

Voicing the Survivor of Those Unspeakable Sites: Translating Vladek Spiegelman¹

Martín Urdiales Shaw

University of Vigo, Spain
E-mail: urdiales@uvigo.es

Abstract

Drawing on the notion that Vladek's foreignized English in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is a pivotal feature of his identity as a Polish Jew and a survivor of the concentration camps, this essay explores the various strategies employed by different translators who have attempted to represent his voice across a range of Romance languages. The essay also examines how some aspects of Vladek's testimony defy the threshold of translatability, inherent as they are to a language unique to the *concentrationary universe*.

Keywords: *Maus*, Holocaust, testimony, foreignized English, (un)translatability

In an essay originally published in 1995, Alan Rosen considered the status of the English language² in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* volumes, perceptively arguing how it functions in a variety of ways in this nonfictional graphic novel. In formal terms, the most visible contrast here is between Vladek's 'foreignized' immigrant English – coloured by the cadences and structures of Polish and Yiddish – and the 'good' *Englishes* in the novel, which may correspond to American characters speaking their native tongue or, interestingly, to the Poles and Jews of the 1930s and 40s *including* Vladek, also speaking their native tongues. Within *Maus*, this second 'good' English, free of American idiom, operates as an *intratranslation*, for the sake of readability, of the source languages spoken by native speakers (Yiddish and Polish) and regularly characterizes Vladek's unmediated story as presented directly to the readers in dialogue balloons.³

Whenever *Maus* engages the present context of the interviews with Art, either in captions or in dialogue balloons, Vladek's English, now *as source language*, becomes foreignized through its Polish/ Yiddish features. This particular rationale in the use of English(es) needn't seem particularly strange to readers who are always aware of the duplex narrative unfolding in *Maus*, Vladek's European story (his memories of the war

¹ I am very grateful to Professor Alexis Nouss for his invitation to carry out preliminary research at Cardiff University, and for his enthusiastic response to the project of this essay and his insightful views into the themes of memory, testimony and translation.

² Alan Rosen, "The Language of Survival: English as Metaphor in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," in *Considering MAUS: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's 'Survivor's Tale' of the Holocaust*, ed. Deborah Geis (University of Alabama Press, 2003), 122-134.

³ Using a 'correct' English as an implicit translation of a natively spoken source language, thus stressing performance over code, is actually more logical than the peculiar convention by which a foreign accent is used not to indicate the non-nativeness of the speaker, but to identify the source language of his/her discourse. Classic examples would be certain World War II films where Nazi officials talk with German accents (in English or in the language into which the film is dubbed).

and the Holocaust) and Art's American story (the 'making of' *Maus* itself through interviews with his father and his own creative process). In fact, the linguistic marking/non-marking of Vladek's speech is a useful reminder of the narrative time frame. Yet, as Rosen has pointed out, there is an added dimension to Vladek's foreignized English: he is not the only survivor of the death camps living in 1970s New York, "but Spiegelman presents [these other émigrés— Mala, Pavel, Anja] as fluent in English, speaking like natives, virtually without accent" (129), thus erasing *for them* the linguistic singularity he preserves for Vladek. Spiegelman himself has underlined the centrality of Vladek's 'broken language' to *Maus*,⁴ and his emphasizing of Eastern European inflection in his father's speech was noted by Nancy K. Miller in relation to how the original Vladek tapescripts⁵ evidenced a fluency in English which hardly corresponds to the 'fractured', 'broken' textual rendering of the character's English in the *Maus* balloons.⁶ Following up on Miller's point, Michael Rothberg confirms Vladek's English in *Maus* as "the artist's reconstruction of a marked dialect."⁷ Thus, this alteration of Vladek's English into an exaggeratedly 'broken' or 'fractured' discourse has been interpreted not just in relation to his identity or background, but, also, in a thought-provoking way, to a defamiliarization of English as the (only?) adequate way to convey the Holocaust testimony. Backing his argument on Sidra DeKoven's views on the historical remoteness of English to the world of the concentration camps⁸ and its intrinsic correlation, for camp inmates, with freedom, purity and civilization⁹, Rosen notes that "this quality of foreignness is the means by which English can become a language of testimony [...] Spiegelman uses it to convey the foreignness of the Holocaust itself."¹⁰

Establishing a 'taxonomy' of languages based on their degree of relevance to the Holocaust, inevitably generates a complex arena for translation practices of *Maus*, all the more fascinating given the variety of languages into which *Maus* has been translated. Immediate questions arise: Is the target language more or less 'foreign' than standard English to the Holocaust experience? If the target language is as foreign as English, or more, must Vladek's English speech also be foreignized in translation? Drawing on the various issues noted above by Miller, Rothberg and Rosen together with the author's own admission that he emphasized the foreignness of his father's speech, it

⁴ Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* (New York: Pantheon, 2011), 155.

⁵ The tapescripts were made public at New York's *MoMA* exhibit in 1991-2 and are now available as transcribed text in *MetaMaus*, 237-277.

⁶ Nancy Miller, "Cartoons of the Self: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Murderer – Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's 'Survivor's Tale' of the Holocaust*, ed. Deborah Geis (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 55.

⁷ Michael Rothberg, "'We Were Talking Jewish': Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as 'Holocaust' Production," *Considering MAUS: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's 'Survivor's Tale' of the Holocaust*, ed. Deborah Geis (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 145.

⁸ Sidra DeKoven, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 11-12.

⁹ English was the main language of the Allies and represented the national identity of the only two countries in the conflict which did not endure German occupation, Great Britain and the United States.

¹⁰ Rosen, "The Language of Survival," 129. Rosen's argument applies to the mediated narrative, which in the Auschwitz and end of war chapters (*Maus* II, chs. 1 to 4) is usually presented through captions, and occasionally interposed present-time panels showing Vladek *telling* Art. Granting that the mediated narrative predominates here over direct speech acts in the past frame (i.e., in 'good' English) the claim that the Holocaust is textually represented in *Maus* only through a 'foreignized' English is somewhat overstating the case.

seems of course that rendering this particular feature of Vladek's speech is fundamental to his characterization in *Maus* as a Polish Jew and a Holocaust survivor, and thus should be contemplated in translation. The question that now immediately arises is *how*. Which strategies, features or conventions can the translator employ to make the target language reflect this sense of foreignization, while making Vladek's speech both acceptable and intelligible to target readers?

