Translation is at the root of every language: A conversation with Silvana Rabinovich

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Abstract. This interview with Silvana Rabinovich, a philosopher working at the crossroads of ethics, discourse analysis, decolonial thought and political theology, presents an overview of Rabinovich's positions regarding the study of language and languages. It then proceeds to the philosophical problems of translating and observes the connections between translation and interreligious dialogue by looking at the case of Judeo-Arabic language. The conversation then moves on to explore Rabinovich's idea, drawing on Levinas, of building a heteronomous relationship with language. In its closing part, the interview presents an apt comment on how academics might contribute to the solving of social problems.

Preamble

Professor Silvana Rabinovich is a philosopher specializing in ethics, language, decolonial thought and political theology. Her work builds upon the central ideas of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Buber, and links them with the decolonial thinking put forward by scholars such as Enrique Dussel and Anibal Quijano. The main object Professor Rabinovich approaches from this point of view is discourse, especially political and religious discourses in Hebrew and Arabic. Two of her works, which already constitute a must-read for both philosophers as well as researchers on the sciences of meaning, have recently appeared in English: *Notes for a Decolonial Political Theology* (Rabinovich 2024a), published by Routledge, and *Biblical Figures in Israel's Colonial Political Theology* (Rabinovich 2022), given out by Springer. For several years now, Rabinovich has worked at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM) both as a teacher and as a researcher. Back in 2013, I had the pleasure of meeting her when I was doing an internship at the Seminar of Hermeneutics of the Institute of Philological Research of the UNAM. In December 2023, now living in Olomouc, Czech Republic, I listened to several interviews she had given to some independent news outlets in

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Mexico. In those interviews Silvana Rabinovich discussed the then recent escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, but she also talked about language, meaning, and the importance of listening and of truly addressing the Other with our words. Some months later, I contacted her to see if we could conduct an interview to discuss two things: (i) language and translation, and (ii) the role of academics in face of all the difficult and painful political situations in the world. She accepted the proposal, and we met via Zoom in early May 2024.

The present interview follows in the wake of a previous one that I conducted with Patrick Sériot (Chavez Barreto 2024), and the reader may find many connecting threads between the two texts. However, the conversation with Silvana Rabinovich had a different quality to it – both of us are native speakers of Spanish since she, as she herself puts it, was born once in Argentina and once more in Mexico, and I was born and raised in the latter country as well. Given our common language, it would have been very unnatural to conduct the interview in English, and thus I opted for translation. The following text was first transcribed from the original Spanish recording and later translated into English. This is by no means as trivial as it may seem. In fact, I must confess that my translation is more of a *tafsir* (see p. 258 below), an interpretation, rather than a proper translation. In many places, I rephrased and changed some of the Spanish formulations, and tried my best to reflect the interviewee's casual and kind way of speaking, using the resources provided by the English language (unfortunately, I also had to omit a joke that would not have been understandable for non-Mexican readers since it involved a reference to a Mexican politician in all likelihood only known in Mexico). My aim was to abide by the maxim of translating not what words say, but what words do. When necessary, I have provided comments on choosing some particular words rather than others in English and given the original Spanish words I was translating. I also substituted most of the book titles, originally mentioned in Spanish, with their original titles; when the title of a book, or an article, was originally in Spanish, I left it as it was and provided a rough translation. For older texts, I also provided a reference to an English translation when possible.

The conversation with Silvana Rabinovich

Israel Chávez (*I.C.*) To begin this conversation, I would like to ask you about your approach to language or, rather, to languages, since your research is so intimately related to language – not only because you work with discourse, or with discourses, but also because you work with *people* who speak all these different languages, and with texts that are, or were, written in different languages. And I

think you often become a kind of mediator between them, so I would like you to tell me a little bit about that: about how you approach language and languages, and how the approach you use came about...

Silvana Rabinovich (*S.R.*) Of course... Well, you know that my relationship with the Hebrew language began when I was six years old, and that it was my grandfather who taught me this language. This was so because I had to start Hebrew school and no one else in my family knew the language except him. Now, my grandfather had had to leave teaching because of his sense of humour, which was a very healthy type of humour – and it was also the sense of humour he passed on to me, a sense of humor that allows you to laugh at yourself, or laugh with a text, but never *at* a text. But despite his good sense of humour, my grandfather was unlucky, and he was expelled from some of the communities where he taught. But his vocation always remained teaching Hebrew and Yiddish. To me, he only taught Hebrew, because I did not want to learn Yiddish, and he taught me in a very ludic, playful way, ever since I was little. He would come every evening and together we would discover the roots of words (or, well, I had to discover them), and this curiosity of searching for the roots in the words and building other words on that basis, this curiosity of deciphering meanings was a game full of love, and that made me become a teacher as well.

