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**Language and Characterization in Mercè
Rodoreda's *La Plaça del Diamant*
*Towards a Third Translation into English***

HELENA MIGUÉLEZ CARBALLEIRA
The University of Edinburgh, UK

Abstract. In Mercè Rodoreda's widely acclaimed, first-person narrative La Plaça del Diamant (1962), language provides the main sociocultural frame and functions as the primary means of characterization of the female narrator. Natàlia's account in her own terms of life before, during and after the Spanish Civil War is not only permeated with references to a highly specific historical, cultural and spatial setting and to her outward struggle for survival; her speech also reveals her inner struggle towards self-expression as an unquestioning woman, trying to uncoil verbally the unfathomable experiences of fear, loss and love. This interpretation, which is largely supported by the increasing number of critical studies of Rodoreda's work, has arguably not been adequately relayed in the two English translations of the novel. This paper examines the various sites of tension among original, translations and criticism, focusing on the narration's oral resonance, cultural setting and gendered language. An argument is presented for a third translation into English where the narrator's language may better reveal her nature and situation.

Translations, it has been said, are "one of the primary means ... by which cultures travel" (Dingwaney 1995:6). The work of Mercè Rodoreda, so intrinsically linked to Catalan culture and customs, has been translated into numerous languages, both within Spain and outside the country, thus making it accessible to a wide readership. *La Plaça de Diamant*, her most representative novel, is now available in Spanish (1965), Basque (1994) and Galician (1995), as well as in a wide array of languages including French (1971), Czech (1973), Japanese (1974), Russian (1981), German (1987), Portuguese (1988), Italian (1990), Chinese (1991) and Lithuanian (2002). The case of the translations into English is a curious one, for there are two translations available with two significantly different titles, published in the span of fourteen years. The translation by Eda O'Shiel was published in 1967, only five years after the work appeared in Catalan, and two years after its first translation into Spanish. The translation by David Rosenthal came

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out in 1981, echoing the increasing academic interest in Rodoreda in the United States. Presumably working with the intent of creating a greater impact in English than that achieved by the previous translation, Rosenthal relaxed the tone and register of O'Shiel's work, which was perceived as "stiff and outdated" (Andreu-Besó 1999:149).

The only insightful analysis of the two translations of *La Plaça del Diamant* published to date, and the first to approach Rodoreda's highly idiomatic and culture-specific discourse from the point of view of the major challenge it poses for translation, is in fact Andreu-Besó's article (*ibid.*). However, his study remains rather summary in the way it addresses issues such as the different choice of titles in both translations, or their more or less consistent use of paratext. More importantly, there is no mention of Natàlia's speech as overtly gender-marked nor of the ways this central feature has indeed been observed or overlooked in the English translations.

In the present article, by contrast, I will focus on the function of speech as a fundamental device for the characterization of Natàlia as a Catalan, working-class woman, in an attempt to trace the discursive peculiarities of a class to which Rodoreda continuously endeavoured to give a voice. For many critics, Rodoreda's crucial achievement in *La Plaça del Diamant* was precisely that she managed to make this marginalized group speak, "that she was able to create a historical subject that had until then remained silent" (Martí-Olivella 1999:224). Because this remains a pivotal aim in the original work, I suggest a closer examination of the different treatments of Natàlia's speech in the two English translations, and more importantly, of the consequences they have for the English-language reader's understanding of her nature and situation.

As will hopefully become clear in the course of this paper, the translators of Rodoreda into English have used a number of strategies that observe the above central feature to a greater or lesser extent. What follows is thus to be understood as an analysis of these strategies and their effects, with a view to elucidating the significant disconnection between ST, translations and those increasingly established critical interpretations of Rodoreda's work.

I will start by looking at the clash between the widespread interpretation of *La Plaça del Diamant* as a written oral exposition of Natàlia's life by herself, and the various strategies used by the translators in their attempt to re-write this highly idiomatic text. An analysis will be offered of the most frequent colloquial speech markers in the novel and of how both translations are often at odds with the generally accepted categorization of Natàlia's discourse and 'scriptura parlada' (Arnau 1979:23). I will argue that language in *La Plaça del Diamant* is Natàlia's only means of uncoiling verbally what has been her monumental strife towards survival. Natàlia's wavery, hesitant, and in many instances elementary speech is therefore of crucial importance for the reader's appraisal of her account as coming from a woman who is

only beginning to understand.

I will then move on to examine the various interpretations of Natàlia's story and argue that they are deeply influenced by the historical period in which she lived, but also by the cultural setting and the space within which her actions are set, namely the *Barri de Gràcia* in Barcelona. For instance, Carme Arnau's suggestion that there is a traceable link between Natàlia's evolution in the novel and her changing perception of the city streets, squares and neighbourhoods finds no representation in David Rosenthal's translation, where specific names of streets, parks and other areas of the city are frequently suppressed.

My analysis will finally focus on what could be viewed as a brief socio-linguistic approach to Natàlia's speech as pre-eminently gendered and on the ways this has been perceived or downplayed by the English translations. The novel has been consistently approached as a woman-centred narration of immense value from the feminist point of view. Natàlia's story is, to put it in Frances Wyers' words, a woman's "long lament", a tale of the "uncommunicability imposed by herself in accord with a social world and a sexual role" (Wyers 1983:301). The thrust of this section is to further this view to the extent of arguing that what the character managed to articulate and the way she articulated it are intrinsically bound to the ways women have been perceived to communicate in a great many studies about language and gender. My analysis is perforce limited, inasmuch as this topic constitutes only a section within this article. The examples I provide are, as in the rest of the sections, only a few amongst the many I have encountered. My intention at this point is to try to demonstrate that Natàlia's language is consistently gender-marked, that her speech is replete with what has been described elsewhere as female speech markers, and that this is a quintessential feature of the novel (and of much of Rodoreda's literary production) that should be thoughtfully relayed in any translation of the work. David Rosenthal's translation is, as I will try to show, elusive of this fact.