Let's begin by examining closely the features of Vladek's English, along with its ethnocultural implications. It must be insisted upon that Vladek's speech in *Maus*, even with its exaggeration vis-à-vis his real voice in the tapescripts, is a perfectly understandable English, which at most takes the form of a "marked dialect" in Rothberg's terms. It must be stressed that Vladek does not speak a "primitive" or a pidgin-like variety of English, and furthermore, that his speech actually extends a convention employed by 20th century American Jewish writers, in depicting Jewish émigrés from Eastern Europe, characters who, in these fictions, are also frequently modelled on the authors' parents. To quote a representative few, writers as varied as Henry Roth, Bernard Malamud, Grace Paley or Tillie Olsen, employ such linguistic registers in giving voice to fathers, mothers and aunts in novels and stories which have a strong autobiographical component. The register may vary from standard American English in intensity or in the number of non-normative features involved, but it is *qualitatively* recognizable as the English of Eastern European Jews who emigrated to America –particularly New York– as adults, and whose 'old country' languages were Polish or Russian, and Yiddish (the *mama loshen*) at home or in the *shtetl*. In dialogues involving these characters, none of these American Jewish writers needs to warn American readers –and neither does Spiegelman– of the idiosyncrasies of their speech, partly because American fiction has a long standing tradition of the vernacular (Mark Twain, William Faulkner), so characters are expected, in fictional dialogues, to speak the particular kind of English which identifies their cultural, regional or ethnic background.

In linguistic terms, and turning now specifically to Vladek's case, these features include changes in word order such as the fronting of adverbs or other complements ("Only she talks about money", 69;¹¹ "I have for you a warmer [coat]", 71), confusion of modal verbs, misconstrued impersonal clauses (*It was for there was/were*), misuse of *what* for *that* in relative clauses, confusions of determiners with [C] / [U] nouns (*much* for *many* / *a lot of*), and misuse of prepositions. There are no lexical errors and no mistakes in the use of verbal tenses per se –excluding usage of modals– and a large percentage of Vladek's utterances only diverge from the norm in no more than one or two of the six features just quoted, while a significant number of his utterances occur in perfect English. As critics have noted, the general *effect* of Vladek's English –this marked dialect– is to remind readers of the significance of his identity as a Polish Jew and concentration camp survivor, but when he is not relaying his 'survivor's tale', Vladek's language actually shows a marked assimilation to American culture ("It looks on you like a million dollars!" 71; "You know...the big-shot cartoonist", 135).

¹¹ All ensuing references of this kind (a page number and no title) will refer to *The Complete Maus*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

Translating Vladek: the Survivor

In the following, I will be examining some of the major approaches to the translation of Vladek in *Maus* into four chief romance languages: Spanish, Portuguese, French and Italian, principally focusing on (a) the translators' (non) responsiveness to Vladek's 'foreignized' discourse as a relevant feature of *Maus*; (b) where applicable, the overall effect of transforming Vladek's discourse in the target language, and (c) other ways through which translators might alert readers to the implications of the various linguistic registers in the original *Maus*. This examination involves more translations of *Maus* than it does languages, since in the case of Spanish and Portuguese multiple versions exist, including three Iberian versions, an Argentinian version, and three versions in Portuguese, one in Peninsular, and two in Brazilian Portuguese.

The very first Spanish translation of *Maus* was published only three years after Spiegelman's original *Maus I* appeared in 1986, and thus only covers the *Maus I* volume, in an equivalent paperback format (henceforth *Sp Maus a*). Although the last page publicizes *Maus II* as 'coming soon', this would never happen under this press or with this translator. The press, *Norma Editorial*, based in Barcelona, is a well-established press specializing in the publication of comics and graphic novels in Spain since the political transition into democracy in the 1970s. The text was produced in agreement with Argentinian *Muchnik Editores*, and its translator was Eduardo Goligorsky, an Argentinian émigré who fled the military dictatorship in 1976 and settled in Barcelona. In relation to Vladek's language, Goligorsky's translation into Spanish illustrates one of the twelve 'deforming tendencies' that Antoine Berman listed in relation to translation practices, that of the 'effacement of the superimposition of languages' in novels where there is a "relation between dialect and a common language."¹² Thus, Vladek in the first volume of *Maus* is given the same neutral Spanish register than his son Art or any other character. I was able to interview Eduardo Goligorsky¹³ who, at 81, is still active as a political commentator for an online journal, regarding the possible significance of his Jewish background to his involvement with *Maus* and his translation strategies, including his neutralization of Vladek's discourse. Goligorsky's feedback was in a sense, not surprising: his parents were Argentinian-born, fully assimilated Jews, and he declared himself an atheist whose involvement with Jewish culture was limited to translation jobs. The *Maus* translation, he explained, was a personal request by general editor Mario Muchnik, but he noted he wouldn't have approached Nazism –or any other 20th century genocide– through this kind of genre. Goligorsky was adamant in asserting that he was firmly set against notions of cultural and political identity. As he provided no feedback on the issue of Vladek's English and its translation challenges, my intuition is that, if he did notice it, he would have found it an irrelevant feature to the quality or success of his translation task, undertaken more as textual 'transcription' than a rewriting or recreation shaped by personal involvement.

¹² Among others, Berman cites the translation into French of Valle Inclán's novel *Tirano Banderas*, in which Iberian (Castilian) Spanish interacts and coexists productively with various forms of Latin American Spanish in ways that are relevant to the source text, while "the French text is completely homogenous, the translator [not having] confronted the problem" (295). See Antoine Berman, "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign" (1985), in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London/New York: Routledge, 2000) 284-297.

¹³ Email interview conducted on 20 September 2012.

This seems to be borne out both by his detached approach to the *Maus* text and his indifference to Jewishness, as well as his overall position on cultural identities.

