

# Dialogical and Transversal Translation Trespassing Cultural Boundaries and Making the Self through Language

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Volume 3, Number 2, 2013

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw3\\_2ntrp02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw3_2ntrp02)

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1925-0622 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Fathi, M. (2013). Dialogical and Transversal Translation: Trespassing Cultural Boundaries and Making the Self through Language. *Narrative Works*, 3(2), 54–71.

Article abstract

This paper draws on two points about the difficulties of conducting research between two languages and cultures which are scant in social science research: one is reflecting on the notion of “making sense” and how prevalent it has become to make sense for a western audience. This process is complicated and leads to more meanings lost in translation, so it is important to unpack it specifically during the research process. The second point I discuss in this paper is the notion of “situated auto/biography” that is not specific to an author or a researcher, but deals with all parties involved in the process of knowledge production. I argue that translation acts as a creative space for thinking and not just conveying meanings, but that through a dialogical and transversal act, it can help in creating new meanings.

**SPECIAL SECTION: NARRATIVES OF TRANSLATION WITHIN  
RESEARCH PRACTICE**

**Dialogical and Transversal Translation:  
Trespassing Cultural Boundaries and Making the  
Self through Language**

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This paper draws on two points about the difficulties of conducting research between two languages and cultures which are scant in social science research: one is reflecting on the notion of “making sense” and how prevalent it has become to make sense for a western audience. This process is complicated and leads to more meanings lost in translation, so it is important to unpack it specifically during the research process. The second point I discuss in this paper is the notion of “situated auto/biography” that is not specific to an author or a researcher, but deals with all parties involved in the process of knowledge production. I argue that translation acts as a creative space for thinking and not just conveying meanings, but that through a dialogical and transversal act, it can help in creating new meanings.

As Hoffman (1989) argued in her book, *Lost in Translation*, speaking a different language is analogous to living another life in another social setting. Translation is an act that lives within and through different cultures and has been an important part of the processes of meaning making in social science research. However, the role it plays in the production of knowledge has not been problematised. This reflective paper is based on my research with a group of 14 Iranian women doctors and dentists in Britain. It draws on the ways in which I translated the interviews conducted in Farsi, my mother tongue, to English. Although the body of research on the Iranian diaspora is increasing, limited thought has been given to the importance of using a translator or being involved in the position of a translator (except Sadeghi, 2007). In this paper, I am highlighting the importance of the act of translation, particularly in the lives of migrants whose lives are already stretched between and across languages.

Traditional positivist approaches to translation try to minimise the role of translators and interpreters in order to increase the validity of data (Edwards, 1998). Although generally an absent topic from social science methodology, translation and the role of translators and interpreters have been addressed by some researchers (Berman and Tyyska, 2010; Temple, 1997, 2009; Temple and Edwards 2002). Translation of data from one language to another resembles the data being processed from an “original” language to be utilised in a “target” language. Riessman (2008) believes that constructing a transcript from a translated interview involves difficult “interpretative decisions” (p. 42). By reflecting on this process as an active process rather than a passive one, the researcher would have the opportunity to critically pay attention to the different stages of the creation of what counts as the “final” product. As stories are inherently embedded in the socio-political context within which they are told and translated, contextualising the act of translation within research across languages is primary. Approaching translation as a process of deconstruction and reconstruction rather than following traditional reductionist viewpoints of translation as a mechanised act acknowledges the importance of culture and the role of the translator.

Simon (1996) argues that translators are involved in translating “concepts” rather than “words” and because of this there should be emphasis on the context within which particular meanings are produced (pp. 137-138). She argues that “the conventional approach views translation as an active original and a passive translation, creation followed by a passive act of transmission,” and asks, “what if writing and translation are understood as interdependent, each bound to the other in the recognition that representation is always an active process . . . , that there is never a total presence of the speaking subject in the discourse?” (p. 11). In the same way, I argue that the degree to which a translator can affect data production is indeed undermined conventionally and in this paper I intend to address two different dimensions of this absence and the junctures created between elements of a research project.

