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Susan R. Adams  
Butler University, [sradams@butler.edu](mailto:sradams@butler.edu)

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# **Audacious Translation: On Being Haunted and Getting Lost on the Way to Translating Spivak. A Reflection on Spivak's "Translating into English"**

*Susan R. Adams*  
Butler University, USA

## **Abstract**

In "Translating Into English" within *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), Spivak eludes apprehension, spurns comprehension, and resists neat translation as I, an American educator, attempt to make sense of what is meant by an aesthetic education as Spivak translates the act of translation. Caught and othered as a language broker in learning the double bind of translation, I find no answers, only new questions as I grope toward ways to conceptualize and to name this moment for translators and language educators: (1) What does it mean to be a translator?; (2) Can and should the convenient genie of English as the language of power and globalization be pushed back into the bottle to make room for linguistic diversity?; (3) What is essentially lost in translation when indigenous languages are abandoned and no longer nuanced with meaning, when "lingual memory" is no longer available? This paper then examines the ethics and struggle of honoring Spivak's call to be haunted in light of the double bind faced by immigrant K-12 students encountering the power of English in U.S. K-12 schools.

## **Introduction**

In "Translating Into English" within *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Spivak (2012) says:

I'd like to begin with what should be an obvious point. That the translator should make an attempt to grasp the writer's presupposition, pray to be haunted by the project of the original. Translation is not just the stringing together of the most accurate synonyms by the most proximate syntax. (p. 256)

Spivak begins this chapter by chastising English translators who "psychologized every noun, making Kant sound like a rational choice bourgeois Christian gentleman" (2012, p. 156) and those she calls "empiricist translators" (p. 257) who embedded their own coded spin in Marx's choice materialist language in translating the German phrase *inhaltslos und einfach* as "slight in content and simple" (Marx, 1867/1990, p. 90) rather than tackling the more challenging idea of a form that is without content. As she speaks of Derrida's notion of "entering the protocols of a text" (2012, p. 257) and of handling with respect the laws inherent and embedded in the text before the reader, Spivak repeats and confides that "translation is the most intimate act of reading, a prayer to be haunted" (2012, p. 257).

I think by "haunted," Spivak is asking in effect: What are the limits, ethics, and responsibility of translation? Or, in other words, what does it mean to *do* the work translation? But she is also interrogating what it means to *be* a translator.

I am generally a reluctant translator. It is something I do when it must be done. I do not know if a translator is what I *am*, but it is sometimes what I do. I am not particularly gifted in translation, but, in the act of brokering communication between two language groups, I am always struck by the heavy responsibility of choosing just the right word, of matching the tone

and accurately delivering the intent of the original message. If, in the moment, I become seduced by my own voice, by my own importance, and by the rhythmic pinging back and forth between the two languages, I sometimes forget my job is to transmit with exquisite care the speaker's intentions. In my very best translation moments, I notice the task of communicating is less arduous, I feel less conspicuous, and I can settle into a smooth, seamless groove with the speaker. Ideally, rather than attracting attention to myself in the act of translation, I dissolve and fade away to the point that the message and the original speaker are centered in the listener's attention. As my presence diminishes, my voice, intonation, gestures, facial expression, and even my timing more closely mirror those characteristics and patterns of the speaker. When this happens, I experience something akin to floating outside of my own body where I am able to observe myself in the act of translation. In that moment of suspension, I wonder if this experience is evidence I am in some stage or process of *becoming* a translator.

Those out of body moments of lostness, while perhaps common for others, have been rare for me; they leave me shaken, feeling fragile and exposed, and marveling at the momentary blurring of the boundaries that separate me from the person who is haunting me, with whom I have just shared the most intimate of entanglements. Inevitably the speaker and I do not speak afterward of this blurring of boundaries; it is too sacred a moment to profane with a cheeky debrief. Unlike other more typical moments of transactional translation, I do not kick myself afterward for my grammar failures or for my technical errors. As Spivak says, I briefly "inhabit, even if on loan, the many mansions and many levels of the host language" (2012, p. 258).

But rather than dwelling on the mystical qualities of translation, Spivak immediately moves from the ecstasy and intimacy of communication (dare I say *communion*?) across language barriers into example after example of all that is consistently lost in small translation decisions, where the historic distinctions and origins of words either send the reader's mind in the speaker or writer's intentional direction or causes the listener/reader to miss the point entirely. Which of these carries precisely the right image: "mortgage" or "arms and legs in hock to the lender"? Here Spivak and I groan together in frustration as she insists, "Translation is as much a problem as a solution" (2012, p. 259). Indeed, there have been times I walked away from an event, certain my translation had been inadequate to bridge communities separated by far more than simple vocabulary differences. In K-12 school settings, for example, bringing in a translator for non-English speaking parents is a common strategy to encourage parent involvement (Sobel & Kugler, 2007), but locating someone with the appropriate language skills who also fully grasps the complexity and collision of interests, concerns, cultures, jargon, power structures, and identities of all participants is no easy feat.

