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Oliver Haag

Translating the History of Race

Indigenous Australian Literature in German

Abstract: . German interest in, and reception of, Indigenous Australian cultures have a long and also burdened history. With the emergence of German translations of Indigenous literature in the 1980s – that is, literature not about, but penned by, Indigenous authors – one-sided politics of representations and thus also stigmatised images started to change. Yet, the translation of literature per se does not simply entail a representation free of clichés and prejudices. Cultural knowledge cannot be simply rendered 'correct' according to the regimes of the source culture, but need to be adapted to the regimes of the target cultures. This article focuses on the ways the manifold concepts of race have been translated into three German audiobooks. Important aspects of race, it shows, have been lost in translation, while the racial history of the target culture poses new challenges for a literature that is intricately enmeshed with race and that seeks to rebut racism.

Since the 1970s, Australian Indigenous books – that is, books authored and co-authored by Indigenous writers[1] – have not only increased in popularity in Australia, but have also thrived in translation in Europe. According to statistical surveys, up to the year 2008, 81 Indigenous books had been translated into Continental languages.[2] Indigenous literature has been more frequently translated into German than any other Continental language, constituting 32 per cent of the corpus of translations, followed by French (19 per cent), Dutch (9 per cent), and Italian (7 per cent).[3]

Despite an increasing body of scholarly literature on the translation of Australian Indigenous literature, scholarship has not yet explored the politics of racial representation that the process of translation entails.[4] The translation of literature is not only of literary concern, but also one of politics and history, particularly so if translations involve racial representation.[5]

The present research fills this gap in scholarship by presenting a comparative study of three German translations of Australian Indigenous books: Paddy Roe's oral narratives 'Gularabulu' (2000) (source text: 'Gularabulu' 1983), Kevin Gilbert's children's book 'Mary Känguru und ich' (2003) (source text: 'Me and Mary Kangaroo' 1994), and David Unaipon's collection of oral accounts, 'Mooncumbulli' (2005) (source text: 'Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines' 2001 [1932]).

There are many debates about the cross-cultural editing of Indigenous texts within Australia.[6] At the heart of these debates is the question of how far Indigenous texts may be edited in order to be readable for a non-Indigenous audience,

1 Anita Heiss, Dhuuluu-Yala, p. 26.
2 Oliver Haag, Indigenous Australian Literature in German.
3 Ibid.
4 Danica Cerce, Oliver Haag, European Translations of Aboriginal Texts; Oliver Haag, Indigenous Literature in European Contexts; Oliver Haag, German Paratexts of Indigenous Australian Literature; Oliver Haag, Indigenous Australian Literature in German.
5 Homay King, Lost in Translation.
6 Anita Heiss, Dhuuluu-Yala, pp. 47-82; Margaret McDonell, Protocols, Political Correctness and Discomfort Zones; Jennifer Jones, Oodgeroo and Her Editor.

and how far this editing distorts the Indigenous contents and thus has an effect on the racial and cultural representation of Indigenous people. The (usually white) editor's influence on an Indigenous text and the changes brought about by such editing is thereby a central concern, relating not merely to grammar and style, but also to the alteration and deletion of historical and political content. In the case of translations into foreign languages, Indigenous texts are perforce changed by the process of translation. Despite the circumstance of any translation entailing an alteration of the source text, there are nonetheless different nuances of editorial change in the process of translation. Possible problems resulting from such textual changes relate not only to the adaptation of the source text to the syntactical and stylistic standards of the target language, but also to how culturally foreign elements are rendered comprehensible to the target audience.[7] Culturally foreign elements can either be concealed, or rendered explicit through additional explanation of cultural and historical context.[8] Thus, for an Indigenous text to be successfully translated does not merely mean to remain as true as possible to the source text, but also to render the text fully comprehensible to the target audience. If the editor's role is indeed, as Margaret McDonell suggests, "to assist the writer to achieve the writer's intention",[9] this role is duplicated in translation. In this case, the translator not only has to preserve the writer's intention, but also to ensure these intentions are accordingly apprehended in target culture contexts. The commitment to maintain cultural and linguistic comprehensibility thus gives considerable power to the translator to change an Indigenous text. The question emerging from the study of foreign language translations of Indigenous texts is to what extent a translation changes an Indigenous text with regard to its content.

