

Translation and the Colonial Encounter: Conversation Between Yuval Evri and Yehouda Shenhav-Shahrabani on Bi-National Team Translation

Source: *ReOrient*, Autumn 2020, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn 2020), pp. 65-85

Published by: Pluto Journals

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/reorient.6.1.0065>

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# TRANSLATION AND THE COLONIAL ENCOUNTER: CONVERSATION BETWEEN YUVAL EVRI AND YEHOUDA SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI ON BI-NATIONAL TEAM TRANSLATION<sup>1</sup>

YUVAL EVRI:<sup>2</sup> I would like to introduce my interlocutor Yehouda Shenhav-Shahrabani to the readers.

Yehouda Shenhav-Shahrabani is a professor of sociology at Tel Aviv University and one of the most influential critical theorists in Israel. He has published numerous books and articles but, in the context of our discussion today, it is important to mention two of them: *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Ethnicity and Religion* (Stanford University Press, 2006), and *Beyond the Two-State Solution: A Jewish Political Essay* (Polity Press, 2012). For ten years (1999–2009) Shenhav-Shahrabani was the chief editor of *Theory and Criticism*, the leading journal of critical theory in Israel. In the past ten years, the centre of his work shifted towards issues of language and translation. This shift was part of a personal and political journey of returning to the Arabic language and culture: the language of the land, and his mother tongue as a son of parents who emigrated from Iraq to Israel. From an early stage of this process, Shenhav-Shahrabani, who defines himself as an Arab-Jew, started translating texts from Arabic to Hebrew, first for his own learning purposes and gradually as a separate scholarly and political project. The peak of this process was the establishment of “Maktoob” (مکتوب), a book series and translators’ forum, in 2014, that will be one of the main subjects of our discussion today (<http://maktoobooks.com/en/about-us>). This project, which yielded a binational model of translation, was a joint initiative together with Palestinian writer Salman Natour and Dr Yonatan Mendel, a translator and researcher, which had, from its inception, literary and political objectives. Our conversation will focus on this personal and political journey, but in a wider

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context, in light of Shenhav-Shahrabani's past and current work on the Arab Jews, the colonial condition in Israel, and the struggle over the soul of sovereignty. Specifically, on the connection between Arabic and Hebrew and the relationship between the languages, and the status of the Arabic language in the Israeli context.

EVRI: Yehouda, I suggest that we start with the "Maktoob" translation project. Could you describe the contours of this journey, both from the personal and the theoretical points of view?

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Thanks Yuval for this lavish introduction. In many ways, my journey is inspired by the Sephardi intellectuals in Mandatory Palestine that you describe in your work. In your work you focus on people such as Yosef Meyouhas, Abraham Shalom Yahuda, David Yellin, Isaac Benjamin Yahuda, and Abraham Elmaleh. Over more than five decades, from the 1880s to the 1930s, they published hundreds of essays, political commentaries, translations, collections of fables and folktales, short stories, and poems, mostly in the local Hebrew and Arabic newspapers. Moving easily back and forth between Arabic and Hebrew, they marked the first modern phenomenon of Arabic-Hebrew literary bilingualism, inspired by the great Arab-Jewish poets and philosophers of medieval Al-Andalus. This group provided a stimulus for me and for the "Maktoob" project. They provided a model for thinking about the relationship between Hebrew and Arabic under conditions of colonial relations and a national conflict. In the current context, "Maktoob" is a place, a space, where Arabic and Hebrew meet in the form of political dialogue. Such spaces are rare in Israel today, where there is a total erasure of the Arabic language. Particularly in contrast to the use of Arabic in violent interactions at the checkpoints and zones of colonial policing. This is even more important in light of the fact that the Israeli legislature recently demoted Arabic from its historical status as a formal language legally equal to Hebrew.<sup>3</sup> The new law validated what was customary on the ground anyway. French intellectuals I hosted in Tel Aviv recently were amazed when they discovered that bookstores were devoid of Arabic literature. Astonishment became shock when they found out that the Jewish intellectuals they met – and who displayed good command of French or English – were illiterate in Arabic, the

language of the region. The erasure of Arabic has spread in Israel like an epidemic, and found manifestation among Arab-Jews themselves. Now, the role of the Arab-Jew here is crucial to understand both the ambivalence towards Arabic and the importance of Arabic. The second generation of Arab-Jews in Israel, such as myself, are colonial subjects, suffused with ambivalence. Second-generation Jews from Arab countries – as you well know, my parents came from Baghdad, and when I grew up, I heard only Arabic at home: the Iraqi-specific Jewish dialect. Nevertheless, as I grew older, I acquired my first language, Hebrew, trying to mimic the standard Hebrew form. As we know, monolingualism became an ethos in Israel and the erasure of the second language, in particular Arabic, was considered an achievement. Then, twenty-five years ago, I experienced a personal shift. Metaphorically speaking: the bomb went off.

EVRI:

What happened then?

