



Diglossia and Ideology: Socio-Cultural Aspects of «Translation» in Québec

Ben-Z. Shek

Volume 1, numéro 1, 1er semestre 1988

Traduction et culture(s)

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037005ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/037005ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières

ISSN

0835-8443 (imprimé)

1708-2188 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Shek, B.-Z. (1988). Diglossia and Ideology: Socio-Cultural Aspects of «Translation» in Québec. *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, 1(1), 85–91. <https://doi.org/10.7202/037005ar>

Diglossia and Ideology: Socio-Cultural Aspects of «Translation» in Québec*

Ben-Z. Shek

In 1977, I published a short article with a long title, called «Quelques réflexions sur la traduction dans le contexte socio-culturel canado-québécois.» It appeared in a special issue of *Ellipse* (no. 21), bearing the heading, «Traduire notre poésie/The Translation of Poetry», made up in large part of the keynote papers of Douglas Jones and Jacques Brault at the meeting of the Comparative Literature Association held earlier that year at Fredericton, and the discussion engendered by them.

In my article which, happily, sparked considerable interest and comment, I tried to probe some of the reasons for the imbalance in literary translation in Canada as between the relatively large number of works translated from French to English, and the much smaller number in the opposite direction. I advanced two main reasons for this situation: firstly, the diglossic, and thus hierarchical, historical relationship between our two official languages — summed up by Jean Delisle thus: «Le Canada est d'abord conçu en anglais, puis traduit pour la collectivité francophone»¹ — with the resulting perception by francophones that translation from English to French, which reproduced

* Paper read at the Canadian Comparative Literature Association conference, University of Manitoba, May 31, 1986.

1. Cited in E.D. Blodgett, «How do you say Gabrielle Roy?» in Camille La Bossière, ed., *Translation in Canadian Literature* (Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1983), p. 27.

symbolically the consecrated direction of constitutional-judicial-administrative documents from 1763 onwards, represented a threat to the minority culture and was seen as a dissipation of energy in marginal activity, given the context of the struggle for survival of that culture and its language. (This same hypothesis, more or less sloughed off as «la raison excuse n° 5, l'argument nationaliste» by Richard Giguère,² during the Fredericton meeting nine years ago, was in fact put in a variety of ways by Gilles Marcotte, Joseph Bonenfant and Gilles de La Fontaine in the discussion following the Brault paper and Giguère's response.) My second main hypothesis concerning the lop-sided trajectory of literary translation came at the problem from the other direction. Basing myself on Catalan sociologist R.Ll. Ninyoles's analysis of what he called «les deux compensations idéologiques»,³ namely the tendency of conservative nationalists in a minority situation to idealize their own culture and denigrate that of the majority, I suggested that his Catalonian-Castilian model could be applied analogically to the French-English conflict in Canada, and I gave examples of the *survalorisation-dévalorisation* phenomenon in Québec discourse from the providential myth of the 19th century right up to the contemporary period.

What I should like to do in this paper is to apply my reading of the diglossic aspects of Québec's socio-cultural evolution to three texts by writers hardly known for their nationalist sentiments — namely Gratien Gélinas, Anne Hébert and Réjean Ducharme — by way of illustrating the depth of cultural alienation as seen in the symbolic clash of English and French in *Hier les enfants dansaient*⁴ (1966), *Kamouraska*⁵ (1970), and *l'Hiver de force*⁶ (1973), respectively.

Gélinas's play, *Hier les enfants dansaient*, counterpoises two generations, two ideologies (Federalism, *indépendantisme*), and two philosophies (pragmatism, idealism). It also juxtaposes in classical diglossic fashion our two official languages, in the last scene of the first act, then inverts the consecrated relationship, in symmetrical manner, in the last scene of the second and final act.

Scene IV of Act I ends with the ringing of the telephone. Prime Minister Lester Pearson is calling from Ottawa to reinforce personally

2. *Ellipse* 21 (1977), p. 46.

3. R.Ll. Ninyoles, «Idéologies diglossiques et assimilation», in H. Giordan, A. Ricard, eds., *Diglossie et littérature* (Bordeaux-Talence, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1976), pp. 151-160.

