

# Lost and Found in Translation: When Words Stand For Remote-and-Close Experiences

Dr. Michele S. Piccolo

## Fishing for words from the unconscious

When I was asked to approach this writing as a personal note on ‘working in translation’ as an Italian-educated psychoanalyst practicing in New York City, I thought that I did not have much to say. In the psychoanalytic discourse there is more writing than our time available to appreciate it if we are busier ‘translating’ communications from our patients. As per the title, I take after Eva Hoffman’s memoir from 1989, I follow her sense of ‘being lost’ on a map. I will use the metaphor of a space inside of us where we search for words – like a pond with fish to catch and sell at the market.

Famously, Amati-Mehler *et al.* in 1990 concluded:

We are not able to share the idea that polylingualism is merely a sum total of several isolated states of monolingualism. Moreover, we believe that a *discursive plurality also exists in a completely monolingual individual*, even though this co-presence of discourses is expressed in one language only, not only because numerous variations exist within one language linked to dialectal nuances, baby language, love language, family vocabulary, but also because the same linguistic discourse can assume [...] a very different meaning according to the emotional and cultural background and the relational circumstances [...] (p.581).

Discursive plurality, thus, implies that the ‘water head’ of the pond of our words inside is a build-up over time out of the multiplicity of our experience since our early life. I deem that bilingualism is a wider vocabulary, a larger ‘pond’ from which one can ‘fish’ a wider range of words, but, in my opinion, it is **not** made of two compartmentalized separated ‘ponds’, as monolingual people tend to assume.

The bilingual individual has one single personally-tailored unconscious fueled by emotional experiences from multiple geographies. The old saying goes that ‘the world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page’ (Saint Augustine). Hence, translating is making intelligible this wider horizon to someone that could not ‘travel inside and outside’ of themselves.

I put forward the idea that sometimes ‘we fish nearby and some other times we fish far away in the same single pond’ when we pick our words – ‘remoteness vs. closeness’ in our word choices. Bridging that distance for the benefit of an external listening audience is what translating is. Translating is making intelligible to others things that we comfortably pick from the ‘water of elsewhere’ linked to our experience that took place *far* from our audience’s current water – but the waters then-and-there and the waters here-and-now are mixed in the same pond in our head.

## Bringing the fish to the surface of the preconscious

Working and living in translation is something that at times leaves in awe my fellow New Yorkers who are fluent in one language only. In actuality, a century ago (and for many still today), it was a norm to be exposed to multiple languages or dialects and juggling them in day-to-day life. When we search for examples, we usually start from Freud: we could say something about his relocation from Moravia to Vienna as a preschooler, we can say something about little Freud having a language at home different from the language at school; about adult Freud treating American and French patients; about Freud lecturing in English in his trip to America; Freud’s hiking on the Italian alps, etc.... these are just examples on how ordinary it was to express oneself in a plurality of languages. Other examples come

to mind, like Melanie Klein born and raised in Vienna, in analysis with Ferenczi in Budapest (where the language is not Indo-European!), later with Abraham in Berlin where she trained and then living to become known as a British psychoanalyst in London.

These two seem as big names from which we feel a certain distance or with which we overly identify, but in ordinary life, years before colonialism, regions with a different language were a short step away. Colonialism changed things (for example, before colonialism, you could find variances of English in relatively small geographical areas within England; while after colonialism, large colonial geographical areas were covered with a 'blanket' of the same 'English for all'). Wherever in the world countries were smaller than large colonial countries like the US and Australia, it would have taken any child few hours of ground travel to find themselves in a location where people would speak a different language and where, at the same time, they could find family friends or relatives who were juggling the two idioms. I have in mind young Freud visiting his half-brothers in Manchester. It seems that when a foreign language was right around the corner people were less surprised to meet bilingualism (see small countries like Belgium or Switzerland), instead when the foreign language was met at the end of a long uprooting journey (see immigrants traveling to the Americas or Australia) then the linguistic shock was more substantial. It seems that familiarity or unfamiliarity with multiple linguistic horizons is linked to a parallel degree of proximity or distance at a psychological level, what I earlier called 'remoteness vs closeness' on the linguistic level, now becomes 'unfamiliarity vs familiarity' at a psychological level.

Hence, colleagues from New York are betraying a sense of 'remoteness' when they ask me, 'do you dream in English or in Italian?' The Welshman Ernest Jones must have felt a similar 'remoteness' when during his first meetings at the Berggasse, he noticed that everyone was quoting 'Latin and Greek passages by memory during their conversations and being astonished at my blank response' (Jones, 1959, p. 35). A more personal example of 'remoteness' is from the instances in which I found myself translating psychoanalytic papers with Italian colleagues who were entrenched with the technical meaning of Bion's term 'reverie' without knowing the use of that word in everyday English before Bion – think of how romantic poets used 'reverie'. Winnicott's term 'holding' is rich with theory indeed, but my fellow Italians did not show experiential 'closeness' with how that word was used in everyday English.

