

INTERNATIONAL MUSIC MARKETING AS TRANSLATION

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TRANSLATION IS MORE THAN LANGUAGE ARITHMETIC

Translation is normally associated with language equivalents, a sort of language arithmetic, a robotic task that computer software can do.¹ But translation is in fact much more than arithmetic, so I start with a three-dimensional example from Indonesia. Indonesia is a country rich in communities influenced historically by a wide range of religions, cultures, and colonial rulers. One such community is the Indonesian Chinese. During a 30-year period in which Chinese culture was banned in Indonesia,² one of the ways Indonesian Chinese young people acquired a Chinese identity was by watching “Chinese media”, films and TV series obtained through the black market. When I first began reading about this, I assumed that the “Chinese media” were in a Chinese language, so I was startled to learn that these films and TV series were in fact dubbed into English with Indonesian subtitles.

The effect of simultaneously seeing Chinese action and images, while hearing English dialogue, and reading Indonesian subtitles was likely less confusing than we may assume today as outsiders who did not directly experience it. What makes this media example “Chinese” is clearly not the language (and in fact many of these young Indonesian-Chinese do not speak or read a Chinese language), but instead physical appearance, action and gesture, family/social situations, and characters familiar from Chinese fables. Some types of meaning are translated and some are not. The visual meaning is not being translated, but the verbal meaning is -- in two ways. The first is spoken, in English; the second is written, in Indonesian. Three separate “languages” are experienced simultaneously. The experience of listening to music is just like that: music’s separate languages are melody, text, and rhythm.

In this paper I apply the art and mechanics of translation to the spread of music around the world with particular reference to Canada and Australia. I started with an example that is not music, not Australian or Canadian, and not marketing in order to get us quickly away from considering translation as simply the stuff of tourist phrase books and language software, both of which apply a type of arithmetic to words using the “equals” sign and recognizing only one correct answer and to demonstrate that translation is not just about words. What I call the “mechanics” of translation is the process of translation. What I call the “art” is the spirit of translation.

¹ This is the unrevised text of the conference paper. The only addition is the footnotes. Please refer to the handout that accompanied the paper.

² 1965-1998

Translation does not always happen *across* languages. It can happen *within* languages, and I continue with an example of translation *within* the English language since both Australia and Canada are primarily English-language nations.

When dealing with other English-language peoples, translators can get lulled into a sense of security of complete understanding . However, nouns such as “body English”, “hundreds and thousands”, “chesterfield”, and “larrikin” would not readily be understood outside their respective native English-language territories of North America, UK, Canada, and Australia.

Please turn to the second page of the handout, for two excerpts from the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* in three modern English translations.

[show Anglo-Saxon text on the OHP from Chickering’s dual-language edition]

The underlined passages on the handout show differences across the translations. It is obvious that none of the translators uses a language arithmetic -- there are many differences, some subtle, some striking -- they all bring imagination to their interpretation of the poem. The actual words here are likely familiar to any English reader (except “hirpling” in the Seamus Heaney example; it’s a Scots and North of England word meaning “hobbling” or “walking lamely”), but the style and the deep sense of *Beowulf* requires some effort to truly understand, as any poetry does.

The translator takes the source apart -- word by word -- to do his work, then re-assembles the whole for the reader’s interpretation. For the modern translator of *Beowulf*, the “source” is the Anglo Saxon poem, written in that alphabet. [point to overhead] For the Anglo Saxon scribe, however, the “source” was live performance. *Beowulf* was a performance piece.

TRANSLATION IS NOT FOREIGN TO MUSIC *INTERPRETATION*

A live performance -- of poetry or music -- is an interpretation, and a translation is an interpretation. The translator interprets the text in a way that best serves the purpose of the translation. Music interpretation is communication, and marketing is communication.

TRANSLATION AS A METAPHOR FOR INTERNATIONAL MUSIC MARKETING

Music marketers have to name and describe the invisibility of music and emotion. Marketing is a way of translating, usually initially within a language (the same language as the lyrics or nationality of the artist). I add here the important note that my premise throughout this paper is that marketing is neither harmful nor superficial and that it takes place on many business levels, from word-of-mouth to mass-media advertising.

Translation is a good metaphor for *international* music marketing because the original must remain intact but at the same time it must change. Translation is a good metaphor for international music marketing because it forces us to look in detail at the source -- the music -- and thus become better marketers because, having translated it, we understand the music more deeply. The goal of international music marketing is to successfully move product into a new country. The goal of verbal translation is to successfully move a piece of writing into another language. For both, the goal is acceptance and effectiveness in the new context.

