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The Translation of Silence in K. Ishiguro's Novels: Testing the Explication Hypothesis on Unreliable Narratives

2019

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The dissertation was granted by Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris III

Abstract

The research of this thesis explores questions related to both translation studies and narrative poetics, through fields that have largely been studied separately thus far. More specifically, it deals with the translation of the implicit and of narrative silence(s) in four of Ishiguro's novels: *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *The Remains of the Day* (1989), *The Unconsoled* (1995) and *The Buried Giant* (2015). It focuses in particular on the different narrative strategies used in these novels, which have in common a high degree of indirectness and to anticipate reader participation as part of the narrative pact. The translator being in the first instance a reader, this raises the question of the impact of translation on such a narrative pact, due in particular to the increased communicative risk involved in translation (Becher 2010a): do translators tend to fill in the blanks of the text with their own understanding of it? Or, on the contrary, do textual clues helping the implied reader reconstruct the underlying narrative become lost in translation?

In order to answer these questions, this work endeavours to test Blum-Kulka's (1986) explication hypothesis from a narratological perspective. The explication hypothesis posits the existence of a tendency towards greater explicitness in target texts than in corresponding source texts. Here, the goal is to determine whether or not there is such a tendency towards explication from a narratological perspective, and if so, what form it takes. I contrast the results obtained with the main approaches to explication (linguistic, and cognitive) for one given example at a time, in order to situate narratological explication in comparison to them and in the aim of contributing to the (re)definition of

the concept of explicitation in translation, for the methodological issues posed by studies on explicitation are largely due to the difficulty of defining this concept (Becher 2010ab, Murtisari 2016). My analysis encompasses the translations of the corpus's four novels into five target languages: French, Hebrew, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. This linguistic diversity is intended, in particular, as a means of avoiding making generalisations on the basis of language-pair-specific results.

This work also approaches the subject at hand from the angle of genetic translation studies. Thanks to a Dissertation Fellowship in the Humanities awarded by the Harry Ransom Center (HRC), I had the opportunity in 2017 to spend a month exploring the archive within its internationally renowned research library located in Texas, which had acquired the entirety of Ishiguro's records to date in 2015. This allowed me to consider the genesis of the narrative strategy in *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Unconsoled* in particular, which was the object of two separate chapters. In these chapters, I approach the variations taking place from one version to the next as intralingual translation, on the basis of Jakobson's distinction between three types of translation (1959). The genetic work carried out in this dissertation builds on studies by Zethsen's (2009) and Whyatt's (2017), among others, in that it seeks to see translation in a broader light while simultaneously striving to shed new light on its intralingual branch. Moreover, the exploration of the process of self-translation honing the narrative voice also lays the foundation for the subsequent narratological and interlingual translational analyses in the corresponding chapters.

Throughout this dissertation, I thus endeavour to explore from a translational perspective the manifestations of Ishiguro's poetics of silence in the various narrative strategies displayed in the four novels of the corpus. I will first present the main concepts at hand and then provide an overview of my results.

The **explicitation hypothesis** was formulated by Israeli researcher Shoshana Blum-Kulka in 1986. According to her research, there is in translation a universal tendency to explicitate; i.e. translated texts tend to be more explicit than their source texts. Blum-Kulka attributes this tendency to the translator's interpretation process, which logically precedes that of translation, since chronologically speaking the translator is first a reader. The explicitation hypothesis is the best-known and most researched of the hypotheses deemed to be translation universals. Since 1986, translation universals (or "probabilistic laws", in

Toury's words (1995)) have been the subject of a great number of studies. Research on explicitation, in particular, has strived to refine scholars' understanding of the phenomenon of explicitation in translation. Thus, Klaudy (2001) proposed the so-called "asymmetry hypothesis" in order to distinguish explicitation as a general tendency in translation, from explicitation due to differences in languages. But while a number of these studies claim to demonstrate the validity of Blum-Kulka's hypothesis (Øverås 1998, Olohan and Baker 2000), others affirm that the explicitation hypothesis cannot claim the status of translation universal, mainly because of methodological problems inherent in the subsequent studies. Becher (2010ab) calls for a redefinition of the terms involved, and for a more rigorous and consistent research method, so that language pair-specific instances of explicitation, for instance, should not be taken into account. As for Saldanha (2008) and Murtisari (2013), they endeavour to approach the explicitation hypothesis through the prism of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986), itself adapted from Grice's cooperation principle (1975). They insist on the role of pragmatics and the importance of context in the analysis of the degree of explicitness of a text, and in the study of the phenomenon of explicitation in translation studies. Particularly relevant to my subject is the notion that explicitation does not necessarily entail greater informativity (Kamenická 2007), or always involve implicitness in the original text (Saldanha 2008). I base my definition of linguistic explicitness on Murtisari (2016) and my definition of cognitive explicitness, i.e. meaning processability, on Heltai's (2004); as stated above, these two approaches serve as a point of comparison to narratological explicitness throughout this thesis.

