POST-VERNACULAR SELF-TRANSLATION:

Bringing Languages Back from the Brink

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1.   The link between diversity and language(s)

The call for papers for the second Bologna conference on self-translation explicitly framed the phenomenon «in terms of the dynamics of diversity/identity and inclusion/exclusion». In 2011, the first edition explored what could be called a poetics of rewriting (Ceccherelli, Imposti, Perotto 2013). This time around, the focus is on the politics of diversity as evidenced by self-translation because of the variety of languages involved: source and target languages, obviously, but also intermediary languages (in the case of so-called indirect or relay translations) and even third-party languages embedded in either the source or target text.

While this makes perfect sense, we should realize that not everybody associates diversity with language(s): in American debates about "diversity", the focus is squarely on race, not at all on language. In the United States, the notion of diversity became increasingly associated with race during the 1980s, with discrimination based on ethnicity and skin colour being more firmly denounced (Michaels 2006). Since then, other identities (cultural, religious, sexual…) have been added but, tellingly, linguistic identities remain under the radar and still go largely undetected on the North-American roadmap to diversity. In a widely available guidebook like *Lonely Planet USA*, for instance, we find a section on multiculturalism, but no mention whatsoever is made of the multilingual make-up of the United States, a country shaped by immigration. Instead, the book's American editors define everything in terms of race:

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for Americans there is no more loaded topic than race and ethnicity, which amounts to a national obsession. No other social or political terms stir Americans as deeply – not class, gender or age, not economics or foreign policy. When the country divides, racial fault lines crack the widest (Campbell *et al*. 2004: 57).

In European conversations on the topic of diversity, conversely, the link with language(s) is unavoidable. Article 22 of the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights casts a wider net by stating that «the Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity». In practice, however, the discussion really evolves around the last of the three. My fellow Belgian Philippe van Parijs, while ostensibly asking «What is diversity?», immediately narrows down the discussion to «linguistic rights» and «linguistic diversity» (2011: 175), with «race […] as defined by skin colour» (178) almost becoming an afterthought. This emphasis on language is probably a legacy of historical-comparative Indo-European linguistics as practiced in the 19th century. The writings of some of those philologists are still invoked today. France's Barbara Cassin, well known for editing a monumental *Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, is fond of quoting Wilhelm von Humboldt:

> The diversity of languages is the immediate condition for us of a growth in the richness of the world and the diversity of what we know about it/*Durch die Mannigfaltigkeit der Sprachen wächst unmittelbar für uns der Reichthum der Welt und die Mannigfaltigkeit dessen, was wir in ihr erkennen*[1].

Focusing on language at the expense of other factors is arguably less of an issue when discussing translation, which is an inherently linguistic phenomenon (even though translation is never just about language.) This goes as well for self-translation. Yet one wonders whether and how it contributes to what Humboldt called «the richness of the world». Does self-translation encourage or discourage diversity? Does it increase or decrease the visibility of languages involved, does it strengthen or weaken them?

I believe that self-translation has the potential to do all of the above, sometimes even at the same time, albeit with varying outcomes and mixed results.

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[1]　Humboldt (1908 [1801-02]: 602), as translated from Pierre Caussat's French translation by Andrew Goffey (Cassin 2009b: 366). The same quote is used in Cassin (2009a: 22, 2007: 231-232, 2014: 27).

At first glance, self-translation would seem to enhance diversity because it involves a greater variety of source-languages than regular (allographic) translation. In Pascale Casanova's «world republic of letters» (1999), books are translated from a handful of so-called "central" languages. Self-translations, by contrast, are sourced from a much larger number of languages, which therefore participate in the international literary conversation more than is the case with allographic translations. But there is evidence of the contrary as well. While their source languages may be many, self-translations display less variety in terms of target languages, which are: English, first and foremost, French and German, followed by Spanish, Italian, and Russian. That's about it. Rather than promoting linguistic pluralism, let alone foster diversity, language choices made by a majority of self-translators thus appear to lead to less diversity. One could even argue that self-translation, like a parasite, feeds off the linguistic diversity provided by source languages. It regulates translational "traffic", restricting it to certain "express lanes" (to stick with the same metaphor).

