



SELF-TRANSLATING IN-BETWEENNESS: From *Life on the Hyphen* (1994) to *Vidas en Vilo* (2000) by Gustavo Pérez-Firmat

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1. Self-translating an essay

In the 2013 volume *Autotraduzione e riscrittura* Trish Van Bolderen remarked that «la ricerca sull'autotraduzione è notevolmente sbilanciata, in quanto gli studiosi hanno privilegiato i testi letterari lasciando di fatto nell'invisibilità l'autotraduzione di altre tipologie testuali» (Van Bolderen 2013: 158). She was referring to non-fiction writing, such as the academic texts studied by Verena Jung in her *English-German Self-Translation of Academic Texts and its Relevance for Translation Theory and Practice* (2002). However, this imbalance also extends to literary essays. If we take into account the main works discussed in four collections of articles on self-translation published since 2013 (Lagarde *et al.* 2013, Cordingley 2013; Ceccherelli *et al.* 2013, Lushenkova Foscolo *et al.* 2019), we find out that 37 from a total of 73 works are novels or shorts stories, 21 books of poetry, 8 autobiographical texts or diaries and 5 theater plays. Just one of the papers of these four books is mainly concerned with self-translated philosophic, academic or polemical essays¹:

¹ I must stress that these numbers include only the texts that constitute the main focus of the article and not the total number of quoted works.

	Novels and other narra- tive texts	Poetry	Theater	Autobio- graphical texts	Essays
Total	37	21	5	8	1
Percentage	50,6%	28,7%	6,8%	10,9%	2,7%

This corpus is far too limited to have real scientific weight; it nevertheless indicates that essays have received less critical attention than narrative or lyrical genres, as an overlook at Eva Gentes' bibliography on self-translation also seems to confirm (Gentes 2022). Is it because self-translation of essays is less common? Or, on the contrary, because it is deemed as too commonplace – after all, throughout history, countless thinkers and philosophers have written directly or self-translated themselves in a language that was not their mother tongue, be it Latin, French or, nowadays, English? I suspect that the consideration of essayistic writing as less personal and stylistically creative than narrative, lyrical or theatrical writing has led to the belief that self-translated essays don't present the kind of linguistic variations that make their fictional counterparts so attractive. This assumption is highly questionable: since Montaigne's famous statement in the preface of his *Essays* («I am myself the subject of my book», Montaigne 2012: 3), the genre is concerned as much with autobiographical soul-searching than with abstract speculation. Whereas essays often lack the density of puns, metaphors and other linguistic devices which are to be abundantly found in fiction and poetry, the conceptual vocabulary they use poses specific challenges to (self)-translation. As the *Dictionary of untranslatables* shows, linguistic diversity brings into question the Greek association of philosophy and thinking with a universal logos. Human beings think with words that differ not only in sound, but also in their «rationally alleged (or allegedly rational) meaning, that is to say: universal and conceptual» (Cassin 2016: 30). Essays, precisely, often showcase the individual and cultural background of rational narratives. As in Montaigne's seminal work, they mark the subject's effort to take personal hold of the general ideas and beliefs at the core of a cultural heritage. It is on the light of the close interconnection between intellectual analysis, autobiographical experience and community-building that I would like to examine Perez-Firmat Spanish self-translation of his essay *Life on the Hypen: the Cuban-American Way* (1994).

Born in La Havana in 1951, Pérez-Firmat went into exile with his family following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. He attended high school in Miami, where he later obtained a PhD in Comparative Literature and he then taught in North Carolina and Columbia University. Probably one of the most prominent Hispanic scholars of the last decades in the US, he is the author of numerous essays, academic monographies and books of poems, written mostly in English, but also in Spanish and even in Spanglish². As most part of his work, *Life on the Hyphen* focuses on the issues of exile, hybridity and multilingualism. It offers an insightful analysis of several relevant figures of what Pérez-Firmat calls the «1.5 Cuban generation», that is to say, singers, actors and writers who were born in Cuba but deployed most part of their lives and careers in the US, thus contributing to the creation of an original and hyphenated Cuban-American culture. As one-and-a-half himself, Firmat is perfectly aware of the autobiographical scope of his endeavor: «The book's map of Cuban America certainly reflects what one calls a personal agenda. At least is not a hidden agenda. I have tried to fashion a narrative that allows me to make sense of the general circumstances of my own life» (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 31).

