"I may not agree with a word you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it." — Voltaire

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Translation And Respect

By WALLY OLSON

People not only tend to judge books by their covers, they often judge people by the speech they use. If one cannot see another person, they will rely upon what they hear or read to try and categorize that person and fit them into some system.

On top of this, all people tend to be ethnocentric – they think that their way of life is the best. If people were not ethnocentric to some extent, they would not have much pride in their way of life and heritage. Putting these two aspects of being human together, there is a real problem for anyone translating from one language into another.

There are several ways in which one can translate a language. For example, the great linguist, John Swanton, in his 1909 publication entitled "Tlingit Myths and Texts" used several approaches. First he gave the original sounds and Tlingit words – "'Ada'x ada' yuq! A'duLiAk yu'an qoūwutc".

Underneath this, he translated word-for-word according to the Tlingit proper grammatical form, "After it about it were all talking the town people." Finally, he has what is known as a "free" translation which says in perfectly good English grammar, "Then the town people were all talking about it." (page 371).

This way of writing lets the reader understand that the translator respects bot the original grammar and word order, but complements the work by putting it in correct English style. The reader, then comes away with a respect for the original storyteller and his or her language, but a further respect because the translator has done his job of translating it into good English.

Swanton used another technique so that he would not shock his Enlish readers with passages that might be shocking to their Victorian ears; he put these parts in Latin! He respected his reader's feelings to this extent. Now comes the problem with translation.

This problem arises when the translator does not tell his audiences that what they are reading or hearing is a literal, word-for-word translation. The hearer or reader, then (being normally ethnocentric) makes a quick judgement that the speaker or writer cannot handle this language, or any language very well. They tend to jump to the conclusion that the person who is speaking is not too bright.

This ethnocentric, "better-than-you" attitude is employed a great deal in acting and writing. When an author wants to get across the idea that an oldtime gangster is not so bright he puts words in his mouth like "youse guys gotter get it done."

In cheap Western movies the Indian chief speaks in broken, almost unintelligible English while the hero speaks English almost to perfection. It is a none-too-subtle way of saying, "By their speech you will know them – the good, intelligent, nice guys from the bad, stupid villains."

Now for the final part of this problem. Oftentimes today, and in the past, those who were recording stories and legends took down the words of the storyteller precisely – word-for-word. But there is a strong tendency to overlook the fact that the storyteller is using a foreign language out of respect for the recorder.

Some people might feel that this gives the story a feeling of being "folksy" or "just like it is". But on the other hand, the reader might just as easily give into his or her ethnocentric bias aand say to himself, "see how dumb they are, they can't even speak our language." This writer recently heard a Paul Harvey news broadcast in which he was discussing bilingual ballots.

In his commentary he said something to the effect that "these people want a voice in government but haven't even bothered to learn our language." The same principle runs through much of American life. "If you don't use good English, if your speech is not as good as mine, then you are inferior – you are much below me."

This whole attitude overlooks the fact that many, many bilingual Americans, Americans who through no fault of their own cannot speak English well, are extremely good, loyal, intelligent Americans. They are, perhaps more loyal and brighter than their critics!

Much of the solution to this problem lies with those who do the translations. It is their obligation and duty – out of respect to the people who are struggling with English as a foreign language – to give their stories a good translation. If the translator or interpreter wishes to use a literal, word-for-word rendition to the story, he should be very explicit in this technique. He has a duty to point out that this is a translation into a foreign language.

If this writer wants to get a laugh out of a group of Tlingits, Eskimos or Athabascans, all he has to do is pretend he is fluent in their language and utter a few words – It often brings the house down! But then they know that this is not my native language and they allow for it.

On the other hand, if the translator does not point this out – that it is a translation into a foreign language – it can easily make the storyteller look bad.

If Swanton could respect his readers' feelings by putting parts that were slightly offensive to the people of his time into Latin, modern translators have to reciprocate; they must respect the storytellers by using good English for their translations.

Books have come out and will continue to come out where the writers feel that by using the crude and stumbling English of some Native American that they are giving the "folksy," "colorful" version. Without consciously knowing it, they might be giving a derogatory version by subtley implying to the reader "you are superior – look at how inferior their language is!"

Translation is not only a matter of linguistics, it is a matter of respect for people and their language. It is a matter of respect for their culture. Use of a poor translation years ago might have been excusable on the basis that a person did not know just how ethnocentric they were. I think we have progressed a little in half a century. Today there is no excuse at all.

* * *

Some Try Emulating Native Writers

Several years ago the editor of this newspaper and the present editor of the All Alaska Weekly, had a rather fascinating experience in trying to decipher a letter supposedly written by a Native. The letter was written in a broken English manner. Somehow, the letter did not convince Tom Snapp and this editor that it was a genuine Native-written missile. We finally decided that the thing was written by a non-Native who had tried to emulate an under-educated Eskimo or Indian.

