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“Sounding the Essence of Sense and Sound: On Translating Playful and Poetic Prose”

Paper presented by TiffaneLevick (PRISMES, Université Paris 3-Sobronne Nouvelle) at theInternational conference “Loose in Translation. Translating Wordplay,” Université de Lille, 23rdMarch 2017

CRITICAL PREAMBLE

1. Introduction: novel + language use

This paper will consider the translation of the playful use of language on the part of marginalised youth living on the outskirts of Paris, as this wordplay appears in a contemporary French novel. This novel is *Moinon*, written by Patrick Goujon and published by Gallimard in 2003. I translated this novel last year within the framework of my PhD thesis at Paris 3. It relates the thoughts and experiences of two young men, the main narrators Hoch and Flex, and of their friends and family. The characters all live on the outskirts of Paris and the story is set in the early 2000s. This information, however, is never directly divulged to the readers; there is no explicit indication of time or place, and it is up to the reader to infer the setting from the language of the novel and/or from the voice that Goujon attributes to each of his characters. One might identify nuances of activism in such a choice as Goujon subtly plants a seed in his readers’ minds, hinting at the invisibility of the outskirts of Paris within French society more broadly. The decision further serves to accentuate the identity function of language, as it is purely thanks to the highly-marked nature of the language employed by the novel’s characters that the reader is able to recognise that when they speak of *la Ville d’acôté*, the City Next Door, they are referring to Paris.

2. Non-standard language: identity and rebellion

Hoch and Flex, and their entourage, speak a particular variety of French that one immediately recognises as belonging to the young people of *la banlieue parisienne*. Goujon’s characters are marginalised, and, indeed, their limited agency finds more ample room to move in language; these young people, suffering from the sentiment of being pawns of French society, rebel against the language of the elite by taking ownership of the language handed down to them, bending and often violating the rules that it enforces, or by shaping and moulding it in ways that members of *la bonne société* would not. Speaking of the particular form of language adopted by young speakers of French in urban areas, Stella Linn states that “This linguistic variety allows underprivileged youths from multi-ethnic suburbs to rebel against authority by deliberately violating standard language norms” (IJLL, August 2016, p. 1). The urban youth language used by the characters in *Moi non* gives them a voice, literally and figuratively, allowing them to assert their identity and express their belonging, and the impact and liveliness of this particular version of youth language that Goujon channels in his novel finds stimulus in the poetics and performance of rap music.

3. Rap music, creativity and constraint

Rap music has its roots in the rise of the hip-hop movement from within the impoverished South Bronx of New York City of the 1970s. The characters in *Moi non* find both inspiration

and an outlet for their voice in rap music as Goujon wields highly informal language characterised by slang and musicality to forge in *Moi non* a distinct style of writing combining the colloquial and the lyrical. He harnesses the MC’s linguistic and stylistic toolkit to play with language, to play with words, as his characters craftily manipulate the standard language to make it their own. They find solace in the creativity that the constraints of rap music impose on them, requiring them to adjust their lyrics to fit the syllabic restrictions resulting from the specific number of beats and bars allocated to each line, while simultaneously making use of rhythm and rhyme to produce a text that flows. Adam Bradley and Andrew Lee DuBois confirm this link between creativity and constraint in their introduction to *The Anthology of Rap*; they claim that “Rap, like other artistic forms, thrives on constraint as much as it does on freedom” (2010, p. xxiii). In fact, the manner in which the characters of *Moinon* generate ingenuity from the constraints imposed by rap music can indeed be seen as an extension of their initial impulse to use language creatively within the context of the hardship of life in the *banlieue parisienne*. As we will see, these rap-related constraints placed on the writer of the original text are compounded in translation, where the translator must attempt to respect both the style and the content of the text as far as possible while making use of the possibilities available to them in the language of translation.

4. Rap constraints and wordplay

The constraints of rap music propel the MC, or in this case the author, towards efforts to play with language, and this wordplay manifests itself through the unusual and unexpected use of words. In *The Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*, Adam Bradley discusses the way in which interspersing rap lyrics with rhyme can engender collocations that are interesting both semantically and stylistically. Bradley quotes poet and critic Alfred Corn who states that “The coincidence of sound in a pair of rhymes is a recommendation to the reader to consider the rhyming words in tandem to see what meaning emerges from their juxtaposition” (2009, p. 54). One might say the same for wordplay, in terms of that way that the highlighting or exploiting of the polysemy or homophony of words prompts fresh connections, encouraging the reader (or listener) to identify new meanings and relationships between words and ideas, calling into question commonly-made associations and/or establishing new ones.