On the textual level, the translation of 'Gularabulu' posed more challenges than the other two texts, because 'Gularabulu' is a collection of verbatim transcripts of oral narrations with an evident Indigenous English spoken and recorded. The other two books, in contrast, are not based on transcripts of oral conversations. 'Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines' and 'Me and Mary Kangaroo' were idiomatically translated into German. This means that, while the structure and syntax of the original English sentences were adapted to a fluid German style, the words were translated with the closest German equivalents, with no omission of any original words.[10] All of the Indigenous words used in the original texts (like 'coolamon' and 'maban') are retained in translation and accompanied by a German equivalent. For example, in Unaipon's 'Mooncumbulli', the term 'corroboree' is maintained in translation, followed by an admittedly inaccurate gloss in German, 'Tanz' (English 'dance'). In a similar vein, many of the particularly Australian oral expressions, such as 'yeah', have been rendered into a colloquial form of speech. Thus, the translation is sensitive to changing the structure of the source texts and remaining as close as possible to the original.

7 Gunilla Anderman, Margaret Rogers, Translation Today; Basil Hatim, Ian Mason, The Translator as Communicator, pp. 121-135.
8 Leah Gerber, "If I've Arksed Youse Boys Once, I've Arksed Youse Boys a Thousand Times"; Lawrence Venuti, Translation as Cultural Politics.
9 Margaret McDonell, Protocols, Political Correctness and Discomfort Zones, p. 86.
10 Ian Mason, Text Parameters in Translation, pp. 176-179.

Such forms of idiomatic translation are observable in the majority of German translations of Australian Indigenous texts,[11] including 'Me and Mary Kangaroo':

> When I was a little boy, there were no Boeing 707 jet aircraft, spaceships or satellites whizzing around. Instead, the aeroplanes looked like big pelicans with propellers for beaks and double wing. The cars were old 'T' Ford and Chevs – all burping rattling smoking things, coughing their way through billowing clouds of red dust that formed the surface of the street like red face powder.[12]

This passage has been translated as follows:

> Als ich ein kleiner Junge war, schwirrten noch keine Boeing 707, Raumschiffe oder Satelliten umher. Stattdessen sahen die Flugzeuge aus wie große Pelikane mit einem Propeller als Schnabel und Doppeldeckerflügel. Die Autos waren alte Fords und Chevrolets – rülpsende, knatternde, qualmende Dinger, die sich ihren Weg durch wogende Wolken aus rotem Staub husteten, der wie roter Gesichtspuder die Straßenoberfläche bildete.[13]

Literally translated into English this translation reads:

> When I was a little boy, no Boeing 707, spaceships or satellites were whizzing around. Instead, the aeroplanes looked like big pelicans with propellers as beaks and double wings. The cars were old Fords and Chevrolets – all burping, rattling, smoking things, coughing their way through billowy clouds of red dust that formed the surface of the street like red face powder.

As can be seen, this translation remains close to the structure of the source text, departing only marginally from a few expressions ('Chevrolets' instead of 'Chevs') which, however, do not alter the content of the story. The German translation in this case is idiomatic and evinces a sophisticated language style. Thus, in 'Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines' and 'Me and Mary Kangaroo' the editorial changes to the source texts that resulted from the processes of translations have not changed the original meaning of the stories. The translator took great pains to remain as close as possible to the source texts, turning the original texts into a fluent and comprehensive German equivalent, while successfully preserving the original meaning of the stories.

This picture is different for 'Gularabulu'. As mentioned above, 'Gularabulu' consists of transcribed narrations in Indigenous English which, in contrast to the other two books, constitutes major challenges to the translator. The main difficulty is that the conversations recorded in Indigenous English – which does not mirror the syntactical and lexical rules of Standard English – cannot be literally translated into correct German. A literal translation of Indigenous English into German would need to reflect the main differences between Indigenous and Standard English, hence orality as well as syntactical and lexical differences.[14] The only way to render such differences comprehensible to a German-speaking audience is to use particular German dialects so as to reflect the orality, as well as the incorporation of grammatical errors, in order to highlight the lexical and syntactical differences. There are, however, two main problems associated with such a translation. First, it would entail the representation of Indigenous English as grammatically faulty English, instead of representing it as a sovereign

11 Danica Cerce, Oliver Haag, European Translations of Australian Aboriginal Texts.
12 Kevin Gilbert, Me and Mary Kangaroo, p. 1.
13 Kevin Gilbert, Thomas Brezina, Mary Känguru und ich, p. 1.
14 Susan Kaldor, Ian Malcolm, Aboriginal English.

