

**THE INTERMEDIATE ZONE OF TRANSLATION PART I.  
QUESTIONS, DILEMMAS, EXAMPLES FROM THE  
TRANSLATORS' WORKSHOP BASED ON *CANTO JO I LA  
MUNTANYA BALLA* BY IRENE SOLÀ**

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**Abstract:** Translation is a par excellence cultural communication and translators are agents of cultural transfer by means of language. Literary texts provide the translator with a higher grade of freedom than any other type of texts because of the self-referentiality of art encoded in language. Decoding the original and creating a new body in a different referential system are individual hermeneutic acts of the translator. Deciphering an author's world is a step closer to the heart of the source culture and an ever-open language-game. The challenges I met translating Irene Solà's novel gave me a special insight to Catalan culture and the English, Italian and Spanish translations gave me the opportunity to study other translation strategies. This essay is the first in the series of traductography essays centred on the Catalan-Hungarian intercultural communication revealing the processes in the black-box of the translator's mind that on the one hand can serve as a guide to Catalan culture and, on the other hand, as a basis for further translatology research.

**Keywords:** Traductography, Minority Literature, Dynamic Equivalence, Untranslatables, Intercultural Transfer.

**Resum:** La traducció és una comunicació cultural per excel·lència i els traductors són agents de transferència cultural mitjançant el llenguatge. Els textos literaris proporcionen al traductor un grau de llibertat superior al de qualsevol altre tipus de textos a causa de l'autoreferencialitat de l'art codificat en el llenguatge. La descodificació de l'original i la creació d'un nou cos en un sistema referencial diferent són actes hermenèutics individuals del traductor. Desxifrar el món d'un autor és un pas més cap al cor de la cultura font i un joc de llengües sempre obert. Els reptes que vaig trobar traduint la novel·la d'Irene Solà em van proporcionar un coneixement especial de la cultura catalana mentre que les traduccions a l'anglès, l'italià i el castellà em van donar l'oportunitat d'estudiar altres estratègies de traducció. Aquest assaig és el primer de la sèrie d'assaigs de traductografia centrats en la comunicació intercultural català-hongaresa que revela els processos de la caixa negra de la ment del traductor.

**Paraules clau:** traductografia, literatura minoritària, equivalència dinàmica, intraduibles, transferència intercultural.

## 1. Minority literature spaces

At the 2019 Catalan seminar in the Hungarian Translators' House of Balatonfüred, in a cheerful pre-Covid atmosphere we were discussing the actualities of contemporary Catalan literature with the invited writers, editors, university professors and poets. We were looking for new voices to extend our offer of Catalan Literature in Hungarian (Faluba, 2021) and I was immediately captivated by the adjective used by the Majorcan poet, Andreu Gomila to describe a recently published book. In his opinion, *Canto jo i la muntanya balla*, by Irene Solà, set in a small village in the Catalan Pyrenees, was a Pyrenean *Pedro Páramo*. Juan Rulfo (1917-1986), the author of the most translated Mexican novel, *Pedro Páramo*, heralded the Latin American boom, and was considered the master by Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luís Borges, Mario Vargas Llosa or Carlos Fuentes. It is in his short novel, *Pedro Páramo* (1955), we first encounter a peculiar polyphony that makes a village, Comala –quintessence of the vulnerable fate of Mexican villages– the protagonist of the novel. This multifocal *genius loci* is able to show every factor of people's real life there and even more since many of the narrators participate in this polyphony from the afterlife. Thus, my curiosity was aroused by this special combination: the Pyrenees as *genius loci*, the polyphony as a way to interpret the world and a young Catalan poet as the author. I decided to translate the first chapter of *Canto jo* for the fiction section of Catalan Literature in translation we had been preparing for the online magazine of world literature, *1749* (1749).

