

Translating Myself: An Essay on Writing in L2

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I like being at the beginning again as a reader and as a writer. I like that I am limited. I like that I only have a certain vocabulary and certain tools, and that I can only go so far. That appeals to me. It's a sort of poverty, you know; it's a choice to make do with less.

—Jhumpa Lahiri

Mexico

I opened my email one winter day to find a Call for Proposals (CFP) from the *Congreso Internacional Red Latinoamericana de Programas y Centros de Escritura*¹ announcing a conference in Guadalajara, Mexico. It would be a bilingual conference on current practice in writing programs and centers, and participants would attend from many countries in Latin America, plus the United States². Keynote addresses would feature Latin American writing scholars, and three American scholars whom I knew from my years in academic publishing. Immediately, I was interested. I knew that writing studies was a growing discipline in Latin America, and I wanted to hear about it firsthand.

I asked myself, Why not propose a paper? I had already begun an essay based on a tutoring experience in a community ESL center nearby; maybe that would be of interest. Also: the CFP said *bilingual* conference. My Spanish was good enough for a *gringo*³ traveler, but I would present in English, so as not to embarrass anyone. In June, the conference planners accepted my proposal, and I began writing in earnest. By the end of summer, I had a full script, introduction, images, slides, and bio. I was good to go. I practiced aloud. But then, in September, the conference planners sent an email to say, oh by the way, yes, it's a bilingual conference, but most attendees will not be English speakers, and translators were available only for the keynotes.

I had been worried about this. Both the CFP and the conference website were slick and bilingual, but evidently the universe was playing with me—and with my hopes to be part of an international conversation. Very funny. What was even more amusing: My topic was the value of translanguaging for tutors and clients who might be, yes, working in their second language. But my Spanish didn't feel ready for prime time, and I had only a few weeks to make a translation. What to do? Maybe I should withdraw the proposal; I could just attend the conference without presenting.

My friend Maria-Luisa is a linguist and a Mexican national. She brushed off my panic. “Ha!” she said. “Obviously, you do it in Spanish. So you are not perfect. So what? *Por respeto a mi tierra*⁴, you should be doing in Spanish already.” That is fair, I thought. I might try to embrace my fear and my linguistic poverty. Out of respect, I should leave my traveler Spanish behind and try building who I am in academic Spanish.

I took a breath and set out to translate myself.

Lahiri and Me

Jhumpa Lahiri made the remarks I quote in the epigraph above during an interview about learning Italian as an adult (Wallner, 2016). I was thinking about those comments one day in Ecuador while walking to Spanish class. Dodging across the street, climbing the *escalinata*⁵, I thought, *Yes. To make do with less—to make do without English—that’s what I’m doing. It complicates things, but it brings focus. It’s hard and a little lonely. I like that.* Lahiri says more:

I feel in some sense linguistically an orphan. There is no language to me that isn’t a foreign language in some way. So, I have a relationship now to three languages: the Bengali of my family, the English of my education, and Italian. And I think Italian is the only language I have really loved. (1:08ff)

I once used this interview and Lahiri’s book *In Other Words* (2016) with adult ESL/EFL students to get them talking about their own experience of language learning. Now, turning down the street toward my Spanish school in Ecuador, I remembered how nonplussed my students had been by Lahiri’s sensibility. The Polish medical doctor spoke of her own very concrete reasons for learning English—her fourth or fifth language; the Pakistani barley researcher mentioned practical community-oriented needs. The Japanese visiting scholars in atmospheric science, the Russian faculty spouse—all the students in that class—were pragmatic intellectuals. To them, Lahiri’s stance seemed sentimental and a bit frivolous. After all, she was born an international, was raised bilingual in an affluent home, was educated in the Ivy League. She has a Pulitzer Prize and a National Humanities Medal. In short, she is a wealthy, privileged American woman, and, at best, she is choosing “a sort of poverty” in only a very abstract sense. More fundamentally, the students couldn’t see why multilingualism would have become self-alienating for her. And finally, they asked, what does love have to do with it?

