

Thick Translation: A Conversation on Translating Indonesian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This conversation on translation theory and practice with Michael Nieto Garcia and a mixed group of State University of New York (SUNY) students took place on 29 October 2019 at the Potsdam campus in New York State. The talk/interview was conducted by the invitation of Professor Richard M. Henry for his Literature and Translation Studies course (LITR520), and it was supported by the Dorf Yes fund at SUNY Potsdam. Some additions were made to the interview transcript to provide explanatory context and to articulate key points. A concluding thoughts section was added to summarize some translation takeaways.

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INTRODUCTION

Michael Nieto Garcia is the translator (from Indonesian to English) of Djenar Maesa Ayu's *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet! / They Say I'm a Monkey*. He discusses the art and craft of translation, covering such topics as thick translation, cultural context, choosing a translation philosophy, domesticating versus foreignizing, and the literary value of translating explicit language or content. To provide sociopolitical context, Garcia also discusses the Indonesian literary renaissance of Generation 98 and the emergence of new women writers. He also addresses story versus plot, bridging cultures through fiction and translation, and the importance of freedom of expression to creativity, art, and humanity.

Biographical Note

Michael Nieto Garcia is a writer, translator, and professor at Clarkson University in Potsdam, New York. He began translating Djenar Maesa Ayu's *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet! / They Say I'm a Monkey* while a Fulbright Fellow in Indonesia in 2004. He is the author of *Autobiography in Black and Brown: Ethnic Identity in Richard Wright and Richard Rodriguez* (2014). His essay *Do Brown People Have Brown Thoughts?: Richard Rodriguez's Philosophy of Race, Culture, and Identity* traces the troubling turn to tribalism, cultural essentialism, and divisive forms of identity politics (2023). He hails from the Mountain West state of Idaho (USA), a place known for its natural beauty, rural culture, and world-famous potatoes. His writing can be found at <https://people.clarkson.edu/~mgarcia/>.

CONVERSATION

Garcia: You've just read a short story, "Durian," by Djenar Maesa Ayu, from her collection of stories, *They Say I'm a Monkey*. This is the 2005 translation, published by Metafor Publishing. The story...it is a little strange, no?

Morgan: It made my eyebrows raise.

Garcia: Which part?

Morgan: All of it.

Garcia: I think you also read the "Introduction" to the collection. I'll give you some context. Indonesia was ruled until 1998 by an authoritarian regime under President Suharto, who had effectively become dictator-for-life. Suharto was an army general who rose to power by putting down an alleged Communist coup in 1965, became acting president in 1967, and remained president until 1998. He was in power for over 30 years. In 1998, a monetary and economic crisis hit Southeast Asian countries. That led to demonstrations, riots, and ultimately political change in Indonesia. Suharto finally stepped down.

After that, there was a literary efflorescence in publishing, including short stories and novels, as well as in journalism. The press was a lot freer overnight. Some of this took the form of pushing against social and political boundaries, a kind of experimentation that the old regime had suppressed. In her fiction, Djenar was pushing boundaries around what was considered socially and sexually transgressive. She just lays it all out. Her stories touch on everything from female promiscuity in a traditional society to child neglect—and other socially taboo topics.

Avery: And so that's the timeline? This is 2002?

Garcia: Yes, *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* was published in 2002. With the political opening up in 1998, there followed a sudden increase in freedom of expression and publishing. A literary renaissance took place now that art and creativity flourished with less censorship and control. I call the new writers that emerged during that literary period "Generation 98." Part of that literary renaissance was new women writers who took on themes like sexuality, political activism, and other socially restricted issues—and began to talk openly about them.

So Djenar is not alone. She was part of the same zeitgeist—and writing on similar themes—as other Generation 98 women authors such as Ayu Utami and Dewi "Dee" Lestari, who wrote the novels *Saman* and *Supernova*, respectively. People came up with this term, *sastra wangi* (which translates something like "fragrant literature"), alluding to the phenomena that a lot of the new, bestselling literature was written by women. Readers and literary critics had not seen a lot of that before. Now, there were suddenly a lot of new women writers, some of whom became very high profile and were getting a lot of attention and selling a lot of books. Djenar Maesa Ayu was one of those.

