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The Creative Web of Languages

Née Lou Sarabadzic: Translating digital identities, a bilingual experience

Lou Sarabadzic

Lou Sarabadzic is a French bilingual writer and performer living in the UK. She has published in French two novels (*La Vie verticale* and *Notre vie n'est que mouvement*), two poetry collections (*Ensemble*, which was awarded the Prix de la Crypte-Jean Lalaude in 2016, and *Portrait du bon goût en individu ma foi plutôt aimable*), and a collection of short texts (*Éloge poétique du lubrifiant*). She blogs in both English and French about OCD and her experience of mental health, as well as family relationships. In January 2018, she received the Dot Award for Digital Literature for the interactive #NerdsProject. Her poems, in French and English, appeared in a range of publications including *The Interpreter's House, harana poetry*, *Gutter*, *Morphrog*, and *A) GLIMPSE) OF)*. Very active online, especially on Facebook and Twitter, she tweets @lousarabadzic.

Abstract

In this fragmented text made of 46 observations, Lou Sarabadzic reflects on her practice as an author writing digitally in both French and English, mainly through blogging and social media. Considering her identity as fragmented, composite, hybrid, she shows that the online world shouldn't so readily be opposed to the "real world," as a virtual identity may be felt as more authentic

than any other we perform offline. She also suggests that while power dynamics are definitely at play, both online and offline, when it comes to multilingualism, the digital offers a space for individual and collective resistance. Bilingual writer, performer and (self-)translator Lou Sarabadzic speaks about the birth of her hybrid virtual-yet-real identity and authorial persona on the web, living in and through writing in her two languages in constant (inter)action with one another and with people in the networks.

> "The problem with the new generation is that they have no true sense of self: since they're constantly connected, they just perform for others. They follow trends. It's all very fake." / "You should go out into the *real world*," I hear them say to the teenager checking their notifications on social media. / "These days, young people have no idea what the *real world* is anymore."
>
> The *real world* would be the one in which we eat, sleep, celebrate birthdays with an actual cake. Not an emoji one. An actual cake.
>
> The *real world* would be the offline part of our existence.
>
> Why, then, is my virtual identity the most real I've ever had?
>
> *Nota Bene*: There are as many experiences of bilingual digital writing as there are bilingual digital writers. Here is my own experience, presented through 46 observations.

0.

My identity as Lou Sarabadzic started online, as it allowed me to be fragmented, composite, hybrid: this is precisely how I consider myself to be.

I.

I live for literature.

Literature only ever starts to exist when it is shared.

Social media and online platforms allow me to share writing – my own or that of others – widely and (almost) instantly. They also help me to challenge traditional one-way dynamics (see the etymology of "lecture"): writers write, readers read. Through social media, as a writer I get to read my readers, readers get to write to me. Doesn't this system seem more equal?

I write, therefore I'm connected.

II.

It's true of everyone, but perhaps even more of writers, since a text can't exist without readers: my identity as a writer doesn't start with me. It starts with the people reading me.

My readers are French speakers.

My readers are English speakers.

A fraction of them speak both languages. Not all of them do. As much as I love and encourage language learning, I don't want anyone to ever think they need to be bilingual to access my work. I feel as close to my French-speaking readership as I do my English-speaking one. So I often self-translate my own work. Particularly non-fiction. There's something about non-fiction that feels fundamentally translatable. Is it because I'm talking about myself, and I live between languages?

III.

I engage with bilingualism differently depending on the platform I'm using: on Facebook, I tend to self-translate my posts. On Twitter and Instagram, I never do. I've never checked how much I write in each language there, but I guess I write most of the time in English, partly because I assume that the vast majority of my followers on Twitter and Instagram either understand English or are used to Google Translate, and would consider the same tweet or photo twice in a different language as just being spam. Facebook also encourages long texts, so I can put both languages within the same post (readers just have to click for *More*), while Instagram, and Twitter especially, definitely don't. On Instagram, you're here for pictures – perhaps you can manage a few hashtags, but that's it. On Twitter, you're here for the 280 characters,[1] even though you can create threads.

