FRAMING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SPACE THROUGH TRANSLATION: THE CASE OF YELIN'S FICTION

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Abstract

The overall aim of this paper is to approach the question of linguistic and cultural translation and its influence on the configuration of distinctive cultural spaces in Yelin's collection *Shulamis. Stories from a Montreal Childhood*. The main character of this collection struggles between worlds –which are, to a certain extent, symbolised by the use and allusion to English, Yiddish and French— in search of her own linguistic and cultural identity. Thus, the confrontation of different spaces and the need to translate one's experience becomes a significant element in Yelin's writing. The stories in this collection present Canada's spirit of respect and equitable treatment for all cultures and identities while showing the difficulties immigrants had to face as well as the dangers of acculturation. In this paper, we examine the construction of different cultural spaces from a theoretical perspective which considers the importance of some cultural and linguistic processes associated with code-switching (Poplack, 1984, Myers-Scotton, 1993, 2006), giving due attention to the phenomena of linguistic and cultural translation (Bhabha, [1994] 2006, Tymoczko, 2000, Trivedi, 2005). Also, we look at the position of Shulamis Yelin as a writer who wishes to translate worlds for her readers.

Key words: *Cultural translation; code-switching; linguistic and cultural identity; space; Shulamis Yelin.*

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1. Introduction

This paper offers a preliminary study, which approaches the question of linguistic and cultural translation and its influence on the configuration of distinctive cultural spaces in Yelin's *Shulamis. Stories from a Montreal Childhood*. In this collection of semi-autobiographical stories, Yelin presents the different experiences associated with being born and raised in Montreal, a city which has been central to the process of Jewish immigration in Canada.[1] The main character of the stories struggles between worlds in search of her own linguistic and cultural identity, which is, to a certain extent, defined in relation to the use and allusion to English, Yiddish and French. Throughout the collection, the confrontation of different spaces and the need to translate one's experience becomes a significant element. Yelin's stories present Canada's spirit of respect and equitable treatment for all cultures and identities while showing some of the difficulties immigrants had to face as well as certain dangers of acculturation. In this paper, we examine the construction of different cultural spaces from a theoretical perspective which considers the importance of some cultural and linguistic processes associated with code-switching (Poplack, 1984, Myers-Scotton, 1993, 2006), giving due attention to the phenomena of linguistic and cultural translation (Bhabha, [1994] 2006, Tymoczko, 2000, Trivedi, 2005). Also, we will be looking at the position of Shulamis Yelin as a writer who wishes to translate worlds for her readers.

2. Shulamis Yelin (1913-2001): An Immigrant Writer in a Postcolonial Context

Shulamis Borodensky Yelin was born in Montreal, Canada, in 1913, to parents who had emigrated from Chernobyl (Russia). In 1983, Yelin published *Shulamis. Stories from a Montreal Childhood* (from now on, *Shulamis...)*, a collection of semi-autobiographical stories that promptly became a literary success to be reprinted six times in the course of fifteen years.[2] The book portrays the city of Montreal at an important historical time, which practically coincides with the period between WWI and WWII. *Shulamis…* presents the reader with some of the pleasant and painful experiences of Shulamis, a young member of the Jewish Canadian community in Montreal.

[1] In *New Readings of Yiddish Montreal,* Anctil, Ravvin and Simon (2007) highlight the centrality of Montreal in the development of Jewish Canadian literature. Also, Simon (2006) provides a characterization of Montreal as a *divided city.*

[2] Yelin's daughter is currently working on a new edition of this collection, which will include new stories and photographs.

Yelin's fiction witnesses the encounter of several languages which come to define her linguistic and cultural identity. Although her narrative is basically written in English, the presence of Yiddish, Russian and French contribute to the shaping of distinct spaces in the stories.[3] It is crucial to note that on many instances the writer provides the reader with translations into English, guiding them across the world of Jewish life in Canada. Yelin, like the protagonist of her stories, attended a Protestant school where she was educated in English[4] and an afternoon Jewish school, where she was instructed in Yiddish.

