"I SEXUALLY IDENTIFY AS AN ATTACK HELICOPTER": TRANSLATION AS A WEAPON FOR QUEER RESISTANCE

ABSTRACT

This article offers a situated reflection on the experience of translating a queer text from English into Italian, foregrounding the translator's own positionality as central to the process. Drawing on my own translational practice, the article first contextualises the short story *I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter* within the virtual communities and digital economies in which it originally circulated. Inspired by Olga Castro's feminist insistence on acknowledging the translator's subjectivity and ideological location, the article understands translation not as a neutral act of equivalence but as an embodied and ethically charged engagement. Rather than erasing difference, the translator's position becomes a productive site for accountability, one that acknowledges their relational embeddedness within both source and target contexts. It then turns to the challenges posed by grammatical gender in Italian and examines how these linguistic constraints have informed – rather than hindered – the process of queer translation. Translation here is framed as a form of queer resistance and as a practice of care, one that entails surrendering control while attending to the communal and political stakes of meaning-making. The article ultimately argues that, through this reflexive and critical engagement, translation becomes a generative space in which to challenge normative structures and enact a queer ethics that is simultaneously creative, collective, and deeply situated.

Keywords: Queer translation. Translator's positionality. Queer resistance. Translation as a practice of care.

RESUMO

O presente artigo propõe uma reflexão situada sobre a experiência da tradução de um texto *queer* do inglês para o italiano, tomando como ponto de partida a centralidade da própria posição tradutória no processo. A partir da minha prática de tradução, o texto inicialmente contextualiza o conto *I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter* no interior das comunidades virtuais e das economias digitais nas quais ele originalmente circulou. Inspirada na defesa feminista de Olga Castro, acerca da necessidade de reconhecer a subjetividade e a localização ideológica da pessoa tradutora, o artigo compreende a tradução não como um ato neutro de equivalência, mas como um gesto incorporado, atravessado por implicações éticas e políticas. Longe de apagar as diferenças, a posição da pessoa tradutora torna-se, aqui, um espaço produtivo de

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responsabilidade, que reconhece os vínculos relacionais e as interdependências que a atravessam tanto no contexto de partida, quanto no de chegada. Na sequência, discute os desafios impostos pelo gênero gramatical na língua italiana e analisa de que modo essas restrições linguísticas, longe de serem um obstáculo, passaram a informar e tensionar criticamente o próprio fazer tradutório em chave *queer*. A tradução é, então, concebida como prática de resistência dissidente e como ética do cuidado, uma prática que pressupõe, ao mesmo tempo, a renúncia ao controle total e o comprometimento com as dimensões coletivas, afetivas e políticas da produção de sentido. Defende-se, por fim, que, a partir desse engajamento reflexivo e crítico, a tradução se configura como um espaço gerativo capaz de confrontar estruturas normativas e de performar uma ética *queer* que é, ao mesmo tempo, situada, coletiva e radicalmente criativa.

Palavras-chave: Tradução *queer*. Posicionamento tradutório. Resistência *queer*. Tradução enquanto ética do cuidado.

Online radicalization: alt-right going viral.

The phrase "I identify as an attack helicopter" originates as a transphobic meme that emerged from online forums and internet culture in the early 2010s. It is often used to mock transgender identities by suggesting that gender self-identification is arbitrary or absurd. While it appears in various forms, the core premise remains the same: a hypothetical individual claiming to identify as a military vehicle is intended to ridicule the legitimacy of transgender identities and reinforce biological essentialist views on gender.

The earliest known instance dates back to a post made by a Team Fortress 2[1] player on March 17, 2014. This copypasta[2] was subsequently shared on platforms like Reddit and 4chan, gaining traction and peaking in usage around 2015. A widely circulated version of the meme appeared on Reddit in 2014, written as a mock first-person narrative of someone who "identifies as an attack helicopter", listing exaggerated grievances such as being oppressed for their "rotor blades". This format mimicked real testimonies from transgender individuals, but with the intent of undermining them by portraying self-identification as inherently ridiculous, in hubs for internet trolling and reactionary discourse.

The meme gained wider traction within the alt-right and other anti-trans spaces, especially as public discourse on transgender rights expanded. It became a shorthand dismissal of trans identities, particularly among those who opposed

1 Team Fortress 2 (TF2) is a multiplayer first-person shooter (FPS) developed by Valve Corporation and released in 2007. It's known for its fast-paced gameplay, unique class-based mechanics, and a cartoonish art style. The connection to the "I sexually identify as an attack helicopter" meme comes from its active online forums and meme culture, where players often share jokes, copypastas, and internet humor.

2 A *copypasta* – a blend of "copy" and "paste" – refers to a block of text repeatedly reposted across online forums, often for humorous, satirical, or trolling purposes; widely circulated examples include absurd rants, memetic jokes, and even early forms of internet *creepypasta* (short horror-related story or urban legend that spreads across the internet).

gender-inclusive policies and laws. While some defended the meme as mere satire, its persistent use in anti-trans rhetoric illustrates its role in reinforcing transphobic attitudes rather than engaging in good-faith critique of gender identity discourse.