SHENHAV-  
SHAHRABANI:

My Iraqi father passed away when an Iraqi missile hit his neighbourhood in 1991 during the Gulf War. I always say with irony that an Iraqi missile killed my Iraqi father, and this symbolic irony is very much a trigger in my subconscious decision to go back to Arabic. Like most Iraqi immigrants to Israel, my father made his living out of that language. They spoke the language of the Middle East and this was their symbolic capital, which benefited them economically, culturally, and politically. Many Iraqi Jews were recruited to teach Arabic; they served in Israel's broadcast authority, the army, intelligence organisations, or the military rule over the Palestinian territories. They always had jobs, and that is, by the way, one of the reasons why the Iraqi Jews did better than other Arab-Jews in Israel. As a second generation Arab-Jew, I refused to be part of that project. I was not that politically aware at the time, but I refused because I did not want to have any linkage to my father's tradition or to have an association with an "enemy language". As soon as my father passed away, his silence, the abrupt silence of his Arabic, stirred up demons in me. It was a rupture in my biography. I decided to go back and learn Arabic in order to make a journey into my father's (and mother's) tongue. It is only ironic that, at the end of the cycle, at the end of the journey, I found myself speaking the Palestinian dialect,

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which is quite different from the Arabic I heard at home. When I come home, my mother mocks me for my Palestinian dialect and tries to push me back into the Iraqi dialect. This is very noticeable and very funny, at times.

EVRI: It was also during the writing of your book *The Arab Jews*, which deals among other things with the erasure of Arabic language and culture within the Arab-Jews in Israel that you decided to go back to Arabic.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Yes, it was in the process of writing *The Arab Jews* which, in essence, was a book about an identity option, a political possibility that existed in the past and had disappeared in the present. In the sense of the counterfactual, or the missed options – tradition. An option that can be reincarnated or represented (rather than represented), to use Gayatri Spivak’s terminology. Even if the matter under discussion is mere nostalgia, I believe that under certain conditions nostalgia may have political ramifications. At the very least, to broaden the political horizons. After my father passed away, I finished my book on the *Arab Jews* and, since then, I became obsessed with returning to the Arabic language.

EVRI: How did it actually take place?

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Through translation. It started with the Palestinian author Salman Natour, who unfortunately passed away three years ago. Salman was a dear friend and he insisted that I speak only Arabic with him. Every day for five years he would go, early in the morning, to his work. It’s an hour drive from his village to Haifa and he would put me captive on that drive speaking only Arabic. Thanks to him, I felt more and more comfortable speaking the language. We actually contemplated the idea of “Maktoob” together. The idea was to create a space in which translation is a joint project of Israeli Jews and Palestinians. We started translating Arabic literature, but we never saw literature as an end in itself, but as the cause and effect of binational and bilingual dialogue.

EVRI: Your return to Arabic took place in contrast to the dominant trend among Israeli Jews and to the general illiteracy in Arabic, which you found in a recent study about the command of Arabic among Israeli Jews.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Indeed, the situation in Israel regarding the Arabic language is grim. One of the findings of the study is the complete illiteracy of Jews in Israel in Arabic. If you want a punchline, a

bottom line, less than half a percent of Israeli Jews can read a text in Arabic, which, statistically, is virtually close to zero (Shenhav et al. 2015). Israeli Jews study English, French, German, Spanish, you name it, but not Arabic, the language of at least 50 per cent of the Jewish population in the past and the language of the Palestinians. The situation is even grimmer if you look at the phenomenon across generations. In the generation of my mother – who was born in 1932, and attended high school in Baghdad – only 26 per cent can still speak Arabic today. Some of them forgot, some were young when they immigrated. In my generation (I was born in 1952) it's around 8 per cent, and this is probably an over-estimation. In my daughters' generation, it turns to zero. This is overwhelming. The gradual erasure or obliteration of the Arabic language is a phenomenon that needs to be explained. How is it possible that leftists who claim to want peace with the Palestinians, or right-wingers who claim that we need "to know the enemy", none of them can read or speak the language? And there is an intra-Jewish ethnic dimension to the story. When you look at the numbers across ethnic groups, you find a fascinating paradox. Among those who can read Arabic, the percentage of Ashkenazi Jews is four times larger than Mizrahi Jews. Those who read are not the offspring of the Arab-Jews. They are the second or third generation of the European Ashkenazi Jews that never heard Arabic at home. Among those who can speak Arabic (to some extent), those who heard Arabic at home and can imitate the Arabic accent, and pronounce its consonants – it is the other way around. Therefore, you find a repetition of a pattern similar to other colonial situations. The colonial fragmentation between the oral tradition and the textual tradition, which is the split between the high language and the low language, so to speak. This is supported by the notion of diglossia, which is an ideological justification for language hierarchies. Where did Ashkenazi Jews learn their Arabic? In the Intelligence, in the military, or at the university; whereas the second and third generation of the Arab-Jews are excluded from it. This is typical in colonial situations, where speech is considered inferior to text – which in turn corroborates racial hierarchies.