In the last section, I will attempt to address the need for a third English translation of *La Plaça del Diamant* by re-examining the strategies used by both translators. In short, while Rosenthal's *The Time of the Doves* tends to neutralize the original discourse's most distinctive features of cultural specificity and gendered language, Eda O'Shiel's *The Pigeon Girl* presents mainly a problem of tone: her lexical choices often raise the original text above its distinctly informal register, simultaneously raising the character's narrative position above that of an educationally naïve woman.

What I will ultimately try to show is that the two existing English translations of *La Plaça del Diamant* suffer from serious inconsistencies and howlers that significantly distort the novel's widely acknowledged original characteristics, namely: the oral resonances of Natàlia's discourse, its highly culture-specific content and its markedly gendered nature. The significant

conflict between original and translations becomes all the more evident when the latter are examined in the light of more recent critical analyses of Rodoreda's work. A third translation, I will argue, is now needed in order to respond to the relevant advances made in Rodoredian criticism since David Rosenthal's translation was published in 1981.

1. Language and maturation: Natàlia as a narrator

La Plaça del Diamant reads as the spoken account by a woman of her life through both day-to-day and extraordinary adversity. Natàlia, nicknamed Colometa in the first chapter by her husband-to-be, relates to an unknown addressee the period of her life that spans from the evening she meets her future husband Quimet in Plaça del Diamant (a small square in Barcelona's *Barri de Gràcia*, famous for the festivities held there), to her life as a mature woman with her second husband, Antoni, after the Spanish Civil war has ended. Her perception of the conflict, and more generally of her life as a married woman and a mother living through it, is articulated solely through her speech, in a way that reveals a particular, but extremely identifiable perspective: that of a Catalan, working-class woman. Mercè Rodoreda's skilled ear for speech patterns and testimonial narrative skills are put to work in this novel, which Gabriel García Márquez described as "the most beautiful novel published in Spain since the Civil War" (in Rosenthal 1984:6).

Natàlia's speech is, therefore, our only guide to the events and the people that fill the novel. As Carme Arnau wrote in her comprehensive study of Rodoreda's opus (which remains the most extensive study of Rodoreda published by a single author): "En realitat, el parlar ho resumeix i ho compendeix tot" ('In fact, speech summarises and frames everything'; Arnau 1979:132). Natàlia's entire milieu (the city of Barcelona at the time, the popular mores, conventions, festivities, and more specifically her private spaces and her relation to other central and peripheral characters) comes to us through the prism of her speech. Moreover, her speech is our only guide not only to the physical environment, but also to herself. What she says and how she says it stands as the only clue the reader has to the overall understanding of her universe and psyche. And thus, if this character-narrator has been described by critics as a prototype of guilelessness or endurance, it is only in her speech that we can find evidence of this. Again, the words of Carme Arnau (1979:120) highlight this:

El personatge central o no hi és mai descrit o sols d'una forma indirecta. Però en canvi, sabem més que si hi fos minuciosament retratat. Tot això és expressat a través del seu parlar, amb el poder d'una paraula.

[The main character is either not described at all or described indirectly. However, we know her thoroughly, just as if she had been



characterized in detail. Everything is expressed through her speech, with the power of her words.]

Natàlia's speech remains trapped between two worlds. On the one hand, there are the outer environment and events, orchestrated by men, which she cannot wholly grasp or attempt to change. On the other, there is her inner self which she will eventually understand by the end of the novel, after a long journey towards self-knowledge and maturation, only made possible "through the dialogical process of narrating" (Vosburg 1999:63). Her speech thus lies somewhere in between these two communicative voids, these two worlds she cannot coherently articulate by means of words – though she continues to try, giving rise to a number of passages where language escapes her and, as Maryellen Bieder notes, "evaporates in the very moment it takes place" (in McNerney 1999:89). Her speech becomes patchy and labyrinthine when trying to reproduce other characters' words or, more importantly, when she endeavours to encapsulate her inner world verbally.

Thus, her language remains mostly within the domain of what she can apprehend, that is, the detailed depiction of domestic interiors and objects, the description of her habits and work, the city of Barcelona and its festivities, its people. All this in a register that has been felicitously termed by critics as "escriptura parlada" ('spoken writing'; Arnau 1979) on the one hand, and "lenguaje de autodescubrimiento" ('language of self-discovery'; Martínez-Rodríguez 1988) on the other. Below I discuss the various implications of these features and the difficulties they have posed in the context of translation.

1.1 Translating 'escriptura parlada'

Having been precluded from communicating in any influential way by most people around her (her own parents, her first husband, who will exert a continuous alienating pressure on her), Natàlia is a woman who feels uneasy with the very act of speaking. Instances that indicate her many modes of (self-imposed) silence are frequent in the novel, especially when she is surrounded by men (usually her husband and his friends). It is normally the case in these situations that none of the participants expects her to pronounce on any issue. However, there are parallel indicators of her speech thriving when she is among a limited number of women, in the shape of sporadic conversations where her contribution is somehow acknowledged. This is the only mode of speech Natàlia knows, that is, the conversational mode.

The characteristics of this conversational, unmediated speech as a discursive device in the novel are rather predictable: there is an extensive use of idioms and colloquialisms, interjections and onomatopoeias. This yields a constant, highly idiomatic, non-straightforward use of language that

necessitates an in-depth linguistic knowledge on the part of the translator. Translating *La Plaça del Diamant* is extremely challenging and problematic in this respect, as a closer reading of its translations into English may reveal. Its degree of idiomaticity may result in sheer obscurity for a non-native speaker of Catalan, an obstacle that has been overcome in different ways by the British and American translators, Eda O'Shiel (EO) and David Rosenthal (DR) respectively. A few examples may help to illustrate this.

In the following excerpt, Quimet (the husband) is making use of his wiles to keep Natàlia intrigued and subjected. His strategy is habitually to mention an imaginary ex-girlfriend he had dumped for Natàlia, simply to trouble her mind:

Va tornar a comparèixer, més tranquil que una soca d'arbre, i la primera cosa que em va dir, amb les mans a les butxaques, va ser, **i la pobra Maria a passeig per tu...** (p. 362)

EO: he turned up, as cool as cucumber, and the first thing he said with his hands in his pockets, was, and poor María dropped for you! (p. 18)

DR: "Quimet turned up, cool as a cucumber, and the first thing he said, with his hands in his pockets, was "Come on, poor María, let's take a walk" (p. 25)

The colloquial expression *a passeig* is an abbreviated form of *engegar a passeig*, literally "to send someone for a walk", used with the meaning of "to tell someone to get lost". The British translation partly captures this meaning but fails to convey the colloquial tone of the construction; the American translation is simply erroneous.

