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**Living between languages: the politics of translation in Leila  
Aboulela's *Minaret* and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English  
Dictionary for Lovers***

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[final draft post-refereeing]

As published in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47(2), June 2012, pp. 207-227.

**Abstract**

This essay examines the notion of “translational writing” – literary texts which bear the traces of multiple languages, foregrounding and dramatizing the processes of translation of which they are both product and representation – through detailed examination of two recent novels set in London: Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). Both novels are narrated by their female protagonists, whose movement between linguistic planes defines a distinctively feminized, translingual identity. Each works to destabilize the assumed relationship between language and national belonging, in part by recasting London as a space of translation: a city of immigrants defined by its polyglossia, and a node in a deterritorialized transnational linguistic order. Yet, while both novels explore the possibilities, risks, and limitations of a life lived between languages, they also demonstrate that translational literature, like translation theory, offers no consensus on the practice of translation. Their divergent conclusions – about the relationship between languages, about the nature and purposes of translation, about the connections between language and truth – reveal much about the complexities of translational writing.

**Keywords**

Leila Aboulela, Xiaolu Guo, language, London, multilingualism, translation, translational literature

The current state of globalization is daily questioning – through the expansion of capital, new financial circuits, technoglobalism, and massive migrations – national ideals and principles about the purity of language, the homogeneity of literature, and the distinctiveness of national cultures.

Walter Mignolo (2000)

Write in a western language, publish in the west and you are constantly translating, back and forth – this is like this here but not there. A thing has a high value here, a certain weight, move it to another place and it becomes nothing.

Leila Aboulela (2002a)

Words are incapable, words are weak, words are burdened, words are manipulated, words are misinterpreted, words are obscure.

Xiaolu Guo (2008)

In the essay about her genesis as a writer from which the above quotation is taken, Leila Aboulela defines herself – a Sudanese Muslim writer writing novels in English, in Britain – as inevitably a translator. She finds the origins of her “writing life” (2002a: 203) in distance: in the need to make connections between Britain and Khartoum, and to offer a counternarrative to the “stereotypical images of famine and war” which dominate western representations of Sudan (204-6).<sup>1</sup> In particular, she sets out to make “their language” (206) – English – bear the weight of her perspective, rooted in a particular view of Islam, on life in Britain; and to use it to explore the emotional and spiritual lives of her Sudanese Muslim women protagonists. For Aboulela, translation is a question of fidelity, of how to transfer “value” without diminution, but she suggests that loss in such transfer is inevitable: “move it to another place and it becomes nothing.” In illustration, she discusses the emotional valency of “*bahdala*”, “an Arabic word I have tried to translate but I can’t.”

There is no equivalent to it in English, no word comes close enough: dishevelled, no, undignified, no, harassed, also no. A friend would tell me about her bad day, a raw searing day, child rushed to hospital, husband God knows where, other children screaming in the background, she has had a rough time and she would say, in a Sudanese accent “*Itbahdalta yaa Leila*,” or in an Egyptian accent “*Itbahdilt ya Leila*.” And I would wish that she wasn't saying that. [...] For I don't want that word. It frightens me. (Aboulela, 2002a: 202)

*Bahdala* is, in Aboulela's account, both feminized and specifically connected to the experience of migrancy: “I travel from home and blows to my pride knock some sense into me, some sense” (202). It is an expression of a frightening dissolution which triangulates yet exceeds its closest English equivalents “dishevelled”, “undignified”, and “harassed”; yet also a spiritual education, a

“medicine” which can “cure the ego's badness, lead to wisdom” (202). It is the lesson, Aboulela implies, which exile has to teach the Arab woman migrant, yet it represents that part of that experience that resists translation.

What Aboulela demonstrates here, among other things, is a certain self-reflexivity on the part of what Stephen Kellman (2000) calls translingual writers – writers who write in more than one language, or in a language other than their “mother tongue” – on questions of language and translation. To negotiate between languages, from a bi- or multi-lingual position, is also necessarily to engage, whether explicitly or obliquely, with the politics of language, the limits of translatability, and the question of the relationship between language and identity. Even when writing in English, about Britain, Aboulela asserts, she is still a translator, trying to convey the apparently untranslatable kernel of Arab immigrant women's experience – *bahdala* – into English.<sup>2</sup> Aboulela casts translation as the transfer of “value” without distortion or diminution; yet as a process which is always necessarily incomplete. For the Chinese writer Xiaolu Guo, writing after the publication of her first novel in English, the movement between languages reveals not only the limits of translation, but the insufficiencies of language itself: “Words are incapable, words are weak, words are burdened, words are manipulated, words are misinterpreted, words are obscure.” Mistrusting not only the process of linguistic signification, but also the role of human agency within it – how others use words, how they interpret yours – Guo expresses a desire to move beyond its constraints. Yet at the same time, to travel between languages is to recognise the world-creating power of language: “the day literature dies, that will be the end of the world.” (Guo, 2008: n.p.).

The aesthetic, philosophical, and political dimensions of translingualism have long been central questions in the field of postcolonial literature, where language asymmetries and translational writing strategies are largely conditioned by colonial history (see for example Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1989; Ashcroft 2009). While Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously draws attention to the relationship between language, individual subjectivity, and collective self-determination in his call to “decolonize the mind” through the rejection of English as a first language of literary creativity for African writers, others like Chinua Achebe and Raja Rao regard translingualism as a first principle of postcolonial writing (Achebe 1975; Rao 1938). A central question in much postcolonial literature remains that of how to reflect, in English and other former colonial languages, postcolonial societies which are bi- or multilingual; and where this linguistic complexity reflects language as both the site of power struggle, and the crucible of cultural and literary creativity. Samia Mehrez (1992) uses the term “radical bilingualism” to describe the traces of multiple languages contained within one ostensibly monolingual postcolonial text, underlining the polysemous nature of writing which works between at least two signifying systems at the same time, and also the counter-hegemonic power of such bilingualism to make the colonial language “‘foreign’ to its own monolingual native speaker” (Mehrez, 1992: 130). Taking their departure from Mehrez and others, scholars like Maria Tymoczko (1998, 2000) have explored the many points of contact between postcolonial literature and the practices of

translation.

