

SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE SILENT ART OF SELF-TRANSLATION

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Resumen

Con todas las dificultades interpretativas inherentes a la traducción literaria, este estudio examina si el autor como auto-traductor es infalible y si su versión es realmente "definitiva". En el caso del autor/traductor bilingüe como Samuel Beckett, preguntamos si es posible hacer una distinción clara entre lo que es la creación y lo que es la traducción, dónde y cuándo acaba una y empieza la otra.

Palabras clave: Beckett, autotraducción

Abstract

With all the interpretive difficulties inherent in literary translation, this paper asks whether the author as *self-translator* is infallible and whether his or her version is indeed "definitive". In the case of the "bilingual" writer/translator Samuel Beckett we ask whether it is possible to draw a clear dividing line between "creation" and "translation" and to establish when and where one ends and the other begins.

Key words: Beckett, self-translation

Résumé

Avec toutes les difficultés d'interprétation inhérentes à la traduction littéraire, on se demande si l'auteur comme auto-traducteur est infallible et si sa version est réellement "définitive". Dans le cas d'un écrivain/traducteur bilingue comme Samuel Beckett, on examine s'il est possible de délimiter clairement "création" et "traduction". Ou et quand commence l'une et finit l'autre.

Mots clés: Beckett, autotraduction

The literary translator's task is a thankless one. He or she is an immediate target for criticism, as the translation will always be judged against the author's creation, and of course it can never be, (or at least it should never be), better than the original. A good translator is an invisible or unobtrusive one. When a reader reads a novel by Dostoevsky, he or she wants to feel it is Dostoevsky, not *Fred Bloggs'* interpretative version, that is being read. The translator is not there to "improve" on the original, but merely reflect it as best as possible. The reward for the completion of this mean feat inconspicuously, (besides any pecuniary benefits), is a name in small print and, at best, gentle praise, mild criticism and subsequent anonymity.

It seems obvious that translation is not a pure science, and therefore, the "perfect translation" clearly does not exist. Translation is subjective, and therefore open to different

opinions, views and commentaries, and often, the renderer is obliged to make choices which may compromise the author's original intention.

In his essay *Traduttore Traditore? ¡Anda Ya!* Guíjarro Morales (this volume) sees the problems of translation as similar to those of human communication in general and argues that misinterpretation or communication break down can occur for any one or more of the following reasons, (which I shall not endeavour to translate, so as not to add any further scope for misinterpretation!)

(1^a) *Porque el autor inicial no supo comunicarlas de manera eficiente.*

(2^a) *Porque el lector-traductor no supo interpretar de manera correcta las señales emitidas por el emisor inicial.*

(3^a) *Porque el lector-traductor no supo transmitir claramente las hipótesis que había recobrado de su lectura.*

(4^a) *Porque el lector (de la traducción) no supo interpretar de manera correcta las señales emitidas por el traductor.*

Clearly literary translation, like all forms of "encoding" and "decoding", is open to distortion, and is therefore fallible. What happens however if we remove the possible "Chinese whisper" effect between the original and the translation? In the case of an author undertaking his or her own translation, do the above points (3) and (4) immediately vanish, thereby reducing the possibility of misinterpretation? Is a literary translation by the author himself no longer an interpretation, but a definitive replica in another language?

For some British people it is a surprise to discover that *Waiting for Godot*, a play which has, for many years, formed part of the English Literature syllabus in schools and places of higher education, is not in fact "English" at all, but a translation of *En Attendant Godot*. And thus, Samuel Beckett, one of the most important figures of twentieth century English literature, wrote his most famous work in French not English. *Waiting for Godot* must be the only translated text included in the G.C.S.E. English literature syllabus, and one may well ask why the original French version *En Attendant Godot* tends to be overlooked and omitted from the "French Literature" program. This incongruence can not I feel be explained simply in terms of national linguistic and cultural pride, (Beckett was Irish by birth after all). The answer I feel lies in the dilemma of Beckett's own particular deployment of language and its subsequent translation. In the case of the bilingual writer/translator the lines between one activity and the other are sometimes thin and it is debatable where one begins and the other ends.

The self-translator has a completely different status to the independent translator. He or she is human, but yet the translation is infallible. It is the "Gospel" truth. Would it for example be justifiable to bring out a new version of *En Attendant Godot*? A new improved translation which is more faithful to the original French than the first and last translation

in 1954 ? Besides the economic inviability of commissioning such an undertaking, since few readers, one would suspect, would choose to buy it in preference to the author's own version, the academic question is: can a neutral translator improve on the work of a *self-translator*? The answer seems to be a clear "No", but the "Why" is more difficult to answer.

