Slovenia, for those unfamiliar with it, was part of Yugoslavia until 1991, became independent in that year, and joined the European Union in 2004. It is a small nation, of only two million, and many outsiders make the mistake of assuming that its language, known either as Slovene or Slovenian (I prefer the latter), is some variant of the ill-fated language once known as Serbo-Croatian that was spoken by the majority of the population of the former Yugoslavia and has now been broken asunder as definitively as the federal republic itself. But that assumption is wrong. It is not the same language. There are some similarities, both Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian being in the family of southern Slav languages, but these are akin to similarities between, say, Italian and Spanish, which also belong to the same linguistic family but are two separate languages, each incomprehensible to monolingual speakers of the other.

Oddly enough, given that Slovenian is a language spoken by so few people and that Slovenians give it credit for holding the small tribe together during the long centuries of foreign rule, the language is internally divided to an absurd degree. There are over fifty recorded regional dialects in the tiny country that are far more varied than, for example, the English spoken by rural Appalachians and the one spoken by gangstas in the south Bronx. Having lived in Slovenia for twenty years, learned the language, and translated for some fifteen of those years, I can attest that this is true. It is still possible for me to travel less than one hour from the capital city of Ljubljana to the village of my in-laws, sit down in a farmhouse kitchen, and understood hardly a single word of a conversation taking place round the table about forestry or pigs or a piece of contested property. In addition to rural dialects, there is the complex and varied youthful slang of urban Slovenia, a mode of expression that includes, since the break-up of Yugoslavia, not only the hip-hop insertions of words from English like kul! (for cool) or ful sufer! (for really suffering), but also from the maligned Serbo-Croatian as well. Finally, as far as registers of the language are concerned, there exists, and this is true of many other European languages, what is known as knjižni slovensko (literary or ‘bookish’ Slovenian) that, though not archaic as such, is quite different from any spoken Slovenian—standard, rural, or urban slang.
So there you have it: a tiny language divided, a veritable cacophony of language registers that the translator of Slovenian should arguably take into account. The translator who decides to tackle contemporary or post-independence literature, of which *Lost Story* by Brane Mozetič is an example, is more likely to face this challenge since the face of Slovenian literature has undergone a transformation in the last few decades. This transformation has its roots in the 1970s when the first real movements against the domination of _knjižni slovensko_ took place, with Reism and Luddism in poetry (Tomaž Šalamun being the best-known practitioner internationally) and _nova proza_ in fiction. And yet, stylistic rebellion notwithstanding, prior to Slovenian independence, the stereotypical writer in these parts was a white male ethnic Slovenian, furnished with either a proud partisan past or a record of dissidence against the communist authorities, or in some cases both. Some writers were fortunate enough to be able to boast of a short stint in jail at the hands of the communist authorities, still more were heroic alcoholics, but there were almost no women to speak of and certainly no minorities. Gay writers, such as Brane Mozetič, were either non-existent or remained resolutely in the _omara_ (Slovenian for closet).

Since independence, however, the tables have turned and, as a result, language registers that depart from standard literary Slovenian have continued to flourish. Women are the most numerous writers (and readers) of fiction. Some of the biggest hits in the post-independence literary scene are ethnic and linguistic mélanges that dramatize the troubled relationships of former-Yugoslavs in post-Yugoslav Slovenia (*Čefuri raus* by Goran Vojnović and *Fužinski bluz* by Andrej E. Skubic). These novels feature the humorous and sexy doggerel known as _čefurščina_ (_čefur_ being a derogatory work for southerner or former-Yugoslav) or _fužiniščina_ (*Fužine* being the neighborhood in Ljubljana where many of them lived), which combines Slovenian with Serbo-Croatian and is spoken by the ‘immigrant’ underclass. These works, at least in terms of language registers as one of the primary artistic expressions of social and ethnic differences and even character, could be compared to books such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which utterances, such as _boy_ or _nigger_, carry far more emotional weight than a whole disquisition on American Civil War history.

But let us turn now to the specific case of Brane Mozetič’s dystopian gay rave novel, *Lost Story*. The story is presented through the diary of Bojan, a gay Ljubljana raver who lives with his boyfriend Tim,
but falls in love with a mixed-race and sexually mixed-up boy named Arjun. Arjun, in order to avoid facing himself and his inclinations, sinks more and more into the world of drugs. Finally, the three young men, in a wild effort to break out of their internal and external confinement, hit the road, heading toward a holiday on Zanzibar, a destination whose name evokes paradise but turns out, like paradise, to be something of an illusion.

The translation of *Lost Story* should be relatively straightforward compared to the works mentioned above that rely on two distinct language registers, because Mozetič does not mix different registers but writes in a single, unified, dense slang. Just to give the English reader an idea of how dense it is, the following are a few snatches of random dialog, first as quoted from *Lost Story*, then in more standard Slovenian, and then in English translation:

A mata kazga iksa?
A imata kakšnega iksa?
Do you have some x?

