic context where creole-speaking writers are by turns writer and translator and we will attempt to show that not only is it not possible to 'suddenly become a translator just because one is bilingual' (p. 24) but it is often even a handicap to be in a diglossic context.

¹ J. Dubois, *Dictionnaire de linguistique* (Paris: Larousse, [2001(?)]).

² J. P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais. Méthode de traduction*. (Paris: Didier, 1958). Further references to this text will be given in parentheses after the quotation.

A diglossic situation is characterised by two languages that make complementary use of registers; what is said in one cannot be said in the other and vice versa. Moreover, speakers in diglossic contexts have often not had the opportunity to develop a register in one of the languages since they systematically go over to the other language when confronted with a situation that implies the register in question, hence the register is missing altogether. In respect of the ‘high’ language such as French, this is only a problem for the speaker who does not have access to the more informal registers, although people do make skilful use of ‘français familier’ (informal French) and ‘français populaire’ (working-class French) when translating the more informal creole registers. In respect of the ‘low’ language, in this case creole, drawing on a more formal register is much more problematic because speakers generally switch to French when required to speak in an ‘elevated’ fashion with the result that the high creole register becomes, to a fairly large extent, confused with French. This is what makes it particularly difficult in the present state of creole development to render words or texts of a formal register in creole and, because of this almost inevitable gap (which writers are often happy to play on), tragedies become laughable and the Bible becomes a rather comical work.

The complex question of translation in diglossia can be represented in the following way:

In the case of strict diglossia (Fergusonian), the relationship between the two languages is represented below, where the black indicates an absence of language register:

acrolectal French	
	basilectal creole

Translation is not possible when there is no white area opposite another.

In the case of bilingualism, on the other hand, which implies even-handed usage of two languages, everything that is said in one language can be said in the other:

acrolectal French	
	basilectal creole

At present, diglossic situations are rarely strict. There is no doubt that the Antilles are moving towards relative bilingualism and, while not everything can be easily translated, there are a number of registers in both languages. Translation is feasible in conditions such as these where there are areas of possible equivalence which means that one is not forced to produce the incorrect translations that are all too often an inevitable consequence of diglossic situations lacking in any intervention where, for example, aristocratic French is rendered as working-class creole or informal creole is rendered as French that is too formal:

acrolectal French	
	basilectal creole

This is of course a conjunctural problem linked to the state of development of the majority of creoles and not a ‘defect’ permanently hanging over them. Registers can, and must, be gradually developed to allow everything from the most serious issues to the most complex feelings to be expressed in creole and rhetoric must also be developed in order to be able to play on language registers. It has to be said, however, that development projects on Antillean creoles, for fear of relying on any French, have been concerned above all with developing the basilect (See ‘Continuum’, link: <http://creoles.free.fr/Cours/anglais/Continuum.pdf>).

To this end, Jean Bernabé and GEREK are officially proposing to fill in the gaps in the basilect by gathering together all forms that are furthest removed from French, whether they are used in real communication or not, aiming to ‘construct’ a creole from voluntarist reasoning.

In *Fondal-Natal*,³ Bernabé undertakes to describe this ‘basilectal creole’ and justifies its selection on sociolinguistic and political grounds. In the same way that ‘the real basilect inevitably has features borrowed from French due to decreolisation’ (Bernabé, *Fondal-Natal*, p. 15), this theoretical ‘basilect’ is also partially (re)constructed because, when ‘gaps’ appear in it, Bernabé makes use of the concept of maximum deviation and retains the form furthest removed from French; in his own words, ‘the basilect aims to establish itself on the basis of maximum deviation in relation to French’ (*Fondal-Natal*, p. 16). Bernabé had already presented the concept of deviation as the founder of his reasoning in an earlier article⁴ where, within the framework of lexical research, he showed why a deviatory term should be created each time one similar to the French term appeared in speech. Hence his suggestion that the creole term *jansív* should be replaced and how, ‘within a group of about ten secondary school pupils [...], we created an original word to refer to ‘gum’ ‘ (Bernabé, ‘Recherches sur le créole spécifique’, p. 19), the result of which was ‘dyenndan’.

(Extract from M. C. Hazaël-Massieux, *Ecrire en créole* (Paris: Harmattan, 1993), pp. 29-30)

Fortunately however, due to gaps between theory and practice, there are some excellent translations into creole. Among those particularly worthy of appreciation are the works of the Martinican, Georges Mauvois, whose excellent translation of Molière’s *Don Juan* was especially successful. Neither Molière, who handles many abstract concepts, nor the creole language have been betrayed in this work and the achievement merits the attention of all those interested in translation.