Beckett, although a brilliant translator, is nevertheless at times guilty of inaccuracies and inconsistencies in his translation. In the French version of *Murphy*, for example, "Victoria Gate" the place in London is for the most part left as such, but on one occasion is called "La Porte Victoria". Sometimes his choice of words could be improved upon but ... wait one minute! Who are we to say ? We may pass comment on Beckett's translation of the *Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (1958) but that is an *independent* interpretation. A translation by the author himself is a completely different kettle of fish. It is, (bar any blatant grammatical or lexical errors), above criticism in terms of interpretation since any deviance from the original text, gratuitous or not, is accepted as artistic licence. The author's own translation is not open to criticism, improvement or debate, as the writer is the only one qualified to know what he wanted to say and how he wanted to express it. That's indisputable!... isn't it?

In *En attendant Godot* there are references to Roussillon and the Vaucluse (in France) Vladimir reminisces about it while Estragon insists that he has never stepped foot there

*Mais non, je n'ai jamais été dans le Vaucluse!
J'ai coulé toute ma chaudépisse d'existence, je te dis! Ici! Dans la Merdecluse!¹.*

In *Waiting for Godot*, the Vaucluse/ Merdecluse word play can only find faecal expression in Irish English by moving Département and going to the town of Macon thus maintaining the "toilet humour" of the original.

No, I was never in the Macon country. I've puked my puke life away here, I tell you! Here! In the Cackon country².

Clearly the artistic licence of gratuitously changing locus for the sake of linguistic unity above thematic and biographical accuracy, would be one of polemical debate, were it not for the fact that the translator was Beckett himself

The student of Beckett would recognize references to the Vaucluse and Roussillon as far more than merely random place names. It was there that he spent the War years in enforced exile after his activities with the Resistance, hiding from the Nazis, merely existing and waiting. Therefore, by removing these direct references in the English version, the play loses its all important personal, autobiographical dimension, for by Beckett's own

¹ *En attendant Godot* (1952: 88)

² *Waiting for Godot* (1954: 57)

rare admission, Vladimir and Estragon are in fact Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil (his wife-to-be) and himself³

Clearly the translation *Waiting for Godot* distorts and strips the original text of this fundamental underlying meaning and the English version is arguably poorer as a result of it. Had such artistic licence been taken by an independent translator, he or she might be considered guilty of over-stepping the linguistic and interpretive mark. Although Beckett's translation must be considered "definitive", there is arguable justification to consider *En attendant Godot* and *Waiting for Godot* as complimentary parallel creative versions, rather than mirror images.

Beckett belongs to a relatively small family of, what can loosely be termed, bilingual writers. By this I mean writers such as Charles D'Orleans, Milton, Tagore, Arthur Koestler and Nabokov who, through the ages have expressed themselves with distinction in two or more languages, stepping over cultural as well as linguistic boundaries to do so⁴.

Bilingualism is still a huge grey area for linguists and psychologists alike. Agreement is hard to reach, but there is a tendency amongst linguists to make an unsatisfactory distinction between "coordinate" and "compound" bilingualism⁵. In the former, the two languages function independently, expressing two separate cultures and ways of thinking, while in the latter two languages express the same culture. Clearly the terms are out-dated and inadequate in many respects, since few people fit neatly into made-to-measure clothes and of course there is the problem of defining "bilingualism". Therefore, for the purposes of this essay I intend to limit my commentaries to Samuel Beckett's particular form of bilingual translation only, without attempting to make any broader generalizations about the nature of bilingual translation as a whole.

Beckett is an unusual case amongst other "bilingual" writers for a variety of reasons. Firstly he wrote the bulk of his most important work in a non-mother tongue, not out of any real necessity, but by his own free choice. He was not an exile obliged to write in a second language through political or cultural persecution. He was not, unlike many African or Asian writers, obliged to adopt a "dominant" medium above a native "minority" language in order to reach a wider audience. He chose to write in a second language, above all, for aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) reasons.

Secondly, unlike most "bilingual" writers, he did not merely write literature in one language or the other, he produced and then reproduced the same work in another language. Beckett, in fact translated the bulk of his work himself from French into English or vice versa. There were a couple of joint efforts before the war⁶, but by the 1940s Beckett had

³ Bair (1990, 512)

⁴ For more information about bilingual writers throughout history see Forster (1970)

⁵ Weinreich (1953), Haugen (1956)

⁶ The task of translating *Murphy* into French was initially begun in collaboration with Alfred Peron, but it was completed by Beckett alone.

come to the conclusion that collaboration created more work than it saved, and being the meticulous perfectionist that he was, he decided that he would undertake the translation of all his work alone. The result was that most of his life was taken up alternating between writing and translation, and at times one activity was indistinguishable from the other as the two linguistic disciplines merged into one. In the end he had reduced self-translation into a unique Beckettian art, where he thought and wrote in simultaneous translation.

