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Vivien Bosley

TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction, vol. 1, n° 1, 1988, p. 139-145.

Pour citer cet article, utiliser l'information suivante :

URI: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037010ar>

DOI: 10.7202/037010ar

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Diluting the mixture: Translating Michel Tremblay's *les Belles-sœurs*

Vivien Bosley

Despite the critical success of Denis Arcand's film *le Déclin de l'empire américain* and North American viewers' pleasure at the insight it gives into the rarified world of Montréal academics and their view of the universe, Hollywood is demanding that the film be remade in its own image with American actors in an American context. The question is why? Why this refusal to appreciate the amusingly foreign article? Why the necessity for internationalization of the situation? Why the rejection of the original in translation?

If I were to attempt to answer these questions in this specific context, I might have some overly harsh things to say about cultural chauvinism. As it is, I shall concentrate upon the resistance to translation and the refusal to accept, in the public mind, something that one cannot directly understand through one's own linguistic system. It is by no means the case that Québec writers have been badly served by translators; on the contrary, a recent article in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* pointed out that the world of Michel Tremblay's Montréal had become very familiar to theatre-goers in the English-speaking world.¹ What is at issue in this paper, however, is the kind of experience we have when watching such a play in translation. It is my contention that, instead of identifying with what is happening on stage, we become observers of an ethnological situation which strikes us as interesting and amusing and quaint, rather like the exotic birds perched on exotic flowers under great glass domes that I remember seeing on the piano during visits to my great-aunts.

1. Matthew Fraser, «Translating Words into Action», *Toronto Globe and Mail*, Feb. 7, 1987.

In order to try to explain this widespread phenomenon, I shall look at the original and then at the translation of Michel Tremblay's *les Belles-sœurs*, and try to say something coherent about their effect in English, both on the printed page and on the stage.

The first part — namely that concerned with the printed page — will be the easier, and therefore the longer. Theoretical accounts of the process of translating abound. There is something fairly accessible about laying pages side by side and reflecting upon the problems posed and the solutions found. A complete play neatly and conveniently printed between the covers of a handy book, has, to re-cast Paolo Valesio's term, an iconic force²; it has become an object with an existence that yields to familiar critical criteria of structure, dialogue, characterization, exposition, and dénouement. To deal with a play and its translated counterpart on stage is more difficult. Already each actor — or, in this case, actress — will contribute to the play in a way foreseen by the author, in articulating the speech of the character — though, of course, in a voice that is unmistakably and uncompromisingly her own; but also, the actors have what Anne Ubersfeld calls an «autonomie des signes»³; in other words, they bring to the play personal idiosyncrasies which give it a dimension unimagined by the author. In addition, the size of the stage, the set, the lights, and the music add a large dose of imponderability to a play which takes it a long way from the written text, and which makes it, in contrast to most other genres, an organic object.

However, a play most certainly does have this double life, so we must try to come to terms with both aspects. First, let us begin by looking at the translated script. What is there to be said about a translation of Tremblay that cannot be said of, say, Ibsen or Chekhov? (And perhaps I should remark at this point that I am going to beg the question of the possibility of translation in absolute terms. I realize that there are those who claim that translation is an impossibility. For my part, however, I maintain that the world stage is considerably enriched — as I am myself — by however pale an imitation we may have of the original Norwegian or Russian. I shall assume, therefore, that readers and audiences are better off with a translation of Tremblay rather than with no Tremblay at all.)

As we look at a page of Tremblay in the original and then in the translation, what strikes us immediately is the fact that the English text looks like a drawing-room version of the French. Inadvertently,

2. Paolo Valesio, «The Virtues of Traducement: Sketch of a Theory of Translation», *Semiotica* 18, 1, pp. 1-96.

3. Anne Ubersfeld, *l'École du Spectateur* (Paris, Les Éditions Sociales, 1981).

willy-nilly, however good the translation may be in transferring the cognitive content from one language to the other the essential cultural component is lacking. The elements that we recognize immediately in the French text as being very specific to a relatively small linguistic group fall away and the language is diluted as it is standardized into generic North American. What this also means is that the linguistic specifics that we have come to associate with the valorization of Québec's identity disappear, so that the overtones of nationalism which are inherent in the attempt to represent in a phonetic way the speech associated with a movement of emancipation from the linguistic hegemony of the French of France are completely lost. Let us take an example from early on in *les Belles-sœurs* — though any page would yield similar examples. Germaine Lauzon is indignant that her daughter Linda is unwilling to stay home and help her entertain the friends she has invited to stick in the thousands of trading stamps she has won. The French text runs thus:

C'est ça, méprise-moé! Bon, c'est correct, sors, fais à ta tête, c'est pas ben ben mêlant! Maudite vie! J'peux même pas avoir une p'tite joie y faut toujours que quelqu'un vienne toute gêter! Vas-y aux vues, Linda, vas-y, sors a'soir, fais à ta tête! Maudit verrat de bâtard que chus donc tannée!

