



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

Translating Coetzee: a panel discussion

Michael Hollington

With Cristobal Perez Barra (Chile), Peter Bergsma (The Netherlands), Reinhild Böhnke (Germany), Miguel Temprano Garcia (Spain) and Jinghui Wang (China).

It was my privilege to be asked to chair a panel on translating J.M. Coetzee at the very end of the 'Reading Coetzee's Women' Conference held at the Monash Campus in Prato, Italy from 27 to 29 September 2016, and now, to present an account of that occasion which contains versions, either of the papers presented at the meeting itself by three of the four invited participants who were able to attend, or submitted to me by two others who could not.¹

The text of the contributions has been very lightly edited by me on the few occasions where it seemed this might help to convey the writer's meaning with maximum clarity in idiomatic contemporary English, and then submitted to the author for approval. In the same way a draft of the following essay as a whole has been submitted to all the participants for comment or suggested amendment. The result, I hope, is that this essay can be considered in large measure as collaborative work – or, indeed, a conversation.

Inevitably, the range of languages covered here is very partial, and indeed, a matter of chance. Before the conference began we were worried that, as a result of participants accepting and then finding themselves forced to withdraw and send in messages to be read on their behalf, real live translators would be rather thin on the ground, reduced to stalwart representatives from Holland and Italy. But we were in luck, discovering as conference delegates arrived that among them were two more Coetzee translators. Furthermore, these were of special interest: representing China and South America respectively, they would enable us to move out beyond the Eurocentric focus originally envisaged. Since both of them kindly agreed to take part at very short notice, we could go a little further than we had hoped, offering a glimpse of the world reception of a writer who, unquestionably, already belongs in his lifetime to Goethean Weltliteratur.

¹ Franca Cavagnola's substantial essay "In every story there is a silence": Translating Coetzee's female narrators into Italian' was also presented as part of the conference panel. However, it is to be published separately in a special issue of [Australian Literary Studies](#) (forthcoming: 2018)

Still, it seems appropriate to begin with languages in which Coetzee himself is fluent, and thus able (and willing) to offer detailed advice to his translators.

Peter Bergsma from The Netherlands, along with Reinhild Böhnke from Germany and Franca Cavagnoli of Italy, can be classified among the doyens of Coetzee translation into any language: as he tells us, he has translated 18 of his books, which nowadays apparently appear in Dutch even before their publication in English! He acknowledges frequent recourse to Coetzee for clarification and comment.

Three things, I think, stand out from Bergsma's entertaining and instructive account of his remarkable labours. Firstly, he underlines Coetzee's extraordinary degree of awareness of translation issues in his work – what aspects of it contain relatively few problems for the translator, perhaps, and what aspects of it present difficulty. Bergsma is the first, and perhaps the most authoritative of the translators presented here in drawing a distinction between the surface lucidity and precision of Coetzee's prose and the very real difficulties and complexities that lie not very far beneath its surface. Virtually everyone included here comments in some shape or form on this dichotomy.

Secondly, Bergsma describes in some detail how he practises in translating Coetzee a policy of 'scrupulous meanness' (the phrase is from Joyce), in order to convey the essential aesthetic principle of 'multum in parvo' that informs the writer's work. In doing so – in pointing out that Dutch, in common with most European languages, is more rhetorical than English (though less markedly so than, say, French) – he explores once more Walter Benjamin's dictum that the translator must to some extent 'make strange' his own language in order to convey the original.

And finally he has some interesting things to say about the problems of translating the second person pronoun. In English (except among Quakers and Yorkshire folk) we have lost 'thee' and retain only 'you'; in most European languages there are complex distinctions between intimate and formal methods of address, differing quite markedly from one language and country to another. Once again, France is probably top of the table in terms of the multiplicity of nuance involved, but Dutch, Bergsma shows, also has its complexities: one form of address may appear appropriate in one context but not in another. He gives two instances where he felt compelled to change from formal to intimate second person pronoun, but – significantly enough – only after consulting with the author himself, whose inwardness with the language enabled him to grasp the issues involved in Dutch and approve of the changes.

