



HAL
open science

Translation as an Art

Chenjerai Hove

► **To cite this version:**

Chenjerai Hove. Translation as an Art. IFAS Working Paper Series / Les Cahiers de l' IFAS, 2005, 6, p. 75-77. hal-00797879

HAL Id: hal-00797879

<https://hal.science/hal-00797879>

Submitted on 7 Mar 2013

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Les Nouveaux Cahiers de l'IFAS
IFAS Working Paper Series

Translation - Transnation

1994 – 2004

**Dix ans d'échanges littéraires entre
l'Afrique du Sud et la France**

*Ten years of literary exchange
between South Africa and France*

Numéro special

**Rassemblé et dirigé par Jean-Pierre RICHARD,
Université Paris 7, en collaboration avec
Denise GODWIN, rédactrice de l'AFSSA**

Special issue

*collated and edited by Jean-Pierre RICHARD,
University of Paris 7, in collaboration with
AFSSA editor, Denise GODWIN*



Association for French Studies in Southern Africa
Association des Études Françaises en Afrique Australe

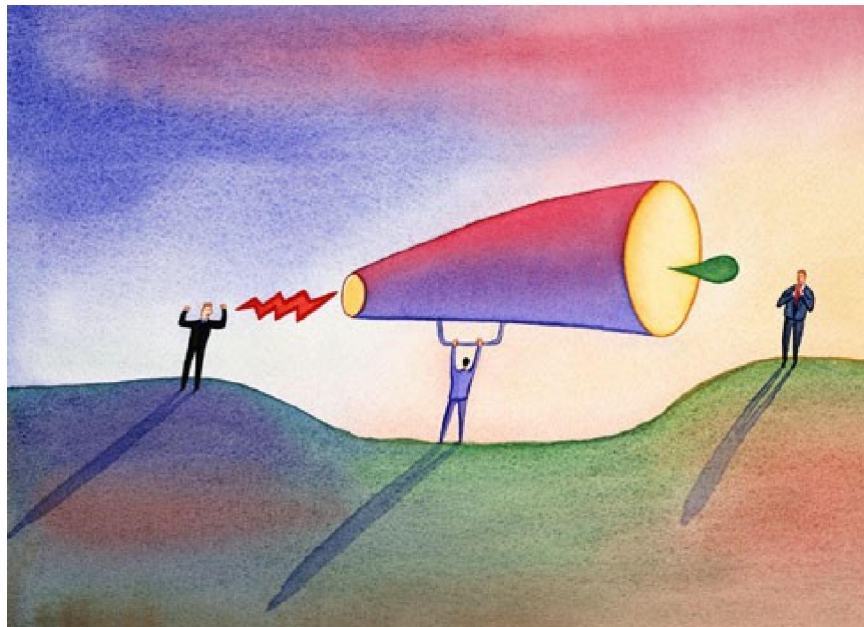
N° 6, August 2005

Translation – Transnation

1994-2004

Ten years of literary exchange between South Africa and France

Dix ans d'échanges littéraires entre l'Afrique du Sud et la France



To Sello Duiker and Phaswane Mpe

Contents – *Sommaire*

Preface – *Préface*

The authors – *Les auteurs*

About translation – *Etudes*

L'autre source : le rôle des traducteurs dans le transfert en français de la littérature sud-africaine **par J.-P. Richard**

A Road Going Both Ways **by C.P.Naudé**

Traduire l'Afrique du Sud post Apartheid : quelle approche ?

par Ludivine Huet-Haupt

Translation of African Literature: A German Model? **by J.-P. Richard**

Publishing After a Decade of Democracy **by Brian Wafawarowa**

Traduire *Triomf* **par Donald Moerdijk**

Personal experiences – *Témoignages*

La publication de la littérature africaine en traduction **par Alain Ricard**

Interview with Bernard Magnier, Director of the “Afriques” collection, Actes Sud Publishers **by J.-P. Richard**

Entretien avec Bernard Magnier, directeur de la collection “Afriques” chez Actes Sud **par J.-P. Richard**

Traduire J.M. Coetzee par **Catherine Lauga-du Plessis**

Translation as an Art **by Chenjerai Hove**

Bibliographie des littératures africaines en traduction française (1994-2004) établie **par J.-P. Richard**

Translation as an Art

Chenjerai Hove

Abstract

Prenant l'exemple de la traduction de ses propres œuvres, Chenjerai Hove illustre à travers une série d'exemples en quoi traduire revient à participer à l'acte de création. L'appropriation du contexte culturel, historique, psychologique de l'œuvre et le fait de s'imprégner du texte, dans le détail des mots et des phrases tout en sachant prendre de la distance pour savoir rendre l'ensemble sont, selon lui, les qualités majeures d'une traduction fidèle.

The story is told of a Japanese translator who, on finding a sentence 'the police came with kudus into Soweto Township' understood the sentence to mean the South African police brought the animals called kudus to quell a riot in the township. Little did the translator know that kudus were a type of military vehicle used by apartheid South African police to violently crush public disturbances. The translator had missed the cultural context of the whole text because he had not made enough effort to search for the small and big hidden cultural notes in any text.