However, each book has its own life cycle from being published, read, and projected to fame, and Irene Solà's novel was selected by the jury as one of the thirteen winners of the European Union Prize for Literature 2020. This prize for fiction, promoted by the European and International Booksellers Federation, the Federation of European Publishers and the European Writers' Council, rewards the best contemporary novelists since 2009. Each year, an excerpt from the winning works is translated into English, and this, along with the author's biography and synopsis of the work, is published in a joint anthology (EULP, 2020). The aim of the prize is to create a common European cultural space and encourage greater interest in non-national literatures of European minorities and of non-EU member but European national languages. The EULP anthologies show us a much more colourful and diverse Europe than that of the great languages. The list of winning authors of the year 2020 is also a testament to this endeavour, since it puts the spotlight on the values of small national cultures such as Northern Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Luxembourg, or Catalonia. The excerpts in English translations of the anthology offer an interesting insight to each of these authors' worlds, facilitating publishers from different countries to discover talents in languages unknown to them, thus promoting the translation of the works. This was also the case with Irene Solà's novel, which the Hungarian Publishing House *Magvető* got to know from the 2020 anthology, and this is how the editorial intention and the

translator's enthusiasm finally met and gave me the opportunity to translate this unique, magical realist fiction of the Catalan Pyrenees that I am very grateful for.

## **2. In the black box of the translator**

This essay is about the intermediate zone of this particular translation familiar only for the translator who inhabits it for months and for the proof-reader who spends there a couple of days as well as for the copy editor whose careful hands also help the final version to come out at its best. In this case I worked with Dóra Bakucz as a proofreader and Eni Rostás as a copy editor of *Magvető*, so they are the ones who already strolled over this otherwise no-go zone full of open questions, dilemmas and doubts. This article intends to be the first one in a series of traductography essays (Albert, 2011: 4-11) that give an insight to what is going on in the black box of translation (Venuti, 2013). By traductography I mean a sort of field work describing the mechanisms, imperatives and decision-making processes of translators that can serve as a basis for translatology studies. I think that it is in the field of fiction and poetry where the interpreter-translator's personality, sensitivity, worldview and life experience count the most, but it is also in these genres where the unbearable lightness of being a translator is most evident. Here the translator faces the constant urge of decision making where no mathematical formulas, professional terminology, conventions, or dogmas can be of help, whereas personal knowledge, philosophical and moral attitude or religious, ideological beliefs can interfere with the decisions. That is why the text of each translator will be different and I will try to demonstrate that even a momentary lapsus or a poorly chosen synonym can result in a more or less equivalent translation. In addition to my own solutions and dilemmas I use the English, the Italian, and the Spanish translations of the novel that the author or the translators kindly provided me with. The English translation is not the final version yet, so I can't give exact bibliographical reference to it.

For this Part I of traductography essays I selected cases of quite ordinary and relatively well-known words. The translation difficulties represented by historical and cultural facts are to follow in Part II and III.

## **3. Dilemmas and decision situations in the translators' workshop**

### **3.1. Poetic or scientific equivalence?**

The dandelion

The translation of the word dandelion does not seem to be a problematic case, since the scientific nomenclature introduced by Linnaeus in the 18<sup>th</sup> century facilitates the worldwide identification of plants. However, the context in which the dandelion appears, represents a real challenge for the Hungarian translator if she wants to convey

the humour on the verge of blasphemy of the original. The English and Spanish translations also represent interesting solutions.

Quina mania a embrutar les muntanyes de creus. Però aquesta era petita. I a vegades hi anàvem, i hi fèiem pipí, com els gossos. I a vegades li dúiem flors collides del terra, allà on s'havia estirat l'home, pixallits, li dúiem, per fer riure (Solà, 2019a: 27).

Micsoda egy szokás elrondítani a hegyeket ezekkel a keresztekkel! De ez legalább kicsike volt. Néhanapján ellátogattunk hozzá, és lepisiltük, mint a kutyák. Néha meg virágot szedtünk neki arról a darab földről, ahol lesújtotta volt a villám, vittük a gyermekláncfüvet az édesapának, s jót kacagtunk rajta (Solà, 2021: 26).

They are always sullyng the mountainside with crosses. But this one was small. And sometimes we would go there, and we would piss upon it, as dogs do. And sometimes we would bring wildflowers there for him, there where the man had been lain out, bedwetter, we called him, for a laugh.

