Voices from Everywhere

Yoko Tawada

Dong Shiyamaker

Titles in the Series

Asia World

Series Editor: Mark Selden
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Chapter Seven
Tawada’s Multilingual Moves: Toward a Transnational Imaginary
Yasemin Yildiz

The idea of a common language is instrumental in the imagination of the nation as a community, as Benedict Anderson has argued. As a result of massive migrations, increased mobility, and the growth of exile and diasporic communities in the twentieth century, however, languages have become dislocated from national territories to an unprecedented degree. This dislocation, and the emergence of new hybrid languages which frequently accompanies it, has created a situation in which the ideological equation of language, territory, and national identity has become increasingly difficult to maintain. In the cultural realm, this situation has led to the emergence of bilingual and multilingual writers who explore the connections and disconnections between languages, territories, and nations in innovative and critical ways.¹

I suggest that we read Yoko Tawada’s bilingual oeuvre in this light as producing and providing insight into new transnational imaginaries.² By transnational imaginaries I mean the mental maps that negotiate the diverse social, cultural, political, and psychic forces that interact with a heightened intensity today and that are not limited to any given national context.³ As is well known, Tawada, a Japanese-born writer who has been living in Germany since 1982, writes award-winning prose, poetry, theater and radio plays as well as literary essays in Japanese and in German.⁴ Her German texts, on which I primarily focus in this paper, frequently employ a displaced female Japanese narrator in Europe, who observes the oddity of rituals and details of everyday life in a sort of ethnography.⁵ Rather than developing coherent plots, the texts usually consist of a series of loosely related vignettes and observations. In addition to her literary work, Tawada has completed a doctoral dissertation on German literature, and so is also fluent in the “languages” of theory and philosophy.⁶

While Tawada is the author of a bilingual oeuvre in Japanese and German, I argue that one of the most important aspects of her writing is in fact her multilingual writing practice within each of these languages. In both her German and her Japanese texts other languages are invoked and inscribed.⁷ As I will demonstrate in more detail below, many of Tawada’s texts develop a varied multilingualism that derives from moving between languages and from switching per-
spectives on the language at hand. In her German texts, she frequently defamiliarizes German language habits by taking words or grammatical concepts, such as grammatical gender, literally. Her attention to the shape of alphabetic letters, and the confrontation of the Roman alphabet with Japanese and Chinese script, likewise serves to defamiliarize the very material of writing. This defamiliarization, aided by another language's presence, but not fully explained by it, puts into question the supposed identity of a language and the notion of clear-cut boundaries between languages.

Multilingualism in literature is not a new form in itself, as the pioneering study of Leonard Forster, The Poet's Tongues (1970), already documents. Yet the recent increase in titles on literary multilingualism indicates that this form is expanding into new directions and at the same time receiving growing critical attention. I suggest that this attention is due to its significance as an aesthetic site for thinking cultural interaction in a globalizing world. I therefore propose that we consider Tawada's multilingual form not only as a site where the contours of national language(s) are made porous but also as partaking in a larger reimagining of language subjects and affiliations. In the often playful move beyond the separateness of national languages, Tawada begins to offer a linguistic imagination that invokes realms beyond categories such as the nation.

Tawada's texts proceed in this reimagining by subtly questioning the naturalized links between subjects and languages. Since the mother tongue is a central figure of claiming such links as natural, it is not surprising that her texts repeatedly turn to this term. In the 1996 prose text “Von der Muttersprache zur Sprachmutter” (From the Mother Tongue to the Language Mother) in the collection Talsian, Tawada deconstructs the notion of the mother tongue most explicitly. I examine the implications of her specific form of deconstruction, namely the turn away from organic to inorganic modes of belonging, and finally to a utopian realm outside language. The very notion of the subject and subjectivity are not left untouched in this deconstruction, but are rather themselves deconstructed. In the short prose piece “Eine leere Flasche” (An Empty Bottle, 2002) the move away from the national context of origin and its language into a new language realm is figured as a move to a new “I” beyond restricted grounding. That text suggests that a transnational move allows for a liberation from nationality, history, as well as gender identity. The volume Überseezungen (Overseas Tongues, 2002), in which it is featured, as a whole introduces an extended transnational realm. This book marks a step beyond the heretofore dominant East-West axis in Tawada’s writing and towards a reorganization of her imaginary topography that now includes an engagement with the North-South axis. The story “Bioscoop der Nacht” (Bioscope of the Night), set in the section on “South African Tongues” provides a compelling constellation of languages and histories in this regard. By constructing a first-person narrator who is a Japanese woman living in Germany but dreaming in Afrikaans, a language unknown to her conscious self, Tawada explores the binary of existing either in the mother tongue or in the foreign language. Her turn to dream-language in general and to Afrikaans in particular has implications for imagining transnational subjects and their historical entanglements.

Mother Language—Language Mother:
Organic and Inorganic Kinship

As a deeply ideological concept, the mother tongue has been used to make political claims about belonging and nationality since the late eighteenth century. While the issue of the mother tongue appears in a number of Tawada’s texts, it is most programmatically treated in the 1996 volume Talsian in her story-essay “Von der Muttersprache zur Sprachmutter” (From the Mother Tongue to the Language Mother—or more literally, preserving the German title’s chiasmic structure: From the Mother Language to the Language Mother.) Written for a German-speaking audience, this text relates the Japanese narrator’s linguistic experiences while working in a German office shortly after arriving in Germany.