But Lahiri has been conjoining love and language for a long time. She did this, for example, in her prize-winning story “Interpreter of Maladies” (1999). Her primary character is a translator—a medical translator—in India, who feels apathetic in his marriage. This

man soon becomes infatuated with a tourist woman, and he reflects on how this new love gives him a joy very much like the joy he feels after writing a successful translation. So, Lahiri knows the thrill of connecting through language.

For my students, translating themselves into English was different. Sometimes exciting, sometimes funny, it was never angsty and never an infatuation or a self-assigned “poverty” challenge—like writing an essay without adverbs. Nor were they looking for linguistic monogamy. They were practical and focused adults; they were serious but often amused at themselves. They were cheerfully multilingual, and they would leave *nothing* behind as they added another language.

My life has been different from Lahiri’s, too. My childhood was grindingly rustic: woodsmoke, animal skins, snowshoes, axes, and guns. The Arctic Circle was just out the back of the house, and my young parents were poor and religious. I am old now, yet I am still quite marked by this background. My South American friends find me exotic because I am from Alaska, but in truth I am not exotic at all. I am provincial, indelicate, unpolished. I am not ignorant, but I am badly educated. Certainly, I am awake to the advantages I have now, especially in Ecuador as I walk to school in this “lower income” country. I am also awake to where I fall short. Falling short is why I am here, learning a language and a culture and building relationships. And this path has made me, like my students, short on patience for mystical one-percenters with first-world problems.

At the same time, I do identify with Lahiri’s affection for the language she has learned as an adult. To learn a new language is to choose a new identity, and this is a choice that most people don’t have in childhood—just as we don’t choose our family or place. For that reason alone, it’s no wonder that Lahiri loves Italian. And I love my L2 for the choice I’ve made, too. However, like my students, I feel challenged and invited, not impoverished, by the limitations I face. Monolingualism would be the poverty.

Under a narrow stone bridge in a sudden downpour, I share a smoke with a Venezuelan refugee, and we chat quietly about the disaster in his home country. I am a descendant of Puritans and Norwegians, so I am not used to being pleased, but it does please me to do the cognitive work that Spanish requires. I love how Spanish opens a window into this man’s experience and how that opens me in turn. I feel enriched in some ways, to be sure, but this is not about gratification; I also feel a responsibility “to begin again” (in Lahiri’s phrase), to lose the easy monolingualism of my class, country, history, and culture.

The Nobel Prize winning author, Toni Morrison, famously said, “white people have a very, very serious problem, and they should start thinking about what they can do about it” (Rose, 1993; 40:33). I wish my people back in the backwoods felt the same. But in my home province, white people, even black sheep like me, sense that to begin again would require ongoing humble work for which we U.S. provincials are not well-equipped. We are survivalists—paranoid, stubborn, prickly, and prideful. “Fiercely independent” is how you will hear it said

in Alaska (which is delusional, of course). While we are prepared to survive some privation and hardship, our isolation has marked us, distorted us so that somehow we cannot handle the simple surrender of ego that might reduce our fear of Otherness. To connect with the Other, even by merely learning a language, would be to *become* an Other, and my provincial people are not sure they could survive that process. They can see that “to begin again” would challenge their myth of independence and self-reliance.

Thus, paradoxically, it falls to individuals—to me and to other white black sheep of the provinces, to make the move. It is as Condon (2020) says in the context of antiracist activism: “[Y]ou can’t snatch your people without snatching yourself” (p. 48)⁶. Engaging with multilingualism is part of this; part of what I can do about it. Part of how I am snatching myself.

Snatching English

Published translation scholarship doesn’t have much to say about translating one’s own work. I was surprised at this as I began reflecting on the experience of rendering my Guadalajara paper from English into Spanish. Maybe the issues are too obvious—translating is translating. However, a few scholars from *outside* the field have discussed the challenges in translating their field notes that were written with the aid of an interpreter. Crane, Lombard and Tenz (2009), for example, offer an observation about the language of research and publication in social geography. As in many other fields, social geographers whose L1 is English very seldom submit work for publication in non-English journals, even when that research was done in non-English settings.