I first studied to be a teacher of Hebrew (my mother was also a teacher, but of Spanish, and my grandfather, of Hebrew). My first degree was in teaching Hebrew, and in 1982 I spent a year in Israel, studying under great teachers, one of whom was the great poet Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000). He taught literature, and thus my relationship to the [Hebrew] language became stronger and stronger. On the other hand, after that, when I became twenty, I started studying French, which was a language that fascinated me because of the literature. So I learned it very-very well and I began to study formally to become a teacher of French too, but I did not finish those studies because I was studying philosophy at the same time, and I received my philosophy degree in 1991.

So, what happened in the end was that these two loves of mine, languages and philosophy, converged in my work. I arrived in Mexico because the scholarship I had when I was doing my Master's in Jerusalem obliged me to work in a Hebrew school, and in Mexico, at the Tarbut school (in Cuajimalpa, well, in Vista Hermosa actually), they needed a teacher of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, I went there and taught like my grandfather had done. He taught me that to be respectful is to be irreverent; if you revere, then you do not show respect. So I was there, teaching the Bible like that for eight years and creating study materials. For instance, one of the things I taught in the Bible programme concerned the Golem, this figure

that is so close to you there in the Czech Republic. The idea was to start from what the letter can do: to give life, to take life away... all this performative – and not only performative, but even more than performative – aspect of the relationship between the Kabbala and language... I would teach that through Scholem[2] and through Borges' poem,[3] for instance. All this to introduce the four versicles that compose the prayer *schma Israel*, which is the basis of Jewish monotheism and which you can find, for instance, in the *mezuzah* (this parchment that is hanged on doors, and on the phylacteries that the religious people wear to pray).

So, I did that and... the whole programme I designed was really related to Prague, you know. For instance, I had to teach the Book of Job, and in my opinion, the programme, as I found it, was very poorly designed, because they would only include the first and the last chapters. To me, this seemed like a very rigid frame into which they had crammed a text of critical importance so they could fit it into the Bible course, even if it was for pedagogical reasons. So, what I did to introduce them to the Book of Job was to make them read Kafka's *Der Process* (*The Trial*), but these were kids in the last year of high school, so not all of them would read, you know. Well, so I also made them watch Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors,* Orson Wells' version of *The Trial*, and later, with all that as a background, they would come to read the Book of Job. So Prague was very present in my Bible course for the last-year students, and it had very good results because they could learn in a very humane way and within a universal context.

Such a way of teaching, for instance, would certainly avoid the chauvinism into which some readings of the Bible have fallen. And well, that is my relationship with the Hebrew language. Now in 1993 I arrived in Mexico with this work permit, but what I really wanted was to study at the UNAM, a university that I admired a lot, and I could enroll into it in the second year after my arrival. Dussel[4] supervised my thesis. It was a thesis about Levinas,[5] which was what I wanted to do. And then I began to take Levinas to the Hebrew school where I was teaching. At the same time, Dussel provided me with a critical approach, an approach that I would easily call 'decolonial', and which at that time, let's say... back then I was curious, I did not know that approach, and I did not know Dussel either, he was a very kind man, but I did not know him then. I got to know him in his seminars and over the years his teachings became bigger, they started to encompass more and more in a very remarkable way.

2   Gershom Scholem (1897–1982); especially through Scholem 1960.
3   Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986). The poem being referred is "El Golem", originally published in the book *El otro, el mismo* in 1958.
4   Enrique Dussel (1934–2023).
5   Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995).

Everything I went on doing afterwards, and especially after I had translated Martin Buber's political writings... and this was a turning point for me: it is a book called *Una tierra para dos pueblos* compiled by Paul Mendes-Flohr.[6] After reading that book, which contained all the critiques of Buber, from 1918 to 1965, to the Zionist movement, while he was part of it, I understood that... well, that now I had to express myself in a different way, and it was at this point that I began to orient myself more openly towards the critique that before I had only done within the Jewish community which had never given me any echo. It was then when the initiative "Adopt a dead child"[7] began. What I want to say – because that was your question – is that it is in my work where all these things converge.