As we shall see, this view needs to be nuanced as well. The first claim (pro-diversity) may have been overly optimistic, but its antithesis leads to more pessimism than is perhaps warranted. A third, dialectical, step is required to "lift" (*aufheben*) the opposition between encouraging and discouraging diversity. Hence my proposal to consider "post-vernacular self-translation" as a way of compensating for, or at least mitigating, the shortcomings of self-translation in terms of diversity.

Though less common and therefore less studied, this last scenario is perhaps more exciting insofar as it shows the potential of self-translation as a form of collective empowerment (and not merely a tool for individual self-promotion.) Not so long ago, speakers of small, fragilized or endangered languages that no longer functioned as full-fledged vernaculars in everyday life, felt that they had no choice but to become translingual writers in a "major" language. While they could and often did work their native tongue into the fabric of their translingual texts, it remained largely invisible to untrained eyes (or ears.) For a variety of reasons (censorship, lack of standard grammar and spelling, their own limited literacy), writing in their native or heritage language was hardly an option. This would change when self-translation developed into somewhat of a trend, in the latter 20th and the early 21st century.

2. Self-translation both encourages and discourages diversity

As Johan Heilbron has shown on a variety of occasions, using the (admittedly imperfect) *Index Translationum* prepared by UNESCO, book translations are an increasingly lopsided, asymmetrical, affair. The overwhelming majority of translated titles stem from only a handful of source languages. Forty years ago, around 40% of all translated books were originally written in English; this number has since risen to 55%, or more than half. In 1980, the next three source languages, French, German and Russian, each represented between 10% and 12% of printed translations. These four languages were the origin of three-quarters of the world's translated books. Today, the share of French, German and Russian has dropped to 10, 9 and 5%. When we add English (55%), these same four languages are nonetheless the source of almost four out of every five (79%) translated books. Italian and Spanish rank fifth and sixth, but even taken together, they provide the source for ten times less titles than English...

This unequal distribution reminds me of the 80/20 principle, also called the Pareto Principle, after the Italian engineer, mathematician and economist Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923). While studying the distribution of wealth and income in various European countries during the last quarter of the late 19th century, he was struck by the profound inequalities but even more so by how constant the relationship was between the wealthiest people and the percentage of total incomes they enjoyed. In his own words: «Ces résultats sont très remarquables. Il est absolument impossible d'admettre qu'ils sont dus seulement au hasard» (Pareto 1964: 312). Later, this regular logarithmic pattern would become a formula: 80% of a country's wealth is owned by a mere fifth, or 20%, of its population (hence the moniker "80/20 principle").

Strangely enough, the imbalance is even more pronounced in the world of translation. Looking at the period between 1979 and 2007, Heilbron and Sapiro (2016: 378) found that the top-20 source languages in the *Index Translationum* covered 96 % of all translated books... Bearing in mind that only 563 languages in the world have more than a million

speakers[2], which could be considered a threshold for possessing a book culture, then twenty languages equals 3,5% (20/563). We thus get a striking mirror image where 3,5% of languages spoken by at least a million people account for 96% of book translations, with the remaining 4% being sourced from the 543 other languages (or 96,5%) – and this without even mentioning the thousands of languages with less than a million speakers. So much for diversity[3].

What we see is a centrifugal movement that starts from an astoundingly small number of languages. Self-translation offers a more varied view, at least in terms of source languages. Here too, however, the distribution is fundamentally unequal, but in the opposite direction, since the dynamic between source and target languages is reversed. Whereas regular translations flow *from* a handful of languages, self-translation overwhelmingly happens *into* the "happy few" among languages. Here, we have a small selection of target languages, not source languages. In both cases, however, the same six languages are at play…

The English- and French-language markets are prime destinations for self-translated books, followed by Spanish, German, Russian, Italian. Barely half a dozen languages (again that fatal number) benefit most from people toiling away to produce a second version of their work in another, often non-native, language. English functions as the target language of choice for writers from immigrant backgrounds in the United States and many Commonwealth countries. French attracts self-translators from former colonies (in Africa and the Caribbean), as well as from its sphere of cultural influence in parts of (Eastern) Europe. The same holds true, *mutatis*

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[2]   According to the Ethnologue website (cfr. <https://www.ethnologue.com/> – last access: 20-08-2025), on which Louis-Jean Calvet based his «world language barometer». Older estimates peg the number of «languages spoken by a million or more» at «200 to 250», which more or less «overlap[s] with […] the official languages» of the world's sovereign States (Krauss 1992: 7).

