

2013

Audacious translation: Learning the double bind to translate Spivak

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Recommended Citation

Adams, Susan R., "Audacious translation: Learning the double bind to translate Spivak" (2013). *Scholarship and Professional Work – Education*. 18.

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Susan R. Adams

Spivak Chapters 12 “Translating into English”

A paper presented at the 2013 34th Annual Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice

Paper Title: Audacious Translation: Learning the Double Bind to Translate Spivak

Abstract:

In Chapter 12 of *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), Spivak eludes apprehension, spurns comprehension, and resists neat translation as I, an American educator, feebly reaches and grasps to make sense of what is meant by an aesthetic education as Spivak translates the act of translation. Caught and othered 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 language educators:

- 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?
- What is essentially lost in translation when indigenous languages are abandoned and no longer nuanced with meaning, when “lingual memory” is no longer available or when younger generations prefer to have their imaginations played with, rather than do the strenuous play of imagination?
- What does it mean to be a translator?

Spivak 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 Chapter 12 by chastising English translators who “psychologized every noun, making Kant sound like a rational choice bourgeois Christian gentleman” (p. 156) and those she calls “empiricist translators” 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” 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” (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” (p. 257).

I think by “haunted,” Spivak is asking: What are the limits, ethics and responsibility of translation? Or what does it mean to DO 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 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 ping-pong back and forth between the two languages I forget my job is to transmit with care the speaker’s intentions. In my best moments, I lose myself entirely and settle into a smooth, seamless groove with the speaker. Is that me BECOMING a translator? Those moments of lostness for me have been rare, but they leave me shaken, 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 we do not speak afterward of this blurring of boundaries-it is too sacred 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” (p. 258). But 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 lost in small translation decisions, where the historic distinctions and origins of words either send the reader’s mind in the writer’s intentional direction or causes the 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 as she shouts, “Translation is as much a problem as a solution” (p. 259). 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 is best solved by learning more languages and by learning to “push through to the original” (p. 259), rather than demanding better translators. Spivak always leaves me holding more questions than answers, wishing I could 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? 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 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 told me to explain to the student 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 me, but he knew enough to realize that I was saying more than he intended. Over time, he grew suspicious and then angry, eventually insisting that I only translate exactly what he said to the student. 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. I was curtly informed that I should remember who I actually work for-the school. Afterward, I was removed as this student's translator and forbidden to attend his expulsion hearing or even to contact his parents. My role as translator in this case was meant to be restricted to serving as a neutral conduit and I was reminded who was paying for my services. On that day I regretted my language resources and my availability to play the role of Mauricio's translator; this language transaction was a bitter reminder of the power of language. As Spivak 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" (1993, *Inside the Teaching Machine*, P. 283).

Language reveals the origins of our identities.

But what possibilities remain for English language learners in this time of globalization?

Spivak 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" (p. 284).

English as the language of power and lingua franca of globalization: The genie is out of the bottle and cannot be forced back in (is this a double bind?) as indigenous languages are

abandoned and young people lament, “I cannot talk to my grandmother”(p. 287) to pursue and acquire English as the language of power. However, I see from the perspective of ESL students that the learning of English only approaches “equivalence. [but] It is not equalization.” (p. 284). Learning/Speaking English does not equalize, but you can never hope to be “equal” without learning English. (ah, there is the double bind!) 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.

But how is it that reading Spivak, who writes to me in her amazing, sophisticated non-native English so often eludes my comprehension? She won’t let me apprehend 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 she 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? THIS IS MY NATIVE LANGUAGE after all. It is *my* mother tongue she is speaking. I cannot return the favor, cannot answer her in her mother tongue, can barely formulate a coherent question, never mind a clever question. Reading Spivak for me is tantamount to reading Latin, or reading in a shaky second language: I OUGHT to understand this, 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 peppers her meanings and pours from her pen. She has claimed no

responsibility to be understood. 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 read her (besides preparing for this panel, of course)? I read her 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. Here are the 2 jewels I am keeping in my pocket today:

1. p. 285: “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...”

2. P. 287: “...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**... 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.”

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