Introduction

One of the most elementary questions about translation, that is also among the most difficult to answer, is this: what allows us to regard language as an individual; on what grounds are we authorized to render language as an indivisible unity? In talking about translation, however, are we accustomed to discussing languages as if they were unproblematically individual and indivisible unities? At this juncture, we may further ask why we oblige ourselves to specify a language as an individual? As a matter of fact, have we not always, that is, trans-historically, taken for granted that language is a countable being, something that can be counted, one, two, three, and so on, like oranges and apples, and unlike water? Perhaps more out of habit than conviction, we have not bothered to ask in what context and under what circumstances language can be treated as a countable nominal. The time has come to discard this absentminded habit.

It may be necessary at the outset to elucidate what is at issue in raising such a question: what allows us to assume, as if indisputably, that a language is an individual unity in our discussions of translation? Why do we have to be concerned with the countability of language and then the individuation of it, especially in regard to translation?

First of all, let us remind ourselves of the truism that on innumerable occasions, the word ‘translation’ is used metaphorically. Since translation can involve a wide range of topics and approaches, the concept of language that is mobilized is not necessarily unitary; one may well infer diverse tropes by saying ‘language,’ so let me specify not only one, but also many contexts in which the individuality of language presents itself as a problematic.¹

Translation is commonly used metaphorically to such an extent that it is not easily distinguishable from a metaphor or a figurative expression in general, and all too often it serves as a trope by which, for instance, a medical doctor’s diagnosis is translated into everyday parlance for ordinary folks, or the literary script of a novelistic work is translated into cinematic language. After all, might translation be a metaphor in its etymology, so that, strictly speaking, there is no way to prevent translation from being used as a substitute for a metaphor? Given a wide range of tropic uses of the word ‘translation,’ it is unsurprising that some scholars search for the definition of what translation ought to be in its propriety, for a definition of

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3

The individuality of language
Internationality and transnationality

Naoki Sakai

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Naoki Sakai

translation that serves effectively to distinguish translation as a trope or metaphor from translation proper or translation in and of itself. So, what is translation proper, after all?

In our conventional apprehension of translation, the conduct to translate or the act of translation is presumed unnecessary unless different languages are at issue. In the last few centuries – at least since the inauguration of the universal system of national education – the dominant apprehension of translation has assumed that translation occurs between two different languages or a pair of languages, such as German and French or Hebrew and Greek. (For the time being, let us evade the possible question as to whether or not translation is able to involve more than two languages. As it becomes immediately obvious, this question itself depends upon how we are possibly able to count languages, on the modality of language’s countability.) In most cases, each of the paired languages between which the act of translation is performed is regarded as an individual marked by a clear-cut border that divides its inside from its outside, as an internally consistent entity that sustains an indivisible unity. Accordingly, it is usually assumed that two different languages between which translation is conducted are different from one another, first of all in terms of individuality as well as indivisibility; in other words, the difference between the languages is an individual difference. Once again, it seems that we are drawn back to the initial question: what allows us to regard language as an individual? On what basis, can we say that language is an individual that can be symbolically, figuratively, and spatially represented as an enclosure with a clear border that divides its interior from its exterior?

Roman Jakobson is one linguist who has responded to such queries about the indivisible individuality of a language in translation as well as the difference of languages in translation at the same time. According to him (1959), the non-tropic or proper use of translation is given in contrast to those apparently tropic or metaphoric uses of the word; the propriety or the archetypal translation must be preserved for the type performed between two natural languages. He insists that translation in the proper sense must be distinguished both from intralingual translation (translation within the same language, which does not involve another one) and intersemiotic translation (translation involving non-linguistic sign systems), and that in the proper sense of the word it means an interlingual translation, a translation between one language and another, between two different languages external to one another.

Let me avow at the outset that I cannot avoid feeling skeptical of the classification of translation types that Jakobson lays out; I am hesitant to endorse the framework against the background of which his analysis of linguistic aspects of translation is conducted. The formulation he deploys in classifying types of translation seems to me to be based upon rather disputable postulations. Conceding that the three types of translation he puts forth are operational hypotheses, whose truth values are to be judged according to how well they serve to illuminate the workings of translation, I can hardly ignore the inklings that Jakobson guilelessly replicates the conventional notions about the event of translation, the definition of translation, and the figures or schemata of languages in terms of which this dialogic event called translation is represented, imagined, or figured out.

Under these circumstances, let me reiterate the initial question concerning different languages: what kind of difference is at stake when we problematize the conventional view of translation? It is supposed that the difference of and in languages prompts translation, and it is also a response to this difference because it is usually assumed that this sort of difference gives rise to difficulty in understanding among interlocutors. For, whenever translation is mentioned, a certain scenario is presupposed by which some difficulty in comprehension or conversation naturally arises when different languages are involved. In our conventional
Individuality of language

apprehension of translation, therefore, difference in and of languages is often equated to the cause for some difficulty or impediment in apprehension between a speaker and a listener in a dialogue; whereas, when no difference is involved, we do not normally expect such a difficulty or impediment to arise. Accordingly, translation is supposedly a natural response to this dialogic obstacle or hindrance that happens between interlocutors.