First, my relationship with the Hebrew language, as well as with the French language, that taught me so much. I approached German only very briefly when I was in Argentina over thirty years ago, always with the same curiosity of finding words in words... it was always that curiosity that drove me, it was always this *Zahori* thing, this Kabbalist thing of searching for words within words. And it was something that eventually influenced my way of doing philosophy a lot ... and I never did philosophy of language, but it has everything to do with what I do. In Rosario, Argentina, where I studied philosophy, we had a "common core" first year, and in that first year there was a course that became extremely relevant for me, taught by the people from Literature. The course was called "Text Analysis". There, I got to read Bakhtin,[8] I got to read Benveniste,[9] and they were key for me. Benveniste accompanied me a lot, not only the *Problèmes de linguistique générale*[10] but also his *Le vocabulaire des institutions Indoeuropéennes*.[11] And of course, de Saussure[12] was important to get started.

Then, in philosophy, I read Wittgenstein,[13] and I liked it; all the work done by the second Wittgenstein. Yet I never went into philosophy of language; instead, I continued playing with language, and more and more from this heteronomous ethics that I went on radicalizing and politicizing thanks to the door that Dussel had opened for me. So, already since several years ago, I've been trying in my

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6   In English, *A Land of Two Peoples* (Buber 1983), for the Spanish translation see Buber 2009.
7   Rabinovich, Silvana 2009. Porque fuerte como la muerte es el amor ('Because love is as strong as death'). Presentation at the *Jornada por la paz* organized by the Centro de Estudios sobre la Paz y la Memoria Pier Paolo Pasolini (February 3rd, 2009). Available online at https://www.academia.edu/3788466/_Porque_fuerte_como_la_muerte_es_el_amor_.
8   Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975).
9   Émile Benveniste (1902–1976).
10   See Benveniste 1966; 1974.
11   See Benveniste 1969.
12   Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913).
13   Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951).

research projects to turn it around in order to understand heteronomy as a justice *of* the other, which is not justice *for* the other. Thus, it drifts away from altruism, which was something Levinas was interested in (to critically radicalize altruism from heteronomy), but which (by conceiving it as a justice *of* the other) becomes deeply *politicized* because what it does is to question all the things we consider as just, it questions the whole order.

It is there where the two things converge, my relationship with the Hebrew language and with the heteronomous ethic, and they converge in a very... radical way. You see, I studied at the elementary school J. N. Bialik, and they officially taught Hebrew; I later obtained a degree as teacher of that Hebrew. Evidently, as you can see, I was taught within a Zionist perspective, a perspective that celebrated the secularization of Hebrew, and... well, as years went by, I saw how serious that was. I saw that that would turn into something very dangerous, something we now see in its last phase, the most destructive phase of all. They are attacking Rafah right now (so we can have an idea). And they do it in the name of a God that does not order to kill... or that does it in very specific places, like in the context of a holy war against *Amalek*, but there is no right to call *Amalek* those who are not, right?... because God orders to kill all the Amalekites and erase their memory, but to have used that in a letter to address the soldiers as Netanyahu did on 28 October [of 2023] is to tear down a very important barrier. That is the problem with secularizing the biblical language and putting it at the service of a national-colonial project like Zionism.

I.C. There are so many things I would like to comment on... Mostly everything you've said, but maybe it is better to proceed step by step. So let me go back a bit and ask you about translation first. You mentioned translation in connection with Buber's texts, but it seems to me that, in a way, the issue of translation is a kind of thread that unifies all the things you talked about, it seems to run through all of them... and regarding translation, I think it's very telling that you did not go to philosophy of language, but stayed on other terrains. I was thinking about Meschonnic[14]...

S.R. Of course! I did not mention him, but he is fundamental, and I had him in mind, he is like a step further...

I.C. ... yes, because Meschonnic says "*traduire ce que les mots ne disent pas, mais ce qu'ils font*",[15] and he says this in the context of a critique of semiotics that I

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[14] Henri Meschonnic (1932–2009).

[15] 'To translate not what words say, but what they do'. See Meschonnic, Henri 1995; 1999: 55, 139ff. For English-language readers, a very good selection of Meschonnic's works has been translated and edited by Marko Pajević and John Joseph (see Pajević 2019).

appreciate more and more, especially because the phrase forces us to ask our-
selves what it is that we translate when we translate. And he builds upon this
problem to make a critique of the reception of Saussure, and of semiology and
of the whole notion of *sign*, a critique that is very interesting, and relevant,
I think... but well, bearing this in mind, I want to ask you about how you
conceive of translation, and maybe ask you about one specific translation: the
Septuagint, and the impact it might have had on the history of the "West"... I
bring the Septuagint into this conversation because I think that the question
"what do we translate when we translate?" becomes very relevant there...

