

## ***translation* speaks to Vicente L. Rafael**

**translation** editor Siri Nergaard met with Vicente Rafael in Misano Adriatico, Italy in May 2013 at the Nida School of Translation Studies where he gave a series of three lectures. During the conversation, Rafael explains how he, as a historian, became interested in translation and how he sees translation in connection to war and weaponization. The imperial ideology of translation to gain control over linguistic plurality and diversity is threatening translation, he says, and can be seen as a war of both and on translation. The control over linguistic plurality through English is our own contemporary example of the United States' imperial project of dominating the world, according to Rafael.

The conversation continues with Rafael's telling about his interest in translation play as an opposite mechanism to war, enabling an undoing and reconfiguration of the power relations between languages and cultures. Via the example of the Philippines, the talk touches upon the role colonial education plays in regulating language, creating a linguistic hierarchy, and how translation nevertheless appears in surprising forms and expressions.

The interview with Rafael was recorded and can be accessed at the journal's website: <http://translation.fusp.it/interviews>

**NERGAARD:** Hello, Vicente

**RAFAEL:** Good Morning

**NERGAARD:** Since our journal *translation* has the subtitle "a transdisciplinary journal," you are really the perfect person for us to talk to in this interview for our journal: you are not a traditional scholar of translation studies, but you work deeply on translation from your perspective as a historian. Translation offers a unique perspective on, or a new way to analyze, colonialism, power, and language, especially in the Philippines, and even today in the United States. I would like you to tell the story of how translation became such a central theme for you.

**RAFAEL:** Well, like all good things in life it happened quite accidentally. By accident I mean that when I was in graduate school two things—one I [was] looking for a topic to do and I got interested in the early modern period, sixteenth century, looking at the Spanish colonization of the Philippines among other things. I noticed that there were very, very few sources written by colonized natives themselves. Most of the history was written by Spanish missionaries. I was also quite surprised to see that a lot of the writings of Spanish missionaries had to do with problems of translating the gospel because they had to preach in the native languages in order to be understood, which is much easier than translating the native languages into Spanish. It is much easier for the missionaries to learn the local languages than for the na-



tives to learn Spanish. And this is, of course, a practice consistent with what they had been doing in Latin America, so I got very interested in this topic and asked myself what would happen if one were to take a look at native languages as historical agents. Because we often think of historical agents as human beings, but there is a certain way in which you can also think of language as a historical agent that is somehow free of human control, in excess of human control, and that's exactly what happened. One result is that I wrote my book, *Contracting Colonialism*, where I talked about the centrality not just of translation, but the relationship between translation and Christian conversion. And it turns out that in the missionary tradition the two are in fact almost synonymous. To translate and to convert are very closely related. And these in turn were absolutely essential for carrying out a kind of imperial project of colonization. So from then on it seemed like translation, conversion, and colonization seemed to all resonate with each other as part of a continuum, and that has been a recurring obsession on my part, where I started looking at my subsequent work. In my later work I started looking at the American empire and the American colonization of the Philippines. But I also became very, very interested lately in the emergence of English as a kind of hegemonic language. So those are the things that have led to my becoming very interested in translation. Originally, the interest in translation grew out of my interest in larger historical issues relating to empire and colonialism.

**NERGAARD:** As a historian this attention to language and translation in relation to history became a kind of obsession, as you said. How did the institutions, the universities react to this? The departments of history have not paid so much attention to language—the role of language and translation. So how was your work accepted, how was it received in the universities?

**RAFAEL:** First of all I think you are absolutely right. Not just history, but in many other Social Sciences, even in the Humanities, translation has been ignored.

