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Translating a troubled return: Comparative fieldwork on deportees in the Dominican Republic and Jamaica

Abstract

These research notes will focus on ideas surrounding planned and unplanned language differences encountered in data collection and analysis. Reference will be made to research conducted in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic between 2004 and 2008 on deportation, using in-depth interviews, mini-focus groups, content analysis, and secondary data, with a view to examining some of the issues surrounding collection and analysis of data across language barriers. Beyond Spanish and English, the additional element of Caribbean creoles will also be discussed. Were such barriers merely linguistic, traversing them would be less challenging. However, combined with, inter alia, inevitable culture differences as well as vast disparities in the education levels of the researcher and the researched, complexities arise. These complexities will also be addressed.

Introduction

Translators are obliged to make difficult choices when jumping through cultural and linguistic hoops encountered in the research process. For this reason, translation and controversy often walk hand in hand. Based on my postgraduate work comparing receiving country deportation policy in the Dominican Republic and my native Jamaica between 2004 and 2008, these research notes look at negotiating language differences and the power issues they raise during the research process.

I employed Patton's (1990, 71) phenomenological perspective, which he sees as the use of methods that capture people's experience of the world without necessarily sharing or

participating in their experience. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with (predominantly male) deportees¹ and government workers in the security sector. NGO representatives provided a more gender balanced group of interviewees. Analysis of documents accompanied by a newspaper content analysis constituted an additional space where independently written materials could be used to better examine local policies towards deportees following the 1996 enactment of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in the US.

I encountered various language forms in the research process, including *inter alia*: Spanish and English spoken by persons with formal education beyond the secondary school level; Dominican street Spanish or dialect; urban and rural forms of Jamaican Creole (patois/“patwa”); and language forms acquired by Jamaicans and Dominicans in the US, particularly during their incarceration.

These notes will begin with comments on the literature on fieldwork translation and a brief discussion of ‘research imperialism.’ Examples of specific cultural and/or linguistic issues that arose during the research are also provided.

The fieldwork translation process

Much of the practical fieldwork translation literature thus far has focused on large cross-country research projects that contrast with the small-scale research described in these notes. Jacobsen and Landau (2003, 192) flag the risk of biased responses from using translators or local research assistants, as well as potential inaccuracies stemming from a researcher’s lack of fluency in a local language. Bloch (2007, 239-240) discusses the need to test appropriateness of different

¹ 96.5 percent of those deported to Jamaica (Headley 2005, ix), and 94 percent of those deported to the Dominican Republic for criminal convictions served in the US are male (Data obtained from Dominican deportee NGO *Bienvenido Seas* in 2006).

concepts across languages and for back translation using interviewers from corresponding linguistic groups.

I conducted all interviews myself but sought assistance from a native speaker in revising the English to Spanish translations of the research instruments used – three short questionnaires with simple open-ended questions. This exercise was made easier by the similarities between the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, which have both been on the receiving end of US criminal deportation policies.

My small research project called for translation of tape-recording transcriptions. Sight translation of documents was also necessary on the spot to ensure that documents received were understood, as was interpretation of sorts if the language used was not a written language. In the Dominican Republic, I listened in Spanish, recording my interviews when so permitted, and took notes in English unless equivalent words failed to materialize.

Language and power implications

In the Dominican Republic, I felt that South-South cooperation ideals initially protected me from Halloran's 'research imperialism' (1998, 45)² and was often greeted as a sister. However, the existence of developing country elites is increasingly highlighted as scholars break away from aspects of dependency theory that 'tended to marginalize or neglect internal class considerations' (Martin, 1991, 207). I was thus aware of my susceptibility to many of the pitfalls historically attributed to Western researchers because of my middle class freedoms, including access to a US visa and foreign currency.

² Hanitzsch summarises this as a type of research that legitimated and reinforced established global inequalities while strengthening Third World dependence on the West. (2008, 114)

Added to this, was my awareness that my tenuous insider standing might be revoked should my eventual findings not meet with insider approval. This brought to mind considerations about working with vulnerable populations and ethical issues confronted by researchers who access interviewees' personal information (Palys and Lowman, 2002). A specific ethical issue in relation to translation was the need to ensure that information provided to me in languages other than English was transmitted as accurately as possible in English. This is always challenging, and indeed some of the translation barriers encountered are discussed in the next section.