There is an implicit assumption about native English-speaking researchers’ willingness to subject themselves to some of the uncomfortable situations described by non-Anglophone colleagues. (p. 40)

The authors are being oblique. As a group, native-English-speaking researchers are rather famously *not* willing to suffer the discomfort of L2-English colleagues who have to submit papers for monolingual English venues.

Just ask Di Ferrante, Bernstein, and Gironzetti (2019), co-editors of an applied linguistics journal. Despite the many recent developments in global communication, they write, most of the colonialist forces that set conditions in place for English language dominance remain today. These editors are concerned that distortions are accumulating in many fields as a consequence of the demographics in published work. “[T]he hegemony of English-language publications over any other language remains a strong influence in scholars’ choice of publication venues, topics, and styles of scholarly debate” (p. 106). Which is to say that

Anglophone culture in academe generally has not yet snatched itself from colonialist monolingualism, and the resulting losses even in “topics and styles of scholarly debate” are incalculable.

A laissez-faire version of translingual theory might have no problem with this. That is, translingual theory posits that language contact is constant, that variation is a given, and that the concept of named languages is suspect anyway. If these are correct, then one could argue that there is no sense in lamenting the loss of language-specific rhetorics. In fact, even in well-intentioned reforms in bilingual education there is a risk that translingual curricula could contribute to the loss in wisdom of difference that Di Ferrante et al. want to protect for the sake of broader human knowledge. Jaspers (2017) remarks,

This is most visible in the way that concerns about minority language maintenance are approached [by translingualist reformers]. Many minority language activists are worried that the promotion of fluid language practices will threaten their own efforts. (p. 12)

I’ve seen some of that erasure in my home province, where—in my own lifetime—more than a few Indigenous languages have been lost to systemic coercion, simple displacement, and other influences, even without the help of translingual educational spaces and fluid language practices recently promoted in bilingual education.

In the context of writing studies—historically a U.S. dominated discipline—one wonders what wisdom in non-English styles of scholarly debate have already been missed, due to that discipline’s tardy movement toward multilingualism. That is why bilingual conferences like the one in Guadalajara are exciting to me. Especially when they are not-quite-bilingual, we can hear what writing studies in the U.S. might learn from the non-English world.

Rareza

Mestre de Caro, in a 2013 study of issues in L2 pragmatics, has her finger on something that is also a central problem for translators. She makes the following comment on what can go wrong when a speaker tries to transfer a verbal formula naively from L1 to L2. The formulation of “certain everyday speech acts,” Mestre de Caro writes,

no puede obedecer a una transposición de la lengua materna o L1 a la lengua extranjera (L2 o L3), pues en la mayoría de los casos habrá un efecto de “rareza” por parte del hablante nativo que constata dicho uso, afectando la comprensión entre interlocutores, el curso y el equilibrio de la comunicación.

cannot obey a transposition from the mother tongue or L1 into the foreign tongue (L2 or

L3), so, in the majority of cases, there will be an effect of “rareza” on the part of the native speaker who observes said usage, affecting the comprehension between interlocutors, the course and the equilibrium of the communication. (p. 409) [my translation]

In translating even these few lines by Mestre de Caro (which I did several years ago for other purposes), I found that a text could not “obey” a simple transposition from Spanish into English.

Rareza is a noun derived from the root *rar-* (rare, peculiar, odd). In common usage, the adjective *raro* appears in *¡qué raro!*—“how strange.” Grammatically, *rareza* is very conventional as Mestre de Caro uses it, but semantically it is an odd choice to describe the relation between interlocutors. And she intends it to be so—as she signals with her scare quotes. This semantic problem gave me pause, and, as you can see, I decided to retain *rareza* as a temporary loanword in my ephemeral translation.

Crane and colleagues (2009), in their reflections on social geography, describe a “moment of friction and hesitation” when an interpreter is unsatisfied with a word choice in the field notes. In such a moment, the interpreter might offer the researcher a revision immediately, or they might revise later when reviewing the transcript. Sometimes, in a *you-just-don’t-have-a-word-for-this* situation, conceptual mediation is entirely stalled. But Crane and colleagues see opportunity here: “these ruptures in knowledge have the potential to open up new horizons, and one must allow for these and explore them” (p. 45). Rupture. *Rareza*. These may be other words for the wisdom of difference.