The next edition of *Maus* in Spanish was produced by *Emecé Editores* of Argentina (henceforth *Sp Maus b*): both volumes of *Maus* were published, as separate paperbacks, in 1994, three years after Spiegelman's *Maus II* was published. The translation for the two volumes was commissioned to another Argentinian, the fiction writer César Aira, who used Argentinian Spanish, but made the same choice as Goligorsky in not giving Vladek a distinct linguistic register, again 'effacing' his super-imposed idiom.

Crucial problems emerge in the adaptation of Vladek's English to a register in Spanish that might have somehow *re-presented* Vladek's identity as Polish Jew / Holocaust survivor in this target language. In the case of the Spanish language, these problems may relate to marketplace demands and the geographical diversity of readerships. Translation has a business basis, and the larger the prospective market for a translated text, the better for the press in possession of the rights. Potential readerships of *Maus* in Spanish are both in Spain and Latin America, and although any Spaniard can communicate and be understood by a Mexican or Argentinian and viceversa, this does not imply that they are speaking languages with identical sociocultural and historical backgrounds.¹⁴ It is highly doubtful that endowing Vladek with a differentiating linguistic register in a Spanish translation would have the same implications for readers on both sides of the Atlantic, or that it would work well with either readership. For one thing, how can Vladek's émigré status be conveyed appropriately for readers in Spain, when this country, unlike the US or Argentina, has been throughout most of the 20th century, a nation of emigrants rather than immigrants, and a largely isolated country where no national or ethnic groups have entered large enough to have acquired and 'foreignized' Spanish in a specific way? From the opposite shore, the case might seem simpler: Argentina, like the US, has largely been a country of immigrants throughout the 20th century, with large inputs of Italian, Spanish, or Eastern European Jewish immigration, etc. Vladek's discourse might be made to reflect the 'foreignized' identity of the emigré for Argentinian readers aware of their country's cultural diversity, but would this discourse work well with other Latin American readerships? The *Emecé Editores* edition is originally Argentinian, but subsequent reprints were produced in Mexico under *Editorial Planeta Mexicana*, which indicates this edition's potential marketplace is all of Latin America. Mexican or Chilean readers of *Maus* will recognise Aira's language as Argentinian Spanish (not exactly 'theirs', but largely 'domestic' and expressive of a significant literary tradition), but they would not necessarily recognise a linguistic register construed as foreign vis-à-vis a specifically Argentinian sociocultural context.

It is illuminating to compare these earlier softcover editions of the *Maus* volumes with the translation strategies employed after 1997, when *The Complete Maus* was published as a hardback compilation of both volumes. Under the simplified title *Maus*, two Spanish versions of *The Complete Maus* were issued, both by large, highly commercial publishing conglomerates: *Planeta-DeAgostini*, in 2001, translated by

¹⁴ On the interrelations between translation, power, ideology and cultural contexts of reception, see Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, eds., *Translation, History and Culture* (London/New York: Pinter, 1990), Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (London: Routledge, 1996), and Lawrence Venuti, ed., *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Roberto Rodríguez and *Reservoir Books*, a division of *Random House Mondadori*, in 2007, translated by Cruz Rodríguez (henceforth *Sp Maus c* and *Sp Maus d*). Unlike Aira and Goligorsky, both these translators opted for a visibilization of Vladek's register in rendering him in Spanish. Now, in view of the above discussion, and taking into account that these are influential publishing houses with extensive world-wide distribution, it seems reasonable to surmise that these translators could not endow Vladek with a linguistic register that would be culturally-bound or culturally relevant to a specific community in the Hispanophone world. Instead, they took what might seem a more neutral, linguistically-bound strategy: to 'transfer' the actual agrammaticality of Vladek's English into Spanish usage, a strategy which is explained, although in different ways, in these editions' Notes:

Nota sobre la traducción: En el texto original inglés, la forma de hablar de Vladek traiciona [sic] su origen polaco mediante un inglés defectuoso. Para la presente edición, no queríamos perder este rasgo tan característico del personaje y, con ese fin, se han utilizado recursos propios de la lengua española. Es por eso que dicho personaje confunde, en nuestra versión, los modos verbales, los géneros y los usos de ser y estar o de las preposiciones, por ejemplo. (*Sp Maus c*; 'front matter' page)

* Vladek todavía comete errores al hablar inglés, sobre todo en los tiempos verbales y el uso de las preposiciones. (N. de la T.)

(*Sp Maus d*; p.13, note to Vladek's first words in English)

Although both editions offer an explanation to the Spanish construction of Vladek's discourse, there are crucial and symptomatic differences. The RH / Mondadori translator, Cruz Rodríguez, footnotes the character's first words to his son Art, with the explanation "Vladek still makes mistakes when speaking English, particularly in verbal tenses and the use of prepositions" (*Sp Maus d*), a translator's note which directs the Spanish reader to the source text rather than to the strategies she will employ in translating Vladek. The note for the Planeta edition (*Sp Maus c*), is worth examining at length. It is inserted in a front matter page saturated with texts, amid paragraphs expressing Spiegelman's acknowledgements, names of people involved in the book's production, copyright information, the publisher's legal information, and a disclaimer. Even though written in italics, it is hard to locate. But more remarkable is the fact that it is not written in good Spanish, inadequately employing the verb "*traiciona [su origen polaco]*" trying to mean "giving away [his Polish origin]". In its figurative sense, the verb *traicionar* implies simulation or pretense (of feelings, a state of mind, etc) and thus cannot be complemented by *origen* in this context. The mix-up here is with the verb *delatar*, which can be used figuratively to mean "give away" or "inadvertently reveal", as in *su acento norteamericano le delató* ("his American accent gave him away"). This statement is all the more nonsensical, given that Vladek as a character is never construed as aspiring to conceal his Polish /Jewish origins in the US. The defective expression, the location of the "Note", and the devices used to mask its authorship¹⁵ lead me to conclude that this paratext was appended at a late stage of printing production, probably not phrased or checked by the translator himself: throughout the

¹⁵ Plural forms and impersonal clauses are used ("no queríamos"; "se han utilizado"; "nuestra versión"), while the wording "Nota sobre la Traducción" reads as *Note on the Translation*, rather than the more standard *Translator's Note*.

volume there is another instance of this.¹⁶ What the note does clarify, too candidly, is the strategy used in the recreation of Vladek's register in Spanish, by means of this language's "own resources" (*recursos propios*), such as "[the character's confusion] of verbal modes, gender [markers], use of *ser* and *estar* or of prepositions". This translation thus openly admits to locating the actual *divergence* from the grammatical norm in the Spanish language rather than in the Vladek's utterances, a strategy not dissimilar to Cruz Rodríguez's in the 2007 version, although she does not make it explicit.

