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The Masked Translator: Layering in Media, Theatre and Fiction during the Pandemic
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This 2003 handwoven wool artwork by the Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri entitled 'Trabaje desde su casa' ('Work from Home') seems a suitable point of departure for a discussion of translating during the COVID-19 pandemic and specifically its impact on women practitioners. It was displayed at the Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M) in Móstoles as part of its Collection 18 on Textiles from 29 October 2020 to 28 February 2021, for which I translated wall and website texts and had the rare pleasure during coronavirus times of seeing at the museum. Kuri's large-scale tapestry, 180 by 250 cm, represents the banality of urban job offer advertisements on a monumental scale, highlighting the space between consumers and citizens and the employment and fiscal regimes that condition and regulate their exchanges. Translating is an activity often exercised from the comfort (and constraints) of

the home and frequently in a freelance capacity, which means translators are well placed to adapt to the new working from home normality. During the pandemic this practice has been normalised, sweeping away some of the misunderstandings and even disdain that translators have faced while also spotlighting the multi-tasking that those with care commitments to other householders, both old and young, have juggled hourly alongside translation work. However, while homeworking has grown over the last year, the working conditions and rates of translators have shrunk, particularly in acutely market-sensitive commercial fields. This is reflected visually through the tear off strips in Kuri's advertisement, signalling a low status job while offering the false promise of high financial reward. This paper seeks to expose some of the professional difficulties that have been exacerbated by COVID-19 but in a more positive vein, it also highlights how literary translation projects developed by women have managed to circumvent adversity.

If we accept the premise that the 'translator needs to grasp what the words can signify in each particular context and then has try to render those additional layers of meaning' (Bielsa and Bassnett 2008, 5-6), the exceptional context imposed by COVID-19 has attached new intra-textual and extra-textual layers to this task. Principally drawing on a local, Madrid-based experience of a situation imposed by this globally prevalent disease, this paper explores how the visibility of women translation lecturers and practitioners has been both obscured and enhanced. It will discuss these impacts in relation to three projects in which women play a key role, while distinguishing between commercial and literary translation practice under COVID-19: first in communications texts for a pharmaceutical company responsible for producing a COVID-19 vaccine, second the dramatised reading of the play *Atra bilis* in translation performed online for the Cervantes Theatre and ending with a conversation with a young Spanish author and translator, Ana Flecha Marco, whose first major book came out in March 2020.

In the viral phenomenon *The Masked Singer*, which is considered a game changer as a contraflow global television format originating from South Korea, the winner remains masked, unlike the less successful contestants whose identities are revealed through unmasking. In September 2020, in-person teaching returned to all schools and some universities across Spain in various different guises. Since then, students aged six and up have been required to wear face masks in the classroom and schoolteachers and university lecturers have taught masked. Whether mask wearing in educational environments has been a winning strategy or game changer falls well beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to outline briefly the experience of in-person lecturing in Madrid order to open up discussion.

In the academic year 2020-2021, all first, second- and third-year degree courses relating to translation at the Universidad Pontificia Comillas de Madrid have been delivered through a combination of simultaneous face-to-face and online lectures using Blackboard Collaborate by all full-time, part-time academic and non-academic members of staff, regardless of age, underlying health conditions or shielding responsibilities. Unless self-isolating or certified as sick, all students and lecturers are required to attend lectures in person daily. In spite of this direct contact, unlike schoolteachers, university lecturers have not been included in the priority groups for vaccination in Spain.

Having lectured on translation for 21 years at the university as a part-time associate lecturer, I had grown accustomed to physical recognition from the student body and was not prepared for the impact of the mask in this respect. Like the contestants in *The Masked Singer*, I repeatedly found students guessing at my identity, addressing me with the names of other 50+ female full-time lecturers they were more familiar with from pre-pandemic months and to whom I bore but a scant resemblance. As mentioned above, many translators work from home and when we sally out into lecturing or other external roles, the sense of physical recognition counts, perhaps more than to other professionals, as we are often veiled in our day-to-day exchanges.

This is particularly true for freelance translators working in the communications and commercial world, where virtual contact has been the norm since technology enabled this in the late 1990s. Practitioners can work for decades with clients without ever meeting them in person or being seen on Zoom, Microsoft Teams or other video conferencing tools. In recent years, e-mails requesting translation commissions habitually omit the name of the translator/s and regularly confuse the identity/number/gender of the translator/s, addressing them as ‘Hola compañer@/chicos/chicas /equipo’, and this obscuring trend has intensified during the pandemic.