The most important discipline in the “mechanics” or process of translation is that it requires the translator-marketer to look at the source in detail. Every ingredient of the source must be examined: including individual words, specific images, levels of meaning, sounds, and colours. For instance, if the “source” is a band from Australia that wishes to succeed in the Netherlands the translator-marketer would examine details of the band’s creative language (in lyrics, song titles, album titles, band name), its promotional language (in speech, press releases, bios, advertising text, slogans), as well as details of the band’s non-verbal “language” of behaviour, dress, performance style, and gesture. Translation cannot be done in a generalized way. The whole cannot be translated until it is taken apart, translated, and put back together. The whole is an aggregate.

The “art” of translation is not the process but the spirit in which the translator works. This is where the translator applies imagination and ability to understand the original source on at least three levels, which we can separate as “surface”, “shallow”, and “deep”. This is where the translator interprets the source for another recipient. The translator must serve at least two masters in an equitable exchange. In his book, *After Babel: Aspects of Language & Translation*, literary critic George Steiner does not shy away from the language of commerce:

“A translator is accountable to the diachronic and synchronic³ mobility and conservation of the energies of meaning. A translation is, more than figuratively, an act of double-entry; both formally and morally the books must balance” (p. 319).

Considering that the job of marketing is to communicate value to fans and consumers thereby creating demand, marketers are obliged to make manifest things that artists and listeners can leave ambiguous. I derive this idea from Umberto Eco’s book *Experiences in Translation*, in a section headed “Showing Things Left Unsaid”. Eco notes that when a written text must be *shown* (as in film or TV), the film or TV director must add visual aspects and “the spectator of the film is obliged to accept an interpretation with regard to which the reader of the novel enjoyed far more freedom” (p. 123).⁴ As I said before, music marketers have to name and describe the invisibility of music and emotion. They cannot leave a message unsaid. They translate, some may say a more accurate term is “popularize”. Professor Eco names “popularization” as a type of rewording, defining it as “expressing something difficult with simple words” (p. 75). When you do that, you are altering the work itself.

TRANSLATION IS NOT FOREIGN TO MUSIC *MAKING*

When popular music is created, whether by a songwriter, a beats producer, a jam band, or another type of composer/originator, it is understood that what is constructed is not permanent. I am not speaking here about the impermanence of popularity, but of the impermanence of the musical work itself. The creator knows that the song-work will most likely be [re]- arranged, re-mixed, covered, re-improvised, and sampled.

³ These terms signify the difference between the historic and the present state of meaning (diachronic = concerned with how something, especially language, has evolved over time; synchronic = concerned with how something, especially language, exists at one point in time).

⁴ By contrast, in the example from Indonesia, the verbal translators worked from a finished film or TV show.

In addition to being re-shaped in some way, the song-work will also be marketed -- on a small or large scale -- which gives it a spin aimed at reaching a listener, finding a consumer, earning some money for its creator.

I believe that there is a marketing “energy” inherent within music. As I said earlier, my premise is that marketing is neither harmful nor superficial. In terms of translation, it is the essence, the deepest level, that must never be lost.

TRANSLATION AS BETRAYAL

To use Umberto Eco’s lovely phrase, “translators play the game of faithfulness” (p. 39). What happens when a translator is not out to play the game of faithfulness and in fact betrays the work? Betrayal occurs when the work -- or the artist -- is misrepresented. There are plenty of examples of this in movie marketing: film directors no longer have any say in making the trailer for a movie, and trailers very often misrepresent the movie for marketing purposes.

It is hard to conclusively define “unfaithfulness”, but -- as is often said about obscenity, or beauty -- “you know it when you see it”. Betrayal by the translator-marketer is unacceptable. The creator must reserve the right for the song-work to mean nothing. Simply by describing the work, the marketer gives it meaning, so marketers must always be aware of the invisible line they must not cross.

TRANSLATING AUSTRALIAN AND CANADIAN POPULAR MUSIC -- AVOIDING ROUTINE TRANSLATION

In terms of international marketing, one great advantage that pop musicians from Australia and English Canada have is that they speak, write, and perform in the English language. With this increasingly mobile language inviting active exports, the first decision is where the most receptive new countries are.

Here’s an exercise that can help you do this. Pick a type of music and a source country and then - - without thinking too much -- write out a list of 15 countries progressively “distant” from the source country, distant not in terms of geography but in terms of the music you want to market. Then go back through the list right away and write down what would translate into the other countries. This will show the marketer where there are potential openings for the artist.

