

Autor\_in oder Herr\_in des Schicksals sein. Also geht es um symbolische Akte, um Arten der ästhetischen Gegenverwirklichung dessen, was sich uns aufdrängt, uns überwältigt, auch fasziniert und im besten Fall wachsen lässt. Ein derartiges Vorgehen, in dem sich passive und aktive Elemente verflechten: Das ist nichts anderes als die Definition der Kunst.

Das Gespräch fand im Februar 2019 in Berlin statt.

## Annika Haas with Emily Apter

### Translation: A Relational Practice

Translation is a practice in which we ceaselessly engage, but without necessarily being aware of doing so. Moving between various kinds of languages in the humanities, the sciences, and the arts, it is a crucial means of communicating among different human and nonhuman agents and of disseminating knowledge. This is a thought that came to me as Emily Apter spoke during the opening conference of the long-term project “The New Alphabet” at the Berlin Haus der Kulturen der Welt in early 2019, on *untranslatability* in fields ranging from philosophy to computational science. A professor of French and comparative literature at New York University whose work ranges across translation studies as well as political, psychoanalytical, and critical theory, her presentation corresponded to my work on this book – which is in itself, as many publications of this kind, a space of translation between languages and concepts. The latter is also true for the project space *diffrakt*, a regular collaborator of the research group “Knowledge in the Arts,” where translation in a broader sense mostly takes place in the format of public conversations. Moritz Gansen of the theory collective had invited Apter to talk about her work on *The Dictionary of Untranslatables* and subsequently brought me on board. What follows is an account of the event in essay form co-authored by Emily Apter. It offers perspectives on translation through the lens of philosophy, epistemology, art, and human-machine communication and aims to continue to think together about translation as a relational practice in each of these four fields. It also seeks to track the theoretical and practical impulses in these different areas that arise from a relational understanding of translation. Summaries of her remarks appear indented in the following and are based on re-assembled notes on our dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

1 Many thanks to Moritz Gansen for co-moderating the event and for sharing his ideas, and to the audience of the event “Translation, A Relational Practice” that took place on May 8, 2019, at *diffrakt* | centre for theoretical periphery

Embarking on a Ferry Leading Across

May 8, 2019. Our conversation began with a viewing of the opening scenes of Catherine Breillat's relatively forgotten film *Brève Traversée* (F 2001). The plot, such as it is, revolves around an encounter between two strangers on a night ferry crossing of the English Channel (or *Pas de Calais*). An adolescent hurries to board, arriving at what is essentially a nonplace or no man's land dominated by safety warnings announced over the loudspeaker and posted on the vessel's walls.<sup>2</sup> The young man proceeds to the canteen where he meets a woman in the queue. They share a table, exchange glances, and hesitantly get into conversation. One is primarily francophone, the other primarily anglophone. She is much older than he is, and their talk begins to circle around questions of how to lead a life. They spend the evening together in the duty free shop, at the bar, and end up having a one-night stand. Apter commented at the end of the clip:

As soon as their ferry reaches dryland the next morning, they immediately disembark and return to their separateness. Their relation, now over, was a *traversée*, at once a physical passage from one place to another and a translational rite of passage from one language to another. Interestingly, these passages lead not to proximity and communication but to the impasse of an impossible relation. Translation works in the film to stage untranslatability, defined as the impossibility of relation.

One could say that it is equally impossible to identify the condition of the protagonists' interlude as it is to identify the failure of translation. Obviously, translation is a necessity of basic communication, but in the film the stilted, half-translated dialogue exposes glaring gaps, broken bridges, the fragility of communication structures. All these associations are condensed in the metaphor of the ferry passage that takes center stage, leaving unknown what the relation is between the two shores. It should be noted that the film's depiction of untranslatability is relevant not only to the professional practice of translation and interpretation but also to the ways we philosophize translation practices and use translation to do philosophy.

Untranslatables

Taking off from Barbara Cassin's approach to philosophical concept-terms in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, Apter focused on how certain philosophical terms and expressions exhibited particularly strong symptoms of resistance

Berlin. I would also like to thank my colleagues and co-editors for their very valuable and encouraging comments.

