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Emanuela Costa

# A tale of two tongues: self-translation in Sekiguchi Ryōko's poetry

**Abstract:** Literary self-translation is a practice that has gained increasing scholarly attention in the fields of postcolonial, transnational studies and translation studies, following the rise in the number of bilingual and plurilingual writers over the twentieth and twenty-first century. In the Japanese context, a growing body of research on works by authors who write in more than one language is now calling for an acknowledgment of how bilingual literature has been “shaking” the foundations of modern Japanese literature, as Komori (1998) suggests, by breaking the equation between nationality, ethnicity, national language and culture that had been developed during the nation-building process in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In this paper, I analyze the work of Sekiguchi Ryōko, a contemporary poet based in France, who writes free-verse poetry in Japanese and self-translates it into French. In the first part, the paper examines a poem included in the collections *Hakkōsei Diapositive* (Japanese) and *Calque* (French) to illustrate how Sekiguchi conceives self-translation as a process that destabilizes the categories of original and translation. Addressing questions of authenticity and fidelity, Sekiguchi seeks to explore the creative potential of translation as a means to reconsider one's affiliation to the mother tongue. In the second part, the paper focuses on Sekiguchi's multilingual public readings, arguing that they offer alternative ways of thinking about translation, communication and linguistic identities, for they stress the need to foster an understanding of languages as historically positioned systems, but also encourage readers to step outside normative linguistic paradigms.

**Keywords:** Sekiguchi Ryōko, self-translation, contemporary poetry, transnational literature

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**Emanuela Costa:** Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, e-mail: emy\_costa@hotmail.com

# 1 Introduction

This paper examines the work of Sekiguchi Ryōko, a contemporary poet who self-translates her texts from Japanese into French. The aim is to shed light on Sekiguchi's contribution to the discourse on bilingual and exophonic writing, as well as to the field of translation studies.

Self-translation has been defined by Popovič (1976: 19) as “the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself.” Variedly assessed by critics, it is a phenomenon with a long history rooted in the plurilingual background that characterized most societies before the spreading of a monolingual paradigm that, as Yildiz (2012) points out, came to constitute a key structuring principle in the formation of individual and social identities:

According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one “true” language only, their “mother tongue,” and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture and nation. [...] The pressures of this monolingual paradigm have not just obscured multilingual practices across history; they have also led to active processes of monolingualization [...]. Multilingualism, then, has not been absent in the last couple of centuries, but it has been and continues to be refracted through the monolingual paradigm. (Yildiz 2012: 2–3)

Until monolingualism became the dominant paradigm, plurilingual situations had been widespread, playing a pivotal role in the making of most civilizations. In the European context, for instance, the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern age signals a shift in the concept of language – and in turn of translation and authorship – that foreshadowed economic, political and philosophical changes. As Hokenson and Munson (2007: 82) point out about such shifts, “changing concepts of the vernacular reflect both increasingly secular theories of the word as well as increasingly political disputes about literacy and class, during the difficult and often violent extension of the democratic franchise.” As Hokenson and Munson further remark, translation was enmeshed in the economy of the book trade, as the transnational circulation of books paved the way for a steady increase in translation between vernaculars. Language policies also served the colonialist agenda, as the colonized where meant to be “civilized” through the language of the colonizers.

In the eighteenth century, political rivalry, economic expansion and deep changes in religious and philosophical views foreshadowed the formation of nation-states. Clearly defined borders – including geographical, ethnic and linguistic borders of a given national language – were vital to consolidate the nation-state system, in which nations are constructed as quantifiable units distinguished from each other and animated by a particular “genius.” Within this

project, new conceptions of language came to the forefront (especially through the efforts of German philosophers such as Johann Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Schleiermacher). The mother tongue became the privileged site of linguistic and social identification for the citizens of a given nation-state. It functioned as a tool to frame inclusion to or exclusion from such “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) and as a powerful means of oppression during colonialism, which often imposed the colonizer’s language on the colonized, and reallocated the functions for the indigenous languages according to a hierarchical structure which privileged a monolingual framework.

