‘Teaching Bi/Multilinguals About Deconstruction is Almost Redundant’: How Migrant Experiences of Bi/Multilingualism Must (Re)Shape Translation Studies.

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Abstract

This essay brings together texts and analytical methods from a literary theory, translation studies, gender studies, critical race theory, linguistics and Twitter, aiming, to emphasize a number of related points. Firstly, the necessity of intersectional reflection of the translation practices centralized and marginalised in and by Translation Studies, and national language policies more widely. For example, by the prioritization of written above oral language ability, according to a European monolingual norm, within which a second language is known and acquired through voluntary study rather than everyday use. I suggest that the study of translation is always the study of geopolitics, and should be recognised as such. Secondly, the importance of the Derridean notion of having and not-having language, and of the imperative to translate and of the untranslatable, for which, again, we should use an intersectional analysis. I suggest that the study of translation is always the study of untranslatability. Thus bi/multilingual migratory experience provides not only the subject of the study of translation, but an epistemological framework, in which what is at stake in translation can be understood.

Keywords: translation studies, intersectionality, bilingualism, multilingualism, Derrida

Introduction

In 2011, Susan Bassnett, a translation studies grandee, reflected on the state on the field in the 1970s, observing that translated texts were 'not perceived as worthy of study in a university […] considered a mere copy' and that '[t]ranslators [were] poorly paid' (2011: ix). These are certainly serious issues, and it is to her credit and to the credit of others that there has been such substantial change since then. Her statement also reveals, however, how written translation was prioritized above oral practice in the so-called cultural turn in translation studies. Significantly, Bassnett defends the value of studying translation by appealing to the value of the translated literary text, writing that 'millions of readers' were consuming 'works in ancient Greek, Russian, Spanish, Arabic and countless other languages' (2011 ix). Notably, she chooses as her examples languages with large historical literary canons recognised by, if not contained within, the Global North.

This emphasis on translation as enabling, primarily, the consumption of literary texts, reinforces the problematic and prevalent assumption that translation is a leisure activity that can be picked up and put down, like a book. Translation as regarded by Bassnett seems to bear little relation to the translatorial language practices occurring outside of the academic literary traditions of the Global North; although she does acknowledge professional translators, it should be said that they will themselves have often passed through an academic institution. I argue that oral language practice should be studied in translation studies, and that translation studies should interrogate the norms and premises against which language practices, both oral and written, literary and non-literary are delineated and valued. In other words, we should not only study the having and not having of language, but self-consciously and intersectionally criticise how such (not) having is arbitrated. By building on work in linguistics, comparative literature, translation studies, critical race studies and deconstructionist literary theory, I argue that a shift in our understanding of translation could provide a new cross-disclipinary epistemological framework. This is a call for the closer study of geopolitical, linguistic and disciplinary bonds and boundaries; specifically the interrogation of how these boundaries, for example between the use and knowledge of language, are constructed and the establishment and recognition of new bonds, for example between linguistics, where most research on bi/multilinguals occurs, and translation studies.[1]

My proposition is as follows: the archetypal translator of translation studies must be removed from the *scene of reading* (and translating), which may be entered and exited at leisure. According to this model, the translator engages in the individualist task of producing the target text from the source text. Instead, I propose that translators must be understood to *exist in the world*; a world whose geopolitics results in unequal relationships between languages according to a Derridean model of the (not) having of language (1998: 21), and of the simultaneous necessity of translation and untranslatability. We should establish what is at stake in the translation practices and texts we study. Simona Bertacco recently wrote that translation should be considered 'both as a lived experience

(many people do live in translation) and as an epistemological framework (it implies a comparative perspective)' (2014: 6). I suggest the specific integration of the experience of bi/multilingualism and migration into the study of translation and their consideration as epistemological frameworks., After all, bilinguals, make up a global majority (Kroll and Dussias 2013:217; Myers-Scotton 2006: 413), including a majority of speakers of English (Sharifian 2014: 51). A return to theory, in this case, can facilitate the recentring of migrant groups in our academic praxis.

This group is important because it is composed of people negotiating various intersecting unequal power relations, and can therefore provide a model for how, firstly, the study of translation is always also the study of geopolitics and, secondly, the study of translation is always the study of untranslatability. This second point may seem paradoxical; it is simply a rejection of the idea that bi/multilinguals possess two (or more) equivalent linguistic and/or cultural halves which may be neatly mapped onto each other. Similarly, the rejection of equivalence in translation studies must be understood as geopolitical, rather than simply linguistic.

