

A BOOK REVIEW OF *THE PROMISE OF THE FOREIGN*

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Abstract

Primarily taking issue with Rafael's definition of translation as "that double process of appropriating and replacing what is foreign while keeping its foreignness in view," this review attempts to show the unusually restrictive nature of this definition and proposes a more empirical approach to the study of translation and lexicalization.

About the Author

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Vicente Rafael's latest effort does not lack in sporadic brilliance and some valuable insights. To read the "meaning" of the processes of linguistic appropriation through the Tagalog literature of the Spanish era and to develop a theory of the development of an incipient public sphere from this is indeed an interesting and very promising undertaking. But the overall argument of the work seems to rest on excessively speculative premises. At the risk of oversimplifying Rafael's argument, this review shall only look into two main ideas of his work. The first has to do with his peculiar and restrictive definition of "translation." The second has to do with the notion expressed in the title of the work as the "promise of the foreign."

Rafael defines translation as "that double process of appropriating and replacing what is foreign while keeping its foreignness in view" (xvii). Since the act of linguistic borrowing functions as the marker for the limit of translatability in Rafael's sense, it might be instructive to look into the problem of what he calls the "opacity" of borrowed words in order to demonstrate the unusually restrictive nature of this notion of translation. For the present purposes, two polar states may be conceived in the process of linguistic borrowing. The first may be characterized as complete opacity in which completely unintelligible and "foreign" words are embedded in an otherwise intelligible language. Depending on the frequency of occurrence of semantically opaque words within an utterance, such a situation may lead to a breakdown in communication due to an overburdened communication load.

In the interest of facilitating the process of communication, translators make sure that they do not include too many foreign words in their translations. When they do use such words, they frequently make use of various techniques of varying degrees of subtlety which may bring the meanings of these words across to the reader despite their unabated foreignness. The second pole, on the other hand, is the situation wherein borrowed words have become completely naturalized by the receiving language to the point that all memories of their foreignness have practically been effaced. One may sometimes hear, for example, upon exiting a cinema where a film was shown in which some Spanish lines had been uttered, people talking with wonderment about how the Spanish language had so many Tagalog words such as “pero,” “sige,” “siguro,” “kumusta,” etc. This erasure of origins may not necessarily be due to any ideologically enforced nationalist amnesia *à la* Renan but due to the inexorable processes of linguistic appropriation. Rather than remaining opaque as they were at the beginning, such borrowed words have become completely transparent in practically all their contexts of usage in the sense that they are no longer even identifiable as “foreign” except for a small percentage of the receiving population with an adequate knowledge of the source language. Indeed, some borrowed words which have undergone intensive morphological adaptation may even require expert linguistic knowledge to determine their origins. One need only look at such seemingly pure Tagalog words as “tanglaw,” “tangi,” “binibini,” and “liham” from Chinese and “tadhana,” “samantala,” “sinta,” and “dalaga” from Sanskrit (Manuel 1948). The thoroughgoing naturalization of borrowed words does not at all entail that their form or meaning may not undergo drastic changes in the process of their linguistic absorption. These may even actually come to mean something altogether different in the process of shedding all traces of their former opacity.

In between the two poles can be found a whole range of linguistic phenomena which possesses neither complete transparency nor complete opacity. To define “translation” therefore as a double process of “appropriation”/“replacement” in which the end product always keeps its opacity or foreignness “in view” arguably does not hold for what may be the greater number of acts of translation and lexical borrowing. Rafael’s insistence on the “foreignness” of translation may be traced to the influence of Walter Benjamin’s (50-62) theory of translation which, in a somewhat awkward combination with James Siegel’s (85) discussion of the Indonesian term “aneh” (odd/strange), implicitly underlies the whole structure of his argument. Although this rather knotted issue shall not be dealt with at length here, it should be pointed out that by elevating the interlinear version (in which the translation follows the syntax of the original literally) as the absolute utopian translational ideal, Benjamin clearly presupposed readers of translations who are fluent in both the

source and target languages. Much earlier than Benjamin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, in opposition to Martin Luther's Germanizing translational strategy, similarly called for a "foreignizing" practice in translation (Koller 43). In advocating this, it was eminently clear to him that he was dealing primarily with an elite readership which had linguistic access to both the original and the translation. Finally, Wilhelm von Humboldt, another advocate of Schleiermacher's views, differentiated between "die Fremdheit" (foreignness) and "das Fremde" (the foreign). According to him, the translator should make the reader feel the presence of the "Other" rather than put "otherness" at the forefront (Koller 44). The point is to let the translation reveal the "foreign" rather than let the simple fact of its "foreignness" obscure it. In stressing this, Humboldt asserts somewhat paradoxically that the true contact with the foreign entails an overcoming of its foreignness. This is one sense of Benjamin's idea that "the true translation must be translucent" (die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend) in order to let the "pure language" shine on the original (59). Both Rafael's theory of opacity and Siegel's interpretation of "aneh" in which unintelligibility and "oddness" are at the forefront seem to remain at the level of "foreignness" rather than moving on to the level of the "foreign."