In both translations, it is the normative employment of certain structures or constructions in Spanish which actually *determine* Vladek's misuse of language, regardless of his actual linguistic competence in the English original; for example, the correct clause "He was a communist!" (28) becomes the incorrect "Estaba un comunista!" (*Sp Maus c*, 28) and, similarly, "Here is the door..." (136) is transformed into the incorrect usage "Ahí es la puerta" (*Sp Maus d*, 136). The problem with such a strategy is two-fold: (i) the translation no longer "matches" the particular instances of Vladek's foreignized register, but starts following the 'discursive' rules of Spanish; (ii) the actual type of error chosen is too bound to basic lack of competence in Spanish. As one distinctive feature, both translators chose the *ser* / *estar* confusion (in *Sp Maus d* occasionally also *haber* / *estar*) to characterize Vladek's register. In Spanish, the *ser* / *estar* mix-up is an error symptomatic of an entirely different condition of linguistic competence, that of a speaker learning the language. The correct use of *ser* and *estar* is usually achieved in a short time through immersion in a Spanish-speaking community, so it is inadequate for a character who is not learning the language, but a long-established emigré. In general terms, both Spanish and Hispanic readerships would interpret this feature as identifying a visiting foreigner rather than a largely assimilated immigrant. Another unfortunate effect derives from the two points noted: since constructions with *ser* and *estar* are so recurrent in the Spanish language, the translations may incur in an overflow of tiring, defective speech which bears no correspondence to the rhythms of the original. This is patent in *Maus I*, chapter 6 of *Sp Maus d*, which systematically alters all of Vladek's constructions with *ser* (and some with impersonal *haber*) to *estar*, and conversely, all forms with *estar* to *ser*, totalling over twenty ungrammatical utterances, concentrated in short page intervals (see *Sp Maus d*, 148-161). At this very point (*Maus I*, chapter 6) the translator in *Sp Maus c* seems aware of the excess generated from systematizing the error, and chooses only a few occurrences, six, of *ser* / *estar* in Vladek's speech to locate the mistakes, allowing the rest to remain correct.

Greater success is achieved through the other foreignizing strategy, that related to verb formation. In this field, it must be recalled that Vladek's English is only defective in the use of modal verbs like *should*, confusion of *-ing* with *to* + [INF] clauses ("You don't know counting pills", 32), or in omitting the *do* auxiliary in questions. As regards the use of present, past or future tenses his linguistic competence is perfect, and

¹⁶ A recruitment notice by the Reich, drawn in gothic script by Spiegelman, was unwarrantedly intervened in the Planeta edition, where the print type was normalized and a concordance error was made in Spanish ("Se necesita trabajadores" *Sp Maus c*, 56; correct form: *necesitan*). It is highly unlikely that the translator was responsible for this particular text and its error. Like some other fusions of text and artwork in *Maus*, the gothic lettering is a relevant feature, which all later translations maintained, in that it relays, *across languages*, the referential attributes of the sign's inherent language, German, as the language of power, instruction and oppression.

consequently, most of his utterances are correct. In terms of strict equivalence, transferring these types of verbal errors into Spanish is virtually impossible, since two of the features mentioned (*do* auxiliary, modal verbs) are inexistent or irrelevant in Spanish, while impersonal clauses function differently. On the other hand, adopting a broader perspective on equivalence, transferring Vladek's verbal errors to the realm of verbal conjugation, which is the natural site of errors for foreign learners of Spanish (or of other romance languages) can be a risky choice if not well measured.¹⁷

But both translators of the *Maus* Spanish editions actually limit Vladek's conjugation errors to specific types of clause in Spanish, those introduced with the relative *que*, either introducing a subordinate clause or in the structure *tener que* (have to) + [INF] . In such clauses, Roberto Rodríguez (*Sp Maus c*) has Vladek habitually use present indicative mode instead of the correct subjunctive form (“no quiero que lo escribes en tu libro”, 25; “para que se esconden” 156; correct forms: *escribas*, *escondan*) and also has him misconstrue *tener que* + [INF] clauses, by wrongly conjugating the second verb (“tengo que lucho para salvarme”, 28; “tuve que ponía todo en orden” 161; correct usage: *luchar*, *poner*). For her part, Cruz Rodríguez (*Sp Maus d*) generally has Vladek use conditional tenses, instead of the correct subjunctive, in these environments (“no quiero que lo pondrías en el libro”, 25 ; “Esperamos a que llegaría el día”; correct forms: *pongas*, *llegara*), although there are also occasional present indicative / subjunctive mix-ups (“Basta que le dirijo la palabra...” 136; correct form: *dirija*)

Although they unavoidably involve different features of the verbal system in relation to English, both strategies are effective in that, by being circumscribed to *que* clausal environments and the complex use of the subjunctive, they *reproduce* the intensity and proportion of Vladek's verbal errors in English. More importantly, this type of error is indicative of an advanced level of competence, as evidence shows that foreigners long-established in Spain, who speak Spanish well, have enduring problems with subjunctive usage, while natives of some regions in Spain (typically, Basque speakers) actually misuse conditional for subjunctive tenses in real conversation, as in Cruz Rodríguez's version of Vladek (*Sp Maus d*), which thus has a preexistent cultural model. This particular type of error alone, combined with occasional prepositional mistakes, would have sufficed to represent Vladek's speech adequately within Spanish, both quantitatively and qualitatively, as a balanced equivalent of his foreignized English.

