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# Transports of Translation: Creativity and Healing

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## 20.1 | 2022

### 1. Creative Writing - 2. L'entre-deux : espaces, pratiques et représentations

#### 1. Creative Writing

#### V. Creative Writing and Translation

## Transports of Translation: Creativity and Healing

Sara GREAVES

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### RÉSUMÉS

#### **ENGLISHFRANÇAIS**

Au-delà des fonctions culturelles, religieuses ou politiques de la traduction (instaurer une autorité religieuse ou participer à la construction d'une nation, par exemple, à l'instar de la bible du roi Jacques), au-delà de ses emplois didactique et esthétique dans l'apprentissage des langues et la médiation interculturelle, la traduction a également un rôle thérapeutique à jouer. Les locuteurs bi- ou plurilingues, ainsi que les étudiants en langues, éprouvent souvent des difficultés diverses : insécurité linguistique dans une des langues, alternance codique involontaire et « crises » d'intraductibilité gênante, embarrassante, ou encore conflits de loyauté liés au statut « inférieur » de la langue maternelle. Des enfants dans l'incapacité de traduire leur expérience à l'école dans la langue de la maison, ou leur « langue intérieure » (De Mattia-Viviès) par exemple, ou des parents plurilingues éprouvés par la nécessité de traduire les symptômes de leur enfant pour le pédopsychiatre, tout comme des étudiants en langues étrangères, tous peuvent bénéficier des transports de la traduction. La polysémie du terme « transport » – à la fois « transfert d'un lieu à un autre » et « exaltation intense de l'esprit et du cœur » qui « nous fait sortir de nous-mêmes » (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), nous aidera à conceptualiser la valeur pédagogique et thérapeutique de la pratique de la traduction. Cet article court s'intéressera aux moyens mis en œuvre dans un atelier de traduction créative pour valoriser toutes les langues, pour soigner les tiraillements identitaires en facilitant et fluidifiant le va-et-vient entre les langues.

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### ENTRÉES D'INDEX

#### **Mots-clés :**

[traduction créative](#), [langue maternelle](#), [langue mat-rangère](#), [chevauchement bilingue](#), [pédagogie créative](#), [thérapie](#)

#### **Keywords:**

[creative translation](#), [mother tongue](#), [\(m\)other tongue](#), [bilingual overlap](#), [creative pedagogy](#), [healing](#)

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### TEXTE INTÉGRAL

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1Translation is a historical staple of language teaching in higher education, but do we as language and literature lecturers really exploit it to the full? What if translating creatively were to facilitate

language learning not only by improving linguistic proficiency but by helping translate... the self? The creative translation classes on offer in the English department at Aix-Marseille University reflect an attempt to explore this hypothesis empirically. Creative translation – which derives from and includes creative writing – highlights and symbolises the idea of rebirth in the second language, as suggested by Salman Rushdie in his novel *Shame*, “I, too, am a translated man. I have been *borne across*” (Rushdie 29), in which the homophones “born” and “borne” come into play: both transported across, and reborn.

- **1** “Embracing the Bilingual Overlap in Second-Language Learning”, Greaves and De Mattia-Viviès, editor ([...](#))

2This contribution falls into two parts: first, a discussion of what I call the bilingual overlap,<sup>1</sup> with reference to identity, empathic capacity, action-research in a medical centre and the need for a return to the body in second language learning. Second, a presentation of the transports of translation as they inform a university course in creative translation, together with examples of student productions illustrating how this bilingual overlap can be helpfully activated, with a view to more authentic, body-rooted second language acquisition.

## 1. Bilingual overlap and the body

### 1.1 Bilingual overlap

3By “bilingual overlap” I mean the wide range of ways in which the frontier between languages becomes blurred or porous. It can be explored from multiple perspectives: the neurosciences, socio- and psycholinguistics or translation studies, and is frequently observed in translation teaching where it is more commonly designated as stilted syntax, inappropriate lexical usage and inaccurate grammar. And when speech comes into play, there is the added dimension of accent. One of the questions behind the creative pedagogy I wish to briefly present here is: what difference does it make to language learning if, instead of – or as well as – speaking of students’ errors, we perceive faulty grammar and other instances of learners’ language use as manifestations of bilingual overlap, as material traces of their mother tongue?

