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The Importance of The Hierarchy of Linguistic Varieties in Transnational #MeToo Literature Using Kristen Roupenian’s Short Story “Cat Person” as a Case Study



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BACKGROUND: During the height of the #MeToo movement, women across America shared stories of sexual assault or abuse. The sharing of these narratives encouraged more women to open up about their personal experiences and create a dialogue that took back the power from their abusers. “Cat Person” was one of the most viral stories.

The author, Kristen Roupenian, used a lot of strategic language choices (referred to as “linguistic varieties” in my research) to emphasize the power imbalance between her two characters, reinforcing #MeToo themes. In reading the French translation, I noticed that the translator, Marguerite Capelle, did not maintain the “hierarchy” of these linguistic varieties in her translation, thereby weakening the message.

METHODS

- 1. I found words frequently repeated throughout “Cat Person” that I classified as important to the overall message of the #MeToo movement and as evidence of Roupenian’s linguistic variety speaking as a woman.
- 2. I compared the French translation to the original English text to see if these words were maintained.

EXAMPLE

After the movie, he came back to her. “**Concession-stand girl**, give me your phone number,” he said, and, surprising herself, she did.

Après le film, il revint. « Eh, **la vendeuse de bonbons**, donne-moi ton numéro de téléphone », et avec une légère surprise, elle s’exécuta (83).

RESULTS

As in the example seen above, the French translator missed many opportunities to translate the repeated word “girl,” which I believe was used by Roupenian to undermine Margot’s agency and highlight the existing power imbalance.

The translator likely did so to value readability for a French audience. This is evidence more research is needed in the translation of short stories written during the #MeToo movement and the preservation of the hierarchy of linguistic varieties based on the intentions of the author of the original text.

Evidence from “Cat Person” suggests that more research is needed in the translation of short stories written during the #MeToo movement



Photograph by Elinor Carucci for The New Yorker

“It wasn’t that she was scared he would try to force her to do something against her will but that insisting that they stop now, after everything she’d done to push this forward, would make her seem spoiled and capricious, as if she’d ordered something at a restaurant and then, once the food arrived, had changed her mind and sent it back” (Roupenian, 2017)

What is “Cat Person”?

- Margot, a 20-year-old college student, meets Robert, a 34-year-old man, while she’s working at a movie theater.
- They go on two awkward dates and after the second, they go back to Robert’s house.
- They have sex, and the entire time Margot’s inner monologue makes it clear that she is not interested in having sex, though she doesn’t express this out loud.
- She expresses her disinterest in a text message to Robert later that week, and the story ends with him calling her a “whore.”

Important themes

Sexual consent; Withdrawing consent; Pressure to have sex; Power imbalance; Age differences

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