In other romance languages, such as Portuguese and French, the adaptation of Vladek's register in translation –when implemented– never tends to such radical transformations. I will examine these more cursorily, and without the above attention to detail, given that these are languages I can read and understand in a large degree, but can never presume to assess as a native speaker.¹⁸ Of the three Portuguese editions, two produced in Brazil, one in Portugal, and all featuring different translators, the early *Editores Brasileira* version (*Maus I*, 1986; *Maus II*, 1995) by Ana Maria de Souza Bierrenbach, and the Peninsular DIFEL volumes (*Maus I*, 1999; *Maus II*, 2001), by Jose

¹⁷ The Galician translation of *Maus*, which makes the Vladek character into a “primitive” speaker, is a paradigmatic example. See my extended review “O *Maus* galego no contexto doutras traducións,” *Viceversa* 16 (2010): 247-57.

¹⁸ I am particularly grateful to Professor Rui Carvalho Homem and Dr. Burghard Baltrusch for their very helpful comments on Portuguese usage.

Vieira de Lima, resemble the early Spanish editions by Goligorsky and Aira, in not attempting to adapt Vladek's register, or marking his speech as foreignized in any way.

An analogy with the history of translations into Spanish seems apparent, since the later Portuguese version of *The Complete Maus*, the Brazilian *Maus: História Completa* (henceforth *Pt Maus*), by the publisher *Companhia das Letras* (São Paulo, 2005) does, like the two omnibus Spanish versions, attempt an adaptation of Vladek's foreignized register into the Portuguese language, again by means of a linguistically-bound standardized notion of the 'foreigner', rather than a cultural model. This translation also locates some of Vladek's errors in verbal usage –and others in gender concordance—but these are generally limited to a misuse of infinitives for the imperfect past tense (“Eu morar”, *Pt Maus* 14 for *Eu morava...*) the survivor employs to tell his story, whereas use of other tenses seems correct throughout. In essence, although Vladek embodies a somewhat stereotyped vision of foreignness, and, again, his performance no longer matches the specific 'foreignized' utterances in the source language (being dictated by the target language discourse) the scope and type of his ungrammatical Portuguese is quantitatively well calibrated and does not incur in the excesses or incoherences, regarding competence, of Vladek's renderings into Spanish.

For the French language, there is only one translated version, that of the publishers' *Flammarion*, who first released the *Maus I* and *Maus II* volumes as separate paperbacks (in 1987 and 1992) and a few years later issued *The Complete Maus* under the very literal title *Maus: L'Intégrale* (1998; henceforth *Fr Maus*). The translator into French, Judith Ertel, does adapt Vladek's foreignized register into French by using a rather elegant and simple solution. Ertel entirely avoids the pitfalls of verbal conjugation as a site for Vladek's agrammatical usage, and focuses instead on echoing the syntactic structure, transferring into French Vladek's emphatic Yiddish-English utterances with complement preceding subject or with anteposed adverbs. Ertel's adaptation is careful to antepose the whole complement (or the adverb) to a position which does not violate the French language's basic syntax, while paralleling, on an individual basis, Vladek's word order: “It's a shame Françoise also didn't come” (13) becomes *Dommage Françoise aussi n'est pas venue* (*Fr Maus* 11) the relocated adverb *aussi* occupying the same position as “also” in the English original (instead of clause-final). Similarly, “A wire hanger you give him!” (13) becomes *Un cintre en fer, tu lui donnes!* (*Fr Maus* 11) reflecting exactly the whole anteposed verbal complement, but not interfering with the internal word order of the noun phrase (*cintre en fer*: wire hanger). The strategy is generally efficient in that it never compromises the readability of the French text, but at the same time construes a French with a certain quaintness, certainly not that of a native or standard speaker. On the other hand, by focusing solely on one strategy, and disregarding other aspects of Vladek's misusage (i.e., modal verbs, prepositions, relatives...) while not including “new” errors relevant to the target language only (like gender concordance), the translator ensures both a coherence of the register within the target language and a qualitative equivalence with the source language.

I would like to draw this section on 'translating Vladek' to a close, by focusing now on the significant exception of Cristina Previtali, a translator of *Maus* who shows an unprecedented awareness to the significance of Vladek's foreignized register and the importance of rendering it in translation. Previtali was responsible for the Italian

translation¹⁹ of *The Complete Maus*, published by *Einaudi* under the simplified title *Maus* in 2000 (henceforth *It Maus*). Among the Romance languages, this is the only translation of *Maus* which (a) explicitly visibilizes the translator's concern with the survivor's discourse as an indicator of cultural identity and geographical background, and (b) transcends other attempts at target language adaptation through solely linguistic / grammatical means, to construct, instead, a *culturally-bound model* of foreignization that can be specifically relevant to an Italian readership. Previtali was so sensitive to this issue that the Italian *Maus* includes a page-long *Translator's Note*, in which she not only describes the Polish and Yiddish elements²⁰ of Vladek's language, but also states:

La presente traduzione di *Maus* é stata realizzata nell'intento di trasmettere al pubblico italiano ... la vasta gamma di sensazioni che il testo in lingua originale suscita nel lettore.

[...]

Il maggior problema, riscontrato a monte della traduzione in italiano, è dipeso dalla mancata cristallizzazione, nel nostro paese, di un linguaggio parallelo alla parlata ebraico-newyorkese. Pertanto, al fine di ottenere un effetto simile a quello provocato nel lettore americano, si è affrontato il lavoro analizzando conversazioni di persone linguisticamente affini a Vladek ma residenti in Italia ed esaminando strutture grammaticali e sintattiche di alcune lingue slave.

(*It Maus* 15)

Previtali's wording here is interesting. She notes that no equivalent of "New York Jew" speech (*parlata ebraico-newyorkese*) has actually developed – 'cristallized'— in Italy (*mancata cristallizzazione*), fully aware of the absence of a similar process. Her translation strategy is the most challenging of all the romance languages. Instead of trying to replicate Vladek's foreignized English within Italian language structures, her model is culturally bound to Italy and adopts a sociolinguistic approach: the examination of Eastern European immigrant speech in Italy, and of grammatical and syntactic structures of the Slavic languages.

Untranslatable Vladek: Auschwitz and Beyond.