- 2 See also Apter's talk at the American Academy Berlin: "Translation and Sexual Safety," May 1, 2019, <https://www.americanacademy.de/videoaudio/translation-and-sexual-safety/> (last access: December 2, 2019).

to translation.<sup>3</sup> Terms like “Dasein” or “Agence” (rendered “agency” or “instance” in English), are just two examples: of words deemed untranslatable because their idiosyncratic usage defies equivalence in another language. In the case of Heideggerian *Dasein*: an English workaround expression like “being there” doesn’t really work. And so the German term *Dasein* tends to carry over in most languages. For Apter this nontranslation is not really an obstacle but rather a spur to thinking. It is where “philosophizing in languages” begins, an expression she borrows from Cassin.<sup>4</sup>

Cassin defines “untranslatables” as “what one doesn’t translate, but what one doesn’t stop (not) translating: after Babel with happiness.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* contains a whole world of different non-, mis- and re-translations of philosophical terms drawn up by a group of philosophers with linguistic expertise. Whereas Cassin’s version understands itself as a philosophical and political gesture aiming “to constitute a cartography of European philosophical differences,”<sup>6</sup> the English edition broadens the cartographic parameters, eliminating the restriction to “European” language so as to push for a global philosophical remit.<sup>7</sup> Either way, the emphasis on linguistic difference holds, as does an emergent theory of untranslatables based on Cassin’s process-based notion of “passing from one language to another.”<sup>8</sup> The implications of translational resistance and difference for a relational theory of translation are far from clear and hardly noncontroversial. This is what Apter alluded to when she acknowledged the pitfalls of untranslatability. For her, it is crucial to mark the practice related to untranslatability as primarily theoretical. Furthermore, it is important to differentiate untranslatability from inaccessibility:

Apter I often get attacked for saying that I am an advocate of permanent barriers ... but what I’m really trying to do is question the assumption of a right to have access to all languages

3 In 2004 Cassin published *Le Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*. Apter co-edited the English translation of what became *The Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*.

4 Cassin, Barbara, Apter, Emily, Lezra, Jacques, and Wood, Michael (eds.): *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, Princeton 2014.

5 See Cassin, Barbara, “Untranslatables and Their Translations: A Logbook,” in *Revue internationale de pensée critique/International Journal of Critical Thought*, September 14, 2009, trans. Andrew Goffey, [www.transeuropeennes.org/en/articles/83.html](http://www.transeuropeennes.org/en/articles/83.html) (last access: November 13, 2019).

6 Cassin 2009. The latest French version emphasizes that it attempts to contribute to a future understanding of Europe that does not reify itself based on its heterogeneous heritage, but that works with the “the gaps, the tensions, the transfers [les transferts], the appropriations, the mistranslations [les contresens].” Cassin, Barbara, “Présentation,” in Cassin 2019, pp. xvii–xxii, here p. xvii, trans. A. H.

7 See also Apter, Emily, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Princeton 2006, as well as “Checkpoints and Sovereign Borders” in Apter, Emily, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (e-book), London, New York 2013, pp. 227–264.

8 Cassin 2009.

through translation. To be aware of conditions under which translation is interdicted, of instances in which the language of the original withholds something or is incommensurate; to desire to work through relational nonrelation across languages is not to say you are against communication or against translation! It's often difficult to make these distinctions clear, which creates problems for the reception of the work I am doing. ... I also use the term untranslatability for spaces of translation zones understood as warzones or dissensus and disagreement (in diplomacy). Translation carries a lot of universalist baggage about the promotion of international harmony, utopian transparency (of meaning and intention) and the promise of mutual understanding. I am saying that there is something called *Unverständlichkeit* [incomprehensibility], which complicates this utopian narrative and that must be analyzed in relation to the history of military encounters and competing ethnonationalisms (extended to what Cassin terms "ontological nationalism"). So, I am not a fetishist of untranslatability for its own sake. Rather I want to use different notions of untranslatability to deepen our analysis of the politics of the encounter. For me, untranslatability is many things, but more than any singular idea, it is a praxis, a way of working.<sup>9</sup>

### Philosophizing in Languages

This praxis leads to questioning – through an interrogation of what stands out as a philosophical term – what "counts" as philosophy.