The choice to test a narrative approach of the explicitation hypothesis in the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro specifically stems from the observation that his novels are, each in its own way, characterised by a narrative strategy that heavily relies on the implicit and the unsaid, as well as by a common poetics of silence. Such complex and subtle narrative pacts naturally make for a demanding translating pact, where the translators themselves are ideally expected to perform the same hermeneutic work as the implied reader, and faced with the additional difficulty of transferring the various nuances of all the interwoven narrative levels – including blanks and silences – into a given target language. Indeed, although the shifts analysed in the corpus are mainly subtle micro-textual variations, their combination has an impact at the macro-textual level (see Leuven-Zwarts 1990); moreover,

in the corpus under study, the macro-textual narrative strategy itself is expressed chiefly through micro-textual elements.

The four novels of the corpus present three main types of narrative strategy, respectively unreliable narration (*A Pale View of Hills*, *The Remains of the Day*), unnatural narration (*The Unconsoled*) and what I label unstable narration (*The Buried Giant*). I describe the type of narratives they represent, characterised by indirectness and incompleteness, as belonging to the umbrella term of “unreliable narrative” (my coinage): each of the three types presents a different facet of this overarching narrative strategy, which reflects in turn the poetics of silence developed throughout Ishiguro’s fiction.

Booth was the first critic, in 1961, to put forward a definition of **unreliable narration**, defining it as cases of mis/under-reporting, -evaluating, -interpreting. In unreliable narration, the narrator withholds information that would, in a more classical reading pact, have been communicated to the reader. Unreliable narrators thus fail to give the reader all the information they have at their disposal. These silences can sometimes hide crucial elements pertaining to the identity of the narrator him/herself, as it is the case in Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1925), in which the narrator eventually turns out to be the murderer. It can also conceal information about their feelings, as in Ishiguro’s short story “A Strange and Sometimes Sadness” (1981), where the reader learns through another character’s intervention that the narrator is in love with her best friend’s fiancé. However, the implied reader (Booth 1961) has the means to piece back together, thanks to a variety of textual clues, a fictional reality different to the surface narrative.

In order to analyse unreliability in the relevant novels of the corpus (*A Pale View of Hills* and *The Remains of the Day*), I rely on an adapted version of Weizman and Dascal’s (1991) pragmatic model on contextual information. I thus differentiate between ‘cues’, i.e. textual signals pointing to the narrator’s unreliability, and ‘clues’ – textual signals directing the reader towards an implicit version of fictional reality. On the basis of this preliminary narratological analysis, I then study the translation of the novel’s narrative poetics of silence in the five target languages, determining whether or not significant shifts of narratological explicitness take place through an increased or decreased prominence of cues or clues.

In *A Pale View of Hills* and *The Remains of the Day*, the poetics of silence manifests itself chiefly in the narrators’ retention of crucial information and in the perceptible gaps

between their discourse and the textual world. Etsuko's and Stevens's unreliability results in a distancing of the reader from the underlying fictional reality, by giving a distorted and/or incomplete account of it. In *A Pale View of Hills*, a number of textual elements point to a discrepancy between the surface narrative and the underlying version of fictional reality, and in particular to the possible overlap between several of the characters, but no stable version of fictional reality can be fully reconstructed by the readers, for no reading truly answers every question or fills every gap in the narration. In *The Remains of the Day*, by contrast, it is possible for the readers to access an implicit version of fictional reality by processing the different cues and clues scattered in the text. Moreover, the gap between narrator and implied reader gradually decreases as the narrator himself evolves towards a greater reliability. This results in a multiplication of the number of textual signals and in a greater prominence of the narrative strategy, and is apt to trigger a process of identification in the reader.

My analysis of the target texts shows that the rendering of the narrative strategy in translation depends on diachronic factors more than on the specific type of narrative strategy, as evidenced by the fact that there is little continuity in the translating strategies in *A Pale View of Hills* and in *The Remains of the Day*. *A Pale View of Hills* stands out from the other novels both from a linguistic and cognitive perspective, with a tendency towards linguistic implicitation and no marked tendency from the point of view of cognitive explicitness. While narratological implicitation prevails in this first novel as in the following ones, it is the only novel in which narratological implicitation is not mirrored by cognitive explicitation.