[3]   Things get worse when we look at target languages. According to figures available on the *Index Translationum* website for 1979-2016, the bulk of books are translated into merely six languages: German, French, Spanish, English, Japanese and Dutch. Most of them import more translated titles than they export: Dutch and Japanese have five times fewer source texts than translations, Spanish four times fewer... Even German has a trade deficit, since it translates 145% more titles than it provides source texts for translation (into French, Spanish and Italian, mainly, and much less into English). English is the only language to enjoy a significant trade surplus: eight times more English titles are exported than titles are translated into English.

mutandis, for German (from Czech, Polish, Danish...) and Russian (in some former Soviet Republics). Self-translations into Spanish start from Spain's minority languages and, more recently, from Latin America's indigenous languages. Italy has a long tradition of self-translation from peninsular dialects, but recent immigration patterns have added new languages (Arabic, Somalian, Albanian) to the mix...

In both translation and self-translation, then, traffic is typically asymmetrical. The imbalance is comparable but operates in different directions. Rather than a centrifugal, downward movement from languages with more symbolic capital to those that have less, we see a centripetal force. Self-translation often starts from a language perceived as less central and less prestigious, and moves towards a language that occupies a more central position. In this very common scenario, which I have labelled «supra-self-translation» (Grutman 2012: 42-46, 2013: 43-44, 2019), the languages involved occupy positions that are too different (whether locally, globally, or both) for "equality" to become a real possibility. Many self-translators work with a "major" and a "minor"[4] language, whether viewed in terms of national status or of international recognition (or a combination thereof). For them, self-translation always becomes a negotiation that forces them to compromise in one way or another. Self-translators, I have found, are no less partial to "domesticating" strategies than third-party translators. They are equally unlikely to proceed in a "foreignizing" fashion that lets their source language shine through in the translation. Instead, they want their self-translations to fit in as much as possible in the target literary system and adapt them accordingly, thereby (unwittingly?) "domesticating" their original work.

The limited number of target languages available to (or at least chosen by) self-translators, combined with their high profile (locally and/or globally), serve as major constraints, to the point where we have to wonder how much is left of the promise of linguistic diversity contained in an initially wider array of source languages. To what extent can self-translation be said to be counterhegemonic? Although it starts from a larger number of languages, at no point does it call into question Pareto's Principle. To

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[4]   Needless to say, "major" and "minor" cannot be measured in absolute terms but are relative concepts: Danish may have seemed "small fry" when compared with English to Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), but it is "a big deal" in the eyes of Greenlanders like Niviaq Korneliussen, who self-translates from her native Inuit (*kalaallisut*) into the colonial language of Denmark.

the contrary: by privileging a limited number of already privileged target languages, self-translation can be said to reinforce existing patterns of domination (as Josep Ramis [2017] has forcefully argued in the context of Catalonia) So much for diversity (*bis.*)

3. Self-translation "visibilizes" diversity

Several signs do indeed point in that direction. Bilingual editions of self-translated poetry, for instance, are simulacra of symmetry rather than the genuinely balanced texts they claim to be. It is not rare for these books to appear with monolingual publishers, or in monolingual countries, or both, thereby limiting their distribution in the other language. US editions of Raymond Federman's *Voice in the Closet / Voix dans le débarras* or, more recently, Achy Obejas's *Boomerang / Bumerán*, come to mind, but it is true as well of Nancy Huston's *Limbes / Limbo*, which only appeared in France. The book's layout itself can also favour one language over another, if only because of the direction in which we read, or even discourage bilingual reading altogether. The latter happens in so-called "successive" or "reversible" (Fr. *tête-bêche*) versions, where the two languages appear in succession, occupying different parts of the volume but without ever facing each other on opposing pages (Gentes 2013: 276-277): again, the above-mentioned volumes by Federman and Obejas can serve as examples.