EVRI: Going back to Salman Natour, you actually started translating his novels.

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- SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Salman offered that I try translating his novel: *She, Me and the Autumn* [هي, أنا والخريف]. I was apprehensive at the beginning but gradually I delved into it, and we did it together in the form of a Jewish-Palestinian dialogue. The same was true with the translation of his novel: *The Life and Death of the Wrinkled-Face Sheikh* (عن حياة وموت الشيخ مشقق الوجه),<sup>4</sup> which was a shaky and moving experience. The novel is based on testimonies and stories of old displaced Palestinian men collected by Salman in the early 1980s. They were written in a fragmented, non-continuous, mode based on their traumatic memories. Memories of refugees displaced overnight from their homes and lives. I remember myself sobbing while translating. I then translated parts of it to English to give it international visibility (Natour 2014; see also Shenhav 2018). At any event, this joint translation is, in a nutshell, the essence of “Maktoob”. Bringing Palestinian literature and prose to the Hebrew reader is important for its own sake, but this is not the only reason for forming “Maktoob”. Literature is also the device, the platform, the excuse for bringing people to engage with the relationships between Arabic and Hebrew. Translation in this mode is also a trigger for the meeting of the two languages in the public space, something that is very rare in the Israeli context today.
- EVRI: It is interesting that your translation path developed from a spoken dialogue with a living author. It is a different story of engagement and relation to Arabic language and literature from most of the Israeli Jewish translators. You said that translation used to be mute and secluded. What does that mean?
- SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Here I would mention the work of our mutual colleague Yonatan Mendel, on the creation of Israeli Arabic (Mendel 2014; 2019). His book addresses the Latinisation of Arabic in Israel. This Latinisation is evident in the muteness of Jewish translators who know Arabic well but cannot speak the language. This is the case with most historians of the Middle East, whether Orientalists, post-Orientalists or otherwise. Five years ago Mendel conducted at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute a conference in Arabic (for the first time not on “Arab Affairs” but on general issues such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, literature, etc.), but participation of Israeli Jews was very low because training in Arabic excludes speech. This Latinisation has much broader political implications. Because, if you look back at Europe and you look

at the development of vernacular languages, I'd say since the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance and onward, was a period when vernacular languages were formed and actually put the Latin language behind them because it was the language that the Roman Empire used. It became not a spoken language, but a theological language, a language of prayer. Since then, you do not speak Latin anymore; you either hear or read it. Ironically, making Arabic Latin, or Latinisation of Arabic, is like going into the proto- or pre-nationalistic period, because in Europe you see how the vernacular languages became the corridor through which nationalism emerged. By pushing Arabic back into Latinisation, it conceals the political dimension of denationalisation. It is an important political point about the state of Arabic in Israel today.

EVRI: You are actually saying that Arabic was institutionalised in Israel as a language not spoken. How is that relevant to the translation of literary texts?

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: If we go back to "Maktoob", there are two issues that we tried to address. The two are interrelated: individual translation and fragmentation between text and speech. If we consider the entire bulk of translations from Arabic to Hebrew in the last 150 years, almost all of them were conducted by Israeli translators of Jewish decent in their private spaces without a dialogue with Palestinians. There were exceptions of course, like Anton Shammas, who is a great translator, whose Hebrew and Arabic are better than both of ours are. He left Israel in the 1980s, because he was disappointed by the political trajectory of the Zionist state. Shammas, now teaching at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor, wrote his great novel, *Arabesque*, in Hebrew, not in Arabic. He did not want it to be translated. He wrote his novel directly in Hebrew. Nevertheless, except for him and a few others such as Naim Araidi, Atallah Mansour, Salman Masalha, Sayed Kashua or Ayman Siksak – most Palestinian authors wrote in Arabic. The translators were usually Israeli Jews, who translated in a unilinear process where they take a text, sit in their offices with dictionaries and lexicons, and then send it to a Jewish editor at a Jewish publishing house, who publishes the piece. They publish the piece and they call it a bridge between cultures. There is no bridge here. And, yes, many of them have never seen a Palestinian in their

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lives. I am saying that metaphorically, of course. Moreover, many of them cannot speak the language. This is a point that we need to address, because it says many things, not only political, but also about the theory of translation.

EVRI: So you created a new model, which is based on shared sovereignty in the translational process. You summoned Jewish and Palestinian translators to work together.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: The project started in a dialogue between the late Salman Natour and myself, and later on it grew like a snowball when it was joined by Yonatan Mendel, Maisalon Dallashi, Eyad Barghuty, Kifah Abdul Halim, Loway Watad, Hanna Amit Kohavi, Bruria Horowitz, Rawiya Burbara, Hanan Saadi, and many others who comprise our team at the Van Leer Institute. We attempted to create a hub, where we actually translate texts and speak the language at the same time.