Being a minority writer, engaged in the production of diasporic narratives in a postcolonial context, Yelin's fiction is, as Broomley (2000) holds for these narratives, concerned with the

> [...] fictional exploration of the complexities of belonging and identity, the shifting and cross-cutting cultural experience of diaspora and relocation [...] belonging is always problematic, a never-ending dialogue of same with other (4-5). These kind of fictions engage with and renew the past, refiguring it as contingent "in-between" space, a space of innovation. (*op.cit.*, 6-7)

Bearing in mind that Yelin's narrative arises in a postcolonial context, it is relevant to consider the strategies of appropriation put forward by Ashcroft *et. al.* ([1989] 2002), which are distinctive of the postcolonial text and become salient in Yelin's fiction: glossing, the use of untranslated words, interlanguage, syntactic fusion, code-switching and vernacular transcription. These strategies combine within Yelin's fiction, taking a prominent role in the construction of space, as the examples below will show. Also, we should look at the particular position postcolonial writers, like minority and diasporic authors, assume before their writing. With reference to minority writers and following Schleiermacher's methods of translation, Rudin (1996) points out two distinct methods employed in these narratives,[5] i.e. domestication and foreignisation. In the field of translation and postcolonial studies, Tymoczko (2000) reminds us that apart from conveying aspects of their original language and culture, postcolonial writers can be said to produce translations rather than fictions. This is to say that in building their narratives, postcolonial writers seem to "translate" from cultural sources, rather than from a source text.[6] This is the operation usually described as "cultural translation."

[3] See for instance "Purim" and "Kasha and Loving Kindness," in which terms regarding food and family as well as some religious celebrations are conveyed in Yiddish.
[4] It should be noted that ever since 1914, Jewish children were educated at Protestant schools exclusively in Quebec. For a historical overview of Jewish education in Montreal, see Margolis (2005, 301-348).
[5] In his book, Rudin examines the position of Chicano writers.
[6] The same notion seems to apply to Spanish-Caribbean narratives. See: Irizarry, G. (2001).

The notion of cultural translation is at the core of the production of postcolonial writers. We must see, however, that the definition of this concept, originally coined by Bhabha ([1994] 2006), remains problematic. According to Trivedi (2005), Bhabha is taking Rushdie's idea of being "a translated man" when he elaborates on his definition of cultural translation. In negative terms, cultural translation can be regarded as an operation, which does not include the literary translation involving two texts from two different languages and cultures. As Trivedi points out "[cultural] translation instead is the process and condition of human migrancy" (*op.cit.,* 5), a translational and transnational condition characteristic of "Western multiculturalism brought about by Third World migrancy" (*ibid.*). For Bhabha ([1994] 2006), cultural translation is a complex form of signification, which contributes to the creation of in-between spaces in which new cultural meanings are negotiated.

In the following sections, we will explore the construction of cultural spaces in Yelin's fiction, focusing on the centrality of language contact phenomena as well as on linguistic and cultural translation in a number of excerpts taken from this collection. We will also consider Yelin as a writer who must "translate herself" in a postcolonial context. As will be seen, the fragments below illustrate the conformation of three distinct cultural spaces in Yelin's fiction as well as her position as a cultural mediator and writer.

3. The configuration of cultural space in Yelin's *Shulamis*...

3.1 The Strathearn Protestant School: *The Site of Acculturation*

EXCERPT 1

"And Tuesday," Denie rejoined, "we go write me into school!"

"May it be in a lucky hour!" Mamma blessed devoutly.

"I'll take you," I volunteered. "I'll take you to the office and *unroll* you," I corrected her Yiddishism." ("Denie Prepares for School," 46. *Our emphasis.*)

EXCERPT 2

"I have to write her in. I mean *unroll* her. She needs to go to Kindergarten."
"You mean you want to register her. You may take her to the office."
(...)

"What's your name, little girl?" she addressed Denie.
"I'm Denie."
"Jeanie?"
"No. Denie. Denie Borodensky (...)"
"(...) What is your name in English?" Denie turned to me. I froze. What other name could Denie have?
"Her English name," Miss Bradshaw repeated, turning to me.
(...)
"And without so much as a wave of farewell, Denie, now Dorothy, disappeared down the long darkening corridor into the new world of Canadian English culture." ("I Unroll Denie in School," 53-4. *Our emphasis.*)

Excerpts 1 and 2 present us with an extreme example of cultural translation. Shulamis's little sister, Denie, must adopt a new name, an *English* name, to be admitted into school. It should not go unnoticed that this episode, which is told as if in passing, relates to other acts of symbolic violence collected in the stories. By the end of the account, the voice of the young narrator fluctuates and a more mature perspective toward the episode is conveyed as Shulamis acknowledges that Denie's enrolment in school represents her formal entrance into the English Canadian culture and the loss of part of her Jewish heritage. In the translation process involved in the little girl's "baptism into Anglicization," the only element that seems to resist translation, in terms of Benjamin (1923), is letter "D." The fragments also show that while Jewish children were admitted into English Protestant schools, they were forced to adjust by homogenising in such a way that differences, cultural and other, became less visible.[7]
Mention should be made as to the relationship between these two stories and the story "I Find My Jewish Name," which comes earlier in the collection. In this story, when starting classes at the Peretz Shule, the young protagonist, Sophie, painfully learns she has a Jewish name. It becomes obvious that Yelin is providing a fictionalization of these episodes, which serve as an introduction for the non-Jewish reader into an aspect of Jewish tradition that concerns naming. Jewish people often have two names: a religious name, to be used at home and at religious ceremonies; and a secular name, to be used elsewhere. They learn these names when they are very young, before they start school. We may see Yelin's intention to provide her readers with a cultural background that can help them understand the symbolic value of her narrative in a better light, hereby reinforcing her mission as a cultural mediator. Her position as a writer can be paralleled to that of the translator who wishes to domesticate his/her text in order to bring it closer to his/her audiences.