In the context of Japan, the encounter with the West in the late nineteenth century entailed deep changes in the political and economic fabric of the country. The process of modernization involved a re-arrangement of political and social structure aimed at transforming Japan into a powerful nation-state on a par with its European counterparts. Within this project, substantial efforts were made to strengthen the military and technologically innovate the country, but also to foster in its inhabitants a sense of identity as one nation and culture. As Sakai and his colleagues argue about the contradictions inherent in the process of consolidation of the nation-state in the wake of Japan’s encounter with the West:

An apparatus of fantasy must take individual experiences of frustration within the modernizing process and “represent” them through the schema of binary opposition between the “West” and “Japan.” Such a regime transforms these experiences into a narrative in which the desire to return to the national community “Japan” may be satisfied. (Sakai et al. 2005: 12)

The consolidation of the nation-state, while effacing the ethnic and linguistic diversity of pre-modern Japan, relied on political reforms as much as on linguistic reforms, with the national language (*kokugo*) becoming a fundamental trait of national identity as well as the tool through which such identity was constructed by the means of schooling and the implementation of a literary canon capable of expressing the “genius” of the Japanese nation. In the first half of the twentieth century, forced linguistic assimilation was an essential feature of the imperialist expansion of Japan in Asia (Kawamura 1990, 1994; Oguma 1995; Lee 2010).

However, the dismantling of colonial empires, the increase in transnational mobility and the wider accessibility to global communication since the postwar years have initiated a reassessment of the relationship between linguistic, ethnic and national identity. In the field of literary studies, a rich body of research is available on the subject, revealing the complexities of the bilingual and plurilingual discourses that have been articulated in literary texts. In fact, the very definition of what nowadays constitutes a bilingual text is problematic: the descriptor “bilingual” might be used when referring to a text featuring two versions placed side by side, or to a text that

employs code switching, or – as in the case of self-translations – to a text that exists on its own in two different languages. In some cases, we find works that are written in a single language yet they evoke an exophonic imagination. Also, it is necessary to point out that not all forms of bilingualism are created equal: the experience of those exposed to additive bilingualism (acquisition of a second language besides one's first) are fundamentally different from the experience of those exposed to subtractive bilingualism (replacement of the first language by the second).

Yet, looking at this multiplicity of bi/plurilingual configurations as a net of “transitive,” potentially sociocultural transformative strategies can shed light on how bilingual and plurilingual works both affect and are affected by the way language is imagined and encoded at individual and collective levels. In other words, while bilingual and plurilingual works reflect specific historically situated, sociopolitically articulated views of language that are not necessarily challenged by the coexistence of more languages in a text, the displacement that bilingual works can produce at the level of both language and cultural intertextuality might encourage a change of discursive practice in understanding how linguistic aesthetics influence, shape and reshape our alignments and identity positions towards the multicultural call of current times. For plurilingual artists, jumping – sometimes falling – into the “holes” of the linguistic systems they inhabit means to position themselves in the cultural fabric that such languages express, but it also provides a margin of dis-identification from existing structures and the stimulus to look at them with different eyes (and listen to them with different ears).

Within the diverse landscape of bilingual writing, self-translators often occupy a niche position. As Santoyo (2005: 19) points out in his outline on the state of the art of the field, even though self-translators figure in the literary world across time and cultures, self-translations have often been considered marginal phenomena. In recent times, however, self-translation has been revitalized as a literary practice through the work of transnational, border-crossing writers who experiment with bilingualism and plurilingualism, and it has gained critical attention as a field of research enquiry, providing “an alternative line of study within literary translation theory” (Tanqueiro 2000: 62). While most studies available in the field deal with well-established literary figures such as Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov and Rabindranath Tagore, or focus on self-translators in Anglophone contexts, recent research has been looking at the works of writers whose bilingualism moves outside the sphere of influence of English. Seeking to contribute to this latter line of enquiry, this paper focuses on the work that belong to different linguistic families and that do not share colonial ties. Through the following analysis, the paper seeks to shed light on how a Japan-born bilingual writer such as Sekiguchi contributes to the discourse on self-translation in contemporary literature.

## 2 Sekiguchi Ryōko and the “bilingualism of the latecomer”

Born in Tokyo in 1970, Sekiguchi grew up and received most of her education in Japan. Interested in poetry since adolescence, Sekiguchi made her official literary debut in 1988, when she was awarded the prestigious *Gendaishi techō* prize. While studying at Waseda University, where she majored in medieval French literature, she published her first poetic anthology, *Cassiopea peca*, in 1993. After completing her doctoral course in Comparative Literature at the University of Tokyo, in 1997 she moved to France to study art history at Sorbonne. She currently lives most of the year in Paris, where she writes, translates into Japanese, French, and Persian, and teaches. In 2012 she was made *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* and from 2013 to 2014 she was appointed writer in residence at the French Academy in Rome.

As this brief biographical outline suggests, Sekiguchi's transnational experience relates to the increased possibilities for flexible mobility – both geographical and linguistic – presently available to wider categories of individuals across the globe. In the context of Japanese literature, Sekiguchi's experience can be situated within the framework of the “border-crossing literature” phenomenon, which includes writers such as Tawada Yōko, who writes both in Japanese and German, Mizumura Minae, who was raised in the United States, and Levy Hideo, who holds American citizenship but writes in Japanese. Although each of these writers hold different views on what it means to be a bilingual writer, they all contribute to the development of a literary space that sustains the creation of a “translingual imagination” (Kellman 2000). In doing so, these writers not only testify to the increasing possibility of expression for artists working outside their native language, but also offer an alternative perspective to reconsider such textual categories as “original” and “translation,” as well as the notion of the “mother tongue” itself.