Spivak herself is a highly skilled speaker of many languages—just one of the many ways reading Spivak puts me in my rightful, humble place each time I read her—and she seems to be saying that the problem of translation would be best solved by everyone learning more languages and by learning to "push through to the original" (2012, p. 259), rather than simply demanding better translators. In a time of globalization in which English is being learned and spoken by more people outside of the United States than inside of it (Crystal, 2003), one might be tempted to rejoice that our collective capacity for mutual understanding must surely increase as humans increasingly speak fewer and fewer languages. Spivak urges us to acquire more languages, pushing against a globalization that would eliminate less powerful languages in favor of languages of empire, claiming:

We cannot all learn all the languages of the world in this kind of depth. But we can learn two:  $n+1$ . And in the process restore the relief map of the world,

flattened under one imperial formation. And it doesn't matter what you call that empire. (2012, p. 287)

While Spivak's call here for increased diversity of language learning seems at first glance counterintuitive, in the world's rush to acquire and become proficient in global English, one wonders what knowledge, histories, understandings, and identities will be relinquished in the transaction. Yet Spivak also says, "You cannot be an enemy of English. People say easily, 'English is globalization. It is destroying cultural specificity.' Here is equivalence. *It is not equalization, it is not a removal of difference*, it is not cutting the unfamiliar down to the familiar" (2012, p. 284, italics in original).

Regarding English as the language of power and *lingua franca*<sup>1</sup> of globalization: The genie is out of the bottle and cannot be forced back in as indigenous languages are abandoned and young people lament, "I cannot talk to my grandmother" (2012, p. 287) in the pursuit to acquire English as the language of power. However, I see from the perspective of K-12 English language learners (ELLs) in U.S. schools that the learning of English only approaches "...equivalence. It is not *equalization*" (2012, p. 284, emphasis added). Learning and speaking English proficiently does not equalize, yet you can never hope to be "equal" without learning English. Ah, there is the double bind! In spite of overwhelming research evidence to the contrary, English learners, no matter how proficient, who retain even a whiff of a native language accent are generally regarded by native speakers as less intelligent, less capable, and less trustworthy. In a nation that proudly and perversely clings to a monolingual identity and a mythology of English as national language, non-native English will never equalize when the mother tongue leaves behind a trace, a Shibboleth that continually reveals one's true origins as *less-than*, no matter how many languages one might speak in addition to English. Language marks and reveals the origins of our deepest identities. But what possibilities remain for K-12 English language learners in this time of globalization?

Spivak describes the rigor and fidelity required to choose exquisite words, syntax, and phrases which transmit sophisticated intentions, images, historical references, and metaphors always embedded in language. Translation of this quality is only possible under the luxurious conditions of ample time and access to linguistic resources, yet the demands and pressures of spontaneous translation do not relieve the translator of Spivak's call to be haunted by the speaker. A gifted and ethical translator is one who dissolves the barriers between the speaker and the audience, who delivers accurate, deep meaning with sensitivity, but without calling attention to the performance itself. On the other hand, it is always possible in the act of translation to put one's own spin on a message or to expand or contract a message. I have witnessed more than one school translator subtly shift away from a school principal's specific intentions through tone of voice or word choice, delivering a message more palatable or reassuring to the parent audience in some cases. While the translator may indeed be most concerned with the way the audience receives the message, it cannot be said that the translator has truly translated the original message or the speaker's intentions.

As I consider what it means to be a translator, Spivak's insistence on being haunted leaves me holding more questions than answers, wishing I could engage her in person to hear her answers to my new questions: What happens to the translation as it passes from the originator, through the mind of the translator, and becomes audible or legible for the recipient? Is real translation truly possible in human communication, especially in communication across two or more

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<sup>1</sup> See Jenkins (2003), McArthur (1998), and Melchers and Shaw (2003) for comprehensive overviews of the notion of world Englishes or English as *lingua franca*.

languages? What gets necessarily or tragically lost in the translation? What is the cost of the lostness of the intentions to the originator and to the recipient? If all language always carries along with it the history of the collective history of the language's speakers, can we ever *really* understand one another across linguistic and cultural boundaries? What happens to the translator during the process of the act of translation? To whom do the loyalties of the translator belong?