Under COVID-19, the de-professionalisation of commercial translation has accelerated due to several factors. From 15 March to the end of state of emergency on 21 June 2020 in Spain, business activity, planning and event organisation ground to a halt for multinational organisations, the principal commissioners of economic, marketing, technical and legal translations. March was a wasteland for such translators and April the cruellest of months, where ‘commissionless’ freelancers in Spain found themselves in stark contrast with the bright spring world that we were not allowed step out into even for the shortest of walks. Spain had one of the strictest lockdowns in the world at this point. Unsurprisingly, when the

first major commissions to emerge in early summer, they were directly related to COVID-19. They took the form of urgent documents on health and safety guidelines for workplaces, introducing swathes of new vocabulary and sparking linguistic debate. The cause of the pandemic itself swayed between masculine (*el virus*) and feminine (*la enfermedad*) gender, until the Real Academia Española (RAE) declared both equally valid (*el COVID-19* or *la COVID-19*).

Meanwhile, companies elected to keep their staff busy during lockdown by getting them to translate documents internally, as this was a task they could usefully be asked to perform from home. Then, interns (mostly woefully paid or unpaid) joined this improvised translation workforce from the summer onwards, reducing the number of commissions for professionals further. When commissions returned, housebound corporate clients increasingly turned to free neural machine services such as DeepL and simply asked translators to furnish the required polish at so-called *tarifas económicas* or low-cost rates (5-20 euros per 1000 words) for bulk commissions. Under this new, lost-cost regime, which ailing companies have welcomed with alacrity, translators are expected to turn out ten to twenty thousand words a day instead of two or three thousand words. The concern now is that this cheap rate is likely to persist after the pandemic.

On an intra-textual level, the quality of source texts for translation has suffered from unschooled co-authorship and document sharing by executives working from home at all hours, leading to a noticeable dip in coherence and multiple contradictions involving key data. Skilled translators can pick up on these inconsistencies and query them with commissioners before they reach the public domain but there has been a rise in publications bedevilled by inaccuracies, crucially affecting public perception of COVID-19 vaccine producers. Another recent intra-textual twist is the growing number of requests for so-called deep readings of source texts, whereby the experienced translator is given license (but no guidance) to produce a press release that fits the tone and register suited to the brand, such as a pharmaceutical company, blurring the line between author and translator in a novel manner.

The lack (and current erosion) of status commercial/technical translators face is reflected in translation studies, as Maeve Olohan points out, as this genre is “considered culturally less prestigious and therefore perceived less worthy of study” (Olohan, 2008, 1). Recent studies such by Olohan herself, Michael Cronin, the aforementioned Esperança Bielsa and Susan Bassnett, Christina Schäffner and Renée Desjardin have helped to narrow this

important gap for the purposes of translator training but there are still prominent areas of professional practice that are overlooked in research.

One such area is media tracking, which consists of translating online and print news information for multinational organizations, usually through their communications and public relations functions and often for reputational reasons. These texts commonly take the form of interviews with CEOs or top executives. Unlike many other commercial documents, media tracking is not bound by confidentiality issues as the texts are in the public domain but critically, in contrast to news translation, these assignments are commissioned with a strategic corporate purpose. This makes them very appealing texts to use in the classroom, as they can range from interviews with brand ambassadors like the actor Lupita Nyong'o for Calvin Klein to business icons like Bill Gates. Translation enables global monitoring of the information published in press and social media so that the commissioner can gauge the impact on its reputation. This adds another layer to the assertion that "in news translation, the dominant strategy is absolute domestication, as material is shaped in order to be consumer by the target audience, so has to be tailored to suit their needs and expectations" (Bielsa and Bassnett 2008, 10). The repackaging of information for media tracking has a powerful corporate dimension and for a non-profit COVID-19 vaccine producer beset by reputational issues in the media, an urgent, ethical layer is attached to the translation process.

Media tracking assignments have featured several times among the translations required by AstraZeneca's Communications function including the communication plans for the local market (Spain), Q&As, statements and press releases. Corporate press interviews are the fruit of media relations, falling into the category of earned media and for AstraZeneca served as a mass communication vehicle to convey messages about the vaccine launch. The media and journalist profiles were carefully selected, based on quantitative parameters such as online and offline circulation and advertising value equivalent (AVE) and qualitative parameters such as Tier-1 media, analysis of coverage to date to ensure scientific rigour in reporting and of the reporter's ideological stance on a non-profit vaccine. Prior to publication a Q&A is drawn up by the international communications division of the company and shared with the interviewer and interviewee. In practical terms, this means a translator translates the Q&A from English into Spanish and then the resulting interview in the Spanish media is translated back into English for media tracking purposes, exposing the journalistic slant given to the information. It is a highly controlled process and the quantitative and qualitative metrics mentioned above are applied pre-publication and post-translation. This echoes Schäffner's point that reactions to news texts made in another country 'are actually reactions

to the information as it was provided in translation' (Schäffner 2004, 120), in this case scrutinised through a corporate, big pharma lens.

