

Covert Ideologies in Pidgin-English Translation Humor

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1. Introduction

Several studies (Romaine 1999; Meyerhoff 2004) have explored ideologies about Pidgin (or Hawai'i Creole (English)) through surveys and questionnaires. For example, Romaine (1999) conducted an informal survey on attitudes towards the use of Pidgin in education, and Meyerhoff (2004) examined attitudes to Pidgin use through respondents' evaluations of the terms *moke* and *tita* (*moke* and *tita* are social categories that prototypically denote Pidgin-speaking locals of Polynesian descent). However, language ideology is only partly captured in self-reports: people's talk about language is often less nuanced than their practical understandings manifest in language use (Keane 1997:98). Focusing on translation jokes circulated in print and electronic media, this study goes beyond self-reports to investigate ideologies about Pidgin embedded in language use. Translation jokes, which often rely on stereotypes for creating humor, serve as an ideal site for the investigation of ideology (Rickford and Rickford 2000:209-214). In Pidgin-English translation jokes, a Pidgin and an English text are juxtaposed. While the core meaning of the texts is kept roughly the same, the intertextual gap is manipulated for comic effect. In our corpus of translation jokes, Pidgin and English are often taken to represent 'local voice' and 'haole (i.e., white) voice' respectively. To uncover ideologies about Pidgin and English, this study (1) examines how the two voices are linguistically constructed in translation humor; and (2) investigates how the portrayals of Pidgin speakers and English speakers in translation humor are interpreted by people from Hawai'i and by people from the mainland. We focus on the first question in this paper. We are currently conducting a reception study to address the second question.

2. Data

We have analyzed the two websites and the two books to examine translation humor circulated in print and electronic media. All four sources aim to introduce Pidgin words and expressions in a humorous way. The website *Full on Pidgin* is intended for tourists from the mainland. There were 64 entries of Pidgin words and expressions as of March 1, 2007. Visitors of this website are encouraged to learn Pidgin and have fun at the same time. The website *e-Hawaii's Searchable Pidgin English Dictionary* appears to be intended for local people in Hawai'i, since its self-introduction page starts addressing "Eh, Howzit

Hawaiian!” There were 311 entries as of March 1, 2007. The goal of this website is to introduce Pidgin in a humorous way: readers are warned that the content may be offensive to some, but it is meant to be funny. For each word/expression, the two websites provide: (i) a definition; (ii) a sentence in which the word/expression is used; and (iii) a rough English translation of the sentence.

The two books *Pidgin to da Max* and *Pidgin to da Max Hana Hou* are sold in bookstores and in souvenir stores all over Hawai‘i. *Pidgin to da Max* was first published in 1981. It covers 294 words and expressions. *Pidgin to da Max Hana Hou* was first published in 1982. It covers 295 words and expressions. Both books were originally intended for local people in Hawai‘i, but the author is well aware that they may be read by people from the mainland. They are widely circulated among local people in Hawai‘i. To introduce a Pidgin word/expression, *Pidgin to da Max* and *Pidgin to da Max Hana Hou* provide a definition and sometimes an example sentence in which the word/expression is used. However, an English translation of the sentence is not usually given. When an English translation is provided, it is often indicated as something said by a *haole* (i.e., a white person), whereas the Pidgin sentence is marked as an utterance from a local. Many of the words and expressions introduced in these two books are illustrated with cartoons.

We have also analyzed translation humor in local comedians’ skits. Our sources are performances from two comedians published on two CDs titled, *Brain Child* (Bumatai 2003) and *Silva Anniversary: 25 Years of Comedy* (De Lima 2001). Both Andy Bumatai and Frank De Lima are from Hawai‘i, and are known for their use of Pidgin. Andy Bumatai has been a stand-up comedian for almost thirty years. He is well known in Hawai‘i. Bumatai also created a number of TV specials for Hawai‘i’s KGMB-TV, notably *School Daze* and *All in the Ohana*. Bumatai also recorded a number of comedy albums.

3. Translation Humor Circulated in Print and Electronic Media

In translation humor circulated in print and electronic media, the opposition between Pidgin/‘local voice’ and English/‘haole voice’ is underscored through several strategies.

3.1. Everyday Words vs. Big Words

First, while common, everyday words are used in Pidgin texts, ‘big words’ and elaborate expressions are used in corresponding English texts. For instance, under the entry of *Futsetta* in the website *Full on Pidgin*, the example Pidgin sentence used is “If you no be good, Futsetta going get you!” The regular translation would be something like “If you’re not good, Futsetta is going to get you.” But the English translation the website provided was, “If you exhibit poor behavior, the Boogie Man’s Mother will enforce extreme measures of discipline upon you!” The simple everyday expressions ‘not being good’ and ‘get you’ are replaced by formal literary expressions ‘exhibit poor behavior’ and ‘enforce extreme measures of discipline’ respectively.