In a world marked by ever-increasing linguistic mobility and complexity, the balance of power still lies overwhelmingly with a handful of dominant languages, pre-eminently English; and with national ideologies linking language, literature, culture, territory in one homogeneous whole. Walter Mignolo, in his *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000), brings the insights of postcolonial theory to bear on the politics of language in a globalized world characterized by massive migrations, forced and voluntary, and the transnational flow of capital, culture, and technology. In particular, Mignolo assesses the radical capabilities of “bilanguaging” – linguistic praxis which negotiates between two or more languages, “infecting” one with the other – to destabilize the imagined homologies of language and nation, and to “redress the asymmetry of languages” (Mignolo, 2000: 231). Writing which emerges from, and dramatizes, such “bilanguaging” practice is an increasingly common phenomenon in a globalized world riven by vast inequalities. Such literature has been subject to increasing critical attention over recent years, particularly focused upon Maghrebi literature, and Chicano/a writing in the US (see for example Mehrez, 1992; Sollors (ed), 1998; Kellman, 2000; Seyhan, 2001; Hassan, 2006; Apter, 2006; Ungar, 2006; Miller, 2011). Yet, in the British context, while translation is often used as a broad-spectrum metaphor for the immigrant condition (see for example Bhabha, 1994a, 1994b; Ranasinha, 2007), little specific attention has been paid to the translingual literary experimentation, at formal, thematic, linguistic, and symbolic levels, by immigrants and their children through the last half-century.<sup>3</sup> London, in particular – currently the most polyglot city on the planet, with more than 300 languages spoken (Benedictus, 2005) – is a crucible for such writing. While the polyglot city is by no means a new phenomenon (Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), for example, triangulates relations of faith, identity, and belonging in the Jewish East End of London between English, Yiddish, and Hebrew),<sup>4</sup> the impact of mass immigration from Britain's former colonies, alongside the effects of globalized capital, have since the 1950s transformed and continue to transform the linguistic and cultural landscape of the city, and the literature produced within it (McLeod, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Symbolically, the city is the site of struggle over language on multiple levels. Its status as erstwhile hub of the English-speaking world makes it a talisman for increasingly embattled invocations of a supposedly once-homogeneous “English”, set against the linguistic and cultural multiplicity of contemporary Britain, of which it is equally an emblem.<sup>6</sup> In terms of linguistic praxis, London is a complex and ever-shifting contact zone: a crucible for bilanguaging, code-switching, linguistic creativity and cross-“infection”; as well as for miscommunication, noncommunication, and various kinds of linguistic separatism and essentialism.

In a sense, *all* translingual texts inevitably offer a reflection, on some level, on questions of language. To occlude the processes of their own genesis, by making interlingual transfer appear transparent or straightforward, or by masking the interplay between languages, is to take a position on translation, just as it is to emphasize its complexities. Wail Hassan uses the term “translational literature” to refer to the latter: texts which self-consciously dramatize their own

multilingualism, “at once foregrounding, performing, and problematizing the act of translation” at structural, thematic, linguistic, and discursive levels. Such texts “raise many of the questions that preoccupy contemporary translation theory” (Hassan, 2006: 754). They circumvent, while highlighting, the processes of silencing, stereotyping, and homogenizing often at play in translation, particularly where translation operates across a large power differential (Venuti, 1998; Spivak, 1998; Dingwaney, 1995; Said, 1995; Apter, 2006); and work to destabilize the apparent distinctions and hierarchical relations between source and target language and culture.

Both of the translingual authors whose work I will examine in this essay, Leila Aboulela and Xiaolu Guo, engage with the politics of translation in their self-presentation as writers. Aboulela explicitly sets out to contest western stereotypes and mistranslations of Islam, of Sudan, and of Muslim women’s lives (Aboulela, 2002a: 204-6). Guo has spoken of her desire to counter western ignorance of the complexities of Chinese culture and literature, and to write against the kind of “woe is me” literature exemplified by Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans*, which dominates the market for English translations of Chinese novels (Bryan 2004; Tonkin 2007). Thus motivated by an understanding of the politics of cultural transmission, the novels I will examine in this essay – Aboulela’s *Minaret* (2005) and Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) – conform to Hassan’s model of “translational literature”.<sup>7</sup> These two very recent texts, both set in London, are written largely in English but dramatize within themselves the interplay between languages. Each is narrated by its female protagonist, whose movement between linguistic planes is definitive of a distinctively feminized, translingual identity. Both texts work to destabilize the assumed relationship between language and national belonging, in part by recasting London as a space of translation, a city of immigrants defined by its polyglossia. Bearing the traces of multiple languages, these novels foreground and dramatize the processes of translation of which they are both product and representation.

Yet translational literature, like translation theory, offers no consensus on the practice of translation: how it works, what it is for, what its dangers are, and what its possibilities. On the one hand, translation may be seen as transformation, both violent and creative; as for Homi Bhabha, who cites Rushdie in casting its inevitable distortions and infidelities as the site where “newness enters the world” (Bhabha, 1994b: 223-9). On the other hand, at the far end of the spectrum lie models of translation which demand not creativity but faithfulness to the source text. In this view of things, both the act of migration and the process of translation are made possible only by investment in the notion of stable meanings, which can be transmitted securely into new contexts. Translation may be seen as recreation and renewal, or an act of violation; as rite, or as taboo. I aim to explore how such divergent views of translation, and the concepts of language and culture on which they are built, animate and underpin the linguistic worlds of “translational texts”. Dramatizing contemporary London as a space of translation, Aboulela and Guo offer very different visions of what it means to live between languages.

**“Teach me something old. Shock me. Comfort me.” Translating Islam in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret***

The Sudanese-British writer Leila Aboulela writes what she has called “Muslim immigrant fiction” – set in Britain and Sudan – exclusively in English.<sup>8</sup> Aboulela herself, born in Cairo and raised in Khartoum, was educated in English from the age of seven (Aboulela, 2002a); and her bilingual female protagonists, like their author, show little outward sign of a struggle to express themselves in English. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Aboulela has suggested that a writer in her position is inevitably a translator, negotiating between languages, cultures, and belief systems, and translation remains a central concern in her writing. Her first novel, *The Translator* (1999), recounts the love story of a Sudanese Muslim woman, Sammar, and the Scottish Middle Eastern Studies expert, Rae, for whom she acts as Arabic-English translator. Moving towards that novel’s pivotal act of translation – the conversion of Rae to Islam – it uses the relationship between languages as a means to consider questions of translation and translatability between English and Arabic, between secular and Islamic worldviews, and between global north and south.<sup>9</sup> *Minaret*, her second novel, also features a female protagonist, an exiled Sudanese woman called Najwa, who, as a bilingual first-person narrator, operates as a very different kind of translator. Her temporally shifting narrative moves apparently seamlessly between English and translated varieties of Arabic, as it shifts between the present – London in 2003; her memories of her teenaged years in Khartoum; and of the early years of her and her family’s exile in London.

