



Resituating Brexit: Anxieties of Early Modern Cultural and Linguistic Translation

Sonia Sahoo

Associate Professor
Department of English
Jadavpur University

Abstract

Great Britain's dramatic exit from the European Union has unfolded against the backdrop of a disquieting culture war over the purported authenticity of English national identity. Yet the populist nostalgia for re-energizing the glorious past of a monocultural and monolingual 'Britishness' that was once undiluted by the influx of migrants and refugees is hardly unique. At any rate the urgency and ultimate instability of the contemporary English neo-nationalist project of myth-making and identity formation (vis-à-vis its 'not-quite-others') that tries to reverse a long history of bicultural traffic is one that similarly afflicted England nearly four centuries ago. This essay uses early modern rogue narratives as a cultural template to unpack similar anxieties of English self-imagining showing how their initial ideological design of envisioning an unadulterated and cohesive nationalism is ultimately ruptured by the sobering realization that translation of identity and language can never be a simple unidirectional process. Instead these pamphlets come to stand for a liminal space of collision that precedes synthesis – a site of transculturation where the dominant language and culture gets rewritten, inflected and subverted by the other.

Keywords: *identity, nationalism, translation, Englishing.*

Nascimur pro patria.

(‘We are born for our country’)

--- Robert Greene, *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage*

Great Britain's dramatic exit from the European Union has unfolded against the backdrop of a disquieting culture war over the purported authenticity of English national identity. While the long-term economic consequences of the referendum may only clarify with time, nonetheless Brexit has

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also helped to unleash a larger set of dormant socio-cultural anxieties of self-imagining for a ‘resurgent’ and sovereign English nation. As Britain embarks on the project of sanitizing and closing its borders, the fertile yet disquieting space of cultural and linguistic translation, where the self, confronts and interacts with an ‘other’, and that had till now been sustaining the idealism of multicultural Britain seems to have ruptured overnight. The fervour of a racist almost post-imperial patriotism that has swept Britain has changed the qualitative meaning of ‘being British’ for a vast majority of non-English citizens who may have been domiciled in the country for generations. The search for the pure, homogenized and unaltered essence of English identity has thrown into jeopardy the notion of a hybridized British self-formed through a dialectical negotiation with racial, religious and ethnic difference. Yet the populist nostalgia for re-energizing the glorious past of a monocultural and monolingual ‘Britishness’ that was once undiluted by the influx of migrants and refugees from Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia is hardly novel. At any rate the urgency and ultimate instability of the contemporary English neo-nationalist project of myth-making and identity formation (vis-à-vis its ‘not-quite-others’) that tries to reverse a long history of bicultural traffic is one that similarly afflicted England nearly four centuries ago.

This essay uses early modern rogue narratives as a cultural template to tease out similar prejudices and stereotypes associated with England’s internal others who like cross-generational migrants were geographically ‘English’ and yet ostensibly outside the ideological and linguistic confines of acceptable English community. Produced in the form of a series of cheap prose pamphlets between 1550 and 1620, rogue literature constituted a body of popular non-canonical literature that helped to restructure a new corporate sensibility and civic/national identity in response to the complex ideological changes associated with modernity. More importantly these pamphlets exploited public frenzy by depicting the growing dangers of rogues and criminals as enemies of the nation (‘a dangerous enormity groweth by them to the discredit of the estate of England’, Greene, *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage*, 1591: 164)¹ and producing a strong patriotic if not chauvinistic

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message of national cohesion in the face of imminent danger. Thus in a tone that may seem faintly reminiscent of the Right-wing Leave campaigners, Robert Greene in his dedicatory epistle to *Notable Discovery* declares, ‘France, Germany, Poland, Denmark: I know them all...only I am English born, and I have English thoughts, not a devil incarnate because I am Italianate...Yet in all these Countries where I have travelled, I have not seen more excess of vanity than we Englishmen practice....The first and chief is called the Art of *Cony catching*’ (163-4). For the apparently patriotically inclined Greene, England’s emergent nationalism seems to be unhappily marred by the presence of vanity induced by what he calls the ubiquitous ‘art of cony-catching’.

