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Code-switching and non-standard language in the Finnish translations of African and Caribbean novels from the 1950s to the 2000s

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Abstract

In African and Caribbean literatures, code-switching and non-standard language are commonly used for various purposes, and the varieties of language used are often both geographically and culturally bound. Because of this, translating an African or a Caribbean novel into another language can be very challenging. Depending on the different techniques used by the authors in creating their novels, translators can also use a variety of strategies in dealing with the cultural reality embedded in code-switching and non-standard language.

The purpose of this article is to analyse and discuss the techniques used by African and Caribbean authors to incorporate code-switching and non-standard language into their novels, and the strategies employed in conveying these features in Finnish. My aim is to illustrate the range of strategies and to discuss their possible reasons and potential effects. My analysis covers a selection of five African and Caribbean novels and their Finnish translations from the 1950s to the 2000s. This is a preliminary overview of my doctoral dissertation, in which I examine different strategies employed by Finnish translators, how they have changed over time and how they could be developed in the future from the point of view of cultural integrity.

Keywords: African literature, Caribbean literature, postcolonial translation, code-switching, non-standard language

1 Introduction

In postcolonial countries, for example in Africa and the Caribbean, it has become common for novelists to write their texts in English, even when it is not their native language. Ismail S. Talib (2002) states that reaching a wider audience and the lack of a consistent written language in the author's mother tongue are some of the main reasons for this practice (Talib 2002: 91). As a result, non-standard language and code-switching can be considered central themes in postcolonial writing (for example Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2005 [2002]: 71). In postcolonial texts written in English, non-standard language and code-switching are used for a variety of reasons, and their presence greatly affects the translation of the texts into other languages.

The purpose of this article is to analyse and discuss, firstly, the techniques used by a selection of African and Caribbean authors to incorporate code-switching and non-standard language into their texts and, secondly, the various strategies employed in the Finnish translations of those texts to deal with code-switching and non-standard language. The term strategy here refers to changes made to the text during the

translation process, or what Andrew Chesterman (1997: 92) would refer to as **production strategies** (Chesterman 1997: 92).

This article is a preliminary overview of my doctoral dissertation, in which I examine different strategies employed by Finnish translators, how they have changed over time and how they could be developed in the future from the point of view of cultural integrity, or the ethics of respecting the cultural elements present in the source text (Venuti 2013). My dissertation will cover a wider selection of novels written in English from a variety of countries in Africa and the Caribbean than can be discussed within the scope of this article, so here I have used a narrower selection of texts from both regions, covering different time periods from the 1950s to the 2000s. I have chosen one Finnish translation from each decade from the 1960s to the 2000s, each translated by a different translator, carrying suitable examples for the points I wish to bring up in this article.

In what follows, I will first introduce relevant previous research in the field and then continue by discussing the use of code-switching and non-standard language in my selection of novels, the range of strategies used in their translation as well as the possible reasons and potential effects of these strategies.

2 Background

As mentioned above, non-standard language and code-switching can be used for a variety of reasons. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (2005 [2002]) explain that postcolonial authors use code-switching for "inscribing alterity" and "installing cultural distinctiveness in the text" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2005 [2002]: 71). Code-switching can thus be seen as a method for differentiating from the conventions of canonical literatures. James O. Omole (1998) discusses code-switching as a situation "where the need to reach the widest possible readership conflicts with the wish to present the exact experience and create the same linguistic effects as in the other language" (Omole 1998: 60). Code-switching is thus used to create both inclusiveness and exclusiveness: inclusiveness for the members of the author's own society, who are privy to the meaning of these references, and exclusiveness to those outside the author's society, who will require additional explanation to be able to understand them. Omole also points out that there are situations where it is not possible to give "an accurate presentation of thoughts and feelings in a language other than one's own" (ibid.). Code-switching, then, can also be more about linguistic necessity than stylistic choice. Talib (2002) explains that non-standard language is used to create "geographical realism" (Talib 2002: 140), or to anchor the text into its source culture. The above-mentioned reasons can also be considered to apply to both code-switching and non-standard language.

