

(DE)CONSTRUCTING BORDERS:
JAPANESE CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION IN
THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

In this paper I try to focus on the concept of “untranslatability” and to apply it to the works of four representative Japanese contemporary writers: the globally renowned author Murakami Haruki (b.1949), but also scarcely translated authors such as Toh EnJoe (b.1972), Tawada Yōko (b.1960), Mizumura Minae (b. 1951). Employing the theoretical approach of the most recent developments in Translation Studies – especially Emily Apter’s works – I try to put into discussion the importance of translation and the value of concepts like “national/global/border-crossing” in the context of contemporary Japanese literature.

Keywords

Untranslatability, translation, Emily Apter, Murakami Haruki, Toh EnJoe, Tawada Yōko, Mizumura Minae,

要旨

本稿では現代日本文学の代表作家の作品における「untranslatability」（「翻訳不可能性」）という問題について検討する。分析対象はグローバルな作家の村上春樹（1949）及び円城塔（1972）、多和田葉子（1960）、水村美苗（1951）であり、これら四人の作家の小説やエッセーに現れる「日本現代文学の翻訳の可能性」や「グローバル文学」と言う概念である。翻訳学理論家エミリー・アプターの「untranslatability」を巡る理論を用いて、翻訳が現在の文学ではどのような意味を持っているのか、また「越境文学」、「世界文学」、「ナショナル文学」と言う概念は日本現代文学の流れにおいてどのような価値を持っているのかを考察する。

キーワード

翻訳不可能性、Emily Apter、村上春樹、円城塔、多和田葉子、水村美苗。

1. Tracing borders through (un)translation

The cultural processes of border-making, border-crossing, and border permeability in contemporary societies have been broadly analyzed in recent years. In an ostensibly borderless globalized world, two linguistic assumptions seem to

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be taken for granted: that translation is the necessary currency of exchange for the circulation of cultural products in the inter-cultural field, and that national languages do not all have the same value in terms of “purchasing power” in the struggle for legitimization and acquisition of symbolic capital. Actually, “we live in a very bordered world” (Diener and Agen 2012, cfr. Chapter 1) where national languages are seen as obstacles to progress that are opposed by the overwhelming power of English, the hegemonic *lingua franca*. Paradoxically, they are also viewed as endangered heritages to preserve. We live in a globalized but very bordered world where access to translation for cultural products — which is no longer “uniformly [conceivable as] a simple transfer of meaning from one language to another” (Casanova 2004, 136) — is a crucial and multifaceted issue.

My focus in this paper is with the specific problems of literary translation and the circulation of Japanese contemporary literature in the international literary field; in particular, I will focus on “untranslatability,” which I consider to be a telling notion revealing the inner workings of contemporary literature worldwide.

Emily Apter’s 2006 book, *The Translation Zone*, opens with a list entitled “Twenty Theses on Translation” — a series of propositions that range from “Nothing is translatable” to “Everything is translatable” (Apter 2006, xi–xii). The middle ground between these two (apparently) opposite theses are crowded with all the issues that lie on the edge between translation and comparative literature studies — issues that have often been raised in critical debate over the last few years.

(Re)definition of national borders in the global age, the conflicting relationship between linguistic and cultural translation, the role of dominant languages and resistance to Anglophone leadership by “minority” language authors, and the crucial role of translation politics in shaping the global literary canon — these are just a few of the crucial focal points developed around the two specular poles of “translatability” and “untranslatability.” The term “untranslatability” apparently conveys a “semantic obviousness” related to an inherent impossibility to carry on interlinguistic processes partially or completely. At a very intuitive level, it is one of the most peculiar elements of the ultimate nature of translation itself. As stated by Apter, it is the focus of one of the “primal truisms of translation”:

Something is always lost in translation; unless one knows the language of the original, the exact nature and substance of what is lost will be always impossible to ascertain; even if one has access to the language of the original, there

remain an x-factor of *untranslatability* that renders every translation an impossible world or faux regime of semantic and phonic equivalence.¹

However, in a post-structuralist, post-colonial, and even “post-world literature” age (at least to critics like Apter), these concepts and their interpretations tell us more than what was suggested by the trite adage “traduttore-traditore.” These ideas are also different from what Walter Benjamin meant by “Übersetzbarkeit”² — the quasi-esoteric definition of translatability, “seen on the one hand as an essential property of certain literary works, and on the other as a condition that might depend upon a text finding its ideal translator” (Wright 2016, 171).