Represented in contemporary parlance as ‘cony-catchers’ (Elizabethan slang for thieving tricksters) or ‘masterless’ men who supposedly formed part of a vast yet covert criminal counterculture centered on the margins of London (especially in the poor and densely populated districts of Alsatia and Southwark) and possessing their own distinctive traditions and languages, these itinerant underclass vagabonds (‘vacabondes’ derived from the Latin *vagari*, meaning ‘to wander’) and rural poor offer an early prototype of the modern diasporic experience. Like contemporary migrants in an economically and culturally resurgent England who are engaged in various service sectors, unemployed and impoverished skilled/semi-skilled labouring men from the countryside flocked to late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century London in search of livelihood, their presence triggering socio-economic unease in an emergent capitalist nation that was working to create a prosperous and unitary national identity. The rogue’s proclivity for trouble-making was perceived to be a threat to state security and his voluntary refusal to work a source of concern for England’s commercial well-being – an unhappy liability on the country’s Poor Law policies. At the very least this serves to set up parallels with the modern day socially ambitious migrants who notwithstanding their economic potential in sustaining fiscal growth is believed to siphon off work from those to whom it lawfully belongs or gain access to the modern state’s welfare system and public services to burden taxpayers in the bid to lead a better life.

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The rogue's deviant lifestyle was indicated by his consummate skill at feigning fictitious identities in order to cheat gullible people of their money; his devilishly clever tricks; rampant sexual promiscuity; immoral, idle and aimless life of roving (being labeled 'cursetors' or wanderers, derived from the Latin *cursare* meaning 'to run') made him the ideal internal enemy against which the Englishman could delineate himself. Such artificially manufactured characteristics helped to induce a faux vision of a beleaguered yet unified country against the specter of a hostile, evil and demonized other. Speaking on the growing burden of supporting a national sense of the self that grew especially acute in the latter half of the sixteenth century, Richard Helgerson points out how the source of this anxiety can be traced back to the radical transformations of the 1530s when England declared its political and religious sovereignty from Rome and affirmed its status as an empire (4). The campaign to buttress this buoyant sense of nativist pride in England's self-projection as a strong, unified and progressive nation was achieved through disowning that part of the self that impaired the nationalist 'rhetoric of uniformity and wholeness' (*Forms of Nationhood*, 22). He states that:

Self-definition comes from the not-self, from the alien other. But in the discourses of nationhood, . . . to constitute itself as a nation-state, a political or cultural community must distinguish itself not only from its neighbors but also from its former self. . . Prompted by the cultural breaks of Renaissance and Reformation, sixteenth-century national self-articulation began with a sense of national barbarism, with a recognition of the self as the despised other, and then moved to repair that damaged self-image (Ibid).

The early modern urgency of self-definition that Helgerson traces above is one that has acquired anxious relevance in the present times, especially as the spectre of waves of refugees arriving daily at Europe's thresholds has begun to unsettle and threaten the cohesive idea called Europe that had itself grown out of 'scattered, diverse, and plural cultures' (Pagden, 43). Yet self-imagination is a dual-edged process and England's withdrawal from the European Union constitutes a unique locus

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for looking at the country's desire to define itself not only against its European (external) others but also from a negative vision of its former (internal) self. Deflecting from the usual focus on external others in scholarly discussions of early modern othering, this essay shows how in his ability to represent the amphibious state of present-day refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers in 'alien homelands', the early modern rogue enables a fascinating rumination on the processes of acculturation, hybridity and translation of identity in a proto-globalized society.

