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Multilingual Literatures and the Production of Universality Through Translation: Cassin, Diagne, Tawada

Abstract: Does the failure of European universalism imply that we should get rid of the universal as a pernicious idea or does it, on the contrary, reveal the urgency of defining a truly universal concept of universality? In the current debate touching both societal and geopolitical issues, philosophers Barbara Cassin and Souleymane Bachir Diagne position themselves similarly, both tracing the epistemic dimension of the problem back to the beginning of the European history of ideas. Considering the abstract logos of philosophy as the bedrock of a "pathology of the universal" (Cassin) – in Diagne's words an "overarching", "imperial" universal – they put it to the empirical test of translation. My paper argues that the strategy of "untranslatables" that they explore is also at work in contemporary multilingual literature and examines the political potential of its poetic thinking. If writers are capable of letting the reader experience this "more complex" (Cassin) or "lateral" (Diagne) universality on the basis of translingual poetics, then they are privileged protagonists in the intellectual debate outlined above.

Keywords: universality, translation theory, translingual poetics, Barbara Cassin, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Yoko Tawada

Translated by Anna Galt

1 Translation and multilingualism in the universality debate

The current debate in the humanities around the notion of universality is not just a theoretical one. As Immanuel Wallerstein puts it in his seminal book *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power* (2006, xv), establishing a (genuinely) "universal universalism" is a task we must tackle if we want to have a say in "how the future world-system into which we will be entering in the next twenty-five to fifty years will be structured". Starting from the critique of European universalism as articulated in postcolonial approaches as well as in theories of modernity and globalisation (Appadurai 1990; Chakrabarty 2000; Conrad and Randeria 2002), it is necessary to completely reconceive the category of the universal in order to not leave the field of thought and political action open to cultural relativism and ethnonationalism (Balibar 2016; Mbembe 2016; Messling 2019; Hofmann and Messling 2021) and their spreading of "murderous identities", as Amin Maalouf (1998) once called it. Within this debate, philosophers Barbara Cassin and Souleymane Bachir Diagne take a similar stance, both tracing the epistemic dimension of the problem back to the beginning of the European history of language thinking.[1] Considering the abstract *logos o*f philosophy as the bedrock of a "pathology of the universal" (Cassin) – in Diagne's words an "overarching", "imperial" universal – they submit it to the empirical test of translation. Translation, they argue, in the back and forth between languages, makes possible the production of a more complex universality – as the title of Cassin's book *Éloge de la traduction: Compliquer l'universel* (2016) suggests – than the supposed universalism of the *logos* claimed from within a culturally dominating language. Following Merleau-Ponty, Diagne calls this universality conceived out of the diversity of languages "lateral", for it presupposes the negotiation of two particular points of view, in contrast to an "overarching universal" (*universel de surplomb*) imposed from above (Diagne 2014).

The problem that Cassin and Diagne articulate here on a theoretical level has become a more and more central focus in multilingual literatures – this seems to me to be the main reason for their political relevance today. If their translingual poetics are capable of letting the reader experience this new form of universality based on translation processes, then these writers are privileged protagonists in the intellectual debate outlined above. I argue that, like literary translators (Thiérard 2019), translingual writers produce a poetic thinking about language, and by doing so have

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1 The position of François Jullien (2008) should also be considered in this context, which unfortunately the limited space of this article does not allow.

a substantial influence on shaping the world of tomorrow. My contribution therefore intends to establish a dialogue between two disconnected fields of research: on the one hand Diagne's and Cassin's philosophy of translation, and on the other hand current research on literary multilingualism that focuses on overcoming the monolingual paradigm or the modern invention of monolingualism (Yildiz 2012; Gramling 2016; Dembeck and Mein 2014; Dembeck and Parr 2017). I will take the work of the writer Yoko Tawada as a paradigmatic example, whose poetics between languages displays certain similarities with Cassin's strategy of observing "untranslatables" as areas of tension that produce knowledge.

