

Novel Dialogue 4.1 “Sometimes I’m just a little disappointed in English”

Alejandro Zambra, Megan McDowell, and Kate Briggs tackle translation

John Plotz

Hello, and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast that brings novelists and critics together to explore the making of novels and what to make of them. Today, we're blessed with a truly starry lineup: Alejandro Zambra, Megan McDowell, and Kate Briggs.

So, I'm John Plotz, one of the many hosts you're going to be hearing in season four of Novel Dialogue, which is devoted to translating fiction and fiction and translation. So, as loyal listeners will recall, our podcast has always been basically a triangle in nature: a host opens the gate and then out rush a scholar and a novelist, and hijinks ensue. So, well, this season we're going to play around with that format.

Today, a novelist, his translator and denoted theorist of translation are going to form that triangle while I am going to be a fourth wheel, I guess, which is mainly going to roll along silently. I think that's what fourth wheels do and then also introduce.

The theorist today and the real convener of the conversation is Kate Briggs, who's 2017 *This Little Art* won the Windham Campbell Prize for nonfiction. The prize citation speaks of *This Little Art* accurately, as at once a memoir, a treatise, and a history, but perhaps inaccurately, depending on how we think about translation, when it calls it her first book, since she also earlier put out marvelous English versions of two Roland Barthes books, *The Preparation of the Novel* and *How to Live Together*, and I should add, she's also since published *Entertaining Ideas* and word on the street, Kate, you can confirm or deny, has it that you have a novel forthcoming as well.

KB

Well, a kinda novel adjacent thing, yeah.

JP

A novel-adjacent thing.

KB

We can talk about that, yeah.

JP

OK, good.

KB

No, yeah, in the space of the novel, I should simply say it's a novel, yeah.

JP

Oh, good. Okay, thanks. Well, anyway, Kate, welcome. It's great to meet you and thanks so much for doing this.

KB

Thank you.

JP

And also zoom present today is the prize-winning translator Megan McDowell, a Richmond, KY native who now lives in Santiago, Chile. You're so lucky.

So the Latin American writers she has translated include Samanta Schweblin and Mariana Enriquez, Lina Maruane, and of course, Alejandro Zambra. So Megan, thanks for being here.

Megan McDowell

Of course. Thank you.

JP

And so, speaking of Alejandro, ta-da, or, as Nietzsche might say, "Ecce Homo." You probably know him as a Chilean poet and a fiction writer, the author of such marvelously witty works as *The Private Lives of Trees*, *Ways of Going Home*, *My Documents*, *Multiple Choice*, and most recently, *Chilean Poet*, which I think we could also say, continuing this question of translation, we could say are also books by Megan McDowell. At least the titles that I read since every word of Zambra that I've ever read was in fact put down on a page by Megan in her role as translator.

In any case, Alejandro, it's a joy to meet you. And really, a thousand thanks for being here and for speaking with us in English. So good morning.

Alejandro Zambra

Thank you. Thank you for this invitation. So glad to be here.

KB

I feel like this is a long overdue meeting in a way because I've admired your work, Megan and Alejandro, for so long. And yeah, I have so many questions. I mean, I guess we, well one something we planned to sort of start things is to ask you to read. And to read from *Chilean Poet*, which is a novel I've now read twice, and as I was saying before the recording started, made me laugh, made me laugh out loud. It made me cry. The ending makes me cry. I think we might, you need to read the whole thing in order to reach the ending, obviously.

There's such a beautiful, such a beautiful book. I hope that we might talk about sort of reaching and the time a novel takes to read and the kind of effect that produces and what happens when we reach the ending of this novel without trying to give too much away to readers or listeners who haven't read it yet.

But I wondered if you might begin by sharing some of the work in Spanish and also in translation in English, in Megan's translation, and that could, from there we could talk further about what these passages are doing and everything else.

AZ

OK. We can do this. So thank you for your words about this novel. I'm going to read a short poem that is inside the novel, and then, Megan, you might read it in English. OK.