Cony-catching literature promoted itself as a circumspect discovery of the lurid secrets of the criminal underworld in order to put the reader on guard against the innumerable traps that could compromise his security in a changing urban world. Thomas Harman in *A Caveat for Common Cursitors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds* (1566) emphasizes that he writes 'for the profit and benefit of my country' (114) and appears convinced that 'Something lurk and lay hid that did not plainly appear' (109). In *Lantern and Candle-light* (1608) Thomas Dekker flaunts the medicinal properties of his work that will heal the wounds of the nation (caused by the rogues) and 'restore those parts to perfect strength which by disorder have been diseased' ('The Epistle Dedicatory', quoted in Comensoli, 75). Thus, the aesthetic translation or retelling of the colorful lives and times of London's hucksters, sturdy beggars and tricksters also functioned to allay fears of the fractured, culturally diverse social space that early modern London was transforming into. These pamphlets advertised themselves as part of a utilitarian and moralistic campaign that would act as a prognosis of what was wrong with the nation. Although Homi Bhabha (*Location*, 224) uses the term cultural translation to describe the postcolonial process and condition of migrancy, yet the very act of relocating cultural items, systems or thought by repeating and re-inscribing them in another cultural space that leads to an ambivalent state of hybridity and indeterminacy can also act as a theoretical model to study the nature of the linguistic and intercultural exchange between two cultures existing in close proximity, one official and the other marginal.

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Thus, in claiming to reveal the dark practices and cryptic jargons of the London underworld the writer of rogue narratives took up a role akin to that of the translator, deciphering and familiarizing an alien culture for consumption by his respectable target readers. Yet this discursive act of translation was not simply a neutral process of faithful ethnographic reproduction but linked to issues of cultural dominance, assertion and resistance. Given the asymmetries of power existing between the two cultures, these translations were launched with expectations of predictable and predetermined outcomes whereby alien cultural or linguistic forms were to be assimilated into culturally or linguistically familiar forms and divested of their foreignness and their radical inaccessibility (Asad and Dixon: 1985). Yet the interest and the potential risk of these narratives lies primarily in the way in which their initial ideological design of imagining a culturally unadulterated and cohesive nationalism is ultimately ruptured by the sobering realization that translation of identity and language can never be a simple unidirectional process. Instead these pamphlets come to stand for a liminal space of collision that precedes synthesis – a site of transculturation where the dominant language and culture gets rewritten, inflected and subverted by the other.

The ruptures underlying this textual project of translating cultures, identities and languages become clearest in the canting lexicographies and glossaries appended to the pamphlets. The symbolic analogies between language and civil/civic living was expressed through the phenomenon of cant which Harman defines as ‘the lewd, lousy language of these lewtering Lusks, and lazy Lorels, wherewith they buy and sell the common people as they pass through the country...an unknown tongue only, but to these bold, beastly, bawdy Beggars, and vain Vagabonds’ (*Caveat*, 148-9). Also, known as ‘peddler’s French’, it was taken to denote the unintelligible underworld jargon apparently spoken by vagabonds, beggars, gypsies and thieves that served as an instrument to deceive ‘the honest substantiall Citizen’ (Greene, *The Black Book’s Messenger*, 1592: 196) of the country. Composed of arcane and foreign sounding words, cant

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threatened more than linguistic uniformity for they challenged the socio-cultural and legal stability/legibility of the nation. The exotic origins of many of its words that comprised scraps of Dutch, illegitimate French and corrupted English with terms ‘barbarously coined’ (*Lantern*, 217) from Latin resisted notions of Englishness. Moreover, their use of garbled Latin for the purpose of misinformation allied the cony-catcher with the discredited papist – another example of the demonized other manufactured by post-Reformation polemic. Its etymological corruption, manipulation and subversive overwriting of standard language called for and justified the pamphlet writer’s eventual translation and assimilation of cant into English as the clear and comprehensible language of civil and legal discourse.