Che mania hanno gli uomini di imbrattare le montagne di croci. Questa però era piccola. E a volte ci andavamo a fare la pipì, come i cani. A volte ci portavamo dei fiori raccolti nei prati, e li mettevamo proprio lì dove l'uomo era caduto, dei piscialletto, portavamo, per riderci su (Solà, 2020: 28).

¡Qué manía de ensuciar la montaña con cruces! Pero esta era pequeña. A veces íbamos a verla y hacíamos pis en ella, como los perros. Y a veces cogíamos flores del suelo y las llevábamos al sitio en el que el hombre se había tumbado, le llevábamos diente de león, en broma, porque tiene propiedades diuréticas, y dicen los niños que, si las tocas, mojas la cama (Solà, 2019b: 26).

In the Catalan original *Dolceta*, the half-witted witch who lives in the otherworldly dimension of the Catalan Pyrenees tells us what she and her fellow witches do with the memorial cross of the lightning-stricken poet: they pee at it and sometimes put a bunch of dandelions under it. Namely, they desecrate the cross with their blasphemous practices, and the name of the wildflower in Catalan, *pixallits* also reinforces this image, because it literally means a sort of a “bedwetting plant”. According to the Alcover–Moll dictionary (DCVB), it is *Taraxacum officinale* in Latin and *diente de león* in Spanish, and other synonyms in Catalan are as follow: *pixacà, lletsó; colomina, herba de colom, herba de fum, fumdeterra, gallaret*. We can see that the flower in Catalan, as in every language of the world, has many different and often poetic but botanically not necessarily correct names, and the author chose the synonym that through its literal meaning served to express in “floral language” the humour of a simple, close-to-nature girl. The diuretic effect of dandelions is well known in folk medicine, and it is reflected by different synonyms also in other languages. The Italian translation uses an Italian word that is

formally very similar to the original: *piscialletto*. The common name for dandelion in French is also based on this diuretic property: *pissenlit*, but there is another analogy from the jagged tooth-like edges of its leaves, hence the name *dent-de-lion*. The common name of this flower in English is derived directly from this French word *dandelion*, but if we search for folk names and other synonyms, we find the following versions: *tell-time, milk witch, Irish daisy, cankerwort, piss-a-bed, pee-a-bed, wet-a-bed* (Zaffaris, 2018), so according to the dictionary there are names that refer to the diuretic properties of the flower and use the mirror translation of the French *pissenlit*. However, the English translator didn't opt for this synonym, the witches in English simply pick wildflowers without more precision and tease the poet calling him a bedwetter. Looking for synonyms or folk names in Spanish that denote the diuretic qualities of dandelions called most commonly *diente de león* or *dienteleón* but also *amargón* o *flor de macho* we come across variants of *meacamas churracamas* (Jardineria Loiu, 2021; Boletín Agrario, 2021). However, the Spanish translator opted for *diente de león*, instead of using the synonym with the same literal meaning as the original. Thus, the Spanish translation ended up slightly overexplicit, similar to a phytotherapy advisor giving the correct explanation instead of the simple, playful words of the 17th-century, half-hearted peasant girl in the original. The Catalan flower is placed at the base of the cross precisely because of its name; if we do not find a synonym in the target language that has the same literal meaning, we should look for another solution. The Spanish translator probably did not choose the plant name with the same literal meaning as the original because it isn't a commonly used version, rather an archaicism or a dialectalism, and the reader would not figure out what kind of flower it is. I assume that the English translator chose generalization for the same reason and simply used wildflower instead of a *piss-a-bed* or a *pee-a-bed* and tried to make up for the loss by mocking the poet as a bedwetter. This way she kept the original image, but it is expressed directly by the witches' words not by the flower itself whose name is not revealed.

