The LLCER English Class as a Meeting Point of the English, French and Reunionese Creole languages[1]

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Abstract

This teaching note addresses the issue of translating an early 19th century English text into Reunionese Creole. It is based on a linguistic experiment that was carried out in an LLCER[2] English class by 16-year-old pupils. Different translations in Reunionese Creole are analyzed and compared. Their faithfulness to the source text is assessed. The lack of accuracy of the translations stems from a creolization of Mary Shelley's text. By making English, French and Reunionese Creole interact, a translation exercise becomes a communicative activity which enables the pupils to develop various skills which range from translating to speaking while considering Reunionese Creole from a new perspective.

Cette note pédagogique aborde la question de la traduction en créole réunionnais d'un texte anglais datant du début du XIX siècle. Elle prend appui sur une expérience linguistique menée dans une classe de première LLCER. Dans cette note, on analyse et compare les différentes traductions. Leur fidélité envers le texte source est évaluée. Le manque de précision des traductions s'explique par une créolisation du texte de Mary Shelley. En faisant interagir l'anglais, le français et le créole réunionnais, un exercice de traduction devient une activité de communication qui permet aux élèves de développer des compétences qui vont de la traduction à l'expression orale, tout en considérant la langue créole sous un nouveau jour.

French and Reunionese Creole are the two languages that are the most commonly used by Reunion's inhabitants. French is the official language in Reunion, which has been a French *département* since 1946. As for Reunionese Creole, it is the language which is spoken by Reunionese natives, not only at home, but very often in the workplace too. In Reunionese schools, the attitude towards the Creole language has dramatically changed over the last 250 years. For a long time, the French language was considered to be the only way for Reunionese pupils to open their minds to the "human conscience." It was thought that only French could give them access to modern notions. Creole was said to be limited to the field of perception (Fageol 12). In addition, French was regarded as a unifying force that was instrumental in turning individuals into French citizens. However, although it is undeniable that Creole was still held in low esteem by many intellectuals and government officials in the 19th century (Fageol 6), there were some attempts at bringing the French and Creole cultures closer to each other. For instance, at the end of the nineteenth centry, Louis-Emile Héry collected all the Creole fables that he had heard while exploring Reunion Island and meeting its inhabitants in a book entitled *Fables créoles et Explorations de l'intérieur de l'île Bourbon*.

It is generally admitted that the opposition to the use of Creole in Reunionese schools somewhat relented after the First World War. Yet it was not until the 1970s that the fight for the recognition of the status of Reunionese Creole as a fully-fledged language resulted in the affirmation of a Reunionese cultural identity and the promotion of this language (Fageol 17). The first bilingual class in a Reunionese primary school opened in 2003. These bilingual classes aim at developing pupils' metalinguistic skills using their command of Reunionese Creole,

improving the image of both Creole and French languages, and making these two languages interact[3]. It is recommended that Reunionese Creole and French be on an equal footing. In particular, teachers should be careful not to use Creole only in oral activities. Failing to do so could give rise to a feeling of hierarchy and ranking.

It is in this particular linguistic environment that LLCER English is taught as a major in Reunionese high schools. The acronym LLCER stands for *Langues, Littératures et Cultures Étrangères et Régionales* (Foreign and Regional Languages, Literatures and Cultures). It can be chosen as one of their three majors by pupils who are in *Première* (the equivalent in the French education system of grade 11 in the USA). The written exam that they take at the end of the following year in *Terminale* consists in writing a summary based on a set of documents which usually comprises two or three texts and a visual document, and in translating a nine to ten-line passage taken from one of the texts from English into French. Therefore, teaching pupils to translate from one language into another is one of the activities that take place in an LLCER class.

Since all pupils in Reunion Island are theoretically French-speaking and most of them also speak Reunionese Creole, I decided to take into account this specificity in my LLCER class. I asked my pupils to translate an excerpt from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from English into Reunionese Creole. As I noticed that they found this exercise at least as difficult as translating a text written in English into French, I asked myself the following question: what makes such a translation exercise linguistically so challenging and yet potentially enriching? In this paper, I first briefly describe the context in which this experiment took place. Then I analyze my pupils' translations from a linguistic point of view before considering the reasons which led them to creolize the source text. Lastly, I try to assess how beneficial this activity was to my pupils. The theoretical framework in which this experiment is examined mainly consists of Michaël Oustinoff's work on the evolution of the relationship between source and target texts and Jean-Pierre Arsaye's in-depth analysis of the problems linked to translating a text from or into Creole spoken in the French West Indies.