And the English translation is:

That's right. You've always said so. I'm dumb. Okay, Linda, go ahead. Do what you like. That's all you ever do anyway. It's nothing new. Christ, I can't have a bit of pleasure for myself. Someone's always got to spoil it for me. It's okay, Linda, if that's what you want. Go ahead. Go to your goddamn show!

When the play was first put on in 1968, one critic, André Major, pointed out that it was about «un milieu populaire muré dans son langage». The bricks of these enclosing walls are quite clearly marked in the French. The accent used by the speaker is indicated by *moé, ben, j'peux, p'tite, a'soir, chus*. This accent is specifically joul and as soon as we see on the page this accepted form of transliteration of local speech, we make various kinds of assumptions on a semiotic basis even before we know anything at all about the content of the speech. What are these assumptions?

1. We know that the speakers belong to a specific and limited linguistic group.
2. We know that this group is situated in Québec.
3. We know that the speakers are from working class level of society.
4. We know that there is authorial identification with this group.

5. We know the *terminus a quo* of the composition of the piece.
6. We know that this language is being used as a metaphor for a state of oppression and that those who use it are being used as instruments to sound the call of self-assertion.

Now, in English, the dilution of the force of this specificity of language is immediately apparent. The initial «C'est ça, méprise-moé» takes three statements to render into English: «That's right. You've always said so. I'm dumb», and all the assumptions listed above fall away, with the exception of number three. Even in English we still know that the *milieu* we are dealing with is no upper crust, but we have no idea of the geographic setting of the conversation, and we certainly have no inkling of any political implications in the text itself. Any authorial identification remaining in the English version would have to be with the translator, as the actual words of the original author have disappeared.

Not only is the way the words are transliterated important, but the actual words themselves play a major role in our interpretation of the text. Several of the words in this brief quotation are used exclusively in Québec French, and would defeat someone trying to find them in a standard French-English dictionary. Such is the case with the use of «vues» for cinema, «tannée» for fed up, and so on. And the expression «C'est pas ben ben mêlant», which is used several times throughout the course of the play, remains untranslated — and presumably untranslatable — throughout. In the speech which follows the one just quoted, Germaine says: «Chus pas une sarvante, moé, icitte», four words in this very simple sentence tell a linguistic tale; in English, however, the sentence is a mere statement of information: «I'm not a slave, you know», which could be said anywhere from Sydney to Seattle or Manchester to Medicine Hat without provoking the slightest *frisson* of linguistic recognition.

I have already mentioned one expression which defies translation. We come now to a whole area of speech which, because it is embedded in the cultural context of Québec, cannot have the same impact outside. I refer to the vocabulary of Roman Catholicism. The fact that the vast winter migrations of Quebeckers to Florida have resulted in the reference to them as «tabernacles» in English, is an indication of the significance of this linguistic feature. Throughout Tremblay's plays, there are liberal smatterings of *bonyeus*. The expression «sacrer» is used frequently, as when Linda, for example says «sacre-moé patience» (p. 93). When Linda or Angéline are being disapproved of the verb used in French is «se perdre»; when Germaine is scolding Linda for being late, she says: «Tu fais exprès pour me faire damner». The translation in English is «lose yourself» for the first and «make me angry» in the second. Neither of these, of course, gives the impression

of having the church as a constant living presence in one's life, such that it is absorbed into the familiar world of everyday speech and understood as a reference to a dominant truth of existence. In translation, therefore, we lose sight of the ritual fact that religious belief has influenced everyday speech in this society, but also that there is a communal reaction to the vicissitudes of life which is expressed in religious terms. When the translation does try to give religious equivalents, English, of course, is found to be notoriously lacking in sacrilligious language. When Pierrette exclaims in astonishment at seeing Angéline, what she says is «Ah ben, câlisse!» When Rose launches into her sex monologue, she begins with «y'a pas une crise de vue française», and goes on to «Maudit cul». The translation uses some version of «god damn» for all three cases — a sign of distance from the religious fact, and linguistic impoverishment thereby.