Moments of *rareza* have always challenged translators, as Ghanooi (2012) makes clear in a historical review, and resolving them invokes a set of questions that run from aesthetics to ontology. A common formulation going back to antiquity poses “word-for-word” translation against “sense-for-sense.”⁷ During the 19th century, Schleiermacher offered a more nuanced idea, suggesting that the translator’s job is only to create the “same impression” in the translation reader as the source text would have had on the original reader (p. 78). In my little translation of Mestre de Caro (2013), I felt there was truly no English equivalent for Mestre de Caro’s “*rareza*.” Plus, there was the matter of wordplay. Scare quotes signal *meaningful* friction and hesitation, and Mestre de Caro rightly uses them to mark the novelty of the connotation she calls up in *rareza*. She’s being witty. But how does one convey a play on words in a source text without equivalent choices in the target language? Retaining the word *rareza*, I thought, might not be witty, but it might create a meaningful rupture and invite the reader to explore it.

Traditional Western translation practice would argue I should *not* retain a word that is foreign to the new reader. Traditional practice tells us 1) a reader is (assumed to be) monolingual and 2) a translator should be invisible, to preserve the reader’s illusion that the text is unmediated. We have to notice, however, that both of these conventions motivate editorial smoothing by the translator—substitutions that, in effect, suppress *rareza*. In other words,

a traditional translator substitutes a comfortable counterfeit for what was a meaningful friction in the source text.

Lahiri is fine with this. In a 2021 *New Yorker* essay, she defends a very strong version of translation as substitution. She describes translating an Italian novel into English this way: “Word for word, sentence for sentence, page for page, . . . [m]y version of this book was produced to stand in place of the Italian. . . . It is now an English book instead of—*invece di*—an Italian one.” She is not wrong that translating produces a new work, but I am a little concerned by how entitled Lahiri feels to replace—*sostituire*—the source with her own text and then theorize this substitution not as a mediating translation but as a new and non-derivative “English book.”

Venuti’s (2008) term for this approach is *domestication* of the source text. While one legitimate goal of any translation is to make the source text comprehensible in the receiving language, Venuti is naming something deeper, something ethical. Ethical because, in effect, domestication re/forms the source text while occulting the reformer. It is a silent revision, in other words, a form of conquest tacitly authorized by the mandate to be comprehensible. Venuti advocates replacing domestication with *foreignization*. By this, he means that a translator, without sacrificing essential comprehensibility, might choose to candidly signal strategic points of cultural *rareza*, specifically to make the translator visible and thus to remind readers of the revisionist, counterfeiting tendency of translation itself. Although translating cannot deliver a source text unmediated, it can *por respeto* acknowledge that “translation changes everything” (Venuti, 2013). So, to foreignize it, to retain its *rareza*, is a snatching gesture.

My own idea with Mestre de Caro’s text above may have been only aesthetic; I just wanted the *rareza* of “rareza.” I wanted that momentary estrangement for the way it would dramatize Mestre de Caro’s concept, and my aesthetic choice created a foreignizing effect. In theoretical terms, I retained “an ethnodeviant pressure” in my translation, “to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, *sending the reader abroad*” (Venuti 1995 p. 20 quoted in Yang 2010, p. 78, emphasis added).

To be sure, there are other ways to do foreignizing in a translation. For example, I also retained Mestre de Caro’s concepts “mother,” “foreign,” and “tongue,” though I did translate them. *Lengua materna* and *lengua extranjera* are standard in contemporary academic Spanish. But US academic culture would be likely to smooth “mother” and “foreign” and “tongue” into “first,” and “second,” and “language.” Here, I felt it was more important to preserve the little *rareza* that these cultural concepts, even in English, might cause for the provincial academic reader—sending them abroad.