In the seminal essay "The Task of the Translator", Walter Benjamin spoke of translation as a site or "region" in which the original "rises into a higher and purer linguistic air", and enters a "realm of reconciliation and fulfilment of languages [although] the transfer can never be total."²¹ In these pages, Benjamin's philosophical approach actually deals with the ontological status of the translated text vis-à-vis the original, in terms of the former's providing a particular "realization" of the latter, so that "unlike the words of the original [the translation] is not translatable, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation."²² I would like to propose that these ideas can actually be redeployed to talk not about the 'limits' or

¹⁹ An earlier Italian translation exists of *Maus I* and *Maus II* as separate volumes by Carano Ranieri (*Milano Libri Edizioni*, 1989; 1992). The publisher is no more, and I was unable to locate this edition for the present essay.

²⁰ In relation to Yiddish terms common to American English usage (*meshugga*, *bagel*, *gefilte*, *oy*, etc) Previtali justifies non-translation on the basis that these "endow the text with cultural connotations" she wants to preserve. See part two of this article on Vladek's untranslatability.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti. (London/ New York: Routledge, 2000), 19.

²² Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," 19.

‘potential’ of translation (Benjamin’s original context) but also to illuminate its reverse notion, *untranslatability*. While, as we have seen above, most of Vladek’s English discourse in *Maus* is defined by a foreignized register, variously reckoned with (or not) by its several translators, there comes a point in Vladek Spiegelman’s account where certain German words are used in the original –paralleling the translingual, but *also* German, title-word “Maus”—and are to be preserved as such, not translated. These are words which speak not so much of the survivor, but of the site he has survived: Auschwitz (*Maus II*, chapter 2: 199-234). Since Vladek is a perfectly competent speaker in semantic terms (i.e., he has no trouble with finding words) Art’s preservation of Vladek’s German words cannot draw attention to his lack of competence. Neither can these words draw attention to the German language itself, used as they are, pointedly and isolatedly, after almost 200 pages, at a specific point of the account. Rather, these words draw attention to what was originally defined by David Rousset as *l’univers concentrationnaire*,²³ a “self-contained world which both generated its own vocabulary and invested common language with new, sinister meanings.”²⁴ This particular idiom within a language, simultaneously German and not German, often academically labelled “Nazi-Deutsch”²⁵ has been well described by Sidra DeKoven as a “perverse rhetoric that signified the collective actions of the National Socialists [characterized by] the incompatible goals of maintaining precise written records of Nazi deeds while camouflaging them in euphemism for the outside world”²⁶ and has been the object of enquiry of a number of survivors, critics and commentators of the Holocaust since the 1950s.²⁷ These terms are actually not numerous in the Auschwitz chapter: *Appel* (210 ss), *Selektion/s* (218, 219, 227), *Blocksperrre* (219, 227) and *Bettnachzieher* (227). In Benjaminian terms, they would all illustrate, in several ways, a relationship between content and language which is absolute and inextricable, and, as a consequence, where the transfer potential into another language becomes zero. Transplantation into “a realm of reconciliation and fulfilment of languages” is impossible, because the words *defy* rational reinscription beyond the *natural sites* of Nazi-Deutsch, namely the concentration camps. Because these words signify horror euphemistically or convey an absurd systematization, the very act of their translation into another language would immediately drain them of at least part of their meaning. For the sake of argument, consider briefly rendering *Appel* and *Selektion* in English (or for that matter, Spanish or French). Terms available to illustrate the functional, surface meanings abound in these languages: *roll-call / summons*, *selection / choice* (Spanish: *llamada / convocatoria, selección*; French: *appel*²⁸, *choix, sélection*), but can any of these terms fully convey the macabre implications of *Appel*, which as Vladek tells Art, was the routine

²³ David Rousset, *L’univers concentrationnaire* (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1994).

²⁴ DeKoven, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature*, 10.

²⁵ At educational or more informal levels also “German of the Camps” (see, for example, webpages on Jewish heritage or genealogy like www.jewishgen.org)

²⁶ DeKoven, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature*, 11.

²⁷ Early essays: Nachman Blumenthal, “On the Nazi vocabulary,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 1(1957): 49-66, Shaul Esh, “Words and their Meanings: 25 examples of Nazi idiom,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 5 (1963): 133-68; Book chapters: George Steiner’s *Language and Silence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), 136-151; Berel Lang’s “Language and Genocide,” in *Act & Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, 81-102 (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Primo Levi’s “Communication” in *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus, 1989), 76-8. Books: Victor Klemperer’s *LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii. The Language of the Third Reich*, trans. Martin Brady (London: The Athlone Press, 2000).

²⁸ The french *appel* can both refer to a polite invitation or to a summons.

procedure of “count[ing] the live ones and the dead ones to see [there weren’t] any missing”? (210). Similarly, can any translation of *Selektion* fully represent the process by which “each day ... the doctors chose out the weaker ones to go and die”? (218). Consider, for example, the benignly egalitarian connotation of the words *choice* and *selection* in contemporary English: “you have to make a choice” or “a selection of the best wines”, etc. It is only within Nazi-Deutsch or “German of the Camps” that words like *Selektion* and *Appel* can maintain their full, unspeakable implications of ruling over human life and death. In yet another way, the term *Blocksperr*e becomes untranslatable because of its inherent and exclusive relevance to Birkenau, site of the gas chambers and crematoria. The term functionally translates as “Close barracks!”, but its meaning centrally *includes* the agonistic moment when all prisoners return to these cabins prior to an apparently random choice of the barracks to be emptied of inmates, then collectively transported to a *Selektion*. In *Maus*, during a *Blocksperr*e, Vladek avoids a *Selektion* by hiding in the toilets (227). Without knowledge of the two Nazi-Deutsch terms, this very sentence would require extensive paraphrasing in any language, including contemporary German. Primo Levi was particularly sensitive to the issue of an *un-German* ‘German’, when he accounts for the fourth term under consideration, *Bettnachzieher*, in *The Drowned and the Saved*. Levi offers a fuller explanation than Vladek’s quasi-comical version in *Maus*, which actually fails to fully portray the utter absurdity of this task (“a ‘bed-after-puller’ ... after everybody fixed their bed we came to fix better so the straw looked square”, 227):