Another indication of the "collateral damage", as it were, unintentionally inflicted by self-translations on already dominated languages, is the common practice of translating into third languages, not from the original but from its supra-self-translation in a so-called "major" language. This notoriously happened with Isaac Bashevis Singer's Yiddish short stories, which were translated (at his own request) from their English reincarnations. *Obababoak*, Basque writer Bernardo Atxaga's breakthrough book, has been consistently translated from his Spanish supra-self-translation. True, this was Atxaga's own wish for the French version (by André Gabastou), but I honestly doubt his opinion on the matter played a role for the English (Margaret Jull Costa), Italian (Sonia Piloto di Castri), German (Giò Waeckerlin Induni) or Dutch (Johanna Vuyk-Bosdriesz) translations, all carried out from the Spanish, never from the Basque original.

Still, these negative aspects notwithstanding, the overall balance remains positive in my opinion. Self-translation not only has the potential of doing more right than wrong but has actually done small-language literatures more of a service than a disservice. Self-translation, as increasingly practiced in the past half century, has proven a formidable form of resistance against absorption and assimilation into the majority. It has sometimes even given a new lease on life to languages that had been either successfully silenced by oppressive regimes or simply sideswept by the supposedly unavoidable march of progress, bringing them back from the brink.

One need only compare self-translation with other (and older) ways of accommodating minority languages, to realize how much more visible the latter have become in and through self-translation. Some of these older strategies involved "embedding" snippets of one's native language into the fabric of texts written in an acquired "matrix language"[5] or worse, literally translating the former into the latter by means of calques, which has the effect of hiding the embedded language beneath the text's surface, rendering it invisible to untrained eyes (or ears). This game of hide-and-seek is played in a significant number of texts by migrant or postcolonial writers that display a distinct preference for «an ornamentalized, cosmetic use of multilingualism meant ultimately to spotlight the utility of the normativity of monolinguality»[6].

Other translingual writers go further and reduce explicit multilingualism to outright monolingualism. Sometimes, this happens in the course of the editorial process – as documented by Ilan Stavans (2016) in his recounting of how his initial polyglot project morphed into the English-only text of *On Borrowed Words*; other times, it is the writer's own decision. One would be hard pressed, for instance, to find even a single sentence in Polish, the abandoned mother tongue in *Lost in Translation*, Eva Hoffman's much discussed memoir about adapting to the North-American way of life. While these procedures no doubt have merits of their own, they have nothing in common with self-translation. Telling in that respect is that Hoffman left the Polish version (*Zagubione w przekładzie*) of her best-selling book

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[5]   As per the terminology for code-switching developed by sociolinguists (Myers-Scotton 1992).

[6]   As per Pandey (2016: 84), who also calls out literary «multilingualism of the post-global turn» for being «doubly and dubiously visible yet invisible; marked as it is marginalized; seemingly apparent yet consistently shallow», as «transparent as it is translatable» (Pandey 2016: 21).

to a third-party translator, Michał Ronikier. As for Stavans, a native speaker of Spanish (but not English), he "declined" when asked by the publisher of *On Borrowed Words* «to do the Spanish version [him]self»:

> it would have taken enormous psychological effort to redress the narrative, which I had fashioned with such care, in another language. It would have essentially meant rewriting the book, and repetition is one of my lifelong phobias (Stavans 2016).

The two options – full-fledged self-translation vs. a more or less liberal sprinkling of "minor" languages in texts couched in a "major" language – seem hard to reconcile. Nowhere is the contrast clearer than in the trajectory of two major figures of African literature in English: Nigeria's Chinua Achebe and Kenya's Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. The former famously called upon African writers «to use English in a way that brings out [their] message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost». His aim was to «fashion out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience» (1975: 61-62). Ngũgĩ (1986) took Achebe to task for having thus internalized the "universalist" bias of colonialism. He himself stopped writing in English mid-career and switched to Gikuyu, his mother tongue, reserving English for his self-translations. The difference between their respective positions may not be obvious at first but is in fact fundamental. Achebe only needs a smattering of African words to obtain the desired effect within one and the same text. Actual self-translation as practiced by Ngũgĩ, by contrast, results in two autonomous texts. The source language is no longer "embedded" into the "matrix language" of a single translingual text but visibly occupies its own space.

When published as a separate volume (often with a different imprint, even in a different country), self-translations lead their own life in another language. Yet even in the more constrained space of bilingual editions, self-translations "visibilize" linguistic diversity to a much larger extent than what happens in translingual writing. Eva Hoffman's Polish or Ilan Stavans's Yiddish and Spanish were literally lost in translation, all but swallowed by the surrounding sea of English words.