Here is what Bergsma had to say at the meeting in Prato:

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'd like to start with a warning: my talk here today will have little or nothing to do with 'gender', because although 'gender' may be a problem for readers and academics doing literary research, it generally doesn't present a translator with difficulties, except in some rare cases, such as the English word 'friend', that may apply to both a male and a female friend, whereas the Dutch has two different words for the two genders. Think of

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the adolescent girl telling her parents that she will spend the night with a friend, without revealing that this friend is not a girl but a boy. That might be difficult for a Dutch translator. But I have never encountered such a girl in Coetzee's works. Whatever he does with gender, has no consequences for the translator, at least not for me. In the novel *Foe*, for instance, when Susan Barton tells Daniel Foe: 'Now I pin my hair up and wear a coat at all times, hoping to pass for a man,' and then goes on to gradually cross the dividing line between the genders, that is just as easy to do in my mother tongue, Dutch, as it is in English.

No gender problems for the translator, then, at least not for me. But what kind of problems do you encounter translating Coetzee? In the essay 'On Being Translated' he himself has this to say about it:

Sentence by sentence, my prose is generally lucid, in the sense that the syntactic relations among words, and the logical force of constructions, are as clear as I can make them. On the other hand, I sometimes use words with the full freight of their history behind them, and that freight is not easily carried across to another language. My English does not happen to be embedded in any particular sociolinguistic landscape, which relieves the translator of one vexatious burden; on the other hand, I do tend to be allusive, and not always to signal the presence of allusion.

Dialogue comes with its own set of problems, particularly when it is very informal and incorporates regional usages, contemporary fashions and allusions, or slang. My dialogue is rarely of this kind. For the most part its character is formal, even if its rhythms are more abrupt than the rhythms of narrative prose. So hitting the right register ought not to be a problem for the translator.²

After having translated 18 books by John Coetzee – the first, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in 1983 – I can only concur with his analysis. But I must add that I am fortunate in that Coetzee speaks Dutch. From that very first book he has read my translations prior to publication and I have been able to ask him questions. So if I turn out to be insufficiently aware of the 'full freight of history' or overlook or misinterpret certain 'allusions', he is the first to point it out.

Having said this, you might start to think that translating Coetzee is easy, at least for a Dutch translator. That is not the case at all. A novel consists, after all, not just of the 'full freight of history' and 'allusions'; there is also such a thing as style. And there is – as you well know – something special about Coetzee's style. In his book *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, David Attwell describes it like this:

² J.M. Coetzee, 'Roads to Translation', *Meanjin*, Special Issue on Translation: Tongues: Translation: Only Connect, 64.4 (2005) 141-51; 143.

Coetzee's English is rather like his mathematics; or, in another exaggerated comparison, it is something like what French became to Samuel Beckett. The peculiarity in Coetzee's case is that although he had been born into English (unlike Beckett whose French was acquired), its naturalness was gradually lost. Coetzee's is therefore an English shorn of the identity markers of Englishness.³

Indeed, Attwell writes, 'Coetzee has speculated that he might not have a mother tongue.'⁴

And that's not something you can just ignore as a translator. What David Attwell calls rather 'mathematical English' is so restrained and frugal that a translator has to do his or her utmost to maintain its peerless efficiency. What it comes down to is that you mustn't use a single superfluous word in the translation. In general people assume that Dutch translations will use around ten percent more words than the English original, because of the structures of the two languages. But in the case of John Coetzee, I think that kind of expansion would be verging on criminal. For a number of years now his books have first appeared in Dutch, six weeks before being released in English and, as a result, I have had the privilege of receiving his manuscripts in Microsoft Word, so I can see exactly how many words there are in the original English. In general I try not to exceed that number by more than two or three per cent. At first that required a process of endless cutting and reconstruction, nowadays I translate much more with that conciseness in mind and have – I hope – developed a variety of Dutch that does justice to Coetzee's English.

But besides the style there is another problem that I encounter while translating Coetzee – and many other English-language authors as well – the 'formal and informal you'. Although the English forms 'thou' and 'thee' have long fallen into disuse, translators into languages that do still make a distinction between formal and informal pronouns – French, German, Spanish, and Dutch too – are constantly required to choose. When making this choice, two things are crucial. First, the character of the author. Is he or she someone who tends towards formality or informality? I am quite confident in my belief that John Coetzee has a tendency to formality. In fact, I have already quoted him about his own dialogue: 'For the most part the character is formal.' The second consideration is the rules of your own language. Dutch, for instance, is less formal than French or German, but more formal than Spanish. In Dutch you wouldn't start out by addressing a stranger over the age of 25 as 'jij', the informal 'you', but that can change in the space of ten minutes. In French and German, on the other hand, one sticks to formal terms of address for much longer.

