Translating Literary Dialect:
Problems and Solutions

Ida Kusuma Dewi

ida.k.d@staff.uns.ac.id

English Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sebelas Maret
Jl. Ir. Sutami 36 A, Surakarta, Indonesia 57126

Abstract. This paper discusses the true challenges of Indonesian translators in dealing with literary dialects, in particular the African American dialect in Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* It also seeks to provide the potential procedure to be used to ensure success in the target text. Four translators of the three Indonesian versions of the novel were asked to provide information on the difficulties they experienced in translating the utterances of the black characters. The result of the analysis reveals the problems encountered by the translators in understanding the words printed in non-standard spellings, recognizing the type of dialect and the roles of the AAE dialect in the novel, choosing the Indonesian language variation to transform the AAE dialect, and finding the literary dialect in Indonesian. Some successful methods have been selected by the translators as solutions to the problems they encounter, although some of their approaches contribute to problems related to different characterization and difficult to understand translations.

Keywords: dialect, literary dialect, *African American English*, problem, solution

1 Introduction

Dialect is a user-related variation of a language[1,2] which is distinguished from other varieties of the same language by its pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and syntax. Dialects reflect regional (geographical), ethnic (national and racial), and social (class, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and education) backgrounds of the speakers.

Dialect can be multifunctional for novel writers. It can be a potent tool to assist novel writers to present the characters they have created to life. It can be employed to demonstrate diverse ways of speaking indicating different geographical origins, cultural backgrounds, or social classes, ethnic, regional or racial group, education levels, etc. [1,3,4,5,6]. The use of dialects by novelists also portrays a means or a tool to direct their social criticism of class and ethnic issues [3,6] as well as to promote equality.[7]

The features of a dialect on the printed page of novels cannot be as easily recognized as those in the spoken medium. On printed literary words, a dialect is indicated by orthographies and miss-spellings, elisions, apostrophes, syntactic changes, signs, etc. This is generally referred to as a literary dialect.[8]

Dialect dictates one way of communicating an utterance. In literary works, how an utterance is articulated is often just as critical for the substance articulated. This is due to the fact the manner of expression provides valuable information about characters. It is from where the evoked meaning of the utterance arises.[9]

Translating dialects creates more of a challenge for a translator than it does for a novelist. Dialects can facilitate a novel writer to present characterizations but is not easy for a translator to reproduce the result in the target language (TL). Furthermore, a translator may

find it difficult to fully understand the source text (ST) while translating it.[10] When attempting to covet the same word, a translator can fail to reproduce the features of the dialect used in the target language. The search for correct dialect reproduction is known to be one of the most challenging obstacles to literary translation.[3]

Many experts have raised the problems of translating dialects in a novel. Nevertheless, studies on the real difficulties faced by translators in translating dialects are still rare, particularly by translators of novels from English to Indonesian. Since dialects are closely related to culture and language systems, the problems that novel translators face with dialects in one language can be distinct from the problems that novel translators face in other languages. Studying dialect translation issues by including translators can lead to effective solutions.

This paper seeks to identify the problems experienced by novel translators when dealing with dialects. It focuses on how the Indonesian translators of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (AHF) deal with African American English (AAE) dialect in utterances of black characters in the novel.

Since the beginning, the use of literary dialect was a hallmark of American literature. Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry* is a good example of a novel featuring a variety of different dialects among its characters that Twain himself said he worked hard to get right. One of the dialects used in the novel is the African American Dialect used by the black characters.

My early study on this novel showed that the utterances of black characters have shown an enormous number of AAE dialect features (Ida Disertasi). The study has shown that in the novel there are 431 utterances spoken by black characters, in which 409 or 96% of the display features of AAE, whether in terms of phonology, syntax, or lexicon.[11.] It is important to note that in these 409 utterances, 2091 words display features of AAE dialect, most of them are marked by nonstandard spellings, such as *ax* (for *ask*), *gwyn* (for *going*), *on'y* (for *only*), *'spec* (for *expect*), *whisht* (for *wish*), *chile* (for *child*), *Mars* (for *Master*), *nuff'n* (for *nothing*), *k'yards* (for *cards*), *whar* (for *where*), etc.