Interestingly, a reverse tendency can be observed in *The Remains of the Day*, where cognitive explicitation largely predominates over cognitive implicitation. However, in terms of narratological explicitness, the prevalence of implicitation is much less pronounced than in *A Pale View of Hills*. I would suggest that at least two factors come into play here. Firstly, the type of unreliability displayed in the novel is different to that of Ishiguro's first novel, with a more stable underlying fictional reality, and is easier to identify. This is particularly true of the second part of the novel, where Stevens gradually evolves towards more reliability. Secondly, the increased familiarity of the literary world and of the general public with Ishiguro's narrative poetics, at the time of the translations, is likely to have played a role in the observed greater adequacy of the various target texts from a narratological perspective.

The second type of narrative strategy, which is that used by Ishiguro in *The Unconsoled*, is **unnatural narration**. Unnatural narration features in non-mimetic narratives, that is to say when fictional reality clearly departs from the actual world. According to Alber, “[a]n unnatural narrative violates physical laws, logical principles, or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge by representing storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces that could not exist in the actual world”¹. Unnatural narration has only been theorised as such since Richardson’s work on unnatural temporalities (2000, 2002) but it is by no means a new phenomenon in literature, which always involved the representation of impossibilities. In fact, some of its more conventionalised forms have been used for centuries, from Gilgamesh’s epic to science-fiction through fables and their speaking animals. Alber distinguishes between those sorts of impossibilities that have over time become familiar in narration (such as the figure of the omniscient narrator or time travel in science-fiction) and impossibilities that have not been conventionalised, as in *The Unconsoled*.

Contrary to unreliable narration, in unnatural narratives, the reader does not have the means to put back together a fictional reality other than that communicated through the narration. But there is a similar phenomenon of distancing of the reader, not only from the narrator’s discourse this time, but from the narrator him/herself, and from the whole of the fictional universe. This distancing stems from the fact that the unnatural narrative depicts a universe subject to rules different from those of the real world. Thus, in Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*, the opening pages of the novel seem to give the tone of a realistic mode of narration, until a ten-page-long conversation between the narrator and a hotel porter in an elevator. After a certain point, which varies according to the individual, the reader is led to discard the possibility that the surreal length of the conversation stems from a miscalculation on the author’s part. They are then led to consider a new, updated narrative pact, in which the fictional universe is not subject to the same rules as the extratextual world.

Adherence to this narrative pact entails a different sort of hermeneutic work to unreliable narration: here, it involves piecing back together the rules governing this alien world. These rules, called “dream techniques” by the author, aim to reproduce dream logic in the textual

¹ Alber, Jan. ‘Unnatural Narrative’. In Hühn, Peter *et al.*, editors. *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Hamburg University, 2013, Hamburg.
<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/unnatural-narrative>.

world, thereby appealing to a shared experience with the reader. However, these techniques are not spelt out and the textual world's underlying logic must be reconstructed by the reader on the basis of the text. The poetics of silence thus takes on a different form here: although unreliable narration features are not absent from the novel, the narrative gaps lie chiefly in this implicit character of the textual world's dream logic, without which the readers cannot bridge the gap between their own world and that of the diegesis.

In *The Unconsoled*, the predominance of linguistic and cognitive explication is less pronounced than in *The Remains of the Day*, and the ratio between narratological implicitation and explication is also more balanced. This can seem surprising given that unnatural narration represents a stark departure from the narrative strategy of unreliability that had by then become associated with Ishiguro's fiction. A possible explanation could be that Ishiguro's status as an authoritative figure on the literary scene had become more solidly anchored still than immediately after he received the Man Booker Prize for *The Remains of the Day*. The fact that the translations of *The Unconsoled* reflect more accurately the source text's narrative strategy might stem from the increase in fame and authority that generally follows this kind of prestigious prize. Moreover, within the narratological shifts observed, the tendency to implicate is more pronounced with elements of unnatural narration than with those of unreliable narration. This is consistent with Alber's (2013) observation that when faced with unnatural narratives, readers tend to use normalising reading strategies, going back to known frames rather than proceeding to frame enrichment.

The third type of narrative strategy present in the corpus, which is that used in *The Buried Giant*, does not correspond to any existing label to denote narrative types. I call it **unstable narration** on account of the shifting dimension of the narrative voice throughout the novel, and because of the impossibility to determine where unreliable narration stops and where unnatural narration begins.

The Buried Giant is characterised by its multifocal narration, with several different narrators whose respective accounts of fictional reality often clash with one another, making it impossible for the reader to reconstruct a stable underlying version of fictional reality. Because of the unnatural dimension of the narrative – which features among other things a number of supernatural creatures – the reader cannot establish with any certainty whether

these inconsistencies stem from the unreliability of some of the narrators, or if one of the implicit rules of the fictional universe actually entails the possibility for several apparently incompatible realities to coexist.