...[I]n every barracks there existed a pair of functionaries, the *Bettnachzieher* (“bed-after-pullers,” a term I believe does not exist in normal German, and that Goethe certainly would not have understood) whose task it was to check every single bed and then take care of its transversal alignment. (...) [T]hey were equipped with a string the length of the hut: they stretched it over the made-up beds, and rectified to the centimeter any possible deviations. Rather than a cause of torment, this maniacal order seemed absurd and grotesque: in fact, the mattress levelled out with so much care had no consistency whatever, and ... under the body’s weight, it immediately flattened down to the slats that supported it. In point of fact, one slept on wood.²⁹ (my italicized clause)

Although total untranslatability in *Maus* is closely linked to these terms as essential markers of Nazi-Deutsch within the concentrationary universe, there are also a few other instances of Vladek’s *récit* which evidence the perception that a concept cannot be easily rendered in translation beyond its home territories. In 1943, before his Auschwitz experience, in the context of hiding from forced evacuations by German soldiers and negotiating security among the Poles in the Srodula ghettos, Vladek tells Art:

Vladek: “Always Haskel was such a guy: a *kombinator*.”

Art: “A what?”

Vladek: “A guy what [*sic*] makes *kombinacja*, a schemer...a crook.” (118)

Shortly, Vladek’s account continues through captions, “Haskel had two brothers, Pesach and Miloch. Pesach was also a *kombinator*, but Miloch, he was a fine fellow” (119). Clearly Vladek struggles to find a precise English equivalent, but the term eludes a straightforward transference into (his) English and entails clarification or periphrasis.

²⁹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 94.

To answer his son, Vladek first deviates to the noun variant *kombinacja*, which clarifies nothing, and then tentatively adds “schemer” or “crook”. But still these English terms seem only to convey partial meanings of *kombinator*, and, unsatisfied, Vladek recovers the Polish term subsequently (119). That the term is expressive and highly significant to Polish culture, as a nation of survivors, is suggested by the variety of dictionary entries with the same root in a Polish dictionary.³⁰ Its very polysemy is played out in the diverse approaches to translating Vladek’s explanation-reply: in Spanish, “un maquinador” (*Sp Maus a*); “hacía kombinacja en su provecho” (*Sp Maus b*, underline in original); “un intrigante ... un pillo” (*Sp Maus d*); in Portuguese, “um trapaceiro” (*Pt Maus*); in French “un magouilleur ... un escroc” (*Fr Maus*). A modern Polish-Spanish dictionary³¹ provides yet another term, not used in any translation: *chanchullero*, a colloquial term in current usage (specially in the political arena) for someone using personal connections and petty corruption self-servingly. Ultimately, *kombinator* translates more comfortably into languages bound to countries that have endured a history of military or cultural subjugation, institutional corruption and poverty, or patent social inequalities, where a picaresque instinct becomes necessary to prosper or survive. Thus, in Vladek’s personal experience of the US, the term has no equivalence within the “place” of American English.

Vladek’s use of the verb *organize* in the past tense, throughout the hiding chapters in *Maus I* (*Mouse Holes*, *Mouse Trap*) and the Auschwitz and its ensuing chapters in *Maus II* functions in a similar way. Here the issue is interestingly complicated by the fact that the verb exists in English but is actually *foreignized* by Vladek to convey a particular Polish meaning. This is evidenced by the actual complements it takes, always involving food or equipment: “we organized ourselves good clothes and i.d. papers” (127), “I had still candies I organized” (150), “I just organized some eggs” (222), “All what I organized I kept in a box” (224), “We left behind ... the civilian clothes we organized” (241), “I still have a little coffee I organized” (267). These sentences are intermingled in Vladek’s account with others in which he uses the (very Anglo-Saxon) term *arranged* in the very same contexts, so readers gradually acknowledge the two verbs as synonyms within Vladek’s discourse. The issue at stake here is not so much untranslatability itself, but the fact that, for Vladek, *organize* deeply reverberates (*z*)*organizować*, an idiosyncratic Polish verb expressing the deeply-rooted notion of availing oneself of things in the face of institutional restrictions and rules, relevant not only to the concentration camps and the ghettos of war-time Poland but also to the ensuing socialist era.³² Certainly *arrange* can carry some of the implications, but it falls short: it is generally a much more benign and naïve term; in Vladek’s discourse, the foreignized-by-Polish sense of *organize*³³ connotes foresight, cunning, enterprise and watchfulness. Some translators, like Judith Ertel, transpose this foreignized meaning (through the French verb *organiser* in inverted commas; *Fr Maus* 125, 148), whereas most others simply translate the standard meaning of *arrange* into the target languages (*Sp Maus a, b, c, d* and *Pt Maus*)

³⁰ N.pl.: *kombinacja*; ADJ(m/f): *kombinator/-ka*; N.sing. *kombinatorstwo*; V. *kombinować*. (Oskar Perlin, *Gran diccionario polaco-español. Tomo I (A-R)* (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 2002), 352.

³¹ Perlin, *Gran diccionario polaco-español*, 352.

³² I am indebted to Dr. Andrzej Antoszek for his valuable feedback on this issue.

³³ Subversively, the verb *organize* never actually appears with its standard English meaning in *Maus*, for example, that which denotes the popular cliché about German mentality. This reinforces the readers’ mental association of *organize* to Vladek’s story of resistance and survival.