Mexico II

In my *ponencia* for Mexico, a major pivot point was my report of a tutoring session in which I had worked with a struggling student at our local community English language center. Javier⁸⁾ was a novice English speaker, and he had been given a writing assignment by an English-Only sort of ESL teacher. The assignment—more precisely its American context—was incomprehensible to him. As we sat down together, it was clear that Javier was almost completely blocked and unable to produce any English at all that would respond to the assignment. He could produce a response in Spanish, however. *Okay*, I said. *Dime en español lo que quiere decir and I will write it en inglés.*⁹⁾ As Javier whispered a draft in Spanish, I scribbled a translation; he then recopied the English and submitted the paper.

We cheated, in other words. Javier's wife, there with us, was a bit scandalized, but there was no pedagogical scandal in my tutoring. Many readers of this essay may agree with me, but in ESL curricula, the *solamente inglés*¹⁰⁾ tradition remains strong. That's where the scandal is—in the theory base of English Only (or any target-language only) teaching—and this is what I argued in my *ponencia*. *Solamente inglés* is a pedagogy of immersion, which is not a bad idea in itself, but, because it imagines only a monolingual immersion, it is misconceived for teaching multilinguals, even emergent ones. This is not a new critique, as I reported in my *ponencia*. What many researchers think would be better, I said, is a pedagogy that we could call “*inmersión bilingüe, un modelo que podría animar, o usar—o al menos no castigar—la translanguaging*”¹¹⁾ (Spooner, 2019).

Here I encountered *rareza* in my own source text. How would you say to *translanguage* in Spanish? It sounds *raro* enough in English.¹²⁾ *To language* is already a problem, because we're pushing a noun into a verbal function. On the other hand, in popular culture, this is quite common. We *text*, we *email*, we *DM* or *Slack* or *post* or *message* or *tweet*, all of which are “verbed” nouns that we find more specific than *to write*. Many English speakers might argue that academics are even worse than adolescents for casual neologizing. (See what I did there?) At an English teachers' convention in the 1980s, I heard a politician tease the president of the teachers association about jargon in academic writing. The president joked, “I see we need to inservice you languagewise.”

Spanish does this, too, although the Royal Academy of Spanish does not approve. A recent example is *textear* (to text), as is *mensajear* (to message). But apparently, at least at this writing, Spanish does not “language,” let alone “translanguage.” I did serious member-checking on this, and I was turned away in no uncertain terms. By normal patterns in Spanish, “to language” would be “idiomar” or “lengüear.” However, these neologisms, I was told, *no tienen ningún sentido en español.*¹³⁾

I dithered for a long while in what Gonzales (2018) calls a “translation moment.” In some ways, this concept of hers echoes the hesitating moment identified by Crane and coauthors.

But where Crane et al. focus on lexicon, Gonzales attends more deeply to the rhetorical dimension. In her description, a translation moment is an audience-focused mini-reflection that occurs when we are working “to negotiate meaning outside the limitations of a single named language. . . . Signaled by a pause, translation moments are instances of rhetorical action embedded in the process of language transformation” (pp. 1–2). Signaled by a pause. A moment of friction and hesitation.

Gonzales, who was researching layers of engagement at a community-based translation/interpretation office, dwells on the rhetorical decisions made by translators in such moments (pp. 87ff). In one example, she tells of a participant assigned to medical interpretation who found herself beside a woman ready to give birth. How does the interpreter of maladies say that the doctor wants to “break your water to get the labor started”¹⁴—in Spanish? Well, you don’t say “water” and you don’t say “labor.” *No tienen ningún sentido* in the birthing room (p. 95–96).

The stakes of rhetorical attunement were not so dramatic for me, but, in the long moment of transforming my little 20-minute *ponencia* into Spanish, I began to realize how unique the rhetorical situation is for translation. I had understood Mestre de Caro’s *equilibrio de la comunicación* too superficially. To translate *translanguaging*, I would need 1) to invent a circumlocution—a cumbersome option; or 2) to coin a term in Spanish—maybe *transidiomando*—which . . . no; or 3) to foreignize my own text and retain the awkward English word *translanguaging* in a deliberate *rareza* . . . and jeopardize the rhetorical equilibrium with my audience.

I was getting disoriented.

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Me: So what about “translanguaging”?

Maria-Luisa: What about it? There is no word *en pinche español*.¹⁵

Me: So . . .