Before analysing my pupils' translations of Mary Shelley's text into Reunionese Creole, it is necessary to describe the context in which this linguistic experiment was carried out. This LLCER class was composed of 22 pupils who were all both French-speaking and Reunionese Creole-speaking. They had been doing translation exercises on a regular basis for only a few months and it was the first time they had been asked to translate an English text into Reunionese Creole. The class was divided into five groups for this activity. Before undertaking this translation exercise, the pupils had studied two excerpts from Mary Shelley's novel and translated the same four-line passage chosen for the experiment under study from English into French. Making sure that they fully understood the situation was essential since, as Michel Ballard (2003) points out, translating is an activity that involves various mental processes such as reading, writing, comparing the source text with the target text, assessing and judging. Two two-hour classes were necessary for my pupils to do the translation in groups and then share their respective translations with the other groups and discuss them. The pupils were asked to speak English throughout the whole experiment. They knew from the beginning that their translations would not be marked.

To begin with, I will examine the most salient features of my pupils' translations. From a lexical point of view, it is worth noticing that some words, such as "fiend", "malicious" or "creator", were translated differently. Indeed, one group and the Creole-speaking English teacher chose to translate "the fiend" by *"*le diab*" whereas two other groups chose to render it into Creole

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[3] Circulaire n° 2001 – 167 du 05/09/2001, Modalités de mise en œuvre de l'enseignement bilingue à parité horaire.

by using *"*le bébête*".[4] By doing so, they, consciously or not, decided to drift away from the French word "*le diable*". The adjective "malicious" was rendered by two different adjectives "*sauvage*" and "*mauvais*" and an idiomatic phrase *"*mi lé en chien*". The adjective "*mauvais*" is closer to the French and thus less typically Creole, at least at first sight, but it enables the translator to preserve the alliteration which appears in the source text ("malicious" + "miserable" > "*mauvais*" + *"*maleré*"). As for the phrase *"*mi lé en chien*", its use clearly reflects the translators' intention to make their rewriting of Shelley's text sound as Creole as possible. This intention can also be detected in the way the substantive "creator" was translated. One group and the Creole-speaking English teacher used the word "*créateur*" while another group resorted to paraphrase and some sort of tautology *"*mon bondié, cet la crée amwen*"), and a last group made a choice that somewhat echoes the previous translation while drifting further away from the source text. The word *"*bondié*", which is commonly used in everyday life in Reunion as well as in Creole sayings, has a more limited semantic value than "creator", which obliged the translators to use the periphrasis *"*cet la crée amwen*". In this periphrasis, the substantive "creator" was turned into a verb. *"*Bondié*" is also an implicit reference to "Prometheus" who appears in the full title of Mary Shelley's novel and to whom Frankenstein is compared. The translation *"*Aou chef, cet la fabrique à mwen*" is also based on tautology and explanation, but it differs from the previous one insofar as the word "*chef*" belongs to a more familiar level of language and is devoid of any religious connotation. It could be seen as too remote from the word it is supposed to translate. However, the periphrasis *"*cet la fabrique à mwen*" enables the translators to compensate for the remoteness of "*chef*" thanks to the use of the verb "*fabrique*", which is quite appropriate to describe the way Frankenstein made his creature by assembling body parts taken from various corpses.

From a stylistic point of view, Mary Shelley chose to make Frankenstein's creature speak the same formal English as its creator. The creature also shows a mastery of rhetoric in its attempt at talking, and then threatening Frankenstein into yielding to his request. For instance, he asks his creator a question both in the negative and in the passive voice which is purely rhetorical. The passive is never used in Reunionese Creole as Danièle Quartier underlines it in *Grammaire pédagogique du créole Réunionnais*. Hence the use of a verb in the active voice in three of the four translations under consideration. Two groups of pupils, as well as the Creole-speaking English teacher chose *"*de moun*" or *"*tout de moun*" as a subject of their sentence in the active voice and a translation of the agent "all mankind" in the source text. As regards the use of tenses, only one group chose to resort to the conditional *"*Mi serais pas fui et détesté par tout de moun*"), which is not as often used in Creole as in French. By contrast, the other groups and the Creole-speaking English teacher conjugated the verbs in the present tense.

Now that the translations have been analyzed and commented upon, it is time to determine whether the pupils endeavoured to be faithful to the source text, or whether they strove to get Mary Shelley's text assimilated into Creole culture at all costs. Put differently, we need to find which of the three ways of translating a text as they were described by Dryden was chosen by my pupils. From Dryden's point of view, those three ways of translating a text are:

First, that of metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another.

