

Pinter in Cantonese: Language, Stage and Meaning

In 1492 Queen Isabella of Spain was formally presented with a copy of Antonio de Nebreja's *Gramatica*, the first grammar written about any modern European language. The Queen asked, "What is the book for?" and the Bishop of Avila replied, "Your Majesty, language is the perfect instrument of empire." The Bishop of Avila was merely stating a well known political fact: language is a necessary and useful instrument of politics. The Greeks and Romans spread their language as far as their armies maintained their outposts, and since then every colonial power has attempted to do the same thing. Colonists impose their language on the subject people and demand or require that they express their loyalty to or acknowledge the unity of the empire by using the single approved or official language. In Hong Kong the only official language was English until three years ago, when Chinese was given equal status with English as an official language. As so often happens in a new nation, the need for national identity expresses itself in an attempt to adopt or revert to a national language. A problem arises, however, where there is a multiplicity of languages found within the nation. A government confronted with the problem is likely to discourage the use of regional dialects since these appeal to local loyalties rather than to a single national loyalty.

The language situation in Hong Kong is complicated by Hong Kong being on the political periphery of Britain, as well on the cultural periphery of China. As far as the official languages are concerned, there is little doubt that local residents reserve the use of English for their dealings with foreigners and for governmental affairs, and opt for Chinese in other situations. But the question is "which dialect of Chinese?" Both the Communist and the Nationalist Chinese governments use Mandarin (a northern dialect) as the official language. Most books are written in the vocabulary and syntax of this dialect. But the predominant local dialect spoken in Hong Kong is Cantonese, a southern dialect. So a Hong Kong person doesn't really write as he speaks. And when it comes to speech, he may choose from English, Mandarin (if he can), some other regional dialect, Cantonese as it is spoken in Canton, or a kind of hybrid pidgin Cantonese of Hong Kong which is characterized by its assimilation of English words and phrases, and by English structures and syntax. Each language performs a different function within the society. Consequently the

choice of language is not just whimsical but part of a speech strategy. For instance, English is spoken only when necessary (i.e. in the presence of foreigners or as a power strategy), traditional Cantonese with older people and on more formal occasions, and what I call pidgin Cantonese with close friends. A Hong Kong person achieves this switch scores of times each day from one language to another—a complex operation of selecting from different vocabularies and different grammatical structures.

This description of the language situation has a bearing on producing plays in Cantonese in Hong Kong, a problem which I myself have faced. Playscripts for both Chinese plays and translations of western drama are published in “pai hua”, a style based on Mandarin, with vocabulary and syntactical structures often different from Cantonese. The speech rhythm of “pai hua” is also different from that of Cantonese (it is rather like what BBC English is to a Geordie or an Irishman). When a Cantonese actor reads his script, he has to do a fair amount of translating of what he sees into Cantonese, and he reads the script with a Cantonese pronunciation. He does this, most of the time, perfectly comprehensibly, but in terms of vitality and rhythm much is often lost in the rendering. In recent years, the use of Cantonese dialect on local television drama has given Cantonese a boost, and young people in Hong Kong are relying more heavily on the more natural vernacular in dramatic productions, this in opposition to the more literarily inclined who champion “pai hua”. I find myself siding with the regional dialect enthusiasts because I feel that drama often needs the immediacy and natural rhythm of native speech. Moreover, the use of regional dialect is important if one is to try to reproduce the same effect in presenting plays in other languages written in dialect, as some of Pinter’s plays are. I did, in my production of *The Caretaker*, for instance, use different varieties of Cantonese to simulate the different registers and idioms used in the original.

This somewhat general preamble is necessary in order to introduce the problems of translating Western plays into Chinese and of putting them across to a Chinese audience in Hong Kong. Having dealt with these preliminaries we can proceed to the actual problems of translation.