Translation is a multidimensional process that involves different epistemological layers. For example, where do we draw the line between the culture that we study and the world to which the research is presented? How do our research and outputs communicate with different audiences? Where do we (as researchers and translators) stand in the process of meaning making? In all these questions, the role of a translator is vivid. This paper comprises two main arguments in relation to the role of a bilingual researcher in translating interview materials, but first I explain my approach to translation: *dialogical and transversal translation*. The first point in this process is *sense*

*making*. The second point is my notion of *situated biographies* of participants, researchers, and audiences. I will start my argument by explaining what the dialogical and transversal approaches to translation are.

### **Dialogical and Transversal Translation**

Referring to Bakhtin's (1981) approach to meaning construction, I argue that translation is only possible through dialogical understanding of words. As he argues:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent and when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. (pp. 293-94)

What I mean by *dialogical understanding* is the construction of meanings for parties involved in a dialogue, so words exist in neither an impersonal and neutral sense nor in solitary existence. Rather, they exist in relation to other people, in different contexts, and for the purpose of serving people's intentions. We use words in this way to push forward our positionings, which are always and constantly situated in relation to other people (Yuval-Davis, 2011). It is through these situated positionings that we take a stance and make a word our own in a specific way. It is also in the same way that we make who we are and who we are not. Hence the act of dialogue is extremely crucial in the construction of our identities.

I argue that dialogical translation is part of a mutual interpretative understanding which leads to the co-construction of meanings across lingual and cultural boundaries. In this way, a translator who prepares the data to be digested by a researcher and by an audience plays a role that is not at all invisible. The intellectual and situated auto/biography of the translator affects the process of the research from data collection to the writing up of findings, even if he/she is the same person as the researcher. Considerations such as who a piece of work is written for, what it would look like in English, what makes sense in such a context and what does not, are always at the back of the mind of a translator who constantly uses interactions between cultures. In practice, a translator is always bridging ruptures between cultures and also between her own understandings and the intended audiences' understanding. As researchers and translators constantly connect these distances by using in-between knowledge and abilities as translators, I argue that a *dialogical and transversal approach* should be applied to the study of migrant life stories. It

acknowledges that there are multiple ways of reading data, and that there is also no single way of translating it. Such reflections should be more acknowledged and meanings should be thought of as recreations that are always in negotiation with the context within which the text is translated.

When discussing dialogical and transversal translation, I am referring to negotiations about meanings among multiple people involved in the research and multiple audiences from situated positionings within different contexts in which discourses about that particular meaning are shaped and reshaped. I am hoping that by the examples I provide below, my approach will become clearer. Within this process, I identify two main elements: the act of sense making and the situated positioning of an individual which I expand on below. I move on to my first main argument about the role of a translator in a research project.

### **“Making sense”**

The translation process, as Jordan (2002) argues, is part of the ethnographic encounters

where experiential learning about self and others gets done, where meanings are tried out, where experience slowly becomes understanding and where encounters and field notes are, in the best cases, constellated with minor epiphanies of the type, “so, this is what it/he/she/they mean(s)!” (p. 96)

In social science research which involves multiple languages, there are several people involved in the construction of meanings: researchers, translators/interpreters, possibly informants, etc. Conducting research where the researcher does not speak the language is not an easy task (Andrews, 1995). As an English-speaking researcher conducting interviews in German in Berlin, Andrews (1995) referred to the difficulties and dilemmas of making sense of meanings in a research context where the researcher, although very well equipped with the topic of the research, does not speak the language. There is general agreement that researchers and translators constantly interpret meanings, either within one language and/or across several languages (Andrews, 1995; Temple and Edwards, 2002). The processes of meaning-making are complicated and at times contradictory in one language, let alone when meanings need to be clarified in multiple languages. Translating concepts gives a large degree of power as well as an intellectual challenge to the researcher in how to deliver the meanings that do or do not already exist in a

particular culture. We have to bear in mind that meanings do not exist in demarcation from the context and individuals; meanings are constructed through and within the use of languages, contexts and audiences. Hence while talking about delivering research “findings,” we should also note that by doing this we are constantly constructing new meanings to audiences who, in the same way, make sense of meanings in new ways. I will discuss this below in the section on *situated biographies*.

