Theories of Translation – Final Paper

“Surrender To The Text”: Dynamics of Power And Language Through Yishai Sarid’s *Victorious*, Translated From Hebrew By Yardenne Greenspan

“Surrender To The Text”: Dynamics of Power And Language Through Yishai Sarid’s *Victorious*, Translated From Hebrew By Yardenne Greenspan

This paper will use Yishai Sarid’s translated novel, *Victorious,* as a case study to raise questions about Hebrew-English translation post-October 7th, 2023. As I write these words in December 2023, the Israeli attacks on Gaza have been ongoing for over two months. During this short period of time, over 16,000 Palestinians have been killed by IDF soldiers – though in reality, the mounting violence renders any attempt at a numerical snapshot inaccurate by the time it is read. Israeli casualties currently stand at about 1,200. Of the 240 hostages kidnapped by Hamas on October 7th, 104 have been released as a result of diplomatic negotiations in November. Of course there is more to say about all of this – more, perhaps, than I am currently capable of saying. Instead, I’d like to point out that I invoke October 7th because it serves as important context for my questions surrounding Yishai Sarid’s novel, *Victorious*.

Yishai Sarid first published *Victorious* in Hebrew in July 2020. Sarid is a well-known author whose writing has received both critical and commercial success. His novels are published through Am Oved Press, one of the leading publishing houses in Israel, and have won multiple literary prizes[[1]](#footnote-1). Though generally well-received, *Victorious* did not achieve any special literary success. Still, Sarid’s impressive track record ensured the novel’s quick translation into English. Yardenne Greenspan translated the book for Restless Books Press in September 2022[[2]](#footnote-2).

In full disclosure, I met Greenspan in person at the 2023 ALTA conference in Tucson, Arizona. She left a good impression, though we didn’t get to talk at length. At that point, I hadn’t yet read *Victorious,* so I didn’t bring up the book in conversation. Still, my personal connection – tenuous as it may be – with the translator leaves me uncomfortable critiquing her work. My discomfort grew when I realized I was straying into nitpicky territory in my critique the more I read. Don’t get me wrong: Greenspan is a wonderfully talented translator. I, however, am a petty bitch. Keep in mind, Modern Hebrew is a tiny language, and the limited opportunities in the field can make it feel like a pen-is-mightier-than-the-sword version of the Hunger Games. I could feel myself getting territorial, as if to say: hey, this is *my* language, not yours. But this left me feeling ridiculous. How can one feel ownership over a *language* – a method of communication meant to be shared with others *by definition*?[[3]](#footnote-3)

Though I cannot formulate a serious scholarly answer right now, I think that following this train of thought is important. By showing the movement from personal anecdote, to affect, to analysis of underlying structural conditions, I hope to demonstrate the way I’d like my analysis to work. In other words, I’m not going to talk too much about why I felt like the need to snarl a *back off*. Instead, I’m going to ask what conditions and dynamics in translating Hebrew to English raise the potential for uncomfortable possessiveness and, well – I hate to say it – territorialism. I am not making this up (I am kind of making this up!): I rely on Sara Ahmed’s work, who says, in one of my favorite texts about complaint as methodology, that “[y]ou can be stuck by the very nature of the terrain. (…) The experiences you need to complain about are the same experiences that make it difficult to keep a complaint going”[[4]](#footnote-4). Think of the terrain as the power dynamic between minor and major languages. Moving through this difficult terrain can often seem look like a complaint; yet making this movement-complaint can often be a way to navigate and map that very same terrain[[5]](#footnote-5).

Okay, hopefully that makes sense! If not, that’s on me. Either way, it’s time to talk about the plot of *Victorious*. Since *Victorious* is deeply concerned with proximity to and fascination with power, reading specific excerpts from it can help us etch a theory of translation that stems from the book itself[[6]](#footnote-6). After I introduce the book’s themes, I will try to see if I can apply them to the act of translating the book in and of itself.

*Victorious* follows Abigail, a decorated military psychologist who specializes in treating trauma from combat. Abigail is also the trusted advisor of the new Chief of Staff, a position that becomes increasingly uncomfortable now that her young son, Shauli, is enlisted into the army. Abigail’s idealism is now put to test: there is no way for her to pull Shauli out of danger without acknowledging the harm inflicted upon young soldiers in the army. Unable to resist the precepts and biases she has leaned on her entire life, Abigail chooses to dig in instead. Sarid presents Abigail’s perspective as impressively cohesive. Thefinal image in *Victorious* shows the unique conflation of power and sexuality which Abigail’s needs to justify her increasingly morally-dubious decisions. Abigail decides to get a tattoo of a dagger on her hipbone, described as “pretty and frightening”. Once the wound is healed she invites her lover Jonah, an IDF officer, to come over and visit: “‘Touch it, it’s for you,’ I whispered as the dagger was revealed. I wanted to storm like I had back then, when we’d pulled the trigger together”[[7]](#footnote-7).

