Accented Futures: Language Activism and the Ending of Apartheid.

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Accented Futures is a passionate defence of multilingualism, diversity and resistance to homogenising erasure of difference. The theoretical background against which Carli Coetzee's defence is situated revolves around her proposed concept of "accentedness", a concept illustrated on a variety of texts and case studies—ranging from cultural and literary, to artistic and pedagogical—all drawn from current South African contexts and circumstances. Coetzee argues that the ending of institutional apartheid does not automatically mean that the need for language activism has become a thing of the past; on the contrary, as amply illustrated in this book, in order to pave the way for "an accented" future, there is a need for a new kind of cultural and pedagogical engagement and, indeed, for a new critical vocabulary.

The terms "accent" and "accentedness" are not used in the strictly linguistic sense of phonetic difference, but rather in the generic sense of highly differentiated and stratified sociocultural perspectives, which do not exclude—but actually valorise—the need for occasional disagreement, discord and resistance. Coetzee's book offers "a defence of difficulty, of failure and of misunderstanding [arguing that the real end of inequality in post-apartheid South Africa] can only be brought about by a high degree of tolerance of difference and disagreement. Accented thinking brings difference to the surface, and does not strive for a unified and unitary position (167).

The author sets "accentedness" in sharp contrast to "translation". While translation is considered to favour the dominant language (through a silencing of the subtle differences or "accents" of the language of lesser circulation), accentedness does the very opposite. It suggests "resistance to absorption" (7) and the right to maintain, preserve and valorise one's set of differences, whether linguistic, perceptual or cultural. Coetzee argues against translation, which she sees as entrenching inequalities in society, particularly in situations where—in the case of translations from indigenous languages into English—homogenising translation methods are being used. Such methods are referred to by translation scholar Lawrence Venuti—for example, in *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (1998)—as "domesticating" (i.e., making the translated text sound fluent or natural in the target language), as opposed to "foreignising" (preserving the flavour and strangeness of the translated text).

As Carli Coetzee herself has chosen mainly to engage with translations into English as target language (not the other way around), her occasionally over-generalised comments about translation might be challenged in a closer interaction with debates in the field of Translation Studies. Scholars such as Mona Baker—for example, in *Translation and Conflict* (2006)—or Theo Hermans—in his tellingly titled *Translating Others* (2006)—would make very similar comments to Coetzee's, but in the name of "translation" and Translation Studies. Both Baker and Hermans, for example, show full awareness of the need to rethink entrenched presuppositions about translation: the need to go beyond traditional, Eurocentric and "domesticating" translation methodologies that favour dominant cultures. Hermans says: "No single model of investigation can capture the intensity of the local. What emerges, rather, is the prospect of a splintered discipline [Translation Studies], a de-centred and perhaps ex-centric field of study that must learn to speak several tongues, recognize the contingency of theory and seek to make its own uncertainties productive" (9). Hermans's comments here do not necessarily contradict

Coetzee's definitions of "accentedness", but unlike Coetzee, he would not set accentedness and translation in any mutual opposition. As do most scholars of postcolonial translation studies, Hermans and Baker are alert to the value of "difference" within dominant and homogenising languages and cultural practices, especially when these practices present themselves as neutral and all-embracing, yet erasing of difference (as is so often the case with English in contemporary South Africa).

Coetzee offers several well-researched case studies in support of her principal argument. Of particular relevance to a South African readership is the chapter on *There Was This Goat* (2009), a book of reflections—by Krog, Nosisi and Kopano—on the translational challenges involved in the reporting of the TRC deliberations. Rather than focus on the conciliatory gestures that are implied in many acts of translation, Coetzee identifies moments where the three researchers find themselves in creative conflict about their own diverse and divergent cultural perceptions of hidden semantic meanings—informed as these perceptions are by specific experiences of the apartheid past—in TRC transcripts into English of, in this instance, isiXhosa oral testimony. Coetzee says, accordingly: "My argument seeks out moments in the text where non-understanding and misunderstanding are presented as the very aim of the text [so as to prevent] the risk of being absorbed into another speech with another set of codes and desires" (21). She suggests that it is precisely via resistance—and not silent submission—to homogenising (even if benevolent) interpretations of experience that new ways of relating across languages and cultures can, almost paradoxically, begin to open up the society.

Coetzee continues her reflections on the hegemony of English in a chapter dedicated to Njabulo S. Ndebele's essays, with a particular focus on his collection, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (2006). Here she reflects on the inequalities involved in the act of linguistic and cultural translation when one of the two poles is English (whether as "source language/ culture" or "target language/ culture" in the translational encounter). Coetzee points out that Ndebele's interpretation of "ordinariness" in the South African context does not celebrate easy recognisability, but rather "accented" multicultural differences of perception and interpretation of meaning. Here, she highlights the value of intercultural and intertextual differences as "pointing out fracture and absence, and insisting on the need for mistrust and suspicion". However, as she continues: "the road leads out of that suspicion, towards mutual vulnerability [and] towards accented thinking" (60).

Ideas of "resistance" and "accent" in intercultural encounters are further developed in other case studies. Of great interest is the chapter on translation as a practice in the early days of colonial settlement in the Cape; Coetzee's argument here being that "[d]espite the multilingualism of the early encounters […] these early instances of translation practices provide us in fact with a clear example of a *lack* of accentedness, and *lack* of intertextuality" (79). A similar situation—she argues—is recognisable in the asymmetrical features of contemporary South African multilingualism, with translation (into English) continuing to be "done at the cost of African languages" (6). Another, and in many ways related, chapter focuses on the markings of early rock painters, and how these artworks have been "translated" and appropriated by academic scholarship. Other case studies include a discussion of Thembinkosi Goniwe's "Returning the Gaze", an artwork that has the power to unsettle viewers who are provoked to acknowledge their cultural "non-neutrality". The concept of resistant "misunderstanding" (as intriguingly more productive than the conciliatory gesture) is also presented in chapters on Jacob Dlamini's and Zoë Wicomb's work, respectively. Of

"activist" relevance are two further chapters on teaching in multicultural contexts; one drawing on the author's own pedagogical "accented practices", including her awareness of the ambiguities and misunderstandings involved in trying to understand and be understood.

Carli Coetzee's book is a bold, well-written and heartfelt declaration of her belief in the potential of South Africa's "accented futures". The author is supportive of the activist work of creating new "accented archives and traditions", while aware of the challenges ahead. I agree with her concluding remarks that language activism "will not always be positive and conciliatory; at times, conflict, misunderstanding and disagreement will be dominant, but out of this will, one hopes, come a willingness to reveal vulnerability and a willingness to learn" (170): a willingness not only to tolerate, but to embrace, and not feel threatened by, the "accents" of others.

Works Cited

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Ileana Dimitriu
dimitriu@ukzn.ac.za
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban