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Linguistic Difference and Cultural Translatability: A Primer

Azade Seyhan

ON THE cross-country flight to the annual Pacific Ancient and Modern Languages Association (PAMLA) conference in Los Angeles in November 2000, I reached for the United Airlines magazine *Hemispheres* for some distraction. Flipping through endless pages of glossy advertisements in search of something, anything, readable—travel tips, city facts, profile of some unspoiled island paradise, or even a recipe for rose-petal jam—I was pleasantly surprised to see two interesting and somewhat related pieces. The first one, “Say What?,” was an information-packed report on “an alphabet soup” (Smith 106) of innovative techniques of language learning and the proliferation of language-learning centers, schools, audiotape and compact courses, CD-ROMs, online language sources, and the growing interest not only in commercially viable but also in lesser-taught and under-represented languages, such as Albanian, Polish, Tagalog, and Bulgarian. It was interesting to learn that Beverly Hills, California, of all places, is “ground zero for language learning in the United States, in part due to Hollywood’s demand for rapid learning by actors” (109). Berlitz, Super-Learners International, Inc., and the Michel Thomas Language Center all aggressively market their goods at the corner of Wilshire and Beverly Boulevards, and individuals as well as corporations are willing to shell out as much as \$16,000 for a crash course. And their willingness is not merely economically motivated. Can it be true that multilingualism has caught up with the blissfully monolingual California surfers? Or is this merely another *f/ad* on the sunny billboards of palm-lined Wilshire? In fact, the Los Angeles metropolitan area has become the contemporary Babel or the oasis of multilingualism, if you will, where thirty Vietnamese newspapers are published, where the main school district recognizes ninety languages (109), and where I heard at least a dozen languages, ranging from Azerbaijani to German, during an afternoon stroll in Westwood Village. Assuring the reader that the race for the taste of other languages is not a passing fad, this feature story closed on an upbeat note, stating, “[n]ext month, the Modern Language Association

will meet in Washington, D.C., to hear 800 presentations about how best to teach second tongues” (114).

The second piece, “Voices from the Pacific Rim,” by Rita Ariyoshi, was a story on a literature prize awarded for the past five years to literature emerging around the periphery of the Pacific Rim. The Kiriyaama Prize is named after the Buddhist priest and author Seiyu Kiriyaama, who in 1994 established the Kiriyaama Pacific Rim Institute, which cosponsors the awards with the Center for the Pacific Rim at the University of San Francisco. The objective of the Kiriyaama Prize is to acknowledge the irrepressible diversity of a region situated at the meeting, collision, confrontation, and resolution site of histories and cultures. The catch is that the books by and about the people of the Pacific Rim are all in English, and the prize aims to highlight English-language literature in the region. A strange irony emerged from the consecutive reading of these two articles. Although on the one hand English has become the *de facto lingua franca* of international business, businessmen find that it is no match for the local languages when business is at stake. On the other hand, in a world where selfhood, community, and national affiliation are so intimately linked with the national language and literature, the literary voices of the many lands of the Pacific Rim are subsumed by English and are (self-)translated into terms of an allegiance to a foreign idiom. Of course, this English-language literature, as its proponents would argue, is not of the monolingual or monoaccented variety. It draws on the metaphorical and idiomatic particularities of diverse geographies, thus

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changing and remolding the language it works with, generating such versions as Manila, New Delhi, or Singapore English. Another argument in favor of rewriting a regional literary heritage in English “translation” is the opportunity to transform local recognition into a global one. Although I agree with these rationalizations to a certain point, I’d like to also note what is at stake in a facile acceptance of this translational transparency.