As a bilingual researcher, I have had to use my intellectual, linguistic, and cultural knowledge to write up my “findings” in order to be able communicate with English-speaking audiences. In practice, this is no joke. I shared this similarity with most of my participants. Whilst clearly as a researcher, one has to separate oneself from what is being narrated to one in the interview setting, it is unavoidable not to change the format and make various attempts to make the text and the context more “understandable” for the intended audience. My PhD research with Iranian women migrants in Britain focused on the construction of the meaning of social class in diaspora. As a native Farsi speaker and a migrant woman and speaking English as my second language, acting in the dual role of researcher and translator made the processes of translation complicated (Shklarov, 2007). Having an English-speaking audience in mind, I vacillated between the two cultures and languages and at points framed meanings in order to “fit in” with meaning-making systems in Western academia. By “fitting in” to this context, I mean finding and understanding the audience’s abilities and skills in meaning making and shaping my narrative coherently. As a migrant academic, one learns how to be understood by various attempts of “not being understood.” To elaborate on this point, I am quoting Nina, a single GP in her early 40s who described her social class with a moving reference to her sense of “fitting in” to her work environment and British society:

Nina: ... In this society, you see a lot of lies, injustices, you see a lot of ***discrimination***<sup>1</sup>, lots of ***racism***. You understand that how low your ***social class*** is in relation to the English. I have higher social class in relation to many English people but ***no way*** that I can ***socialise*** with a ***proper*** English guy. I mean you never reach the top. I don’t know why maybe because I have not been ***integrated*** much within British society. Or I haven’t had relationships [with men]. ***I don’t know***. But I feel that those who

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<sup>1</sup> The words that were uttered in English were made bold and italic to distinguish them from the translated surrounding words.

are on top, I mean the social class that I could have as a doctor in Iran, I cannot have here. . . . do you understand what I mean?

In order to make sense of Nina's stories, I should have understood the different contexts she was talking about first. Making sense cannot be done with any reference to the context within which the narratives are located. In Iran, doctors have relatively higher status than doctors in British society; however, Nina discusses her sense of being understood as a foreigner and as one occupying a lower class in British society. Such understandings of social class in Nina's narrative require knowledge of the British context, the realm of medical professions in both countries, understanding the participant, and acknowledging the translator/researcher's abilities and knowledge closely.

As such, making sense depends on three elements: one is the context within which the meaning is produced. The second is the intellectual auto/biography of the researcher/translator and the third is the audience's engagements and positioning. However, this idea has not been used when the researcher and the translator are the same person. As Temple (1997, 2009) argues, I also believe that what translators/ researchers choose to communicate is important in making judgements about what concepts *can* make sense in another culture because making sense depends also on the abilities of the audiences and their pre-existing knowledge.

When the roles of a researcher and translator are shared by the same person, dividing these identities on the basis of a task, such as analysis, translation, or writing up, can be complicated. The blurred boundaries of the two roles also increase the power of the researcher enormously. It is problematic when such positionings are not problematised within a research context (Shklarov, 2007), so the "neutrality" that Freed (1988) relates to the role of interpreter is impossible. In explaining who the interpreter is, Freed argues: "the interpreter is a conduit linking the interviewer with the interviewee and ideally is a neutral party who should not add or subtract from [sic] the primary parties communicate with each other" (p. 316).