Moreover, cant served to foster the myth of a subcultural speech community to which its members were emotionally attached. Rogues were shown to speak cant as an act of conscious choice even though they were proficient in Standard English, thereby using language to claim affiliation to a closed and exclusive subculture if not anti-community and in effect shutting out those unable to understand their jargon. Dekker opens *Lantern* with a discussion on the history of language and its connection with nation formation. He looks back at a time of linguistic unity when all people spoke one language and claims that the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel was the basis for nation formation. In the ensuing chaos the people ‘hearing a man speak like themselves, followed only him, so that they who when the work began were all countrymen, before a quarter of it was finished, fled from one another as from enemies and strangers. And in this manner did Men at the first make up nations’ (215).

Cant exemplifies the complex ways in which racial or class constructed language beliefs and ideologies can function as a symbolic means of discriminating and isolating particular minority languages and their speakers. Similarly the foreign and exotic tongues spoken by migrants/refugees, their outlandish accents and their lack of sociolinguistic competence become a

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source of further marginalization by the mainstream community. For such newcomers' mastery of English as the new *lingua franca* is essential for settlement in a foreign land. Four hundred years later emerging linguistic xenophobia still looks upon monolingualism as the norm and multiculturalism as something exceptional, abnormal or deviant, undesirable and even positively dangerous (Weber, 14). In a world that is trying to approximate towards neater boundaries and demarcations, national identity is increasingly being linked to one's native tongue.

As language becomes the most essential characteristic that defines the image of a nation to the world, the absence of an unadulterated national language presupposes threat to national identity and possibly the impending destruction of the nation. Thus, even though individual multilingualism is encouraged and positively promoted, societal multilingualism is viewed with suspicion and discursively constructed as a threat to social/political unity (4). Since speaking two different first languages can lead to conflicting allegiances and identities, it is a common perception that migrants or foreigners can never acquire the national identity of the host country since to do so he would have to lose his own linguistic and cultural identity. Yet even if this were to happen it would not lead to a pure identity but to a hybrid entity formed out of mixing old (native) and new (foreign) elements. In his commentary on the Irish Crisis in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) Edmund Spenser raised near similar issues regarding the problematic intersection between language and national identity when he warned that it was dangerous for an English child to learn Irish as his or her first language since 'the speech being Irish, the heart must needs bee Irish: for out of the abundance of the heart, the tongue speaketh' (71; quoted in Stafford, 330). The fall of Latin from its position of prestige after the Reformation and its adulteration by other languages including English coupled with England's first ventures into imperialism made linguistic mutability, mixture of speeches and the notion of a new multivocal nation pervasively anxious concerns. Language reformers of the seventeenth-century Royal Society tried to explore ways of restoring the universal character of language and return it to a state of primal innocence.



Similarly, rogue narratives act as palimpsest for highlighting fissures in the imagined purity of English national identity by using language as a means of enacting self-conversion. Thus rogues were able to use English profitably to perform a translation of identities, successfully imitating gentlemen in order to perform their tricks, convincing others of their upper-class status. Yet the greater risk was posed by the way in which despite its criminal basis the superficial charm and glamor of the London underworld proved irresistible rather than repulsive to the ordinary citizen. If the arcane secrets of cant could be textualized and ‘Englished’ (the verb indicating the desire to make the unknown identifiable and thus translate it in the process) it also opened the threatening reverse possibility for ‘un-Englishing’ the common Englishman (exemplified by the early modern community of the Roaring Boys/Girls who willfully chose to become a part of the rogue community; smoking, swaggering, canting and terrorizing people on London streets) via his understanding of cant and thus becoming a part of rogue ethos. The last stanza of the poem that concludes Harman’s *Caveat* shows this indeterminacy and indistinguishability of identities as rogue and gentleman become one and the same:

Thus I conclude my bold Beggars’ book,
That all estates most plainly may see,
As in a glass well polished to look,
Their double demeanor in each degree.
Their lives, their language, their names as they be,
That with this warning their minds may be warned,
To amend their misdeeds, and so live unharmed (153).