In this regard, let me further expound on what kind of difference is expected or demanded in our apprehension of translation. How do we conceptualize this difference that supposedly accompanies or gives rise to the occasion of translation? However, one must keep in mind that, as soon as language is postulated as an individual, a certain logical confusion inevitably ensues: since every language, ethnic or national, is of necessity a composite – language as such always contains variations called ‘dialects’ – a language is already a species of languages in the hierarchy of logical classification. In other words, language would be doubly registered at the level of individual as well as that of species. Therefore, difference between languages would necessarily be at the same time one between individuals and one between species. Is it a difference upheld as such, what is referred to as specific difference (diaphora), or one that exists between two substances or individuals, each of which cannot be further divided (atomos or adiairetos) in terms of classical logic, and both of which share some common property by virtue of belonging to the same class, namely that of languages in our case?

Two languages A and B are separated from one another, and they are different. At the same time they can be subsumed under the same category since they both belong to the same class, that is, the specific class of languages. Thus the difference at issue is represented in terms of an interstice between two unified individual things, two individual languages, as if they were represented spatially as two figures or territories marked by their respective borders and external to one another. Indeed, difference cannot be of a specific kind when either ‘category mistake’ or catachresis is committed. In addition to ‘category mistake’ and catachresis, can there be some other kind of difference beyond a specific one, to remove the need to postulate two substantive or unified individuals between which there is an interstice?

Whereas Jakobson sees no problem in subsuming the difference of languages to which translation is a response under the general category of difference between individuals, our discussion of translation may well take an alternative journey, since we entertain a different conception of difference precisely because our discussion of translation does not start with the premise that translation proper is an interlingual translation, or as a response to difference subsumed in the traditional concept of specific difference.

What if, in contrast to Jakobson, we assume that the difference of languages cannot be subsumed under specific difference, under the general category of difference between individuals both of which belong to the class of languages?

As I discuss later in this chapter, we cannot preclude the possibility that the difference involved in translation can be something else not subsumed under the general category of specific difference or diaphora; it can be a difference other than a specific difference, a difference that does not require the postulation of languages as individuals. Tentatively I call this difference ‘discontinuity.’

We now must call into question the historical conditions thanks to which the very classification of these types of translation – interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic translations – appear indisputable. These historical conditions are, most often, summarily referred to by ‘internationality’ in the modern world. Henceforth, let me situate the problematic of translation in the modern international world.
Many in one

It is implicitly assumed – and rarely thematically questioned – that, while there is one common world, there are many languages. The world accommodates many languages. Even though humanity is one, it contains a plurality of languages. It is generally upheld that, precisely because of this plurality, we are never able to evade translation. Thus, our conception of translation is almost always premised upon a specific way of conceiving the plurality of languages. Not surprisingly, we are often obliged to resort to a certain interpretation of the fable of Babel when trying to think through the issues of the unity of humanity and translation. Assumed behind this fable is a certain vision of the international world, according to which the entirety of humanity is divided into units of languages, and each language constitutes an individual unity that cannot be mixed or conflated with other such units. The internationality of the international world thus represented consists in the juxtaposition of individual languages. And each is external to any other. It follows that the link between any two languages is necessarily of an interlingual kind, so that the representation of the international world coincides with the Babelic vision of the world that is fragmented by the individuality of languages and unified only through interlingual translation. Interestingly enough, the inter- of interlingual translation somewhat resonates with the inter- of the modern international world.

But, can we take this assumption of a unity in plurality of humanity for granted historically? Are we always permitted to presume that the plurality of languages in the world can be apprehended in terms of an ‘interlingual’ framework, or according to the economy of the classical logic of individual, species and genus? In other words, can we possibly conceive of discourses in which the thought of language is not captured in the formula of ‘many in one’? Are we able to entertain some epistemic possibilities in which language is conceived of in an alternative way?

How do we recognize the identity of each language, or to put it more broadly, how do we justify presuming that the diversity of language or languages can be categorized in terms of one and many or of an interlingual plurality? Appealing to our familiar grammatical category, I can also pose the question this way. Is language a countable? For example, is it not possible to think of language, in terms of those grammars in which the distinction of the singular and the plural is irrelevant? What I am challenging is the individual unity of language, a certain ‘positivity of discourse’ or ‘historical a priori’ in terms of which we understand what is at issue whenever a different language or difference in language is at stake. My question is: how do we allow ourselves to tell one language from others? What allows us to represent difference in and of languages in terms of specific difference?

I stated my answer to this question some 30 years ago, and I still believe it is valid (Sakai 1992). My answer is: the individual unity of language is like a regulative idea. It organizes knowledge, but it is not empirically verifiable. Immanuel Kant introduced the term ‘regulative idea’ in his Critique of Pure Reason. The regulative idea does not concern itself with the possibility of experience; it is no more than a rule by which a search in the series of empirical data is prescribed. What it guarantees is not the empirically verifiable truth; on the contrary, it forbids the search for truth ‘to bring it[self] to a close by treating anything at which it may arrive as absolutely unconditioned’ (Kant 1929: 450 [A 509; B537]).

Unlike some religious convictions, it never confirms truth absolutely or unconditionally. Therefore, the regulative idea only gives an object in idea; it only means ‘a schema for which no object, not even a hypothetical one, is directly given’ (Kant 1929: 550 [A 670; B 698], emphasis added). The individual unity of language cannot be given in empirical experience.
because it is nothing but a regulative idea that enables us to comprehend other related data about languages ‘in an indirect manner, in their systematic unity, by means of their relation to this idea’ (ibid.) It is not possible to know whether a particular language as a unity exists or not. It is the reverse: by prescribing to the idea of the individual unity of language, it becomes possible for us to systematically organize knowledge about languages in a modern, scientific manner. It follows then that the existence of a national or ethnic language cannot be empirically verifiable. In this respect, it is a construct of schematism, figuration, and imagination. Just as a nation is in the imaginary register, so is a national or ethnic language.