Arguably Firmat's most influential essay, *Life on the Hyphen* is the only book, along with his memoir *Next year in Cuba*, that he decided to self-translate into his mother tongue. Published six years later than the original English version, *Vidas en vilo* (2000) is a «consecutive self-translation» (Grutman 2014: 328) which takes place in the context of a shift in the author's bilingualism. As Firmat explains in *Tongue ties* (2003), whereas he remained Spanish-dominant through high school, he soon felt uneasy about Spanish, his mother tongue, but not about English, his second language:

I'm relieved to be judged by my English rather than by my Spanish sentences. Not necessarily because I "do" English better, but because I don't take personally ungrammaticalities and infelicities in English [...] Criticize my English, and your words will never hurt me. Criticize my Spanish, and you're

² Main works in English: *Carolina Cuban* (1987), *Bilingual Blues* (1995), *Scar Tissue* (2005), *The Last Exile* (2016), *The Mayberry Chronicles* (2021) (poetry); *Idle Fictions* (1982), *Literature and Liminality* (1986), *The Cuban Condition* (1989), *Life on the Hyphen* (1994), *My Own Private Cuba* (1999), *Tongue Ties* (2003), *The Havana Habit* (2010), *A Cuban in Mayberry* (2014) (essay); *Next Year in Cuba* (1995) (memoir); *Anything but Love* (2000) (novel). Main works in Spanish: *Equivocaciones* (1989), *Viejo verde* (2019) (poetry); *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio* (2000), *Saber de ausencia* (2022). Some of Firmat's poems extensively use code-mixing.

attacking me, my deepest convictions and theories about myself (Pérez-Firmat 2003: 161).

However, when the author turned fifty, a personal crisis in his American life persuaded him «that it wasn't too late to reach out and back to my mother tongue» (Pérez-Firmat 2003: 161). He then wrote in Spanish *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio* (2000), a «combination of language proficiency test and belated love poem» and set to rewrite «*Life on the Hyphen* in Spanish, a therapeutic self-translation» (Pérez-Firmat 2003: 161). If the original work constitutes a study on what it means to live and create between cultures, its self-translation further develops the intimate dimension of this reflection by reassessing Firmat's status as a writer in Spanish and therefore by trying to reestablish a balance between the author's two languages. For Firmat, self-translating his essay is all but an academic exercise in finding linguistic equivalences between abstract concepts; it involves, on the contrary, the very definition of his cultural and intimate identity.

2. Self-translating translation

The change of the title from *Life on the Hyphen* to *Vidas en vilo* may suggest an «opaque self-translation» that presents itself as the original text and conceals its derivative origin (Dasilva 2016: 104). On the contrary, *Vidas en vilo* is preceded by a short preface in which Firmat stresses that the Spanish text is the self-translation of the original English text and sums up some of its objectives:

Una manera de combatir la invisibilidad a la que nos ha querido relegar la mal llamada "Revolución Cubana" – y a la que ahora nos quieren relegar ciertos sectores de la sociedad norteamericana – es señalando el valor de nuestra vida en vilo, rescatando y estudiando el acervo de la cultura – alta, baja y mediana – engendrado por el encuentro de lo cubano con lo norteamericano (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 13)³.