[…] The second way is that of paraphrase, or translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense, and that too is to be amplified, but not altered.

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[4] The rules of written Reunionese Creole have now been established and were officially adopted by the Académie de La Réunion in 2020. Both the University of Reunion and the Académie de La Réunion are engaged in the teaching and dissemination of the official orthography. In the present study, the author deliberately chose not to require pupils to use a specific system to facilitate the translation process.

[…] The third way is that of imitation, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty not only to vary the words and sense, but to forsake them as he sees occasion; and taking only some general hint from the original, to run division on the ground-work as he pleases. (cited in Oustinoff 7-8)

After reading the pupils' translations, it appears that no group chose to follow the first way of rendering a text from one language into another by translating it word by word. This is not surprising as no word in a given language can be said to have a perfect equivalent in another language. In that respect, Ballard (2003) insists on the fact that all languages can be said to be imperfect because they are numerous and they differ from one another. The implication is that all translations are bound to be imperfect for the very reason that they are not, and cannot be the original.

What's more, it must be kept in mind that English as a language has a much longer history than Reunionese Creole and that English literature is much older, and therefore richer, than Reunionese literature in Creole. Consequently, it cannot be denied that anyone trying to translate a text written in what Arsaye (2004) calls a "prestigious language" such as French, English or German into Reunionese Creole is at a disadvantage. For all its vitality, Reunionese Creole does not have the same range of language registers as those prestigious languages. There seems to be no formal Creole since Reunionese Creole was only spoken until recently. Actually, the only formal Creole that is spoken on the island is a Frenchified sort of Creole which could be described as French interspersed with a few Creole words. In addition, Reunionese Creole does not have the same lexical variety as English or French.

In the example under scrutiny, the distance that separates the source text from the target text is of a nature which is both synchronic and diachronic. Not only does Reunionese Creole lack the variety of language registers that an English speaker has at their disposal, but two centuries also separate Mary Shelley from the pupils who participated in this experiment. Thus, being faithful to the source text and its author, would have meant asking oneself what kind of Creole a learned Reunionese young woman who lived in the early 19th century spoke. Given the status of Creole in Reunionese society at the time, it is very unlikely that such a young woman had ever existed. In the face of these constraints, my pupils undeniably took some liberty with Mary Shelley's text and focused more on the sense of the text than on the words this sense stems from. Nevertheless, their efforts to stick to the source text by trying to find phrases in Reunionese Creole equivalent to Shelley's words are visible. For instance, they rendered the phrase "tear to pieces" into Creole by using phrases such as *"*détruire en ti bout*", *"*casse par bout*", *"*crase*" or *"*kass comme ti bois*". As Dryden put it, they kept the author in view, but they did not strictly follow her words. It is particularly true for one group who seems to have delighted in straying away from the text. We mentioned their translation of "malicious" by *"*mi lé en chien*". Likewise, they translated "[…] and instead of threatening, I am content to reason with you" by *"*Au lieu de batte pression sur ou, ma préfère kose ek ou*". This group's translation clearly verges on what Dryden refers to as "imitation". It could be criticized for failing to reflect the portentous tone of Frankenstein's creature's message in which he warns his creator against the consequences of not taking into consideration his request. The discrepancy between the language register in the source text and that in the target text makes the latter almost sound like a parody of the former. Bearing in mind the fact that, as Gérard Genette (1985) explains it, etymologically speaking, parody comes from *ôdè*, which means "song", and *para*, which means "alongside", this group could be reproached for having sung out of tune while translating this text.

The way they translated this passage into Reunionese Creole calls to mind the approach to translation which prevailed until the end of the 18th century. Indeed, Oustinoff (2003 and 2006) explains that for a long time, translating a text into one's own language had mostly amounted to domesticating what sounded exotic, making it sound familiar to readers. This process aimed

at the assimilation of what was foreign, no matter how detrimental it could be to the source text by failing to reflect its specificities. Things changed with Wilhem von Humboldt who contended that classical Antiquity had been brought into German culture thanks to translation and that translated texts helped to enrich it despite a possible foreignization of German. In Humboldt's view, priority should be given to the source language whereas my pupils clearly gave priority to the target language in their translations. They aimed at making Mary Shelley's text theirs by turning into a Creole text.