Although unreliable and unnatural narration both feature in *The Buried Giant*, the narrative strategy in this novel is more complex than a combination of the two such as that found in *The Unconsoled*. The line between the two narrative strategies is blurred by the instability that lies at the heart of the narrative strategy, characterised by linguistic, narrative and ontological ambiguity. Rimmon-Kennan describes “ambiguity as a literary device” (1982:30) as a conjunction of exclusive hypotheses based on contradictory sets of clues; in *The Buried Giant*, such contradictory sets of clues do exist, but they do not necessarily point to mutually exclusive hypotheses. However, they do prevent the implied reader from attaining a stable version of fictional reality. The text’s intent thus lies precisely in its reluctance to be interpreted in a univocal way, and ambiguity, elusiveness and instability permeate the novel at every level of the text. Syntactic and semantic ambiguities abound, and the interweaving of known and unknown elements produces an unsettling and defamiliarising effect that places the implied reader in a state of hesitation. This hesitation is reinforced by the frequent switches between different types of focalisation (Genette 1979). *The Buried Giant* thus takes this process of initial distancing of the reader one step further: the all-pervasive ontological instability, whether it results from or is simply mirrored in the characters’ amnesia and lack of grasp on fictional reality, plunges the reader in a comparable state of confusion.

The unstable narration at work in the text gives rise to often incompatible reports of fictional reality by different narrators, even when it comes to physical perceptions, which undermines the very notion of interpersonal referentiality. Here, the text’s silence paradoxically stems from this multiplication of the narrative voices, and lies in the absence of resolution of the different conflicts arising from this multifocal dimension. As often in Ishiguro’s fiction, the text ultimately gives no definitive answer to the questions it raises. The narrative pact itself entails the implied reader’s identification of ambiguity as part of the text’s global meaning, which questions the very possibility of one stable, univocal reality. While in *The Remains of the Day* and in *A Pale View of Hills*, the key to the mystery lies in the narrators’ discourse, and in *Unconsoled* in the diegetic world itself, in *The Buried*

Giant both contribute to the complexity of the narrative pact, and the mystery itself is the key.

As in *The Unconsoled*, unnatural narration tends to be implicitated more than unreliable narration in *The Buried Giant*, which is consistent with the explanation proposed above. Overall, the prevalence of narratological implicitation is more pronounced still in *The Buried Giant* than in the other three novels. Due to various elements, such as a mix of genres or a shifting focalisation, the narrative mode used in this novel departs even more drastically than that of *The Unconsoled* from identifiable narrative categories, such as the unreliable narration used in Ishiguro's first three novels. However, in my view, this is not the only explanation for the greater prominence of narratological implicitation. The pervasive ontological ambiguity central to the narrative strategy poses the translators with a different sort of challenge that often takes place at the linguistic rather than narratological level, triggering obligatory shifts in explicitness. Moreover, the prevalence of cognitive explicitation is as pronounced as in *The Remains of the Day* and *The Unconsoled*, which confirms that increased cognitive explicitness and decreased narratological explicitness often go together and are the dominant trend.

The overall results of my research show that, in spite of the undeniable importance of translational norms and of linguistic factors varying from target language to target language and from novel to novel, there appears to be a certain evolution towards greater adequacy (see Toury [1978] 1995) in the translation of Ishiguro's narrative poetics of silence across the corpus. Unreliable narration, in particular, seems to have become widely identified as forming part of the text's intent, and its reproduction appears to have become more central to the translations' respective *skopos*. This in turn suggests that the translators' competence as implied readers, and in turn as translators, evolves as the author himself hones his narrative technique and as this technique becomes more clearly identified with his writing.

When it comes to intralingual translation, the investigation carried out in this thesis shows that the relevance of the notion of *skopos* extends to this kind of translation as well, and that in the case at hand, implicitness is precisely at the heart of the text's intent. In the self-translations under study, there is thus a tendency towards complexification in the translational shifts carried out by Ishiguro from one version to the next.

Similarly, while my results tend to confirm the validity of the explicitation hypothesis from a linguistic and cognitive perspective, they also show a pronounced and generalised tendency towards implicitation of the narrative strategy in the interlingual translations – especially, as stated above, when it departs from the narrative strategy of unreliability once it has become associated with Ishiguro’s fiction. This implicitation can correspond to filling in narrative blanks and resolving ambiguity, or to the disappearance of the textual signals pointing the implied reader to the subtext or underlying logic below the surface narrative. However, while these results tend to disprove the validity of the explicitation hypothesis from the point of view of narrative poetics, they do not prove that translation does not affect the explicitness of the narrative strategy; the systematicity of implicitation as the dominant type of narratological shift and the tendency to a reverse correlation with cognitive explicitness suggest the opposite. In my view, these results show that the main translation universal at play here is not explicitation but reduction of complex narrative voices (Chesterman 2010). This calls for more research on the subject, and more generally on the exploration of the interplay between narrative poetics and translation studies.