Something very different happens in self-translations, even when they appear alongside originals in bilingual volumes. Granted, the less prestigious and/or less widespread of the two languages is "weakened" as majority-language readers can skip the minority language (Whyte 2000; Krause

2007), but the latter is not erased. It remains visible alongside the more accessible language and becomes more tangible, less elusive, less hidden. As Hana Muzika Kahn (2007: 101) points out about bilingual poetry collections, «monolingual reader[s]» are made aware of «the difference and inaccessible domain of the other language». In the case of Guatemala's Humberto Ak'abal, the most acclaimed indigenous self-translator from Abya Yala (to use a native term instead of the obviously Eurocentric "America," derived from Amerigo Vespucci's Christian name), that other language is K'iche', a Mayan language spoken by close to a million people. Monolingual Hispanophones of Ak'abal's bilingual collections «experience directly» his «right to communicate in [his] language» and, perhaps more importantly, «what it means to be excluded from a linguistic domain» (*ibidem*).

Equally as relevant to the present discussion is the fact that Ak'abal did not start out as a bilingual writer who publishes in both languages. His poems initially appeared in Spanish only. Still according to Kahn (2007: 101), «Ak'abal himself first learned to read and write in Spanish, and, like most Maya school children, did not acquire literacy in his mother tongue. When he first began to write in K'iche' he wrote as he thought fit, without conforming to any accepted standards». In the absence of monolingual publications in K'iche', whose potential reading public is still too limited, bilingual editions become a means of promoting what has been called, in another indigenous Latin-American context, «the silenced tongue/*el idioma silenciado*» (Ancalao 2018). Current versions of the languages spoken before 1492 are weakened by continuous language attrition, if not outright threatened with extinction by massive language shifts. For the past thirty years, however, a slow but steady process of linguistic revitalization has seen them regain at least some of the terrain lost to European languages.

Self-translations, mostly in bilingual books, are a small but nonetheless significant sign of this continent-wide revival. They have been appearing in increasing numbers, as poets from almost every country, from Canada's True North to the *Cono Sur* shared by Chile and Argentina, self-translate from one of the several hundred native languages that have been documented. Closest to the Polar Circle we find Inuk poet, Ashley Qilavaq-Savard, from Iqaluit; at the other end, Liliana Ancalao hails from Comodoro Rivadavia, in Patagonia. Between these two geographical extremes, writers, and in particular poets, from Chile, Peru, Paraguay, Guatemala, Mexico, and Canada are choosing self-translation as an alternative way of expressing themselves. By showcasing Abya Yala's "original" languages alongside

State-sponsored (or imposed) European languages, they play an active role in bringing them back from the brink and saving their linguistic heritage from being erased from collective memory.

4.	Self-translating post-vernacular languages (Ireland and Scotland)

Hence the notion, put forward in my title, of «postvernacular self-translation». In English, the adjective "vernacular" means 'relating to, or being a nonstandard language or dialect of a place, region, or country' (*Merriam-Webster*), with the dialect in question being "the vernacular". This usage has permeated American sociolinguistics, as evidenced by William Labov's landmark study of "Black English vernacular" (BVE for short), meaning English as spoken by inner city African Americans, as a «separate system» with «distinct rules of its own» (Labov 1972: 36). This code is associated with a linguistic minority that can be localized, spatially situated. It is a "dialect" (or, more technically, a diatopic variety), in other words.

In different contexts, however, the English word "vernacular" refers more to "everyday usage" and "ordinary speech" than "dialect." Some form of vernacular is mastered by most members of a speech community. It is acquired spontaneously, before (or without) going to school. Seven hundred years ago, Dante Alighieri (1982 [1305]) opposed 'vernacular speech' (*locutio vulgaris*), «which we receive without any rules, by imitating our wet nurse» («*quam sine omni regula nutricem imitantes accipimus*» [I, I, 2]), to what «the Romans called *gramatica*», whose rules had to be acquired through long, assiduous study («*non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur et doctrinamur in illa*» [I, I, 3]) In his day, the latter was Latin, of course, and the former would have been one of the many varieties of Romance spoken throughout the peninsula in his day – Dante describes several of them in the second part of his treatise on "vernacular eloquence" (*De vulgari eloquentia*.) The fact that they were local (or at best, regional) varieties matters less than their affective effectiveness in specific circumstances. There was nothing vulgar about what Dante termed *vulgaris*, which simply meant 'popular' speech, as opposed to learned Latin writing. Indeed, he prioritized the "natural" language of the people over the "artificial" code of scholars: «Of these two kinds of language, the more

noble is the vernacular» («*Harum duarum nobilior est vulgaris*» [I, I, 4]). As we know, Dante demonstrated his commitment with action, and would go on to write his most famous work, the *Commedia* (later deemed «divine» by Boccaccio), in an eloquent mix of "vulgar" tongues.