EVRI: This is fascinating – it is a paradigm change in the way we understand and structure translational work. How do you articulate the political implications of this project?

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: I believe that we introduce a model, which comes close to binational translation. The idea is to reverse the model where individual translators who are mostly Israeli Jews, sitting in their offices in solitude, produce a text without voices, without talking, without a dialogue. From a political point of view, it is unacceptable that translation from Arabic to Hebrew is a monopoly of Jewish translators. It is as if all ethnographers that studied Palestinians were Jewish. It is no longer acceptable. We talk about native translation like native anthropology. The idea is that we form translation as a group enterprise, binational work in which, for every translation, we have Jews and Arabs, or Palestinians, working together in parity. This, for me, is a huge political achievement.

EVRI: You also said that there is a theoretical angle behind that endeavour.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Let us look at the history of translation. To put it more accurately, at the genealogy of modern translation. Let us focus on two dimensions of translation that existed in the past and vanished with the rise of the modern model. I am referring to your own work on the Andalusian model of translation. Even earlier in ninth-century Baghdad we meet Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-‘Ibbadi (حنين بن إسحق العبادي), known as the sheikh of the translators,

and the director of Bayt al-Hikma (بيت الحكمة, House of Wisdom), where all the translation activities were concentrated (see, e.g., Osman 2014). All this movement around, all this messiness, all these hesitations, the juxtaposition of speech and text – all this vanished into the Renaissance/Enlightenment/national/modern concept of the individual. During the Renaissance, I would say in the mid-fifteenth century, we witness the emergence of a new model of translation, which we can label “the neoclassical model” (Shenhav-Sharabani 2019). Leonardo Bruni is the usual suspect. His model was based on an individual who has perfect knowledge of both the source and target languages. In the terminology of modern social sciences, I would call it “methodological individualism”. This is in contradistinction to the Andalusian model (real or imagined), which was based on group work which facilitated a dialogue and movement in the space across borders. It was based on teams composed of people who possessed different languages. You would find somebody who knows Latin, someone who can understand Greek, somebody who speaks Arabic, and they would decipher and translate texts, in a dialogical manner. The individualisation of translation was part and parcel of individualism in the Renaissance, which became the focus of ontological and epistemological reason during the European enlightenment.

EVRI: When I think about dialogue, it reminds me of Mikhail Bakhtin.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: No doubt, for Bakhtin a “dialogue” is not only conversation, however important, but also a circular movement whose deep principle is a political epistemology, involving subjects, texts, objects, ideas, and ideologies. Literature in a model of dialogue is not only a thing for itself, or a thing in itself, but also the cause and the trigger of action in the world. Dialogue is born of literature, and literature is the platform for its existence. The dialogue is a circular mechanism of mutual reflection: the translation’s reflection on the source, but no less, the repetitive reflection of the original on the translation. Movement directed at the “other” that does not end in one round but is repeated over and over again. Dialogue does not mean swallowing the other into one’s self, but rather flexing the hard boundaries between them. This is one of the principles

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that gives dialogue its political significance. Dialogue also allows for transgression, producing translation which does not situate itself automatically within the cradle of national philology, which encourages translation in the mere idioms of the target language. This is a major point, since the “renewal” of the Modern Hebrew language was a political project, founded on the exclusion of Arabic sources. We want to bring translation into this ideal of creating a dialogue, which is particularly necessary given the colonial relationship between Hebrew and Arabic. This is about bi-nationalism. But more than that, we try to reverse the Orientalist overtones in translation, and also to change the existing Orientalist customs about Arabic in Hebrew. For example, transliteration is a field in which the textual and oral encounters are laden with ideological decisions under the guise of technical claims. Tracking translations from Arabic to Hebrew indicates that phonetic transliteration – which is based on the Hebrew modern (and Ashkenazi-European) pronunciation – increased over the years. A major player in setting the “rules” of transliteration today is the ear of the Hebrew reader and the alleged need to find the closest sound he/she knows and uses. For example, the letter “ص” in Arabic (that exists also in Hebrew, and is equivalent to the letter “צ” – such as in the Arabic word *يصل* and its Hebrew equivalent *בצל*) is replaced with the letter “ס.” This happens because in modern (and Ashkenazi-European) pronunciation, the Hebrew letter “צ” is pronounced as an East European affricate consonant “ts,” instead of a Semitic emphatic consonant “ṣ.” Hence the Arabic name *نصرالله*, which needs to be transliterated to Hebrew as *נצראללה*, is replaced by *נסראללה* (in English: *Nasrallah*). These types of transliteration are sometimes embarrassing, for example the word *صالح* (“*Ṣaliḥ*”) which means a decent, honest man, and needs to be transliterated to Hebrew as *צאלה*, is often transliterated into Hebrew as *סאלה*, and so it both distorts the Semitic connection between the languages (the root *ח.ל.צ* in Hebrew refers to something that was achieved successfully/honestly, while the Hebrew root *ס.ל.ח* has a totally different meaning and refers to “forgiveness”); and it also totally misrepresents the Arabic, as the Hebrew pronunciation “*saleḥ*” means in Arabic, among other things, bird droppings. These conventions that were set in historical

times and are products of convenience to Hebrew readers, create lingual and political clashes, and take part in the ongoing process of disconnecting the two languages – and pronunciations – from one another.

