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TRANSLATING A MOTHER TONGUE

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Abstract

Most Indonesians of my generation are multilingual; we can at least speak two or three languages, namely Indonesian, English, and a local language. This paper reflects my personal effort in discovering how the languages are positioned in my mind. I assume that Javanese was the first language I acquired, followed by Indonesian, and then English. As I grew up, Javanese became the language I use mainly at home or to certain people only. Indonesian and English, on the other hand, seem to be taking the more dominant place in terms of level of proficiency and amount of usage. Needless to say, I only use my mother tongue in informal conversational level. By translating Javanese literary work into English, relying on translation theories and language of thought, this project helps me assess my real mastery of a language I call mother tongue. The reflection on the translation process shows that my oral proficiency in the mother tongue is perceived to be higher than reading and writing proficiencies. The reading comprehension skills in the register of literary texts are lower than expected because of my intensive exposure to other languages.

Keywords: *mother tongue, translation, literary work, Javanese*

1. Background

Most people I met in the Department of Linguistics, Ohio University, were bilinguals. They were proficient in two or more different languages. My Moroccan officemate, for example, was multilingual; she could speak English, French, Moroccan Arabic, and Standard Arabic. I had never realized the fact that I was also multilingual, until one day a friend asked me, "So, since your studying Linguistics, how many languages do you speak?" Hesitantly, I started to count by mentioning them one by one. I told the person that I was born in Java, and that my parents raised me speaking Javanese, thus it is my mother tongue. In kindergarten, I learned to read and write in Indonesian. And as a student of a *madrasah* (Islamic elementary school), I learned Arabic for six years, which made me a fairly good reader of Standard Arabic. I studied English since the fourth grade and chose English as my undergraduate major. Living in Singapore, even for a short period of time, had also given me a good command of Malay. My friend's plain question simply reminded me of my own language proficiencies. I was happy that I might be a multilingual, just like all my colleagues and professors. But since then, I have been questioning myself: how confident am I to really call Javanese my mother tongue, since it is the first language I could utter and the one I always use to communicate with the closest people in my life?

2. The Language

Javanese is spoken by around seventy million people residing in Java Island (Wolff and Poedjosoedarmo, 1982). Additionally, a large number of Javanese speakers can also be found in New Caledonia and Surinam. On the contrary, people might not have realized the decrease of Javanese because the language has a large number of speakers. However, there are some reasons why Javanese is diminishing. The most significant reason is the establishment of Indonesian as the national language. As a national language, Indonesian is used as "the language of law and government administration, the medium of instruction in education, and a tool for national planning and for the development of science, technology, and national culture and for communication on the national level for the planning and implementation of national development and governmental affair's" (Lowenberg, 1992, p. 66). Thus, it is clear that there is a significant shift by Indonesian to not continue using their mother tongue.

In the case of Javanese, the language is still spoken in daily conversation by the older generations; however some values are gradually disappearing. Javanese is unique because the language is divided into certain levels of speech: *Ngoko*, *Madyo*, and *Kromo*. *Kromo Alus*, the highest form of the language has rarely been used. Meanwhile, *Ngoko* is the lowest level of the language, and is addressed to "persons with whom they are familiar and persons who are not of high status" (Wolff & Poedjosoedarmo,

1982, p. 4). According to Effendi (2010), every Javanese speaker can always speak *Ngoko*, most of them can speak *Madyo*, but they don't always speak *Kromo*. Further, he emphasized that most generations in Malang are able to comprehend speech in *Kromo*, but are having difficulties to converse in *Kromo*. Unfortunately, I have to admit that I belong to the same generation; therefore, the text that I translated in this project is written in *Ngoko* Javanese.

3. The Project

According to Ajidarma (2009), we are thinking in different languages depending on certain experiences related to the thoughts. He stated, "experiences are stored along with their languages", which means that he uses different languages to think simply based on the category attached to the thoughts. Further, Ajidarma elaborated that he was thinking in Javanese for daily thoughts, but prefer Indonesian whenever he needed to find a seminar topic. In addition, English came when he wanted to explain technical terms from academic texts. In short, he used English and Indonesian to obtain more sophisticated registers.

