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"Don't fence me in": translating pluridentities¹

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"Don't fence me in" is the title of a song by Cole Porter, sung by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters in 1946, recycled in 2021 as the title of a different song by the Australian punk rock group, Amyl and the Sniffers. Both songs allow the title phrase to resonate freely, allowing listeners to identify with sensations of confinement of all kinds, while closely reflecting their time. Porter's is set in the Wild West beneath starry skies, with the accusations of fencing-in levelled at a patriarch called "Popper", and the punk rock version – which was played recently on French radio channel France Culture to illustrate Hegel's reifying categories – is set in today's world with young people's demands for gender fluidity. The perceived threat of fencing-in is that of gender binaries, of a cultural environment composed of mutually exclusive "scenes", each with a clearly-defined identity, or other people's "ulterior motives". But the desire not to be fenced in can be applied to any number of situations of oppression, and I use this phrase out of empathy for a nation whose aspiration for freedom, whose particular cry of "Don't fence me in" has resulted paradoxically in its people being forced, temporarily, to rally beneath a flag, a national identity.

This paper will be concerned with the sensation of being fenced-in by language, in particular the mother tongue, and with translation as a form of release from mother tongue tensions. It takes an interdisciplinary and creative approach to translation studies, drawing on psycholinguistics and creative writing research. We will begin by taking a broad overview of some of the ways in which language can be perceived as restrictive or confining, then turn to some literary examples of healing through translating, before focusing on creative translation classes in which techniques such as plurilingual writing, cut-ups and self-translation can enable plural and hybrid identities to emerge while paving the way for the individual voice.

¹ This term was inspired by Susan Bassnett's « bidentity », as quoted in French by Aude A. Gwendoline : « Susan Bassnett s'est entretenue avec l'écrivaine à l'identité linguistique double, ou « bidentité » ». « La traduction-guérison : un aperçu de cette métaphore à la lumière de quelques cas célèbres », *Itinéraires*, 2019.

Language constraints

There are various ways in which language may be experienced as a constraint, and various solutions to it, collective or individual. One is its inherent tendency to reify and essentialise, enclosing living, growing beings within boundaries, while leaving others out of the picture. This characteristic of language has been critiqued and deconstructed in recent decades by feminism and cultural studies (poet and writer James Fenton, for instance, was using the pronoun "she" as a universal pronoun in the eighties), and with the rise of the LBGTQ+ movement, inclusive writing has evolved to counteract it. The gendered character of language has become more visible, and sensitivity to the essentializing tendency of language has grown. For instance, words such as "slave" may be replaced by "enslaved people"2, which lends a provisional, non-essentialising character to the language, separating the people from the label. In Britain the pendulum seems to swing back and forth between those who want to call a spade a spade, as when modernist writer Wyndham Lewis defended the word "skivvy" for a female domestic servant in the thirties despite its derogatory connotations, and those alert to the way language encloses, imprisons, or stigmatises. A very sensitive area is medical diagnosis, particularly in mental health, where the stigma attached to terms such as Alzheimer's or dementia makes the condition harder to live with. This sensitivity sometimes leads to the use of euphemism, and we think of the terms that have replaced the blunter terminology for infirmities or handicap, such as the phrase "visually challenged". Conversely, we recall philosopher Giorgio Agamben's objection to euphemism, in particular the term "Holocaust", shown to inhibit thought rather than furthering the necessary investigation to map a new ethical territory for the horrors of the death camps³.

Language's tendency to veer away from reality, its ability to create imaginary worlds and produce abstractions has often been met with suspicion, as with the controversy concerning language and universals in the Late Middle Ages known as Nominalism. Nominalists' critique of language saw it as imposing a universality that does not exist in the world beyond language: "Nominalism denied the real being of universals on the ground that the use of a general word (e.g., "humanity") does not imply the existence of a general thing named by it." Hence the need for a language of particulars, such as the poetic language of nineteenth century English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Today a critique of language that is basically similar, in that it rejects the universality within language, is at the heart of inclusive writing. The rejection of patriarchal gender representation within language has led to what could be described as a form of intralingual translation, from gender-universal to inclusive writing, introducing a degree of unfamiliarity within the mother tongue.