> Online radicalization and recruitment occur on a constellation of websites, from 4chan, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, the "manosphere" (men's rights and misogynist forums), and conspiracy theory news sites. Social communities on these websites collectively form a pipeline of sorts, where algorithms intended to increase engagement or "clicks" funnel users into increasingly extreme content and tactics. This pipeline is not composed of a single app or site, but rather affects a person's whole ecosystem of internet use and social media. Adherents to various hate movements or ideologies eventually meet and integrate members of one group into another, forming allied commitments towards radical reactionary racial, gender, and political agendas. For example, women are present in neo-Nazi groups, despite the antifeminist and male-orientation of these ideologies, due to a shared racist agenda. (Haverkamp at alia, 2023, p. 90)

The attack helicopter meme is emblematic of how internet culture can be weaponized to marginalize vulnerable groups. By framing trans identities as laughable or delusional, the meme contributes to the broader cultural climate of transphobia, making it easier to dismiss genuine struggles for recognition and rights. It has been used in debates over gender-neutral bathrooms, pronoun usage, and trans healthcare, often as a way to shut down discourse rather than engage with it meaningfully. This reflects a broader strategy within reactionary movements: deploying humor and absurdity to mask underlying bigotry, making it more socially acceptable to express transphobic views under the guise of satire.

The "I identify as an attack helicopter" meme is more than just an internet joke: it is a rhetorical tool that has been used to invalidate transgender identities and reinforce exclusionary views on gender. Its origins in online trolling spaces and its adoption by reactionary movements underscore the ways humor can be weaponized to perpetuate discrimination. However, the counter-reclamation of the phrase by trans activists and artists demonstrates the resilience of marginalized communities in challenging and subverting oppressive narratives. As cultural conversations about gender continue to evolve, so too will the ways in which trans identities are defended against attempts at erasure and mockery.

In response to its widespread use, some trans and queer communities have reclaimed the phrase as a form of counter-satire, turning it into a joke that highlights the absurdity of transphobic arguments rather than legitimizing them. Artists and writers have also explored the meme's implications in critical and creative work, using it as a lens to examine the intersection of gender, technology, and militarism.

The helicopter Story: reductio ad absurdum and queer (transfeminist) re-vision.

Isabel Fall's short story, originally titled *I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter*, published in "Clarkesworld" in 2020, remains one of the most debated science fiction works of the 21st century. The story's withdrawal following a severe backlash from online communities foregrounds broader discussions on the intersection of identity, genre, and the politics of representation in speculative fiction. This section of the article examines the story's thematic engagement with gender dysphoria and military violence, its reception within online and literary communities, and the implications of its erasure.

Fall's story situates itself in a near-future world where gender identity is not only socially constructed but also technologically modifiable, particularly for military purposes. The protagonist undergoes a transformation into a literal war machine, a process that mirrors trans embodiment while simultaneously critiquing the militarization of identity. By employing the phrase "I sexually identify as an attack helicopter", which has roots in transphobic online discourse, Fall reclaims and subverts it in a very original way, using it as a lens to explore the lived experience of gender dysphoria, control, and agency.

The use of speculative fiction allows Fall to explore these themes in a manner distinct from conventional realist narratives on trans identity. Science fiction has historically served as a space to probe the boundaries of identity and power. However, Fall's depiction of transformation, consent, and agency diverges from conventional transition narratives, complicating easy interpretations and generating discomfort among readers with differing political orientations.

The story's reception was polarized. Many readers, particularly within trans and queer communities, expressed suspicion over the author's anonymity and the decision to engage directly with a transphobic meme. Initial reactions accused the piece of either reinforcing transphobia or appropriating trans narratives insensitively. This outcry, which primarily spread across the web through various social media platforms and discussion forums (e.g., X, formerly Twitter, and Reddit), led to the story's removal from Clarkesworld and Fall's eventual public outing as a trans woman, adding further complexity to the discourse surrounding its publication.

The backlash underscores the tensions between representation and reception within marginalized communities. The reaction to Fall's work reveals anxieties over who gets to tell trans stories and how those stories should be framed. The demand for "safe" or politically unambiguous representations often conflicts with the messiness of lived experiences and the ways experimental fiction seeks to engage with them.

The deletion of *The Helicopter Story* from official archives raises pressing concerns about censorship, community gatekeeping, and the precarity of trans authors within speculative fiction. The removal of Fall's work from public discourse reflects the fragility of narratives that challenge preconceived notions of gender and power. While

some saw its erasure as a corrective action against perceived harm, others interpreted it as a troubling precedent for artistic freedom and trans storytelling.

Despite its controversial reception, Fall's story has cemented itself as a critical point of discussion in contemporary science fiction and trans literature. Its existence, even in absentia, continues to provoke questions about the role of genre in negotiating identity and the responsibilities of authors and readers in shaping these conversations. Isabel Fall's (now re-titled) *The Helicopter Story* embodies the fraught relationship between trans narratives and speculative fiction, challenging both literary conventions and political expectations. Its removal speaks to the volatility of online discourse and the complexities of trans representation in an era of heightened scrutiny. Whether seen as a cautionary tale about the risks of subversive storytelling or as a lost work of vital trans literature, Fall's story remains an essential case study in the evolving landscape of science fiction and identity politics.

Shortly after its publication, the story became the subject of intense debate. Some readers viewed it as a sophisticated critique of gender essentialism, while others, unfamiliar with the author's intentions, found its premise troubling. The choice to reference a meme that had frequently been used to mock trans identities complicated its reception, as many were uncertain whether the story was an act of subversive reclamation or a harmful reiteration of transphobic tropes. The controversy was exacerbated by the fact that Fall had not publicly disclosed her trans identity at the time of publication, leading to speculation about her background and intentions.

As the discussion escalated, Fall became the target of severe online scrutiny, harassment, and doxxing. The hostility directed at her, combined with the psychological toll of the controversy, led her to request the removal of the story from Clarkesworld. The magazine complied, and the novelette was withdrawn within days of its publication. The backlash and its consequences ultimately prompted Fall to withdraw from public life as a writer.