Likewise, the following extract is not adequately translated in either of the English translations:

El pit amb llet se'm va obrir. La llet no volia anar-se'n. Jo sempre havia sentit a dir que la llet és molt senyora, però mai no hauria pensat que ho fos tant... (p. 397)

EO: The breast with the milk suddenly opened on me. I couldn't stop the milk. I had always heard that to have milk was very lady-like, but I never knew it was anything like that ... (p. 60)

DR: Milk started dripping from one of my breasts. It was hard to get it out. I'd always heard people say how mother's milk is very lady-like, but I never realized how much ... (p. 63)

The noun *senyor/senyora* (sir/lady) has an idiomatic meaning when used as an adjective describing inanimate objects. Generally, it means *stubborn* or *wayward*, and it is used to indicate that the object seems to have a mind of its own. The literal translation *ladylike*, which appears in both translations,

is wrong and results in a nonsensical rendering of the original.

When we turn to colloquial patterns, that is, those syntactical structures typical of spoken language and featuring heavily in Natàlia's discourse, we come across a similar problem. In the process of narrating her recollections of past times, Natàlia makes extensive use of expressive words and constructions such as *vinga + infinitive* or *tots a + infinitive*, which significantly affect the tone and the word order of her sentences. This is, in fact, a central trait of her discourse and a fundamental contribution to the development of her *escriptura parlada* as it has been defined. The whole text is interspersed with constructions such as the following:

Vam dinar molt bé i en havent dinat van fer música amb discos i **tots a ballar**. (p. 377)

EO: We had a grand dinner and when we were finished they put on records and off with us all to dance. (p. 35)

DR: The meal was delicious, and when we'd finished they put on some records and everyone danced. (p. 41)

Amb l'Antoni adormit o plorant per terra, **vinga pintar**. (p. 401)

EO: With Antoni asleep or crying on the ground, off with me to paint. (p. 63)

DR: So I painted while Antoni slept or lay on the roof and cried. (p. 68)

The constructions highlighted are instances of highly colloquial structures in Catalan. They are practically devoid of any semantic load, though it is possible to argue that they all attach a sense of drive, persistence or continuity to the actions they modify. They are, however, an unequivocal sign of spoken language (they reflect the typically oral use of syntactical ellipsis, characterized in speech by a particular intonational pattern) and, as pointed out above, they permeate the whole of Natàlia's narration. These patterns are of paramount importance for the development of a characterization technique some scholars have named *ingenuismo* or *literary primitivism*, which Elizabeth Scarlett has defined as follows (in relation to Rodoreda's most recurrent choice of female characters):

For protagonists she deliberately chooses women low on the socio-economic scale whose lives are *not concerned with the written word* (their real-life counterparts often could not read or write). Her writing consequently effects an almost maternal rescue of her novelistic creations. (1994:101; my emphasis)

There is an observable tendency in the translation by Eda O'Shiel to attempt to capture this type of structure. The English *off with us all to dance* or *off*



with me to paint testify to the translator's endeavour to reproduce the original colloquial register and, indeed, the protagonist's inability to shift to a more formal language. David Rosenthal's translation above shows a tendency to adopt a more neutral register, where a large number of the original spoken-register indicators are ignored.

1.2 Writing toward self-knowledge

The pattern underlying Natàlia's process of maturation, from self-denial in her youth to the glimpse of an enthusiastic perspective she experiences as a grown-up woman, is made visible in her language. The whole novel seems to be the narrator's attempt to disentangle the continuous flow of isolated emotions and past events by means of language, her language, which, as has been said, "dismantles a traditional concept of linearity" (Carbonell 1994:28).

Inaccuracy and convoluted syntax, lack of punctuation (where it would be necessary), recursive use of the preposition *de* (of) and the conjunction *i* (and), repetitions and parallelisms are all crucial features for understanding Natàlia as a silenced, dominated character who eventually gains access to action through dialogical introspection. The following example evidences the translators' treatment of the original significant repetitive patterns:

"Vaig abaixar el cap perquè no sabia què fer ni què dir, i vaig pensar que havia d'apilotar la tristesa, fer-la petita de pressa, que no em volti, que no estigui ni un minut escampada per les venes i al voltant. Fer-ne una pilota, una bala, un perdigó. Empassar-la" (p. 389)

EO: "I bent my head because I didn't know what to do or what to say, and I thought that I had to make a little ball of the sadness, and make it small as quickly as I could, and not let it slip from me, nor let it escape for a moment through my veins to the rest of me. Make a little ball of it, a little bullet, a little bit of grapeshot. And swallow it" (p. 50)

DR: "I lowered my eyes because I didn't know what to say or do, and I felt like I had to roll the sadness into a ball, a bullet, a bit of grapeshot. Swallow it" (p. 57)

In Rosenthal's translation, Natàlia's speech is manifestly simplified, re-ordered, better structured. Most repetitions, deliberate parallelisms and crucial digressions are suppressed in an attempt to make her discourse linear. This has a double effect: at a superficial level, the poetic overtones so clearly present in the original are evened out in favour of a smoother, more straight-forward discourse. See, for instance, the following example:

"I alçava el braç enlaire i obria la mà i tots els granets queien com una pluja i en tornava a agafar i després m'olorava la mà i olorava l'olor de tot" (p. 505)



EO: “and I’d raise my arm in the air and open my hand and all the grains would fall like a shower of rain and then I’d do it again and then I’d smell my hand and smell the smells all around” (p. 184)

DR: “and raise my hand and open it and all the kernels would rain down and I’d pick another handful and afterwards I’d smell my hand and sniff all around” (p. 178)

