



JHUMPA LAHIRI ON SELF-TRANSLATION: A Focus on Metaphors

MONICA TURCI

1. Introduction

This article looks at self-translation in a selection of Jhumpa Lahiri's works. Self-translation is discussed in the context of Lahiri's unusual career; a bilingual writer in English and Italian, she is the author of critical essays, translator from Bengali, Italian, Greek and Latin and, more recently, self-translator of her Italian works. Exposed to two languages – Bengali and English – since childhood, issues of translation have inhabited Lahiri's memories of growing up and have played a central role in the process of negotiating her linguistic, personal and professional identity and in her approach to self-translation. Theories and practice of translation and self-translation are debated in her critical essays and are a recurrent theme of her creative writings.

In 2015 Lahiri wilfully put on hold her successful writing career as an English author to move to Rome and immerse herself in Italian, a language she had been attracted to ever since her first trip to Italy. This move led to a revisitation of her childhood bilingual condition from the point of view of an adult, and has had lasting effects on her career, turning Lahiri into an acclaimed bilingual author¹. As a scholar and teacher, the exploration of her fractured linguistic identity has been unrelenting as is testified by self-reflexive pieces in both her creative and critical writings.

¹ This unusual career move has attracted the attention of the press. On this see L. Allardice's interview (2021) and T. Hadley's (2016) review of *In Other Words*.



This personal and professional context has played an important role in the self-translation of her Italian writings. Self-translation, defined by Lahiri as «the most complicated issue that I have faced thus far in my creative life» (2022: 56), is never treated as an abstract concept, rather one that is inextricably linked to issues of language learning, translation, bilingualism and linguistic identity. Lahiri has displayed different, indeed opposite, attitudes to self-translation: her resistance to self-translating *In altre parole* (*In Other Words*), her first creative work written in Italian and published in 2015, was later revisited and overturned in 2018, when, not without some initial hesitation, Lahiri resolved to self-translate into English *Dove mi trovo* (*Whereabouts*). This self-translation is the first of a long series; since then, Lahiri has continued, and still continues to this day, to self-translate her Italian works.

Besides attracting the attention of leading critics (cfr. Grutman 2018), self-translation in Lahiri has been a central theme of her self-reflexive pieces; these include:

- a paratextual initial note in the bilingual Italian / English edition of *In Other Words* for the explicit benefit of Lahiri's English-speaking audience in which she explains her reasons for commissioning the translation from a professional figure. Lahiri is well aware that this is an unusual decision and one that challenges readers' and critics' expectations as a bilingual author writing in a second language would be expected to self-translate towards her first language;
- a chapter of *In altre parole* entitled *L'adolescente peloso* (*The Hairy Adolescent*) that recounts her first failed attempt at self-translating. In *mise en abyme* fashion, this mirrors Lahiri's decision not to self-translate *In altre parole*;
- the critical essay in Lahiri's collection *Translating Myself and Others* entitled *Where I Find Myself* in which the author reflects on her first experience at self-translating. This piece was written while and after she completed her self-translation. It shows not just a change of mind, but also a different way of thinking self-translation.

In spite of their differences – *In Other Words* is a piece of creative autobiographical writing, *Translating Myself and Others* is a collection of critical essays – these two works have some points of contact: their theme is Lahiri's linguistic biography with particular reference to her encounter with

the Italian language, and, stylistically, metaphor is the foregrounded choice to illustrate this theme.

The term foregrounded is used here in the meaning deployed by stylistic scholarship and refers to the use of specific linguistic traits in a way that are meant to attract the reader's attention through the mechanism of deviation from the linguistic norm (Mukařovský 1977). Specifically, in Lahiri's case, the effect of deviation is connected to quantitative data. As will be shown in section three below, metaphors are unusually frequent throughout Lahiri's above mentioned works and most especially in *The Hairy Adolescent*. More importantly, metaphors are the way through which Lahiri conceptualises the Italian language:

If *In Other Words* needs a key, it's the book itself. I began with a metaphor that led me to another, and then another. [...] In the book, my slow but stubborn learning of Italian is a lake to cross, a wall to climb, an ocean to probe. A forest, a bridge, a child, a lover, a sweater, a building, a triangle. [...] Once my first attempt to write in Italian was behind me, I undertook another. From time to time new metaphors came to mind, even if I didn't look for them anymore (2022: 11).

