language-landscape #2

Supplementary material

language-landscape #2 — post-screening talk, 28.05.2026

Hello, and good afternoon. My name is Amit Leblang, I am a visual artist and PhD researcher, working on translation as a visual art practice and a material. The video we are about to see is a 9-minute art piece I presented at an exhibition in Brussels last September. I will first show the video and then discuss its making and themes.

----------Video screening----------

1. **Position**

The video we just watched encompasses core questions in my research. I came to this through my own experience of immigrating to Belgium, a country whose language I did not speak. Ever since moving here, I have been learning the local languages.

2. **Motivation**

The trigger for this video was the way I was often introduced to Belgium's territory and government structure. Belgians told me about their regions through language — "this is the Flemish-speaking region," "the German-speaking border", "the French-speaking area."

The film was shot across multilingual border regions in Belgium: Mouscron, Sint-Genesius-Rode, Waterloo, Visé, Bütgenbach—places where language is said to shift — legally, politically and by social convention.

I was also told, "one can feel it's a Flemish area" — as if a flat green surface is more Flemish-speaking than a curved or hilly horizon. The questions that drove my filming were about the relation between language and place: can language and translation be *seen* in a landscape? Does one language belong more than another in a certain terrain? Is there a connection — or even a necessity — between language and territory? I was triggered by how the people living here give their territories the ability to speak. I wanted to stand at the exact point where one language and region supposedly ends, shift into another and witness it. What exactly in this border speaks Flemish? By being there, filming and creating the mediated gaze, could I manage to see the moment of translation?

Being able to walk freely across these “language borders” and, without noticing, to cross the edges of a language and region, is a confusing experience for an outsider. Many of these borders are unmarked and insignificant; at the back of a home, with no sign or checkpoint, or flag. Linguist Roman Jakobson said that languages differ not in what they can say, but in what they must say — for example, gender assigned to nouns in Arabic and Hebrew but not in English or Dutch. Languages impose different obligations on their speakers, while the territory they are assigned seems indifferent to them. The border — which is a language border, not a mountain or a river — has the force of language but the appearance of landscape.

So, the power of the border is not sensory. I couldn’t capture it with the camera’s “blow-up” abilities, the zoom-ins, in slowing down the shot, or in looping the same image; I had constantly the feeling I “missed” the moment of change. The camera also follows the birds, the fields, or whatever element within the frames that could maybe reveal something of the time and place of transition. But, it was absent from the space and from its representation.

3. translators

Alongside the landscapes, you hear segments of interviews I did with translators and interpreters. These experts, working across literary, institutional, legal, and theatre settings, gave me different answers to the same questions. In the editing, I didn’t try to resolve these tensions but let them intertwine and contradict each other, hoping the viewer can imagine they are all sitting in the same room, discussing and disagreeing. As if they share a non-physical space.

4. Inputs

Some translators see themselves as craftsman, and some as artists. Some give their work great political and social weight, while others consider it insignificant.

One interpreter working for the European Court of Justice spoke about his body and the physical tension of simultaneous interpretation, and how meaning moves through breath, tone, and gesture. Another raised the question of time: in some Arabic dialects (Egypt, Syria), months are spoken of numerically. So, should he translate “the fourth month” as “April,” or keep it literal? Each choice already says something about whose sense of time is important to acknowledge in the room.