El viento es un él

Igual que el trueno ye el rayo son ellos

Pero la nieve (que nunca he visto)

Y la escarcha (que conozco)

Y la garúa (que es igual a la llovizna)

*La palabra lámpara es una ella
Igual que la palabra mesa
Y la palabra palabra
Y la palabra palta*

*La palabra Verano es un él
Igual que el invierno y el otoño*

*Se dice una primavera
Se dice un terremoto
Un tatuaje
Un lunar*

*Se dice una peca
Una cicatriz
Una herida
Una Lluvia
Una gota
Pero
Un gotero*

*La uña y el cortaúñas
La lata y el abrelatas
Pero el pie y el puntapié*

La noche ye la medianoche

El día y el mediodía

Pero la sombra y el sol

El cuerpo y el espacio

La mano y la blusa

Pero el pie y la pisada

Y el deseo de no jugar nunca más con las palabras

Y el deseo de no jugar nunca más con las palabras

Y el deseo de no jugar nunca más con las palabras

Speaker 4

He laughed.

Speaker 4

You know.

{6:20}

MM

So this is my version of that poem and we can talk a little about how I got there.

In my mother tongue, the word for earthquake is masculine, though I may disagree. The word for tattoo is too. The mole on your skin that's male, but a freckle is female, like a scar, like a wound, like the rain and a raindrop. But a leek, now that one is male. The wind is a he, same as Thunder and lightning, but the snow which I've never seen is a she, and the frost which I have is also a she, and so is the drizzling rain and the storm. The word for lamp is a she,

naturally, and likewise the word for table and the word for word and the word for char. In my language, the words for winter, summer and fall are all male. Only spring is a female season. I may disagree, and I do, but those are the words that we have. Of fingernails, she, and nail Clippers, he. A bottle she and its opener, he but a foot and a kick are both he. Night and midnight, hers and hers. Day and midday, his and his. But shadow and sun, hers and his. Body and space are his. Hand and blouse are hers, but foot and foot fall, his and hers. And the desire to never play with words again is all mine. And the desire to never play with words again. And the desire to never play with words again.

KB

Thank you. That was beautiful. It's interesting that you chose to read that particular poem, I wondered, well, for many reasons, there's lots to talk about, but there seems to be in the translation by necessity, there's this kind of reminder that of course this originated in another language, in the language where the, when nouns are gendered. And but this this is happening in a novel where we're also reminded at certain moments, like one or two kind of very delicate moments that this is a novel that's being written. So there is that kind of these sort of moments of, what would you call it, like a self-reflexivity or a kind of reminder or opening or in a world that's so kind of fully imagined and so compelling there are these reminders that we are being told a story. We're in a space of narration, we're in a space of something being made-up. So I just wonder, yeah, Megan, I'd love to hear how you indeed you arrived at that version and I guess Alejandro, the question following that would be around this. What it is to do that you know, to have these reminders of actually this is a novel in the process of being written and to sort of reveal that gently to the reader.

MM

So I like to read this poem because I feel like it encapsulates a lot that's going on in this novel and in the translation. You know, it's called *Chilean Poet*. It's a book that is very situated in terms of place and it also is very conscious at all moments of language and what language is doing, so. This was the thing that I struggled with the most was this poem because, well, hopefully people will have read the novel or are going to read the novel, but there, there's two characters, this is a poem written by Vicente, who is the young poet, one of

two who the novel focuses on. And he writes it when he's about 18 years old and he's, it's addressed to this girl, woman, who he has fallen in love with, who is a gringa, who's from the United States. She's in Chile, and she's also been struggling with language because she's learning Spanish or she knows Spanish, but it never stops being something that she really struggles with, and one of the things that she struggles with is the gender of words.

So that's what the poem is about. You know, these are, these words are feminine and these words are masculine. And there's nothing we can really do about that. And my version kind of makes explicit, I guess, something that I feel is implicit in the Spanish, which is, you know, it's not really fair, body and space are masculine and you know, hand and blouse are feminine and there's nothing we can really do with that and I like, through, I put in this line that because, I may disagree but these are the words that we have. And that's, well without getting too much into the plot, it's a callback to something that's really important with his relationship with his stepfather, who is the other poet, one of the two who could potentially be the Chilean poet of the title, that he learned from his stepfather as a child, you know. We have to use the words that we have.

