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How to cite:

Doloughan, Fiona J. (2015). Translating culture: linguistic attachment, detachment and (self)-narration. In: Barta, Peter I. and Powrie, Phil eds. *Bicultural Literature and Film in French and English*. Routledge Studies in Comparative Literature. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 237–247.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<https://www.routledge.com/products/9781138832862>

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## Translating Culture: linguistic attachment, detachment and (self)-narration

Writing is always a type of translation (Hoffman).

Just as there are institutions that compel us toward the defense and adoption of only one language for our identities under siege, there are also equally strong forces in the world today pushing us toward multilingualism as a real alternative (Dorfman).

### ***Introduction: a life in two languages***

As a Polish émigré first to Canada, then to the United States, the writer Eva Hoffman felt keenly the loss of her native Polish as she tried to master English, a language which had to be “broken up, deformed and reformed” (Hoffman, 2011) before she could feel comfortable with it and begin to appreciate her cultural doubleness as something positive. She describes this rather fraught bilingual journey in her memoir, *Lost in Translation* (1998), a work in which she seeks to trace a movement from periods of “immigrant rage” (Hoffman, 2011) to acceptance of her bilingual/bicultural status. For Hoffman, writing emerged from her experience of emigration and crossing cultures, as she tried to fathom her new world and her place within it and to translate her experience into terms capable of making sense of her (remembered or re-imagined) past and present situation. This was a necessary step in a process of narrative (self)-construction and understanding through articulation and shaping of what is ultimately representative of a more general immigrant experience: that of finding oneself subject to “the grid of general assumptions” (Hoffman, 2011) applied to people from other cultures as they struggle with a sense of alterity and loss of identity in the negotiation of linguistic and cultural differences. In the period during which she felt her Polish to be atrophying and before she felt entirely comfortable with English, Hoffman came to realize the deep importance of language and culture in relation to the construction of a sense of self.

In a postscript to *Lost in Translation* which appeared in *Lives in Translation* (2003), an edited volume of essays by bilingual writers, Hoffman looks back at what she calls “that brief but darkly informative experience of being without language” (de Courtivron, 2003: 49), recognizing that her repression, rather than loss, of Polish had to do with both physiological and psychic attachment. In order to free up space for English, she had to reject Polish, to which she was deeply attached, and learn to “form an equally strong bond to the new language in which I was fated to live” (51). Not until English had planted itself securely in her mind and affections did she feel able to let “Polish out of its box” (53) and begin to be surprised by it again “after a twenty-year hiatus” (52). It was now possible to “go back and forth with the knowledge that both languages that have constructed me exist within one structure; and to know that the structure is sturdy enough to allow for pliancy and openness” (54). Interestingly, however, Hoffman feared that it was too late to write in Polish, since whole domains of experience which had opened up through reading and

discussion in English (e.g. literary criticism) were not so easily accessible to her in Polish.

Like Hoffman, Ariel Dorfman struggled to come to terms with his “bilingual fate” (de Courtivron, 2003: 30) and followed a similar trajectory insofar as he suppressed one language in favour of the other (first Spanish in favour of English, then English in favour of Spanish) as he moved between North and South America as a consequence of migration, what he characterizes as “a back and forth that was determined by exile and repression and geography” (32). He too experienced “the distress of being double” (33) before finally learning to accept “the glory of being hybrid and open” (33). What Simon (1999: 60) refers to as “the drama of language contact” was one that he would begin by refusing, preferring to try consciously to keep his languages apart and reject “the risky play of dialogue” (60). However, as he was to discover in the course of his bilingual journey, “‘language contact’ can be put to imaginative use” (72). It was a journey that was to take him from Buenos Aires, the city of his birth, to New York to Santiago de Chile to Berkeley and back to Chile again before being forced to leave the country he had made his own, via Buenos Aires, and go into exile. *Heading South, Looking North* (1998) was written in both English and Spanish and published two years after he became a Distinguished Professor of Literature and Latin American Studies at Duke University, North Carolina.