2 Thinking in tongues: Against the eurocentric universalism of the *logos*

The ethical and political implications of the European philosophy of language (*Sprachdenken*) have been highlighted in the last few decades by philosophers and critics such as Henri Meschonnic (1982),[2] Jürgen Trabant (1986; 1990), and Barbara Cassin (2016)[3] – all working in the linguistic anthropological tradition of Wilhelm von Humboldt.[4] In particular they reveal the disastrous consequences of the prevailing dualistic understanding of language for shaping our society and denounce this model dating back to Aristotle, which under the guise of the universality of language (*langage*), establishes the superiority of a certain language (*langue*) or language family. In *De interpretatione*, Aristotle posits universal abstract concepts, as if words were merely clothing, uninvolved in the process of knowledge. As Trabant points out, in this "probably most influential European text on language – after the Bible passages", "language is degraded to a tool for the communication of thoughts that have been formed without words" (Trabant 2003, 30, 34).[5] This supposed universality of the *logos* based on the radical division between *conceptus* and *vox*, between cognition and communication, is in fact conceived from a particular language and is therefore strongly ethnocentric: Thus

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2 Meschonnic's most important texts on Humboldt are reprinted in Meschonnic (2012, Chapters 28–30).

3 See the chapter "Le dispositif Humboldt" in Cassin (2016, 177–226).

4 On the founding of a linguistic anthropology in Trabant and Meschonnic, see Pajević (2012, 124–191).

5 Unless otherwise specified, all the German and French quotes have been translated for the purpose of this article.

Greek declares itself to be the language of reason and being, excluding those who speak other languages ("barbarians") from participating in reason.[6] This "overarching universal" is "the position of those who declare their own particularity to be universal" (Diagne 2018, 68–69) and can only interpret alterity as inferiority. Depending on the age, the self-declared language of reason is Greek, French or English – the "barbarians" are then accordingly renamed "primitives". Diagne urges us not to confuse universalism with universality, pointing out that African languages are still commonly considered to be deficient compared to European languages: they lack writing, abstract concepts, the future tense, the verb "to be", etc. (Diagne 2018, 69–70). Must we remind ourselves that philologists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided arguments for a theory of European linguistic and cultural superiority, which largely justified the Europeans' colonial rule over the rest of the world and not least helped obtain public acceptance as a "mission civilisatrice" (Messling 2016)? To paraphrase Meschonnic, the Aristotelian conception of language that has so strongly influenced the history of linguistic thought in the occident is dangerous, because a theory of language always implies a theory of society (Meschonnic 2012 [2005]).

Against this dualistic tradition in language philosophy and its inherent "pathological universal", Cassin deploys Humboldt's conception of language as a dynamic synthesis of sound and idea, of communication and cognition, in which the material word participates in the concrete process of forming thoughts. In contrast to Aristotle, Humboldt considers the diversity of languages epistemically interesting, because he does not regard it as being a purely material: "Their diversity is not one of sounds and signs, but a diversity in the ways of viewing the world itself" (Humboldt 1903–1936, IV, 27). While language (*langage*) is "the formative organ of thoughts" for Humboldt (1903–1936, VII, 53), this world-constituting process necessarily takes place within a certain language (*langue*) and is therefore partly conditioned by a particular historical setting. Based on this understanding of individual languages as worldviews, Cassin wants to grasp epistemic universality in a "more complex" way, which first of all means moving away from the postulate of a given, abstract universality of human language – as in Aristotle, but also, for example, in Chomsky's idea of an innate universal grammar. In order not to reduce it to similarity with a dominant language, we should rather consider universality as a never-ending task, which, out of the concrete differences of individual languages, allows a common world to appear on the horizon.

In this sense, Cassin and Diagne understand translation as a philosophical method. The monumental reference work coordinated by Cassin, *Vocabulaire*

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6 Trabant raises the same objection against Chomsky's neo-Aristotelian position, which leads to indifference about the diversity and materiality of languages (Trabant 2003, 279–283).

européen des philosophies. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles (2004), took more than ten years and the work of almost 150 contributors to complete. It tackles four hundred lemmas that show noticeable resistance to translation and are therefore treated as important symptoms of the difference between (European) languages.[7] Philosophical texts in translation teem with such "untranslatables", whether they lead to neologisms or are simply adopted in the translation as loan words (Heidegger's *Dasein*, Hegel's *Aufhebung*). Other cases are less obvious:

> Does one understand the same thing by "mind" as by *Geist* or *esprit*, is *pravda* "justice" or "truth", and what happens when we render *mimesis* as "representation" rather than "imitation"? Each entry thus starts from a nexus of untranslatability and proceeds to a comparison of terminological networks, whose distortion creates the history and geography of languages and cultures (Cassin 2014, xvii).

