

# CITIES IN TRANSLATION: SOME PROPOSALS ON METHOD

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## Abstract

This article argues for the existence of a category of linguistically divided cities and provides four examples: colonial Calcutta, turn of the century Trieste, Barcelona and Montreal. These are cities which—at specific historical moments—are characterized by competition between two languages each claiming entitlement to the space of the city. Because there are two strong languages claiming the allegiance of citizens, these cities are different from most other multilingual cities where there is one overarching dominant language. In the context of current debates over linguistic citizenship and increased global migration, the contact zones of divided cities offer lessons that are particularly valuable. While the potential for violence and civil war haunts every divided city, the differences of the city also offer possibilities for creative interconnections. The interactions of such cities can be studied as forms of translation.

Key Words: divided cities, language competition, translation, method, city space

There has never been a unilingual city. Every city is a gathering-place for cultures, for ideas and for styles, and languages are part of the mix. While each urban setting has its own blend of accents and its own map of contact zones, there are some cities where language relations have a special importance. These are cities where the longstanding cohabitation of languages has created competing senses of entitlement to the space of the city. This is the case most dramatically in colonial or proto-colonial cities (like Calcutta, Rabat, Dakar), as well as in cities where an imperial language shares the city with an emergent national language, as was the case in the Habsburg cities of Prague, Trieste and Budapest. Linguistically divided cities also result from conflicting internal nationalisms (Barcelona, Brussels, Montreal) or the massive immigration of one single language group (Miami, Los Angeles).

Translation takes on more than incidental importance in such cities. To track practices of translation among competing languages is to throw new light on the cultural history of these cities and to investigate the ways in which literary interactions foster a “bilingual esthetics” (Doris Sommer). While the potential for violence and civil war haunts every

divided city, the differences of the city also offer possibilities for creative interconnections. Offering the potential for interactions that include mistrust, resistance, and vivifying exchange, double cities are vital terrain for the exploration of cosmopolitan urbanism as a reality and as an ideal. In the context of current debates over linguistic citizenship and increased global migration, the contact zones of divided cities offer lessons that are particularly valuable.

Multilingual contexts, of course, are never spaces of pure difference, but specific configurations of institutions, creating specific possibilities of expression. In cities where more than one historically rooted language community lays claim to the territory of the city, languages share the same terrain but rarely participate in a peaceful and egalitarian conversation: their separate institutions are wary of one another, aggressive in their need for self-protection. To speak of bilingual cities is to use a term that is misleading. Double cities come into existence as a result of historical episodes of violence. Whether undertaken under the aegis of imperialism or of colonialism, a separate language community takes up residence along a pre-existing one. The French and English colonial cities of Asia and Africa in the 19th century came into existence as double cities, commonly known as the White Town and the Black Town. The Habsburg Empire created linguistically divided cities when German was imposed as an administrative language on the communities of Czech, Hungarian or Italian speakers. Montreal's double city was created through two successive moments of colonial rule, first the French then the British. A Catalan city, Barcelona has succumbed to, but also resisted, repeated incursions by Castillians. These are some examples of longstanding relationships of cohabitation, where more than one language has acquired a sense of entitlement to the space of the city.

Such cities are haunted by the threat of renewed violence, and indeed one of the strongest themes that emerges from the history of the world's great cosmopolitan and multilingual cities is that of multiplicity annihilated-- of linguistic diversity reduced to monolingualism. Centuries of coexistence among languages and religions are wiped out by the triumph of nationalism. This is the story of Salonica (Mazower), Istanbul (Pamuk), the Habsburg cities (Baier, Ara and Magris, Spector), and colonial cities like Calcutta (Chaudhari). The spectre of partition hovers over such cities as Jerusalem, Beirut, Johannesburg under apartheid, the gaps widened to the point where it becomes necessary to speak of two separate and warring entities.