**NERGAARD:** Even Comparative Literature ignored translation for many years...

**RAFAEL:** It is for the same reason that there is a tendency to see language in purely instrumental terms, as a means to an end, as if thought was possible without language—as if actions were possible without language. I was very, very lucky again to be at the conjunction of things. I started my graduate training in the late '70s and I went to Cornell, which is in upstate New York, and at that time the United States was just opening up to a fresh wave of Continental theory, mostly from France and Germany. Everything

ranging from Hermeneutics to Deconstruction, to French Feminism—all of which paid close attention to the workings of language. So it was a time that was very hospitable to what they used to call the Linguistic Turn and so it allowed me space and resources to do my own work. But it is still a struggle. In other words, the question of language is not something that is easily thought about in the historical profession. In that sense, my work is still sort of idiosyncratic, but that is OK because then I always feel like I have something different to say than what most other historians have to say. I am not doing the same old thing. I have got something different to contribute. There are certain advantages to being on the margins. One just has to know how to take advantage of that position.

**NERGAARD:** You are speaking about a period in which the so-called Linguistic Turn took place in philosophy, but it also ignored translation.

**RAFAEL:** There is another aspect in my case to what I was doing that made translation absolutely essential—that I was involved in the US in what was called Area Studies, which is this thing that emerged in the post-Cold War period. The United States was very interested in competing with the Soviet Union, and one of the things that they did was try to extend not just their military influence, but their cultural influence around the world. Part of that was to fund universities to put up what they called Area Studies so they would study different regions of the world and develop a kind of scholarly expertise in these areas. Very similar to what Britain and France and Holland and all the other European countries had done. And in the process of funding these Area Studies programs they began to emphasize language training and of course that brought out the question of translation. So people became very adept, or at least there was a whole generation of Area Studies experts that emerged from these centers that developed fluency in the languages and some of them became interested in the problem of translation. This included two of my advisors at Cornell—one of whom was Benedict Anderson, another of whom was James Siegel—and they had written particularly on problems of translation around the emergence of things like nationalism, the emergence of authoritarianism in various parts of Southeast Asia. So, in a way, again I was very fortunate to be working with people who already assumed the importance of translation. In my case, as I said, translation emerges organically from the very sense of the problems I was looking at, beginning with religious conversion and then later on with... more lately thinking about problems of counterinsurgency and militarization and so forth, where once again language and the attempt to tame language through translation becomes absolutely crucial.

NERGAARD: In the last works you mentioned, you introduced new terms and a new vocabulary with which to discuss translation studies. War of translation, translation in wartime, weaponization of translation, targeting translation in the counterinsurgency. This is really a new vocabulary and it is quite strong.

RAFAEL: Well it's not so much that it is new. The other day I was rereading *The Translation Studies Reader* by Lawrence Venuti. It is very interesting to read his historical introduction about translation studies in which he talks about, for example, Roman Antiquity and the status of translation as it was understood by the late Roman writers—Cicero and Horace and others. I am not very familiar with that history, but I was very surprised to realize that even then there were competing notions of translation. For example, a part of the idea of translating Greek authors into Latin in part had to do with the late Roman desire to rival the legacy of Greece. Not only were they appropriating Greek literature and Greek writing and Greek thought, they also wanted to, as it were, conquer it in the sort of imperial vein and so you realize that the idea of translation, at least in the West, was always implicated in the idea of rivalry, competition—which is another word for war. Not only that, but there has always been a contest between rhetorical approaches to translation and grammatical approaches to translation—word-for-word, sense-for-sense—and that tension has animated, for example, translations of the Bible from St. Jerome to Luther. And, of course, it has figured in the history of missionary translations of the gospel all the way up to today. At the Nida School of Translation Studies we are talking about this. So it is not surprising translation should figure in imperial projects of all sorts including the latest one, which is the United States' project to maintain their dominant position in the world. So in a sense what I am doing is simply reminding people of a feature of translation that tends to get lost, which is it tends to turn on not just the transfer of meaning, but also on the struggle to control that process of transferring meaning. It relates to all sorts of tensions around procedures, around the limits of what can be translated. In that sense, translation is always fraught, so it is always at war, as it were. And, finally, something I was trying to talk about yesterday is that there is what Derrida calls a kind of logocentric tradition in Western thinking, which tends to privilege thought over speech and then, of course, speech over writing and so, for instance, there is this hierarchical chain of signs. And translation figures very prominently there because within the logocentric context, as I have tried to argue, translation becomes a means to an end. And that end, at least in the Western logocentric context, is the end of translation, so you can say the end of translation is the literal end of translation—the point where peo-

ple will feel like everything is so transparent that there is no need to translate. That itself is part of this war of domination that is going on.