The events surrounding the publication and removal of the story sparked broader discussions on trans representation, the dynamics of online discourse, and the ethics of critique within marginalised communities. In the years following its removal, many critics have re-evaluated the response to the novelette, recognising that some of the initial outrage may have been shaped by misinterpretation and reactionary discourse. However, the wider implications of the controversy remain unresolved, raising questions about the intersection of trans identity, speculative fiction, and the responsibilities of both writers and their audiences in engaging with difficult or provocative material.

I thus immersed myself in the digital spaces where trolls and reactionary individuals cling to their conservatism, sensing a disruption in the inherited power structures that have long upheld the status quo. They experience an unsettling loss of stability, perceiving societal frameworks as increasingly unpredictable. To this, I thought: good – let them fear the queer! This exploration proved valuable in understanding the vulnerabilities that also constitute the strengths of these aggressors,

and, consequently, the structural articulation of Isabel Fall's narrative, as critically examined and concisely synthesised by S.J.S. Hancox-Li (2020):

- The government is coercing individuals into gender transition.
- The narrator's conception of femininity is stereotypical and sexist.
- The protagonist poses a threat to women and children.
- The protagonist is merely a confused woman uncertain about her gender.

These elements within the story were identified by various trans-queer community members as offensive and harmful, leading to accusations of transphobia and sexism against the author – accusations that overlook the ways in which these very elements are employed literarily within the text.

The protagonist's internalised misogyny becomes particularly evident in the passage that conveys the frustration induced by the socially imposed construct of femininity, as it is enforced within patriarchal social dynamics. Specifically, when Barb was a woman, she was a small woman – not only metaphorically. Within the identity of Seo Ji Hee, corporeality and symbolic structures converge in a persistent sense of being the wrong size, ill-fitting, and perpetually at risk.

> I was always aware of being small: aware that people could hurt me. I spent a lot of time thinking about things that had happened right before something awful. I would look around me and ask myself, are the same things happening now? Women live in cross-reference. It is harder work than we know.

The exhaustion and terror of being perpetually under attack, under enemy control, drive Seo Ji Hee to become Barb – to become anything but a woman. It is a pursuit of a finally conforming, accepted position of power. The social renunciation of an assigned female gender at birth is not framed as an act of self-determination but rather as the only conceivable form of personal liberation. The assertion of newly acquired power within a socially normative framework can occur only through the delegation of identity exploration to the military: the most explicitly codified and hierarchical institution of individual control.

The possibility of transgressing gender beyond the binary is entirely annihilated by the subject's subjugation to military practices. Barb is rendered as an attack helicopter in terms of gender: aside from the necessary admission tests, briefly mentioned in the narrative, the process and reassignment are entirely dictated and executed by the entity of the 'Army'. Through a neuro-surgical operation that alters pre-existing cognitive structures, the military applies its desired attributes, thereby replicating, through a form of medicalisation, the same process previously imposed socially via categorisation within the construct of normative femininity.

> [...] And the moment their work reached a usable stage—the moment society was ready to accept plastic gender, and scientists

> were ready to manipulate it—the military found a new resource. Armed with functional connectome mapping and neural plastics, the military can make gender tactical.

The choice to make explicit the military's co-optation of resistance terminology – specifically that of gender assignment and reclamation – serves as a textual signal that mirrors the author's own use of such a strategy in the title. In this instance, too, we are confronted with an appropriation that feigns subversion but in reality prefigures an act of insidious coercion. Isabel Fall exposes the military's appropriation of terminology originally used in resistance to imposed normativity as yet another attempt at assimilation, ultimately aimed at preserving the status quo. This process enables the suppression of any genuine prospect of change through a superficial form of pinkwashing. This critique is made particularly clear through a poignant reflection articulated by Barb herself regarding her new existential function:

> [...] Apache Mystic. America names its helicopters for the people it destroyed.

Upon closer examination, and setting aside the blind trust too often granted to the narrative voice, the only character who genuinely experiences and navigates a form of gender dysphoria – or more precisely, a misalignment given the context – is Barb's partner, Axis. Confronted with the horrors accumulated through war and the imposed obligation to act unquestioningly, Axis hesitates. He finds a way to connect with the true essence of his self and, if only for a moment, glimpses the possibility of entirely dismantling the falsehood upon which their existence as an attack helicopter pair is predicated.

The protagonist has desperately sought a solution to her own suffering, a means to attain a position of power that grants her the freedom to act beyond the constraints of her assigned gender. However, this pursuit has ultimately resulted in a different form of conformity to the same imposed normativity. She has relinquished the identity of being a woman, instead embracing the opportunity to become a lethal military weapon in service of state violence, thereby forfeiting her actual agency. By contrast, Axis, though momentarily blinded by the overwhelming illumination of this fundamental truth, reclaims his agency through hesitation; through inaction. In this fracture from the normative, then, emerges the only truly redemptive possibility: to align with oneself rather than to fall in line.

These essences coexist within a single entity – that of the attack helicopter: an aerogyro perpetually subject to dual forces to maintain flight and reliant on tail rotor compensation to achieve stability. The precarious balance of these interacting forces is the only viable interpretative key, resulting in a technical miracle oscillating between terror and salvation.

Whether one approves of it or not, this story has sparked critical debate, personal reflection, and new forms of writing. Isabel Fall has taken the sparse, transphobic hypotext and transformed it into an extended narrative capable of interrogating themes that are, regrettably, not as futuristic as one might hope: the utilitarianism of sex and gender, identity as subjected to power, the misuse of artificial intelligence, climate change, the militarisation of bodies and minds, the medicalisation of individuals in service of imperialism, and the expansion of capitalist colonisation. The density of this work is such that from its fissures, further literature can emerge. One such example is the hypertext of S. Qiouyi Lu (*My Gender Is Classified*),[3] which, while remaining in dialogue with Fall's piece, responds more specifically to the demands for introspection and characterisation – elements highlighted in the critiques of the *Helicopter Story*.