But though tensions prevail in what is always a fragile balance, there are moments when double cities offer possibilities of creative interaction. Arguing with Doris Sommer for the civic and democratic benefits of language contact, joining Mary Louise Pratt in promoting “new public ideas of language”, I argue that linguistically divided cities enhance our understanding of the ways that language inhabits city space and nourishes enduring patterns of diversity. The divisions offer a possibility of mixture; their particular topographies allow for zones of contact as well as zones of exclusion. Unlike multilingual capitals like Paris, New York or Toronto, where many languages coexist under the authority of one unquestioned language (and where there is unquestioned allegiance to one single language of citizenship), double cities promote language-consciousness. There are competing languages and competing cultural institutions, and so there is continual conflict over legitimacy. To track practices of translation among these communities is to gather material for a cultural history of the city. But the understanding of translation must also be enlarged, so that conflict as well as harmony falls within its purview (Cronin, Apter).

### **Translating across small distances**

The question of small differences and small distances is especially pertinent today as a question in translation studies. As it migrates across disciplines, translation is also applied to changing situations. With the intensification of migration, diasporal communities and cultural hybridity, translation operates increasingly across small spaces, “at home”. Multilingual contexts and multilingual forms of communication call for new ways of thinking about transfer, and the ways in which language relations are inflected by the proximity of differences. The idea of “endotic travel” (Cronin)—of movement across small, “internal” spaces—applies to the complexities of translation across the shared spaces of today’s cities, for instance. How then do multilingual situations, where communities share a common geographical space—or compete for it—inflect the process of cultural creation? The spaces of cities offer a new terrain for translation studies, in particular cities which have a long history of linguistic cohabitation, where more than one community lays claim to the territory. This proximity of differences within the city urges us to rethink the nature of the relationships between literatures and how they are mediated: how to replace the familiar distinctions between ‘source’ and ‘target’ or between ‘import’ and ‘export’? Does Translation Studies offer appropriate concepts and methods to analyse the new literary cartographies, to rethink literary

relations in multilingual cultures?

But what in fact are small differences? What seem to be small differences --between languages in particular-- often turn out to be large ones. To the eyes of a visitor in Barcelona, the differences between signage in Spanish and Catalan can at times appear maddeningly minor. The difference of one vowel, of a double L rather than a single one. Yet this small difference stands in for an entire literary tradition reaching back to the Middle Ages, as well as a political struggle with very real consequences. But small differences can also be magnified for political ends. And so, the fact that there is now a Bosnian language --one which demands its place on the currency market at par with the Serbian and Croatian, languages it was once identified with--is an enforcement of a small difference<sup>1</sup>. Where once these languages were considered mutually intelligible, translation is now called for.

## Montreal

In this paper I want to argue for the category of the linguistically divided city—and propose this city-type as a candidate for study through translation. My model is the city of Montreal where the double colonization of France (with the establishment of New France in the 17th century) and then England (with the Conquest of 1759) has created a spatial and linguistic doubleness which has persisted until now. In *Translating Montreal. Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (2006) I tracked practices of translation across Montreal from the 1940s to the present, arguing that the cultural history of the divided city must be told as a story of the relationships and interactions among the city's language communities--tracing out the pathways created from one to the other. I focused on a number of translators whose work was crucial to the self-definition of the city from the 1940s onwards. Malcolm Reid, F.R Scott, A.M. Klein, Pierre Anctil, Gail Scott, Jacques Brault -- each of these writer-translators initiated new interactions across the city, some reinforcing the traditional east-west divide, others, like Pierre Anctil's translations from Yiddish into French, creating entirely new pathways and setting old relationships on a totally new footing. By following the trajectories of these translators (literally tracking their movements across the city, as they moved--for instance--between the institutions of the English and the French-speaking neighbourhoods), by examining

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<sup>1</sup> The Dayton Peace Accord recognized Bosnian as a distinct language spoken in Bosnia and Herzegovina by Bosniaks

their translation practices, the study emphasized the influence of these transactions on changing conceptions of city space. While recognizing the impossibilities of successful translation at fraught political moments, while tracing out zones which promote (or discourage) interaction, the book argued for the benefits of cultural frictions.