NERGAARD: And it is almost always there as a ghost, as if that transparency was the ideal, where translation is not necessary any more.

RAFAEL: Yes, exactly.

NERGAARD: With that transparency—the end of translation—we would lose everything. We would lose plurality. We would lose meaning. We would lose everything. Nevertheless, that's the kind of ideal ghost right there.

RAFAEL: Right.

NERGAARD: As if we could avoid difference.

RAFAEL: And it not so much, really, to avoid difference or to avoid plurality. It is to be able to have total control over linguistic plurality, to make this control totally mechanical. And that is the dream, for example, of automatic translation systems. Now, the attempt to develop automatic translation systems, which I have also written about, is precisely to make everything perfectly equivalent to everything else, which of course is the dream of capitalism. This would be a perfectly capitalized world where everything could be exchanged for a single medium and measure of exchange, and in this case that medium and measure of exchange is increasingly English. English is now becoming the equivalent of the dollar, the capitalist “sign *par excellence*.” So, again, it is not so much the disappearance of difference—it is about the ability to control the production and circulation of differences that this imperial ideology of translation, in my opinion, has set out to do. And, of course, there are all kinds of resistances to that, and that is part of the story that I am very, very interested in: to try and plot the way in which not only this war on translation is progressing—that is, the war *of* as well as *on* translation—but also the way in which this war is being evaded, the way this war is being displaced, the different responses to this war in such a way as to make the kind of final victory impossible. So what you get, instead, is the emergence of what I call ongoing insurgency, linguistic insurgencies of all sorts: puns, jokes, the creation of slang. And there is, of course, the most important arena for linguistic insurgency, which I believe to be literature. So long as you have literature you have hope. Because so long as you have literature, you have the need for translation. It works both ways: to the extent that you have translation, literature becomes possible, and to the extent you have literature, translation becomes essential.





NERGAARD: Necessary and essential.

RAFAEL: Right, to that extent you cannot have a single ideology of translation controlling the production of difference, because difference will always proliferate beyond the control of any particular translation ideology, thanks to literature.

NERGAARD: Thanks to literature...



RAFAEL: Yes, so literature is a principle of hope as far as I am concerned, or I should say a resource, a resource of hope in a world where translation tends to get reduced to merely instrumental terms, such as, for example, when the US Department of State calls translation a complex weapons system.

NERGAARD: Very interesting. And the connections to other areas in translation studies becomes clear. But I still suggest that you introduce a new vocabulary. With postcolonial criticism we are familiar with concepts like "power" and "conflict," but you use "war." You use other concepts, too, such as "weaponization"...



RAFAEL: In part, that grows out of the influence of the events of the last ten years, including the "Global Wars on Terror," the kind of brazen attempt at colonial occupation on the part of the United States in Afghanistan and in Iraq as well as interventions in places like Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and so forth. Not to mention, of course, the occupation of the Palestinian territories by Israel, which would not be possible without the aid of the United States. All of that has placed the question of war, I think, in a lot of people's minds, and my attempt to talk about translation in terms of war grows out of my concern with more recent events. There is also another aspect to it, which is that there is a way in which war has always played a central part in the formation of social relations and the formations of society. When you think about how, for example, modern national states have arisen, almost every single modern state has arisen precisely in the wake of, or in the process of, engaging in war both against other nation-states, as well as against certain peoples within that particular nation-state. So I would think that, to the extent that war is constitutive of social relations, it would then also have a constitutive role in the processes of translation, as indeed one can see by looking at the history of translation, showing how it is always fraught, it is always involved in all sorts of conflict. That there is, just as Derrida many years ago said about the violence of writing, so too I think there is a violence that is intrinsic to every act of translation. I think in certain cases it helps to think about translation in those terms. I do not, of course, assume it is an appropriate way to



think about translation in every possible context, but, especially in contexts I have been looking at, I think the connection between translation and war is very useful.