This historical and comparative approach on the one hand makes the *Vocabulaire* an essential reference work for the humanities today, and on the other promotes an awareness of how we philosophise in tongues, i.e. how our thought categories are to a certain extent dependent on our language categories, as Nietzsche already identified.[8] Thus the epistemological gesture of the *Vocabulaire* is altogether a (linguistic) political one: the commitment to a (rich) many tongued, European tradition of philosophising vehemently opposes the increasing monolingualisation of the academic world in its use of English as a (European and global) *lingua franca* (Globish) (Cassin 2016, 55–60). Furthermore, Cassin also explicitly attacks a part of the analytical philosophy in the English-speaking tradition, which, she argues, demonstrates its own flaws with its monolingual attitude of dominance (Cassin 2016, 59–60).

It should be noted that with the plural noun "intraduisibles" (untranslatables), Cassin does not invoke untranslatability in the name of an absolute language relativism, which sacralises language difference as opacity – "the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating" (Cassin 2014, xvii).[9] Following Humboldt, Cassin values the zones of incommensurability between the languages as an opportunity for the work of the mind [*Geist*], because "[t]he sum of what may be known, as the field to be cultivated by the human mind [*Geist*], lies between all languages" (Humboldt 1903–1936, IV, 27). If the conception of individual languages as worldviews means a limitation of perspective and therefore the knowable, then decentring can

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7 Each lemma deals with a multilingual keyword group, meaning that in total there are about 4,000 philosophical keywords from fifteen European languages in the *Vocabulaire*.

8 Diagne (2014, 252) quotes the famous part from Nietzsche's *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (para. 20) and refers to Crépon's reading of it (see Crépon 2000).

9 A form of the plural that leads to neologisms in translation, thus performatively realising the idea of "intraduisibles".

only have a productive effect. This decentring is the source of the productivity of untranslatables, which, employed as a method, may shed new light on old philosophical problems. Fundamentally it is about de-essentialising the language of European philosophies – from Aristotle to Heidegger – that is to refute the position of a "national essentialism" (Meschonnic 1990), which assigns certain languages (for instance Greek, German) an ontological status (Cassin 2016, 60–62). To philosophise in tongues therefore also means, based on the canonical philosophical texts' resistances to translation, revealing this form of the "overarching universal" as an historically particular construction. Although the *Vocabulaire* is not a postcolonial project per se, still we can identify a strong resonance with Achille Mbembe's criticism of European universalism in its inherent impetus (Syrotinski 2019). In this regard, Syrotinski draws attention to the English, as well as especially the Spanish and Portuguese editions of the *Vocabulaire*, which were published in the USA (2014), Mexico (2018), and Brazil (2018), and which shift the originally internal European dimension of the criticism[10] into a postcolonial context.[11] Among the members of Cassin's team working on the *Dictionary*, Diagne best articulates what is at stake in a postcolonial world in this conception of universality as a process of translation (Diagne 2013; see also Diagne's article in this volume).

Diagne takes a clear stance in favour of a decolonisation of knowledge/thinking, pleading for African languages to become (once again) languages of philosophical production.[12] However, he also points out a danger within postcolonial studies when the critique of European universalism leads to abandoning the idea of universality altogether.[13] In his essay "L'universel latéral comme traduction", he illustrates this danger by contrasting the approaches of two African philosophers, Alexis Kagamé und Kwasi Wiredu (Diagne 2014, 2022).[14] Since as early as 1955, Kagamé has been demonstrating the epistemological imperialism of the

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10 In Cassin's approach, the dominant universalistic tradition of the European *logos i*s criticised from the inside out, with recourse to post-structural and deconstructionist theories, especially Derrida, Lacan, and Deleuze (Cassin 2016, 64–67, 122–123).

11 On adapting the *Vocabulaire* in various editions through the process of translation (also into Romanian, Arabic, Ukrainian, Russian, Italian) see Cassin (2016, 70–76).

12 Diagne frequently refers to the writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and his influential book *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986).

13 On this tension within the postcolonial studies see the interview with Souleymane Bachir Diagne conducted by the ERC Minor Universality research team, "Universalisme et multilatéralisme" (ERC Minor Universality 2021).

14 For further reading see Diagne's chapter "De l'universel et de l'universalisme" (Diagne 2018, 69–72) in the volume he edited with the anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle E*n quête d'Afrique(s). Universalisme et pensée décoloniale* (2018). In this book, the dialogue with Amselle about their diverging views on universality brings Diagne to expand on his argument from the 2014 essay.