To be sure, it should not be overlooked that these border-crossing writers share a condition of extended freedom in many respects, including few legal travel limitations, fewer economic concerns than economic migrants, and a wider access to linguistic capital. Thus, border-crossing writing should be read against the backdrop of a diversified field of accessibility to social, economic and cultural capital, and multiple positionalities. As Cordingley remarks:

Discussions of self-translation often distinguish between writers who, for political, historical or cultural reasons, need to self-translate and those who decide to self-translate of their own free will. Criticism relating to this second group of writers often asserts and celebrates self-translation as an exploratory, creative act: a positive discovery or negotiation of mul-

tiple “selves,” even the emancipation of one or many identities within the self. However, many such writers experience self-translation as being particularly boring, unpleasant and even painful, a violence inflicted upon their texts and/or upon themselves. (Cordingley 2013: 81)

In the works analyzed here, self-translation emerges as a choice Sekiguchi makes in order to explore the creative possibilities of translation, drawing from her own personal experience of living in-between her native language, Japanese, and her second language, French, which she acquired during adulthood. Her decision to self-translate is partly due to external circumstances. Sekiguchi herself has admitted (during conversations we had and during a lecture she gave at Ritsumeikan University in 2014) that it has been a strategy to self-promote her work, which otherwise would have circulated only in the Japanese context.

On the other hand, Sekiguchi’s self-translation is also the outcome of a questioning about her positioning towards the two languages. She grew up monolingual and wrote her first works in Japanese; she learned French as a young adult and later moved to France permanently. If we follow the standards of the monolingual paradigm, which still informs the way our linguistic identities are perceived, she is a late bilingual. This means that every act of writing and translating will be filtered through the author’s linguistic consciousness. As Sekiguchi herself remarks:

There is a crucial difference between the “bilingual” author and the self-translator who was not forced by circumstances into being bilingual. [...] As an independent individual with external, historical as much as personal reasons for being attached to the French language, this author’s [= my] relation to it is completely different. Rather, something like a “textual bilingualism,” an artificial bilingualism only possible within the field of writing, a bilingualism of the latecomer or the handicapped if you will, is a more apt description when one comes to it from the middle of the culture and history of the language. [...] When someone has already acquired a language as his or her language for writing, and has written some texts in that language, that writer can’t help but return to questions about writing in that language. To translate oneself and not to write in another language is thus, almost inevitably, to relate the text to two languages, to take responsibility for two languages of writing. It is not a matter of rewriting but really a matter of translating. (Sekiguchi 2006: 71)

Sekiguchi’s approach to translation works both in line with the commonly held notion of “fidelity” in translation and against its grain, by producing self-translations that are semantically close to their originals but include some discrepancies to convey an effect of linguistic estrangement both towards the original and the translated language of the text. For Sekiguchi, self-translation is a process of deconstruction and reassembling which, while trying to adhere to the meaning of the Japanese text, generates little alterations in syntax and imagery in its French counterpart. In doing so, Sekiguchi aims to show that

her self-translations should be understood as different versions of the same text. Although we have a text – the Japanese one – that chronologically comes first, translation makes it acquire a new existence in the French language. What the poet aims to stress in this process, in my understanding, is not the idea of rewriting her Japanese text into French but rather the way the Japanese text is re-read through French. In other words, even though the literal meaning (and, to a certain extent, graphic form) of the Japanese and French texts is the same, there will be changes in syntax and differences in semantic nuances generated from “within” the language of the translation. As each language is informed by and actively produces different axiological systems, the two versions will be subject to different modes of reading and reception.<sup>1</sup>

The time gap between the preparation of each version will add a further layer of signification derived from the possibility of new viewpoints the author/self-translator might develop while going through the “original” version in order to translate it. Indeed, through her work Sekiguchi seeks to emphasize this iterability of texts and the possibility that the self-translated version can affect the understanding and reception of the Japanese version. By going against the idea of translation as a one-way movement of departing and arrival, Sekiguchi aims to open up her texts to a process of estrangement carried out through linguistic displacement and repeated readings. In the process of self-translation, both the writer and the reader are asked to recontextualize their frames of reference: the text thus takes on new meanings that exceed the biographical, national, linguistic positionality of the “original” text and of its author.