EVRI:

Does that include a dialogue between translators and authors?

SHENHAV-  
SHAHRABANI:

Of course, when it is possible. Salman Natour, whom I translated in the early stages, knew Hebrew well. He could read my translations and it is hard to work under these conditions. When he gave me his novel *You, Me and the Autumn*, we worked simultaneously. I translated and he read chapter by chapter. At one point I realised he was rewriting his novel throughout the process. I resisted and told him: “Salman, the author is dead.” Of course, I was teasing him, because rewriting is part of a dialogue. But translating a living author, who can read your work, and look behind your shoulder at the computer screen, so to speak, is a bit anxiety-producing. There are many models of relations between writers and translators. Not all authors are so nonchalant with their translators. We have examples of authors who really oppressed their translators. Vladimir Nabokov used to run after his translators and reprimand them for deviations from the verbatim, word-by-word translation. Günter Grass used to answer every question from the translators and he provided them with general instructions. Others, like Borges or Umberto Eco, gave their translators freedom and considered the translation a new product.

EVRI:

You have translated five novels by the renowned Lebanese writer Elias Khoury: *White Faces*, *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, *A Bundle of Secrets*, *Children of the Ghetto*, and now you just finished his new novel, *Stella Maris*, which is the second volume of *Children of the Ghetto*. How would you characterise the work with him?

SHENHAV-  
SHAHRABANI:

I am a captive translator, since I am honestly mesmerised by Elias Khoury’s novels. I am lucky to have a friendly relationship with him; it is an experience because he is not only a great writer and thinker but also a great man. By the way, he never provides his translators with textual stability. In the novels he wrote about Lebanon – such as *The Little Mountain*, *White Faces*, *The Journey of Little Gandhi*, *Yalu*, or *A Bundle of Secrets* – he held a mirror, in fact a broken mirror, up to a collapsing society during the civil war. In fact he has a novel

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titled *Broken Mirrors*.<sup>5</sup> Khoury's writing style is based on repetitions, as if the narrator needs them to prove that impossible things did happen. In a sequence of subsequent stories, he describes the dismantled and fragmented Beirut, the torn bodies, the ruined streets, and the crumbling houses. The stories unfold in a fragmented way, as reflected in a broken mirror. His Palestinian novels (*Bab al-Shams*, *Children of the Ghetto*, and *Stella Maris*) also consist of fragments and repetition, opening layers and circles that do not always close, but are reopened each time like petals. Khoury does not cling to the simple chronicle when telling stories, as he takes off on surprising flights into the past and the future, and it is not always clear which are "reality" and which "imagination", since they are often given similar status. Each novel is made up of multiple layers of space and time, entwined with the history and biography of the protagonist Adam Dannun as it moves in a time machine-like fashion between past and future, and parallel worlds. Khoury changes perspectives, lets unreliable narrators speak, and he points to the inability to tell a story. Actually, he experiments with the genre of the novel. Nevertheless, you submit yourself to the experience because you know that he is a skilful writer, and you trust him. You know that he knows what he is doing. This is part of his magic. I love translating him. Each time I receive a new novel by him, it is a celebration. Incidentally, Khoury is a strong supporter of BDS and is against normalisation with Israel. Yet, he makes a distinction between institutions that he boycotts, and individuals. He knows my political views and my position vis-à-vis the current Zionist establishment. He also does not boycott Palestinian citizens of Israel, who are integral part of the "Maktoob" project. I should also mention that he wants his novels to be read in Hebrew.

EVRI:

But Khoury cannot read the translation in Hebrew.

SHENHAV-

SHAHRAHANI:

That is half-true. In the beginning of the process Khoury asked me to show the translation to Anton Shammass, whom he trusted. And since then, I feel that Anton is standing behind my back watching the screen as I translate. You always need the significant other that you imagine watching your screen and telling you: "Ha, ha, ha, this is not the right way to do it!" Over time, Khoury gained trust in me and at times he behaves

like Borges. He tells me: “You are my voice.” He trusts me in a way that this whole discourse of loyalty versus betrayal (to the source, to the author) vanishes, and becomes unimportant. I mean, my relationship with Elias Khoury is not organised around fidelity or treason, but our position in a different matrix: of dialogue. Not only in the sense of conversation (remember that he is located in Beirut and me in Tel Aviv – not a trivial matter in terms of relationships), but in the sense of dialogue of circularity as an epistemology. This can allow us, also, to look back and examine the basic assumptions about translation.

EVRI: This might be too abstract for the readers. Can you provide us with an example?