As someone who eventually came to work and write comfortably in both English and Spanish, and who would accommodate to his position as a bilingual, bicultural individual, Dorfman sees the rise of English as a lingua franca as a phenomenon to be welcomed with caution. On the one hand, he is aware of the “invisible losers” (de Courtivron, 2003: 35) associated with globalization and the silencing of those whose location and language/s do not occupy a dominant position in the new world order. At the same time, he sees in the deterritorialization of language a possible “model for tomorrow’s new humanity” (35) and takes comfort in the fact that English or any other language occupying international status is subject to “the slings and joys of outrageous appropriation” (35) thereby remaining fluid and engendering change.

In the course of this chapter, I wish to consider more closely the relationships between language, culture and the construction of identity as articulated in Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation*, first published in 1989, and Dorfman’s *Heading South, Looking North*, a hardback edition of which came out in 1998. Specifically, I wish to focus on their representation of linguistic attachment and detachment as they struggle to come to terms with the constraints and affordances of their situations as bilingual, bicultural writers. In other words, my interest here will revolve around their discursive constructions of self and other as they negotiate a move across and between languages and cultures. This move is both a physical fact and a psychic reality constructed by and mediated through language. What I shall suggest is that the commonalities expressed in their representations of the construction of self and their narration of a particular type of story, that is, the sometimes painful and often

traumatic journey, from language (as) loss to language (as) gain, can be seen to reflect the social and cultural locations of these bilingual writers as well as to correspond to a historically inflected and discursively constituted trajectory of second language acquisition. To put it slightly differently, narrative representations of bilingualism which plot a particular kind of linguistic and cultural journey can be seen to mirror social attitudes to, and understandings of, the bilingual condition as it is held to be at any particular historical moment. The implication is that as new understandings of bilingualism emerge, so too do the kind of stories told about coming to terms with life in two languages.

### ***Changing contexts for, and new understandings of, bilingualism***

In a review of “Dimensions of bilingualism”, Li Wei (2000: 25), a leading researcher on bilingualism, shows how ideas about bilingualism have changed over time and indicates the extent to which they can be seen to relate to a variety of social factors.

Bilingualism is not a static and unitary phenomenon. It is shaped in different ways, and it changes depending on a variety of historical, cultural, political, economic, environmental, linguistic, psychological and other factors.

As well as pointing to methodological issues with respect to previous research on bilingualism, what his review stresses is the nature of language as social practice and the fact that language is a socio-political issue with “its own unique cultural symbolic value” (14). In other words, he situates the presentation of knowledge of language and debates about the benefits or otherwise of bilingualism within a larger social frame, identifying changes in attitudes which seem to correlate with changes in political ideologies (21). In contrast to previous research from “the early nineteenth century to about the 1960s” which saw bilingualism as having a largely “detrimental effect on a human being’s intellectual and spiritual growth” (18), he sees the thrust of current research as being primarily positive in respect of the potential cognitive and cultural benefits of bilingualism.

Such a view chimes with more recent research on living with two or more languages (Burke, 2005; Heller, 2007) where the construction of bilingual/multilingual subjectivities is situated within specific social and cultural contexts and takes account of the narratives available to individuals and groups across contexts in the construction of self. Burke’s research, for example, points to the differing articulations of those who experienced childhood in several languages and those who were forced to leave their country of origin and “work’ the disjuncture between their different experiences in each language, across time and in a different place” (Burke, 2005: 172). She goes on to discuss the prevalence of a notion of doubleness in some participant accounts of their experience of living with more than one language, in spite of “postmodern theorizing of subjectivity as multiple” (174) and attempts to differentiate the various contexts in which the trope of doubleness has cropped up.

For example, she recognizes that it “may have become a prevalent metaphor for those who learned a language later in their lives, describing a period when their internal language and external language were different” (174). She goes on to indicate that for some individuals who have migrated there exists “the idea of a core self, signified through the importance of language in the early years of life” (175) and cites Hoffman as an example. Certainly, if we consider Hoffman’s evocation of her early years in Cracow, Poland, there is evidence of the primacy of an idyllic period when language and the reality it points to appear to coincide; when, as she expresses it in “P.S.,” “the world was [...] word-shaped” (de Courtivron, 2003: 52). Poland was the place that:

has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind. It has given me the colors and the furrows of reality, my first loves. The absoluteness of those loves can never be recaptured: no geometry of the landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservations (Hoffman, 1998: 74-5).