### 3 “Tracing” the body of words: *(Com)position*, *Hakkōsei Diapositive* and *Calque*

Sekiguchi’s views on writing and translation have been articulated in her early works such as the French poetry collection *Calque* [Tracing] (Sekiguchi 2001). It features the translation of some texts originally printed in Japanese in the collections *(Com)position* (Sekiguchi 1996) and *Hakkōsei Diapositive* [Luminescent Diapositive] (Sekiguchi 2000). The French title word refers to the act of tracing, metaphorically suggesting that the author/self-translator is superimposing the body of the words in her Japanese poetry in order to obtain a version of the text that

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, self-translations are often seen as variants of a text, versions of equal status (Fitch 1988: 132–133), complementary texts (Attar 2005: 139) rather than translations.

adheres to its prototype – that is to say, a text in French that is semantically and graphically close to the Japanese one.<sup>2</sup> Yet it also functions as an autonomous piece of writing. The poet traces words from one linguistic surface onto another, in a process that is virtually open-ended. Moving from one language to the other, words can find different positions than the ones occupied in the original text, so that the two versions are close but not identical.

A worthwhile example to illustrate Sekiguchi's experiment with language is the poem *Haisha no henkakuki/Epoque réformatrice des dentistes* [Dentists' reformation era], included in *Hakkōsei Diapositive* (Japanese) and *Calque* (French). The text (as well as the entire book in both languages) has no page numbers and employs – in the Japanese version – an unconventional A3 format with pages that need to be unfolded horizontally in order to be read. The subtitle on the first page of the poem warns the reader that the page is actually the back of the poem, “Look from behind” (*Ato kara minu/Regarder à revers*). Most of the space on the page is filled with white squares and rectangles that surround a short block of poetic prose, while the second section “Words and water” (*Hatsugen to mizu/Les paroles et l'eau*) is made of several blocks of poetic prose and a void right in the middle of the composition that match, in a perfect fit, the squares and rectangles of the first page.

The two sections reveal their interconnectedness as each block fits the text written on the back of the page. Space and text encounter each other and mutually shape the layout of the composition: in section one the blank geometrical figures constrain the body of the letters, while in section two the letters themselves form squares and rectangles. The graphic arrangement of this prose-poem, with its neat display of sentences contained in geometrical forms, strives against its unclear meaning. As suggested in the verse “the energy to not make up stories” (*monogatari o tsukuranaï koto no chikara/L'énergie de ne pas créer de récits*), no context for the verses is provided, and the boundaries between addresser and addressee are blurred through elliptical and deictic sentences such as the following:

- (1) 「よい声を出すためには、膝をそのようにたてていてはいけない。」  
 « Pour avoir une belle voix, il ne faut pas plier le genoux comme tu fais »
- (2) そうかなあ、と、ついうなずきかけてしまう。  
 « C'est possible », j'ai failli le dire.<sup>3</sup>

2 In English the word “calque” already falls into the domain of translation theory, as it refers to loan translation, the linguistic phenomenon which occurs when a word or phrase is borrowed from a foreign language and translated word by word so that the internal structure of the original expression is maintained but its morphemes are replaced by those of the language that is adopting it.

3 “To have a beautiful voice, you should not bend your knees the way you do.” “It’s possible,” I almost said. (English translation, here and henceforth, from Sekiguchi 2003).

In contrast with the semantic ambiguity of these lines, the poem is neatly arranged in geometric figures. The page is not just a surface onto which words are projected; in fact the words of the poem are the ones to be constrained, through spacing and syllable segmentation, by the layout of the text.

Sekiguchi explains the choice of employing poetic blocks as her way to deal with the ending of her texts, as an attempt to deny that works need to have an “exit” (Sekiguchi and Yoshimasu 2006: 45; see also Mairesse 2010 and Yamade 2010: Ch.3). When we think about the text in relation to its French version, however, we can see that the shape of the poetic blocks is a readily identifiable element of the text in both languages. Geometry – and mathematic formula in other texts by Sekiguchi – functions as a universal, supralinguistic code which is shared by all her readers.<sup>4</sup>

Also, the fact that the layout of the text is arranged using the same shapes both in the original and in the translated version, reminds us that the shape of a text does not “signify” in the same way words “signify.” The layout of the words can easily be transposed in the same way as in the original text, which reminds us that this material form is not subjected to linguistic relations, and thus it is neither translatable nor untranslatable.