European languages using the example of Aristotelian ontology, which with its eight or nine categories of being is clearly indebted to the grammatical categories of the Greek language, and whose translation into Indo-European languages is quite unproblematic. Had Aristotle thought in one of the Bantu languages, his ontology would very likely have had four categories of being instead. But is it therefore a justifiable position to set up a Bantu ontology against the Greek-European ontology, as Kagamé proposes, thereby replacing one national essentialism with the other? Distancing himself from this relativist position, Diagne favours that of Wiredu, much closer to his and Cassin's idea of translation as a method. Wiredu does question the logicians' concept of truth based on his difficulties translating it from English into the Akan language (Ghana). However, he does not oppose it with any particular Ghanaian concept of truth, but rather uses this zone of incommensurability between the languages critically in order to pose the philosophical problem in a new way – to find a lateral way in, which makes the concept less ethnocentric, that is, more universal.

3 The strategy of *intraduisibles* in multilingual literatures: Against the monolingual paradigm as overarching universal

The growing body of research on multilingualism in recent years has led to a questioning of the idea of monolingualism as a cultural norm and highlighted its historical indebtedness to the modern ideology of the nation (Dembeck and Mein 2012; Gramling 2016; Yildiz 2012). To address multilingualism in a more complex way, Gramling proposes to adopt M.A.K. Halliday's sociolinguistic distinction between "glossodiversity (diversity of linguistic codes) and semiodiversity (diversity of conveyed meanings)" (Gramling 2016, 31). I would like to argue here that this distinction from the field of applied linguistics ahistorically opposes the two main positions, unequally represented in the history of European linguistic thought, regarding language diversity: today's prevailing conception of glossodiversity on one hand, characteristic for a technocratic multilingualism as it appears for example institutionally in the European Union ("a diversity of codes in service of common meaning-making"), reflects the Aristotelian indifference towards the supposedly neutral materiality of languages; semiodiversity on the other hand again picks up Humboldt's theory of languages as worldviews. In this respect, it is not surprising when Gramling refers to Barbara Cassin and the *Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* and calls

it "an extended experiment around semiodiversity in comparative intellectual history" (Gramling 2016, 32, fn. 29).[15]

In *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (2012), Yasemin Yildiz argues that multilingual, contemporary writers such as Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Yoko Tawada, and Feridun Zaimoğlu are subverting from the inside the "monolingual paradigm" that established dominance during the course of the formation of nations. This means that these literary works performatively demonstrate a kind of multilingualism that disrupt the very idea of glossodiversity. The sheer presence of several languages in one and the same literary text does not necessarily have this subversive force. In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for example, the integration of French mostly contributes to the social characterisation of the Russian officers belonging to the nobility. What makes multilingual literatures particularly explosive today is their ability to tightly interweave an epistemological and a cultural-political critique of language in their poetic thinking: this is how multilingual literatures make the affinity between the monolingual paradigm and what Cassin identifies as the pathological universality of the European logos tangible, and how they subvert both of them.[16] The disastrous social consequences of a conception of language that postulates a single epistemological model have already been outlined. What is at stake in the subversion of the monolingual paradigm is no less than the de-essentialisation of the relationship between language and nation. The sharp contrast between mother tongue and foreign language, in other words the idea that individuals are naturally in possession of only one language in which they can express themselves with authenticity and which shapes their subjectivity, is one of the cores of the monolingual paradigm. From an historical perspective, this is one of the most powerful inventions of modernity, since the idea of national ethnicity is constructed based on this community of feeling in the mother tongue. Viewed in its macrohistorical context, Herder's idea of the *Volk* (the people of a nation) originally had an emancipatory goal: it was intended to dismantle a political order based on aristocratic legitimacy in favour of a new political order which postulates the people as the new criterion of legitimacy (Thiesse 1999). As is well known, literature played a major role in this process by endowing the respective peoples with cultural capital (Casanova 2011), so that they could assert themselves against the aristocracy, which until then possessed all the legitimate symbolic power. What matters here is that literature attests to the existence of a certain people as a collective as far back into the past as possible, for what gives birth to a nation and keeps it alive

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15 Gramling wonders in this footnote why Cassin does not use the term "semiodiversity" herself.
16 On the aspect of critique of language in multilingual literatures, see Heimböckel (2014).

is above all the belief in this "imagined community" (Anderson 1983). Although national identities in Europe have emerged as relational co-constructions – constructed out of frictions between neighbours for example – in which the forming of national literatures also plays a role,[17] the traces of their historical construction have later been erased in order to essentialise these identities.[18] Indeed, the excluding mechanism of national communities works better if one declares them to be a naturally given fact (Anderson 1983). Politically of course, the idea of the nation as a new form of collective identification serves not only to weld a people together, but also to set one people against another, for in cases of conflict it must feel natural to go to war in solidarity with one's fellow countrymen and women.

