

War and conflict

EMILY APTER

From: *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature* (2006)
Princeton: Princeton University Press.

“Twenty Theses on Translation

- * Nothing is translatable.
- * Global translation is another name for comparative literature.
- * Humanist *translatio* is critical secularism.
- * The translation zone is a war zone.
- * Contrary to what U.S. military strategy would suggest, Arabic is translatable.
- * Translation is a *petit métier*, translators the literary proletariat.
- * Mixed tongues contest the imperium of global English.
- * Translation is an oedipal assault on the mother tongue.
- * Translation is the traumatic loss of native language.
- * Translation is plurilingual *and* postmedial expressionism.
- * Translation is Babel, a universal language that is universally unintelligible.
- * Translation is the language of planets and monsters.
- * Translation is a technology.
- * Translationese is the generic language of global markets.
- * Translation is a universal language of *techné*.
- * Translation is a feedback loop.
- * Translation can transpose nature into data.
- * Translation is the interface between language and genes.
- * Translation is the system-subject.
- * Everything is translatable.
(pp. XI-XII)

The urgent, political need for skilled translators became abundantly clear in the tragic wake of 9/11, as institutions charged with protecting national security scrambled to find linguistically proficient specialists to decode intercepts and documents. Translation and global diplomacy seemed never to have been so mutually implicated. As America's monolingualism was publicly criticized as part of renewed calls for shared information, mutual understanding across cultural and religious divides, and multilateral cooperation, translation moved to the fore as an issue of major political and cultural signif-

icance. No longer deemed a mere instrument of international relations, business, education, and culture, translation took on special relevance as a matter of war and peace.

It is in this political situation that *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* took shape. The book aims to rethink translation studies—a field traditionally defined by problems of linguistic and textual fidelity to the original—in a broad theoretical framework that emphasizes the role played by mistranslation in war, the influence of language and literature wars on canon formation and literary fields, the aesthetic significance of experiments with nonstandard language, and the status of the humanist tradition of *translatio studii* in an area of technological literacy.

Structuring my lines of inquiry has been an awareness of the contradictory process by which globally powerful languages such as English, Mandarin Chinese, Swahili, Spanish, Arabic, French simultaneously reduce linguistic diversity and spawn new forms of multilingual aesthetic practice. While it has become commonplace, for example, to bemoan the hegemony of global English as the lingua franca of technocracy, there has been insufficient attention paid to how other global languages are shifting the balance of power in the production of world culture. Chinese, for example, is now a major language of internet literacy and is taking on English as never before.

An underlying promise of this book has been that language wars, great and small, shape the politics of translation in the spheres of media, literacy, literary markets, electronic information transfer, and codes of literariness. The field of translation studies has been accordingly expanded to include on the one hand, pragmatic, real world issues—intelligence-gathering in war, the embattlement of minority languages within official state cultures, controversies over ‘other Englishes’—and on the other, more conceptually abstract considerations such as the literary appropriation of pidgins and creoles, or multilingual experimentalism among historic avant-gardes, or translation across media.

Translation studies has always had to confront the problem of whether it best serves the ends of perpetuating cultural memory or advancing its effacement. A good translation,

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as Walter Benjamin famously argued, makes possible the afterlife of the original by jumping the line between the death of the source language and its futural transference to a target. This death/life aporia leads to split discourses in the field of translation studies: while translation is deemed essential to the dissemination and preservation of textual inheritance, it is also understood to be an agent of language extinction. For translation, especially in a world dominated by the languages of powerful economies and big populations, condemns minority tongues to obsolescence, even as it fosters access to the cultural heritage of “small” literatures, or guarantees a wider sphere of reception to selected, representative authors of minoritarian traditions. (pp. 3-4)

VICENTE L. RAFAEL

From: **“Translation, American English, and the National Insecurities of Empire”** (2009) *Social Text*, 101, v. 27, no. 4, Winter.

In a time of war, the task of the translator is invariably mired in a series of intractable and irresolvable contradictions. It begins with the fact that translation itself is a highly volatile act. As the displacement, replacement, transfer and transformation of the original into another language, translation is incapable of fixing meanings across languages. Rather, as with the story of Babel, it consists precisely in the proliferation and confusion of possible meanings and therefore in the impossibility of arriving at a single one. For this reason, it repeatedly brings into crisis the locus of address, the interpretation of signs, the agency of mediation, and the ethics of speech. Hence is it impossible for anyone to fully control much less recuperate its workings. The treachery and treason inherent in translation in a time of war are the insistent counterpoints to the pervasive wish for language to be fully transparent to meaning and fully compliant with the intentions of its speakers regardless of what side of the conflict they are on. Any attempt to reduce language into a sheer instrument of either the will to power or the will to resistance, thanks to translation, will invariably fail. Undercutting attempts to impose domination or hegemony, translation betrays both by promoting the circulation of what remains untranslatable. It would seem then that in the context of war, translation is at permanent war with itself.

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Translation *at* war and *as* war: how do we understand this? If translation is like war, is it possible that war is also like translation? It is possible I think if we consider that the time of war is like the movement of translation. There is a sense that both lead not to the privileging of order and meaning but to emergence of what I've referred to as the untranslatable. 'Wartime' spreads what Nietzsche called in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war, "an all consuming fever" that creates a crisis in historical thinking. So much of the way we think about history, certainly in the Westernized parts of our planet since the Enlightenment, is predicated on a notion of time as the succession of events leading towards increasingly more progressive ends. Wartime decimates that mode of thinking. Instead, it creates mass disorientation at odds with the temporal rhythms of progress and civilization. In this way, wartime is what Samuel Weber refers to as "pure movement." It is a "whirlwind... that sweeps everything up in its path and yet goes nowhere. As a movement, the whirlwind of war marks time, as it were, inscribing it in a destructive circularity that is both centripetal and centrifugal, wrenching things and people out of their accustomed places, displacing them and with them, all [sense] of place as well. ...Wartime thus wrecks havoc with traditional conceptions of space and time and with the order they make possible."

It is precisely the disordering effect of war on our notions of space and time that brings it in association with translation that tends to scatter meaning, displace origins, and expose the radical undecidability of references, names and addressees. Put differently, translation in wartime intensifies the experience of untranslatability and thus defies the demands of any particular power to reorder a place and call forth the submission of its inhabitants. Just as civilizational time engenders the permanent possibility of wartime, the time that is out of joint and out of whack, so the time of translation is haunted by untranslatability, the feverish circulation of misrecognition and uncertainty from which we can find neither safety nor security, national or otherwise.