Language hegemony also came to the fore. Use of the English language, particularly by an educated anglophone interviewer, had power implications in marginal communities. Purcell-Gates notes that,

the hegemony of English is widespread, primarily reflecting the dual roles of economics, in this world of 'free trade' and globalization, and of military might. The power of the United States is behind the current domination of English worldwide. However, traces of prior English language hegemony [reflect] the historical colonizing activity of England. (2007, 23)

The Dominican Republic was once occupied by the US with which it still has an asymmetric relationship based on evident economic, military and size differentials. I was regularly reminded of this. On one disturbing occasion in June 2006, a resident rushed into the lounge at a *Hogar Crea* rehabilitation house in Santo Domingo. Having heard that an English-speaking lady was interviewing deportees, he somehow interpreted this to mean that I could help to rescue him and others from the nightmare of deportation. This incident illustrates a commonly held assumption that English speakers are in a privileged position.

Other linguistic and cultural challenges

I anticipated differences in culture and language to present challenges as I journeyed from my native Jamaica to the Dominican Republic. Not unexpectedly, some recurrent translation and

interpretation challenges arose. Here, I will focus on four examples relating to translations of race; the free flow between Jamaican Creole and standard English; US-Dominican prison slang; and nascent attempts to forge a consensus on a term designating persons sent back ‘home.’

‘Blackness’

‘Blackness’ in the racially diverse Caribbean can be a problematic term, particularly when crossing from the English-speaking Caribbean to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Translation and interpretation of the word ‘black’ when referring to race issues can become perilous.

Any reference to significant African roots or heritage in connection with the Dominican people has traditionally been far from the mainstream³. Wigginton’s (2005) examination of Dominican public school textbooks found a perception that blackness represented a lower social status and could be prevented through generational whitening (*blancamiento*), as well as the presentation of blackness using hyperbolized stereotypes. Equally important, two UN human rights experts visiting the Dominican Republic in October 2007 reported, ‘a profound and entrenched problem of racism and discrimination against ... blacks within Dominican society’ (UN News Centre, 2007). This distancing from blackness has survived the migration journey in many locations. Itzigsohn et al (2005) found that Dominican immigrants in the US tended to respond that they were ‘*hispano/a*’ or ‘*indio/a*’, while indicating that they were perceived by the US mainstream as ‘black’.

Many Dominicans who would be considered black in neighbouring Jamaica find it insulting to be referred to as black, which some associate either with objects or Haitians.⁴ Eison-Simmon’s comments on being an insider (2001, 97) with women of colour ‘cultural consultants’ in the

³ This is not to say that there is no critical debate among Jamaicans about issues such as skin bleaching (Charles, 2003). However, an established black elite and the long tenure of a dark-skinned Prime Minister, PJ Patterson (heralded in some quarters as ‘black man time’), renders the issue almost as much one of class as one of race in Jamaica. While some dark-skinned Jamaicans might be aiming for a prosperous “brown” ideal, there is a visible black middle class – the same cannot be said of the Dominican Republic.

⁴ Often the main target of anti-black racism in the Dominican Republic.

Dominican Republic owing to their shared racial and gender characteristics are interesting in this regard. Her story of being referred to as '*india clara*' resonated with me. During visits, I have always been affectionately referred to as '*india*' and '*morena*' – never '*negra*' (black). My early—and subsequently discontinued—attempts to refer to myself as '*negra*' in a straight interpretation of how I see myself in Jamaica were more often than not rejected in the Dominican Republic.

Aversion to things black is also clearly reflected in the use of '*el blower*' in hair salons in impoverished *barrios* and exclusive neighbourhoods. This near-miraculous styling using a very hot blow dryer with a hairbrush (a process which I have enjoyed as a woman but also automatically deconstructed as a black Jamaican researcher) ensures that hair is straight but bouncy and as Caucasian as possible. Through the lenses of a post-'consciousness' Jamaican this may be interpreted as self-denial, and Jamaica's established black intelligentsia may feel duty-bound to 'rescue' fellow persons of colour away from '*el blower*' and guide them into black consciousness.

If no attempt is made to frame this and other culturally specific phenomena from a position of immersion and understanding, a researcher/translator may be unable to analyze and faithfully present local situations. Finding appropriate language in translating words that reflect the culture of a Dominican 'other' may become even more elusive. My translation challenge also lay in the absence of a full range of equivalent terms in Jamaica. In the end, I found that this problem could be partially solved through the use of extensive footnotes or explanations for non-Dominicans. For example, my '*morena*' or '*india*' refers to a medium-brown complexion—with all the leeway and subjectivity that implies.

Intermingling of local dialect(s) and English

Language barrier issues were also encountered in Jamaica. Here, one deportee relates how he had to disguise his American accent at an interview in Kingston.

