Flying Blind Over Strange Terrain, or Ezhi-mkoshnang Kweji-aan’kinoosjigeng: Issues in English-Nishnaabemwin Translation

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INTRODUCTION

Translation is an exceedingly complex endeavour, as attested by the existence of professional degree programs to train translators and interpreters. To do good translations, much more is required than just fluency in the languages involved. This paper will outline some of the major challenges that confront the English-Nishnaabemwin translator. Certain of those challenges are particular to the task of English-to-Nishnaabemwin (E-N) translation, and those will be discussed briefly. However, E-N translators grapple with many of the same sorts of challenges that confront anyone in the business of translation. Therefore, in discussing issues in English-Nishnaabemwin translation, I will draw on literature from general translation studies.

I will begin by outlining my experience as a translator and identifying the challenges I and fellow English-Nishnaabemwin translators have regularly encountered. The texts that we translate deal typically with health, legal, and governance matters. Some E-N translators also work on stories for inclusion as educational resource materials whether in schools or other organizations. However, texts of another type have recently been presented for translation into Nishnaabemwin, and these have revealed a new set of challenges for the E-N translator. The Daphne Odjig art exhibition project, which is described in the third section of this paper, serves as an example of this new type of translation project. Following the background on that project, I identify the particular dilemmas it posed as I strove to render another type of specialized discourse intelligibly and faithfully in Nishnaabemwin. Then a few

examples are presented to illustrate the sorts of translation issues I had to resolve. My brief concluding remarks reveal my feeling of not quite having been equal to the daunting task I undertook.

**MY ENGLISH-NISHNAABEMWIN TRANSLATION EXPERIENCE**

Being one of a small number of Nishnaabemwin speakers who is also fully literate in this language and in addition has taught it for many years, requests by various organizations for Nishnaabemwin translations often are directed to me. Over the years, I have translated such materials as slogans for posters, brochures and pamphlets on health matters, and factsheets on provincial parks which describe such things as vegetation, topography, rock types, geographic location, and area. I have also handled a substantial legal text in the form of rules and procedures for a provincial inquiry. This particular document contained approximately 50 clauses that contained such terms as *standing* (in the legal sense), *hearing* (meaning the legal process), and *subpoena*.

Most E-N translators have worked with similar types of texts and, no doubt, they have encountered the same challenges I have. What most would likely typify as the major problem is the absence of Nishnaabemwin words for many English terms. This problem is raised typically in relation to nouns referring to concrete things, especially new technology. It also arises in relation to abstract concepts such as *liberal thought* (as used for example in political philosophy), *nation*, and *province*. Some terms defy translation, or at least a readily intelligible one. Many foreign terms can actually be translated; they just are not expressed in terms that are structurally and grammatically equivalent in the target language. Fawcett (1997) mentions rank-shifted translation as one recognized technique used in these types of situations. He explains this choice of term; in one kind of rank-shifting as an example, the translator is “going...from a unit at a lower rank, the morpheme [in the original language] to a unit at a higher rank, the phrase” (p. 16) in the target language. If the translation of a
particular term in a particular context becomes too convoluted to be readily intelligible, thus also making the broader passage confusing. I have generally opted against creating a word or even using a phrase or clause to describe what the English noun captures. Instead, I have simply left an English noun in the Nishnaabemwin translated text. This is how I would handle igneous, CAT scan, and subpoena, for example. (A similar problem also occurs with verbs, of course.) When rendering a term as a Nishnaabemwin phrase or clause that does not make the sentence too unwieldy, then I will use this type of rank-shifting.

Apart from posing normal challenges of this type, these sorts of translation projects have not struck me as being exceptionally difficult. I say that not to suggest that I have done complete or perfect translations. Rather, I mean that the decisions I made as to which terms to leave in English were relatively easy for me to reach and seem to me to be reasonable decisions. My subsequent readings in translation theories and practices have allayed concerns about whether I was acting appropriately by taking that kind of approach when I felt that was the better choice.

