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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Linguistic *Rencontres* in Kim Thúy's *Mãn*

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### Abstract

Linguist Ofelia Garcia proposes the term 'translanguaging' to refer to a 'dynamic bilingualism' that 'is centred, not on languages as has often been the case, but on the practices of bilinguals that are readily observable in order to make sense of their multilingual worlds.' In this article, I examine Francophone Vietnamese writer Kim Thúy's practice of translanguaging in her 2013 text *Mãn*. In this text, Thúy blends French and Vietnamese to create a dynamic, plurilingual idiom. I focus on three narrative strategies that Thúy develops: her bilingual inscriptions in the margins of each page; her frequent citations of Vietnamese with no accompanying translation; and her creation of words and expressions that meld the two languages to create plurilingual neologisms. Taken together, these strategies move her text beyond the blending of two discreet languages to the invention of a new form of communicating subjectivity in transit.

### Résumé

La linguiste Ofelia Garcia propose le terme 'translanguaging' pour représenter un 'bilinguisme dynamique' qui est 'basé non sur les langues, ce qui est souvent le cas pour les théories du bilinguisme, mais sur les pratiques observés chez les individus bilingues pour donner du sens à leur monde multilingue.' Dans cet article, nous analysons la pratique de 'translanguaging' de Kim Thúy, écrivain vietnamien d'expression française, dans son texte *Mãn* (2013). Dans ce texte, Thúy mélange le français et le vietnamien pour créer un langage dynamique et plurilingue. Nous nous concentrons sur trois de ses stratégies littéraires: les inscriptions bilingues dans les marges de chaque page ; les citations fréquentes du vietnamien sans traduction ; et la création de nouveaux mots et expressions qui mélangent les deux langues pour inventer des néologismes plurilingues. Ensemble, ces stratégies forment un texte littéraire

qui n'est pas fondé sur la combinaison de deux langues discrètes mais qui invente une nouvelle forme de subjectivité en mouvement.

## Keywords

**translation, translanguaging, Quebec, forced migration, Vietnamese script, la traduction, le Québec, la migration forcée, l'alphabet vietnamien**

Kim Thúy achieved fame for her first published text, the partially autobiographical *Ru*, in 2009.<sup>1</sup> This work recounts the tale of her departure from Vietnam at the age of ten as one of the 'boat people,' headed for Canada. The main protagonist narrates in vignette style memories of her childhood, her mastery of the French language and her growing personal and professional success in Quebec; she rises from a seamstress to an interpreter to a lawyer to the owner of a highly successful restaurant. Although far from an exclusively happy, optimistic tale of leaving Asia and thriving in a Western state, *Ru*, which has been translated into several languages, has been criticised for what some interpret as glossing over the trauma involved in forced migration.<sup>2</sup> Thúy's subsequent text *Mãn*, which appeared four years later, is notably more sombre. As literary critic Lidia Menendez points out, this text is not as autobiographical as *Ru* but is presented as a continuation of the earlier text (2014: 182). The story is again of a young girl from Vietnam who migrates to Quebec and it contains echoes of tropes of the first work, such as the importance of the mother figure, shattered families, separation and professional success. Yet, also discernible in this text is a more poignant sense of loss, as the narrator becomes involved in a doomed multinational love affair and the tone of the text becomes more intimate, more confessional and more melancholy.

What is most interesting about this later text is its sustained reflection on the subject of language and of living, loving and writing as a multilingual person. This is not to say that the Vietnamese language was absent from *Ru*. Several of the vignettes in this earlier text allude to language or to multilingualism. Language is foregrounded by the narrator's work as an interpreter for the New York Police Department, as she makes her living through being a polyglot. She writes that 'ma mère voulait que je parle, que j'apprenne à parler le plus rapidement possible le français et aussi l'anglais, puisque ma langue maternelle était devenue non pas dérisoire, mais inutile' (29).<sup>3</sup> In a later reminiscence that points to the pain of language loss and the consequences of privileging another language over one's mother tongue, she laments that 'j'ai dû réapprendre ma langue maternelle, que j'avais abandonnée trop tôt. De toute manière, je ne l'avais pas vraiment maîtrisée de façon complète parce que le pays était divisé en deux quand je suis née ... Comme au Canada, le Vietnam avait aussi ses deux solitudes' (87).<sup>4</sup> While *Ru* contains references to bilingualism, language learning and the connection between language and identity, these do not translate into a sustained reflection on the narrator's language use or choices but remain in the background of the text.

1 I thank Tess Do for the significant linguistic and cultural insights from which this essay has benefitted.

2 For an analysis of the migrant 'success story' and of the narrative of gratitude that this text stages, see Nguyen (2013).

3 'My mother wanted me to speak, wanted me to learn French and English as quickly as possible since my mother tongue had become not derisory but useless.' All translations are my own.

4 'I had to relearn my mother tongue, which I had abandoned too early. In any case, I hadn't completely mastered it because the country was divided in two when I was born ... Like Canada, Vietnam also had its two solitudes.'