S.R. Look, I like to approach the Septuagint in opposition to the *version of the
seventy* that Carlos Lenkersdorf (1926–2010) made in Tojolabal.[16] The
Septuagint tells a legend that is very much in line with the hegemony of iden-
tity in "Western" thought. Let us say that the isolation of each of the transla-
tors would have produced a unique homogeneous version... it is suspicious...
but it has to do with a line followed by a whole essentialist and homogenizing
strand of interpretation of the biblical text. Now, Lenkersdorf did not work
with the so-called Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, but with the Gospels...
you know the work he did with Tojolabal, and the article "*Nos-otros los 70*",[17]
right? We interviewed him in that article and, well, he did exactly the oppo-
site: it is in constant dialogue, in a discussion that seeks a plurality of voices,
it is there where one translates. So the group of translators would meet each
week, they would propose a translation of a given fragment, then they would
go to different communities to discuss it. Later, the seventy representatives
would meet again and then they would make a choice. That, to me, seems so
much more interesting than the legend of the Septuagint.

What I am currently interested in is something that I discovered about a
year ago, and which for me is something very precious because it has put me
onto a new track. I am talking about the Judeo-Arabic version of the Torah,
and some books of the Bible, by Saadia Gaon (882–942), which is a version
in Arabic, but written in Hebrew alphabet, from the 10th century. This came
about in Bagdad, and it is not called translation, it's not '*tarjama*' (ترجمة),
it is called '*tafsir*' (تفسير), which is something like 'interpretation'; it is a trans-
lation that recognizes itself as an interpretation. In it, it seems to me, there
is not only another way of approaching the biblical text, but also the inter-
religious rapprochement, I believe, is extremely productive as well; it is full

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16   Tojolabal is a Mayan language spoken in today's Southwestern Mexico.
17   See Rabinovich, Huarte 2010. The title "*Nos-otros*" is an untranslatable word play in
Spanish, to the extent that the word '*nosotros*' ('us'), contains, hidden, the word '*otros*' ('others').

of life, and it profoundly sets in question all these things we are seeing today. I mean, it has a political power that transcends what the text aimed at in its time.

In its time, Saadia Gaon had a conflict with the Karaites. That was his concern; but beyond that aim, there is the echo this text has today, in a secularized context, where the Hebrew language is portrayed as an enemy of the Arabic language – a context that forces the Arab Jews, whose number is very big, to see their inherited language, their language of love, as a language of the enemy, and to use it as a weapon of war in espionage. This produces clear self-hate, the direst of all the self-hates: hating your own mother tongue. Then 'Judeo-Arabic' is an orientalist designation, typical of this optic that looks favourably at something as having existed in the past but now regarded only as an object of the study of the past... like the Palestinians, or the Mayans, as Lenkersdorf would say... but I believe 'Judeo-Arabic' to be a very promising designation despite this horrendous moment we are living at, which is the most apocalyptic of all, but well... there is something there, in the hyphen between 'Judeo' and 'Arabic', that still gives a promise of life, I think.

And so, this is the side I use, and I bring into it all the work I have done, all the readings from decades ago on heteronomous ethics, and what language means for heteronomous ethics, because in this (heteronomous) ethics there are three threads: *temporality*, *subjectivity* and *language*. And I take them as places that become blind spots for a very destructive colonial machinery. This is the problem I tackle. Thus, of course, my knowledge of Hebrew becomes very useful but, at this moment, it is more urgent to study Arabic. I started studying it in a very unsystematic way back in 2015, although sometimes I have been lucky enough to study it more systematically. And it was these two languages that drove me closer to the Judeo-Arabic, which was actually being written for centuries and which some people still use today in a religious setting. So I am working with these texts. Last year, for instance, I taught a course on translation and decolonization, because now I am working on that: utopias of translation. Luckily, the group I was teaching really liked a book from the 11th century that was written in Judeo-Arabic, but of which there is a Spanish translation made in Zaragoza; the book was written at the time of the Taifa of Zaragoza. We read the book together with Buber's political writings, so it was a dialogue between two voices, and it was wonderful. The author is Ibn Paquda, and the book is called *Los deberes de los corazones* ('The duties of the heart').[18] That, for me, is key at this moment, the relation

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[18]   The original title, transliterated, is *Kitāb al-hidāya ilà farā 'id al-quiāb* ('Book of the guide

between translation and utopia, in the best sense of the term 'utopia', which is, of course, political, and which has a nest precisely there... in translation...

I.C. Yes, and this brings me back to Meschonnic because in his works there is this effort of establishing a relationship between language and politics... let us say, in a manner of speaking, we can find in his works the idea that the way in which one conceives of language, the way in which one thinks about language, is already a political position... so I would want to link this to the more "mythical" conceptions of language, and thus to the question of the extent to which some beliefs that are *about* language might impact how we approach it, and to which extent they might even determine, in some sense, our place as speaking subjects, and of course, the place of the other to whom we speak...