5. Translation-immigration connection

To explain how territory and translation intertwine with identity, I want to quote Mekhitar Garabedian, a Belgian-based visual artist born in Syria of Armenian roots. In an interview in 2015, he says: "In diaspora, both the old and the new, the original family and the new community, their languages and cultures, appear equally attractive and problematic, resulting in a subjective condition marked by longing and belonging, and by always being in between cultures, times, places — layering, contaminating, and balancing different pasts, presents, and futures — being here, and, at the same time, always already there. It means to keep feeling threatened by this past, by this former territory, and to be caught up in memory... Diaspora is also marked by translation. Inhabiting two or more languages concurrently challenges our subjectivity, as we are pending, undecided, between two languages. Bilingual or multilingual consciousness is not the sum of two languages, but a different state of mind altogether — defined by the mode of translation. As a foreigner, you are constantly translating, in both directions. You find yourself in a position in which you can no longer speak of a mother tongue — always in between (two, or more) languages, always speaking the words of others. Being essentially a translator, the foreigner is intimately aware of the untranslatability, and of the foreignness (or otherness), of language; the uncanny, intractable, and disturbing character of language — experiencing that we not only speak a language, but are also spoken by it."[1]

This speaks to both the immigrant experience and the translator's experience—a position of at least duality, if not more.

6. Methodology

I want to speak briefly about the formal choices of video: the text, coordinates, recorded audio, the cuts, and the image are all tools for looking at translation before it happens and disappears. This layering of media like moving image, spoken voice, written text, and geographic data — is itself an intermedial practice – the tension between the representations creates the meaning.

Subtitles appear in five languages; they overlap and fight for attention. The language I read most fluently pulls my eye; it takes priority over the image. This draws attention to the automatic aspects of linguistic belonging and to the feeling of "being-in-language" that accompanies fluency. I wanted to avoid the fluency and transparency we often associate with

[1] Mekhitar Garabedian, in an interview with Eva Heisler, "Always Speaking the Words of Others," *Asymptote Journal*, 2015, accessed March 3, 2026, https://www.asymptotejournal.com/visual/mekhitar-garabedian-always-speaking-the-words-of-others/.

translation and allow multiple versions of the same sentence on a single frame. This also allowed me to use the text as a drawing and create a parallel between the words and the horizontal lines in the frame.

The subtitles are there to place us briefly in a state of translation, pending between languages, and not fully landing in one.

The frame is not a transparent window onto the landscape; this is definitely not a documentary of these places. The image is used as a malleable material in the editing and as a plane of confrontation, for the text to move upon. The images are a manipulated representation of territories, trying, in combination with the words and the sound, to level the ways of being in place; so, the images are not "more" representative than the words or coordinates.

The editing mirrors the translators' insights. When one of them speaks of working "paragraph to paragraph, line to line, word to word" — and shudders at this style of translation — the image cuts and reverses direction. When another translator reflects on constant negotiation — "can I? could I just put this?"—the frame flips, making this "extreme" change in orientation, checking if the complete opposite is possible.

Geographic coordinates that appear throughout the sequences, anchoring each shot to a precise location. This is somewhat of an ironic gesture; for me, these landscapes look quite similar. The coordinates are the voice of mapping, of measuring, something that should be "trustworthy" and indicative, more than speech and moving images, and, at the same time, the border is still invisible to the camera.

7. Subjectivity

So, if the borders are invisible, if the landscapes could be anywhere, what does it mean that it was filmed *here*, with *these* cuts?

The honest answer is that I could reach these locations by train, because I was allowed to migrate here.

That is already a condition and choice embedded in the material — not just what I filmed, but that I could film it at all. The act of walking in a "borderland" and looking for something that isn't visible is already a form of making, of using the ability to cross and to represent, duplicate, and mould.

The camera and the editing are also not neutral. When I cut early or late, loop or flip a sequence, these are positions I take, and, like every translator, I am not neutral. I intentionally chose moments that seem like nothing is happening, pointing at the non-event of translation and of border crossing in this context. I chose to translate and, by doing so, highlight the words I found most entangled with the moving images, and that can be interpreted on several layers at the same time (for example, “we are not there” in Hebrew, English, and German).

8. Close

To conclude, the work was my way to be in translation. It tries to be in multiple representations at once, in multiple languages, in an image that is also a text, a speech that is also a location.

These replications and ramifications are formal choices that mirror the translation itself. What I keep coming back to is that the border is real, and it is also nowhere.

Thank you.

References

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