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Essay

Traveller to the east or towards the rising sun? The English and French translations of *Moeti oa Bochabela*

Some years ago Chris Dunton read *Traveller to the East*, the English translation of Mofolo's *Moeti oa Bochabela* by Edmund Hugh Ashton (not Harry Ashton, as given on the title-page of the Penguin edition). Dunton found it generally rather dull. This might have had to do with his lack of enthusiasm for the novel's subject matter and for allegory. But that the problem lay elsewhere was suggested by the much more invigorating experience of a subsequent reading of the French translation of the novel, *L'homme qui marchait vers le soleil levant*. Could it be that the Ellenberger translation was on its own terms a better piece of writing than the Ashton?

The respective titles of the two translations suggested that this might be so. *Traveller to the East* is perfectly sound as a literal translation of the original.¹ It is however rather lacklustre, reminiscent of a London Underground direction indicator. The French, on the other hand, seizes the imagination and has a beautiful cadence.

We undertook a critical comparison of the two translations, Lerato Masiea working between the Sesotho and English and Dunton from the English and French. In addition, Masiea prepared a new English translation of selected passages from the novel.

Our contention is that it is clearly important for translators to be competent both in the language of the original text (the source language) and in the language into which they are translating (the target language), but in the case of literary translation the latter competency is perhaps the more important, since the goal is to arrive at a text (the translation) that is readable, idiomatic and enjoyable. Thus David Petersen has argued that in literary translation (in his case from Japanese to English) the goal is "to focus on conveying the main ideas as clearly as possible in colloquial English, rather than preserving the structure [of the source language]. I think of this as target language *driven* translation because of the distance from the source text during the process of composition" (n.p., italics in original).

The point is made well by Jean-René Ladmiral, who distinguishes between *sourciers*—those who privilege the source language—and *ciblistes*, those who privi-

lege the target language (xv). Amongst the latter he includes himself, and we align ourselves with that position. Later in his account (55–59) Ladmiraal expands on what he refers to as *la double competence* (dual competency), and distinguishes between a bald translation (or what he calls *version*, of the kind students practice at secondary school) and a more fully satisfactory translation (*traduction*).

Edmund Hugh Ashton was a highly-educated first-language English speaker and there is no doubting his competence in the language.² Where he falls short is, in part, in his ability to employ language sensitively and creatively. Part of the problem with *Traveller to the East* has to do with the weak translation or mistranslation of culture-specific terms. Alain Ricard has noted that “the English translation often obscures the Sesotho cultural dimensions [of the original text]” (*Un ouvrage* 17; see also Ricard, *Le Sable* 186).³ As an example Ricard gives the French and English translations of “*bale*”: for Ellenberger “*initiées*” (female initiates), for Ashton the far less precise “girls.”

More generally, however, the problem with the English has to do with its flatness, its lack of spark. Take the final paragraph of chapter five, which we give below in the Sesotho and in Ashton’s translation.

O ile, o ile, o ile, bosiu ba mo sela a le koana, hole-hole, ‘me le hona a sa bea butle. Ba e-sa a khile liphoka, a meneletse mohlankana oa pholo. Ba e-sa a kene tseleng, a e-ea moo a sa tsebeng teng. Ba e-sa a le tseleng, a ea batla, a ea batla ho loka, a ea batla Molimo. Ba e-sa a baleha, a balehela bokhopo ba atileng, a baleha lefatšeng leo ho loka ho leng sieo ho lona. Pelo ea hae e ne e batla, e ne e bala, e luma ntho e le kholo. (Moeti 38)

He went on, he went on, he went on, the night waned on him far away, and even then he was not going slowly. The night waned on his feet wet with dew, with his clothes packed up, that big boy. The night waned on him as he was on his way, he did not know where he was going. The night waned on him walking, looking, looking for righteousness, looking for God. The night waned on him running away, fleeing from that increasing wilderness, fleeing from the land in which there was no right. His heart was searching, was meditating, wishing earnestly for some great thing. (*Traveller* 46)

With its multiple repetitions of words and phrases, the impact of this should be tumultuous and hypnotic, and Ashton does largely succeed in getting this across. Yet from the title of the chapter onwards, the virtues of free play within the target language are apparent. The Sesotho original, *Fekisi o tloha hae ha habo* is translated by Ashton as “Fekisi leaves his home”. Ellenberger gives *Fekisi quitte son village and les siens* (Fekisi leaves his village and those close to him) and through an expansion of the sense of *habo* better conveys the momentousness of the event. In Ashton’s translation of the final paragraph, the phonetic similarity between “went on” and “waned on” helps build up the sense of Fekisi’s obsessive determination, but it also has a slightly comic effect; in the French the repetition of *l’aube le trouva* (“Dawn found him”) is perfectly effective.

In the original the second sentence ends with the phrase *mohlankana oa pholo*. The French radically restructures the sentence, thus diminishing the emphasis Mofolo places on this phrase (“*La nuit finissante vit le courageux garçon trempé de rosée, d’autant qu’il avait relevé ses vêtements pour pouvoir avancer plus librement*”) but *le courageux garçon* is surely a more effective translation of *mohlankana oa pholo* than Ashton’s lame “that big boy”.

When it comes to the opening words of the paragraph, the French is—by serendipity—phonetically close to the Sesotho (“*il alla, il alla, il alla*” for “*o ile, o ile, o ile*”). Masiea came up with “Gone, gone, gone” using the English past participle instead of the simple past. This amounts almost to what Stanley Fish calls a “strong misreading”, shifting the focalisation of the phrase, allowing us to glimpse what Fekisi has left behind and the impact of his departure on his family, his fellow herdsmen and his cattle, the subject of the following chapter, and hinting at a tragic dimension to the text.

Credit, though, where credit is due. There are instances where Ashton’s translation scores over Ellenberger’s. Take the following line from chapter seven, when Fekisi’s journey is well under way:

Original: “*Eaba o re ka pelong: ‘Ea setseng ke ea setseng’* (Moeti 46);

Ellenberger: “*Il se dit alors: ‘Restent en place ceux qui ne veulent pas partir’*” (*L’homme* 112) (And so he said to himself ‘Let them stay where they are, those who do not wish to leave’);

Ashton: “Then he said in his heart: ‘He who stays behind is he who stays behind’” (*Traveller* 55).

Here Ellenberger misses out on the emotive effect of *pelong* (Ashton: “in his heart”). And is it fanciful to suggest that Ashton’s at first glance platitudinous “He who stays behind is he who stays behind” (closer to the original than the Ellenberger) is effective if the reader picks up two meanings of “behind”: geographical location and stage of development?

In conclusion, we reiterate the principal outlined at the beginning of this essay, that notwithstanding the importance of fidelity to the source text, in the case of literary translation the fundamental desideratum is to produce a text in the target language that is appealing to read.

Notes

1. *Bochabela* and the fuller form *Botchabatsatsi* are the standard Sesotho terms for “East” (the root being the verb *chaba*, “to rise”).
2. Ashton, a British colonial officer, was at one time District Commissioner for Maseru.
3. “*La traduction anglaise gomme souvent les dimensions culturels sotho*” (Ricard, “Un ouvrage” 17).

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