Lahiri's use of metaphors to write about the Italian language is lexically and cognitively very varied, as exemplified in the above-quoted passage. Here attention will focus only on one type, i.e. language as a person (henceforth LANGUAGE IS A PERSON)². Before delving into its close analysis, section two briefly presents a selection of recent developments in metaphor studies in order to provide the theoretical background for the analysis that follows. It focuses on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and gives an illustration of a selection of relevant specialised terminology.

Section three is a close analysis of the LANGUAGE IS A PERSON metaphor. This specific metaphor is singled out for its connections with a pervasive non-deliberate metaphor through which Lahiri thinks herself in a relationship with language and for encompassing several and interrelated micrometaphors. As this section will show, micrometaphors form a network that activates connections between self-translation, translation, bilingualism and second language learning that dynamically unfold throughout Lahiri's linguistic biography. From a close reading, this article moves to general reflections that will briefly consider Lahiri's contribution to the present debate on self-translation.

² Conceptual metaphors and metaphor domains are indicated in small caps without capital letters.

2. Method and terminology

To provide a theoretical background for a close analysis of Lahiri's metaphors, this section briefly outlines a selection of key aspects of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth CMT), as well as introducing some specialised terminology. CMT is an umbrella term that refers to developments concerning the way metaphors and their effects are understood. As shown in the next section, it provides an appropriate and useful tool for the analysis of Lahiri's work.

CMT gained momentum in the sixties and has since represented the most influential approach to metaphor studies. In early stages, its main contribution was to counteract what at the time was the prevalent view on metaphor shared by scholars across several disciplines: by «rhetoricians who demoted metaphor to mere stylistic decoration, [by] logical positivists who dismissed it as meaningless emotive venting, and [by] romanticist critics who celebrated its poetic power to create and express the nondiscursive» (Stern 2008: 264). CMT has turned metaphor from a marginal subject in the fields of poetics and rhetoric into a central concern of linguistics and cognitive science. Of key importance for this shift and for the way CMT has since developed is the Lakoff and Johnson collaboration. This led to their pioneering, and still much quoted, study entitled *Metaphors We Live By* ([1980] 2003). As noted in the foreword, the authors «had discovered linguistic evidence showing that metaphor is pervasive in everyday language and thought» and «shared the intuition that [methaphor is] a matter of central concern, perhaps the key to giving an adequate account of understanding» (ix). Metaphors' role in providing «a fundamental scheme by which people conceptualise the world and their own activities» (Gibbs 2008: 3) continues to be a central aspect in current critical approaches, and also one that is particularly significant for Lahiri's understanding of her experience with languages. In an attempt to explain to her audience why she decided to start to write in Italian, Lahiri provides a testimony of metaphors' central role: «I began with a metaphor that led me to another, and then another. That was how my thinking unfolded» (2022: 11, my italics, M.T.). For Lahiri, metaphors provide a way to conceptualise her project to write in Italian and, as will be seen, self-translation, which is one of the main consequences of this project.

Lakoff and Johnson's work has also introduced a rigorous and replicable methodology to analyse metaphors that has enabled connections between metaphor studies and stylistics (cfr. Steen 2014) leading to a wealth of case studies that have inspired the following close reading. Lakoff and Johnson's method is based on the existence of two domains: «the target domain, which is constituted by the immediate subject matter, and the source domain, in which important metaphorical reasoning takes place and that provides the source concepts used in that reasoning» (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 266). The target corresponds to what is unfamiliar, abstract or complex. This is rendered familiar, concrete or simple through the source domain. Underlying the relationship between target and source domains is the fact that meanings of the source domain are different from those of the target domain. With reference to the metaphor LANGUAGE IS A PERSON, the target is 'language', an abstract system of signs³ that is rendered familiar through the source domain 'person'.