On my blogs, it varies. I started out sticking to a bilingual layout: both predictedprose.com and telpere.com are written in English and French. However, the blog *Montaigne ou L'Italie*,[2] which I started in 2019 to document my trip to Italy through France, Germany, Switzerland and Austria is only in French. I didn't have enough time to translate my daily posts, and I was focusing on writing a book in French at the time. The interactive nerdsproject.com doesn't have much text as it is mainly visual anyway, but the small amount of text I had to put there is in English. The aim of this blog is to collect visual representations of cultural productions (books, films, icons, songs…), so these have to exist in a global (or almost global) collective imaginary.

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1 Actually, the most common length of tweets is 33 characters anyway. Source: Will Oremus, "Remember when *longer tweets* were the thing that was going to ruin Twitter?," *Slate*, 30 October 2018. [Online] https://slate.com/technology/2018/10/twitter-tweet-character-limits-280-140-effect.html [accessed 8 December 2019].

2 [Online] https://www.polarsteps.com/Montaigneoulitalie/1425813-montaigne-ou-l-italie [accessed 8 December 2019].

That's why the source of inspiration I suggest usually needs to have been translated into English, if not directly created in English.

IV.

I read a lot, and I said earlier I believe literature is to be shared. I therefore share many quotes through Facebook. Sometimes, the books from which I'm quoting are already translated into French or English in a different edition. I try to find the corresponding extract, #NamingTheTranslator.

Sometimes, the books I've read aren't translated, in which case I translate the quotes myself. I used to, anyway. At first, I translated any quote I posted into the other language: if it was coming from a book in French, I translated the quote into English, and *vice versa*. Except one day, anxiety was too high I guess, the imposter syndrome too close; I stopped translating quotes from French into English, and concentrated on English into French.

Thankfully, I keep translating my own posts. The imposter syndrome hasn't stopped me from writing – yet.

V.

Writing in English through social media and blogs is as much a way of including my local community (I have lived and worked in the UK for 10 years) as it is a way to reach out to the largest possible online community, since English is the most spoken language on the internet.[3] To me, a bilingual presence is as much about local as global.

Even if I said I didn't want to reach a wider audience, I would anyway, unless I made my posts and texts private. I don't get to decide the politics of online language. That's the privilege that comes with the English language: people are more likely to hear and read you.

VI.

Writing in French is a way of including my previous local community by showing them that I'd rather spent time to translate myself than to make them dependent on Google Translate.

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3 Before Chinese and Spanish. French is only the seventh most spoken language on the Internet. Source: Miniwatts Marketing Group, "Internet world users by language: Top 10 languages," 2019. [Online] https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm [accessed 8 December 2019].

I've been told it probably was a control issue, too. That may well be true. If there's anything we learn from dystopias, it's that we never know how authoritarian we are until we're in charge of language.

VII.

Writing in both French and English is a way to assert my identity as essentially bilingual. I may be more fearful than authoritarian, actually. I may want to prevent people from challenging me: "So, are you thinking in French or in English right now?"

What if I think in both?

What if I don't know?

I sometimes think in franglais. Perhaps I'm interlingual more than I'm bilingual.

Does it matter anyway? "Well, of course it does," they say.

VIII.

Writing in both French and English is also a translation game.

For each blog, I change the rules: my posts on predictedprose.com are always written in English first, then translated into French. It's the other way around on my blog telpere.com: I first write in French, and then translate my texts into English. For social media posts, it varies.

Yes, sometimes I'm aware that I rewrite certain extracts.

No, you're right, I'm not *always* aware.

IX.

The way it works may be closer to facts than it is to my so-called rules of the game.

On predictedprose.com I write about mental health. The doctor's office was in Scotland, then in England. Memories come to me in English. To this day, I mostly live my mental health, whether good or not, in English.

On telpere.com I write about my relationship with my father, who has always lived in France. I lived with my parents for 17 years. Memories come to me in French.

I said there was something about non-fiction I found fundamentally translatable.

Perhaps I meant: translating non-fiction allows me to distance myself from real-life experiences.

But writing online, in any of these two languages, feels like a real-life experience too. In fact, it is even more real: self-translating means facing your memories twice, and with the most careful scrutiny. You need to feel again the weigh and texture of every single word. No act of reading is more attentive than the reading of a translator.