It is this last question of loyalties that returns me in memory to a translation I was forced to do for an ESL student of mine, Mauricio, as an administrator filled out a discipline form for this student whose English was inadequate to the messiness and complexity of the moment. The administrator directed me to explain to Mauricio in his native language what was happening, which I did, but to each statement I added an amplification of the administrator's words with quiet, emphatic instructions to the student to stay calm and to focus on me. The administrator did not understand my translation, but he knew enough to realize that I was saying more than he intended. Over time, he grew first suspicious and then angry, eventually insisting that I only translate exactly what he said to Mauricio. I rather stupidly dug in and reminded the administrator that with no parents in the room, I was the student's only advocate and that he deserved to understand what was happening to him. At this point I was curtly informed that I should remember who I actually work for—the school and not the student. At the conclusion of this incident, I was removed as this student's translator and forbidden to attend his expulsion hearing or even to contact his parents—something I normally did as part of a discipline incident involving ELLs.

My role as translator in this case was meant to be limited to embodying a neutral conduit for transmission of information; I was harshly reminded who was paying for my services. On that day I regretted my language knowledge and my availability to play the role of Mauricio's translator; this language transaction was a stark reminder of the raw power of language and the complexity of the act of translation. As Spivak (1993) says elsewhere, "This is the risk that one must run in order to understand how much more complicated it is to realize the responsibility of playing with or working with fire than to pretend that what gives light and warmth does not also destroy" (p. 283). Language brokering has the capacity to warm its participants and can simultaneously char and consume both the recipients and the conduit when disproportionate power relationships are present.

Reading Spivak leaves me a bit singed as a reader. How is it that Spivak, who writes to me in her amazing, sophisticated non-native English, so often eludes my comprehension? She evades me and resists my apprehension of her, no matter how hard I try. Her exact meaning always slips between the fingers of my mind, revealing my desire for certainty in my attempt to translate her into something familiar, something close, something friendly, or at least something *approximating* understanding. As I read her, as I hear her voice narrating the text in my mind, I begin to suspect that somehow Spivak is on to me, that she knows how hard I am laboring to make meaning of the difficult images she effortlessly spins out of her multilingual identity. What is happening here as I struggle to comprehend her? I am reading in English, my own native language after all. It is *my* mother tongue she is speaking. I cannot return the favor, cannot answer her in her mother tongue. Even in English, I can barely formulate a coherent question, never mind a clever question. Reading Spivak for me is tantamount to reading in Latin, or reading in any other shaky second language: I feel I *ought* to understand this, but I know I am barely skimming the surface. I occasionally grab an idea by the tail, only to feel it slip from my grasp in the avalanche of geographies, histories, literary references, insider conversations, and world language use that pepper her meanings and pour from her pen.

Spivak has denied any responsibility to be understood by the reader. Somehow, though we are separated by time and distance, as I read the text, her voice in my head takes on a dismissive, rather disappointed tone. I feel then that *Spivak is reading me*. She finds me wanting. So why do I continue to read her? I read Spivak because she seems to know I can keep struggling through the density of her text, her words, and her meanings if she drops from time to time a shimmering jewel of language and meaning so lovely and multifaceted that I must slip it into my pocket and carry it like a treasure. I find these jewels are enough to keep me slugging my way through, limping along until I find my reward.

As I read “Translating Into English,” I encountered two precious jewels I am keeping in my imaginary pocket. The first is deeply personal and speaks to the profound primacy of the mother tongue: “Language has a history; it is public before our births and will continue so after our deaths. Yet every infant invents it and makes it the most private thing, touching the very interiority of the heart...” (2012, p. 285). Here she returns me in imagination to my earliest formation at my mother’s breast. The second centers and challenges me as I attempt to become a translator in the spirit of Spivak, who states,

I remember Marx’s very well-known words: “The beginner who has learned a new language always re-translates it into his mother tongue. He can only be said to have appropriated the spirit of the new language and to be able to produce it freely when he can manipulate it without reference to the old and when he forgets the language planted in him while using the new one.” ...*This is what a translator should be—someone who can forget translation.* (2012, p. 287, italics added)

I find the intimate act of reading Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is indeed “a prayer to be haunted” (2012, p. 257) as her work draws me ever deeper into forgetting translation as I seek to “inhabit, even if on loan, the many mansions, and many levels of the host language” (2012, p. 258) and I will continue to pray to forget myself in the act of translation.

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