To the extent that the unity of national language ultimately serves as a schema for nationality and offers the sense of national integration, the idea of the individual unity of language opens up a discourse in which not only the naturalized origin of an ethnic community but also the entire imaginary associated with ‘national’ language and culture is sought after, debated, and refuted. What is of decisive importance is that such a language is represented in a schema or an image of national or ethnic totality. Regardless of whether or not it is somewhat proven to exist, first of all, it must be projected and postulated as an image. Only through an integrated image of a language can a vast variety of traditional heritages, bundles of familial lineages, and a wide range of fragmented customs be synthesized and unified into the figure of national culture. In short, it is in this discourse that the imaginary of an ethnic community, whose members are supposed to share the same language, a common tradition or a set of collective customs, comes into being, but it does not necessarily follow from this postulate of ethnic community in imagination that an ethnic community or a prototype of national community can be shown to be present factually or empirically. On the contrary, one could argue that an ethnic community ought to be brought into existence, whereas actually it is totally absent. An argument about the absence of national language, or by implication, of an ethnic community, can equally serve to endorse a sort of discourse in which the individual unity of language is postulated. As was the case in the birth, or more precisely stillbirth, of the Japanese nation, the imaginary of an ethnic community becomes available in its absence, in the modality that it is absent where it should be present. What is at stake in the discourse of national language is not the actual existence of a national or ethnic language, but rather the very possibility of imagining it as a topic. Such a discourse opens up the theme of a national language as a possible topic in such a way that it becomes possible to discuss many of its aspects including its absence. Regardless of whether it is affirmative or negative, adorable or deplorable, present or absent, the very possibility of imagining such a language as some mysteriously shared medium is postulated there. This is to say that, in such a discourse, the very figure of a proto-national language is introduced for the first time as ‘a historical apriori’ (see Foucault 1969: 166–173, 1972: 126–131).

The language that is debated may be pure, authentic, hybridized, polluted or corrupt, yet regardless of a particular assessment of it, the very possibility of praising, authenticating, complaining about or deploring it is offered by the unity of that language as a regulative idea. It is repeatedly argued in American mass media that the English language is a national matter, and that the soundness of the language is intimately related to the welfare of the nation, and such conventional contention is rarely challenged. Moreover, by focusing exclusively on the language of the majority, it seems that little attention is paid to the fact that many other languages, heterogeneous or even foreign to what is assumed to be ‘good English,’ are spoken in the population coextensive to the territory of the United States of America.

Regardless of how unscientific and capricious popular discussions on ‘good and beautiful English’ may be, the strategic principle of national language is scarcely challenged. It is precisely because of this strategic aspect of the schema of national language that the discussion
of good and proper language has never failed to be oppressive toward minorities who are perceived as deviating from the ‘standard,’ thereby rendering it possible to mark the authentic from the inauthentic in terms of nationality. Nationality is not merely a matter of the inside and outside of the national community; it is also a matter of prescription and manipulation. It demands and prescribes how one should conduct oneself in order to participate in the feeling of nationality (see Sakai 1992), rather than whether one is or is not in the national community in an exclusively descriptive way. One is offered the choice of national inclusion and exclusion in the conditional: if you conduct yourself in such and such a manner, then you will be entitled to belong to the nation or the ethnicity; but if you do not, you will deserve to be discriminated against. It is a threat, but it is given as a modality of conduct.

For Kant, as I have so far argued, a regulative idea is explicated primarily with regard to the production of scientific knowledge; it ensures that the empirical inquiry of some scientific discipline never reaches any absolute truth, and is therefore endless. Furthermore, Kant qualifies the regulative idea as a schema that is not exclusively in the order of idea, but also in the order of the sensational. Hence, the regulative idea works in the realm of imagination, of the faculty of the human mind that synthesizes the ideational and the sensational.

Kant’s critical philosophy was contemporary with the emergence of a new form and image of community called ‘nation’; he witnessed the revolutions which helped establish a new state sovereignty based on the nation. In this regard too, the institution of the nation-state is no older than German idealism. In due course, we are led to suspect that the idea of the unity of language as the schema for ethnic and national communality must also be a recent invention. The regulative idea thus serves to organize the modern international world as well as the imaginary formation of national or ethnic language in that world regulated by the inter-lingual schematism of inter-nationality.

By now this much is evident. From the postulate that the unity of national language is a regulative idea, it follows directly that we do not and cannot know whether a national language, such as English or Japanese, exists as an empirical object. The unity of national language enables us to organize various empirical data in a systematic manner so as to allow us to continue to seek knowledge about that language. At the same time, moreover, the regulative idea offers not an object in experience but an objective in praxis toward which we aspire to regulate our uses of language. It is not only an epistemic principle but also a strategic one. Hence, it works in double registers: on the one hand, determining propaedeutically what is to be included or excluded in the very data base of a language, what is linguistic or extralinguistic, and what is proper to a particular language or not; on the other, indicating and projecting what we must seek as our proper language, what we must avoid as heterogeneous to our language and reject as improper for it; the unity of a national language as a schema guides us on what is just or wrong for our language, what is in accord or discord with its propriety.