By contrast, the constraints of translation on a semantic level unravel different patterns of readings, and syntactic and lexical discrepancies are bound to occur. An example is given in the following sentence, again from *Haisha no henkakuki/Epoque réformatrice des dentists* where we find the verb stem replaced by a blank space, and we have the addition of the pronoun “nous” [we] and the adjective “notre” [our], which are not found in the Japanese version. Of further note is the use of a linguistic calque for *batsu gēmu*, which is literally translated as “*jeu de punition*” [penalty game]:

- (3) 肯定の矢印に引きずられて、（小さな頭を れる）。こまの動かしようがないときの罰ゲーム。

Traîné par la flèche de l’affirmation (nous.....notre petite tête). Jeu de punition lorsqu’il n’y a plus moyen de bouger les pièces.<sup>5</sup>

In the following verse, we also have discrepancies:

- (4) びよびよと跳ねている。楽しいゴム遊びの始まりのように。  
Ses sautillements de poussin. Comme un jeu joyeux de ballon.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on how translations and translators are constrained by poetic forms, see, for example, Boase-Beier and Holman (1998).

<sup>5</sup> Dragged by the arrow of the affirmation (we . . . . . our little head). Punishment play when there’s no way left to move the pieces.

<sup>6</sup> Chickadee hops. Like a joyous ball game.

In the first part of the line, the Japanese version uses an onomatopoeic sound (*pyopyo*), whereas the French version mentions the animal (*poussin*) that makes these sounds. As for the second part of the line, the Chinese jump rope game (*gomu asobi*) becomes a ball game (*jeu de ballon*) in the French version. Despite these differences there is a certain alliterative quality in both versions: *pyopyo*, *haneru* and *hajimari* all start with a kana character from the *ha*-row of the kana syllabary, which becomes recreated in the French version through the recurring “s” sound in the first part of the line, and in the second part through the alliteration in “*un jeu joyeux*.” In other words, the process of self-translation here highlights how a certain image is visualized in different ways when the poet imagines it in her second language.

As for a possible reading of the poem’s meaning, the verses of *Haisha no henkakuki/Epoque réformatrice des dentistes* do not form a coherent narrative but the elliptical expressions and the sounds that are singled out throughout the page might be interpreted as an itinerary in learning a foreign language, a linguistic journey that entails both frustration and insights. The lines unravel the experience of finding one’s self in-between two languages, struggling with the feeling of losing one – the mother tongue – but not “possessing” the other fully, with words emerging from the imagination but dying out before becoming fully articulated sentences. Here are a few other examples:

- (5) 「*m* を発音するために口を閉じよ。」  
« Ferme ta bouche pour prononcer *m*. »
- (6) 「*u*、ただ一点に集中することの。」  
« *u*, de converger sur un point. »
- (7) 正しい*g*の発音地から、  
親指をずらせば、知らない土地について、  
新しい水をくむものとしていつものようにその  
言葉をしゃべっている。  
禁止されたその行為、  
正統性を勢いよく翻す  
舌があればいいのに。  
Décaler le pouce du lieu de la  
prononciation correcte de *g*, me voici  
sur un terre inconnue, et comme celui  
qui puise de l’eau, je parle  
cette langue comme d’habitude.  
Cet acte interdit, si seulement je

possédais une langue qui renverse  
l'authenticité.<sup>7</sup>

There is a bodily involvement in this learning process: the poet focuses on the physical experience of acquiring sounds aside from meaning. However, there is also a foray into the theoretical and political dimension. In the passage from Japanese to French, the bodily connection that the poet develops with the foreign language through her tongue acquires a two-fold meaning where *langue* is both the phonatory organ, and language. Also, these lines hint at the question of legitimacy expressed through the word *seitōsei*, which in turn intersects the question of authenticity in the French version, where *seitōsei* is replaced by *authenticité*. Here it is suggested how the appropriation of a new language outside the monolingual framework goes against the notion of language as something original and authentic which should be appropriated through mastery of the legitimized standard in grammar and pronunciation. The politically charged term “*seitōsei*” also suggests that such categorical and non-negotiable view on linguistic identity is used at the societal level to legitimize certain speakers, forms of speech, identities, at the expense of others. To speak a tongue shifting away from “the place of the correct pronunciation” is a “forbidden act” because the language the poet is acquiring is not her “authentic” one. Hence there is no legitimization for her act of speaking.

To be sure, few of Sekiguchi’s readers are likely to study the two versions side by side, and even fewer will be sufficiently fluent in both languages to grasp the small discrepancies between the two versions. Nevertheless the author uses various strategies to convey a displacing effect in the encounter between Japanese and French separately in both versions of her works.