³ «One way to fight against the invisibility to which the misnamed "Cuban Revolution" has tried to relegate us - and to which certain sectors of American society now want to relegate us - is by pointing out the value of our lives on tenterhooks, rescuing and

If (self-)translators have often been condemned to invisibility (cfr. Venuti 2018), Firmat considers his Spanish version as a way to make visible the cultural achievements of the Cuban-Americans to a new readership. Self-translation being a conspicuous example of interculturality, one may have thought that the fact that *Life on the Hyphen* deals with culture and language contact would facilitate the adaptation from one language to the other. This is not so, for the very symbol of hybridity that gives its title to the original turns out to be untranslatable in Spanish:

Puesto que *Life on the Hyphen* se centraba en ciertos mecanismos de adaptación al idioma inglés y a la cultura norteamericana, no siempre ha sido posible trasladar literalmente todos sus conceptos. Así sucede con el *hyphen*, el guión o la rayita que se emplea en Estados Unidos como símbolo de hibridez étnica, y que motiva el título de la versión original del libro. Un cubanoamericano, en Norteamérica, es un *Cuban-American*: la rayita que une (y separa) los dos gentilicios, ese puente que también es pantano, marca el lugar de contacto y contagio entre las dos culturas. Invisible en español, la rayita no pierde su potencia hibridizante; *Vidas en vilo* está escrito desde, hacia y sobre esa rayita (Firmat 2000: 13-14)⁴.

This last statement is somewhat striking: according to Firmat, the Spanish self-translation is mainly conceived in function of a punctuation mark that does not even exist in the target language. The author's chief interest in his book doesn't lie on the Cuban or the American culture, but on what unites or sets them apart – an ambiguous and complex dynamics expressed by the hyphen that the Spanish orthography conceals under a seemingly unproblematic agglutination. Firmat's attitude recalls that of Vilem Flusser, a multilingual philosopher for whom the creative principle at work in his self-translations was activated «by that which opposes it-

studying the cultural heritage – high, low and medium – generated by the encounter between the Cuban and the American» [my translation – M.E.].

⁴ «Since *Life on the Hyphen* focused on certain mechanisms of adaptation to the English language and American culture, it has not always been possible to translate literally all its concepts. This is the case with the hyphen, the dash or little line that is used in the United States as a symbol of ethnic hybridity, and which motivates the title of the original version of the book. A cubanoamericano, in North America, is a Cuban-American: the little line that joins (and separates) the two demonyms, that bridge that is also a swamp, marks the place of contact and contagion between the two cultures. Invisible in Spanish, the little line does not lose its hybridizing power; *Vidas en vilo* is written from, to and over that little line» [my translation – M.E.].

self to an easy transfer into another language, that which is not so much strictly untranslatable but which by its near untranslatability compels the translator-writer to find an original solution» (Guldin 2013: 98). Firmat's alternative for the untranslatable English title allows him, just like Flusser, to explore new dimensions of his main subject: the Spanish expression "estar en vilo" means 'to be without a physical support or without stability' and 'to be worried and distressed'. Whereas the English title indicates a location – metaphoric as it were –, the Spanish "vilo", on the contrary, suggests the absence of one. *Life on the hyphen* places the experience of in-betweenness in language; *Vidas en vilo*, in the psychological realm. Far from considering the "vilo" as an imperfect equivalent, Firmat makes of it an ever-present *leit-motif* in the Spanish version. In some cases, "vilo" replaces the untranslatable "hyphen"; in other passages, it appears in new contexts as a way of reaffirming the cohesion of the self-translated text – a cohesion that sets it apart from the English version:

Life on the **hyphen** can be anyone's prerogative, but it is the one-and-a-half's destiny (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 4)

Pero para los integrantes de la generación del medio, **el vilo** no es una elección sino un destino; justo o injusto, el "medio" es nuestro medio: **en vilo veritas** (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 18)

The Cuban-American, and in particular the one-and-a-half, is one of the possible forms that the Cuban **talent for hyphenation** can assume (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 16)

El **vilómano** one-and-a-half que se tambalea en la cuerda floja entro lo cubano y lo norteamericano, no ha dejado de ser cubano, aunque ya sea otra cosa (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 27)

Cuban-American culture begins in bed, on those rumpled satin sheets that by now have become an enduring American icon (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 45)

Su **vida en vilo** no empieza en la calle, en la casa o en la clase; empieza en la cama, sobre esas lustrosas sábanas que se han convertido en una de las imágenes más perdurables de la cultura norteamericana (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 53)