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Look, Khoury’s writing in these novels places him within the Hebrew and the Israeli sphere, and as an anthropologist, he translates these imagined episodes for the Arabic readers. Usually the translator makes the leap to the author’s cultural context. In this case, my translation into Hebrew is a translation of a text that itself is already in the possession of a translation, in a fascinating role reversal where the source takes place in the space in which the translator lives. *Stella Maris* features scenes of Haifa life, exposing all forms of trickery employed in Haifa-themed literature, and chronicling the interplay of identities of a young Palestinian living in the Jewish state. The issue is not Khoury’s topographical knowledge, as he is equipped with Google Maps, and is well acquainted with the dimensions of the Benyamin Garden or the geography of the ghetto in *al-Lidd*. The matter is Khoury’s identity games, and the semiotic and semantic context of language, since much of the narrative in Arabic is originally written in his imagined Hebrew. When I approach these texts I actually do a reverse translation – which is a translation that produces lack and excess at the same time – from the imagined Hebrew of Khoury written in Arabic back to Hebrew.

EVRI: You were about to give an example of a dialogical process.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Yes, this role reversal is already a dialogue. The novel *Stella Maris* begins with a series of back-to-back linguistic and meta-literary questions: how can the absentees possibly write about a space and time from which they are removed? Do the absentees rely on those who have experienced and who recall those events in the first person? What happens to the

first person narrator when they are stripped of their story that is then handed over to that illusive third person presence? After translating into Hebrew the first chapter, which addresses these issues, I translated it again in “back translation” from the Hebrew to English, and Khoury was kind enough to provide me with editorial comments, which in turn helped revise and edit the Hebrew translation. By the way, the text appears in its English version in the *Journal of Levantine Studies* (Khoury 2019). I published it since there is not yet an English version of the novel.

EVRI: In this example, dialogue takes place in the final stage. Can you give us an example of an earlier stage in the translation process?

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: One evening, back when Khoury was still in the middle of writing *Stella Maris*, he called me and asked when the trips of Israeli students’ delegations to the Auschwitz concentration camp, or to the Warsaw Ghetto, started. I told him that to my knowledge, they started back in the 1990s, which he promptly dismissed. “Could they have started in the 1960s?” he enquired. He said to me: “Adam recalls going with a delegation to visit the Warsaw Ghetto.” I immediately told him that that would be highly unlikely, seeing as in 1965 there were no such trips to Poland; however, after a brief rummage through the archives, I came to realise that Adam was in fact telling the truth. Between 1963–1965, three delegations were sent over to visit the Warsaw Ghetto; a project hatched by ghetto survivor Fredka Mazia. And so, Mazia would later emerge as a (marginal) character in the novel. This story is important, not because we tried to make literature factual. This is not the point. The point is the dialogue, which yields not only the translation, but also sometimes feeds back into the source itself. How the translation, or the translator, writes back into the source. Now, I am not saying Elias Khoury needs me in order to know all these details. He can find them himself. The point is, I would say, the dialogue. These dialogues take us out of the straitjacket of fidelity versus treason – and all these concepts in translation theory, which suit monoglot readers rather than bi-national bilingual readers.

EVRI: It allows for a polyphony of voices.

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SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Exactly. For example, Khoury's narrator frequently opts for counterfactual thoughts and action – in defiance of reality – which point to a variety of possible versions of many events – an infinity of parallel mirrors reminiscent of Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths*. In this vein, Khoury outlines an array of possibilities, imagined in a polyphony of voices, and which indicate a multitude of authorities speaking in one's own literary theatre.

EVRI: Including the voice of the translator?

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Because he is so playful and I really admire his writing, I imitate him. It provides the translator with the freedom to present themselves. This is against the notion of the “invisible translator”, as Venuti coined it. In our case, the translator is not transparent. In the context of colonial relations, transparency is concealing. Khoury often uses meta-literary comments, which is sometimes surprising. He can describe an episode in which a character named Rima enters a bar or a nightclub and all of a sudden, unexpectedly, he writes: “By the way, Rima is the only character in this novel that does not live on Al-Hamra Street.” It is like “what?” This is something you do not find regularly in novels, where the narrator bursts into the text, presenting himself in such an unusual way. As a translator I sometimes imitate him. For instance, in one of the scenes where Adam professes his love for Rivka, he quotes an Arab love poem, “lam yuzidni al-wirdu illa ‘atashan” (“لم يزدني الورد إلا عطشاً”). Adam struggles to translate the line to Hebrew and, when failing to find an appropriate equivalence, decides to abandon the poem's translation altogether. Should the translator then translate the poem to Hebrew after all, or are they to leave it in its Arabic version, as unintelligible to the monoglot readers as it is to Rivka? In this instance, I opted to leave the poem in its Arabic version, transliterated in Hebrew without any translation, and even added a note in the text, which follows the same meta-translative register, indicating that the translator also chose to leave the line untranslated. In doing so, I was attempting to not only stay true to Adam's decision but to also make the translator a flesh-and-blood presence, a figure with a theoretical, cultural, and political agenda, thus breaking with a tradition in which the translator dons a proverbial invisibility cloak with the aim of producing a text so transparent, one would never know it is in



fact a translation. Uncloaking the hidden-absent translators and making them present in the text articulates the reality that translators do have an agenda that mediates the novel's transition from Arabic into Hebrew, and which is their ethical responsibility to reveal.