In Spain, AstraZeneca elected to field two principal spokespersons, providing a gender balance: Ricardo Rafael Suárez, Country President, and Ana Pérez Domínguez, Medical and Regulatory Affairs Director. To illustrate this process, two links follow. They contain interviews with Tier-1 media published before the University of Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine was approved by the European Medicines Agency: Suárez in *El País* on 25 November 2020 -["No se entiende muy bien cómo se decide el precio de una vacuna"](#)- and Pérez in *El Mundo* on 24 November 2020 ["Esto no es una carrera por la vacuna contra la Covid"](#).

The challenges commercial translators have suffered during the pandemic have affected some areas of literary translation to a lesser extent as book publishing has continued, as discussed below, but the theatre, as a live cultural event, has been hit hard. Since September 2020, The Cervantes Theatre in London, which showcases Spanish and Latin American plays in Spanish and in English translation, has sought tenaciously to carry on its activities through producing digital content consisting of dramatised readings of works in translation and conversations with playwrights. I was asked to translate *Atra bilis* by Laila Ripoll for this pandemic series, which was directed by Paula Paz and read by an all-female cast. *Atra bilis* is a grotesque farse where Nazaria Alba Montenegro and her two sisters, Daría and Aurorita, and servant Ulpiana, dredge up the past bitterly at the wake of Nazaria's husband on a stormy night with monstrous and tragic results.

Premiered in 2001, Ripoll directed the play with her own theatre company MicoMicón, casting four male actors in the role of four old women that make up the cast list. As the playwright explained in the post-performance Q&A, her decision to cast men was governed by practical considerations as the company did not have enough women to play the roles. In the COVID-19 pandemic, four English-speaking actresses, Jeryl Burgess, Jude Arkwright, Gilly Daniels and Anne Farnworth took up the roles, with Candela Gómez narrating the stage directions. However, social distance measures, heightened by age considerations, prevented them from gathering together on stage to be filmed, as was the case with previous plays in the Cervantes Theatre online series. Moreover, the day of the performance, 5 November 2020, England went into a second lockdown.

Atra bilis draws dramatic agency from a torrent of Hispanic literature, art and song: García Lorca, Valle Inclán, Rulfo, Salarrué, Lope de Vega, Quevedo, Gutiérrez Solana, Jorge

Manrique, Cervantes, Zuloaga, Bécquer, Arrabal, La Habana Vieja and translating the sometimes clear and often sly, slightly diverging references in the text to the above, as well as to Catholic liturgy, was even more of a challenge in COVID-19 times when our laptop and personal bookshelves constitute our whole library. Embittered and violent sisterhood and death are two of the main themes and characters gather round the coffin of the absent yet central male character for much of the play. As I translated, I could not help but ponder the impact that this key prop might have had if the play had been staged during the pandemic. At the Zoom rehearsal, Gilly Daniels (Daria) lamented the absence of the casket in the scene where her character urinates on the dead man in an act of defiance and disgust. In response, the Zoom stage directions provided by Paz fixed the coffin's position so that all four women gazed in the same direction both individually and as an ensemble, as the screen moved from showing one actor or more.

The Cervantes Theatre is not only exceptionally good at giving visibility to translators, as bilingual performances are central to their mission, but they also involve translators actively in the rehearsal process, this time, on Zoom. Ironically, the pandemic gave me an opportunity to be 'in the room', which I could not have been normally. I could listen to the flow of the words from Madrid, with the actors and director locked down across the United Kingdom and note down then alter any sentences that jarred as they were read, as well as take onboard the actors' suggestions. As Burgess (Nazaria) recalls at the rehearsal 'a couple of the names were simplified for the English-speaking voice and ear and I remember suggesting a slightly different word order to make a sentence feel more natural for me to say.' Burgess also flags up how uplifting it was to come together with her fellow actors and 'special it was to have the chance to be active when theatres were closed.' In a similar positive vein, Ripoll described the dramatised reading as a 'a shot in the arm, a stimulus to carry on creating.' The collaborative, choral approach adopted by the Cervantes Theatre was reinforced by the Q&A session after the performance, where all eight women (playwright, translator, director and cast) participated. The sense of ongoing conversation around the play that this created also had an impact on the viewer as Burgess sums up: 'although there has been access to many wonderful performances online during the past year, I think being able to see a live performance as it unfolded will have brought a real immediacy, as well as a feeling of taking a step back towards normality.'