More specifically the metaphor LANGUAGE IS A PERSON has the following characteristics:

- it connects and de-automatises a pervasive non-deliberate conventional metaphorical expression found in Lahiri's works;
- it is a megametaphor.

Non-deliberate metaphors are not immediately recognisable because they have become part of already existing language-expressions and thought-conceptualisations. They are not remarkable from a stylistic viewpoint (Steen 2016: 318), nevertheless they contribute to shaping thought patterns⁴. In Lahiri's work a frequent non-deliberate metaphor is triggered through references to Lahiri describing herself in a relationship with language. 'Relationship' is an instance of nominalisation «a word -formation process [...] whereby nouns are derived from verbs by nominalizing suffixes» (Wales 1989: 321). One of its effects is encapsulation of meanings: «[B]y nouning the process, the writer can reflect the fact that s/he has negotiated and established the meaning of the clause centred around the process – in

³ On language as an abstract system of symbols, see C. Pierce on types of signs in Selden, Widdowson (1993: 105).

⁴ For an extensive definition of deliberate and non-deliberate metaphors, see Steen (2023) and Prandi & Rossi (2022).

other words, that meaning can now be treated as existing» (Thompson 1996: 167). If, on the one hand, Lahiri's use of the word 'relationship' has been "normalised" by a long-standing tradition of critical approaches to language and linguistic biographies⁵, on the other hand its metaphoricity emerges at the level of lexis. The definitions listed in the Cambridge Dictionary for 'relationship' include connection between abstract things (definition B2), between people (definition B1 and c), but not the connection between abstract things and people⁶. By setting up a relation of identification between language and person, the source domain of the conceptual metaphor – i.e. PERSON – functions as a lexical point of entry to unpack the meanings of this non-deliberate metaphor as concerns what kind of relationship Lahiri has with language and what kind of person is language identified with.

Megametaphors are different from isolated linguistic metaphorical expressions; «they are part of extensive patterns [...] running through and structuring the entire text or discourse as connective forces» (Virdis 2022: 62). They function as conceptual devices that provide coherence for single metaphors or micrometaphors. As will be illustrated in the next section, some extracts from *In altre parole* and *Translating Myself and Others* show that megametaphor LANGUAGE IS A PERSON encompasses linguistically and conceptually related micrometaphors that, through a complex network of similarities and differences, provide an illustration of the way self-translation as a concept unfolds.

3. Metaphors in Lahiri's work: an analysis

Introducing micrometaphors in Lahiri's *In altre parole* and *Translating Myself and Others*

This section deals with the types of micrometaphors in Lahiri's works. As noted above, these are linguistically and cognitively connected to the megametaphor LANGUAGE IS A PERSON.

⁵ Critical approaches founded on connections between human beings' life experience and language include works in sociolinguistics, identity studies, philosophy of language, psycholinguistics and social studies.

⁶ Cfr. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/relationship> (last access: 20-08-2025).

Micrometaphors cohere to the LANGUAGE IS A PERSON metaphor through the semantics of its target and source domains, that is to say 'language' and 'person' respectively. Both these terms activate hyponymy «a relationship between the senses of lexical items of 'inclusion'» (Wales 1997: 222). Specifically, 'language' and 'person' are hypernyms, or umbrella terms, which have the potential to contain hyponyms – that is to say, subordinate terms that designate types or instances of the hypernym. In Lahiri's works, the hypernym 'person' – the source of the above-mentioned megametaphor – includes the hyponyms 'child', 'lover' and 'acquaintance', just to mention a few. In this instance the semantic relation between hypernym and hyponym presupposes general knowledge about human relationships. As concerns the target domain, the semantic relation between hypernym 'language' and its hyponyms is defined by Lahiri's complex linguistic biography, as briefly outlined at the beginning of this article. Hypernym 'language' with reference to Lahiri encompasses three classes of hyponyms:

- types of language: Bengali (the language of Lahiri's family), English (Lahiri's first language) and Italian (her third language);
- experiences with the above languages, which, taken as a whole, form Lahiri's linguistic identity. In chronological order, these include bilingualism (Bengali and English); Lahiri's translations from Bengali into English; the process of learning Italian and of writing in Italian; her translations from Italian into English, her reactions to translations of her works by others and, finally, her self-translations;
- linguistic artefacts; Lahiri's production in English and Italian, including bilingual editions of her works translated by others, self-translations, her translations of other authors and critical essays on translation and self-translation.