*OK I went to *** to get a *** job, and it was two deportees, me and this other guy, so the guy was like, the lady, who was giving us the test, said to the guy, ahm 'I hear you have an accent' an di guy 'Yes!' an then she said 'where you from' an he was like 'I'm from New York' an stuff like that so she said ahm 'so what are you a deportee' and she said, he said 'yes' and she said 'what were you deported for?' and he said something like drugs and whatever, and, and she seh 'oh, I'm sorry, we doesn't accept deportees' So, so you know what I'm saying **so den mi change-mi not even badda start talk like ...mi change mi start gi ar de raw, raw ragamuffin caw mi ah seh wah – yu nah tek deportee – mi a nuh deportee again cause me waan di job, an me affi get i.**⁵ And they took me, you know.⁶*

The translation challenge from this transcript came from the interchange between English and Jamaican Creole used to describe his successful linguistic and cultural camouflaging. In the end, the quote was left intact; from a bilingual perspective, any attempt to translate it seemed futile because the choice of language here is not guided only by concerns about how best to communicate something, but more importantly about how to perform and present oneself in a certain way. This performative dimension of choices about language use would be made invisible if the whole quote was presented in English. However, this was another example where footnotes and explanations were useful for non-native audiences.

Prison talk

Prison slang in the Dominican Republic was encountered most strikingly with recently arrived deportees. One deportee arriving for processing at the Villa Juana police station in Santo Domingo in October 2008 retorted sharply to a remark by saying 'Yo sé camina(r) en la máxima.' Interestingly, interpretation or translation into Jamaican Creole would perhaps be

⁵ The interviewee describes how he began to speak in a pure, urban street variant of Jamaican patois to a job interviewer to ensure that she would not detect a foreign accent. He badly needed the job and did this because he realized she would not knowingly hire a deported person.

⁶ Mini focus group at a Kingston drug rehabilitation facility in 2007.

more accurate than into English. One Jamaican Creole translation could be, ‘*Mi know di runnings inna maximum security*’ or another, ‘*Mi know ow it gwaan inna maximum security.*’ A standard English translation could be, ‘I know how to survive in maximum security prison.’

This standard English translation provides meaning but removes critical class and other elements from the statement by turning it into a language that has a long history of being written and used by elites, whereas Jamaican Creole was the spoken language of an oppressed majority long before attempts to write it and advocate for its classification as a language.⁷ I found myself automatically translating any Spanish quotes into standard English, but strongly suspect that as time goes by academics in Jamaica may increasingly translate expressions from other languages into Jamaican Creole for local audiences.

From deportees to repatriados

Terminology also came into question with the use of the very word ‘deportee’ in Jamaica. The problem is not the word itself but the stigma of criminality and rejection attached to it in the media and popular culture in both the sending and receiving country. A similar phenomenon was observed in the Dominican Republic, where NGOs and returnees preferred the term ‘*repatriado*’ to ‘*deportado*’.

However, I have been unable to accept the English-language term ‘returnee’ as definitive because it can refer to any number of returning residents with widely varying experiences. Involuntary returned resident is accurate but unwieldy, and IRV is not yet a well-known acronym that can be used widely. A slightly better alternative may be ‘deported person.’ Like ‘enslaved man’ as opposed to ‘slave’, it restores some of the humanity stripped away during a humiliating process.

⁷ Although a standardized format for writing patois has been available for decades, I confess that like many other Jamaicans before me I have strayed from it. This could be attributed to a combination of exuberance and indiscipline when immersed in this highly auditory language, where vocabulary evolves constantly because of the innovative nature of Jamaican street culture.

Progress in the Spanish language has been better. Deportees in the Dominican Republic have at least managed to smooth off the rough edges by accurately using '*repatriado*' in referring to someone who has been repatriated, although the term has not been widely embraced by the society.

A Dominican NGO leader confided to me that he opens awareness-building workshops with a defiant '*soy deportado, ¿y qué?*' ('I'm a deportee, but so what?'). He has, however, been promoting the term '*repatriado*' to reduce the stigma against deported persons.

Conclusion

In these brief research notes, I have outlined some of my experiences and challenges as a researcher-translator in two linguistically distinct countries, one in which I am an insider (Jamaica) and another in which I have evolved into a neighbourly insider-outsider (Dominican Republic). Class considerations and linguistic hegemony have also been discussed, along with challenges in communicating meaning across cultures without detracting from the richness of the culture of origin and the cultural context of the terms used.

Given arguments about cross-cultural insensitivity and imperialism, particularly – but not only – in large cross-country studies, these challenges and implications of translation, and the questions of power and representation they raise, must be addressed with great care by researchers from any (linguistic, cultural, disciplinary and methodological) background.

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