- **2** My thanks to Professor Monique De Mattia-Viviès for drawing my attention to this research.

4If language learning were a level playing-field, to borrow a current catchword, there would perhaps be less to be gained from taking bilingual overlap into account, but in truth individual aptitudes for languages vary hugely, as do their ways of entry into their mother tongue during infancy. Among the attempts to understand these variations are the experiments conducted by Guiora *et al* in the nineteen seventies, in relation to the role of empathy.<sup>2</sup> The authors observed that “second language learning in all of its aspects demands that the individual, to a certain extent, take on a new identity”, and advocated “flexibility of psychic processes” or “empathic capacity” in second language learning, particularly in order to acquire “approximate native-like pronunciation” (Guiora, Brannon and Dull 13).

5The authors define empathy as “[...] a process of comprehending in which a temporary fusion of self-object boundaries, as in the earliest pattern of object relations, permits an immediate emotional apprehension of the affective experience of another, this sensing being used by the cognitive functions to gain understanding of the other” (Guiora, Brannon and Dull 13). Pondering this, it is tempting to see making mistakes in the foreign language as a sign of this “temporary fusion of self-object boundaries”, and therefore a positive stage in the language learning process. More usually though, shaky grammar is perceived negatively by students and teachers alike, and fear of making mistakes and awkwardness when speaking a foreign language often have an inhibiting impact on language learning, particularly speech. Without necessarily welcoming grammar mistakes or a pronounced accent – although there may be some very strong personal and aesthetic reasons for enjoying and savouring the “phantom” of accent (Fleischer) – we can perhaps try to understand why, spectrelike – to extend Fleischer’s metaphor – they haunt the second language as they do; why in some cases it is so hard to eliminate or abandon them; and whether in some teaching situations at least it is worth trying to work with, not against, the bilingual overlap.

## 1.2 Action research and the (m)other tongue

6Such was, more or less, the starting-point of an action-research project carried out by Monique De Mattia-Viviès and me in a medical centre for small children, the CAMSP (Centre d'action médico-sociale précoce) Salvator at St. Marguerite hospital, directed by psychiatrist Dr Jean-Luc Di Stefano. While my colleague listened in to child psychiatry consultations with the young patients and their parents, a member of the healthcare staff and I ran plurilingual creative writing workshops with the children's non-Francophone parents. While my colleague observed under-sixes suffering from language disorders interacting with the psychiatrist and their parents, my input was aimed at relieving their parents' language insecurity in French, first by creating a safe space in which their languages were made welcome, second by inviting them to an exploration of identity and perhaps an experience of aesthetic satisfaction, through plurilingual creative writing (Greaves and Di Stefano).

7This study allowed us to pursue our research into the social and psychological stakes involved in speaking a foreign language. In her 2018 article, "Entrer dans la langue ou dans les langues, de la langue maternelle à la langue mat-rangère" translated and republished as "Entering into Language and into Languages: from the Mother Tongue to the (M)other Tongue" (Greaves and De Mattia-Viviès 15-38), Monique De Mattia-Viviès observes that the Mother tongue establishes the foreign language as *other*, and coins the portmanteau word "langue matr-angère" to convey the fact that notwithstanding this alterity, "the second language always comprises, as a constitutive component, an '*in-matrie*' dimension, 'within the bounds of the mother': a regressive, sensory, physical dimension that underlies speech in a foreign language" (Greaves and De Mattia-Viviès 6).