Few studies have been devoted to linguistically divided cities. Scott Spector's study of fin de siècle Prague is relevant to the present study in showing how translators mediated across the divided spaces of Prague, in the context of the dying Habsburg empire and emergent Czech nationalism. Language relations in divided cities are different from those which prevail in multilingual capitals, where many languages coexist under the authority of one unquestionably dominant language. This does not mean that there are not relations with other languages. Indeed my study of Montreal demonstrated the importance of Yiddish in the literary history of the city—and the increasing importance of immigrant languages such as Italian in the literary imagination of the city today. What it does mean is that immigrant languages enter into a conflictual, triangular relationship with the two main languages.

As will become rapidly evident, the commerce between communities is rarely that of generous reciprocity. Multilingual cities are often a collection of closed enclaves, where literary communities turn their back on one another. Translation can be an act of polite acknowledgment, scarcely disturbing the self-enclosed assurance of each group. Yet the presence of competing language and cultural systems can also create new possibilities for self-awareness. In defiance of parochialism, cultural adventurers can invent new forms of identity. The translators who serve as guides to divided cities travel across their cities in search of illumination. They practice language crossings in ways that both reflect and influence the culture of their city.

Exploring literary works which are the result of linguistic and cultural encounters means that I study conventional translations, but also works which invoke an expanded idea of translation, one in which language contact creates a transcultural sensibility, a transcultural poetics. "Translation" therefore includes the conventional activity of language transfer (when a text in one language replaces that of another) but also writing inspired by another language or writing produced in contact with another language (as in a journalist's account of an event which takes place in another language) as well as writing that combines languages (what I call creative interference). This broad and loose understanding of translation as interlingual communication

allows a rich and textured account of the changing types of interaction between languages in the contact zones of the city—challenging symmetrical ideas of bilingualism and introducing zones of non-translation. To study these interactions against the backdrop of the spaces and histories of the city, focusing on particular individuals whose artistic trajectories and intercultural explorations reveal significant trends, allows an understanding of the spread of social movements from one community to another, or the introduction of new styles and literary forms.

### Other cities

What cities fit the profile of the linguistically divided city? Here I would like to briefly propose three additional cities—Calcutta, Trieste, Barcelona—as candidates for analysis and justify their inclusion.

### Calcutta (today Kolkata)<sup>2</sup>

In the 19th century, Calcutta remained a rigidly divided colonial city, with a predominantly Hindu town in the north, its White Town further south and in the centre a “Gray area” where other populations lived.(Chattopadhyay) Yet the meeting of British and Bengali culture across the spatial separations of Calcutta was the occasion for what Amit Chaudhuri calls “one of the most profound and creative cross-fertilizations between two different cultures in the modern age” (Chaudhuri, 2001, 3). The separate and hierarchical spaces of colonial Calcutta were a crucible which produced a rich array of new cultural forms which together have been called the Bengali Renaissance(Sarkar, 1997, 160) “Modernity’s journey in colonial India,” says Partha Chatterjee, “would spill over the embankments of the White city, to proliferate in the native quarters...Energized by the desires and strategies of entirely different political agencies, the intellectual project

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<sup>2</sup> I use « Calcutta » rather than today’s « Kolkata » because the period I am referring to long predates the name-change.play Nildarpan (for which he was jailed by the British) as well as his founding of the Vernacular Literature Society (and the initiation of a program of translations into Bengali which were peddled across Calcutta from door-to-door by the very first women hawkers); and the longlasting influence of the young European-inspired woman novelist and translator Toru Dutt; are revealing of the influence and conflictual nature of the transactions which took place across the city. Debate continues today among the most important Indian cultural theorists (P.Chatterjee, D. Charkraborty, Sumit Sarkar, among many others) as to the nature and effects of the Bengali Renaissance. The transactions marked all aspects of Bengali culture, including religious and social practices, visual arts (T. Guha-Thakurta), and popular culture (Sumanta Banerjee) and included the emergence of new cultural forms such as the novel.

of modernity found new sustenance in those densely populated parts; and in the process it took on completely new forms.” (Chatterjee 1995: 8) The period of the entire Bengali Renaissance is rich in varieties of translation – and a series of remarkable individuals marked the emergent Bengali culture through their interactions with English and Sanskrit.

