Traittore; Traduttore: Cultural integrity and translation involving Māori and other indigenous languages

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Abstract

Traittore; Traduttore is Italian for *Traitor; Translator*. I argue here that translation from or into an indigenous language such as Māori is always, whatever the content and function of the source text, a political act and that, therefore, a Code of Ethics grounded in indigenous perspectives is essential if the ever-present danger of cultural betrayal is to be avoided.

Introduction

Is the translator a cultural intermediary, or a cultural traitor? *In the Tītohu Whakamāori* programme at the University of Waikato, this is a question that students are expected to take seriously. What is their purpose in training to become translators? Why do they want to translate? What is in it for them? In a personal as well as in a professional sense, a translator is a cultural mediator, bridging two worlds. We teach that our language and our well-springs in our culture are *taonga*, precious gifts to us that demand our respect. These teachings need to be reflected in a Code of Ethics that is specific to the context in which Māori-English and English-Māori translators operate in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Concepts of translation and cultural embedding

Translation can be conceptualised in a variety of different ways. The word 'translate' is derived from the Latin meaning to 'carry across' – a 'spatial' concept. In Sanskrit, however, the term 'anduvar', means 'to say again' – a 'temporal' notion. Newmark (1996, pp. 4-5) states that "translation is the transfer of the meaning of a text . . . from one language to another for a new readership . . . as accurately as possible". Houbert (1998, p. 1) asserts that the translator is primarily a "message conveyor . . . whose work essentially consists of conveying the meaning expressed by the original writer". In these approaches to translation, both Houbert (French) and Newmark (English) reflect the cultural foundations of their own linguistic heritage. In Māori, the word 'whakamāori' (to cause to be Māori) is used with reference to translation into Māori, and 'whakapākehā' (to cause to be English) is used with reference to translation from Māori into English. The prefix *whaka-* contains the idea of a creative process, its use signalling the recognition that the processes involved in translation are as important as the product. Translation involves something more than a transfer in space and/or time.

Translation and colonisation

With reference to the use of translation as a colonising tool in the Indian-British context, Niranjana (1992, p. 186) points out that "our search should not be for origins or essences but for richer complexity, a complication of our notions of the 'self', a more densely textured understanding of who 'we' are".

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A classic example of the disruptive use of translation in the colonial context is that of Sir George Grey's late nineteenth century treatment of the attempt by Māui (a Māori demi-god) to outwit and overcome Hine-nui-te-pō (the female *atua*[1] of Death) (Grey & Williams, 1971). What was involved here was recreation rather than creation. Victorian England had a taste for the quaint and the exotic. It did not, however, respond positively to overt sexual references. Thus, Grey presents Māui as entering Hine-nui-te-pō via her mouth, misrepresenting the Māori metaphor that illustrates how the male infant struggles to break free of the female cocoon, only to struggle mightily to return via the same passage in adulthood.

In English literature, Shakespeare is dubbed 'The Bard'. There is no other as celebrated as he. In the early 20th Century, eminent Māori leader, lawyer, politician, scholar and poet in his own right, Sir Āpirana Ngata (1959) collected Māori Song-Poetry, asserting that therein lay the equal of anything 'The Bard' could produce. He then translated the song-poems into English, collaborating later with another Māori intellectual of note, Pei te Hurinui Jones (Ngata, 1961; 1980). These translations sometimes gloss over aspects of the source text. One example of this is Ngata's translation of *Poia atu taku poi* by Erenora Taratoa of Ngāti Raukawa (Ngata, 1959, p. 143). Here, Ngata glosses over explicit mention of matters of the female form.[2] To the discriminating Māori audience, a key point is lost. The song was composed in response to the jealous accusations of other women that the author, Erenora, was a base woman of ill repute, guilty of gross misbehaviour. Erenora makes specific mention of those parts of her toward which men felt particularly attracted, parading an enormous pride in her femininity. She outlines also her noble birth and background, tracing her lineage, again through that most essential female part, to the Māori aristocracies of the time. She is proud of her ability to attract the opposite sex. She has no shame in relation to behaviour that is intended to maintain their attention.