- (1) FUTSETTA (Full On Pidgin)¹

¹ In the present paper, (i) a definition of the Pidgin word/expression is introduced as “a.”; (ii) a Pidgin sentence in which the word/expression is used as “b.”; and (iii) a rough English translation of the sentence or the utterance provided as white haole ‘white’ voice is introduced as “c.” Spelling and emphasis using capital letters are as appeared in the corpus.

- a. Boogie Lady – Boogie Man’s Mother
- b. **If you no be good, Futsetta going get you!**
- c. **If you exhibit poor behavior, the Boogie Man’s Mother will enforce extreme measures of discipline upon you!**

(2) is the other example from the book *Pidgin to da Max* where common, everyday words are used in Pidgin texts but ‘big words’ and elaborate expressions are used in corresponding English texts. For the entry *Haaah?* which is defined as ‘Sorry, I didn’t hear you,’ the book provided the cartoon strip where the local looking man is mumbling something and the other man cannot hear what he is saying. The haole voice says, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that, could you please repeat it?’ whereas the local Pidgin voice simply says, ‘HAAAAH??’

(2) Cartoon strip for *HAAAAH?* (Pidgin to da Max)

- | | | |
|---|------------|--|
| 1 | Local guy: | Mumble, mumble... mumble... |
| 2 | Haole: | I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that, could you please repeat it? |
| | | |
| 1 | Local guy: | Mumble, mumble... mumble... |
| 2 | Pidgin: | HAAAAH?? |

3.2. Euphemisms in English Texts Replace Profanities in Pidgin Texts

The second strategy we recognized is that euphemisms are used in English texts to replace profanities and other offensive words in Pidgin texts.

- (3) MAKI DIE DEAD (Full On Pidgin)
 - a. Extremely dead, way dead
 - b. We wen jump out a da airplane Burtrum wen pull his ripcord. Da bugga nevah rip. **He MAKI DIE DEAD!**
 - c. While we were in a free fall skydiving, Burtrum tried to open his parashoot. Unfortunately, his shoot failed to work. **He didn’t make it.**

In the example (3), euphemisms for death are used in the English texts but not in the Pidgin texts. Under the entry *maki die dead* which is defined as “extremely dead”, the Pidgin sentence provided to show the use of the expression goes, ‘He MAKI DIE DEAD!’ It should be translated as ‘He is extremely dead’ following the definition that the website gives, but the English translation goes; ‘He didn’t make it.’

Euphemisms are also used in the English texts to replace potentially offensive terms of reference as in (4).

- (4) HAOLE (e-Hawaii’s SEARCHABLE Pidgin English Dictionary)
 - a. Slang term used to describe an individual of Caucasian descent
 - b. **Damn haole!**
 - c. **I wish that Caucasian individual would understand me for once!**

For instance, the entry *haole* is defined as “a slang term used to describe an individual of Caucasian descent.” In the Pidgin sentence, it is used as in ‘Damn haole!’ using moderately profane word ‘damn.’ But the English translation provided by the website does not use any profane words and paraphrases the whole sentence fragments with the sentence ‘I wish that Caucasian individual would understand me for once!’

Also, sexual euphemisms are used in the English texts but not in the Pidgin texts as in (5).

- (5) OKOLE (^OKOLE) (e-Hawaii’s Searchable Pidgin English Dictionary)
- a. Hawaiian word for the gluteus maximus [sic.] region
 - b. Hoo, dat wahine **get one sweet `okole!**
 - c. That attractive woman **must work out.**

The Pidgin example sentence in (5) goes ‘Hoo, dat wahine get one sweet `okole!’ The regular translation would be something like ‘Wow, that woman has a sweet butt/ass.’ But the English version provided reads, ‘That attractive woman must work out.’ In another example (6) from *Pidgin to da Max*, under the entry *fo* which is used instead of *to*, while Pidgin sentence reads, ‘Ah was on’y tryeen fo’ touch you’ body,’ haole voice says, ‘I was only trying to get to know you’ using sexual euphemism.

- (6) FOR, FO’ (FOAH) (Pidgin to da Max)
- a. To
 - b. Pidgin: Ah was on’y tryeen fo’ touch you’ body.
 - c. Haole: I was only trying to get to know you.

