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Translation and meaning making: A critical study of a multilingual performance in “The Voice Russia”

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Abstract

The paper explores the meaning making potential of incorporating translation in a multilingual performance. Drawing evidence from the multilingual performance of “Soldat” (“Soldier”) by Dilyara Vagapova in blind auditions of the vocal contest “The Voice Russia” (“Golos”) and ethnographic data, it demonstrates that resorting to a language unfamiliar to the audience can serve as an attention-getter, enhance the musical component of the song, and construct the performer’s ethnic identity.

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1. Introduction

The translation of songs implies not only “searching for local cultural and semantic equivalents” of foreign lyrics to make their meaning available to a wider audience (Adamu, 2010, p. 42), but also matching up the lyrics with the existing music of the original song. Translation of song lyrics poses an especially strong challenge in terms of retaining semantic closeness: according to Franzon, “a song translation that strives to be semantically accurate can hardly be sung to the music written for the original lyrics, and a song translation that follows the original music must sacrifice optimal verbal fidelity” (Franzon, 2005, p. 377). Several studies of song translations have focused on the ways songs can actually be translated (Franzon, 2005, Low, 2008). Franzon (2005, p. 390) identifies three properties of music – a

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melody, a harmonic structure, and an impression of meaning, mood or action, – which are particularly essential for the musico-textual fit in song translation. Low (2008) examines translations of song lyrics in terms of the rhyme, sense, singability, rhythm and naturalness (“the pentathlon principle”, see below). In both studies, musical features of a song are demonstrated to play a crucial role in its translation.

Recent studies of multilingual popular songs, i.e. songs comprising two or more different languages, show that to appreciate the message of the song it is not always necessary to understand the meaning of its translated version. Davies and Bentahila (2008, p. 250) argue that since comprehension of the words is not the most important aspect of the song’s impact on the audience, “it is after all quite possible to enjoy a sung performance without any knowledge of the language being used; the appeal of Italian opera to so many who do not understand a word of Italian is just one example”. In other words, translation does not always fulfill its typical role of fostering understanding, but in some cases “seems to be an opportunity to bring other changes to the content, sometimes to the point of eradicating certain essential features of the original song” (Davies, & Bentahila, 2008, p. 268). In multilingual lyrics, translation may perform functions other than fostering understanding: for instance, it can be used to reflect or reinforce contrasts and/or parallels within a song (Davies, & Bentahila, 2008), to serve comic purposes (Chik, 2010) or to assert multiple identities (Androutsopoulos, 2010).

This study explores the pragmatic effect and additional meanings of translation in the multilingual performance of “Soldat” (“Soldier”) by Dilyara Vagapova (ethnic Tatar from Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan within the Russian Federation) in blind auditions of the vocal contest “The Voice Russia” (“Golos”)¹. In addition to Russian and English, which appear in the original song by “5’NIZZA”, Dilyara Vagapova’s performance offers translation of the Russian lyrics into the Tatar language. This paper aims at demonstrating how the incorporation of a translated fragment in a multilingual performance may serve as a way to gain attention, construct the performer’s identity, and highlight some essential features of the original song.

2. Research setting

“The Voice Russia” (“Golos”) is part of the international syndicated show “The Voice”, which has local (national) versions in over 60 countries of the world. The aim of the singing contest is to find the best voice – a versatile talented singer – through a series of rounds (blind auditions, battles, knockouts, and “live shows”, including quarterfinals, semifinals, and a finale). The contestants’ performances are evaluated and discussed by four coaches, who are successful performing artists in various musical genres. The coaches give contestants professional advice on what songs to choose for their performance and how to sing them in order to reveal their vocal abilities. The coaches also act as judges during the show. In blind auditions, the coaches select vocalists who will join their teams and proceed to the next rounds of the contest. Blind auditions are particularly exciting, as the coaches sit in chairs facing away from the stage and listen to contestants without seeing them. If one of the coaches likes a performance and is interested in working further with the contestant, they press a button on the chair and turn to face the contestant. No wonder, the first and foremost wish for all of the contestants in blind auditions is to produce a memorable performance to make at least one of the coaches press the button.

A distinguishing feature of the Russian “Golos” is its special international status, which is expressed in a wide geography of participants from the republics within the Russian Federation (Tatarstan, Chuvashia, Chechnya, North Ossetia-Alania, Kabardino-Balkaria) to the CIS states (Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan, Latvia, Estonia) and from countries farther afield (the USA, the UK, France, Italy, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Uruguay, Brazil, the Maldives, Cameroon). In order to impress the coaches and demonstrate their individuality, contestants of the show employ various strategies. These strategies include singing original and fresh interpretations (or cover versions) of famous songs, performing famous songs from different countries (or cultures) in different languages, and combining different languages in their performance. In this respect, the vocal competition

¹ An ideological analysis of this multilingual performance is presented in Aleshinskaya & Gritsenko, forthcoming: Language Practices and Language Ideologies in the Popular Music TV Show *The Voice Russia*, in *Language & Communication, Language Ideologies in Music*, edited by Eeva Sippola, Britta Schneider, Carsten Levisen.

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