
The peculiarities of translating Robert Burns' poetry into Standard English

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Received: 09.03.2013

Abstract. The article regards a number of peculiarities of translating Robert Burns' poetry into Standard English. It explains the reasons why Scots–English translations exist and analyzes the examples of Robert Burns' poetry translations of this kind.

Key words: translation, Scots, Standard English, Robert Burns

UDC: 81'25+821.111(411).0

Introduction

When asked the source of his greatest creative inspiration, Bob Dylan selected 'A Red, Red Rose' by Robert Burns. Abraham Lincoln was also a Burns fan, reciting his poetry from memory. Perhaps, when emancipating African American slaves, he was influenced by the great Scottish poet's resolutely stated belief in human equality. Burns was a man ahead of his time: on the eve of the French Revolution, he was writing 'The Rights of Woman'. The poems by Burns inspired the titles of classic novels, John Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men' and J. D. Salinger's 'The Catcher in the Rye'. Burns was a pioneer of the Romantic Movement, influencing major poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. He also became a source of inspiration for many founders of democratic, liberal and socialist movements around the world [1].

Robert Burns (1759–1796), often called simply 'The Bard' in Scotland, wrote in three languages: Scots, English and a Scots-English dialect, for which he is the best known today. What could possibly account for his popularity and unique position as a national bard of Scotland? Jennifer R. McDermott considers that it is precisely Burns's sophisticated code-switching between Scots and English, or his Anglo-Scottish hybrid, that accorded him a strong following in the sentimentalist vogue, while also allowing him to present a genuine voice for Scottish nationalist expression. Specifically, Burns's Kilmarnock edition of 'Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect' (1786) created a release valve against the anti-Scots pressures dominant in the eighteenth century [2].

The greatest Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, in the preface to his 1847 year 'Kobzar', called Burns "*a poet national and great*" and contraposed him to Walter Scott who wrote mainly in English [3: 170–171].

Coming to the very topic of this study, we should mention the very language of the Burns' poetry and its translation into Standard English. At first, we will try to find out why such translations actually exist. One can think that Scots as a variant of English – rather than a foreign language – should be understandable enough for any average English-speaking reader. The real situation, however, looks quite different and this originates from the status of Scots language as such, as well as from its linguistic peculiarities.

The negative influence of language attitudes, stigma and prejudice had led to the situation when Scots was often considered as ‘slang’, ‘dialect’, ‘careless speech’, or ‘bad English’ and, socially the most damaging of all, ‘a speech of the uneducated’.

Another problem until recent times was that Scots was often depicted as a language with many names: it was called Doric or Lallans (i.e., Lowland Scots), or Scotch, or broad Scots and, at times, just by the name of a particular dialect of Scots Glaswegian, Shetlandic, Buchan, etc. In addition, Scots was sometimes wrongly described as Scottish English and sometimes confused with Gaelic, because of its name (Scottish Gaelic, or occasionally Scots Gaelic) [4: 50–56].

With growing pro-independence movement in modern Scotland, some positive changes in this sphere may appear. Brian Logan from ‘The Guardian’ writes: “*After a 2010 survey revealed that a majority of Scotland’s population still speak Scots, and want it taught in schools, the SNP (Scottish National Party) committed to follow recommendations from an advisory group led by pro-Scots scholar J. Derrick McClure... The government aims to rectify this, with an increased use of Scots in education (“we want to see teaching about the nature of the language and its literature”, says McClure, “and to see teachers using Scots as well as teaching it”) and more celebration of Scots in communities... In an independent Scotland the country’s indigenous language will be given more value and status, and people will feel much more proud and confident in using these words*” [5: 122–123].

Still there exist some consequences of the lack of ability among Scots, in particular, in the Scottish history (e.g., students’ inability to read Scottish historical documents which has left the Scottish history open to interpretation), or lack of understanding of folk song lyrics or storytelling – this inability has become an alarming feature, showing that many Scots are being alienated from their own culture. This is why many people who speak the language do not identify themselves as speakers, whereas the people who hardly speak it might like to think of themselves as speakers, especially if the issue is connected to extralinguistic factors such as identity or nationalism. Many people, especially of the middleclass, use a large body of Scots vocabulary and idiom, but would not think of themselves as Scots speakers.

To crown it all, one can remind that Scots embraces a great range of phonetic, lexical, grammatical and phraseological characteristics which make it just slightly close to Standard English.

With all of those things in mind, we cannot doubt reasonability of translating Robert Burns’ Scots poetry into Standard English.

Analysis of translations

Now we would like to analyze some examples of these translations and investigate the peculiarities of translation of the Robert Burns’ poetry into Standard English.

We will start with the poem ‘To a Mouse’, since it represents an older version of Scots. In this poem Burns consciously casts himself as a “*heaven taught plowman*”. The plot, even in the Scots sections, is easy enough to follow for a Standard English speaker. Burns, in plowing a corn field, has upturned the nest of a little field mouse and does his best to console the “*wee, sleekit, cow’rin, tim’rous beastie*” [2]. This is in keeping with how Burns describes himself, in the dedication which prefaces his Edinburgh edition, as “*A Scottish Bard, proud of the name, and whose highest ambition is to sing in his Country’s service*”. He explains that the Scottish muse came to him “*at the plow, and threw her inspiring mantle over [him]*”, commanding him to “*sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes of my native soil, in my native tongue*”. Burns employs Scots in this poem, and even an exaggeratedly archaic Scottish dialect. The obscure farming terminology would

have been beyond the Scots actually spoken even in his time, but he uses it in order to characterize himself as an idealized or archetypal Scottish farmer.