So, for me, translating this poem was like putting that into action, that idea of we have to use the words that we have. Because how do you translate a poem about the genders of words into a language that doesn't have gendered words, you know, and up until the very end, I just didn't think I could do it. If you look at a galley of this book, it's a different version that uses Spanish. And so, then I took that phrase to heart, you know, we have to use the word that we have. And so then I started thinking, well, how do we talk about gender in English, and this is something that I used a lot in the translation of the book is just to talk about language. You know, sometimes I say, this character spoke in English, or you know the Spanish word "padraastro?" is negative, you know, sometimes you just have to be explanatory.

So I started with that and said the word for earthquake in my language is masculine. Like a very, just making that statement, you know, and I thought this raised his and hers and then I started playing with that and then I got to the end and thought okay, the desire to not play with words is all mine. You know, playing off of the his and hers. So that's kind of in a nutshell how I got there.

AZ

Wow. Well, there are many things to talk about. I would just add, about this poem we just read, that it is related to correcting other people's pronunciation. You know, when you speak a second language, in Spanish, I think it's very common that people would get to speak Spanish making many, many, many mistakes and nobody would correct you for many reasons. In a way, English is the language we've been exposed, and so in a way, we are, an American or an English person speaking Spanish. It is a language we've heard, you know, so and it's really no big deal that you make mistakes for example with the gender of words. People would understand you, so the normal situation is that nobody corrects you, but Pru says to Vicente, "Please correct me, because I want to speak properly," you know. So that's why Vicente takes this form of correcting or giving advice to this foreign speaker of his language and creates a poem out of it.

So I mean there are different problems when I speak English for example, I feel very stupid because I don't have a really, alternatives, you know. I have one word for saying one thing in Spanish, obviously you go with the flow and you have many skills that that you are not even aware of. But when you speak you feel, you feel that you can go this way or that way.

KB

I feel like in this book, the character of Pru and also Gonzalo and Vincente, like that they're all, in a way, Chilean poets. They're all, in a way, poets, right, because they're both--there's something Alejandro has said, I'm pretty sure I got this from him--that like, you know, people always think the writers and poets are the people who really, are good with language. But really they're the people who are the most uncomfortable with language and they like feel it grating on them and you know, and they question every word and they feel like there aren't words to say what they really want to say.

And Pru is doing that as she is living in Spanish, you know, she's trying to figure out how to use words to express herself and so in a way, in a process that is similar to how the poets are trying to express themselves through words and the same way Gonzalo when you know, when he talks about the word "padraastro," "stepfather," that you know has this negative connotation,

but we don't have any other words and we have to, you know, use them in order to change them and I don't know.

I really related with Pru in that sense because like so many of her experiences, like when she's giving, when she's interviewing people and she spends the whole day speaking Spanish, she feels this mixture of exhaustion and pride, you know. And yet she's very aware that, like Alejandro says, she's limited. And she has to, she lingers over details too much and she struggles to tell stories. But it's kind of like being a little, it's kind of like being a kid, you know when you're learning the words for things, you know, and it's like it's there's a beauty in it.

MM

When it does—maybe, and from what you're saying is this, you know that there's, well, poetry begins or writing starts to begin when language no longer goes without saying. It's like it's not, it's something that is kind of open to question in the way that as translators like it has to be because, we're, you know, we're suddenly confronted with like this, the strangeness of English, of how English works when you're trying to bring another set of sentences into it.

But it makes me think of when I'm teaching, often I'm working with non-writers, like artists who have no interest really in becoming writers particularly, but nevertheless are working with language, and often with people for whom language is a second or third language, for whom English is a second or third language. And one thing I often say as a starting point is that you realize this is a force actually. This is not a limitation. This is your force, because it does, it means that you bring to bear exactly that kind of questioning of not taking anything for granted in the way that exactly is happening at all levels.

I love that they're all Chilean poets in different ways. But Alejandro, what about this--

JP

Can I jump in here?

KB

Yes, sorry.

