

## Migrations of meaning: Women, translation, visibility, invisibility

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Trencadis ("broken tiles") by Antoni Gaudí

**Summary.** All speech, indeed, all thought, is a translation of the impressions and sensations we seek to transmit. Intralingual translation is generally unconscious; interlingual translation is a conscious act, marked by vulnerability. Translation is always imperfect, as there are no perfect equivalencies, but its depiction as traitorous is based in semi-religious interpretation. In fiction it often reflects political and sexual barriers to be crossed. In practice, it engages power, between majority and lesser-known languages, and it gives access to power. Finally, it is a gendered act, in which the translator, required to be invisible, brings the unseen to the surface. [Contrib Sci 12(2):109-115 (2016)]

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I am here as a translator, and more particularly, as a translator of Catalan literature. My discussion takes off, then, from a specific experience of cultural migration, that of a tight-rope walker who teeters with a pole on a wire above the abyss of language. But I would like to start by saying that we are all translators. To quote Domenico Jervolino: "To speak

is already to translate (even when one is speaking one's own native language, or when one is speaking to oneself). Further, one has to take into account the plurality of languages, which demand a more exacting encounter with the different Other."

So, even those unfortunate souls who are only monolin-

This article is based on the lecture *Women and cultural transmission. The essential role of translation* given by the author at the Institute for Catalan Studies on 3 March 2016, as the Distinguished Lecture of the *AE-BKH Women's Week of 2016*.

gual engage continually in translation: first and foremost, every speech act is a translation of the sensations or thoughts we wish to communicate. Speech always supposes an other, and the production of words is a translation of ourselves for the other. The essence of language, what all languages have in common “is a capacity to mediate between a human speaker and a world of meanings (actual and possible) spoken about”. When a father explains to his daughter that the animal that barks is a dog, he is translating for her; when your friend asks what you mean when you say you are not happy, you are translating for him. When slang first appears, it is a private language that eventually reaches the larger public through elucidation in the media or from group to group: in some cases, by the time it reaches the mainstream it is often no longer in use in the originating group. In others it becomes mainstream. Intralingual translation is generally unconscious; it is in interlingual translation that we become aware of our role, and of the frequent precariousness of our role.

Hence, my discussion will inevitably deal with a dual vulnerability: that of the translator—common to all those who walk the tightrope between languages—and that of the translator from Catalan, who faces the specific vulnerabilities of a language not only without a state, but even now under siege by a government that, paradoxically, sees in a strong and impassioned, but still-vulnerable, language a danger for its own, supposedly impregnable, fortress.

What is this abyss, this *mise-en-abîme*, of language as viewed from the standpoint of translation? One of the most beautiful explanations I have read comes from a Turkish translator, Aron Aji, who explains the shortcomings of mere vocabulary in this way.

“What Turkish may lack in lexical breadth (its vocabulary is only a fifth of the English), it compensates amply in semi-otic depth. What may seem like unsettling ambiguity in English is often part of the allusive poetic substance of Turkish. The Turkish to English translation must therefore entail effort to capture as much of this substance as possible. [...] But it is almost never possible to capture everything.

