

The Expression '*roulé ma bosse*' in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*

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In chapters 12 and 13 of *Lord Jim* Conrad's character-narrator Charles Marlow recounts at length his conversation about Jim with the "elderly French Lieutenant whom I came across one afternoon in Sydney, by the merest chance." The Frenchman "had been one of the boarding officers" (Conrad 2012: 107) sent by a French gunboat to rescue the damaged *Patna* after it had been abandoned by its officers – including Jim. Marlow's report of their conversation is one of the best-known sequences in Conrad's novel, justly admired for the way in which it explores certain key topics such as fear, bravery, and duty while simultaneously providing a moving insight into the way in which a short, chance encounter can offer an intimate glimpse into a stranger's complex history and linked personality. The conversation takes place in French, and Marlow's account is notable for the manner in which he repeatedly offers snatches of both the original French and also their literal translations – often very literal translations – into English. Marlow also on occasion makes use of an English that bears clear signs of the French from which it has been translated, but without the French original:

In the establishment where we sat one could get a variety of foreign drinks which were kept for the visiting naval officers, and he took a sip of the dark medical-looking stuff, which probably was nothing more nasty than *cassis à l'eau*, and glancing with one eye into the tumbler, shook his head slightly. "*Impossible de comprendre – vous concevez?*" he said, with a curious mixture of unconcern and thoughtfulness. I could very easily conceive how impossible it had been for them to understand. Nobody in the gunboat knew enough English to get hold of the story as told by the serang. There was a good deal of noise, too, round the two officers. "They crowded upon us. There was a circle round that dead man (*autour de ce mort*)," he described. "One had to attend to the most pressing. These people were beginning to agitate themselves – *Parbleu!*" (Conrad 2012: 108)

The passage is typical of the whole scene, in which the two languages flow into each other, exchanging vocabularies and syntax much as the blackcurrant juice and water (or eau de vie!) blend together in *cassis à l'eau*

– or as unconcern and thoughtfulness form a “curious mixture” in the Frenchman’s attitude. The latter’s “*concevez*” prompts Marlow to use the slightly unidiomatic “conceive” in his succeeding sentence, while Marlow’s own use of the English phrases “most pressing” and “agitate themselves” are so unidiomatic as to make it clear what the Frenchman’s words must have been.

These introductory comments regarding Marlow’s apparently deliberate eschewal of idiomatic renderings of the Frenchman’s comments in favour of pedantically literal translations represent a necessary prelude to a discussion of one particular response of Marlow’s to a piece of French slang:

“Yes! Yes! One talks, one talks; this is all very fine; but at the end of the reckoning one is no cleverer than the next man – and no more brave. Bravo! This is always to be seen. I have rolled my hump (*roulé ma bosse*),” he said, using the slang expression with imperturbable seriousness, “in all parts of the world; I have known brave men – famous ones! *Allez?*” He drank carelessly. . . . “Brave – you conceive – in the Service – one has got to be – the trade demands it (*le métier veut ça*). Is it not so?” he appealed to me reasonably. (113)

Marlow’s English rendering of “*roulé ma bosse*” is so very literal as to constitute a mistranslation. “What,” the English monoglot may be forgiven for asking, “is the ‘hump’ in question, and how on earth does one roll it?” The general meaning of the slang expression is clear enough: the *Grand Robert de la Langue Française* gives “*Rouler sa bosse* (1875; *semble avoir remplacé rouler son corps, ci-dessous*): *voyager beaucoup, avoir l’expérience qu’on acquiert dans les tribulations d’une vie aventureuse*” [(1875; appears to have replaced rolled one’s body, see below): to travel extensively, to possess experience acquired as a result of setbacks associated with an adventurous life]. If this much is clear, the origin of the expression – its more precise literal origin – remains unreported and undetectable in Marlow’s English version.

It is true that the dominant meaning of “*bosse*” is indeed “hump”: the French for “hunchback” is “*bossu(e)*.” But how does one roll a hump: as one rolls a coin on the ground, or as one rolls (up) a piece of string? The *Grand Robert* helpfully suggests a different meaning for “*bosse*” here: “*Cordage fin, généralement de faibles dimensions, utilisé pour saisir solidement qqch.*” [Thin rope, normally found in short lengths, used to fasten something securely.] Other sources suggest an additional reason why the French Lieutenant should have used this particular slang expression: the

colloquialism is specifically associated with sailors' speech. Two internet sources make this clear. The first comes in the form of an answer to a reader's question concerning the origin of the term "rouler sa bosse" on the CNEWS site.

Faisant référence aux aventuriers et baroudeurs en tout genre, l'expression "rouler sa bosse" est apparue dans le courant du XIXe siècle. Elle tire son origine du vocabulaire des marins.