These two flight stories actually pulled me down to earth to reflect on the very real and conflicting institutional decisions I have to live with as a teacher of languages and literatures. It seems that all of a sudden many Americans—or is it just Californians?—want to listen not to popular music but to foreign language tapes or CDs while working out. The paradox is that we want to learn another language but not venture into its literary culture. We seek to separate language from culture and literature and approach the latter only in translation. This concept of language study, unfortunately, has lately become de rigueur among the administrators at my institution, who see language teaching as a technical matter divorced from a genuinely intellectual enterprise. Furthermore, it seems that this liberal arts college would rather than Berlitz took over the unpleasant task of teaching languages. Foreign language programs—with the obvious exception of Spanish—have been steadily streamlined, downsized, and subjected to other forms of corporate restructuring. The East Asian studies program has lost its Japanese and Chinese faculty members, and these languages are taught by adjuncts and on an ad hoc basis. After two impending retirements, Italian as a major will most likely disappear. German has a faculty of two. The usual story, a reflection of the times, we say resignedly. The good news, however, is that the English department is making a series of tenure-line hires for the teaching of American “ethnic,” transnational, and diasporic literatures. Even better, history, sociology, and political science departments are advertising for candidates with cross-cultural and interdisciplinary teaching expertise to work in an “international and multicultural” institutional structure.

How well are these claims to education, informed by an international orientation, implemented at the curricular and departmental levels? Postcolonial literatures, exile and travel writing, autobiographical accounts of migration and displacement, and literary productions from around the globe are now routinely introduced into history, anthropology, sociology, and political science courses and provide counter or alternative explanations to culturally biased frameworks of reference. The invasion of social sciences by literary fictions and autobiographical voices is part of the larger self-critique process these disciplines are currently engaged in. It is also part of the ethical turn, the Lévinasian moment of opening oneself to the other’s experience in dialogue. These scripted experiences of otherness and various other forms of embracing alterity, however, have come under attack, for

such gestures appear to their critics as “a trick for seeming to include ‘the other’ in our discourses of self, even while we fail to confront the absolute impossibility of embracing the otherness of the other” (Budick 4). Aleida Assmann sees in the postmodern philosophy of difference a predominant “ethical claim” that has transformed *the other* from a “menacing, anxiety-provoking term” into “the central value of postmodern culture” (99). These critics also point out that the valorization of difference has emerged against the background of an increasingly homogenized and globalized world. They warn us against translating the other’s idiom into our terms and alert us to the reality of cultural untranslatability. This warning comes under different codes and labels. In her extended meditation-cum-cautionary tale on misappropriation and mistranslation of others’ stories in *Proceed with Caution*, Doris Sommer, for example, provides an anti-instruction manual for the reader eager to tame alterity in texts that resist facile appropriation. She alerts readers ready to comprehend the radical strangeness of another idiom by assimilating it into their horizon of understanding to “the stubborn residue that survives on the margins of normalizing discourses.” “Difference,” she maintains, “safeguards particularist identities against seamless assimilation.” Cultural specificities, secrets, and intimacies are protected in spaces of difference characterized by stubborn circumlocutions, deferral of translation, or (self-)censorship of truths that are all strategies of what Sommer calls “a rhetoric of particularism” (xiii).

I take the lesson of Sommer’s cautionary tales to heart. However, deference to cultural difference need not turn into an endless deferral of translation and understanding. The first order of business is to recognize that literatures we call postcolonial, ethnic, or transnational, though written in English or French or the next lingua franca in line, are really at least “bilingual.” Therefore, reading them with monolingual intent yields no reflective understanding but bi- or multilingual insight does. Furthermore, through a rhetoric of silence, nuance, and concealment, the writer not only withholds particular truths but also reveals significant insights into issues of translation and interpretation. The curricula of English departments have been profoundly enriched by the study of Cuban American, Chinese American, and postcolonial literatures. Nevertheless, a monolingual approach to the study of these literatures leads to a facile appropriation and standardization of their voice and to a false sense of cultural intimacy. Additions to reading lists cannot have enduring impact unless we read with a multilingual imagination and learn or, at the very least, learn to listen to some of the languages that go into the making of texts.

As multicultural reading lists grow and scholarship on emergent cultural formations expands, an important link is bypassed in the process. Linguistic difference and linguistic diversity are often a major concern of cultural transformations. However, current scholarship has paid

little critical attention to issues of linguistic difference and cultural translatability. In an age of shifting borders, besieged nationalisms, and contested linguistic and cultural identities, it is timely and necessary that departments offering courses in cultural, ethnic, and diaspora studies require proficiency in another language and cultivate a responsiveness to language politics at both the local and the global level. Struggles over rights to use one's language are at the heart of numerous ethnic conflicts today, from Sri Lanka to Kosovo, Estonia, Latvia, and the American Southwest. Neither an emphatic perception of linguistic difference and its attendant challenges nor the condition of cultural translation can exist in the monolingual environment.