The novel’s prologue foregrounds issues of translation, beginning as it does with the opening of the first *surah* of the Qur’an, recited daily by observant Muslims:

*Bism Allahi, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem*

The prayer is given in Qur’anic Arabic, transliterated into Roman script, but not translated; raising immediate questions about the limits of translation in this English-language text. The *surah* hangs over a vision of London, seen from Regent’s Park, in the early morning light – a cityscape which is defined by the minaret of the nearby mosque, and which is also a reflection of the narrator’s psychological state:

The trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the minaret of Regent’s Park mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn. In summer it is seedy and swollen, in winter it is overwhelmed by Christmas lights and in spring, the season of birth, there is always disappointment. Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent. (Aboulela, 2005: 1)<sup>10</sup>

The end of this passage offers an oblique, defamiliarized glimpse of the narrator herself, as the reader will come to know her. It is recalled, a little later on, by the momentary reflection of Najwa’s face in a mirror; but here the reflective surface is the city itself. And, while the mirror merely shows “a woman in a white headscarf and beige, shapeless coat” (3), the reflection of Najwa here – overwhelmed, disappointed, beautiful – reveals much more. London, in other

words, is cast as a potential medium for translation: in its mutability, it is able to accommodate both the minaret and the narrator herself. At the same time, her melancholy tone suggests the uneasiness of these relationships.

In this way, the novel's opening asks questions about translation and translatability which will be fundamental to the unfolding narrative: how far Islam is translatable into London, and into this English-medium text; how far London, and the English language, can accommodate Islam. In a work of fiction about Muslims in Britain written, published, and partly set in London shortly after 9/11, these questions about translation carry an enormous political charge, although this context is very much understated in the text. Nevertheless, British Islamophobia is a constant if unemphasized presence, here as elsewhere in Aboulela's writing. Out walking with Tamer, the devout Muslim son of her employer, Najwa senses “the slight unease he inspires in the people around us. I turn and look at him through their eyes. Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist” (100). An effective translator, she is able to “look at him through their eyes”; but of course, the same is not true in reverse, and Najwa's *hijab* is similarly mistranslated as the signifier of a radical, political Islam. When a group of drunken youths on a bus throw a can of Tizer at her, calling her “Muslim scum”, Najwa's instant recognition of the taste of that beverage – in all its almost absurdly anachronistic Britishness – demonstrates her insider's knowledge of the society which marginalizes her (80-1).

On one level, then, it is translation, rather than untranslatability, which defines the novel: an attempt to replace mistranslation with “correct” translation of a spiritual Islam which exists within London, recalibrating the city even as it is relegated to its margins. Najwa's innermost thoughts, her doubts and strivings, her developing personal engagement with Islam, are apparently expressible in an English-language narrative in which translation is mostly unmarked, save for a few embedded words of transliterated Arabic, and translatability rarely brought into question. This is in keeping with Aboulela's wider project as a writer, to produce unresistant English-language texts which make an Islamic worldview intelligible to an English-speaking readership, both Muslim and non-Muslim (Aboulela, 2002a; Hassan, 2008: 309; Chambers 2009: 98. See also Malak 2005: 7-12). Her translational strategy, therefore, in one sense, is to emphasize the contiguities between source and target. The novel, in fact, operates through two simultaneous processes of translation: making English a language capable of expressing a Muslim worldview, and enacting a “translation of London – into a religious space” via the minaret of the Regent's Park mosque (Cariello, 2009: 349).

While Najwa's English narration appears largely unproblematic, however, it is certainly the case that the linguistic world of the novel is emphatically unequal, primarily distinguished by the asymmetric contemporary power relations between English and Arabic.<sup>11</sup> As a teenager in 1980s Khartoum, Najwa's bilingualism is a mark of her elite status as the privileged daughter of an influential politician, a product of her English-medium private education. Sudanese Arabic is the language of Sudanese nationalism (16); but English holds power both as the former colonial



language in Sudan, and as the language of US-led international communication. When the family are forced into exile after Nimiery's overthrow, at first Najwa's excellent English contributes to her feeling largely at home in a London familiar from childhood holidays. But, as she begins what she describes as her “fall” – her father is executed, her mother dies, her brother Omar is imprisoned for stabbing a policeman during a drugs raid, the family's money runs out – Najwa's isolation intensifies despite her command of English. In spite of contemporary political arguments to the contrary, Aboulela's narrative implies that there is no causal relationship between fluency in English and a sense of British belonging. At this point, Najwa rediscovers an old flame, the secular political radical Anwar, who is also seeking asylum in London, and they rekindle their romance into what eventually becomes a sexual relationship. Theirs is a fraught alliance, and Anwar simultaneously admires, covets, and resents Najwa's bilingualism; he comments on her excellent English to his friends, and insists that she act both as his editor and cheerleader as he attempts to break into English-language journalism, while seeking to undermine her intellectually, and reacting angrily whenever she corrects his writing in English.

In the context of this relationship, Aboulela presents us with one possible means to destabilize the hierarchical contemporary relationship between English and Arabic. Linguistically, Najwa and Anwar's growing intimacy is signalled in the novel by a playful hybridity, as they code-switch between the two, breaking the grammatical rules of both languages to create their own, personal, language-in-exile: “It made us laugh, mixing the two languages, Arabic nouns with English verbs, making up new words that were a compound of both” (163). On the one hand, this translingual lovers' language asserts parity between English and Arabic as both are subsumed into a private code of intimacy; yet on the other, associated as it is with their troubled and doomed relationship, this code is not to be trusted. The words which Anwar particularly favours – “frustrated, inevitable, sexy” (163) – foreshadow the sexual relationship which they will soon embark on, which will reveal finally to Najwa that the “freedom” she possesses in London is apparently indistinguishable from a dizzying, amoral anonymity. For this reason, while her linguistic games with Anwar appear as a marker of intimacy, they are equally the sign of her exile, and this playful linguistic fragmentation is a foretaste of Najwa's self-fragmentation to come. In the logic of this text, linguistic iconoclasm is a marker not of a new identity, but of a shattered self.