This Edenic view of Poland takes a very long time to be displaced or modified. The sense of exile to which the young Eva succumbs in Vancouver is deeply felt and her journey towards an accommodation with her status as an immigrant and acknowledgement of its possibilities is fraught as she struggles to secure “the more stable, less strenuous conditions of anchoring, of home” (197), rather than being a stranger to others and to herself or living in a no-man’s land of inbetweenness. From being what she describes as a “silent ventriloquist” (220), Eva begins to develop a voice of her own from the multiple voices that she hears around her and imbibes: “by assuming them, I gradually make them mine” (220). The period of detachment and critical distance that she experienced as she observed and recorded the strange rituals of the society around her gradually give way to a fuller and less self-conscious engagement with her world. Her movement from being a non-participant observer of the strange world around her to someone who partakes fully in the rites and rituals of her new culture reflects a process of acculturation marked by different phases. Only after returning from a trip to Poland during which she finds herself dispelling myths and translating American culture for her Polish peers, does she recognize the distance she has travelled in terms of feeling comfortable and at home with the strange but fascinating realities of her new world. The language she has come to make her own seems to fit perfectly and is in harmony with the world around her. Her nostalgia for a lost past has been replaced by an ability to appreciate the present which has “becomes a fulcrum on which I stand more lightly, balanced between the past and the future, balanced in time” (Hoffman, 1998: 280).

Dorfman, too, seems to go through stages in his bilingual journey, stages that, in his case, reflect both his changing geographical location and his psychic and political, as well as linguistic, attachments. As a child in New York, hospitalized for a period with pneumonia and isolated in a ward where no one spoke Spanish, the young Dorfman hears only English. On being discharged from hospital, he refuses to respond to his parents’ questions in Spanish and for the next ten years speaks only English as he

tries to embed himself in American culture. So successful is this strategy that when the family is forced to leave the US in the McCarthy era and move to Chile, Dorfman finds it difficult to speak Spanish and has to re-learn it. It is several years before Spanish takes hold again and infiltrates his habits (114). However, he tries to keep his languages apart and does “not allow my new language to enter into a dialogue with the older one” (115). English is the language in which he writes; Spanish is what he speaks. Yet, after another bout of illness at the age of 15, he finds that his writing has matured and allows him to explore the contradictions of his experience: “I found myself able to contact in my writing an ambiguity and a turbulence that had not till then been allowed expression” (131). Later, as a young man in Berkeley, it is English that he decides to renounce and wills himself “to become monolingual again” (Dorfman, 1998: 101), as he poses and fails to answer the question of who he is. It is only later that he will come to see his actions as those of a young man who:

did not have the maturity – or the emotional or ideological space, probably not even the vocabulary – to answer that I was a hybrid, part Yankee, part Chilean, a pinch of Jew, a mestizo in search of a center” (220).

As the plane leaves Buenos Aires at the end of the book, Dorfman contemplates his future in relation to the myth of return “with which I tried to keep sane and whole” (276), conscious, however, that there is another equally powerful myth, that of having to leave “the place of one’s birth” in order “to create a new society, to give a real start to anything worthwhile” (276). The fate of the wandering bigamist of language, as he refers to himself in an article on his life in two languages (de Courtivron, 2003), is to continue to journey in search of a home that he will find in his writing and in his ultimate acceptance of his bilingual, bicultural existence.

As with Hoffman, writing appears to be fundamental for Dorfman. His “journey towards duality” (116) is rooted in the knowledge that it is “literature that could shield my identity constructed in English” (83) and that writing, insofar as it permits the creation of an alternative vision, “could influence the way one lives one’s life” (131). As McClennan (2010: 201) puts it:

By creating a diasporic subject that at one and the same time attends to the binaries that structure identity and moves beyond a dualist ontology, Dorfman creates a multi-layered self that remains true to the complexities of subjectivity, especially for those who have experienced violent dislocation.