How does Tawada stage belonging with regard to the “mother tongue,” a concept that invokes language affiliation as a result of birth and kinship? In Tawada’s text the figure of kinship does not relate to the “mother tongue” itself, but to what the narrator calls her “language mother.” Instead of invoking an organic mother, this term refers to a machine. The narrator explains that in order to learn the grammatical gender of German nouns, she imagined them as male or female objects. By taking the notion of grammatical gender literally and conflating grammatical gender with human gender (or even sex), that is, treating it as if it was a natural dimension of the object, the text paradoxically denaturalizes the grammatical category. The literal-mindedness, a seemingly naïve stance, reminds the reader of a dimension of the language that is normally not perceived. This reminder does not change the grammatical order of the German language, but it defamiliarizes the language to its speakers and readers and thereby does alter it nonetheless.

In the text, this shift leads to a sexualized desk, where the narrator finds herself surrounded by male—even masculine—seeming objects, such as pens and pencils: “the pencil, the ballpoint pen, the fountain pen—the male shapes lay there in a manly way and also got up in a manly way when I took them in my hand.” The only “female” object on this desk is die Schreibmaschine (the feminine article typewriter): “This female machine which gave me the gift of language I called a language mother.” The machine functions as a “mother” insofar as a new language subject originates from it. Kinship is transferred to a mechanical process of repetition and reproduction. This shift does not lead to a second mother tongue, though, since for the narrator the typewriter “did not change the fact that German is not my mother tongue.” The machine does not reproduce a mother tongue, but supplements it. What it changes is the notion of kinship itself: that term is no longer limited to organic relationships but designates inorganic relationships which can “adopt” subjects as well. Why the mother tongue needs to be supplemented in this manner is only explained at the end of the text:
In the mother tongue words are attached to people so that one cannot playfully enjoy language. There, the thoughts cling so closely to the words that neither the former nor the latter can fly freely. In a foreign language, however, one has something like a staple remover: it removes all the things that are attached to each other and cling to one another.  

The mother tongue is associated with too tight a relationship, a form of belonging that requires strategies of detachment. What is removed is the inevitability and supposed naturalness of the relation between word and referent. The desire for distance from the mother tongue is not presented as based on cultural rejection but rather on the desire for cultural space not smothered by nativity. Thus Tawada’s title—“From the mother language to the language mother”—appears as a programmatic stance on affiliation, indicating a shift from a discourse of a naturalized relationship to language to an inorganic one.

While the typewriter—interpellated as the “language mother”—occupies a privileged position through its titular appearance, it is in fact the staple remover, the Hefklammerenferner, that functions as the ultimate model: “its wonderful name embodied my yearning for a foreign language.” The staple remover is outside of the chiasmus of the title; it detaches what the chiasmus still holds together, namely kinship figured through both the mother language and the language mother. This utensil, not able to write or erase, is fully detached from the act of writing itself. It is “illiterate” and does not function to reproduce language or writing. In contrast to the other objects on the desk, this item is also not imagined as male or female in a human sense. Rather, it is said to resemble a snake’s head with teeth. The auxiliary alignment of an object’s grammatical gender and its “sex” in the narrator’s imagination is interrupted. With that the object breaks the chain of human reproduction and even alternative modes of kinship. The desire for a “foreign language”—rather than German—gestures to a realm beyond the human, the one that is supposed to be distinguished by language. In this text, Tawada moves from an organic to an inorganic model of kinship, only to abandon it altogether as a repressive model. Rather than kinship and belonging, the text envisions detachment as a desirable process and quality of being. This detachment is enabled by a multilingual environment, not because any specific language is preferred over another one, but because multilingualism can defamiliarize the very language structures in which we exist. With this positive definition of detachment as liberatory, Tawada suggests a perspective on multilingual transnational encounters as positive and productive rather than as a site of loss or grievous alienation.

Redefining the Subject

Whereas in the “Muttersprache” text the gender system of the German language is used as a point of departure, the short prose piece “Eine leere Flasche” (An empty bottle) from the 2002 volume Überseuzungen (Overseastongues) takes up the gender system inherent to Japanese, in order to problematize subjects and belonging from a different perspective. In a number of her German texts,

Tawada refers to the Japanese system of pronouns in which gender is built into the “I.” In “Eine leere Flasche” the Japanese narrator tells German-language readers of the different Japanese terms of self-reference and their gendered and age-specific character. She explains that these terms range from the young girls’ self-reference as arashi and the boys’ self-reference as boku or the older boys’ ore to the ungendered adult term watashi. Tawada’s elaboration emphasizes that children are strongly gendered until they reach adulthood and have the option of using a gender-neutral term for “I.” The narrator of this brief text—like the first-person narrator in the earlier novel Das Bad (The bath, 1989)—tells us that as a child she was uneasy with all these terms for “I” because she did not feel gendered in as clear a way as the terms demanded. She further tells us of a girl who refers to herself with the young boys’ “I,” namely “boku.” That girl defines her gender, her gefühltes Geschlecht (felt gender) as boku. In contrast to that grammatical gender crossing, the narrator identifies neither as a girl-I nor as boku.