He begins the poem by layering many distinctive Scots lexical elements (such as ‘bick-erin’brattle’, ‘laith’, ‘wee’, ‘pattle’, etc.) and an emphasized long ‘a’ vowel sound through the orthography. The Scots here is interconnected with an emotional, immediate, and comforting voice. But then, in the second stanza, the poem slides effortlessly into a more reflective and controlled English. The verses continue to balance Scots and English – moving towards the creature with a gentle, rural simplicity and vigour associated with Scots – while further meditating on his despair in thoughtful, more distant English.

The Scots lexis and idioms, like ‘cranreuch’, ‘dribble’, ‘daimen’, ‘foggage’, and ‘gang aft agley’ serve not only to create a milieu but also to highlight specific ‘motivations’. Burns employs ‘primitive’ sounding terms to increase stylistic effect, but as Macaffé avows, he also uses these Scots words to link the emotional, humanized side of his character to a Scotsman’s insider awareness. He chooses Scots terms that carry more meaning for one selected group of readers than another. Yet, even so, these idioms give the English readers a desired air of exoticism and convey a distilled essential Scottishness even if they do not recognize the insider’s meaning, making the dialect item “*the mot juste in the immediate context*” for both audiences [2].

Though the plot of the poem is evident, translation of it into Standard English becomes vital to understand the details which are the author’s emotions and the background of the story. Michael R. Burch (a famous American poet and translator) enables the reader to see the despair of cold season revealing green ‘mosses’ from behind ‘foggage’ and the fact that December’s winds “*blow fast and keen’ from behind ‘baith snell an’ keen*”. Only due to rendering of the lines,

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen icker in a thrave
'S a sma' request;
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,
An' never miss't. [1]

into

I have no doubt you sometimes thieve;
What of it, friend? You too must live!
A random corn-ear in a shock's
a small behest; it-
'll give me a blessing to know such a loss;
I'll never miss it! [1],

an average English-speaking reader can feel compassion to both the author and the mouse, and not just turn over the page because of his or her ignorance of archaic Scots.

The political implications of Burns’s code-switching are more obvious in ‘A Bard’s Epitaph’, a concluding poem of the Kilmarnock edition. Here Burns makes himself into a national symbol by writing about himself as one – albeit deceased. In the opening stanza, Burns asks any man, any “*whim-inspir’d fool, / Owre fast for thought, owre hot for rule*” that passes his grave to pause and shed a tear on his behalf. The words ‘inspir’d’ and ‘rule’ hint at the political undercurrent in this poem. Yet, it is in the second stanza where Burns really begins to characterize himself as a fallen hero of Scotland. He, “*the bard of rustic song*” who (in a hidden pun) both ‘steals’ a position among the crowds and ‘steals’ the crowd towards radical sentiment, appeals to the onlookers and

hopes to elicit a “*frater-feeling strong*” or sense of Scottish fraternity. Burns then makes an example of himself for the others, asking them to avoid his mistakes and wildness (probably his fondness for whisky and women). He cautions the onlooker, and so too the reader, to ‘attend’ and learn to steer the course of their lives with similar passionate Scottishness but with more prudence.

In so doing, Burns switches from a thin Scots at the opening to pure Standard English in the final stanza – linking ‘self-control’ with an increasingly anglicized voice. This code-switching implies that the English stanzas are careful ones, those more officially permissible yet drained of the passion of the opening Scots [2].

In this case we will turn to a translation by George Dryburgh (whose translations of all Burns’ poems were issued in 2004) and will easily be able to see that he left a great deal of the whole text almost unchanged. The first stanza looks ‘translated’ since

*Owre fast for thought, owre hot for rule,
Owre blate to seek, owre proud to snool?*

turns into

*Too fast for thought, too hot for rule,
Too shy to seek, too proud to cringe?*

Nonetheless, the rest of the text is exaggeratedly ‘loyal’ to the Scots original in the middle stanzas. (The last one has no need to be translated). It cannot be explained only by a closeness of the poem’s language to Standard English. It is also the desire of the translator, who himself is a great admirer of the Scots culture, to bring in as few alterations as possible [6].

The sentimental ‘A Red, Red Rose’ also undergoes only slight changes, although it is translated by the same Michael R. Burch who has earlier turned ‘To a Mouse’ into something greatly different from the original.

This time the language is not archaic and still Burns uses the original Scots words and phrases like ‘luv’, ‘bonie lass’, ‘gang’ or ‘fare thee weel’. This mixing of English and Scots makes the reader believe the truthfulness of the author’s feelings since Burns uses the both languages in his life and could really talk to a close person [7].

We believe that this time the very desire of the translator to save the naïve charm of a Scotsman’s love message has prevented him from some remarkable alterations. A comparison of the lines

*As fair art thou, my bonie lass,
So deep in luve am I;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.*

*And you're so fair, my lovely lass,
and so deep in love am I,
that I will love you still, my dear,
till all the seas run dry.*

seems to be enough evidence of this statement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to resume that, although some of the fragments of Robert Burns’ poetry or sometimes even his full texts can be quite understandable for an average English-speaking reader, the existence of their Standard English translations is totally approved by the fact that Scots is individual enough to be considered as a separate language.

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Galkina Karolina, The peculiarities of translating Robert Burns' poetry into Standard English, 2013, *Sci. Horiz*: **1**: 40 – 44.

***Анотація.** У статті розглянуто низку особливостей перекладів поезії Роберта Бернса літературною англійською мовою. Пояснено причини існування шотландсько-англійських перекладів і проаналізовано відповідні переклади віршів Роберта Бернса.*