The LANGUAGE IS A PERSON megametaphor and its micrometaphors are a recurrent feature of Lahiri's production; more particularly they provide the structure for the narrative of *L'adolescente peloso* centred on Lahiri's resistance to self-translate; they are found, albeit not so frequently, in *Where I Find Myself*, which focuses on Lahiri's progress towards self-translation, and they also extend into the works that contain these chapters. They form a network of interlinked and comparable metaphors that construct a narrative in which self-translation emerges as a dynamic and fluid concept related to the specific contexts of Lahiri's linguistic biography

and in connection with her experience with languages, particularly translation and second language learning.

**From *In altre parole* to *Translating Myself and Others*:
a metaphorical journey from resistance to acceptance of
self-translation**

In altre parole (henceforth IAP) is the autobiographical recounting of a specific moment during which Italy and the Italian language become pivotal elements in Lahiri's life. After almost ten years since its publication, IAP remains a complex work that defies categorisation; it has been classified in a spectrum of different genres – a short story, a novel, a piece of therapeutic writing (Reichart 2017), «a personal diary or journal, [...] a short essay on the values of Italian language and literature» (Adami 2017: 87) – and through different forms of autobiography, including language memoir (Ray 2022, Grutman 2018) and linguistic autobiography (Lahiri 2015).

Regarding the autobiographical genre, as the above definitions suggest, in IAP the Italian language plays a central role. It is not surprising therefore that the beginning of this work is marked by a frequent use of the non-deliberate metaphor that portrays Lahiri in a relationship with the Italian language. In the following quotations the author describes her first contact with Italy and Italian during her short visit to Florence: «from the start my relationship with Italy is as auditory as it is visual» (2015: 13); the Italian language,

[S]embra una lingua con cui devo avere una relazione. Sembra una persona che incontro un giorno per caso, con cui sento subito un legame, un affetto. [...] Sento una connessione insieme a un distacco. Una vicinanza insieme a una lontananza. Quello che provo è qualcosa di fisico, di inspiegabile. Suscita una smania indiscreta, assurda. Una tensione squisita. Un colpo di fulmine (IAP: 22-23).

The non-deliberate metaphorical relationship between Lahiri and the Italian language is initially elaborated through the micrometaphor ITALIAN LANGUAGE IS A LOVER. «Mi sono innamorata» writes Lahiri «ma ciò che amo resta indifferente. La lingua non avrà mai bisogno di me» (IAP: 22).

The quotations above provide further clarifications of the source domain LOVER that characterise the type of love relationship as romantic love («un colpo di fulmine»), typically physical («sono attratta»), that cannot be explained rationally («resta un mistero; ciò che amo resta indiffer-

ente») and is riven with contradictions, in which closeness and distance between the lover/language and Lahiri co-exist («[U]na vicinanza insieme a una lontananza»).

It would be tempting to interpret these metaphors as instances of the well-known and much exploited myth ever since the Grand Tour of the Anglophone female visitor romantically engaging with Italy⁷. However, when considered in the context of Lahiri's work, these provide the beginning of a dialogical exchange of cognitively related metaphors, which, through their reciprocal similarities and differences, contribute reflections on self-translation.

Metaphors in *L'adolescente peloso* are in this respect significant. This chapter is wholly devoted to self-translation and sees the introduction of the micrometaphor ITALIAN LANGUAGE IS A SMALL CHILD. This re-configures Lahiri's relation with the Italian language from one of romantic love to one of maternal love. ITALIAN LANGUAGE IS A SMALL CHILD is central to the narrative of the whole chapter, which approaches resistance to self-translation through the recounting of a specific event. While staying in Rome, Lahiri is asked to contribute an essay for a literary festival. At this stage she had not used English for a year and it appears natural to her to write and deliver the piece in Italian. However, as this is going to be published in a bilingual Italian-English version, Lahiri has to face the dilemma of either having it translated or translating it herself. Against her better judgement, obeying her sense of duty and following the advice of her husband, who urges her to keep control of her writing, she makes her first attempt at self-translating. The chapter closes with Lahiri's reflections on the bilingual publication of her talk, which, far from providing a conclusion is, as we shall see, a new beginning of another way of thinking about self-translation.