This text stresses the relationship between “I” and gender particularly in a Japanese-language childhood. Given that determinative relationship, a language which does not force the speaker to identify herself in terms of gender every time she refers to herself is seen as desirable and liberatory. This liberation is linked to a spatial move and a linguistic change:

I lost sight of the problem of self-reference. Because I moved to Europe and found the word “I” which does not force you to have such considerations. An “I” does not need to have a specific gender, or age, or status, or history, or attitude, or character. Anyone can call themselves simply “I.” This word consists only of the fact that I speak at all . . . “I” became my favorite word.

The “European” word is described as an empty sign that takes on meaning only in the act of speaking itself and is thereby idealized for its lack of baggage. The narrator of this text consequently favors the word ich for similar reasons as the narrator of “Muttersprache” privileges the staple remover, namely they both serve as sites of detachment. This is based on a linguistic understanding of pronouns as shifter, though in that field this characterization is not limited to European languages. This notion—that in Europe a subjectivity can be expressed that is not circumscribed by gender, age, status, or history—is enabled by the focus on a structural understanding of language, rather than a historical one.

However, in the end of the text, both the “I” and the verb “to be” are offered in an altered sense that relies precisely on Japanese in order to be a space of possibility:

I also like that an I (ich) begins with the letter I, a simple line, like the beginning of a brush stroke which touches the paper and simultaneously proclaims the opening of speech. Bin [first person present tense of “to be”] is also a beautiful word. In Japanese there is also the word bin, that sounds exactly the same and means “a bottle.” When I begin telling a story with the two words ich bin (I
am) a space opens up, the I is the beginning of a brush stroke and the bottle is empty.25

Comparing the I in ich to the stroke of a brush implicitly evokes calligraphy and relocates the “European” letter to the realm of Japanese writing art. The pleasure is derived in the calligraphic opening of speech. The possibility of a Japanese phonetic understanding of bin, that is, the German first-person form of the verb “to be” as Flasche (bottle) supplies another dimension of meaning. The text translates the parts of ich bin (I am) into a calligraphic opening stroke and a bottle respectively. Though seemingly unrelated, those two associative and phonetic meanings are combined into a new understanding. What is transformed is the deeply philosophical articulation of existence and subjectivity that is encapsulated in ich bin. In the Japanese-inspired but ultimately primarily associative, creative, and “subjective” version of Ich bin this expression becomes one of openness, possibility, space, lightness, and emptiness. These words are translated from German to Japanese and back to German until we end up with an idiosyncratic and object-filled image.

The story “Eine leere Flasche” that began with the problem of the Japanese self-reference does not end with a shift to the “European” alternative but uses the European version as an occasion to combine and reimagine both German and Japanese. This reimagined form of “I am” is thus multilingual in its multiple moves between these two languages. The multilingualism resides in the fact that we do not simply encounter two different languages. Rather, in the series of translations and reimaginings it is the narrator’s association which provides the rewriting. This association is the third term in the interchange of the two languages. The gender aspect is “overcome” not only by growing up and moving to Europe but, as this ending implies, also by the replacement of human subjectivity with writing utensils and acts of writing (the calligraphic stroke) as well as other non-human objects (the bottle). In that sense it performs a similar shift to the one in “Muttersprache” where the gendered objects including the “language mother” itself are ultimately transcended by the name of an object that is not imagined in human terms, namely the Hefklämmernernfern (staple remover). This vision of forms of detachment leads us to the question of history. Does Tawada completely eschew history in her multilingual, transnational imaginary?

**Dream Language and the Topography of Transnational Imaginaries**

What happens after the staple remover detaches papers from each other and let them reorganize or “fly freely”? As I indicated earlier, Tawada’s more recent writing undergoes such a reorganization with respect to the maps underlying her “imaginary topography,” to borrow Sigrid Weigel’s term. Whereas “Europe” is a frequent reference point for Tawada in many earlier texts, most notably in Wo Europa anfängt (Where Europe Begins, 1991), her 2002 collection Überseezungen expands this topography. The text “Eine leere Flasche,” for example, is situ-
can thus speculate that the essential of cultural identity is also the essential of identity. We have noted that the idea of the "core" of the modern culture is that of a "core" of identity, which is expressed in the form of a "core" of identity, and that this "core" of identity is the essential of the modern culture. We have also noted that this "core" of identity is the essential of the modern culture, and that this "core" of identity is the essential of the modern culture. We have also noted that this "core" of identity is the essential of the modern culture, and that this "core" of identity is the essential of the modern culture. We have also noted that this "core" of identity is the essential of the modern culture, and that this "core" of identity is the essential of the modern culture. We have also noted that this "core" of identity is the essential of the modern culture, and that this "core" of identity is the essential of the modern culture. 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Appendix A: Figures and Tables


Appendix B: Key Terms and Concepts


Appendix C: Glossary