[7] As pointed out by Lowenstein, even today family names and given names "are still a convenient marker used by both Jews and non-Jews to tell (or at least guess) if a person is Jewish" (Lowenstein, 2002, 83).

Now, it is interesting to draw attention to the different instances of linguistic translation in the excerpts above. By using the phrase "write me into," Denie is providing a literal translation of a Yiddish verb ("*farshraybn zikh*") into English, a Yiddishism which is promptly identified and "corrected" by her elder sister, Shulamis, who tries to render the verbal phrase idiomatically into English. It will be noticed that Shulamis's correction "unroll" constitutes an instance of *interlanguage*, which is typical in the process of acquiring a second language, and a feature, as we have already mentioned, of postcolonial writing. A few observations can be made as of these translations. On the one hand, Denie is, to some extent, *translating herself* into a new linguistic and cultural system. Still, it is worth noting that this translation leaves room to see the "original," the source that is operating underneath.

On the other hand, at a different level, it should be observed, following Authier-Revuz (1984, 1995), that the construction of discourse relies on the allusion to Yiddish, the language that stands for the character's cultural origin. The writer introduces the form "unroll" in the first story as an explicitly marked element. The italics which mark off this term perform a double function. They certainly convey emphasis, which might signal a particular intonation, characteristic of a statement meant as a correction, but they also function as an element which indicates a point of heterogeneity, which connects Yelin's particular choice to the Yiddish language and culture more evidently. In the following story, "I Unroll Denie into School," the word appears integrated into the title without being marked as a heterogeneous element. Within the universe of Yelin's narrative, the term "unroll," which means to unfold and also to reveal, acquires a new cultural and linguistic sense, which has been enabled by the discursive operation described above. Surreptitiously, the writer is establishing a space in which English and Yiddish meet to configure a new mode of expression.

Regarding the linguistic processes involved in these instances, the fusion present in the verbal phrase "write me into," accounts for the overlapping of two systems, a kind of *double voicing* process (Arteaga, 1997), in which two languages are competing for sense. In this case, the morphology is rendered literally from Yiddish, but the lexical components belong to English. The same linguistic process appears in the idiomatic expression "may it be in a lucky hour," which is also perceived as a literal translation from Yiddish.[8] This last example brings about the problem of idiomatic expressions, which, we know, represent a collective use mostly associated with the cultural heritage of a certain linguistic community. Given their idiomatic

[8] According to Mayne (pers.comm., 2009), this expression is a literal translation of the Hebrew expression "*beshaah tovah.*"

nature, these expressions are not to be rendered literally in translation but through their cultural dynamic equivalents (Tymozsko, 2000). In language contact situations, formulaic expressions, as Poplack (1984) and Myers-Scotton (1993) point out, tend to appear in the language identifying their origin;[9] in this case, Yiddish. However, it must be noted that although Yelin is using Yiddish indirectly, through a literal translation, her rendering is readily accessible to the non-Yiddish speaker. As seen in the examples, these strategies, among others, serve to create an image of Yelin as a writer who is willing to bridge the gaps that may exist across cultures.

In terms of the configuration of cultural space, the Protestant School emerges as a distinct milieu which, built mainly in connection with English and its symbolic value, is embedded in a broader intercultural background. The anecdote shows that English is the language one has *to translate oneself into* in order to belong or, at least, be part of the registered children's list. Incidentally, the stories allude to the compromises Jewish immigrants had to agree to in order to be accepted as students at school and as members of a given society.

3.2 The Peretz Shule: *The Site for Intercultural Communication*

EXCERPT 3

"Now," said Lerern Sherr, "I will call the roll and you will answer "Doh," which means Present. If you attended the singing class on Saturday afternoon you will say "Geven," which means that you were there. And if you have done your homework, you will say, "Gemacht." Remember: "Doh, geven, gemacht."

(...)