Dorfman has to find a way of reconciling his “certainty that I wanted, above all things in the world, to be a writer” (158) with his desire to represent the interests of his country and of the Chilean people. He sees his transformation into a Latin American as somehow bound up in “the process of situating myself on the border between the continent of my birth and the world outside” (161), of becoming, like Hoffman, a kind of cultural intermediary. Unlike Hoffman, however, for whom English became the language in which she wrote, Dorfman’s to-ing and fro-ing between English and Spanish, led finally to an ability to write imaginatively and critically in both.

In rehearsing a brief history of bilingualism, Heller (2007) indicates that attempts to regulate diversity and manage bilingualism have been undercut by approaches to language study which have challenged the notion of the autonomous structure of linguistic systems, pointing to the “messiness of actual usage” (13), and have shifted emphasis “towards [a concern with] process and practice” (15). Even as she acknowledges the legitimacy of some critiques of globalization, she notes “the observably new degrees, and maybe even types, of mobility of people, discourses and resources which make it harder and harder to do the work of uniformization from which an interest in the ‘problem’ of bilingualism initially sprang” (15). In other words, what Heller is pointing to is the fact that discourses relating to bilingualism and the terms in which research questions and issues are couched are reflective of social, ideological and cultural concerns at any given moment. So while individuals may experience their feelings in relation to their bilingualism as unique and subjective, the structures of feeling and the discourses available to them to express their feelings about and understandings of their condition can be seen to relate to more general social concerns and conditions.

For example, notions of language as loss or the untranslatability of experience from one idiom into another as opposed to a more positive construction of bilingualism may be as much the product of changing beliefs and attitudes alongside shifting situations in terms of the dissolution of boundaries uniting language, nation and culture as objectively available and empirically identifiable realities. Given such a perspective, we might expect there to be parallels in ways of constructing their experience of being bilingual among writers whose conditions of migration and socio-economic conditions are broadly similar, notwithstanding differences of geography and gender. Of Jewish parentage, with all that that implies in terms of cultural and intellectual heritage, Hoffman and Dorfman were of the same generation. However, whereas Hoffman came to English as a Polish teenager growing up in Vancouver, Dorfman’s exposure to the language came at a much younger age in New York when his family was forced to flee Argentina. As individuals who had experienced the ‘trauma’ of dislocation, being subject, though at different moments and for different reasons, to enforced migrations rather than voluntary departures, it is perhaps not unexpected that removal from one country and linguistic and cultural system to another might prove emotionally challenging. It is interesting and instructive, therefore, to consider the metaphors and ways of describing their experiences and the terms used to couch their bilingual journeys of both Hoffman and Dorfman in order to register their similarities.

### ***Translating self and other***

Quite apart from the title of Hoffman’s memoir which clearly signals the theme of translation, there are numerous references in the book to the ways in which immigrants translate both themselves and their culture/s as they interact with others in a new cultural context. Indeed, Hoffman’s resolution of the conflicting selves within her depends upon her “translation therapy” (273), a telling of her story in English and

a recovery of her Polish childhood expressed in her new language. She comes to see herself as the sum of her languages and is able to “move between them without being split by the difference” (274). She begins to see her condition as no more and no less than the condition of the contemporary world where “[d]islocation is the norm rather than an aberration” (274) and to register in her very ability to relativize cultural meanings the residue of her immigrant consciousness: “All immigrants and exiles know the peculiar restlessness of an imagination that can never again have faith in its own absoluteness” (275).

Hoffman’s encounter with another language and culture compels her to confront the relativity of norms, conventions and ways of being which perhaps otherwise would have remained naturalized and absolute. The sense of exile which she feels upon being expelled from the paradise of her Polish childhood relates as much to her frustration at not being at home with the new language as it does with her sense of difference and displacement. “The words I learn now don’t stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue” (Hoffman, 1998: 106), she writes.

I have no interior language, and without it, interior images – those images through which we assimilate the external world, through which we take it in, love it, make it our own – become blurred too (108).