While this is the most important issue in French/creole translation, the differences between the languages and cultures, such as geographical or anthropological gaps, also of course present problems, as is the case with all languages, and can lead to improper uses of words or faux-amis and so on. If an expression that makes reference to a daily reality in one language, such as two Russian men kissing on the lips, is translated literally into English for example, where this gesture is only conceivable between two lovers, it takes on an entirely different meaning to the one it actually has in a Russian novel. A cultural transfer is essential in English in order that the exact meaning from the Russian text is not distorted.

The difficulties in crossing from a language that says less to a language that says more should also be pointed out. While it is always possible to cross from a language that says more to a language that says less, for example it is not difficult to render the English ‘mutton’ or ‘sheep’ by the French ‘mouton’ (with the option of stipulating whether reference is to the living animal or the meat on a plate), it is far more complex to cross from a language that says less to a language that says more. Citing a Swedish example, Malmberg underlines what is automatically added by the translation ‘min farbror’ of the French ‘mon oncle’ (‘my uncle’)

³ Jean Bernabé, *Fondal-natal. Grammaire basilectal approchée des créoles guadeloupéen et martiniquais* ([Paris?]: Harmattan, 1983). Further references to this text will be given in parentheses after the quotation.

⁴ Jean Bernabé, ‘Recherches sur le créole spécifique. Part I: la désignation des parties du corps humain’, *Espace Créole*, 2 (1977), 13-38. Further references to this text will be given in parentheses after the quotation.

because the translator has no choice but to convey in addition that reference is actually to the subject's father's brother as opposed to their mother's brother:

The essential difference between languages consists therefore of the fact that two semantic elements follow one another in some languages but appear combined and without order in others. In the case of the word 'oncle', there is a dimension of order and hierarchy in French where it is 'paternal' that determines 'oncle' and not the reverse, but in Swedish the question of order does not arise. This encapsulates the (semantic) structural difference between languages and although it often complicates translation, it does not preclude it.⁵

Malmberg goes on to say:

We can thus summarise by saying that transformations of this type entail linear changes or changes in the succession of a combination of elements in the target language which do not know any dimension of order in the source language. Any transformation in this direction is therefore a structural simplification and any transformation in the other direction is a complication. Translation will entail excessive specification, unnecessarily so in the eyes of the target audience, where the source language represents the least developed structuring and will have an irritating lack of concretion in the reverse case. (pp.252-3)

When translating from a language that says more to a language that says less, there is always the possibility of syntagmatically adding some meaning in the form of determiners, parentheses, interpolated clauses, and so on or, at a pinch, by recourse to the 'translator's note'. It is often possible to compensate for paradigmatic absence with syntagmatic exposition provided that the translator is careful to make additions advisedly, although some expositions and periphrases, faithful no doubt to the meaning of the source word, cannot possibly cross over to the target language. Initiative plays a major role when translating from a language that says less to a language that says more; the translator needs to make good choices and adding meaning becomes an obligation rather than a risk. It is enjoyable to speculate on how to avoid making the distinctions that are, a priori, necessary in the target language and how to reduce or neutralise meanings. How can 'uncle' be said concisely when the language does not allow it? Additional characteristics are unavoidable in this situation and, where it is not made clear in the source text, the translator will also have to decide whether the maternal or paternal 'uncle' should be retained from the various possible terms which all offer superfluous distinctions. There is hardly ever a solution here (with the exception once again of the great 'translator's note,') and the translator is always forced to add extra meaning to the text and not always satisfactorily so opting, in the absence of a hypernym that corresponds to the general term in the source language, for a hyponym which is probably far too precise. It is interesting to note that while 'seat', for example, may be a hypernym for all terms such as 'armchair', 'chair', 'settee', 'stool', and 'pouffe' which were the subject of Pottier's well-known semic analyses, there is no hypernym to replace such terms as 'sideboard', 'dresser', 'wardrobe', and other tall storage units. Every language has its richness and its gaps which are not always easy to manipulate. As Jakobson famously wrote,

Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey.⁶

⁵ B. Malmberg, *Signes et Symboles: Les bases du langage humain* (Paris: Editions Picard, 1977), p. 252.

⁶ Roman Jakobson, 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation' in *On Translation*, ed. by Reuben A. Bower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), pp. 232-9 (p. 236).

* Note

The sections in Bradley Hand ITC font have been introduced to give a deeper understanding of certain concepts.