The relationship ends as Najwa, who is as she puts it “wanting to be clean, crying for it” (237), becomes a devout Muslim. The locus of her transformation is the Regent's Park mosque, in the heart of the city. It is an emphatically multilingual space; when Najwa first enters, she is discomfited to hear women whispering about her in a language she doesn't understand, and which she identifies perhaps as Turkish, perhaps as Urdu (238). In this polyglot environment, English serves as a *lingua franca*, although it is another language which lies at the apex of Muslim spiritual life: Qur'anic Arabic.<sup>12</sup> Unlike most other London mosques, the Regent's Park mosque is not located in a predominantly Muslim area, and for this reason, it draws its congregation from all over the world. In a text which is so deeply suspicious of monoglot nationalisms – be they Sudanese, English, or the Iranian revolution which so fascinates Najwa on TV as a teenager –

the choice is a significant one. The novel eschews linguistic, ethnic, and national affiliations in favour of a transnational Islam defined by its polyglossia.<sup>13</sup> As Tamer says, “My mother is Egyptian. I’ve lived everywhere except Sudan: in Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. [...] I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you?” Najwa replies, “I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I’ve changed. And now, like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim”(110). In this context, it is significant that the English language is associated in the novel as much with the international reach of American popular culture – for example, in Najwa and her brother’s teenaged obsession with Michael Jackson’s *Off the Wall* – as it is with the colonial legacies of British cultural hegemony. The ending of the novel has Najwa renouncing her romantic claim on Tamer so that he can go to read Middle Eastern Studies, in English, at an American university in Cairo. And, as with English, so with modern Arabic: as Najwa sits in London watching Arabic satellite TV channels from across the world, the language is deterritorialized as a medium for a global Islam which transcends national borders. In this way, Aboulela levels English and Arabic into equally valid transnational vehicular languages for the expression of Muslim identities and Islamic thought, as she makes London a node in the circuits of a global, polyglot Islam.

Yet while the narrative works to undo linguistic hierarchies (of a secular sort), it also betrays a certain mistrust of language. That a shared language is not, in *Minaret*, a guarantee of or prerequisite for shared understanding, is abundantly demonstrated in Najwa’s failed relationship with Anwar. Later, in the mosque, the Syrian teacher Um Waleed is immediately described in terms of her linguistic proximity to Najwa, both of them Arabic speakers (76); but although Najwa admires Um Waleed, she feels no close connection to her: “she is not my friend, I can’t confide in her and when we are alone the conversation hardly flows. Our natures are not harmonious; we orbit different paths.” (185) A shared language is not any kind of basis for a sense of belonging in London itself, either. Despite her fluency in English, Najwa’s access to the city is increasingly circumscribed by her poverty, her status as a refugee, and her visibility as an observant, hijab-wearing Muslim woman: ‘He might not know it but it is safe for us in playgrounds, safe around children. There are other places in London that aren’t safe, where our very presence irks people.’ (111) Equally, while English serves as a *lingua franca* in the mosque, it is also a medium of hatred elsewhere, as when the boys on the bus shout “Muslim scum!”

As she negotiates such complex questions of language, place, and belonging, Najwa’s narrative evinces a longing to move beyond the confines of linguistic communication altogether. This is a theme which Aboulela has addressed in the past; in an earlier essay, “Barbie in the Mosque”, about Muslim communities in Scotland, she writes

I hear the children and the tinkling blur of Turkish; one woman is breastfeeding a huge baby, the other has a mole on her cheek. They are louder than the Bengali woman and her sister. I can understand neither Turkish nor Bengali, and this soothes me. It is as if I am a child, too young to understand what my mother is

saying to her friends. (Aboulela 2002b: 1-2)

Here Aboulela describes a comfort derived from a feminized and spiritual homeliness which resides in the mosque as a polyglot space, but which is independent of her ability – or perhaps more properly, dependent on her *inability* – to understand what is being said around her. To move outside language as a system of signification, to return to the realm of the prelinguistic, is “soothing”.<sup>14</sup> In *Minaret*, Najwa longs to be soothed in such a way too. When she meets the Senegalese ambassador’s wife at the mosque during Ramadan, the immediate closeness she feels is not dependent on language: “I didn’t tell her any more than my name and what I did. There was no need – we had come together to worship and it was enough.” (188) Instead, sitting in the ambassador’s wife’s car, “I used to doze to [...] her voice speaking on a mobile phone in Senegalese. I would dive in dreams to become small again, pampered by my parents.” (188-9) Later, near the end of the novel, she experiences something similar listening to the meaningless chatter of her friend’s baby:

Ahmed is babbling away: words that don’t make sense, strung together with inflections and exclamations of surprise, as if he is talking in a foreign language. His voice is lovely. I close my eyes. There is nothing to work out, just memories, impressions. (274)

At moments such as this, the novel fantasizes a freedom from the vagaries of ordinary linguistic signification – freedom from the slippage of meanings, the need to “work [things] out”. Such freedom is to be found in the prelinguistic: in the babbling of baby Ahmed, which allows Najwa to move freely in “memories, impressions”. But most significantly, it is to be found at the point from which the novel begins – in the apparent immutability of the Arabic of the Qur’an. For the Islam which becomes Najwa’s solace and refuge is an Islam premised on the miracle of direct revelation, a miracle which inheres in the word-as-divine-truth, absolutely stable, atemporal and unchanging:

The words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it. Refresh my memory. Teach me something old. Shock me. Comfort me. Tell me what will happen in the future, what happened in the past. Explain to me (240).