Translation studies have undoubtedly added complexity and insights on key concepts of the contemporary critical debate, such as nation, nationalism, transmission and appropriation of cultural capital, creolized identities, and border (re)definition. This is because, as poignantly observed by Brett de Bary, “like the movement of a pencil tracing a line, or border, on a page of paper, translation is precisely the *movement* of creating the border, and must not be confused with the static (and arbitrary) *representation of difference* that is its after-effect” (de Bary 2010, 41).

The movement of translation itself creates a *caesura* more than filling a gap, since it allows us to distinguish between two or more languages. Very often, the pencil that traces the dividing line is metaphorically held by dominant languages, no matter if in the role of target or source language (and sometimes “central languages,” as defined by Heilbron,³ function as intermediaries or vehicular languages for “peripheral” language groups).

Translation emphasizes and (re)creates *difference* in its supposed pursuit of sameness; however, the inclination to assimilate and reduce differences (a normal part of the translation act as a result of the unavoidable “cultural filtering”

¹ Apter 2005, 159. [emphasis added]

² “In the introduction to [his German translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*] an essay entitled ‘The Task of the Translator’, Benjamin outlines his theory on the translatability of texts. For Benjamin, ‘the law governing the translation: its translatability’ (1992: 71) has to be found in the original. [...] In Benjamin’s view, the translatability of a text is independent of whether or not such text can be translated. This is the reason why he asserts: ‘Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability’” (*ibid.*). Cfr. De Pedro 1999.

³ Heilbron 1999.

process) is seen by certain scholars as increasingly risky.⁴ On the one hand, for a long time, *untranslatable* has meant (and in certain cases still means) “exotic”, “strange”, or “other”, and then *negligible*. On the other hand, the idea that “everything is translatable” introduces the danger of assimilation dreaded by Antoine Berman, who warned against a “systematic negation of the foreignness of the foreign work.”⁵ The fascination with the supposedly untranslatable can certainly have important effects, like meaning attribution and an “essentialization” of the “other.”

In this paper, I will focus on the idea of “untranslatability” conveyed in the works of a very limited group of contemporary Japanese authors who do not share a common vision about the ideas of “borders” or “translation.” However, all deal—with varying levels of commitment—with the notion of “untranslatability” in their own idea of literature in light of their concern over the dissemination of their works abroad. As stated by Cassin in her introduction to the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, to speak of untranslatables “in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated. [...] But this indicates that their translation [...] creates a problem. [...] It is a sign of the way in which, from one language or another, neither the words, nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed” (Cassin 2006).

2. *Writing the (un)translatable*

Speaking of contemporary Japanese literature in translation without mentioning the works of Murakami Haruki (b. 1949) would mean ignoring the proverbial elephant in the room. Spending much of his authorial time in the bad graces of some Japanese critics for his supposed excessive xenophilia and disregard for tradition (primarily influenced by American literature), Murakami is, as Cécile Sakai defines him, “the master of the game” (Sakai 2015, 366). It may appear out of place to match the notion of “untranslatability” with an

⁴ Karen Bennet, as an example, spoke in very harsh terms of “epistemicide” operated by the positivist discourse connected with the overwhelming hegemonic role of the Anglophone world and its associations with the power structures of modernity (Bennet 2007, 151–169).

⁵ “J’appelle mauvaise traduction la traduction qui, généralement sous couvert de transmissibilité, opère une négation systématique de l’étrangeté de l’œuvre étrangère.” (I call bad any translation which, using the pretext of transmissibility, works towards a systematic negation of the foreignness of the foreign work). Berman 1984, 17.

author whose works have been translated into more than forty languages and who is one of the “star translators” of American literature in his own country. Translation is in fact inextricably connected with Murakami’s writing; in a sort of mirror game, Japanese and English coexist in Murakami’s works, and the *terrain vague*—an apparently smooth land of translatability in which they exist—seems to greet an always increasing number of readers worldwide. Sakai summarizes Murakami’s reception in these terms:

Schematically, we may say that Japanese readers approach the great American style through a Japanese story, and that American readers in translation focus on slightly alternative Japanese images integrated in familiar frames; other readers, in France for instance, feel fascination, or at least curiosity, for an East-West (Japanamerican) paradigm which dominated the global world in the first decade of the 21st century, appearing as a kind of major transnational utopia.⁶

Undoubtedly, Murakami’s works from conception to dissemination are a very telling example of the dynamics of “border-blurring” in contemporary global literature. It is interesting, however, to consider a reflection on translation that the young Murakami reported in an early essay entitled “Kigo to shite no Amerika” (America as sign, 1983). According to the author himself, at the beginning of his long and intimate relationship with North American literature, he wasn’t filled by any longing to actually visit the places he was translating into Japanese. America was for him, at the time, a sign to interpret, but his fascination with it was merely fed by his own yearning for a vague, exotic “untranslatable” and unknown world.

In a recent article, Rebecca Suter recounts a telling episode that occurred to the young translator:

In the text, Murakami recounts how, while translating a novel, he encountered the expression ‘you’re cooking with Crisco,’ a phrase that he had never heard before. Unable to find it in any dictionary, he asked an American friend, who informed him that Crisco is a brand of vegetable oil, and the expression is synonymous with ‘you’re cooking with gas,’ meaning ‘you got it right.’ The episode gives the author pause, prompting him to reflect on what American culture, and by extension America as a foreign place, represent for him. [...]

However, discovering the meaning of the expression is ultimately underwhelming, and Murakami realizes that he preferred it when it had an aura of mystery: ‘the echo of the word (the sign) Crisco, whose meaning I didn’t un-

⁶ Sakai 2015, 367.

derstand, delighted me immensely,’ and such delight was dulled when the allure of the ‘pure sign’ became lost in translation.⁷

Suter wisely matches this sign (anti)epiphany with Roland Barthes’ “famous disquisition on the appeal of Japanese as ‘the unknown language’ that allows the European traveler to ‘descend into the untranslatable, to experience its shock without ever muffling it’” (Suter, *ibidem*). Murakami’s prosaic vegetable oil and the refined *Empire des signes* of Barthes share the fascination for a hypothetical “other,” which is actually nothing more than a reassertion of their own individual subjectivities. Crossing the border is not deemed necessary—and can only be deceiving—because the *unknowable* is what they want to know and experience. Essentializing the “other” by conceiving it as “untranslatable” has for a long time hindered dominated languages’ literatures from accessing the “world republic of letters,” as Casanova calls it. However, the opposite attitude—which corresponds to the “everything is translatable” end of the spectrum—has caused, according to Emily Apter, the affirmation of an imbalanced “world literature,” a dominant paradigm in the humanities “grounded in market-driven notions of readability and universal appeal” (Apter 2013, 3).

As for the place of contemporary Japanese literature in this scenario, Murakami Haruki certainly *is* the master of the game, but the rules that govern it—marketability and readability—systematically exclude a huge number of players from “international competitiveness.” Toh EnJoe,⁸ a PhD physicist devoted to literature and author of a vast number of texts that include science fiction and metafiction, argued that “one of the possible definitions of [international competitiveness] is *translatability*” (in Okamoto 2013, emphasis added). In a conversation with Shimada Masahiko published on *Bungakukai* in 2012, EnJoe, freshly awarded the Akutagawa prize at the time, ironically tried to predict the future of this imbalanced situation, saying, “At the end of the globalization of literature, when the borders are crossed and regional differences are ironed out, what stands out as trustworthy piece would be a story handed down by word of mouth or a community-based one.”⁹ Of course, these “trustworthy” works would remain in their regional borders without translation, about which EnJoe holds a very disenchanting view:

⁷ Suter 2016, 186.

⁸ 円城塔 (officially transliterated as EnJoe Toh, nom de plume, real name unknown) was born in 1972.

⁹ Cfr. EnJoe 2012b, translation by Sayuri Okamoto (Okamoto 2013).