I'll give two examples that caused me some problems: the first is from the opening chapter of *The Childhood of Jesus*. When Simón arrives at the 'Centro de Reubicación de Novilla' with little David, he finds 'a young woman, who greets him with a smile' behind the desk. In Dutch it is to be expected that Simón, in this situation, will address the young

³ David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (Melbourne: Text, 2014) 41.

⁴ Attwell 35.

woman, who is called Ana, formally as 'u'. Simón and Ana are in regular contact in Chapters 2 and 3, for instance when Ana arranges temporary accommodation for Simón and David, and in these circumstances too it is only normal for Ana and Simón to address each other as 'u'. But then, in Chapter 4, Ana invites Simón and David to join her for a picnic in the park, an event that soon leads to an argumentative atmosphere with sexual undertones in which Simón, who clearly finds Ana attractive – despite realising that she is unattainable for him – addresses Ana by her first name for the first time: 'Are you one of those nuns, Ana, who have left the convent behind to live in the world? To take on jobs that no one else wants to do – in jails and orphanages and asylums? In refugee reception centres?'⁵ As it would be completely incongruous to retain the formal 'u' here in Dutch, I had no choice but to switch – more or less abruptly – to the informal 'jij'.

My second example is from the recently published *Schooldays of Jesus* and involves the relationship between Simón and the museum attendant Dmitri. Both begin by addressing each other with the formal 'u', but then, in Chapter 11, an enraged Simón confronts Dmitri in the museum and snaps at him:

David tells me that you have been inviting children from the Academy into your room. He also tells me you have been showing him pictures of naked women. If this is true, I want you to put a stop to it at once. Otherwise there will be serious consequences for you, which I don't need to spell out. Do you understand me?⁶

Even if Simón and Dmitri have systematically addressed each other formally in the preceding chapters, it would be ridiculous in Dutch to maintain that in this conversation, so here too I needed to change abruptly from the formal 'u' to the informal 'jij'.

Again, I have the great advantage that John Coetzee knows Dutch and always reads my final version so that in both of these cases – and in many other similar instances in his other books – I was able to ask his advice. Fortunately he agreed with my decisions and – equally fortunately – no Dutch reviewers have taken exception.

To conclude, I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to this highly instructive congress and giving me the opportunity to speak here today, even though I have barely touched upon the subject of the conference, 'gender'. And I would like especially to thank John Coetzee and his Dutch publisher, Cossee, for the faith they have shown in me as a translator for the last 33 and 15 years respectively.

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⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (Melbourne: Text, 2013) 39.

⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (Melbourne: Text, 2016) 121.

The Challenge of Translating J.M. Coetzee – A short contribution to the conference in Prato by one of Coetzee’s female translators.

Reinhild Böhnke

Reinhild Böhnke is another seasoned Coetzee translator enjoying close personal links with the author. She and her family are prominent members of the Leipzig intelligentsia, with a special link to Coetzee, as she explains, through a mutual love of Bach, which has now and again drawn the novelist to the annual Bach festival in Leipzig (no-one who has read *The Schooldays of Jesus* in particular can doubt that Bach is a major presence in Coetzee’s work). Her husband Gunter is a noted writer and performer in Leipzig and Saxony: he and their son Dietmar have themselves rendered valuable service to literature in English through the discovery and publication of a cache of letters from Dickens to his Leipzig publisher Tauchnitz. The extent of Coetzee’s faith in her work is his unbroken insistence that she be entrusted with the task of translating him at a time when by and large most translators trained in the GDR have found themselves neglected in favour of their West German counterparts, who benefit from closer links to the major publishing houses.