JP

As you guys were talking, especially Alejandro, the point you made about like that sense of depletion in a second language as a, you know, the kind of word cloud of possibility in your primary language. And then the second language where there's only, you know, limited pathways, the one word you have to use because you're not sure about the other words. Does this make you guys, do you think about this question of writers who end up writing in a second or a third language? People like Joseph Conrad, I mean the, or Nabokov even. I mean whether that, which people often cite as this amazing superpower, you know that they manage, you know Conrad managed to do it even though he didn't even speak English, right? He spoke French most of the time rather than, but yeah, I don't know. So I guess, maybe Alejandro, one question is, do you ever think about writing in English or do you, you know, like would that be a good challenge or would it be a nightmare?

MM

He's done it.

AZ

I've written many emails in English.

JP

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AZ

I'm proud of some of them. But I mean as a playful thing, I would, I would do it and I've done it. I wrote when I was living in New York, I wrote a, I would say a whole novel in English. A very, very bad novel. It was really funny because of that, because I don't have a way of speaking English for starters.

I mean when I was living there, I mean by the end of that year I had some words. I had, I felt English differently, but still it wasn't my language and it was more like playing. But I had friends, I was only communicating with them using English. So, that makes a difference. That is something really beautiful. Many friends that don't speak Spanish at all. So I feel like, in some cases, those

friendships are meaningful because in a way, aren't friendships related to communication issues, you know. When you become friends with someone who and you have a really something against that friendship, right, that, when you when you get to it that was, I was talking about this little thing I wrote, a very bad thing, but it was more like a playing and I never thought about the publishing. Although Megan read some of it and, but my rule was—

JP

You should make her translate it into Spanish.

AZ

Yes. But my rule is, I mean, it's something that I'm translating now into Spanish, and it's really funny because like two pages are ten pages or one sentence is one word, you know, it doesn't have like any logic. But the thing also, my rule was I'm not going to look up into the dictionary. So if my, if I happened, if my character would have to use the door and I wouldn't know the word door, he might use their window.

MM

Or the thing that you use to go in and out of the house.

KB

Yeah, it's elaborate explanations.

AZ

I want it to flow, so I was sometimes making decisions related to my limitations. And so, now that I'm translating very slowly this thing I wrote into Spanish, I have a lot of fun because some things I wrote, I wouldn't have written them at all in Spanish.

KB

But isn't that, no I just think that's so, that just really speaks to me and I wonder if Megan, you feel the same way about translating one of the--I've just started translating again after a long time sort of writing my own work, although that's the kind of complex thing of like what, for me at least, like when my own work becomes my own, you know, in the sense of, I guess work under my own name solely. And I've just started translating again. And one

thing I love, actually also in other forms of writing, are these limitations and are indeed the fact of being constrained and like the need, I feel like I'm someone who really needs limitations in order to, it takes me a long time to put them in place in ways that makes sense to me in order for anything to happen, because they're kind of, especially when writing fiction, this sense of like, well, absolutely, yeah, it could be, it could be the window, it could be the door, it could be the tunnel, it could be, you know, the helicopter. Like, what is it that narrows and gives a kind of a sense, of necessity to what is written.

And I wonder if that speaks to you, Megan, like what appeals to you about translation as a practice, are these, are the fact that it's a constrained form of writing, that there are, but it's limitations are narrowed but that doesn't make it any less demanding or fascinating?

MM

Yeah, I think, I think that there are two kinds of people in this world.

KB

Tell us.

MM

Those who feel like limitations are freeing and those who feel like limitations are limiting and I am of the previous, the former. You know, I think, I've always thought it felt like translation has a lot in common with like the Oulipo writers who would write according to some you know, hidden organizing principle, like music or mathematical principle. And you know, maybe you read the book and you don't necessarily know what that organizing principle is, but you can sense that there's something there behind it. And I feel like translation is very similar in that regard, that, you know, you're making decisions with every word. And a lot of times those decisions are unconscious, you know.

One reason I like to read the poems is that I feel like those decisions become very conscious when you're doing something like that. Or with other books, like a lot of, well this book too, a lot of Alejandro's works make the decision-making process, they foreground it, I guess. Because, you know, he plays with language a lot. There's a lot of you know, sometimes experimentation, different voices, but you're always making decisions in a translation and, but

this goes back to the limitations, you're making decisions between things, you know, you don't have the blank page in front of you. And you know if you have a great knowledge of literary history and the dictionary, you have a lot of options, but they are constrained. So, and I do like that, I do really appreciate that, you know, I feel like when I know what my options are, to a certain extent I know where to go.