To the best of my knowledge, in *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante does not use the Roman term *vernaculus*, which meant 'domestic' in classical Latin and was derived from *verna* (pl. *vernae*), the word used for home-born slaves. Consequently, vernaculars were used at home, meaning *when* at home, or with people from our own household (which tended to be larger in Ancient Rome than today.) If vernacular languages are used in everyday life, particularly at home, it follows logically that post-vernacular languages are no longer used on a daily basis, not even at home. In migration studies, this is known as "language attrition": migrants forgo their native language and as a result, their language skills deteriorate to the point where they can no longer carry on a conversation, let alone pass on their ancestral language to their children.

The shift from space to time is key to understanding the idea of "post-vernacular usage" as first formulated by Jeffrey Shandler (2004, 2006) in his description (and one might add, celebration) of recent mini-revivals of Yiddish, the traditional language of Ashkenazi Jews. In Europe, its speakers were systematically persecuted by Hitler's Nazis. In the diaspora, the Siren call of Anglo-American society did the rest, to the point where the intergenerational transmission of Yiddish has been severely threatened, not to say interrupted. According to Katz (2019), Yiddish is no longer alive in North America, except for small, ultra-Orthodox, mostly Hasidic communities, such as the ones in Williamsburg (Brooklyn, New York) or Outremont (Montréal), where the language continues to be spoken on a daily basis by native speakers.

It is not hard to see, then, why the term "postvernacular" was coined in the United States, where most Ashkenazi Jews are not capable of having a conversation in the language of their grandparents. Shandler is particularly interested in the many new uses to which they have been putting Yiddish: amateur theatre, folk music, poetry and evening classes, or simply inserting key words and phrases in English conversations, not with gusto but with chutzpah (which is actually a loanword from Hebrew). These ritualistic uses all underscore the power of language for the purpose of identity building, even when it is no longer used for everyday interactions. Post-vernacular languages make up in symbolic value for what was

lost in terms of communication. Still according to Shandler, they also signal a desire to belong to a community. People want the language in question to be part of their social identity.

Every situation is unique, of course, and the plight of Yiddish speakers is arguably an extreme example. This does not mean, however, that the idea of a language becoming post-vernacular cannot be applied to other languages. America's indigenous languages come to mind, but also regional languages in Europe. The fallout of imperialist policies is still very much tangible in Ireland and Scotland, as we shall see shortly. Spain is another scarred country. Under the long and ruthless rule of General Franco (1936-1975), the Basque language came close to losing the battle for survival. So dire was its situation that more than a decade after Franco's death, Joshua Fishman (1991: 149-153), when documenting successful reversals of societal language shifts, did not feel comfortable adding Basque to a list that included Catalan (in Spain as well), Hebrew in Israel, and French in Quebec.

In some of these communities, self-translation is booming when compared to the past. In today's Ireland, many people grow up in English and only reconnect with the Irish of their forebears through the educational system, which has become more sympathetic to instruction of and in the Celtic tongue. For an outsider like myself, it is remarkable that several major figures in today's Irish-language literature should not be native speakers of the language but had to learn it anew, the chain of "natural" transmission having been interrupted. This is true for the bilingual novelist, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, but also for poets Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Louis de Paor. The former solo translates her L2 Irish poems into L1 English, while the latter tends to co-translate his (after initially refusing to be translated at all).

In Scotland, Christopher Whyte (2000: 183) also describes himself as «a native speaker of English and a learner of Gaelic», the only language he directly writes poetry in, which he then translates into his L1 English. On more than one occasion, people are puzzled by this and ask him if he never sneakily works the other way around. This is because of the widespread tendency to perceive recent poetry in Gaelic as «English verse in Gaelic». Corinna Krause, who has documented this trend, explains that «the creative impulse is understood to originate in English with the author thinking in English and being immersed its literary conventions and aesthetics» (Krause 2007: 93). In Ireland as well, there is a «sense in some cases that even when the poet is writing in Irish, what they're doing is self-translating

from English and then producing this self-translation into English which in fact is the original text» (Cronin & Ní Ríordáin 2010).