To illustrate one instance of cultural translation and its discontents, I would like to comment briefly on what I call "bi- or multilingual" or "transnational" literary works that have been the focus of my research for a decade. These are texts that are often written in a literary lingua franca (mostly in English and French, and now increasingly in German, as Germany has endured as an economic power in Europe) but that are conceived in a diversity of lesser-known, underrepresented languages informed by the burden of interrupted histories, migrations, and the violence of forced forgetting. Born in the mother tongue, they now live in the other tongue because of exile, displacement, or historical and political necessity. As Milan Kundera, one of the most prominent contemporary writers writing outside his homeland, has so eloquently shown, small nations constantly face the threat of an enforced forgetting of their language and literature. What remains often resurfaces in translation and outside the nation. The emergence of Czech cultural memory in German or French "translation," for example, is a peculiar extended meditation on witnessing loss and recovering shards of one's history in another idiom. For the most part, the work of Chinese American, Cuban French, or Turkish German writers highlights their authors' particular destiny as agents of historical and contemporary sociopolitical formations and specific heritages threatened by the assault of global flows and information technologies on cultural and communal memory.

I maintain that the introduction of bi- and multilingual or transnational literatures produced in the English-speaking world into the curriculum is of immense pedagogical and intellectual value. Literary voices carry neglected or forgotten heritages across time and geography. Bi- and multilinguality always signify more than linguistic status. They mark the sites of conflict and negotiation in complex histories of transplantation and translation. Language registers these passages. The understanding of these registers, therefore, requires that we attend to the nuances that go into the making of bilingual writing and literature. We cannot read this literature as merely an English-language literature with no sense of the other language (or languages) that inflects it. Mono-

lingual certitude leads to a willed ignorance of political, social, and cultural geographies. Bilingual writing emerges within and outside the borders of nations and mediates between different linguistic, cultural, and literary heritages. Its accents betray particular geographical and historical origins and the struggles, passages, suffering, negotiations, and triumphs that have transfigured the memory of these origins. The widespread loss of stable communities because of ethnic conflict, labor migration, political persecution, and fragmentation of nation-states in the last several decades of the departed century has resulted in an inevitable interdependency of linguistic and literary experiences across borders. There is no doubt that reading Pacific Rim, Japanese American, or Iranian American literature in English is an important step toward imagining a culturally very complex world. Nevertheless, we should not forget that although bilingual or transnational writing resists enclosure in a particular national heritage, it still carries the burden of memory inscribed by that heritage, a memory continuously reconfigured by the passages and geographical and historical contexts it participates in. The hypothetical hyphens that mark these narratives highlight the multiplicity of identities and attributes and their contingency and fragility. Such contingency may resist readerly comprehension. Voices "cracked by multiple migrations," to use the Indian American poet Meena Alexander's felicitous phrase (3), beseech us to listen to untold (or stuttered) (hi)stories, confront the black holes of our unknowing, and venture into unknown (culturally uncoded) narrative territory. A reading strategy or approach that barely masks its monolingual conceit cannot participate in a dialogue with another. The bilingual imagination remains much more alert than monolingual understanding to forms of (self-)censored speech and is acutely aware of resistance to cultural transparency and translatability.

The linguistic, cultural, and identificatory entanglements the hyphen in bilingual writing (e.g., Mexican-American, Franco-Maghrebian, Afro-German) betrays can often lead to an inscrutable semiotic at the close of the translation project. Here I raise two further issues. First, does translatability pose a problem only for the eager, appropriating reader-translator? (I look into the challenges it raises for the bilingual speaker-writer below.) Second, what hope is there of introducing texts of underrepresented or misunderstood cultures and finding pedagogical returns if we accept their opaqueness as a given? We already live in a culture (and by extension, an institutional culture) where reading is at worst resisted and at best seen as an enterprise with diminishing returns. One response to the second question is that learning a new language whets the appetite for adventures in reading—in that language or about it. The Internet has opened an enormous world of information in every imaginable language. We now have access to daily newspapers from all over the world. Since the shelf life of information is so

short, the ability to read in other languages allows us to have better and faster updates on global developments.