In this respect, it is worth noting that invariably the modern discussion of national language assumes itself to be situated ‘after the Babel,’ so to speak, in a world marked by ‘many in one,’ in a characteristically particular manner. Walter Benjamin is among those authors who rely upon the mythology of Babel, but it is noteworthy that he deliberately adopts a particular tropic strategy that highlights the fragmentary nature of languages while purposefully obliterating the very distinguishability of interlingual and intralingual translations (Benjamin 1992). He emphasizes languages as fragments and splinters that retain the shapes and contours of the original unity, thereby he very judiciously evades postulating languages as individuals and indivisibles, each of which is internally coherent or organically intact. By ‘pure language,’ he designates one that can never be an individual or indivisible. If we strictly
follow Benjamin’s tropics, it would have been extremely difficult or almost impossible to either equate translation proper to an interlingual translation, or to represent it to ourselves as a transaction taking place in the interstice between two individuated figures of languages. In this respect, he illustrates an entirely different orientation to that of Roman Jakobson. Inopportune, nevertheless, we must admit that Jakobson represents the overwhelming majority, as a consequence of which very few scholars in translation studies today appreciate Benjamin’s discussion on translation.

By virtue of the fact that we take the model of interlingual translation as translation proper, we are obliged to acknowledge that we live in a world ‘after the Babel,’ in a modern world ordered by internationality. In the modern era, an inquiry into language begins with an acknowledgment that universal language has been lost, so that humanity is inevitably fragmented into many languages. None of us can occupy the position of totality from which the oneness of humanity is immediately apprehended. Every one of us is necessarily situated within one or some languages; our apprehension of humanity is destined to be partial because it is no longer possible for any of us to have access to an aerial view from which the entirety can be grasped instantaneously. Instead, the apprehension of oneness requires tedious processes in the interstices of many autonomous and individuated languages. I want to tentatively call these processes translations as they are represented according to the modern regime of translation.

Of course, translation serves as a metaphoric term with much broader connotations than an operation of the transfer of meaning from one national or ethnic language to another, but in this context I am specifically concerned with the delimitation of translation according to ‘the modern regime of translation,’ by means of which the idea of the national language is practiced and thus concretized. What I want to suggest thereby is that the representation of translation in terms of ‘the modern regime of translation’ is facilitated as a schema of configuration: it helps to project a paired schemata of individual languages between which interlingual translation is supposed to take place. It is of translation, so that it always involves difference. And this difference is of a specific kind between two individual languages. It follows that the representation of interlingual translation necessarily requires a pair of schemata, a pair of two figures. To the extent that the representation of interlingual translation is projected by means of a pair of schemata, it is a process of a configuration. The paired schemata work as if one synthetic schema, so that only when translation is represented by the schematism of co-figuration, does the putative unity of one national language as a regulative idea ensue. The schema of configuration is an apparatus that allows us to imagine or represent what goes on in translation; it allows us to give to ourselves an image or representation of translation.

A corollary immediately follows: unless another language is represented, a language would never be figured out as an individual unity. A language is identified only through the schematism of co-figuration, so that the image of one’s own language is dependent upon how another language partnered with it is represented. In other words, only when an apparatus is available by which to recognize and imagine a different language into which a topic, theme or message is translated from this language, can a language be figured out as an autonomous and individuated language independent of the other. This is to say that, unless a foreign language is recognized, one’s own would never be recognized as such. This is why a national language becomes representable and recognizable only in an international world, even though the internationality of this world may not be immediately ascribed to that instituted by the Eurocentric international law, Jus Publicum Europæum.

Thus imagined, the representation of translation is no longer a movement in potentiality. This image or representation always contains two figures, and, in due course, is necessarily
accompanied by a spatial division in terms of ‘border.’ Hence, the image of translation is
given by the schematism (the putting into practice of schema) of co-figuration in the re-
gime of translation. In other words, the unity of a national or ethnic language as a schema
is already accompanied by another one for the unity of a different language. This is how the
unity of a language is possible only in the element of ‘many in one.’

Translation may well take various forms and processes insofar as it is a political labor to
overcome the points of incommensurability in the social. It need not be confined to the
specific regime of translation; it may well be outside the modern regime of translation. In
the context of our discussion of translation, the ‘modern’ is marked by the introduction of
the schematism of co-figuration; without this it is difficult to imagine a nation or ethnicity
as a homogeneous sphere. Thus the economy of the foreign, that is, how the foreign must
be allocated in the production of the domestic language, has played the decisive role in the
poietic – and poetic – identification of the national language. Without exception, the formation
of modern national language involves certain institutionalizations of translation, according
to what we have referred to as the regime of translation.

Translation as continuity in discontinuity

Finally, we will return to the question of the relationship between the issues of translation
and discontinuity. This is to say that we will probe how our commonsensical notion of
translation is delimited by the schematism of the world (i.e. our operation of representing the
world according to the schema of co-figuration), and inversely, how the modern figure of the
world as ‘inter-national’ (i.e. a world consisting of the basic and juxtaposed units of nations) is
prescribed by our representation of translation as a communicative and international transfer
of the message between a pair of ethno-linguistic unities.