Adrienne Rich, one of the most influential feminist poets and theorists of the twentieth century, introduced the concept of re-vision in her seminal 1972 essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision". For Rich, re-vision is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich, 1972, p. 18). More than a mere reinterpretation, re-vision is a transformative process that enables women to reclaim narratives historically shaped by patriarchal perspectives. It is both a literary and political act, fundamental to feminist creativity and consciousness.

Rich argues that traditional literature and history have been constructed largely by men, positioning women as passive subjects rather than active creators (Rich, 1972). To challenge this, women must engage critically with past texts, uncovering silenced voices and reimagining existing narratives. This process is crucial for women writers who seek to carve out a space for their own experiences and perspectives, rather than merely inheriting restrictive frameworks (Showalter, 1979). Gilbert and Gubar (1979) further expand upon this notion, demonstrating how female writers have historically had to contend with the "anxiety of authorship", a condition born from their marginalisation in literary traditions.

Beyond literature, re-vision extends to feminist creativity in all artistic and intellectual fields. It encourages a re-examination of dominant cultural symbols, myths, and representations, allowing for new forms of expression that challenge and subvert patriarchal norms (Moi, 1985). Feminist artists, poets, and thinkers have employed re-vision to reinterpret classical works, redefine female subjectivity, and disrupt traditional power structures in storytelling (Butler, 1990). This act of reclaiming and reshaping cultural narratives is a crucial strategy for resisting the hegemonic ideologies that pervade artistic and academic discourses.

Rich's concept remains vital today, as feminist scholars and creators continue to interrogate and reshape inherited narratives. In a world where gendered structures persist, re-vision serves as a powerful tool for critique and reinvention, ensuring that women's voices are not only heard but also central in shaping cultural and artistic discourse (Cixous, 1975). As such, re-vision is an enduring methodology that fosters

3 Now available in Italian language in AA. VV., *Il mio genere è top secret. Fantascienza queer e trans.*, Future Fiction (2022)

critical engagement with tradition and paves the way for alternative epistemologies within feminist literary and artistic production.

Evidently aware of and having thoroughly assimilated the lessons of feminist critique, Isabel Fall chooses to take a step further (or to the side), thereby generating a further rupture within the tradition of rewriting. Rather than engaging in a direct opposition to established narratives or defining herself in antithesis to the material of the narrative hypotext, Fall instead embraces its original form, employing it as a springboard for a new creative horizon. In doing so, she challenges the conventional strategies of subversion that have historically characterised feminist and queer interventions in literature, which often seek to dismantle and overturn dominant discourses through explicit critique or ironic appropriation.

Fall's approach is more radical in its engagement with language and narrative structures: rather than merely reclaiming or reversing a transphobic phraseology to expose its inherent absurdity, she intensifies and expands it to its extreme, pushing its logic to the point of implosion. By doing so, she constructs new and unsettling possible worlds that refuse easy categorisation as either utopian or dystopian, unsettling the very epistemological and ontological foundations upon which contemporary discourses of gender and identity rest. Her narrative strategy does not simply engage with the structures of transphobia as a means of negating them but instead inhabits them fully, allowing their contradictions to unfold in a way that forces the reader to confront their own assumptions about identity, agency, and the politics of embodiment.

By imbuing the future with a macabre quality that follows the trajectory of present discourse, Fall not only critiques but also exposes the hidden violences embedded in contemporary ideological constructs. In doing so, she disrupts the very mechanisms of temporal and spatial structures, creating a narrative that resists linearity and fixed interpretations. Her work thus represents a significant departure from traditional strategies of resistance, offering instead a vision in which language and meaning are in constant flux, mirroring the complexities and instabilities of trans experience itself. In this way, Fall's work stands as a provocative and deeply unsettling intervention into both speculative fiction and the broader discourse on gender, power, and the politics of narrative form.

This new generative condition, which stabilises identity knowledge not through antithesis or opposition but through an alternative mode of engagement—including its specific literary device-based transposition—constitutes an act of queering. It marks a shift from the framework of difference, as characterised by Second Wave feminism, towards a perspective of differences, wherein a spectrum of gendered existences collectively reimagine new modes of validation, freeing themselves from the constraints of the cisheteropatriarchal order. Rather than seeking external legitimisation, Fall enacts a radical act of defiance through self-definition.

Translation as a position, a process, a practice.

Recent developments in translation studies have foregrounded the translator's visibility and positionality not merely as methodological considerations but as ethical imperatives. Following Venuti's foundational call for the visibility of the translator (1995), which counteracts the illusion of neutrality prevalent in domesticating translation practices, more recent scholarship has interrogated the implications of how a translator becomes visible, and in what terms. As argued by Moira Inghilleri (2017), visibility should be understood not only as a textual strategy but as a socio-political stance that acknowledges the translator's embeddedness within systems of power, ideology, and cultural expectation. In this context, the translation choices discussed throughout the article may be read as interventions that make the translator's presence legible while resisting the homogenising tendencies of target language norms.