Translation is, so to speak, the customs duty to literary trade. It's an obstacle, and the goods must be worth the high tariff. If you can replicate the same stuff in your country, you don't need to import it paying a high tariff, no matter how useful the item is. It's certainly an irony that being special is a prerequisite of trade, but that being too special hinders it.¹⁰

The relationship between EnJoe's works and translation is somehow controversial. He defines himself as "a man on the fence" ("I'm the traditional-style sushi chef who can, however, also make international-style California rolls", in Okamoto 2013), since he writes both genre fictions and very complex literary works often judged as "impenetrable" (Okamoto) or even "discombobulating"¹¹ by critics. Some have been¹² translated and appreciated for their scientific lucidity unmistakably grounded in his educational background. In 2011, he found himself in the very uncommon situation of being a candidate for the Akutagawa prize but having some works already translated into English. However, the work *Dōkeshi no chō* (Harlequin's Butterfly, 2012a), which eventually won him the prestigious award, generated very conflicting reactions among the judges for its unreadability.¹³ Ogawa Yōko's comment is particularly meaningful: "Even if the language I use could only be understood by myself, would I still write a story? The pattern that emerges in the end, to my eyes, is this very important question."¹⁴ EnJoe's texts seem to be conceived as an incessant provocation to their readership, and at the same time to the potentiality of expression of the language itself. His *Self-Reference ENGINE*'s English translation ("Science, surrealism, number theory, and more dead Sigmund Freuds than you can shake a stick at. This is not a novel. This is not a short story collection. This is Self-

¹⁰ Okamoto 2013.

¹¹ James Hadfield, "Granta opens a window into Japan", *The Japan Times*, April 2014.

¹² In addition to a certain number of tales and essays published in specialized literary magazines in English (*Speculative Japan*, *Granta*, *Monkey Business*, and *Words Without Borders*, among others), a major SF work—*Self-Reference ENGINE* (original English title, 2006, Hayakawa Shobō)—was translated in 2013 by Terry Gallagher; the work received a special mention in 2014 "Philip K. Dick Award" competition.

¹³ Records of the judgments can be found here: <http://prizesworld.com/akutagawa/ichiran/ichiran141-160.htm#list146>

¹⁴ 「もし自分の使っている言葉が、世界中で自分一人にしか通じないとしても、私はやはり小説を書くだらうか。結局、私に見えてきた模様とは、この一つの重大な自問であった。」 (Ogawa Yōko, Akutagawa Prize, 146th edition, 2011) Cfr.: <http://prizesworld.com/akutagawa/sengun/sengun137OY.htm#list146>

Reference ENGINE”¹⁵: a quintessential postmodern title indeed) needs some “instructions for use.” One of them reads, “Remember that the chapter entitled ‘Japanese’ is translated from the Japanese, but should be read in Japanese.”¹⁶

Like in a Chinese boxes structure, EnJoe’s books always contain books—metaleptic writers and translators, often discussing writing and translation, frequently make their appearance in his pages. The first chapter of *Dōkeshi no chō*, for example, is supposed to be the “near-complete translation of *Best Read Under a Cat*, a novel by the peerless polyglot writer Tomoyuki Tomoyuki”; the first-person narrator takes on the responsibility of the translation:

Since I was responsible for the translation, any literary effect that may be said to exist in the original has surely been lost. Before talking about effect, I’m not even sure if the literal meaning has been preserved. *Best Read Under a Cat* is written in Latino sine flexione, or Latin without inflections. Of the manuscripts left behind by Tomoyuki Tomoyuki, who wrote in some thirty languages throughout a life of continuous relocation, it is the only work written in this language.¹⁷

“Pseudotranslation,” “fake translation,” and “translation with no original” are narrative strategies largely exploited in postmodern literature worldwide, and they are certainly efficacious metatextual devices to lay bare the inner workings of the translingual process. Speaking of texts conceived as (pseudo) translations (“when there is [...] no ‘original’ language or text on which the translation is based”), Apter observes:

The reader is either placed in a nether-world of “translatese” that floats between original and translation, or confronted with a situation in which the translation mislays the original, absconding to some other world of textuality that retain the original only as fictive pretext. In both instances, the identity of what translation *is* is tested; for if translation is not a form of textual predicate, indexically pointing to a primary text, then what is it? Can a literary technology of reproduction that has sublated its origin still be considered a translation? Or should it be considered the premier illustration of translational ontology, insofar as it reveals the extent in which all translation are unreliable transmitters of the original, a regime, that is, of extreme untruth?¹⁸

¹⁵ Cfr. the publisher website: <http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Self-Reference-ENGINE/Toh-Enjoe/9781421549361>

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ EnJoe 2013.