Sej jutr greva pa lohk v Ambasado…
Saj jutri lahko greva v Ambasador…
Tomorrow we can go to the Embassy…

Spet te iste face gledat… Men to že utruja…
Spet te isti obrazi gledati… Meni to že utruja…
All the same faces again… I’m already sick of it….

Pa km drgm, no… kva jest vem..
Pa kam drugam… kaj jaz vem…
Then somewhere else… what do I know…

Ej, zdej pa morm it. Sm s fotrom zmenen.
Ej, zdaj pa moram iti. Sem s očetom zmenjen.
Hey, now I have to go. I have to meet my dad.

Jest ne morm, vidva pa lohk, če čta.
Jaz ne morem, vidva pa lahko, če hočeta.
I can’t, you two can go, if you want to.

The orthography of nearly every word is altered, mostly shortened, to
reflect how Ljubljana and Slovenian youth eliminate syllables and transform the pronunciation of many basic words and sounds: *kaj* becomes *kva* (what), *jaz* becomes *jest* (I). There are also many expressions that are contemporary foreign borrowings: *iks* is the drug ecstasy or *x* (a letter that doesn’t exist in the Slovenian alphabet), *face*, *foter*, *sori*, etc. It’s almost like a sort of Pig Latin; once you crack the code, it’s easy enough to understand.

Perhaps a more suitable metaphor than Pig Latin for this kind of language transformation would be the improvisational dialect created on internet chat rooms, which also, not surprisingly, features in *Lost Story*. The following is an example (only in Slovenian and English translation).

<lol17> hehe ja ej kolk si star?  
<lol17> haha hw old r u?

<timi> 28, pa še nimam takih izkušenj, da bi ob ircu seksu, dej, pliz, pokaž  
<timi> 28, but never fcked online cmon pls pic

What does this kind of language accomplish in the Slovenian original and can its accomplishments be emulated throughout the whole of the English translation? First of all, and most obviously, Mozetič’s work is a continuation of *nova proza* and the rebellion against literary Slovenian. Second, the slang is authentic. It is, in fact, how many young Slovenians speak. Third, and most interesting, the sheer ubiquity of the slang, the fact that it affects nearly every word, creates a dense stylistic patina over the language that reflects the claustrophobic and ultimately tragic atmosphere in which the characters live. The characters express themselves in a staccato, truncated, and even ugly manner that reflects the frustrating quality of their relationships and their inability to connect. There are rare glimpses of potential transcendence—for example, in Arjun’s physical beauty, in the young men’s fantasies about Zanzibar, in a fantastic acid trip on the walls of a castle above the Adriatic Sea—but these moments are few. By the end of the book, the reader, like the characters, longs to escape from the condensed jittery misery of this novelistic world. In this way, Mozetič has created a perfect synthesis of literary content and style.

It may be a measure of my shortcomings as a translator, but I decided not to try to emulate this perfect synthesis. I did, of course, emulate to some degree the staccato rhythm of the original, I avoided excessive punctuation and highfalutin words, but I did not attempt to import (or create) a parallel slang. The main practical reason for this
decision is that it is quite unlikely that a form of English slang, sufficiently parallel to the one in *Lost Story*, exists. There are, of course, dense slangs in English—one need only think of the Baltimore black kids in the HBO series *The Wire*—but it goes without saying that it would be inauthentic to superimpose a specific local slang on an entirely different locality. After all, Bojan and Arjun live in Ljubljana, not in Baltimore.

Another issue resides in the ability of specific languages at specific periods in their development to accommodate such alterations. This is far more relevant in written forms than in spoken forms (such as *The Wire* mentioned above). I have read translations in English—in which when every gerund ends with –in’ rather than –ing, in which –what is always spelled –wha, in which every iteration of a swear word in the source text is matched by fuckin’ this and fuckin’ that in the translation—and they quickly become tiresome. Such translations are little more than crude parody. A heavy stylistic imposition, if not impeccably done, distracts fatally from content. Of course, Mozetič’s stylistic imposition in the original borders on extreme (and distracting) mannerism, but it is a mannerism that is absolutely in sync with the current explosion of writers from the margins of society onto the Slovenian literary scene, and with the ongoing rebellion against the strictures of this extremely difficult and grammatically demanding Slavic language (difficult not just for imports like myself but for locals as well). Mozetič’s stylistic choices speak to the Slovenian literary establishment in a way that may not be relevant or even possible in the English language literary establishment.

Despite aspects of the original that cannot always be carried over, I believe that if a work of literature is sufficiently compelling and universal it will survive the translation process even if some stylistic elements are lost. I remember how I scoffed when I heard that my Slovenian-American children were reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in Slovenian translation in their elementary school. Absurd, I thought. How can they possibly absorb this historical story without the marvelous nuances of the African-American dialect set against more standard forms of English? How will they discern the social differences between the characters, the sting of humiliating moments, the contrasting moments of transcendence and human fellowship without the different registers in language? But amazingly they did. It may not have been the same experience as reading the original, some of the music may have been lost, but the essence came through and that, in some cases, must suffice. So despite the lost slang in Mozetič’s *Lost Story*, I strongly recommend this moving and universal novel to English language readers.