EVRI: This is fascinating, and I think that there is another dimension here, that has, of course, a political implication, in the sense of your dialogical relations with Elias Khoury. The two novels are written in Arabic, and as you mentioned some of the dialogues were in Hebrew. How does this affect the nature of translation?

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: This is a very good point because it also addresses the colonial relations between the languages. For example, in *Children of the Ghetto*, a Jewish-Israeli soldier shoots in the air above the head of the Palestinian doctor and he is frightened. And the soldier laughs and says (in literal translation): "He peed in his underpants!" This idiom, "He peed in his underpants", is written in Hebrew in Arabic transliteration. But in Hebrew it is idiomatic to use the term "he peed in his pants". Should we fix it? This may sound minor, but it indicates larger issues regarding the art of translation. What do you want to say? How do you want to present the author? I could not or would not aspire to ask Khoury about it. He would answer: "Go ask Adam. I don't know."

EVRI: This is an example of how linguistic idiosyncrasies put a barrier into the process.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: The idiosyncrasies of Arabic are heightened by Khoury's in-depth foray into language. Every so often, he will stop and turn to meta-linguistic terminology that demarcates how words, grammar and syntax ultimately all fall short. His intense preoccupation with language and even more so, language's language, forms a long and winding road, littered with linguistic, semantic, and discursive bumps and obstacles, which make the recreation of the novels in Hebrew all the more challenging. In one of the episodes, Adam lists to his girlfriend, Dalia, twenty synonyms for the word "love", found in the Arab dictionary. These are in fact the result of an act of translation within language itself. An attempt to endow each of these words with meaning via the dictionary results in a "dictionary loop", for the semantic fields in which they exist do not overlap

between the two languages, nor do they follow any form of hierarchy in Hebrew or Arabic. Unfortunately, in Hebrew you can find only six synonyms to the word “love”. There is no way of breaking this cyclical pattern without taking some arbitrary decision, seeing as every choice made leads to a simultaneous excess and lack. One’s only remaining option is to transliterate the Arabic words into Hebrew, and to decide arbitrarily what their Hebrew markers will be.

EVRI: Another issue that you are dealing with, which is, again, related to the colonial situation in Palestine-Israel, is the place-naming that was changed from Arabic to Hebrew. Are you going to use the Hebrew names that were formed post-1948, or do you use only the Arabic names, but then the Hebrew readers . . . ? So, can you tell us, because this is another political issue of language and colonial relations?

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: That’s an excellent question that juxtaposes the political and the literary. In 1949 the Israeli government renamed all the places on the map of Palestine, of historical Palestine. They converted the names of places from Arabic to Hebrew, and made them sound like biblical Hebrew. Sometimes there was a biblical source, sometimes there wasn’t, but this whole project of translation, of naming places on the map of the new-born state, is a huge project of translation, with colonialist assumptions. I am loyal to the Palestinian map prior to ’48. And I insist on bringing in the Palestinian names, except in cases where it really looks bizarre.

EVRI: Let us go back to your notion of bi-national team translation.  
 SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: We have three principles. First to base translation on teamwork, involving Jewish and Palestinian translators. Second, we juxtapose speech and text. And third as I said, we use translation as a paradigmatic model for a bi-national state. Here is a great example. We just published a collection of seventy-five stories of Palestinians from Israel and Palestinians from the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the diaspora, titled *Amputated Tongue*. Some of the writers are very young, some are older. On each story we work in a group of translators, in a team; and since, by the way, many of the texts that we receive in Arabic did not go through editing in the original – this is something that I don’t want to say in a harsh way, because I would sound like a colonialist – but many texts do not go through, in the original, a

process of editing. We did the editing on the ground, within the bi-national team. Let us imagine four people: two Palestinians and two Israeli Jews, working together – we create, within the translation room, a new version. We actually create a cloning, which then is sent to the author if the author can read Hebrew. Therefore, we are conducting a dialogue over several iterations of the translation. Translation that is fully loyal to the original might be a notary translation, not a literary translation.

EVRI: I want to go to another circle that we discussed, because the first translators in modern days, the end of the nineteenth century, from Arabic to Hebrew, were the Arab-Jews.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Whom you write about in your recent book *The Return to Al-Andalus* (Evri 2020)

EVRI: Yes, because they mix the oral and textual tradition – along the Andalusian tradition. They revived the Hebrew language as part of a modern bilingual Hebrew-Arabic languagescape. And, for them, it was a political project for a shared life in Palestine.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: And there is a very important point about that period also, that was still an option. The British colonisation of Palestine was not something that was determined, or overdetermined, but there were options.