¹⁸ Apter 2005, 160.

EnJoe, who admits to being aware that his writings may be perceived by Japanese readers as translations of scientific English textbooks, envisions translation and creative writing as “the same thing” (cfr. Okamoto 2013). In his idea of literature, a “natural Japanese” that can be smoothly transferred into another “natural language” without any loss or addition is not just an ideal—it is a lie, like any mimetic approach to writing. In this sense, and for all the peculiarities of his literary production highlighted above, EnJoe’s works are substantially and consciously “untranslatable,” since they reveal from within the complexity of the “experience of language” of every single author and every single text.

This idea of “unsolvability” of an experimental proximity with language and the literary creation is crucial in the works of another contemporary Japanese writer: Tawada Yōko. Having spent part of her life in two different countries, she has often been grouped by Japanese critics with authors like Mizumura Minae and Levy Hideo under the label of “ekkyō,” or “border-crossing.” This definition can be problematic, because as noted by Brett de Bary, “the representation of Tawada as boundary-crossing obviously construes this ‘boundary’ as that between Germany and Japan, making Tawada a representative of Japan while erasing heterogeneity between” (de Bary 2010, 42). Born in Tokyo (1960), she moved to Germany in the eighties; Tawada is now considered as “perhaps the leading practitioner today of what we might call exophonic writing” (quoting Perloff, in Slaymaker 2007, vii).

More than at the crossing of two languages, Tawada’s literature can be found outside both of them. She can undoubtedly join the practitioners of what Umberto Eco has called “lunatic linguistics” (Eco 1998) — “writers that have in common the ability to make standard language strange to itself—superimposing their own private grammatical logics and laws of homonymic and syllabic substitution onto the vehicular tongue, such it remains quasi-intelligible; in a state, if you will, of *semi-translation*” (Apter 2005, 160). The poem that follows can be considered a telling example of Tawada’s playful and paradoxical approach to linguistic creation; the title is “Die *Tōsō* des *Tsukis*” (un-usefully un-translatable as “The Escape of the Moons”):

Die 逃走 des 月s

我 歌 auf der 廁
 da 来 der 月 転
 裸 auf einem 自転車
 彼 hatte den 道 mitten 通 den 暗喩公園 ge選
 um 我 zu 会
 戸外 道 entlang 散歩te 齒磨end eine 美人
 auf der 長椅子 im 公園 飲 ein 男 in 妊婦服 林檎汁

Am 末 eines 世紀s ist die 健康 適
 Im 天 穿 ein 穴
 Die 月的不安 Der 月的苦惱 sind 去
 全「的」 飛翔 活発 um das 穴 herum
 Die 皺 des 深淵s 平
 Auf der 光滑en 表面 der 苦惱
 登場 der 詩人 auf 氷靴 an
 月 我的 neben 我¹⁹

The poem is taken from a conversation with the poet Tanikawa Shuntarō (cfr. Tawada 2010), in which she affirms, “I am using here the alphabet in place of *hiragana*” (ひらがなの代わりにアルファベットを使っています).²⁰ What she is actually doing is using kanji instead of German nouns; but for Tawada, resorting to the alphabet means opening wounds on the page, showing the entryways into the inner workings of language. The materiality of the language is both a theme and a device in several works by Tawada; in one of her first short novels, *Moji ishoku* (Transplanted Letters, 1999), the protagonist is a young female translator who feels unable to accomplish her task until she covers all the wounds on the page represented by the letter “O” that “has eaten the page,” as she says.

Tawada’s novels, poetry, and essays are written in Japanese *and* German, but more often in Japanese *or* German—she doesn’t systematically self-translate her works, but her approach to the linguistic creative process goes beyond the conventional boundaries between “original” and “translation” to examine the area between “mother tongue” and “second language.” In the conversation published on *Shinchō* in 2010, Tawada admits that “as far as the German language is concerned,” she is not able to write just in German (ドイツ語ではドイツ語でかけることしか書けないし), and that’s precisely why (だからこそ) she writes in a non-German-like German (ドイツ語らしからぬ). One may think that this is quite normal for a “naturalized” speaker expressing herself in a foreign language, but then she adds, “*Nihongo mo onaji desu*” (日本語も同じです, “it’s the same for Japanese as well”; Tawada 2010, 157). Her writings are always composed in a language “in-a-state-of-translation,” to quote Apter’s words (Apter 2005, 160), and this greatly destabilizes the common logic and politics of interlinguistic exchange. I find symptomatic of this disorientation a very small but highly eloquent paratextual element in French translations of Tawada’s “German works” published by Editions Verdier. The publisher points

¹⁹ Tawada 2010, p. 162.

