

In Translation: Language, Poetry and Identity

Natasha Garrett

I am not a stranger to translation. Every dinner involving my husband's and my own family tends to be an intense linguistic experience – translation as an exercise in endurance. I should know better by now and have a quick bite before every meal because once the din of clanking silverware and the deluge of Macedonian and English begins I hardly get a chance to eat. My parents' English is as good as my in-laws' Macedonian, rudimentary at best, but their discussions spare no topics: history, travel, cooking, family gossip, politics. I switch back and forth, English to Macedonian, Macedonian to English, inserting explanations and verbal footnotes as I go. By the time the last piece of bread mops the bottom of a plate, I am exhausted. Alternating between two different languages demands quick thinking and plenty of improvisation; it also puts a physical strain on one's voice apparatus – spoken Macedonian engages the back of the mouth and throat; English is all lips and teeth. I'm resigned to the reality that my actual participation in these family conversations is minimal. Eliot Weinberger, a writer and a translator, has written that translators are invisible people. I'm developing a fondness for Weinberger.

I moved to Pittsburgh from Macedonia in the early nineties as an undergraduate student. I had been living in Pittsburgh for a few years when I stumbled upon my first translation/interpretation assignment. A local company was hosting a group of Macedonian engineers and they desperately needed a translator. I knew very little about engineering river dams but I was a Macedonian fluent in English, and that was good enough for them. I continued to sporadically translate medical documents, birth certificates, occasional university transcripts. At first, I approached these assignments as simple transactions; I provided a service and got paid for it, rarely dwelling on these projects after they were completed. Once in a while, reading someone's medical history or high school grades made me feel like an intruder. I remember a physician's report on the treatment of someone who had just suffered a heart attack. The document was only a paragraph long. As I was translating each sentence, looking up technical terms as I went, I hesitated to finish, as if my not getting to the end of the translation would somehow prevent the patient's death. What right did I have to witness, although indirectly, the most intimate of events – this person's departure from the world of the living?

In most situations, it is easier to have a casual detachment from written documents than from actual people. For example, I interpreted for a Bosnian woman and her teenage son who were evicted from their apartment for not paying their rent. They weren't paying it because the repairs promised months ago hadn't been made. I walked into the tiny office of the magistrate, cluttered with seventies' furniture. I shook hands with the representative from the real estate agency that managed the apartments. I extended my hand to greet the Bosnian lady, but she ignored it and instead gave me a big hug. She was a tall, grey-haired woman dressed in black from head-to-toe (a widow, I correctly assumed). She told me her name and proceeded to shower me with the typical migrant questions: Where are you from? How long have you lived in Pittsburgh? Married yet? Is your husband from around here? You got citizenship then? The woman, my mother's age, was practically weeping. Finally someone could understand what she was saying. The landlord was fed up with all the Bosnian refugees and their broken English, she told me, and he kept saying he would get the leak fixed and the carpet cleaned, but it had been four months and nothing had been done.

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This woman had been already evicted from her own house, her own country and her native language due to a civil war. Now she was being evicted from her shabby apartment in the South Hills of Pittsburgh. It was hard for me to remain indifferent. For this woman, I was a part of the establishment, a person with authority; I was also, by virtue of being born in the same country (at the time), of speaking her language and knowing her history, not a perfect stranger. I already knew too much of her personal affairs. I wanted to argue for the woman's right to have her apartment repaired. I wanted to tell the real estate representative that just because this woman didn't speak good English, she knew that somebody was taking advantage of her. I had chosen a side. Would it show in the tone of my voice, in the way I look at her landlord? It is somewhat of a consolation to be able to at least translate the woman's words, her version of the events.