In *Mãn*, by contrast, linguistic variation becomes an integral part of the text. This later work is marked by a rich tapestry of languages—English, French and Vietnamese—and by extended discussion of the differences between them. In this article, I analyse Thúy’s language practice in *Mãn*, arguing that she develops a rich form of ‘translanguaging’ to disrupt traditional understandings of multilingualism. I demonstrate that Thúy develops strategies to meld her languages (mostly French and Vietnamese) into a dynamic form of language use to achieve a language-focused self-narrative. I focus on three narrative strategies that Thúy develops: her bilingual inscriptions in the margins of each page, her interweaving of French and Vietnamese, and her differing approaches to translation. Taken together, these strategies move her text beyond the blending of discreet languages to the invention of a new form of self-narrative in transit.

## Translanguaging and literary studies

Traditionally, bilingualism has been considered according to a monoglossic view that suggests bilinguals have two separate linguistic systems. More recently, linguists have been questioning this premise and calling attention to the dynamic processes practised by bilingual and plurilingual speakers. Sociolinguist Christian Lagarde reminds us that ‘l’identité linguistique, parfois considérée en tant qu’essence, est en réalité sans cesse en construction, portée par une dynamique, par des stratégies’ (2007: 21).<sup>5</sup> Applied linguist Ofelia García uses the term ‘translanguaging’ to refer to this ‘dynamic bilingualism,’ pointing to a theory of language use that ‘is centred, not on languages as has often been the case, but on the *practices* of bilinguals that are readily observable in order to make sense of their multilingual worlds’ (2009: 140). The term ‘translanguaging’ comes from the Welsh word *trawsieithu* (an amalgam of ‘traws’/‘between’ and ‘ieithu’/‘languages’) and was first used by applied linguist Cen Williams in 1992 to describe a pedagogical approach that asks language learners to alternate language, incorporating both the target language and the native language into tasks (Garcia & Wei 2014: 20). Translanguaging, therefore, is predicated upon two languages functioning together and suggests that bilinguals practice a heteroglossic, dynamic system of language use; as Garcia summarises, ‘responding not to two monolingualisms in one but to one integrated linguistic system’ (2009: 120). Linguist Canagarajah underscores the ability of bilinguals to transform the two languages that they inhabit, suggesting that ‘the term translingual conceives of language relationships in more dynamic terms. The semiotic resources in one’s repertoire or in society interact more closely, become part of an integrated resource, and enhance each other. The languages *mesh in transformative ways, generating new meanings and grammars*’ (2013: 8, my emphasis).

The critical tool of translanguaging opens up new possibilities for interpreting literary texts that incorporate more than one language. It is important to point out that the practice of writing bilingually or multilingually is nothing new. There is, for example, a long tradition of authors who have adopted a language other than their own in their literary writing. Literary critic Rainier Grutman (2007) points to the number of writers who have achieved literary acclaim in France despite the fact that their mother tongue is not French; to his list of André Makine, Milan Kundera, Hector Bianciotti and François Cheng can also be added Rachid Boudjedra, Jonathan Littell, Julien Green, Nancy Huston and many others—many long before the twenty-first century. Grutman notes, however, that ‘dans les médias parisiens, on

<sup>5</sup> ‘Linguistic identity, which is sometimes considered to be an essence, is in practice always in the process of being constructed, brought about by a dynamic, by strategies.’

aime bien les écrivains venus d'ailleurs mais qui se sont "convertis" au français, illustrant du même coup l'universalité de cette langue, un peu comme au bon temps de Rivarol ... A-t-on assez remarqué toutefois que ces auteurs ont tous eu la politesse de laisser leur langue maternelle au vestiaire?' (Grutman 2007: 38).<sup>6</sup> The French tradition is specific in this regard due to the regulation of its very standardised literary language through the *Académie française* and to the imposition of French through colonialism. More recently, however, authors have begun to include lexical items from other languages within their French-language writing, using techniques such as footnotes or glossaries to convey their meaning.<sup>7</sup> The context of Quebec, the home of the author under discussion here, is slightly different but standardised French still dominates Quebecois literary and academic writing. In this article, I examine how Thúy practises translanguaging in her writing, arguing that French and Vietnamese are not presented in this text as two discreet entities in a monoglossic system but as a dynamic, productive dialogue that emphasises the practices of the contemporary bilingual individual.

