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Translating a linear language into three dimensions

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Translating from a linear language into a three-dimensional one involves processes of linguistic and cultural adaptation to find semiological, syntactic and prosodic equivalents. In poetry, translation into French Sign Language requires the translator to engage in a re-creation in a visual grammatical space. This transduction of the audible world into the visual becomes all the more complex when it concerns oral poetry.

In Flora Aurima Devatine's work the place given to visual perception guides the translation towards a shared culture. The author, attentive to the "music of the stars", offers us the possibility to highlight a "Deaf view" of the world; indeed, her poetry gives us fundamental insight into the situation of the Deaf community. Three poems will serve to illustrate our approach to translation in this context: "Address", "Solitude" and "The Petrel".

In the poem "Address", the "internal music" provides a key to the process of translating into French Sign Language, by enabling us to recreate the underlying meaning of the terms chosen by the author and so guiding us in our own silent selection among our self-mooted options. Defining music as rhythm, which is not only in sound but also and especially vibratory or kinaesthetic, invites us into a cognitive or psychological space in relation to time and our memory. The image chosen by the poet - "weaving the human mat" - is typical of the method of French Sign Language, using personification as a stylistic device. The beauty expressed in words can be given an equivalent in the language of signs. We find ourselves as humans in a visualised space, a space of signing, in which we can all bind together to form a mat. The grammar of French Sign Language sets the "scene" in which the "actors" will take their place and perform their relationships, actions and emotions.

According to Danica Seleskovitch² and her Interpretive Theory of Translation (ITT), the fundamental feature of translation consists in conveying meaning. In translating poetry, the aim is to find equivalents, both semantic and formal. This may seem paradoxical, as we are dealing with radically different forms - orality and gesturality. Flora Aurima Devatine's style invites us humbly to do just that, however. Her ability to slip poetic effects into everyday language is akin to the construction of Sign Languages (SL).

The poem "Solitude" beckons us to enter a state of contemplative meditation. The Sign Language translator expresses meaning visually in a "telling through showing" approach

¹ Marie Lamothe translated ten poems by Flora Aurima Devatine into French Sign Language for the *Voix Vives* Poetry Festival in 2018.

² *Interpréter pour traduire*, Danica Seleskovitch, in collaboration with Marianne Lederer, Paris, Didier Érudition, 4th edition, 2001 [1984].

developed as an analytical theory for French Sign Language by the linguist Christian Cuxac³. In this approach, every piece of the setting is represented as a scenic element. Sign Language is applied like paint to a canvas, allowing one to see the picture and project oneself into it. The interpreter engaged in simultaneous interpreting, borne by the author's reading aloud, finds a meaningful prosody beyond the text. We experience the inner sounds coming from the lapping and foaming of the waves, and this gentleness guides us to our perceptible sensations of smells, colours, etc., without any need to name them. Author, translator and public all share in the emotion.

Translating poetry has required me to engage in a real effort in listening to my own emotions, freed of the deontological fetters of conference interpreting. For over a decade I had been involved in translating the *Voix Vives* poetry festival with our team of professionals from the Des'L cooperative in Montpellier. The experience with Flora Aurima Devatine has been quite particular, however, both breezy and powerful. Her very strong personal connection to the visual world becomes accessible to the wider world. Sign Language opens up possible paths to the universality of languages, and in translating her poetry I found myself sharing a common view of humanity. Her written language, deeply inspired by a traditional oral culture, is itself close in nature to a Sign Language.

The most striking poem in this very new experience is without doubt "The Petrel". In 2018, the festival organisers, in close collaboration with Brigitte Baumié and her association *Arts résonances*, extended a second invitation to a deaf poet creating work in the genre of Visual Vernacular. VV is idiomatic to Sign Languages internationally, thanks to the talents first of Simon Attia and later of Erwan Cifra. Translating VV, a very distinctive form, into French is a complex and challenging exercise requiring a search for equivalents between the visual world and the world of sound. Through the magic of poetry, however, together with the encounters it enables, "The Petrel" came to life in Sign Language, and the result of this process is close to Visual Vernacular.

