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Tackling the sonorous dimension in African novels and grounding this aesthetic device for translation purposes

Abstract

This paper is a presentation of my dissertation project.

Within postcolonial translation studies, no-one is contesting the idea of hybridity and diglossia of African writers. Some consider African writing as a vernacular shift of European languages (see Bandia, 2001). Others present African writers as first and foremost translators (Ojo, 1986). Most scholars agree on the point that African literature is a negotiation between a European written legacy (the *novel*) and an African oral tradition (Coetzee, 1999), offering a syncretic and oxymoric production of its own: the oral novel (Anyinefa 2000). “The Africanness of [the African writer’s] work is (...) created by the images, figures of speech and other rhetorical devices drawn from the African orature and environment.” (Ojo, 1986: 295) In spite of the impressive amount of scientific literature regarding orality in African writing, one must say that little has been done on addressing orality as “vocal dimension” and that virtually nothing has been undertaken for considering the sonorous aspect of African literatures¹ for translation purposes. This dissertation will try to tackle the sonorous dimension of African fiction writing based on an analysis of five African novels written in English and their translation into French and five African novels written in French and their translation into English. I will first analyse the sonorous dimension in the original corpus before showing whether this aspect has been taken into account (and how) or muted in the translated versions. The purpose of this dissertation is to show how literary translators can ground their creative translation process in relevant African aesthetic discursive devices. I will draw on works by Canadian medievalist Paul Zumthor (1983) who established the fundamental concept of « vocality » and proposed to depart from traditional Western critique to address orality as an aesthetic dimension of the written text and on a dissertation by Ryan Fraser (2007) who reflected upon the ways in which translators deal with the sonorous dimension of texts. Antoine Berman and Barbara Folkart will provide inspiration for a methodology to analyse and compare the anglophone corpus with the francophone one (original versions as well as translated ones).

¹ Intentional plural.