David Rosenthal significantly reduces the above passage, by making use of anaphoric elements in order to avoid repetition (*raise my hand and open it*) and by widening the range of vocabulary used in the original (*smell-sniff*). At the level of characterization, these deliberate changes exert a more damaging effect. Natàlia reads as a character in command of language, even eloquent throughout, which symbolically obliterates the above-mentioned process of maturation. This is not the case in O’Shiel’s translation, where there is a clear attempt to preserve, even reinforce, the original patterns of repetition: *and then I’d smell my hand and smell the smells all around*)

2. Culture-specific items: Spain, Catalonia, Barcelona and Natàlia

As a story whose protagonist appears to be intrinsically linked to a whole country, a region, and more significantly to a very specific part of Barcelona itself, *La Plaça del Diamant* displays an extraordinary degree of cultural specificity. Natàlia’s life is stunted by a major historical event, the Spanish Civil War, as seen from a Catalan’s perspective. Her first husband Quimet is killed in the war, leaving her and their two children to confront extreme hardship and misery. More precisely, Natàlia’s life is strongly affected by life in Barcelona, to the extent that the city itself has been at times analyzed as a supplementary, character-like presence in the novel (Bou 1994:31-41). Let us consider the different ways in which this cultural specificity has been treated in the English translations, by looking at the way they accommodate a number of **domesticating** and **foreignizing** strategies as defined by Lawrence Venuti (1995).

The advent of postcolonial theories and the heyday of cultural studies in the nineties served as a new impulse for many humanistic disciplines, which found in these innovative approaches a fruitful and more powerful framework for their development. Academic work on translation gradually seized upon this methodology, widening out its scope and redefining its tenets, in an attempt to make translation practices both overt and resilient. This “redefinition of expectations” (Maier 1995:29) starts with the acknowledgement that translation as we commonly understand it invariably involves a translation of cultures, and that this movement between cultures will, in all likelihood, give rise to some form of *violence* on the part of the translating agent.

Natàlia's speech, which is incapable of articulating the unfamiliar, the undiscovered or the abstract, remains deeply influenced by what is culturally domestic and recognizable by the narrator. With regard to the way in which this highly culturally-specific discourse has been transposed, the two translations into English of *La Plaça del Diamant* prioritize two diametrically opposed strategies: the translation by Eda O'Shiel consistently seems to maintain the highest number of culture-specific items possible, in an attempt to preserve the source culture's particularities; it can thus be broadly classified as a foreignizing translation. The translation by David H. Rosenthal, however, seems to adopt a domesticating approach overall. The degree of cultural specificity in the original is reduced in the translation by means of a series of complementary strategies. Here are some examples.

Paratext vs. Domestication

"I que l'havia estrellat tirant amb un revòlver de vent que els reis havien dut al nen" (p. 417)

EO: "and she's smashed it with an air pistol that the Kings had brought to the child" (p. 81)

DR: "She'd shattered it with an airgun the boy had gotten for Christmas" (p. 84)

Eda O'Shiel includes a footnote for the term *Kings*, explaining that "Catalan children do not get their presents at Christmas from Santa Claus but on the Feast of Epiphany (January 6th) from the Three Wise Kings". David Rosenthal opts for substituting the term with *Christmas*, thus suppressing a Catalan (and Spanish) tradition that has been in full force until quite recently.

Paratext vs. Suppression

"I la seva mare vivia en una caseta cap als periodistes" (p. 363)

EO: "And his mother lived in a little house near the Reporters" (p. 18)

DR: "his mother lived in a little house down toward the centre of town" (p. 26)

O'Shiel includes a footnote with additional information about the place referred to in the original, *the Reporters*: "A building site in Gracia bought by the Press association for reporters' houses". David Rosenthal obliterates this reference and opts for an imprecise rendering, thus sparing his readers the details of this culture-specific reference.

Paratext vs. Explicitation (or Intra-textual Gloss)

"I per sota de la teulada els coloms es llançariem a volar pel Tibi i pels voltants" (p. 430)

EO: "And from here the pigeons would start off on their flights to the Tibidabo and the surroundings" (p. 97)



DR: “And the doves would take off from under the tiles and fly around Tibidabo Mountain and other places in the neighborhood” (p. 100)

Eda O’Shiel integrates additional information about the Tibidabo in a footnote: “Mountain behind Barcelona, so called because popular legend had it that it was here that the devil tempted Christ. Tibi Dabo – I will give you, etc...”. David Rosenthal chooses to include supplementary information in the text itself (‘Tibidabo Mountain’).

These choices shape the final translations. On the whole, Eda O’Shiel’s *The Pigeon Girl* reads as a highly localized text. There is a manifest endeavour to preserve the numerous traces of Spanish and Catalan culture, as well as Barcelona’s topography, in her translation. Her paratext goes beyond the specific explanation of a problematic cultural item, as the examples above show, to integrate further information about traditions and popular legends, thus recreating Natàlia’s environment as fully as possible. This is particularly relevant for the depiction of different ambiances and places, since their presence in the novel is so intrinsically linked to Natàlia’s evolution from her life as a normal married woman to sheer hardship and ostracism during and soon after the war. Carme Arnau was the first to point out the importance of the scenery in *La Plaça del Diamant*. In her book *Introducció a la narrativa de Mercè Rodoreda: el mite de la infantesa* (1979), she devotes whole sections to the analysis of objects, places and festivities as key points for the description of Natàlia’s universe. She concludes that the protagonist’s state of mind can be traced in her perception of the city she lives in, which becomes more and more blurred, with a concomitant increase in her tendency towards introspection (Arnau 1979:126):

Igual com els fets típics, els llocs i les situacions exactes de la ciutat es concentren a la primera part de la ficció ... A mesura que avança la història i els temps esdevenen més difícils, hi ha una progressiva pèrdua de la realitat per part del personatge principal.

[In the same way that popular festivities, places and exact situations in the city abound in the first part of the novel ..., there is a progressive loss of sense of reality on the part of the protagonist, as the story develops and times become harder]

The cultural imprecisions for which David Rosenthal often opts are therefore costly in terms of this interpretation of the story, as they serve to obscure the evolution of the protagonist’s life. His choice of cultural generalization runs counter to the reading supported by most scholars today, as outlined by Enric Bou: “The image of the city in *La Plaça del Diamant* functions as a mirror for the main character’s intricate destiny” (1994:32). When this *mirror* is not recreated in the translation, the fundamental link between Natàlia’s unfolding psyche and her perception of the streets, squares and emblematic



Barri de Gràcia ceases to apply.