X.

The consequences of writing bilingually in the digital world are twofold: it empowers me, and it makes me doubt myself. It makes perfect sense, yet it can confuse me.

Bilingual writing highlights my contradictions, weaknesses, fragilities.

XI.

Once someone told me that when translating thrillers, they regularly noticed errors in the plot: inconsistencies. Impossibilities, even. Contradictions in the story line. They discussed it with the writer, who usually agreed to have them corrected.

Translated stories might be closer to what we mean than the original ones.

XII.

I can't really trust the language I was born in.

That's probably because I felt that suspicious towards French that I went on to study stylistics and linguistics.

XIII.

I particularly like that after years of writing a blog bilingually, the tag cloud reflects differences as much as intersections. For some words, a translation was necessary, for instance: *grief/deuil* on predictedprose.com, so they both appear. For others, I didn't create a new entry just for one missing accent; I am not that much of an authoritarian after all. So *dépression* is just *depression*. (Power dynamics: I let the English win.)

XIV.

Writing bilingually means I can connect with two writing communities. Given the important differences between the French and the British publishing industries, it isn't just helpful: it's necessary. This sense of belonging is invaluable.

Plus, I can be as lonely in English as I am in French. Language isn't always great company.

XV.

Writing bilingually is political: it means that I refuse the hegemony of English, the most dominant language on the Internet.

Yet I confront it with another dominant language, so while it can appear as a form of resistance to French speakers (especially those based in France), other people usually find this argument rather weak.

Writing bilingually is political, whether we like it or not, and I may not have developed the best defence mechanisms.

XVI.

Writing in English and French makes privileges obvious. I don't think we talk about this enough.

For instance, people think it's "wonderful" or "incredible" that I can write poetry in two different languages. Immigrants the world over speak two, three, four and more languages, use them with their storytelling skills every day, but they don't receive such praise. Because these immigrants are not white, because they came for different reasons, or because they don't speak the "right" languages.

The way my bilingualism is seen or perceived reflect the way I'm perceived as an immigrant: people would rather say "expat." Before, during, and after the Brexit referendum, this was made extremely clear: many said they didn't see *me* as an immigrant. So I went to check the definition in a dictionary: I can confirm that I am an immigrant. A white, middle-class immigrant. An immigrant nonetheless.

I want to promote multilingualism. I do try through my writing platform, and I'm aware that my own position is one of privilege. I'm writing bilingually to support voices different from my own, to increase my chances to meet and hear these voices.

XVII.

Experiences of bilingualism (speaking and writing) are different depending on a range of factors, among which age, gender, race, class.

Language is, always will be, political.

In French, to translate "author," I write "autrice" or "auteur·trice" depending on what is meant. I also like "auteurice," but I haven't used it myself so far.

XVIII.

At least when I write (rather than talk) people don't tell me my French accent is "sexy."

They don't ask: "Oh, where do you come from?"

When I write, I can create my own space. I'm not surprised it's a virtual one I'm given.

XIX.

We're not all equal in relation to a given language.

Someone once said to me I should be careful with experimental writing, on the page, screen, but even more so during performances, because people might think grammatical errors and weird sentences are simply "wrong." I don't get to be an experimental writer in English the same way I could in French, because people might think: "Oh, bless her, she didn't really know what that meant."

In offline English I'm often a child trying to be accepted by the grown-ups. In online English I can be as broken as anyone else is.

XX.

I share a lot of thoughts – not necessarily my own – on translation on social media. Bi- and multilingualism is not only the way I express myself and create, it's also a major point of interest to me and my followers.

My own bilingual digital identity logically leads to much metadiscourse.

I'm okay with this, because I love metadiscourses.

XXI.

Translation, ultimately, is always about making choices.

XXII.

I love that some of my readers, who speak both French and English, actually look at my blogs in both languages, to see what translation choices I've made. For instance, I decided to translate a post entitled "Guilt" by "Coupable," as I thought "Culpabilité" was too long, and therefore too indirect, to translate this idea.

Sometimes, like in all writing, I realise that if I were to do it again today, I'd do it differently. (This is not the case with "Coupable" for "Guilt," though. "Coupable" still is my favourite translation.)

XXIII.