I suggest that you make your own list -- you’ll find that it’s easy to do 5 or 6 countries, but continuing through to 15 without stopping will test you. My list is on the handout, but don’t look at it until you have done your own.⁵

However “near” some countries may seem, beware of routine translation for any of them. Routine translations, using the “language arithmetic” I spoke of earlier, are inherently weak because they do not account for any but the most superficial meanings, and they don’t take the original to any destination. A translator-marketer is most tempted to use routine or literal translation when the language is the same, although this takes no account of the culture the

⁵ 15 Countries List -- progressively “distant” from the USA. My own list: UK, Canada, Australia, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Turkey, India, Iraq, Israel, South Africa, Senegal.

translation is intended for. Literal translation in a different sense -- the sense of copying trends -- is also weak as a business strategy. Here's the advice of a top "trendwatcher" in the United States, Robyn Waters: "Avoid literal translations of any trend concept or hot idea. It's hard to differentiate yourself when you merely copy what's already out there" (p. 85).

TRANSLATING IN A TRIANGLE

Music rarely wants to move in just one direction, to just one new place, and as I was preparing this paper, I started to ask myself what would happen if we started to think about translation in a triangle rather than one line between a source and its destination. The triangle idea also suggests itself especially for Australia because of that country's geographical position in a triangle with China and India, both regarded as enormous emerging markets for virtually all products and services.

Triangles can be different sizes and shapes, closed or open. Please look at the first page of the handout for three sample triangle types. There are several consequences to thinking in terms of translating in a triangle. First, it automatically broadens the thinking when choosing potential new markets (doubling at the very least) and thus increases the odds for success. For example, it is common for non-US artists to focus on the USA as the only desired expansion market, even though it's the hardest market to break. Thinking in terms of a triangle -- that is, adding another target market -- immediately creates more options and more creative marketing. As a second consequence, translating in a triangle can lead to longer-term stability and reciprocity of music trade, especially if it is a closed triangle as in "sample a" on the handout.

[Sketches are of three types of triangles: a) equilateral, closed; b) equilateral, one open side; c) right angle with unequal sides plus hypotenuse.]

Now please turn to the last page of the handout and the three sketches of triangles. Without turning this into a paper about geometry, here is an explanation of each of these. The first triangle model is equilateral, closed: three countries with sufficient potential to suggest reciprocal three-way trade. Let's add country names to illustrate: Canada, Australia, Netherlands. The second triangle model is equilateral, with one open side: the source country is the common point. In this model the other two countries have sufficient potential to suggest reciprocal trade with the source country, but not necessarily with each other. Let's add country names to illustrate: Canada (source country), France, UK. As a side note, one result of the initial trade with the common source country could mean that in the future the triangle does close. The third triangle model is a closed right angle triangle with unequal sides: the source country is the right angle corner. The other two countries both have sufficient but different levels of potential. The two recipient countries also trade with each other more than with the source country. Again let's add country names to illustrate: Australia (source country), USA, Canada.

Thinking in terms of translating in a triangle can of course extend to more than two target countries. Once the translator-marketer has looked in two directions, they have had to decide what is the essence -- the inherent marketing "energy" -- that must not be lost, and they understand what can (and should) be changed. This approach could be used right through your whole list of 15 countries.

THE DEATH OF DISTANCE: DOES DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION RENDER TRANSLATION IMPOSSIBLE OR UNNECESSARY?

Discussions of verbal, visual and cultural translations raise questions about how far a translation can go before the original is lost, and whether, therefore, exporting music with no translation at all is the only solution. Digital distribution raises similar questions because it works with digital marketing -- marketing available all the time, on demand, anywhere in the world that there is access to the Internet. On-demand marketing removes time and distance. If marketers do not know who and when and where music is being sought, found, listened to, or sold on the Internet, how can they translate the music appropriately?

Digital distribution removes intermediaries. The translator-marketer described in this paper is an intermediary. I believe that the music *consumer* cannot and should not be isolated from marketing -- consumers are defined by how they are sold to. Nevertheless, I also believe that the music *listener* (like the novel reader in Umberto Eco's film example) should be allowed to make their own interpretation, unaffected by any influence other than that of the "pure" music.

The pop music industry's strength lies in the universality of its multiple meanings. Love lyrics, dance beats, and pop melodies travel the world with no need of translation. But less universal music -- including many genres and languages -- needs marketers who can dig deeply into the music's languages and translate without betrayal.

Thank you.