Closely linked to this is the concept of positionality, especially as developed within feminist and decolonial translation studies. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) insists on the importance of intimate, situated reading practices that preserve the opacity of the source text, particularly when translating across asymmetrical power relations. Feminist scholars such as Luise von Flotow (1997) and Sherry Simon (2005) have further emphasised that the translator's position – shaped by gender, race, class, language, and geopolitical location – necessarily informs the translation process. More recently, scholars such as Olga Castro and Emek Ergun (2017) have argued for a critical shift in how we conceptualise translation: moving beyond the simplistic binary framework of invisibility versus visibility that has traditionally dominated translation studies. This binary often positions translators as either invisible, working silently behind the scenes, or hyper-visible, foregrounded as the key mediators of cultural exchange. However, Castro and Ergun contend that this dichotomy limits our understanding of what translation actually involves.

Instead, they propose approaching translation as a deeply relational and affective practice. This perspective emphasises translation as an intersubjective labour – a process rooted in ongoing negotiations between translator, source text, target audience, and the cultural contexts that shape both. Translation is not merely about transferring words or meanings; it is a dynamic interaction that involves emotional engagement, ethical responsibility, and the building of connections across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

By focusing on translation as relational labour, scholars highlight how translators constantly navigate power dynamics, cultural differences, and affective responses, which shape both the process and outcomes of their work. This approach calls attention to the translator's embodied presence, emotional investments, and the ethical complexities inherent in their choices. In this way, translation becomes a site of co-creation, where meaning is collaboratively produced rather than mechanically reproduced.

This more nuanced framework challenges the binary of visibility/invisibility and foregrounds the human, affective dimensions of translation, acknowledging translators as active agents in intercultural dialogue rather than passive conduits. It also opens up new avenues for understanding translation as a form of labour that is simultaneously cognitive, emotional, and social.

This article's engagement with translation strategies that resist fluency and linear equivalence aligns with this call, suggesting that translation is never a neutral transfer of meaning but an act of ethical and epistemic negotiation. Acknowledging this positionality is not a weakness but a form of critical accountability, particularly when the texts in question challenge dominant narratives, speak from minoritised positions, and/or are already linguistically experimental. Isabel Fall's *"I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter"* can be read as a paradigmatic case where issues of visibility and positionality – key concerns in contemporary translation theory – are thematised not through linguistic transfer between languages, but through the transposition of discourse across ideological terrains. The narrator, who adopts the US military's hypermasculine register while simultaneously destabilising it through a narrative of embodied queerness, presents language as a site of both constraint and liberation. In this context, readers are placed in a translator-like position: asked to navigate a discursive world in which conventional referents (e.g. gender identity, technowar rhetoric) no longer function as fixed, and where positional reading becomes essential to meaning-making.

The story's reception history reinforces this claim: accused of transphobia by some readers and defended as a radical, interior engagement with trans identity by others, Fall's text reveals how visibility can backfire when unaccompanied by a shared understanding of positionality. The author's initial anonymity and the later revelation of her trans identity became flashpoints in the debate, underscoring what Castro and Ergun (2017) describe as the affective and epistemic risks of feminist translation work. In this sense, *Helicopter Story* performs what Olga Castro calls "situated translation" – an embodied, high-stakes negotiation between multiple discursive communities. If we take seriously Lawrence Venuti's (1995) call for ethical visibility, we might extend it here to argue that Fall's narrator insists on a form of hyper-visibility that weaponises the very codes used to suppress non-normative gender expressions. The story thus functions as both a critique of hegemonic language and a demand for radically attentive reading – a form of "translation" attuned to contradiction, tension, and the refusal of binary categorisation and therefore a similar approach is necessarily to be taken when engaging with the text in its translation into other languages.

”Il racconto dell’elicottero”: the Italian case.

This invaluable contribution to “letteratura di genere”[4] has found a place within the Italian literary landscape thanks to the meticulous and determined research efforts of the collaborators at the independent publishing house Zona42. The publishing house was established in response to its founders’ need to produce the literature they sought but could not find on the shelves – primarily science fiction, with a subsequent expansion into adjacent genres such as the fantastic, weird fiction, and horror. As Giorgio Raffaeli (one of the founders of the publishing house) stated in an oral interview conducted in March 2025, “We publish science fiction because we believe that, among literary tools, it is perhaps the most suited to exploring the complex times we are experiencing”.

At the end of 2020, in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the publishing house redirected its time and energy towards a new project, 42Nodi. Long drawn to the idea of engaging in the production and dissemination of short fiction – an enduring stylistic hallmark of “leteratura di genere” – they decided to invest in a format that has significantly shaped the collective imaginary of speculative fiction: the novelette. Longer than a short story yet more concise than a novella, the novelette allows for greater world-building than the former while maintaining the narrative conciseness that often characterises speculative fiction. This definition, which aligns with classifications set forth by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association (SFWA) and other literary institutions, is particularly fitting for the text under analysis here.[5]

Following the removal of the story from its original publishing platforms, Chiara Reali, curator of the 42Nodi series at Zona42, undertook a thorough search across the web for the original text. After a careful reading, the editorial board of the publishing house decided to invest their time and resources in attempting to contact the author in order to secure the translation rights. Demonstrating foresight and perseverance despite the challenges involved, they successfully obtained the author’s consent to translate the story – originally written in English – into Italian for publication.

What must be emphasised in this context is that queer translation is inherently a radical act. To speak meaningfully of queer literature, one cannot focus exclusively on the identity or sexual orientation of the writer, the characters, or the themes; rather, a queer positioning is, above all, a political stance that necessitates an ethical approach to textual engagement. For this reason, the publishing house deliberately sought to collaborate with an emerging translator – namely, the author of this article – who

4 Science fiction is referred to as “letteratura di genere” because it falls within an editorial and critical classification that differentiates literary texts according to thematic, stylistic, and audience-based conventions. The term “genre” (from the English *genre fiction*) is employed to designate works that adhere to a recognisable set of narrative codes, often regarded – rightly or wrongly – as more “popular” or “commercial” than so-called highbrow or mainstream literature.