The lack of connection between interior language and external reality, as Burke (2005) notes, becomes a source of distress. In order to overcome the ‘trauma’ of the lost link between outer and inner realities, mediated through language, Eva needs to re-inscribe a connection and construct a sense of identity. She does this by keeping a diary in English which mediates between her other, Polish self and the new world around her. What she calls her English self “becomes oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives” (121). She finds herself using not the pronoun “I” but “the double, the Siamese-twin “you”” (121). She records activities and thoughts as if from a distance, just as in social settings as an adolescent she will watch the proceedings “as if I were an anthropologist of the highly detached nonparticipant variety” (131). From her location as an immigrant, she observes and comments on the world around her, keeping her distance. Such a detached stance, however, proves unsatisfactory; Vancouver will remain for her the place where she “fell out of the net of meaning into the weightlessness of chaos” (151).

It is only many years later as a successful professional living in New York that she feels that she fits in, having overcome the problems of translation or at least amassed enough background “to grasp the meaning of the foreground” (190). She has learnt to “bend toward another culture without falling over” (209) and to “stop reading the exterior signs of a foreign culture and step into the inwardness, the viscera of their meanings” (209). In this process of homecoming or at least finding a place in the world, language is central. Hoffman accumulates words and images in English “so that they yield the specific gravity of things” (217). As a result, her Polish

is modified through its encounter with English: “Each language makes the other relative” (273). She becomes the sum of her languages.

Arguably, it is in the writing of *Lost in Translation* that Hoffman succeeds in constructing a sense of self. As she indicated in discussion in the context of a Research Forum at the University of Surrey: “Writing is always a type of translation” (Hoffman, 2011). This is a particularly pertinent statement given the multiplicity of meanings to which it gives rise. In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman is primarily referring to what is involved in moving from one language and cultural context to another (Polish to English and Poland to North America) and to the adjustments which have to be made in order to fit in to the new linguistic and cultural landscape. At the same time, she is locating her newly constructed sense of self in her ability to move between languages and cultures without loss of identity or more precisely as someone capable of operating, albeit to different degrees, in both.

This self-translation is dependent on knowing the different cultural codes and conventions and being able to locate oneself within them. It also depends on having a language in which to construct a vision of self. If, as Hoffman declares, it was her experience of migration that made her a writer, then a further meaning of translation relates to mobility and to making sense of self in relation to other in a new cultural context. In effect, *Lost in Translation* becomes a record of a life in translation and documents, albeit in a highly literate and structured form, “the process and effect of translation itself” (Trivedi, 2007). Not only is Hoffman a translated subject in the sense of having been transplanted from one culture to another where she has had to acquire a new language; as a writer, she is also in a position to translate her experience into her own (carefully chosen) words and thereby shape a new identity and give voice to a new self. For as Jordan (2002: 107) indicates, “self-narration is inescapably one of the things we do when we write and translate culture”.

That translation is a more general and perhaps fundamental process than that which may be attributed to linguistic and/or cultural transfer, or even to self-narration, is made clear by Hoffman’s inclusion of music and musicality in discussion of her journey towards acceptance of her biculturality. As a child she had dreamt of being a pianist and music has always played an important part in her life. Indeed, her novel *Illuminations* (2009) features a female protagonist who is a concert pianist and represents that protagonist’s romantic involvement with a political exile from war-torn Chechnya. While not wishing to disregard features of the novel such as the critique it offers of certain kinds of Romanticism, there is nevertheless evidence of an investment in the process by which music and lyricism is translated into words. This, along with development of an ability to ‘hear’ the musicality of another language in its poetry, for example, is for Hoffman key to accessing and appreciating other worlds.

In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman describes the moment when, for her, the doors of language opened. It was while reading “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” which she is to explicate to a class of undergraduates. In reading it, it is the music that she