My venture into poetry translation began as a casual conversation between my father, a poetry enthusiast and a former language teacher, and my mother-in-law, Nola Garrett, a working poet. Eating dinner on my in-laws' patio in Florida, the two of them made a plan (with my assistance, since they don't speak each other's language, but without my input, as I was busy translating) for me to send Nola a poem or two by Radovan Pavlovski, a prominent Macedonian poet. Of course, I had to translate the poems first. As soon as we returned to Pittsburgh, I e-mailed Nola a rather basic line-by-line translation of Pavlovski's poem 'Big Man, Small Country'. Within an hour, she responded by thanking me and offering a more polished version of the translation. The back and forth went on for a few months. By the end of the summer, after numerous e-mails and only one physical meeting, we had translated the whole collection by Pavlovski, *God of the Morning*.¹

In my ignorance, I felt quite confident I had all the qualifications to do a reasonable poetry translation: I know both languages well, I have a degree in literature, I read and love poetry, and I am on good terms with my mother-in-law, a potentially crucial component of this new venture. Translating Pavlovski's poems required not only a knowledge of the languages – arguably the easiest part – but also attentiveness to subtleties of meaning, historical allusions, nature/rural references, imagery, metaphors. The strength of Pavlovski's poetry lies both in his poetics and in his role as a national poet. Weinberger asserts that 'good translations are always a form of advocacy criticism: here is a writer one ought to be reading and here is the proof'.² As a young country in what seems like a permanent process of affirming its identity, Macedonia takes its literature, poetry in particular, very seriously. Pavlovski is truly a national Macedonian poet. Translating Pavlovski's poetry bestowed on me a new sense of responsibility. The poet became the country. The translations were making an argument: here is a country one ought to recognise, and here is the proof.

While translating, I began to think of myself as a translation. As someone living across two languages and cultures, I see translation as a vital transnational activity, for it creates a bridge between the original work (home country) and the translation (host country). The connection between language and identity is more than a theoretical question for me. It emerges during my routine activities, such as interactions with the people closest to me: my husband, my son, my American friends, my Macedonian friends, my in-laws. When do I get to be my authentic self? Is it when I speak English or Macedonian? Is a translated poem a new poem? Does the host language ever become a home for the translation? Can I claim English as *my* language?

Joshua Fishman uses the term 'beloved language' for one's mother tongue, the language that represents 'the throbbing link to one's own formative cognitive and affective experience of

¹ Radovan Pavlovski, *Bog na utroto* [God of the morning] (Skopje: Mislá, 1991).

² Eliot Weinberger, 'Anonymous Sources (On Translators and Translation)' *In Translation: Translators on their Work and What It Means* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) 25.

“being at home”³. The beloved language is both a link to personal origins – mother or father metaphors dominate descriptions of native languages – and a link among generations. The beloved language, Fishman argues, is deeply personal and emotional, because, among other things, ‘we dream in it.’⁴ Ah, the dream question. What language do I dream in? I disappoint with the answer: In my dreams, I speak English to Americans and Macedonian to Macedonians.

When I moved to the States, steeping my daily life in a second language was like entering a very cold pool on a hot day – a bit shocking. The fundamentals were there; I could read and write in English very well, and I thought my conversation skills were acceptable. I soon found out that I wasn’t as nearly as fluent as I wanted to be. It took me a while to be funny in English. I couldn’t pick up the cultural references. I met Henry Winkler at an event but had no idea who Fonzie was. Since I had been taught British English in school, everyone around me sounded like they had just stepped out of a Western movie set; I had a hard time taking them seriously. Conducting my daily life in English shook up my relationship with Macedonian; I used to have an unquestioned loyalty to my native language. I had grown so accustomed to it, I hardly ever noticed it, like the colour of my eyes. In the States, I grew more aware of it; it felt new and fresh and pleasant on my tongue, giving me respite from the foreignness of daily English. It also revealed its limitations, its lack of certain words or phrases, its excess of consonants. My husband finds the vowel-less words particularly amusing, so much so that he has memorized a string of them: *srp, prst, vrv, smrt, krv!*

Translation awakened a new attentiveness to my own language. From a translator’s vantage point, I recognised the language as my own, but the words somehow became less precious. Translation allowed for a more hopeful revelation that languages may have different words for what is essentially the same human experience. For example, Nola and I spent some time on translating Pavlovski’s poem ‘Green Market’. We began with the literal translation of the original title as ‘Market people’ or, ‘People who go to the market.’ We also considered: ‘People going to the market’ but we found it too long and too descriptive. Finally, we settled upon ‘Green Market’. The colour green is abundant at the open air markets in Macedonia. Not only there are plenty of fresh (green) vegetables, but the actual metal booths and shelves upon which they are displayed are painted green. Perhaps Farmer’s Market may be more of an equivalent term, but ‘Green Market’ preserved some of the original flavour while sounding natural, we hoped, for the American reader.