3.3. Imperatives in Pidgin Texts Replaced by Indirect Forms in English Texts

The third strategy is that imperatives in Pidgin texts are replaced by indirect forms in English texts: while some are recast as mitigated statements, others are reframed as requests and take the form of interrogatives. There are several strategies to construct imperative sentences in Pidgin grammar. First, as in English the verb appears first in the sentence in imperatives in Pidgin as in the sentence (7).

- (7) **Spock** um out. (e-Hawaii’s Pidgin-English Dictionary)
 ‘Take a look at that. [Our translation]’

No is put before the verb to form negative imperatives as in (8):

- (8) **No even go ovah da Pali**, get choke cars. (Full on Pidgin)
 ‘Don’t even go over the Pali. There’s a lot of traffic. [Our translation]’

Try can be used to soften commands as in (9), but it is not as strong as *please* (Sakoda and Siegel 2003: 86).

- (9) ‘**Try wait** eh? I goin’ call Boogah.’ (e-Hawaii’s Pidgin-English Dictionary.)
 ‘Please wait, okay? I’m going to call Booger. [Our translation]’

First-person plural imperatives take the same form as first-person plural declaratives as in (10).

- (10) 'Ho, **we go grind den.**' (Full on Pidgin)
'Oh, let's go eat then. [Our translation]'

In the example (11) below, softened imperatives are used in the English texts through the use of *please*. Under the entry of *bulai*, Pidgin example sentence uses the bare imperative as in 'No bulai you.' But English version uses softened imperative using *please* as in 'Please don't lie to me.'

- (11) BULAI (e-Hawaii's SEARCHABLE Pidgin English Dictionary)
a. Liar; lies
b. **No bulai you.**
c. **Please don't lie to me.**

Some imperatives are recast as suggestions as in (12). Although the Pidgin sentence simply uses a bare imperative, the English version recasts the imperative as suggestion saying 'I don't think it is a good idea to eat in that restaurant.'

- (12) CHOKE (Full on Pidgin)
a. Many, a lot, big amount
b. Ho dat restaurant, **no eat ovah deah.** How cum? CHOKE kakaroaches.
c. **I really don't think it is a good idea to eat in that restaurant.** Why?
It's not very sanitary.

Furthermore, some imperatives are reframed as requests as in (13). Simple bare imperative is reframed as a polite request using the expression 'would you mind Verbing.'

- (13) BOY (e-Hawaii's SEARCHABLE Pidgin English Dictionary)
a. An endearing way to call somebody younger than yourself; also used at the end of a sentence
b. Eh boy, **go get yo daddy one beeyah.**
c. Hey son, **would you mind getting a drink for your dear father?**

As for this strategy regarding imperatives, we quantified all the examples in our corpus to see how often this strategy is used. In the Pidgin texts, there are 55 bare imperatives and 8 imperatives with *try*. They correspond to 21 bare imperatives; 15 softened imperatives (with *please*); 4 declaratives (suggestions); and 23 interrogatives (requests) in the English texts. The quantification reveals that this is a frequently observed strategy in Pidgin-English translation humor.

3.4. Contextualized Pidgin Texts vs. Decontextualized English Texts

Another strategy we recognized is that contextualized language is used in Pidgin texts, but decontextualized language is used in corresponding English texts. In contextualized language, shared knowledge and situational cues play a prominent role in meaning construction. In decontextualized language, however, meaning is conveyed through textual cues (e.g., explicit vocabulary, complex grammatical constructions) (DeTemple, Wu & Snow 1991). For instance, in example (14), in English texts, complete sentences are used to replace sentence fragments in corresponding Pidgin texts. Pidgin sentence that consists

of sentence fragments ‘Wat HAPAI?’ is replaced by a complete sentence ‘Is she pregnant?’ in English translation.

- (14) HAPAI (Full on Pidgin)
- a. Pregnant
 - b. So I wen turn da corner, an dere she was standin’ in da street, beeg as a house. **Wat HAPAI?**
 - c. So right around the corner, there she was, right in the middle of the street. She was as big as a house. **Is she pregnant?**

Secondly, complex syntactic constructions are used in English texts but not in corresponding Pidgin texts. For instance, in example (15) while Pidgin sentence simply employs sentence fragment ‘Some AKAMAI!’ to refer to the Physics Professor. However, the corresponding English sentence reads, ‘He is the most intelligent man I have ever known!’ using the relative clause with *that* omitted.

- (15) AKAMAI (Full on Pidgin)
- a. Someone who is very smart
 - b. You know my Feezicks Professah, you know da bolo head one? **Some AKAMAI!**
 - c. You know my Physics Professor at the University of Hawaii Manoa? The one with the shinny bald head? **He is the most intelligent man I have ever known!**

(16) is another example where complex syntactic constructions are used only in English texts but not in Pidgin texts. The adverbial clause introduced by the subordinating conjunction *as* is used in English to express the reason whereas in Pidgin there are two simple sentences.