Maria-Luisa: No, you just say it in English. Make it a loanword. In context, they will get it.

Me: But maybe I should . . .

Maria-Luisa: *No te preocupes*. Don’t worry. They will get it.

Snatching English II

To retain the word “translanguage” in translation, I would be foreignizing my Spanish text—making an “ethnodeviant” choice. I would be a foreigner foreignizing himself. This was *raro* indeed. Unlike examples of foreignizing to preserve a cultural sensibility from erasure, my identity was not under pressure. On the contrary, I was coming from a privileged language with a global reputation for unwillingness to experience the discomfort of L2 colleagues.

What ethos would it display for a person like me even to make the foreignizing gesture? Wouldn't it be the same old American paternalism? I didn't want to say "there's no word for translanguaging in *pinche español*" right there in my *ponencia*!

And what was a person like me, anyway? Crane et al. (2009) point to a responsibility that sounds a lot like snatching yourself.

[M]ultilingual settings require more intensive, reflective, and careful thinking about the researcher's identity and positionality. . . . [R]esearchers in privileged positions . . . should be encouraged to constantly examine their position in the wider research world, and the implications this has for others. . . . Discussions about language may therefore have potential to provide space for reflexivity for human geography as a discipline, as well as for individual researchers. (p. 44)

For writing studies, the insight is no less germane. Contact between the languages of writer and responder, regardless of which is L2 for whom, marks out a space for reflection on the part of the writer, responder, researcher, theorist, even publisher, and ultimately the field itself. Sociolinguists have fruitfully explored such contact zones for many decades (as have literary writers like Lahiri). Sociolinguistics, in fact, informs the foundational insight of translanguaging theory: that languages are dynamic, always in motion, always in contact. To view languages as separate unbridgeable ontologies is untenable.

Still, reflecting on my own grasp of Spanish, I began to wonder if I would truly be speaking from *respeto a la tierra* in Guadalajara. I knew my audience in Mexico would be hospitable and might even empathize with me as an L2 speaker. Our shared interest in scholarship on writing and on multilingualism was a bond; our resistance to *solamente inglés* made it stronger. Still, might I be overreaching? Maybe I wasn't trying hard enough. Maybe I should wait until my Spanish was more mature.

And other layers of my positionality might be just as problematic: white, US, academic, senior, cis, man. Retired. Maybe it had been an act of *gringo* paternalism even to propose a paper for this conference. As much as I loved my subject, as much as I loved Spanish, I wondered if I should just let it go. I didn't know whether I was feeling impostor syndrome or imposture itself. Maybe there's no real difference. Maybe I should withdraw.

Lahiri and Me II

Throughout her book, *In Other Words*, Lahiri frets. "I know that my writing in Italian is something premature, reckless, always approximate. I'd like to apologize" (pp. 83–85). She thinks of her three languages as a triangle, three sides framing her mirror, in which, "I saw only fluctuation, distortion, dissimulation. I saw something hybrid, out of focus, always

jumbled” (pp. 157–159). She thinks of mythological Daphne, who transformed into a tree. She thinks of Pessoa, an Italian, who reinvented himself as four different writers.

A total metamorphosis isn't possible in my case. I can write in Italian, but I can't become an Italian writer. . . . Maybe what I'm doing, by means of Italian, resembles [Pessoa's] tactic. It's not possible to become another writer, but it might be possible to become two.
(pp. 171–173)

The interpreter of maladies, at the end of Lahiri's story, settles into disillusionment about his tourist crush and into a kind of grief for the affair that was never consummated. This made me wonder about my affair with Spanish. I can write in Spanish, but beyond the land of English, I may always be an *extranjero*, a stranger, an Other in that language. Could this be how Lahiri herself—disillusioned, unrequited in Bengali and English—will someday feel about Italian?

Rareza II

“*No te preocupes,*” said Maria-Luisa. Don't worry.

English speakers talk of retirement as a new chapter in life, while in Spanish, retirement is called *jubilación*.¹⁶ I approached my new chapter with as much jubilation as my Puritan ancestors would allow, but, before retiring, I also prepared several long-term projects, so the transition into freewill would not rattle me. I began to travel in Latin America each year, studying Spanish; I also began formal study of L2 teaching at my local university; I volunteered at the community ESL center; I contacted my former literary agent to let him know I was writing novels again. (He did not reply—*pinche gringo*.)