Reflecting on language and its constraints reminds us indeed that translation is a case in point, with both the translator's languages fencing them in. The translator is torn between two types of constraint: that of their reader's mother tongue as a vector of sense of self and identity, and

² The Guardian, 24 April, 2023, p.4.

³ Agamben, Giorgio, *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz: l'archive et le témoin, Homer Sacer III*. Trans. Pierre Alferi, Payot & Rivages, 2003.

⁴ Encylopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/nominalism

⁵ . "Pied Beauty", for instance, names a selection of distinct "dappled things" in the natural world. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose*, Penguin Classics, 1985.

the threat to it that the foreign language represents, and that of the demands of the foreign language and text. Translation – practising it and reading it – is an activity in which the hold of the mother tongue is felt extremely keenly. "Foreignising" translations, to adopt Lawrence Venuti's terminology, for which the reader is required to adapt to a certain unfamiliarity in the language, to modifications of the syntax, or of its phonetic or lexical systems, are sometimes rejected due to being experienced as a kind of violation of the mother tongue, as if the mother tongue were somehow sacred and translation were an act of transgression. Conversely, to the bilingual reader of the translated language, as perhaps to the traveller or ethnographer familiar with the translated culture, "domesticating" translations that "normalise" the foreign text's foreignness, are judged to be violent in another way and said to colonise the source text – a far cry from Paul Ricoeur's conception of translation as hospitality.⁶

As well as these examples of philosophical, ethical, socio-political or literary perspectives on the constraints of language, there are also cases of feeling psychically trapped in a language that doesn't fit. Some individuals experience their mother tongue as stifling and suffocating or in some way a threat, and seek to escape from its ascendancy by moving out of its sphere, of which the best known example is the American writer Louis Wolfson. The mother tongue has a holding, containing function for the psyche or for the self, it provides an enveloping cocoon of reassurance and reinforcement, a protective yet porous membrane or skin that upholds the ego, to borrow a metaphor from psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu, who coined the term "Skin-ego" in his 1985 book *Le Moi-peau*. It thus contributes to one's sense of identity, of uniqueness, of being distinct from others. However, this beneficial function can turn on the self and not only hold it, but hold it up and hold it back, leaving the subject holed up within a restrictive identity. Learning a second language and "translating" the self can provide a way out or a way forward.

Translating the Self

In a 2019 article, Aude A. Gwendoline demonstrates the role of translating as a healing process, recalling for instance how when Antonin Artaud was in the care of Dr Ferdières (one of the founders of art therapy) in the psychiatric hospital in Rodez in the South of France, the doctor suggested he try translating Lewis Carroll's nonsense poetry into French⁹. This gave rise to highly idiosyncratic translations and a new lease of poetic creation. Gwendoline also discusses Freud's patient Anna O., who refused to speak her mother tongue, German, only expressing herself in English, and writer and self-translator Nancy Huston, who has written about the sense of freedom and uninhibitedness she experienced when writing in French, her second language. Gwendoline also discusses Louis Wolfson's *Le Schizo et les langues*, with its elaborate writing system based on phonetic translation, on homophony between a syllable of English, his mother tongue, and a syllable in another of the four languages he was studying at the time, as a strategy

⁶ Sur la traduction, Belles Lettres, 2016, p. 10.

⁷ Louis Wolfson, Le Schizo et les langues (Paris: Gallimard, [1970] 2009).

⁸ Dunod, [1985] 1995.

⁹ « La traduction-guérison : un aperçu de cette métaphore à la lumière de quelques cas célèbres », *Itinéraires* [En ligne], 2018-2 et 3 | 2019, mis en ligne le 20 février 2019, consulté le 24 avril 2023. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/itineraires/4930 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/itineraires.4930

to write outside what Monique De Mattia-Viviès calls "the sphere of the mother tongue" 10. The writer's invented language is at the time, entirely distinct from his mother tongue and yet, through homophony, a continuation of it. Similarly, psychoanalyst Yoann Loisel convincingly argues that Samuel Beckett's literary use of French – often thought of as a kind of escape from the pressures of the mother tongue – actually formed a continuum with English, not a rupture, and that whichever the language, Beckett was pursuing the same goal – that primal energy that adult life in language had diluted or repressed 11.