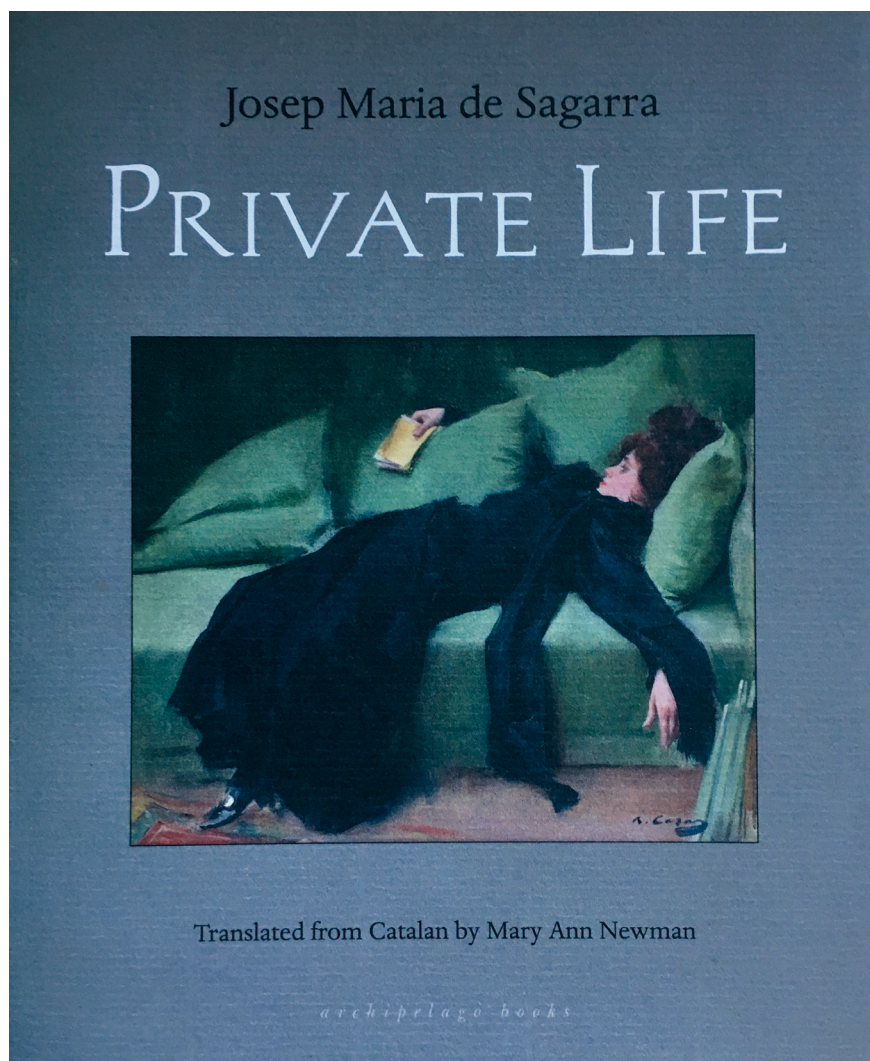
When successful, I’d like my English translation to not only convey the translatable in a satisfying manner but also gesture toward, give the reader a distinct sense of, the untranslatable. In *A Long Day’s Evening*, it was particularly satisfying to render Bilge Karasu’s impossible phrase *yaklaşmanın uzaklaştırıcılığı* as ‘being ever near yet never, ever there.’

There is a beautiful parallel between Aji’s rendering of the Turkish phrase—“being ever near yet never, ever there,” and Amiri Baraka’s description of jazz in his groundbreaking book, *Blues People*. In it, Baraka, born Leroi Jones, conveys the kinds of vulnerability and resilience we will be discussing here, when he explains that one of the most fundamental differences between classical music and jazz is that classical music pursues the perfection of hitting the perfect note perfectly, and always in the same way, while jazz instead seeks out the note, playing in the vicinity, approaching it, caressing it, and then leaving it behind, but almost never hitting it— Baraka called this “blueing” the note. And in a way not unlike Aji’s implicit critique of the overexactness of English vis-à-vis the more allusive and elusive Turkish, Baraka is positing jazz— the music of African-Americans, also known sometimes as “America’s classical music”— as more allusive and elusive than its European, or, to be more exact, “white,” counterpart.

So translators are faced with a double dilemma. To convey to the best of their ability inexactitude, when precision is insufficient, but also to recognize when the richness of precision requires imagination. To take an example from English and the Romance languages that confirms what Aji suggests about the impressive breadth of English vocabulary, English has dozens of synonyms for walking—to stride, to saunter, to amble, to plod, to dawdle, to hike, to trudge, to trod...—*at some point before the automobile we must certainly have been a walking folk*. It is very difficult to convey these specificities in a second language; this must usually be achieved by attaching adjectives and adverbs to *caminar*. But at least one has a sense what adverb to use. A different challenge emerges, one that thrusts the translator into the territory of almost rewriting, when deciding which

1 Let’s take, for instance, “hüzün,” (pron: hu-zun’) Orhan Pamuk’s by now famous example of an untranslatable Turkish word, which means, very loosely, “sorrow.” If it is untranslatable, it is not because English does not have a one-to-one correspondence, but because it has much too many synonyms—many of which are simultaneously implied in the Turkish—and settling on the wrong one can tragically reduce “Hüzün” to virtual nothingness.