5 Some famous novelettes include Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Word for World Is Forest” and Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life” (which was adapted into the film Arrival).

identifies as non-binary. My selection for this challenging task was not solely based on my sensitivity to and literary knowledge of the subject matter, but also constituted a consciously political act: an affirmation of a human and literary existence that deviates from cisheteropatriarchal norms.

Similarly, the book's preface was entrusted to the writer and activist Antonia Caruso, a trans woman who has been at the forefront of advocacy for the rights of marginalised and oppressed identities for years. Within this framework, I was privileged to approach the translation in a manner that was not alienating but instead rooted in a network of solidarity and mutual support. This allowed for a continuous process of exchange and revision, an openness to multiple possible renderings of the text, and a form of communication that was both transparent and radical – one fundamentally grounded in an intersectional ethical model.

Furthermore, at the author's request, the entire financial investment for acquiring the rights to the text was donated to an organisation advocating for trans rights in the United States. In the same spirit, both the publishing house and myself, decided to match the donation, contributing an equivalent sum to an organisation supporting trans rights in Italy. This act is not only a conscious political gesture but also a deliberate attempt at mirroring the communities experiences – an effort to embed the original context of the text within its new cultural and linguistic environment. Such an approach reinforces the notion that translation should not be reduced to a mere linguistic exercise but should instead serve as a conduit for the ethical and political values embedded in the original work.

Discussing the sense of community that enables translators to approach a queer text with due respect is a fundamental aspect of queer translation. Particularly within underground knowledge-sharing practices, queer translation frequently draws upon workshops and collective working groups, expanding discussions that might otherwise be constrained by cisheteronormative frameworks. Many of the manifestos associated with abolitionist and/or post-gender philosophies and politics are, in fact, collectively authored (one might consider, for instance, Xenofeminism). These texts are often translated into multiple languages by autonomous working groups, primarily composed of politicised queer individuals, who collectively contribute to their rendering in order to extend the conversation within their own cultural contexts; discussions that are often, perhaps excessively, dominated by anglophone perspectives.

Similarly, although the translation of Fall's story bears my name, its roots lie in an ongoing dialogue with the Italian queer community, of which I am an active member, in an effort to ensure the respectful use of specific gender-inclusive language. Furthermore, an alternative communication network (e.g. Discord) has fostered the development of a collaborative discussion group on translation methodologies and texts, titled *Dipende dal contesto* ("It Depends on the Context"). Within this space, individuals of diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, cultural backgrounds, and class positions provide mutual support in refining the translation process. This is achieved through collective revision of work in progress and an open, constructive exchange of advice and feedback on linguistic choices. In this sense, my personal

translation practice is, in fact, a collective endeavour. Despite being signed in my name, not only does it remain consciously attuned to a community of reference whose plurality it seeks to honour, but it also functions as a deliberate act of non-alienated knowledge production – one that resists the isolating tendencies of conventional translation practices by fostering shared intellectual and creative labour.

Another aspect of appropriate translation practice lies in the decision to render as accurately as possible the scientific and practical dimensions of the mechanical actions of the helicopter subject, a parallel adventure that is, in its own way, equally communal. The majority of helicopter aviation experts in Italy, in fact, are linked to military circles and similar affiliations. For this reason, I decided to engage in various conversations within diverse Facebook groups of helicopter enthusiasts and aficionados. Despite the kindness of some individuals who guided me in understanding the engineering mechanics of the flying object under study and its piloting, a significant number of messages were publicly and privately dismissive of my sincere, albeit naïve, interest in the subject, and several attempts at interaction were misleading, if not explicitly sexual in nature, at times bordering on harassment.

Italian language posits some challenges for queer translation. Italian is an inflectional language, meaning that grammatical gender is deeply embedded in its morphology, affecting not only pronouns and nouns but also adjectives and verb conjugations. This structural rigidity complicates efforts to adopt gender-neutral or non-binary linguistic strategies, as the language lacks widely accepted non-gendered pronouns and standardised forms that can replace the binary masculine/feminine distinction without disrupting syntactic coherence. Traditionally, the masculine has functioned as the so-called universal or default form, used generically to refer to mixed-gender groups or individuals of unspecified gender. However, in recent years, there has been a growing tendency to use the feminine more explicitly, particularly in contexts where female presence was historically obscured. Despite this shift, grammatical gender remains obligatory in most cases, requiring speakers and writers to specify either a masculine or feminine form. While grammatical gender does not always align with semantic gender – *luna* (moon), for instance, is feminine, though it does not denote a female entity – this structural feature has nonetheless prompted efforts towards linguistic neutralisation.[6]

A clear example of this is the second sentence of the story, where the neutral English term *soldier* in the title of the American military technical manual is necessarily rendered as *soldato* in Italian.

> Bugia. Secondo il manuale tecnico dell'esercito americano, Il soldato come sistema, "elicottero d'attacco" è un'identità di genere, non un sesso biologico. (Fall 2022, p. 15)

6 Neutralisation strategies have been introduced to avoid gender marking, whether to accommodate non-binary individuals, address a mixed-gender audience inclusively, or circumvent the implicit bias of defaulting to the masculine.