Yen Fu (1854-1921), one of the earliest and most respected of Chinese scholars who translated western literature for a Chinese readership, laid down three requirements for good translation: faithfulness, comprehensibility, and elegance. This sound

advice is followed by many good translators of texts. But translations of plays to be performed on stage for a Chinese audience living in a British colony demand more than these qualities.

The vocabulary in a language allows people speaking that language to respond to their environment in a way that has value to them in their lives. By the same token, some people are linguistically deaf to words which other people consider obvious, yet can be very perceptive in talking about things others have no easy way to describe. For instance, the Koya Indian language attaches no significance to the making of any distinctions between dew, fog and snow. When questioned about these natural phenomena, a Koya Indian can find a way to describe them, but only in a long and arduous manner. On the other hand, he has the linguistic resources to speak about seven different kinds of bamboo; these seven extraordinary specific words would be very difficult to translate into English.

Many of the technical terms for tools and furnishing materials mentioned in Pinter's *The Caretaker*, such as jigsaw, fretsaw, formica, raffia, afromosia, have no exact equivalent in the Chinese vocabulary. They are known either by their transliterations or by not altogether exact translations in "pai hua" and by brand names in pidgin Cantonese. In any case this kind of term plays a much more restricted part in the vocabulary of the Hong Kong Chinese with the exception of those in the trade. However, sometimes even commonplace words describing buildings or furnishings are difficult to translate. "Penthouse", variously translated as "a room at the top", "a luxurious flat", "a luxurious suite situated on the top floor of the house", loses by the translation either in terms of the social context of the word or in the rhythm of the sentence in which it appears. Both make a great difference to a dramatic production.

In some cases a verbal translation can be achieved, but to little purpose as the whole significance is lost in translation. Take, for instance, the mention of "vegetable pan" in *The Caretaker*. In the Chinese, kitchen utensils are categorized under methods of cooking rather than kinds of food to be cooked. When Davies tells Aston that he found his wife's dirty underclothes in the vegetable pan, he clearly intends to shock Aston and the audience. In this case, accuracy of word translation should be sacrificed in order to preserve the shock value by translating "vegetable pan" as "soup pot"—that article being sacred to the Cantonese who think of soup as the panacea for all ills, and as the salvation of mankind. Gene-

rally speaking, however, most of the vocabulary relating to Western customs and innovations is transliterated into Chinese e.g. "sandwich", "cheese" and "sofa". In fact pidgin Cantonese abounds in such vocabulary.

Not only do emotional reactions and attachments to pots and pans differ from culture to culture, taboos differ even more obviously. Any overt disrespect, especially violence, to the aged is taboo in a Chinese society, because it has been ingrained so deeply into us that respect for age is a cardinal virtue. The treatment of Davies, especially Mick's treatment of Davies, in *The Caretaker* shocked the Chinese audience when I produced the play in Hong Kong. It set up a very strong conflict of sympathies and one which I feel is probably more intense than was originally intended. Some others of Pinter's plays such as *The Homecoming* may arouse even greater antagonism in a Chinese audience.

On the other hand, racial prejudice is openly recognized and accepted by a Chinese society with as little demur as it is accepted by Alf Garnett or Archie Bunker. Once Blacks was translated as Indians, the strong and innate hostility of the Southern Chinese towards the former was let loose. This factor again doubtless accords to Davies more sympathy than the author had meant him to have from us.

Obscenities, too, are deeply related to the culture of the language. The four-letter words can be translated, but not so easily the blasphemies connected with the Christian religion. An expression like "Christ" or "Jesus" in translation does nothing at all to a Chinese audience. Nor do scatological terms and expletives have any effect on a nation of people who can discuss their biological functions freely and in a matter-of-fact manner in social intercourse. Many of the obscenities and expletives have, to remain effective, to be changed to contexts of sex, or of incest, and even into such wholesale curses as would involve the total extinction of a family or clan before they can achieve the intended effect of shock.