### **Making sense in migrant contexts.**

Language acquisition is integral to migrants' lives, as it is a key to understanding and contributing to the new life after migration. Migrants are constantly in the process of making sense of their own lives within new perspectives and making sense of others' lives in order to make connections between the two (Lutz, 2011). In analysing the data obtained from migrant communities, one should constantly

remind oneself that the aim is not to mirror people's lives. Rather, what I do as a researcher is try to understand and to make sense of why and how a person tells a particular story in such a way. This approach to reflexivity has been addressed in relation to researchers who work within migrant communities and with interpreters (Berman and Tyyska, 2010) but not those researchers who also act as translators, except Shklarov (2007).

Because life stories are embedded in particular contexts, when one translates a text or a piece of interview transcript there is a need to narrate a life story in such a way that it makes sense. Hence the emphasis is on the coherence and fluidity of the content, but within the target language framework. The best possible way that we can make the text/story make sense is through connecting the cultural nodes between our participants, ourselves and our audiences. As Lutz (2011) contends, a migrant biography is, and always must be, elaborated in more than one way. It is concerned with sense-making in the context of the sending and the receiving society. Making sense for migrants' lives means understanding their positionalities and their situated biographies since migrants want their stories to be understood.

"Making sense" in a multilingual research context entails referencing both contexts. As I described above in an extract from Nina's interview, the choice of words and the ways in which they are presented in a sentence is important. To elaborate on this point, I am drawing on a piece of interview with one of my participants, Niloufar, who was a consultant in her 50s and a mother of three. The experience of being a refugee who later in life married a white British middle-class man developed a sense of attachment to British lifestyles for her. She embraced Britain and called it her home, partly because she knew she could not go back to Iran, but mainly because of her children from her first husband who should have been able to make a future as the second generation of migrants. It was interesting that despite her strong comments about home, about diaspora, she found the word *ta'alogh* (belonging) irrelevant. As she asked:

Niloufar: ... [in a dismissive tone] what does *ta'alogh* [belonging] mean?... *ta'alogh* is something about the past. I always think that if we were supposed to think about the past, God would create us with two eyes at the back of our heads. But God has given us two eyes in the front in order to look forward to what comes in the future. So what is in front exists here. So I make here my soil. I make here my country. I live comfortably. If I want to think about the past, it holds me back. To think



about the past, keeps you backward. I want to go forward and I have three kids and I am responsible for them.

For Niloufar, getting across the meaning she knows of *ta'alogh* is a difficult task. She shared an aspect of belonging which to her made sense if put in a future context, whereas the meaning of emotional attachment for her was to build her children's future life. So she points out the inefficiency of the Farsi language and the meanings she can make from the word "belonging." Niloufar was a mother of three, had worked hard to be recognised as a refugee doctor in Britain and was married, living a middle-class life. Belonging for her did not mean what it meant for the majority of women in this study, whose understanding of the term was usually related to Iran, in relation to nostalgic memories and idyllic childhoods.

In this text, I decided that to do a literal translation (word-for-word translation) first and then add an explanation of what she meant by the phrase "I make here my soil" contextually in order to make her point.<sup>2</sup> Culturally, soil may not make sense in English although in Iranian culture as well as other cultures it has a strong emotional meaning that represents one's roots in a particular geographical location (Yuval-Davis, 2011). When Niloufar says "I want to make here my soil," she means that the notion of belonging is so important to her that she readily replaces her Iranian soil with the soil in this country. In other words, Niloufar wants to tell me that belonging for her is beyond inheriting a national identity as an Iranian. Literally, she refuses to acknowledge the concept of *ta'alogh* as a relevant one in relation to her life as an immigrant. Here, without understanding Niloufar's life story as a skilled worker and her future hopes for her children in Britain, her dissatisfaction with life in Iran and the freedom she enjoys in Britain, it is difficult to "make sense" of what she means and the depth of her understanding of the words *belonging* and *soil*. As is seen from the above example, making sense requires that a great deal of attention be given to individual biographies, the context these stories are narrated in, and the intellectual auto/biography of the interpreter/researcher. Maybe this is why we need to learn the art of listening to our participants first (Back, 2007) before we try to make sense of their lives.