2 While translating, I follow a disaggregation process, exploring the full taxonomy of a given Turkish word or phrase, considering all its properties, mining its sense, sound, syllabic meter as much as its metaphoric depths, translating it in as many ways as it can sustain, then reducing the options while trying to preserve as much of the semiotic range as possible.



Book cover of “Private Life” (“Vida privada”) de Josep M. de Sagarra, translated into English by MA Newman, 2015.

of the many synonyms will best convey a simple *caminar* in English: is it fair to the author, or to the character, or to the text, simply to translate it as “walk”? Or is there an imaginative license that allows the translator, indeed that requires the translator, to visualize the character’s pace and stride and convey some facet of his or her nature or personality through a nuance of movement? Is the translator allowed to add something in compensation for the always-lamented “losses” of translation?

Conversely, and more in keeping with the dilemma of the Turkish writer, what is a translator into English to do with the incredibly useful and ineffably poetic word *esma*, and my absolute favorite expression in Catalan, *d’esma*. *No tinc esma de fer-ho*: is that “I don’t feel like doing it”? “I

don’t have the energy to do it”? Literally, it is. But does that really convey the spirit of *esma*? And what about *Ho vaig fer d’esma*? “I did it automatically”? “I did it without thinking?” Sure, why not. But it doesn’t convey by any means the pure beauty of doing something *d’esma*. Though the origin, as in the Catalan verb for love, *estimar*, comes from the Latin *aesmar*, which is to calculate the cost of something. Down the road, however, it turned into its opposite and became to do something without calculating the cost or the energy.

So a translator is always teetering above or navigating these waters of ambiguity, where exactitude is not valued, where the note always has to be blued, where the hall of mirrors draws you—*d’esma*, but willingly—into the abyss. Translators can never entirely be “right”; translations are

never perfect. But both translators and translations are tarred with the wrong brush when they are seen as traitors. Perhaps this is a good time to examine why the catch phrase *Traduttore, traditore* has prospered as it has (aside from the simple, apposite, but infelicitous, coincidence of the sound of the two works, a false etymological likeness.)

Translation between two languages often, perhaps always, entails a power relationship. It is not neutral to translate into English—the passage from a language spoken by 11 million people like Catalan into a behemoth like English, and the destiny of the text once translated, cannot be abstracted from the context of politics and commerce. Maybe one day this will be the case for Chinese as well. The position of English as a *de facto* lingua franca—and one that can use *de facto* and *lingua franca* in the same sentence without blushing—is entirely different from that of the other immense languages. English is seen as a monster, the linguistic analog to the U.S. Army or to Wall Street. But once English has become the means by which Anglophone Indian or African writers—or Danish or Japanese—have access to García Márquez, or Quim Monzó or Orhan Pamuk, it takes on a position not only as an “oppressor,” but as a conduit.

This brings us to another question posed by the theme of this conference, an issue that is almost inevitable in the analysis of power relations: the gendering of the power transaction, whereby the individual, entity or practice that is perceived to be the weaker is also presumed to be female. In the case of the tropes of translation this is very clearly the case: translators are seen, according to Franz Rosenzweig as paradoxically “serving two masters: the foreigner with his work, the reader with his desire for appropriation, foreign author, reader dwelling in the same language as the translator.” This is the fundamental betrayal: the translator refuses to take sides, and slips back and forth, a *tras-latio* that becomes a *tras-gradio*.

It is in this context that translators are called upon to be “faithful” to the text, to be “invisible”, to be silent conduits for the transposition of language. To be the magician’s assistant. And finally, the ever-so-tired allegation of treachery and betrayal in the catch phrase *Traduttore, traditore* takes us directly to the postlapsarian myth of the Garden of Eden. Translation, the dispersion of languages, is always associated with sin: the apple of Eden (or the pomegranate), the tower of Babel, and the arrogance of the city... We are taught that there is a perfect original language, the sacred mother tongue, that we have spoiled. Translators are al-



Òmnium Cultural

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ways seen as repeating that sinful act. Each text to be translated is seen as perfect and pristine, and the translator must pour it into a new language vessel without variation or macula. To do otherwise is to sin, and to fall.