The conflation of linguistic, cultural, and national identity stems from the ideology of the mother tongue at the centre of the modern invention of monolingualism (Dembeck and Parr 2017, 27–33). Two closely related postulates support this ideology and contribute to shaping the modern understanding of linguistic diversity and translation (see Sakai 2009). The first one posits the idea of individual languages as homogenous, complete, and closed language systems – an idea towards which the national philologists in the nineteenth century worked conscientiously with their descriptive and normative linguistic tools. Grammars and dictionaries of the time systematically disregard phenomena like contact between languages, to provide clear, unambiguous contours. This idea of homogeneity also gains ground in national literatures over the course of the nineteenth century and slowly forces back the internal traditions of multilingual writing (Anokhina, Dembeck, and Weissmann 2019). The second postulate establishes the interchangeability of individual languages in the sense of an unproblematic, "systematic transposability" (Gramling 2014) of utterances from one language system to another. This notion of translation shows most clearly how deeply the monolingual paradigm is indebted to the Eurocentric universalism of the *logos*, for it presupposes a rational concept of language (*langage*) striving towards the ideal of mathematics (Dembeck and Mein 2012, 137–138). In this modern understanding of multilingualism as glossodiversity, languages (*langues*) may be involved in the cultural identity of individuals, but do not have an epistemological relevance.

The strategy of *intraduisibles*, whether adopted in philosophy such as in the work of Cassin, Diagne, and Wiredu, among others, or in multilingual literatures, not only undermines one of the key assumptions of the monolingual paradigm,

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17 On national literature emerging in a national-transnational process in Germany and France, see Jurt (2009).

18 Casanova's distinction between *littératures majeures* or *pacifiées*, which understand themselves as universal, and *littératures mineures* or *combatives*, which still participate in the national struggle, is based on how any trace of the construction of the nation was erased (Casanova 2011).

but also works towards another, more complex or lateral way of producing universality. In contemporary translingual poetics, we often observe translation processes taking place within the text: as this writing between languages unveils zones of resistance to translation and shifting images, it reclaims the detours and derailments of meaning in translation to engage poetically in an intercultural critique of language. Whether in the form of poetry (Yoko Tawada's *Abenteuer der deutschen Grammatik*, 2010), autobiographical essays (José F.A. Oliver's *Mein andalusisches Schwarzwalddorf*, 2007; *Fremdenzimmer*, 2015) or language autobiographies (Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, 1989) and language-learning fictions (Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, 2008), of novels that reflect on language (Luigi Meneghello's *Libera nos a Malo*, 1969),[19] and fictions about translation (Annette Hug's *Wilhelm Tell in Manila*, 2016; Cécile Wajsbrot's *Nevermore*, 2021), these writers are exploring areas of incommensurability between languages as worldviews. In their poetic thinking about language, they do not just reflect the problematic, conflict-ridden change of perspective that takes place in the search for a lateral universality, but also make their readers experience it in their own bodies, in order to bring about a change in their consciousness.[20] In this regard, the poetic strategy of *intraduisibles* goes perhaps a step further than the philosophical one, when one considers the potential for social change.

4 Yoko Tawada's poetic strategy of *untranslatables*: Exploring a minor form of universality

The Japanese-German writer Yoko Tawada holds a PhD in literature and has a comprehensive education in the areas of philosophy and cultural studies, which also informs her multilingual writing practice. Drawing creatively on approaches to language, culture and translation theory from Walter Benjamin to Jacques Derrida via Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Tawada has produced one of the most complex translingual poetics in contemporary German literature. One could almost claim that in her fictional short prose, literary essays, and poems, she is systematically pursuing the goal of turning the monolingual paradigm on its

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19 The 2010 French translation by Christophe Mileschi makes Meneghello's novel contemporary literature again.