AZ

Every book is so different to me, and this novel is the only one I would think, it's related to the idea of a novel, you know? So, the and I think it's my first book that really resembles the idea of a novel. And my last one, it was, writing it was in a way relating to today, the other novel. And having fun with that idea, you know, with the storytelling, I mean the narrator is, it's not exactly new in my work, I think, it's a little like the narrator of some of the stories of *My Documents*. I mean, it's about conversation, and I think the narrator is more talking than writing, and that makes a big difference between this book and my formal work.

But in a way, this contradiction is inside the novel, you know? Between brevity and long forms, between characters who hate novels, but happen to be inside a novel, you know. Same way we sometimes hate life, but we are alive. And this idea that a poem is related to intensity and the novel is more loose and it's more about, I don't know, life, and so in a way, I wanted to recreate everyday life. I mean this is the first time I really want to do that exactly. Repetitions for starters. Repetitions, the way you deal with them, the way you never really repeat things or mistakes.

But this is also a novel about being a poet or trying to become a poet. And there is this big question. Why? Why do you want to be a poet? Why do you want to become a poet? And there is this other similar question, that it's more in the autobiographical level like, why when I was 15 years old I found it reasonable to become a poet? And I have to say that it was very important to me at the moment where my characters started to be really different, At first, obviously, both of them were in a way similar to my experiences, but there was a moment where I was able to really see them and that moment was exactly the moment when I wrote their poems. I interrupt the writing and I dedicated, I would say, one week, but maybe it was one month, for writing

their poems. Not because I wanted to put them in the novel. I had the idea I would want that to happen, I mean, I like that. I like when that happens in, I don't know, Nabokov's books and on a different level when, I like when that happens in comedy movies. I mean, I like to be able to have some of the work someone is struggling with, someone is trying to get done, you know.

But besides that, I really wanted to get to know those characters by knowing their poems, and in order to know them I had to write them. So I was just imagining good poems, bad poems, sketches of poems written by those characters.

JP

I was thinking there's a thread here that connects the point, Megan, you were making about the enabling constraint of translation, and the language that you were using to describe it sounded to me like the way people talk about the sonnet sometimes, you know, like there's a famous Wordsworth sonnet, which I think begins "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow walls," so the idea that the limit is actually the thing that allows you to build something because you have a wall to climb up rather than it being something that that shuts you in.

And then the connection to that, Kate, when you were describing locating a site of subjectivity or a moment of intense personal feeling within, not a poem that's voiced through your own voice, but a voice, someone else's voice like, not in propria persona. So I teach 19th century literature and the way we think about those poets of the middle of the century, people like Robert Browning and Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Bronte for that matter too, and Charlotte Bronte, they find voice for their poems by making up a character who will say what they want to say. So it that sounds like what, Alejandro, like, I love what you were saying about this being the first novel you wrote, kind of under the sign of the novel, you know, because you're talking about the characters coming into something like actuality or reality, but that sort of enabled you to give them a lyric voice, which is your lyric, but not your own person that you're writing in. And yeah, like in the 19th century we talk about that as like what happens when the Victorians kind of move away from romantic poetry, but it happens, you know, in our own writing as well, I guess.

AZ

And also this Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning idea of the poem, the dramatic monologue was related to the fact that they were in a way creating a character in order to express themselves. And so, and I really care about that kind of poetry.

With the literary genres, I feel like they are like clothes you use, you know. And at first you're not really comfortable with them, you don't feel like this fits, but there is a moment where you feel that the clothes are, got accustomed to your body, in a way you know. So it's a little about, but all these questions I wouldn't say are not important or are important I mean. It's really like every day you make a decision about them. But I said that maybe because I as a poet, when I was writing, I wasn't really thinking about representing life, you know. It's obviously a representation, I mean, obviously I'm doing that, but I wasn't really trying to create a reflex of a previous world or simultaneous world, you know. It's more like fighting with words.