While technically their primary language, these Irish and Scottish poets consciously eschew English in their creative work in favour of a neglected minority language that has become a passive part of their heritage. Self-translation brings back to life tongues that not so long ago almost seemed invisible and especially inaudible. The latter certainly applies to the crème-de-la-crème of "Irish" writers: from Swift and Sterne to Joyce and Beckett, without forgetting Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats, and George Bernard Shaw, they all wrote in English, even the Catholic ones.

In everyday life as well, Scottish and Irish have gradually ceased to be spoken at home – as per the original meaning of "vernacular". In an essay provocatively entitled, «Why I choose to write in Irish, the corpse that sits up and talks back», poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill (1995: 3) found that the «number of Irish speakers […] who use the language in most of their daily affairs […] varies from 100,000 at the most optimistic estimate to 20,000 at the most conservative. For the sake of a round number» she pegged it at «60000, or about 2 percent of the population of the Republic of Ireland»[7]. As it happens, this is also the number of native speakers of Gaelic that are left in Scotland according to Christopher Whyte. «For many Scottish people», he adds, «Gaelic is like a grandmother dying in a far-off room in the attic. Life would be infinitely simpler if she would breathe her last once and for all» (Whyte 2000: 181). Both the imagery and the indictment resonate with what Ní Dhomhnaill (1995: 27) wrote about Irish:

> I can well see how it suits some people to see Irish-language literature as the last rictus of a dying beast. As far as they are concerned, the sooner the language lies down and dies, the better, so they can cannibalize it with greater equanimity, peddling their "ethnic chic" with nice little translations "from the Irish". Far be it from them to make the real effort it takes to learn the living language.

Whyte (2000: 181) diagnoses a similar contradiction in Scotland, where «lack of effective commitment» to not only talk the talk, but also walk the

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[7] According to the 2006 Census, «only 72000, less than 2%» spoke Irish «daily outside school». But, Seán Ó Riain (2010) hastens to add, «some 97000 speak it at least weekly, and it is significant that only 25% of the 1,66m» people who claimed some knowledge of Irish in 2006 «never actually speak it». In addition, Northern Ireland is home to at least a 100000 Irish speakers.

walk, goes «hand in hand with [...] the major symbolic significance attached to Gaelic on the larger Scottish scene».

This may seem contradictory, until the issue is framed through the lens of "postvernacularity". For starters, «postvernacular performances are typically couched in retrospective metalanguage that speaks of their value as a continuity with or retrieval of the [...] past» (Shandler 2004: 38). Think of Gaelic's glorious past or of the still Irish-speaking pockets known as the "Gaeltacht", which «are the last remnants of an earlier historical time when the whole island was Irish-speaking» (Ní Dhomhnaill 1995: 3). Also typical of the "postvernacular mode" is its insistence on symbolism (on form) rather than on semantics (on content). In the case of Yiddish, precisely because of the lack of fluency, «the very fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as meaningful as the meaning of the words being uttered – if not more so» (Shandler 2006: 22). This ties in with Christopher Whyte's remarks about Gaelic being put on display at various cultural events without requiring fluency on behalf of the people attending those events.

That same feature, the «primacy of form over content», Shandler argues, «renders Yiddish as something more akin to music than a language, to be appreciated as a signifier of affect or as an aesthetic experience of sound play» (2006: 139-140). One can easily see how this would apply to the acoustic beauty of Celtic languages. In an assessment of the state and status of translation in Irish-language writing for a special issue she edited for the French journal, "Études irlandaises", Clíona Ní Ríordáin (2010) looks at bilingual editions of Louis de Paor's poetry. Their layout, with the Irish versions on the left page, «forc[es] the reader's eye to look at them before turning to the English versions». Yet at the same time, a collection like *Agus Rud Eile De / And Another Thing* includes a CD featuring de Paor reading several poems. They «are accompanied by music», which functions as «a translation into a third language» according to the musician involved in the project, Ronan Browne. Ní Ríordáin describes both «readings and musical settings» as «accomplished haunting recordings, enabling the non-Gaelic reader (or the rusty Gaelic reader) to listen to the text while following the translated version in the book» (*ibidem*). The reviewer for "The Irish Times", Siobhán Long, pays even less attention to the actual meaning of the words than to the acoustics of «sensual Irish language poetry»:

> Browne doesn't so much paint an aural landscape as stitch it seamlessly around every syllable, swaddling de Paor's richly spoken words in a tapestry

laden with left-field sound samples [while] the spine-tingling vocals of Zahrah and Naisrín Elsafty dig deeper still beneath the skin of de Paor's compelling poetry (Long 2010).