4. Gratien Gélinas, *Hier les enfants dansaient* (Montréal, Leméac, 1966).

5. Anne Hébert, *Kamouraska* (Paris, Seuil, 1970).

6. Réjean Ducharme, *l'Hiver de force* (Paris, Gallimard, 1973).

the offer made to Pierre Gravel to become Minister of Justice after contesting a safe seat in a by-election. The conversation up to this point in the Gravel home, between the aspiring minister, his brother-in-law, O'Brien, and Nicole, his son André's girl-friend, has of course been conducted in French, the vernacular language. With the call from Ottawa, however, there is a sudden switch to the vehicular tongue, namely English, the language of Canadian politics. Thus, O'Brien, picking up the phone at the beginning of Scene V, says: «Oui... One moment please», again switching back to French in his aside to Gravel, «Un interurbain d'Ottawa», then again to English to his interlocutor: «May I ask who's calling?», followed by the parenthetical stage direction («Impressionné, à Gravel»), and this time, the English-language aside, punctuated by an exclamation mark, «The Prime Minister's residence!» This *va-et-vient* between the two languages will continue when Gravel picks up the receiver. To his servility before Mr. Pearson — «It's mighty good of you to take the trouble of calling» — will be added his hypocrisy, when Gravel, who has rejoiced at being able to replace the corrupt old-guard minister who has just died, echoes Mr. Pearson thus: «It is a damn shame! He was an excellent man indeed.» After hanging up, M. Gravel relates to his brother-in-law a key sentence of the Prime Minister's, which seems to suggest that a model for the would-be cabinet member was another Pierre, who would eventually shift from the Justice portfolio to the Prime Minister's office: «Il m'a dit: 'Pierre, we have big plans for you!」 Gravel and O'Brien are symbolically oblivious to the presence of the younger generation, André and Nicole, so great is their euphoria at this moment. But this will soon change to shock when Gravel discovers that his elder son is deeply involved in a transposed pacifist FLQ-like underground movement, an *engagement* which spells doom for his political aspirations.

In the second act, during the rather static debate between the «deux ennemis», Nicole and André will, of course, not fail to underline the subservience of Gravel which they have just witnessed. André will call his father and uncle «les 'yes men' du fédéralisme», while Nicole will add, «des constipés, des velléitaires et des vaincus d'avance», concluding with this striking *double entendre* concerning André and Gravel: «Il n'est pas étonnant que vous ne puissiez pas vous entendre tous les deux: vous ne parlez pas la même langue!»

A second «coup de théâtre» will come in Scene VII of the second act, when the Gravel parents will discover that their Loyola-educated younger son, Larry, is also a member of the clandestine cell. In the final scene, Gravel, encouraged by his wife, will agree to fulfill his commitment to speak at the Canadian Club in Toronto in spite of everything that has happened. He begins to dictate to his secretary the conclusion to his talk: «Gentlemen... by now you all know that my

own house is divided over the problem that, together, we have faced today.» Then, with a sudden dramatic switch which inverts the situation he faced during his telephone conversation with Prime Minister Pearson, he instructs the secretary: «Mademoiselle... je continuerai en français», thus reversing the consecrated direction of translation in Canada, and ending the play with the following words: «Car ma maison divisée ne saurait périr sans ébranler la vôtre dans ses fondations mêmes...»

In *Kamouraska*, Anne Hébert's brilliant novel, the love theme dominates, with the linguistic-nationalist one functioning as a filigrain, as a subtle undercurrent, in opposite fashion to *Hier les enfants dansaient*, and classical works like *Maria Chapdelaine* and *Menaud maître-draveur*. Elisabeth d'Aulnières, whose second husband, the notary, Jérôme Rolland, is dying, succumbs to a fitful, nightmarish sleep, obsessed by the recurring images of the murder of her first husband at the hands of her lover, Dr. Nelson. She is frightened lest M. Rolland expose publicly the ignominy of her provocation of, and complicity in, the violent act. Yet in ways similar to *Hier les enfants dansaient*, English sentences and references, and especially the charge read against her by the anglophone judge, John Crebessa, during her trial for homicide, break into the text, in italics, disturbing the linguistic and typographic rhythm of the French in the narrative, which is constituted almost entirely of the heroine's stream of consciousness, or semi-consciousness.

Thus, on the very second page of the novel, the narrator evokes briefly her trial of September, 1840: «The Queen against Élisabeth d'Aulnières-Tassy». A little later, the charges against her are reproduced in their entirety, taking up half a page of printed text, in which phrases like «Our Lady the Queen», «Our Sovereign Lady Victoria, by the grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Queen, Defender of the Faith (...)», and «(...) against the peace of our said Lady the Queen, her crown and dignity», ring out ironically, as do, throughout, evocations of the absurdity of the situation, as in this typical outburst: «The Queen! Toujours the Queen! C'est à mourir de rire». Shortly after this last quotation, which follows fast upon the heels of a remembrance of the final sentence of the charge, Elisabeth's consciousness registers the fact that «c'est en langue étrangère qu'on vous accuse...», this obsession, too, forming a rhythmic pattern throughout the text, coupled with phrases like, «L'acte d'accusation est écrit en anglais, par les maîtres du pays», and, «Selon la loi anglaise de ce pays conquis (...)».