Even so, I found that *jubilación* required room for more *rareza* than I had expected. In *Latinoamérica*, there is no way for a tall white *extranjero* to blend in. Back home, enrolling in a third master's program after 35 years, I was unprepared for how young graduate students had become. And professors—I was older than all of them. I felt deeply self-conscious and afraid of failure. I don't like being conspicuous, so I contrived a quiet and studious persona. A retiring presence, if you will.

I had spent three decades as an academic publisher and editor and writer, and, although I loved my work, the pressure was intense. The stakes were always high, and the pay was always low. I was burned out. Now, as a *jubilado*, I was a free man in the cities of Latin America, but I wasn't sure what to do with myself. The question for retirement was not how to begin a new life chapter, but how to remain legible, how to translate myself while retaining an identity I could recognize. *Jubilación* is a translation moment—I had rhetorical life

decisions to make.

Mexico III

At some point, I began to wonder if translation was truly what I was doing with my *ponencia*. In the interplay between my rhetorical needs and my limitations in Spanish, my English version was losing control of me. That is, I had to reconsider what I needed to say in terms of what I was *able* to say. The process was triggering changes in how I understood my own content. Not radical changes of direction, but noticeable changes of nuance. I thought of Lahiri's (2016) comment, "Even if I remain half blind, I can see certain things more clearly" (p. 229).

As I redrafted my translation, what I was able to write was getting me closer to what I wanted to write, and soon I was beyond the bounds of my *lengua materna*, gamely writing in my premature Spanish as if I were on the street in Ecuador. I wasn't substituting words for words or sense for sense; rather, language was my *activity*. I had been "linguaging," in Swain's sense of the term (e.g., 2008), employing language to mediate cognition—i.e., not to convey meaning but to *make* meaning. Moreover, ironically, I had been *translanguaging*—I had been mediating cognition in L1 and L2 simultaneously.

Translation changes everything, Venuti says (2013), and here it was changing the translator, too. I was becoming an Other, writing in Others' words.

Lahiri and Me III

To Lahiri (2016), named languages are ontological realities, infinitely separate. "The closer I get, the farther away [I am]," she writes. "The disconnect between me and Italian remains insuperable" (p. 91). She imagines concealed layers, secret pathways of meaning. "I walk on the surface, the accessible part" (p. 93), she writes, but she wants to master "the real," "the true life of the language" (p. 92) that she imagines below.

What she desires is not there, but her desire still informs her view of translation. That is, if languages are irreducibly different, then translation is a massive domestication—a substitute wholly created by a second author. I'm not content with this idea, but I can empathize. As I headed for Mexico, Spanish still felt remote, maybe inaccessible. However, hoping to gain "mastery" of a language is like trying to solve the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, or the dour Puritan idea of God: The more we know of the Infinite, the more we know it is unknowable.

Unlike the drill writing I had done in language school, this translating/revising project was an exercise in making meaning. Perhaps I could gain on my L2 only by half-lengths, like Achilles, but it was never immeasurably far away. In fact, to work with its unfamiliar

possibilities had become a delight. I loved how my frictions and hesitations were helping me refine my thinking and to begin seeing myself as an L2 writer. It was like noticing the Infinite just out the back of the house: Spanish was not only quite available, I was already drawing on it. Secret pathways don't worry me, because when I recognize that I myself am "something premature, reckless, always approximate," I see that learning is as ineffable and full of wonder as mastery would be.

From these paradoxes and these transits between Spanish and English emerged not poverty but a richer, deeper sense of translingual cognition.

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On the street, I pass a cluster of sidewalk umbrellas, and I glance at the early morning coffee drinkers. Young people inhabit their pressed clothes and coiffures, their messenger bags and bike helmets. The security man nods; we see each other every day. At a table near the wall, three older guys, maybe *jubilados*, tip back in their chairs, sharing a laugh. I am the only gringo in sight, but—*qué raro*—nobody looks up at me.