## Bilingual inscriptions in *Mãn*

Thúy develops a number of narrative strategies to 'translanguage' in *Mãn*. One of the most striking is the bilingual inscriptions that appear on every page. The text is written in vignette style as the narrator recounts isolated, often disjointed memories of growing up in Vietnam and moving to Canada. Most of these vignettes are less than one page long. Literary scholar Jenny James analyses this narrative technique in *Ru*, interpreting it as a reflection of the fragmented nature of experience in diaspora (2016: 67). In *Mãn* the same technique is evident but with the addition of a bilingual element. The title of each vignette appears in the margin and, crucially, is presented bilingually: both the Vietnamese title and its French translation are displayed. The title, *Mãn*, is not translated, presumably because it is a name, but the titles of all of the chapters appear in both languages. Most interestingly, the Vietnamese is on top, followed by the French below: an ironic reversal of the power relationship between the two languages, perhaps, especially since the text itself is written predominantly in French. The text thus becomes a visual representation of the mixing of languages in literature, as the two languages appear next to each other and are foregrounded at the top of almost every page of the text. On the rare pages with no title, since the vignette is more than one page long, there is an example of the Vietnamese language within the writing, so that there is barely a page in the text in which the two languages are not visible. The Vietnamese language is recorded in *Quốc-Ngữ*, the Romanised script invented by the French in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to record the Vietnamese oral language. This script was initially used in indigenous schools to support the teaching and learning of the French language and was appropriated by the Vietnamese people as their national written language. This script thus originated through French colonisation and was developed by the French but became a way for the Vietnamese to reclaim power over their language. The visibility of this language and script on every page of *Mãn*—especially with the Vietnamese inscribed above the French language—stands as a reminder of this reappropriation. Moreover, the two scripts serve as a visual representation of the intertwining of the two linguistic systems in Thúy's self-narrative.

<sup>6</sup> 'In the Paris media, they love writers who have come from elsewhere but who have "converted" to French, illustrating the universality of the language, like in the good old days ... Have they noticed, however, that these writers have all had the good manners to leave their mother tongue in the closet?'

<sup>7</sup> For examples of how writers have incorporated other languages into their writing, see Kellmann (2000) and Karpin (2013).

The titles of the vignettes are typically short: either one word or a short expression. Interestingly, some of the titles draw attention to the differences between the two languages, including linguistic nuances and cultural signification that only the astute learner or native speaker would likely discern. For example, in a poignant example of a culturally specific term that separates the two languages, the title ‘tiển đưa’ is translated as ‘dire adieu, accompagner quelqu’un jusqu’au point de départ’ (52).<sup>8</sup> The short Vietnamese phrase with its much longer French translation indicates the specific context in which the departures were taking place. Many Vietnamese people emigrated at this time, during which communist Vietnam was isolated from the rest of the world due to the American embargo. The Vietnamese who emigrated during this time were thus departing with no hope of return, hence Thúy’s use of ‘adieu’ rather than ‘au revoir.’ In this vignette, the narrator recounts her own departure from Vietnam. In contrast to the other passengers, who were accompanied by emotional family members who assumed their departing relatives would never return, the narrator departed alone and on instruction from her mother to forget her past. She was clearly not granted access to the important cultural practice of ‘tiển đưa’ and this is presented as a source of regret for her, especially since the vignette ends with the admission that, on the subject of forgetting, ‘c’était impossible’ (52).<sup>9</sup> A further example of a title that plays with linguistic and cultural nuances is in the vignette that presents the character, Hồng, a Vietnamese woman who works in the narrator’s restaurant and who is the victim of domestic violence. The title of the vignette is ‘hồng/rose ou parfois rouge’ (75).<sup>10</sup> The non-Vietnamese speaking reader can only imagine that the name is also a colour and that this colour has a wider spectrum than simply ‘rose,’ alluding to the differences between languages in discerning concepts such as colours. The reader with some knowledge of languages of the region will recognise that *Quốc-Ngữ* is a phonetic script for both Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese words and that Thúy uses elements from both languages in her writing; ‘hồng’ means ‘pink’ or ‘rose’ in Vietnamese but ‘red’ in Sino-Vietnamese. Thúy’s text thus demonstrates the multilingual layering of Vietnam and reinforces its impact upon her narrative of identity. The multilingual presentation of the titles thus serves as a visual reminder of the overlapping of languages and of how this bilingual narrator brings languages and scripts together in order to achieve self-expression.

The bilingual inscriptions that form the titles to each vignette highlight cultural differences but also serve to nuance the writer’s unique self-narrative. Sometimes the titles are clearly related to the subject of the text and consist of one key word taken from the vignette. For example, in the vignette that recounts the narrator’s visit to New York, the only one in which the titles are the same in Vietnamese and French, the vignette is simply entitled ‘New-York/New York’ (64). It is interesting to note that Thúy did not use the Vietnamese word for New York in this instance, preferring to Anglicise her title and thereby refuse any consistent approach to the representation of bilingualism in the text.<sup>11</sup> In another example of an explicit connection between the title and content of the vignette, she recounts an episode of her journey from Vietnam to Canada entitled ‘Thuyền nhân’ and gives the translation in English and in italics as ‘boat people’ (14). This Vietnamese term is a literal Sino-Vietnamese translation of the term ‘boat people,’ which was widely used for the Vietnamese refugees in

8 ‘to say goodbye, to accompany somebody to their point of departure.’ Thúy’s spelling is also incorrect, which is a common mistake by Southerners. It should be spelt ‘tiển.’

9 ‘it was impossible.’

10 ‘hồng/pink or sometimes red.’