5. Rap and poetry

Within *Moinon*, the character who narrates the better part of the first half of the novel, aspiring poet Hoch, proposes his own definition of poetry: “*C'est ça la poésie pour moi. Son avantage c'est que même si la syntaxe, le contenu sont pas corrects, les possibilités de faire sonner les mots, les mettre en désordre, les inventer même, c'est toujours là pour t'aider à pas te faire cocu toi-même*” (Goujon, p. 14 – plus translation on PowerPoint). Hoch’s voice is perhaps the most poetic of all the characters’, and the way that he exploits literary devices is clearly influenced by the rap music that seeps through to his ears via his Walkman. The introduction to *The Anthology of Rap* insists on the relationship between poetry and rap and states that “Good rap lyrics are poetically interesting because they have to be; they have little in the way of melody or harmony to compensate for a poor lyrical line” (2010, xxxiv). The style and effect of the game that Goujon plays in *Moinon* can be likened to the “flow” of a piece of rap, or the rhythm and the rhyme of the words, and the way in which these elements

interact. Adam Bradley defines flow as “an MC’s distinctive lyrical cadence, usually in relation to a beat. It is rhythm over time” (2009, p. 6). Goujon has clearly been inspired by the writing of rap lyrics as he extends the use of poetic devices from the explicit passages of rap and poetry peppered throughout the novel to imbue the narration more broadly. Indeed, wordplay provides for Goujon the ideal platform to dabble in a juggling of sound and semantics, to vivid effect.

6. Translation of wordplay

Such creative and militant use of language necessitates particular attention in translation, since the translator must identify solutions which communicate the playfulness and the nuances of meaning nestled within the original turns of phrase, all the while suggesting the agency of the characters in their particular use of language. Failing to do so would betray the premise that is central to the original text, in which characters resort to a clever exploitation of language to assert the only agency they possess. Wordplay is used extensively throughout Goujon’s novel and takes on a number of forms. I propose in what follows to focus primarily on the role played by constraints in the translation of rap or rap-like prose by opposing examples of passages of formal rap with passages of the narration influenced by rap.

1. CASE STUDY: NARRATIVE FLOW

1. Flow in the narration

Let us first look at aspects of wordplay in the narration of *Moinon*. Where wordplay makes an appearance in the narration, it is primarily deployed through the use of homophones. When translating these homophones, I prioritised orality rather than striving for an exact replication of the type of wordplay used in the original. Therefore, when the use of a homophone in English risked hindering the flow of the translated text or appearing forced and artificial, I chose to focus on imbuing the text with rhythm and sound through the use of complementary literary devices such as assonance and consonance, all the while ensuring that I was making use of imagery and figurative language. The fact that I was translating rap-like narration and not formal rap meant that I was able to take more liberties in terms of rearranging syntax and shuffling word order so that the translation would flow in a manner that was pleasing to the ear.

1.1. NARRATIVE FLOW EXAMPLE 1

This first example I have chosen to analyse with you today is taken from the beginning of the novel, when Hoch and Flex are in a department store. Hoch is attempting to steal a silk shirt, and his friend Flex is distracting the security guard so that they won't be caught.

<i>Mon ami est mon paravent et d'ici que le type calcule, je prends ma part avant.</i> p 20	My friend's my shield and, by the time the guy's put two and two together , I've already sealed the deal .
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In the above example, the homophonic wordplay of the French is not reproduced in the English. I opted instead for a rhythmic translation that channelled assonance and consonance, using the expression “to put two and two together” for *calculer*, and “to seal the deal,” for *prendre ma part avant*. Though establishing homophonic wordplay in the English could have been a possibility, through playing with the word “shield,” for example, I preferred the final solution without homophones in English as the flow of the sentences was particularly forceful, therefore placing the emphasis on rhythm.

1.2. NARRATIVE FLOW EXAMPLE 2

My second example is also taken from the first chapters of the novel, where Hoch is describing his relationship with his friends and the kinds of activities and discussions they partake in together.