I have indicated that Ngata sometimes 'glossed over' certain matters. In saying this, I do not intend to suggest that this was a result of any lack of skill as a translator. On the contrary, Ngata's decision to do so demonstrates an awareness of audience and purpose. Precisely because he took account of the sensitivities of the time, he was able to provide a non-Māori audience with a window through which they could view something of the beauty of his Māori world. To upset their sensibilities would have been counter-productive. Could the same be said of Grey? I think not. Certainly he took account of the sensitivities of the time but the ways in which he did so were very different. He recreated rather than glossed over aspects of the source text and, furthermore, relegated female *atua* to the role of 'bit players'. In doing so, he revealed a profound lack of understanding of Māori culture and spirituality and demonstrated a type of plagiarism and eurocentricism that were characteristic of the time.

Translation as celebration of Self, Other and Self-as-Other

In an attempt to bring to a Māori audience a sense of Shakespeare's genius, Te Hurinui Jones (Shakespeare & Jones, 1946) translated *The Merchant Of Venice* into Māori. The first live performance in Māori was in 1984. In 2002, the play was made into a film – *Te Tangata Whai Rawa O Weniti* (The Māori Merchant Of Venice). In this production, we experience that "complication of our notions of the 'self'", that "densely textured understanding of who 'we' are" referred to by Niranjana (1992, p. 186). The costumes, the settings, the scenes, the actions are essentially the Venetian

vision of the Elizabethan Shakespeare; the language, the cultural nuances, the music are essentially Māori. Scenes in which Shylock sharpens his blade in anticipation of the Ducal favour which will allow him to take a pound of Antonio's flesh may have appealed to the anti-Semitic sentiments of an English Elizabethan audience. A Māori audience is, however, likely to find itself espousing the cause of the Jewish minority. When Portia succeeds in thwarting Shylock's purpose where the cleverest of males has failed, she turns the tables on male machismo in a way that clearly appeals to a Māori audience. These possible readings of aspects of the play are certainly not absent from the source text. However, the fact that they appear to become more salient in *Te Tangata Whai Rawa O Weniti* relates not only to what is said, but also to the fact that it is expressed in a language which has come to be associated with cultural oppression. Our indigenous selves celebrate the variety in being *Other*. Our indigenous world, hidden in its essence from the 'mainstream', is *kokonga ngākau*[3] and hence, precious. It teaches us to value Self, Other and Self-as-Other.

Translation in the modern world: two examples

In translating from English into Māori a document outlining national achievement standards in Graphics at the Year 12 Level, I came across the term 'negative space'. Having no concept of what was meant by 'negative space', I turned to cousins (*whanaunga*) involved in teaching. They suggested I meet (*hui*) with some of their colleagues who were involved teaching graphics, art and technology and talk through (*whakawhitiwhiti kōrero*) this idea of 'negative space'. Through this *hui* and *kōrero*, I discovered that in order to make a plaster or metal model of something, one should first make a cast. The 'negative space' of the cast produces the positive image, something like the negative in a photograph. I then sought terms in Māori that could express this concept. Dictionaries were of no help. Putting Māori words for 'negative' and 'space' together produced a result that seemed to have no bearing whatsoever on the concept to which I had been introduced. It was clear that I would have to return to my Māori roots (*tikanga Māori)* - but I had to move quickly in order to complete the assignment in the required time (*wā tika*). There is in Māori a word - *whaitua* (region/space) – that refers to a space beyond the conventional concept of space, a space that shapes the conventional concept of space. This word is made up of the roots *whai* (to win/possess/have/own) and *tua* (beyond). There is also in Māori the word *ngaro* which refers to something that is hidden from normal visual perception. These concepts provided a possible base from which I worked in coming up with *whaitua ngaro* as a translation of 'negative space'. Before I submitted the translation, I consulted other colleagues (*whakawhitiwhiti whakaaro*). Although their suggestions for alternative translations were not always particularly helpful,[4] they did provide me with an opportunity to attempt to justify (*whakarite*) my position, and provided a very useful critical assessment (*whakatau*) of the translation itself and of that justification. Having verified (*whakatika*) the translation with my colleagues, I passed it on to my clients who, no doubt, had their own verification criteria (*whakamātau*). In the event, the translation was accepted and the term *whaitua ngaro* is now frequently used to refer to 'negative space'.