Another linguistic feature of the original which defeats translation into English, is the fact that Québec — and in particular, Montréal — French is permeated with anglicisms, the anglicisms of social mores imported from another culture, which gives us expressions like «pi-notes» and «coke» and from the aspirations of another culture with «fun» and «cheap». Both of these latter expressions have overtones of censure in that in each case they are used to refer to a state which in some way exceeds the normal expectations of the contextual society. The «fun» most frequently referred to in this way is the pleasure Angéline Sauvé gets from frequenting a night club. The word «club» itself, of course, is used in French to refer to this hot-bed of sin, and when the young girls insist «C'est ben l'fun, les clubs», the older women respond with horror, and Angéline is in danger, not only of losing her immortal soul, but also of losing her life-long friend Rhéauna Bibeau, for «fun» is an alien concept, coming as it does, from an anglo, and therefore pagan society. «Cheap» on the other hand is the word used by Lisette de Courval who is condemning what she perceives as the squalor of the world of the play, and by using an imported word, she identifies with a society outside her own; (there is a nice irony, of course, in the fact that the external world is France, but that the identifying word is English.) Finally, there is another anglicism — this time, an amusing one — again used with tone of moral censure, during the conversation about Monique Bergeron. Rose is castigating girls who become pregnant, and apparently for once agreeing with her husband who calls them «agace-pissettes». When she describes Monique's dress, she says «J'sais pas si vous vous rappelez de ses shorts rouges... y'étaient short all right». Again the use of English implies a naughtiness, a sexual licentiousness inconceivable in the French of the society which is making the judgements.

To examine the question of the intranslatability of proper names we should look no further than the title of Tremblay's most famous

play, which remains *les Belles-sœurs* in English — as does *Bonjour là bonjour*. To try to translate *LBS* would be to tackle the vexed question of the pun in French, but also to ask us in an Anglophone society to look more closely at the relationships between the characters in the play. Where are the sisters-in-law, we might ask, and the answer should be that there are very few — in fact Thérèse Dubuc seems to be the only sister-in-law who actually appears on stage, she being the sister of Germaine's husband. In the course of the play, however, we often hear of other in-laws of various kinds — sons, daughters, brothers, mothers, so we can understand that the title is a kind of short-hand to indicate the complex social network which is portrayed in the play. If the title is left in a foreign language, then somehow the vagueness of this network also remains, and the very title serves as a kind of door between two worlds. The famous example of proper names within the body of the text is the list of names of those present at her sister-in-law's birthday party recited by Yvette Longpré. What is not lost in translation is the fact that Yvette isn't the brightest of the bunch, and so has no comment to make upon the world — an accumulation of non-sequiturs is her intellectual limit. What is lost, however, is the intimacy of the kinds of names. For an Anglophone they simply sound odd in the way that any foreign names sound odd. For a Quebecker, however, they are essentially names from home which reinforce the sense of community in the theatre.

To turn from the text to the actual performance is to come up against a whole new series of problems. A director must first decide how his actors are going to speak. If they speak with a French-Canadian accent, then they risk sounding like the send-ups of Québec politicians that the rest of Canada is used to hearing on the Royal Canadian Air Farce. In addition they will sound separate from the community of the audience, so the intended identification on both sides of the footlights will be lost. On the other hand, if the actors do not speak with French-Canadian accents, then the specificity of the setting is lost, and the audience must resort to the normal procedure of accepting the programme notes and supplying the environment — a very second-rate experience, given the immediacy of the original.

Whichever a director chooses, the forms of address are going to sound unnatural in English. In an English-speaking neighbourhood in any Anglophone community, the characters of *Les Belles-Sœurs* would surely be on first name terms; to hear the characters in English call each other Madame Brouillette, Madame Jodoin, Mademoiselle Verrette is a further step towards ethnic quaintness, and specimen gazing. Nor is it easy to make a distinction between the affectation of a Lise de Courval when the linguistic differentiations already noted above have been ironed out. Her pretentiousness about her trips to Europe is easily enough grasped, but what of the references to Euro-

pean French culture, which are not easily comprehensible by an audience not used to watching imported T.V.. Private jokes like the reference to Jean Marais and Gabrielle Jodoin's comment «Ça c't'un homme» in the context of the relative masculinity of French and French-Canadian actors (though Marais is known to have been a close friend of Cocteau, which is ironic enough) are necessarily lost on an uninformed audience.

We have already looked at the linguistic influence of religion upon the universe of *LBS*. When we examine the cognitive influence of the church we find that we are excluded from a closed world dominated by the church. We outside Québec do not inhabit a world where people put on the radio in the evening to listen to the rosary and recite novenas to our favourite saint. Similarly, the subject of annual retreats and the discussion of the qualities of the priest who is to conduct them belong to a closed and specific society.

That we have insight into this society even in translation is undeniable. One may argue that the most important feature of modern western drama is to give us insight into a closed and specific society, starting with the closed world of the crumbling, uncomprehending Russian gentry in Chekhov, and the closed hypocritical small-town Norway of Ibsen. Norwegian and Russian friends say that we miss a lot in translations of those plays, too. Still, we are grateful for them. What is lost in the translation, however, is the mirror effect noted by Alain Pontaut in his introduction to the Leméac edition of *LBS*. For those of us who are foreigners to this world, the mirror becomes the optical lens of the scientific observer. We remain outside a world to which we do not possess the linguistic passport; for, as Tremblay himself said: *LBS* is unthinkable except in *joual*!

University of Alberta