The micrometaphor ITALIAN LANGUAGE IS A SMALL CHILD, in conjunction with the non-deliberate metaphor Lahiri has a relationship with languages, provides an elaboration of the source domain – SMALL CHILD – and portrays Lahiri in the role of metaphorical mother:

Voglio difendere il mio italiano, che tengo in braccio come un neonato. Voglio coccolarlo. Deve dormire, deve alimentarsi, deve crescere. Rispetto all'italiano, il mio inglese mi sembra un adolescente peloso, puzzolente. Vattene, voglio dirgli. Non molestare il tuo fratellino, sta riposando. Non è una

⁷ Cfr. E.M. Forster's novels *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) and *A Room with a View* (1908).

creatura che può correre e può giocare. Non è un ragazzo spensierato, vigoroso, indipendente come te (IAP: 91).

This citation provides a further specification of the source domain. Besides a metaphorical mother, this child has an older sibling, the English language, who is identified as «the hairy, smelly adolescent». The terms of this identification contribute to define the relationship between mother and the two siblings and establish that the small child is mother's favourite and the one she has a particularly close relationship with:

Adesso, mentre traduco me stessa, mi sento la madre di due figli. Mi accorgo di avere cambiato il mio atteggiamento nei confronti della lingua, [...] Provo una passione ancora più intensa, più pura, più trascendente per i miei figli. La maternità è un legame viscerale, un amore incondizionato, una devozione che va oltre l'attrazione e la compatibilità (IAP: 91-92).

Lahiri's relationship to the Italian language is described through that «visceral bond» that connects the body of a mother to her newborn, which is further mentioned, though indirectly, in the chapter entitled *Il secondo esilio* that describes Lahiri's return to America. By framing her journey within reminiscences of her first separation from her children when they were very young, Lahiri's following passage is not so much about leaving Italy but rather the painful, physical detachment from the Italian language, her metaphorical child:

Torniamo alla metafora materna. Penso alle prime occasioni in cui ho dovuto lasciare i miei figli a casa, appena dopo la nascita. Provavo, all'epoca, un'ansia tremenda. Mi sentivo in colpa, anche se questi brevi momenti di separazione erano normali, importanti sia per me sia per loro. [...] Eppure, ora come allora, sono acutamente consapevole di un distacco fisico, doloroso. Come se una parte di me non ci fosse più (IAP: 95).

The visceral bond between Lahiri and the Italian language contrasts with one of the elaborations of the micrometaphor ITALIAN LANGUAGE IS A LOVER, which represents the target as estranged from Lahiri's body: «Nel sangue, dentro le ossa, questa lingua non c'è» (IAP: 42). Comparatively, the introduction of the micrometaphor connected to her refusal to self-translate *In altre parole* causes a re-positioning of Lahiri in relation to the Italian language: from physical disconnection to complete bodily identification.

In *Where I Find Myself* included in *Translating Myself and Others* (henceforth TMO) different elaborations of the same metaphors found in IAP and

the introduction of new ones illustrate Lahiri's change of attitude towards self-translation. This is a complex and eclectic essay that is structured in three parts each of which represents a stage in the self-translation process.

The first part is a self-reflexive narrative recording the writing of *Dove mi trovo*; it contains reflections on the possibility of either its translation or self-translation. At this stage, Lahiri's attitude to self-translation remains one of uncertainty. The second part, initially written in Italian and later self-translated, consists of random notes taken while self-translating. The third part is written during the final proofs of *Whereabouts*; it deals with some translation problems and the way these were approached, as well as containing final considerations about self-translation. Though still based on Lahiri's personal experience, the latter two parts depart from the autobiographical genre to adopt a critical style. All three parts are characterised by an interplay of metaphors of closeness and distance between the Italian language and Lahiri that maps her altered attitude from resistance to performing self-translation.