So far the problems discussed are general ones which confront any translator. I should now like to discuss the particular problems of translating Pinter into Cantonese and of putting him across to a Chinese audience. (I shall draw most of my examples from *The Caretaker*.) Pinter is especially difficult to translate not only because he uses words meticulously and with amazing virtuosity, but because he uses words as a dramatic strategy, constantly reminding his audience of the presence of sub-textual meaning, by

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weaving an intricate arabesque with what would seem to be otherwise unremarkable words. Words may evoke associations which, though not entirely acceptable lexically, are nevertheless relevant and significant to the central theme. One need only look at the titles of his plays to see this at work. The usual meaning of *The Dumbwaiter* is a miniature lift used for serving food, for delivering it up from a basement kitchen. But when the expression is written as two separate words they describe a waiter who is not very intelligent, or one who waits in silence. Then again this last meaning brings to mind Milton's famous line "They also serve who only stand and wait", which raises the question of values and goals. "What do they serve?" and "What are they waiting for?" All questions which are pertinent to the play.

If one were to translate this title into Chinese, one could do no more than call it "the miniature lift for serving food". None of the other associations would be possible. *The Dumbwaiter* ceases to become a waiter and becomes "the food lift" instead! *The Homecoming* means a family reunion after a prolonged separation. But the two component parts of this word carry associations of sexual fulfilment and self-revelation—"coming" in the sexual sense in connection with the relationship between Joey and Ruth, "home" in the sense of revelation in that most of the characters find a few "home truths" about themselves. And yet it is the nature of "home truths" that when others confront us with them, we often find them equally revealing of the preoccupations of our advisers, hence we are thrown into the uncertain and disturbing regions of psychological motivations and relationships. This line of speculation, though apparently far-fetched, is yet germane to the play.

It is the attempt to bring out all these levels of word-play in Pinter which frustrates a translator. Arbitrary adherence to the most literal word translation of the titles of the plays makes the task of the producer more difficult by fixing the audience's anticipation to the most superficial, though most overt, level of meaning.

In my production of *The Caretaker* in Chinese, my translator had to settle for "caretaker" in the sense of "janitor". There was just no way of including the other implications of "a person who cares for someone", or "a person who is cautious", or "one who takes other's cares on his own shoulders", or the rather remote possibility of "one who takes care of someone" in the gangland euphemism for liquidation.

Pinter deliberately loads his words with different associations so that he can suggest more than one thing at a time. A brief

example from the conclusion of *The Birthday Party* demonstrates this point clearly:

Meg: Where's Stan?

(Pause)

Is Stan down yet, Petey?

Petey: No . . . he's . . .

Meg: Is he still in bed?

Petey: Yes, he's still asleep.

Meg: Still? He'll be late for his breakfast.

Petey: Let him . . . sleep.

Having seen Stanley reduced to utter passivity and almost carried off by Goldberg and McCann, and having witnessed Petey's feeble protests over Stan's departure, we find Petey's choice of the word "sleep" very revealing. He could have used it as a euphemism for death as in "put to sleep" or he could have chosen it for its association with the proverb "let sleeping dogs lie". In fact both meanings would apply simultaneously: Petey is convinced that Stan has been put to sleep by Goldberg and McCann and he is ashamed of his own attitude of "letting sleeping dogs lie" even when the deed has been committed in his own home.

Sometimes the allusions are less obvious and more subtly buried in the text, which makes translation even more difficult. For example, in a scene between Aston and Davies in *The Caretaker*:

Davies: You sleep here, do you?

Aston: Yes.

Davies: What, in that?

Aston: Yes.

Davies: Yes, well, you'll be well out of the draught there.

Aston: You don't get much wind.

Davies: You'd be well out of it. It's different when you're out.

Aston: Would be.

Davies: Nothing but wind then.

(Pause)

Davies: Yes . . .

Aston: Mmnn . . .

