Translating Homophonic Wordplay in Patrick Goujon's *Moi non*
A case study

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1 Introduction

Homophonic translation, or the translation of homophones? To the untrained ear, the two terms represent a source of confusion, beckoning the question of whether these two types of translation are synonymous. Alas, they are not. Despite the fact that both types of translation pivot on concerns relating to sounds and semantics, the nature of these concerns remain distinct. On one end of the spectrum sits homophonic translation, adopting as its agenda the creation of new semantic networks in the translated text. The task of translating homophones sits towards the other end of this spectrum, focussing instead on the creation of new sound networks in the translated text while adopting a more orthodox approach to maintaining meaning. When comparing the two processes, it becomes apparent that the interaction of sound and sense in each sets them apart.

Unlike the other articles in this collection, what follows represents a case study of the translation of homophonic wordplay in a novel, rather than of the homophonic translation of words. The novel under study is entitled *Moi non*, written by Patrick Goujon and published by Gallimard in 2003, and the homophonic wordplay throughout relies on the devices of rap, both explicitly within passages of rap lyrics and more implicitly within rap-like prose. The novel relates the thoughts and experiences of the two young men, the main narrators Hoch and Flex, and of their friends and family.

The characters live on the outskirts of Paris and the book is set in the early 2000s, though this information is not directly divulged to the readers. Making use of highly informal language characterised by slang and musicality, Goujon forges in *Moi non* a distinct style of writing in which homophones offer an ideal platform to dabble in a juggling of sound and of polysemy.

I undertook the translation of this novel as part of a PhD thesis, in which my research sought to explore issues at play when transcribing and translating the voice of marginalised youth in a work of fiction. The relative freedom engendered by the academic context of this project may have encouraged me to adopt a more experimental approach to translating slang and wordplay, in which case the techniques used as part of the process of homophonic translation might have provided a suitable means of testing the boundaries of more conventional strategies. However, I was interested in offering a study of the implications of choices commonly made by translators working in commercial contexts while proposing an alternative strategy embedded within the pages of my own translation, and eager for this strategy be considered as a viable alternative. It is for this reason I did not deviate drastically from the semantic value of the source text, concerned more with harnessing aspects of the sound-sense relationship of the homophonic wordplay of the source text in such a way that I would produce an independent text, but one which could be readily compared with the original.

The style and effect of the linguistic game that Goujon plays in *Moi non* can be likened to the 'flow' of a piece of rap, or the rhyme and the rhythm of the words, and the way in which these elements interact. In *The Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop,* Adam Bradley defines flow as "an MC's distinctive lyrical cadence, usually in relation to a beat. It is rhythm over time"[1]. Goujon's focus on flow renders his text lively and creative, and the Webs of linguistic complexity woven into his lines provided ample matter for reflection in the attempt to translate this wordplay into English. My concerns in translation orbited around the ideal of identifying creative solutions that respected the playful acoustics of the original text without straying too far from its structure and content. Determining to what extent the flow of the original needed to be respected, and in what ways, and what liberties I could therefore take in the manipulation of the structure of the original text and of the specific images it conveys, was by no means an objective process: I was acutely aware of my agency as a translator, and of the subjectivity of the reasoning behind my own decisions, with which not all translators, readers or critics would agree.

In their introduction to *The Practices of Literary Translation, Constraints and Creativity,* Jean Boase-Beier and Michael Holman point out that "there is no agreement on the level of intervention permitted to the translator"[2]. Two other theorists writing about the role of creativity in translation, Manuela Perteghella and Eugenia Loffredo, offer echoes of such reasoning when they say that "the source text offers the starting point for a journey and becomes the space 'into' and 'through' which the translator

1. Bradley, Adam, *The Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*, New York, BasicCivistas, 2009, p. 6.

2. Boase-Beier, Joan, Holman, Michael (Eds.), *The Practices of Literary Translation: Constraints and Creativity,* Manchester, St Jerome Publishing, 1999, p. 10.

is given the opportunity to explore creatively and perform his/her subjectivity"[3]. It therefore seems reasonable to assert that what links homophonic translation with my own approach to translation, and, indeed, with all types of translation, is the steps all translators must necessarily take each time they undertake a translation: namely, those of interpretation and of expression, or of re-expression. When reading a text to be translated homophonically, the translator must privilege certain sounds or combinations of sounds of this original, and identify within the abundance of possibilities available to translate each sound unit or combination of sound units in the language of translation the solutions they find the most fitting. In the same vein, the translator undertaking a 'conventional' translation must identify, consciously or unconsciously, the elements of the original they find the most relevant and then sift through the abundance of possibilities available to translate the series of words from the source language into the target language. And the choices made by each translator will necessarily be different.