Everyone had a Jewish name but I! For what sort of Jewish name is Sophie or even Sophele?
"But of course you have a Jewish name!" Mamma replied. "Your name is Shulamis, for my father Shloime."
"Then why do you call me Sophela?"
"We live in Canada. We wanted you to have an English name for school."

(...)

A new dimension was added to my life. ("I Find My Jewish Name," 36-37)

[9] Myers-Scotton (1993) refers to these particular uses as "embedded language islands."

This story, "I Find My Jewish Name," functions as a companion story to the stories analysed in the previous section. Here the writer approaches the same topic from a different perspective. In this story, an identity conflict arises when a certain choice, the protagonist's secular name (Sophie), is perceived as a marked name at Peretz Shule. This is totally unexpected for the little girl, who ignores that she actually has another name, a Jewish name. The conflict stems from the fact that the symbolic value projected by the name "Sophie" is not intended or known by the little girl. The name "Sophie," which was supposed to function as an unmarked choice and, therefore, an element of social integration in Canada, becomes a highly marked choice in the context of Shule, which excludes the girl from this world ("We live in Canada. We wanted you to have an English name for school"). This name echoes a set of socio-cultural values, which are alien to Jewish culture and traditions. As from this episode, the girl learns the full implication of her name: she has been named "Sophia" after a supposedly famous Russian socialist so that she could be an "unmarked" Canadian.[10] Now, understanding these implications necessarily entails assuming the meaning of a new identity. The social and psychological values ascribed to the name "Shulamis" will enable the little girl to belong in the world of Shule, where her name connects her to two heroes: a biblical hero, King Solomon, and her own grandfather, Shloime.

As from this moment, each of these names, "Sophie" and "Shulamis," remain attached to different languages, different schools, and different sets of socio-cultural values; all in all, they create two different identities or, to be more precise, a dual identity: "And while in the Protestant school, I continued to be known as Sophie, I was Shulamis, she of the singing name, the little girl who lived on Colonial Avenue near Prince Arthur – and the Sweetheart of King Solomon" (Yelin, 1983, 37). As will be noticed, the constitution of this dual identity is to be found in the associations evoked by these two names. For many years, Sophie/Shulamis will dwell between two worlds, without being able to find a name of her own.

As opposed to the English School, the Peretz Shule represents a space in which English and Yiddish can encounter one another without conflict. Linguistic translation functions here as a communicative tool, which does not deprive anyone of their identity. Like many other Canadians, Sophie/Shulamis must develop strategies to adjust to the multicultural and multilingual space. This adjustment is often seen in the translation of her experiences and,

[10] As noted by Kahan (2009), the name "Sophie" is also significant to the protagonist's cultural Russian origin. The little girl is named Sophia after a famous Russian socialist. So, even if this is an English name, which may function as an unmarked choice in the present Canadian context, it still holds a strong relationship with the past Russian milieu.

more importantly, in the translation of her-*self*. On and on, Sophie will have to translate into Shulamis and the reverse in order to survive in this milieu.[11]

3.3 Shulamis's home: *The Site for Cultural Negotiation*

EXCERPT 4

I didn't take to Winnie. She was a big strapping girl from New Brunswick who spoke only French, laughed loudly and heartily, and offered up prayers to a strange God who favoured beads and crosses—a totally different God from my grandmother's.

When I told my friend Bessie that we had a French maid, she bristled. "Why a French? They hate the Jews worst than the English. They're Cath'lics—like the nuns. Why doesn't your mother get a English—you should be able to talk to her?"

"They don't answer the advertisement. Only the French. That's why. And my father says there's good and bad people by everyone. And anyways, I could learn French."

A roar of laughter filled the air. It was Winnie robed in a sheet. "Jus' pour le fun!" she roared. "Don' yell! C'est jus' pour le fun." ("Winnie,"42-45)

"Winnie" is one of the few narrative pieces by Yelin that has been anthologized. In 1982, Spilberg and Zipper edited a trilingual anthology called *Canadian Jewish Anthology*, which offered articles, stories, poetry and interviews in English, French and Yiddish. The fact that "Winnie" represents a central dimension of the configuration of Canada as a multicultural nation may account for the editors' choice. This story shows a third and less prominent feature of the main character's upbringing in French Montreal. The selection of anecdotes and episodes in the collection constantly reminds the reader of an environment in which English was the language of communication In *Shulamis...*, French and the cultural and psychological associations linked to it will only appear indirectly in "Winnie" and in a few other stories,[12] Still, the incidental mention of the French maid, Winnie, collected in the excerpts above, opens a new door to the reader. As pointed out by Hooton [13], it is only after the Quiet Revolution (1960-66) that French asserts itself as the dominant language in the province of Quebec. The movement leading to this revolution tried to correct the situation of poor,

[11] The observations regarding "I Find My Jewish Name" will appear in Spoturno, María Laura (*forthcoming*), "A Name of One's Own: The Construction of Identity in Yelin's *Shulamis. Stories from a Montreal Childhood*.