(Pause)

As we have seen, Pinter has an uncanny ear for words and phrases which carry suggestions or allusions to secondary implications, and in this passage the subtextual meaning hinges on the expression "getting the wind up" in the sense of being afraid, or on the expression "watching how the wind blows" which suggests caution and uncertainty. Here Pinter has fragmented these expressions and placed the bits carefully in what appear to be unremarkable verbal surroundings. But the pauses and painful monosyllabic responses which surround mention of the phrase "the wind" is sufficient clue to lead the audience to perceive that both Davies and Aston share

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an unspoken fear.

One could translate the two passages above quite accurately on the semantic level, but one would not be able to retain the echoes and reverberations of the many-levelled meanings lodged in these key expressions.

As I have tried to suggest, Pinter's use of words, and in a more significant way, his plays, operate on many levels, from the overt and concrete, to puns and *double-entendres*, to allusions, and to the uncertain region of suggestions. Symbol-hunting would seem an excessive indulgence, and yet it is so tempting because it is so fruitful and rewarding. In this sense, I would say that Pinter's plays take on the quality of the surreal. Fully to appreciate this surrealist quality one has to be willing to acknowledge the parts that are overt, and to accept the tentative. And it is this demand on the audience which makes Pinter particularly difficult to put across to a Chinese audience. Granted, even in a western context, Pinter isn't altogether an easy playwright to accept. But a Chinese audience is probably more stubbornly insistent on fact and rationality, and is less prepared to play a teasing game with the merely possible and the tentative. This was a problem I faced when I first suggested producing *The Caretaker* in Cantonese. How, I was asked, could a Chinese audience take a dramatist who de-emphasizes plot, who deliberately evades motivating his characters and who seems intentionally to mix up fact and fantasy in his dialogue? Besides, how can a Chinese audience take part in this teasing word-game when some of the clues are lost in the translation?

The answer, as I saw it, was to accept the inevitable loss through translation, and to present Pinter's play as a sequence of partial discoveries for the audience. The way I chose to do it was faithfully to reproduce the rhythm of the speeches: I found that when the tones, rhythm, and pauses of the original were reproduced faithfully, much of the pressure, tactics and moments of tension and decision could be communicated. The pauses, the waiting in an intermittent dialogue, provide a space into which each man projects his own psychological anxiety. So even if the verbal connection is broken at times, and the possible social or metaphysical levels of meaning are lost in translation, the universal language of psychological anxiety holds the attention still. Or again, when Mick's first couple of long speeches are delivered at great speed with perfect enunciation and virtuosity, the audience is overwhelmed with an admiration for that very virtuosity, a bewilderment

at the deluge of information, and a Pinteresque anxiety at the thought of losing grip on the world.

If I have appeared to be pessimistic about the business of translation, it is not because I want to condemn it as futile. I want to set out the facts honestly so that I can say, despite the difficulties of translation, that the effort is still worthwhile, because what is left after what is lost is still a substantial gain. What we have achieved in translating and producing Pinter in Cantonese is more than a small success in a linguistic venture. If we are to keep up an interest in drama and the arts in any community, we need to keep on reviving it with stimuli from outside. Young aspiring writers need to be aware of what is being done outside their own country in order to be encouraged to imitate creatively as well as reject critically. Left to read Pinter, Beckett, and Brecht on their own in the original not many would bother or even have the resources to bother. But if work from outside is presented in their own language, their own dialect and idiom they will take an interest. If even thirty per cent of the original is lost in translation, at least they will be able to get seventy per cent of it. Moreover, audiences should be challenged from time to time to taste, if not enjoy, sensations and ideas outside the range of what they are accustomed to and are comfortable with, so that they can be enriched by new experiences and new understanding. This, after all, is the point of presenting drama in translation. And, as I say, from my own experience with Pinter, if you cannot always get all the words in, text and sub-text both, you can manage the silences. And silences, given of course an outside structure to hold them in place, can speak, if not a universal language, then at least a theatrical psychological basic.

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