11 *Nữ-Uớc* is the Vietnamisation of New York.

the 1970s and 1980s who landed in countries where English is spoken rather than French. Although the accepted French term 'réfugiés de la mer' exists, the English usage refers to this specific history and hints at the unsuitability or the limits of the French language. There are several examples, however, in which the titles are not clearly linked to the subject of the text. In a vignette recounting the narrator's mother's practice of giving her daughter dictations in the evening from Maupassant's *Une vie*, a book that they had to hide to avoid it being confiscated by the Communist authorities, the title of the text is 'lỗi,' which is translated as 'fautes' (24; 45).<sup>12</sup> The word 'fautes' does not appear in this vignette, which succinctly summarises the mother's nightly instruction in dictation and 'analyse logique, grammaticale et syntaxique' (45).<sup>13</sup> The 'fautes' may refer to the mistakes that the narrator must have made in the process of learning French and testify to her difficulties in learning the language. The allusion to a 'faute' might also refer to the illegal action of owning a book at this time, especially a French book. The fact that the illegal book is *Une vie*, the tale of a solitary, abandoned mother whose child leaves, is telling. The title of the vignette is not in the text, then, but it forms the backdrop to her memory – and, importantly, not the French word but the Vietnamese. Even though the writing is predominantly in French, Vietnamese is omnipresent and interrupts the French language to nuance the narrative of self that this multilingual author develops.

One specific usage of the bilingual inscriptions of the titles deserves more exploration. The vignette that appears on the third page of the text incorporates a list of words in both French and Vietnamese, as opposed to the one-word or one-phrase titles elsewhere. Here, the narrator describes the way in which her mother learnt the word *lundi* and how she taught it to her daughter. The title presents the days of the week in Vietnamese followed by the French beneath each one: from 'thứ 2/lundi' to 'chủ nhật/dimanche' (11). The days in Vietnamese follow the pattern of day two for Monday, day three for Tuesday, day four for Wednesday and so on, so do not have different words to express them, apart from Sunday.<sup>14</sup> This will immediately strike a note of unfamiliarity in the French reader who has no knowledge of Vietnamese. Moreover, the narrator's mother learnt the French word *lundi* by conjoining two Vietnamese words and linking them to an action; the narrator explains *lon* means *canette* and *đi* means *partir*, thus the mother taught her to point at a can and kick it away, saying *lon-đi* at the same time. The two languages are thus not treated in a way that isolates them as discreet systems but as ways of imagining different meanings and of calling attention to the ways in which languages are built of the same phonemes but imbued with different meanings. In this case, the two phonemes of the French word, *lun* and *di*, form a different expression in the Vietnamese language and are infused with a different meaning on a general level—to any speaker of Vietnamese—and on a personal level; the narrator refers to the fact that her mother learnt this from her mother, who died before teaching her the remaining days of the week. This particular word is therefore imbued with the loss experienced by the narrator's mother and the rupture in maternal legacy—even more acutely since *đi* in Vietnamese can also mean 'to die,' as can 'partir,' used metaphorically. By isolating the phonemes of one language—Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language—and translating these phonemes literally into French, the text shows

12 'fautes' translates to 'mistakes' or 'errors' in English.

13 'Analysis of logic, grammar and syntax.'

14 This pattern follows not the French but the Portuguese days of the week (Monday is *lundi*, which is *thứ 2* in Vietnamese and *segunda-feira* in Portuguese. In fact, as Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly state, the Quốc-Ngữ script that the French Jesuit Alexandre de Rhodes perfected was initially created by Portuguese missionaries (2001: 221).

the intermingling of two languages in the practice of the bilingual; French and Vietnamese are not presented as separate phenomena that exist in different realms or are employed in different circumstances or for different purposes. Instead, the two are presented in terms of the heteroglossic, dynamic view of bilingualism proposed by García. The two languages of this bilingual author appear on every page as a visual reminder of the constant presence and interweaving of the two systems and of the different meanings they produce when brought together.

## Transcultural imaginings

Within the vignettes, the two languages are frequently interwoven to highlight the cultural differences between Vietnam and Canada. Discussion of language itself is constantly foregrounded in this text; language becomes more important than plot or characterisation and the narrator devotes more time to discussing language than she does to telling her story or sketching her characters or events. The tale moves quickly in a chronological, forward movement but skips over vast amounts of time. Much is left unsaid, therefore, and many questions remain about the narrator's character and the experiences that she undergoes; discussion of language is often the only thread that ties the vignettes together. For example, as early as the seventh vignette, the narrator discusses the morphology of Vietnamese and its cultural signification. This episode introduces the narrator's future husband, one of the 'boat people' who settled in Canada. Returning to Vietnam in search of a wife years later, his knowledge of several significant Vietnamese customs is inconsistent. His hesitation in addressing the family, particularly the narrator's mother, is immediately apparent: 'il l'appelait pêle-mêle 'grande sœur' (*Chị*), 'tante' (*Cô*) et 'grande-tante' (*Bác*). Personne ne lui en a tenu rigueur parce qu'il venait d'ailleurs, d'un lieu où les pronoms personnels existent pour pouvoir rester impersonnels' (15).<sup>15</sup> The language-culture nexus is accentuated in this instance, as this episode presents a situation in which language use should be determined by a speaker's knowledge of cultural matrices. What is more interesting about this meeting is that the man is a native speaker of the language but that his linguistic errors are forced by his lack of cultural knowledge. The narrator writes in this quotation that he comes *d'un lieu*, from a place, in which pronouns are different, although he originally comes from the geographical space of Vietnam and from the linguistic background of the Vietnamese language. The language, she hints, is a complex system of foreignness that can be impenetrable even to the native speaker. She foregrounds discussion of such linguistic difference throughout the text, instructing her French-speaking reader about the intricacies of the language and, crucially, about its importance to her self-narrative. The interplay between languages is a constant presence in this text as the narrator underlines her dual linguistic heritage and the mixing that this necessitates. Rather than negating, downplaying or eliding the two languages, she underscores linguistic difference and elevates it to an integral part of her narrative of identity.

As the interplay between the two languages is foregrounded, the Vietnamese language peppers the text, mostly through italicised words and phrases as in the quotation above. Often Vietnamese appears as a way of providing additional information about a character, a place or an event that cannot be accurately expressed in French. Such occasions highlight the gaps between languages—not just in words but also in the world views and perspectives that inhabit

15 'He called her indiscriminately 'older sister' (*Chị*), 'aunt' (*Cô*) and 'great-aunt' (*Bác*). Nobody insisted because he came from elsewhere, from a place where personal pronouns exist in order to remain impersonal.'

different languages. For example, the narrator points out that Vietnamese people do not refer to their hair or eye colour as a distinguishing feature since there is minimal variety: 'les Asiatiques n'ont qu'un ton: brun très foncé jusqu'à noir ébène.'<sup>16</sup> As a result, when she attempts to express the colour of her French lover Luc's eyes accurately, she struggles to do so in her native language. She uses the word *xanh*, green, but feels obliged to nuance this, explaining that 'son *xanh* ne représentait pas le bleu mais bien le vert, un vert des eaux de la baie de Hạ Long ou un vert jade foncé et vieilli; celui des bracelets portés par les femmes pendant des décennies' (88).<sup>17</sup> Language use such as this calls attention to the specificity of language and to the fact that this text is written by a bilingual author who approaches language in a different way to a monolingual person; she claims to experience colours and numbers more readily in Vietnamese than in French, for instance, and records these colours and numbers in her native tongue. She hints that her experience of the world is mediated through different languages at different times and that the melding of both—in her own specific use of translanguaging—is essential to her understanding of her self.

The Vietnamese language is inserted into the text even on the level of the sentence, producing changes in syntax that reflect the interweaving of two languages in the practice of a bilingual person. Thúy develops a number of strategies to accomplish this. Since the narrator is a cook and becomes a restaurant owner, as is the case in the more consciously autobiographical *Ru*, she frequently refers to culinary terms in Vietnamese. Cooking is the backdrop to the narrator's story and is the skill that enables her to settle in Canada, cooking in a small café that her husband buys before increasing the size and scope of the business. Indeed, the final section of the text is a sample list of traditional Vietnamese recipes and is entitled 'des mots et des mets' (145), in a telling example of the two things that tie the book together. The names of Vietnamese foods and dishes are frequently included among the French sentences. Sometimes the French comes first but the Vietnamese is always included; the narrator refers to the traditional preparation of 'piments vicieux,' for example, but includes the Vietnamese immediately in parenthesis in italics: '*ớt hiểm*' (12). The two languages may exist side by side, then, but French cannot replace the use of Vietnamese for this narrator. Sometimes these terms are not translated due to the impossibility of an equivalent, such as when she mentions that there are dozens of varieties of bananas but 'seules les bananes *chuối xiêm* peuvent être aplaties sans se briser et glacées sans noircir' (13).<sup>18</sup> In this instance, the Vietnamese term features in the French sentence easily as she glides from one language to the other without a footnote, a parenthesis or any break in the language.

In addition to using Vietnamese words in French sentences in a way that creates a seamless meaning for her, the author also brings the two languages together in ways that create new formations. Referring to her early practices in Montreal of making simple Vietnamese dishes for the local population of Vietnamese heritage, she writes 'les jours les plus occupés, les clients amis se contentaient d'une boule de riz recouverte d'un œuf *ốp la* (au plat) salé à la sauce de

16 'Asians only have one tone: very dark brown to ebony black.'

17 'his *xanh* was not blue but green, green like the waters of the bay of Hạ Long or a dark, old jade green; the green of bracelets worn by women for decades.'

18 '*chuối xiêm* bananas are the only ones that can be crushed without breaking and frozen without turning black.'



soja' (42).<sup>19</sup> This example shows both a culinary and linguistic mixture but what is interesting is that the French phrase is instead written phonetically according to Vietnamese script. Rather than simply state that it was an *œuf au plat* within the French sentence, the author insists upon the Vietnamisation of a French expression. Not only does she insist upon a Vietnamese rendering of French words, she also reverses the hierarchical power relationship between the majority and minority language; rather than Vietnamese being forced to conform to the rules of the French language, here the French language is modified by the Vietnamese. In a similar example, in a vignette entitled 'Đông-Tây/Est-Ouest,' in which the narrator convinces her mother to migrate from Vietnam to Canada, she explains a further linguistic play. The East-West movement is not confined to the narrator's mother, as she also recounts in this vignette that she employs a French patisserie chef to reinvent Vietnamese desserts, which lack the sophistication of French dishes. She writes 'les Vietnamiens appellent les gâteaux d'anniversaire 'bánh gatô' alors que le bánh veut déjà dire 'pain-gâteau-pâte'.<sup>20</sup> Nous devons importer ce mot parce qu'il s'agissait d'une tradition culinaire inusitée. Il fallait apprendre à utiliser le beurre, le lait, la vanille, le chocolat ... des ingrédients qui nous étaient aussi étrangers que les méthodes de cuisson' (69).<sup>21</sup> The absence of ingredients and cooking methods in Vietnam lead to the importing not just of these ingredients but also of the words to denote them.<sup>22</sup> *Gâteau* becomes *gatô* in a transliteration of the French language, again producing a Vietnamisation of the French expression and relegating the French language to a secondary position. The French word enters the Vietnamese language but is subject to a spelling change and to the position of a suffix, an addendum to the original Vietnamese word *bánh*. This is not presented as a contamination of the Vietnamese language but as an addition to it that solidifies Vietnamese as the dominant language. This example thus represents cultural and linguistic movement as a two-way process, not a simple, one-directional development in which a more powerful language corrupts the purity of a less powerful one. Thúy's text thus presents the two languages as necessary to her self-expression in certain circumstances and demonstrates the ways in which they work together to produce meaning for her highly individual narrative.

Thúy's use of translanguaging when discussing foods and culinary items necessitates another linguistic dimension, which points up an important element of her text. She refers to *smoothies* (16) and to local Québécois foods, such as when she writes of '*smoked meat à la tourtière*' (54). As can be seen in this phrase, English impacts upon the narrative of Thúy's experiences in Montreal. This usage highlights something that is never discussed in her text but which is necessarily a backdrop to her life writing; she is living in a bilingual environment. The linguistic reality of life in Montreal adds a further dimension to the background of her text. English rarely enters the narrative but the instances in which it becomes visible remind the reader of Thúy's multilingual lived experience: she lives her life not just in French and

19 'on the busiest days, the customers/friends were happy with a bowl of rice with a *fried egg* on top seasoned with soy sauce.' Thúy uses several other words throughout this text that are borrowed from French and subjected to Vietnamisation, such as *min/mine*, *xich-lo/cyclo-pousse*, *cao-su/caoutchouc*, *ca-phê/café*, *va-li/valise*, thereby underscoring the ways in which the two languages have melded to create meaning.

20 'bread-cake-pastry.' Thúy's definition here is selective, since she omits to mention that 'bánh' also means 'wheel.'

21 'the Vietnamese call birthday cakes 'bánh-gatô' although *bánh* already means 'bread-cake-pastry.' We had to import that word because it referred to an unusual culinary tradition. We had to learn to use butter, milk, vanilla, chocolate ... ingredients that were as foreign to us as the cooking methods.'

22 Except for 'lait' (milk), all the Vietnamese names of the other ingredients are borrowed from French: 'bơ/beurre', 'va-ni/vanille', 'xô-cô-la/chocolat'.

Vietnamese but also in English and in an environment in which bilingualism is a feature of the everyday linguistic landscape. To Quebecois authors, translanguaging is certainly not a new phenomenon, as they frequently incorporate English and French into their literary writing. Translanguaging in Quebec is more complex than in France given the historical and linguistic conflict between French and English. In contrast to many Quebecois authors, Thúy complicates Quebecois literary practices by melding not two but three languages and concentrating upon two (French and Vietnamese) that depart from the standard French-English couplet. The particularities of Montreal as a site of transit and resettlement mean that Thúy's text is not an expression of a decontextualised French but one that reflects, intervenes and complicates a particular multilingual context.

## Translation and translanguaging

In addition to moving between the two languages within sentences and thereby emphasising the necessary place that both of them occupy in her self-narrative, the text also develops innovative approaches to translation. Translation has become an area of significant scholarly interest and scholars have long questioned a view of translation that views languages as neatly separated, discreet entities. Roman Jakobson famously suggested that there are three types of translation: interlingual, between two different languages; intralingual, between signs in the same language; and intersemiotic, between linguistic and non-linguistic signs (1959: 239). Jacques Derrida, by contrast, criticises such a view as primarily monolingual, suggesting that translation is more than the passage from one language into another (1985: 72). Purity of language is a fiction, he indicates, as there are always many languages, many signifiers and many deferrals at work in any linguistic system. In Thúy's text, the narrator moves back and forth between her two languages—along with incursions into English—in a way that demonstrates that in her own linguistic system, there is no purity of language but a constant, productive linguistic contamination that enables her to develop innovative literary techniques to convey her experience.

This is perhaps most apparent in Thúy's references to literature, which occupy a central role in *Mãn*. As we have seen, Maupassant's *Une vie* is a significant text in the narrator's learning of the French language and an important representation of the cultural restrictions in Vietnam at the time. When her friend and business partner makes a library in their restaurant space and fills it with literary works, the narrator is overwhelmed and proceeds to recount the difficulties in obtaining literature during her childhood in Vietnam. She explains that books in French and English were confiscated and that sometimes isolated pages were recovered: 'on ne saurait jamais par quel chemin étaient passées des pages entières pour se retrouver entre les mains de marchands qui les utilisaient pour envelopper un pain, une barbotte ou un bouquet de liserons d'eau ... On ne pourrait jamais me dire pourquoi j'avais eu la chance de tomber sur ces trésors enfouis au milieu de tas de journaux jaunis' (57–58).<sup>23</sup> She isolates specific words that she retained from these individual pages, such as 'lassitude' from Françoise Sagan, 'languueur' from Verlaine and 'pénitentiaire' from Kafka.<sup>24</sup> These words are not translated into Vietnamese but are retained in the original French. She explains that her mother frequently did not know the French words on the page so they had to appeal to the 'dictionnaire vivant' (59)<sup>25</sup>: a local man

23 'We will never know the path they had taken, these whole pages used by shopkeepers to wrap bread, catfish or flowers ... I will never know why I had the fortune of happening upon these treasures buried among piles of yellowed newspapers.'

24 'lassitude,' 'languor,' 'penitential.'

25 'a walking dictionary.'

who had a French dictionary, which was confiscated but which he had memorised. The act of translation is thus personified, as this individual becomes the guardian of bilingualism. He is considered mad by the neighbours who see him reciting his absent dictionary aloud, but he underscores the need to meld the two languages—isolating each word and explaining it in his own language—to preserve linguistic diversity. What is particularly interesting about this image is that the man attempts to preserve the language of the coloniser. French was under threat in the former colony at this time but the neighbour wished to preserve its presence. This passage points to the importance and value of both words and of linguistic diversity and the neighbour in this sense functions almost as a metaphor for the central message of this consciously bilingual text.

The narrator also refers to several literary works in the Vietnamese language. She uses various techniques to present these to a French-speaking reader, taking a variety of approaches to the question of translation. She alludes to a poem, for instance, as she is describing her mother's life. The narrator gives the title as *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kiều) in italics but with no French equivalent, then writes the poem in French translation (25). She explains that her mother would recite the poem to her father when he was unable to sleep and that it has a wider, collective resonance; the poem, which has over 3,000 verses, tells the story of a young girl who sacrificed herself for the family and it is said that as long as the poem exists, Vietnam will be protected. Even illiterate Vietnamese, she tells us, can recite several of its verses. This poem and its presentation in the text are particularly pertinent to this author's approach to translanguaging. *Truyện Kiều* is the most well-known poem in classical Vietnamese literature and its author, Nguyễn Du, wrote it in *Nôm*, an ancient Vietnamese script. The poem thus points to the literary and linguistic heritage of Vietnam, demonstrating that a literary tradition in the Vietnamese language continues to resonate with Vietnamese people. It also highlights the linguistic tradition of Vietnam in two ways. First, it refers indirectly to a script that predates the *Quốc-Ngữ* developed by the French, thus emphasising the history of the Vietnamese language and its written systems that predate the colonial period. Second, it reinforces the oral tradition of the Vietnamese language. The narrator and her compatriots are more familiar with the spoken than the written form of the poem, since it travels across time, across generations and across nations in oral form. The text appears to claim that there are many different ways to preserve a language, including written scripts and oral forms. Thúy's varied approach to translating examples of Vietnamese literature thus points to a nuanced representation of the history and diversity of the language.

In other examples of literary texts cited in *Mãn*, the original Vietnamese is foregrounded. One such example is when the mother again teaches the narrator a poem that we learn all Vietnamese people know by heart. The title is absent but the opening lines of the poem are included, first in Vietnamese in italics, followed by a French translation by Thúy herself (81). The poem describes the lotus, its flowers and colours, and emphasises its sensory aspects. As we have seen, Thúy pauses to reflect upon the ways in which the two languages present sensations differently. One may assume that the translation is provided here to point up these differences and also to personalise the account; the translation that she gives is her own, as the sensation that she experiences in her own language is unique to her. This is also an unauthored folk poem as opposed to the classic poem *Truyện Kiều* that has been translated many times by well-known translators. Thúy thus waivers between using published translations and her own knowledge of the language, changing her strategy depending upon the instance and not conforming to a singular, rigid model throughout the text. Moreover, the narrator prints this poem in both Vietnamese and French translation on pieces of paper that she gives to

customers in the restaurant as a means of starting a literary space. Students of literature start to congregate in the restaurant garden and write, in order to ‘échanger un mot contre un autre ou rassurer ceux qui paniquaient devant la page blanche’ (81).<sup>26</sup> The text thus proclaims the importance of individual words and emphasises how individual language users will engage with them differently. In another example of literary citation, Thúy quotes two poems in English and provides translations of them in French but not in Vietnamese (86, 123), and selects an epigraph that is a French translation of a German text with no Vietnamese translation (7).<sup>27</sup> The decision to omit the Vietnamese translation does not diminish the importance or position of this language; rather it highlights Thúy’s non-standard approach to translation. Sometimes she includes translations and sometimes she does not, and she weaves between using published translations and her own. She thus refutes any linguistic conformity or standardisation, instead inscribing her experience in language that makes sense to her regardless of the highly codified language in which she mainly writes.

The different approaches to translation that are discernible within the text emphasise the individual bilingual’s range of linguistic practice and the dynamic shifting between the two languages. Bilingualism is represented as a dynamic, moving process that insists upon instability, rather than existing as a static, unwavering system. Translation is presented in the same way. The author insists that translation is not a simple matter of substituting one word for another but is instead a moving process that points up the plurality of meaning within languages and cultures. The narrator recounts teaching her friend Julie to pronounce the tones of Vietnamese, for example: ‘elle prononçait les “la, là, lả, lã, lāi ...” en distinguant les tons même si elle ne comprenait pas les différentes définitions: crier, être, étranger, évanouir, frais’ (65).<sup>28</sup> By drawing attention to this monosyllabic language’s individual syllables, phonemes that are each imbued with different meanings, the author draws attention to the intricacy of the Vietnamese language and to the different web of signification in which it operates. Most interestingly, she applies this perspective to the French language, breaking down the words into phonemes that create different signification. She describes her father’s second wife as her ‘Mẹ Ghê’ (23), for instance, and gives the literal translation into French of ‘une mère froide.’<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, she adds that ‘il faut dire que ghê signifie aussi “gale”<sup>30</sup> and proceeds to nuance her description of this character from the perspective of two translations of the word. Such attention to the plural signification of individual phonemes in Vietnamese further nuances her French-language text. Rather than downplaying or oversimplifying the language, Thúy writes in a way that brings the two languages into dialogue with each other, using narrative strategies and approaches to translation that enrich rather than contaminate them both.

Furthermore, by taking an external perspective on the French language, she uses a less powerful language to undercut a dominant one. As Pierre Bourdieu wrote, ‘la langue n’est pas simplement un instrument de communication ou même de connaissance mais un instrument

26 ‘exchange a word for another or reassure those who are panicking in front of a blank page.’

27 From Ernst Jandl, which the author explains was quoted in French from Richard David Precht’s *Amour: Déconstruction d’un sentiment* (2011), which had been translated from the German by Pierre Deshusses.

28 ‘She would pronounce ‘la, là, lả, lã, lāi ...’ distinguishing between the tones even though she didn’t understand their different meanings: to scream, to be, foreign, to faint, cool.’

29 ‘a cold mother.’

30 ‘I should say that ghê also means “scab.”’

de pouvoir' (1977: 19).<sup>31</sup> The power that a colonial language has over the languages of its former colonies emanates from a web of social, economic and cultural relations that serve to reinforce the legitimacy of one over the other. Pascale Casanova states in *La Langue mondiale: traduction et domination* that languages are 'socialement hiérarchisées selon leur proximité au pouvoir et à la légitimité ou (ce qui revient au même) selon les profits symboliques qu'elles procurent' (2015: 11).<sup>32</sup> In *Mān*, however, Thúy refuses a hierarchical approach to languages and subverts the traditional power relationship between a colonial and a colonised language. She explains her very personal approach to language thus:

Il y a plusieurs de ces mots que je tente de comprendre par leur sonorité, comme « colossal, » « disjoncter, » « apostille, » et d'autres par la texture, l'odeur, la forme. Pour saisir les nuances entre deux mots cousins, par exemple pour distinguer la mélancolie du chagrin, je pèse chacun d'eux. Quand je les tiens dans mes paumes, l'un semble planer comme une fumée grise alors que l'autre se comprime en boule d'acier. (91)<sup>33</sup>

This sensual approach to words rejects any sense of power, hierarchy or superiority. Words are important, the text proclaims, due to the possibilities of signification that they constitute and these possibilities are increased through intermingling with other languages. By breaking down the French language into individual words and phonemes, Thúy thus underlines the similarities between the two languages and points up the added layers of meaning that they can produce through coming into contact with each other.

Overall, then, *Mān* proclaims the importance of bilingual writing for expressing subjectivity in diaspora and for exploring the possibilities of self-expression. French and Vietnamese do not merely brush up against each other in this text but join each other in this author's individualised practice of translanguaging. The text pluralises the notion of translation, subverting the idea that one word in one language signifies one word in another by insisting upon the dynamic processes of movement between languages. Crucially, moreover, Thúy does not chide the French or the French language for linguistic domination, but merely gives a different perspective on it. She hints that the French language can be viewed differently, as a product of other linguistic encounters over time. By calling attention to her bilingual existence in her writing, and specifically in a way that complicates the bilingual environment of Quebec, she contributes to a change in the sensibility and in the status of the writer. Rather than being straight-jacketed into a mode of writing that is monolingual, monocultural or monoethnic, Thúy lays bare the dynamic processes in language switching that many of the world's inhabitants perform on a daily basis.

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31 'Language is not simply an instrument of communication or of knowledge but also an instrument of power.'

32 'Socially hierarchised according to their proximity to power and to legitimacy (which come down to the same thing) according to the symbolic benefit that they procure.'

33 'There are several words that I try to understand by their sound, like "colossal," "short-circuit," "annotation," and others by their texture, smell, shape. To understand the nuances between two similar words, such as melancholy and chagrin, I weigh each one of them. When I hold them in my palms, one seems to wisp away like grey smoke while the other constricts into a ball of steel.'

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