8Monique De Mattia-Viviès founds her theory on the process of separation of the infant from the body of the mother, in connection with John Bowlby's attachment theory, and posits that in second language learning the original language learning process is reactivated and returns, sometimes handbraking it if access to articulated language in infancy was delayed or problematic. This might explain some students' difficulties, she maintains, particularly in acquiring native speech sounds. She contends that the mother tongue is comprised of three stages: Lacanian *lalangue*, the sensual, prelinguistic babble or baby talk; interior language, the language of the family circle; and exterior language, the language spoken at school or in society at large. She goes on to discuss numerous familial, social and psychological obstacles along the road to speech, ranging from a mother's reluctance to allow her child out of her sphere, possibly because of a difficult or premature birth, to a child's conflict of loyalty due to a sharp contrast in the parents' languages or language registers or use, or to when the interior language is distinct from the exterior one due to social class, or migration from a foreign country. In order to enter articulated language, the transition from *lalangue* to the interior language, and from the interior language to the exterior one, must be smooth, accepted by mother and infant, and the frontiers between them sufficiently porous to allow the bodily experience of *lalangue* to seep through and remain alive in the exterior language. According to this model, learning a foreign tongue could thus be conceived as a fourth stage in this distancing process, or a fifth or sixth in the case of further foreign languages; rather than as a distinct, binary other, the second language could be envisaged as a continuation of the mother tongue and thus as a (m)other tongue, irrigated through porosity with prelinguistic *lalangue* and thus rooted in the body.

9Given Guoria *et al's* emphasis on the advantages for second language learning of empathic capacity and "fluid psychic processes", and bearing in mind the hazards of being hampered in second language acquisition by the return of negative early learning experiences – by a lack of porosity between the different language stages –, the possible benefits of a creative, plurilingual approach to writing and translation, in which different languages are drawn together and interwoven, may start to emerge.

## 2. Transports of translation

### 2.1 Conflicts of loyalty

10The close link between language and identity is a familiar assumption in sociolinguistics, but the connection tends not to be explicitly addressed where language students are concerned. When the interior language of the family circle and the exterior language that lies beyond it are very divergent, there is a strong possibility that problems of identity may arise, in particular divided allegiance or conflicts of loyalty, and, insofar as second languages learnt at school, for instance, may be perceived

by the subject as another exterior language, as we have seen, this may impact second language learning negatively. How can one embrace a new identity if one is insecure in the old? In the following extract from "Serious Pepper" by Patience Agbabi, one of the poets I use in creative translation classes, conflicted identity is conveyed metonymically through food:

I used to eat cold meals all the time  
they had been hot  
once

but they held my nose and force-  
fed me on two cultures  
egg and chips or eba and groundnut stew

nothing got past the  
lump  
in my throat (Agbabi 15)

11Conflicts of loyalty can take years to resolve; can the process be speeded up through a therapeutic, plurilingual pedagogy based on mixing languages, semi-collective writing using other students' languages, and self-translation? Why might this work better than inviting English studies students to write in their chosen language – their chosen new identity – and to translate to and from English (which incidentally may be a counter-language, a kind of refuge from a complicated relationship with the mother tongue)? The answer lies, I think, in the healing benefits of the following: destabilising and decentering the self and introducing a third term into the self/other binary confrontation; the gratification and aesthetic pleasure derived from weaving languages together into a text and seeing or hearing one's own words plaited into someone's else's; the disconcerting yet potentially jubilatory experience of moving between languages; – in other words, in the transports of translation, both the "intense exaltation of mind and feelings" (jubilation) and the way it "lifts one out of oneself" (decentering), to borrow the definition provided by the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Healing transports such as these can perhaps be more efficacious in the long run in transporting – translating – the self.

- 3 'Aporia of transmission' is a phrase used by child psychiatrists Marie Rose Moro and Rahmeth Radjac (...)

