On Translating Indonesia

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I still remember very vividly the moment I became hooked on the study of Indonesia and on the mystery of translation between Indonesian and English. I guess all of you, as translators, have experienced, as I did, that small (or perhaps for some, big) moment of bewilderment, of insight, of a sense of mystery... that remind us of the abiding paradox of translation: that all people – speaking through their languages and cultures – are the same and yet somehow, also deeply and mysteriously different.

I had been studying Indonesian for some time and I thought I was making progress. Of course, I had discovered that Indonesian and English divide up the world differently. I had discovered, for example, that Indonesian has four words for "rice" where we have just one in English. I had discovered that where English has separate words for fingers and toes, Indonesian sees fingers and toes as essentially the same thing – appendages at the end of your limbs – and therefore it refers them with a single word.

I had even begun acquire a dim awareness of the complex range of second person pronouns in Indonesian. In English we are blessed with a single word: you. French has tu and vous, and German also has two second person pronouns. Dutch has three: jij, jullie and U and I had heard that Indonesian has even more than three second person pronouns. I was living in Indonesia at the time, teaching at a university there, and one day I sent one of my students out on a linguistics field assignment. His task was to note all the words in Indonesian that would be translated "you" in English. He came back with an assignment titled The 52 Words for "You" in Indonesian. Many years later, when I came to write a dictionary of the Indonesian language – a dictionary for English-speaking learners – in the interests of economy I cut this number of pronouns in half, and in my dictionary there are only 24 Indonesian pronouns that correspond to "you".

I also discovered many "unusual", even exotic (to my English-speaking mind), categories of meaning – semantic domains, if you like. For example, Indonesian has what are called numeral classifiers – words that you use when you are counting things, and that indicate what semantic category the things belong to. We have a few examples of numeral classifiers in English. If you are counting cattle in English, you often use the word "head" to help you count them. "Twenty-five head of cattle." You can't use the word "head" to count things that fall into other semantic categories… you can't say, for example, "Twenty-five head of people."

Indonesian, like many Asian languages, has many numeral classifier words (though in Indonesian a good number of them are now dropping out of use in everyday conversation). For example, to count cattle in Indonesian you use not "head" but "tail". You say: "Twenty-five tail of cattle." What intrigued me were the (at least to my mind) strange bedfellows that were to be found within the same semantic categories. For example the numeral classifier batang was used to count cigarettes, pencils and pieces of chalk, but also rivers. The numeral classifier helai was used to count individual hairs on your head, but also sheets of paper. The numeral classifier pucuk was used to count firearms but also letters (i.e. items of correspondence). What did cigarettes, pencils and pieces of chalk have in common with rivers? What did hairs have in common with sheets of paper? What did firearms have in common with items of correspondence?

As I tried to track down the connections between these ideas I made the discovery that all translators make, indeed that all learners of a foreign language make: that every languages has a unique semantic system, and no matter how bizarre or irrational this system may appear to be at first, it is perfectly logical and coherent (or mostly logical and coherent) to native-speakers of the language. The word batang is used to count things that are long and narrow with two parallel sides, and this applies equally to rivers (with their parallel banks) as it does to cigarettes, pencils and pieces of chalk. The word helai is used to count things that are very thin, that have, if you like, a fragile thinness. When Indonesians look at a hair and a sheet of paper they see the similar thinness of these two things, not their very different areas or degree of flatness.

But what of firearms and letters? I puzzled over this for some time, and my Indonesian colleagues couldn't explain the association either. Then one day it hit me, when I saw the word pucuk used to describe a leaf growing at the top of a banana tree. When a fresh new leaf emerges, not only in a banana tree but in a number of other tropical plants too, it is rolled up, and it slowly unrolls and flattens out into the big wide tough leaf we all recognise. In the distant past, letters too were rolled up into a cylinder and sealed with wax. Now the connection between letters and firearms was suddenly clear. Firearms have barrels, long and cylindrical like newly sprouting leaves and like the rolled up letters of former times. Letters and firearms used to be similar in shape, and today, when letters come to you in flat envelopes, and indeed when they come to you in email form, in very formal Indonesian they are still counted with the numeral classifier pucuk.

But I have meandered away from that small moment of mystery, that small epiphany, that I mentioned at the beginning of this talk. I had been given the task of translating into Indonesian a newspaper article in English on a subject to do with zoology. I was making good progress, things were going well, when suddenly I came across a small sentence, lying like a landmine buried in a quiet forest path, and I stepped on it with all the blundering confidence of one who doesn't yet truly know the lie of the linguistic land. The sentence read: "Birds are the only living creatures with feathers."