I find no contradiction or incompatibility between the Cuban condition and the Cuban-American way (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 81)

No veo incompatibilidad entre la **vida en vilo** y la condición cubana (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 88)

Through self-translation, Flusser's aim was not to be faithful to the original, but to overcome it (Guldin 2013: 99). The invisibility of the hyphen that Pérez-Firmat refers to could also be interpreted as a metaphor

for the very act of self-translating, which seems to obliterate the original text under a new interpretation. The changes introduced by Pérez-Firmat in the Spanish version are actually too numerous to be analyzed in detail: the titles of the chapters are systematically modified; whole paragraphs are suppressed; some of the short literary texts or “mambos” that the author inserts between chapters are written anew; the many word puns of the original are often replaced by entirely different ones and relocated elsewhere in the text. In the old and ongoing debate about self-translation as translation or as rewriting, Pérez-Firmat's Spanish version apparently falls into the latter category. All the alterations of the original I have quoted tend to give the impression that *Vidas en vilo* has been originally written in Spanish. In *Tongue ties* Pérez-Firmat criticizes Cabrera Infante's English self-translation of his Spanish book *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* and he blames for its flaws «the hybris that, almost inevitably, self-translation provokes». According to Firmat, «no writer wants to play second banana to another writer, and least of all to himself. As if the web of tongue ties were not obstacle enough, the temptation to tinker, to amend, to get it right or righter the second time around, will tend to alienate the self-translated work from its original» (Firmat 2003: 108). Was Pérez-Firmat himself the victim of this hybris that stems from the «ruthless desire» to affirm authorship and alienates the self-translator from the original text?

Contrary to this hypothesis, the author underlines that he has not intended to “dissimulate” the fact that *Vidas en vilo* is a translation:

Una de las ideas rectrices de *Vidas en vilo*, precisamente, es que la cultura cubanoamericana surge de un ímpetu traslaticio, de una vocación de traducción. Eliminar las huellas de tal proceso en mi propia escritura, aun si me fuese posible hacerlo, sería falsear el testimonio que quiero dar (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 14)⁵.

How can we conciliate this commitment with Pérez-Firmat's many non-canonical interventions in the original? The core of the problem lies, of course, in the meaning we give to the term “translation”. As Pérez-Fir-

⁵ «One of the main ideas of *Vidas en vilo*, precisely, is that Cuban-American culture emerges from a translational impetus, from a vocation for translation. To eliminate the traces of such a process in my own writing, even if it were possible for me to do so, would be to falsify the testimony I want to give» [my translation – M.E.].

mat shows in his essay, the nuances of this word can be very tricky to translate:

The photograph from *People* illustrates the two forces that shape Cuban-American culture, which **I will call *traditional and translational* (...)** “Tradition”, a term that derives from the same root as the Spanish *traer*, to bring, designates convergence and continuity, a gathering together of elements according to underlying affinities or shared concerns. **By contrast, “translation” is not a homing device but a distancing mechanism.** In its topographical meaning, translation is displacement, **in Spanish, *traslación*.** This notion has been codified in the truism that to translate is to traduce (*traduttore, traditore*); implicit in the concept is the suggestion that to move is to transmute, that any linguistic or cultural displacement necessarily entails some mutilation of the original. In fact, in classical rhetoric *traductio* — which is of course Spanish for translation — was the term used to refer to the repetition of a word with a changed meaning. **Translation/traslación, traduction/traducción — the misleading translation of these cognates is a powerful reminder of the intricacies of the concept** (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 3)