12For while the experience of existing between languages may involve a loss of identity (Wismann) or an "aporia of transmission",<sup>3</sup> it brings with it the possibility of a certain freedom – of a transcultural rebirth, one could suggest, where transculture is a way for each individual to overcome the determinations of their own culture :

Transculture is a different model of cultural development, an alternative to both leveling globalism and isolating pluralism. Among the many freedoms proclaimed as inalienable rights of the individual, there emerges yet another freedom that is probably the most precious one, though so far most neglected – *the freedom from one's own culture*, in which one was born and educated. (Epstein 330)

13Creative translation, I contend, can help move towards this freedom and fluidity – and maybe simply the kind of adaptability necessary for survival in today's perplexing world.

## 2.2 Teaching creative translation

14The creative translation course is presented to the students as a course in didactic translation re-defined as a means to explore their relationship with their languages. The aim is to shift the focus away from grammatical and lexical excellence and right or wrong answers to a more "holistic" approach. When I teach "traditional" translation classes, designed to prepare students for the French competitive teaching exams, the CAPES or the *agrégation*, I encourage them to explore semantics, context, tone, register and focalisation, among other textual, linguistic or literary aspects, to bring them into play in search of a plausible interpretation. After the hermeneutics comes a kind of game of anticipation; the reader being an examiner, what suppositions can be made about the examiner's expectations? This approach to translation recalls Lawrence Venuti's term "instrumentalism", by which he means "translation as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant that is contained in or caused by the source text, an invariant form, meaning or text" (Venuti 1), in other words, fidelity to an original. By contrast, creative translation follows his hermeneutic model which "conceives of

translation as an interpretive act that inevitably varies source-text form, meaning and effect according to intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture" (Venuti 1). Moreover, in the exercises proposed, the dividing lines between reading, writing and translation become blurred and porous and the three activities feed into each other. These exercises – plurilingual creative writing, self-translation and poetry translation – are designed to encourage moving creatively between languages as well as to trigger a theoretical engagement with language- and translation-related issues. They are also an invitation to reflect on multiculturalism and hybridity, nostalgia and language loss, exile and in-betweenness, with "source" texts taken from transcultural poets such as Daljit Nagra, Derek Walcott, Stephanos Stephanides, Patience Agbabi, among others.

15A typical classroom sequence – of two two-hour sessions, for example, or one three-hour session – takes the form of a creative writing workshop beginning with reading and discussion of a poem, during which different interpretations may transpire. This is followed by a stage-by-stage semi-collective writing exercise, during which words and phrases in different languages are gathered and shared. A lengthy piece of individual writing ensues, usually with English as the embedding language and other languages inserted into the discourse using codeswitching or translanguaging as theorised by Ofelia García, although with an aesthetic slant added:

Translanguaging is the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential. (2009, 140)

16Through such means the source poem is relocated and recreated in another culture or transposed to a personal context or imaginary world. This plurilingual semi-collective piece of writing may then be self-translated, perhaps involving extensive rewriting, and a reflexive commentary is requested to explain and reflect on translation difficulties and strategies – including how to translate hybrid textualities such as those produced by plurilingualism. The final stage involves reading aloud and responding constructively to each other's work.

17A variety of pedagogic objectives are at work in this kind of teaching; the ones I wish to emphasise here are: harnessing the psychical energy and sensuality of the prelinguistic *infans* through wordplay and creativity; facilitating empathic capacity through decentering the self and using others' words and texts; and enabling emancipation from identity determinisms via an open, fluid approach to plural cultural appropriation. The following example of student work produced in a creative translation class will help give a clearer idea of how this works.

### 3. Identity and self-translation

- 4 Many thanks to Lucie Brillet for permission to share her work.