MM

One of my favorite parts of the book is where he talks about the silence of the days, which is not at all silence, you know, it's the sound of the refrigerator humming and the door and people talking to themselves or to each other. Or the part where, this one I'm not going to be able to quote exactly, obviously, but it plays with the language of the report card and he says they always bought merkén and they never, you know, they occasionally ate scrambled eggs and you know this always, occasionally, never to talk about the almost monotony of the days and this life together that they all experienced for a time and then, spoiler alert, when it's gone, you feel that as a loss, you know, because you see that they were happy for a moment.

KB

So just, I don't want to, I'm interrupting you, but only to continue because I really want you to continue. But just to say, I think for me there's something so crucial in what you're saying about the idea of like what this clothing of a novel is, and I think for me it has in tight, like it's a force or its particularity has absolutely to do with that, with duration, it being this time-based unfolding, interrupted form, that lasts.

MM

Right, yeah, digressive.

KB

Yeah, and that's why that it has power, that the days do go by, and I put the book down and my day goes by and I pick the book up, and, you know, there's something I think so particular to that, but please carry on. Carry on.

MM

Well, I mean I was just going to say like, I really, I think what Alejandro said before is really true and really important that this book is spoken, not written. And that was important to me as in the process of translating, you know. I read the book out loud as I was working on it in both Spanish and English, and you know, it does have this kind of discursive voice, that you have, that Alejandro has used before, like in some of the stories in *My Documents*, but it's expanded and that voice was really important in dealing with a lot of the questions of language that I had to deal with, you know, because as you said in the beginning this book is very Chilean and there, and I wanted to preserve that and I didn't want to, you know, I think in a lot of times in a translation there's this tendency to over explain or to homogenize and to take out the foreign and all that stuff and you can't do that obviously in this book. So I had to kind of figure out how to talk about that and how to do that and I did it by just pretending I was talking to someone in a bar, you know, like, oh, so he said this in Spanish, you know, or just explaining it in a very, in like a colloquial way, in a way that people can understand. Or leaving words in Spanish but explaining them within the text, you know?

And I felt like this was a voice that you could really do that with. Because while every word is there for a reason, you know, like Alejandro thinks a lot about language and knows exactly why everything is there, and I do know, I feel like I have to know that too in the process of translating, like why certain words are there. So everything serves a purpose, and I had to keep asking myself what that purpose was, and sometimes that purpose was to maintain awareness of place, let's say, or awareness of that thorniness of language.

AZ

I'm really interested in the gap between people who don't read at all and people who read a lot, you know, including people who read two books a year, you know, five books a year, you know. This is something I'm really obsessed with. Because I believe I belong to the people who don't read, who don't like literature, you know? And I don't want to forget that. I mean, I had this temptation when I was a student. And I liked theory a lot, I like theory a lot. And academy felt like a new home where I was able to speak this new language and I was smart and I was accepted by these teachers, so my future was in a way being part of that.

But there was a point where I learned that that was impossible because I wanted to communicate with the people I love. So there is something really twisted and hard to explain--I would say in English, but in Spanish it would be it would be hard for me too--which is related to not, I think that has really made a difference in my way of writing, my style. My style is changing the whole time, but I always feel like I have to talk about the very complex things I want to talk, in a very simple way and that movement is present in both books and I think in novels I really like. I feel like, and this is something that is explicitly present in *Chilean Poet*, which is in a way a novel about literary location, but explaining literary location, you know.

So to me it's a very important moment where Vicente in the little room finds these books, Emily Dickinson and Gonzalo Millán Those books are there. And he flips through them and don't like them at all. He doesn't. He doesn't like those books. And some years later, he does like something and he doesn't why, but that's so important. And that's why I think literature is in a very bad position today, because they teach literature and so you always feel like you have to understand literature. And if you compare that to music and no, kids know about music from the very beginning. And nobody is telling them this is music, music is something you have to learn, and there are different kinds of songs. No, they don't need that. They play with it, they feel music, they listen and at the same time they know they are able to play music. You know, this is something really twisted about literature, because for many reasons, reasons we do understand, literature is now divided in the reading side and the writing side, you know. Even in university, you know you have to study literature, history of literature, literary theory, then something completely different is writing. There's no reason for that, if you think about it, and if you

compare that to the way, for example, architecture is taught, you know. And literature has this, so they teach you, this is a poem. But they don't show you 40 poems, 40, it's like they would, they would tell you, okay, this song is music and that's it, you know?