The other kind of challenge that would arise for translators without a wide enough breadth or a great depth of knowledge of certain subjects was not a major issue for me on the earlier types of translation jobs. Fawcett remarks that “translators [need] to have encyclopaedic knowledge extending way beyond the purely linguistic” (p. 28). I have been fortunate in that I have an innate curiosity about many things that prompts me to read such magazines as Sky News, Discover, and Scientific American, and books on assorted topics. My formal education in natural sciences at the undergraduate level, and in business administration and higher education governance and related topics at the graduate level, has also exposed me to many concepts that many E-N translators may not have had opportunities to study. Thus, although my choice of programs and reading material was in no way motivated by the expectation I would ever need to translate certain kinds of terminology (I never actually set out to be a translator), the knowledge I have gained, while nowhere near encyclopaedic,
nonetheless has eased the translation task immensely in many instances. However, knowledge has branched out in many, many directions especially in the last century, and a recent translation project introduced me to a branch of knowledge that I have never delved into either through formal study or informally through leisure reading. It is the translation issues inherent in this type of project to which I will now turn.

THE DAPHNE ODJIG ART EXHIBITION PROJECT

This translation project came about when the dynamic curator of this exhibition, an Anishinabe woman by the name of Bonnie Devine, decided that the book or catalogue that would be produced in conjunction with this ought to be translated into Nishnaabemwin. Because much of the funding for the exhibition was federal, providing English and French versions of the book was a stipulation. Ms. Devine argued successfully that, especially given the ancestry of the artist, a native of Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve, the book also ought to be translated into the language of her people. I agreed to do the translation of the two essays and the poem that constituted the bulk of the catalogue. The titles of paintings, captions for photographs, and other matter included in the book also needed to be translated. Combined, these components added up to roughly 12,000 words.

Upon turning to the first essay that was sent to me, I found -- as I expected -- a slew of phraseologies that had absolutely no equivalents in Nishnaabemwin. Furthermore, it was rife with artistic jargon that was almost totally foreign to me personally. The extent of my exposure to this type of language was a course on Canadian art that I had taken when I was working towards my B.Sc. I took the course only because a first-year humanities elective was compulsory for that degree. Arts magazines are not among the types of publications I read for leisure. The second essay was equally complex. The third piece in the catalogue, a poem, presented a different type of challenge that was only slightly less daunting. The deadlines involved left me no time to do
research on how others have approached similar types of texts. I undertook research on these issues after the fact largely because it seemed to be an interesting academic exercise for purposes of sharing my thoughts with other scholars. Thus, this discussion is effectively a retrospective on the project that ensued from The Drawings and Paintings of Daphne Odjig: A Retrospective Exhibition.

**MY DILEMMAS**

The first professional dilemma I faced was how much of the curator’s vision to try and realize, given the technical challenges the essays posed. Ms. Devine saw this project not just as a way to enhance the status of Nishnaabemwin, but also as a means of enabling the language to grow by forcing the creation of new words for concepts that had never before been articulated in Nishnaabemwin. While I shared that aspiration, I was conscious of the sensibilities on the part of, in my estimation, probably all of those fluent in Nishnaabemwin with regard to art. The proportion of this population that appreciates art, in particular Native art, is likely no less than the proportion in broader society. The criteria by which the two groups, Native and non-Native viewers of art, judge such works is another matter. My impressions, based on the topics that come up in everyday conversations among Nishnaabemwin speakers, and on remarks made about specific works of art or artists, are that this population is not much concerned with assessing art in the way that a knowledgeable art critic would. The evaluation of a piece of art is likely to centre mainly on its basic aesthetic appeal to the viewer – it is either beautiful (or pretty), or not. There is no talk of formlines, or of evidence of influence from such-and-such an artist, or as a good (or poor) example of a particular school. There may be remarks on colour, for example, Mnwaande ‘It’s a nice colour’ or Nboodewaande ‘Its colour conveys desolation.’ Certainly, of many artists, I have heard Nishnaabe speakers remark, Ntaa-mzinbiige ‘He/She’s a good artist.’ Of abstract art, a not uncommon remark is something like
Minj wiya ge-nji-gchi-shpi-dbamagbane wi, ‘I have no idea why someone would pay such an exorbitant price for that [unrecognizable piece].’ In other words, the issue I grappled with was not merely that Nishnaabemwin has no equivalents for terms such as formline and Surrealist. A deeper issue was that such concepts essentially hold no significance in Nishnaabemwin speakers’ assessments of the merits of a piece of art. Hence, would the target audience of the Nishnaabemwin catalogue actually read, in the deep sense, the highly perceptive essays by the art critic and by the other contributor, Robert Houle, another Nishnaabe painter? Despite my doubts in that regard, I did endeavour to fulfill my professional responsibilities the best I could.

