

Surface Translations: Meaning and Difference in Yoko Tawada's German Prose¹

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Translation as a play of surfaces, as hyperattentiveness to form and literality, lies at the heart of Japanese writer Yoko Tawada's aesthetic probing of German culture. Tawada, who lives in Germany and writes in both German and Japanese, often uses fictional Japanese narrators to filter the German cultural manifestations they encounter through a pseudo-Japanese perspective back into a strange kind of German, thereby revealing the artificiality of the ways they perceive both German and Japanese culture in her texts. She presents intercultural encounters as translation problems with infinite potential solutions, because she does not regard translation as a means of replicating an original meaning (for example, "Tawada Yōko Does Not Exist"). Rather, she sees it as a way to bring language to life and to call cultural conventions into question. Her translation of the surfaces of language – that is, her focus on letters, sounds, discrepancies between words and images, and on other aspects of linguistic form – ultimately makes both German and Japanese enigmatic, animated, and multivalent. Her approach to translation reworks ideas about the relationship between source and translated language and links her writing to current debates about the cultural dimensions of translation, such as the role of the translator in mediating between cultures. Surface translation as presented in her fiction, essays, and interviews questions the concept of a source, or native, language and, by extension, the distinction between native and foreign culture. The translator plays a central role in this process by attending to the sensual play of aesthetic forms on the body. Tawada's translating figures gain both strength and pain by focussing on the ways meaning attaches to and detaches from form.

Critics praise Tawada for her creative exploration of language, culture, and (mis)communication. They focus on how her works show heterogeneous identities and new subject positions (Breger; Fischer; Kraenzle; Schestokat) and how she presents being foreign as a process that transforms perceptions and the body (Arens; Ervedosa; Laudenberg; Matsunaga; Weigel). Others address the ways in which she emphasizes the strangeness of language (Esselborn; Ette; Grond; Kloepfer

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and Matsunaga; Krauß; Mitsutani; Weigel) or how she emphasizes exophony or stepping outside of the mother tongue (Ivanovic; Slaymaker; Suga; Tachibana). Several analyses of Tawada's work have demonstrated the different ways it criticizes dualistic and Eurocentric thinking about cultural difference (Albrecht; Breger; Fischer; Kersting; Kraenzle; Mejcher-Neef; Wägenbaur; Weigel; Yildiz). Claudia Breger, for instance, refers to postcolonial and feminist theories to show how the pseudo-Japanese perspective of Tawada's protagonists deconstructs European concepts of Japan and of Europe. Her figures experiment with the ways language affects power relationships and perceptions of the body. Their different poses, according to Breger, subvert the dominance of West over East and male over female ("Meine Herren" 47). Sabine Fischer argues that Tawada expresses the loss of identity in the situation of being foreign as an inability to comprehend meaning. Fischer contends that the foreigner is forced to perceive differently by incorporating the foreign language (79). Andrea Krauß focusses on the decentring effects of Tawada's childlike narrators, whose misreading of cultural and linguistic conventions produces a multiplicity of perspectives that challenge binary models of cultural difference. Christina Kraenzle centres on travel as a spatial metaphor for the journeys that the "translated self" takes through language in Tawada's *Überseetzungen*. Although the protagonists in the volume's different tales cross over geographical boundaries with relative ease, their movement across linguistic borders transforms them physically, for instance, in the exertion they make in speaking a new language and in the ways they view their bodies and identities through the perspective of the new language (6–7). While these studies address the physical and alienating aspects of translation, none of them investigates in detail how translating surface phenomena empowers the translator.

This article builds on the scholarship above by concentrating specifically on the process of hyperliteral or surface translation in Tawada's writing and on how the translator uses this process as a means of avoiding both assimilation and marginalization, but a means that is never complete. The result renders the "native" culture as exotic and strange as her narrators' "foreign" perspective. She reveals the paradox of the translator's desire to become a subject by creating meaning and the concomitant danger of becoming objectified during this process. This article will first situate Tawada's thoughts on translation in relation to other ideas about translation. It will then analyze the ways her literary texts represent and expand on her ideas in a selection of her prose writings that have appeared in German. Although some of these were "originally" written in Japanese, Tawada has become known in Germany both through the texts she has written in German and those translated into German by her translator, Peter Pörtner. When translating her own works, she at times changes them markedly from their "original" form (Tawada, "Zukunft" 71). As will become clear, Tawada rejects the notion of an original language and the privileging of the mother tongue. Ursula März, in her "Laudatio" of Tawada when she was awarded the Goethe-Medaillon in 2005, notes that in some of Tawada's books, such as in *Wo Europa anfängt* (1991), it is impossible for the readers to know which texts were written first in the language in which they appear

and which have been translated (26). Tawada challenges the distinction between original and translation as false; her belief in the author as being subservient to language, as functioning at times like a medium for language, undermines concepts of authorship and original. This study analyzes both translated and “original” texts in German by Tawada as texts in their own right. It focusses on the prose pieces “Fersenlos,” “Das Fremde aus der Dose,” “Zungentanz,” and “Wörter, die in der Asche schlafen.” “Fersenlos,” which first appeared in Japanese and was translated into English and later into German, illustrates Tawada’s insistence that translations are always transfigurations of other translations and how this notion connects to pressures to assimilate. “Das Fremde aus der Dose” (first published in German, translated into English as “Canned Foreign”) differentiates between reading and observing as two forms of interpretation. “Zungentanz” (first published in German, translated into English as “Tongue Dance”) shows the physical effects on the translator of translating for meaning. “Wörter, die in der Asche schlafen” emphasizes the power that surface translating can impart to the translator. These pieces exemplify Tawada’s unconventional approach to translation as discussed below. While her more recent works extend her ideas about language and translation into a global context (touching on South Africa, the United States, France, and Vietnam, for example) and into other media (e.g., film in *Das nackte Auge*, 2004), this article will address how her notions of language and translation relate to a German context.