A domesticating strategy in translation can also have some detrimental repercussions for the protagonist's characterization. In *La Plaça del Diamant*, Natàlia's speech is a vehicle for her personal conception of the world. Thus, the diversity of expressions, idioms, comparisons and superstitious clichés that she produces synergetically combine to give shape to her character, which has been described as a prototype of naïveté and ingenuousness. Taking this as a starting point, I would like to examine the way in which a consistently domesticating strategy in translation may damage the characterization of a narrator whose speech is so intimately embedded in (popular) culture. Let us look at the following example, where Natàlia describes the tapeworm her husband had just expelled from his body:

"No n'haviem vist mai cap: era de color de pasta de sopa sense ou i el vam guardar a dins d'un pot de confitura, de vidre, amb esperit de vi"
(p. 411)

EO: "We'd never seen one before. He was like the vermicelli you put in soup, made without eggs, and we kept him preserved in alcohol in a glass jam jar" (p. 74)

DR: "We'd never seen one. It was the color of spaghetti made without eggs and we kept it in alcohol in a jam jar" (p. 78)

The translation of *pasta de sopa* into *spaghetti* by David Rosenthal is ill-suited to the purpose of characterization and detracts from the overall coherence between the character and her environment. In fact, the term *pasta de sopa* (also *pasta alimentària*) was a generic term covering the different shapes of pasta people used to cook soups and broth with, this being by far the only culinary option with pasta at the time. These shapes did not include spaghetti, which only the upper classes could have been aware of in pre-War Spain; there is no specific entry for the word *spaghetti* in the *Enciclopedia Universal Espasa-Calpe* of 1920, nor is it mentioned under the heading for *pasta* (Vol. 42:611). The term *spaghetti* in the translation distorts Natàlia's reality and social positioning in a way that the translation by Eda O'Shiel quite plausibly avoids. Here, the term *vermicelli* is the closest rendering of the image immediately evoked by *pasta de sopa*, and the culture-specific reference to soup (the term *pasta de sopa* is, indeed, an encyclopaedic entry on its own) is not suppressed altogether. Similarly, a faulty understanding of Natàlia's character may ensue from the reading of terms such as *hydrochloric acid* for the colloquial *salfumant* (DR: p. 147), or *like I was superhuman* for *com si jo no fos una persona* (DR: p. 107), literally *as if I was not a person*. These loquacious translations into English create a sense of linguistic command on the part of the narrator which is precisely what is significantly lacking in the original.

3. Female speech patterns in *La Plaça del Diamant*: Natàlia as a woman

The search for substantial, empirical evidence of the existence of gender differences in language has been a central aim in the field of sociolinguistics for nearly three decades. More recently, feminist scholars have engaged in extensive research on sexism in language and the way language is used as an efficient means for excluding women from social agency. At the same time, there has developed a primarily empirical approach to gender differences in language, whose aim is not so much to denounce as to document and attest a hitherto unacknowledged social phenomenon. Descriptive studies in language and gender set out to investigate and describe existing patterns of speech and interaction among men and women, as well as attempt to explain the causes for their divergent use of language where this can be observed.

In Spain, the works of linguists such as Ángel García López, Ricardo Morant, Pilar García Mouton and Irene Lozano have echoed the achievements of their Anglo-American contemporaries, including Deborah Tannen and Jennifer Coates. These Spanish scholars have published pioneering studies on gender in the context of Spanish, highlighting distinctive female speech patterns in the Spanish-speaking world. These patterns (which are also observable in Catalan) feature prominently in *La Plaça del Diamant*, and rendering them into English is one of the most challenging aspects of the translator's task.

Studies on language and gender often acknowledge, as a starting point, the existence of well-entrenched stereotypes relating to the way men and women speak. For example, Pilar García Mouton discusses *estereotipos* before she goes on to analyze the speech patterns she observes among women (García Mouton 1999:59-82). These conventional ideas about women's potentially deviant use of language include the widely accepted perception that "la mujer habla demasiado, de donde se deduce que charla y que no sabe guardar secretos" (*ibid.*:60; 'women speak too much, from which it can be derived that they are prone to chatting and unable to keep secrets'). Although these perceptions are often in line with a general pattern directly observable in women's speech behaviour, what these studies set out to demonstrate is the social and cultural factors which give rise to these prejudiced perceptions, and they stress that the observable patterns ultimately have nothing to do with gender differences but are instead a consequence of processes of socialization. In other words, and as Ricardo Morant wrote in his introduction to *Gramática Femenina* (López García and Morant 1991:63):

Como no existe una correlación perfecta entre lenguaje y sexo, es necesario tener en cuenta la posible influencia de otras variables (edad, clase social, contexto ...) a la hora de justificar el uso distinto que del lenguaje hacen hombres y mujeres. ... El distinto comportamiento



lingüístico y extralingüístico de mujeres y hombres es aprendido en la sociedad y determinado por ella.

[Given that there is no one-to-one correlation between language and gender, we must take into account the possible influence exerted by other variables (age, social class, context ...) when it comes to explaining the different ways in which men and women make use of language. This distinct linguistic behaviour is acquired within society and determined by it.]

In studying female speech in *La Plaça del Diamant*, it is crucial to bear this explanation in mind. The speech markers that could arguably be classified as female are the linguistic indicators of a societal group that has been historically underrated because of its gender. In *La Plaça del Diamant*, linguistic indicators of a poor education effectively combine with well-documented female speech markers to create the most recurrent type of character in Rodoreda's works, that is, the low-class, uneducated woman.¹

A number of these patterns are structural (for example the use of diminutives); others reflect lexical and thematic choices which are thought to occur most frequently among women. Ultimately, all these patterns constitute a linguistic façade to those underlying tensions between "what any normal human being might desire and what a woman must become" (Pratt 1981:6) as well as the various social constraints undoubtedly experienced by the narrator of *La Plaça del Diamant*, and, indeed by its real author, a Catalan woman who had to spend much of her life in exile. As I will argue below, these patterns constitute a decisive contribution to the textual characterization of Natàlia and should therefore be captured in any subsequent translation of the work.