Having initially hoped to attend the conference with her husband, Reinhild eventually found herself compelled to withdraw because of the pressure of other work. But she sent in the following text, which I read on her behalf:

In the first letter John Coetzee wrote to me (in 1998 it was not unusual to write letters) he mentioned J.S. Bach in connection with my home town Leipzig. And I reacted with my opinion: ‘B-A-C-H ist Anfang und Ende aller Musik’ (‘Bach is the beginning and end of all music’). My father having been a vicar at St. Thomas’ Church in Leipzig, I may say that I grew up with Bach’s music. And later the connection got even stronger, because my younger son was a member of the famous ‘Thomanerchor’. Thus the genius of Johann Sebastian hovered over our cooperation from the beginning.

The ‘cooperation’ was of course rather one-sided: John offered generously to read my translations before publication and give useful advice. And he answered all my queries promptly, which has been inestimable. It was a lucky coincidence that I got to know some of Coetzee’s novels before I got the chance to translate his texts. Up to 1989 his books were not available in my part of Germany, but one of our English friends brought *Life & Times of Michael K*, *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* with him and I was fascinated by this literary voice from South Africa.

Coetzee’s spare prose and steely intelligence, his ‘pregnant dialogue and analytical brilliance’ (Swedish Academy for the Nobel Prize) have often been praised. I think it was an advantage that my first Coetzee translation was *Boyhood* – ‘a text without ado but complex below the surface’ (as I wrote to him). I have often been asked if it is difficult to translate Coetzee’s texts – and I must say, it has always been a pleasure to translate such lucid texts and to probe for things below the surface and to discover allusions. The quest

for the precise word or phrase has often been a challenge and a cause of anguish, if it couldn't be found. The complexity of 'disgrace', for example, is not rendered in 'Schande', since 'grace' – 'Gnade' – is not incorporated.

It has also been a challenge to find the exact tone to convey the lightly ironic flavour of later texts (beginning with *Youth*). Some texts which came as a surprise to me because of their unusual expressive style ('Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos', 'He and His Man') provoked the translator to become even more creative.

Some of the heroes in Coetzee's literary cosmos (Cervantes, Wordsworth, Dostoevsky) belong to familiar terrain. But time and again, Coetzee's texts led me to discover authors hitherto unknown to me (e.g. W.G. Sebald). Coetzee's familiarity with philosophical concepts induced me to study philosophers from Plato to Thomas Nagel, which has been quite a study project.

I also want to mention that I felt privileged to experience closely experiments with the genre of the novel, such as essayistic forms penetrating into the novel. And in *Diary of a Bad Year* the narrative element fighting its way back into the novel from below.

Some of Coetzee's characters had the potential to irritate the reader/translator – I am thinking of Elizabeth Costello above others. The first thought often was: *Not her again*
...

But after all, this irritation leads to prolonged reflection on certain topics and has a productive outcome. And on the whole I have to confess that Coetzee's texts tend to linger and keep growing in my thoughts, which is quite an achievement.

It will be seen that there are a number of echoes of Peter Bergsma here. But Böhnke points to some other issues that are of importance for the Coetzee translator, and that crop up in the remarks of other participants. The first of these is the near-impossibility of finding exact equivalents in the target language for puns and the like, words in the original that convey two or more meanings at once. Her word for not being able to find an equivalent in German for 'Disgrace' in English is 'anguish': both Franca Cavagnoli and Jinghui Wang refer to the translator's 'trauma', the latter giving a fascinating account of her attempts to find a way of conveying a degree of double meaning in Chinese.

She also raises the question of irony in Coetzee's later work, and the difficulties it presents for the translator. There are obvious pitfalls on every side – the translator may do it in a heavy-handed way, for instance, when the original is subtle and unobtrusive, or fail to render it altogether (the relatively lukewarm reception of Jane Austen outside the English-speaking world, for instance, may in part have to do with the problem her essential ironic indirection poses for translators). But Böhnke puts on display her aptitude for the task in her witty remarks on Elisabeth Costello. I know of at least two devotees of Coetzee, besides Böhnke and myself, whose estimate of this particular character in his work lies well this side of idolatry.

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'A Watery Content': some observations about translating The Childhood of Jesus by its translator into Spanish.

Miguel Temprano García.