This explanation is based on the logic that I pursued trying to find a synonym in Hungarian that has the same literal meaning as the original Catalan *pixallits*. There was a good chance for it, since the dandelion is traditionally well known in folk-healing for its diuretic properties, but strangely enough none of its many poetic names covering diverse semantic fields (Rácz, 2010; Vörös, 2008) had anything to do with bedwetting, so I was forced to find a completely different solution. I chose one of the most common names for dandelion: *gyermekláncfű*, because its literal meaning: "children's-chain-plant" refers to a children's game making jewellery out of little rings made of the thick stems of dandelions. With this semantic possibility I constructed a different signifying chain that answered to intelligibilities and interests of the target reader connected to another motif of the story. In the novel, a little earlier (Solà, 2019a:17) we find a short description of the life of the lightning-stricken peasant-poet: he gets married young, and soon after that becomes a father, which is a joy but also an annoying condition since children are always whining and he cannot write poetry.

Indirectly, this is the cause of his death, because Domènec goes up the mountain to have silence when a fatal storm strikes him down. Thus, the Hungarian word denotes the same flower, but the semantic field conveyed by this synonym is related to the father-child relationship. The witches make fun of the father by bringing him *gyermekláncfű*, and by the small, interlinked rings of that flower he is chained again to his children he had left behind. If the name with the semantic field based on the diuretic effect had existed in Hungarian, most probably I would have tried to form the same picture as in the original, even if the word was a dialectalism or an archaism and would have been utterly unknown by the target reader. But the English and Spanish examples testify that translators always bear in mind their target audience, so they would rarely opt for a Middle-English word or a dialectalism used in Euskadi. There is another possibility –and probably many, many more– if we choose a flower name that literally denotes its diuretic properties thus assuring that target readers get the humour of the original even if the flower in question is not a dandelion. But this is also a very audacious solution. Translators are bound by the original, –if they know it is a dandelion– they insist on the botanically correct equivalent word, even if a flower name with the same literal meaning as the original would fit better the context. Nevertheless, I don't rule out this possibility, as the Catalan original exploits the playfulness inherent in the literal meaning of the word, so in this case very likely it is not the exact scientific, botanical, taxonomic correspondence that should be guaranteed but rather the meaning.

#### The black trumpet

Translators can come up with a good idea to compensate for the loss that arises when it is impossible to preserve the innumerable nuances of meaning inherent in the original, as exemplified by the translations of *pixallits*. However, there are cases –quite often– when you have to get along with a less strong, less expressive Hungarian version, such as in the case of dark trumpet mushrooms.

I havia trobat un grapat de **trompetes de la mort** fora d'època, aquella tarda, tot anant a guaitar el bestiar, i les duia embolicades a la panxa de la camisa (Solà, 2019a: 16).

Azon a délutánon, amikor kiment megnézni az állatokat, talált egy marokra való **sötét trombitagombát** is, pedig olyantájt még nem is szokott előbújni, és az övébe tűrt ingébe tette (Solà, 2021: 12).

And that evening he'd found a fistful of early black chanterelles, when he checked on the herd, and he carried the mushrooms wrapped in the belly of his shirt.

Quel pomeriggio aveva trovato delle **trombette dei morti fuori stagione**, mentre andava a controllare il bestiame, e le portava avvolte nelle falde della camicia (Solà, 2020: 16).

Esa tarde, cuando fue a ver al ganado, encontró unes cuantas **trompetas de los muertos** fuera de temporada y las llevaba envueltas en los faldones de la camisa (Solà, 2019b: 14).

In the Romance language translations we find the same poetic names of the species of fungus identical in form and meaning with the original that have the word “death”. These versions inherently contain the impending tragedy, for the poet who gathers them in the belly of his shirt soon lies dead on the field predicted by “the trumpets of death”. The adjectives of the names in Hungarian and in English “dark” and “black” are also ominous, but not deadly. The English translator could choose “black chanterelle” or “black trumpet” for *Craterellus cornucopioides* and she chose the former, the French loanword of Greek-Latin etymology, meaning a sort of drinking vessel, which doesn’t conjure up an apocalyptic end. In this case non-Romance language target readers are satisfied with the name of this rare mushroom, they don’t attach a particular importance to the name of the species, since the important motive of this context is that mushroom-picking nations –and Catalans are *boletaires de soca a rel*– and peasants in the mountains do pick mushrooms whenever they find some, even a couple of minutes before they die. However, the premonitory, sinister name of the peculiar, rare mushroom makes the original and the other Romance language texts more mysterious and profound. The other target language readers receive a somewhat less dense though completely coherent version, and they aren’t aware of the loss.