This faithless wantonness is borne out by the place translation often occupies when it appears in literature or film, that is, when translation is the topic, or when a translator is a character. As Paul Ricoeur says, “we have always

translated: there always were the merchants, the travelers, the ambassadors, the spies to satisfy the need to extend human exchanges beyond the linguistic community, which is one of the essential components of society.” The appearance of translation always signals a breach, a tear, and this breach is always a political or erotic transgression: a customs house or a seduction. Translation or translators in a text always point to a border to be crossed or a subject to be seduced. Think of all the war films in which an invader or escapee’s ability to get in or get out of a place depends on his or her ability to simulate the language or pass a cultural test: to know the secret word.

This is snatched from the Bible, of course, from Judges 12, where the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan River that led to Ephraim. To distinguish the Ephraimite survivors, the victors asked them to pronounce the word *shibboleth*. If they pronounced it with an initial “sh”, they were allowed to cross over; if they pronounced the “sh” as “ess”, they were killed on the spot. It is written in *Judges* that forty-two thousand Ephraimites—and one must assume, Gileadites with speech impediments—were killed as a result. (*You Are What You Speak*, Robert Lane Greene, p. 3).

You may think the presence of translation is an infrequent occurrence, but once you start noticing, it becomes quite common. Fans of the *Star Trek* movies may remember a film—I think it was *Star Trek 5*—where Captain Kirk had to steal a starship in order to rescue his men on a distant planet. The ship was disguised, but when they reached the Klingon checkpoint, they had to radio in. If they used the automatic translation technology—the universal translator!—the Klingons would recognize them. So Lieutenant Uhura—the black woman is the translator, of course—drags out an immense, dusty tome, and they start translating word for word—the spectator understands all of this through the subtitles. All goes well, if clumsily, until the Klingon makes a joke in Klingon and laughs; they are at a loss; panic starts to set in until Scotty—also a “different” English speaker, perhaps more linguistically aware as a Scot—motions to Uhura to turn on the radio and bursts into forced laughter. The rest all follow, the Klingon thinks they got the joke, and they are allowed to pass.

**On to seduction.** There is a scene in the second *Wayne’s World* movie, in which Wayne wants to impress Cassandra, his Chinese-American love interest, by speaking with her in Mandarin. She is appropriately impressed, but

at a certain point, when Wayne tries to philosophize beyond his linguistic abilities—Kierkegaard is mentioned—his voice trails off, but the subtitles continue to roll, and Cassandra waits patiently until the written sentence is finished. These are, additionally, two cases of a very clever visual counterpoint—the use of subtitles to reveal the subterfuge, or the shibboleth—in films that couldn’t be more popular and mass media.

A case from proper literature, then: In Javier Marías’s *Corazón tan blanco/Heart So White* (translated by Margaret Jull Costa) the protagonist is an interpreter assigned to translate between two thinly-veiled stand-ins for the British and Spanish heads of state, Margaret Thatcher and Felipe González. The male translator is attracted to the female supervisor, who must stop the proceedings if there is any incorrect or inappropriate interpretation. The translator combines thoughts of the woman’s beautiful ankles and beautifully shod feet—Prada is mentioned—with expressions of boredom at the uninteresting conversation. Suddenly, he interjects an impertinent question, something that patently hasn’t been said; the supervisor is shocked, but doesn’t dare interrupt because his lapse in protocol has set off a genuine conversation between the two heads of state. His ever-greater breaches in interpretation are accompanied by advances in the foreplay, and by the end of the chapter he has made the supervisor complicit in the betrayal and hence in the seduction.

