

Phonologist translates Pygmalion

Ádám Nádasy, reader of phonology at the Department of English Linguistics at the Eötvös University, Budapest, Hungary, is not only known for his popular *Introduction to Linguistics* courses, or for his thought-provoking linguistic columns criticizing the purist-prescriptive approach to “language conservation”. Nor only for his singing in the recent Youtube-hit ‘We are the linguists’ (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIol1_ktcP4, at 01:30 and 02:50). He is also a poet and translator, and he has re-translated many of Shakespeare’s plays to Hungarian using a new ‘voice’: profane words and colloquial expressions would better reproduce the effect of the Shakespearean text in its Elizabethan context than the elevated, literary, at times even archaic language choice of earlier translations.

Nádasy has just finished re-translating G. B. Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, the popular play that also served as the basis for the musical and film *My Fair Lady*. Professor of phonetics Henry Higgins, who can tell the background of anyone based on their speech, meets Liza Doolittle, a working class girl selling flowers. He invites her to his house and starts educating her, turning her into a real lady, and first of all, teaching her how to speak in a higher class language. The play is a real piece of cake for the linguist, especially for a scholar of English phonetics and phonology. Yet, Ádám Nádasy identified a problem that previous translators had not: the working class sociolect in Hungarian does not have characteristic phonological features comparable to Cockney English. When Higgins transforms the flower girl into a lady – “raw material” into a “beautiful piece of art” similarly to the sculptor Pygmalion in Greek mythology – then he lifts her socially, and this process is primarily reflected in her speech. Consequently, the play would be misinterpreted if the translator used dialectal or ethnolectal features, such as Northern-Hungarian, Transylvanian or urban Roma (Gypsy) varieties of Hungarian. The distance in the play is sociological, and not geographic or ethnic. Therefore, Nádasy decided to use a different strategy: he replaced the phonetic-phonological identity markers with morphological and lexical markers, which indeed reminds the audience the urban working class sociolect of Hungarian.

It would be interesting to compare Nádasy’s solution to the techniques employed by the translators of *Pygmalion* (or of *My Fair Lady*) to other languages. The title of an article by Ghil’ad Zuckermann (‘Abba, why was Professor *Higgins* trying to teach Eliza to speak like our cleaning lady?’, 2005) suggests that the problem is far from trivial in other language contexts, as well.

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