The feminine form was deemed inappropriate, as unrealistic, despite the narrator having previously lived with a female gender identity before conforming to the demands of gender militarisation. Terms such as *soldata* or *soldatessa* do not carry the same weight of militarisation that the context and the text itself insistently convey, as noted earlier. Therefore, the use of the masculine form in the Italian translation constitutes a specific deliberate choice, one that projects the full burden of militarisation alongside masculinisation – understood here as socio-aesthetically authoritarian and violent.

Similarly, none of the currently proposed and debated variants of a neutral gender formulation could be adopted and for sure, at this moment, various alternatives have been adopted in different contexts, such as the use of the schwa (ə), as well as punctuation marks, signs, and symbols (x, *, @, and so on). However, none of these solutions – though ə currently appears to be the most widely favoured – has received formal recognition. Indifferent, in true queer spirit, to the need for institutionalisation or academic validation of specific terminology or morphological markers, an alternative approach was deliberately chosen, rooted in an anti-ableist perspective.

Despite its potential benefits, the implementation of the schwa faces challenges. The Italian language's deep-rooted binary gender system makes the integration of a neutral ending complex. Moreover, the pronunciation of the schwa is not native to Italian phonology, posing difficulties in oral communication. The best qualitative and quantitative analysis to date on this case has been conducted by Anna M. Thornton (2022), who observed the bottom-up demands for this new linguistic function and its spread and semi-formalisation in editorial contexts. Many of my own doubts are addressed here with a careful, non-judgmental investigative lens, leading to a practical and thoughtful observation of the possibilities for the expansion of the Italian language, recognising its flexibility and limitations with a conscious positioning on the part of the author. Broadly speaking, there is also resistance from purists who view such changes as unnecessary alterations to the language's natural evolution (Sulis and Gheno, 2022). However, most importantly, at present, none of the proposed solutions adequately accounts for the difficulties faced by visually impaired readers, whose assistive technologies are unable to reproduce an alternative sound to the standard -a/-o endings (or -e/-i in the plural, respectively marking feminine and masculine forms).[7]

7 I adopt here the political intentions and the goals of democratizing language and culture of Marcia Tiburi, as presented in *Feminismo em comum: para todas, todes e todos*. Rio de Janeiro: Rosa dos Tempos. 1. Ed. 2018. (Ebook não paginado). "O feminismo nos leva à luta por direitos de todas, todes e todos. Todas porque quem leva essa luta adiante são as mulheres. Todes porque o feminismo liberou as pessoas de se identificarem somente como mulheres ou homens e abriu espaço para outras expressões de gênero – e de sexualidade – e isso veio interferir no todo da vida (N. 1). Todos porque luta por certa ideia de humanidade (que não è um humanismo, pois o humanismo também pode ser um operador ideológico que privilegia o homem em detrimento das mulheres, dos outros gêneros e, até mesmo, das outras espécies) e, por isso mesmo, considera que aquelas pessoas definidas como homens também devem ser incluídas em um processo realmente democrático, coisa que o mundo machista – que conferiu aos homens privilégios, mas os abandonou a uma profunda miséria espiritual – nunca pretendeu realmente levar à realização. N. 1: Para identificar o gênero não binário neste livro, em lugar de "x" ou "@", optamos

Empirical studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of the schwa in neutralizing gender associations in Italian. One such study examined how Italian speakers perceive role nouns with traditional gendered endings compared to those neutralized with the schwa. The findings indicated that while the schwa can reduce gender associations to some extent, its effectiveness varies depending on the noun's inherent gender connotations. For instance, neutralized forms like "direttorə" (director) still evoked masculine associations, and "casalingə" (homemaker) retained feminine stereotypes. Additionally, the schwa appeared more effective in written contexts than in spoken language (Abbondanza et alia, 2025).

Following extensive consultation between myself, various experts in translation and queer representation, and, crucially, with the guidance of Chiara Reali, the decision was made to employ feminine grammatical forms when referring to the protagonist in passages explicitly linked to their past as a woman, while utilising the masculine – falsely neutral, yet conventionally perceived as such – in sections describing the protagonist's military experiences, when more immediately identified with Barb (e.g. soldier/soldato).

> Prima di entrare nell'esercito mi chiamavo Seo Ji Hee. Ora il mio nome di battaglia è Barb, che non è l'abbreviazione di Barbara. Condivido grado (ufficiale di volo), genere e sistema urinario con **il mio mitragliere**, Axis: siamo **imbragati e cateterizzati** nella stretta cabina di pilotaggio a due di un Boeing ah-70 Apache Mystic. (Fall 2022, p. 20, my emphasis)

In this proposed section, for example, no gender marking is assigned to Barb directly, who speaks in the first person; however, the plural masculine declension is maintained, which pertains to the co-presence and practical co-existence of Barb and Axis. Axis is necessarily rendered in the masculine form (as a machine gunner) by convention, partly to avoid confusion with the "lost" humanity (which is, however, highly significant in the story) of Axis. Had Axis been rendered in the neutral or feminine form, such as *mitragliərə* or *mitragliera*, this could have produced a possible shift in meaning from the agent performing the action to the object itself. It is true that the assimilation of the character to an object of violence is Isabel Fall's ultimate intention, as she employs every weapon at her disposal in English — pun intended. Unfortunately, rendering this intention in Italian would have resulted in a loss of the character's depth, which is a pivotal element of the entire narrative, making a neutral or non-masculine dominant rendering practically impossible.

Another instance of an irreconcilable declensional tension, yet a linguistically deliberate and, in my view, appropriate choice, occurs in the passage where Barb, with surprise, feels betrayed by Axis' inaction, and partially compares their relationship to a matrimonial one.

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por usar a letra "e" (como em "todes") – de modo a não criar barreiras para a acessibilidade do conteúdo por deficientes visuais. [N. da E.]"