I use the phrase 'heritage speakers', which Silvina Montrul defines as:

> [I]ndividuals who have been exposed to an immigrant or a minority language since childhood and are also very proficient in the majority language spoken in the wider speech community, are bilinguals characterized by the complex interaction of all these factors. (2013: 165)

This term is useful for two reasons. Firstly, it centres oral ability, *without prescribing the extent of, or method of quantifying, the linguistic ability in question*. Secondly, it ascribes an inherent epistemic and cultural value to this linguistic ability by describing it as constituting, and originating in, heritage.

In considering the intersections of migration and class, I apply an intersectional framework, a concept coined and substantiated by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectional analyses aim to consider how marginalization operates as various *intersecting* axes of oppression, rather than along a single axis, for example, only race or only gender. The reason being that a ‚single-axis analysis', tends to erase the experience of multiply marginalised groups, for example by foregrounding men of colour in the study of race, and white women in the study of gender (Crenshaw 1989: 40). Crucially, the intersection of axes is different to, and unique from, the sum of those individual axes: 'sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women - not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women' (Crenshaw 1989: 44). In an attempt to integrate intersectional and deconstructionist discourses, I suggest that intersections of identity, experience and power are untranslatable; there is no direct equivalence between their constituent axes.

Towards An Intersectional Consideration of the (Not) Having of Language in Translation Studies

The project of considering the Derridian (not) having of language with regards to translation studies is already underway. Emliy Apter adopted a deconstructive position in her monographs (2006, 2013), as does Simona Bertacco in her 2014 essay collection, foregrounding the simultaneously existing necessity of translatability and untranslatabilty (c.f. also Derrida 1998: 56). Derrida's model emphasizes the ambivalent position of the migrant who must be translatable (lives in translation) but whose cultural untranslatability must be emphasized in order to avoid its epistemic colonization. As a result of colonial language policies, Derrida had limited access to Arabic and other Algerian languages under the French regime, but equally, was not considered to speak French as a native in France. The very paradox of the statement 'I have only one language, yet it is not mine' (1998: 21), expresses the untranslatability of his situation. As such, we can think of the knowing and using of language as centring around questions of having and not having, the simultaneous imperative to translate and of untranslatability. Importantly, Derrida gives theoretical expression to what is also a legal as well as social and linguistic phenomenon, where the geopolitical hegemony of a monolingual European state arbitrates the having and not-having of language.

With an emphasis on what is at stake for migrant heritage speakers living at various intersections of class and race, I offer for comparison the reason given by monolingual Western Europeans for second language acquisition. According to Myers-Scotton, 'they may wish to 'join', if only symbolically through language, another culture. For these reasons, some people learn a second language because of its exotic associations' (2006: 63). In this second model, nothing is at stake for the translator; it is therefore an inappropriate model to use for translation generally, and should not be assumed or implied as the translational norm. I suggest working according to Bertacco's principle that "untranslatables' do exist […] [T]ranslation is the model [...] for a critical praxis aware of, and sensitive to, the complexities of contemporary global language politics. (2014: 50).

In 2015 the UK exam boards threatened to cancel school level qualifications in so-called 'community' languages - i.e. those often spoken by heritage speakers - revoking an institutionally validated route into professional translation. Therefore Derrida's question of the having of language, and the question of the intersection of class and migration, has never been more pertinent to translation studies (National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education, 2015). The continuing emphasis on a knowing of languages above the *use* of languages has always been a part of the epistemological dominance of the imperial project, and operates more or less violently at different intersections of race, class and migration. 'What do heritage speakers know about their language?' Montrul asks (2013: 173) and similarly Myers-Scotton asks "[s]hould we emphasize knowing more than one language in our definition of a bilingual, or should we emphasize using more than one language regularly?" (2005: 38).