Beckett was not bilingual by birth (if such a thing does exist), but became fluent through dedication. The psychologist W E Lambert⁷ argues that successful language learning depends on an integrative motivation as well as an instrumental one. Integrative motivation implies the desire to integrate and be accepted by a target community, which includes style of behaviour and expression.

Perhaps as a young student this may have been the case of Beckett, but even then, any passion he may have had was based on literature and the written word, and in the end allegiance to any one nation and culture was circumstantial⁸. He was initially drawn to Paris, the international heart of literary creativity in order to escape the claustrophobic confines of Ireland, rather than any all-consuming passion for all things French.

This is not to say that he was *not* attracted to the French culture, it was simply he did not choose to assimilate or be assimilated. He was an outsider in all respects, a universal misfit who didn't truly belong anywhere, whether it be in France, Ireland or England, and this sense of no-man's-land is reflected in his writing. His art depended on this freedom from cultural ties. He borrowed and absorbed part of the cultures around him, but sought to maintain an artistic independence.

In fact, adopting French as his main weapon of expression was fundamentally a means of forging a cultural and linguistic void, from which he hoped to develop his own style, free from the restrictive literary influences of his past. Thus Beckett adopted the French not for any integrative tendencies, but, in his own words:

*Parce qu'en français c'est plus facile d'écrire sans style*⁹

However, although the means of communication chosen was French, Beckett's mental conceptualization was, partially at least, influenced by the English language. Often the language used to develop the idea might be different from the one used to express it. This dual language approach was not confined to his writings in French, for one should not forget that many of his works were written in English and then translated into French.

⁷ Lambert (1956: 83-102)

⁸ Beckett rejected national and political allegiance throughout his whole life. However, it is true that at the outbreak of the Second World War he did choose to make one of his very few, but highly significant national/political statements: preferring to stay in Paris and work with the resistance rather than returning "home" to neutral Ireland. Thus I feel however owes more to humanitarianism than nationalism.

⁹ Quoted in Gessner, N. (1957), *Die Unzulänglich der Sprache. eine Untersuchung über Formzufall und Beziehungslosigkeit bei Samuel Beckett*, Zurich, Junfermann Verlag, 32

This simultaneous bilingual approach can be seen as early as the 1940s. If we look at the manuscript of *Watt* written during the war years while in hiding in Roussillon, we see a man at a mental crisis point of acute bilingual tension. The novel is an often frenzied, comical exploration of the English language, replete with unusual puns, inversions, word games. It is interesting to note however, that the marginal notes in the original manuscript are written in French, indicating that even during this period of early artistic development Beckett was already assuming his unique bilingual approach.

In *Fin de Partie* Nagg and Nell are a fossil-like couple who are confined to two dustbins, existing side by side in shackled acrimony, unable to live with each other and yet unable to live without each other. On one occasion Nell threatens to leave Nagg:

Nell: Je veux te laisser.

Nagg: Tu peux me grater d'abord?

Nell: Non. (un temps) Où?

Nagg: Dans le dos¹⁰.

Beckett, although he always rejected any symbolic interpretation of his work, (*No symbols where none intended¹¹*), did seem to "suggest" meaning through his choice of language or image. The idea of "grater le dos" probably suggested little to the first French audiences who saw the play. The direct English translation which appeared a few months later is arguably far more significant. The image of "Scratching another's back" has an intrinsic secondary association in English, which is absent in the original French. In English the idea of mutual help and dependence is suggested through idiomatic implication - "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine". Needless to say Nell does not leave, there is too much at stake. If she goes it alone who'll scratch her back? Thus the indications are that Beckett was constantly translating even while writing, consciously or unconsciously aware of two cultures and trying to walk the thin line between the two.

Beckett always denied that "Godot" had any "religious" associations, claiming *If Godot were God I would have called him that¹²*. When the visual similarity between "Godot" and "God" was pointed out, Beckett reminded the critics that the play was originally conceived of in French, and thus "Dieu" bears little resemblance to "Godot". However, it is hard to believe that the visual similarity between the two words would have

¹⁰ *Fin de Partie* (1957: 159) Preceding *Endgame* (1958: 101)
Nell: I am going to leave you
Nagg: Could you give me a scratch before you go?
Nell: No (pause) Where?
Nagg: In the back

¹¹ *Watt* (p. 255) and repeated on numerous occasions, especially to critics!