Tawada counters a naturalizing approach to translation by which a translator strives to master another language through deciphering and reinscribing a supposedly original meaning. This notion of meaning assumes a kind of prelinguistic intention that is nonetheless translatable. A competent translator is supposed to be able to grasp this intention and match it with the appropriate form. Ottmar Ette contends that mastering a language implies sanctioning the translator’s role as an author, for an author presumably masters her native tongue. However, he points out that an author writing in a language other than her mother tongue runs the risk in German intellectual circles of not being considered a legitimate author in that language because she does not “master” it in the same way as do German authors. Ette asserts that writers like Tawada contradict such assumptions about legitimacy by making fluid through translation the seemingly fixed boundaries between foreign and native (167–68). Sherry Simon also rejects naturalizing translation in favour of the notion of translation as process. She criticizes what she sees as the “masculine” authority of creating an “original,” which relegates the translator to a derivative, “feminine,” position (*Gender* 42–51). In her view the status of the original has yielded to the notion of translation as performance. This gives more power to the translator, who actively creates meanings (*Gender* 13). In fact, Simon contends, “[t]ranslators articulate – and enact – changing cultural and literary relations” (“Culture Brokers” 139).

Problems arise when the translator confronts a strange language signifying a cultural text that is also unknown, as Umberto Eco notes when he asserts that translating concerns the “interpretation of two texts into two different languages”

(14). In such cases, the materiality of the foreign language, its sounds and letters, dominate the translator's attention so that any meaning is difficult to grasp. Attempting to lend meaning to a completely foreign language by comparing its sounds and forms to one's "mother tongue" and then attaching meanings linked to words in the mother tongue to similar-sounding words in the foreign tongue, as Tawada does, shows the futility of a search for appropriate meaning. They give the translator a key role in elucidating this futility.

This elucidation rests on making language strange. Tawada's mode of translating attempts to render visible what she views as the incomprehensibility of the world by constructing enigmas, and this is easier to do with a foreign language. As she says in her interview with Monika Totten, "one does listen closely to a foreign language [...]. You realize that the language means something, you don't understand, and yet, something is communicated" (98). The enigma provokes thought, which, in turn, leads one to consider how meanings arise. Translation for Tawada shows that language is not a tool for transmitting meaning, but it is an integral part of meaning production. What interests her is language as a kind of voice that one can hear only if one cannot understand the content – thus the disadvantage of a mother tongue (98). To Totten she asserts,

Well, I think it an illusion to believe the mother tongue to be authentic. The mother tongue is a translation from non-verbal or pre-verbal thoughts, too. Language is not natural for us, but rather artificial and magical. People who like to believe that language should be identical with human emotions and thoughts do not like to speak foreign languages. They feel that they have to pretend to be somebody else or even that they have to lie when they speak foreign languages. Foreign languages draw our attention to the fact that language per se, even one's mother tongue, is a translation. (95–96)

Reliance on the "mother tongue" also reveals a lack of imagination, as if one cannot even imagine anything that the native language does not express ("Das Fremde aus der Dose" 42). In her works, Tawada strives to make the German language foreign and enigmatic for her German readers, thereby prompting them to broaden their imagination and freeing them to think beyond conventional meanings. The questioning of the mother tongue connects to her general skepticism toward the idea of an original or native meaning.

Having worked with Walter Benjamin's writings in parts of her doctoral dissertation, later published as *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie* (2000), Tawada's emphasis on the literal evokes but differs from Benjamin's in his classic essay on translation, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers." There Benjamin questions the dichotomy of original and translated language by suggesting a reciprocity between both that could "liberate" fragments of a much greater, universal but lost language through the process of translation (17). He was interested in the literality of translating, an emphasis on words rather than sentences, because this negotiation between languages can expose the incompleteness of both translation and original and give

glimpses of the “pure” language he posits. The translation serves as a supplement to what cannot be expressed in the original, that is, its very constructedness as language, as such critics as Barbara Johnson (56) and Rey Chow (504) point out. In Benjamin’s words,

Die wahre Übersetzung ist durchscheinend, sie verdeckt nicht das Original, steht ihm nicht im Licht, sondern läßt die reine Sprache, wie verstärkt durch ihr eigenes Medium, nur um so voller aufs Original fallen. Das vermag vor allem Wörtlichkeit in der Übertragung der Syntax und gerade sie erweist das Wort, nicht den Satz als das Urelement des Übersetzers. Denn der Satz ist die Mauer vor der Sprache des Originals, Wörtlichkeit die Arkade. (18)

By revealing in its literality the unnaturalness of the original, such a translation can dismantle any exclusive claims to “truth” the source text may have.

The affinity of Tawada’s and Benjamin’s ideas finds expression in Jacques Derrida’s explication of Benjamin’s concept of the interplay of translation and original: “The original is not a plenitude which would come to be translated by accident. The original is in the situation of demand, that is, of a lack or exile. The original is indebted a priori to the translation. Its survival is a demand and a desire for translation” (152). While Benjamin’s description of a pure but inaccessible language sustains the idea of an originary, “whole” language despite its concomitant critique of that idea (Johnson 61–64), Tawada’s model of language dispenses with the original. As she announces in her lecture, “Schrift einer Schildkröte oder das Problem der Übersetzung”: “Meistens existieren mehrere Originaltexte, die gefunden und erfunden werden können” (39). A single, authoritative original text thus does not exist. She adds the effect of the translator to this model, for each translator moves between languages in many different ways and lends her own meaning to them. In the piece “Erzähler ohne Seelen” (first published in German, translated into English as “Storytellers without Souls”), she compares the translator’s body to the booth in which simultaneous interpreters work. The various gestures and movements accompanying each interpreter’s translation give the impression that each is translating a different text, that they could hardly all be referring to a common text. She continues