In Najwa’s case, the power of such a vision of language provides a sense of stability amid displacement, and a salve for traumatic remembering. Nevertheless, there is a paradox here: a polyglot, transnational Islam guaranteed by an investment in the Qur’an as unitary, singular truth which, because it posits a fixed, one-to-one relationship between word and meaning, is itself resistant to translation. This is a feature of Aboulela’s writing which has attracted particular critical attention. In her first novel *The Translator*, her protagonist Sammar says of the Qur’an, “the meaning can be translated but not reproduced. And of course the miracle of it can’t be reproduced.” (Aboulela, 1999: 124) As Nadia Butt remarks,

This idea clearly harks back to the Islamic practice of maintaining Arabic as the language of revelation in a Muslim world constituted by hundreds of millions of non-

Arabic speakers: as the Q'uran [*sic*] was revealed to Mohammed in the Arabic language, Asian [*sic*] and Africans were expected during Islamic colonization (and are expected even today) to read it in its original Arabic version so that they do not miss anything in God's words which a translation is likely to miss (2009: 175).

It is this insistence on the untranslatability of the Qur'an which is invoked in the first *surah* at the outset of *Minaret*: transforming London, while remaining itself untransformed.

Thus, the multilingualism and linguistic mobility around which Aboulela's writing revolves does not correlate in Najwa's case to individual agency, despite this being a notion which Hassan (2006, p. 756) has (quite reasonably) claimed as usually vital to translational literature. Although Najwa travels between languages, her ultimate destination is a language which she does not so much speak as be spoken by, and her lack of self-reflexivity is bound up with this.<sup>15</sup> She is careful to avoid "discussion", and the expression of "opinion" (pp. 77, 79). Instead, Najwa's life at the mosque revolves around the language-work of *tajweed*, the rules of recitation of the Qur'an, which she learns and practices in the exclusively feminized space of the women's classes. David Farrier, writing about *Minaret* as "asylum fiction", considers how Najwa's experience of uprootedness, isolation, and trauma, lead her to value "repetition", such as the recitation of *tajweed*, "as a pathway to being-in-stasis." (2011: 112) Here and elsewhere, Aboulela is at pains to emphasize the diversity of the women at the mosque in terms of language, ethnicity, and social class; yet in *tajweed* these differences are erased, as the women recite with one voice.

The Tajweed class is my favourite. I learn how to pronounce the letters correctly, when to blur two letters together, when to pronounce the n in a nasal way, for how many beats to prolong a certain letter. This concentration on technique soothes me; it makes me forget everything around me. [...] Here in the Tajweed class, all is calm and peaceful. We practice and practice until we get the words right. I want to read the Qur'an in a beautiful way (78-9).

This passage represents the centre of the linguistic world of Aboulela's novel. *Tajweed* here represents the site of absolute triumph of monoglossia over heteroglossia: phonological homogenization stands metonymically for the fixity of the sign, in a language of revelation which exists outside time and space.

Aboulela's claim to be a translator is a serious one: her resistance to dominant western narratives of Muslim women's lives intersects with her consideration of how identities are forged between languages. In her emphasis on transnational, multilingual Muslim communities, Aboulela contests the idea that Britain and Islam constitute mutually exclusive categories, just as she is insistent that an interpretation and expression of her Muslim worldview is possible in English; English can and must accommodate Islam, just as London can and must accommodate the minaret.<sup>16</sup> But polyglossia and heteroglossia are, for her, not at all the same thing. The instabilities and infidelities of language and translation are dangers to be guarded against. Thus, her polyglot, feminized, global vision of Islam, superseding other modes of national, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic affiliation, is paradoxically guaranteed by the untranslatability of the

Qur'an itself, which is impervious to the effects of transnational exchange and translation. The language of revelation represents the “miracle” of absolute correspondence between sign and referent, which cannot be reproduced in any other language; the risk of the loss of “value” is, in this context, a risk too high to be borne. Moreover, the shuttling of translation “back and forth”, between “here” and “there”, is made an irrelevance where the Qur'an stands outside time and space, neither “here” nor “there” but everywhere. Aboulela, writing through and about translation, nevertheless refuses the in-between, the “third space” which is so often imagined through, and treated as integral to, the workings of translation (Bhabha, 1990; 1994a). Instead, her focus lies with uncoupling languages from their customary nexus of language–nation–literature, and reinserting them into a global Islamic framework within which English and Arabic are equally valid vehicles for the expression of Muslim religious thought. In *Minaret*, Qur'anic Arabic holds a one-to-one relationship between language and truth, while other languages – English included – offer equal, if imperfect, means to approach that truth.

**“Sorry Of My English”: travelling between languages in Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers***

Xiaolu Guo's vision of language and translation has points of contact with Aboulela's, but *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) offers no confident assertions about the relationship between language and truth, and its fundamental assumptions about translation could hardly be more different. Pivoting on the differences between Chinese and English, the novel considers how language conditions worldview – in effect, how different truths are suggested by different linguistic systems – and explores the possibilities and insufficiencies of translation as a metonym for human relationships, while at the same time subverting notions of linguistic stability and purity in favour of a meditation on feminine subjectivity, and creativity, constructed *between* languages.

Guo was already established as a novelist, film-maker, and critic in China before moving to London to take up a British Council film-making scholarship in 2002. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* was her first novel in English, and it is structured formally, thematically, and linguistically, around the movement between languages.<sup>17</sup> Like *Minaret*, the novel is narrated by its female protagonist. Zhuang Xiao Qiao, or Z, as she becomes known to the English people around her who can't pronounce her name, is a young woman from rural China, sent to London by her peasant-turned-shoe-factory-owning parents for a year to learn English at one of the city's many private language schools. The novel is laid out as a journal, each chapter recounting a month of the year she spends in London, and follows her love affair with an older British man – never named – to whom the text is partially addressed. Z falls for her lover's “beautiful language” (59), and the narrative of their love affair at the same time charts the twists and turns of her relationship with the English language, with which it is intimately entwined.<sup>18</sup> Tellingly, Z's relationship with her lover is itself founded upon a mistranslation: he says “be my guest”, and

she, interpreting the phrase literally, packs her suitcase and moves into his Hackney home.