Some of the most prominent of these individuals are Michael Mahasuddan Dutt, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, and Rabindranath Tagore—but also such lesser known translators as Gerasim Lebedeff, Reverend James Long and Toru Dutt. Though earlier moments are important (M. Dutt and Lebedeff), the period from 1850-1900 is richest for its important translations towards Bengali.

The stories of these translators, in particular the eccentric and provocative work of Lebedeff in the theatre (he was responsible for the very first translations of English plays into Bengali); the extremely influential work of James Long as the sponsor of the translation of the

The emergence of the novel in Indian languages has become something of a legend— with Bankimchandra Chatterjee playing the starring role, and Calcutta serving as the matrix of a modern literary culture created at the intersection between British and Bengali traditions. But what has been less studied is the way that the novel in Indian languages was born as a result of – and as resistance to— translation. Priya Joshi has conducted an extensive study of the novels which were imported to India, particularly to the city of Calcutta, and of their readership. The colonized city was flooded with middle-brow reading material, and many of the novels were translated into Bengali. Bankim’s own career was marked by an initial decision to write in English followed by a decision to translate the novel form into Bengali, adding the fantastic elements more familiar to the Indian tradition, and shifting his focus from the present to the past. As the “Walter Scott” of India, and an intellectual deeply engaged with both British and Bengali culture, Bankim’s invention of the novel is profoundly “translational”. To study the emergence and reception of his novels is to explore the very loose boundaries of translation in the context of the colonial encounter.

By placing translation activities on the map of the colonial city, across neighbourhoods and in cultural monuments like Town Hall, identifying intermediate spaces (in particular the space of cultural intermediaries like the Marwaris, Anglo-Indians and Muslims), analysis of this moment will bring to light the material and linguistic underpinnings of an extraordinary moment of cultural encounter, and will draw a portrait of a divided yet interactive city. It will also refine our understanding of the ways in which the colonial city prefigures today’s

globalized city—providing a model of intense, though conflictual, cultural movement across language lines.

It is true that the interactions of Calcutta have been extensively studied, to the detriment of other important multilingual Indian cities. But though Calcutta today is not as multilingual as other cities, it provides an extraordinary model for understanding the effects of linguistic division during an intense period of colonial encounter. It is for this reason that it most fully corresponds to the profile of the linguistically divided city which I am establishing.

## Trieste

All the Habsburg capitals were multilingual. Language-consciousness was intense in Budapest, Prague and Trieste, where a prestigious language of empire (German) cohabitated with an emergent national language (Czech, Hungarian, Italian). Translation took on broad importance as a figure of writing (Spector). Trieste (where German, Italian and Slovene lived in uneasy coexistence) experienced itself as a cosmopolitan centre on the margins of empire, the city found itself suspended in fragile equilibrium between the values of imperial pluralism and progressive nationalism, between the language of empire and the language of the emerging nation. The identity of the city was forged by its situation at the edge of the Habsburg empire, but also—as the 20th century progressed—in the fraught space between Western Europe and the Slavic world, touching Tito's Yugoslavia (with borders actually traversing the city of Gorizia, with Trieste itself in political limbo and separated from its hinterland for almost 10 years after the end of the World War II). In response to its existence as a border city (a city at the border, a city traversed by borders) Trieste has produced a powerful, translated/translating literature of anxiety and desire (Ara and Magris). Italo Svevo is an emblematic figure of Triestine literature, educated in German, writing in Italian, speaking in the Triestine dialect. Like James Joyce (during his Triestine years, brilliantly recounted by McCourt) Svevo moved between languages as he created new links across the city. The contemporary essayist and novelist Claudio Magris has been influential in describing the "border literature" of Trieste and its complex relations both to Mitteleuropa and to Slavic culture, as well as arguing for the powerful esthetic movements created by the very uncertainties of Trieste's linguistic ground. His translational writings (self-translations, essays) crossed the charged ideological spaces of the multilingual city, tapping into the differential energies of its communities, using topography and specific urban sites (Magris' Caffé



San Marco, the Public Garden, as described in *Microcosms*, but also the cafés, restaurants and other sites of cultural mixing described by Hametz) as powerful evocations of cultural history. Reference will be made to transactions with Slovene which will accompany and then take over from German as an insider/outsider language in the city (but without the prestige of German). Miran Kosuta's *Scritture parallele* (*Parallel writings*, 1997) is as an important resource here, as well as the writings of Boris Pahor (translated into Italian from Slovene), bringing the story of Triestine translation into the present.