I come next to **Miguel Temprano Garcia**, a Spanish translator who was also unable to attend the conference. Although he has only translated one novel by Coetzee into Spanish, *The Childhood of Jesus*, he too is a thoroughly prolific and experienced translator who has produced excellent versions in Spanish of very varied literary classics in English. I first met him in Uruguay at a conference on W.H. Hudson's masterpiece *The Purple Land*, which he was then busy translating. His literary background pedigree is impeccable (his father a Professor of Literature expert on the important Spanish Modernist Ramon Gomez de la Serna), his linguistic prowess hardly less remarkable. Quite how he manages to combine his teaching at a school in Majorca whilst producing a steady stream of translations of demanding works (*Martin Chuzzlewit* and Whitman's recently discovered *The Adventures of Jack Engle*, for instance, both within the past year) I don't know.

As you will see in what follows, Temprano Garcia takes off from the same perception of surface clarity and hidden difficulty as noted by both Bergsma and Böhnke, taking this a little further perhaps in the direction of paradox by suggesting that translating supposedly 'easy' writing is harder than translating difficulty.

First of all, I would like to apologise for not having been able to attend this conference as I should have liked. Reinhild Böhnke, the German translator of several novels by John Coetzee, has described the style of one of his books as 'without ado but complex below the surface'. That is exactly the way I felt when I started translating *The Childhood of Jesus*: apparently it was going to be an 'easy' translation, the elegant sentences flowed and offered no apparent problems, and the story, although it might look a bit strange at times, seemed also quite clear.

Of course, there is nothing I am more afraid than an 'easy' translation. Experience has taught me that in the end it is much more easy to translate an elaborate and even intricate style than the work of those authors with a so-called 'simple' style. I was to find very soon that this was precisely the case. One of the obvious difficulties of this particular work was that it is written in English, takes place in a Spanish-speaking country, but the characters don't speak English or Spanish, so sometimes it would be tricky to make it clear which language the characters were speaking in a way that didn't sound strange to the Spanish reader. But I had found similar problems in other novels before, and I had, more or less, coped with it.

What I wasn't so prepared for were the subtle nuances hidden in an apparently crystal-clear text. I was lucky because Professor Coetzee, despite his fame of being a reclusive writer, is not one of those authors who hide behind their literary agent or refuse to cooperate with the translator and he also speaks Spanish and that proved to be really helpful.

When I wrote to him to ask a couple of things that had come to my attention, he answered by pointing out several things that were not so evident or easy to translate as I had thought. For instance, some of the characters speak of ‘washing clean of old ties’ and as there is not an exact translation for that in Spanish, I had translated it as ‘desembarazarse de los viejos vínculos’, which means something like ‘getting rid of old ties’. But when I asked Professor Coetzee, he insisted on my finding a verb with a ‘watery content’, to convey the idea that the two protagonists had crossed a sea or a river of forgetting. Finally, after some fruitful discussion, we decided to change ‘ties’ to ‘memories,’ for in Spanish you can be washed clean of your memories but not of your ties! This sort of nuance lay hidden everywhere in the text, making the translation I had thought so easy at the beginning similar to a minefield, although, with Professor Coetzee’s help, I hope I was able to deactivate most of the mines.

Böhnke also refers to the ‘challenge and anguish of the quest for the precise word or phrase’, and again her remarks carry echoes for the Spanish translator (the translator of *Disgrace* into Spanish, for instance, had a very similar problem, because ‘Desgracia’ is a synonym of ‘misfortune’ and doesn’t carry the meaning of ‘dishonour’ or ‘shame’). I also found it difficult to find *le mot juste* in *The Childhood of Jesus*, a book that is so enigmatic and so full of linguistic and philosophical questions. It was something of a relief, however, to find that I shared this problem with the author: when I pointed out a very slight inconsistency in the text, the English version had already been published and he told me to translate the passage as it stood, adding that he ‘would have to live with the contradiction the rest of his days’.

I have the feeling that many critics, in Spain as elsewhere, took the view that this novel is ‘minor’ Coetzee. The reason for this, I think, is that most of them didn’t notice the subtlety of nuance to which I have referred, which, in my opinion, makes *The Childhood of Jesus* a novel as Coetzeean as any of his other books. Sorry again for not having been able to attend the conference, which I am sure has been a great success.