A recent example of a sophisticated form of "translationwork", to borrow a phrase from British translation studies scholar Clive Scott, 12 no doubt another form of translation of the self, is provided by Comédie française actor, director and writer Denis Podalydès. In Célidan disparu, an autobiographical text, the sphere of the mother is portrayed as an aura of anxiety, and one can speculate that this might be what led the young Podalydès to invent a foreign country of his own, named Penher, with a geography and a history, its own laws and politics, and of course a language. 13 This language is intimately related to the child's mother tongue as it uses French words written backwards – it is in fact a mirror image of French. Just as for Artaud translating involved, Gwendoline claims, a replay of the psychoanalytical mirror stage, to the extent that the translated text overwhelmed and cannibalized the source text, with Artaud accusing Lewis Carroll of plagiarizing him, so Podalydès seems to have practised a kind of intralingual translation within his mother tongue and foreignizing it, as if to re-boot the process of individuation and self-recognition in a kind of distorting mirror. Insufficiently neurotic, no doubt, to be duped by his own illusion, the actor describes how he finally abandoned his parallel world with a deep sense of self-disgust, and reflects on his intuition that his profession, involving memorizing pages and pages of other people's words, might be a continuation of that childhood experiment with alterity. Such an experience pertains to what we might call (m)othering the self, recalling Monique De Mattia-Viviès's concept the langue mat-rangère or (m)other tongue, in which the mother tongue and the foreign one are seen not as distinct but interconnected. 14 In the light of this, Podalydès's make-believe language-world seems at once a strategy of self-protection and a bid for freedom and otherness – the challenge of unfamiliar rhymes and rhythms. Interestingly, he mentions the difficulty of speaking *Penherois*, his invented language, which involves a complex mental effort, and its awkward unwieldiness, its ugliness.

These writers could be said to differing degrees to have been fenced in by the sway their mother tongue holds over their psyche, and to have found in translation or self-translation the means to

¹⁰ "Speaking, to be sure, requires separation from the mother, but only up to a certain point, for when this separation takes place the child enters the sphere of the Mother tongue, which is of a symbolic order where her presence can still be felt." "Entering into Language and into Languages: From the Mother Tongue to the (M)other Tongue", *Language Learning and the Mother Tongue: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Sara Greaves and Monique De Mattia-Viviès (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 2022, p.21.

¹¹ "Samuel Beckett's Change of Literary Language: An Apparent Severing of Links to Continue Writing on the Maternal Side of Language", *Language Learning and the Mother Tongue: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Sara Greaves and Monique De Mattia-Viviès (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 137-170.

¹²Clive Scott, "The translation of reading", Translation Studies, 4:2, 213-229, 2011.

DOI: 10.1080/14781700.2011.560020

¹³ Mercure de France, 2022.

¹⁴ Language Learning... Op.cit., pp. 15-38.

exist elsewhere, in a distinct space in which perhaps the emotional stakes are lower. A similar principle is at work in creative translation classes, in which students are invited to write creatively, playfully, using the languages at their disposal. I will briefly present this approach to translation teaching along with some student feedback on language and identity.