As I translated the passages of *Moi non* particularly marked by creativity and inventiveness, I became acutely aware of the influence of my own style and background on the English version of the French original that I, alone, was creating. As Susan Bassnett would put it, I had become a re-creator of the text in English.[4] While this text in English was the product of my own imagination, it was also bound by the limits of the general form and content of the original text. As such, I had become a co-author of sorts, and I remained conscious of the fact that my version of the text would be vastly different from that which might be produced by another translator, with a set of interpretive and imaginative capacities necessarily different from my own. This much can be said for any translation, of course: no two translators will produce an identical version of the same text in the target language. However, it seems to be especially true of translations of heavily-stylised texts, where one notices a distinct effort to play with literary devices, inviting, and indeed compelling, the translator to unearth particularly creative solutions in the target language.

Having now laid the foundations of the issues with which the translator must contend when dealing with homophonic wordplay, it is fitting to explore more concretely the implications of such concerns in the work chosen for discussion here. The following seven examples from the translation of *Moi non* are organised in terms of the types of homophones used in the original and in the translation.

2 Translation through exact correspondence

Of the numerous techniques that I adopted to translate homophonic wordplay in *Moi non*, the first technique, that of exact correspondence in both languages, is the least commonly exploited. The following example is in fact the sole case in which I deemed the technique both possible and appropriate:

3. Perteghella, Manuela, Loffredo, Eugenia (Eds.), *Translation and Creativity: Perspectives on Creative Writing and Translation Studies*, London, New York, Continuum, 2006, p. 10.

4. Bassnett, Susan, Bush, Peter, *The Translator as Writer*, London, New York, Continuum, 2006.

Tu connais la presse ? [5] Non. J'ai pensé Presse, presse comme journaux. Parce que tu es à la presse. Le préposé est en congé maladie et tu le remplaces. À la presse à mannequins. (p. 28)	Do you know the press? No. I thought Press, press as in newspapers. Because you're in the press. The attendant is on sick leave and you're replacing him. In the mannequin press.

Since the nouns '*la presse*' and 'the press' share the same double meaning in both languages, indicating both the machine and the journalism industry, we are afforded a swift and straightforward transfer between the two texts. A more linguistically nimble translator may have found appropriate solutions to employ this technique elsewhere in the translation. However, since the inclusion of homophones often appeared incongruous, I felt inclined to adopt a more liberal approach, as the remaining examples will reveal.

3 'Compensation' through the use of added homophones

In an effort to re-establish a balance in the translated text, taking into consideration the several instances in which I was unable to use homophones in the translation in the same passage as which they appeared in the original, I endeavoured to identify opportunities to add to the translation a number of homophones at different places where there was no corresponding homophone in the same passage in the original.

je suis le rêve de l'arbre sur des milliers d'années / l'écorce patiente qui sent la main du nouveau-né / je suis les initiales gravées sur le torse, le bois, le flanc / je suis l'un, je suis l'autre, ceci est ma force. (p. 204)	I'm the dream of the tree that thousands of years have borne / the patient bark feeling the hand of the baby just born / I'm the initials engraved in the hide, the wood, the side / I'm one, I'm the other, this is my pride.

In this example, I seized the opportunity to play on the sound 'born' by using two of the three past participles of the verb 'to bear': 'borne' with an 'e' and 'born' without an 'e'. This choice enabled both the use of a rhyme, essential to the two bars of rap, and of a homophone. I fleshed out the '*sur*' of the original and transposed it into a verb: the tree had carried, held, or borne a dream for thousands of years, while the baby had just come into the world, or been born.

4 Change in part of speech

When I was able to keep a homophone in the same place in the translation as in the original, where the words in both languages could convey different meanings in similar ways, it was, as previously established, rarely possible to use the homophone in the exact same way, that is to say, to keep the same part of speech. This passage again presents an example of rap lyrics, written by Flex.