Unlike Prague, where German was the prestigious language of literature (even though only 10% of the population was German-speaking), German was never a dominant literary language in Trieste. Trieste had a remarkable history of fidelity to the Italian-language (or Venetian dialect)—combined with political allegiance to a German-language empire and a conflictual relationship with its Slavic population. The history of Trieste is *sui generis*—with its double cultural fissure, from the north and from the east. To call Trieste a linguistically divided city is to propose a somewhat simplified geometry. The multiple divisions of the city has given birth to a fascinating literature and varied literature—which is best analyzed as translational.

## Barcelona

Barcelona resembles Montreal as a city whose bourgeoisie rules its region, but not its nation. Translation looms large in the Catalan national consciousness, as an instrument of cultural redress and revival, and the importance of translation for Catalan linguistic nationalism has been amply documented. Kathryn A. Woolard's classic study *Double Talk. Bilingualism and the Politics of Ethnicity in Catalonia* as well as Robert Hughes' influential *Barcelona* (1992) set out the terms of conflict between traditional Catalan culture and its outsiders—but neither of these address literary interactions in the modern city or highlights the disconnect between official state Catalan policies and the reality of transactions within the city of Barcelona. It is hardly coincidental that Barcelona was the site of one of the most ambitious contemporary art projects relating to translation: Antoni Muntadas' *On Translation*, presented by the MACBA (Barcelona Contemporary Art Museum) from 2002 to 2003, or that the theme of language and the city is nurtured by many important Barcelona institutions.

Post-Franco developments in the Spanish-Catalan dialogue are marked by the trauma of the Spanish Civil War (and the subsequent prohibition of the public use of Catalan for forty years) and by the influx

of a Spanish-speaking immigrant population, often identified with specific neighbourhoods of the city—and marked as well by the increasing importance of international English. The language-conscious city is divided between old and new (following the creation of the New City, Eixample, between 1870 and 1910) and identified since 1975 with a concerted new era of public planning, design and art. The public marking of space associated with nationalist projects (the iconic status of Mercé Rodoreda and her neighbourhood of San Gervasi, the recent controversial construction of Catalonia's national Theatre in an attempt to give civic visibility to Catalan institutions (Buffery)), highlight the ways that language-identified cultural zones are voluntarily created and modified. *El Amante Bilingue* (1980) by Juan Marsé—a novel which is a clever parody of language politics in Barcelona and a text which has become the basis of several important commentaries—sets the scene for language interactions in Barcelona. Important translators are Maria Aurelia Capmany (a feminist and political activist whose translations into Catalan between 1963 and 1968 were a direct confrontation with the Franco regime) and Joaquim Mallafré (translator of Joyce's *Ulysses* into Catalan). Barcelona is most importantly terrain for discussion of an unusual brand of self-translation: writing in Spanish (Montalban, Mendoza and others) which has as its object the Catalan city yet neutralizes linguistic references.

### **Dividedness**

The proposed cities are all divided in different ways—Calcutta by the rigid lines of colonial exclusion and racism, Trieste by the historical faultlines where Germanic, Latin and Slavic cultures meet in central Europe, Barcelona and Montreal by the internal struggles of their federal states where historic regional identities confront the broader multinational nation. In each case the central language conflicts are part of additional interactions with other languages and with international English—and with the many other kinds of spatial, class, race and gender divisions which are part of every city. Yet the imaginations of their cities are coloured by these primary divisions, and they impinge on the literary culture of their cities. Translation is a particularly appropriate lens through which to study important transitional moments in the life of these cities-- foregrounding the importance of language interactions in urban life (neglected in the contemporary literature on cities) and demonstrating the pertinence of translation studies for exploring issues of urban citizenship.

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