Vielleicht geht es in Wirklichkeit auch gar nicht um einen einzigen gemeinsamen Text, sondern die Übersetzer machen durch das Übersetzen sichtbar, daß dieser Text gleichzeitig mehrere Texte ist. Der menschliche Körper hat auch viele Kabinen, in denen Übersetzungsarbeiten gemacht werden. Ich vermute, daß es dort um die Übersetzungen ohne Original geht. Es gibt aber Personen, die davon ausgehen, daß jedem Menschen bei der Geburt ein Originaltext gegeben wird. Den Ort, an dem dieser Text aufbewahrt wird, bezeichnen sie als Seele. (“Erzähler ohne Seelen” 19; see also “Storytellers” 104)

This multiplicity without an original depends on translators who listen to the sounds and rhythms of what they are translating and recount what each thinks these mean

("Erzähler ohne Seelen" 18–19). The translators are all foreigners attempting to decipher the enigmas of language. Breger reads this essay as a reckoning with Benjamin's essay "Der Erzähler" and the reference to "Seele" as the site where his "original text" is preserved. In contrast, she asserts that Tawada's concept of the body as the site of "translations without originals" (or "translations for which no original exists" in Susan Bernofsky's translation; Tawada, "Storytellers" 104) links her thinking to the performative model of language grounding contemporary feminist and postcolonial notions of identity: "Tawadas Text verfolgt die Übersetzungsvorgänge, in denen Subjekte 'gemacht' werden" (Breger, "Meine Herren" 48). The notion of translations with no originals also evokes Freud's statement about the language of the unconscious – in dreams, for example – as being a translation without an original. Doug Slaymaker notes Tawada's reference to Freud's statement in his analysis of her essay "Tawada Yōko Does Not Exist" as deconstructing the idea of an original author as "a fiction in ways parallel to dreams" ("Writing in the Ravine" 49). Discussing her translation into English of Tawada's translation into Japanese of a German story that translates a legend, Margaret Mitsutani makes clear that "'the original' can't really be said to exist" ("Missing Heels" 35). Tawada's passage above deflates idealized notions of an original language and gives power to the translator, who "in reality" can make the constructedness of language visible without recourse to a universal source language. Meaning is only what the translator creates through translating. This process is a complicated one, as will be discussed later, for the power of traditional concepts of language is still strong.

Translations without originals also function as gates through which one can enter languages from unexpected vantage points. Karin Schestokat argues that in Tawada's works "Die Wörter der Originaltexte sind dabei nicht zu sehen als statische Behälter, die eine einzige Bedeutung eines Wortes für ewig aufbewahren, sondern als Tore, die es erlauben, von einer Konnotation zur anderen überzusetzen." In her first investigation of the (un)translatability of Paul Celan's poetry, for example, Tawada discovers that many of his poems contain the radical or root character "Tor" when translated into Japanese ideograms. For instance, she notices the radical "Tor" in Mitsuo Iiyoshi's translation of "Schwelle" in Celan's volume of poems *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* ("Das Tor des Übersetzers" 123–24). She connects "Tor" to liminality and argues that Celan's poems already anticipate their later translation into Japanese, despite the fact that Celan did not know Japanese. In doing so they possess something that cannot be glimpsed until the later translation illuminates it. Recalling Benjamin's dictum above about an original text's dependence on its translation, she claims further, "die Begegnung des Originals mit seiner Übersetzung findet bei der Entstehung des Textes statt und nicht später" (129). This encounter can happen only, in Tawada's view, by considering original and translation in some kind of common space accessible through words functioning as gates. "Ein Wort zu schreiben bedeutet, ein Tor zu öffnen" (130). Hiltrud Arens sees this temporal reversal of translation and original as a "radical difference from Benjamin" (62). Tawada's insistence that, through their translatability, Celan's poems probe the Japanese language supports her

conflation of translation and original. She thus provides an affirmative answer to her question at the beginning of this Celan essay as to whether a translation can be literature, too (“Das Tor des Übersetzters” 122). This essay already blurs the distinction between translation and original, pointing to Tawada’s more explicit rejection of an original text in her other writings. Later essays on Celan present further translation of his lyrics and their graphic form (“Die Krone”; “Rabbi”).

Theorists Shingo Shimada and Chow have reworked ideas about the potentially liberating effects of translation to address attempts by ethnographers, historians, and anthropologists to “understand,” “describe,” or otherwise appropriate cultures very different from their own. Indeed, instead of submitting to the primacy of the source, the very fact of translating depends on objectifying the culture being translated, on silencing it (Shimada 260). A translated culture may even accelerate its own silencing by “accommodat[ing] to the demands and concepts of the dominating culture” (Bachmann-Medick 12). Just as Tawada presents translation as a means to transform and lend agency to the translator, Shimada argues instead for a different view of intercultural understanding that makes clear the ways that translation is a process of changing and recreating the self rather than absorbing the foreign (261, 270). He emphasizes that translation relies on the assumption that there exists a mutual frame of reference that makes understanding within a culture appear easy. Likewise, understanding another culture is supposed to be difficult (86). But such an assumption is only an illusion. Shimada contends that understanding and communication can occur only by acting on the notion that translation is possible and ignoring “the untranslatable elements of meaning” (91). He concludes that a hierarchy of modern culture over traditional culture, of Western over non-Western, is untenable, for every culture mediates among different frames of reference (89).

Chow’s studies of Chinese film see a focus on the literal as a way to turn intercultural translation into something other than an interpretation of depth. Literality in her view, and with reference to Benjamin, is the arcade or passageway for perceiving the “truth” about the constructedness of cultures. In her words, “Rather than some original text, it is the brilliance of this ‘fabling of the world’ to which Benjamin’s arcade leads us” (515). She presents intercultural translation as a play of surfaces. Superficiality in language or culture is precisely the aspect that is translatable. It is most apparent when meaning or depth is debilitated (513). This type of translation weakens the force of cultural traditions by emphasizing how a culture is constituted and the functions those traditions play.