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<sup>2</sup> I thank my friend Nicola Samson, who brought this issue to my attention. When we were proof reading my PhD thesis, being a native speaker, she said to me that I needed to rephrase "I make here my soil" as it did not make sense to her. We eventually kept it as a literal translation, but I wrote a note for myself pinpointing the importance of manipulating the meanings in the original language in order to make sense to an English-speaking audience. Nicola brought her intellectual autobiography into the process.

Making sense of migrants' lives requires insider knowledge of the contexts within which they live their lives. Temple (1997) argues that in her research with Polish migrants, having insider knowledge of what *family* means helped her to reproduce and empirically unfold what lay in the text: the word *family* and what it meant to a Western European audience who were "on the outside." It is the duty of the narrator to make this syntactic and contextual connection, a talent that often goes unacknowledged in the social sciences.

For migrants, making sense through a dominant language (here English) means to provide meanings which can make connections to not only the surrounding words in the particular text but also to the meanings which already exist in that language. Once these connections are made, words convey meanings that are familiar or understandable. But in the process of making sense, there are assumptions from the audience which alter meanings, as is the case with any text, story or narrative. An important part of who we are is formed and enunciated through the choice of language that we use in our communications (Temple, 2009). The language in which we choose to communicate is intended for an audience and for answering a particular question, so if we feel that there is no connection between the language and the given impression or conveyed message, then we feel obliged to change the former in order to change the latter.

In social science research in the West, making sense of someone/something happens in the dominant language(s). This point becomes clearer in one of my other participants, a successful surgeon, who had come to Britain at the start of her studies and made a choice to speak in English. This was the only interview I conducted in English. However, by the time we reached the question of *Ta'alogh* (belonging), I felt it was bizarre to continue in English when she answered the question in Farsi:

M: Do you belong to Iran or Britain?

Batool: *Man be Iran ta'alogh daram, man kamelan Irani hastam* (I belong to Iran, I am completely Iranian).

It would have been interesting to ask her why she said it in Farsi, but because of time restraints, I was not able to explore this change of language. This has been discussed by Ansari (1977). He argues that the "choice of language" in interviews with Iranians outside Iran is a sign of "national" or "ethnic pride." I do not fully agree with Ansari that the choice of language among Iranians is related to ethnic pride. It can be related to the degree of their assimilation, their education or the degree of their desire to return to Iran. However, language has been

part of the sense of belonging that can be associated with a homeland, culture, and history. Related to this point, in the next section I will discuss the second aspect of the role of a researcher in the translation process and that is the importance of “situated biographies.”

### **Situated Auto/biographies**

Translation/interpretation is a form of constructing meanings. If one thinks in this way, then “literal translation” that is loyal to the original text carries little weight as it undermines the processes and contexts within which meanings are produced. Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic (2000) argue that translation marks the historical, socio-cultural, and political context within which a language is used for individuals to communicate their situated lives. In this way, these communicative practices construct the lifeworlds that individuals engage actively in their daily lives. For explaining my point of situated biographies, I am going to draw on the notion of “intellectual auto/biography” to which Liz Stanley (1990) refers. The concept of intellectual auto/biography, as she argues, is:

An *analytic* (not just descriptive) concern with the specifics of how we come to understand what we do, by locating acts of understanding in an explication of the grounded contexts these are located in and arise from. (p. 62)

The concept has been used in thinking critically on translation and the use of a translator/interpreter as a third and passive person who should apply her/his knowledge objectively (Temple, 1997; Temple and Edwards, 2002). Temple (1997) argues that it is not possible to differentiate what is “in the text” from what is “outside” of it as the boundaries of “inside” and “outside” are auto/biographical in nature (p. 609). That is, the boundaries depend on who the writer (researcher) is, who the translator/interpreter is, and of course, who the reader is.