²⁰ Ibidem.

out in the frontispiece that the works are translated from German, but not from the “natural” language—rather, from “allemand-Japon” (“German–Japan”).

In my opinion, critical reception of Tawada must embrace the fruitful notion of “untranslatability” in her texts. This in no way implies that they cannot be translated; rather, they should be considered an escape from the “celebration of translatability” and—as pointed out by de Bary—people should “read [Tawada] in ways that divorce her writings from the more intractable tensions of multicultural politics” (de Bary 2010, 43).

Following this path of “translatability” can lead, in my opinion, to simplistic readings of her work. One could be somehow connected to the sharp boundary between “strangeness” and “stranger/foreign” that can be found everywhere in Tawada’s works. Speaking of her reception in Germany, Brendt says:

When describing the writings of Yōko Tawada, journalists and critics alike have tended to include in the characterization of these works that they are “somehow surreal” and, in the same breath to flippantly dismiss them. When used in this, rather common... way, the word “surreal” is emptied of any specific meaning and has become an interchangeable synonym for a whole host of other words: “eccentric,” “outdated,” in some way “non-German,” “strange,” or simply “incomprehensible.”²¹

While working on the translation of Tawada’s first short novel, *Kakato o nakushite*, and reflecting on the narrative devices at work in the text, I have on occasion²² tried to apply categories of “unnatural narratives” in order to show to what extent the dream-like “surrealism” of her text is a compelling narrative strategy that performs (in the words of de Bary) “a dislocation of the existing ‘terms of intelligibility’” (de Bary 2010, 47). Almost reiterating what I have said about EnJoe’s idea of translation and literature, I think that Tawada’s narrative strategies suggest considering the notions of “unnatural” and “untranslatable” as devices that effectively make the reader aware of the “dimension of epistemological scam or faked up alterity inherent in all processes of linguistic creation, and then of *translation* in a broader sense” (Apter 2005, 167).

This process of “defamiliarization” — which echoes *ostranenie* — is also brilliantly displayed in the novel(s) *Schwager in Bordeaux/Borudo no gikei* (“A Brother-in-Law in Bordeaux,” 2008/2009), one of the very rare cases of

²¹ B. Brendt, “The Tea Ceremony of Marquis de Sade: Yoko Tawada and the Surreal,” 2004, cit. in de Bary 2010, 46.

²² “Donne senza talloni e uomini seppia: straniamento, riscrittura e ironia nelle *unnatural narratives* di Tawada Yōko (1960),” XXXVIII Convegno AISTUGIA, Università del Salento, Lecce, 2014 (Unpublished paper).

self-translation by Tawada. In these works, the narration is fragmented in very short sequences preceded by a single kanji, both in the German and Japanese version. The German reader cannot find the connection between the character and the development of the story, but the effect of feeling “lost in (un)translation” is precisely what Tawada aims for. In fact, in the Japanese text, the kanji is unreadable and has lost its inner semiotic charge, since it is reversed.²³

The dangerous downside of untranslatability also concerns the complex politics of the international translation market. As Lawrence Venuti points out, translations have been used to build national identities by means of organized borrowing from different languages and cultures, guaranteeing visibility for a few “representative” writers in ways that corroborate existing ethnocentric biases. In this “specular process,” “one becomes more oneself by selectively becoming another” (Venuti 2005, 178). Tawada’s works, untranslatable by their own nature, do not preclude translation nonetheless; however, their disruptive approach to language and culture challenges the norm of the translation market and the conventional vision of Japanese literature in the Anglophone/Eurocentric literary field.