Tawada’s oeuvre confronts the problems of inter- and intracultural understanding by highlighting processes of translation and miscommunication. The “untranslatable elements” of a culture, to which Shimada refers, are of central importance in her work. Her attempts to translate surface phenomena reveal these “untranslatable elements.” Karl Esselborn sees untranslatability in Tawada’s texts as transformative, as allowing her figures and the author herself freedom to move among different languages and cultures (255). März contends that Tawada is more interested in the indefinable than she is in any particular culture (25). As Bettina Brandt notes, “What has become strange in Tawada’s

writings is the language of cultural description itself" (3). Tawada's focus on the literal and superficial breaks down language and cultural manifestations into elemental parts and then offers innovative ways to combine them. Mitsutani also sees the creative aspects of literal translation in Tawada's writing. She argues, for example, that the translating narrator in "Saint George and the Translator" – originally entitled "The Wound in the Alphabet" in reference to the Japanese title *Arufabetto no kizuguchi*, which, in turn, refers to German writer Anne Duden's story "Der wunde Punkt im Alphabet," which Tawada's narrator is translating (Mitsutani, "Afterword" 182) – aims "to free individual words and phrases from the restrictions of the sentence, to give them a life of their own" (36).

In Tawada's prose with German settings the narrators and main characters often appear in the form of "Japanese" women figures trying to make sense of a strange German context by translating literally what they see, hear, and experience into familiar sounds and words. The narratives then follow their thoughts as they compare "German" and "Japanese" culture. Some narrators have the role of tourists passing through Germany. In other texts, the narrators are immigrants trying to get their bearings in an alien culture. The pressure they feel to overcome their foreignness and conform to the culture in which they are immersed is often represented as an alluring, penetrating masculine force or figure. The various female figures' efforts to comprehend this assimilatory force, to translate it into something familiar, distance them from its power over them. They weaken it by taking it at face value and scrutinizing its potential for different meanings, thereby transforming it. Their function as fictional Japanese highlights the artificiality of the German conventions they confront. In the words of Breger

Der Blick der "Japanerin" auf Europa verleiht auch dem (vermeintlich) blickbeherrschenden Kontinent jenen prekären Status des Fiktiven, der Möglichkeiten der Veränderung impliziert, dessen Betonung jedoch, wie die Kritiker(innen) dekonstruktivistischer Kulturkonzepte erläutert haben, auch eine imaginäre Entmächtigung implizieren kann. ("Mimikry" 201)

By using the German language to represent this process, Tawada's writing makes German foreign to itself. Its words no longer have clear meanings or origins. One has to consider each word anew.

Rather than translating for meaning, Tawada's narrators use intuitive and associative signification, based on observing and playing with the surface phenomena of language, such as the shapes and sounds of letters and syllables. Her protagonists use language to negotiate between pressures to assimilate into the dominant German culture and desires to maintain their difference from it. For Fischer, Tawada "wendet sich gegen eine Sprache, die ein dichotomisches Denken begünstigt, den Blick auf das Andere determiniert und so das Fortleben traditioneller Theorien über kulturelle Differenz ermöglicht" (64). Tawada opts for communicating through linkages that make manifest underlying conditions of estrangement. In an interview with Carola Ebeling and Tim Shomaker, she explains:

Man ist ja verwirrt, wenn man ins Ausland fährt. Oder nicht einmal das: schon in diese Welt reinzukommen. Aber das verdrängt man und dadurch macht man das Leben lebbar oder erträglicher. Eigentlich ist alles unglaublich unverständlich und fremd. Die Sprache kann das beschreibbar machen. Das ist, was ich möchte. [...] Für mich ist es wichtig, Differenzen zu beschreiben, ohne zu sagen, das ist die asiatische Denkweise oder das ist die europäische. (18; qtd in Laudenberg 141)

Translation becomes a means for overturning cultural hierarchies (such as West/East, native/foreign, masculine/feminine), although these always threaten to reassert themselves. Translation in her texts is thus not aimed at capturing a meaning from one language and releasing it into another. There is rather a fluidity of meaning production.

“Fersenlos” (published in Japanese as “Kakato o nakushite” in 1991; translated into German in 1994) is a key text for exploring the manners in which Tawada questions the desire for meaning, rejects the “masculine” authority of a native language, and represents alienation both within and between cultures. The main figure in the story is afloat in a sea of untethered signifiers and learns to manipulate them to her advantage. In “Fersenlos” she contends both with internal and external pressures to submit to one language by ignoring its linguisticity and by focussing on what it “means.” This story recounts the efforts of a mail-order bride newly arrived in a nameless city distant from her home to learn about the new culture and her husband, who hides from her in their house and appears only in her dreams. As the narrative begins, the nameless first-person narrator recounts how she finds herself awash in sounds, images, and concepts, which she attempts to put together in meaningful ways, but they do not always fit. She often cannot match sounds and images or words and concepts, such as when she hears eggs breaking but sees no broken eggs upon her arrival, that is, upon her “birth” into a strange culture. Signifiers and what they signify have slipped apart. The narrator is also physically disoriented and has difficulty walking straight. She has the impression that the characters in this new culture believe that she does not have heels. The images of missing heels and balance problems signal the difficulties she has in “gaining a footing” in the new cultural and linguistic system she has entered. Her body calls attention to her difference from the people she meets, and she at first tries to disguise her “deficit.” In contrast to these associations for the German (or English-speaking) reader, Tawada’s title metaphor evokes for the Japanese reader foreigners living in foreign lands, for those, as Reiko Tachibana clarifies, “are said to lose their heels: they do not walk firmly and naturally on the ground but instead seem to be ‘floating’ or rootlessly alienated within the societies in which they try to settle” (163). This image derives from the way premodern Japanese viewed European foreigners. The boots and shoes that the Dutch, for example, wore were so different from Japanese footwear that it seemed that the Dutch must be trying to conceal their missing heels (163).