The AAE dialect used by the black characters in this phenomenal novel also influences the characterization because the features of AAE that appear in the utterances of the black characters not only point to their African American ethnic background but also give an indication of their lower social background as well as their geographical background, showing that they come from the southern part of the United States.[11] The non-standard spelling used to write the utterances spoken by the black characters in the mid standard spellings for the utterances of the majority of the white characters, as well as the narration, also indicates that the black characters are regarded as a group that is marginalized and powerless. This multi-dialectal is apparent in AHF, as the use of AAE by characters not only tells us of a geographical background (that of the southern part of the USA in particular), but also reveals social (low, uneducated, marginalized) and ethnic backgrounds.[11,12]

Since the appearance of dialect in the novel AHF cannot be considered incidental and has a strong influence on the plot and characterization, the translators should ideally be able to show in their translations that Twain's phenomenal novel contains particular features of dialect, as suggested by Harvey et al[.10] The AAE dialect is not suggested to be neglected. For the translators, however, dealing with the AAE dialect in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can be problematic as it is considered to be one of the most difficult aspects to deal with in literary translation. As Berthele puts "Probably one of the most difficult tasks for a literary translator is to find target-language equivalents for dialectal or sociolectal speech in the source text."[3]

2 Methods

The data of this study are pieces of information from the four Indonesian translators of the three Indonesian versions of AHF novel about the problems they encountered and the procedures they took to solve the issues when translating the novel. The data were gathered through interviews and questionnaires.

The first of the three versions of AHF is entitled *Petualangan Huckleberry Finn*, translated by Juniriang Zendrato (1-TV1) and Siwi Karmadi Kurniasih (2-TV2), and published by Narasi in 2007. The second translation is entitled *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, translated by Ambhita Dyaningrum (TV2), and published by Bentang in 2011. The third translation is titled *Petualangan Huckleberry Finn*, translated by Peusy Sharmaya (TV3), and published by Elex Media Komputindo in 2014.

3 Finding and Discussion

This subchapter presents and the challenges translators face and what steps they take to address the problem. Also, the results of my previous research on translation techniques and quality will be considered to see if the steps that the translators have taken to solve the problems they face are a solution. The possible solutions which can result in better quality translation will be suggested in the discussion.

3.1 Findings

The first problem encountered by the translators when translating the utterances of black characters in AHF novel is related to the non-standard spellings in the novel. The four translators found it challenging to comprehend the utterances of black characters in the novel given that most of the black characters' words are written in nonstandard spellings. In the previous section it has been stated that my previous study has shown that in the 409 utterances of black figures in AHF, there are about two thousand words that display the characteristics of the AAE dialect characterized by words written in non-standard spellings.[11] The non-standard spellings suggest the pronunciation of words characterizing the AAE dialect.

In fact, 3 of the 4 translators (1-TV1, 2-TV1, and TV2) had been already acquainted with some characteristics of the AAE dialect before they translated the novel AHF. The features of the AAE dialect they knew, however, are related to syntactic characteristics, not phonological ones. Consequently, they found it difficult to recognize the non-standard spelling words representing the non-standard pronunciations.

The translators had taken different ways to solve the problems (1-TV1, 2-TV1, and TV3). Three translators read the sentences aloud to get the meaning of the words. The TV2, interestingly, read the translation version 1 to check the meaning of unrecognizable words. In other words, she used a novel translation to check the meaning.

There was also a problem with the awareness of the translators that black characters speak in AAE dialect. The 1-TV1 found that the black characters spoke in a manner distinct from the way the white characters speak after several chapters were translated. This awareness came from the discovery of Jim's speech in the chapter she translated, which was written with

non-standard spellings. The 2-TV1 comprehended the use of AAE in the novel after being told by 1-TV2. The TV2 had known that the novel contained AAE dialect before she translated it, it is from the knowledge she got during her undergraduate studies. The TV4, however, did not recognize that the utterances expressed by black characters are the AAE dialect. What the translator understood was that such utterances signify non-standard English widely used in informal contexts.

Recognizing all of the roles of the AAE dialect in the novel AHF is also problematic for the translators. Some studies have indicated that the AAE in the AHF represents the black characters' ethnic and social backgrounds (Dewi, 2018, Dewi, 2019, Minnick) as well as the geographical backgrounds.[12] The nonstandard spellings depicting phonological features of AAE signifies that the black characters are from a marginalized group.[14,15] and differences in intensity of contact with white characters who speak with standard English[14]. Not all of the roles, however, were recognized by the translators.

Both the translators of version 1 (1-TV1 and 2-TV2) were aware of the importance of AAE dialect in characterization. Although they failed to realize the function of AAE in showing the geographical background of black characters, and differences in intensity of contact with white characters who speak with standard English. They were aware of the role of AAE dialect in the novel AHF in demonstrating the ethnic background and lower social background of the black characters. The awareness of 1-TV1 and 2-TV2 of the roles stemmed from the narrative in the novel and from their previous knowledge of the AAE dialect, which they know as 'Black English', from the American-made films they watched.