The poem's use of the first person enabled me to develop my translation as a kind of "personal transfer" (C. Cuxac's theory)⁴. "I" become a petrel. Each and every movement is reproduced by a body transformed and yet still immersed in language. We might imagine ourselves to be entering into the world of mime or dance, but it is in fact nothing of the sort, as no movement occurs outside of the frame. Sign Language respects specific rules of syntactical construction in the aim of producing signs within a defined space. Indeed, the great strength of this language lies in its ability to introduce a spatial component without having to move in space. The petrel is able to travel kilometres across different landscapes through changes to one's facial expression, gaze, rhythm and range of gestures.⁵

³ Christian Cuxac, *Fonctions et structures de l'iconicité des langues des signes*, doctoral thesis, University René-Descartes - Paris V, 1996; and *La langue des signes française (LSF); les voies de l'iconicité, faits de langues*, 15/16, Paris, Ophrys, 2000.

⁴ Christian Cuxac, *La langue des signes française, op.cit.*

⁵ The term "personal transfer" is to be understood, broadly speaking, in Sign Language as being in contradistinction to that of "situational transfer". It concerns a grammatical analysis of (sign) language proposed by the French linguist Christian Cuxac, and is thus very different from the meaning of "transfer" used in psychology. In poetic translation, we talk about "translating" when it involves making a transposition from one language to another, and "interpreting" when it involves performing these signs on stage. This is an embodying of the poem. In French, the

This poem is constructed in a way that allows the Sign Language translation to shift perspective as we follow the path of the petrel's flight. The bird steers us towards the horizon, down to the deep sea, up to the clouds or cliff top. At each stage its viewpoint evolves between shot and reverse shot in one continuous scene, a film technique which is also used in the creation of VV.

Another linguistic feature similar to VV is the use of distinct verbs for each place that we observe or approach. The engagement of the body is modulated by this gradation of the lexical field of the flight. The marked intensity of the lexical item is revealed by the range and rhythm of the signs selected. These linguistic factors regain their full original meaning as expressed in poetry like that of Flora Aurima Devatine.

The intimate relation between body and language is another feature found in this poet's work. Her insights intersect unconsciously with the perceptions of another people, as she speaks to all peoples. Cultures discover their similarities by respecting their singularities. They come together to share their emotions and their thoughts. Flora Aurima Devatine reveals the essence of her poems through her style. She shows the force of a language free of preconceptions. She invites us into a bilingual world of writing, to an encounter with others and their culture.

Following this experience, I would now like to extend my research to find equivalents for the glossary in Tahitian, to move towards a translation into Tahitian Sign Language. Bringing together sign languages and oral languages will enrich my techniques of poetic translation. Translation draws on different forms of expression about the one and the same world, and the diversity of cultures enables us to have a better understanding of the essence of these forms of expression.

Translating contemporary poetry is a real commitment to the recognition and spread of so-called minority languages. Once we denounce the hierarchical stratification of languages, each can express its literary force in connection with its culture. As a reader-translator working on texts by Flora Aurima Devatine, I am comforted in the knowledge that while every language is different, all languages provide intellectual nourishment by calling on our emotions and engaging our perceptions of sound and sight. The one complements the other and feeds into it. The body rediscovers its roots in thought.

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word *interpréter* can refer to the act of translating but it can also refer to the act of performing on stage. [Translator's note: In an article published in English, Christian Cuzac and his co-author Marie-Anne Sallandre call this a "Highly Iconic Structure". Marie-Anne Sallandre and Christian Cuzac, "Iconicity in Sign Language: A Theoretical and Methodological Point of View", Paper presented for the "International Gesture Workshop: Gesture and Sign Languages in Human-Computer Interaction", London, 18-20 April 2001. See Revised Papers, p.2. [10.1007/3-540-47873-6_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-47873-6_18)].