It is as if, when I don't worry about translating myself but simply compose myself, I almost belong in this scene.

At the end of *In Other Words*, Lahiri feels it too. She now dreads leaving Rome and returning to the States. She writes,

I wish there were a way of staying in this country, in this language. I'm already afraid of the separation between me and Italian. . . . [and] if I go back to working in English, I expect to feel another type of loss. (p. 229)

I know that feeling. But hey, *No te preocupes, Lahiri*. Let's skip school today and get a *cafecito*.

Epilogue: How Did it Go?

The room was full, the audience engaged and opinionated. Teachers from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Argentina, and other countries understood implicitly my tutoring session with Javier. Their own multilingual students—often L1 speakers of Indigenous languages—face a Spanish system not very different from what Javier faced in the racist and classist heritage of American English Only. They had read of translingualism and were pleased to hear a summary of the research. It was a good session.

They made no remarks on my L2 proficiency.

I began exploring my thoughts via this essay while still feeling quite tentative and unsure about even my right to present formally in Spanish. Ironically, a week after completing a

workable draft, I received an email from the *Red Latinoamericana de Programas y Centros de Escritura*. I will translate the first lines here:

Dear presenter,

By this letter we extend an invitation to participate in the collected publication of the works presented at the 4th International Conference of the Latin American Association of Writing Programs and Centers . . .

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Endnotes

*This essay is dedicated to Professor Keiko Wells, in thanks for her kind friendship and for the many years of intellectual conversation and correspondence, during which we have covered so many of the topics that come together here.

For their thoughtful, critical, and encouraging responses to drafts of the paper, my thanks to Professors Victor Villanueva, Elizabeth Boquet, and Michele Eodice, noted scholars of writing studies. *Gracias también a mi profesora de español, Virginia Abrill Hinojosa, de Arequipa, Perú, quien leyó un borrador temprano, y a la Profesora María-Luisa Spicer-Escalante por su inestimable consejo y crítica de la ponencia original.*

- 1) International Conference of the Latin American Network of Writing Programs and Centers
- 2) Or “including the United States.” The self-identified Latino population of the U.S. in 2020 was over 60 million, according to the official U.S. census.
- 3) An outsider—similar to *gai-jin*. In Latin America, *gringo* often refers to a white person from the U.S.
- 4) “To show respect for my country.”
- 5) A long, broad staircase.
- 6) A friend used to warn her kids, “Child, I will snatch you baldheaded!” I loved it that Condon used this indelicate verb for social correction.
- 7) Cicero mentions this tension, for example, as does St. Jerome (cf. Yang 2010 or Ghanooni 2013).
- 8) A pseudonym.
- 9) “Tell me what you want to say, and I will write it in English.”
- 10) “English only,” but expressed in Spanish as an ironic resistance—a *rareza*, if you will. Hat tip to Victor Villanueva, from whom I’ve heisted this wordplay.
- 11) “bilingual immersion, a model that could encourage, or use—or at least not punish—translanguaging.”
- 12) I should note that it was in Welsh, not English, that the coinage of “translanguage” first appeared (cf. Williams 1994).
- 13) They have no meaning—make no sense—in Spanish.
- 14) In English, this expression refers to rupturing the amniotic membrane, which can trigger contractions of the uterus. Obviously, Spanish speakers know the process, but they do not use this idiom.
- 15) “... in [expletive] Spanish.”
- 16) In English, jubilation.

(Utah State University Press Diector, retired)

Translating Myself: An Essay on Writing in L2

by

Michael Spooner

Preparing for a conference in Mexico led the author to explore translation theory in a reflective essay. He engages a set of theory problems, including the invisibility of the traditional translator, the cultural “smoothing” of texts, and the revisionist tendency of translation itself. He queries the ethical meanings of an L1 speaker of English (a hegemonic language) addressing an audience of non-English speakers in Latin America (historical targets of English hegemony) and presuming to do so in his imperfect Spanish. Was he appropriating others’ words, or was Spanish gradually becoming his language, too? Along the way, he interacts with the writer Jhumpa Lahiri’s description of her relation to Italian, her own L2.