

Space and Silence as a Possible Form of It: Thoughts of a Literary Translator

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Abstract

Space is often referred to as a vacuum and sound cannot travel in it, thus the silence experienced in space. At the same time, space is full of movement, thus, silence is part of that perpetual vitality and energy present in outer space as well as in other spaces defined as such in our everyday life, for example space between letters in this paper. Silence in space is gaps between particles while gaps or blanks in other fields such as literature are part of the explanation reception theorists, Iser (2006) among them, give us to the question of why we have different readings of the same text arguing that these gaps, in given parts of the text “trigger synthesizing operations in the reader’s mind ... [as they] lead to collisions between the individual ideas formed” (p. 66). Studying silence in the literary space also allows us to reflect on it as an important question of literary translation from several aspects. First of all, translation is bridging the space between different cultures. We will see that silence as a certain form of appearance associated with all kinds of space is universal and at the same time culture-bound and, thus, it also acquires meaning in context while we try to capture and trace the different meanings and notions of it in different fields and consider it from a dialectical aspect as well.

Keywords: concept of space and silence; the language of God and *Natursprache*; translation as an empty space between cultures; ‘translated man’; semiotic trichotomy of Peirce; ellipsis

On seeing a word a translator will immediately think about its possible interpretations and ways of conveying its meaning into another language. To do so one has to look for and find the strongest connotations that would help to transmit its meaning in the target language.

The word *space* evoked the notion of *silence* in me and I was not able to escape the thought of that inevitable connection between them firstly as the silence of the universe. I also saw this connection in the case of human communication, which is my narrower field of interest, where space might mean a break in speech or an omission, a hiatus, a gap or pause that may be a blank space in writing, or simply the space between words; all these would mean a kind of silence, the lack of sounds or thoughts that are there but not pronounced, thus further elaborating the meaning of silence. Giving further considerations to it, and following my practice as a literary translator, I decided to go around the topic and look at it from different aspects because this connotation can be tackled in philosophy or music as well as in the religious or political space, thus silence can be considered as one of the forms of space that we are able to find in different fields and detect via different approaches.

Space, namely outer space is said to be empty and soundless and is often referred to as a vacuum and we suppose that sound cannot travel in it, thus the silence experienced in space. On the other hand, based on Einstein's thought, scientists now found that space is not silent after all; it is full of vibrating movement and lively energy and sound as well. From this respect space as vacuum can also be seen as immense gaps of nothingness between these vibrating and moving particles. As a result, silence, viewed as an integral part of space, can be defined as the gaps between sounds and thus a link between them.

In her famous essay, *The Aesthetics of Silence*, Susan Sontag (1983) also explains silence as a gap in our 'earthly' space and time: "Something takes place in time, a voice speaking which points to the before and to what comes after an utterance: silence [which] then, is both the precondition of speech and the result or aim of properly directed speech" (p. 196). In our everyday space, in our life-space it also means that silence is not only a part but also a means of communication and its "meaning differs depending on who is silent" (Shivani, 2007, p. 143). So silence is not only the opposite of language but also part of it; a message, a form of speech and according to H. D. Thoreau (2006) "In human intercourse the tragedy begins, not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood" (p. 407). Therefore, silence itself can be considered a sort of language on its own, a language without a dictionary proper so, in the case of any communication but especially interlingual communication, the translator should rely on his/her own resources when trying to convey the meaning of different silences to a target text because, as a result, silence and the space it takes is also culture-bound. We should add here that silence in our social and historical space contains a general human aspect,

a kind of common memory and culture we all understand. So we might say with Shivani Singh Tharu (2007), the Nepalese playwright and media personality that silence

plays an integral part in human nature, philosophies, and discourse. We express ourselves through languages made up with words, grammatical structures and even body language. And, when we exhaust visible or audible mediums, we use silence to complete it. It comes spontaneously. Every sentence finishes with full stop; a punctuation mark, [that] represents the absence of sound for a moment. Therefore, every sentence requires silence in the end, which could mean think over, or start another. (p. 407)

Shifting slightly towards religious as well as philosophical spaces of silence we will see the difference between silences that may be defined as outside noise that goes unnoticed such as the music of the spheres and inner silence, which is so important in religious contemplation. The first is outside us and based on an ancient philosophical thought recalled by Andrew Edgar (1997) in his essay on music and silence: "The music of the spheres becomes a noise that goes unnoticed, and as such is silent, as is any sound that falls outside our immediate concern and attention" (p. 320). The other is inside us and according to Ramana Maharshi, an Indian thinker and Hindu spiritual leader, "silence is never-ending speech. Vocal speech obstructs the other speech of silence. In silence one is in intimate contact with the surroundings" (as cited in Godman, 1985, p. 65) and thus, silence is "the highest and most effective language" (as cited in Godman, 1985, p. 65). In fact, it is this *inner silence*, this "most effective language" that many religious traditions strive to reach, emphasizing the importance of a silent, quiet mind and spirit to provide the possibility of true contemplation that would lead us and make able to commune with God.¹ It often conveys more information than speech and can thus be regarded as a part of the universal human aspect of communication which is common in all cultures. According to a Chinese philosopher, "Silence speaks because [it] has its invisible, inaudible, intangible, and yet indispensable content and context to be silent about ... [Thus] we all communicate with one another through silence ..., which is not only culturally specific but also universally meaningful" (Chen, 2007, p. 37).

Western culture has reached the same conclusion, as a random example from Thomas Carlyle (2001), the Victorian satirist, will show. In his essay on Walter Scott—originally, a review assessing John Gibson Lockhart's account of the *Life of Sir Walter Scott*—he claims the following: "under all speech that is good for anything there lies a silence that is better. Silence is deep as Eternity; speech is shallow as Time" (p. 6).

¹ We will see this thought in another light when discussing Jakob Boehme's idea of 'natural language.'

Despite the truth of this statement we will also see that eventually, it is usually speech or language use that embraces silence and provides context to it—otherwise the significance of silence would be lost. Susan Sontag (1983) also emphasizes this dialectic relationship between silence and sound, silence and language for the notion of silence is not understandable unless it implies its opposite in a given time and space: “without the polarity of silence, the whole system of language would fail” (p. 193). And we must see: “just as there can’t be ‘up’ without ‘down’ or ‘left’ without ‘right’ [...] one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence” continues Sontag (1983) and enhancing the existence of silence in time she adds that “any given silence has its identity as a stretch of time being perforated by sound” (p. 187).

Empty space is just like silence; as long as we see and can look at things, we inhabit empty spaces. Susan Sontag’s famous example is taken from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* (1872/2012); it is the scene when Alice suddenly finds herself in a shop that

seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it all was that, whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty: though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold. (p. 47)

“A genuine emptiness, a pure silence are not feasible—either conceptually or in fact” continues Sontag (1983) and adds that “the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence” (p. 187).

According to John Cage (1961), composer of 4’33”, “there is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear” (p. 8). Elsewhere he also says “there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound” (Cage, 1961, p. 191) and so it is during those 4 minutes and 33 seconds, in which the audience is waiting all ears. This experimental composition is “a piece that could be played on ‘any instrument’; a piece with no musical notes ... that would highlight to the world that it was absence of silence, not absence of sound, that truly defined the limitations of music” (Woolfrey, n.d., para. 3). Certainly, it also means that we are not bound by a place or time because there can be a performance of this piece anywhere and anytime; “all we have to do is think to listen to it” (Woolfrey, n.d., para. 13). Thus we can deduce silence seems to pervade our lives as well as the space we live in:

[it] is the space in which our planet spins relentlessly. It is the space between the words on this page. It is the screen on which you watch the movie in your favourite multiplex.

It is the traffic signal at the crossroads. It is the photo in your living room, which speaks fondly of a distant memory of a special time spent with loved ones. It is the space between two thoughts. It is the silence all around you. It is the silence outside when you are not talking. It is the stillness inside when you are not thinking. (Sachdeva, 2008, p. 66)

Accordingly, there are different silences or different ways of understanding silence in our everyday lives as well. Thus, silence is not only a part of communication but also a means of it and can appear in any situation, as when a subordinate, an employee is standing in front of his boss; or it can affect someone who is mourning the loss of a beloved one.

Let us see how this psychological sense of silence in our literary space affects the work of translators. They have to try to determine the hidden meaning and message (the sub-text) of a particular silence, which might imply surprise, love, agreement, anger, dissatisfaction, and frustration, or the portentous silence that precedes an emotional storm. For example, such a heavy and ominous silence seems to be present in *The Raven* by E.A. Poe, when the narrator, brooding over the loss of his Lenore, hears some gentle rapping and finds only the silent darkness outside. "Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,/ Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;/ But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token," (1959, p. 234).

In a very different text, in a novel by Daniel Gray Marshall titled *Still Can't See Nothin' Comin'* (2001), Mandy, who has been suffering from continuous sexual abuse by her father falls into a frightened and impotent silence that finally culminates in her suicide. When translating her silence the ensuing tragedy should be built up by finding a way to convey it through tiny moves; the choice of those subtle words that will psychologically prepare the reader for the inevitable.

Another, more formal aspect of silence in literary context focuses on the different possible ways and levels of how we might interpret the different kinds of silences, from silence manifested in spaces or pauses or blank places along with the meaning of words and texts to the silence of the text itself separating cultural spaces.

Reading literature is an entertaining way of acquiring knowledge. All readers of a literary work form their own interpretation of it, and the translator, who is also a reader, is no exception. In this respect, the translation of a work of foreign literature can be considered nothing more than the personal interpretation of its translator as a reader. Therefore, target language readers with no knowledge of the source language text or its cultural background will, paradoxically, have to rely on the translator's personal interpretation

to be able to form their own interpretation of that work. Consequently, without the work of translators, writers from different languages and different cultures would remain in the shade: formless, soundless, and unknown in hidden nooks out of the literary space of the translator's national culture.

The basic material of a literary work is language; moreover, the unique language of the writer and silence as well as the use of silence is an integral part of it. According to reception theorists, readers play an active even creative role in interpreting a text, and part of their answer to the question of why we have different readings of the same text is that these gaps or blanks are filled or linked by the knowledge or experience of the individual reader. Wolfgang Iser (2006), for example, argues that these gaps, in given parts of the text "trigger synthesizing operations in the reader's mind [as they] lead to collisions between the individual ideas formed" (p. 66).

In the process of translation, this basic material is first destroyed, then recreated in another language, and so the unique language of the writer is at the mercy of the talent and the competence of the translator that transforms and transmits the foreign literary text and its overall cultural content for the reader who in turn crosses borders, approaches the foreign and becomes familiar with it and with the imagination, traditions, and ways of thinking of others. (Somló, 2011a) In the meantime, between languages the text is silent and in this case silence is the cradle of a new text that will be recreated in another language and culture.

"Silence is the language of God, all else is poor translation" (Rumi as cited in Kononenko, 2010, p. 134). When I came upon this thought of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, the 13th-century Sufi poet, and philosopher, I thought we had better remain silent. Yet, the translation of 'all else' might contain a phase when we try to approach this silence, the language beyond languages. During the process of translation, the translator approaches a point beyond languages, a phase that we might consider a kind of meta-text between the source text and target text. It is described by the British translator, Anthea Bell (2019) as "passing briefly through a no-man's-land where neither really exists, only the meaning and the tone of voice. It's difficult to explain because of the absence of language in this interim phase" (para. 2).

The absence of language, those languages, which appeared after the fall of the tower of Babel leads us to the thought of the late 16th century Christian mystic and theologian Jakob Boehme (2008) who spoke about a 'natural language' (*Natursprache*) of the senses in which there was perfect agreement between the name, the sound, and the essence.

It was the language that “Adam spoke when he named the animals in the Garden of Eden” (Boehme, 2008, para. 7). Boehme (2008), just like a good translator, had a “God-given insight into the interpretation of the sounds and forms of his own language” (para. 7) revealing some facets of that primordial language. Structures and design in the creation of artificial languages were often based on the assumption so common in the 16th–17th centuries “that the hoped-for philosophical language would copy the function of Adam’s language, thus recapturing a measure of the insight into nature and the unity of knowledge that had been lost” (Boehme, 2008, para. 7), that is to say, into the real meaning of a space created by God.

There is yet another approach to this interim phase; that of the writer writing in a foreign country in a foreign language, which might be considered a kind of self-translation. “A foreign language is a paradoxical escape” (p. 5) says the Bulgarian-born writer and poet Kapka Kassabova (2005). “To translate is to travel this unpredictable landscape. To live between languages ... is to be constantly moving over untrodden territory, negotiating internal and external boundaries of identity and meaning” (Kassabova, 2005, p. 5). This thought corresponds with what Susanne Sontag (1983) says about the approach modern art requires; she compares it to approaching a landscape because it “does not demand from the spectator his ‘understanding,’ his imputation of significance, ...; it demands, rather, his absence, it asks that he not add anything to *it*” (p. 191).

Nearly all cultures in human history reach a point when discontent with distorted, contaminated language, and loss of meaning leads to a critique of language. Such an instance is shown in the absurd drama that Martin Esslin (1965) calls “an attack ... on fossilized forms of language... [that] has become a kind of ballast filling empty spaces” (para. 13). Thus, it is silence that purges art and language, “the most exhausted of all the materials out of which art is made” (Sontag, 1983, p. 189). Kassabova’s silence, the ‘muteness of her mind’ was due to her leaving her homeland and mother tongue behind. When a writer emigrates to a foreign country, to a different unknown space, s/he/ loses all intellectual background, ‘the language house’ s/he used to ‘inhabit’ and as a result: becomes speechless.² When Kassabova (2005) realized that she had to start writing in English she “became stuck between two languages”³ and found herself “stranded in a mental no man’s land, with no shelter in sight and no familiar landmarks” (p.10). Now she writes and publishes books in English yet “yearning for the language house [she] used to inhabit persists” (Kassabova 2005, p. 12).

² It is in fact a form of silence—refusal or failure to speak, communicate—reminding us of Mandy’s silence discussed earlier.

³ Compare Anthea Bell’s ‘no-man’s-land’ that interim phase characterized by the absence of any particular languages.

Salman Rushdie is yet another emigrant writer who, on the other hand, calls *himself* 'a translated man.' His life has led him to different parts of the world where he managed to gain insider's access to those worlds.

But something happens to individuals who move across the planet: out of language, out of culture, out of place ... Something is lost in translation. However, you can also add to whatever it is you think of as yourself, as a result of such a journey, such a translation. (Rushdie cited in Campbell, 2006, para. 14)

After all, this strange silence of the writer and the 'muteness' of the mind will finally appear in his/her writing either by expressing the feeling of loss or being lost or simply by becoming an integral part of his/her artistic expression.

Silence in a text may denote an effective break such as the caesura or the rhetorical device of the pregnant pause⁴; concurrently it might be a description in the text conveying the different emotional, philosophical, artistic, or social, or other meanings of silence some of which we have already touched upon. "[S]ilence is a multifaceted linguistic construct, with a range of forms, serving different functions and whose meaning can be extended into the visual domain" (Jaworski, 1997, p. 32). At the same time, due to its communicational role, silence often functions as a sign. Using the semiotic trichotomy of Peirce (1995)—icon, index, and symbol—Chris P. Miller (2007) explains silence as follows: "An empty space between words is *iconic* ... it both resembles and functions as an absence. As an *index*, silence both maintains a presence and refers to the physicality of absence, exemplified in the function of ellipses."⁵ (para. 3). From the point of view of the *symbolic* usage of silence he makes a functional distinction between language and rhetoric.

Similar to a symbol, silence functions as a law (language) and association of ideas (rhetoric). This is true in so far as silence can be seen as a body of rules organized under a common authority (similar to language), such as the legally structured and structuring 'moment of silence.' The 'moment of silence' denotes a prescribed system of behaviors and regulations, a Symbolic ground for the gestural space of law, as can be seen in many public/private places of study (classroom), veneration (church), and due process (courtroom). In terms of rhetoric, silence (as a Symbol) can be articulated through a series of associations, such as a constellation of ellipses/absences in a given text or speech. (Miller, 2007, para. 3)

⁴ Certainly, in speech, we also might have thinking breaks or breathing breaks as well as 'timing.'

⁵ Emphasis mine.

Most of the time, a break in the text, such as the caesura, is part of the form, the structure—say of a poem—that should be maintained in the translation. The first two lines of Yeats's poem "Down by the Salley Gardens" offers a good example of how a caesura is translated in two different Hungarian versions. The exact place of the caesura—a feminine caesura in this case—is slightly different but the aim of it denoting a rhythmic pause in the middle of the line is clear in both versions.

Down by the Salley Gardens

Down by the salley gardens/⁶ my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens/ with little snow-white feet. (Yeats, 1978, p. 7)

A kertben

Találkoztam veled/ a kertben, kedvesem,
Fehér lábad szökkelt,/ ragyogva csendesen. (Kosztolányi, 1966, p. 218)

Lent a fűzkertek alján ...

A folyóparton álltunk,/ körülöttünk a rét;
Támaszkodó vállamra/ tette fehér kezét. (Szabó, 1964, p. 350)

Although from the point of view of form, both translations seem to fulfill the requirements of the caesura that is present in the source text, the first line of the first target text (Találkoztam veled/ a kertben, kedvesem,) is less successful. There is another stop following the comma in the second part of the first line, while the first line of the second translated text (A folyóparton álltunk,/ körülöttünk a rét;) strengthens the caesura by an additional comma which is, however, also required by Hungarian syntax. On the other hand, in the case of the second line, it is Kosztolányi's version enhancing the caesura by a syntactically essential comma proving the rule: whatever is lost will be gained at another point of translation.

The pregnant pause or dramatic pause—usually a beat or two of silence with no dialogue—might be represented by an ellipsis, which is sometimes marked by the use of blank spaces or, more often, by three periods in writing. It might be used to heighten tension or refer to hesitation as well as let a joke sink in. The interpretation of a pause in translation is always defined by its linguistic surrounding and by the overall meaning of the text.

Here I have to mention a special, rather frustrating kind of silence in translation called untranslatability. Some poems, poetic forms, or devices might momentarily prove

⁶ Slashes in the following lines denoting the caesura are mine.

impossible to translate into another culture but the innovative talent of translators will brave the impossible and try to solve these problems⁷ as well as convey proverbs or puns or jokes, which are generally shrugged off as untranslatable. For example, in a 19th-century text, I came across the following English proverb or idiomatic expression: 'Worse things happen at sea.' It is generally used to tell someone not to worry so much about tiny personal problems and the message could only be conveyed by changing the cultural dimensions of the context: a dangerous and tragic sea voyage is similar to the aftermath of the lost battle at Mohács in Hungarian history⁸ appearing in the corresponding Hungarian saying: 'Több is veszett Mohácsnál' (More has been lost at Mohács). So, we have a near equivalent of the phrase but the word as well as the notion of Mohács will not fit into the Hungarian translation of an English text. Looking for a way to convey the meaning of the English proverb by evoking the feelings present in the Hungarian phrase I used the connotations of the words 'több is veszett' (*more has been lost*) to steer the thoughts of the reader toward the meaning I wanted to make clear and then finished it by adding the words 'at sea'—Hungary has no seaside, at all—to maintain distance and foreignness in the target text and, thus, to evoke the filling of a different cultural space.

When examining different national cultures operating in a particular political space we can see that they "construct their images of writers and texts" in different ways, and, consequently, there is a difference between "the ways in which texts become cultural capital across cultural boundaries" (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1998, p. 138). Cultural capital itself has a twin role: first, it represents a kind of national standard *within* a nation's culture or the dominant cultural values that are present in a particular society at a certain point in time. At the same time, especially in the case of translation, it represents a kind of cultural capital *imported* from outside to enrich and develop the target cultural system and appear on the target scene to inhabit a special space in it. Certainly what the target culture *imports* mostly depends on those dominant cultural values *within*, so the choice of what is translated is basically defined by the very state of the target culture and its literary tradition. In other words, the quality and the cultural value of the cultural capital chosen to be presented and offered for further use is determined by the cultural standard of the target public; but it is also governed by people in power positions as well as the dominant poetics (Somló, 2011b). The producer of symbolic goods—the writer or the literary translator in our

⁷ For example, the 14th-century Petrarchan sonnet was introduced as a new poetic form in English literature via translation in the 16th century and got incorporated into English culture as an innovation in the form of the Shakespearean sonnet.

⁸ 1526: The overall victory of the Turkish army over the Hungarian, which led to the country's division into 3 parts for nearly a century.

case—aims to create intellectual values to enrich and become part of the cultural capital and appear on the national cultural market that is controlled by other players present, namely the powers adding their political and ideological values to it (Somló, 2011b). When a writer remains silent, it can be intentional or an imposed state of muteness; thus, silence, on the one hand, might be a kind of resistance or radical speech, and on the other, a kind of punishment imposed on the artist by outside forces. In her article on the functions of silence in modern Spanish literature, Janet Pérez (1984) describes some instances when Spanish writers used “literary silence as a reaction” (p. 115) to Franco’s regime and ideology. As Susan Sontag (1983) claims: “silence is the artist’s ultimate other-worldly gesture: by silence, he frees himself from the servile bondage to the world, which appears as patron, client, consumer, antagonist, arbiter, and distorter of his work” (p. 183).

Traditionally Hungarian writers often turn to translation for different reasons; one of them is silence imposed upon them. During our stormy history, most prominent writers as well as our national literature often became entangled with politics. Those poets and writers who did not die in action were silenced as a punishment—or remained silent by their own choice. Thus we have yet another possible connection between space and silence as the political space where anyone struggling against the ruling power might be silenced. For example, after World War II or 1956, Hungarian writers suffered various fates: some were supported by official cultural policy for helping, one way or another, the actual political system; others were just tolerated or suppressed. Suppressed or merely tolerated writers were to turn to translation because it offered the possibility of occasional employment as well as a hidden way of expressing their thoughts and views by way of interpreting the message of a foreign writer.

Conclusion—or Something Like That

Following the way a translator approaches his/her task, trying to experience meaning from many aspects, we find that silence is always followed by movement in our life-space; sounds such as words or just inner sounds such as thoughts will finally acquire meaning in context, moreover in the context of silence, and will eventually fill a given space or link different spaces.

We have also seen that silence as part of our space is an integral part of the text as well as a language in its own right and has as many interpretations and roles in the translated text as any other parts of the source text. We have touched upon many aspects and interpretations of silence thus instead of a proper conclusion I would rather propose

an open mind so that we would be able to incorporate into our national selection of foreign literature the works of all those silent figures and cultures of foreign literary systems that are still out in space, in the shade, unknown and hidden for our culture.

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