At the level of academic institutions, curricula need to reflect the crossroads, crises, and challenges that inform every aspect of our contemporary culture. One important step in this direction would be a critical engagement with the cultural productions of consistently neglected nations and languages. Beyond the noble goal of academic diversity, there is relief here from an oppressive sameness of much art, entertainment, writing, and literature. Reading Kundera is an ongoing lesson in political, literary, and cultural history in a local and global context. How little we know of Czech history, yet how exemplary it is in affording us a much more complete picture of European history.

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, an extended autobiographical meditation on exilic consciousness and the threat to cultural memory, Kundera laments the untranslatability of the Czech word *litost*, a “synthesis of grief, sympathy, remorse, and an indefinable longing” (121), the comprehensive idiom that corresponds ideally with the ever-present sense of loss and mourning that accompanies exile. The gap this loss forms in his adopted language is an erasure of memory, a memory that sustains the core of his Czech identity, his personal, familial, communal history. Emine Sevgi Özdamar, a prominent Turkish German writer, remarks that in the foreign language—in which she writes—words have no childhood (“In der Fremdsprache haben Wörter keine Kindheit”; 42). And she appropriates the foreign language and subjects it to conformity with the memories of childhood and home. She deliberately leaves dangerous holes of the untranslatable uncovered; for instance, when she writes, “they pumped out the milk they drank from their mothers through their nostrils” (12), she uses a common figure of speech in Turkish that means to bug, bother, and, in a more exaggerated vein, torture but that sounds through this alienation effect of untranslatability particularly savage and serves as a graphic description of the police brutality she is referring to. Although these writers dwell in the unbearable lightness (because unburdened by the past) of their adopted tongues, the irreducible untranslatability of their first idiom marks for them the space of exile. The adopted idiom retains the memory and the metaphorical traces of the first language. These traces challenge not only the reader’s comprehension but also the writer’s adaptive economy. Conceptual and verbal challenges determine formal choices. For example, in many instances, the elliptical nonlinearity of (self-)translation mimics gestures of self-censorship, untranslatability, forgetting, remembering, and code switching. Translation as a form of re-membering affords the writer new strategies to access the past and to reclaim stories that history forgot to record. “Writing in a foreign language, not in either of the tongues of my native country—the Berber of the Dahra mountains or the Arabic of the town where I was born,” Assia Djebar reflects, “has

brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my youth, to my own true origins. Writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters” (204). The gaps in translation can be a form of resistance to appropriation and subjugation to interpretive regimes. However, they should be understood also as a writerly prerogative to commemorate the comforting space or rituals of one’s own idiom.

I think it necessary to honor the space that resists translation and also to find a way of equalizing interpretive authority between languages. In an 1813 lecture on the different methods of translation, whose views were strongly reiterated by Walter Benjamin in a more recent historical context, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the German Romantic theologian and critic, argued that as no translation could be completely adequate to the foreign (other’s) text, the “genuine translator” who wants to bring the author and the reader together has two choices: either he “leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” (9). The first method directs the target language to register cultural and linguistic difference. The second method implies an appropriative hermeneutics, a subjection of the foreign text to the cultural lexicon and values of the target language. Schleiermacher makes it clear that his choice is the former (foreignizing) strategy, which provides the translated text with the space where its foreignness could be reflected. Of course, this alterity can be reflected not in the other’s own terms but only in those of the target language, and, therefore, one can say that it is already encoded. Nevertheless, Schleiermacher, the father of modern hermeneutics, devoted his prodigious talents as translator and critic to perfecting the art of understanding otherness, to a painstakingly conscientious treatment of the authors and their language in translation. In “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (“The Task of the Translator”) Benjamin advocates a mode of translation where the original language is not subjugated to the force of target language (for the most part he has German in mind) and the two become “fragments of a larger language” (59). This “larger language” denotes the (sacred) realm of the translatability of languages, a space where all God’s languages are equal. Benjamin maintains that one can speak of an unforgettable life or moment that, though it may have been forgotten by all human beings, lives on in “God’s memory” (“Gedenken Gottes”). By the same token, the translatability of all verbal creations holds the promise of being fulfilled, even if these proved to be untranslatable for human beings (51). In secular terms, the space of translatability acknowledges the equalizing and generative power of human languages and frees them from rankings of status.