Translating pluridentities

Paul Ricoeur speaks of the resistance of languages to translation and of the inhibiting assumption of untranslatability that haunts the translator before even setting out 15, but goes on to observe that the obsessive influence of this resistance is alleviated once the translationwork has begun. 16 Creative translation can be seen as taking its cue from this: translation is writing between languages, between texts. Torn between two masters, as Ricoeur writes, a literary translator must withhold their own subjectivity, as was brilliantly illustrated by Brice Mathieussent's novel, Vengeance du traducteur, ¹⁷ in which the translator's footnotes take up an increasing amount of space on the page, and one could perhaps add to the list of types of violence in translation that perpetrated against the self. 18 Creative translation is thus a way of reintroducing subjectivity into the process of translation, and thereby for the language student, enhancing subjectivity into language use. It is a pedagogical approach within translation studies that I have been developing with undergraduate and Masters students in the English department of Aix-Marseille University for about fifteen years. Inspired by creative writing workshops as taught on the Aix-Marseille professionally-oriented course Formateur en atelier d'écriture, it uses creative writing exercises (often based on Oulipian writing constraints adapted to transcultural English-language poetry), self-translation, cultural transposition, plurilingual writing, and recently, cut-ups. It takes a circuitous approach that focuses on different kinds of writing between languages and texts, and students are required to think reflectively on their productions and on their relationships with their languages. My observation over the years is that creative translation not only helps students with language proficiency and with the interlingual translation they are required to produce in the context of their English studies degrees, but also enables them to explore plural linguistic identities and move more smoothly between them.

Creative translation draws on postcolonial theory, socio- and psycholinguistics and didactics as well as translation studies. Students are invited to experiment with notions such as Homi Bhabha's third space, mixing languages to create new cultural hybridities, or Lawrence Venuti's invisibility of the translator, seeking to counteract that invisibility not only by foregrounding the foreign in the translated text, but by celebrating self-consciousness and developing a metatranslational dimension. It can alert students to the imbalance of power in languages between nations or within multicultural societies, or the divergent roles languages can play within an individual speaker or writer, the varying degrees of emotional attachment languages can elicit. Through writing parodic re-translations of canonical texts or translating their own

¹⁵ « [Le traducteur] rencontre [cette résistance] dès avant de commencer sous la forme de la présomption de non-traduisibilité, qui l'inhibe avant même d'attaquer l'ouvrage. » *Sur la traduction*, Belles Lettres, 2016, p.4.

¹⁶ « Mais la résistance à la traduction revêt une forme moins fantasmatique une fois le travail de traduction commencée. » *Sur la traduction*, Belles Lettres, 2016, p.4.

¹⁷ P.O.L., 2009.

¹⁸ Typhaine Samoyault, Traduction et violence. Seuil, 2020.

texts interlingually through self-translation, students can explore actual, potential or imaginary identities, thereby releasing tensions relating to their own sometimes complex and conflictual, inhibiting or imprisoning sense of belonging and identity. Above all, however, creative translation is a pedagogy and the underlying identity that it takes to task is that of the student as such, a status too often synonymous with a kind of cultural subaltern, trained to consider works of literature with inhibiting reverence, or bound by formalistic methodologies.

I recently asked a group of eight Masters students – whom I warmly thank – who were studying for their postgraduate degree in Cultural Studies in the English-Speaking World (ECMA, Aix-Marseille University), to assess a Creative translation course by means of a questionnaire. Displaying a range of national identities, Tunisian, French, French of Comorian origin, French of Algerian origin and Austro-Polish, their answers provide insights into the following: the powerful ascendancy of the mother tongue; learning a foreign language as a possible escape from its hold; and the benefits of encouraging subjectivity and creativity in language learning. In connection with the ascendancy of the mother tongue, here is Malika's answer to the question "Do you have the impression of changing identity when you write or speak in a different language?":

"My mother tongue is Arabic and it is extremely hard to express yourself without thinking about the moral and social constraints."

While Malika experiences her mother tongue as morally and socially restricting, as exercising a moral censorship, another perspective is provided by Katia, who evokes emotional inhibitedness:

"I feel that I am more myself in English than in my mother tongue. In my mother tongue I have emotional boundaries and fears because people might judge me. Whereas in English I can express everything without being scared of judgement from family and friends (there is only a fear of judgement from native speakers)."

This was confirmed by Féthi:

"I definitely think that we change identities once we change languages, and could act in a stark opposition to our inherent nature, but of course the core always remains the same deep inside. I mean I know for a fact that I could never not even in a hundred years find the right words to express certain feelings or emotions in my own native language..."