La fotografía de *People* ilustra las dos corrientes que confluyen en la cultura cubanoamericana: **tradición y traducción (...)** Derivada de la misma raíz que “traer”, la palabra “tradición” designa convergencia y continuidad, la concurrencia de elementos a partir de afinidades subyacentes o intereses compartidos. **En cambio, la traducción no es un mecanismo de convergencia sino de distanciamiento.** En su sentido primitivo, traducir es apartar, desviar; de ahí el viejo (e intraducible) axioma, *traduttore, traditore*, que nos enseña que mudar es transmutar, que cualquier traslación lingüística o cultural entraña una alteración del original. En la retórica clásica, el término *traductio* — de donde viene, por supuesto, la palabra “traducción” — se (16) utilizaba para designar la repetición de una misma palabra con diferentes sentidos: **en inglés, traduction es nada menos que vilipendio o calumnia. Traducción/traductio/traduction: la equívoca equivalencia de estos vocablos demuestra cuan difícil es traducir sin traicionar**, aunque la tradición sea, a su vez, el rescate del significado anterior (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 17)

In spite of their semantic equivalence, the etymological connotations of the words “translation” and “traducción” are not the same: “traducción” evokes the Spanish verb “traer”, “to bring”, and is closer to the term “tradition”; on the other hand, the prefix “trans-” of the English “translation” conveys the idea of movement and displacement. According to Pérez-Firmat, the associations of the English word match better the true nature of the process, for translation «is not a homing device but a distancing mechanism». In one interesting passage of *Vidas en vilo* the English term “traduction” (which, as Perez-Firmat reminds us in the Spanish version, means in

English nothing less than “defamation and slander”) is translated as “olvido”, “oblivion”:

Although these errata may be evidence of sloppy editing, they are also typographical reminders of translation as loss, as displacement, as traduction (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 153)	Si bien estos errores pueden ser consecuencia del descuido del autor o de sus editores, también sirven como recordatorio escritural de que toda traducción es desplazamiento, pérdida, olvido (165)
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Throughout his book Pérez-Firmat repeats that the Cuban-American culture is based on «a translational impetus». This idea was already formulated in *The Cuban Condition* (1989), in which he pointed out that the «translation sensibility» which characterized much of Cuban culture’s «insular consciousness» was based on a specific type of translation, which was closer to Jakobson’s «intralingual translation» than to conventional interlingual translation:

For the intralingual translation, the possibility of identical reproduction is always available: all you have to do is quote (but without quotation marks). This means that an intralingual translation, in order not to collapse into the original, in order to maintain its integrity as translation, needs to keep its distance. Normally this distance is built into the insurmountable barrier between languages, but here it has to staked out through different means. An intralingual translation, even as it attempts to restate the original, must deviate from it in perceptible ways. That is to say, intralingual translation strives precisely after that “insular consciousness” propounded by Mañach. So as to maintain its separateness, the translation needs to insulate itself, to stake out a piece of earth in what Edward Said has called “the endless sea of linguisticity”. This variety of translation gives full force to the topographical meaning of the word: translation as displacement. The intralingual translator is someone who knows that in order to pick his word, he has to keep his distance (Pérez-Firmat 1989: 5).

From a strictly objective point of view, it might seem absurd to consider self-translation as a variety of «intralingual translation»; however, this characterization proves less ludicrous than it seems if we take into account psychological and contextual factors. For a bilingual speaker such as Pérez-Firmat, English and Spanish are emotionally and biographically related in so many intimate ways (what the author calls «tongue ties» in his essay on bilingualism (Pérez-Firmat 2003) that it can be difficult to consider them as two entirely separate linguistic systems. In *Languages in contact* Weinreich established a classical distinction between the «coordinate bilingual», for whom the meaning or conceptual level is fused or shared between the two

languages and information at the lexical or word level is independent, and the «compound bilingual», for whom the two languages are separate and independent, both at the conceptual and the lexical levels (cfr. Weinreich 1979). Whereas this dichotomy has been repeatedly challenged from a linguistic and neurological perspective (Gekoski 1980; Chen and Bond 2010), it can be useful to describe different types of relations to languages in function of the linguistic biography of the speaker and the context of utterance. For someone whose bilingualism is the result of a traumatic experience such as exile, it might prove more difficult to keep the word or the lexical level independent not from the “conceptual level”, as in Weinreich’s theory, but from the affective one. This difficulty depends of course on the kind of linguistic interaction and on the conditions under which it takes place: in the case of translation, the emotional involvement in an allograph translation of a scientific text is obviously less strong than in a self-translation dealing with autobiographical matters, such as *Vidas en vilo*.