Right Place, Right Time

Garcia: I said I would tell you about myself. The Cornell connection is part of it because Cornell scholars have a long history in Indonesia, all the way back to before Indonesia even won its independence from the

Netherlands. In the era of State Department funding, Cornell University and other schools opened area studies programs. At Cornell, they have a Southeast Asia program, a hub for scholarship on (among other places in the region) Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines. They have scholars working in all these areas. That's where I just lucked out. I was just in the right place at the right time. I went to Cornell to study English Literature, but when I got there, I met Indonesian scholars, which in turn led me to study the Indonesian language while at Cornell.

I had planned on taking a language course while in graduate school. What were the available languages? One of them was Indonesian, which is a language that is not commonly taught in American universities. The guy who wrote the textbook that everybody was using at the time was John Wolff. He was a linguist there at Cornell and the first author of the iconic blue-cover textbook, *Beginning Indonesian through Self-Instruction*.

The other thing that happened—because Cornell had all those Indonesian connections and all those Indonesianists—was that there were a lot of Indonesian undergraduate and graduate students. Some of them, for example, came specifically to work with a well-known Indonesian economist. Cornell had a pipeline of Indonesian graduate students who knew about the school and came to Cornell to study in the various grad programs there.

Because of that, I met my future my wife, who is Indonesian and came to Cornell as a graduate student on a Fulbright scholarship. And then I said, well, I should study the language. I was able to study the language, which was taught by a native speaker. Again, when are you going to get that lucky?

After that, I applied for a Fulbright and ended up in Yogyakarta in the summer of 2003. Indonesia is an archipelago of many thousands of islands, but half of the population lives on one island: Java, which is a really good place to be based for research and to begin learning about the country. So, I go to Java for a year. Before getting there, I did some intensive language study in an immersion program in Manado (in northern Sulawesi). I'm reading like crazy because there's this efflorescence of new Indonesian fiction. It's a very exciting time to be there, and I'm reading everything I can get my hands on while this literary renaissance is going on—not just in fiction, but also in journalism. *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* is one of the books I come across.

As with your initial reaction to this story, I was a little shocked at first. It's a little bit over the top at times, especially along sexual lines. I think, wow, there's something more going on here. Djenar's book fit in with a larger literary and cultural phenomenon. I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time to witness this literary efflorescence going on in Indonesia. So, I decided to translate one of the stories.

The Business of Translation

Garcia: If you're thinking about becoming a translator, what's my advice? Do a little of everything. You're going to have to be part detective. You're going to have to be part entrepreneur. You're going to have to be part editor, because you need to read your own translation manuscript like an editor. You are part journalist because you're tracking down and researching stuff and trying to find out the real story (the deeper story and cultural context) so you can make sense of things and convey that context to the readers of the translation (the "target language" audience). You are part anthropologist because you have to really immerse yourself in the culture.

A literary translation is more than just a literal translation of each word, which is sometimes called a word-for-word translation—or that tries to keep translation equivalents at the word level. A literary translation is also

about finding a way to convey that deep cultural context. That is one of the things that distinguishes literary from literal translation.

Avery: Can you talk about the specific details behind the process, starting with your pursuit of the copyright owner and everything like that?

Garcia: I just decided: I'm going to try to translate one of these stories. Then I managed to get into contact with the copyright holder, Richard Oh. He had a publishing house, Metafor, that eventually published the translation. He also had a bookstore in Jakarta, QB World Books. It was a nice bookstore: great ambiance with an English-language book selection that appealed to expats and native Jakartans of a certain socioeconomic class. QB World Books also had a lot of novels, comic books, and a big Quranic studies section—all big sellers.

Richard Oh and the author, Djenar, were friends. They both speak English—Richard Oh particularly well. I said, “I would like to translate the whole book. What do you think?” Eventually, they both said, “Yeah, let's do this.” Translation had been their plan all along. That's why they had already sorted out the translation copyright matter, Oh having secured the translation copyrights from the original publisher, Gramedia.