<i>On se raconte nos petites histoires, enfin je t'ai déjà dit, les taffes soporifiques et les tafs en sous-marin, les coups de vice à la scred'.</i> p. 31	We trade stories, like I said, about trading under the table. About smoking and joking, puffing to relax, about wheeling and dealing, covering our tracks.
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Here, I have played on the double meaning of “trade,” used in two forms (“trade” and “trading”) and tried to emulate the use of homophones in the original. In this example as in the previous, it is clear that I departed considerably from the syntactic arrangement of the original text. I took the first use of a gerundive and built it on in the second part of the passage, attempting to achieve a robust flow. This flow is different from in the original, but has more impact on an acoustic level than what I might have settled on had I followed the syntax of the original more closely.

1.3. NARRATIVE FLOW EXAMPLE 3

My third and final example of rap-like prose appears towards the end of the first half of the novel, where Hoch is reflecting on consumerism before a sales festival in the mannequin store at which he works.

<p><i>Oublie la qualité, pense cadeaux, promos, remises, soldes, crédits. File des lunettes de soleil pourries et des stylos plume. Oublie la franchise, franchise les détours de langage et fais des petits. Fais du fric, du fric, du fric et à la fin de la journée, lave-toi les mains.</i></p> <p>(p. 71)</p>	<p>Forget quality, think gifts, special offers, discounts, sales, store credits. Stock up on shitty sunglasses and fountain pens. Forget being earnest. Roll out the smooth talk so you're the one raking in the takings. Earn money, money, and more money and then, at the end of the day, wash your hands.</p>
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In this example I was again able to use a partial homophone in “earn” and earnest”, though these two words are not juxtaposed as explicitly in the translation as in the original since they are separated by a sentence, rather than appearing side-by-side. I attempted to compensate for the reduced impact by instilling in the English lines a distinctive rhythm, especially through the rhymed use of the sound “aking” in “raking in the takings.”

1.4. Flow over homophones

Although wordplay is prominent in the form of homophones in the above examples, I reckoned that it came second to rhythm, and this hierarchy of priority provided ideal reasoning to focus on flow in the translation when the use of wordplay was either clumsy or forced. I adopted the same logic when translating rap, but the more formal constraints did not allow me as much flexibility in fleshing out the verses in English.

2. CASE STUDY: RAP LYRICS

2. Formal constraints in rap

Let us look then at a few examples of the translation of rap lyrics, governed by more formal constraints. In translating these and other passages of rap, the rhythm that I was able to employ was determined more forcibly by the structure of the original text since I needed to maintain rhymes and keep a similar number of beats per bar. That said, Adam Bradley reminds us in *The Book of Rhymes* that an MC is able to alter and play with standard pronunciation in performance to stress and accentuate certain parts of the lines, which means that an exact number of syllables per bar is not always indispensable, so long as the verse “balances its linguistic weight in such a way that it can be performed without awkward pauses, gasps for breath, or other infelicities” (2009, p. 27). Sound and rhyme in particular played a significant role in dictating my choices in translation, as I attempted to instill in the English bars elements of consonance, assonance and alliteration as far as possible, and to ensure that a coherent and consistent rhyme scheme rippled through each passage.

2.1. RAP EXAMPLE 1

The first example of rap lyrics that I have chosen to look at with you is taken from the second half of the novel where Flex expresses his thoughts and fears about the future.

<p>Je veux pas me sentir enfermé, l'cœur en ciment en si peu d'temps / m'retrouver dans une peau que je kifferais pas, du vent / sur mes couplets, dans les poches de mes vêtements / le regard fatigué et froid de ceux qui squattent les bancs, <<< mais bon / c'est comme ça nos vies, on pense qu'à se plaindre et à se tirer d'ici / c'qu'est toujours mieux que se tirer dessus / J'ai vu tellement de rêves échouer dans le décor / emboutir des hommes et des femmes sans même leur donner la mort / les r'garder droit dans les yeux, sans même les plisser / leur dire « à compter d'aujourd'hui ton seul bonheur s'ra d'aller pisser ». p. 203</p>	<p><i>I don't want to feel trapped in this urban sprawl, heart like a stone wall in no time at all / end up with a skin I don't want to be in, scrawl / lyrics as thin as the clothes beneath my chin, crawl / tired and cold, like drifters idling in a hall, <<< but, after all / that's our life, we think only of complaining and of escaping on the next bullet train / which is always better than putting a bullet in the brain / I've seen so many dreams drown with the fish / crush men and women, not even grant their death wish / look them right in the eye and not even blink / tell them "from now on in your only pleasure will be smelling your shit stink."</i></p>
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Arriving at and settling on this translation was by no means a fast or facile process, but I departed from the two meanings of the verb *se tirer* evoked here, that of leaving and that of shooting, to brainstorm a list of words and expressions with similar meanings. Somewhere in this mess of notes was the word “bullet,” noted to correspond with the idea of shooting oneself. When fleshed out into an expression, bullet could become “bullet in the head” or, indeed, “bullet in the brain,” which conveniently rhymes well with the idea of running away on a bullet train. While they adjust the exact images projected by the original text, these two