And, finally, an example from Catalan literature. In a 1915 novel by Eugeni d’Ors, *Gualba, la de mil veus/Gualba of the Thousand Voices*, a forty-year old father and his eighteen year-old daughter go to a mountain village for vacation. They spend the mornings taking healthful walks through the countryside, and the afternoons translating *King Lear* into Catalan (though the target language is never stated). A great sexual tension arises between them in the course of the novel, and the channel of expression for their feelings is the translation. The eventual act of sexual consummation is not described, but a previous chapter describing the voluptuousness of their ululation of the verb of Shakespeare had foreshadowed and, in fact, stood in for it. This is a beautiful case of translation not as a metaphor for sex, but as a substitute for the act itself.

My purpose in adducing these examples from literature and film, both high and low, is to suggest the ubiquitousness of the figure of the translator or of translation, and its unmistakable, unshakable, and immanent aura of trans-

gression and danger. (The etymologies bear this out: of course, *trans-latio* is a move from side to side, from one place to another; what people perhaps are less aware of is that trans-gression also indicates an advance, a going beyond, a taking of steps—from *grada*, “step.”)

This suggestion of false steps—of *faux pas*—points to the abyss under the translator’s tightrope, genders the translator as feminine, or as the less-powerful subject, and guarantees her vulnerability, as an invisible subject.

One of the great elucidators of translation, practically the father of translation studies in the United States, is Lawrence Venuti. He has traced the trope of invisibility as applied to translation from the 17th to 21st centuries. And the epigraph of his first and most influential book, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, a quote from Norman Shapiro, says it all:

“I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it’s there when there are little imperfections—scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn’t be any. It should never call attention to itself.”

Invisibility is a tricky thing. What Venuti is concerned about is that “translation is required to efface its second-order status with transparent discourse, producing the illusion of authorial presence whereby the translated text can be taken as the original.”

The translator is seen to be conjuring the presence of the author, and his or her own authorship is erased. As Venuti once again says, this “undoubtedly reinforces [translation’s] marginal status in Anglo-American culture.”

And as we know, invisibility has profound implications for society. We are continually seeing the effects of invisibility, of things that go on behind closed doors and high walls. There is much controversy here in Catalonia these days over what the linguist Carme Junyent calls *desdoblament*: the insistence, usually of politicians and educators, on pronouncing both genders when speaking to an audience. Ladies and gentlemen, or *Senyores i senyors* has come to seem natural, even though we have seen a photograph in the Mobile World Congress of an audience for Mark Zuckerberg that appeared to be composed entirely of men. Yet when this is extended to “*ciutadans i ciutadanes*” or “*companys i companyes*”, and all the other inclusionary titles that make manifest the presence of women, it is taken to

be absurd and unnecessary. It is not. Invisibility and exclusion always have consequences. Until women’s and men’s salaries are the same, until women are promoted at the same rate as men, until it is no longer necessary to promote parity by percentage, it will be worth the time and bother to include women in the speech act. And until we are included, those things will not happen. And until what now seems forced, linguistically, becomes natural, those things also will not happen. It is a perfect vicious cycle.

## Conclusions

A very beautiful Franco-Algerian movie came out, I calculate in the early 90’s, called *Women Hold Up Half the Sky of Allah*. It told the story of the Algerian revolution from the point of view of women. It showed how women had participated actively in the Algerian revolution, often passing arms across checkpoints under their veils and voluminous skirts. The new Constitution included greater rights and opportunities for women. And yet, little by little, the government of Ben Bella stripped away those rights, in response to right-wing demands, until women were once more placed behind closed doors. The filmmaker made explicit the point that women who are not seen are subject to much greater domestic violence, and the film which began on the urban battlefield ends in a shelter for battered women. Once again, invisibility has consequences.

This year a beautiful Turkish film called *Mustang* was up for the Oscar for best foreign film. It, too, documents the shutting away of five high-spirited adolescent girls in a beach town on the Black Sea. In the house, whose gates and walls grow higher and more impregnable (never better said) as the film goes on, the young women are abused by their uncle who watches religious programs with them whose principal topic is the temptations represented by women and the chastity that must be imposed on them.