18The following poem, written in 2021 by a second year Master's student in Cultural studies of the English-speaking world (ECMA, Études culturelles du monde anglophone) at Aix-Marseille University,<sup>4</sup> illustrates issues of conflicted loyalties and belonging as played out between two kinds of speech, a grandfather's Provençal and his granddaughter's 'sharp' Parisian accent: "pountchu" or "pointu" in standard French. Over the semester, poetry, creative writing and translation were used to try to stimulate a sensory, emotional and playful relationship through and to language, reminiscent of *lalangue*, and to draw the students' languages closer together through plurilingual writing assignments using devices such as homophony and paronomasia or phonetic translation, or exploring the creative possibilities of self-translation, with a view to allowing the bilingual overlap to emerge. Two poems were given as source texts for the exercise: "Ars Poetica: Water for Poetry" by Stephanos Stephanides, a Greek Cypriot poet (Stephanides 16-17), and an extract from *Omeros*, Nobel Prize-winner Derek Walcott's Caribbean epic. The former is a meditation on the attempt to pronounce the name of a Turkish Cypriot poet, Gür Genç, drawing on phonetics and Hinduism to create a transcultural bridge across the Greek/Turkish divide (again introducing a third term into the binary equation). The latter concerns an "aporia" of transmission as mentioned above: Achilles, a twentieth century St. Lucian man whose forebears were transported to the Caribbean to be slaves, dreams he meets his African ancestor who disparages his relationship with a language that is his birth-right but of which he has been deprived:

When he walks down to the river with the other fishermen  
his shadow stretches in the morning, and yawns, but you,  
if you're content with not knowing what our names mean,

then I am not Afolabe, your father, and you look through my body as the light looks through a leaf. I am not here or a shadow. And you, nameless son, are only the ghost

of a name. (Walcott 138)

19 I should add that at the beginning of the semester the student who wrote the following poem was not aware of any plurilingualism in her background, and she seemed surprised at what she had written:

“Parla pountchu”	“Parla pountchu”
The sun’s too bright here,	Le soleil brille trop par ici,
The air’s too hot.	L’air est trop chaud.
<i>C’est le cagnard</i>	<i>C’est le cagnard</i>
What’s Kyne-yard ?	C’est le cas-Gnard ?
It’s scorching hot.	Chaleur ardente,
I’m burning.	Brûlante.
<i>L’a oublié le capeou</i>	<i>L’a oublié le capeou</i>
What’s cap-hew?	Le cas-Péou?
My face’s melting,	Mon visage fondu,
My skin’s boiling...	Ma peau en ébullition...
<i>Què die?</i>	<i>Què die?</i>
It’s stifling,	J’étouffe,
I should know,	Je sais pourtant,
I should belong.	C’est mon pays.
When I’m talking,	Quand je parle,
Don’t you know,	Tu entends pourtant,
It’s your tongue,	C’est ton parlé,
All these new words,	Tous ces nouveaux mots,
It’s a new world,	C’est un nouveau monde,
I bring along.	Qui arrive pourtant.
<i>La compreni pa</i>	<i>La compreni pa</i>
<i>Parla pountchu la pitchoun</i>	<i>Parla pountchu la pitchoun</i>
<i>Fait pas bon se faire viei</i>	<i>Fait pas bon se faire vie</i>

20 These poems tell a tale of a break in the chain of transmission due to a family’s removal from south to north within the same country (France). Speaking or not speaking Provençal may seem a relatively unimportant issue, yet the poem speaks with humour and melancholy of the forgotten cultural know-how of how to cope with Provençal heat, and the generation gap is intensified to the point of estrangement: “*La compreni pa*”. The use of the pronouns “I” and “you” suggest a split self, both belonging and unbelonging: “When I’m talking / Don’t you know, / It’s your tongue”. In the English poem, anaphora and parallelism are used, as well as rhyme and near-rhyme: “belong”, “tongue”, “along”, and the feminine rhymes “melting”, “boiling”, “talking”, and we see how the non-native speaker playfully tries to adopt the auditory perspective of an Anglophone: “What’s Kyne-yard”? We see from this how writing creatively encourages a sensory approach to the second language, and how the plurilingual dimension can prompt decentring of the self, thus enhancing identity fluidity and plurality of allegiance.

- 5 “[T]he whole point of translating [...] is to bring into English something that didn’t exist in Engl (...)”
- 6 A deeper analysis of these poems is provided in « Entre langue maternelle et langue(s) étrangère(s) (...)”