Because the seminal action of the novel is set in the late 1830's, the Rebellion for independence from Britain appears in several key passages. When pondering the use of English in the accusation against

her, Elisabeth struggles between her recognition of the fact that this is the tongue of her lover, while also being that of the conqueror. At one point, lost in her amorous passion, she is oblivious to the hanging of the Patriote leaders following the defeat of the Rebellion; later, she compares her revolt to theirs: «J'habite la fièvre et la démence, comme mon pays natal». She at one and the same time exhibits a high degree of aristocratic «anglomanie» (by furnishing her bedroom à l'anglaise, sending her two eldest sons to Oxford, being proud of the compliment paid her by the governor for her fine English accent, and by her parallel mockery of the speech of the «Canayens») and yet, as we have seen, constantly expresses revulsion at the alien language in which she is accused of being an accomplice to murder, with such phrases as: «Quel cri aigu et guttural à la fois (...)\», extending this sentiment through a sardonic reference to the trade-name of Dr. Nelson's pot-bellied stove with its «lettres bâtarde de 'Warm Morning', marque déposée». It is as if a struggle were going on within her between the nationalist super-ego, and her anglomanic id, or perhaps the reverse, both basically showing a linguistic and political conflict that is «historical» in the broadest of senses.

* * *

I will speak only briefly about Réjean Ducharme's *l'Hiver de force*, which, like *Kamouraska*, is torn between two contradictory forces: a mockery of neo-nationalist francophone elites, and a simultaneous tragic consciousness of the technological, commercial and cultural alienation with which anglophone North America threatens the francophone island of Québec. If in *Hier les enfants dansaient* the linguistically natural vernacular bows before the vehicular English, in Ducharme's novel, a vast topography and entire eco-system, symbolized by Frère Marie-Victorin's *La Flore laurentienne*, the constant companion of Nicole and André Ferron, seem superfluous in the crass homogenizing process of North American materialism and commercialism. Thus there is a progressive degradation in the lives of the protagonists, which one can chart in the titles given to the book's four parts: The hardwoods of «La zone des feuillus tolérants», give way to the «amaranthes parentes», those *imaginary* undying flowers, or *showy* foliage, then to the ironic *pastiche joualissant* of Mallarmé, «Le fonne c'est platte (la chair est triste et j'ai vu tous les films de Jerry Lewis)\», and finally to the diglossically ordered and objectified, «Linen finish writing pad (Tablette à écrire fini toile),» with the French equivalent set off in a marginal parenthesis.

Clearly, the seemingly simple translation of all three texts from French to English virtually effaces the very significant interplay of diglossic elements which I have been emphasizing.

* * *

In the conclusion of my 1977 article, with which I began this presentation, I stated that there was a clear move in Québec to make French both the «source» language *and* the «target» language, in symbolic terms, in order to reverse the historical situation of inequality. I also added that whatever developments occurred in the constitutional arena — and one could say much about Québec's weakened position in the 1982 Constitutional Act, as well as about the reappearance in the centre of Montréal of unilingual English-language commercial signs, the lowering of the CRTC's minimum of French-language songs played on the electronic media from 65 % to 55 %, and the *nivellement* of Québec to the status of New Brunswick at the recent Francophone summit, all of which, I believe, is not unrelated to the new juridical framework — in the short term at least, each of the two communities will need to have well-done, truthful translations of major literary works in order to comprehend *per se* the world outlook of the other, and possibly too, to bring us closer together in a new *modus vivendi*. Although this latter ideal has been suspended for the foreseeable future, I still believe it to be viable.

In this spirit, and because we are meeting a few minutes' walk from the place where Gabrielle Roy was born some 77 years ago, I should like to refer to her posthumous work, *la Détresse et l'enchantement*⁷, probably the crowning achievement of her career, which, within a multi-faceted network of dialectical relationships, illustrates, in George Steiner's words, a «contradictory coherence»⁸, that concerns us today. What is striking in *la Détresse et l'enchantement* is the creative tension *and* unity which the author develops between her fervent desire to protect and nurture her own embattled culture in Manitoba — but also in Québec — and her simultaneous «ouverture au monde», her receptiveness to «l'altérité», to the other. From the very first sentence of her autobiography, Roy asks pointedly: «Quand donc ai-je pris conscience pour la première fois que j'étais, dans mon pays, d'une espèce destinée à être traitée en inférieure?» But a few pages further, relating her discovery of Shakespeare, she exclaims: «(...) je fus prise par sa sauvagerie passionnée, alliée parfois à tant de douceur qu'elle ferait fondre le cœur, à ce flot d'âme qui nous arrive tout plein de sa tendresse et de son tumulte. (...) Il ne s'agissait plus de français, d'anglais, de langue proscrite, de langue imposée. Il s'agissait d'une langue au-delà des langues, comme celle de la musique, par exemple».

This approach, then, is a rejection in practice of the «deux compensations idéologiques» of which Ninyoles has written. As he

7. Gabrielle Roy, *la Détresse et l'enchantement* (Montréal, Boréal Express, 1984).

8. Cited in D.G. Jones, «Grounds for Translation», *Ellipse* 21 (1977), p. 72.

says: «Idéalisation et dénigrement excluent par définition la normalisation. Seule une égalité réelle entre les deux groupes en conflit peut induire une autre logique qui rejettera catégoriquement toute affirmation diglossique»⁹. As in so many other ways, then, Gabrielle Roy has given us, in her dialectic of language, a paradigm for «translation» in its broadest sense, in the Canadian context.

University of Toronto

9. *Art. cit.*, p. 159.