The earliest computers were little more than counting machines, so the English word 'computer' (borrowed from the Latin root meaning 'to count') was originally more appropriate than it is now. In Māori, computers are referred to as *rorohiko* - literally 'electric brain' – derived from the Māori root words '*roro*' (physical brain) and '*hiko*' (common usage: electric) (Māori Language Commission, 1996, p. 230). The

translation reflects the fact that sophisticated technology is now involved in computers.

Translation, ethics and indigenous perspectives

The word *rorohiko* demonstrates the appropriate use of creativity in translation. However not all forms of creativity are equally appropriate, particularly where individual creativity replaces consultation and community agreement.

The skills of the translator have been increasingly sought after in Aotearoa/New Zealand since Māori became an official language (The Māori Language Act 1987). The fact that many organisations, including Government Departments, now require documents to be translated from English into Māori means that English-Māori translators can now earn very respectable incomes. Although this is a good thing in itself, it carries with it a range of potential dangers, especially where translators who are obliged to work to deadlines may be tempted to substitute individual creativity for culturally appropriate processes that involve consultation and discussion. In such a context, a Code of Ethics is essential in order to ensure that both the needs of the client and the integrity of the languages and cultures involved are respected.

The Code of Ethics of the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT, 2000) is useful in providing guidance on professional practice. What it does not do is provide guidance on issues that are specific to translation involving indigenous languages. What it cannot do is address those issues that are specific to English-Māori translators. What is needed is a Code of Ethics that takes full account of the particular issues that face those whose translation involves indigenous languages and, in particular, those who are involved in translating English into Māori. Any such Code would need to be firmly founded in indigenous bases. In the absence of such a Code, too much reliance is placed on the training and personal integrity of individuals, and the potential for the transformation of *Traduttore* into *Traittore* is ever-present.

Any Code of Ethics that was developed with the needs of Māori-English and English-Māori translators in mind would need to take full account of processes that are culturally appropriate, processes that involve traditional problem-solving behaviours, *puna*[5] from which culturally appropriate translation processes can be developed. These would inevitably include each of the following: *tikanga* (lore), *wā tika* (appropriate use of time), *whanaungatanga* (relationships), *tungāne-tuahine* (female-male roles), *tuākana-tēina* (senior-junior roles), *pakeke* (elder roles), *hui* (meet), *whakawhitiwhiti kōrero* (discussion), *whakawhitiwhiti whakaaro* (express opinion), *whakarite* (justification through cultural mores), *whakatau* (settled assessment).[6]

Endnotes

[1] Elemental Spirit, Goddess.

[2] 'Ka rawe rā māua ko taku tara ki te hāpai ewe ki ngā whenua …' Literally: My genitals and I are enticing and [well able to] carry my womb across the lands. Ngata's translation: 'But see now how well with my feminine allure I fly carefree to distant lands …' Interestingly, in 1994, Te Ahukaramū Royal of Ngāti Raukawa provides this translation: 'Yet see how I fly carefree to distant lands …' (Royal, 1994, p.33).

[3] '*He kokonga whare e taea te kite, he kokonga ngākau – e kore!'* 'One can see the corner of a house, but not the corners of the heart'.

[4] One suggestion was that I use 'te kore', the void before time began.

[5] Wellsprings.

[6] The English translations provided here are intended simply to give readers a general sense of each of these concepts.

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