Be the term «intralingual translation» appropriate or not, *Vidas en vilo* fully corresponds to the variety of translation that Pérez-Firmat describes in *The Cuban Condition*. As if he feared that the self-translation could «collapse into the original», the author displays a wide range of textual strategies to ensure «the separateness» of the Spanish version. His effort is concentrated as much on «restating» the original than on «deviating» from it «in perceptible ways». Inasmuch as this kind of translation is presented as typical of the Cuban culture, by adopting it the author reaffirms his belonging to his homeland’s tradition. A paradox ensues: translation not as a «homing device but a distancing mechanism» becomes a means to get closer to the author’s cultural origins.

3.

Self-translation the self

Many previous studies have shown that self-translation «appears to be more strongly influenced by target culture than so called ordinary translation» (Autotrad 2007: 82). As Tzvetan Todorov points out self-translation provokes a shift in the «imaginary reader» of a text (Todorov 1985: 21). On a superficial level, the knowledge attributed to the imaginary reader of the new version provokes additions or suppressions of explanations and intra-

textual translations of specific terms or culturemes both from the source and the target culture.

Alluding to this historic event, Walter Winchell later said, in a wonderful phrase, that a conga line should be called instead a *Desi chain* (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 2)

Más tarde, al referirse a este singular acontecimiento, Walter Winchell afirmó, con una frase llena de malicia, que tal ritmo debería llamarse una *Desi chain* (“**cadena Desi**”), aludiendo a la frase que nombra el encadenamiento de cuerpos en una orgía, la *daisy chain* (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 16)

The conge, **which originated in Cuban carnival celebrations**, was ideal for big productions numbers (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 54)

La conga era ideal para esas grandes producciones (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 64)

A 1920 tourist guide carried the reassuring title, *When It's Cocktail Time in Cuba* (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 62)

Una guía de turismo editada en 1928 llevaba por título *When It's Cocktail Time* in La Havana, frase que aseguraba al turista norteamericano **que Cuba se regía por costumbres nortteñas como el cocktail time** (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 71)

The influence of the new readership and its horizon of expectations goes far beyond these minor pedagogical adjustments. In the aforementioned article Todorov explains how, when he began to self-translate a paper for a congress in Sofia from French to Bulgarian, his mother tongue, he realized that the eulogy of cosmopolitanism he had originally intended was pointless for a public of Bulgarian scholars for whom nationalism was a means to resist to Soviet Imperialism: «I had plainly to replace an affirmation by his contrary» (Todorov 1985: 21). The readership of *Life on the Hyphen* is composed of Anglo-Americans interested in Cuban or Latin culture and fellow bilingual Cuban-Americans. *Vidas en vilo*, on the contrary, mainly targets Spanish-speaking Cubans settled in the island or in other countries such as Spain. This change involves a reevaluation of the author's relationship to his homeland. In the English version Pérez-Firmat explains that the goal of his essay is to draw «a cultural map of Cuban America, that hybrid “now-here” whose spiritual center is materialistic Miami» (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 12). In the Spanish version «Cuban-America» becomes «la Cuba del Norte, esa híbrida y suave patria cuya capital es Miami» (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 23). The expression «Cuban America» presents the hybrid culture of the Cuban diaspora as part of the great US

melting pot; «Cuba del Norte» ('Northern Cuba') considers it instead as an extension of Cuban mainland culture. Analogously the descriptive «now-here» is replaced by the term «patria» which implies a strong cultural and sentimental allegiance.

Life on the Hyphen represents a strong defense of US multiculturalism and of the capacity of Cuban exiles to blend their mother culture into mainstream American civilization. *Vidas en vilo* does not disavow the belief in the cultural fecundity of hybridism and hyphenation, but it adopts a more nuanced and distinctly less enthusiastic attitude towards Cubans' assimilation to US culture:

Once the "real" Cubans go back to the island, those of us who remain here will have no choice but to realize that we are Americans, with or without the hyphen (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 18).