21 It is noteworthy likewise that the French self-translation does not reveal a search for an “invariant”, a faithful rendering, but interprets the poem, transposing it to and rewriting it in a new context, “according to intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture”, as Venuti writes; – perhaps producing writing that could not have come about first-hand, and we recall that poets as different as

Stéphane Mallarmé (a translator of Edgar Allan Poe), Robert Lowell and John Ashbery have spoken about how translation and living outside their Mother tongue nourished and sharpened their own writing.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the phonetic wordplay of the original poem – a playful response to the bilingual overlap – is transcreated and a parallelism set up: cas-Gnard and cas-Péou, marking the foreignness of the Provençal phrases by placing the speaker outside them, this time from the perspective of a Francophone, in a creative move which may not have occurred had the poem been written first in French. Overall, the translated poem seems to be allowed to deviate towards a more poignant sense of unbelonging, with the addition of “par” in “par ici” and the hyperbolic noun phrase from which the subject pronoun has been removed: “chaleur ardente, brûlante”. “Brûlante” alliterates with “brille” from the first line (and perhaps with Brillet, the author’s surname, as a signature of the poet), and the array of alliterating plosives, as well as the insistent repetition of the plaintive “pourtant”, all contribute to a more subjective inscription than in the original – as if indeed the author’s empathic capacity had been stimulated by the poem in English, and directed towards her own split self.<sup>6</sup>

22 In this paper we have seen some of the theoretical assumptions underlying the creative pedagogy exposed here, and how it might be implemented in the classroom. By accepting the decentring, destabilising effects of plurilingual writing, sometimes using other students’ words or phrases to construct their own texts, students are encouraged to inhabit that uncomfortable space in-between languages and to listen in on language from the outside. By such means they may be able to release the healing benefits of reconnecting with and tapping into their own particular early learning experience, prior to articulated speech, thereby directing or redirecting its energy into the second language and, via the various transports of translation, successfully translating the self.

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## NOTES

**1** "Embracing the Bilingual Overlap in Second-Language Learning", Greaves and De Mattia-Viviès, editors. Translations by Sara Greaves. *Language Learning and the Mother Tongue: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp.58 – 90.

**2** My thanks to Professor Monique De Mattia-Viviès for drawing my attention to this research.

**3** 'Aporia of transmission' is a phrase used by child psychiatrists Marie Rose Moro and Rahmeth Radjack in Chapter Four of Greaves and De Mattia-Viviès, *op. cit.*: "It is this desire to relate that is threatened, the desire for metalanguage, the desire for the desire of the other, because of an aporia of transmission", p.99.

**4** Many thanks to Lucie Brillet for permission to share her work.

**5** "[T]he whole point of translating [...] is to bring into English something that didn't exist in English before. I don't think I've ever done a translation of a poem I could have written myself", Robert Lowell, interviewed by D.S. Carne-Ross in *Delos 1*, National Translation Centre, Austin, 1968, cited in *Translation - Theory and Practice: A Historical Reader*, Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinnsson (editors), Oxford University Press, 2006, p.352. American poet John Ashbery lived in Paris from the mid-fifties till 1965, working as an art critic and translating French authors including Raymond Roussel, an experience that placed him on the outside of his mother tongue and helped lead him to a certain poetic stance on the outside of language. Cf. *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*, John Shoptaw, 1995.

**6** A deeper analysis of these poems is provided in « Entre langue maternelle et langue(s) étrangère(s), une 'voix-peau' plurilingue : écriture et traduction créatives pour anglicistes. » *Écrire entre les langues : littérature, enseignement, traduction*. Anne Godard and Isabelle Cros (editors), Éditions des archives contemporaines, sous presse.

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## POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

### Référence électronique

Sara GREAVES, « Transports of Translation: Creativity and Healing », *E-rea* [En ligne], 20.1 | 2022, mis en ligne le 15 décembre 2022, consulté le 31 janvier 2023. URL :

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