First of all, the fact that the book cover of *Calque* includes the phrase “*Version française*” below the title itself already makes the reader aware that the text exists in another language. Readers are asked thus to read the work in a palimpsest-like “translational” mode, knowing that traces of the other version linger in the French version. The lack of a side-by-side layout allows the text to preserve its distinctness as an autonomous piece of writing, but at the same time the palimpsest effect created through the image of tracing and through the status of the text

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7 “Close your mouth to pronounce *m*.” “*u*, to converge on a point.” Shift the thumb from the place of the correct pronunciation of *g*, now I’m in a strange land, and like he who draws water, I speak this language as if it were a habit. This forbidden act, if only I had a language to reverse the authenticity.

as “version” opens up the possibility of a metaphorical dialogue between the two texts.

Furthermore, Sekiguchi reproduces the diversity of the linguistic texture of her poetry by preserving a typographical heterogeneity both in the Japanese text, where the alphabet stands out among kanji and kana, and in the French one, where words in italics call for the attention of the reader even though the visual density of the kanji–kana mix is lost. The word *conversation* in the lines below, for instance, creates a double displacement not only because it graphically stands out, but also because it can be associated simultaneously with its French or English equivalent, depending on the reader’s choice. In doing so, Sekiguchi traces a bilingual movement from one version to the other, but she also hints at the plurilingual potential of her texts.

- (8) 遠くの歯医者には黙秘権がある。治すことができない原則を手に掘削を止めず、片足で跳ねる*conversation*をひっぱたくことだけを考え続ける。  
Le dentiste lointain possède la droit de garder le silence. Le principe inguérissable dans sa main, poursuivant le forage, il ne pense qu’à gifler la *conversation* qui saute à cloche-pied.<sup>8</sup>

This plurilingual quality is further exploited through the reference to one more language, namely Persian. Fascinated with the Middle East, Sekiguchi often embeds references to places such as Syria and Iran: in *Hakkōsei Diapositive* she sometimes inserts Arabic in the text of the poems; in *Futatsu no ichiba, futatabi* [Two markets, once again] (Sekiguchi 2001) and its French version *Deux marchés, de nouveau* (Sekiguchi 2005a) she sets the storyline in a bustling oriental market; in *Nettai shokubutsuen* [Tropical botanical garden] (Sekiguchi 2004) and its French version *Héliotropes* (Sekiguchi 2005b) Sekiguchi creates her own version of the *muwashshah*, an Arabic poetic genre in strophic form that was popular in the Arabic Andalusia of the Middle Ages. In *Haisha no henkakuki/Epoque réformatrice des dentistes*, Persian appears beside Japanese, French and English in the following verses:

- (9) (صなんて、けっしていわなかったね。)  
(Jamais elle ne disait ص.)<sup>9</sup>  
時々、ダルスからはなれてしまいたいと思う。  
授業という語をどう読むのかわからないので、  
そのままの名で呼ぶことにして。

<sup>8</sup> The distant dentist has the right to remain silent. The incurable principle in his hand, following the drill, he thinks only of slapping the *conversation* that jumps hopping out.

<sup>9</sup> She never used to say ص.

Parfois, j'ai envie de quitter *dars*.  
 Ne sachant pas comment lire le mot leçon,  
 je me décide à l'appeler tel quel.<sup>10</sup>

Whereas the alphabet letters in italics and the word *conversation* are still within the range of variation that is easily intelligible to the readers, both in Japanese and in French, the reference to Persian introduces a different challenge. Considering the long relationship between France and the Arabic-speaking world – particularly with reference to the French colonial discourse – and to the significant presence of Arabic speakers in contemporary France, readers of the French version would likely be less surprised at the view of the Arabic alphabet (which is the script also used to write Persian) than Japanese readers. As the author commented during a conversation we had, she believes that the readability of the Persian in her texts differs in her French and Japanese readerships and she is keen on conveying that France and Persia have a relatively long history of cultural contacts: Paris has been home to Persian intellectuals and politicians since the seventeenth century, hosting a small but generally highly educated community of immigrants who sojourned in France for educational purposes or to escape revolutions and political turmoil (Calmard 2000). By contrast, the majority of Iranians in Japan were lower middle-class migrants and guest workers who entered the country after the end of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), and often stayed illegally once bilateral agreements had been cancelled (Kura 1996; Morita 2003).

Yet, if we read the *دس* and “*dars*” in the text as Dari (a variety of Persian which is spoken in Afghanistan), then the ties that both France and Japan have built with Afghanistan are connected to the role these countries have been playing in security and development missions during the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. In this sense, the cultural views about Afghanistan held by Sekiguchi’s readers in Japan and France might likely have similar frames of reference.

Such diverse set of relations highlights how the different positionality of Japanese and French readers towards the cultures that shape Sekiguchi’s texts entails different modes of reading, based on different historical and political grounds. Thus, the choice of creating such plurilingual displacement within the body of the text shows that, no matter how close the two versions might be, the “voice” of a text is always relational, for it relies on the readers’ own way to engage with the text and its language(s).