As the main protagonist searches for meaning, the characters she meets also strive to interpret her. Since she has no history in her new residence, she is merely an empty form to those who try to “read” her and arbitrarily attach meaning, such as the children who sing about her missing heels, calling her a “Tintenfisch auf Reisen” (“Fersenlos” 13). She observes passively but with growing fascination the disjointed sign system she has entered and chafes against its almost invisible force to manipulate her, demonstrated figuratively by her omnipotent husband, hidden from her view. In a series of dreams he tries to lure her into acquiescing to his will. She dreams of herself as a shrinking or pliable female figure and of him injecting ink into her ear. From the start, then, the narrative depicts a struggle between constructing a new sense of self and being enticed or coerced into submitting to a stereotype. And at first it appears as if the latter option will prevail as the protagonist floats across the ocean of foreign language surrounding her. For instance, when she bathes, she feels as if she is at sea surrounded by innumerable squids, all staring at her, just as she feels the eyes of her husband and of the city's inhabitants observe her, emphasizing her otherness. She has also lost her ability to write because her writing tools are in her suitcase locked in her husband's room.

In this story, the main figure's most overt attempts to gain linguistic control take place during her visits to the “Allgemeine Fachschule für Anfänger,” which “stärkte[n] [ihr] das Rückgrat” (“Fersenlos” 32). The irony of a general school of specialized subjects for beginners alludes to the false sense of security that cultural knowledge is supposed to impart, thereby allowing one to translate “correctly” and not obtrude. The *Fachschule* promises meaning but there is no specificity to what is to be learned. The school is a metaphor for the empty promise of meaning that “learning” a foreign culture or language can hold. As the narrator reconnects signs and referents according to her own logic, however, she changes position to active foreign presence, one who imbues her difference with her own meanings and communicates them in the dominant language. For instance, her first teacher, a woman, begins a lesson on bathing customs by flipping over a painting of a landscape to reveal a blackboard. The teacher inscribes on it the words *Frühstück* and *Aufstehen* (28), thereby marking a surprising relation between image and words, because neither word appears to signify the landscape on the other side. The incongruent constituents of such a sign reflect the narrator's puzzlement over the new meanings she is supposed to docilely accept. She resists by interrogating her instructor. Her probing unnerves the teacher so that she, in turn, tries to gain her “footing” by imagining sinister motives behind her student's questions. The teacher's accusations continue until she loses complete control of her fantasy (30). The narrator's queries over words and meanings thus allow her to steer ideas in new directions. As the narrative continues, the main figure gains more confidence by unsettling her interlocutors, sometimes to the verge of tears.

Yet her ability to manoeuvre the language to her own advantage becomes clear to the narrator only after her visit to a doctor to correct her physical “deformity.” He first inspects her ears for the cause of her imbalance, an action suggesting that, from his perspective, her reception, not the culture around her,

is the alienating factor. When he suggests adding some plastic to her feet to help support her, she realizes she has no need for a prosthesis, because her body, her “shell,” has no need for it. She rejects his offer. Only by viewing her alienated body as her “self” was she trapped in a humiliating foreignness. By uncoupling her sense of identity from her physical looks, and from the way the new culture values these looks, she detaches herself from her subordinate position.

Similar to her translation experiences, where words and concepts flow freely, unlinking her body from her sense of self also emancipates her. Her lack of heels loses significance. The analogous relationship between cultural-linguistic and physical sense of balance recalls Julia Kristeva’s writing on foreignness that equates the artificiality of using a new language with a prosthesis and asserts that artificial language can remake the body (15–16). Like the *Tintenfische* who shrieked as she ripped off their ears in a restaurant kitchen near the beginning of the story, the narrator felt at the mercy of those cultural insiders who wanted to alter her body. However, the more she would have resembled them, the more she would have felt compelled to make her sense of identity conform to her new appearance. She would have become one of them, too, and this would have meant losing her awareness of difference. Her acceptance of her missing *Fersen* as a situation to resolve on her own prompts her to write again, to create her own *Verse*, with “v.” And in order to do so, she must obtain her notebooks from her husband by invading his room, thus breaking his power over her. Tawada draws here a correlation between physicality and the materiality of words by connecting heels and writing. Albrecht Klopfer and Miho Matsunaga remark that this latter association is not present in the Japanese original (nor does it work in the English translation); it emerges only in the translation into German (6). Such new associations are in keeping with Tawada’s belief that translations bring to the fore hidden elements or even another language.

By revealing the husband behind the locked bedroom door as a dead *Tintenfisch*, the narrative exposes him as an empty signifier, one imbued with paternalistic authority, into which the narrator has been pouring her fantasies. His shrivelled corpse has little to do with the man she has been imagining in her dreams over the previous nights. The imagined husband had been controlling her thoughts and movements from his hiding place. Her efforts to make sense of him turn out to have been a series of “translations without an original,” for there never was a husband. This central image of the dead husband gives rise to different associations in different languages. The English translation, “squid,” is not as evocative of ink, a material for writing that can also veil the squid and make it enigmatic, as is the German “Tintenfisch.” The Japanese word *ika* emphasizes more the notion of defamiliarization (Tachibana 163). One also sees that the husband’s death, instigated by the narrator’s penetration into his room, and his corpse’s shape, similar to her image of her own body without heels, signal her figurative killing of the impotence of the “feminine” position into which she has been pushed. Yet her newfound autonomy is deceptive, for although her husband is dead, his (phallogocentric) language is becoming her own language.

As it drips into her ear she reworks it and makes it her own. The narrator thus moves from listening (*hören*) towards belonging (*zugehören*; "Das Tor des Übersetzers" 126). At this juncture, the narrator's desire to write shows her decision to assume an active role in the new linguistic system. Her acceptance of her "unbalanced" perspective seems to ensure that she can navigate on her own without surrendering to the system's full force.