Translation is an art in itself. As an artist, the translator becomes as much part of the text as the original creator of the text. In other words, the two, author and translator, meet in the text in order to create something new called a translation. Both share the same vision since I believe the original creator is also a kind of translator who works with original materials from his society and language to give birth to the original text. The author is a translator of other people's visions and words.

Sometimes the 'other people' in the text are the characters who shape the text as well as the vision of a writer as he or she creates texts for them to say on the final page. The translator too has to go through the same activity of locating the voices of the 'other people' as well as the voice of the author. In the end, something new is born, a translated text of a novel, a poem or a dramatic piece.

In order for that marriage of texts to happen, the translator has to wear many shoes in his or her imagination. He has to translate the author's texts as well as other silent texts which, if he listens attentively, he will be able to hear deep down in the original text.

As an art, translation requires that the translator immerses himself or herself into the literary work in so many different ways. The sounds of the original language and even its echoes and suggestion in the distance, all have to be translated.

My first Norwegian translator worked through my novel *Bones* in a thoroughly mechanical way. It was only at the last minute and just before the printing that she ran to the publisher and confessed that she had not been able to totally immerse herself in the text. She withdrew her text and asked the publisher to search for another translator.

I am talking of what one could call resonating with the text to be translated. If a translator does not resonate with the text, the risk is that it will be a piece of mechanical translation which these days one finds in computerised translations.

Maybe computerised translations of texts work with technical language, especially in the sciences. But in literary works, they are simply too distant from any form of resonance with the text. For resonance with the original text only starts when the translator begins to feel as though he or she were a small part of the original creator of the text.

There is creative translation just as there is creative reading. Creative translation makes the creator a joint creator of the original text because imaginatively the translator almost drowns himself in the text and participates in its creation. It is the same with a creative reader. The creative reader/translator also drowns himself or herself in the text to a point when those rhythms and sounds of the words of the original text begin to appear in the new, receiving language.

Until such a harmony is discovered between the original language and the receiving language, the translation will be found wanting.

Now how is such a harmony discovered? I have already invoked some of the ingredients above, but it is important for the translator to rise above mere words and phrases. Every sentence of the original text has its own pace, rhythm, discords, harmonies and disharmonies which should be part of the translation.

Sometimes even the harmony and disharmony of the geographical landscape of the original text are in it and the translator has to move into that realm. For example, whenever I read some Indian poetry aloud, I cannot help hearing the sounds of the river Ganges hidden in the intricacy of the words and the way they are sequenced.

Sometimes the hidden sounds of the landscape are visible, but at times they lie hidden in the intricate veins of the original text. A good translator finds them and works them into the new language. A bad translator ignores them and ends up giving the readers of the new language what I could call 'a dried piece of meat' of a translation: breathless, bloodless, juiceless.

Every creative piece of work has its cultural context. The culture which the language carries has many other corners like music, dance, proverbs, humour, ways of living and dying, cultural space which is also emotional space as well as the psychology of the land. There is even the history of language in every word, phrase and sentence used by the original creator.

The effective translator searches for those cultural goods to the point where he or she begins to realise that some experiences might not be possible to translate. For example, I use a lot of children's play songs in my novels. I always ask my translators not to worry themselves by translating them because they will look absurd in translation.

They will look absurd because their cultural contexts cannot be found in the English, French or Japanese ways of play.

In my language, there is the culture of joking with or about a corpse at a funeral. Sometimes it does not make sense for such a humorous episode to be translated into a language in which such a cultural practice is unheard of. The translator, as a creative participant, has to find a way, beyond mere words, of translating that experience and making sense of it.

Although translation is simply a matter of words and phrases and sentences, it helps if a translator knows a little bit of the original linguistic context of the words to be translated. If, for example, a translator works on my texts, it is better and easier for him to handle the cultural materials of the text if the translator has some knowledge of a Bantu language.

Knowing a bit of the language enables the translator to realise the cultural baggage which the original language carries. My Japanese translator had to visit Zimbabwe and spend a few months learning the basics of the Shona language. By so doing he was able to immerse himself into the human experiences which the language was fighting to portray in the literature.

But practically, it may not be possible for the translator to travel that far and to have the time to familiarise with the culture from which the original language comes. Bearing in mind that limitation, it becomes urgent for a thorough exchange of notes, faxes and email between the translator and the original writer of the text.

Translation is an act of profound communication, and it requires thorough search of the 'other' through the text and subtext. Both texts meet through the two creative participants, translator and author. Without it, a lot of translation sad stories will be recorded.

When all these things are well done, the reader will be able to enjoy a genuine piece of art translated from one language to another, in its beauty and ugliness. For the translator also runs the risk of re-writing the original text, making it more beautiful or uglier than the original. It is up to the translator to use his or her own tools of professionalism and sensitivity in order to render its rightful place among other unique artistic works to the original work.