However paradoxical it may seem, post-vernacular performances like these enhance the symbolic value of languages whose communicative value has dwindled. In Ruth Ellen Gruber's words: «playing klezmer and Yiddish music represents a symbolic attempt to right wrongs: to reconstitute Jewish culture destroyed in the Holocaust, to 'bring back,' to 'resurrect,' to 'heal'» (quoted in Shandler 2004: 22, 2006: 130).

5.   Some concluding remarks

As the examples above suggest, self-translation can play a not insignificant role in reconquering lost language terrain, and become a form of both social emancipation and reterritorializing decolonization. True, as pointed out before, this falls short of creating autonomous texts in minority languages, but it still goes a lot further than other options traditionally available to minority-language writers. One of these is translingual writing that lets the other language "shine through" (by incorporating literal translations, for instance.) Another is sampling words or expressions, thereby creating heterolingual islands in an otherwise linguistically unform text. Unfortunately, for one novel that successfully orchestrates languages into an organic whole, weaving several strands into the fabric of the dominant language, a feat accomplished by Henry Roth in *Call it sleep* (Wirth-Nesher 1990), nine others fail to do so and end up reducing the dominated language to a handful of «mimetic clichés» (Sternberg 1981: 226) with no impact whatsoever on the text as a whole.

Self-translation, in comparison, moves the "minorized" language out of the shadow cast by the "major" language. It becomes visible for all who care to look. In Spain, minority writers from a century ago, like Pio Baroja or Camilo José Cela, could not have written in their native Basque or Galician even if they had wanted to; today, their heirs can (and do): no longer an exclusive means of literary expression, Spanish has become another string to their bow, which they are fee to use (or not) for self-translating work conceived in Basque or Galician. In that sense, I feel, the glass of self-translation is half full rather than half empty. By developing literacy,

empowering minorities and visibilizing formerly invisible languages, post-vernacular self-translations become an exercise in inclusive democracy.

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Abstract

RAINIER GRUTMAN

Post-vernacular Self-Translation: Bringing Languages Back from the Brink

This article examines the complex relationship between self-translation and linguistic diversity. It proceeds in three steps. First, self-translation can be seen as a vector of diversity because it involves a larger number of source languages than regular (allographic) book translations, which happen from but a handful of languages. The opposite view can be taken as well, however, when we realize that the dominant practice of L2 "supra-self-translating" into acquired, but more widespread or more prestigious languages, results in a reduction of said variety, with now the number of target languages being extremely restricted. While the first of these claims (pro-diversity) may have been overly optimistic, its antithesis leads to more pessimism than is perhaps warranted. A third, dialectical, step is required to "lift" the opposition between encouraging and discouraging diversity. Hence the idea of "post-vernacular" self-translation as a way of compensating for, or at least mitigating, the shortcomings of self-translation in terms of diversity.

Though less common and therefore less studied, this last scenario is perhaps more exciting insofar as it shows the potential of self-translation as a form of collective empowerment (and not merely a tool for individual self-promotion.) Not so long ago, speakers of fragilized or endangered languages that no longer functioned as full-fledged vernaculars in everyday life but have become «post-vernacular» (Shandler), felt that they had no choice but to become translingual writers in a "major" language. For a variety of reasons (censorship, lack of standard grammar and spelling, their own limited literacy), publishing in their native or heritage language was hardly an option. The first quarter of our century has however witnessed a revival of some of these languages, with self-translation (which Shandler does not study) sometimes playing a not insignificant role for long-neglected languages that were/are on the brink of extinction. By developing literacy, empowering minorities and visibilizing formerly invisible languages, post-vernacular self-translation becomes an exercise in inclusive democracy.