"Birds are the only living creatures with feathers." My work came to an abrupt halt. I couldn't translate it. Why was this innocuous sentence so difficult? Well, let me try, if I can, to explain the difficulty. In English we have words like "feathers", "plumage", "fur", "bristles", "hair" and others to describe what grows from the skin of a living creature. Indonesian has what you might call a "generic" term, the word bulu. Bulu denotes body covering or a "coat" in a generic sense. It can be applied to most living creatures: mammals, birds, even insects (but not fish). English has the word "coat" that occasionally corresponds to bulu. For example you can say "Your cat has a beautiful glossy coat" but you couldn't say "Your canary has a beautiful glossy coat" and if you saw a hairy man, you couldn't say "Oh dear, he has such a long coat on him." But in Indonesian you can do this with the single, generic term bulu. I suppose you could say that, in English you can't talk generically about body covering or skin-growth with a single, comprehensive term, but in Indonesian you can.

Now you might ask, how then do Indonesians differentiate between feathers and body hair, or between feathers and fur… after all, they are different. Well, yes, they are different, but in Indonesia the difference is a subsidiary difference, it is secondary to the primary semantic focus which is the idea of a skin covering. When you absolutely must talk about a bird's plumage, distinguishing plumage from the other kinds of body covering that mammals or human beings have, you talk about "bird body-covering" or "bird bulu" (bulu burung).

So let’s come back to my sentence “Birds are the only living creatures with feathers.” The word bulu is the only option in Indonesian to translate “feathers”. So, rendering my translation back into English in a literal way, I could translate the sentence “Birds are the only living creatures with body covering.” This is patently untrue, so I go to my secondary or subsidiary term which produces this sentence “Birds are the only living creatures with bird body-covering.” Both translations are absurd.

Ladies and gentlemen, this conundrum has been eating away at me for several decades now, and I still haven’t found a clear, elegant Indonesian translation for this little sentence. Sometimes I have nightmares, I wake up in a sweat in the middle of the night seeing featherless birds with goose-bump skin mocking me from the branches of trees, or birds covered in glossy fur, miaowing like my cat. I have these nightmares, but Indonesians don’t. For them there is nothing nightmarish about the notion of bulu. (Unless they are translators, of course).

Learning a very different language, and trying to translate from it into English, or into it from English, can be a very stimulating experience, teaching you much about the multitude of different ways it is possible to be human. But it can also be a salutary, sobering experience. We are all conditioned in a very subtle, but very powerful way, to regard the world embodied in our native tongue, as “normal” – the ultimate yardstick. To put this another way, we have a need somehow to say “the buck stops here” conceptually speaking, and our mother tongue is the final yardstick, the final measure of normality. Unfortunately for our peace of mind, translation teaches us relativity. When you are confronted with a very different way of seeing the world, and you see how logical and true it is, you have no choice but to acknowledge the contingency – the relativity – of your own worldview.

On another occasion I had to translate an advertisement into Indonesian. The advertisement offered customers what it called an “exciting adventure holiday”. There was no problem locating an apt Indonesian counterpart term for “holiday”, but what about “adventure” and what about “exciting”? Though it may seem strange, Indonesian doesn’t seem to have words for “adventure” or “exciting”, at least not ones that correspond exactly, or that don’t sound forced or artificial or “foreign”.

The notion of “adventure” is one which, on the face of it, seems universal, but it turns out that it is something peculiar to certain cultures and is far from universal. The Macquarie Dictionary defines “adventure” as (among other things) “an undertaking of uncertain outcome, a hazardous enterprise” but this does not do justice to the resonances the term carries from deep within our history. In English-speaking culture, and I think throughout much of Europe, “adventure” has overtones of romance and individualistic daring. It has a lot to do with the tradition of knighthood that we have inherited from the middle ages whereby a man proved his courage and nobility by facing and overcoming dangers. The knightly tradition of adventure really bloomed during the age of European imperialism and migration when young men (and many young women too) went out to the colonies to brave the dangers of unfamiliar places and make their fortunes. Adventure and individualism go together: adventurers prove their courage by leaving the security of community and succeeding on their own. These days, of course, “adventure” has been re-incarnated (albeit in a somewhat debased, and less individualistic form) in mass travel and tourism.

In Indonesia, the notion of chivalric knighthood never bloomed. Indonesians were the targets of European imperialism. They were the victims of imperial adventurers from Europe. Indonesia has never possessed colonies in distant parts of the world that its young men and women could aspire to visit as “adventurers”.

And of course, even today, Indonesia is a country in which community prevails, and the "tall poppy" adventurer is not admired as he or she usually is in the cultures of Europe. Indonesia does not really have an eccentric, individualistic Don Quixote in its cultural history, the "quixotic" individual who goes out on his own and tilts at windmills.

The word "exciting" is also very culturally and historically contingent. "Excitement" and "adventure" seem often to go together. In fact one of the Macquarie Dictionary's definitions of "adventure" is "an exciting experience". The Macquarie Dictionary defines "excitement" as a condition of being "stirred emotionally, agitated, stimulated to activity". This rather bland, minimalist definition is okay as far as it goes, but it ignores the pleasure aspect of excitement. Excitement is something to look forward to, a condition of being emotionally aroused, but in a safe way. Safety is absolutely essential to the notion of excitement. When you ride on a roller-coaster, or do a bungee jump, or watch an action movie, or travel to an exotic tourist destination, you know you will be safe. Excitement, then, is an emotion of the comfortable, well-protected Euro-American middle class. That is why the notion is a new, alien concept in Indonesia where life is much less protected, and where safe but exciting leisure is a very new concept.

