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Linguistic hospitality: Thinking with language to reflect on positionality within more-than-human participatory design.

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Citation

LINGUISTIC HOSPITALITY. THINKING WITH LANGUAGE TO REFLECT ON POSITIONALITY WITHIN MORE-THAN-HUMAN PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This text is a reflection on an ongoing PhD research on more-than-human hospitality, more particularly on how farmers (might) live with water. Within my research, I will undertake an ethnographic study paired with Participatory Action Research (PAR), through which I will attempt to *bring water home* - shift mindsets towards water and build capacity for an environmental transition. In this contribution I will address a relatively under-discussed issue of multilingualism within design and reflect on the process of entering a sensitive context without speaking the native language. Taking the form of a polyphonic essay, this text will explore paradoxes and possibilities lying in thinking with language(s). I will claim that embracing the uncertainty translation poses and taking a more quiet and humble approach may spark a genuine connection between me and the participants and, in turn, form the basis for poetics of relation with water (Glissant, 1997).

INTRODUCTION

This article, written by the first author in the I form, to underline the personal search, is framed in a PhD trajectory within the EU Reworlding project, exploring, among others, the translations between human and more-than-human worlds. The question of translation motivated me to dive deeper into the topic of language. The PhD explores the uncertainty for the future and tensions present among a community of farmers located in the region of Haspengouw, Belgium. The area suffers from frequent and irregular floods and droughts, and while there is a counter-action already devised - namely the Water+Land+Schap programme, a new water management scheme - so far, it is not being implemented and there is scarce dialogue between farmers and other stakeholders. Inaction in regards to the policy spells disaster for more-than-human actors, already disappearing from the landscape, while other factors, such as long-standing tensions between the farmers and spokespeople for climate significantly hinder dialogue, necessary to guide the transition.

This article reflects on an ethnographic study paired with PAR I undertake in my PhD in order to build trust, create capacity for an environmental transition and shift mindsets towards water and other-than-human actors - *bring water home*. Bringing water home in a highly conflicted and distrusting environment can be considered a matter close to PAR's concerns, as it entails working collaboratively towards social change and empowerment. However, it also becomes a question of what I will call more-than-human hospitality - the act of welcoming an ultimate, more-than-human other, giving room to it and seeing it as a full-fledged actor and thinking entity. As such, it invites more ethical dilemmas, reflection on power structures and mediation. Entering a conflicted territory where change is imminent to inspire openness and strike up interspecies dialogue is a hard task as it is. But how to mediate and encourage care for water - so far treated as a thing to harness and use - without speaking the language of the farmers? How to form an understanding with farmers?

This text will take inspiration from various linguistic concepts to explore possibilities for mediating in (more-than) human and conflicts lying in adopting alternative forms of communication. Its main line of inquiry revolves around a question - might an effort to communicate, without knowing the spoken language of my interlocutors, reveal both the multiplicity of personal languages among farmers and the lack of common language between farmers and water? Might revealing potentials, rather than limitation in a language barrier, question monolingualism and draw attention to pluriversality? And could that make the environmental transition not only more participatory, but heterogenous and nuanced, as well as help establish a more-than-human hospitality and an interspecies dialogue?

The text will unpack several existing concepts, such as monolingualism, multilingualism (Glissant, 1997), hospitality (Derrida, 2000), translation and linguistic hospitality (Kearney, 2021; Ricœur, 2006), and visiting (Arendt, 1992, p. 43), as well as discuss a novel one, namely more-than-human hospitality. Though it is relatively under-discussed, implementing linguistic notions into the design field, such as translation, linguistic hospitality or multilingualism, has the potential to significantly enrich and improve design processes. As participatory processes and relational design rest mainly on the ability to bridge worlds – draw attention to plurality, embrace multiplicity, and situate humans more firmly in interspecies constellations - translation has the potential to become a design strategy allowing "staying with uncertainty" (Morton, 2010, p. 59) and caring for ontologically different entities. Thinking with these concepts would tap into goals and presuppositions of both PAR – producing new knowledge *with*, rather than *about* participants, and building capacities to address conflicts – and Participatory Design (PD) – improving design and transition processes by including ontologically diverse voices, and giving room to participants as experts. To reflect the multifaceted nature of thinking with language(s) within Participatory Design, as well as evoke contradictions revealed through conversations, fieldwork and research, the paper is built up as an errantry (Glissant, 1997) - a collection of dilemmas, perspectives and insights - and takes the form of a semi-structured narrative interspersed by other voices.