Similar to Holloway’s (2012) point on our personal and emotional investments in our research projects, I argue that there is so much more of who we are in our research projects than our research participants. It is in choosing the texts, the mode of analysis, the experts that we use, the ways in which we translate, that the outcome becomes a manifestation of who we are rather than who our participants are. For example, throughout the translating process, I realised that the more I was moving forward in translating the data the faster I became on “guessing” what my participants meant after translating hours and hours of interview material. It should be mentioned that the last interviews were read more fluently in English

than the first few, although all the interviews shared a similar tone and style of writing. However, as with other research processes, this change can be due to several factors that form my situated autobiography as an Iranian immigrant: my knowledge of recurring themes, the content of stories I was interested in, constant referrals to the Oxford dictionary. However, there remains one important factor in translating a large quantity of oral interviews. Being faster in translating implies less time spent on the translation process and this means that there might be more meanings that get lost in translation, although there is never a “correct” translation and a degree of lost meaning is always an implication.

Situated biographies should be read within the domination of the western context. It is in the absence of making sense within the dominant language(s) that the imposition of the culture or target language is illuminated. In the following quotation, I am going to illustrate how Roxana analyses the dominance of the context she is living in. In the interview she narrated the story when she got married. She intended to migrate to Britain before her visa application was rejected in the British consulate in Tehran and she decided to consider the brother of one of her friends as a suitable candidate to marry. In this reflexive account, she is talking about the “lost in translation” principle and the wide lingual space between the two cultures that necessarily leads to lingual distance. Roxana is referring to a traditional Iranian way of proposing, called *Khastegari*:

**Roxana:** When they [husband’s family] came [to our house], I saw my [future] husband, I liked him and they said it is good [you two] see each other more. I have to tell you this that although the way we got acquainted was traditional, it was not the proposal or the way these people [in Britain] mean. They call it **arranged marriage** here. Whenever they talk about this, I get really furious that they are **homogenising** us. Although we [Iranians] think that European people are thinking of themselves as superior, they are thinking in a different way and this does not mean it is higher. It [their thinking] is just different. ... These people think that whoever comes from India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or anywhere alike has got married by **arranged marriage**. You have to explain to them that, “No, this is not arranged marriage. It is like when you go on different [dating] **websites**, and search for a mate to date. In Iran, someone who is a family or a friend, someone whom you trust refers you to another person and that results in seeing each other, and there is no obligation in getting married after dating each other.” ... It is not **arranged**. No one has **arranged** it. But these people [in

Britain] have strange thoughts about us. You cannot explain to them because by the time you want to explain it, it takes two hours. You have to tell them about the *background* and I don't have the time and energy for it. I say to myself let them think whatever they want!

Here Roxana explains about the difference between *khastegari* and “arranged marriage.” The difference between the two illustrates what I mean by the situated biography of Roxana, her Iranian heritage, and her difficulties in being identified as belonging to a similar category. By saying that “I don't have the time and energy for it,” she shows her frustration in translating her understanding of a tradition that comes from her situated positioning as an Iranian woman. Noting that Roxana is a mother of two, a full time doctor, and a migrant who already is dealing with the dynamics of translation in her daily life, she has no energy to convey the minutiae of everyday Iranian culture. As can be seen, Roxana tried to fill this space between her own life and her audience through different attempts, but is frustrated that the word does not encapsulate a familiar meaning (Bassnet, 1994). She knows that the audience of her narrative do not know what *khastegari* means. By saying “they are homogenising us,” she refers to the important role of translation and the linguistic challenges that migrants face on a daily basis in a culture that recognises only one type of traditional marriage, i.e. an “arranged marriage.” She tries hard to differentiate a new concept in English and to replace that with an already known concept but shows how hard it is as a migrant to demonstrate the difference between Iranian, Arab, and Indian people.