**NERGAARD:** You probably could relate this to what Antoine Berman says—that all translation is naturally ethnocentric. So you sense this violence again, because you want to change what is foreign and make it look more like what you are familiar with.

**RAFAEL:** I mean, I agree with that to a certain extent in that the translation might begin in a sort of ethnocentric vein, but to the extent that translation also signals a kind of ineluctable opening to the other, it also initiates a kind of ongoing alterity. Its war-making powers, as it were, invariably become attenuated. Again, as I suggested yesterday in my talk, the other possibility in thinking about translation as war is translation as play, and the question of play then turns conflict, violence, and so forth in a different direction. It is about the displacement of conflict. It is not the banishment of conflict, but the reformulation of conflict as a kind of indeterminate, ceaseless displacement that allows for the destabilization of any particular power relations. And play, this is something I would like to explore further. I have only just begun to think about this question of play and of course there is an enormous literature about this. But the question of play as that which attenuates, not just a particular kind of dialectical conflict, which is at the heart of war, but the question of play is that which opens up into other possibilities, the possibilities of the literary, for example, as I was trying to suggest yesterday. Play as that which is connected to the question of freedom. Why do we play? We play because in some sense play offers a kind of escape. It offers a kind of release. It opens up an alternative world where nothing is stable, where no one is permanently on top, no one is permanently on the bottom, where there is a certain kind of joy and happiness in being able to not just control the world, but also in allowing oneself, as it were, to be controlled by the world; so there is a kind of delight in the loss of identity, or the fluidity of identity.

**NERGAARD:** But you have to be empowered with language before you can allow yourself to play in such a fashion.

**RAFAEL:** Well, you have to know the rules, of course, you have to know the rules before you can play the game, so it also brings in a certain kind of discipline, but a discipline that is not about surveillance. It is a discipline that is not about submitting to a particular power. It is a discipline that enables you precisely to participate in the loss of power, if you will. So much of play is predicated on

this loss of power, and, as I said, a kind of opening up to a certain kind of freedom. It is to think about translation as that which is connected to an emancipatory project. That is the other side. So on the one hand translation is war, which is to think of translation as ineluctably implicated in power relations, but on the other side of it is translation as play, which is to think of translation as that which also has the potential to undo and reconfigure, and perhaps do away with these power relations in the name of a more just and a more free world.

**NERGAARD:** Yesterday, during your talk at The Nida School in Misano Adriatico, you were discussing the school system back in the Philippines. Can you tell us a bit more about that situation in which local languages are prohibited and the use of a foreign language is imposed?

**RAFAEL:** What I was talking about yesterday was colonial education and the role colonial education plays in regulating language and in the creation of what I have been calling a linguistic hierarchy. I think this is typical with all, not just in a colonial context. I think this is typical of all schools, the majority of schools, where the idea of going to school, among other things, is the idea of learning how to behave in a certain socially acceptable way. And intrinsic to that mode of behavior is the ability to be able to speak in a certain accessible way. So one is educated, but one is educated in a particular way, so one becomes recognizably “grown up,” becomes developed. There is this whole developmentalist philosophy that is, I think, intrinsic in all modern educational systems, colonial and postcolonial. And that has to do with being able to speak in a certain way. Speaking in a certain way, speaking in a way that is educated, as they say, and this is something that can be empirically verified in lots and lots of different situations. But this idea of appearing to be, or sounding to be, educated means being able to speak language in a kind of standardized conventional way. That often entails repressing the more idiomatic, more colloquial, more dialectical versions of that language. So one speaks Italian correctly, which means not speaking the local dialects. This is intensified and amplified in the colonial situation. The colonial situation I was talking about yesterday, where Filipino students were expected to speak English, but in the process of speaking English, they were expected to repress the vernacular. And then, of course, the question becomes to what extent is this repression successful? Or does the repressed always return? And obviously in the case of the Philippines that is what happens. It returns to haunt, as it were, various attempts to speak in a standardized conventional fashion. How do we know this? Very simply, we know this because of the persistence of accents. To the extent that people still speak with accents is the extent to which