On the other hand, Pinker (2007) argued that people's thought are of a different language, it is neither Polish, nor Russian, nor English. Instead, they use the language of thought. "This language of thought probably looks a bit like all these languages, presumably it has symbols for concepts, and arrangements of symbols" (Pinker, 2007). The language of thought can also be referred to as *mentalese*. Compared to any other language, "*mentalese* must be richer in some ways and simpler in others. It must be richer, for example, in that several concept symbols must correspond to a given English word like stool or stud. There must be extra paraphernalia that differentiate logically distinct kinds of concepts, like Ralph's tusks versus tusks in general, ..." (Pinker, 2007, p. 72). Pinker put "stool" and "stud" or "tusks" as examples to his argument, because he speaks English. However, logically, speakers of other languages than English must have also had paraphernalia to differentiate similar concepts in their languages. Further, Pinker (2007) stated, "On the other hand, *mentalese* must be simpler than spoken languages; conversation –specific words and constructions (like *a* and *the*) are absent, and information about pronouncing words, or even ordering them, is unnecessary" (p. 73). Pinker's previous explanation explained why as multilingual speakers we sometimes could not define in what specific language do we think because the process of thinking itself is faster than realized.

In this project, I would like to translate a text of my mother tongue into English. Munday (2008) states that translation is the process of changing a written original text into a source text. In relation to that definition, the personal aim of this project is to allow me to reflect on the process of interacting intensively with a written Javanese text and trying to transform it into another language that is more foreign, English. I believe that the intensive interaction can emphasize the language of thought involved during the translation process, which language is more dominant and which one has been shifted by the others. On the other hand, referring to Pinker's idea of the language of thought, it would also be interesting to notice towards encountering what specific language would I use most of my paraphernalia.

4. The Text

The text is taken from a Javanese literary work anthology, "Javanese Literature Since Independence", by J.J. Ras. It was one of the few numbers of Javanese literary works that I could find in Alden Library of Ohio University, a library well known for its Southeast Asian book collections.

Venuti in Munday (2008) mentioned that translations are often decided by different elements (government, politically motivated institutions, or publishing industries) with their own agenda. For some reasons, Javanese writing product is not popular among most big publishing companies, as they prefer to publish Indonesian-English translations. As mentioned in the above chapter, Javanese is now used in more limited scope than Indonesian. Most native Javanese speakers use the language in conversational level only.

5. The Translation

Srengenge Isih Duwur
The Sun is Still Shining
Written by Ngalimu Anna Salim

Nalika dalane munggah, mula dokar ngarep kuwi dadi rindik. Malah kepara diarani nggramah menek, alon-alon. Ing kahanan	Because the road was inclining upward, the gig in front of me moved at a slow pace. As if it was climbing up a mountain, it went really
--	---

ngono kuwi sepedaku dak-genjot dak cedakake, persis kari watara loro utawa telung meteran.

Dokar kuwi ditunggangi wong lima, nem tekan kusire. Lan sing nunggang ing sisih kiwa iki, sing bayake endog asin, jarite putihan, sandale putih lan slendange abang Lombok, kaya-kaya aku wes nate kenal.

Wong wadon kuwi isih durung mlengak. Isih repot ngetupyus omong karo ngarepe. Nanging, aku wis nggraita manawa wong wadon kuwi Saginah, ledek Miri sing kondang. Lan nalika dalane arep mudun, bel dak unekake, kiraku arep nyelip; nanging Saginah ngonangi lan alok-alok:

"Mas, mas Salim! Awas ya!"

Aku kepeksa ngerem sepeda alon-alon. Lan nalika ing dalam kang lempar, dak jejeri dokar kuwi.

"Saka pasar pa, dik?"

"Allah, mbuwak tilas. Mas Salim anggep saiki, ki."

"Lho piye, ditakoni durung semaur kok wis nganggep-anggepna."

"Mau, saupama ora dak-aruh-aruhi apa panjenengan kersa nyapa."

"Aku pangling," celatuku karo mesem.

"Isih tetep."

"Apane sing isih tetep?"

"Banyak alasan".

Aku mesem maneh. Aku kelingan nalika arep uwal saka deweke, limang taun kepungkur. Lan nganti saprene lan lagi dina iki dalam Jepon sarta desa Kemiri dak-saba maneh. Iki bae Manawa ora bola-bali disurati kangmasku Manawa simbokku tansah lara-laranen lan tansah nakokake aku. Aku putra sing ruju.