I started working on the translation. I was still working on it when I had to leave Indonesia in the summer of 2004. Having those broad experiences in Indonesia helped. Reading widely is another way to have that vicariously. Also, I'm a generalist by temperament. I think training for being a translator is largely about doing many other things as well. Anything around writing and editing is going to make you a better translator. Gaining that breadth, that skill set: picking up the editing skills and how to write a sentence.

Deep Context: An Author's Themes, Style, and Sociopolitical Setting

Avery: I definitely had a number of questions about that translation process.

Morgan: In your introduction to the book, you brushed on the idea that Djenar's work is met with a mixture of controversy and acclaim. Do those reactions to her work factor into your translation process?

Garcia: One of the things I worried about was that readers would read this ‘controversial’ book stripped of its social, political, and cultural context without understanding where it's coming from—which is partly a reaction against thirty years of social restrictions and political oppression, including along sexual lines. Without that context, it's too easy for readers to maybe think that the stories in the collection are just sexual sensationalism. There's a lot more than that going on in *They Say I'm a Monkey* because it's coming from that social and political context. I was trying to provide that context for readers in the “Introduction” to the book.

Also, what might otherwise be perceived as sexually sensationalist content is actually exploring much larger issues and themes. Readers can easily see some of the themes that Djenar keeps coming back to, and how she's wrestling with difficult topics, like neglectful parenting and childhood trauma. It's a theme in a couple of her stories. There is one story called “The Leech.”

Morgan: I can say I made the mistake of reading just the ending of it without any context at all. Again, eyebrows were raised.

Garcia: Yes, it's very shocking. But what Djenar's doing is invoking the conceit of keeping a pet leech in the house as a metaphor for childhood neglect and trauma. At first, the leech-boyfriend only leeches on the single

mother, mooching on her financially and emotionally. But then, when the neglectful and self-absorbed mother is away, the leech-boyfriend turns his leech-like behaviour on the daughter. The metaphorical leech is depicted as a literal leech in the story, literalizing the metaphor to depict the childhood trauma caused by neglect and abuse.

Avery: Expanding on that, do you have any concerns about her reputation, portraying her correctly, and how you are going to be shaping some kind of impression of the writer?

Garcia: Absolutely. The translator's task is to remain faithful to the original text and let readers form their own impressions. But the question of what constitutes a faithful translation is not always easy to decide. You may have heard the Italian expression, "*traduttore, traditore*": translator, traitor. To be a translator is to inherently also be a traitor, because you're betraying the original. As a translator, you always worry about that. Am I being true to the original? Am I preserving the most important aspects?

On the other hand, there's the myth of perfect equivalence—on the word level, on the sentence level, all the way up to the level of the entire text. Anything that departs from the nearest equivalent in the target language would be considered a faithless translation under that logic. It doesn't quite work like that.

There are many different ways you could translate a particular literary text. And many of them would be good translations. It boils down to a series of translation choices that you're making at all these different levels: word-for-word, sense-for-sense, pattern consistency throughout the translation, as well as considerations of prosody—rhythm, meter, or tempo—and how it all hangs together tonally and otherwise. So there are a lot of ways to do it right. But there are also a lot of ways to do it wrong. And always, it is a matter of tradeoffs, such as: Do you sacrifice the sense of a line, or its meter instead?

That's the challenge. What are the wrong ways for me? I have to be true to the spirit of the text. Usually, that means being true to the story's voice.

Cultural Context and Translating Metaphors

Gabrielle: Given the cultures and the languages, how hard were metaphors to translate?

Garcia: Well, those were some of the easier things. The leech was easy. But then there are the things that the target audience may have never seen or heard of...has anyone here ever seen a durian fruit?

Gabrielle: I looked it up. They said that it has a bad smell. But if you can get past the smell, the taste is awesome.

Garcia: It's very good. It's very creamy. Indonesians have an expression that really captures the essence of what durian means to them. They say it's the fruit that tastes like heaven but smells like hell.