So in a way I wanted this level to talk about the literary location, I mean the moment where, what's the word for "arveja" or "chícaro"?

MM

Pea.

AZ

Pea.

MM

Pea.

AZ

Pea? P, E, A?

MM

Pea. P, E, A.

AZ

Well, this is the moment where Vicente reads a poem about a lonely solitary pea in the refrigerator, you know. So he reads this poem and he's really happy because someone wrote a poem about this. I've seen that.

MM

And he's seen that pea.

AZ

I've seen that, I've seen that pea in my own refrigerator many times. So someone's job is to collect those totally useless, arbitrary images and a poem could be that, you know. That's a big lesson.

JP

I love this conversation, but I guess my job is to come in. It's like I'm "the hurry up, please, it's time" guy in the in the Eliot poem.

KB

Yeah, there's so much more to, yeah.

JP

So I'm going to conclude with the Novel Dialogue signature question, and this is something we ask everyone in this season. I should say in past seasons we've asked people about things like what treat they eat while they're writing, but this year we've kind of decided to leave the belly behind. So the signature question this year is: is there a word or a concept that you consider untranslatable or very difficult to translate?

And I just invite any of you to--

AZ

This is something really complicated for Megan. Megan hates that idea, you know. If you want to make her mad, you should talk about this.

KB

Do you want to provoke her? Against untranslatability, forever.

AZ

Every time someone says, oh it got lost in translation, she's really mad.

MM

Yes, that's true. And whenever someone says, oh no, that's just untranslatable, my, I will always say, nothing is untranslatable, because yeah, that is a philosophical stance that I take.

However, I have started keeping a list of the words that I get caught up on, that, like always make me, like, I'm never satisfied with the translation and it's not really the words that you would expect. But this is really only going to make sense probably to Alejandro and anyone who speaks Spanish because they're words in Spanish, and these are words that maybe come up a lot in Alejandro's work. But "*llanto*" is a word that just can't....it's such a powerful word. And Alejandro wrote a piece called, what was it, [*inaudible*]?

AZ

[inaudible]

MM

Yeah, and so yeah, I mean, *llanto* just means sobbing, crying, something like that. But I feel like the gerund is not a powerful word. But *llanto* is a really powerful word. And the same with “*olvido*,” which just means like, it's like *forgetfulness* or, I don't know, sometimes it's translated as *oblivion*, but it's just like a powerful word. It is a noun that means having been forgotten or the state of being forgotten. Those are things that I always come up against and I find it difficult to make them as powerful in English as they are in Spanish. And then I have like specifically Chilean words like *chamullento*. Or sometimes “*silencio*” versus *quedarse callado*. Like just to silence versus not talking, *quedarse callado*.

Like in Spanish a lot of times you have, you have verbs for the lack of an action, like sometimes “*ignorar*” means “not know,” you know, and.

So anyway, I have a long list of those, but I won't go through them because they're not necessarily concepts that are untranslatable, like we have those concepts. But sometimes I'm just a little disappointed in English and also words for sex. English has much fewer words for sex than Spanish and much less satisfying curse words.

KB

And that must have been a huge project for this novel in terms of like the demand on your vocabulary in relation to that. Actually can I kind of—

MM

You should see—

KB

No go ahead.

MM

I was going to say, you should see the long exchanges we had with our editors over the word “penetration” in English.

KB

Brilliant. No there's lots of, there's you know, it's like, shitting and like you know there's. But can I just put forward that I think the cat's name, I think Darkness is a better name in English, than the, I didn't, what is it in Spanish?

MM

Oscuridad

AZ

Oscuridad

KB

Oscuridad

Okay I just, Darkness for a cat, I mean darkness it's just like a band name, from like, I don't know, it's just such a brilliant name for a cat. I think maybe there, you can kind of compensate your, you know—

MM

It's pretty good in Spanish, too.

KB

Is it really good?

MM

Yeah.

JP

I well, I was going to say that the title of this episode should definitely be "I'm just a little bit disappointed in English," but Kate here, Kate, you're not disappointed in English, then, you're standing up for English there.