[12] Also, see "Scarlet Fever" and "I Learn the Facts of Life" in this collection.

[13] Brett Hooton (pers.comm., 2009).

uneducated Francophones like Winnie, who had fewer opportunities in Canada, as the story clearly reveals.[14]

The extracts selected also reproduce the cultural tension between Roman Catholics and Jews in French Canada in the first decades of the twentieth century. Bessie, one of Shulamis's friends, shows a strong rejection towards the French language and the cultural and ideological values attached to it; namely, the French Canadian Catholics' hatred toward the Jewish minority. By way of indirect mention, the appearance of Winnie, the rude, poor, Catholic French maid from New Brunswick highlights the fact that English Canadians enjoyed a superior status within Montreal society. The reader is, thus, allowed to integrate this new dimension to the construction of space in Yelin's collection of stories.

With respect to strategies of translation and language contact phenomena, attention should be given to the expression used by Winnie, "c'est jus' pour le fun," as the status of French and English is quite dubious here. We may say, following Myers-Scotton (1993), that given the context of use, this occurrence makes for a marked instance of code-switching. However, it is interesting to note that the writer is playing with the two languages: she is resorting to English for a morphosyntactic frame and using some French words to spice up her expression. In Aschcroft's terms, this accounts for an instance of syntactic fusion. By using this expression, the character, Winnie, attempts to *translate herself* into the language of *the other*. The fact that Winnie is portrayed as trying to conquer the child's affection and complicity, without airing any kind of prejudices, is weakening the tension raised at the beginning of the story.[15] The writer seems willing to reinforce the image of Canada as a country in which religious and cultural tolerance may be possible. In the collection, this image is clearly embodied in the construction of Shulamis's father. Although segregation by religion persists within the Canadian context, the writer is attempting to negotiate cultural differences, in a broader sense of the term.

These excerpts contribute to the configuration of home as a distinctive space. Home is the site for real cultural negotiation. As we have seen, the English Protestant School imposes a new set of values, admitting no difference whatsoever. The Peretz Shule, on the other hand, tries to reconcile and communicate two different worlds: the English Canadian milieu and the Jewish

[14] As Bisso (2009) suggests, the fact that Yelin writes these stories at the time of the Quiet Revolution should not escape our attention. Through "Winnie," Yelin is reflecting part of the conflict put to question by this revolutionary movement.

[15] We should notice that it is Shulamis's mother who paves the way to the mutual understanding between her daughter and the young maid.

community. Home seems to be oriented in two opposite directions. Mother tries to preserve Jewish traditions and ways, always referring back to their origins and the life they had in Russia; while Father is portrayed as an open-minded man who is willing to move forward and adjust to the new environment, knowing that by so doing he is not losing his identity. Thus, the mother symbolises the cultural and religious origin, quite characteristic of the Jewish tradition, for which women are the ones who pass on Jewish identity into their children, while the father is oriented to the future. He is trying to open doors and minds so that his children will be able to perform in an intercultural society, in which, hopefully, it might not be so relevant whether you are a Jew or not.

Concluding remarks

In this article we explored three distinct cultural spaces in Yelin's *Shulamis. Stories from a Montreal Childhood*: the Protestant English School, the Peretz Shule and her home. The analysis of a few excerpts from the collection enables us to say that the Protestant School stands for a site of acculturation, in which no difference is admitted; the Peretz Shule creates a space for intercultural and interlinguistic communication, in which tolerance is held as a true value; home, on the other hand, locates the site for cultural negotiation, which is symbolically portrayed in the different figures of the child's mother and father.

Throughout her narrative, Yelin's intention to bridge cultural gaps with her readers is made evident. We may say that intratextual translation is used to that effect in the collection. As a cultural mediator, Yelin can be regarded as domesticating her fictional text in order to make her cultural text more accessible to the non-Jewish reader. The piece serves as an initiation into the ways and traditions of the Jewish community in Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the collection unfolds, readers are made to negotiate cultural meanings with the writer. Terms and expressions such as "Zaida," "Cohen," "Bubbie," "Purim," "unroll," and "L'Chaim," to mention but a few, acquire a new linguistic and cultural dimension for the English-speaking reader, who is now able to perceive a different dimension in the configuration of Canada's multicultural arena. And there lies, we believe, part of the strength of Shulamis Yelin's writing.

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