S.R. Yes, I think you are on the right track with Meschonnic, because he has this book *Heidegger ou le national essentialisme*,[19] so this is where the problem lies: in essentialisms. However, there is something very important to bear in mind: decolonization, I mean decolonial thought, also runs the risk of taking an essentialist way. I always try to avoid that way, and I think one must stay alert so as not to venture onto it. But the problem is there – in the essentialism that leads to the notion of identity. From that point on one will not be able to understand anymore that translation is at the root of every language, that there is no "purity" of languages, that everything we have is merely invented mother tongues, like the "Semitic language". It is all an invention, it is a need we have, but in any way something that is there at the origin.

For instance, when Hebrew became secularized, the most militant of all was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. He was Lithuanian. And well, you will find streets named after Eliezer Ben-Yehuda everywhere in Israeli cities... Now, he had this ludic disposition that linguists have of wanting to bring Hebrew out of its religious environment, because Hebrew was not really a *dead* tongue, but it was a language confined to the ritual sphere. Well, when he was confronted with all those centuries when Hebrew had not been spoken in the streets, and with the question of from whom, or from where, one should take the words that were needed, he answered without a doubt: from Arabic. Then the problem had more to do with the instrumentalization of the language caused by Zionism. Zionism is Eurocentric, and hence the difficulties of incorporating Arabic, because Arabic is a much more complex language than Hebrew,

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for the directions of the hearts'). For the Spanish translation see Paquda 1994[ca.1090]; for the English translation, titled *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, see Paquda 1973.

19   See Meschonnic 2007.

way more complex: it is richer, more diverse, more widely spoken... And so, it turned out that Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was not listened to. Streets might be named after him, but he was not listened to. Hebrew, then, transformed into a kind of Esperanto, I don't know... something that did not prosper and... well, it turned into something that took its more violent direction from that impossibility. That is what we are seeing today... I do not know if I answered your question, because I have taken you from the Septuagint to something that interests me ten times more...

[*We both laughed.*]

S.R. ... but, well... all this has to do with being careful so as not to fall into these essentialist positions, for they are so commonplace, and we should avoid them...

I.C. Well, it is all for the best, because, you see, in the long run it was not the Septuagint that interested me but rather this "symbolic" dimension that language has (in discourse), and how our ideas about language (and I am talking now as a linguist), how these ways of thinking about language, are all mixed up with ideas that sometimes have nothing to do with linguistics and are simply well-sedimented beliefs in a given culture. In connection to this, there is something I remember hearing from Dussel, and that I think you also mentioned once, that has to do with the fact that all these mythical and symbolic aspects of culture must be part of the solutions we may find to the conflicts that sprout out of essentialist positions, and it also has to do with the fact that there is powerful and effective knowledge in all these mythical and symbolic aspects... even if sometimes we want to disregard those aspects and that knowledge. I mean, I simply want to say that we should acknowledge the value and potency of forms of knowing other than only hegemonic and legitimized ones.

And it is in this connection that I wanted to ask about the impact of the Septuagint, or Jewish thought at large, in the history of Europe – just in order to try to understand a bit better how this might have influenced the ways, including the scientific, linguistic ways, in which we approach language... For instance, throughout the 19th century, but importantly also in earlier centuries, there was a big fixation with finding an *Ursprache*, and, of course, Hebrew was a candidate at one point, and so was Latin... and these concerns guided scientific progress at one point, even if they were not what we would regard as exactly scientific concerns today... What you mentioned at the beginning of our talk about the Golem, and the letter, and life: to which extent this idea that to name something brings that something into existence, or this idea that the letter, or the name, can give life – to which extent these

ideas have an impact on other ways of knowing language, and of thinking about language...

S.R. ... Yes, I believe that the problem here still is this European essentialism. I believe so. There are several authors we have not mentioned yet, and there is one who is very important for the topic of translation, almost as important as Meschonnic, and maybe even a little bit more. I am talking about Benjamin.[20] He is fundamental because in him we find this estrangement in the process of translation that is also experienced by Buber and Rosenzweig[21] when they translate the Bible into German. But what you say about myths... The 19th century was terrible. Especially regarding the filiation that Germany invented for itself in Greece, or regarding, for instance, the orientalism of Renan.[22] He takes the sons of Noah from the Bible, Shem, Ham and Japheth, especially Shem and Japheth, to talk about Semitic people. And, you see, this is linked with an aspect of Dussel's thought that I appreciate a lot. I am currently working on him and his Semitic humanism (I will talk about this at the Congress of Philosophy in Rome). What he does is, precisely, to open the door for the decolonization of the term 'Semitic'. At first reading, one could think that he follows Renan, but no: Dussel opens a door precisely to run away from that, and I believe what he does is very valuable. The whole conception of the Semitic, its opposition to the Japhetic principle, became very somber. Renan thought of it in a Romantic way... 'Semitic' applies to Jews, not to Muslims, of course, Renan already had a very remarkable Islamophobia, but he is very interesting; it is interesting to see all the quarrels they had. Do you receive the journal *Interpretatio*?[23]

I.C. Yes, of course, the online version, but I do...