KB

No, but I agree, I think with everything Megan said that there's a sense it's not like, it's not that there's an impossibility, it's not like there's not a way of doing things. I think it's always possible to rephrase. That's our work, to say it again, to say it differently, to release new meanings through the rephrasings, but

there is one sort of phrasing that I bring into my English language. In French you can say "*j'assume*," like "*assumer*", which means all kind, lots of different things, but very compactly, like if I were to say something like , I cry easily, which is true, you know, *mais j'assume*, you know I, but it means I accept it, it means I take it on, it means I don't apologize for it, you know, it means a lot of different things in one kind of, and I find that would be one thing that if I'm talking with, you know, my family who also speak French, then I can say that, put that in as a kind of shorthand because it's quite useful. Like, I accept this. I take, I don't mind this character failing, if it is one, you know in that example *assumer* is really useful.

So there are just certain things where it has a force and it has an economy. That's the--

MM

Yeah, yeah, exactly.

KB

And it may be a pleasure in the voicing as well and it's that that you're seeking. Yeah, but I also take the stance of against untranslatability.

MM

Yes!

KB

Yeah, yeah.

AZ

When you speak Spanish, you know Spanish is spoken for so many people. In many different ways. But we always understand each other and so we are kind of used of these little tricks between Argentinian and Chilean way of speaking Spanish and Mexican way of speaking Spanish and the way they speak Spanish in Spain is a little more different than the way we deal with it in our countries. So in a way you are always translating yourself and if you read books, I think literature is like second language for everybody, I mean. You are, you might not speak a second language, but if you read novels, if you read poems, you want the language to work in a different way. And I really like that.

So the question about what feels untranslatable, it's a question I like a lot, because when you get to that, you are getting to something that it's important to think about. And so, I would get closer to Megan's fear about two kinds of people. Because I think, well, there is also an international way of speaking Spanish. A very damp way of speaking.

MM

Yeah, like neutral.

AZ

It's the language of bestselling books. I mean, I'm talking about the genre called *best sellers*. Not the books that sell well, you know, because in Spanish we call them best sellers. And that means like, I don't know how to say--

MM

Commercial.

AZ

Commercial literature. And so there's many writers that use Spanish in a way every person would get it without feeling a real way of approaching that language, you know, so it's very interesting, I think.

JP

Yeah, because, I thought you were, I thought the point you were going to end on with something like its translation all the way down. Like in every slippage and every move from genre to genre, there's translation, but then you ended by saying no, but there is this way you can iron out all of the space, and we have that in English too, right? Like business English? Or standard English? I feel like I. A. Richards tried to develop that simplified English, but he didn't need to develop it because it's the language of like international business meetings or something, so yeah.

AZ

But there's also bad English, which is the language I speak. And it's sometimes it's really easy—

JP

Your English might be many things, but it's not that, no.

AZ

It's really easy for me to speak with people who have English as second language because with a person from Holland, we speak the same bad English.

JP

Yeah, that's a Randall Jarrell line.

KB

Although they speak amazing, they speak amazing, amazing English in here, which is a limitation on my Dutch let's say because. They just astound me, but I agree yeah, I like that meeting as two non, you know, second language speakers of a common language and it feels like a territory that's all your own. I really like that. Yeah, speaking French with other non-native French speakers.

JP

So with the idea that this is going to be an interminable conversation, which I'm sure will be continued beyond this, but I'm still going to wrap up the podcast part by thanking the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship and acknowledging support from our partner Public Books. Hannah Jorgensen is our graduate intern. Connor Hibbard is the sound engineer. And I'd encourage you to subscribe, rate us and leave a review on Apple Podcast, Stitcher, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts.

So novelists from past seasons include Chang-Rae Lee, Teju Cole, Orhan Pamuk, Helen Garner, Sigrid Nunez, and Caryl Phillips, and many more conversations like this one, though perhaps not as sublime as this particular one, but many more conversations are coming your way this season.

So thank you all so much for participating, you know, Kate, Megan, Alejandro, it's been a great pleasure.

KB

Thank you.

MM

Thank you very much.

JP

And thank you all for listening.