Avery: All I've ever heard about them is how bad they smell and nothing about the taste. But here, there is the sweet smell. How do you handle that?

Garcia: That's what had to be emphasized, the desirable scent of the durian. To Indonesians, it's not necessarily a repugnant smell. So, I created an entry for *durian* in a short glossary at the back of the book.

You asked about metaphors and when it is a challenge not to lose the cultural connotations and associated context that come with that metaphor. Providing a glossary for some of the regionally and culturally specific

terms and items in the stories was one way to solve the problem. One translation choice might be to change the durian fruit (though it is the central metaphor of the story) to a cantaloupe since English-language readers living in more temperate climates might not know what durian fruit is. I would consider that a poor translation choice because you're losing what is essential, which is the cultural context. The translation challenge is providing essential context when it doesn't appear directly in the original text, often because it is taken for granted or implicitly understood by anyone living in that culture. How do we give readers of the translation the essential regional and cultural context? The way I did it was by convincing my editor and publisher to allow me to include a very small glossary.

Thick Translation

Garcia: One of the things the anthropologist Clifford Geertz is most known for is his theory of how to do ethnographic observation. He used the term 'thick description' to describe the context needed to make sense of anthropological field observations. Specifically, the key to a better understanding and interpretation of observed behavior is asking participants and native informers their own explanation, interpretation, or meaning of the activity they are engaged in.

Most of us go about our lives without really noticing things about our own culture. When you immerse yourself in another culture, you're really noticing things because they're all strange and new to you. But you also need to learn—from people within the culture—the cultural and situational context in order to make sense of what you're observing. That's thick description.

Some translators adapted that contextualizing approach to translation and began to talk about 'thick translation.' So, you have someone like Vladimir Nabokov. He translated Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. The translation is four volumes: one volume for the poem, and three volumes of notes. That's thick translation.

Again, it always comes down to a series of tradeoffs and translation choices. You're balancing one thing against another. One tradeoff is between what Umberto Eco called 'foreignizing' (translating durian fruit as *durian*, and thus keeping the cultural context—though your target audience might not know what durian is) versus 'domesticating' (changing the durian to *cantaloupe* for Western readers) the translation. Nabokov went with foreignizing, giving us the most literal translation he could render, and then stuffing the cultural context into the three volumes of notes. So, a thick translation can expand a 100-page book into 300 pages or more. I wanted to make sure my readers knew what a durian fruit is, with all its cultural significance. But I wasn't going to have three volumes of notes, and the publisher would have never gone for that. I tried to strike a balance by having a glossary.

As mentioned, durian has a pungent smell. It has a thorny skin. It is similar in size to a cantaloupe, and the translation or glossary might provide that helpful information. That's something that helps English-language readers visualize the size and feel of it. But I would not have translated it as *cantaloupe*.

Avery: Would you say that factors into an immersion of sorts? For me, I like marginalia, like four or five words. What is your specific problem with this?

Garcia: As a translator, part of you really wants to do that: to put copious translator's notes in the margins, or as footnotes—editorializing and providing explanatory scholia on every page. You want the readers to get everything you're getting out of the story. And you want them to understand the culture the way you've come to understand the culture. And that's part of why we read books from other languages and cultures, right? To

learn a little bit about another culture while reading a good story. You wouldn't want all that cultural specificity stripped away.

But there are publishing and economic pressures that go in just the opposite direction. Word count, for example. With each extra page, the publisher has to pay more money for production costs.

Gabrielle: But they want it to make sense to us.

Garcia: They also don't want the reader to have to stop and shift their eyes to read that footnote. That slows down the flow of reading, especially with fiction, which is read more for pleasure than for information. The editorial theory is that it's less readable.

Audience and Editors

Rick: Your English translation was published in Indonesia. Who is the audience? They already know the context. You shouldn't have to do all that.

Garcia: Yeah, this is a good point. The question is who the audience is going to be. The hope was to get some copies of the book to Australia, where you'd have a big English-speaking audience. I always hoped the translation would make it stateside and be republished here. I was hoping for that larger audience someday. I'm writing with them in mind, too.