We have had quite a lot of experience in deciphering under-educated Native writers and it is not a too-difficult task to decide that a letter was written by a Native Eskimo or Indian. After living with such things for years, one learns to recognize the Native mannerisms in writing as well as thought patterns involved.

We may not be perfect at this but we are quite willing to stick our necks out that we can pretty well recognize a Native-written letter. The letters are not only charming but they get the thought across in a roundabout way.

– H.R.

Cultural Heritage—

Writer Inspires Another

By ANDREW J. CHIKOYAK

Having read your article on Mr. Tommy Ongtooguk's "Unique Historical Project" in which to preserve his disappearing culture in your September 3 Tundra Times newspaper has inspired me to write this article.

As a Yupik Eskimo and a film maker from the Alaska Village Council Presidents region, I have felt alone many times on my efforts in which to document our cultural heritage and to produce educational and information films and video tapes. However, your article on Mr. Tommy Ongtooguk's efforts has made known to me that I am not alone in climbing the mountain.

Last year in December, 1974, the YUPIK FILMS, INC. was incorporated as a non-profit film corporation with the 501 (C) (3) IRS tax exempt status. It was formed by Andrew J. Chikoyak, John Evan, and Mary Evan, all from Tununak. It was formed with three goals in which to accomplish:

(1) To produce and provide the rural villages with an educational and information films and video tapes pertaining to the land, corporations, health, education, and both functions of the State and Local Governments.

(2) To document and preserve our rapidly dying cultural heritage and traditional ways for the present and educational reference purposes.

(3) To provide the rural villages with the video tape communication assistance pertaining to the land and subsistence living for hearing purposes.

The finished films and video tape copies will be filed and be made available to the public, educational institutions, and other organizations. Copies will be made available for both rental and purchase.

The monies received from rental and sales will be used to obtain more needed film and video tape copies and some be released to other non-profit organizations educational funds.

In the rural villages, today is the hardest and critical time of our lives. After the passage of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act, many city oriented problems have arisen.

In the past, the Eskimos, the true natives of this land, have used the land mainly for the subsistence living. They still use the land for this purpose in the rural villages, for it has been their way for many centuries. In the past, too, the social structure in the villages was simple.

The social structure consisted of a church, a school, a store and a traditional and IRA Council members. These did not require complicated problems, for they were put in the villages packaged from the lower 48 states. However, as the time went on and the native people progressed educationally, base organizations were formed for the group villages on the surface of Alaska.

Through the struggles and efforts of the native leaders under these organizations, the educational system and living standards in the villages improved. As the years went by, the native leaders, having realized the future situation of the people as far as the land was concerned, put their tireless efforts in preparation of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act Bill, which later on was passed.

The passage of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act meant one thing: CHANGE. In terms of the natural law, change is inevitable. However, when a change is imposed upon the people, it is difficult for them to accept over-night.

Here, time is involved. The change in a community depends on the people's mental abilities, strength, willingness, and an understanding of change itself.

As I see it today, the language barrier is a problem in most rural villages. Most Eskimos do not speak English in the rural villages. It is difficult to imagine for them to totally understand the passage of the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act, structures and functions of corporation, both the State and Local Governments, and the use and management of their lands.

This does not mean they have not been informed. Professional people have come into the villages and explained of aforementioned structures, functions, and their rights and responsibilities under them but have been very little understood.

The reason behind this is that it is difficult to totally understand anything that is originated from another culture other than their own. Knowing an existence of this problem, I have been thinking for about five years how this problem could be solved.

Having seen many films by the National film Board of Canada, and knowing that Mr. Tim Kennedy of Anchorage has been successful in the past with his Skyriver Film Project patterned after the National Film Board of Canada Challenge for Change, I came to conclusion of both the film and video tape.

Because most natives are visually inclined and that both the film and video tape have programmed educational natures, the YUPIK FILMS, INC. was formed hooping to alleviate the lack of understanding due to the language barrier.

In doing these types of films, the subject matter would be done in relation to the native's life-style.

They would also be narrated in their native language, as well as in English. Then the community as a whole or individually can watch the films many times as they please to learn. The result of this would be a better understanding of their organizations, their rights and responsibilities under them.

Having a better understanding, I feel strongly that the people in the rural villages would learn to help make decisions, solve problems, and better assist their representatives in doing a better job.

The sudden transitional period's impact has made many people cease to exercise their cultural heritage and traditional ways. Many older people have died with many invaluable information along with them.

As I see it, the older people are the heart and foundation of our cultural heritage and traditional ways. Just as long as the older people exist, our cultural heritage and traditional ways will exist as well.

Once they die out, our cultural heritage and traditional ways will die as well. Knowing that our cultural heritage and traditional ways are our identity as a living human race, I am attempting to have them recorded on film for the present and future educational reference purposes. This is one of the goals of the YUPIK FILMS, INC.

For nine months now, I have put all my time and efforts to the

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