20 On this performative aesthetic in Tawada and Oliver, see Thiérard (2018).

head. She usually takes the concrete experience of everyday life as a starting point to make the zones of incommensurability between languages tangible, thus performing Humboldt's idea that "thought is embodied" (Trabant 2017, 23).[21] Tawada's poetic strategy of untranslatables appears most clearly in *Überseezungen* (2002), *Talisman* (1996), *Sprachpolizei und Spielpolyglotte* (2007), *Abenteuer der deutschen Grammatik* (2010), and *Akzentfrei* (2016). These works provide a good overview of the many textual techniques involved in her translational poetics and how they undermine the core assumptions of the monolingual paradigm.[22]

Tawada's short narratives, somewhat overloaded with language reflexivity, often counter the postulate of the mother tongue as a natural and most suitable medium of expression with its insidious violence, showing that in a mother tongue the conventional relationship between word and thing is essentialised without the speakers being aware of it. For example, the story "Eine leere Flasche" (An Empty Bottle) (Tawada 2002, 53–57) demonstrates the embodied violence of the personal pronoun "I" (*boku*, *ore*, *watashi*, *watakushi*) in her Japanese mother tongue. In this understanding of the mother tongue "the thoughts cling so tightly to the words" (Tawada 1996, 15) that Humboldt's worldview threatens to turn into a linguistic prison, as Mauthner suspected.[23] Tawada's first-person female narrator repeatedly liberates herself from her mother tongue by learning a foreign language, which works like a "staple remover": "It removes everything that staples and clings together" (Tawada 1996, 15). The estrangement of her own language consciousness is narratively staged as a liberation from a linguistic determinism, which restricts the ability to think and perceive due to habituation and automatisation. In Tawada's work, however, mother tongue and foreign language by no means remain in a static relationship, for this would mean opposing them to one another as an essentialising and an emancipatory principle. Quite the contrary, an essentialisation of linguistic conventions also takes place in the foreign language, when it no longer feels foreign. In *Überseezungen*, Tawada shows how the narrator's language consciousness, shaped by German as a second language, is in turn defamiliarised in contact with other foreign languages, such as English ("Porträt einer Zunge"), French ("Musik der Buchstaben"), and Afrikaans ("Bioskoop der Nacht"). This repetition of the process of defamiliarisation is necessary if one does not want to fall from one national language ontology into the next –

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21 See Pajević (2020) for this focus.

22 Since this aspect is well documented in Tawada research, I will not undertake an in-depth textual analysis in the following and instead refer the reader to the relevant chapters in Gutjahr (2012); Ivanovic (2010); Banoun and Ivanovic (2015).

23 In his epoch-making work *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (Contributions to a Critique of Language), Fritz Mauthner (1923) calls attention to the limitations of language to gain knowledge of reality, insofar as it determines what people think instead of enabling them to think.

a risk already pointed out by Diagne in objection to Kagamé's philosophical agenda. For Tawada is not just concerned with the fact that individual languages shape cultural identity, but much rather that they are archives of a productive interpretation of the world and therefore also have a share in social and geopolitical power relations.

Tawada quite often deconstructs the postulated homogeneity and closed completeness of individual languages using text-internal translation as a means of demonstration. The translingual poem *Die Mischschrift des Mondes* (The Mixed Writing of the Moon) (Tawada 2010, 41), written halfway between German and Japanese, merges two systems of writing considered incompatible. The genesis of this poem involves a double process of translation: long after having published a German translation of one of her Japanese poems, Tawada transcribed the German text back into Japanese, while leaving some passages untranslated.[24] On the one hand, this mixed writing exemplifies the inherent heterogeneity of the Japanese writing system, in which word stems are written using Chinese ideograms, while Japanese characters phonetically notate the "hands and feet of the words". On the other hand, Tawada's multiscriptual *réécriture* of the poem combining Latin letters and Chinese ideograms shows, according to the author's note, "that one can also write German with this mixed method." The poem thereby urges German readers to deconstruct the supposed homogeneity of the German language as well.[25] Furthermore, many of Tawada's short stories draw attention to a second heterogeneity of the Japanese language which results from the double-pronged constitution of meaning – phonetic and visual – in languages with ideograms. This kind of semiodiversity internal to languages is particularly irritating for European speakers, since it conflicts with their common understanding orientated around alphabetic writing systems: script only records what is said, without participating in thinking. In "Die Botin" (The Messenger) (Tawada 2013 [2002], 44–50), the entire narrative relies on the technique of surface translation to stage this internal semiodiversity of Japanese: the German speech to be transmitted, transcribed into ideograms of roughly the same phonic value, is thus rendered unrecognisable, which turns out to be a powerful way of celebrating the signifying materiality of languages.[26] Here we can draw a further parallel with Cassin's fondness for homophony and homonymy relationships in the Greek language, which she uses to subvert Aristotle's dualistic theory of language (Cassin 2016, 87–145).