An inquiry into translation invokes a seemingly endless series of questions when some
formulaic response to this inquiry is postulated. Retracing the network of affinity in trans-
lational equivalence – taking fanyi in Chinese, Übersetzung in German, honyaku in Japanese,
as instances strictly within the economy of the modern international world – you may well
find the sense of transferring, of conveying or skipping from one place to another, of linking
or mapping one word, phrase, or text to or on another. Comparing the lexicographical and
etymological explications of the word ‘to translate’ or its cognates in many languages, one
may feel vindicated to offer this definition: translation is a transfer of the message from one
language to another.

Even before specifying what sort of transfer this can be, you would realize it is hard to
refrain from asking initial questions about the message. Is what is referred to as the message
in this definition not a product or consequence of the transfer called translation, rather
than something whose being precedes the action of transfer, or something that remains invariant
in the process of translation? Is the message supposedly transferred in this process determin-
able in and of itself, without first being operated on or affected by something? Is the sense
of translation determinable prior to its being translated? Does this future-anteriority of the
message in translation not suggest that what remains invariant does not belong in the worldly
time of past – present – future? It neither belongs to the present of the past, the present of the
present, nor the present of the future. Is it because the message is never present or because it
repeats the very movement of what Jacques Derrida called ‘iterability’ that it can be said to
remain invariant in translation? (For iterability, see Derrida 1982.)

Accordingly the message transferred in translation is, above all else, a supposition of the
transmitted invariant that is confirmed, retroactively, after the fact of translation. So, what
kind of definition is this that includes the term that ought to be explained by what the very definition aims to determine? Does it not constitute an emblematic circular definition? Likewise, the unities of languages are also suppositions, in whose absence the above-mentioned definition would hardly make sense. Then, are we not required to examine what translation could be when languages are not countable or when one language cannot be so easily distinguished from another?

In the first section of this chapter I already provided my answer to this question. The languages from and into which a text is translated are like regulative ideas; they serve as schemata in our representation of translation. As to the empirical existence of these languages, therefore, we cannot tell whether they exist or not except through our operation of translation in which these languages are retrospectively represented.

The measure by which we are able to assess a language as a unity – let me stress again that I am not talking about either phonetic systems, various morphological units, even syntactical rules of a language, but instead the whole of a language as a langue – is given to us only at the locale where the limit of a language is marked, at the ‘border’ where we come across a non-sense that forces us to do something in order to make sense of this non-sense. It goes without saying that this occasion of making sense out of non-sense, of doing something socially – acting toward foreigners, soliciting their response, seeking their confirmation, and so forth – is generally called translation, provided that suspending the conventional distinction between translation and interpretation is allowed. So let me repeat once again that the unity of a language is represented always in relation to another unity. It is never given in and of itself, but in relation to another, transferentially so to say. One can hardly evade a dialogic duality when it is a matter of determining the unity of a language; language as a unity almost always conjures up the co-presence of another language precisely because translation is not only a border crossing, but also and preliminarily an act of drawing a border, of bordering. This is why I have to introduce the schematism of co-figuration in analyzing how translation is represented.

Already we are concerned with a range of problems difficult to evade when attempting to comprehend the terms ‘meaning’ and ‘language.’ At the very least we can now say that, logically, translation is not derivative or secondary to meaning or language; it is as fundamental or originary in our attempts to elucidate these two concepts. To the extent that translation suggests our contact and encounter with the incomprehensible, unknowable, or unfamiliar, that is with the foreign, we must insist that nothing starts until we come across the foreign. If the foreign is unambiguously incomprehensible, unknowable, and unfamiliar, it is impossible to talk about translation since translation simply cannot be actualized. If, on the other hand, the foreign is comprehensible, knowable, and familiar, it is unnecessary to call for translation. Thus, the status of the foreign must always be ambiguous in translation. It is alien, but it is already in transition to something familiar. The foreign is at the same time incomprehensible and comprehensible, unknowable and knowable, and unfamiliar and familiar; this foundational ambiguity of translation derives from the ambiguous positionality generally indexed by the peculiar presence of the translator. Apparently the translator’s work consists in dealing with discontinuity among the interlocutors, among whom incomprehensibility, miscommunication, or non-sense can possibly occur, and then building continuity in this discontinuity. This situation may be rephrased this way: for the first kind of audience, the source ‘language’ is comprehensible while for the second it is incomprehensible. Only insofar as the distinction between the two kinds of audience exists can someone be summoned to be a translator according to the modern regime of translation.

Yet, it is important to note that ‘language’ in this instance is figurative in the sense that it need not refer to any ‘natural’ language of an ethnic or national community, such as German
or Tagalog; it is equally possible to have two kinds of audience when the source text is a heavily technical document or an avant-garde literary piece. Here ‘language’ may well refer to such a set of vocabulary and expressions associated with a professional field or discipline, such as ‘legal language’; it may imply a style of graphic inscription or an unusual perceptual setting in which an art work is installed. One may argue that these are exemplary of intra-linguistic and inter-semiotic translations respectively. But, these two types of translation can be postulated only when they are in contra-distinction to inter-linguistic translation or translation proper. Let us not forget, however, that the propriety of translation presupposes the unity of a language; its propriety would be impossible unless one unity of language is posited as external to another unity, as if already, languages were given as countable like apples. Thus, these figurative uses of the term ‘translation’ illustrate how extremely difficult it is to construe the locale of translation as a linking or bridging of two languages, two spatially marked domains. Here I want to stress once again that translation is not only a border crossing but also and preliminarily an act of drawing a border, of bordering.