3.1 Details matter

Natàlia's eye for domestic detail is a constant in *La Plaça del Diamant*. Whenever she tries to describe the intricate features of the houses she encounters in the course of her story (her first house with Quimet, the house of the family she works for as a cleaner, the house she will finally move to with her children and her second husband Antoni), her language becomes a reflection of her many attempts to portray what matters to her accurately. This tendency, which many scholars have pointed out as a generalized trait of female expression (Ciplijauskaitė 1988:210), is traditionally discounted or rated as inferior to the "male-dominated portrayals of historical or mythological subjects" (Kramaræ 1981:17). Its importance lies, nevertheless, in that it powerfully communicates a parallel way of perceiving one's environ-

¹ For a detailed study of low social-class markers in Natàlia's speech see Ugarte (1999).



ment. As Kramarae goes on to explain, “using materials and images from their everyday lives, they [i.e. women] are consciously trying to develop a visual language that corresponds to their own experience” (*ibid.*:17).

Translating the language of detail in *La Plaça del Diamant* may pose real difficulties for various reasons. First, the kind of detail Natàlia indulges in is to a great extent culture-bound; that is, her descriptions almost always achieve a high level of precision through the use of numerous items characteristic of a very specific cultural and temporal setting. In the following excerpt, for instance, Natàlia describes the various pieces of furniture and ornamental elements in the household where she has just started to work:

“De seguida vaig veure una caixa daurada de dalt a baix, daurada i blava, amb escuts de colors tot al voltant de baix i, a la tapa, alçada enlaire, una Santa Eulàlia tota decantada, amb un lliri de Sant Antoni en una mà” (p. 419)

EO: “Straight away I noticed a chest that was gilded all over, gilded and blue with shields of every colour at the bottom edge and on the top, inclining her head, there was St. Eulalia with a lily of St. Antony in her hand” (p. 83)

DR: “The first thing I saw was a chest all gilded from top to bottom, gold and blue with colored shields all around the bottom and a Santa Eulalia on top sticking up in the air and holding a golden lily in one hand” (p. 86)

We see that Natàlia’s detailed description of the most trivial objects in the house cannot always be accurately rendered without resorting to a number of supplementary translational strategies. Eda O’Shiel, for instance, opts for a literal rendering of the religious objects (*St. Eulalia* and *lily of St. Antony*) but includes a footnote explaining that the first is “a Roman Martyr, ancient patron of Barcelona”. David Rosenthal, on the other hand, leaves the first item untranslated (*Santa Eulalia*) and resorts to a communicative paraphrase in the case of *lliri de Sant Antoni*, which he translates as *golden lily* (the term *lliri de Sant Antoni* actually refers to a certain type of white lily). As seems to be the case in general in his translation, his aim appears to be to ensure accessibility for the target readership, if necessary at the risk of losing the cultural marks of the original. This hypothesis, however, does not account for his leaving the term *Santa Eulalia* unchanged (except for the removal of the written accent)

A further difficulty in translating Natàlia’s detailed accounts of her surroundings is the linguistic intricacy of those very passages. In her attempt to reconstruct her visual memories as accurately as possible, she manages to introduce a great deal of information by means of repeatedly resorting to modification and subordination. Moreover, it is important to note the deliberate vagueness of these types of construction. Natàlia endeavours to capture



in her discourse every single feature of the images she mentally visualizes, but in that process, it becomes increasingly apparent that she does not possess the vocabulary for all the elements she wants to include in her descriptions. Whenever this happens, Natàlia's only alternative is to paraphrase. And these circumlocutions or roundabout expressions, because they say so much about the character's personal attempt to stretch language so that it covers all facets of female experience and perception, have to be handled carefully in translation. The following two examples illustrate the conflicting translational strategies that can be observed in the two texts with respect to this issue.

"M'havia posat el vestit de color de fusta de rosa" (p. 357)

EO: "I had put on my dress the colour of rose wood" (p. 12)

DR: "I'd put on my pink dress" (p. 19)

"El paper del menjador era un paper amb ratlletes que feien cèrcol"
(p. 367)

EO: "The wallpaper in the dining-room had a pattern of little lines going round in circles" (p. 23)

DR: "The dining-room wallpaper had thin circles on it" (p. 30)

There is an observable tendency in David Rosenthal's translation to systematically obliterate a significant amount of detail for the sake of structural clarity in English. The first example is a meaningful reference to a typically (or stereotypically) female way of perceiving and describing colours. In *Cómo hablan las mujeres*, Pilar García Mouton (1999:70) talks about this preference for extreme specificity in a number of semantic fields usually assigned to women:

Es frecuente que el léxico sufra especializaciones por campos de interés, como ocurre con el de los colores o el de las telas, que han sido tradicionalmente femeninos. Hasta hace poco se habría considerado poco masculino a un hombre que empleara en una conversación normal *azul cielo*, *verde hoja* o *rosa palo*, porque la expresión de determinados matices y sentimientos sólo estaba permitida a las mujeres, hasta el punto de que algunas palabras se especializan semánticamente por sexos.

[It is frequently the case that the lexicon undergoes a process of specialization of its semantic fields – colours or fabrics for instance – which have been traditionally of interest to women. Until recently, it would have been considered *not very manly* for a male to use the terms *beige*, *aquamarine* or *ecru* in a normal conversation, because the expression of certain nuances and sentiments was only allowed for women, to the extent that the use of some words is semantically specific to one sex.]

By translating *color de fusta de rosa* as *pink*, the distinctiveness of Natàlia's speech as typically female is suppressed. Similarly, and as the above examples show, David Rosenthal significantly simplifies the original by translating whole modifying clauses (*que feien cèrcol, fent rodona*, literally *that made up rings, that made up a rim*) into a semantically equivalent noun (*circle*). The effect, however, is far from the one intended in the original, as the narrator's meaningful tendency to paraphrase is eliminated. One has the impression that David Rosenthal translates into exact terms what Natàlia struggled to express, rather than portray her actual struggle.