"Kapan rawuhe, mas?"

"Wingi sore e, dik."

"Ing endi ta saiki?"

"Ing cedake dik Saginah ngono kok."

...to be continued

slow. On such situation I pedaled my bike closer, only around two or three meters away.

There were five people in the gig, six with the driver. Looking at those people, I recognized a familiar figure sitting on the left bench. She was the one wearing a periwinkle colored blouse, white skirt, white sandals, and a dark-red shawl.

The woman was not still looking back at me. She was still busy talking to the person in front of her. However, I was already sure that she was Saginah, a very famous dancer from Miri. When the road was about to slope down, I rang my bell before passing them. Unfortunately, Saginah turned her head around and yelled at me:

"Mas, mas Salim! Wait up!"

I was forced to push my bike's brake slowly. Only when the road was broader I was riding the bike next to that gig.

"Which market did you go, dik?"

"Ah, I know you stop because you feel guilty. Mas Salim only consider me now."

"Heyy.... I asked you a question and you have not answered it yet.

"If only I had not said hi to you, you wouldn't even talk to me, right?"

"I did not recognize you," I replied with a smile on my face.

"Still..."

"What is still?"

"So many reasons".

Once again, I smiled. I remembered the moment when I was going to leave her, five years ago. And from that day on, I have never traveled down this road from Jepon to Kemiri village. I came here after receiving my brother's letters. He wrote me that my sick mother always asked for me. I was an obedient son.

"When did you arrive, mas?"

"Last evening, dik."

"Where have you been?"

"Me? I am right next to you".

6. Reflection on the Translation Process

The translation process took me longer than what I was expected. Facing a text written in Javanese turned out to be more complicated than I had ever imagined. Some of the problems I faced were related to cultural items. I decided to keep certain words that are cultural specific intact (foreignization). For example the word *mas*, which refers to elder brother; and *dik*, which refers to someone younger. During the translating process, I wanted to show the readers that status and age are very important in Javanese culture. It is uncommon for Javanese to call each other by name only. Using *mas*, *dik*, *mbak*, *pak*, or *bu* is considered essential to show others respects.

Unlike Javanese, English does not have different levels of speech. The text is written in *Ngoko* Javanese, but sometimes the dialogues between its characters are in *Kromo* or *Madyo*. Unfortunately, I

was not able to make that distinction in my translation. It is interesting to note how Saginah (the woman) uses the most polite pronoun in Javanese (*panjenengan*) when she talks to Salim. This refers to the concept of women paying more respect to men. Therefore, I was disappointed for having to use the same pronoun in my translation ("you"), but on the other hand, I was also relieved that I did not have to expose the submissiveness of women.

In the second paragraph of the short story, the author used metaphors when describing the colors of the woman's clothes. The term "*endog asin*" (salty egg) was used to describe periwinkle color and "*abang Lombok*" was used to describe a deep dark red color. I decided not to maintain the metaphor and use the equivalent word with the same meaning in the target language, although they are not nice metaphorical expressions (domestication).

The thought process during the translation was also a bit different as when I was translating from Indonesian into English. I felt that I did two different ways of translation: from Javanese into Indonesian initially, and then Indonesian into English afterwards. This may relate to the fact that I first learned English in school where the medium of instruction in English. I communicated with my English teacher in Indonesian; thus, it explains why I had certain drive to translate Javanese into Indonesian before transforming it into English.

7. Implication in Translation

I learned that translation includes many significant choices. As a translator, we are required to decide which translation strategies we prefer to use in our translations. Domestication and foreignization, for example, are two different approaches that we can use in our translations. There is no right or wrong in translation, but we have to acknowledge that each approach might result in different senses and perceptions.

8. Personal Implication

My oral proficiency in the mother tongue is perceived to be high; meanwhile, my reading comprehension skills in the register of literary texts are lower than I had expected and may be diminishing because of intensive exposure to other languages. Or, probably they are undeveloped because I am not simply familiar with this register.

Most of the challenges I faced in this project were related to my lack of exposure to Javanese written texts. I am afraid that in several years to come my Javanese proficiency would only be limited to spoken proficiency. Therefore, I will train myself by reading more Javanese literature, magazine, and short stories.

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