Untranslatability acquires one last dimension in *Maus*: that of the deliberate preservation of an original language. I will not be commenting here on the Yiddish idioms (*oy!*, *ach!*, *meshugga*, *bagel*, etc) which occasionally mark Vladek's discourse. Any sensitive reader or translator understands their relevance to Vladek's Jewish identity and these terms have permeated American English –specially New Yorkers' speech– for years (see footnote 20). Rather, I'd like to pay a particular attention to the striking hitchhiker's scene in *Maus II*, a brief episode that is spatially and temporally removed from the survivor's story, and yet somehow brings it to bear in the present (1970s America) through the power structures of language(s). Driving back from a shopping mall with Art and his wife Françoise, she decides to stop for a black hitchhiker. Vladek is instantly enraged (“...it's a colored guy, a *shvartser!* Push quick on the gas!, 258) and for the first time in *Maus*, the following two panels show a scowling Vladek speaking *whole Polish sentences*, which Spiegelman translates in the captions.³⁴ This poses no problem for translators, who simply keep the Polish in his dialogue balloons and provide the translation into the target language through the captions, reproducing the artist's own device. Pragmatically, Vladek speaks Polish now to avoid being understood (see footnote) but in the very fertile context of language / power intersections in *Maus* the implications of Vladek's sudden emotional language shift are worth noting. As Alan Rosen observes, “the episode witnesses a shift of roles and voices (...) In reverting to his native Polish, he finally regains a fluency ... [that] comes at the expense of, and suspends, the authority [of] his tortured English” (131). Although Rosen's argument proceeds differently, what is fascinating here is that in adopting his native Polish, Vladek seems to enact a discourse of power and victimization, uncomfortably reminiscent to that of the Reich's “native German”, an effect intensified by the fact that in these panels, the hitchhiker himself speaks a non-normative “Black English”³⁵. When the hitchhiker alights, and Françoise reproaches Vladek for his being, “of all people”, “a racist” (259) the survivor replies, “It's not even to compare the *shvarsters* and the Jews!” (259). Vladek then recalls “coloreds” or “shvartsers”, dithering between the outdated colonial term³⁶ and derogatory Yiddish³⁷, as thieves he had to watch out for constantly in his early immigrant days (1950s), when he worked at the New York garment district (260).³⁸

³⁴ Top left panel, 259: “*(POLISH:) Oh my God! What's happened to his wife? She's lost her head!!”; next panel, top right, 259 “*(POLISH:) @!★!! I just can't believe it! There's a *SHVARTSER* sitting in here!”

³⁵ Rosen claims that “the black hitchhiker...speaks an English that, in its idiosyncrasy and visual effect, approximates the foreign English that defines Vladek's authoritative voice as a survivor” (131). Even though the ‘visual effect’ is invoked, I find the comparison problematically Anglocentric, since it ignores the key distinction between the *domestic* nature of Black English and the immigrant's *foreignization* of English.

³⁶ “Colored” is often agreed to be not politically correct usage today, yet the term has been preserved in the wording of the NAACP (*National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*).

³⁷ See Milly Heyd's discussion of the term in *Mutual Reflections: Jews and Blacks in American Art* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1999), 194-196.

³⁸ As his outlook is deeply moulded by his survival of the camps, Vladek seldom voices criticism of American society at large, but his sweeping statement on blacks must be qualified in the context of New York's garment industry undergoing, at that time, a process of severe wage cuts due to outsourcing, competition, and an excess of unskilled, cheap labor, supplied by incoming immigrant groups. See Carmen T. Whalen, “Sweatshops Here and There: the Garment Industry, Latinas, and Labor Migrations”. *International Labor And Working-Class History* 61 (Spring 2002): 54-55.

Early in this essay, questions were raised on the taxonomy of languages in relation to the Holocaust and the ways in which languages can be made (or not) to reverberate the register that forges Vladek's identity as a survivor. I did not consider German at that point, but I will now, as a way of drawing towards a conclusion. Primo Levi has famously noted that understanding German was key to survival during the first days in Auschwitz, before primitive and brutal SS men who did not distinguish if the paralyzed reaction to an order derived from an understanding of the language or not.³⁹ As has been noted here, Nazi-Deutsch became a perverse semantic code in itself, but its underpinnings were inevitably within the German language. Both German and Yiddish⁴⁰, certainly within their different regions of communication, would rank first and second in the taxonomy of languages at a place like Auschwitz. Yet for all the immediacy and pertinence of both languages to the concentrationary universe, Art Spiegelman's story of the early failed attempt at a German version of *Maus* paradoxically illuminates the challenges involved:

As soon as [*Zweitausendeins*, a publisher the artist had worked with] heard I was starting on the long *Maus* book they optioned the rights – way before there was an American publisher. (...) of course it was essential to keep Vladek's broken language intact (...) it's at the heart of the work. My publisher said, "Well, we'll just have to do some kind of Germanized version of Yiddish." But when getting ready for publication years later, *Zweitausendeins* got a very well-respected translator who came back with Vladek talking like some kind of hip Berliner. My publisher then insisted that if they did Vladek's language in a kind of Yiddishized German, no German would understand it and it would also be seen as anti-Semitic. I found that difficult to wrap around, figuring either it was anti-Semitic, or nobody would understand it – but if they didn't understand it why would it come off anti-Semitic?⁴¹

Ultimately, because for a German-speaking readership Yiddish cannot easily be released of its peculiar idiolectal status⁴² as a vulgarized form of their own language, some of the very traits that work so well in the foreignizing of Vladek's English actually worked dangerously or counterproductively in this particular attempt at his rendering into Yiddishized German. After further trials, Spiegelman bought the rights back and eventually published *Maus* with *Rowohlt* (1989), whose translators were a married couple, "one a professional translator, and the other a German journalist whose parents were Eastern European Jews."⁴³ At one point in his survivor's tale, Vladek somewhat naively tells Art, "Auschwitz was in a town called Oświęcim" (185), as if not really considering that Auschwitz is the German translation of the Polish place-name Oświęcim. And, indeed, why should he? Place-names might be translated across languages, but the naming of *these* places rightfully belongs to the collective memory of European Jewry and all other victims.

³⁹ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 70-71.

⁴⁰ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 78.

⁴¹ Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, 155.

⁴² Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 29-30.

⁴³ Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, 155.

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Vocea supraviețuitorului unor locuri de nedescris: Vladek Spiegelman în traducere

Plecând de la ideea că engleza neobișnuită a lui Vladek din *Maus*, cartea lui Art Spiegelman, e un element cheie al identității lui ca evreu polonez și ca supraviețuitor al lagărelor de concentrare, eseu de față explorează diferitele strategii utilizate de către traducătorii care au încercat să-i reprezinte vocea în mai multe limbi romanice. Acest eseu examinează de asemenea și modul în care unele aspecte ale mărturiei lui Vladek sfidează posibilitatea traducerii, dat fiind caracterul lor specific *universului concentraționar*.