Maria Tymozcko has commented that the 'current presuppositions' of translation theory originate in a 'small subset of European cultural contexts

based on Greco-Roman textual traditions, Christian values [...] and an upper-class emphasis on technical expertise and literacy'. As a consequence, '[m]onolingualism has been taken as the norm, whereas it may turn out to be the case that plurilingualism is more typical worldwide…' (2006: 14-6) Despite global numbers of migrant bilinguals, according to the Eurocentric norm of national monolingualism, the place of 'foreign' language acquisition is outside of the home in educational institutions, access to which is often class-dependent. Myers-Scotton comments that 'Typical Europeans in nations with a firmly established single national language used to think of becoming bilingual as not the by-product of everyday life, but rather a part of formal education (at places such as Oxford, Cambridge, Heidelberg, etc.).' (2006: 4) Therefore, although it is true, as Bassnett reflects, that the 'cultural turn' has done much to raise the status of certain types of translation - and justifiably so - it is now time for translation studies to reshape itself by decentralizing the normative assumption of translator in the European monolingual tradition, and attempt to intersectionally address issues of class, race and geopolitical marginalization within its discourse.

There is a pattern among translation studies textbooks according to which Western traditions of translation are considered in the main body of the text, while, in the back pages, postcolonial traditions are addressed in their own section (e.g. Anthony Pym's *Exploring Translation Theories* (2010), Jeremy Munday's *Introducing Translation Studies* (2001), Edwin Gentlzer's *Contemporary Translation Theories (1993),* Lawrence Venuti's *Translation Studies Reader (*2012)) The consequence of this tokenism is that although questions of migration, class, sexuality, gender are acknowledged, these questions are thematically separated and abstracted from translation per se. The relevance of these questions to translation studies is therefore not only represented as optional or partial (i.e. suggesting that translation is not necessarily the study of geopolitics), but approached through 'single-axis analysis' (Crenshaw 1989: 40), failing to acknowledge how, for example, migration and gender, intersect and reinforce each other, and how these intersections are always relevant to the translation practice and therefore its study. The translator is able to remain in the scene of reading, able to exit and enter, refer or not refer to postcolonial theory or indeed to (geo)politics at all. The having of language(s) - a bi/multilingual and profoundly translatorial negotiation - exists at many intersections: race, class, gender and migrant status among them. Translation practice and study must acknowledge the value of that which cannot be translated, and acknowledge that it *this* which is at stake when we assume a monolingual Eurocentric norm that erases the intersections at which heritage speakers translate and use language(s).

Two Latinx Examples: 'Mock Spanish' and the 2015 Brazilian Election on Twitter[2]

An illustrative example of the hegemonic denial and devaluation of heritage speakers' language knowledge is the use of 'Mock Spanish' in the USA, described by Ana Cecilia Zentella. She writes how:

> examples of Mock Spanish, such as 'no problemo,' [serve] as indicators that Spanish is minimized and dismissed as a simple language. The implication is that all you have to do

> is add an -a or an -o to an English word and anyone, even alien terminators, can master it with little effort (after all, Latin@s speak it). (2003: 52)

Although Zentella, unlike Derrida, has access to her heritage language, 'Mock Spanish' attempts to devalue her *use* of it through the assertion of that others know it ('anyone… can master it with little effort'). Zentella emphasizes how this positionality is also conditioned by class: '[w]hen working-class Latin@s come face to face with English monolinguals, the imbalance of status and power that is customary in those situations makes conversation on an equal footing impossible' (2003: 63). The availability of Spanish - of the knowing of Spanish - to those benefiting from class and migration (and I would imagine, racial) privilege, directly challenges her right to call the language 'mine'.

In the same book Julio Marzán describes how it was university education that granted him full(er) access to Spanish:

> By the age of ten [...] I had already begun wilfully to forget my Spanish [...] after graduating, inspired by the late sixties and early seventies, I submerged myself in revolution and Spanish, making it my political purpose to become as literate in it as I had become in English. (2003: 223)

Not only does Marzán imply how the pressures of assimilation encouraged him to 'forget *my* Spanish' (my italics) as acquired in the home, but he describes how when he does make it his 'political purpose' to relearn Spanish, this occurs in an elite educational space, and according to traditional Eurocentric monolingual terms, measuring his proficiency in terms of literacy and in comparison to his knowledge of English. This evidences the hierarchization of knowing language, coherent with the model of the European monolingual who acquires his second language through an educational institution, rather than an 'imperfect' use of language(s), particularly in informal spheres, such as the home. Despite being a heritage speaker, Marzán, through his access to high education, operates at least partially in the room of the *scene of reading*, demonstrating how the intersection of class and migration dictate the extent to which marginalization according to the norms referred to above occur.