*Khastegari* here refers to a specific (although fluid) activity that necessarily does not have an equivalent in British culture. This process is different from what Temple argues about family. *Family* is a general concept that forms the basis of all societies, although the term is different in its cultural specificities. Translating terms with less “cultural baggage” is not as challenging as those like *khastegari* that have distinct meanings in a particular context. But this depends on the audiences' reception and recognition of the difference and their situated biographies. My concern—or rather Roxana's concern—is not the pronunciation of the (*kh*) rather than *K*, and the long and unfamiliar word. Roxana's concern is certainly about the alienation that using the word causes her, due to British people's different understanding of the term and the processes which expose this Iranian tradition and those with Iranian lifeworlds as alien. By alienation, I am referring to the sense of disintegration that happens a lot in migrant life narratives. I provided a similar example at the beginning of this article in Nina's case.

Roxana's frustration about this lack of connection between herself and the receptors of her stories in British society should be read within an emphasis on individualisation discourses. We can see from her story that the notion of *Khastegari* is being translated into an already known and familiar concept of arranged marriage by a western audience. By acknowledging the power relations between languages and cultures, she, in the end, thinks of *Khastegari* as a non-translatable concept and does not insist on finding a way to make it into a known concept.

This alienation process after all is a testimony of the hierarchical systems of languages. Although we use English to be understood as Iranians living the West, we also frame everything in Iranian culture in order to be tangible and proximal in English. Through media communications, people tend to generalise and oversimplify concepts for their utilisation. Acknowledging the differences between a translator's meaning-making of a particular subject and the sense of alienation that a translated text gives to the translator/researcher, I believe that we can provide better ways to explore new meanings in these lingual spaces that are created in multilingual research studies. This leads me to the issue of the "translatability of the data."

Some theorists doubt the translatability of cultural patterns. As I argued before, making sense of a text or a dialogue depends on the reception and the recognition of audiences; the same applies to the translatability of a text. What makes a text translatable depends on the way the researcher chooses to convey its content within the realm of target language and culture. Therefore, "intellectual biographies" (Stanley, 1990) and situated biographies affect the translatability of the data. The public's recognition of a concept is a requisite aspect of translation which includes reception of the text. In the above example, Roxana talks about the Iranian style of marriage which cannot be translated because according to her it takes a long time to do that. Although some have argued that translation is violence (Venuti, 1996), I argue that the processes of understanding a different culture and understanding new meanings used and imported into languages need be given attention in the wider political and cultural context of the societies we are living in.

### **Situated "Other."**

The importance of translation is not just about showing the differences between cultures, since different cultures do not stand differently in equal terms. Due to particular histories which accompany languages all the time, there are also power relations between cultures and discourses. The act of translation, then, is not

simply transiting meanings from one to the other. Translation processes are infused by the experiences of “we” and “them,” of what it means to be part of the known and being part of the “Other.”

The “Other” is constructed through language, but also through having exposure to other languages. As Knapp (2009) in a paper in the *Celebrating Intersectionality?* conference argued, knowing another non-European language is seen as being pathological in Europe as it pertains to exposure to an unknown culture. The idea of being a migrant and belonging to somewhere outside Europe is comparable to the unknown world, to the exotic, or to terror, so the notion of knowing another language as a form of a cultural capital or as Lutz (2011) puts it, as a form of “innocent” communication, is not valid. Knowing a non-English language in this context accompanies references to historical and cultural incidents which form the basis of acceptability of that language. Once, my sister refused to accept my offer of an Iranian novel written in Farsi, to read while commuting to work, due to her reluctance to explain to others what language it was:

M: ...because I am tired of people’s curiosity, they always ask what language it is and I have to say it is Farsi, and not Arabic. I do not want that attention!