Fawcett’s words capture succinctly another aspect of my dilemma. He writes of the translator’s need “to make difficult judgements about the readers’ level of sophistication and the degree to which they can be expected to show initiative” (p. 46) (i.e., the reader referring to dictionaries instead of the translator having explained certain terms in footnotes, which is another translation technique suggested for certain types of situations). He adds that the translator must also try “to balance out such things as information overload and readability” (p.46), which was the very sort of considerations leading to decisions I had made in previous translation jobs.

A related question that nagged at me was whether the terms and phraseologies that would be created would be picked up as discursive tools by any Nishnaabemwin speaker. Should the words that might be coined be intelligible, would the new notions being expressed, such as post-modernism, trigger a “growth spurt” so to speak in artistic sensibilities and the ensuing discourse on the part of Nishnaabemwin speakers? From my vantage point as an academic in a Native-specific degree program, there still appears to be a great divide between the mindset of Native community members and academia – and the curator is an academic with a master’s degree in fine arts. While Native scholars are generally admired for their achievements, there is suspicion of what scholars in general do or, if not, at least an expectation that Native scholars
ought not to do the kinds of “useless things” that mainstream scholars are often perceived to be doing. The words of Vine Deloria Jr. express (in stronger words than some others might use) the sort of sentiment that exists in the minds of some. Justice (2004) quotes him:

I fear we have raised a generation of sell-outs who have no commitment to the Indian Community...this generation is doing nothing for the people that come. They keep themselves in a little intellectual ghetto and throw around big words like ‘sovereignty’ and think they are doing something. (Justice, p. 114)

The foreignness of intellectual endeavours of the type associated with the mainstream academy is also illustrated by a remark I overheard in the corridors at a conference on Native American Studies in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, many years ago. A Nishnaabe person, noticing that one presentation title referred to Indians and post-modernism, remarked jokingly to his companions, “What’s that about? Indians at the post?” In short, would the essays in Nishnaabemwin find an appreciative audience? Perhaps not, but I nonetheless saw the project as having great merit. Thus, I turned to the task at hand.

THE TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

I will not go into an in-depth discussion of the technical translation challenges the art catalogue posed. That sort of discussion would better serve the purposes of another type of presentation in another sort of forum such as an English-Nishnaabemwin translators’ workshop. I will simply give some choice examples of challenging terms, phrases, and passages, and give an indication of the sort of decisions I made.

One passage in one of the essays mentioned the following examples: “music, sculpture, literature, poetry, drama and painting” (Devine, 2007, p. 21). This posed two main types of challenges. For one thing, Nishnaabemwin more naturally
expresses the activities associated with these nouns in terms of verbs, for example, *mdewechge* ‘He/She is playing’ music’ or ‘He/She plays a musical instrument.’ Although a relatively concise and intelligible noun can be fabricated from this verb, *mdwewechgewin*, this particular noun is rarely if ever uttered in normal Nishnaabemwin speech at least among the speakers I know, so it sounds quite unnatural -- at least to me. But would others as well necessarily find it contrived? Perhaps some would find it sounds natural enough and begin bandying it about in routine conversation and popularize it. However, that possibility in my assessment seemed too remote to justify ‘creating’ this particular noun.