Clara, whose mother tongue is French, highlights excessive self-consciousness in her mother tongue, as if there were too much selfhood, too much subjectivity there:

"I tend to be too self-conscious when I speak French, whereas I'm far more relaxed when I'm speaking in English. It's another self that doesn't have to be perfect – for I'll never speak in English the way I can in French. And it feels good to just "be"."

Even when no change of identity is experienced and no observation of moral, social or emotional constraints, the foreign language may be perceived as providing a release of tension and a tranquility not found in the mother tongue:

"English is technically my third language, though I consider myself more comfortable in it than in both of the other languages I speak."

These responses may seem surprising; they paint a nuanced picture of the mother tongue and show identity through language to be more complex than we frequently assume, basing our expectations for the mother tongue on proficiency and fluency alone. ¹⁹ Undeniably, these students – after several weeks of writing between languages – perceive their mother tongue as inhibiting to differing degrees and experience a sense of freedom in the languages they have chosen to study.

Considering the second insight provided by the questionnaire – the function of the second language as an escape from the hold of the mother tongue – we note that this emancipatory effect in the foreign tongue takes different forms. Malika observes:

"I feel more liberated when I use the English or the French language. I feel that I am able to say whatever I want without being judged."

For Katia, despite having two mother tongues, Polish and German, the foreign language provides a refuge in which the individual can hide from family pressures:

"Although I have never lived in an anglophone country, I feel a deep connection to the language and prefer to communicate in English. Maybe this can be explained by the fact that it is a language which I learned by myself and which my family cannot speak, so I was able to evolve in this secret identity and explore the space which I needed to take."

This subjective dimension is the third insight mentioned above, and the main aspect that creative translation aims to develop in language learning. In answer to the question "Do you think creative translation is a good way to explore identity?" Féthi wrote:

"I think Creative translation is not only a good way to explore identity, but also it is a great way to get touch with one's various sides and identities... [...] Thanks to the boundless freedom that it has to offer us, creative translation is bound to stimulate creativity in each one of us, and when we are creative and inspired, the mind becomes open and receptive to endless possibilities, trains of thought and ideas which would definitely lead to the exploration of the self and of one's identity, or the various identities that one conceals from within."

When Féthi writes "get in touch with", he would seem to be referring to aspects of his personality that are not usually solicited. In answer to the question: "What surprised you during the writing and translating exercises – were you ever surprised at yourself?", he listed several points, among them the fact that the course had contributed to his self-esteem. Katia's answer to the same question was also enthusiastic, and she claims to have been surprised at her own talent:

¹⁹ For instance, François Grosjean writes in *Bilingual: Life and Reality*: "Despite the increasing emphasis put on language use when describing bilinguals, one cannot do away with the notion of fluency – that is, which languages bilinguals know and the degree of proficiency they have in them." (Harvard University Press, 2012, p.23).

"I have to admit that I was rather surprised by my ease to indulge in the process. It turned out that allowing a creative dimension in translation emancipated me from the conventional and expected framework. I no longer felt constrained in the exercise, I reached for further tools and different methods than I would usually have, and also: I loved it!"

Cut-ups

I would like now to introduce a new creative translation exercise that I have been experimenting with, inspired by Helen E. Mundler-Arantes's work on cut-ups²⁰. Cutups – associated with surrealism and the American poet William Burroughs, although the technique goes back a lot further – can be envisaged as an intermediary text inspired by Clive Scott's approach to literary translation, with its focus on a phenomenological approach to reading the source text. Composing a cut-up can be a way to register, verbally and visually, a reading experience. The following is an example of a cutup produced this semester,²¹ of which the source text is a seven-stanza poem by Daljit Nagra, a British poet, in which the speaker reflects on his upbringing as a second-generation child of Indian parents. Here are the opening stanzas:

"Ode to England"

There was a time on your island of the spires when I was a child in the clouds with no inklings. My fingers woven and raised to your language which came from the cuckoo on our roof, over which my sounds were the hollow of its Indian cousin, the kokila.