The use of non-standard language and code-switching greatly affects the translation of the texts into other languages. Firstly, the style of the language used is influenced by many different aspects of the author's background as well as the purpose of writing. For example, the author's mother tongue is an important influence on what kinds of linguistic structures are present in the text. Secondly, non-standard language varieties are often both geographically and culturally bound, containing elements that are specific to their time and place of use, which means that translating an African or a Caribbean

novel into another language can be very challenging. The level of foreignness embedded in the source texts also differs between texts depending on different techniques employed by the authors; I will illustrate this through some examples in sections 3 and 4 below. Based on these techniques, translators can also use a variety of different strategies in dealing with non-standard language and code-switching as well as the cultural reality embedded in them.

Translating code-switching and non-standard varieties of language thus presents many challenges, and issues related to it have been widely discussed in the field of literary translation studies. Many authors, such as Federici (2011) and Venuti (2013), have called for creative solutions in translations and acknowledged that some change always necessarily occurs in the process of translation. María T. Sánchez (2009) approaches the issue from the perspective of parts making the whole: “[a] thorough understanding of the role played by the smaller units is essential as a prerequisite to linking them to bigger ones, which means that, inevitably, there will be cases in which some form of loss or of change will occur” (Sánchez 2009: 82). The types of changes are determined by the strategies employed by the translator.

Furthermore, postcolonial literature, by its nature, is very often quite culture-specific, thus creating its own unique set of challenges for the translator. For example Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (1999) have addressed some of the issues related to postcolonial translation, including the similarity between writing postcolonial texts and translating them. Maria Tymoczko (1999) also draws this comparison between postcolonial writing and literary translation, pointing out that the process of choosing which elements of a culture to present in a text and the process of translating that text into another language are in fact very similar in some aspects (Tymoczko 1999: 22). Previous research more closely related to my specific topic has also been done, and some of the most central works for my topic include Rocío G. Sumillera’s (2008) discussion on non-standard language in the Spanish translation of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Anne-Marie Lindfors’s (2009) examination of language in the Finnish translations of novels by Igbo writers.

In dealing with code-switching, translators can choose a **domesticating** or a **foreignising** strategy, depending on the level of foreignness they wish to convey in their translation; Venuti (2004 [1995]) defines domesticating as “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home” and foreignising as “an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (Venuti 2004 [1995]: 20). Venuti (2013), who draws heavily from the work of Antoine Berman (see for example Berman 1992 [1984]), criticizes translations in the field as often being target-culture centred (Venuti 2013: 11). Although, as I mentioned earlier, some degree of change in the translation process in inevitable, I agree with Venuti in that the foreignness of the source text should be respected. However, as Tymoczko (1999) points out, this can cause particular challenges when the source culture and target culture are far removed from each other: “[t]he greater the distance between an author’s source culture and the receiving culture of the author’s work, the greater will be the impetus to simplify” (Tymoczko 1999: 23). Tymoczko (2006), among other authors, has also criticized Venuti’s idea of foreignisation for being elitist, “more appropriate to

a highly educated audience than a broad readership" (Tymoczko 2006: 454). Venuti has also been criticized for vagueness in defining his terminology (see for example Ruokonen 2004).

With regard to using non-standard varieties of language, Liisa Tiittula and Pirkko Nuolijärvi (2007) concur that Finnish translators have tended to be more conservative than authors of texts originally written in Finnish (Tiittula & Nuolijärvi 2007: 392). Tiittula and Nuolijärvi list some of the strategies employed by Finnish translators of non-standard language. Although some translators have translated a foreign dialect into a specific local dialect of Finnish, often the illusion of spoken language is created by combining elements from several varieties (Tiittula & Nuolijärvi 2007: 396). Using an existing dialect is clearly a domesticating strategy, but in the latter case, the end result is not a specific dialect but a combination of many dialects that conveys the feel of non-standard language without strict geographic placement.

3 Code-switching

In this section, I take a closer look at the techniques of code-switching used in African and Caribbean novels and some of the strategies used in their Finnish translations, whilst also discussing possible reasons and potential effects. My aim is to illustrate the variety of strategies present in the material, not to provide an exhaustive or a representative overview.

In their texts, authors use a variety of techniques to help the reader identify or understand foreign expressions. This is referred to as overt or covert **cushioning** (for more on cushioning, see for example Talib 2002: 128). Common methods for this in the novels I am discussing are, for example, italicising foreign words to bring out foreign elements or giving an explanation for them. Italics and explanations can also be added to the text by the translator, or the translator or even the publisher can include other explanatory additions, such as footnotes or a glossary of foreign words. Thus, especially in the case of translation, quite a few different agents may have influenced what the final text looks like and what methods are used to help the reader along.