S.R. Well, in its last issue, I published an article about Job, more specifically, about Saadia Gaon's *tafsir* of Job.[24] But I also talked about the translation of Job in the quarrel between Renan and Leroux. Pierre Leroux (1797–1871) was a socialist, and he said "this is the true translation of Job", and it is nothing like the Bible's version. Renan, who was a diligent scholar, tried to do it as closely as possible, so that it be as similar as possible, like all those erudite thinkers, but Leroux brought Job to revolution, he portrays him as a kind of revolutionary Christ. We could say that in Leroux's translation Job is practically

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[20] Walter Benjamin (1892–1940).

[21] Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929).

[22] Ernest Renan (1823–1892).

[23] A Mexican journal of philosophy and hermeneutics published by the Seminar of Hermeneutics of the Institute of Philological Research of the UNAM.

[24] See Rabinovich 2024b.

Christ, and he is right in the middle of the July Revolution of 1830. So, Renan embodies bourgeois orientalism, in Said's[25] sense of the term, and, in opposition to him, Leroux embodies a popular socialist perspective. And it is so interesting to see these discussions around the translation of Job and to see the essentialism that kept growing throughout 19th-century Europe. It was that very same essentialism that Zionism would later export to Palestine in a very naïve way, for it was the same essentialism that did not see a place for them in Europe, but that looked favourably at the European Jewish refugees becoming settlers. And so Zionism took this essentialism as a gift, although it really was but a poisoned gift. They do not understand that this ends in a collective suicide of themselves together with their enemy; they do not understand that by dehumanizing the other, they themselves have become dehumanized, and well... that all this has a suicidal overtone, this genocide that we are seeing (but they, the perpetrators, cannot see it). And all this happens in language, in *the* language. And it is crucial, I think, for us to acknowledge that this is not happening in an *essential*, but in an *existential* way in the language. All these things, they are produced... there is something very performative in all that...

I.C. ...yes, and regarding this Japhetic denomination, it was not uncommon for linguists even to use such terms in the 20th century...

S.R. Have you read Maurice Olender? He has a wonderful book *Les langues du paradis*[26] and he explains all this very well in it...

I.C. That is very useful. I am currently working more and more on the history of linguistics throughout the 20th century, and I am re-reading a work by Patrick Sériot[27] in which he also deals extensively with the problem of essentialism in Russian linguistics throughout the previous century. The book touches upon the works of Nikolai Marr (1865–1934) and his Japhetic hypotheses and all that, but what is perhaps more interesting to me is that Sériot shows very clearly all these interrelations between the study of languages, the ways of thinking about languages and politics, or, well, specific political positions... and he shows this through the history of ideas, of certain ideas, let us say... and for him, I believe, the problem of essentialism shows up in conceiving of languages as if they were things...

S.R. ...yes, or as if they were merely instruments [for communication]. I learned from Benveniste that languages are not that... that one thinks *in* a language

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[25] Edward Said (1935–2003).

[26] See Olender 1989.

[27] The book is *Structure and the Whole*. For an interview with Patrick Sériot that touches upon the topics of language and essentialism, see Chávez Barreto 2024.

and is embraced, held, by a language. Hence, I had the idea of thinking about the heteronomous relation to language. Seventeen years ago, I was teaching a course at the Institute of Philological Research [of the UNAM] about the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and we would begin by reading the book in Hebrew (although most of the attendees did not know the language). The class began by hearing a cantillation[28] of the fragment we would read. The idea was to establish a relation with the language that would not be a relation of deciphering it, or knowing it, but rather to let yourself be embraced by the language: a heteronomous relation with the language, and see how that would produce another kind of understanding...

I.C. Yes! Actually, one of the things I wanted to ask you was whether you think ethics begins in language...

S.R. Exactly! I was precisely going there... You see, I do not know if it begins there, I cannot answer that, but what is certain is that language is constitutive. That is precisely what I wanted to say. I mean, the approach is completely heteronomous, and ethics... well, the rapprochement of different languages helps us understand heteronomy better: the justice *of* the other, the word of the other that will always belong to the other, and which has to do, in the case of Levinas (and for me it is clear that this is Levinas, alongside Levinas, and beyond him too, because he would not have liked so much politics), with this '*in another way*' that he proposes.