Perhaps the novel's most distinctive feature is Z's narrative voice, which is an astonishing literary performance of Chinese “learner's English”. At the outset, it is extremely unpredictable and fragmented, characterized by calques (where she is thinking in Chinese and translating word-for-word into English), malapropisms, mishearings, and misinterpretations. As the narrative progresses, Z's English becomes more complex and more stable, developing into a flexible and expressive interlanguage, inflected by Chinese grammar and peppered with East London slang, which remains uniquely her own. Guo's risky literary experiment with narrative voice has attracted some criticism – Jonathan Mirsky, writing in the *Spectator*, concluded a dismissive review by remarking that he looked forward to reading her next novel, “written in grown up English” (Mirsky, 2007).<sup>19</sup> Certainly, issues of language and problems of translation are the source of much of the novel's humour, which at times plays to stereotypes of Chinese English: Z writes of “Heathlow Airport”, the “Loyal Family”. Yet at the same time, the text works to subvert the kind of British comic norms which would make the language-learner a figure of fun, while Z herself becomes increasingly aware of how her English fits with, or contradicts, British stereotypes of the “typical Chinese”.<sup>20</sup> It is to be expected that she “cannot pronounce the difference between 'r' and 'l', and request people without using *please*” – far less so, that she will sit alone in a Hackney café studying a porn magazine for three hours, with the aid of a dictionary, as a means to learn English (Guo, 2007: 187, 118-9). In the end, the novel flouts English linguistic and literary norms to aesthetic and existential, as well as comic, effect. Z's shifting English becomes a medium to consider how languages create worldviews; how the self is constructed in and between languages.

Z arrives in London armed with her *Collins Concise Chinese-English Dictionary*, and with an attendant faith in what it apparently represents: language as a stable system of one-to-one correspondences between word and referent; translation as a straightforward process of substitution between different yet at the same time commensurable systems. As Z puts it: “*Concise* meaning simple and clean” (10). Guo's text works swiftly to destabilize such monologic views by exposing growing tensions between the apparent certainty of the dictionary definitions which begin each chapter (the slipperiness of signs again evident when the *Dictionary* is partially supplanted by *Rogel's Thesaurus*), and the complicated nature of Z's lived experience of English, and particularly, of her experience of love. The novel's title points us to one of the narrative's central ironies: the insufficiency of the dictionary's model of translation as a vision of interpersonal relationships. In the end, it is Z and her lover, rather than Chinese and English, that prove to be incommensurable.

Although Z arrives full of expectations about a London comprised of “important places including Buckingham Palace, or Big Stupid Clock” (14), in fact her experience of the city remains largely limited to its impoverished seams: Tottenham Hale, Hackney, the red light district of Soho. The London of the novel is also a city largely populated by immigrants, second-language speakers of

English; even when Z meets fellow Chinese people, they are Cantonese speakers whom she cannot understand. Incomprehensibility is a repeated theme: for example, while in *Minaret*, Anwar and Najwa find the Tube map to be a reassuring representation of the city's 'system' and 'structure' (Aboulela, 2005: 149), to Guo's Z, it is 'like plate of noodles' (19). The linguistically complex, baffling, demotic London in which she finds herself adrift is further signalled in the novel's patchwork of registers, languages, and scripts. Embedded in Z's narrative are Collins English dictionary entries; scrawled cafe menus; condom, and vibrator instructions; scraps of handwritten letters, notes, and maps; the utterances of other second-language speakers of English as well as surly London cab drivers; poetry and song lyrics; and both transliterated Mandarin and written Chinese.

In the face of such incomprehensibility, Z is swiftly led to begin compiling her own, piecemeal "dictionary" which, in its heterogeneity (like the heterogeneity of her narrative itself), charts a more complex, provisional, and idiosyncratic route between languages. In Whorfian mode, the novel probes disjunctures between Chinese and English at the level of syntax, grammar, and lexis, in order to consider how languages construct reality differently.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, Guo eschews a deterministic view of the relationship between language and individual consciousness. To give the most striking, if the most obvious, example: one repeated refrain, in the novel, is the problem of grammatical temporality and English tense construction for speakers of Chinese. Yet while it may be Z who has difficulties with the future tense, it is her commitment-phobic English lover who finds it impossible to talk about the future (319).

The idealized vision of language and translation represented by the Chinese-English dictionary is replicated in the breezy ESOL-speak of Z's language school brochure:

Dear Student, Welcome to London! On finishing our course, you will find yourself speaking and thinking in your new language quite effortlessly. You will be able to communicate in a wide variety of situations, empowered by the ability to create your own sentences and use language naturally. (342)

In the context of Z's narrative, the brochure's assurance sounds near-parodic. Speaking and thinking, this novel suggests, can never be "effortless"; the movement between languages, and the business of human communication, are complex and exhausting negotiations from which Z at times longs to be free. In a Soho peep show, her momentary fantasy of becoming a prostitute is simultaneously a fantasy of escape from the constraints of language: "I want be able to expose my body, to relieve my body, to take my body away from dictionary and grammar and sentences, to let my body break all disciplines" (138). For a woman from the global South – for impoverished women from all over the world, including the women from Eastern Europe whose labour keeps the Soho sex industry running – the struggle with English is enmeshed with socioeconomic, cultural, and gendered structures of power. For Z, too, these are indivisible from the complex power dynamics of her relationship with her lover. In one moment of crisis in their relationship, Z reverts to Chinese, in a passage which is given in English 'Editor's translation' (the editor being

Guo herself) as follows:

*I am sick of speaking English like this. I am sick of writing English like this. I feel as if I am being tied up, as if I am living in a prison. I am scared that I have become a person who is always very aware of talking, speaking, and I have become a person without confidence, because I can't be me. I have become so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding me becomes enormous. It swallows me, and it rapes me. I am dominated by it. (179-180)*

Desperately, Z continues, “*I wish I could just go back to my own language now*”. Yet the text does not countenance the possibility of return to a pristine monolingualism. For one thing, Z's “Chinese” is already not one but several, split between Mandarin and written Chinese, as well as between national standard and local dialect (180). Moreover, while the “homeliness” of the “mother tongue” is a staple of some translanguaging writing (see Yeh 2008), in this novel it is an excoriating presence: Z is haunted by her “mother's harsh local dialect”, a voice which tells her over and over, ““You are ugly peasant girl”” (18, 60). Thus on one level, English comes to represent a language of love and beauty, displacing the castigating sound of her mother tongue:

When I badly communicating with others, my mother's words becomes loud in my eardrum. I am ugly peasant girl. I am ugly peasant girl.