Bilingual writing is always implicated in a translation project that equally validates and celebrates the lan-

guages it works with. Prominent authors of this genre, like Abdelkebir Khatibi, Ana Castillo, and Özdamar, cultivate grammatically, stylistically, and professionally the second language in which they write but also lovingly preserve the sounds, memories, and accents of the first one. As a form of translation, this genre “gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a complement to the language in which it speaks, as its own form of *intentio*” (Benjamin 59). Nevertheless, a cautionary comment is in order here. Although Benjamin sees the “pure language” of translation as an arbiter between languages, bilingual texts often murmur a much more complex message: that language may come to a halt at the edge of an abyss that marks the threshold of irreducible untranslatability, where no ideal unifying language can recover an elusive idiom. Nevertheless, writers like Djebbar and Khatibi, an Algerian novelist and critic who publishes widely in French, see the voluntary or involuntary departure from the hospitable space of their first language as the necessary cost of an education through remembering, the price of reclaiming lost geography and history through writing. Khatibi considers the travails of bilingual tension in speech and script not as a source of confusion and deficiency but as the condition of a “third ear” (4–5). The third ear expands our capacity for hearing the diverse and contesting accents of idiom, history, memory, and identity. It exploits the potential of the languages it listens to and imagines a grammar of translation that transcends the limitations of linguistic precision. Transnational writers who write outside the preserved and protected space of national literary paradigms, in borrowed and adopted languages, establish verbal and cultural bi- and multilingualism as the most equitable form of dialogic encounter.

I believe that a freely chosen trilingualism—the mother tongue, the other tongue, and at least one less-studied language—not limited by the contingencies of global markets, situational needs, and curricular requirements would be the first step toward a meaningful solidarity with many of our fellow human beings separated by histories, borders, and ideologies. Michael Isador, a gifted musician friend of mine who is fully bilingual in English and French and conversant in other Romance languages, chose early retirement—not an easy choice for

a very accomplished person—over the meaningless vexations of working for an institution some years ago. He has since learned Turkish, and this language has given him a new, alternative community to be a part of. He has survived a bad heart, a series of career moves, displacements, separations, and departures. Integrating another layer of fluency into his life, however, has given him the energy and freedom to take flight toward new directions. Languages give out more than sounds and words; they deliver care packages for the mind and the soul in the form of history, imagination, cognition, and agency. Furthermore, each language opens up a novel world of metaphor which, as Hélène Cixous observes, is transport in all the senses of the term: “ascension or elevation” (Cixous and Calle-Gruber 23).

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The article aims at revealing the possibilities of a textual approach to the process and result of translation activity from a new perspective and stating the inviolability of the text as the main category of Translation Studies. The results of the conducted research show that the complex nature of translation requires consideration of a wide variety of factors, but the final set of parameters relevant to the translation process depends on the text, since it is the text that determines the primary and secondary communicative situations. Translatability problems that are linked to grammatical categories occur, for instance, when a category is absent in a language and present in another. When the translator wants, for example, to render a noun from a language that doesn't contain articles into a language that does, he has to look for the missing information in the context. If this does not provide the needed information, which occurs rarely, the translator has to decide on the appropriate choice to be made. Mounin (1968) presents an example about word order, which is said to reflect the way linguistic communities perceive Linguistic untranslatability: "failure to find a TL [target language] equivalent is due entirely to differences between the source language and the target language" (Catford, 1965: 98). Some examples of this type of untranslatability would be ambiguity, plays on words, oligosemy, etc. The practical implications of reducing cultural untranslatability to a form of linguistic untranslatability would greatly affect the field of machine translation, since a computer could hypothetically be programmed to recognise such anomalous collocations. However, it seems that there is more to cultural untranslatability than just a matter of collocation.