I was telling you about the course and these first minutes when we heard the text that we would study in class, but we would hear it from this not-knowing of the text, from this letting ourselves be embraced by this stranger and establishing an affective relation. Also because cantillation predisposes you to receive the text *autrement qu'être* ('otherwise than being'). It was very interesting. For instance, we made this experiment of listening to the Ten Commandments cantillated, and later realizing that these were the Ten Commandments, and we saw how all this authoritarian imposition thing of an old, bearded guy simply disappeared. And it is there where the possibility appears for, as Derrida says, "You shall not kill" to come to mean the obligation of helping the other live with dignity, and this is so much more than just refraining from killing. These are the things that show up and that the text opens, if one allows language to come close without ruling over it, without possessing it, or without intimidating it, because sometimes in a very intimate relation with a text, one can intimidate it.

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[28]   A specific way of reading, or reciting by singing, the Hebrew biblical text.

Some years ago, back in 2005, I published a text in *Acta Poética* that was called "*Gestos de la letra*" ('Gestures of the letter').[29] The text was about how the Hebrew Bible is read: you read it with someone else, aloud. You cannot read it quietly, because you run the risk of imposing things to the text. It is not that I read it aloud because the other cannot read, I read aloud because then the word reaches me through my own ears, and then it will be impossible to arrogate the text to oneself: and it is there where the other speaks, and it is there where the other teaches, as Levinas says, and this other is the text, and the other is the voices that are in the text. In *Difficile liberté*, Levinas says that time, language and subjectivity are the three threads that he approaches in a heteronomous way, and that language is fundamental precisely because it is non-essentializable; because we acquire it. And, well, this word 'acquire'[30] is pretty open, one can still use it, because it does not mean 'to arrogate' or 'to appropriate'... we receive our language as we receive a heritage,[31] and the same thing happens with time, with subjectivity, and with our given names. We receive them as a heritage, and 'to inherit' does not mean to become the owner of something, it means keeping something that comes from others and goes on to others. So, as regards language, we cannot arrogate it to ourselves, we must live *in* language with a lot of responsibility, and we should be able to be held accountable for each word we utter. But that does not mean we possess them, or that we should determine their ultimate meaning. Language will continue to speak in us, psychoanalysis taught us a lot about that, and Marxism too, and I believe Dussel's reading of Marx in his book *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* ('The theological metaphors of Marx')[32] is brilliant, and it shows so many interesting paths, it may also be of interest to you...

I.C. It certainly is... but, also, as to this whole reflection, I think it is very relevant, in general, but also specifically in the case of Hebrew because... well, linguists usually cite Hebrew as the most "effective" case of language *revitalization*, but perhaps... [*We both burst out laughing.*]

S.R. ...perhaps not in the best sense, right? The word [revitalization] is very interesting, because it actually had a lethal effect... that is precisely why

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[29]   See Rabinovich 2005.

[30]   '*Adquirir*' in the original Spanish.

[31]   I decided to translate as 'heritage' the Spanish word '*herencia*', which means both 'heritage' and 'inheritance'. The difficulty this posed was that the verb '*heredar*' in Spanish does not seem to have an equivalent in English linked to the noun 'heritage' (as 'inheritance' has to the verb 'to inherit'), Thus, a few lines later in the text the reader will find the verb 'to inherit' as translation of Spanish '*heredar*', but it should be kept in mind that it is meant to refer to 'a heritage'.

[32]   See Dussel 1993.

ultraorthodox Jews will refuse to speak Hebrew, and they keep it strictly within religion...

I.C. Yes... and, you see, I myself, as a linguist, tend to side more with functional approaches to language, I think they are, in some sense, better than the more formal approaches to language, but when I speak to philosophers like you, or when I read philosophy, I start finding myself in conflict with myself, and I like this very much, because... you see, the main idea of functionalism in linguistics is that, along very general lines, the main *function* of language is communication, and thus structural features of language should be explained by their purposes in communication. So there is a kind of instrumentalization of language (as you mentioned before), yet some functional linguists do not so much emphasize the idea of communication as mere transmission of information, but rather think that the *function* that would explain structural features of languages is the expression of subjectivity, of one's own subjectivity, and of subjective experience itself – something that is not only communication, I think. Eric Buyssens (1910–2000), for instance, claimed that the problem of "communication" is that no two mental states are the same, and thus they cannot be ever represented by the same words, thus, for speaking one must accept that "*le concret est incommunicable, le moi est ineffable*".[33]

So I believe there is a way of reading linguistic functionalism where the central problem lies in how to express, via words, something that is, in principle, non-expressible: subjective experience itself. Yet it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that subjectivity can only be so in relation to something that is not it (and this is a Saussurean, and therefore linguistic, principle, I think [*laugh*]), and thus language cannot be simply about what is subjective; instead, by aiming to express subjectivity, the other immediately appears, if only because this subjectivity is addressed to that other...