What is disclosed here is a certain cartography in the representation of translation. However, this cartography is not about mapping from one striated space onto another; it is concerned with the mapping of something alien or anterior to spatial coordination onto a co-ordinated space; it is a mapping of the incomprehensible onto a distance between two figures in a striated space. It is precisely because the unities of languages are no more than ‘objects in idea’ or schemata with no corresponding objects in experience, that the schematism of co-figuration projects figures of language at the locale of translation. In this respect, the schematism of co-figuration is an art of spatialization, some technology that one might call a primordial cartography, without whose aid the externality of one language to another would be inconceivable.

For brevity’s sake, allow me to skip the many steps necessary to move from this primordial cartography to the global configuration of modernity in which the dichotomy of the West and the Rest serves as a ruling trope in the imagination of the international world. It goes without saying that this conception of translation according to the schematism of co-figuration is a schematization of the globally shared commonsensical vision about the international world; it consists of basic units of nations and is segmented by national borders into territories. In this schematization, the propriety of ‘translation proper’ does not only claim to be a description or representation of what happens in the process of translation; but it also prescribes and directs how to represent and apprehend what one does in translation. In this respect, the propriety of ‘translation proper’ is a rule of discursive formation: it is part and parcel of an institutionalized assemblage of protocols, rules of conduct, canons of accuracy, and manners of viewing in the operations of bio-powers. In other words, the modern regime of translation in bio-politics is poietic or productive in bringing out what Speech Acts theorists call the ‘perlocutionary’ effect; it repeatedly discerns the domestic language co-figuratively as if the two unities were already present in actuality.

As long as one is captive to the modern regime of translation, one can only construe the ambiguity inherent in the positionality of the translator as the duality of the position a translator occupies between native and foreign languages. One either speaks one’s own mother tongue or a foreigner’s. The task of translator would then be to figure out discernible differences between the two languages as well as the two positionalities, those of the native and the foreign. In each language one’s position is discernibly determined, so that the difference one deals with in translation is construed always as that of two linguistic communities external to one another. Despite innumerable loci of potential difference within one linguistic community, the modern regime of translation obliges one to speak so as to address oneself according
to the binary opposition of either speaking to the same or the other. I call this attitude of address homolingual address, the anticipatory attitude of relating to others in enunciation, whereby the addresser adopts a position representative of a putatively homogeneous language community and relates to general addressees also representative of an equally homogeneous language community.

However, I must hasten to add a disclaimer: by homolingual address I do not imply the social condition of conversation, generally referred to as monolingualism, in which both the addresser and the addressee supposedly belong to the same language; they believe themselves to belong to different languages yet can still address themselves homilingually.

Ineluctably, translation introduces a disjunctive instability into the putatively personal relations among agents of speech, writing, listening, and reading. In respect to personal relationality as well as to the addresser/addressee structure, the translator must be internally split and multiple, and devoid of a stable positionality. At best, she can be a subject in transit. This is firstly because the translator cannot be an ‘individual’ in the sense of individuum in order to perform translation, and secondly because she is a singular that marks an elusive locale of discontinuity in the social, while translation is the practice of creating continuity at that singular point of discontinuity. The place she occupies, therefore, belongs to a space anterior to one striated with coordinates, rather than to an extensive one in which the relationship of externality is possibly predicative. Translation is an instance of continuity in discontinuity and a poietic social practice – bordering – which institutes a relation at the site of incommensurability. This is why the aspect of discontinuity inherent in translation would be completely repressed if we determined it according to the model of communication. And this is what I have referred to above as the ambiguity inherent in the positionality of the translator.

To elucidate what is implied by continuity in discontinuity, it is necessary to elaborate upon the concepts of continuity and discontinuity. As is the case in the mathematical conception of continuity – often talked about in the name of ‘the Dedekind cut’ – continuity primarily concerns cutting and divisibility. The possibility of infinite cutting defines continuity, for instance, at point A in the neighborhood of that point. In order to recognize a boundary or cut at A, therefore, that point must be continuous. Routinely we represent difference inciting the act of translation in terms of a gap or crevice, but despite such a habit of making sense by means of a spatialized figure, the incommensurability that we want to understand as difference cannot be represented as such. The difference at issue is a radical one that is ‘non-sense,’ for it is prior to the act of translation which is after all a process of sense-making; translation is ‘an act of making sense out of non-sense.’ Yet, this difference cannot be determined in and of itself. We cannot think of the past, the present, or the future in which this difference presents itself. In other words, just like what Plato called khora, it is never present or in the present. The representation of incommensurability as a cut or boundary, therefore, is bound to betray what it is supposed to represent. In other words, incommensurability is unrepresentable because it is discontinuous. What is suggested by discontinuity is the impossibility of cutting or of comprehending in terms of a boundary. It is non-sense precisely because it is anterior to continuity. The difference in or of language to which translation is a response must be distinguished from measurable difference that is representable as a gap, crevice, or boundary, for such a representation is possible only when difference is conceived of in the measure of continuity. What we refer to as incommensurability is a radical difference lacking in common measure. It is for this impossibility of finding common measure that this difference is called incommensurability. This is why difference in or of language that incites the act of translation comes as a representation only after the process of translation. Inherent in translation is a paradox of temporality that cannot be accommodated in the worldly time of
the past, the present, and the future; it calls for a positing of an invariant that is never present. Translation is not only a process of overcoming incommensurability; it is also a process in which difference is rendered representable.