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<sup>10</sup> Sometimes I want to leave *dars*. Not knowing how to read the word lesson I decide to call it as it is.

## 4 Poetry reading as multilingual performance

The question of how to represent bilingual subjectivities and their relation to the concept of translation is further explored by Sekiguchi during her public readings and related events she regularly attends. While these readings do serve the purpose of promoting Sekiguchi's works, they are also performative events which stage the discourse she articulates through her texts. Given the inextricable link between word and sound in poetry, it is worth considering poetic readings as a constitutive part of Sekiguchi's creative process.

Sekiguchi's performances follow different staging patterns. In some cases, she only reads in one language; sometimes the poetry readings involve a bi/trilingual performance, with texts being read in sequence (Japanese, French or vice versa) and occasionally followed by the English translation. There are also readings that include the use of audio and visual materials, and sometimes bilingual reading is performed simultaneously.

When the two versions of a text are read one after the other, most of the audience will likely understand just one of the two versions and will listen to the mere sound of the other version. In the case of readings where the versions are read simultaneously, however, the audience is prevented from experiencing the plurilingual quality of the texts as a sequence of two monolingual performances because the overlapping languages create sound interferences that will make it difficult for the readers to understand any one of the two languages. Sekiguchi defines this "noise" as a significant element in the creation of plurilingual and exophonic texts:

I said it is a noise, but I did not mean it in a negative way. I believe that perhaps some quintessential features are concealed precisely in those parts that cannot be heard. [...] Once I started to write in French, whenever I write something in Japanese, French gets in the way. I believe that this way of exposing languages to a threat – that is how I should call it – has been a meaningful experience. [...] Sometimes I go to public readings of other foreign poets, and usually they first read the texts in the original language, followed by the French translation. Needless to say, every poet does it differently, but there are times when I feel as if there were something missing [in such kind of performance]. That is to say, the original and the French translation are clearly separated. By contrast, when you listen to them simultaneously, you get the feeling of standing in the middle of the translation [process]. (Sekiguchi and Yoshimasu 2006: 32–35)

The noise Sekiguchi describes is a strategy that breaks the illusion of transparency in translation, exposing the audience to the experience of juggling between languages. But if such noise purposely obscures the audience's attempt to understand the meaning of what is being read/said, what do they gain in this

process then? Here I believe it is useful to consider the question through to the concept of “heterolingual address” proposed by Sakai (1997) in his *Translation and Subjectivity*. Sakai postulates the need for a “heterolingual address” as opposed to the “homolingual address” that shapes our common views on translation. According to Sakai (1997: 2), the “homolingual address” expresses “*a certain representation of translation*” [emphasis in the original] which preempts “communication” of a message from one circumscribed language community into another, as the fundamental condition of translation. Sakai suggests that we distinguish between the meaning and function of address and communication:

“addressing” is distinguished from “communicating” because an addressing does not guarantee the message’s arrival at the destination. Thus, “we” as a pronominal invocation in *address* designates a relation, which is performative in nature, independent of whether or not “we” actually communicate [...] In the heterolingual address, the disparity between addressing and communicating is most conspicuously perceived, while the regime of homolingual address serves to repress the awareness of this disparity between the invocation of “we” and its representation and thereby reinforces the assumption of immediate and reciprocal apprehension. [...] The homolingual address assumes the normalcy of reciprocal and transparent communication in a homogeneous medium so that the idea of translation does not make sense unless a positively heterogeneous medium is involved. In contrast, the heterolingual address does not abide by the normalcy of reciprocal and transparent communication, but instead assumes that every utterance can fail to communicate because heterogeneity is inherent in any medium, linguistic or otherwise. (Sakai 1997: 4–8)

I argue that Sekiguchi’s experimenting with overlapping languages follows a similar rationale: during her performances the audience is addressed, but communication is not taken for granted. Addressing shows the presence of communication, but does not aprioristically assume its actualization. Indeed, the risk of failure of communication is envisioned by the poet, who describes the creative process behind her works as one where “language is put in danger” time and again.

The threat that such confrontation between languages posits to the communicative function of language does not nullify the experience of translation. In fact, it tells something about the workings of translation as a process that does not necessarily presume the compartmentalization of languages, conceived as spatially enclosed, distinguished territories. Needless to say, this is not to suggest that Sekiguchi aims to deny or overlook the historicity of language, for it is within specific historical trajectories that the commonly held notion of languages as something possessing an inside and outside took shape. Yet, this kind of performance problematizes the idea of translation as a form of border-crossing movement that implies leaving one linguistic territory and entering into another, inasmuch as it asks whether the noise produced while standing “in the middle of

translation” voids the act of translation itself. Sekiguchi drags the audience out of the safe boundaries of its linguistic positioning in order to make the listeners experience translation as passage rather than as a matter of departure–arrival. This way of performing seems to ask: is this performance the negation of language and of translation because it *apparently* fails to communicate meaning?