The Indonesian language is alien enough in its grammar, semantic categories and discursive character. But among Indonesia's hundreds of languages, in many ways the Indonesian language is the most accessible to English-speaking students. We need to keep in mind, though, that Indonesian is the national language of modern Indonesia, a kind of lingua-franca, that lies across a host of very different local languages. Some of these local languages have written traditions that go back a thousand years, further back indeed than the written tradition of Indonesian itself. I'd like to give you a very brief glimpse of one of these languages and the special problems it hosts for translators.

The Javanese language is spoken by about 70 million people, most of whom live in Central Java and East Java. (There are other local languages on the island of Java, most notably Sundanese, spoken by around 25 million people in the western part of the island, and Madurese spoken by perhaps 10 million people in East Java and on the neighbouring island of Madura.) One of the interesting features of all these languages, and it is especially prominent in Javanese, is the use of what are loosely called "honorific levels".

What is a honorific level? In English, for some notions we have a kind of hierarchy of terms that embody different degrees of respect. For example, when you are talking about a house, if you are talking informally, you can called it a "place" ("Come around to my place!"), then you have a "house", then more respectfully, a "home", and finally very respectfully and deferentially, a "residence". English doesn't compel us to choose one or other of these terms, though there is strong pressure to choose a term that is in keeping with the perceived respect due to the place or the owner of the place. So if you were listening to a newscast you probably would not hear the sentence "President George Bush stayed the night at the American ambassador's place." but rather "President George Bush stayed the night at the American ambassador's residence." Similarly you probably would not say "Your residence or mine?" unless you are speaking ironically. You would probably say "Your place or mine?"

In French there is a distinction between tu and vous. Making this distinction correctly is compulsory in French – basically it is not a matter of style, although personal style and irony etc. can influence whether you choose tu or vous in certain contexts. Now imagine a language in which the tu / vous distinction is multiplied around a thousand times over in the basic vocabulary of the language,

and indeed multiplied even further by another (third) ultra-respectful level of words.

When a Javanese person says a sentence, the words they choose instantly tell you something about the social relationship between the two speakers. So, for example, in Javanese if I want to say the sentence “That’s a very nice shirt you’re wearing.” and I am speaking, for example, to a small child, I will say “Apik men klambimu.” But if I am speaking to the child’s grandfather or grandmother, to whom special respect is due, I will choose completely different words to say exactly the same thing: “Agemanipun sae sanget.” Like the tu / vous distinction in French, this is compulsory, and, as I said, it applies to around 1,000 of the most common words in Javanese: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions – even affixes.

Now, the problem for a translator is that we have no real equivalent for this in English. In order to translate from Javanese, especially from conversational Javanese, you have to add some kind of commentary or clarification that is not in the Javanese text. So you might say: “That’s a very nice shirt you’re wearing,” he said speaking down, or “That’s a very nice shirt you’re wearing,” he said very deferentially. Needless to say this produces the translator’s nightmare: a translation that is good in the sense that it is accurate, yet at the same time it is a terribly bad translation in the sense that it demands the addition of words and phrases that are not in the original, and that are likely to make the translation tedious or unreadable.

Which brings me to the final point I want to make, the question that perennially troubles translators: Is it possible at all to translate between two cultures that are so different? Well, as I think you will agree, this is a silly question, because the only sensible answer to it is a silly answer: “yes and no”. Of course you can translate between two very different traditions, but to do so accurately you have to be inaccurate in the sense that you must do violence to many of the conventions in the source language for which there are no immediate counterparts in the target language. But if you try hard in your translation to do justice to all the uniqueness of the source language, your translation will very likely violate conventions of the target language perhaps to the extent that it becomes difficult or impossible to read.

Ladies and gentlemen, I don’t need to tell you about this dilemma. For you it is your bread and butter, the problem you wrestle with in every translation task you undertake. It just happens that, the dilemma becomes more acute – more stressful – the further you edge away from the familiarity of the Euro-American cultural realm.

The really important thing is not whether translation is possible or not, but what the translation process tells about the diversity of being human and especially, what it tells us about ourselves (as I have tried to indicate in the few examples I’ve been able to give in this talk). As I think you can see, I believe very strongly that the study of Indonesian, indeed the study any language from a tradition very different from that of Europe, can tell us a whole lot more about ourselves as English speakers than the study of any European language can. Because the starting point of the tradition concerned is so different, if we have any curiosity and humility at all, it compels us to ask far more searching questions about ourselves, and to relativise our Euro-American culture and its conventions in a more thorough, sometimes very disturbing, way.

I find this an exciting adventure.

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