Je veux pas me sentir enfermé, le cœur en ciment en si peu d'temps / m'retrouver dans une peau que je kifferais pas, du vent / sur mes couplets, dans les poches de mes vêtements / le regard fatigué et froid de ceux qui squattent les bancs, mais bon / c'est comme ça nos vies, on pense qu'à se plaindre et à se	I don't want to feel trapped in this urban sprawl, heart like a stone wall in no time at all / end up with a skin I don't want to be in, scrawl / lyrics as thin as the clothes beneath my chin, crawl / tired and cold, like drifters idling in a hall, but, after all / that's our life, we think only of complaining and of esca-

5. All dialogue in Moi non is differentiated from the narration through the use of italics, rather than through quotation marks.

tirer d'ici c'qu'est toujours mieux que se tirer dessus / J'ai vu tellement de rêves échouer dans le décor / emboutir des hommes et des femmes sans même leur donner la mort / les r'garder droit dans les yeux, sans même les plisser / leur dire « à compter d'aujourd'hui ton seul bonheur s'ra d'aller pisser ». (p. 203)

ping on the next bullet train / which is always better than putting a bullet in the brain / I've seen so many dreams drown with the fish / crush men and women, not even grant their death wish / look them right in the eye and not even blink / tell them "from now on in your only pleasure will be smelling your shit stink".

Arriving at and settling on this translation was by no means a fast or facile process, but I departed from the two meanings of the verb '*se tirer*' evoked here, that of leaving and that of shooting, to brainstorm a list of words and expressions with similar meanings. Somewhere in this mess of notes was the word 'bullet', noted to correspond with the idea of shooting oneself. When fleshed out into an expression, bullet could become 'bullet in the head' or, indeed, 'bullet in the brain', which conveniently rhymes well with the idea of running away on a bullet train. While they adjust the exact images projected by the original text, these two new rhyming images in English reflect the overall idea elicited by the French lines. The two expressions also function in terms of flow and establish a consistent and mirrored rhythm over the two bars.

5 Displacement of the homophone

In cases where it did not appear fitting to translate a homophone by another homophone, using the same or a different part of speech, it was still often possible to use a homophone in another part of the corresponding passage of the translation.

Je demande pas où sont les ceintures à l'arrière, vu que c'est la seule option absente dans la bagnole, et puis, avec le caisson de basses dans le coffre, faudrait que j'aie plus de coffre encore pour gueuler ma question. (p. 74)

I don't ask where the seat belts are in the back seat since that's the only "extra" missing in the car, and, plus, with the subwoofer thumping behind us, it's not like my question'd be loud enough to beat the beat of the bass.

Another constraint framing my approach to the translation here necessitated the restructuring of the sentence; I generally avoided using vocabulary specific to a particular part of the Anglosphere in the translation and so chose not to translate the homophone '*coffre*' as 'boot' or 'trunk'. This choice lead subsequently to the identification of an alternative solution, involving the use of a homophone, as I translated the location '*coffre*' more generally through an adverb of place ('behind') and displaced the use of a homophone to another part of the sentence. The noun homophone 'coffer' in the original was translated by the homophone 'beat' in English, used as a verb and then as a noun. This choice allowed the same sort of wordplay to be maintained, but inexactly, since the sentence is rearranged to allow the homophonic wordplay to be transferred to another word.

6 Partial homophones

Partial homophones are used extensively in the original text, especially within the passages of rap lyrics. These partial homophones are the product of assonance and consonance, featuring prominently in rap lyrics and often used to make half rhymes, or slant rhymes. The term partial homophones here refers not only to the use of

words with similar sounds, but to the repetition of entire syllabic sounds through the use of the same base word or sound with different endings. Below are two examples of partial homophones, used in the original text and in the translation.

On est paumés, on compte pour des pommes et on tombe comme des mouches, pas de mouchoirs quand on meurt, les langues de putes se touchent et nous gomment, la vie est tellement conne parfois qu'on peut dégommer son voisin et rester sans voix, vis ce que je vis vois ce que je vois, j'ai la rage, la gorge et le poing serrés, elle pour le lancer lui et lui pour me rassurer... (p. 192)	We're spaced out, a waste of space, and we're dropping like flies, not a tear will drop at our death, the catty bitches come out and drown us out, life's so dim sometimes you can make your bro your foe, drown him, take him out, and see the cat get your tongue, live what I live, see what I see, I'm riled up, throat tight, fist out to fight, the throat to thrust the fist and the fist to ease my mind...

'*Paumés*' and '*pommes*' are translated as the slightly different sounding 'space' and 'spaced', in 'spaced out' and 'a waste of space', and '*mouche*' and '*mouchoir*' through two forms of the verb 'to drop': 'dropping' and 'drop'. I used the same technique of building on base words by changing the ending further down in the passage where I added a partial homophone: the noun 'cat' and the adjective 'catty'. One might argue that this addition of a partial homophone compensates for the lack of homophone in the translation corresponding to the different uses of '*vois/voix*'. This example in particular demonstrates the significance of structural compromises through syntactical rearrangement in the translation to allow the sounds and images to reflect what I perceived to be the essence of the ideas conveyed in the original lines. The passage in English is markedly different from its French counterpart, but both are comparable in their use of rhythm and sound to communicate very similar messages.