new rhyming images in English reflect the overall idea elicited by the French lines. The two expressions also function in terms of flow and establish a consistent and mirrored rhythm over the two bars.

2.2. RAP EXAMPLE 2

The second example contains a remarkable use of partial homophones which make a frequent appearance throughout the original text, especially in rap lyrics, often used to make half rhymes, or slant rhymes. When I use the term “partial homophones” here, I am referring not only to the use of words with similar sounds, but to the repetition of entire syllabic sounds through the use of the same base word or sound with different endings.

<p>On est paumés, on compte pour des pommes et on tombe comme des mouches, pas de mouchoirs quand on meurt, les langues de putes se touchent et nous gomment, la vie est tellement conne parfois qu'on peut dégommer son voisin et rester sans voix, vis ce que je vis vois ce que je vois, j'ai la rage, la gorge et le poing serrés, elle pour le lancer lui et lui pour me rassurer... (p. 192)</p>	<p><i>We're spaced out, a waste of space, and we're dropping like flies, not a tear will drop at our death, the catty bitches come out and drown us out, life's so dim sometimes you can make your bro your foe, drown him, take him out, and see the cat get your tongue, live what I live, see what I see, I'm riled up, throat tight, fist out to fight, the throat to thrust the fist and the fist to ease my mind...</i></p>
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Paumés and *pommes* are translated as the slightly different sounding “space” and “spaced,” in “spaced out” and “a waste of space,” and *mouche* and *mouchoir* through two forms of the verb “to drop”: “dropping” and “drop.” I used the same technique of building on base words by changing the ending further down in the passage where I added a partial homophone: the noun “cat” and the adjective “catty.” One might argue that this addition of a partial homophone compensates for the lack of homophone in the translation corresponding to the different uses of *vois/voix*.

These two examples of rather dense rap lyrics demonstrate the difficulties involved in translating rhythm and rhyme in such a way that the translated text functions as a performable piece of music while reflecting the ideas communicated in the original text. Structural compromises through syntactical rearrangement in the translation were often necessary to allow the sounds and images to reflect what I perceived to be the essence of the ideas conveyed in the original lines. The passages in English are markedly different from their French counterpart, but the original and the translations are comparable in their use of rhythm and sound to communicate very similar messages.

3. CASE STUDY: COMPETITION (time permitting)

Before I finish, I wanted to return briefly to the idea of the use of language as a weapon, in this case when a person’s witty use of wordplay can allow them to gain an upper hand in a verbal exchange with social rivals. The idea of playing a game that is suggested by the terms “jeu de mots” and “wordplay” can be likened to the competitiveness of rap when it is performed in the context of rap battles. In the following example, Hoch finds himself in an uncomfortable situation, surrounded by young men from whose place in the social hierarchy is higher than his own. These young men attempt to impress Hoch by interrogating him, patronisingly, about his job and the type of car he has. Hoch is able to “beat” them by turning their insults on their head and using them against them through his quick wit.

[...] *Mon talent de tailleur je veux dire, un truc qu'on connaît bien. Quand on se fait chier, sur les bancs, dans les halls, on fait des concours de vannes et laisse-moi te dire que celui qui manque de répartie en prend pour son grade. C'est cruel parfois, faut être agile du verbe, avoir du répondant, sortir la bonne crasse au bon moment, moduler le ton et adopter celui qui convient. Faut y participer pour le croire. J'ai fréquenté des pros, des imbattables de la vanne. Ils pouvaient te démolir en une seule phrase. [...] Un vrai massacre oral, dissimulé derrière sourires hypocrites, bon enfant, mais j'ai taillé dur et mes adversaires, même à trois, étaient loin de faire le poids. Eux, c'était plutôt genre Elle est bien ta chemise, ils font les mêmes pour hommes ? Alors que moi, c'était plutôt Pourquoi, tu te sens des élans de virilité ? Si tu vois ce que je veux dire. [...] Dans ce monde-ci, ce monde de tapettes mises en plis qui se font la bise, dans ce monde, je n'étais pas le bienvenu. **Mais mes armes étaient les leurs, et incontestablement, les miennes étaient mieux affûtées.**pp. 76/77*