Buchi Emecheta, in her novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), uses a variety of different Nigerian languages to portray the extent of linguistic variety and the language barriers it forms both within Nigeria and with the rest of the world. In this novel, words in Nigerian languages have been **italicised**. In the following passage, the italicised Igbo word has not been explained, which has also been the strategy in the Finnish translation of the novel, *Nnu Egon tarina* (1989), translated by Kristiina Drews:

(1a) Your chief wife is very ill. Your *dibia* is doing all he can for her, but I don't think she will survive. (Emecheta 1994 [1979]: 21)

(1b) Ensimmäinen vaimosi on hyvin sairas. Sinun *dibia*si tekee hänen hyväkseen minkä voi, mutta en usko että hän selviää. (Emecheta 1989: 18)

The word *dibia* has thus been left untranslated in the Finnish version, but the word has been inflected according to Finnish grammar. Although it is possible to deduce from the novel's context that *dibia* could refer to a doctor or other medical person, this is not an

exhaustive explanation. Udobata R. Onunwa (2010) explains that, in addition to practicing medicine, a *dibia* can also be associated with various other functions in society, including religious rituals and divination (Onunwa 2010: 29). Talib (2002) states that there has been discussion on the subject among critics, who have objected to the translation of *dibia* as medicine-man as an over-simplification (Talib 2002: 91). Thus, one reason for the author not giving a straightforward explanation for a word could be that it has such complex meanings in the source culture that a short and simple explanation would not suffice. In this example, the translator has chosen a **foreignising** strategy by not explaining the word; this helps in maintaining the text's cultural integrity, as the complex cultural term has not been reduced to a simple, target-culture centred explanation.

A partly similar strategy regarding complex meanings has been adopted in Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1998 [1994]). Danticat uses Creole words and phrases in her text and these words have been **italicised**, but the author has also **added explanations** to many of them in English. Therefore, in the following passage, one could say that the author has assumed the role of the translator; in Tymoczko's (1999) words, the "cultural differences are muted and made peripheral to the central interests of the literary work" (Tymoczko 1999: 21). This can be likened to a combination of a **domesticating** and a **foreignising** strategy in translation; although the author has used Creole vocabulary, **cushioning** has also been added, which makes it easy for Leena Tamminen, the translator of the Finnish version *Näen, muistan, hengitän* (1999), to follow suit:

(2a) "*Ki niméro* today?" he asked. "What numbers are you playing?" (Danticat 1998 [1994]: 5)

(2b) "*Ki niméro* tänään?" hän kysyi. "Millä numeroilla te pelaatte?" (Danticat 1999: 11)

However, as in the case of *dibia*, there are instances where no explanation is given, possibly due to the complexity of the word's meaning. An example of this is the Creole word *konbit* used in several parts of the novel (for example Danticat 1998 [1994]: 3). Jennie Marcelle Smith (2001) explains *konbit* as "virtually any sort of collective effort" that can range from "house-raising" to "school children engaged in helping one another with lessons" (Smith 2001: 84). Danticat does in fact explain this practice in the novel without referring to the word *konbit*:

(3) Back then, a whole village would get together and clear a field for planting. The group would take turns clearing each person's land, until all the land in the village was cleared and planted. The women would cook large amounts of food while the men worked. Then at sunset, when the work was done, everyone would gather together and enjoy a feast of eating. (Danticat 1998 [1994]: 11)

The author can be considered to have used a **foreignising** strategy here, as the explanation to a foreign word in the text comes several pages after the term has been used. Complex words like these, which refer to a cultural issue or which are part of a way of living, cannot simply be explained in a few words, and thus the authors often choose not to give any overt explanation to them.

Jean Rhys, in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (2001 [1966]), has solved the issue of explaining by placing Creole words in the mouth of a character that is foreign to the culture. This makes the act of **explaining** much more natural:

(4) Every evening we saw the sun go down from the thatched shelter she called the *ajoupa*, I the summer house. (Rhys 2001 [1966]: 52)

In the same novel we can also find a passage where the translator has added both **italics** and an **explanation** to a word appearing in a passage narrated by the protagonist Antoinette. In the source text, the word *obeah* has not even been italicised, perhaps because the author has not considered it foreign enough to her readers. However, a Finnish reader might not be particularly familiar with the cultural references of the word, and thus, in the Finnish translation *Siintää Sargassomeri* (1968), translator Eva Siikarla has chosen a combination of a **domesticating** and a **foreignising** strategy by retaining the foreign word but adding **cushioning** by italicising the word and adding a short explanation:

(5a) No one had ever spoken to me about obeah – but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. (Rhys 2001 [1966]: 13)

(5b) Kukaan ei ollut koskaan puhunut minulle *obeah*ista, neekereiden taikamenoista – mutta tiesin mitä löytäisin, jos uskaltaisin katsoa. (Rhys 1968: 29)

However, the explanation given by the translator, which defines *obeah* as “negro magic”, does not present the source culture in good light and cannot be said to further understanding between the source and target cultures. The word ’neekeri’ itself was considered neutral in the Finland of the 1960s (see *Nykysuomen sanakirja* 1996 [1967]: s.v. *neekeri*). Nevertheless, similarly to the previously mentioned criticism of the simplified translation of the word *dibia*, this kind of simplified explanation is target-culture centred and its function is to make the text more understandable to the target text’s reader at the expense of the source text’s cultural integrity.

There is also a tendency, especially in African cultures, to create new words in English that have been influenced by the local languages. This technique could, in a way, be considered a hybrid form of the types of code-switching and non-standard language that I have discussed in this article. An example of such a word can be found in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes – A Love Story* (2004 [1991]), where the word *booklong* is used to refer to an educated person. Terhi Kuusisto, the translator of the Finnish version *Muutoksia – eräs rakkaustarina* (2002), has chosen a domesticating strategy and made a somewhat interesting choice in replacing *booklong* with the Finnish word for ‘dry’, thus making quite a strong assumption on what educated people are like and giving the word a negative connotation:

(6a) Ei, Esi Sekyi… and she always looks so busily professional… and so booklong! (Aidoo 2004 [1991]: 17)

(6b) Esi Sekyi! Ja hän näyttää aina niin kiireisen ammattimaiselta… ja niin kuivalta! (Aidoo 2002: 25)

In this example, the cultural reference of the word is lost in translation. Lindfors (2009) mentions a similar phrase, “*to know book*”, which is used in several Nigerian novels to

refer to an educated person. This has also been lost in the Finnish translations analysed by Lindfors (2009: 5–6). In these examples, then, the cultural integrity of the novels has not been preserved.

The above examples show some of the ways in which code-switching has been used in African and Caribbean texts as well as the strategies employed in their Finnish translations. The strategies used by the authors and the translators illustrate a similar range, from italicising foreign words to giving explanations for them or replacing them with target-language words. Thus, both domesticating and foreignising strategies as well as their combinations can be found. In the following section, I will move on to discuss the use of non-standard varieties of language in African and Caribbean novels.

4 Non-standard language

Another challenge from the point of view of translation is the use of non-standard language in African and Caribbean literatures. Non-standard language can refer to different kinds of language usage. Often non-standard language is used in a novel to portray a character speaking a creolised form of language common to native inhabitants in a certain country or region. These varieties can, for example, include non-standard grammatical structures and introduced vocabulary that can be either straightforward foreign words or directly translated words that do not originally exist in the target language. Talib (2002) points out that dialects are most commonly used in the "language of the characters or the first-person narrator", whereas a third-person narrator's language "is usually quite close to what is regarded as the standard in a particular socio-cultural or national context" (Talib 2002: 138).

Federici identifies two overall strategies used by translators in translating non-standard varieties of language: "a standardization, or neutralization, reducing the relevance and significance of the idiolect features, or a creative impetus to solve the impasse in entirely different ways" (Federici 2011: 11). Federici's idea of standardisation can be considered to be similar to domesticating strategies. He finds it extremely important that more creative solutions are attempted. According to Tiittula and Nuolijärvi (2007), Finnish translators have for example utilised colloquialisms, short and elliptical sentence structures, repetition and non-standard pronouns in creating a sense of spoken language in their texts, although it is also possible to use an existing dialect or a neutral standard language (Tiittula & Nuolijärvi 2007: 400). In this section, I will discuss examples of the techniques and translation strategies used for non-standard varieties of language in Caribbean and African literatures.