It's not all serious. I use bilingualism on social media for fun, such as through Oulipian-type games. For instance, with the creation of the hashtag #ProverbesLeRemix, I wrote:

> "Il ne faut pas mettre tous ses vœux dans le même banquier."
> "Chassez le naturel, il revient ce salop."
> "Après la pluie, vole un bœuf."

And with #PopPhrasesRemix, I wrote:

> "Revenge is the best medicine."
> "Faith is the sincerest form of flattery."
> "You can't make an omelet."

XXIV.

When we talk about creative writing in a second language (which English is to me, I learnt it as an adult), it's usually to focus on limitations. When I give workshops to non-native speakers of French, I always insist on the opposite: "there's so much you can write that most native speakers would never think about. Think how free you are. Think how creative you have to be, because you may not know all the words, you may not master every register."

We all have gaps in our own language. Bilingualism or multilingualism simply make them more noticeable. Monolingual writers do have language gaps, too.

XXV.

I'm writing this text in English. I considered writing it in French after I had already started. It didn't feel right.

It may be because I gave the original talk in Lancaster in English, back in 2018. It may be because I'm writing it in Cornwall, where I'm currently a Writer in Residence for the Causley Trust, so my brain is somehow set on writing in English. Though I've been editing French texts here, so I'm not convinced.

XXVI.

When I write a monolingual piece, one I don't intend to translate, I don't write the same things in French or English.

One of the reasons why is quite easy to understand: I don't have the same culture in both languages. I need both to be who I am, I am both – I said I am composite, but these two languages correspond to different times and spaces in my life. My childhood references are all in French. I've learned the British ones, after ten years of living in the UK, but what they mean to me is anything but childhood-related. I used to work in libraries, singing rhymes to babies and toddlers. They're all songs I've learnt as an adult, in a very grown-up environment: that of work. The work you do to pay your bills. It may be a nice job. Still, it's a job. If I like *Humpty Dumpty* and *Diddle Diddle*, it's because they sound to me like a Dada-inspired poem, or an absurd narrative. *Frère Jacques*, however, has this sense of comfort I can't find in any English nursery rhymes, however much I like them, however sweet they are.

XXVII.

With poetry, it's flagrant: I don't write in the same way at all in English and in French. Yes, I can translate my poems from one into the other. In fact, I'm often asked to do so for public readings, so I do. But I don't have the same style in both of them.

Another way of saying it would be: I don't have the same poetic voice in different languages.

XXVIII.

I actually don't have the same voice, period. That's what I've been told at least. You never hear yourself the way others do. People say that my voice is deeper in English than it is in French. And to think I used to have a complex, as a French teenager: my voice was too masculine. And that was in French.

XXIX.

I don't care anymore about sounding (or looking, for that matter) masculine. In fact, I chose my first name to reflect that. I'm Lou. Because it works in both French and English. And it can be a man's or woman's name. In the UK, people usually assume, when they only read my name, that I'm a man. Probably the influence of Lou Reed. In France, people usually assume that I'm a woman. Probably the influence of Lou Doillon.

Putting both cultures together equals gender trouble. I love it.

In both countries, they usually assume Lou Andreas-Salomé has something to do with my first name. She does. She was Russian-German. I didn't think about it at the time.

XXX.

For my last name, I put two surnames together. I didn't look very far: my father's (Sauzon) and my mother's (Arabadzic). I asked my mom whether she'd agreed to let me borrow her name.

To my great joy, she said yes. I kept the first letter of my father's, and now it reads *Sarabadzic*. It didn't exist, and yet it feels real.

It feels real because it's so much my own identity that I actually was the one who chose it. How much closer to the self could my name ever be?

It feels real because my mom isn't erased. Because every time I say my name, I say hers too. Because every time I say my name, I say my grandfather's name. A grandfather who came from former Yugoslavia, who didn't teach my mom his native tongue – it wasn't what good immigrants did. Good immigrants had to prove they were committed to everything French. Good immigrants had to forget a little where they were coming from.

I never met my grandfather, so it may just be my stubbornness to have him live with us. To have his language made public, when he felt he couldn't.

XXXI.