> Niente di sbagliato in nessun sistema, se non in quello senza spie, il mio coniuge, il mio mitragliere. (Fall 2022, p. 24)

In this passage, the choice of the word *coniuge* (spouse) replaces *sposo* (husband): although *il mio* indicates a subject grammatically masculine, the selection of a gender-neutral term such as *coniuge* to describe Barb's perception of Axis appeared the most suitable variant to strike a balance between the universalising masculine and more expressive linguistic variables serving a dimension beyond gender.

This alternating approach and continuous reflection on its rendering, far from claiming to be a universal or unproblematic solution, represents a responsibility I have taken upon myself and one with which I continually grapple, even in memory, betrayed by my own language: a language in which I, too, am unable to grammatically articulate my identity as a non-binary subject.

With the publisher's approval, however, the afterword to the text, which I also authored, adopts the -ə to refer to myself. This was intended as a deliberate gesture towards potential future grammatical developments, with the hope of also arriving at a truly anti-ableist solution. The adoption of the schwa extends beyond linguistic reform; it has significant implications for the well-being of non-binary individuals. Inclusive language practices, such as using the schwa, can reduce feelings of marginalization and promote positive identity affirmation. The "Be as You Are" Clinical Research Center at Sapienza University of Rome supports the use of the schwa, recognizing its potential to foster gender euphoria and improve mental health outcomes among non-binary patients (Baiocco et alia, 2023).

Nonetheless, I consider it essential, particularly in this context, to highlight a fundamental concern: while a non-gendered synthesis of experience, detached from both masculine and feminine markers, may serve a pragmatic function in translation, it unsettles me on both a political and literary level. It compels me to question whether it is truly necessary to impose a single, unified choice that condenses the multiplicity of expressive possibilities into one sign. In doing so, there is an inherent risk of inadvertently normalising, through the linguistic structures of the dominant order, the very anomaly that defines queer identity as radically open and indeterminate.

A positional take on translating the story into italian.[8]

When I first encountered Isabel Fall's short story, I did so without prior knowledge of its origins, its intended audience, the discourse surrounding it, or the international controversy it had sparked. In this sense, I was fortunate; my personal circumstances allowed me to engage with its irreverence and literary quality in a more immediate and unfiltered manner.

8 This section of the article translates and mirrors the afterword to the book, written by me, here revised specifically for this purpose and reproduced with the consent of the publishing house of the Italian edition.

However, engaging critically with a text necessitates a deeper investigation. With patience and the support of queer communities that sustain me, I navigated both the limited spaces of discussion and the more pervasive realms of hostility that had shaped the story's reception.

Upon retrospectively examining the original usage of the phrase "I sexually identify as an attack helicopter", I uncovered its emergence in 2014 as a *reductio ad absurdum*. Initially employed in a jocular yet cruel manner, it functioned as a mechanism of false irony and genuine hostility to discredit a need that has only recently found a linguistic framework reflective of the experiences of non-cisheteronormative individuals. Entering this hostile arena, I found protection in the communities I have encountered and within which I have recognised something fundamental about myself. I was also shielded by the awareness that language is a tool as flexible as it is perilous, and by the privilege of having had continual access to literature – especially experimental literature, which has consistently defied rigid categorisation and served marginalised existences. Such literature, precisely because of its marginalisation, has inspired resilience and provided sanctuary through subversion. Most significantly, I engaged with the hostile online spaces that had fuelled this meme by using Isabel Fall's own story as my defence.

The use of a phrase so deeply associated with transphobia immediately drew widespread attention, prompting speculation regarding both the author and the story itself. Many accused the text of being a literary extension of the very transphobic ideology that, in reality, the narrative seeks to critique. It is worth noting that Fall responded to critiques from various voices within queer communities who found her literary choice painful; she subsequently altered the title to *Helicopter Story*, which aligns with its Italian translation. Nevertheless, the broader literary and social mechanisms at play in the text remain worthy of deeper analysis. The thematic re-elaboration initiated by this provocative title diverges from the conventions of revenge literature. Rather than engaging in a simplistic inversion of power dynamics, Fall's meticulous – though succinct – characterisation and world-building do not constitute a reclamation of the phrase in the service of trans-queer communities. Unlike the established practice of reappropriating slurs as markers of identity (such as the term "queer", which has now gained widespread international use), Fall's story instead illustrates the horror of assimilation. What unfolds is a narrative that offers no redemption, no salvation, and no reversal of power structures. The phrase, deployed as a weapon, is not redirected against oppressive forces; instead, it becomes a tool turned inward, carving deeper into wounds that are now examined with full awareness.

Isabel Fall does not attempt to recontextualise the antisocial behaviour of internet trolls within a social framework. Quite the opposite. The phrase that originates this antisocial conduct retains its negative charge, replicated within the hierarchical and violent dynamics of warfare. For non-normative subjects, war is not merely a metaphor but an imposed reality – one in which survival demands relentless effort and from which it is nearly impossible to emerge unscathed. It is an existence in which

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every element deemed foundational to society is, more often than not, a weapon – one that is perpetually aimed and rarely misfires.

In this sense, I felt the duty to strive for a translation that carried the same meaning in potential and of potential. I have adopted queer translation tactics as a weapon – one ready to wound, but above all, a weapon of safety and resilience, as both the literary world and broader society seem to demand of nonconforming subjects. The variations enacted upon the text result from a deliberate, politically intersectional stance and a semi-collective practice of reflection and action. In this way, the practice of translation – even before the actual act of translating – becomes a tool of resistance for the queer community, the text's primary interlocutor.

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