A more clinical example of these psychological 'proximal and remote zones' is the case of Anna O. (Breuer, 1893). In her hysteric episodes, she compartmentalized one of the multiple languages in her head because of what she needed to keep 'far' in her specific neurosis for emotional reasons, but both idioms were available in the pond of her unconscious.

Going to my own experience to which many Italians could relate, as a child I would hear at home my parents switching between Italian and their dialect, an unwritten language with a different vocabulary from the language in school. While one generation before, a child would hear standard Italian for the first time not at home but from their first-grade teacher – think of Elena Ferrante's characters. The examples above have in common the theme of 'remoteness vs. proximity' in a person's exposure to languages. Sometimes, the distance to be 'exposed' is short (from Vienna to Budapest), other times the distance is large (immigrants in America) .

I am of the opinion that nowadays third generation immigrants in America (or other colonial countries) – the offspring of the generations who walked the 'long' distance – are the ones who are most in awe when they travel to places like Switzerland or Belgium where people can walk a 'short' distance to be immersed in another idiom without a cultural shock. Americans and Australians are far more

surprised while observing bilingual people than someone from Switzerland or Belgium. We have an unhappy joke in Italy that goes like this: 'How do you call someone who can speak two languages? Bilingual. How do you call someone who can speak one language only? American!'. For Strachey, translating Freud was a much shorter step than for many psychoanalysts of the following generations, while many New York psychoanalysts treat the Standard Edition as if it was written by Freud originally in English since they experience the GESAMMELTE WERKE as 'experientially remote'. Didn't Freud have an accent when lecturing at Clark University?

### **Exchanging our fish in the market of idioms**

My experience includes being born near the Swiss-Italian border from southern parents, educated in standard Italian, doing a doctorate with Italian teachers and English assignments and eventually emigrating to New York where I speak Italian to my Italian-educated American wife, and I speak English to my Italian-American children. My practice in New York is made of about 30% of Italian speakers and the rest are Americans. Most of my Italian patients intersperse English words in their speech to one degree or another. I also have an Italian patient that for defensive reasons speaks mostly English – as if he is trying to avoid a particular species of fish – linked to his mother – from the pond of his unconscious, but he is aware of the co-habitation of multiple species.

The process of finding words in a session is very well described by Bucci with her concept of 'referential activity': the patient's attempt 'to express emotional experience, including warded off experience, in verbal form' (Bucci, 2001. p. 40). It seems to me a broad concept that implies that when we are searching for words, we are already translating something --- translating some internal state into some sound that is intelligible to the listener. Patients are translating something from inside because they want to feel understood (or because they need to hide something) – closeness vs remoteness. Both a monolingual and a bilingual patient in session are looking for a verbal representative of the experience they want to communicate. They can even resort to silence if they feel that the experience which they want to narrate is ineffable, or because the experience was traumatically inenarrable.

Using the metaphor of fishing, for emotional reasons they can pick a 'nearby-word' or a 'far-away-word' or find that the fishing line was ripped by a traumatic experience, from a pond where even a monolingual person experiences variances of language based on the long or short way they have come emotionally. As I suggested elsewhere (Piccolo, 2019), our speech in session is about translating experiential traces from what our 'body kept the score of' into what our vocal cords can convey for others to hear. In my opinion, the medial point between somatic experience and language is made of 'imagery' – very often my Italian patients pick *images* coming from their near-hand American life in New York, some other times they pick *images* from their remote past in Italy. Now, in this effort of translating 'imagery' into intelligible words we 'fish' for what is available in the proximal surface of our preconscious – an area where fish is made available in that moment by the water stemming out of the defensive and conflictual remix of the underlying currents in the 'lake of our images-before-they-become-words'.

Therefore, translating is about the distance between two places which can be close to each other or far from each other. For the translator the two sides of the bridge are 'connected' experiencing closeness. For the monolingual reader, there is disconnect and remoteness. More scholarly publications have made the point that something is also 'gained' in this near-far pendulum of translation with bilingual patients: 'Something might have got lost in that process, but other things could be approached more easily from that distance and opened up.' (Byford, 2015, p. 338). More technically, 'language choices are mapped onto deeper inter- and intra-psychic conflicts' (p. 333). Put

more simply, there is a degree of the abovementioned 'discursive plurality' in all of us and, in my opinion, 'internal currents mix the waters *both conflictually and creatively*'. In brief, when colleagues ask, 'Do you dream in Italian or English?', I should say 'I dream in Italian **and** English. So sad for people that do not have a choice but dreaming monolingually!

## References

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