Not only women are invisible, though. The question of Church pederasty is worldwide, and was also exposed in the movies this year, with the wonderful movie, *Spotlight*. And the question of the invisibility of black Americans in the film industry—despite the growing and extraordinary artistic presence of African-American faces in films and television, not a single African American was nominated for an award in the past two years—achieved notoriety this year with the hashtag #OscarSoWhite. And these are generally people of

privilege. It is only thanks to exposure through technology—the omnipresence of cell phones and security cameras—of the bigotry of police tactics that citizens can protest and effect change. And, finally, it is only through the exposure of the surveillance machinery that has taken place in the world, and perhaps most particularly in the United States, since the attack on the World Trade Center, that citizens have a chance to question the policies being carried out on us in the name of security.

**Secrecy.** This has repercussions both for the practitioners of translation and for the place of translations in the world. While the rest of the world translates English language texts into the other major languages, English does not return the favor. The preponderance of publications written originally in English and the lack of attention to world literature has a chilling effect on the ability of translators to transport knowledge of the world through texts. Through translations we discover our commonalities and our differences—herein the importance of not entirely erasing the signs of diversity in the process of translating. If a book is so transparently translated as to appear to be written in the target language, the reader is robbed of the experience of difference.

When Paul Ricoeur was already in his 90's he wrote three small essays on translation—small in length, but enormous in their implication. Ricoeur develops a notion of *linguistic hospitality* which entails “correspondence without complete adhesion. ... Just as in a narration it is always possible to tell the story in a different way, likewise in translation it is always possible to translate otherwise [...] Linguis-

tic hospitality, then, [is] where the pleasure of dwelling in the other's language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, on one's own welcoming house.”

Translators are not some sort of language siren, awaiting the ship with our betrayals and seductions. We are writers, we are language workers, and we are necessarily resilient. Traveling between languages allows us to bend and fold, to bob and weave, to shift with the punches. To keep two ideas in our heads at the same time. To interpret, for the good and pleasure of the reader. Far from being traitors, I think it is time we began to think of translators as heroines... and heroes. 🟩

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**Acknowledgements.** It is a great privilege to be speaking here today. I am grateful to Dr. Ricard Guerrero for confiding to me the opening talk of this fascinating conference, in which we will honor the experiences of migrants and, in particular, of women who migrate. I am thrilled to be among such old friends as Dr. Guerrero and Dr. Salvador Giner, who led this beloved host institution and who is speaking on a topic so fundamental to questions of gender. I look forward to remembering the astonishing Lynn Margulis, who not only mapped the science of Gaia, but had the poetic sensibility to memorize each day a poem by Emily Dickinson. I am particularly looking forward to comparing notes with Mitsi Ito about how a New Yorker fell in love with Barcelona—because that makes two of us—but it will also be the start of new and fruitful conversations with Maryam Ghafouri, Pere Castaño, Carmen Chica and Sílvia Pellicer. That Dr. Guerrero and Anna Wasmer have put together such an extraordinary cultural event including art and music and intercultural dialogue to celebrate Women's Week is a tribute to the authentic spirit of Europe, which, as Dr. Guerrero reminded us, is the continent of the “open face” or “open eyes”—*amb la traducció hem topat*—and of the *Academia Europaea*.

**About the images on the first page of the articles in this issue.** Articles of this thematic issue of CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCIENCE, devoted to the activities of the Barcelona Knowledge Hub of the Academia Europaea (AE-BKH), show in their first page a reproduction of a *trencadís*, a type of mosaic used in Catalan Modernism, made from broken pieces of ceramics, like tiles and dinnerware. Those nine “broken tiles,” designed by the architect from Reus Antoni Gaudí, show multiple angles and views, reflecting the ever-changing reality around us. The AE-BKH believes that those images, created more than a century ago, represent appropriately the multiple aspects of the present academic world, both in science and humanities, which constitute one of the main objectives of the activities of the Barcelona hub. See also the article “Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926): The Manuscript of Reus,” by R. Gomis and K. Katte, on pages 145-149 of this issue. This issue can be downloaded in ISSUU format and individual articles can be found at the journals' repository of the Institute for Catalan Studies [[www.cat-science.cat](http://www.cat-science.cat); <http://revistes.iec.cat/contributions>].