"THE ROOT IS MONOLINGUAL." (GLISSANT, 1997, P. 15)

Starych drzew się nie przesadza.[1] The likelihood of transformation and living with uncertainty brought about by climate change often results in feelings of anxiety and hostility towards necessary socio-environmental transitions. The farmers I work with feel betrayed and estranged and see water, as well as the policymakers attempting to reintroduce it, as invaders, robbing them of their livelihoods and crashing the gates of their homes.

> *- I am going to lose 15ha of pastureland in 2028. But the worst part is the uncertainty - there is still no plan. They don't give any time to react.*[2]

There is a real danger that in response they will become defensive and deep-seated, fixing their roots more permanently. Rootedness can very easily morph into fixity, alienation, (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7) and, in that regard, finds itself close to monolingualism, a concept coined by Édouard Glissant (1997, p. 15), referring to a state of estrangement, both fueled by and resulting in favouring sameness over otherness. What is rooted is monolingual, as striving for permanence can lead to reservations towards welcoming those that are different. How should I, a foreign outsider, find a way into a - at first glance - monolingual environment? Will the farmers have the capacity to welcome me to their homes and could we commonly reflect on a possible shift from hostility to hospitality towards water? Could welcoming a human stranger make it simpler to open up one's home "to the absolute unknown"? (Derrida, 2000, p. 25)

Entering a conflicted context can make it harder for a researcher to take a stance, as well as mediate and inspire care for other entities. How to navigate between empathy for farmers and their sense of "*casaperdida*" (Arrow, 2015) - a fear of loss of home due to climate change - and the knowledge of the likely consequences for other species their refusal to act will beget? How to build trust, form a genuine understanding, and collaboratively work on the transition when your interlocutors are faced with imminent loss? Is not knowing the language an advantage or not?

> *- You don't know Flemish?*

> *- No.*

> *- And you want to talk to farmers?*

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[1] In a way similar to 'old habits die hard', yet literally translatable to 'old trees should not be uprooted,' this Polish proverb expresses the inherent need for stability and belonging.

[2] Fragment of a conversation held with a farmer.

- Yes.

- This won't work.[3]

Many people I talked to assumed that not knowing the language is a disadvantage. However, are farmers really not open to conversation? Or is maybe their monolingualism a "delusion," (Mol, 2020, p. 385), a concept pigeonholing them into a homogenous block and obscuring multiple realities existing among them, as well as maintaining the power relation ethnographer (I) | subject (they)? Despite the danger of monolingualism among farmers, what is truly hindering entering into dialogue, as well as bringing out biases in me, are the doubts and apprehension expressed by other researchers, experts and organisation representatives. Fearing and expecting monolingualism can potentially obstruct the inability to start a dialogue with farmers. This might lead to a further alienation and hinder the possibility for more-than-human hospitality and interspecies care beyond repair. Questioning monolingualism and acknowledging dialogue as a constant act of mediation and interpretation of personal perspectives draws attention to the concept of translation.

"TO UNDERSTAND IS TO TRANSLATE." (RICŒUR, 2006, P. 11)

Translation is not a foreign element within design. Every participatory process is a kind of translation - mediation between diverse, even ontologically different actors, during which the researcher should inspire a caring language between participants. (Huybrechts et al., 2022, p. 11-12) Translation enables language to become a form of hospitality and points towards multilingualism - another concept coined by Glissant (1997, p. 19), which he saw as an understanding formed through an acknowledgement of difference. Thinking with translation and multilingualism reveals untranslatability of any language or reality; perversely, Derrida went as far to say that "translation is another name for the impossible," (1998, p. 57) while Ahmed - after Spivak - wrote that translation is "a form of love and proximity that always fails to grasp the text." (2000, p. 147)

"Host and guest languages are never the same - and never should be." (Kearney, 2021, p. 266)