“My body is crying for you,” you say.

Most beautiful sentence I heard in my life. (60)

In this sense, the novel narrates a flight from origins, and casts language-learning alongside love as the site of a self-remaking which is both tortuous and liberating. To acquire a new language, as Stephen Kellman points out, is to acquire a new way of seeing the world, and oneself (2000: 20-1). In particular, Guo traces a nexus between language-learning, gender, sexuality, and self-authorship; as, for example, in her repeated riffing on the double signification of “lips” as the site both of articulation and of female sexuality (38-9, 137, 245). Sitting in a café one day, Z reads a newspaper article about the death of a 90-year-old Chinese woman, the last speaker of a “womans-only language: ‘Nushu’. This four-hundred-year-old secret language being used by Chinese womans to express theys innermost feeling.” Z continues:

I want create my own “Nushu”. Maybe this notebook which I use for putting new English vocabularies is a “Nushu”. Then I have my own *privacy*. You know my body, my everyday's life, but you not know my “Nushu”. (121-2)

Z's imagined “Nushu”, created in the space *between* the languages of the Chinese-English Dictionary, stands at the other end of the spectrum to the model of language which the Dictionary represents: a language which is intensely interior, feminine, covert. In Z's “Nushu”, the learner does not so much acquire but *recreate* the language, idiosyncratically and anew. This process of “learning” calls for imaginative engagement with the language, with convention acting only fitfully as a guide. For all her confusion, Z is alive to the workings of language; as, for example, when she grapples with the meaning of “drifter”, and the dead metaphor comes alive in her hands:

Something is very important about this word *drifter*. [...]



I have to learning this word first, then to learning something about you.

[...]

*Thesaurus* only make me more confusing. Drifter like fishing boat? Drifter goes fishing on fishing boat? Or situation of a fishing boat swing in the sea is like situation of drifter?

I think of that picture you are on the boat wearing the shorts, holding the paddle, smiling at the camera. Behind you is brown colour sea. You a drifter, I believe. (92)

Her study visa and her love affair both expired, the novel ends with Z's return to China, although not to her village. Instead, she opts to move to Beijing – perhaps to become a writer, in spite of her mother's desperate, joyless protest that “Writing on paper is a piece of nothing compared with a stable job in a government work unit!” (351). The Beijing she finds, however, is “unrecognizable”, a postsocialist megalopolis dominated by ceaseless construction and consumption:

I am sitting in a Starbuck's cafe in a brand new shopping centre, a large twenty-two-storey mall with a neon sign in English on the roof: *Oriental Globe*. Everything inside is shining, as if they stole all the lights and jewels from Tiffany's and Harrod's. In the West there is “Nike” and our Chinese factories make “Li Ning”, after an Olympic champion. In the West there is “Puma” and we have “Poma”. The style and design are exactly the same. (352)

This sudden sequence of brand-names is as arresting, in its own way, as the broken English at the start of Z's narrative; as Emily Apter puts it, “trademark language is perhaps the last taboo, ushering in what is strictly speaking profoundly exogamous to literature” (2006: 167). Beijing has become a vast, febrile, transnational contact zone, crossed and recrossed by ceaseless processes of translation in the service of capital. We see here not only what Apter calls “CNN creole” – the incursion of global brand names – but also other complex processes of translation and indigenization, whereby “Puma” becomes “Poma” but remains in other senses “the same”. The moniker of the *Oriental Globe* is overlaid with irony, signalling as it does not only the ongoing cultural power of the West, but also China's aggressive ambition to make the globe “*Oriental*”.

The novel's vision of globalization, like its vision of love and of creativity, rests on translation. As Z continues:

I feel out of place in China. Wherever I go, in tea houses, in hotpot restaurants, in People's parks, in Dunkin Donuts, or even on top of the Great Wall, everybody talks about buying cars and houses, investing in new products, grabbing the opportunity of the 2008 Olympics to make money, or to steal money from the foreigner's pockets. I can't join in their conversations. My world seems too unpractical and nonproductive. “But you can speak English, that alone should earn you lots of money! Nowadays, anything to do with the West can make money.” My friends and relatives keep telling me this. (352-3)

Shifting perspective from the personal to the global, Guo concludes with a vision of

deterritorialized language in a world characterized by constant linguistic flux and transfer. Z is indeed “out of place”, in relation to a commodified translation which promiscuously and indiscriminately subsumes all cultural material, from the Great Wall to Dunkin Donuts, in the pursuit of profit. Yet this dystopian view of Beijing as a contact zone, in which translation is the instrumentalized medium of capitalist exchange, serves as a foil for the novel’s alternate and ultimately redemptive vision of translation as defiantly “unpractical and nonproductive.” In the last scene of the novel, Z receives her lover’s final letter. Written in English, but also invoking Britain’s ancient multilingualism in its Welsh point of origin at Carningli, “Mountain of the Angel”, it is precisely the handwritten letter’s low-tech materiality which allows it to embody the transnational and transcendent power of language. The words, “soaked in great peace and happiness”, are in the end “the best gift you ever gave me.”

I kiss the letter. I bury my face in the paper, a sheet torn from some exercise book. I try to smell that faraway valley. I picture you standing on your fields, the mountain behind you, and the sound of the sea coming and going. (354)

### **Conclusions: words and gifts, translation and loss**

Guo’s novel concludes with a powerful invocation of words as “gifts”, rather than commodities. Indeed, in some ways, both texts seek models of translation which might *evade* the operations of “the expansion of capital, new financial circuits, technoglobalism” (Mignolo, 2000: 229), and offer alternate models of transnational exchange. Translation is the key to the vision of creativity around which Guo’s novel revolves, just as Aboulela’s concept of translation is fundamental to her view of Islam.

Both novels invoke, while destabilizing, London’s position as the hub of the English-speaking world. In *Minaret*, the former imperial metropolis is a home-from-home for an anglophone North African postcolonial elite; in *Dictionary*, its history is recalled in its position at the centre of the international ESOL marketplace. Yet in both texts, London becomes a node in a deterritorialized, global linguistic order: a complex contact zone, in which English is both a national language and a *lingua franca*, used as much between disparate immigrants as between immigrants and British-born.

