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# THE TRANSLATION OF HUMOR ; WHO SAYS IT CAN'T BE DONE ?

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The translation of humor is a stimulating challenge. It requires the accurate decoding of a humorous speech in its original context, the transfer of that speech in a different and often disparate linguistic and cultural environment, and its reformulation in a new utterance which successfully recaptures the intention of the original humorous message and evokes in the target audience an equivalent *pleasurable* and *playful* response.

My purpose here is to illustrate the stresses and strains inherent to the translation of linguistic humor. I shall draw examples from a translation project on which I am currently working, analyze the problems and propose, whenever possible, a solution hopefully as humorous as the original.

The work in question is one of the many detective novels authored by Frédéric Dard, alias San Antonio, from the name of the protagonist. Dard is one of the most prolific and widely-read writers in France presently.

In one of his interviews he openly declared, "It's the style that gets me, going as for the story, I couldn't care less". It is this distinctive and clearly subversive style which, in rite of the popular nature of the genre, has gained him recognition as a literary phenomenon among the French intelligentsia, literary critics, and scholars.

The hero and narrator, Police Detective San Antonio (S.A. for short), is a Gallic counterpart of Philip Marlow and James Bond combined. He is worldly, self-reliant, and resourceful; tough and cynical, handsome, and indestructible. He is also irresistible to women and very vulnerable to their seduction. The heroines are, in the very words of their author, gorgeous, enigmatic and "*riches en tétons*".

The general bawdiness of the language borders on the pornographic, but Dard performs a brilliant act of balance, reaching out from the daring to the outright crude, without ever breaking the readers' lexical taboos. He achieves this with suggestive metaphors, euphemisms and the abundant borrowings of unfamiliar and very specialized underworld idioms. The overall effect is shocking and grotesque. It is also hilarious.

The examples I chose for illustrating some of the problems I have encountered are taken from one of his latest novels entitled *Mon culte sur la commode*, a title so riddled with puns that a satisfactory English equivalency, at this stage, is problematic.

Puns are used in many different variations, proper names being the most simple: Finnish civil servants and government officials are disrespectfully named Monsieur Kelkoonaar, Colonel Dükkonlajooa, Inspecteur Bakunu, which would be freely translated as Mr. Uhatöderndgörk, Colonel Djole Skruubool, and Inspector Berasbööm, respectively. I have retained the deceiving spelling in the translation; I have also tried to preserve some of the original meaning, but it is not mandatory, for that sort of pun has only a minimal link with the context and, as such, admits many variable or free interpretations.

My second kind of play on words is the "double-shift effect", where the semantic flow of an utterance is unexpectedly altered. The sudden confusion resulting from the ambiguity makes it an effective element of the humorous discourse. "*Un gonzier apeuré, c'est pas sa bagnole qu'il prend, c'est ses jambes à son cou*". In this case the comical

effect is produced by juxtaposing the meaning of the word “*prend*” in its literal sense with its meaning in a fixed sense as part of the colloquial locution: “*prendre ses jambes à son cou*”. Again, an accurate representation of this process can only be achieved through equivalency, that is, the replacement of the French fixed locution by an English alternative with similar potential ambiguity. The following translation, while not a perfect equivalent, preserves somewhat the humorous jolt: “When a dude is scared, it’s not his wheels he runs for, it’s his life”.

Dard also uses plays on words to make allusions to his characters’ idiosyncracies and peculiarities. He describes an Italian popular singer with homosexual leanings in this way: “*Le rital trémousseur avec sa chanson vedette et son prose à ressort*”. The suggestive quality of “*Trémousseur*” from “*trémousser*” meaning “to wiggle” is increased by the intentionally incorrect masculine use of “*son prose*” implying “*son prout*”, a slang expression which describes an effeminate *derrière*. The suggestion is further heightened by the rhythmical play of alliterations. The caricature is rendered entirely by linguistic means. Equivalent techniques must be used for translating the text to English. The following rendering is a possible interpretation: “The wiggling wop with his hit song and his swishing platitudes”.

The following passage further illustrates Dard’s use of clichés in direct discourse. San Antonio is making a subtle pass at a gorgeous and enigmatic female he has just met:

*“Vous semblez pensif ... murmure Valérie Lecoq.  
J’ai mal dormi, réponds-je.  
Moi de même, soupire la charmante jeune femme avec ses deux poumons à la fois. Et ce qu’ils sont bien carrossés ses soufflets, à la chérie!  
Elle demande :  
“Pensez-vous que ce voyage soit nécessaire ?”  
“Je vous répondrai au retour, ma ravissante amie.”*

The humor here is in the disruption of the romance discourse into an informal and facetious register to express San Antonio’s lusty frame of mind in an aside to the reader. I propose the following translation:

“You seem distant,” whispers Valerie Lecoq.  
“I slept poorly.”  
“So did I,” sighs the charming creature with her two lungs at the same time, and let me tell you, the little darling has a pair of bellows that will knock the breath out of you.  
She inquires.  
“Do you really think this trip is necessary ?”  
“I’ll answer you on our way back, my pretty lady.”

Another translation difficulty is the neologism. Neologisms by derivation are created by slightly changing an existing word, by combining two existing words or by adding to a word a modifying prefix or suffix. Dard uses all of these devices to condense or simplify his message and accelerate his delivery, what he calls a “*déravage contrôlé*”. This is how he describes a man playing the slot-machine: “*Le vieux birbe enfonce sa piécette d’un mark (dans le zinzin). Il titouille les bistounets. Ça clabrilte un peu partout, ça gringue, des lumières se font entendre.*”

“*Titouille*” is probably a derivation of “*titiller*”, meaning to tickle. Combined with the argotic suffix “*-ouille*” it has a derogatory connotation and also, in this case, suggests “*couille*”, a familiar word for testicles. “*Bistounet*” may derive from “*bistouquet*”, a euphemism used by children to refer to the penis. The sexual connotation resulting from the juxtaposition of these words is Dard’s suggestive way of describing the handles on the

slot-machine. "*Clabrille*" is made of a combination of "*claquer*" and "*briller*", and reproduces the visual and auditory sensation of a slot-machine in operation. The incongruity is reiterated in another form at the end of the sentence by the combination of the words "*lumière*" and "*entendre*".

How much of this linguistic firework can be preserved in a translation ? Here is one possible solution :

The old bozo stuffs his teeny coin in the doodad. He fingles the knoberoo. The thing clablinks all over ; it jangles, flashes light with a clang.