Yet, the untranslatability is not equivalent to the impossibility of communication; it merely acknowledges the fact that both human and more-than-human participants will never fully know or agree with each other during the process - but maintains the

possibility of understanding and caring for one another. Translation provides the possibility to stay with uncertainty (Morton, 2010, p. 59) - accepting failures, miscommunications, and time needed to grow understanding. This could build genuine trust between me and participants and between farmers and water, reframe the power structures and inspire more-than-human hospitality. Too often ethnographic approach leads to speaking *about* or *for*, imbalance which a language barrier may only. Adopting translation as a strategy may let farmers authorise the process and knowledge, rather than make them authorised by it. (Ahmed, 2000, p. 63)

In effect, translation could become a process requiring reciprocity, mutual respect, and curiosity. The acknowledgment of an irreconcilable difference every translation process poses and the impossibility to "be at home" (Derrida, 1998, p. 57) within any language, makes apparent the need to design for a world where many different worlds fit, which might result "in a therapeutic mourning of the dream of fusion." (Kearney, 2021, p. 266)

"When the translator acknowledges and assumes the irreducibility of the pair, the peculiar and the foreign … he can find his happiness in what I would like to call linguistic hospitality." (Ricœur, 2006, p. 10)

Paul Ricœur, when coining linguistic hospitality, referred to it as "correspondence" (2006, p. 10) - which implies dialogue, while maintaining difference. It is a form of imperfect, yet meaning-full relation, which allows for "resonances" (Mol, 2020, p. 385) and personal perspectives to emerge. Thus, engaging in hospitality and translation would require a more quiet, patient and receptive stance on my part, which would be in line with PAR's prerequisites - an "acceptance of uncertainty and tensions." (Cornish et al., 2023, p. 6) Turning towards receptivity - a willingness to be taught new ideas - and being appreciative of others' standpoints, even if they stand in opposition to ours, might be what is lacking in design processes within conflicts. A basis for poetics of relation lies in accepting multilingualism - willingness to learn foreign ideas and forms of communications and to become affected by others.

It is so nice to find someone who listens to you.[4]

Perhaps this is why humility is sometimes referred to as a quiet virtue - not giving voice or speaking for, but merely - or rather, significantly - being responsive. Surprisingly little is said about modesty within design. Humility is perhaps not the most spectacular form of

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[3] Fragment of a conversation held with a person working in relation to agricultural heritage in Belgium.

[4] Fragment of a conversation held with a farmer.

citizen empowerment, and too often is connected with an apologetic inferiority, yet it certainly feels needed in the practice, as it manifests an honest acknowledgement of one's inadequate experience, thus inviting the insight of others, which, incidentally, is in line with presuppositions of PD. However PAR with its focus on inducing empowerment to change comes closer to such an approach by inviting its researchers to exhibit "humility and genuine kindness." (Cornish et al., 2023, p. 6)

"RELATION, IN CONTRAST, IS SPOKEN MULTILINGUALLY." (GLISSANT, 1997, P. 19)

Translation in the context of my study could draw closer to "visiting," a concept proposed by Hannah Arendt (1992, p. 43), entailing noticing and looking closely to understand others. Thus, it reflects a humble wish to learn from the farmers and understand them in order to allow their perspective to resonate.

Adopting translation as a design strategy would have a threefold meaning. Firstly, it could allow delegating agency to farmers, and, through encouraging them to share their insights as experts, to water. If farmers will undertake more time-consuming, yet caring ways of communicating and noticing, water might be effectively *brought home* – embraced as an equipotential actor. Secondly, translation could point towards multiplicity of perspectives and pluriversality always present, yet often obscure within design processes; as such, it would entail diversifying the monolingual, homogenous block of farmers as "they" into a more heterogeneous patchwork of languages and stories. Finally, taking up translation as an approach may become an invitation for farmers to learn from and think with water to react to climate change in a more caring, less exploitative ways.

"IT IS PRECISELY WHEN TWO DISTINCT TONGUES CROSS THAT A THIRD CAN BE BORN." (KEARNEY, 2021, P. 266)

Translation, in a more literal sense, may make the design process and our conversations lengthy and erroneous - yet, by necessity, they will probably become more concise and performative. A conventional interview setup - a sit-down conversation - could potentially turn into a walk through the house, a collaborative drawing session, or a working day at the farm - sessions of togetherness. Observing movements and gestures, interactions with soil, trees, vegetables, animals, as well as other workers, can reveal as much - or perhaps more - than a conversation.

Farmers stick to themselves. There is a big competition and not much cooperation or mutual help. They keep their mouth shut when something potentially good is available.