The third and final project focuses on the book translation and publishing world. I was asked to translate a sample from *Dos novelitas nórdicas* (*Two Nordic Short Novels*) comprising *Story of Ø* and *Mancha* by Ana Flecha Marco supported by a grant from AC/E for

promotion at the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Spain was meant be Country Guest of Honour in 2020, and now will be in 2022, after Slovenia and Italy, the invited countries of the following years, agreed to delay their presence by one year. This book was launched in Spain in early March 2020 by Mr Griffin (Mrs Danvers Collection), not the most propitious timing, as the author recalls:

Now that I think back, it is almost funny to realise that we chose the worst possible week for the book launch. We did not know it then, but just a few days later a full lockdown hit, and we were stuck at home, toilet paper was scarce, and the book was in a printer's limbo. The book presentation was postponed, then cancelled. We had no idea when and how the physical books would be available, how safe it would be to send them to the people who had pre-ordered it, how this delay would affect the sales and the general public's willingness to read a book by a someone they had never heard about while immersed in a surreal and very serious situation. I was aware of how absurd it was for me to worry about my book, which suddenly felt so unimportant.

Story of Ø tells the tale of the handful of inhabitants left living on a tiny island in the Norwegian Sea, which is sinking inexorably due to climate change. The islanders decide to try and preserve the collective memory of the land that has been their home for so many generations; a memory that lies in the objects and traditions that have shaped their personal and shared landscape. *Mancha* vividly conjures up the impressions of young woman as she arrives in Flekke, a small Norwegian village, to teach Spanish. The village is populated by a kaleidoscopic range of inhabitants whom the teacher grows to understand as she interacts with them day by day. The lightness of touch, mixing humour and insight into cultural diversity, told through a distinctive female voice, made it a delight to translate.

During the long months of strict lockdown, the book rapidly gained traction with millennial readers (and their parents) on social media, with authors like Pilar Bellver and María Sánchez (Premio Fundación Princesa de Girona Artes y Letras) praising it on Twitter, then in June 2020 in an article in *El Cultural*, the best-selling author, Elvira Lindo, indicated she was reading *Dos novelitas nórdicas* during lockdown, stating 'it's written in a curious, different style, I'm really enjoying it', thereby widening critical interest and the readership. Unable to launch the book in person until restrictions relaxed, the publisher organised an outdoor book signing event in Flecha's hometown of León in mid-July and on 4 September she presented the book with the aforementioned veterinarian and writer María Sánchez and multidisciplinary artist Andrea Galaxina in an enchantingly safe rural setting, the grounds of the Fundación Cereales Antonino y Cinia (Cereales del Condado), with a limited number of

tickets and socially distanced seating. However, it has not been possible to organise a launch event in Madrid, where the author lives, and it is possible that this celebratory moment of visibility, like so many others in the pandemic, has passed.

Flecha joins a burgeoning group of young Spanish women writers now appearing in translation and whose work she admires, such as Irene Solà, Alba Flores Robla, María Sánchez, Alicia Kopf and Berta García Faet and follows in the steps of more established authors like Cristina Sánchez-Andrade, Mercedes Cebrián and Angélica Liddell.

As a silver lining to the postponement of the Frankfurt Bookfair and building on the success of her first book, *Piso compartido (New Flat)*, her intergenerational portrait of female co-habitation in Madrid, will be published by Mr Griffin in the second quarter of 2021 and will also feature, accompanied by a translated sample, at the fair. Flecha is very aware of the international projection this could bring, stating ‘I am a translator as well as author, and nothing would delight me more than having my books translated into other languages. Commenting on the impact of the pandemic on her work she states ‘I am very lucky because, at least so far, my work as a literary translator has only been affected by the loss of social life, which used to make working from home a lot easier. Without the social factor, my job feels lonelier than ever and harder to do, since I don’t rest as much or as effectively as I used to.’ She is also quick to point out that Associations for Spanish literary translators such as ACE traductores, with a 68% female membership, act a buffer against this homeworking solitude.

In a description that can easily be applied to the translation process and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, María Zambrano (1987, 31) stated that writing is a way of ‘defending the solitude you find yourself in; it is an action that springs from effective isolation,’ she then adds a crucial layer by recasting the adjective, ‘but from a *communicable* isolation, in which, precisely because of the remoteness of all concrete things we can discover the relations between them.’ Through this paper for this workshop, my hope is that we too can communicate from our respective isolations and explore the relations between our translating experiences under COVID-19.

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