On the other hand, a head nurse's relentless sucking on the narrator's toes in her last dream also reveals the power of the new culture to absorb her, its yearning to possess her. Suddenly her "strange" feet, which previously evoked laughter, have become objects of longing. Her foreignness entices the Westerner because the narrator's newly gained skill with the language combined with her outsider's perspective reveal surprising facets to common objects, like feet and heels. Translating superficially, as opposed to acceding to linguistic norms without probing them, becomes, on the one hand, a question of self-defence, of resisting cultural absorption, just as the squid ejects ink when threatened. Translating without knowledge of the cultural context, by concentrating on what is immediately apparent and linking a word or phrase to that, makes the translation more enigmatic, more refreshing. This, in turn, makes the translator appear desirable, because she enables the "natives" to see their culture and language anew. As Tawada pointed out in a conversation with students at a North American university (Tawada, Conversation), a squid has a soft body in the water. Just as water flows through it, language traverses her translating narrator, who only gradually learns to use this new language. The main protagonist's linguistic power, however, merely changes the quality of her cultural objectification. By taking charge of her alterity, she metamorphoses from an object of derision, because she looks different, to an object of desire, because she makes language function differently. Yet as long as she can translate, she can elude total assimilation. Emerging from the "ocean" of the new language around her by translating it superficially and then communicating the estranging aspects of what she observes keep her difference from dissolving. The narrator becomes the one to guide her intercultural experience as she learns to write again. Thus the tale enacts the convergence of foreigner and foreign environment as a mutually irritating but, in this case, ultimately productive process, because the foreigner participates in the construction of meanings in a new way. Translation helps her to write, that is, to create meanings, but meanings that make clear their artificiality.

While Chow points to the difficulties of synthesizing different sign systems into one model of representation (511), "Fersenlos" appears to offer the hope of learning to live with shifting models of representation. Other Tawada narratives, however, present a more conflicted view. Similar to Chow's ideas about depth and surface in her work on Chinese cinema, Tawada's incongruous characters and surreal manner of narrating slide along the textual surface of German everyday culture to question the very depth of this culture. Unlike the narrator in "Fersenlos" the narrator in the literary essay "Das Fremde aus der Dose" (in the collection *Talisman*, 1996) cannot move from surface translating to writing. In

this tale about a foreign narrator getting to know two “German” female figures, Tawada draws an analogy between notions of reading and observing and ideas of depth and surface, or of interpretation and translation. Both the “foreign” narrator and the two “native” Germans she meets, Sascha and Sonja, cannot read German. They all appear as cultural outsiders. Ability to read rather than nationality seems to be the key to fitting in. Yet the letters in unknown words distract the narrator from considering the words’ communicative function. She focusses instead on their sounds or on associated images, like an “s” and a snake, remarking, “Ich wiederholte die S-Laute im Mund und merkte dabei, daß meine Zunge plötzlich fremd schmeckte” (39). Unable to penetrate beyond the surface, she also persists in her feelings of estrangement. And her inability to read in the foreign city she inhabits maintains her difference and prevents others from interacting with her, because they cannot read her face: “Damals erlebte ich oft, daß Menschen unruhig werden, wenn sie mein Gesicht nicht lesen können wie einen Text” (40), she says. Her inscrutable face both repeats Orientalist stereotypes and repels attempts to “know” her. “Transparency,” according to Homi Bhabha, “is the action of the distribution and arrangement of differential spaces, positions, knowledges in relation to each other, relative to a discriminatory, not inherent, sense of order” (109). The narrator’s lack of transparency hinders any moves to contain her by knowing her. Likewise, she cannot gain a grasp over the other characters. Appropriation is thus connected to interpreting or attaching meaning to words, objects, or people and making them comprehensible, thereby reducing the interpreter’s sense of cultural distance. In contrast, Tawada’s surface translation counters the temptation to interpret and make transparent, but its polysemy isolates.

This type of translation builds on observation. The alphabetic Sascha is undisturbed by the narrator’s apparently unreadable face. “Sascha konnte jede Art Unlesbarkeit mit Ruhe akzeptieren. Sie wollte nichts ‘lesen,’ sondern alles genau beobachten” (40), the narrator explains. They get to know each other by carefully observing and interacting on the basis of their observations. While they remain cultural outsiders, their friendship indicates the possibility of intercultural communication based on concentrated attention to direct observation rather than on inattentive stereotyping. The narrator contrasts her new friendship with the pain she feels at the way many “Germans” strive to interpret her. They bombard her with questions about “the Japanese” based on what they have read in newspapers. Yet she cannot transmit cultural difference in response to such questions, for what the others have understood through reading is too constraining for her to deal with. Indeed, the narrator asserts, “Der Unterschied [zwischen zwei Kulturen] wurde direkt auf meine Haut aufgetragen wie eine fremde Schrift, die ich zwar spüren, aber nicht lesen konnte. Jeder fremde Klang, jeder fremde Blick und jeder fremde Geschmack wirkten unangenehm auf den Körper, so lange, bis der Körper sich veränderte” (41). This idea of another culture trying to inscribe itself onto her recurs throughout Tawada’s writing. Her narrators constantly work to extricate themselves from a signifying system that makes their position as foreign woman

into something to be penetrated. The fact that this narrator cannot read the cultural signs around her, which she likens to an incisive script on her skin that is gradually changing her body, shows the quandary she is experiencing. Rather than functioning as a translator between cultures, she has to deal with the painful pressures of the dominant culture working to incorporate her and to impose its view of "Japanese" culture onto her, which feels as if this culture were writing its stereotypes onto her. But if she were able to read the German script on her body, this would imply that its meanings were no longer questionable to her, that she shared "German" cultural perspectives. As long as she remains aware of the "untranslatable elements of meaning," she suffers but resists the notion that difference lies only between homogenous cultures. In the words of Bhabha, "the subject of cultural difference becomes a problem that Walter Benjamin has described as [...] the *element of resistance* in the process of transformation, 'that element in a translation which does not lend itself to translation'" (224; emphasis in the original).