These types of negotiations were the essence of our translation process. Literary translation is often charged with the task of answering the unjust question of whether such an act is even possible. Edith Grossman suggests that a more appropriate question would be whether it could be done well. Conscientious translators make decisions as to how close to the original text they need to stay, and to what aspects of the text – the form, the tone, the meaning, or some combination of those. Depending on those choices, we speak of different versions of the translation. Weinberger suggests that translation is often wrongly considered a failure when it departs from exact equivalence. This misjudgment of the quality of the translation, Weinberger argues, misses the purpose of a translation, which is ‘not, as it is usually said, to give the foreign poet a voice in the translation language. It is to allow the poem to be *heard* in the translation language, ideally in many of the same ways it is heard in the original language’.⁵ Walter Benjamin maintains that fidelity and freedom in translation are not conflicting tendencies. A

³ Joshua Fishman, *In Praise of the Beloved Language: A Comparative View of Positive Ethnolinguistic Consciousness* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996) 38.

⁴ Fishman 50.

⁵ Edith Grossman, *Why Translation Matters* (New Haven and London: Yale, 2010) 4.

good translation, according to Benjamin, lies in the capacity of the translator to find and release the meaning within the target language, thus creating new spaces and new meanings in the language.⁶ Therein lies the originality and creativity in the work of the translator.

Poetry translators often work in pairs, one person a native speaker of the original, the other of the target language. The reason for that practice became obvious to Nola and me early on in the translation process. In the beginning, we thought that I ought to be in charge of ‘fidelity’ while Nola was striving for ‘freedom’. Ultimately, we learned to trust the poem. We became less territorial. Like concerned parents, we began thinking in terms of making decisions that would allow the poem to thrive in the new language environment. I developed a sense, however subjective, of how much improvisation the poem could handle. I accepted that not every departure from the literal translation compromised the original. A more creative, less literal translation could bring the poem to life more elegantly; it released the poem *into* the new language.

To move the translation from a rudimentary to a more refined stage, to carry the poem over from one language into another, to play with language, are some of the pleasures of translating. It can be very liberating. As Weinberger observes: ‘Because a translation will always be read as a translation, as something foreign, it is freed from many of the constraints of the currently accepted norms and conventions in the national literature’.⁷ Readers are more open to the strangeness, to the foreign quality in a translated work, because they are prepared to accept a departure from the literary standards to which they are accustomed. People similarly are more likely to embrace the strangeness or difference in other people, if they are prepared to encounter it. Once, when I was hesitant to buy a pair of shoes for fear they were too avant-garde, my friend Julie assured me, ‘You speak with an accent, Natasha. You can wear whatever you want.’ My foreignness makes it easier for Julie to accept my unconventional footwear choices. Other little freedoms become easier to achieve. Speaking a foreign language sometimes provides me with a subtle detachment from the content of what I am saying. I find it easier to say things in English I may not dare say in my own language, like someone permitting herself an oversized margarita and a loud print shirt only while on vacation.

Am I the same person in Macedonian as I am in English? Am I merely impersonating an English speaker? Can a person be translated into a new language, and a new culture? Poetry translation is to a great extent a dialogue between two translators about where to position the poem so that it conveys the original ideas, imagery, rhythm, or feelings to the reader of English. The translated poem is a version of the original, but it is not the original. The translation enjoys a level of independence by the sheer fact that it is written in another language, directed towards a different audience, and frequently presented on its own.