My offline name is Virginie Sauzon. It's not a secret. I didn't take up a pseudonym to be anonymous. Quite the contrary. I took up a new name so I could finally exist publicly, as a writer.

My offline name is Virginie Sauzon, but is it really offline? I've signed digitally published academic papers with that name. I have a digital account with many companies under that name.

Virginie Sauzon isn't only an offline name. Once again I'm composite: I'm as much Virginie Sauzon as I am Lou Sarabadzic.

XXXII.

I used *Lou Sarabadzic* in my blogs and on social media, so that people in my family could choose whether or not to make our connection public. I wanted them to choose their identities as much as I chose mine.

Perhaps we should all choose our last name. It would make family tree more complicated, perhaps, but wouldn't it be worth it? You could stick with the one you were given, anyway. We could have 10 different names.

I know, for security and admin purposes, it wouldn't be good, now, would it?

XXXIII.

It's not just the pseudonym: the digital world protects you, and at the same time makes you more vulnerable.

XXXIV.

I chose to be born again to exist digitally.

It's so cliché.

It's so crucial.

XXXV.

I didn't choose to write bilingually. It was natural.

XXXVI.

But there's obviously nothing *natural* in any writing.

XXXVII.

I announced my pen name in the same Facebook post I announced the launch of my blog predictedprose.com, on the 4th September 2014 at 2:30pm. Two announcements were made: one in English, and one in French.

I was born on the internet.

XXXVIII.

Internet terrified me. I reconsidered my fears after a friend told me that to challenge internet, you may not necessarily have to avoid it altogether. You could put so much information about you that your identity gets buried under thousands of annual posts. I don't know why, but it felt true. And there I am today: the more I post, the less I fear for my intimacy. Who would read *everything* that I post? Even I don't remember I'm all of these.

XXXIX.

After only a few hours, the visit map available on Wordpress, the platform I use for predictedprose.com, confirmed that the people who visited my blog were predominantly located in the UK and France.

"Know your audience," they say.

XL.

As Virginie Sauzon I was the French girl who came to study to the UK. I was the teacher who burnt out, who quit her job because of severe mental health issues. I was the one ashamed, the one who didn't go out for fear that people would ask questions. "What are you doing here? Don't you live in Scotland now?"

As Lou Sarabadzic I'm the one who talks openly, and in two languages, about OCD and depression on social media. I am the one who wrote a novel about it. It's in French. And it's about getting treatment and therapy in a second language.

XLI.

I need French as much as I need English to talk about my first book. I can't speak about mental health in French the way I do in English. Because we don't even have the words for it. Consider this, for instance: saying "mental health," in English, is no big deal. But to say "santé mentale?" Try it. People will immediately picture asylums, antisocial behaviours. It's not only a linguistic matter. In France, at least – I can't speak of other Francophone countries with the same certitude – the conversation about mental illness, disability and stigma has only just started.[4]

XLII.

All the things I'm passionate about, all the things that define me one way or another require two languages. I came to the UK to study women's writing. At the time, people were still laughing at me in France when I said I wanted to do so.

To engage with gender studies, feminist studies, women's studies, I needed English. But I can't unlearn my language. It took me years to say *autrice* rather than *auteure*. To make it sound female. To refuse this additional layer of invisibility. The way my French develops is due to my activities in and English-speaking world. Digital activism certainly encourages it. And my online social media accounts are all witness of this evolution.

XLIII.

I feel in both languages anyway.

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[4] Languages move quickly, though. Back in 2019, when I used to say "santé mentale," people didn't like the sound of it... Now, it is widely used. And that's only in two years' time. So many other things have changed since I wrote this text.

XLIV.

I search, investigate, question our world in both languages.

I use the autocomplete function to take screenshots of internet searches, but I do it with Duckduckgo, not Google. Google tracks you, Duckduckgo doesn't.

I alternate: one search in French, one search in English. Even with a literal translation, you obviously don't get the same options. Search engines necessarily translate cultures in addition to languages.

XLV.

Virtual writing isn't fake.

It's just another language of *reality*.

Just like any language, it is both collective and individual.

XLVI.

In a bilingual digital world, I'm more real, more of a writer, than I'll ever be.

Cyprus Well, Launceston (UK), 8/12/19.