Reading can lead to misunderstandings, which in turn do violence to the ideas or persons being read. Observation, however, can also be misleading, as the narrator learns after buying a can with the picture of a "Japanese" woman on it, but instead finding tuna fish on the inside. This cultural artifact defies her interpretive desires and links her translating problems to the breaking of stereotypes. The image of the woman on the can has been freed of any fixed meaning, in contrast to the ways that the narrator feels that others interpret her and that she tries to read others. Fischer notes that this literary essay illustrates a stage of being foreign at which one can recognize letters but is not yet proficient at combining them. This inability rests in part on ignorance of the ideas, codes, and conventions that lend them meaning (68). Yet this ignorance compels the narrator into a productive quest for meaning, as her narration shows. In what Thomas Wägenbaur describes as "a utopia of a legible society" (344) the narrator tries to compare people to letters that come together for a short time to form words, and groups of people to words that form sentences, which would allow the narrator to interpret them, their culture, and the city. The narrator ponders this by stating

Es muß einen Moment gegeben haben, in dem die Kombination dieser Wörter zufällig mehrere Sätze bildete und in dem ich diese fremde Stadt wie einen Text hätte lesen können. Aber ich entdeckte niemals einen Satz in dieser Stadt, sondern nur Buchstaben und manchmal einige Wörter, die mit dem "Inhalt" der Kultur direkt nichts zu tun hatten. ("Das Fremde aus der Dose" 44)

No matter how much she seeks a meaning behind the words, she finds only more words. Her inability to read frustrates attempts to "master" ideas and keeps her in the role of translating outsider. Yet her desire to belong blinds her to the strength of precisely this role. Her search for cultural content shows that she still believes in the depth of meaning. This naïveté, whether deliberate or not, keeps her translating.

Stuck on the surface, the narrator cannot penetrate the new culture by trying to comprehend it, but it also cannot penetrate her. She instead translates her attempts to read, which results in a plethora of unexpected associations. In Tawada's words, "Die Sprache der Übersetzung tastet die Oberfläche des Textes vorsichtig ab, ohne sich von seinem Kern abhängig zu machen" ("Schrift einer Schildkröte" 35–36). Profound meaning is kept out of reach. This is like the problem of the translator described by Barbara Johnson in her book *Mother Tongues*,

The task of the translator suddenly becomes even more complicated if he has to edit out a swarm of associations that are not functional in order to stick to "what is meant." Clearly those associations form no part of "what is meant," and their presence is purely irrelevant. Yet the linguistic "noise" of the act of translating, in *not* being meant or intended, comes close to the pure linguisticity of language itself. The very obstacles to translation, then, may point toward the "pure language" that translation enables one to glimpse. (61; emphasis in the original)

The noise that Tawada's protagonists register emphasizes the linguisticity of their translations. Their glimpses of other languages reveal a cacophony of potential meanings blocking their desire to understand "what is meant."

Yet this surface translating is never complete; a longing for the depth and stability of meaning and the comfort of belonging is always present. The hyperattentiveness and incomprehension of Tawada's linguistic outsiders maintain both their feelings of alienation and their awareness of linguistic play. Comprehension, on the other hand, parallels assimilation, for those who do not stumble over meaning are the ones who belong in a language and feel no need to question, the ones who do not really have to listen to each word and sound. Belonging, or becoming assimilated, demystifies language and numbs perception. *Zugehören* (etymologically related to *gehörchen*, *gehörig*, according to Duden 225–26) is the term Tawada uses as the goal of her marginalized protagonists, who long to exchange it for their role as (*Zu*)*Hörer* (in the sense of "auf etwas achten" 291). Hearing can be an activity that enables the listener to perceive differences but also to act on that knowledge, to leave the threshold and jump into a language, to belong ("Das Tor des Übersetzers" 126). Once that happens, however, differences tend to vanish. The foreign figures are caught on the threshold, wishing to relish the surfaces of the German language while being pressured to comprehend its depth.

Translating for depth also involves a physical struggle within the translator that involves other senses. For example, in the tale "Zungentanz" (in the 2002 collection *Überseetzungen*, which plays on the German words for translation, oversea, sole, and tongue), the narrator dreams that her entire body consists of a tongue. When she is in danger of being engulfed by German, when it touches her body, she reconfigures it by mutating metonymically into a body part that repre-

sents language. However, she also refers to her new condition as a disease, thereby connecting it to her sense of estrangement. This connection of body and language recurs throughout Tawada's work. Margret Brüggmann, for instance, contends that Tawada's references to the elemental sensory organs, to tongue and ear, in the novel *Ein Gast* (1993) show that foreignness begins in and imprints itself on the body (351). Kraenzle refers to the "radically physical experience of language throughout [*Überseetzungen*]" (6). Clara Ervedosa explains that the tongue's function in both tasting and speaking allows it to stand for, in Tawada's works, a new kind of perception that links body and thought (579). In "Zungentanz" a problem arises when the narrator pronounces all words with equal stress and can no longer read German for meaning. The narrator playfully revises Benjamin's statement that the sentence is a wall blocking access to the original and that the literality of words serves as an arcade leading to the original. The narrator in this tale claims that the letters of the words she is trying to understand create a wall that prevents her from gaining access to their meaning, despite the fact that she created the original text of which they are a part. Once she wrote them down, the text metamorphosed into another language that she cannot read (10). The vastly different systems of writing and speaking in Japanese and German impede her from connecting form to content in German. Literality in this case reveals in an exaggerated manner the surface construction of language, the shapes and sounds of its letters, but it separates it from any kind of underlying meaning. The search for such meaning exhausts the narrator, who notes, "Mit winzigen Füßen muß ich jeden Buchstaben hochklettern, ohne sehen zu können, was hinter ihm steckt. Jeder Laut ein Sturz. Die Stimme wird immer leiser, während die Schriftzeichen immer lauter werden" (11). Only when she uses her tongue to place differential emphasis on words, to apply hierarchies to them, can she read past the letters, although they do not become invisible. In her words, "Um lesen zu können, muß ich auf den Text blicken. Aber um nicht zu stolpern muß ich so tun, als wären die Buchstaben gar nicht da. Das ist das Geheimnis des Alphabets: Die Buchstaben sind nicht mehr da, und doch sind sie noch nicht verschwunden" (13). Learning to read or to translate for meaning is based on ignoring the presence of the literal. Reading thus relies on pretense and requires the reader or translator to ignore her senses of sight and sound, to trick her body.