[...] I unleash my wordsmith’s prowess, something we all know well. Whenever we get bored, sitting around on park benches or in foyers, we have comeback battles and, let me tell you, anyone lacking wit doesn't get off lightly. Things can get nasty – you have to be quick off the mark, always be ready with an answer, produce the right insult at the right time, adjust the tone and pick the right one. Have to play the game to believe it. I've met pros, unstoppable champions of the art of the comeback. They could crush you with a single sentence. [...] It was a real verbal bloodbath, concealed behind hypocritical smiles, good-natured, but my blade was sharp and, even with three of them, my opponents' were far too blunt to make a mark. They were a bit like *Nice shirt, do they have them in men's?* And I was more like *Why, you feeling particularly virile?* If you see what I mean. [...] In that world, a world of cheek-kissing, blow-dried wimps, in that world, I wasn't welcome. **But my weapons were their own, and mine were undoubtedly better sharpened.**

It was vital in the translation of this passage to maintain the overall tone of competition and animosity, clearly indicating the shift in power resulting from Hoch’s clever use of language. Here, and in the accompanying passages containing these kinds of exchanges, what needed to be privileged was the casual yet forceful manner in which Hoch dismantled the arguments of his opponents, achieved through a relaxed but crisp syntax. More broadly throughout the passage, I needed to ensure that the imagery of battle was maintained in the translation, communicating the idea of words as weapons and of the urgency of the competition.

CONCLUSION

I entitled this paper “Sounding the Essence of Sense and Sound: On Translating Playful and Poetic Prose,” a title which solicits a questioning of the possibility of maintaining both sound and sense in translation, and of the creative licence afforded to the translator. I have presented today several examples from my own translation, providing my own justification for the choices and changes made. My concerns orbited around the ideal of identifying creative solutions that respected the playful acoustics of the original text without straying too far from its structure and content. Determining to what extent the flow of the original needed to be respected, and in what ways, and what liberties I could therefore take in the manipulation of the structure of the original text and of the specific images it conveys, was by no means an objective process: I was acutely aware of my agency as a translator, and of the subjectivity of the reasoning behind my own decisions, with which not all translators, readers or critics would agree. Jean Boase-Beier and Michael Holman In *The Practices of Literary Translation, Constraints and Creativity*, state that “There is no agreement on the level of intervention permitted to the translator” (1998, page 10). This paper, and indeed this conference, is perhaps itself a form of activism: like the voiceless youths of Goujon’s novel, who latch on to language and sculpt it in their own way to make themselves heard, the translator, often forgotten or sidelined, or to use Venuti’s terminology, “invisible,” is in his context able to shed light on the deliberations influencing the final product and draw attention to the process hidden from public view.

In his book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, André Lefevere reminds us of the tendency to assume that a translator must privilege either the sound or the sense of the text being translated; that is impossible to render both in translation, to be a servant of two masters. “Translators, we are likely to be told, will be able to render the sense of the original only at the expense of the sound, and often also of the morphosyntactic features organising the original.” I hope that in my translation of these passages containing wordplay, I have rendered the essence of the sense of the original text, sacrificing the morphosyntactic features of the original, which incidentally I felt was inevitable or at the very least indispensable, but not the sound. Such an approach allowed me to respect the way in which the characters of *Moinonuse* language as a weapon and as a vector through which to express rebellion. Rather than show compliance and complicity through the use of the standard French that is regulated by the Académie française, dictated by *Le Bon Usage*, and governed by strict rules, the characters choose to speak out against their domination by seizing the tool handed to them by the dominators. They appropriate it, adhering to the adage “rules are meant to be broken,” making use of the techniques of rap to create playful and ungrammatical prose. In taking liberties to perform syntactic reshuffling and modify specific images to suit the sound patterns that I, personally, felt had the most force in English, I have created a new text in my own language and my own words, which is able to stand alone, in its own right, but which is at the same time reflective of and clearly comparable to the function that language serves in the original novel.