Thus, translation pertains to two dimensions of difference that should not be confused: a radical difference of discontinuity that does not render itself to spatialized representation, and, a measured difference in continuity imagined in terms of a border, gap, or crevice between two spatially enclosed territories or entities, figuratively projected as a distance between two figures that accompany one another. And the transition from the first to the second is what we often call ‘translation.’

Undoubtedly, the locale of translation as the ambiguous point of difference is also the state of exception in the sense that Carl Schmitt talked about the sovereign. In due course, the positionality of translator is comparable to that of the sovereign who, ‘although he stands outside the normally valid legal system, nonetheless belongs to it, for it is he who must decide whether constitution must be suspended in its entirety’ (ibid.: 6). Referring to Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben argues (1998: 17): ‘Through the state of exception, the sovereign ‘creates and guarantees the situation’ that the law needs for its own validity.’ By overlooking the moment of discontinuity, one could easily be oblivious to the fact that the locale of translation is the state of exception, and the place of the sovereign; but it is also a site of transformative labor. Now, it is possible to inquire into the social performance of labor in terms of translation (cf. Solomon and Sakai 2006).

In considering the positionality of the translator, we are now introduced into the problematic of subjectivity in an illuminating manner. The internal split within the translator, which reflects in a certain way the split between the addresser – or the addressee, and furthermore the actualizing split within the addresser and the addressee themselves – and the translator, demonstrates the way in which the subject constitutes itself. In a sense, this internal split within the translator is homologous to what is referred to as the fractured I, the temporality of ‘I speak,’ which necessarily introduces an irreparable distance between the speaking I and the I that is signified, between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciated. Yet, in the case of translation, the ambiguity in the personality of the translator marks the instability of the ‘we’ as the subject, rather than the ‘I,’ suggesting a different attitude of address which I elsewhere term heterolingual address, and in which one addresses oneself as a foreigner to another foreigner. Heterolingual address is an event because translation never takes place in a smooth space; it is an addressing in discontinuity.

Captured in the regime of translation, however, the translator is supposed to assume the role of the arbitrator, not only between the addresser and the addressee, but also between the linguistic communities of the addresser and the addressee. And, in the attitude of monolingual address, translation as repetition is often exhaustibly replaced by the representation of translation. What is rejected in monolingual address is the very social character of translation, of an act performed at the locale of social transformation where new power relations are produced. The study of translation will thus provide us with insights into how cartography and the schematism of co-figuration contribute to our critical analysis of social relations, premised not only on nationality and ethnicity, but also on the differentialist identification of race, or the anthropological difference and discriminatory constitution of the West.

**Conclusion**

It may still be necessary to remind readers that the viewpoint I have adopted in this chapter is historically delimited, and that I have scarcely done justice to the topic of translation in view
of the diversity of skills, practices, and accomplishments in human attempts to deal with the incommensurate, the incomprehensible, and the foreign. This chapter is not designed to give a comprehensible vision of what translation can be. Instead it is designed to historicize what we take to be ‘translation proper’ – provided that not only peoples in the West but also in the Rest are designated by ‘we’ in this case – and to show that the modern regime of translation, a biopolitical technology in terms of which we conduct, apprehend, evaluate, and judge ‘translation,’ is a rather recent invention. Yet, undeniably, this regime of translation is viable only in the modern international world, a particular order of inter-state politics, which, as Carl Schmitt illustrated in The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum, originated in Europe around the seventeenth century and subsequently spread all over the globe, through modern colonial rules and capitalist commodification. In other words, our apprehension of translation is under the auspices of the international order in which the world supposedly consists of the horizontal juxtaposition of national languages, and each of these national languages is assumed to be an individual, indivisible unity. Prior to the modern international world, a plurality of languages existed, but this plurality was not that of individuated languages. Yet, the modern regime of translation drastically changed our ways of apprehending the plurality of languages and the differences among them. Since the eighteenth century, step by step, we have been obliged to accept the legitimacy of an imaginary order according to which one’s belonging to the newly constructed community of ‘nation’ is most decisively and deterministically marked by one’s own ‘national language.’ Now, for some miraculous and fantastic reasons, one must be able to be identified as a native of this national language community and not allowed to change it as if one were born into it. This is nothing but a consequence of the modern regime of translation in the modern international world.

I do not believe that the modern international world will disappear in the near future, even though for the majority of humanity on this planet, the basic unit of this international world – the nation-state – is rather new, less than one-century old, and appears temporary and artificial. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that the very structure of the international world is in transition. As Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson argued in Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor, the borders of the modern international world are less and less effective to regulate the global distribution of labor forces, capital, population, knowledge and commodities. What we conventionally call ‘globalization’ is eroding the regularities of the international world. Far from giving rise to a ‘borderless’ world, globalization generates more and more borders and new regimens of discrimination.

With globalization, the inadequacy of conventional translation studies is all the more evident. Because of their uncritical acceptance of the modern regime of translation, they have so far failed to address the socio-political aspects of translation, how it has contributed to the institutionalization of nationality and ethnicity. To the extent that we draw attention to the expanding sense of anxiety in that globalization is experienced as humiliating, impoverishing, alienating, and demoralizing by the majority of people on the planet, the critical assessment of the individuality and individuation of language should serve as a critical supplement to the inadequacy of existent translation studies.