Cette expression fait référence à la technique employée pour ranger les cordes qui étaient utilisées pour accrocher le bateau à une bitte d'amarrage ou pour attacher les voiles une fois celles-ci repliées. Former une boule avec le cordage était à l'époque un geste répété de nombreuses fois au port et pendant le voyage, si bien qu'on disait des marins qu'ils "roulaient leurs bosses" un peu partout dans le monde.¹

[Referring to adventurers and mercenaries of all kinds, the expression "rouler sa bosse" appeared in the course of the 19th century and originates in the vocabulary of sailors. It comes from the technique ~~used~~-employed to store the ropes used to hang the boat on a mooring bollard or to tie the sails once they have been folded. To form a ball with the rope was at the time a gesture repeated many times in port and during the voyage, so much so that sailors were said to be "rolling their bumps" again and again in different parts of the world.]

The second discussion of the slang term comes from the French internet site "Expressions."

L'expression roulé ma bosse aurait vraisemblablement pour origine le monde marin. Une bosse est une corde à nœuds utilisée par les marins qui étaient réputés pour vagabonder, voyager et voir du pays. Par extension, l'expression s'utilise pour désigner quelqu'un qui a une grande expérience dans un domaine.²

[The expression "roulé ma bosse" most probably has a maritime origin. A "bosse" is a knotted rope used by sailors, who had the reputation of being wanderers, travellers, and observers of different places. By extension, the expression is used to designate someone who has extensive experience within a particular field.]

¹ www.cnews.fr/racines/2016-06-13/dou-vient-lexpression-rouler-sa-bosse-731743

² www.linternaute.fr/expression/cgi/expression/expression.php?f_zone=impression&f_id_expression=14479

As a colloquial equivalent in English Laurence Davies (private communication) has suggested the old Australian phrase “humping my bluey” – in other words, going on the road with one’s belongings over one’s shoulder rolled up in a blue blanket. Eric Partridge’s *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* dates this expression to the 1880s, adding “Ex. the *hump* of a bent back” (Partridge 1984: 582).

From this example, a number of additional issues – one small and the others of more moment – can be further explored. The small issue can be expressed in a simple question: did Conrad know that “*roulé ma bossé*” had a specifically naval origin and set of connotations? If Conrad did not, then we must accept that his narrator Marlow shares this ignorance. But if he did, then other questions follow.

The idiom appears nowhere else in Conrad’s writing, so this single example constitutes the only evidence we have regarding Conrad’s familiarity with it. He puts it in the mouth of a sailor, and has Marlow confirm that it is a slang expression. Moreover, the meaning of the expression is unobscure, and the text suggests that both Marlow and the Frenchman are familiar with this meaning. But Marlow’s unidiomatic translation (“I have rolled my hump . . . in all parts of the world”) offers the puzzled reader, whether French- or English-speaking, no help whatever in fixing the expression’s origin in the ropes that sailors rolled into balls. It is possible that Conrad has Marlow offer his unhelpful literal translation (a real *faux ami*!) to undercut his assumed competence in French, but this seems unlikely. More likely but far from certain is that Conrad – who served as a teenager on the French ships the *Mont-Blanc* and the *Saint-Antoine* on their voyages to the Caribbean in 1875 and 1876–77 as well as on the *Roi des Belges* in the Congo in 1890 – was not aware that “*bossé*” here meant not “hump” but “corded rope.” If this is the case then it is mildly surprising that the need to offer an English translation of this expression did not lead Conrad to wonder what on earth the hump that has been rolled around the world was. But we all make use of expressions – slang or accepted in standard utterance – the origin of which we are totally unaware. One can hazard a guess that Conrad might have thought that the expression originated in a sailor’s bag that, carried on the back, resembled a hump (as in “humping my bluey”), but this is no more than a guess.

The larger questions are not unrelated to this relatively straightforward yes/no issue. Conrad was quite capable of producing idiomatic translations from French into English; he commented in detail on such translations by various members of his circle, and had clearly thought long and intelligently about the varied issues raised by translation. Moreover he offered advice on the translations into French of his own works. Rendering a French utterance into a more idiomatic English than “One had to attend to the most pressing. These people were beginning to agitate themselves” was clearly well within his capabilities. Why then did he not do so, and what is the effect on the reader of Marlow’s painfully literal renderings of the Frenchman’s comments into English? One immediate possibility presents itself: Conrad wishes the reader to associate these stumbling English translations with Marlow, to imply that although Marlow spoke enough French to converse with the Frenchman, he lacked the linguistic skill necessary to produce a polished, idiomatic but nonetheless accurate English version of his companion’s French comments. This explanation must surely be rejected. Marlow is characterized – in *Lord Jim* and elsewhere in Conrad’s *oeuvre* – as very much the Englishman, but also as a sophisticated international traveller. In the encounter with the French Lieutenant it is Marlow who displays a cultural and moral flexibility and an intelligent and open-minded willingness to interrogate his own assumptions about such matters as duty, while the Frenchman is so disturbed by Marlow’s invitation to him to think outside the box of a rigid set of professional obligations that he breaks off the encounter in alarmed dismay.