What does this have to do with language in general, and with the specific issue of Hebrew-English translation? One way of summarizing *Victorious* would be to say that the novel describes the internal power struggles and conflicts within a group of unapologetic oppressors. To return for one moment to the post-October 7th events, it is clear that the current destruction and murder inflicted upon Palestinians are possible because of a long-standing power dynamic between them and Israel. Israel’s proximity to Empire – in the form of the country’s close diplomatic relations with the US – affords the country power and legitimacy to act as a subjugating empire itself. The official language of this empire is, of course, Modern Hebrew. Though Arabic and English remain auxiliary languages in Israel, the country has made no secret of its efforts to promote Hebrew-language supremacy[[8]](#footnote-8). Thus, within the context of a globally Anglophone culture, Hebrew’s status is that of a minor language – suffering the same pressures and undergoing the same negotiations as all lesser-spoken languages. Yet within Israel, (as well as the West Bank and Gaza Strip to some extent) Hebrew is an oppressive language enacting many of the same violences and indignities it is forced to endure from others upon a global stage.

The parallel to Abigail’s position in *Victorious* is striking. See, for example, Sarid’s description of a mock-interrogation scene in the novel. In this scene, Noga, a pilot cadet, undergoes a kidnapping simulation as part of her training. Noga does not know that the kidnapping is only a test, meant to measure her ability to endure the extreme pressure of interrogation. Her ‘captors’ are not Hamas operatives, but rather Israeli Secret Police officers playing the part. It is in this scene that Sarid – for the first and last time in the novel – turns the reader’s attention to Hebrew’s power:

The short guy walked over to the tall guy and said something quietly, in Arabic. I was also feeling uncomfortable at this point. “Tie her up,” the bearded one told him in Hebrew. They were playing the game well and I could tell they were enjoying it[[9]](#footnote-9).

The enjoyment of interrogating a prisoner is in Hebrew; what more can I say? True, the Secret Police officers also speak Arabic, but their Arabic is used as a tactic to provoke fear and simulate a kidnapping scenario. By pretending to be Arabic-speaking assailants, the officers further cement the connection in soldiers’ minds between the Arabic language and terrorism. With so many layers of power, subjugation, and oppression embedded in Hebrew’s status – what can a resistant, pro-Palestinian liberation translation practice even look like? In conclusion, what does surrendering to the text look like, while still resisting the power structures that lie behind it?

1. Am Oved has published six out of seven of Sarid’s books, including his latest, *Vulnerabilities* (2023). See also: https://www.ithl.org.il/page\_14587 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Greenspan also translated Sarid’s The Memory Monster in 2020. See Translation Database Records for *Victorious*:

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/translation/search/index.html?record=10203>

See Translation Database Records for *The Memory Monster:*

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/translation/search/index.html?record=9238> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Capitalism – the answer is capitalism, folks. (very tempted to add citation to *Das Kapital* here, but I have only ever read short excerpts and my resolution for 2024 is to stop being so pretentious!!) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sara Ahmed, *A Mess As A Queer Map*:

https://feministkilljoys.com/2020/12/23/a-mess-as-a-queer-map/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is a way of explaining how I see Mona Kareem’s text as a productive roadmap for translation craft and praxis, not only theory. Kareem’s takedown of Western translators is brilliant and funny, but also important, because it allows her to ‘zoom out’ and ask important questions about the conditions of translation: “How can one any longer believe in ‘collaboration’ or in ‘translation’ without first addressing the power structures that cast their shadows over any two people working together?” (Mona Kareem, *Western Poets Kidnap Your Poems and Call Them Translations*: https://poetrybirmingham.com/mona-kareem-western-translations) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A quick note to explain how I understand Spivak’s call to “surrender to the text” – a surrender she specifically says is “more erotic than ethical” – in the context of *Victorious*. Abigail, the narrator, finds herself concerned with the power dynamic between her and various men in her life. A calculated and ambitious woman, Abigail often finds herself reaching for more power than she has. Her femininity becomes a tool to acquire that power, as she describes her control over Rosolio, the Chief of Staff:

All right,” he said, nodding hard. “That’s what I’ll do.” His eyes remained closed and I rubbed his hair with my perfect hand. When he got up he ran his hand down my cheek, and had I let him he would have kissed me with gratitude as well, but I didn’t need it.

Rosolio’s surrender and show of vulnerability to Abigail in this moment is only possible because of their usually-opposite power dynamic. By previously surrendering erotically to Rosolio, Abigail is now able to exert her influence and power over him. Thus, her surrender becomes a form of exerting power in and of itself. Thinking back to Spivak, I would say that a similar dialectic of surrender and power is – must – be at the forefront of the translator’s mind during their work. A concern with the power dynamic between source and target language, original and translation, does not mean that these relations are stable or static by necessity. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yishai Sarid, *Victorious* (tr. Yardenne Greenspan), p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Importantly, Arabic was stripped of its status as official language of Israel in 2018, with the passing of the basic constitutional law, *Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Yishai Sarid, *Victorious* (tr. Yardenne Greenspan), p. 41-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)