Such a prospect revealed the instability in the English project of cultural and linguistic translation thereby enhancing already present anxieties about the rogues and their morally contagious culture. It exposed how national or cultural identities were contingent rather than innate and that translation was an unsteady, uncontainable process that could move unpredictably in both directions. Harman’s faithful reproduction of the dialogue between an ‘upright-man’ (the second in rank in rogue society) and a rogue in the *Caveat* followed by its interlinear translation into English reveals

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the unanticipated underlying affinity between the two languages and serves to stimulate the reader's further interest in learning the jargon.

Man. Bene Lightmans to thy quarroms! In what libken hast thou libbed in this darkmans; whether in a libbege or in the strummel?

Good morrow to thy body! In what house hast thou lain in all night, whether in a bed or in the straw?

Rogue. I couched a hogshead in a Skipper this darkmans.

I lay me down to sleep in a barn this night (150).

The crucial reason why the purported nationalist rhetoric of rogue pamphlets gets destabilized is because the presence of a jocular subtext weakens the patriotic framework, blurring the reader's ability to make rational distinctions between vice and virtue. Thus, Dekker's didactic stress is subverted by his play on the pleasurable aspects of the reading process, opening the possibility that the information might both attract and corrupt. He justifies the inclusion of canting songs to conclude *O per se O* (1612), some of which are translated into English, on the grounds that just 'as sweetmeats are best last, your last dish which I set before you to digest the hardness of the rest is a canting song, not feigned or composed as those of the Bellman's were out of his own brain, but by the canters themselves and sung at their meetings' (quoted in Comensoli, 233). Moreover, the songs are creations of the bellman's (the narratorial character who initiates and guides the reader into the world of the rogues) imagination, showing that 'learning the language makes one at least partially "roguish"' (Stafford, 321).

In addition to providing a brief grammar of canting and a dictionary of select terms, Dekker provides the reader with translation exercises. He deliberately leaves some canting untranslated as a lesson 'to be construed by Him that is desirous to try his skill in the Language, which he may do by help of the following *Dictionary*' (*Lantern*, 218).

Enough---with bowsy Cove maund Nace,
Tour the Patring Cove in the Darkman Case,
Docked the Dell, for a Copper meek,

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His wach shall seng a Prounce's Nab-cheat,
Cyarum, by Salmon, and thou shalt peek my Jere
In thy Gan, for my wetch it is nace gere,
For the bene bouse see my watch hath a win, etc.

The Canter's dictionary serves as a 'little *Mint*' where the reader 'may coin words for your pleasure' (220), thus providing socio-cultural currency to the reader to undertake his journey into the underworld. The bilingual vocabulary consists of basic words such as:

Autem-mort, a married woman; *Bung*, a purse; *To cut bene*, to speak gently; *Duds*, clothes; *Dews-a-vill*, the Country; *Flag*, a Groat; *Glimmer*, fire; *Lour*, money; *Lightmans*, the day; *Smelling cheat*, an Orchard or Garden.

The reader is given the ability to enter an unknown exotic world, maybe even impersonate as a rogue by using the language he has learnt by reading the pamphlet: 'he that desires more pieces of this pedlary ware may out of this little pack fit himself with any colours' (*O per se O*; quoted in Stafford, 326). His identity becomes unfixed since he can fashion 'any colours' he likes. The looseness of the Englishing project becomes apparent as the distinctions between rogue and citizen disappears, because as soon as any Englishman can cant, it becomes impossible to determine who is or is not a rogue. Rogue narratives thus create a miniaturized representational context for playing out the same anxieties that are impelling present-day Britain. As the country thus embarks on the path of altering the course of its rich intercultural traffic in the pursuit of a homogenized 'untranslated' nationality, the outcome of this project is already obvious.

Notes

¹ All quotations from rogue pamphlets unless otherwise mentioned have been taken from Arthur F. Kinney's collected edition *Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars: A New Gallery of Tudor and Early Stuart Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

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