their speech is always marked by the very thing they were supposed to suppress. And what is that very thing they were supposed to suppress? They were supposed to suppress their mother tongue, which is their origin, right? So the origin always comes back, as it were, in displaced fashion. In the form of an accent, and I think this is true every time people speak, they always speak with accents and those accents always betray where they came from, their accents always betray another speech. Deleuze has this wonderful short essay called “He Stuttered,” where what he says about stuttering we can say about accents. Stuttering, he says, reveals the existence of another language within language. And he goes on to talk about this in another register when he talks about style. He says style is the foreign language that dwells within conventional speech, and to the extent that we all have our own style of speaking, that we try to develop our own style of speaking when we speak with an accent, is the extent that we are always speaking another language within the language that is socially acceptable. So that means we are always translating whenever we speak, whether our own or another’s language.

**NERGAARD:** And can I use the accent because I want to keep my identity, too? It is not that I am not able to speak proper English, but I keep my accent because that is part of my origin.

**RAFAEL:** Yes, perhaps, perhaps. As you know the sounding of accents is always the sign of translation at work, so another way of thinking about accents is that accents are always the points where translation occurs, where it fails or it succeeds, right? Now, I don’t know how you do this, but for example in my case, my English would be standard American English, but when I go to the Philippines I cannot speak like this. If I spoke like this people would have difficulty understanding me, or they would think that I was putting on airs, that I was trying to be better than them because I spoke a different, more Americanized English, and so they would expect me to speak in the local register. I would have to change accents and usually within a day or two I am speaking entirely, as it were, “native.” I have to “go native,” right? Perhaps this happens to you too when you go to Norway? And this usually is the case, so we are always translating back and forth, not only between languages, but between accents, because accents are ways of marking our identity, which is to say, difference, right?

**NERGAARD:** Exactly, exactly. I was thinking about the history of Norway when the Danish dominated Norway and the official language was Danish. Our written language was Danish, but the accent persisted: no Norwegian speaker used the Danish pronunciation. These languages are very close, so you have the language, the nonlanguage and the in-between, and the





Norwegians were still always in-between—they wrote in Danish, but the pronunciation was Norwegian.



**RAFAEL:** Fantastic, fantastic. And there is a question of whether or not it is a matter of intention. We like to think it is a matter of intention. We like to think we are in control of our accents, but in fact, to the extent that we always speak with an accent, is the extent that we cannot help but speak with an accent. That suggests that there is something physiological about speech that is beyond intentionality. Which is to suggest, if you take it one step further, that there is something about translation that is beyond our intention. There are different ways to think about it. One can think maybe translation is hardwired into our body. We must translate, we have no choice but to translate within language, across languages, within accents, across accents. It is precisely something that we are compelled to do, which is to say it is compulsive. It is beyond our intentionality. That is the other interesting thing, too, about accents: we find it is not just the sign of translation at work, it is also the sign of a certain kind of resistance to intentionality. Right?



**NERGAARD:** That's very interesting. That's another area that has not been explored in translation studies at all. The psychological aspect of it, too, deserves study, so I will look forward to your next book, Vicente.



**RAFAEL:** It will be on accents.

**NERGAARD:** Of course. Thank you very much.

**RAFAEL:** You are very welcome. It has been a pleasure.



**NERGAARD:** Thank you.

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**Vicente L. Rafael**, is Professor of History at the University of Washington in Seattle. Much of his work has focused on such topics as comparative colonialism and nationalism, translation, language and power, and the cultural histories of analog and digital media especially in the context of Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and the United States. His books include *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule* (1993); *White Love and Other Events in Filipino Histories* (2000), and *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (2005).