- (16) NO CAN (e-Hawaii’s SEARCHABLE Pidgin English Dictionary)
- a. Cannot; it is not possible
 - b. Wot? Yeah right! **No can brah! I gotta help tutu dakine, move.**
 - c. Are you kidding me? **I will not be able to go with you as I have to help my dear grandmother move out that day.**

Several jokes highlight the multifunctionality of linguistic forms in Pidgin. For example, *bummahs* (17) in *Pidgin to the Max* is defined as “a Pidgin Expression of disappointment or regret which is good for all kinds of occasions.” In the cartoon strip provided, three different expressions in English haole voice such as ‘Gee, I’m real disappointed to hear that!’ ‘I’m so sorry to hear you’ve been sick in bed!’ and ‘It’s too bad you totaled your Celica!’ are all expressed in the same expression “Wow... Bummahs, man!!” in local Pidgin voice.

- (17) Cartoon strip for *bummahs* (Pidgin to da Max)
- | | | |
|---|--------|--|
| 1 | Haole | Gee, I’m real disappointed to hear that! |
| 2 | Pidgin | Wow...Bummahs, man!! |
| 1 | Haole | I’m so sorry to hear you’ve been sick in bed! |
| 2 | Pidgin | Wow...Bummahs, man! |

- 1 Haole **It's too bad you totaled your Celica!**
 2 Pidgin **Wow...Bummahs, man!**

Another example of multifunctionality of Pidgin is the word *da kine*. Perhaps this is the most famous Pidgin expression with multiple meanings and functions. *Full on Pidgin* defines *da kine* as “anything to which you are referring when you can’t remember what it is.” *e-Hawaii’s Searchable Pidgin English Dictionary* explains *da kine* as “much like the word Aloha, *da kine* has multiple definitions, meanings and uses. Mostly, it is used when trying to explain something when you can’t think of the words.” According to *Pidgin to da Max*, “*Da kine* is the keystone of pidgin. You can use it anywhere, anytime, anyhow. Very convenient. What would we do without DA KINE? ‘Ey, I no can da kine if you no like da kine too!’”

(18) is an example of the use of *da kine* from *Full on Pidgin*. Pidgin sentence uses *da kine* twice both of which English translation specified its references ‘Susie & Judy’ and ‘pizza & beer’.

- (18) DA KINE (Full on Pidgin)
 a. Anything to which you are referring when you can’t remember what it is
 b. You going take **da kine** wit you fo go pick up **da kine**? Yah. Oh shoots.
 c. So are you going to take **Susie & Judy** with you to pick up the **pizza & beer**? Yes. Good.

Pidgin to the Max provides the cartoon strip where the two local looking women are communicating perfectly using *da kine* without specifying what they are talking about as in (19).

- (19) Cartoon strip for *Da kine* (Pidgin to da Max)
- | | | |
|---|---------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Woman 1 | Ey Marie! Wheah da kine ? |
| 2 | Woman 2 | Da kine ? |
| 3 | Woman 1 | Yeah, you know da kine ! |
| 4 | Woman 2 | Oh... da kine ! Try wait! |
| 5 | Woman 1 | T’anks eh, Marie! |
| 6 | Woman 2 | Bring ‘em back when you pau, yeah? |

4. Translation Jokes in Local Comedians’ Skits

In translation jokes in local comedians’ skits, the opposition between Pidgin/‘local voice’ and English/‘haole voice’ is constructed through the use of similar strategies we have seen in translation humor circulated in print and electronic media.

Andy Bumatai is a Hawai’i based comedian and actor. For nearly 30 years, Andy Bumatai’s island-style comedy has been one of the most popular comedy show providing a humorous perspective on local culture for residents and visitors.