At the same time, K is in the middle of helping a neighbour-farmer out with their machine.[5]

Although the sessions might prove harder to decode, such an approach might disrupt the binary us | they and open doors to pluriversality, the many realities present and yet unrealised. Openness to patchy forms of communication and plural possibilities among not only other-than, but also human beings, could significantly enrich more-than-human participatory design, so often focused on "giving voice" to other species, which, despite good efforts, often only maintains the hierarchy and exclusion - people communicate, other species do not. Realising that every being and each context has a specific language of their own could bridge the difference more efficiently and respectfully. It also questions the idea of language from a spoken communication towards a broader concept, entailing learning specificity of personal histories, context, or land.

"WATER CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS A PARTICULARLY POTENT LINGUISTIC INGREDIENT." (CHEN ET AL., 2013, P. 10)

Interestingly and fittingly, in both hydrofeminism and new media water is understood as mediation (Chen et al., 2013, p. 8; Zylinska, 2020, p. 224), a form of linkage and communication between species - a kind of more-than-human translation. As such, both water and translation can be understood as complex and hybrid processes which create and bridge worlds. Embracing uncertainty, miscommunication, and inconsistency of translation might make it easier for farmers to see themselves and water as interdependent. Thinking *with* water not merely *about* it (Chen et al., 2013, p. 3-4) - evaporating, flooding, and drying up - asks for the skill to read between the lines, (Robert, 2023, p. 9) requires the ability to shift, become fluid, contest clear-cut concepts, being open and attentive - all qualities translation teaches. In order to both think with water and become multilingual, one needs to learn receptivity, leakiness, relationality, and the willingness to be affected. Might it not be right, then, to assume that in order to make room for water and bring it home farmers need to attune themselves to different ways of communicating?

IT IS VERY INTERESTING TO READ NATURE.[6]

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[5] Fragment of a conversation with a farmer.

[6] Fragment of a conversation with a farmer.

Could farmers, through getting accustomed to alternative forms of communication and empowered by a more nuanced approach, become speakers for their environment and imagineers - co-creators of interspecies futures? Might engaging with translation have the power to awaken - or teach - ways of communicating, noticing and learning from other beings latent or not present in farmers? Could it also make it easier for me to decode the relationship farmers have with landscape and translate it into a liquid imaginary - knowledge that could make environmental transitions participatory for all species? Could one translation - intralingual - beget another - a trans-species one?

Beech is dying. I visited a friend who had a beautiful alley of old beeches leading up to their house, but they started to die, to shed their barks. The bark boils in the heat and peels of. I cried when I saw it.[7]

A deep concern about fragility of beings other than human (Tokarczuk, 2019) suffering consequences of climate inaction can become a basis for an interspecies dialogue and spark hospitality. By taking care to observe, engaging in a sometimes imperfect, time-consuming and difficult dialogue, water might transform from an untrustworthy and reified resource to a thinking entity, from whom the farmers might learn to understand their environment more deeply. Thanks to working in the field daily in close contact with various species and entities, the farmers possess an intimate, situated knowledge of their environment. That knowledge, however, due to farming conditions and inequalities, is often translated into a language of profit. Linguistic hospitality might change the current translation into one of care. By attempting to approach water with linguistic hospitality, the language of a design process becomes "a more-than-human collaboration." (Chen et al., 2013, p. 11)

ENDING REMARKS

What kind of design materialities, knowledge or outcomes undertaking translation might point to? Approaching conflict through linguistic lenses could result in translation of the unique perspectives of farmers into tools influencing environmental transition, as well as building capacities for more-than-human hospitality. Realising the untranslatable, yet bridgeable difference between ontologically different actors, as well as multiplicity of languages, may nurture non-exploitative and horizontal relations. Embracing the challenges of multilingual and alternative forms of communication might, therefore, potentially prepare farmers for an unconditional welcoming of water within

their homes - a risky, yet loving (Morton, 2010, p. 81) relationship, requiring compromises and care. Fieldwork and interviews conducted with translation and linguistic hospitality in mind attune to reading between the lines, looking for hidden meanings and observing closer the actions and contexts in-between. There is nuance, affinities, and loanwords in each language, no matter how closed off or strange it might at first seem. Perhaps both me and the farmers still need to find the dictionaries to our respective languages and the one used by water.

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