The TV2 argued that the AAE dialect was intentionally chosen by the author for a specific purpose. According to her, the AAE dialect could distinguish black characters from white figures. She believed that the AAE dialect was also used to show the social background of black figures from marginalized circles.

For version 3 translators, black characters used non-standard English variations but did not specify which English variations were used. For her, the writer uses non-standard English to stress that black characters are different from white characters. However, she did not mention the differences more specifically.

Deciding whether or not the distinct way of speaking of the black characters is transformed to the target text is also a challenge for the translators. After a long discussion, 1-TV1 dan 2-TV2 decided to transfer it to their translation. They, however, found it difficult to choose the Indonesian language variation to transform the AAE dialect.

The TV2 and TV3 chose to use standard Indonesian language to translate the black characters' utterances, which perished the black characters' unique voice. Even if both TV2 and TV3 had the same choice of using standard Indonesian language, they had different reasons for the decision. The TV3 translated the utterances of the black characters into standard Indonesian language because, in her opinion, there are no Indonesian variations that could depict the same purpose as that of the use of the AAE dialect in AHF. She also thought the Indonesian standard language would avoid target readers from having difficulties in comprehending the message. The last explanation is also the explanation for the preference of the standard Indonesian language from TV3.

The further challenge encountered by the translator of version 1 who decided to transfer the unique speech is the determination of language variations that could represent variations in the language used by black characters. It crossed the mind of the translators of 1-TV1 to use the Eastern Indonesian dialect to represent the ethnicity of the black characters but she was worried that this might cause offense to a certain ethnic group in Indonesia and feared that the speakers of the chosen dialect might feel a sense of discrimination.

4

The two of them then agreed to choose how the slurred person spoke to represent the manner in which the black characters spoke, namely that the slurred person generally could not pronounce the consonant /r/ perfectly but pronounced it as /l/ or /y/. Their translations of the black characters' utterances also indicate colloquial Indonesian features.[11]

As to the considerations the took in making this decision, the two translators claimed the same. For them, there was no Indonesian variation that was commensurate with the AAE effect given that there are very large cultural differences between users of black English and users of any variation of Indonesian. Another consideration is that the utterances spoken by black characters must be written in a spelling that is not standardized as in the TBSu novel. The other consideration is that the slurred way of speaking can represent the background of the black figures as uneducated individuals.

My previous study to the translation technique used in AHF found that in the translation version 1, the black characters' unique way of the speaking is represented by the result of techniques such as speech defect, spelling variation and artificial variation, and compensation which points to a speech defect, spelling variation, and artificial variation.[12] These three techniques produce words that are written with non-standard spelling so that they appear different to the reader. The frequency of occurrence of words written with non-standard spelling is not as high as in the English version of the novel.[11]

The translators, however, are not consistent in presenting the black characters' speech in the translations, since standard Indonesian language is also used to translate the utterances of the black characters as indicated in my previous study.[11] My former study has shown that in the opening chapter, the translators only apply a technique of neutralizatio.[11] The speech defect technique only appears in Chapter 8 of translation version 1. In Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, the translators use a technique of neutralization and to a lesser extent use features of colloquial Indonesian language.

As a result of the translators' inconsistency in the application of their translation techniques, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, Jim speaks using standard Indonesian and does not appear as a person with a speech impediment, while in Chapter 8 and subsequent chapters, Jim develops a speech impediment. From the results of the interview, it was found that the translators of version 1 only became aware of the existence of AAE dialect while in the middle of the translation process.

My previous study has also shown that some black utterances translations in translation version 1 are not easy to understand.[11] The low level of readability of this small number of utterances is due to the presence of words in which the consonant /r/ is replaced with the consonant /y/, or the utterance being written using non-standard spelling that is not commonly used by Indonesian language speakers.[11] The readability of the translation is disturbed because of the result produced by using techniques of a speech defect, artificial variation, and deletion.[11]

3.2 Discussion

The above results show that there are problems that AHF translators encountered during the processes of analysis and transfer. To address the question of difficulty in interpreting the utterances of black characters, the translators have chosen an efficient method, as they can recognize words written with non-standard spellings by reading the black characters' utterances aloud and reading a translation of AHF. The evidence that they can

understand ST well is that most of their translations are accurate, as my previous research has indicated.[11]

However, they have not managed to capture all the roles of the AAE dialect in the AHF novel. The problem is that they are not with the AAE dialect, the features, and the dialect used in literature. The results above show that the more familiar they are with the AAE dialect, the more roles of AAE they can recognize given that the TV3 who did not know AAE dialect knew lesser roles than the other three translators did. The three translators had heard and knew some information about AAE before they translated AHF. Reading references about the use of language variations, especially the AAE dialect in AHF can be a solution to the above problems. Readings to some details about the novel and the dialects used in the novel result in a much clearer understanding of the nature of the dialect and the dialect as well as the features of dialects used in the novel as far as my experience is concerned.