EVRI: For a shared life. Mostly, at the end of the Ottoman Empire and the early Mandate, before the logic of partition became dominant. But another formative moment in the history of the Arab-Jewish translators was 1948 and early 1950s, when Arab-Jews (mostly Iraqi Jews, but not only) immigrated to Israel. Some of them were already writing in Arabic, poetry and prose, in their homelands and when they arrived to Palestine . . . or Israel, in the 1950s, they tried to continue writing in Arabic while refusing to change their writing language to Hebrew. In many ways, in your personal story, you are part of the second generation of these Arab-Jewish immigrants. In the 1950s and 1960s, I am talking about figures like Samir Naqqash, who continued writing in Arabic –

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: And Shimon Ballas!

EVRI: – Shimon Ballas, I think, has a pivotal role since he exemplifies the shift from Arabic to Hebrew. Shimon Ballas and Samir Naqqash of course always had a connection with Palestinian and Arab intellectuals and spoke Arabic.

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SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Shimon Ballas gave me as a gift my first book to read in Arabic. It was Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*. I asked him: "How can I learn Arabic really well?" He said: "Read, read, and read. Miles of reading. Just keep reading."

EVRI: It's interesting, because Shimon Ballas did the reverse process of yours. Because he came to Israel in the 1950s with Arabic and he, at a certain moment, understood that he needed . . . the only option for him to write –

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: To survive. . .

EVRI: – was to write in Hebrew. So, he tried to learn Hebrew, the same way you learned Arabic. And – put aside the Arabic for a moment – but even after the transition into writing in Hebrew we can find in his novels, quite strongly, the echoes and footprints of Arabic. In that way, similarly to the Maktoob translation project, in Ballas's literary work, the "natural" link between Hebrew literature and Israeli sovereign territory is challenged, and spaces and languages mingle anew.

SHENHAV-SHAHRABANI: Shimon Ballas was a model, for me, for both of us, for you too. Your master's thesis is about Shimon Ballas. He was a model for me. I received help from Shimon Ballas. But, at the time, I couldn't read, for example, Samir Naqqash. Samir Naqqash was adamant on writing in Arabic all his life, although he was only 13 when he came to Israel. He tried to escape and crossed the border several times to Lebanon and got arrested. Naguib Mahfouz said that Naqqash was the most interesting, deepest Arab-Jewish writer in modern history. He insisted on writing in Arabic here in the Tel Aviv area. But he had no reading community. Nobody could read him. And, today, the number of people who can read Samir Naqqash is vanishing, because he writes in juxtaposing dialects: Iraqi; and Fusha; and Lebanese; and Hindi – Indian; and Farsi. It is a melange of dialects, which is very hard to read. The Arab-Jewish option is an option that can be reproduced and materialise, if it is retained as a political option, a cultural option. People like Ella Shohat, Moshe Behar, Zvi Ben Dor, myself, and others – treat the "Arab-Jewish" option as a re-presentation rather than representation of identity. I think that re-presentation of the Arab-Jewish identity is a political horizon, particularly in the particular context of Israel, where there are, as we argued in the beginning, colonial

relationships between the languages, colonial relationships between different groups, and the colonisation of Palestine by the Zionist movement. For me, if we go back to “Maktoob”, “Maktoob” is a political project in that sense. If more and more Jews join our project, and start going back to Arabic, in many ways, in different ways, we can create something on the ground in the world itself, not only in literature. Literature, with all due respect, is important, we love literature, we use literature. But in a pragmatic way, this is also pragmatism, action in the world. We were two or three people when we started “Maktoob” and we are now a hundred people and I really hope that, when this hub grows larger, there is something significant. Because I think that, if 20 per cent of the Jews in Israel could read and speak Arabic, there would be a cultural and political revolution in Israel-Palestine. Maybe I am naïve.

## Notes

- 1 The conversation was conducted on 22 May 2019 and was transcribed on August 2019.
- 2 Yuval Evri is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at King’s College London. His research focuses on Arab-Jewish intellectual modern history, with a particular interest in the late Ottoman era and the Middle Eastern context.
- 3 Editorial comment: This refers to the Nation-State Bill or the Nationality Bill, which was adopted by the Israeli Knesset on 19 July 2018. It specifies that the state of Israel is the nation state of the “Jewish People”. Whereas up to this point the Arabic language was considered an official language side by side with Hebrew, the law specifies that, from now on, only the Hebrew language would be considered the official language of the state of Israel.
- 4 2015/01/08 “ذاكرة، سلمان ناطور باللغة العبرية: عن حياة وموت الشيخ مشفق الوجه” موقع هنا، <http://www.hona.co.il/article/9910>
- 5 *al-Maryta al-maksoura* (المرايا المكسورة: سينالكول) English translation: *Broken Mirrors: Sinocal*. Humphrey Davis, 2012.

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