What particularly interests me here is how Temprano Garcia describes the process of translation, with the aid of the author’s own comments, as a process of interpretation and discovery which involves a thoroughly active critical awareness. He is saying something simple but vital – that the translator can determine the way a writer is seen by the audience for whom he writes. To be alive to the riches of the text he works on is to enhance its capacity to reach new readers; to be insensitive to these is to pass up that opportunity.

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Translating J.M. Coetzee in South America: In Search of a Transatlantic Spanish.

Cristobal Perez Barra.

It is of course logical to follow consideration of Miguel Temprano Garcia’s work with discussion of that of **Cristobal Perez Barra**, the first of our serendipitously unearthed

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impromptu performers at the translation panel. This is especially so since he himself foregrounds, as we shall see, the question of translating Coetzee into different varieties of Spanish:

English and Spanish have in common the fact of being both global and transcontinental languages (although this has to be immediately qualified, for after 1973 the status of the Spanish language ceased to be official in the Philippines, meaning that today the language is still transcontinental, but, unlike English, only transatlantic). But then again, this transatlantic nature also has to be qualified, for the Spanish language is governed by the Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española, of which the Real Academia de la Lengua Española and the 22 national academies are members. Together, they publish the *Diccionario*, the *Gramática* and the *Ortografía*. That is to say, if we allowed ourselves to play a Borgesian game and to do away with colloquialisms, a short story by a writer in Tierra del Fuego and in Catalonia could be written with identical words placed in identical order – which would not be the case if we took writers from, say, Maryland and Suffolk, and the English language, as an example.

John Coetzee has said in interviews that he aims for a linguistically neutral English: his writing is not distinctively from South Africa or from England, from the United States or from Australia. Aiming to replicate this peculiarity I try to choose wherever possible words and constructions that would be instantly recognisable to Spanish speakers both in Spain and America (and by 'America' I mean the word used to express the cultural and linguistic community that existed between the Río Grande and Tierra del Fuego at the time of Imperial Spain). As I say, the institutional standardisation of the Spanish language enables me to do this.

On the other hand, so that the narrative discourse shall not be interrupted, I keep footnotes to a minimum, even if the profusion of French expressions and references to other writers may well justify the inclusion of many more. Therefore, I only insert those I deem absolutely necessary for the adequate understanding of the text.

There is one aspect of my translation that I knew from the beginning is bound to remain unsolved. When John Coetzee inserts expressions in Spanish into his English original the reader is filled with a feeling of eeriness, of otherness, of a time out of mind, of which the regrettable but inevitable footnote reading 'En español en el original' can only give a pale reflection. In this, as well as in many other matters, the translator is bound to betray the author (the *traduttore* is of course a *traditore*) and also to fail. However, this should not be disheartening to the practitioners of this difficult, often invisible but noble task. As Samuel Beckett said in *Worstward Ho*: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better'.

Once more, Perez Barra explores the translator's necessity of 'making strange', this time in a particularly interesting context. Instead of using the idiomatic colloquialisms of everyday Latin American Spanish – the language that would come naturally to him and his readers – he employs a kind of Spanish equivalent of BBC English, an international standard version of

the language designed to provide an equivalent for Coetzee's particular range of stylistic effects.

I am impressed, not only by the penetrating grasp here of the cardinal issue of selecting the right linguistic register into which to translate a given text (particularly important, perhaps, in the case of languages where some version of the French Academy works to establish and police correct usage), but by the memorable Beckett quotation with which Barra concludes, providing us with what is perhaps the best brief description of the 'splendours and miseries' of the translator's role in the texts assembled here. And Perez Barra can presumably be enlisted among Elisabeth Costello's admirers, for his Coetzee translations thus far consist of versions of her lectures.

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The Trauma of Translating the Title of Coetzee's Novel Foe into Chinese.

Jinghui Wang

Our second miraculous find at the conference itself was **Jinghui Wang** of Tsinghua University in Beijing, China. At very short notice she provided us with the following precious contribution, delivered with inimitable humour and verve:

Comparatively speaking, Coetzee's works are easy to translate, as his diction in the novels is always concise and clear, but this doesn't mean that there is no challenge in translating them. The particular challenge I would like to present to you might even be called a trauma, even if it can be seen to have positive as well as negative aspects.