3.2 *The use of diminutives as a typically feminine communicative strategy*

In studies on gender differences in Romance languages, the use of diminutives has attracted as much attention as, for instance, women's frequent use of tag questions in English, to the extent that it is now considered a well-attested trait of female speech in those languages (including Catalan). This speech pattern has at times been explained in terms of women's historical role as child-bearers and their constant interaction with children, in whose presence diminutives are widely used. This has given rise to a certain interpretation of female speech as puerile or immature (García Mouton 1999:72).

However, the most common connotations of an extensive use of diminutive suffixes typically relate to their expressiveness. Diminutives are semantically loaded particles which, when added to nouns, adjectives, adverbs or even gerunds (as in the colloquial Spanish *corriendito*) integrate all kinds of emotional and expressive overtones which convey the speaker's attitude. It is for this reason that their use has often been associated with women, whose emotional disclosure is traditionally highlighted in the literature and in society.

The translation of diminutives into English is clearly problematic. Even though there are areas of semantic overlap between the use of a diminutive suffix in Catalan and the adjective *little* in English, the former use is far more frequent, so that a translation which attempts to achieve a straight correlation between the two is not always plausible. *La Plaça del Diamant* features an extensive use of diminutives, a trait which has been given a different degree of attention in the two English translations.

“Amb la Rita al darrera amb els bracets enlaire” (p. 438)

EO: “And Rita after him with her little arms in the air” (p. 107)

DR: “With Rita behind him with her arms raised” (p. 107)

“Un dia vaig veure unes xicres de xocolata molt boniques i en vaig comprar sis: totes blanques, gruixudetes” (p. 380)

EO: “One day I saw some lovely little chocolate cups and I bought six of them: nice and thick and white they were” (p. 38)



DR: "One day I saw some very pretty hot-chocolate cups and I bought six of them; all white" (p. 44)

The examples above illustrate the tendency in David Rosenthal's version to treat the original diminutives as largely untranslatable, and accordingly to overlook them in the target text. Although, as he may have reasoned, a literal rendering of every diminutive suffix would not have been acceptable, their outright dismissal is an equally extreme strategy which serves to obliterate another crucial element for the identification of Natàlia's speech as typically female. O'Shiel's translation, by contrast, draws on a number of supplementary strategies which reinforce this interpretation, as the original diminutives are qualitatively translated, that is, their semantic value is assessed and carried over to the target text wherever possible.

In the first example, the original *bracets* is translated as *little arms*, thus recapturing the affectionate nuances in Natàlia's speech when she remembers her daughter as a toddler. The adjective *little* is plausible here both as a reference to size and as an indicator of the speaker's attitude. The second example is extremely representative of several female speech markers functioning together. In the first instance, there is the appreciative adjective *boniques* (Sp. *bonitas*, Eng. *pretty*, *lovely*), a word perceived to be more frequently used by women. Second, we have the use of the diminutive in *gruixudetes*, which denotes, above all, the narrator's liking for the set of mugs, and again, functions as a further marker of gendered speech. Finally, the adjective *totes* which pre-modifies *blanques* and *gruixudetes* strengthens the colloquial tone of the utterance. In the light of all these markers and their connotations, O'Shiel's translation reveals an attempt to produce an equally gendered target text. In a remarkable show of audacity, she manages to reproduce all three aspects outlined above, namely: the feminine overtones in the choice of appreciative adjectives (*lovely*, *nice*), the preservation of the original's diminutive suffix by means of the plausible insertion of the adjective *little*, and the maintenance of the colloquial tone by inserting the tag *they were* at the end of the sentence. Her effective translational choices stand in sharp contrast with David Rosenthal's suppression of these crucial elements.

3.3 Euphemism as a female speech marker

For many linguists, the use of euphemisms is one of the most distinctive indicators of female speech, especially in societies that have been traditionally oppressive towards women (Coates 1993:43, Lakoff 1975:55). In Spain, the various educational strategies applied to children until very recently evolved into a system of linguistic expectations and restrictions imposed unevenly on men and women. These linguistic (and behavioural) restric-

tions manifest themselves in the form of taboos. The consequent use of euphemisms to avoid them has been reinforced mainly among women, who were invariably cautioned that *eso no lo dice una niña* [a girl can't say that].

Gender-based taboos are gradually becoming irrelevant in our modern societies, as women learn to (and, indeed, are expected to) display a more assertive and less hesitant use of language. However, since this was not the state of affairs in pre-war Spain, the character of Natàlia is understandably observed to comply with the expressive limitations set upon members of her sex at the time.

There are numerous examples of Natàlia's speech becoming ambiguous when dealing with such matters as illnesses, death, the body or sex. In recalling the time Quimet developed a tapeworm in his intestine, she says: "I aleshores va venir aquella cosa" (p. 410; 'And then that thing came'). The actual term for that phenomenon (*solitària*) is never used. The same happens when she uses "fer nit de nuvis" (p. 384; 'to do the wedding night') in order to avoid any overt reference to the sexual act.

The following is an example of the different strategies used by the translators of *La Plaça del Diamant* with respect to close rendering or explicitation of the euphemisms in the novel:

"I mentre em dedicava a la gran revolució amb els coloms va venir el que va venir, com una cosa que havia de ser molt curta" (p. 444)

EO: "And while I devoted my energies to the grand revolt against the pigeons, there took place what had to take place, and it seemed as if it would be over quickly" (p. 114)

DR: "And while I was working on the great revolution with the doves the war started and everyone thought it was going to be over quickly" (p. 113)

In the original, as in the translation by Eda O'Shiel, the word *war* is never mentioned. Although this omission may not be considered a typical instance of euphemistic use of language (compared, for example, to expressions used to avoid explicit mention of sex), it can be explained in terms of Natàlia's poor understanding, and thus, vague, inaccurate reference to an event she considers alien to her, and primarily controlled by men. In fact, this is a key element for the interpretation of the book as a woman's account of a very specific historical moment: the Spanish Civil War. By ignoring the deliberate and meaningful paraphrase in Natàlia's speech, and spelling out the term that is carefully avoided in the original, David Rosenthal's translation seems inconsistent with the widely accepted reading of *La Plaça del Diamant* as a powerfully constructed, alternative version of what was never recorded in the annals of war: the silent grief and strife of working-class women as expressed by one of them:



All references to what is traditionally understood as 'history', such as the mention of factions, figureheads, political details of war, and even the word 'war' itself, hang silently and ominously, ever-present but untouchable, over the main character's personal history. ... It is a remarkable example of a feminine approach to reality: emphasizing seemingly non-empirical reality, and stressing feelings and reactions, inner experiences and apparently insignificant changes. (Bou 1994:33)

4. Conclusion: Why a third translation?

In view of the issues examined in this study, it seems reasonable to argue that *The Pigeon Girl* by Eda O'Shiel remains a closer and more deferential rendering of the original work than Rosenthal's. The multiple facets of Rodoreda's deliberately naïve style, together with the original's marked cultural location, are captured successfully on the whole.

The major drawback in Eda O'Shiel's translation, however, is its inability at times to capture the original's markedly colloquial tone. In general, O'Shiel's translation shows a tendency towards elevated vocabulary, often at odds with the original's simplicity and informal tone. Again, this limits the reader's ability to perceive Natàlia as a working-class woman with a limited command of language, often barely articulate. In the following examples, we can see how O'Shiel's translation tends to use a higher register, not evident in the original:

"Amb un nen que els havia sortit escanyolit de tant que s'havien pogut mirar a fer-lo..." (p. 443)

EO: "And with a child who was nothing but a miserable specimen for all their efforts in producing him" (p. 113)

DR: "with a kid who'd turned out so skinny in spite of everything they did to make him strong" (p. 113)

"Va dir que em feia tots aquells obsequis en record dels tips que ens havíem fet de rascar paper junts" (p. 454)

EO: "And he said he was giving me all these presents as a souvenir of the desperate job we'd done together scraping wallpaper" (p. 120)

DR: "He said he'd brought me all those presents in memory of how fed up we'd gotten scraping wallpaper together" (p. 125)

In the first example, the original *escanyolit* finds a more felicitous translation in Rosenthal's *skinny* than in O'Shiel's *miserable specimen*, a term that Natàlia would have been highly unlikely to produce. In the second example, the original colloquial *tips* is again better captured in Rosenthal's *how fed up we'd gotten* than in O'Shiel's *desperate job* (the same applies to her choice of the word *souvenir*). All in all, there is a lack of correspondence

between stylistic registers, which may well prompt a skewed interpretation of the main character on the part of the target readership.

As for David Rosenthal's translation, what most of the examples examined clearly demonstrate is that his rewriting exercises an economics of **standardization** (Toury 1995) or **domestication** (Venuti 1995) which reduces the source text's own highly idiomatic and culture-specific colour, arguably distorting the literary quality of the work.

The standardizing solutions Rosenthal opts for can be fairly successful in contexts where it is possible to focus mainly on the translation of a story line. Ritva Leppihalme's study of the translation of Kalle Päätalo's *Koillismaa* into English supports this view. She proceeds from a similar starting point, that is, the realization that the American translator consistently effaces the regional variety used in many of the novel's dialogues. However, as the argument develops, new insights are brought to bear on the issue of targeted readership and the translator's agenda, as well as the extent to which the English translation of the Finnish novel ultimately accomplished what it had set out to achieve: to provide North-American readers of Finnish origins with an account of "a past way of life ..., the struggle for survival of their cousins in the Finnish backwoods" (Leppihalme 2000:266).

This argument, largely based on Vermeer's skopos theory (1989) and on the theoretical status of a translation's goal or predefined purpose, seems irrelevant in the case of assessing a translation of Mercè Rodoreda's *La Plaça del Diamant* in the current context of the long-standing interest in her oeuvre. Rosenthal set out to translate this work back in 1981, at a time when scholarly interest in the Catalan author among Anglo-American academics was just beginning to develop, but the situation has changed significantly since then. Readers of Rodoreda today may range from the nostalgic English-speaking reader of Catalan descent to the student of Catalan studies whose imagination is captured by the extensive critical work on the author; from the avid lay reader to the highly specialized critic conducting research on what has been defined as "the best Catalan novel of our century" (Wyers 1983:301). It is therefore of paramount importance that a fresh translation of Mercè Rodoreda's *La Plaça del Diamant* (as well as of her other works) is made available, one that would attempt to convey the various facets of the original that have been capably analyzed by scholars for nearly thirty years now, if only to avoid the potential for complete disconnection (indeed a real *desencuentro*) between the literature *about* Rodoreda and the literature *by* Rodoreda available in English today.

I have tried to demonstrate that the two existing translations of *La Plaça del Diamant* into English reveal conflicting patterns when compared with each other, with the original Catalan and with the various interpretations of the work, as detailed in the growing literature on Rodoreda's opus. Natàlia's language in *La Plaça del Diamant* functions as the main sociocultural frame



of the novel. From this point of view, it can be argued that both translations suffer from a number of weaknesses: David Rosenthal's translation fails to construct Natàlia's stereotypically female discourse as well as her unsophisticated, dithering attempts at self-expression. O'Shiel's translation attempts to reproduce these traits of the original, but suffers mainly from a problem of tone: the lexical choices in her text are somewhat *recherché*, thus failing to portray Natàlia's underprivileged education and inability to express herself.

A third translation into English of *La Plaça del Diamant* could address the weaknesses outlined in this article, and subsequently enable the English reader to engage more closely with the character of Natàlia as originally envisaged by the author. My objective in this article has been to demonstrate that effective characterization of Rodoreda's Natàlia as a poorly lettered, female historical subject is mainly achieved through her use of language, and that this feature therefore merits careful and sensitive treatment in a third translation into English.

HELENA MIGUÉLEZ CARBALLEIRA

*School of European Languages and Cultures, The University of Edinburgh,
David Hume Tower, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JX, UK. hmiguel@
yahoo.co.uk*

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