hears: "I read, tasting the sounds on the tongue, hearing the phrases somewhere between tongue and mind" (Hoffman, 1998: 186). This aural access, she realizes, takes her "back within the music of the language" (186) but unlike her childhood experience of the musicality of Polish, she is now able to discern, in English, words "crosshatched with a complexity of meaning, with the sonorities of felt, sensuous thought" (186). This might be taken as a description of a kind of thick translation (cf. Appiah, 2000) where all the layers of meaning and experience are captured in their polyphonic and multidimensional richness. No longer gliding on the surface of literary culture in English, Hoffman has reached a stage of development in her interaction with her acquired language when she is able to experience Eliot's poetry in its fullness, that is not only via knowledge of other critical readings but also in relation to a deeper understanding of the resources of English in cultural context. Such understanding is the consequence of prolonged engagement with the literary culture of England and America. Indeed, one might see *Lost in Translation* as a work which embodies the spirit of Appiah's call for "productive modes of translation" (427) insofar as it attempts to provide context for and commentary on what happens in the process of linguistic and cultural translation and elaborates the construction of a new, translated textual self.

In essence, Hoffman combines in her memoir the notions of translating culture and cultural translation (Trivedi, 2007). For not only does she have to literally move from one country and language to another; as a consequence of this move she learns to translate, for self and other, her experience of different modes and practices as they appear to be embedded in the different cultures she inhabits.

The same might be said of Dorfman's enmeshing of his own story and the history of a Latin America he came to love. His personal quest for identity takes place against the backdrop of an attempt to translate his knowledge and experience of two cultures into terms which make sense not only of his own bilingual journey but also of events and attitudes in North and South America between 1942 and 1973. As someone who straddles two cultures, he is able to ground the events of which he writes in cultural, historical and political context for readers less familiar with both Americas than he is. Indeed, his escape into exile after the collapse of the Allende government is the result, at least in part, of his being seen by his revolutionary compatriots to be more useful to the cause in exile where he can "give words and stories to others" (146). As Dorfman himself realizes while waiting to leave Chile from the safety of the Argentinian embassy, English is his passport to a future in which he can help his compatriots by bringing their plight to the attention of journalists and producers using his native-like English to translate one culture into terms accessible to another.

### ***Concluding remarks***

Trivedi (2007) has pointed to what he sees as the dangers in the emergence of a view of cultural translation which appears to disregard or gloss over one of the key components or founding assumptions of translation, that is, that it is a process which

has language, or rather languages, at its core. What both the work of Hoffman and Dorfman emphasize, however, is the necessity of access to linguistic frames of reference in understanding other cultures. Indeed, Hoffman's account of her experience of the new culture in which she finds herself brings together the ethnographic and the linguistic insofar as her encounters with another society are mediated through a cultural and linguistic lens. As her knowledge of both the language and the rites and rituals of that society increase providing an ever-shifting contextual frame, she begins to feel less of a stranger and observer and more of a participant, albeit it one with a "bifocal vision" (Hoffman, 1989: 213). Her sense of otherness and her detached stance are modified by her growing attachment to her new language – English – and to her growing understanding of the work that she can do as a writer, interpreter and translator of culture.

Likewise, what lies at the heart of Dorfman's transformation into "the multiple, complex, in-between person I would someday become, this man who is shared by two equal languages" (Dorfman, 1998: 42) is a sense of the centrality of language in helping to shape the world and providing access to ways of being, "the subtle way in which English made me one kind of writer, one kind of person, and Spanish somebody else" (221). What emerges in both Hoffman's and Dorfman's accounts of their lives in two languages, perhaps even more strongly in the case of Dorfman, is the creative, as well as critical, potential of bilingualism providing, as it does, access to an expanded set of linguistic and cultural resources. As both writers recognize in the course of their journey, languages are changed by their mutual encounter. Far from remaining untouched by contact with the other language, they tend to inform one another and can leave in one the inflections or traces of the other. As Dorfman recognizes when he lets Spanish back into his life, his writing begins to change in that he has at his disposal alternative literary models. This contact with the other (literary) culture impacts most obviously upon the shape and tenor of his work (cf.131) but can also inflect its rhythms, syntax and lexis (cf.221). Far from being a handicap, this mutual dependency and interpenetration of languages allows Dorfman to exert, in the agency of writing, control over his own story as well as over the (representations of) the history of the countries and cultures that produced him. It is through his memoir that "Dorfman explores the intersections between writing, identity, and representation" (McClennan, 2010: 201), demonstrating in his narration and construction of self the scope and benefits of his bilingual journey and his deep attachment to language/s.

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