Tawada’s works are in the very paradoxical status of being highly appreciated by scholars of Japanese, German and comparative literature, but proportionally very scarcely translated. “Translation — says Tawada in *Moji ishoku* — is, like itself a language. You can tell because you feel as if some pebbles were falling down on you”.²⁴ The materialization of language, the epiphany of something falling from nowhere and shaking the old language: the burdensome work of the translator is impossible, but necessary, in Tawada’s ironical view. Even more the translation of the untranslatable.

3. *Conclusion: translatable or not translatable, that is the question*

The choice between the English language and the language that is not English does not represent a choice between two different languages. It represents a choice between a universal language and a local language. [...] I was so busy resisting English that I could not see the two languages for what they were, totally unaware of the choice I had until the choice was irrevocably lost. [...]

²³ A partial translation into Italian has been published in a literary review in 2014; the original texts—that is, the German and Japanese ones—and their Chinese characters have been included alongside the translation in order to try to preserve the effect of defamiliarization for the Italian readership (cfr. Tawada 2014).

²⁴ Translated by Keijirō Suga (in Slaymaker 2007, 26).

I tried, through the Japanese language, to make a case for the irreducible materiality of all languages, the reason for which writing even in the most local of all the local languages becomes a worthwhile activity in itself. [...]
 (T)he irreducible materiality of language —the untranslatability of language— is that which prevents the world from ultimately making sense only in English.²⁵

These words that recall once more the “materiality of language” belong to Mizumura Minae (1951), a novelist born in Tokyo who grew up in the United States but established herself as a professional author in Japan. She has devoted a substantial part of both her fictional and non-fictional productions to showing the overpowering, hegemonic role of the English language and her personal fight against the taken-for-granted idea of “translatability.” In her second novel, which is autobiographical in inspiration, the bilingual Mizumura — who holds a very resistant stance in choosing Japanese as her way of expression, defying the notion of translation by writing works that are deliberately untranslatable — portrayed a young Japanese woman living in the 1980s on the East Coast of the United States. The title, *Shishōsetsu from left to right*, is an important key to understanding the novel’s concept. The novel is printed horizontally, defying the convention of Japanese vertical text, and words and sentences often appear in English, like the result of a language *grasp*, to speak in Tawada’s terms. The graphic innovation defies the traditional content intent; *shishōsetsu* — or “I novel” — clearly recalls the autobiographical genre that laid the foundations of modern Japanese literature. *Nihon kindai bungaku* (Japanese modern literature) is the subtitle of this work, since the protagonist loses herself reading modern Japanese classics. This “regular attendance” with the language of her childhood allowed her to become a writer “in Japanese” when she went back to Tokyo years later.

The relationship between (modern) (Japanese) *literature* and (un)*translatability* is crucial in this work, and more generally, in Mizumura’s understanding of literature as a local/global conflicting system:

Hence the reason why it was only *kindai bungaku* that could have indicated to the protagonist the untranslatability of language. The language of *Nihon kindai bungaku*, born initially out of an effort to come up with translations of Western literature, is a language that sought the translatability of language in the language. (A writer like Izumi Kyoka who prided himself on his work being untranslatable was an only small minority.) It was a will to universal signification that was at the core of *kindai bungaku*. And it was this very will to universal signification, with its conscious and unconscious emphasis on the referential

²⁵ Mizumura 2004.

function of language, that necessarily brought forth to the eyes of the protagonist the intrinsic and inalienable logic of the Japanese language. [...]

There may be some writers today, as there always were and always will be, who play with the notion of the untranslatability of language. But no writer today seems to find it necessary to actually seek the translatability of language. The translatability of the Japanese language is already assumed as a fact. The language, in other words, has become transparent.²⁶

Tawada and Mizumura clearly look at the very same object—the irreducible materiality of language—from opposite perspectives, but even if different in terms of their approach and output,²⁷ their literature, like Murakami’s or En-Joe’s, cannot disregard the importance of translation in the global age in which it is produced and consumed. The “will to universal signification” that strengthened the foundation of modern literature has shown the political implications of the downside of translatability. Clearly, this is not a cultural process specific to Japanese literature; on the contrary, in this paper, I have tried to show that the concern over *untranslatability* is a telling aspect of contemporary global literature useful for showing how borders are (de)constructed and how the literary capital circulates in the “world republic of letters.”

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²⁶ Mizumura 2004.

²⁷ For an interesting comparison cfr. Costa 2012 and Sakai 2015.

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