In the first part, Lahiri begins to think about the translation of *Dove mi trovo*, as inevitable and unnatural as «a bulb that sprouts too early in mid-winter» (TMO: 71); here lexical choices such as the verbs 'conceived'⁸ and 'born' recall the semantic field of the maternal metaphor that represents the backbone of Lahiri's narrative about resistance to self-translation. However, the visceral bond that characterised the relationship between Lahiri and the Italian language is repeated only to be undermined. *Dove mi trovo* is still described as born of Lahiri's «flesh and blood», but it is also «an inherently foreign creature, both recognizable and unrecognizable» (TMO: 73). Here Lahiri's metaphorical creature – her book – is described through oppositions that create a mixture of connection and disconnection with Lahiri and that are reminiscent of one the elaborations of the micro-metaphor ITALIAN LANGUAGE IS A LOVER. In this part, along with the maternal metaphor, the micrometaphor, ITALIAN BOOK IS A PATIENT appears for the first time. Lahiri employs this metaphor to reflect on translation and while considering the possibility of self-translating her book: «In order to undertake a translation [...], one must understand the particulars of the book in question, just as the surgeon, ideally, needs to study her patient's

⁸ The meanings of the verb 'conceive' include not just «to invent» (definition c2) but also «to become pregnant, or to cause a baby to begin to form» (definition c2), cfr. <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/conceive>> (last access: 20-08-2025).

organism before entering the operating room» (TMO, 72). The source domain introduces a different cognitive frame that has a knock-on effect on Lahiri's relationship with language, in particular as regards the connections between language and her body. In previous examples, Lahiri's body emerged from elaborations of the metaphor as emotionally connected or disconnected with language, here it is the language's body that becomes the object of Lahiri's cognition.

In reflecting on the possibility of self-translation, Lahiri asks the following question: «What surgeon, in need of an operation, would take the scalpel to herself? Wouldn't she entrust the procedure to another pair of hands?» (TMO: 73) The visceral bond between Lahiri's body and language merges with the micrometaphor *ITALIAN BOOK IS A PATIENT* and leads to a question in which Lahiri is paradoxically identified simultaneously with the surgeon and the body of the patient. The first part of the essay concludes with Lahiri's leaving Italy and returning to Princeton, a geographical distancing that makes it possible for her to move towards self-translation.

Along with a journey away from the Italian language, the second part also features instances of metaphorical distancing. Not only do lexical markers connected to the maternal metaphor disappear completely, but as Lahiri confronts the act of self-translation, she comes to understand Paul Valéry's idea that a work of art is never finished but only abandoned and, that «there is no ideal phase of gestation, nor of birth» (TMO: 76). The maternal relationship is momentarily obliterated, while the micrometaphor *ITALIAN BOOK IS A PATIENT* is further elaborated. Along with an operation, self-translation requires the patient to undergo an injection of radioactive dye so the surgeon/self-translator can locate with precision even the smallest «states of imperfection» (TMO: 76). Once the self-translation begins, identification between Lahiri and Italian is erased and the Italian book/patient becomes the object of her detached and impassive gaze. At this stage, «[A] true separation» (TMO: 78) occurs. While at work in a Princeton library during the last stages of the self-translation of *Dove mi trovo*, Lahiri realises that she forgot to bring her Italian copy; the disconnection is now complete, the self-translator, unlike the mother in IAP, is oblivious of the child who is left behind.