England, your scrannel songs were greetings from paperboy to whistling postman to bowler hat who nodded to boiler suit. The clipped laughs and mumbles I mimicked in the mirror: my head upright as a gentleman to fake the high notes as rawwraww or croak fleurr. [...]²²

²⁰ Helen E. Mundler. « Criticism, practice, pedagogy: creative convergence through A.S. Byatt's *Babel Tower* », *E-rea*, 20.1 | 2022. http://journals.openedition.org/erea/15293 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.15293

²¹ With my sincere thanks to Clara, the author!

²² British Museum, Faber & Faber, 2017.

Fleur B

My arms wide as Garuda,
the Himalayas
or the kokila,
croaking "rawwraww" like the eagle of the gods;

You, were the sepia monarch of the world
Flying through the sky's golden days,
Sometimes blue as a Hindu god,
That twirls and haps in this devotional ball

My fingers woven and raised to your language
I'd jumpidown for the high notes

Uttering A brillig of bonbon and sherbet
The very joys and desires of a child in the agreen clouds

Hence your middle mame,
echang the garden's dangling leaves,
Chiming like the first flowers of spring:

fleurrr.

> Ede to the other self within; own inner child

Dept this sense of matalgia, the notion of "Otherness" Daljit Nagra had for England, while conveying the emeetness of the memory. I meant to elicit Basil Brunting's active approach by recreating the idea of mainement., I tut out loads of words as well but mat importantly, I matched his conception of sounds femorious but blended it with colourful inages so that it would mirror a child's vivid imagery (or imagination).

And I decided to call it "Fleur" for it's my middle name;

Both translation studies and cultural theory posit the existence of a third term that is an inbetween text, space, language or stage. Paul Ricoeur refers to "a third inexistent text", ²³ Homi Bhabha coined the phrase "third space", Walter Benjamin imagined a "pure" messianic language of translation that transcends individual historical translations, and interpretive theory envisages an intermediary stage that takes place within the mind of the translator. Placed between those two demanding taskmasters, the source language and the target language, the student of Creative translation is here invited to have recourse to cut-ups, meaning that the source text is recomposed to produce a text that is a self-appropriation, a subjective rewriting, while at the same time using the selfsame words as the source text, letting the text write itself and allowing for the play of the unconscious.

I asked my students if making cutups of source texts produced a deeper level of engagement with the text than if they had started translating as usual. Clara wrote interestingly of the mechanical dimension of language and of a move from a passive to an active writing experience:

"Owning" the poem by making cut-ups definitely allowed me to feel closer to the text and the meaning. I do believe it inspired my translation afterwards, as I felt that I just embraced the mechanisms to create such a piece. It is as if I went from passive to active in my approach to translation (experience being a significant tool).

This response, I would suggest, implies that with this method the desire for the letter of the text, to which Antoine Berman testifies in his defence of foreignizing the target language in translation, is satisfied, even as the subjectivity of the translator asserts itself²⁴. Similarly, in Katia's words: "Taking the author's text and re-wording it in our own design puts a personal touch in the text as well as [it] keeps the original's identity intact since we are simply recycling the words." The necessary parting with the letter of the text, the mourning process which Paul Ricoeur sees as inherent to translation, is facilitated and the student is free to find their own voice. Féthi puts it this way:

"[...] through cut-ups, we become a part of the writing process in that text, we become active participants in that text. As opposed to the traditional translation approach when we simply play it safe, and watch from a distance, instead of actively participating in the writing process."

We have seen how words, phrases and grammar can have an enclosing function on individuals or groups of speakers, and some of the diverse perspectives on this aspect of language. We have taken a rapid overview of some celebrated instances of mother-tongue ascendancy within the psyche and of the varied approaches to translation or self-translation as a means of emancipation. Finally, we have shown how creative translation can learn from these examples and a pedagogy be developed in language learning to help the student reclaim agency and devise strategies through writing and translating their pluridentities as they choose, thereby enhancing subjectivity in language and enabling them to find their own voice.

²³ Sur la traduction, Belles Lettres, 2016, p.6.

²⁴ L'Épreuve de l'étranger : Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique, Gallimard, 1984.

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