In fact, Rafael's thesis on the ineradicable presence of the foreign entails the existence of a reader capable of "making strange" what may have already become commonplace to the greater part of a language's speakers. The phenomenon of linguistic "purism" for example, presupposes a select group of people capable of distinguishing and demarcating between pure and impure, between indigenous and foreign. "Purism" as a language movement, in its various forms and shades, is therefore a phenomenon typically found among bilingual intellectuals and elites (Thomas 138-9). Contemporary Filipino English-speaking intellectuals coming face-to-face with the substantial literary and linguistic traces of Spanish colonialism would probably feel the foreignness of the past and of the ilustrado origins of Philippine nationalism quite keenly and even with a sense of tragedy. But it could have been quite another thing what the audiences of the Tagalog *komedya* or of the *awit* "Florante at Laura" may have felt while encountering the Spanish words embedded within their language. Looking at the particular case of "Florante at Laura," it is empirically implausible that the approximately 216 borrowed word-forms in that text, among them "reino," "ciudad," "caliz," "palacio," "mundo," etc., should all have the same degrees of opacity for its intended audience. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by a barrage of meaningless signifiers, they must instead have felt varying degrees of familiarity with the words which they heard uttered on stage or read from books. Balagtas's footnotes actually served to signal the few points in the text where he feared

that the opacity of words may endanger understanding. Indeed, these nineteenth century Tagalog texts could be seen as representing the culmination of a long process of linguistic naturalization of Spanish words into Tagalog rather than the jarring and discomfiting juxtaposition of two distinct languages as Rafael seems to imply. Simply put, what may actually be phenomena of linguistic borrowing and lexicalization within a monolingual community is somewhat inappropriately represented by Rafael as code-switching by bilingual writers in front of an uncomprehending audience. One may suspect that Balagtas so freely “traffics” in “untranslated bits of Castilian” because, for all intents and purposes, and with respect to his audience, the greater part of these bits of Castilian had already become an integral part of the Tagalog lexicon and the Tagalog linguistic imagination after centuries of more or less intensive linguistic contact with the colonizers. This of course requires further proof, but the same applies to Rafael’s opacity thesis.

Various manifestations of nationalism as an ideology have indeed traded in notions of purity and the rejection or eradication of the foreign, but elite and state nationalisms particularly in the Philippines have always desperately held on to their connections to the foreign with much pride and even arrogance. By incessantly repeating the colonial origins of all that is good and advanced in the Philippines, the state functionaries and the elite intelligentsia make sure no one forgets this, much less themselves. As if a foreign language were their only claim to civilization, Filipino government officials coming from an impoverished and demoralized country make it a point to flaunt their English skills in international fora while their more dignified counterparts from other countries insist on using their own languages for all official functions. Some Filipinos overseas would even be offended upon being identified as “Filipino” and would indignantly retort to the effect that “You see, I’m not actually Filipino, I’m half Spanish and half Chinese.” They therefore bring back into play an already forgotten and perhaps irrelevant distinction since most of them could not actually migrate back to China or Spain even if they wanted to. Undoubtedly, some examples of ideologies of national purity could be found among the anti-American Tagalog-speaking intelligentsia at the turn of the century, but despite having a certain tolerated status even within contemporary state ideology, these cannot at all be considered as constituting the hegemonic form of official nationalism in the Philippines.

Finally, given the Philippine context, Rafael’s second point regarding the disruptive “promise of the foreign” (182) which foretells the coming of a completely other cultural and social order seems somehow confusing. Who or what actually serves as the “other” in relation to the repressive Philippine state in the age of English globalization? These are the great majority of children and youth unable to finish their schooling because of

sheer poverty even as the public educational system undergoes rampant privatization and commercialization. These are the modern-day young *indios* forced to pay fines or clean the toilets in elementary and high schools for making the mistake of uttering words in their own language during the “English Only” campaigns. These are the sleepless workers in call centers forced to do violence to their tongues to make callers feel like they are listening to native speakers of English in Texas or Dublin. These are the hundreds of thousands of modern-day slaves aggressively being marketed and exported by the Philippine state and whose only comparative advantage in relation to millions of other impoverished workers in Asia and Africa is their purported English proficiency. It seems to make no sense to say that the promise for their liberation emanates from the foreign. Maybe their grasp of a foreign language may help them earn dollars, but this seems to be quite different thing from liberation in its most genuine sense. Traditions of struggle and protest have had a long history in the Philippines of creatively drawing from both foreign and indigenous sources. What is perhaps more fundamental than the disruptive presence of the foreign are continuous acts of “translation” among the oppressed and between themselves and the revolutionary intelligentsia in order to arrive at a lasting consensus on the necessary transformation of Philippine society. Too long have Filipinos been told to wait for the promises of the foreign, maybe it is time to pin their hopes somewhere else.

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