The disconnection of the mother from her creation does not imply the end of the motherhood metaphor, rather a shift of focus; the mother might disappear and be replaced by the impassive and distant self-translator, but the siblings survive and thrive. While attention moves away

from the mother, the micrometaphor ITALIAN AND ENGLISH ARE SIBLINGS is developed. By placing ITALIAN AND ENGLISH as target domain this metaphor addresses directly the very stuff of self-translation that can in this way be elaborated upon through the source domain. The two siblings were already mentioned in *L'adolescente peloso*; initially they are described in a confrontational and destructive relationship, with the older one – the English language – always about to overpower the younger one. However, once the bilingual English/Italian version of Lahiri's talk is printed, a truce is declared: «Vedo il testo inglese in blu sulla sinistra, quello Italiano, in nero, sulla destra. L'inglese è muto, abbastanza tranquillo. Stampati, rilegati, i fratelli si tollerano. Sono, almeno per il momento, in tregua» (IAP: 93). In the essay entitled *In praise of echo* (TMO: 44-59) the connection between the siblings and self-translation is made explicit: «To self-translate is to create two originals: twins, far from identical, separately conceived by the same person, who will eventually exist side by side» (TMO: 57). In the final part of *Where I Find Myself*, once the process of self-translating is finished, the siblings' metaphor is repeated and through an elaboration of the source domain provides a further development of Lahiri's reflections on self-translation. «[T]hey [the siblings] have nourished and been nourished by the other» (TMO: 81). From a relationship of peaceful but passive coexistence, the siblings are now actively engaged in a relationship of mutual cooperation in which each of them has contributed to the growth and well-being of the other. The metaphoric mother is reduced to a «passive bystander» (TMO: 83) and the accomplishment of the self-translation is no longer about Lahiri translating herself, rather a reciprocal and beneficial dialogue between two languages.

4.

Beyond metaphors towards an open conclusion

This final section moves from the analysis of the intricate network of linguistically and cognitively connected metaphors about and around self-translation to briefly consider the contribution of Lahiri's work to the present critical debate.

Following Anselmi's (2012: 11-15, 17-20) description of the state of the art of self-translation, one way to describe Lahiri's contribution is to see her work in relation to two main critical tendencies in self-translation

studies: a recent one that sees self-translation as a sub-field of translation, and a more traditional and long-standing one that treats self-translation as a literary phenomenon to be investigated with reference to each single case (Anselmi 2012: 11).

The above analysis of metaphors shows that Lahiri's position in this respect is far from straight-forward. On the one hand, Lahiri seems to side with those that see self-translation mainly as a translation phenomenon. The surgeon/ translator metaphors conflate descriptions of Lahiri's translation and self-translation that are reminiscent of the way Samuel Beckett and Nancy Houston – just to name two examples – have used the term translation to actually define their self-translation. The erasure of the 'self' through which these two different practices become the same process is also testified by micrometaphors that characterise self-translation as a change in Lahiri's relationship with language: from alternating feelings of emotional and physical connection and disconnection, to a cognitive and detached examination of language and to the final negation of any active role of the self-translator.

On the other hand, the metaphor of almost identical twins used to represent source and target texts aligns Lahiri's contribution to critical receptions from literary studies that, against the taxonomies proposed by translation theory, suggest the equality of original and translation as partaking of the same act of creation by the author/self-translator (Anselmi 2012: 20-21).

As a whole Lahiri's reflections contribute a perspective on self-translation that is dynamic and shifting: from the impossibility of self-translating to its realisation via a necessary process of distancing from the language, and to the final erasure of the self-translator. This last move has far-reaching effects; in a similar way in which Roland Barthes' idea of the death of the author (1967) has enabled critical discourses on the birth of the reader (cfr. Burke 1998), Lahiri's demise of the self-translator does not mark a critical end point; rather it is an invitation to further develop critical approaches in which self-translation is viewed in relation to second language learning as a life-long and life-changing process.