### 3.2. Corrections of grammar and spelling

The idea of the following example comes from a short article (Villaroda, 2020) about a linguist, a retired university professor Narcís Garolera downgrading Irene Solà’s novel based on linguistic inaccuracy. The Professor Emeritus discovers terrible mistakes in spelling and syntax, so out of respect for good literature he advises Catalan readers not to read it. The objected sentences in question are the following:

Sóc Pòs. Sóc Pòs. Sem els ossos. Dormíem una son molt llarga i ens hem llevat (editorial pdf) (Solà, not final 117).

Soc Pòs. Soc Pòs. Sem els ossos. Dormíem una son molt llarga i ens hem llevat (printed version) (Solà, 2019a: 143).

Medve vagyok. Medve vagyok. Mínk vagyunk a medvék. Hosszú, nagyon hosszú álmat aludtunk, de felébredtünk (Solà, 2021: 159).

I’m the bear this year. I’m the bear. We’re the bears. We were sleeping for a very long time and we’ve awoken.

Sono l’orso. Sono l’orso. Siamo gli orsi. Dormivamo un sonno molto lungo e ci siamo svegliati (Solà, 2020: 151).

Soy el oso. Soy el oso. Somos los osos. Estábamos durmiendo un sueño muy largo y nos hemos levantado (Solà, 2019b: 145).

The pdf version provided to me by the publisher and used for the translation was not the same as the final version published in print. One of the differences that you can see here is that the first person singular of the verb *ésser* in the pdf is still in the old spelling form: *sóe*, while in the printed version appears according to the new, simplified version: *soe*. This change shows that, from an orthographic point of view, the book was written at a time of revolutionary changes (Vázquez García, 2017). The professor's criticism is about the word "bear" – *ós* that despite of new rules simplifying Catalan orthography by suppressing the usage of diacritic marks, should keep its mark and stay as it was before so that it could be unequivocally distinguished from the word *os*, meaning "bone" (Camps, 2017). Narcís Garolera states in a Twitter message: "I tried to read Irene Solà's latest novel, but I had to put it down. She writes about bones, and it took a long time for me to understand that they were bears [...] I returned to Rodoreda". Then, in his next tweet message, he performs a linguistic analysis of the next sentence (although he quotes it incorrectly) as follows: "*Vam dormir una son profunda*" In five words, two errors. Great! 1. *dormir* is an intransitive verb 2. when we sleep, *fem un son*, and if we are sleepy then *tenim una son*. Congratulations to the jury".

The professor's linguistic objections are, of course, justified, and they are certainly of greater importance for readers of a stateless minority language living in the shadow of a world language since the realm of their language denotes a virtual fatherland. Spelling mistakes do indeed cast a shadow on the quality of a book. However, I do not think that in this context anyone could have doubts for more than a second as to "bones" or "bears". I am also convinced that widely read novels like *Canto jo...* –that first appeared in 2019 and is still on the top of *The best of Sant Jordi* list (Gremi Editors, 2021), and is adapted to theatre (Teatre Barcelona, 2021), and whose translation copyrights are sold to 14 languages (Anagrama, 2021)– contribute a great deal to the prestige of Catalan language. Also, I think that it is the task of correctors and copy editors to oversee the orthography and syntax of what is published and blaming the author and discouraging the reading is simply too high a price to pay for a linguistic criticism.