Evaluating this translation exercise requires to take into account the fact that before translating this passage into Creole, the pupils had translated it into French. Even if they were asked not to look at their French translation, some of them could not help doing it. When asked why they had felt the need to do so, they explained they found it easier, as if French had become a go-between, a means of communication between English and Reunionese Creole. Even for the pupils who respected the instructions, the French translation acted as a filter between the English text and its translation into Creole. Using Genette's categorization of texts (1985), the pupils' translation into French can be described as the first hypertext that derives from Mary Shelley's text, their translation into Creole being the second one. The pupils who translated their own French translation into Creole translated a text which they had themselves written and which had consequently become some sort of "substitute" hypotext. Thus, their translations became "self-translations", a word used by Oustinoff (2006) to refer to Beckett's or Nabokov's own translations of their respective plays or novels into French or English.

This translation exercise gave my pupils the opportunity to compare and discuss their respective translations into Creole. The members of each group had to justify their choices in English. Thus, this translation exercise turned into a communicative activity. The need to interact with others was genuine and this activity enabled them to improve their speaking and social skills. Even the pupils who were usually unwilling to speak in front of the others managed to overcome their reluctance. As for the most enthusiastic among them, they were often those who tended the most to drift away from the source text. They obviously relished making Frankenstein's creature speak like a 21st century Reunionese adolescent.

That said, the enjoyment the pupils got from this unusual activity should not overshadow the other benefits that were derived from it. It was maybe the first time they had been given the opportunity to think about the true meaning of some words and phrases in Creole. They did not always agree with each other on their meaning, or on the context in which these words could be used. This activity also highlighted the possible interferences between French and Reunionese Creole and the necessity to be able to tell one from the other. Agreeing on the spelling of words in Creole was not always easy. No spelling standard was imposed on the pupils. Indeed, Arsaye (2004) warns his readers against the danger of setting too many rules and imposing too many standards when turning a language which is mostly spoken into a written language.

Eventually, as this activity was a translation exercise, it was necessary to determine whether it helped the pupils to become better translators. What is certain is that their translation skills did not improve overnight. However, this experiment raised their awareness about the distance between English and Reunionese Creole. They realized how tricky rendering a text written in what Antoine Berman (1985) calls a *koiné* into a younger language could be. They were also sensitized to finding ways to compensate for the differences that might exist between these languages. Their greatest achievement was probably to act as the ferrymen and ferrywomen whom Oustinoff (2006) alludes to when he explains that the German word for "translate" (*übersetzen*) originally refers to this idea of taking or ferrying across, as they managed to make a written message cross the river which separates two, if not three, different linguistic systems.

Excerpt taken from Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* and translated into Reunionese Creole

'You are in the wrong,' replied the fiend; 'and instead of threatening, I am content to reason with you. I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, my creator, would tear me to pieces and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity a man more than he pities me?'

Group 1

*'*Ou na tort,' le diab la dit amwen; 'et au lieu de menace aou, ma préfère koz ek ou. Mi lé sauvage paske mi lé maleré. Eske de moun y fui pas à mwen, eske de moun y aime pas mwen? Aou, mon créateur, ou veut détruire à mwen en ti boute pou gagner. Ou rappelle aou de ça et dit à mwen poukwé mi devrais avoir pitié d'un moun que na point pitié de mwen?'*

Group 2

*'*Ou na tort, la réponde le bébête; 'au lieu de menace aou, mi contente à mwen raisonne ek ou. Mi lé mauvais paske mi lé maleré. Mi serais pas fui et détesté par toute de moun? Aou, mon bondié, cet la crée à mwen, Ou veut casse a mwen par bout et fait le coq. Rappelle aou bien de ça et dis à mwen à koze mi devrais avoir pitié d'un boug plus que li na pitié de mwen?'*

Group 3

*'*Ou na tort,' le bébête la dit à mwen; ' Au lieu de batte pression sur ou, ma préfère koz ek ou. Mi lé en chien ek ou paske mi lé maleré. Na point tout de moun i fui à mwen et i déteste à mwen? Aou chef, cet la fabrique à mwen, ou lé capab crase à mwen et fais l'intéressant après. Rappelle aou de ça et dis à mwen poukwé mi devrais avoir pitié d'un moun li prend pas pitié de mwen?'*

(excerpt translated by a Creole-speaking English teacher)

*'*mi Ou la pas compris à moin,' la dit le diab. 'Mi veux pas menace a ou. Çak mi veux, c'est réfléchi un peu ek ou. Moin lé sauvage paske moin lé malheureux. Ou vois pas tout do moun i koze pas ek moin, i aime pas moin? A ou, mon créateur, ou gaign kass à moin comme ti bois et gaign la gloire ek ça. Oublie pas ça et dis à moin à koz i faut moin na na plus pitié pour un moun que li na na pitié pour moin?'*

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