and equally valid variant of English. Second, a grammatically and syntactically incorrect German is associated with foreign speakers. Moreover, xenophobic discourse tends to portray migrants and foreigners as intellectually incapable of speaking correct German. A translation into unidiomatic language thus would have represented Indigenous people not as autochthonous but equal to migrants and evoked racist prejudice. The words spoken by the Indigenous protagonists in the film 'Australia' (2008), for example, were translated into grammatically faulty German, to which German audiences responded negatively.[15]

In 'Gularabulu' the translator did not attempt to replicate the Indigenous English, but instead translated the text into Standard German. The grammatical specificities of Indigenous English have thus been adjusted to Standard German, with the distinctive character of Indigenous English being lost in translation. Whereas this constitutes a severe editorial intervention, this practice was only on the grammatical level, and did not change the meaning of the original stories. For example, the original story 'Mirdinan' begins as follows:

> Yeah -----
> well these people bin camping in Fisherman Bend him
> and his missus you know –
> Fisherman Bend in Broome, *karnun* –
> we call-im *karnun* –
> soo, the man used to go fishing all time –
> get food for them, you know, food, lookin' for tucker –
> an' his, his missus know some Malay bloke was in the
> creek, Broome Creek –
> boat used to lay up there –
> so this, his missus used to go there with this Malay
> bloke –
> one Malay bloke, oh he's bin doin' this for –
> over month – [16]

This passage is directly translated from Indigenous English into Standard German thus:

> Am Fisherman Bend in Broome lagerten einmal ein älterer Aboriginal-Mann und seine Frau. Der Mann ging jeden Tag fischen, damit sie 'was zu essen hatten und während er sich täglich um das Essen kümmerte, traf sich seine Frau mit einem malaiischen Fischer, der sein Boot am nahen Broome Creek liegen hatte. Anfang der zwanziger Jahre gab es viele Malaien, Japaner und Chinesen in Broome, die in der damals florierenden Perlenfischerei Arbeit fanden. Die Frau hatte also dieses Verhältnis mit diesem Malaien und das ging wohl über einen Monat ohne dass Mirdinan etwas davon ahnte.[17]

Literally translated into English this part reads as follows:

> An elderly Aboriginal man and his wife once camped in Fisherman Bend in Broome. The man used to go fishing each day so that they had something to eat. And while he was looking each day after the food, his wife met with a Malayan fisherman who had his boat lying at the nearby Broome Creek. In the beginning of the twenties there were many Malayans, Japanese, and Chinese in Broome who found work in the then-flourishing pearling industry. So the woman had this relationship with this Malay and this was going on for *well* [emphasised] over a month without Mirdinan having noticed anything about it.

15 Oliver Haag, Tasteless, Romantic and Full of History.
16 Paddy Roe, Stephen Muecke, Gularabulu, p. 3.
17 Paddy Roe, Stephen Muecke, Karl Merkatz, Gularabulu, p. 1.

As is apparent, there are grave differences between the original and the translation, particularly regarding the omission of Indigenous English, which has been translated directly into Standard German. Moreover, the historical context in Broome in the 1920s is not expounded in the original, but included in a footnote (f.n. 2). Neither is the name 'Mirdinan' mentioned in the original (it appears in the introduction).[18] Yet, for all the differences, the content of the story is unchanged; the message, although not entirely reflective of the structure of the original text, is basically the same as in the source text. That is, the historical contexts of the narration (foraging and adultery in times of interracial contact) have been preserved in translation in the sense of having remained – in its essence – comprehensible for the foreign German target culture. This comprehensibility would have suffered severe change if the German translation had simply replicated Indigenous English given that the lack of German equivalents would have evoked codes of racial prejudice that would have ensued a more literary correct translation, true, but that would have, in the end, falsified the context of the source text (i.e. to portray a story of racial representation instead of one of foraging and adultery). The translation of texts, in other words, is not merely a literary but also a historical endeavour to adapt social-historical contexts from the source culture to the contexts of the target culture, which can be conflicting: to stay literally and contextually as true to the source text, hence to make at times severe literary interventions to properly convey the socio-historical contexts.

The textual representation of Indigenous people

A respectable amount of critical literature has been devoted to the portrayal of Indigenous people within Australia.[19] This literature has identified different forms of representing Indigenous Australians, ranging from the practice of rendering Indigenous people silent, over romantic views and new primitivism to the overemphasis of racial oppression and victimisation. The translation of Indigenous literature, too, affects the representation of Indigenous people. As has already been demonstrated, processes of translation can exert an influence on racial representation – a literal translation of Indigenous English with its distinctive styles of narration, for example, can entail a racist perception. Linguistically, the translations of the three books portray Indigenous people as positive: the sophisticated language style makes the authors appear in an intellectually sophisticated light, and the decision not to use unidiomatic language can be seen as reflecting a decidedly anti-racist stance.