¹² Quoted in Bair (1990: 406)

been lost on the meticulous Beckett, especially as the name "Godot" was an after thought¹³. He wrote with two languages in mind, and for an English speaking audience the association begs to be made, even if only to reject it later.

What Beckett seems to do is write with both French and English in mind, straddling two languages, mentally translating and writing in them both simultaneously and never escaping from the two confines. There often appears to be three possible ways of reading Beckett's work. There is the original text, the text in translation and the two as two parts of a bilingual and bicultural whole. Creation and Translation was not merely a case of giving birth to twins, whether identical or not. It was more a case of giving life to separable Siamese twins, two independent yet dependent halves which together, compliment to form a different entity. There are hundreds of cross-lingual connections scattered throughout Beckett's texts and translations, which are only evident to the careful coordinate bilingual/bicultural reader of both texts.

For instance, in *Malone meurt*, the second part of the Trilogy in which insanity is a constant theme, it is the "Louis" family who entertain Sapo. When the English translation *Malone dies* was published five years later in 1956, the family was no longer "Louis" but had been apparently gratuitously been renamed "Lambert". The bilingual and biculturally reader who takes the trouble to read both versions *might* appreciate the extra intellectual *intertextual* dimension Beckett offers. The two independent names placed together form the separate entity *Louis Lambert*, the title of one of Balzac's novels about a young man who becomes insane. Clearly Beckett is playing intellectual mind games for his own personal creative pleasure and for the privileged few who share the same bicultural wavelength.

For a man with so much language and so many linguistic resources open to him, it is perhaps ironical that what he consistently tried to express was *silence*. All Beckett's work and his theatre in particular, arguably depends not so much on successful communication, but non-communication, or at least non-direct communication. He was conscious of the limitations of language and unlike Modernists such as Joyce and Proust he did not feel language was an adequate means of communication in a modern incomprehensible world. His plays are notable for long uncomfortable periods of silence, (which of course needs little translation). Language is used to break silence and fill in time. The content of what is expressed is not as important as the fact that something has been said, for in terms of Beckett's vision, the relevance of communication is to break up the interminable silent monotony of existence. Thus in *En Attendant Godot* Vladimir and Estragon rely on banal small talk to relieve the boredom of their eternal wait.

¹³ The actual working title was simply "En attendant" and "Godot" was added later. Beckett was tired of being constantly asked about the origins of the name. His replies ranged from the non-committal to the facetious. His most common reply was that it originated from "godillot", the French slang for boot (since a lot of walking is alluded to in the play). Alternatively, he claimed that it was the name of a slow rider in the "Tour de France" who the crowd waited patiently for to finish. For the record, I agree with Michael Worton's view (in Pilling (1994)) that "Godot" has a function rather than a meaning or source. It represents an absence without existence. I personally do not believe that "Godot" is God in the strictly religious sense of the word, although I believe that Beckett was fully aware of the possible connection. "Godot" is anything that justifies a continued existence of waiting. For some it could indeed be filled by God, for others it could be the straggling rider in a bike race. Beckett, the atheist, was therefore telling the truth when he told Alan Schneider: *If I knew who Godot was, I would have said so in the play*.

Vladimir. *Dis quelque chose!*

Estragon: *Je cherche.*

(Long Silence)

Vladimir (angoissé) - *Dis n'importe quoi!*¹⁴

This silence finds its logical expression in Beckett's experimental mimes/plays *Acte sans Paroles I / Act without words I* and *Acte sans Paroles II / Act without words II*.

Beckett, although painfully aware of the limitations of language, recognized his own need to express himself and saw language as the only tool available to him. Language for him was a functional medium to express his vision of the human condition rather than a lyrical one. In fact Beckett's creation arguably depends on bilingualism and translation to create a neutrality through his work, so he can tread the narrow path through linguistic neutrality, where neither language dominates, leaving a universal voice of communicative non-communication audible in the Tower of Babel

¹⁴ *En attendant Godot* (1952-91) Preceding *Waiting for Godot* (1954, 51)
Vladimir *Say something!*
Estragon *I'm trying*
(long silence)
Vladimir *(In anguish) Say anything at all!*

The texts

For the sake of convenience and easy reference, I have chosen to work from collected volumes of Beckett's works. The page references cited are to be found in the following editions.

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