Yet if the city is a space of translation, each novel traverses it very differently. Guo’s translingual *bildungsroman* celebrates the creative possibilities of linguistic disorder, and explores how a new subjectivity can be forged in the space between languages. For Aboulela, the dissolution of the self in translation is a spiritual education, a route to a new order which is in fact not new at all. The movement between languages, the recognition of the inevitability of loss in translation, is used to highlight the notion of a language which transcends time and space and which resists, or refuses, such loss. Both novels are “translational texts”, yet they demonstrate how translation can be premised on very different understandings of language, identity, and value.

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<sup>1</sup> Having spent two decades living in Britain, Aboulela now lives in Doha, Qatar. Her latest novel, *Lyrics Alley* (2010), written in English and set in colonial Sudan of the 1950s, and touching upon the cultural and linguistic implications of Sudan's complex colonial history, represents in some ways a divergence from, in others a new and interesting spin on, some of the themes discussed here.

<sup>2</sup> Aboulela's description of *babdala* suggests the kind of crisis which precipitates, in different ways, the spiritual journeys of the Muslim immigrant women protagonists of her first two novels, *The Translator* (1999), and *Minaret* (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Obvious connections could be drawn with the excellent work which has been done on the heteroglossia of modernism – John Marx's *Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire* (2005), for example, in many ways paves the way for this kind of study. Most critical work in this vein on writing in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond has tended to focus on Scottish writers, particularly James Kellman and Irvine Welsh (see for example Scott 2009). One exception is Lars Ole Sauerberg's survey *Intercultural Voices in Contemporary British Literature: The Implosion of Empire* (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, we could go back a lot further than Zangwill. Leonard Foster's survey *The Poet's Tongues: Multilingualism in Literature* (1970) begins in the Middle Ages, while Laura Ashe (2007) traces the beginnings of English literature in the early modern nexus between English, French, and Latin.

<sup>5</sup> The examples are too numerous to list exhaustively, but we might for example think of Sam Selvon's creolization of the city in *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and *The Housing Lark* (1965); the endlessly self-translating 'Elloven Deeowen' in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988); Buchi Emecheta's translingual semi-autobiographical kunstleroman *Second Class Citizen* (1974); Hanan Al-Shaykh's Arabic narrative of migrancy and translation *Only In London* (trans. 2001); or the quasi-hallucinatory London conjured by way of varieties of Zimbabwean English in Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009).

<sup>6</sup> To give one striking recent example: historian David Starkey's recent outburst on BBC television's *Newsnight*, ostensibly in response to the August 2011 riots in parts of England, reveals much about the relationship of language to a particular kind of anxious national imagining which converges on London. Invoking Enoch Powell's infamous 1968 “rivers of blood” speech, he ascribed the violence of the riots to “whites [who have] become black” in “Tottenham and [...] Clapham”, who speak a “language which is wholly false, which is this Jamaican patois that has been intruded in England and that is why so many of us have this sense literally of a foreign country” (Quinn 2011).

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that each of these novels makes oblique connections with other, earlier texts which engage with questions of translation. For discussion of Aboulela's relationship to Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, see Guth, 2006; Smyth, 2007; Hassan, 2008; Chambers 2009. Bachner (2010) notes, albeit rather dismissively, Guo's relationship to Han Shaogong's radically experimental *Dictionary of Maqiao* (1997).

<sup>8</sup> For Aboulela's views on being regarded as a “British Muslim writer” see Chambers 2009: 91.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of translation and Islam in *The Translator*, see Hassan (2008) and Butt (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Subsequent references to *Minaret* are to this edition and will be cited by page number in the text.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of the contemporary asymmetric relationship between English and Arabic see Mignolo (2000: 292-3). Contemporary varieties of Arabic are spoken across the Middle East and parts of North Africa; in structural terms they are similar, but vary lexically and phonetically, and are not all mutually intelligible.

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<sup>12</sup> The majority of the world's Muslims do not speak varieties of Arabic, although most read the Qur'an in Arabic.

<sup>13</sup> This can be seen, for example, in the emphasis Aboulela places upon British Muslim converts in her writing, who as Hassan says, serve to “demonstrate the universality of Islam” (2008: 312). It could be argued, though, that Aboulela's vision of the transcendental Islamic faith group or *ummah* “downplays the very real tensions between different Muslim groups” across the world, as well as “within an in any case divided Britain” (Chambers 2011b: 182).

<sup>14</sup> For discussion of the role of religion in the novel as “substitute for parental care”, see Chambers 2011b: 184.

<sup>15</sup> Notably, like many of Aboulela's other female protagonists, Najwa rejects the kind of critical engagement central to many strands of Islamic, and Islamic feminist, thought. See Hassan 2008, pp. 314-6; Cooke 2001; Barlas 2002.

<sup>16</sup> A notion which, in the novel, is not restricted to mainstream British opinion, but which is also shared by the secular Sudanese immigrants Anwar and Kamar, who tells Najwa during Ramadan that “we're in London now” and that “[p]eople in London don't fast” (Aboulela, 2005: 231).

<sup>17</sup> She has since published the novel *UFO In Her Eyes* (2009) and a collection of short stories, *Lovers in an Age of Indifference* (2010), as well as self-translating and adapting her earlier Chinese novel *Fenfang's 37.2 Degrees* into English as *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* (2009). Kellman (2000: 12-15) calls such writers, who have published literary work in two or more languages, “ambilinguals” – although the “ambi-”, for Guo, appears more in the sense of “ambivalent” than “ambidextrous”.

<sup>18</sup> Subsequent references to *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* are to this edition and will be cited by page number in the text.

<sup>19</sup> See also the (rather more sympathetic, despite the title) review by Carole Cadwalladr (2007), “Heathlow Airport? Oh How We Laughed”.

<sup>20</sup> From Sheridan's Mrs Malaprop to the 1970s British TV comedy “Mind Your Language” and beyond, the speaker who attempts unsuccessfully to master English norms has served as an object – but rarely the subject – of British comedy. For discussion of the comedic exploitation of non-white people's “linguistic deficiency” in modern British literature, see Ross (2006).

<sup>21</sup> “We ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees” (Whorf, 1972: 214). Or in Edward Sapir's famous formulation, “human beings are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society” (Sapir, 1929: 209). See for example Guo, 2007: 26-7, 125-6, 153, 299, 301.