But who are those English speakers in Indonesia? Well, most college-educated Indonesians in urban areas, and affluent Indonesians, speak a little English. There's cultural cachet associated with being able to read books in English. That's part of the market there, especially in Jakarta.

The Indonesian original had been a commercial hit there. So why would Metafor be interested in publishing an English-language copy? A couple of things. If you're an Indonesian author, you gain cultural and social status domestically by having your work translated into English. It also gives your artistic work more global reach. So that's a big part of it. The authors are very keen on this. There's a big expatriate community in Indonesia, too. So, that was part of the niche market the publisher was going after. These are native English speakers who tend to be very interested in anything Indonesian, because they're living there for the next year, or two, or three. You've got some people working in the oil industry and at the World Bank—that sort of thing. Not to mention the academics.

Avery: What were the responses to your translation?

Garcia: I never heard from the author directly, nor did I have the opportunity to work directly with her. In a lot of ways, it would have been nice, especially with an author who speaks English, so you can sit down and say, "Well, what were you really thinking here? I think I read it this way, but I might have got it wrong."

Avery: What would you say your level of satisfaction would be for this translation?

Garcia: Happy in some ways. In other ways, there are some things I feel like I will not be able to rest in peace until I get to fix them in print. But the thing is out in the world now, and that's just not likely to happen. In the story you read, there was an editor-introduced error—one among many—that I was rather unhappy about.

Sound and Sense: On Translation Choices

Avery: I just noticed that, but not in a negative way. In the introduction, you talked about how you wanted to capture her brisk tone with your use of commas to capture that staccato. I thought that was intentional.

Garcia: Thank you for the charitable reading. That is true, I was trying to retain the staccato rhythms of the original. But that was not what happened in this case—the case of a missing direct-object pronoun. In my original manuscript, it was there. It disappeared in the typesetting. That was one of several errata introduced between the manuscript and page proofs stage. The editor was a little heavy-handed, making some translation changes that I disagreed with. However, I must admit that in one case, he was right: *kebaya* is a distinctive Indonesian garment and should not have been translated as *bolero*. That unfortunate translation choice went against my own translation theory and practice aims for that book, namely, striving to retain cultural context and metaphors in a thick translation way.

The other thing in the scene from “Durian” is when she jumps into the river that is flowing with human waste. You’ve got to see one of these polluted rivers in Jakarta. They’re filthy, especially in certain parts of town. And you would not—I would not—even dip a toe in that river. You’ve literally got human waste floating down the river. Every once in a while, a dead body. The rivers can be very polluted in the urban areas. Don’t imagine some tropical paradise with aquamarine, crystal-clear water. You have to imagine that these are turbid, muddy, dirty rivers. And, yeah, downstream, people have to use the same river to wash their clothes.

Gabrielle: So that description you added. But if we don’t know about the human waste, that is an error?

Garcia: One rule of translation is not to add anything that isn’t in the original. Fortunately, the part about the river flowing with human waste was in the original, so there was no need to add anything to let non-Indonesian readers know that this urban, Indonesian river is nothing like the pristine waterways the reader might otherwise imagine. The filthiness of the river heightens the stakes (and the shock value) of the character jumping into the river to retrieve the durian.

I’ll just read some of the original: “*Tapi ketika hari-harinya lagi-lagi dirisaukan dengang keinginan untuk mencicipi durian itu, ia mulai kembali membenci durian dan dirinya sendiri.*” Since you don’t know what the words mean, you are forced to focus on the sound rather than the sense. That gives you some sense of the cadences of the original. The prose has more of a staccato cadence than the ticktock rhythms of English with its typically unstressed-stressed metric feet. Have you seen the Indonesian fight film, *The Raid*? If you want to hear what the Indonesian language sounds like when spoken, go watch *The Raid*. It has English subtitles.

Plot versus Story

Avery: I really like this part where you talked about how Djenar claimed to never use a plot. And then you went on to remind us about the presence of metaphors. In actuality, the stories are strong, and the plot ends with a twist. I guess I’m wondering what you think about how the plot affects meaning.