When I speak Macedonian, I sit differently; I make plenty of hand gestures; I turn up the volume (what my husband calls ‘getting my paprika up’). For Weinberger, translation means change – and things do change when I switch mediums. My English-language persona makes longer pauses between sentences; she uses less irony, more sarcasm; she uses phrases like: ‘give him some space’ and ‘I don’t want to talk about it’ (as the Macedonian inside me rolls her eyes), she doesn’t yell at the phone when talking to relatives. If people always think that we Macedonians always fight when we talk to each other, it is because we do. We get chatty and argumentative and impatient. Every language has a sort of physical rhetoric attached to it. These may be changes on the periphery, but they ripple deep down. Even writing this essay makes me

⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’ [1923], *The Translation Studies Reader* edited by Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁷ Weinberger 18.

feel like an imposter. I worry that my choice of words, the cadence and the rhythm of my sentences is contrived, an imitation of other English sentences I have read. Each language guides me to frame my thoughts differently, even though they may be the same thoughts. I am a version of myself in each language; the essence is still the same, but the contexts are different. Like a poem, I depend on my readership. My audiences differ in Macedonian and English; their existing frame of reference will direct the way they read me. For multilinguals, languages become locations with their own geographies, populated with people and emotions. Babak Elahi, an American-Iranian, writes about how, for his family, language has become a sort of sanctuary, 'the *andaruni* (inner, private quarters) of Persian, intimate rooms of conversation.'⁸ As if reading my mind, Elahi poses the question, 'which one is the truer indication of who I am, the language I first spoke in childhood or the language I most commonly use in my daily life as an adult? ... To what extent are our identities liminal, and to what extent is this liminality a function of language?'⁹

In 'Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs', Elahi draws attention to the women's use of metaphor as a way of making meaning out of their bilingualism and biculturalism. One of the authors understands the travel between the States and Iran as an oscillation; another writer compares bilingualism to a seesaw. As Elahi observes, the languages' 'access to truth and the richness of their texture can only be experienced in the alteration between one and another tongue, not in the space between or on one side alone'.¹⁰ I can't look to a single language for a strong source of identity. If my second language is not exactly a home, it has certainly become a very comfortable indefinite lease. On occasion, I write a clumsy sentence or fail to summon the right word for a concept I know so well in Macedonian. I am reminded that I'm still a tenant. Otherwise, I feel settled in.

I mostly speak Macedonian to my son Oliver. When he was a baby, I sang him the same lullabies my parents sang to me when I was a child. To my amazement and horror, I use the same lines my parents used on me when they disciplined me. Keeping up with Macedonian is tough, and it is getting tougher. I am the only one at home who speaks it to him, while his father, teachers, friends, books, television shows, all stubbornly insist on English. I can't translate in Macedonian many of the terms that are such a staple of his daily life; there are no Macedonian terms for play date, granola bar or Lego Monster Fighters. Conversing in Macedonian with him around other people often seems isolating, separating us from the group and the potential collective discussion that could take place instead.

Sometimes I feel plain selfish, imposing *my* language on my boy, making him my accomplice in my efforts to maintain my own culture. Rhina P. Espaillat warns about nostalgia as 'confusion of identity',¹¹ a fear that if we lose the native language, we lose parts of the self. I know what she is speaking of; I feel that if my son doesn't speak Macedonian, much will be lost. He would not be able to speak to his Macedonian grandparents, would not be able to read my recipe notebook, or the legal documents that entitle him to an apartment at Lake Ohrid. With his blonde hair, light complexion and blue eyes, Oliver stands in sharp contrast to my darker Mediterranean appearance. With the exception of his chin line under a certain light, he has inherited none of my physical features. My friends, the Macedonians in particular, tease me that I have produced a true American boy. Being able to communicate with each other in Macedonian is a bond that is

⁸ Babak Elahi, 'Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs, *Iranian Studies* 39.4 (2006) 461.

⁹ Elahi 462.

¹⁰ Elahi 470.

¹¹ Rhina P. Espaillat, 'Afterword: Bilingual/Bilingue', *Where Horizons Go* (Kirksville: New Odyssey Press, 1998) 68.

unique to us. It makes him more a part of me.

Oliver cooperates – up to a point. He is fine listening to me in Macedonian, but he tends to reply in English:

Natasha: Здраво!

Oliver: Hi, mommy.

Natasha: Како помина денес?

Oliver: I had a good day.

The seesaw/oscillation of our daily conversations.

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