Bibliography

- Adami E. (2017), *Identity, Split-Self and Translingual Narrative in Jhumpa Lahiri*, "CoSMo. Comparative Studies in Modernism", 11, pp. 85-96.
- Allardice L. (2021), *Jhumpa Lahiri: 'I've always existed in a kind of linguistic exile'*, "The Guardian", cfr. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/may/01/jhumpa-lahiri-ive-always-existed-in-a-kind-of-linguistic-exile>> (last access: 05-05-2025).
- Anselmi S. (2012), *On Self-Translation. An Exploration in Self-Translators' Teloi and Strategies*, LED Edizioni Universitarie, Milano.
- Barthes R. ([1967]1977), *The Death of the Author*, in: *Image Music Text. Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang*, New York, pp. 142-148, cfr. <<https://archive.org/details/TheDeathOfTheAuthor/mode/2uped.or>> (last access: 05-05-2025).
- Burke S. (1998), *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Gibbs Jr. R.W. (2008), *Metaphor and Thought. The State of the Art*, in: R.W. Gibbs Jr. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 3-13.
- Grutman R. (2018), *Jhumpa Lahiri and Amara Lakhous: Resisting Self-Translation in Rome*, "Testo e Senso", 19, pp. 1-18.
- Hadley T. (2016), *In Other Words by Jhumpa Lahiri review – a Pulitzer prize winner gives up writing and speaking in English*, "The Guardian", cfr. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/30/in-other-words-jhumpa-lahiri-review-learning-italian>> (last access: 05-05-2025).
- Lahiri J. (2015), *In altre parole*, Guanda, Parma.
- Lahiri J. (2016), *In Other Words*, transl. by A. Goldstein, Bloomsbury, London.
- Lahiri J. (2018), *Dove mi trovo*, Guanda, Parma.
- Lahiri J. (2021), *Whereabouts*, transl. by the author, Bloomsbury, London.
- Lahiri J. (2022), *Translating Myself and Others*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Lakoff G., Johnson M. ([1980]2003), *Metaphors We Live By*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Mukařovský J. (1977), *On Poetic Language*, in: J. Burbank, P. Steiner (eds.), *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays*, Yale University Press, New Haven ct, pp. 1-64.
- Prandi M., Rossi M. (2022), *Researching Metaphors: Towards a Comprehensive Account*, Routledge, London.

- Ray S. (2022), *Translation, Poetics of Instability, and the Postmonolingual Condition in Jhumpa Lahiri's In Other Words*, "Modern Fiction Studies", 68, pp. 544-566.
- Reichart D. (2017), *Radicata a Roma: La svolta transculturale nella scrittura italoфона nomade di Jhumpa Lahiri*, in: G. Marina (ed.), *Il pensiero letterario come fondamento di una testa ben fatta*, Roma TRE Press, Roma, pp. 219-247.
- Selden R., Widdowson P. (1993), *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead.
- Steen G. (2014), *Metaphor and Style*, in: P. Stockwell, S. Whiteley (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 315-328.
- Steen G. (2016), *Metaphor: Metaphor and Style Through Genre, with Illustrations from C.A. Duffy's Rupture*, in: V. Sotirova (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Stylistics*, Bloomsbury, London, pp. 308-324.
- Steen G. (2023), *Slowing Metaphor Down. Elaborating Deliberate Metaphor Theory*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam.
- Stern J. (2008), *Metaphor, Semantics, and Context*, in: R.W. Gibbs Jr. (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 262-279.
- Thompson G. (1996), *Introducing Functional Grammar*, Arnold, London.
- Virdis D.F. (2022), *Ecological Stylistics. Ecostylistic Approaches to Discourse of Nature, the Environment and Sustainability*, Palgrave, London.
- Wales K. (1997), *A Dictionary of Stylistics*, Longman, London.

Abstract

MONICA TURCI

Jhumpa Lahiri on Self-Translation: a Focus on Metaphors

This article looks at self-translation in a selection of Jhumpa Lahiri's works including *In Other Words* (*In altre parole*) and *Translating Myself and Others*. Defined by Lahiri as the most complicated issue that she has ever faced in her creative life, self-translation continues to be at the centre of attention of her work and life, as it is inextricably linked to issues of linguistic identity. This article uses aspects of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to provide a comparative analysis of one of the most pervasive metaphors in the above-mentioned works – LANGUAGE IS A PERSON – and its micrometaphors. Analysis of these shows that a network of interlinked metaphors constructs a narrative in which self-translation emerges as a dynamic and fluid concept related to the specific context of Lahiri's biography, particularly to her experiences with translation and with learning and writing in Italian

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *In altre parole*, *Translating Myself and Others*, self-translation, conceptual metaphor theory, translation.