The next example is taken from the narration in the first half of the novel and shows again the use of a partial homophone in the translation of a passage containing a pure homophone:

On se raconte nos petites histoires, enfin je t'ai déjà dit, les taffes soporifiques et les tafs en sous-marin, les coups de vice à la scred'. (p. 31)	We trade stories, like I said, about trading under the table. About smoking and joking, puffing to relax, about wheeling and dealing, covering our tracks

The double meaning of 'trade', used in two forms ('trade' and 'trading') is used to emulate the use of homophones in the original. In this example as in the previous, it is clear that I departed considerably from the syntactic arrangement of the original text. I took the first use of a gerundive and built it on in the second part of the passage, attempting to achieve a robust flow. This flow is different from in the original, but has more impact on an acoustic level than what I might have settled on had I followed the syntax of the original more closely. This focus on flow is what most influenced my translation strategies, and the final example to be studied reveals the extent to which considerations of rhythm and rhyme dominated my translation choices.

7 Rhyme and rhythm

When it was neither possible nor apt to include homophones, partial or full, in the translation, the primordial concern still remained rooted in sound. I systematically strove to achieve a strong rhythm and rhyme in the English text by privileging words with complementary sounds arranged to enhance echoes:

Mon ami est mon paravent et d'ici que le type calcule, je prends ma part avant. (p. 20)	My friend's my shield and, by the time the guy's put two and two together, I've already sealed the deal.

In the above example, the homophonic wordplay of the French is not reproduced in the English. I opted instead for a rhythmic translation that channelled assonance and consonance, using the expression 'to put two and two together' for '*calculer*' and 'to seal the deal', for '*prendre ma part avant*'. Though establishing homophonic wordplay in the English could have been a possibility, through playing with the word 'shield', for example, I preferred the final solution without homophones in English as the flow of the sentences was particularly forceful, therefore placing the emphasis on rhythm.

The examples presented for analysis in this chapter have explored indirectly the role of constraints in sparking and structuring creativity. When writing and translating rap, the writer and translator find themselves preoccupied by the conjuring of rhymes as well as of a certain rhythm that corresponds to the beats available in each bar. The writer of rap lyrics is faced with the arduous task of exploring the linguistic and stylistic possibilities present in their language that respect the requirements of rap so that the lyrics produced are pleasing to both the ear and to the mind. As we have established, even outside of the numerous passages of rap lyrics that punctuate the narration and the dialogue of *Moi non*, the prose remains heavily influenced by the concerns of flow, the hallmark of rap music. As such, the stylistic devices so common in rap lyrics frequently make a noticeable appearance in the narration; the rhythm that imbues each line enhances the overall force of each passage. Homophonic wordplay is perhaps the most salient of these devices.

The rap-related constraints placed on the writer of the original text are compounded in translation, where the translator must attempt to respect both the style and the content of the text as far as possible while making use of the possibilities available to them in the language of translation. In both the original and the translation, however, the constraints imposed on the writer and the translator by the features of rap music, by linguistic (im)possibilities, and by a range of other requirements both in and out of the text, can, and indeed do, provide a source of creativity. Boase-Beier and Holman, cited earlier, dedicated a book to case studies exploring the role of constraints in sparking creativity in literary translation, and in their introduction, they assert that " ... creativity is often intimately tied to constraint; it is a response to it, it is enhanced by it".[6] Framed within the deliberations of the articles in this collection, the resonance of such a statement hardly requires reinforcing.

In his book *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame,* André Lefevere reminds us of the tendency to assume that a translator must privilege either the sound or the sense of the text being translated; that is impossible to render both in translation, to be a servant of two masters. "Translators, we are likely to be told, will be able to render the sense of the original only at the expense of the sound, and often also of the morphosyntactic features organising the original"[7]. I hope that in my translation of these passages containing homophonic wordplay, I have rendered

6. Boase-Beier/Holman, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

7. Lefevere, André, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, London, New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 100.

the essence of the sense of the original text, sacrificing the morphosyntactic features of the original, which incidentally I felt was inevitable or at the very least indispensable, but not the sound. In taking liberties to perform syntactic reshuffling and modify specific images to suit the sound patterns that I, personally, felt had the most force in English. I have created a new text in my own language and my own words, which is able to stand alone, in its own right, but which is at the same time reflective of and clearly comparable to the original text in French.