Garcia: I still wrestle with this one. Fiction writers and screenwriters often make a distinction between plot and story. What a lot of writers mean when they say, “I don’t care about the plot,” is that they care more about the emotional arc of the story. Writers of ‘literary fiction’ pride themselves on favouring character-driven stories over the plot-driven narrative of most genre writing. So, they disavow plot in the sense that every story should be as formulaic and plot-point connected as a detective story, where everything’s so cause and effect. I think when Djenar says she doesn’t have a plot, she is really saying that she is more concerned with the

emotional arc and the psychological reality of her characters. But you can see in the story “Durian” that there’s definitely a ‘plot’: the character desires something, resists temptation, gives in to temptation, and ultimately pays the consequences for doing so. In that sense, there’s a classic plot.

Literary Ambiguity

Avery: You were warning against metaphors being so one-to-one, like the reader who takes the leech for a direct reference to male anatomy.

Garcia: That’s a good one. Ambiguity is one of the hallmarks of literature. What is a leech? A leech is something that’s parasitic. It feeds on the life force of others, like a vampire. You wouldn’t want the reader to miss that broader but less literal—and in this case, less explicit and shocking—sense of the metaphor. Djenar often uses the shock value of transgressive acts or explicit sexuality to get at larger themes or an even deeper trauma. In this case, it’s a psychic trauma: the leech as someone who is sucking the life force out of you, and the even more traumatic impact of feeling betrayed or abandoned by the very person—your own mother—who is supposed to protect you and keep the home a safe place. Djenar is literalizing the metaphor, turning the metaphor of a leech-like person into a creature that is literally a leech...like Kafka does when turning Gregor Samsa into a literal insect. But the ambiguity of the leech as a metaphor (as with Kafka’s “insect,” which can be translated more ambiguously as “vermin”) prods the reader to consider more than just whatever shock value there might be in the crass, sexual dimension of the story. Much the same is going on in the story “Durian,” which on one level is a semi-surreal or absurdist story about a woman who cannot resist the temptation of durian...but on another level can be read as a metaphor for sexual desire and the consequences of becoming a slave to our desires more broadly.

Avery: I’m pleased to say thanks for helping the reader to avoid being too reductive in their reading.

Garcia: Ultimately, I’m trying to let the stories talk for themselves. Let me give you another example. There’s another story where all the characters have animal heads. One is a hyena. Another is more of a lion. The story is an allegory, or extended metaphor, about hypocrisy and demeaning others in a status-obsessed culture where an in-group looks down on their ‘lessers’ but is blind to their own vices and bad behaviour. The snobby hypocrites—in what looks like a Jakarta ‘club scene’ version of high society—behave like animals in even more shocking and transgressive ways than anything the monkey-narrator does. The other characters are incredibly rude to the main character and look down on her. So, whenever she does something they disapprove of, the other animals say of the main character: “Well, what do you expect: she’s a monkey?” (Which is where the book’s title—*They Say I’m a Monkey*—comes from.) The hypocrisy of the other animals highlights the absurdity of inheriting a higher social status based on being born into it and in-group conformity, as is often the case with wealth and social class. On one level, the story is really about this character feeling looked down on because of who she is in terms of her identity, social position, and failure to conform to gendered social expectations about proper behaviour for an attractive young woman in her society.

Cultural Metaphors

Garcia: I make the case for preserving cultural metaphors. Let me come back to the example of durian versus cantaloupe. There is a translation of a novel by one of the Generation 98 women writers. In her preface, the translator explains her translation philosophy and her translation choices in general. She said something like if the original compared something to “the aroma of steaming rice” (as a simile, metaphor and/or image), the English-language readers aren’t going to understand the warm feelings (the intended emotional evocation or

connotation) that the sight and smell of steaming rice conveys to Indonesians. So, the translator argued (and again, I'm paraphrasing) that she would change 'aroma of steaming rice' to 'bread fresh from the oven' because that better conveys all the warm, homey associations that the author is trying to convey by saying it was like steaming rice.