Una vez que regresen los que quieran o puedan hacerlo, los demás no tendremos otra opción que aceptar que éste es nuestro país, aunque nunca llegue a ser nuestro pueblo o nuestra patria (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 29).

In the English version the affirmation of the author's Americanness is unrestricted and unambiguous; in the Spanish self-translation the United States will never be able to replace Cuba as «the people» and the «homeland» Pérez-Firmat belongs to. In the same way *Vidas en vilo* suppresses an interesting passage of the English version in which the author refers to the Cuban habit of «eating roots»:

I realize that my views will probably strike some as unpatriotic and even assimilationist, but it is not assimilation that I am talking about. Cuban-American culture heightens and draws out certain tendencies inherent in mainland island culture – most prominently, the tendency toward hyphenation. We Cubans have a peculiar relationship to our roots: we eat them. What is the *ajiaco* if not a root roast, a kind of funeral pyrex? You take your favorite aboriginal roots – Malanga, ñame, yucca, boniato – and you cook them until they are soft and savory (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 16).

Even though Pérez-Firmat defends himself of being an «assimilationist», his ironic reference to roots clearly pleads for a rejection of every form of nationalism and ethnic isolation. The absence of this significant reflection from *Vidas en vilo* indicates the Spanish version is much eager to reinforce the ties between the «mainland island culture» and its US diasporic offspring. The closing remarks of the first chapter of the book, which are

entirely modified, offer another telling example of the ideological differences between the two versions:

One of the points I want to get across is that, contrary to most reports from the field, there is nothing particularly zany or exotic about Cuban Americans. Multicultural pieties aside, the Cuban-American way is not inconsistent with the American way. A well-groomed mango (like a well-crooned mambo) can be just as American as apple pie. The Desi Chain may move to the beat of the conga, but with each step it advances deeper into the American heartland (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 20).

Mucho ha llovido desde aquellos buenos y malos tiempos, pero los cubanos exiliados seguimos frente a la misma interrogante: ¿tenemos regreso? En mi caso particular, y por mucho que a veces quiera negarlo, la respuesta ha de ser negativa – no tengo regreso. Me aventuro a afirmar que a la gran mayoría de mis congéneres le sucederá lo mismo. Precisamente por eso he tratado de entender y preservar un modo de vida que, bien lo sé, es ya nuestro único destino (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 29).

Once again, *Life on the Hyphen* presents the hybrid Cuban American culture as a particular but not exceptional example of the US capacity to integrate all kind of foreign-born populations, whereas *Vidas en vilo* insists on considering the Cuban-American way of life as a specific result of exile from the island. Exile and assimilation are present in both versions, but the importance given to each varies. This discrepancy reveals not just a calculated effort to flatter two different publics, but an intimate split in the author's subjectivity. *Life on the hyphen* turns to the future and announces an ever-deeper transformation of Cuban culture in contact with «the American heartland»; it reflects the author's efforts to integrate in the US and to fully become an American citizen. *Vidas en vilo* remains more nostalgic and evokes more often the exile's impossible return. Pérez-Firmat's own biography influences thus the imaginary of his languages, which has also an impact on self-translation: English appears as the language of adaptation, change and the future; Spanish, as the language of fidelity, permanence and the past.

There is yet another important and subtler difference. In *Tongue Ties* Pérez-Firmat reflects on the reasons why, historically, the literature of Spain and Spanish America has not been rich in self-writing: «Could one reason be the language's relative inhospitableness to subject pronouns? When the language itself makes the writer's "I" grammatically redundant, autobiography verges on solecism, and self-disclosure risks becoming a slip of the tongue» (Pérez-Firmat 2003: 14). The Spanish self-translation shows this tendency towards self-concealment. The passage in which the

author stresses that his book has tried «to fashion a narrative that allows me to make sense of the general circumstances of my own life» (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 31), as well as an autobiographical digression in which the author evokes his parents, who «have no choice but to be Cuban», and his children, who are «American through and through» (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 19), are both absent from the Spanish version. From a grammatical point of view, the English “I” is sometimes replaced by an impersonal expression in Spanish:

Yet I am struck by how apolitical, how rootless the sound of Miami often seems (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 120)	Uno se sorprende de la escasez de referencias políticas (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 133)
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In some other contexts, however, the “I”, rather than being concealed, is subsumed in a collective “we”:

But this chronological progression belies the crucial fact that these attitudes commingle and alternate. For one thing, not everybody reaches exile at the same time or at the same age (Pérez-Firmat 1994: 11).	Tal sucesión temporal, sin embargo, enmascara el hecho crucial de que estas actitudes se entremezclan y alternan entre sí. En primer lugar, no todos los cubanos llegamos al exilio al mismo tiempo (Pérez-Firmat 2000: 23)
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The shift from the individual to the collective is perceptible from the very title: the «Life» of the original English becomes a plural («Vidas») in the Spanish version. For Pérez-Firmat English represents the language of the autonomous and rational individual whereas Spanish embodies the community: the “pueblo”, the “gente” (people), the “barrio” (neighborhood). As it was already the case with the kind of adaptative translation that Pérez-Firmat considered typical of the Cuban condition, the ideological and grammatical changes of his Self-translation often express the author’s desire to remain faithful to his national origins. *Vidas en vilo* thus proves that self-translated essays, far from concealing cultural and psychological gaps under the language of impersonal and conceptual argumentation, can reveal them in full light. Ideas are not less autobiographical than emotions. Even if ideas have a universal dimension (the basic thesis of both *Life on the Hyphen* and *Vidas en vilo* are *essentially* the same), they are modulated and altered by the language and the context in which they are expressed.

As Mary Besemeres underlines: «it is translation that helps the otherness of the self to come to the surface, because it makes the two parts of the self physically present, visible and audible» (Besemeres 2013: 194). When compared to

Life on the Hyphen, *Vidas en vilo* exposes Pérez-Firmat's divided self. Nevertheless, in *Tongue ties* the author considers his self-translation as «therapeutic» (Pérez-Firmat 2003: 161). Isn't dividedness a sign of psychical turmoil? How can it then contribute to the subject's well-being? As Pérez-Firmat stresses in some of his poems, the bilingual dwells in (self-)translation: «having to translate himself/ to himself/ endlessly» (Pérez-Firmat 2017: 68). Each sentence he writes in English conceals a silence, an absence: that of the Spanish sentence that he wouldn't or couldn't write (Pérez-Firmat 2017: 211). Whereas splitting in two is usually associated with incompleteness and trauma, for a bilingual author such as Firmat assuming duality is the only available means to wholeness. Self-translation is a way of recovering the half of meaning which was lost in translation. Just like Cuban one-and-a-halfers, self-translation lives on the hyphen between the self and its complex translation to others.

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Bibliography

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Self-Translating In-Betweenness: from Life on the Hyphen (1994) to Vidas en vilo (2000) by Gustavo Pérez-Firmat

Self-translation studies have given less critical attention to essays than to other literary genres such as novels or poetry. However, inasmuch as essays often display a subjective apprehension of collective values and ideas, their self-translations are a showcase of the complex interactions between cultures, languages and the individual. Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's *Life on the Hyphen* (1994) provides an in-sightful analysis of the hybrid Cuban-American culture as part of the vibrant us melting-pot. *Vidas en vilo*, its Spanish "therapeutic" self-translation, introduces important changes in the original that reaffirm the author's bond to the Spanish language and to his Cuban home-land. Paradoxically, translation as a "distancing mechanism" draws the author nearer to a native tradition of cultural syncretism. Self-translation exposes the author's divided self, but, for a bilingual and bicultural subject, assuming duality is the only available means to wholeness.

Keywords: self-translation, translation, Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, bilingualism, hybridity, Cuban-American culture, Hispanic literature in the us.