In *Foe*, the title itself functions as a pun. On the one hand, Foe, as a proper name, is associated with the writer of Robinson Crusoe: Daniel Defoe. History has it that the writer's original name was Daniel Foe, probably born in Fore Street in the parish of St. Giles Cripplegate, London. He later added the aristocratic-sounding 'De' to his name, claiming himself as a descendent of the family of De Beau Faux. So, seen from this perspective, Coetzee makes use of 'Foe' to deconstruct 'Defoe', and thus announces his intention of probing into the past in a new, more faithful way, a strategy that echoes his giving voice to the female character Susan, the 'real' story teller of Robinson Crusoe's story. On the other hand, 'foe', as a general noun, depicts the adversarial relationship between any number of binary pairs: writer and reader, master and servant, male and female, or even truth and fiction. Well, in English, the one word 'foe' can contain all these meanings.

However, in Chinese the two sets of meanings of 'Foe' are expressed in two entirely different words. One is '福', the character left after the 'De' of 'Defoe' is taken off; and the other is '敌人', which means 'enemy'. So to translate the title into Chinese, I had to choose one or the other. I had to admit that this involved a kind of trauma. To choose one meaning means that the other meaning is lost forever. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to

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compare the effect of it to the trauma suffered by Sophie in Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, when she is forced to choose which of her two children to spare from the gas chamber in the concentration camp, either her boy or her girl.

Faced with such a trauma, I thought of drawing on a particular aspect of Chinese culture to add something more to the translation of this title – a kind of subliminal element that would enrich the title to make up for the perpetual loss of its original meaning in English. In choosing the title '福', it turns out that besides the meaning of one's name, this character also means 'luck'. And in Chinese tradition, every new year, we stick a piece of red paper outside the door, on which there is the Chinese character 'luck' (福) placed upside down, symbolising 'the coming of good luck' (upside down it is pronounced 'dao', phonogram of 'coming'). When visiting Australia, I was able to discuss my idea with J.M. Coetzee himself, and he also thought it was a good idea.

So I suggested to the Chinese publisher of the book *Foe*, that if the Chinese title was printed in this way, it would provide a parallel in its particular way to the polysemous nature of the original title. The Chinese publisher of this book liked my idea, but didn't think it workable, for it would apparently fall afoul of the official regulations of the Chinese publishing bureau, making the book difficult or perhaps impossible to catalogue. Her response was totally understandable: it was her job to ensure, not only that the translation was truthful to the original version, but that it could in fact be published. So I suggested that they might consider using that upside down character of 'luck' on the book cover as a background to the title. She said they would consider this, but in fact the final version of the Chinese *Foe* does not have the 'Luck upside down' character, because the book belongs to a series with a standard cover.

Anyway, this process – the trauma I experienced and have shared with you – will be familiar to translators all over the world. Translation is a losing game: the moment one starts to translate, one starts to lose meaning, as I did with the title of *Foe*. But perhaps at the very moment when double meaning has to become single meaning, some new aspect of the meaning of the text is revealed.

Here, of course, we encounter difficulties of a quite different kind and on a quite different scale from any mentioned heretofore. But in many ways the principle illuminated in Wang's wonderful vivid, hyperbolic account is the same as that faced by translators into European languages. That is to say, the translator cannot hope to preserve every feature of the original text, but must constantly attempt in some way to compensate for what is lost by insinuating it elsewhere in a different form. Here Wang had recourse (or attempted to have recourse, since her brainwave ultimately foundered on issues of publishing standardisation in China) to the powerful visual significances that the Chinese written character may convey. Translators using other scripts may lack this option, but they too perpetually seek to atone for the inevitable loss of meaning over which the translator presides.

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Translating Coetzee. Michael Hollington.
Writers in Conversation Vol. 5 no. 1, February 2018.
journals.flinders.edu.au

The most extended and ambitious of the contributions to this conversation will be published separately. **Franca Cavagnoli** reflects not only on the particular question of how to translate Coetzee but also on many of the general issues concerning the translator's impossible task that have arisen here. And, at the same time, this is the only contribution that gives detailed thought to gender issues in translated texts. Cavagnoli is a very experienced and established practitioner of the craft, who also teaches translation at the University of Milan.

Cavagnoli's searching and probing meditation on the art of translation in general and the problems of rendering Coetzee's female narrators can be read in a forthcoming issue of *[Australian Literary Studies](#)*.

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