I take the opposite view on that particular translation choice. I understand that the translator was trying to retain the positive emotional connotation, though it meant sacrificing the culturally specific image and metaphor. But I'm not sure the two are mutually exclusive here. You don't have to change "aroma of steaming rice" to "bread fresh from the oven." Readers will get it and will appreciate it if you instead bring over and retain as much of the character's home culture as possible in the translation. In this case, given the context of the scene, the translation choice of "aroma" (as opposed to "smell" or "scent") does that.

They have an expression in Indonesia: if you haven't eaten any rice today, then you haven't yet eaten. Rice—their staple food—is so important to the Indonesian diet and culture that it almost doesn't matter what else you ate that day or at that meal. The Indonesian language has four words for rice. That is how important rice is to Indonesians. They have a word for rice when it's still in the field. They have a different word for rice when it hasn't yet been hulled. They have a word for rice after the hull is removed. They have yet another word for rice after it is cooked. Rice is so integral to Indonesian culture that you really have to keep the "aroma of steaming rice" image and metaphor in translation.

Register: Colloquial Speech, Slang, and Tone

Gabrielle: I know a lot of different languages have a very clear distinction between how they speak and the slang they use.

Garcia: Oh, that was a hard one.

Gabrielle: Was it?

Garcia: There is another story where this character says, "*Ngebul, ni ye.*" The sense-for-sense translation is "smoking, huh?" and the story context is that the unnamed speaker is shouting a reproach at a stranger out their window, expressing their disapproval of the character's behavior (because she's a woman smoking a cigarette in public). It's Jakarta slang. Sometimes Djenar puts Jakarta dialect in her stories, which most Indonesians don't use. So how do you translate that? Do I leave it as "*Ngebul, ni ye,*" and then add a glossary entry? Or do I insert a parenthetical English translation right after the untranslated word or phrase? I think that's what I did in that example. For the English rendering I had, "Smoking, huh?" It conveys the reproach, and the disapproving tone—coming from this random stranger who is expressing general social disapproval of women smoking. The editor changed it to "Hey, smokemouth!" which was much stronger. I felt it was too strong and less faithful to the original, rendering what I read as the restrained reproach of a stranger into a much harsher and more personal condemnation.

Gabrielle: I know that some languages have a clear distinction between how they speak to one another versus the way it's written.

Garcia: The formal versus informal register? Djenar's stories are inherently slangy. It's on the informal register. How did that pan out in the translation? For "Durian," I tried to make it simple and straightforward. That's her style. She's not overly wordy, not overwritten.

The Thin Line between Euphemism and Explicit Language

Gabrielle: A lot of her stories center around sexuality. So how do you make decisions between “having sex” versus “sleeping with” versus “screwing” versus “rape”? Are there clear distinctions between those?

Garcia: Yeah, you’re right. I did go with “screw” in one instance where the original used a different euphemism for the sexual act. This is the scene where a guy helps the character out of the open-sewer-like river that she falls into while chasing the durian along the riverbank. He immediately demands sex in exchange for the durian, claiming that he saw it first and so it belongs to him. Again, on the literary level, the story is a metaphor or allegory for desire and the consequences of becoming a slave to your desires. It’s about more than just sexual desire. I kind of want to say hedonism...and on a more literal level, the character’s pursuit of sexual desire has consequences for her children in the story. That’s a big theme in Djenar’s work; many of her characters are sexually promiscuous, or the character’s parents are sexually promiscuous. The story makes it clear that the character almost uncontrollably desires the durian, but knows she has to resist it, else there will be consequences. But ultimately, she doesn’t resist...and there are consequences. That’s really what the metaphor is about.

So, the guy says, “that’s my property, that durian, because I saw it first,” and then he tells her, “*kamu menginginkan karung itu, kau harus menyetubuhiku.*” The dictionary translation of *menyetubuhi* is ‘to copulate,’ so the sense-for-sense translation would be something like “if you want it, you’re going to have to sleep with me.” I would say that’s not too slangy. But, given the context, and the rough character here, I went with the stronger and slangier, “You’ll have to screw me for it.”