Further reading


Arguably the most important book on the social and political significance of globalization through an analysis of border under transformation.

In this book I attempt to broaden my scope of translation studies to include the twentieth century development following the initial insights laid out in my seminal work *Voices of the Past: The Status of Language in Eighteenth-Century Japanese Discourse* (1992).


A classic work that discusses the early modern formation of the international world and its inherent Eurocentricity.


Perhaps the most insightful examination of individuation and individuality.


A brilliant analysis of how the modern regime of translation was institutionalized in modern China.

**Notes**

1 For more theoretically rigorous discussions on the problem of individuality, see Solomon (2019).

2 Of course, it is questionable that dialect can be postulated as an individual. But, by the same token, it is doubtful that language is taken to be an individual.

3 That language cannot be an enclosed unity or represented as a spatial enclosure is brilliantly demonstrated by Ferdinand de Saussure. By analyzing the instances of dialectic features, de Saussure demonstrates convincingly that it is impossible to postulate a dialect as an indivisible unity. The same can be said about any language. Cf. Ferdinand de Saussure, *TROI SIEME COURS DE LINGUISTIQUE GENERAL* (1910–1911), d’apres les cahiers d’Emile Constatin, Eisuke Komatsu ed. Roy Harris trans. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993, 24–32.

4 Here, let me outline the preliminary procedure involved in the classification according to classical logic. For difference between two individuals A and B to be of specific difference, A and B must both belong to the same group. It would be tantamount to sheer meaninglessness if A and B are a desk and a family. Yet, a desk can be an individual just as a family can be an individual. A desk and a family cannot be comparable to one another unless the common denominator is specified. For instance, as two words or nouns, they can be compared, yet the referents these words refer to remain incomparable. The minimal condition for comparison is that A and B share some common quality or predicate. Expressed in propositional form, the two propositions, for example, ‘A is C’ and ‘B is C,’ are upheld where C signifies some quality or predicate that A and B share. In the absence of such a shared predicate, a specific difference between two individuals is unthinkable.

5 Fukuzawa Yukichi translated the English term ‘nationality’ into ‘kokutai’ (national body), in the 1870s in Japan. Later ‘kokutai’ was used to express the sovereignty of the Japanese Emperor System.

Fukuzawa reiterated what John Stuart Mill said of nationality, ‘a portion of mankind’ that are united among themselves by common sympathies which do not exist between them and any others – which make them co-operate with each other more willingly than with other people, desire to be under the same government, and desire that it should be government by themselves or a portion of themselves exclusively. This feeling of nationality may have been generated by various causes. Sometimes it is the effect of identity of race and descent. Community of language, and community of religion greatly contribute to it. Geographical limits are one of its causes. But the strongest of all is identity of political antecedents; the possession of a national history, and consequent community of recollections; collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret, connected with the same incidents in the past.

*(Stuart Mill 1972/1861: 391)*


6 In *Voices of the Past: The Status of Language in Eighteenth-Century Japanese Discourse*, I discussed the formation of discourse in which the Japanese language was invented for the first time in the eighteenth century (Sakai 1992: 311–317). Later I returned to this topic in 「死産される日本語・日本人...
Individuality of language


7 The logic of ‘imbrications’ among different registers – transferential identification of social positions, colonial and colonized discriminatory hierarchy, racial classification, border formation in terms of nationality, and so forth – are explored in my book in progress, Dislocation of the West. I also underline the fact that I have skipped an analysis of the transition from bilateral schematization (the schema of co-figuration) to multilateral schematization (the system of the international world).

8 This phrase with its apparent resonance with modern mathematics is from Nishida Kitāro (1870–1945). In conceptualizing social praxis and self-awareness (jikaku), Nishida appealed to the mathematical formulation of discontinuity. Following the tradition of modern philosophy since Leibnitz and Kant, he conceived of the formation of the practical subject after the model of differential calculus, but at the singular point of discontinuity. Therefore, for Nishida, as his later formulation clearly shows, the constitution of the subject in ethical action is also the making of the social formation. ‘Hirenzoku no renzoku, (or continuity of discontinuity)’ thus suggests the possibility of conceptualizing the constitution of the subject at the site of the incommensurate in the social. cf.: Nishida (1934/1965a, 1935/1965b).


10 The split cannot be contained only in the cases of translation. For, as Brianke Chang suggests, the putative unities of the addressee and the addressee can hardly be sustained because the addressee himself is split and multiplies, as figuratively illustrated by the Plato–Socrates doublet in Derrida’s ‘Envois’ in The Post Card (Derrida 1987: 1–256). With regard to communication in general, Chang argues, ‘Because both delivery and signing are haunted by the same structural threat of the message’s nonarrival or adestination, the paradox of the signature also invades communication. Communication occurs only insofar as the delivery of the message may fail; that is, communication takes place only to the extent that there is a separation between the sender and receiver, and this separation, this distance, this spacing, creates the possibility for the message not to arrive’ (Chang 1996: 216).

References


De Saussure, F. (1993) Troisième Cours de Linguistique Générale (1910–1911) d’après les cahiers d’Emile Constan-
tin/ Saussure’s Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistics (1910–1911) from the Notebooks of Emile Constan-


53