S.R. Of course, it is the intersubjective, the community... Look, there is a beautiful book from 1903 by Gustav Landauer (1870–1919), an anarchist who was friends with Buber. The book is called *Skepsis und Mystik* (and he wrote it after Fritz Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*);[34] it was translated into Spanish by Héctor A. Piccoli my German teacher from Rosario, and the translation is wonderful. It was published in Herder, Mexico. In the book Landauer talks about how our ancestors live on in us and how they express themselves in us, often in non-harmonious ways, and thus the matter of expression becomes very important... I imagine you have also Deleuze in

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[33] 'The concrete is incommunicable, the *me* is ineffable.' See Buyssens 1970.

[34] See Landauer 2015[1903].

mind, right? Not only his *Kafka, pour un littérature mineur*,[35] but also his reading of Spinoza concerning expression[36]...

I.C. Yes, and I was thinking more about Spinoza than Deleuze... but, as I see that we have already been talking for longer than the time we originally had at our disposal, let me just ask you two final questions. One has to do with all these problems of translation and expression... I have always been very curious about the work you did with the translation of Darwish's poem,[37] – what was that like?

S.R. Oh, that was a wonderful experience, and it was inspired by Lenkersdorf's "the 70". During six months fifteen people from the faculty of Philosophy of the UNAM, together with the Palestinian student Shadi Rohana, gathered to translate this genius poem that we got to know through a personal friend of Darwish (the anti-zionist Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzin, whom I had invited in 2013 to give a course on messianism, orientalism and secularization).[38] When we finished, it was clear that the path of the poem had only just begun towards indigenous languages, and that the Spanish language of Mexico had the opportunity of decolonization. The poem was already a "translation" because it was written in Arabic and Darwish actually drew inspiration from the famous letter of the Swamish Seattle Chief. By now, the poem has been translated into Mazatec, Chinantec, Mixe, Isthmus Zapotec, Yucatec Maya, Totonac, Nahuatl, Haiti Creole, Qom, Quechua, Persian... and it continues to be translated[39]...

I.C. That is wonderful... and as the last question: what can we, academics who in one way or another deal with languages and language, do to help solving, even if only a little bit, all these problems we are seeing in the world?

S.R. Well, if the problems you are referring to are the Gaza genocide, in my case I see it very clearly: to establish bridges between the languages they want to portray as "enemies". The expressive potency of words is our challenge (at least here at the Institute of Philological Research). For me, denouncing is not

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[35] See Deleuze and Guattari 1975.

[36] See Deleuze 1968.

[37] Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008). The poem referred to is "The 'Red Indian's' penultimate speech to the white man", for an English translation by Fady Joudah see Darwish, Joudah 2009.

[38] That was the first proposal of the project "Heteronomies of justice: Of exiles and utopias" (PAPIIT IN 401215); see Rabinovich and Mondragón 2019.—S.R.

[39] Besides the book *Retornos del Discurso del "indio" (para Mahmud Darwish)* edited by Silvana Rabinovich, see Rabinovich 2017; other translations can be found on the *Heteronomies of Justice: Nomadism and Hospitality in Language* project website https://www.iifl.unam.mx/justiciadelotro/seccs.php?idSec=5&pos=5.

enough (and I extend this to other struggles, such as gender). Denouncing is a first step in the social responsibility of our public word (in the Kantian sense of the term), because denouncing has the authority, the police, as an ultimate point, and that belongs to the order of domination, but the word, the word has a potency that can compel us to leave that order of domination. It is a liberating potency that I relate to love (in the Spinozian sense of the term). Hate, a common hate, can hold a group together for a while, but in order to build a community, the bonds must affirm life. Spinoza in his *Ethics* defines passions as beginning from love, joyful passions, and from hate, sad passions; every sad passion can be turned into a joyful one when you understand it. I believe our task consists in transforming the sad passions of those who are suffering from injustices (and we can understand their sadness) into joyful passions. It is not fair to load onto the victims the weight of our frustrations, regardless of our eagerness to show solidarity. Our task is to make their burden lighter, to try and illuminate lines of flight, liberating routes.

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