Gabrielle: Well, that’s something else that I noticed. This is still very raw and aggressive, and bold, but there’s no swearing.

Garcia: That was a conscious choice. I could have gone with, “If you want that thing, you’ll have to fuck me for it.” I felt that was a little too much. The untranslated original didn’t use language that strong in Indonesian, and Djenar rarely uses profanity in her stories. If I were writing the story, that’s probably how I would have said it. But as Djenar wrote the story, it wasn’t that crude, neither in its expression nor as an image. It’s kind of fascinating. The situation is so shocking. And yet, the description of it is more understated in Indonesian than how an American would probably say it. Despite the shocking material, Djenar is still rather reserved in her language. Again, she’s writing for an audience. It’s an Indonesian audience with Indonesian sensibilities. There’s an opening up of what’s permissible at that time period, but there are still limits in the Indonesian context. Also, the book ended up being published by what is probably the biggest publishing house (Gramedia) in Indonesia—and publishers have their own limits on what they are willing to publish.

Kyla: What were some of the other challenges of translating from Indonesian to English?

How Grammar Can Reflect Culture

Garcia: I’ll give you one language-specific challenge: the passive voice. Indonesian grammar loves the passive construction. When writing in English, you do just the opposite: you try to avoid the passive voice. It deadens the prose. And so the hard part is determining when I should preserve that. It matters more than you might think, because it’s not just a grammar or stylistic choice in Indonesian. There is also a cultural aspect to the passive construction: it is used to save face and maintain social harmony—important social values in Indonesian society. And that might be intentional and important here. When do I translate a passive construction to active voice? That, for me, is one of the most challenging parts of translating from Indonesian.

TRANSLATION TAKEAWAYS: SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Garcia: In reflecting on this conversation, I'd highlight a few takeaways. As a translator, I strive to understand and convey the cultural context of the story. No matter what your translation philosophy, a deeper understanding of the cultural context will help you make better translation choices.

When I realized how culturally specific metaphors can be—and how the same metaphor can signal differently in different cultures—I started referring to this class of metaphors as “cultural metaphors.” My translation philosophy is to preserve the cultural context and cultural metaphors.

The translation process is about so much more than a word-for-word translation, which can be done by machine translation. Large Language Models can translate using the statistical frequencies of phrases as translation equivalents and surrounding words as statistical “context,” even though AI does not understand the meaning of what it translates. Human translators, in contrast, must understand multiple levels of translation, including the sense-for-sense level, something that AI cannot do. The art of translation is often about figuring out how to best convey that sense in deep context, which is to say, what it means in the context of the story and its world.

Ultimately, the quality of a translation is the sum of its translation choices. That does not mean there is only one ‘correct’ way to translate. But you do need a translation philosophy for each work you are translating, at least enough of one to remain consistent in your translation choices. There are multiple levels of translation choice (word-for-word, sense-for-sense, the metaphorical level), and you will have to decide which tradeoffs to make (such as sound versus sense) since you won’t be able to preserve all levels of the original in translation. Some of these translation choices are dictated by the intended audience or restrained by commercial considerations: it’s hard to sell an overly experimental translation.

In preparing to be a literary translator, it helps to be a generalist and to have read widely. The more widely you've read, the more likely you are to find the “just right” turn of phrase when you need it. And, of course, it helps to be curious about things you don’t know, things that may be strange and foreign to you. And to know how to look up things you don’t know. You have to know a little about grammar, a little about editing, and a little about the business side of things. I think the advice on the mindset, temperament, and sensibility it takes to become a writer is also true for aspiring translators: Are you fascinated by language? Do you love sentences?

A final piece of translation advice: cultivate your translation community. You don’t do it alone. As a translator, you will need people in both languages who can give you feedback on some of the harder translation choices. Find people who can help out and answer those kinds of questions when you're stuck or need a sounding board. Create your own informal Translation Advisory Board, so you have more than one person you can ask, “What the heck does this mean to you? I just don’t get it. Am I missing something?” They’ll be like, “Oh yeah, that’s just an expression, just a figure of speech.”

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