Getting better acquainted with the AAE features will potentially solve the two problem.[13] The nonstandard spellings found in the black characters' utterances, as has been stated earlier, represent the phonological and syntactic features of the AAE dialect. They are not arbitrary but systematic. Therefore, knowing the AAE features well will make the translators be able to recognize the standard words represented by the nonstandard spellings. Since some features of AAE relate not only to the AAE ethnic but also the social status and geographical background of the AAE speakers, the familiarity to the AAE features will also lead the translators to the roles of the AAE in the AHF.

As shown in the above findings, the translator found it difficult to find TL dialects that can transpose the functions of the AAE dialect in the ST and to transform the spirit of the writer's spirit to show the speech distinctions of the black characters from the white ones. This conforms to the words of Berthelethat finding target-language equivalents for speech showing dialect is one of the most difficult tasks for literary translators.[2] Riera also puts that the transposition of dialect and its related cultural consequences one of the most ardent problems for literary translators.[14]

The language variations used by the three translators result in the translations representing black characters of different identities from those in the source text. The non-standard spellings used by 1-TV1 and 2-TV2 representing persons with a speech defect result in different characterizations which is not found in the ST. Translation very specifically shifts the text and misleads readers by presenting minority characters as unable to speak a normal dialect. The inconsistencies of black characters' representation may confuse readers about the black characters' identity.

As a result of the standard Indonesian language used by TV2 and TV3, characters who in the source text come from a lower social background may undergo a shift to be portrayed as characters from a higher social background. The use of the standard Indonesian language to translate the black characters shows that the AAE dialect is neutralized. [11,15] In the TT, the black characters are represented to have the same backgrounds as the white characters do. The translators appear to be unaware of this consequence. Standardization in dialect translation will be best applied when the dialect represents only a geographical background of the character.[2,16]

In fact, the belief that the use of a variation of standard Indonesian in the Indonesian translations will be more attractive to the reader is not always correct, since there are many Indonesian novels written in non-standard Indonesian with a particular dialect which sell well and are in high demand. Examples include the *Derai Sunyi* novel by Asma Nadia which not only sold well but also won an award from the Southeast Asian Literary Council.[17] Another example is the novel *Nanti Kita Cerita Tentang Hari Ini* by Marchella FB which held the top

position as the best seller of an Indonesian novel in November 2018 according to Gramedia.com. (https://www.gramedia.com/blog/daftar-novel-indonesia-best-seller-november-2018-gramedia/#gref)

It will never be easy for translators to retain all the functions of dialect in a translation, one example being the role of AAE as an indicator of the ethnic background of the speaker. What can be retained by the translator is the role of AAE in showing the lower social background of the black characters and their position as a marginalized group of society. Information based on the plot of the story, namely that the AAE speakers in the novel who work as slaves, work around the house, and are uneducated, can be taken into consideration when choosing an appropriate Indonesian language variation to translate the utterances of the black characters. It means that the translator should capture the complexity of the characters.[19]

In addition to this, the writer Mark Twain writes clearly in his Explanatory about the reasons for using various kinds of dialect in the novel TAOHF, as a way of showing diversity and that the characters speak using different language variations. This Explanatory can in fact provide an indication for the translators about how they should treat the different language variations in the novel TAOHF, including AAE dialect. From this Explanatory, it is clear that translating AAE dialect into standard Indonesian is not in accordance with the goal of the writer, which is explicitly stated in the novel. Therefore, the translators need to choose a dialect that is able to represent a social group which is comparable to that in the source text

4 Conclusion

In this paper, AAE literary dialect in Mark Twain's novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is proven troublesome for Indonesian translators. The problems can lie in the analysis stage of the text and the transfer. Better knowledge of the translators about the characteristics of the dialects, the use of the ST dialects in the ST literary tradition, the TL dialects in TL literary traditions and the techniques for translating dialects will enable them to solve problems.
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