In V.S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* (1964 [1957]), the protagonist Ganesh speaks Trinidadian Creole with traces of Hindi, which is depicted with a variety of linguistic tools; there is a general lack of inflection as well as repetition and non-standard spelling. In Seppo Loponen's Finnish translation, *Täysinoppinut hieroja* (1978), the approach is slightly different; inflection has been added, but this has been compensated for with the use of ungrammatical forms and colloquialisms. Another feature not present in the source text is the use of demonstrative pronouns instead of personal pronouns, which is a common practice in Finnish spoken language. The source text's repetition of the word crazy has also been replaced with the Finnish word *pähkähullu* ("completely mad"):

(7a) He just did look crazy crazy to me. He had funny cat-eyes that frighten me, and you shoulda see the way the sweat was running down his red face. Like he not used to the heat. (Naipaul 1964 [1957]: 37)

(7b) Minusta se näytti pähkähullulta. Semmoset kissansilmät että ihan pelotti, ja olisitte nähnyt kuinka sen punanen naama rypi hiessä. Niinkun mies ei olisi tottunut helteeseen. (Naipaul 1978: 40)

Ganesh is considered an educated man in his society, and this also shows in his speech, which is somewhat closer to Standard English than that of the other characters. Although the overall feel of spoken language is maintained, this differentiation between different characters' ways of speaking does not come through in the Finnish translation, as all non-standard language has been translated in a similar manner. According to Tiittula and Nuolijärvi (2007), this kind of simplification was quite a common feature in the Finnish translations of the time, although the use of non-standard language had increased in the 1970s (Tiittula & Nuolijärvi 2007: 392–396).

In Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the character Christophine speaks Martinique Creole, which is also depicted with a lack of inflection and verbs in general. Her dialogue also has very simple sentence structures. In Siikarla's translation, the structures are closer to standard Finnish due to added verbs and inflection, but this has been compensated for with the use of ungrammatical forms, colloquialisms and demonstrative pronouns:

(8a) When man don't love you, more you try, more he hate you, man like that. If you love them they treat you bad, if you don't love them they after you night and day (Rhys 2001 [1966]: 68)

(8b) Kun mies ei rakasta sinua, mitä enemmän yrität, sitä enemmän se vihaa sinua, mies on sellainen. Jos rakastat niitä, ne kohtelee sinua pahoin, jos et rakasta, ne on kintereillä yötä päivää (Rhys 1968: 115)

Rhys's text utilises a variety of different languages, Christophine's Creole being only one of them. Sumillera (2008) believes this to be vital to the cultural integrity of the novel; "by including characters from different national and social backgrounds, and by giving them the chance to speak in a direct way, the narrative plays with a multiplicity of voices which contribute to its enrichment with various points of view" (Sumillera 2008: 30). In such a case, removing the distinct features of language from the translation would greatly influence the text's function as well as its cultural integrity.

In the previous sections, I have discussed some examples of the use of code-switching and non-standard language in my material and analysed the strategies used in their Finnish translations. For the part of code-switching both domesticating and foreignising strategies can be found. In the two examples I have used to illustrate the use of non-standard language, the translations have shifted towards standard language in some aspects, but this has been compensated for with other techniques. In both these examples, the translator has chosen to use elements of various Finnish dialects instead of using a specific, strictly geographically bound Finnish variety. However, although the feel of spoken language is maintained, the variation in the language of different characters in the novel is lost, as all non-standard language has been translated using similar techniques.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed examples of the techniques of code-switching and non-standard language in African and Caribbean novels as well as strategies used in translating these into Finnish, illustrating the range of strategies and discussing their possible reasons and potential effects. The publication times of the texts I used range from the 1950s to the 2000s. Both domesticating and foreignising strategies as well as their combinations were present in my selection of novels; some translators had chosen to add italics and explanations to foreign words, whereas in other places cultural references had been lost altogether. For the part of non-standard language, the overall feel of spoken language had been maintained with the use of multiple techniques, but the variety of spoken language in the source texts had been lost.

Authors such as Venuti (2013) have spoken for the importance of maintaining cultural integrity in the translation of such texts. Although Venuti's ideas have been criticized for potential elitism, cultural variety and giving voice to people who have been silenced in the past is such a central part of postcolonial literatures that maintaining cultural integrity and linguistic variety can be argued to take precedence over ease of reading. As I mentioned above, there is some variation in the degree to which cultural integrity has been maintained in my selection of novels. In my doctoral dissertation, I plan to analyse the points discussed in this article further as well as take a closer look at some other types of cultural references that can be found in African and Caribbean novels written in English. I also plan to examine what kinds of effects the author's native language can have on the structure and language used in the source text as well as how the techniques used by African and Caribbean authors and the strategies used in the Finnish translations of their novels have changed over time.

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