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24 On the relationship between the original poem, the German translation by Peter Pörtner and the *réécriture*, see Ette (2012, 318–323).

25 Schmitz-Emans (2012) interprets Tawada's mixed-writing poetic practice in relation to the problem of the untranslatability of script.

26 On the technique of surface translation, also known as homophonic translation, see Dembeck (2015).

In Tawada's poetic thinking about language, the cultural-political aspect is just as inseparable from the epistemological one as in Diagne's strategy of *intraduisibles*. Dieter Heimböckel (2015) reads Tawada's "fictional ethnography" as a form of writing back,[27] appropriating and rewriting European ethnographic discourse about Japan and the Orient, as it is known, for example, in Roland Barthes' *Empire des Signes*. Tawada's "intercultural language criticism" should therefore be read in relation to her literary and cultural study *Spielzeug und Sprachmagie in der europäischen Literatur: Eine ethnologische Poetologie* (2000). Her fictional ethnography does not fall back into the dichotomies of an orientalist discourse any more than she inverts this discourse into an occidentalism. Much rather she deconstructs cultural identities and proposes an aesthetic experience which makes the constitutive relationality of languages as discursive constructs (Sakai 2009) tangible for the reader.

Although Diagne's idea of a universality produced by translation can certainly not be reduced to the necessity of an intercultural dialogue in the postcolonial age (on this interpretation see Amselle 2018), nonetheless it is based on an "ethnological experience". Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work Diagne draws on, describes the process of moving from an overarching universal to a lateral universal, as follows:

> [. . .] the equipment of our social being can be dismantled and reconstructed by the voyage, as we are able to learn to speak other languages. This provides *a second way to the universal*: no longer the *overarching universal* of a strictly objective method, but a sort of *lateral universal* which we acquire through ethnological experience and its incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 119–120).

The power of transforming subjectivity that Merleau-Ponty ascribes to learning other languages testifies to an embodied concept of language (*langage*). This idea of language as "the organ of thought", as Trabant reminds us, was historically coined by Humboldt: "As an organ, language is more closely interwoven into the corporeality of man, [. . .] situated on a deeper level of consciousness than it is when conceived as a tool" (Trabant 1986, 59).[28] This deep transformation of subjectivity in contact with other languages is central to Tawada's poetic thinking about language, as expressed through the metaphor of "the lens of flesh" (*Fleischbrille*) in her essay

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27 Originally coined by Salman Rushdie, the term "writing back" became a central concept in postcolonial studies in the 1990s, describing a counterdiscursive strategy constitutive of postcolonial texts. Among other things, it undermines the supposed hegemony of knowledge of the (former) colonial power and its construction of the colonial "other" (see Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin 1989).
28 On the conception of language as organ in Humboldt, see Trabant (1986, 51–61).

"Eigentlich darf man es niemandem sagen, aber Europa gibt es nicht" (I really should not be saying this, but Europe does not exist) (Tawada 2015 [1996]):

> In order to see Europe I need to use a Japanese lens. Since anything resembling a "Japanese point of view" did not and does not exist – and that is not an unfortunate fact as far as I am concerned – this lens must inevitably be fictitious and constantly needs to be manufactured anew. In this respect my Japanese point of view is not authentic, despite the fact that I was born and raised in Japan. Yet my Japanese lens is not an instrument that can be bought from a store. I cannot put it in or take it out at will. This lens grew out of my eyestrain and grew into my flesh, as my flesh grew into the lens (transl. Takabvirwa 2014, 56–57).

Although immediately suspended as fictitious, the metaphor of the "intercultural lens" is nonetheless reactivated by the physical dimension of pain. Tawada's translingual poetics forces the reader to engage, during the act of reading, in the "ethnological experience" between the languages as described by Merleau-Ponty. It also reminds us that the epistemological change of perspective proposed by Diagne and Cassin is a painful, never-ending process, not produced on an abstract level, but rather in one's own flesh.

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