Knowing and reading a Farsi text for my sister is not seen as powerful cultural capital as it endangers her belonging to British culture. Such a positioning was shared with some of my research participants who refused to read in Farsi in public spaces such as Monir. To be seen as Arab or Iranian connotes a form of otherness, of belonging to a culture overseas. These are highly politicised narratives which are recurrent in migrants’ narratives. Similarly, Lutz (2011) argues that “in a dominant social discourse in which migration is seen as a biographical risk factor, it is often comparable to a chronic disease or other physical deficiency” (p. 354). This is shown in the flowing extract from Solmaz’s interview, a specialist doctor in her late 40s and a mother of two:

M: What do you feel about being an Iranian and living in here?

Solmaz: At the moment, it is not a good feeling to have an Iranian nationality.

M: Why?

S: With all these issues about Iran and the PUBLICITY that Iran has, you do not feel proud to say that you are Iranian. But I do

[say] when it is required. I say that I am Iranian but people's reaction is, all of them say: Oh. I mean there was nobody who said. Their first reaction was Oh, REALLY? ((laughs)). Has it ever happened to you?

M: Yes, very much

Solmaz: OH REALLY? ((laughs))

M: And then their next question is definitely about Ahmadi Nejad.

Solmaz: I mean it is not a good feeling to say that you are Iranian.

M: But generally, how is it? At work? With your COLLEAGUES who know you are Iranian.

Solmaz: My colleagues who know I am Iranian, as I work with a small group; it is not [a big deal]. But generally it is not a good feeling.

As Holloway (2012) argues, any data analysis should be put in the context of everything that we “know.” In the above example, I agreed with Solmaz that as an academic migrant, I am also subject to questions that remind me of not-belonging to British society. However, Solmaz's notion of belonging was not lying in the same framework as mine. While I was thinking more about specific political questions I was being asked on trains and buses, Solmaz was speaking more about her workplace and her colleagues' effects. My ability in understanding Solmaz at the time of the interview was coming from what I knew on the basis of my own situated knowledge and positioning. The same process applies to translation and the “ability” of the researcher/translator in translating the words and concepts and their situated knowledge. The issue of ability and degree of knowledge of a language is heavily context-based. In talking about translation one should not underestimate the potential of a person with limited abilities and a situated positioning and knowledge to translate a text or story.

### **Concluding Notes on Translation**

In this paper, I have reflected on the challenges and the importance of problematising the role of a translator in bilingual



research. To summarise, there are two important points in relation to the role of the researcher in translating non-English interviews into English which go unrecognised across studies in the social sciences. The first is the participants' intentionality of cultural meanings in their narratives. By this, I mean that the processes of making sense in a migrant context often are not problematised even by bilingual researchers. Research participants' agency is often undermined by the hegemonic and dominant discourses that prevail over the research process. However, individuals within a research study actively engage with pre- and post-migration discourses and re-create their own understandings of concepts as I demonstrated in the case of Niloufar's understanding of belonging. Translation of these concepts requires lots of attention being paid to individual biographies of migrants.

In my second argument on translation, I argued that there are two important situations in relation to migrants' meaning-making of concepts. Whilst making sense of a concept means a lot for migrants in daily life, they either try to place their narratives within the majority discourses, or they try to keep their distinct understandings of the terms. In any case, I argued that "situated biographies" of translators, writers, and audiences as well as research participants shape the ways in which a word, sentence, or concept is presented to specific audiences.

Following Bakhtin, I argued that translation is part of a dialogical interpretation and co-construction of meanings across lingual and cultural boundaries. My approach to translating and analysing these interviews fleshed out the role I played in making sense of what my interviewees wanted to convey: for instance, the difference between the word *belonging* in Niloufar and Batool's extracts. The approach also takes into account the supposedly invisible role of audiences of a product. As I showed in Roxana's story, language, cultural barriers, and linguistic spaces are harder to overcome in real world. As audiences, we should actively involve ourselves in listening and connecting these distances by using our in-between knowledge and abilities. Hence the process of re-creating meanings should always be negotiated with all the participants in a research study.

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