The translator also transforms herself by altering the languages between which she travels. Kraenzle argues, "in crossing over from one linguistic territory to another, the speaking body is nevertheless doubly transformed, both through a renewed sense of the bodily exertion inherent in speech acts and through a re-coding of the body in the foreign language" (6). Indeed, this process can inflict pain on the translator, as Tawada's protagonists repeatedly experience. Douglas Robinson explains the somatic reaction to unexpected ways of translating as anxiety at being jarred from usual ways of perceiving the world (xii). Such anxiety could also affect a translator who struggles against shaping translations to accommodate repressive perceptions. Yet the translator's body, whether as tongue or in more conventional form, can help bring to the surface submerged or obscured

aspects of language that may or may not be translatable. Indeed, the body is what Tawada, in “Erzähler ohne Seelen,” calls a “Resonanzkörper” and gives voice to the incommensurate of language, if one listens. “Nur in einem Zustand, in dem man nicht auf Verstehen fixiert ist, kann man sie [die Sprache] hören” (25), she writes, thus the emphasis on ears and hearing in her writing. Her translations of German back into German always alter her translators’ bodies in some way, which points to the imbrication of subjectivity in the web of meaning creation.

Language in Tawada’s works is thus physically real but also alien, and the only way for the subject to express this strangeness is through translating. This is always both insufficient and liberating. Mitsutani remarks on the translator’s “inevitable participation in the story she is translating” as a hindrance to completing or perfecting her translation; this renders translation an open-ended process (43). Tawada’s invented Japanese figures cannot overcome their fears of difference merely by translating into language what they sense, they must first incorporate the foreign (or German) and, in doing so, instigate a process of permanent self-metamorphosis (Fischer 79). This is valid for translating nonverbal signs as well. In another tale from *Überseetzungen*, “Wörter, die in der Asche schlafen” – the title evokes Tawada’s essays on translations of Celan’s poetry – the fictional Japanese narrator makes the spit deposited in her hair by a passing xenophobic “German” cyclist into another opportunity for translating associatively, as a way to name the material symbol of the inexplicable hate that pierces her skin. In searching for a name for it, she translates it several ways (*Spucke*, *Spuk*, *Flüssigkeit*, *Speichel*, 22), thereby releasing it from its hateful meaning. She separates the unpleasant feeling of the spit on her body from the cyclist’s malevolent intention, thereby erasing its representative force. She rechannels its power over her into something different and enriching as she imagines curse words that she could use as a retort (*Du Fenchel*, *Tasche*, *Gefäß*, *Tüte*, 26–27).

When Tawada’s figures translate literally and superficially, they are able to resist the violence of determinate meaning, that is, the force that prevents a free play of associative meanings. They can then transform the pain they experience into something harmless, such as the way the narrator reworks the curse *Arschloch* in the same tale. By attempting to translate the word literally, the translator first thinks of looking into a *Loch*, or hole, in her chest or into an oven filled with ashes, the ashes of an animal that has been thrown alive into the oven. She imagines it was caught because its name had been used as a curse word and the animal itself, an animal with long, soft eyelashes and horizontal pupils, had been forgotten. However, she claims that the animal still sleeps in the ashes, like a word that has never been said and that she will call its name and wake it (30). She thus transforms the curse into the remains of an act of violence and forgetting, an act committed against something living that she can revive by considering superficial associations. *Arsch* reminds her of *Asche* or *Aas*, which reminds her of something dead, or maybe just asleep, something that she can reawaken. This way of ignoring an undesirable meaning for a multitude of

connotations discards the negative force of the curse. The curse had been cast at her by a "German" character who could express himself only in stereotypes, and the association of the narrator with the words *Arschloch*, *Asche*, and *Ofen* links the spittle in her hair to residues of a fascist hatred of minorities and foreigners. By transforming the curse into a signifier in an incomprehensible sign system, the narrator loosens the curse from its conventional context and makes it foreign. She also relieves her pain for a while.

Benjamin ends his translation essay by citing Rudolf Pannwitz's contention that the translator must expand his language through the foreign language (20). Similarly, Tawada enhances German by using Japanese to make it exotic and then translating this strange German back into German. Her translating narrators make their own kind of sense, breaking down barriers between notions of foreign and native by multiplying their connotations. This article has shown how surface translating in Tawada's works disrupts painful processes of cultural absorption by challenging the assumption of homogenous cultures and momentarily relieving pressures to assimilate. Like the Chinese films that Chow addresses and Shimada's assertions about intercultural translation, Tawada's hyperliteral translations reveal the artificiality of ideas about German culture. And her use of "Japanese" narrators suggests the inadequacy of how meaning is ascribed to Japanese culture. Her translating narrators take charge of their alterity by transforming "Germany" into an alien world where natives and nonnatives alike are all strange and different creatures. However, this dissolution of hierarchies is ephemeral. Like the vampiric "German" head nurse in "Fersenlos," a resurrected mutation of the supposedly vanquished paternal cultural power in the narrator's new home, the force of the German language and all that it means lies ready to consume Tawada's subjects. The native/foreigner duality constantly threatens to reappear and settle into the depths of conventional meaning. This difference is even necessary for the production of such meaning. Thus her writing shows the need to rise to the surface and translate again and again.

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