Secondly, not all fields of terminology are equally well-developed lexically. Thus, while we have the verb *zhibiige*, ‘He/She is writing,’ we have no way of concisely indicating that one is writing poetry. One might devise a translation that describes a salient feature of certain forms of poetry, rhyme, but that term too cannot be translated concisely. One might get at it with the notion of ‘writing in a way that words [at certain locations or intervals] sound the same,’ *naasaap wii-nitaagok aapiichin kidwinan zhi-zhibiigeng* – an excellent example of an unworkable translation. In isolation, it would make sense as an explanation of what poetry is, but in the context of the sentence in which the term *poetry* appeared, the point of which was not to explain what poetry, literature, and so on are, the point of the sentence would likely have been lost entirely in the thicket of convoluted phrases.

A couple of other examples of terms that defied translation are *honorary doctoral degree* and *curvilinear drawing style*. Actually, I did try a wording to get at what the latter conveys. This used a term I fabricated (and I say that in all humility, but not to suggest there was any intent to deceive) which is *waawaannibiige*. This, I formed by using a morpheme that appears in the verb *waannibza* ‘He/She is going around a curve [as he/she is driving or flying]’ and combining that with the morpheme /biige/ (or /bii’ge/ as a conscientious linguist might write it). The latter morpheme appears in verbs describing the action of writing, such as *ntaa-
"zhibiige, 'He/She writes well.' Then I just used reduplication. The word produced literally says, 'He/She draws in a way that uses curving motions.' Whether any other Nishnaabemwin reader gets that mental image from this word, I have not checked. The poem, on the other hand, presented me with a rather different set of choices.

Peden (1989) has likened the task of translating literary work to a reconstruction project:

We cannot translate until we 'do violence' to the original literary work. We must destroy – de-struct...before we can re-construct (emphasis in original)....All the debris – the components of the original edifice – must be transported to a new language, to be restored to its original...splendor with the least possible signs of damage. (p. 14)

She goes on to apply this analogy to the translation of poetry specifically.

The translator must sift through the rubble of his or her de-construction and rescue such materials as meter, rhyme, vocabulary, rhetorical tone, poetic figure, and period. (p. 23)

The poem that I translated did not have all these features. The features of the poem that were most salient to me, with my quite limited literary sensibility, were meter (which was not consistent throughout the whole piece), a definite rhetorical tone (which I did know was the name of what I was noticing), and the various kinds of imagery employed. By sheer good luck, my guess that I would be better off not trying to keep all the exact same imagery when rendering the poem in Nishnaabemwin (not having seen any guides for translating poetry) turned out to be a reasonable one in light of my subsequent quick cursory study of translation theories and principles. I also decided to maintain a rhythm in those lines that had a definite meter in the English original, but not to try and make the Nishnaabemwin meter match the English meter exactly. On the latter type of issue, Peden writes in reference to English
translations of Spanish poetry, “English and Spanish lines are built from different rhythms. The Spanish speaker counts syllables; the English speaker counts stresses, or beats” (p. 24).

When translating poetry into Nishnaabemwin, there is no established tradition called poetry in Nishnaabemwin that can serve as a guide for the E-N translator as to what rhythm would create the desired poetic effect. Although certainly those studying Nishnaabe myths may characterize some of them, or parts of certain myths, as being poetic, a category of Nishnaabemwin literature that parallels English poetry has not flourished if it ever emerged at all. As well, few if any current Nishnaabemwin speakers would likely have examined poetry in any language formally and critically. Although there are certainly those who must have found some pleasing poems in the course of taking English in high school, again it’s unlikely that many would have studied such matters in depth. Hence, I have no way of gauging how successful my translation of the poem was in terms of a solid literary critique. It perhaps would evoke some emotions in the reader, but I have no way of knowing whether particular lines would be recognized as poetry if they were not laid out on the page like lines of a poem. I’ll just illustrate with one line as an example. Redbird writes,

And we no longer see the smoking fires of those ancient ones –
the uncontaminated sanctuary that was their flesh and bones. (p. 45)

I rendered this as follows:

Gaa’sh geyaabi gwaabnda-ziinaa da-zaagaabsaaweyaat gonda
gchi-gete’aak –
Gaa-yaajik kina gegoo jibwaa-bnaajtoong.