From an historical view, however, there is a grave problem with the translation of David Unaipon's 'Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines', which was first published in 1932 and thus uses expressions no longer in current use because they are considered racist. These expressions caused major difficulties in the translation of the text, as they were translated literally, with no explanation

18 Paddy Roe, Stephen Muecke, Gularabulu, p. 2.
19 Eric Michaels, Bad Aboriginal Art; Gillian Cowlishaw, On Getting It Wrong; Jackie Huggins, Sister Girl, pp. 25-36.

of the historicity of the text and its outdated vocabulary. Thus, the translation of 'Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines' replicates racist terminology. Two of these terms that are employed in this audiobook are the German equivalents of 'race' ('Rasse') and 'full-blood' ('Vollblut'). Whereas the term 'Vollblut' is as racist as the English 'full-blood' and would have required at least a proper contextualisation for the target audience, the term 'Rasse', in contrast to 'race', has a purely biological connotation, referring to physiological criteria and skin colour.[20]

Apart from extreme right-wing contexts, the German term 'Rasse' is no longer employed, mainly because of its use during the National Socialist past, during which individuals of specific religious and ethnic groups were murdered as *races* of lower rank. Hence, it was the concept of race that legitimised mass murder.[21] From this history, the German equivalent of 'race' is undoubtedly a racist term. Anne Brewster has likened the term 'Rasse' to the English word 'breed',[22] and, significantly, in the other German translations of Indigenous literature, the word 'Rasse' is notably absent.[23] Its use in Unaipon's translated text would thus have required either rigorous explanation as to its historicity and different meanings in German and English or complete substitution with a neutral term, such as 'Volk' (people). As it stands in the translated audiobook, the word 'Rasse' represents Indigenous people in solely biological terms. The literal translation of politically sensitive terms has occasionally resulted in a problematic historical representation of Indigenous people.

Another problem of representation relates to the translation of subtitles and the use of the terms 'myth' and 'legend' therein. The translation of titles is in this event certainly influenced by the publisher's marketing strategies. As Gerard Genette argues, titles are an essential instrument which publishers use to guide and attract audiences.[24] Advertisements can thereby produce cultural and racial images that do not necessarily replicate the content of a publication. For example, David Unaipon's 'Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines' was published under the subtitle 'Mythen und Legenden der australischen Aborigines' (English 'Mooncumbulli. Myths and Legends of the Australian Aboriginals'). 'Gularabulu' demonstrates a similar tendency; whereas the original subtitle reads 'Stories from the West Kimberley', the subtitle in translation reads 'Myths and Legends from the West Kimberleys (sic)'.

The words 'Mythen' (myths) and 'Legenden' (legends) employed in the subtitles are inaccurate. They are drastically different from 'story' and 'legendary tales', respectively, since they do not merely imply a fictional account, but also have a ring of incredibility, particularly so in political parlance, when they are used in the sense of a 'lie'.[25] The notions of fiction and falsehood do justice neither to Paddy Roe's stories, nor to Unaipon's book, which contains decidedly non-fictional, that is, ethnographic material.

20 Peter Weingart, Rasse, Blut und Gene.
21 Michael Burleigh, Wolfgang Wippermann, The Racial State.
22 Anne Brewster, Teaching the Tracker in Germany.
23 Oliver Haag, Indigenous Australian Literature in German.
24 Gerard Genette, Paratexts, pp. 55-63.
25 Michael Aust, Schichtagitation in der Heckscheibe, p. 238.

The present analysis reveals an ambivalent picture of the three translations. On the one hand, the textual reproduction of the original stories is of high quality and represents the Indigenous authors in an intellectually sophisticated light. The translations are idiomatic and maintain a sophisticated German style, and literal translations have been avoided in the event of possibly prejudiced reactions among the target audience. This particularly applies to the rendition of Indigenous English. On the other hand, there are quite severe problems with the rendition of titles and sub-titles as well as the translation of historically sensitive terms which produces racially prejudiced representations in translation. As becomes obvious, translators need to pay heed not only to literary but also to historical criteria. Translation indeed is a highly political endeavour.

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