Conrad’s fiction is filled (one could be forgiven for saying chock-a-bloc) with characters of many cultures and many native tongues. In some cases their non-English speech is rendered without comment into English. Thus in the earlier *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow overhears a conversation between “the nephew” and “the uncle” while lying flat on the deck of his steamboat. He reports this conversation in detail and in English, making no overt comment concerning the actual language spoken by the two. Owen Knowles, editor of the Cambridge edition of the novella, however, comments in an explanatory note that Gallicisms such as “I did my possible” and “Conceive you – that ass” “indicate that the conversation probably takes place in French” (Conrad 2010: 450 n. 76.2). The rendering of other languages into English in Conrad’s fiction varies in ways that range from the *Heart of Darkness* example (where the hints that the words have been translated from French to

English in Marlow's report are so slight as to be inconclusive) to examples that draw attention to the act of translation, even providing snippets of the original language (as in Marlow's encounter with the French Lieutenant).

There are other examples of unidiomatic English in *Lord Jim*, although they are not translations offered by Marlow or another character but rather reports of the speech of non-native English speakers. The German captain of the *Patna*, Stein (born in Bavaria), and the master of the brigantine, "a dapper little half-caste of forty or so" (181) who, on Stein's orders, ferries Jim to the mouth of the river leading to Patusan, all have their unidiomatic English speech transcribed unchanged by Marlow in the novel. In the case of the last-named, Marlow's report explicitly mocks the master's mangling of English in an extended passage that oscillates between free indirect discourse and direct quotation. It begins as follows:

He was going to carry the gentleman to the mouth of the river but would "never ascend." His flowing English seemed to be derived from a dictionary compiled by a lunatic. Had Mr Stein desired him to "ascend," he would have "reverentially" – (I think he wanted to say respectfully – but devil only knows) – "reverentially made objects for the safety of properties." (181)

While Stein's Germanic syntax in his conversations in English with Marlow somehow contributes to an admiring portrayal of the man, the "half-caste's" malapropisms are presented as a laughable part and parcel of his misplaced self-assurance.

What of the French Lieutenant? How differently would the scene of his conversation with Marlow work upon the reader were it to be rendered only in idiomatic English with perhaps just the slightest hint of its origin in another language – as in the report of the conversation between "the nephew" and "the uncle" in *Heart of Darkness*? Certainly the way in which Marlow's report of this overheard exchange is conveyed to the reader in the earlier work strips the account of all concern with linguistic and cultural differences, and of the association of these differences with contrasts of character and personality. In the case of Marlow's encounter with the French Lieutenant the opposite is true: their failure to reach agreement about Jim and his act is not just a matter of two individuals differing; it is also a matter of unmatching world-views that are inseparable from the cultures to which the two individuals belong, and the languages that they speak and through which they think and communicate.

Would it be possible to take Marlow's misleading translation of "*roulé ma bosse*" as "rolling my hump" as a token of the impossibility of a wholly satisfactory translation from one language to another? Does Conrad, through Marlow, provide such inadequate English translations of the Frenchman's comments as a token of the impossibility of understanding a person's cultural and moral universe from the perspective of another language? Or is such impossibility only the case with *this*, rather than *a*, person? Marlow's conversation with Stein, after all, appears to cast Stein's Germanisms not as barriers to full communication but rather as contributions to a mutual sharing of insights between the two talkers. Stein's unidiomatic English manages to put the force and perceptions of another culture, another life, behind what he says, and in doing so makes his statements both more profound as comments on life and also more revealing as insights into Stein's unique personality and value-system. In contrast, Marlow's transcription of the French Lieutenant's remarks into a sort of pidgin English uses language to depict the Frenchman's inability to see beyond, or outside, a rigid set of professional standards. Unlike Jim, the Frenchman is not "an imaginative beggar" (67), and the over-literal translations of his speech provided by Marlow serve for the reader as tokens of his inability to imagine realities beyond familiar regulations and conventions – whether of a native language or of a seaman's code of honour and behaviour. Marlow, like Conrad, does not dismiss such professional standards of behaviour, or the people who live their lives strictly in accordance with their dictates: if you are watching the flakes of rust drop off a damaged bulkhead, then the French Lieutenant is the man you need, not an imaginative beggar such as Jim. But such an unimaginative sailor is unlikely to be able to explain why, in certain circumstances, you should to the destructive element submit yourself, however widely he has rolled his hump.

Acknowledgements

This note has its somewhat convoluted origins in a request for help posted on the Virginia Woolf e-mail discussion group hosted by Ohio State University Press. Stuart N. Clarke asked what the word “boss” meant in this sentence from Chapter 13 of Virginia Woolf’s novel *Jacob’s Room*. “Bowley who liked young people and walked down Piccadilly with his right arm resting on the boss of his back.” The present writer then mentioned the French “*roulé ma bossé*” in *Lord Jim*, and contributions followed both within and outside the discussion group from Adolphe Haberer (who located a key internet source quoted above), Laurence Davies, Alexandre Fachard, and others.

Works cited

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