I fully acknowledge that I definitely was unable to “restore the original splendor” (to paraphrase Peden’s elegant phrasing) that exists in the English original for these lines.
LOOKING BACK

Even in revisiting this piece in the course of preparing this paper, more poetic Nishnaabemwin phraseology that would enable me to better execute this particular task still eludes me. Were I to have the opportunity to re-do this translation, certainly, I would look for more Nishnaabemwin imagery that is equally potent or eloquent. But, given the lack of an established Nishnaabemwin poetic tradition, I am not certain what sorts of imagery would achieve the effect Redbird intended when he wrote such elegant turns of phrase as “the uncontaminated sanctuary that was their flesh and bones.” But at least he is still with us and I would be able to talk to him to get the deeper meanings of his words. Then, the edifice I would rebuild in Nishnaabemwin, while it would have a different architecture, would come close to matching the level of artistry in his original work.10

I end this paper simply with this expression of hope.

ENDNOTES

1 Nishnaabemwin is the term now used by many teachers and others involved in the preservation of the language that most scholars still recognize as Ojibwa or Chippewa. The status of the term, Nishnaabemwin, and the related term, Nishnaabek, within the Native community is evident in its adoption for use in organization names and course titles, albeit with spelling variations. Two major organizations that use either of these terms are the Anishinabek Educational Institute and Anishinaabemowin Teg. At Laurentian University, the titles of courses teaching this language employ the term “Nishnaabemwin,” which is the spelling I will use in this paper.

2 I say “we” simply to indicate others are doing similar work, not to imply that we work as a collective on any given translation project. However, we will often consult each other for ideas or to see if someone has come across a term that might apply as one of us works on a specific project.

3 Regrettably, those of us who are regularly asked to provide E-N translations have thus far not been able to find the time to confer on the issues that arise.

4 I wish to reflect and validate Bonnie Devine’s way of saying this word when she identifies her ancestry rather than impose another’s notions of consistent orthography on her. Ms. Devine’s commitment was so firm that even when I
explained to her the challenges particular to this type of project, she would not be dissuaded. If anything, these only reinforced her belief that this project was vital not only as an art project, but as part of the efforts to preserve and revitalize Nishnaabemwin.

5 A recent newsletter from the Chief to the band members explains the Council’s rationale for retaining “Unceded Indian Reserve” in the official name of the community rather than switching to the term First Nation as many have done. The rationale relates to its distinctive “unceded” status (R. Corbiere, Newsletter, December, 2007).

6 The curator does intend to commission Nishnaabemwin translations of the papers presented at the symposium on Woodland art that was also held in conjunction with the exhibition in Sudbury. Hence, this research will have allayed certain concerns I had while doing the first phase when I undertake this symposium proceedings phase of the project.

7 I use this term loosely in the sense of my professional obligations in accepting a commission, not to imply that I am claiming to have professional certification as a translator.

8 The curator herself does not speak Nishnaabemwin, but she clearly values the language.

9 A number of Native scholars describe traditional Native knowledge and ways of passing on that knowledge as being, in a sense, an academy as well. This is seen to be distinct from, but no less intellectual than the mainstream academy because of the holistic and spiritual-based approach employed.

10 Another challenge was associated with translating titles of paintings. On this part of the project, I was literally flying blind. I was given only a list of the titles and, in the rush of things, did not think to ask the curator whether she could at least e-mail me photographs of the paintings. Thus, there are a number of mistranslations, and one that stands out in my mind is The Evil Spell. This is the title of a painting which, when I finally saw it once the exhibition opened, I discovered was of a highly erotic nature and very different from how I had envisaged it. I drew on the terminology associated with bearwalking. Similarly, for the painting, Moment of Commitment, I was not at all certain whether it related to marriage which was the first connotation that sprang to mind.

REFERENCES