- (20) Excerpt 1: *Accents* (Bumatai 2003)

- 1 You know everybody’s got accent you know they tease us about our

- 2 Pidgin but man you go to the Midwest there they speak in complete
 3 sentences. This guy says me,
 4 → **“Andy, I just thinkin’ about goin on in the kitchen get myself a**
 5 **ice [a:s]-cold coca-cola an’ while I was in the kitchen I just**
 6 **wonderin’ maybe you like [la:k] for me to bring you back an ice**
 7 **[a:s] cold coca-cola for yourself.”**
 8 Why, I felt real guilty going, “Nah”
 9 → In pidgin the whole sentence would be, **“Soda?”**

In this skit, just as we have seen in section 3 in the analysis of translation humor circulated in print and electronic media, very long complete sentence in English from the line 4 through 7 allegedly said by someone from the Midwest is replaced by a single word “Soda?” in corresponding allegedly Pidgin texts. Andy Bumatai himself implicitly points out this strategy in his narration when he says “...you go to the Midwest there they speak in complete sentences...” and “In Pidgin the whole sentence would be, “Soda?”” This skit also highlights the multifunctionality of linguistic forms in Pidgin. Taken out of context, “soda?” can be interpreted as ‘Did you say “soda?”’, ‘Is that a soda?’ or ‘Do you want a soda?’ Multifunctionality in linguistic forms is often complimented by facial expression and body movement in Pidgin voice. In the actual standup comedy show, Bumatai forms his hand as if holding a can of soda and reaches it toward the audience as he says the line “Soda.”

Frank De Lima is known for his ethnic jokes and musical parodies. In his skits, he often makes fun of the different ethnic groups in Hawai‘i: (e.g., the Portuguese (‘Portagees’), the Chinese (‘Pake’), the Japanese (‘Buddha heads’), the Filipinos (‘Buk Buks’), and white people (‘haoles’).) He has published several joke books and produced numerous CDs and videos of his musical parodies. In one of his performances, Frank De Lima sang a song called *Da Blalla*. This song is set to the tunes of *La Bamba*. Frank De Lima sang the song in the first part of his performance. In the second part of his performance, he translated the Pidgin lyrics into English. Excerpt 2 in (19) below shows the second part of his performance.

(19) Excerpt 2: *Da Blalla* (De Lima 2001)

- 1 Same words same translation [laugh]
 2 → **No bother me**
 3 → **It is of no consequence** [laugh]
 4 I stay Halekawila
 5 I frequent Honolulu’s industrial district [laugh]
 6 I work body and fender
 7 I’m an automotive design specialist [big laugh]
 8 Stay live my [ma:] a car, my honey’s place, my mother’s house
 9 I have various places of residence [laugh]
 10 I go stay eat tasty broiler
 11 Among my interest is gourmet dining [laugh]
 12 → **You no go messin’ ma sister**
 13 → **Please do not compromise my female siblings** [laugh]
 14 I know but I don’t understand that one either, woo, oh wat dat
 15 siblings? One small plant? Dat’s seedling. One you plant, one you
 16 fight with. [laugh]

In this skit, while common, everyday words are used in Pidgin texts, ‘big words’ and elaborate expressions are used in corresponding English texts. In line 3, the Pidgin text ‘No bother me’ is translated into ‘It is of no consequence’ in English text rather than the regular neutral translation ‘Don’t bother me.’ In the similar way, ‘You no go messin’ ma sister’ is translated into ‘Please do not compromise my female siblings’ using the big words ‘compromise’ and ‘siblings’ although the regular translation would be something like ‘Please don’t mess with my sister.’ Frank De Lima himself implicitly mentions this strategy in the narration by pretending that he doesn’t understand the word ‘siblings’ he uses in English translation when he says ‘I know but I don’t understand that one either, woo, oh wat dat siblings? One Small plant? Dat’s seedling. One you plant, one you fight with.’ In addition, as we have seen in 3.3, the softened imperative in the English texts is used through the use of *please*. The Pidgin imperative sentence ‘You no go messin’ ma sister’ in line 12 is translated into softened imperatives in English ‘Please do not compromise my female siblings’ in line 13 through the use of *please*.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the four linguistic strategies discussed above contribute to the linguistic construction of ‘local voice’ and ‘haole voice’ in translation humor circulated in print and electronic media as well as in local comedian’s skits. Different audiences may interpret these strategies differently. Here is the example of possible interpretations of translation jokes by different audience. For some, everyday words and contextualized language in Pidgin texts conjure the image of a down-to-earth person, while ‘big words’ and decontextualized language in English texts evoke the image of a verbose, pretentious individual. For others, however, the same Pidgin features index unsophistication and inarticulateness, and the same English features index refinement and precision. Similarly, different audiences may find the Pidgin speakers’ use of direct expression and imperative straightforward or rude, and English speakers’ use of euphemisms and indirect forms roundabout or polite.

Finally, this study demonstrates how translation humor can be explored as a fruitful site for the examination of language ideologies. It also highlights the inherent ambiguity of the indexical meanings of linguistic forms. Currently we are conducting a reception study to investigate how people from Hawai‘i and people from the mainland interpret the portrayals of Pidgin speakers and English speakers in these translation jokes. We will report our findings in a later paper.

List of Sources

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