At the same time, the performance can also be experienced as the representation of a bilingual consciousness, where multiple languages coexist and interfere with one another.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the performance offers to its viewers an insight into the workings of a multilingual mind, and it might also account for the author’s desire to keep self-translating her poetry<sup>12</sup> so that her works could exist bilingually just as her mind lives in-between two languages.

It is also worth pointing out that multilingual public readings establish a different relation between the poet and the reader. Unlike the intimate experience that reading on one’s own might provide, as if in a dialogue between author and reader, during a multilingual reading the authorial “voice” might be embodied by different people (the translator, fellow writers, organizers). And even when the poet is the only one performing in Japanese and French, the bilingual nature of the reading undermines any easy correspondence between the “voice” of the author and that of the text. In doing so, the text and its translation are placed in a different temporal framework: the French version might be read before the Japanese one (which chronologically came first) or even, as we have seen, in synchronous mode. More than that even, this practice also puts some distance between the text and the individual life of the author.

I believe that looking at these bi/plurilingual readings against the background of phenomena such as the “Japanese language boom” (*Nihongo būmu*) which hit Japan at the beginning of the twenty-first century, might shed light on the role that these readings can play in challenging certain nationalistic tendencies underlying modern and contemporary discourse on language and its education (see Tsuboi 1997). While the positive re-evaluation of the Japanese language through an aural, recitative approach as suggested by best-selling volumes such as Saitō Takashi’s (2001) *Koe ni dashite yomitai Nihongo* [Japanese that wants to be read aloud] might encourage speakers to explore the expressive possibilities of the Japanese language, the institutionalization of such practice is, as some scholars have noticed, suspicious (e.g., Komori 2003). Through a rhetoric built upon ideas of physical enjoyment, emotional freedom and soul–body connection, it

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<sup>11</sup> I am thankful to one anonymous reviewer for his/her insightful comments about this point.

<sup>12</sup> Sekiguchi also writes essays in French but her prose works are not available in Japanese yet.

reinstates a discourse on language as something organic, authentic, unique to a specific community. Such promotion of the Japanese language revives the *kokugo* ideology of the Meiji period (Lee 2010) and promotes the concept that learners should reproduce the “correct” pronunciation of the national language from one’s mother or institutional figures like teachers, whose education in fact has developed within the normative values of the nation-state itself. In other words, the institutionalization of orality as seen in the “Japanese language boom” revival seeks to constrain the heterogeneity of aural expression into the logic of the written form. Experimental public readings in more than one language such as the ones Sekiguchi performs may represent a counter-strategy that promotes a dialogical – often playful – relationship towards languages without conflating national belonging, linguistic identity and race.

## 5 Conclusion

I would like to conclude this paper with a remark by Nakagawa Shigemi about the role of comparative literature today, which points at a dilemma that Sekiguchi too is embracing in her works:

The idea behind the concept of world literature or cosmopolitan literature is one that tends to embrace the fantasy of crossing borders and countries, yet literature cannot come into existence without taking into account the consciousness that is embedded in each language, culture and geographical peculiarities of a country. (Nakagawa 2011: 21)

Sekiguchi’s work is sustained by the same, seemingly contradictory tension between the aspiration to convey the universality of her poetry beyond the boundaries of Japan and the wish to foster a sense of positioned reading in those approaching her texts. Thus, the analysis of Sekiguchi’s works not only sheds light on the contribution of Japanese plurilingual authors to the history of self-translation, but also on how such written, oral and aural strategies can be mobilized towards the recognition of linguistic heterogeneity, even in those cultural contexts that are generally thought to be monolingual. The works by authors living in-between two (or more) countries and languages show how mobility and easier access to linguistic capital can redefine the relationship between language and identity, opening up the possibility for the creation of a new form of world literature which not only bears the visible traces of different literary influences, but is itself hybrid for it is produced and exists simultaneously in multiple languages.

The staging of the bilingual experience that Sekiguchi carries out during her poetry readings shows how linguistic identities are not necessarily experienced through a clear-cut dichotomy of mother tongue and second language, allowing individuals to “inhabit” more than one linguistic home. In her attempt at unsettling the reader’s sense of linguistic belonging, Sekiguchi’s works call for a process of double positioning that becomes the essential condition to the creation and understanding of border-crossing literature. Here, plurilingual writing and translation are combined to give shape to one of the emerging configurations of world literature today.

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