From the point of view of translation, this small passage is paradigmatic in multiple respects: despite the missing diacritical mark none of the translators interpreted the sentence as talking about bones thanks to the unequivocal context, best friend of all translators. Also, none of the target language versions of the second sentence is grammatically objectionable, so even if translators notice that there is a transitive verb instead of an intransitive or a feminine noun instead of a masculine, they will give a correct version in the target language that is, translators correct automatically. The bears in this chapter of the Catalan original "speak" in Northern Catalan dialect, obviated only by the first-person plural of the verb *ésser*: *sem* instead of *som*. The ritual described in the book takes place annually at the Festival of the Bears in the Northern Catalan settlement, Prats de Molló, in France. A Creixells-winning short novel by Joan-Lluís Lluís, *El dia de l'ós*, (The Day of the Bear) (Lluís, 2004) introduced this literary landscape



to contemporary Catalan fiction. Translators could not convey this regional language version in the target language versions, only the Hungarian version made a faint allusion to the change of language register. Since I don't know any Hungarian dialect where the first-person plural would be different than the standard version, I used the dialectal form of the personal pronoun: *minke* instead of *mi*, which fits well the speech of drunken men disguised as bears in a village feast, but it sounds like a lonely strange word in this chapter which is a stylized literary speech of someone enacting the bear and doesn't speak in the voice of a Northern Catalan village bachelor. Anyway, only by using a dialectal form (no matter which one), there is no way to give a hint to Northern Catalonia in Hungarian or in any other language. Dialectal forms can refer to regional idiosyncrasies, but the connotations hidden in dialectal forms are decipherable only by a domestic code, therefore it would be absolutely false, completely lacking verisimilitude to allude to Northern Catalonia by using a Yorkshire, a Cantabrian or a Transylvanian dialect. Dialects are one of the untranslatable words.

### 3.3. Style

In case of spelling or grammar mistakes translators automatically correct the original text in the translated version and this urge for “improvement” is typical also in stylistic matters. Irene Solà's language is extremely poetic, metaphorical, and it is impossible to over-stylize it. The translation of *Canto jo* required a different operation, I had to reduce the quantity of conjunctions “and”. Though I intended to cut as many as possible, the reviewer and the editor took their chances to obliterate even more.

Els ventres negres, carregats d'aigua fosca **i** freda **i** de llamps **i** de trons. Veníem del mar **i** d'altres muntanyes, **i** vés a saber de quins llocs més, **i** vés a saber què havíem vist (Solà, 2019a: 15).

Sok fekete has, tele hideg fekete vízzel, villámlással **és** mennydörgéssel. A tenger felől **és** más hegyek felől, **és** isten tudja még hány helyről jöttünk, **s** mi mindent láttunk (Solà, 2021: 11).

Black bellies, burdened with cold dark water, lightning bolts **and** thunderclaps. We came from the sea **and** from other mountains, **and** from unthinkable places, **and** we'd seen unthinkable things.

Il ventre nero, carico d'acqua scura **e** fredda, **e** di lampi **e** tuoni. Venivamo dal mare **e** da altre montagne, **e** chissà da quali altri luoghi, **e** chissà che cosa avevamo visto (Solà, 2020: 15).

El vientre negro, cargado de agua oscura **y** fría, **y** de rayos **y** truenos. Veníamos del mar, de otras montañas **y** de toda clase de sitios, **y** habíamos visto toda clase de cosas (Solà, 2019b: 13).

The examples show that the continuous repetition of the conjunction “and” is less disturbing for the Romance languages, the Italian translation keeps all of them, the Spanish translator spared only one, the English already two, and the Hungarian three,

though one is replaced by a synonym. Perhaps, if I had a chance to revise the translation, I would be even more cruel with the repetition of this conjunction because target language readers read the text based on their own language criteria, and in Hungarian this excessive use of *is* is confusing instead of suggesting an exciting new style. In the absence of a golden rule to find the delicate balance between the imperatives of fidelity to the original text and the norms of the target language, it is the translator's responsibility that requires thorough consideration.

Based on the above cited examples we can claim that there are inevitable losses but also gains in the process of the age-old art and practice of translation that always strives for perfection without ever attaining it. Translators always manage to create a target language version though on a philosophical level we are entitled to doubt its equivalence with the original. Equivalence in this case is hardly a scientifically measurable concept to be checked on a word to word or sentence to sentence level. The effect created in the reader's mind could be a good way to approach the problem, but target language readers perhaps don't have to know what they lose if they gain their private Pyrenees.

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