Returning to the idea that what is at stake in translation is the untranslatable, the untranslatable is of epistemic importance, I offer examples of untranslatable bi/multilingualism as an assertion of non-conformity. These five tweets, taken from the vast twitter commentary on and about the 26th of October 2014 on the Brazilian election, use informal grammar in English, Portuguese and one on occasion Spanish, and references to black, feminist and queer culture from the USA to comment favourably upon the election of Dilma Rousseff Brazilian politics. The effect is to create a discourse accessible to those with a particular set of cultural political reference points.

I will here provide a brief explanation and 'translation'. @Gabbsmaciel writes that 'dilma e lula são os carters do brasil', comparing, Dilma Rousseff and her popular predecessor, Lula, to iconic US artist Beyoncé and her husband Jay Z,

whose shared surname is Carter. Other Twitter users punned on lyrics from Beyonce's 'Who run the world (girls)' and Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda' (a song which adapts lyrics originally popularised by Sir Mix A Lot in 1992 in what was seen to be a reclamation of his objectification of the black female body). @Leave_ah, writes ,four for you dilma rousseff! you go, dilma rousseff! and none for aécio neves. bye.' adapting a quotation from the 2004 cult film *Mean Girls* to refer to 'dilma rousseff' instead of character 'Glen Coco'. Finally, @marcoscopio tweets 'presidenta dilma, shantay you stay!'. They refer to RuPaul's Drag Race, a popular show about drag queens whose format is taken from underground queer dance hall culture, by applying the line spoken to candidates who have not been eliminated to 'Presidenta Dilma'.

I have no doubt that, for some readers, the paragraph above will confirm that if a joke must be explained it has already lost its comedy. Others will appreciate at least some of the references. It demonstrates the existence of a transnational discourse, potentially between, but certainly inclusive of, heritage speakers and first generation migrants (perhaps following the election online - this is at least how I came across these tweets), as well as younger Brazilians familiar with US popular culture. The specific bonded intertextuality of these tweets, which cluster around Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé , black women known for discussing female sexuality and empowerment (e.g. in their collaboration on the 2014 'Feeling Myself', a song about female masturbation), evidences a transnational and transcultural politics, which is at once consistent, coherent, and selectively intelligible. If untranslatability is what is at stake in translation and if untranslatability is geopolitical phenomenon with epistemic value, then these tweets are an example of a translatorial discourse operating unconstrained by the norms often imposed by (living in) translation.

Conclusion

This essay has brought together texts and analytical methods from a range of areas, aiming, to emphasize a number of related points. Firstly, the necessity of intersectional reflection of the translation practices centralized and marginalised in and by translation studies, and national language policies more widely, for example, by the prioritization of written above oral language ability; the study of translation is always the stud of geopolitics. Secondly, the importance of the Derridean notion of having and not-having language, and of the imperative to translate and of the untranslatable, for which, again, we should use an intersectional analysis; the study of translation is always the study of untranslatability. Thus bi/multilingual migratory experience provides not only the subject of the study of translation, but an epistemological framework, in which what is at stake in translation can be understood. translation studies benefits from being a relatively young and flexible field with strong academic ties to more the traditional literary disciplines. By drawing on research in Gender Studies, Critical Race Studies, Migration Studies and Linguistics, in addition to diversifying the primary texts it studies, translation studies could become a nexus point for exciting interdisciplinary research, and bonding these disciplines. This is not to say that translation studies should abandon the study of literary texts, but rather to suggest a reconsideration of their centrality, and indeed the boundaries of what is considered 'literary'. The archetypal translator must be removed from

the scene of reading and must be understood to exist in the world.

Endnotes

1 I use the term 'bi/multilingual' to refer to those functioning (in whatever way) in more than one language because I find its prefixes the most self-explanatory and therefore accessible — although they appear somewhat cumbersome on the page. However, 'plurilingualism' is preferred by Tymoczko and even 'bilingualism', which Myers-Scotton uses as an all-encompassing term for people 'speaking two or more languages' (2006: 2).

2 'Latinx' is a gender neutral alternative to 'Latino/a', a noun and adjective used to refer to Latin Americans, the Latin American diaspora and their culture. 'Latin@,' which is used by Ana Zentella, serves a similar purpose.

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Biography

Yara Rodrigues Fowler is currently studying for an MA in Comparative Literature at UCL. She completed a BA in English Language and Literature in 2014. Her research interests include translation studies, latin@ literature, English literature from various periods and postcolonialism.