Apter The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* explores how singular terms acquire political capital by dint of their privileged connection to thought. Keywords such as *aletheia*, *Begriff*, *chôra*, *conscience*, *Dasein*, *dialectic*, *Geist*, *Geschlecht*, *logos*, *mimēsis*, *mir*, *’olam*, *polis*, *pravda*, *praxis*, *reason*, *sense*, *Stimmung*, *sujet*, *Tatsache*, *to ti ên einai* [quidditas], *universal*, *virtù*, and *zôê* earn their high rating as building blocks of philosophical metalanguage; vehicles or power tools that enable thinking "to think," or ways of being "to be." As philosophemes that endure the test of time and acquire over time the kind of sovereign exceptionalism that Jacques Lezra derives from Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben. "Sovereign is he," writes Lezra, "who decides on

9 See also Apter, Emily, "Theorizing in Untranslatables," at The New Alphabet – Opening Days, January 11, 2019, Berlin Haus der Kulturen der Welt, <https://www.hkw.de/en/app/mediathek/video/69579> (last access: December 2, 2019). In referring to "all-access to everyone's language all the time," Apter is thinking of cases like the EU Parliament or at border controls.

the translation, sovereign is he who decides what is or is not translation ... ‘Sovereign’ my Schmitt says, ‘is he who decides what is untranslatable.’” Lezra’s formulation recalls the Hobbesian sovereign who comes to power in answer to the question “Who Shall be the Judge?” Untranslatability and sovereignty converge in what Lezra calls “a quality that resides with one, indivisible, singular term ... The conceptualization of modern imperial sovereignty, with its delegated, distributed and bureaucratized translations of unitary sovereignty.”<sup>10</sup>

The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* shored up the sovereign authority of the untranslatable by building out its translational lemmas. That said, in broadening the field of what counts as philosophy or deserves to wear its mantle, the *Dictionary* democratized philosophy’s political estates. Dominant languages of European thought – Greek, Latin, German, French and English – were consciously entered into dialogue with Arabic, Hebrew, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Rumanian, Danish, Swedish, and Dutch, with an eye to soliciting, in some future Wiki iteration, an active engagement with all languages of the world. Widening the compass of languages in which the canonical history of philosophy is written, and “making-philosophical” components of language and speech that have traditionally had no purchase on philosophical standing, Cassin and her team redressed class hierarchies.

The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* marked as philosophical a range of eclectic terms that normally would not make it into a standard philosophical encyclopedia, such as *absurd*, *ça*, *care*, *kitsch*, *life*, *love*, *sex*, and *gender* as well as *pleasure*, *postupok*, *Sehnsucht*, *unconscious*, and *vergüenza*, *vorhanden*, *word order*. The practice of introducing these words as “untranslatables” worthy of being philosophized pluralizes the canon and challenges the high concept-driven hierarchies embedded in continental and analytic philosophy alike. It is a language-oriented approach that contests the hegemony of a propositional logic,<sup>11</sup> preferring instead to ferret out different logics as they arise from context, philological transformation, grammatical usage, and everyday idiom.

Apter For Cassin the task of “linguaging” philosophy involved recasting its transhistorical abstractions as live elements of a “tongue,” subject to the contingencies of situational usage, the wear and tear of social exchange, and the ironies

10 Lezra, Jacques, *Untranslating Machines: A Genealogy for the Ends of Global Thought*, London / New York 2017, p. 99.

11 The latter, broadly speaking, emphasizes a relatively narrow notion of what a truth is, based on the logical determination of a true or false proposition.

of mistranslation. In this scheme, minor words and syntactic structures exercise their right to philosophizability. Extrapolating here, one could say that “to language” philosophy is “to justice” philosophy’s conceptual predicates. Justicing, made into an active verb, carries the sense of rendering unto, or calling to account, structural inequalities inscribed in histories of thought. “To justice” philosophy in the fullest sense would entail reconfiguring its classical modes and branches, from metaphysics to ethics, aesthetics to phenomenology, canon law to logic. If there is a specific political charge, it inheres in the desire to “unexceptionalize” Western philosophy’s sovereign vocabulary, thereby extending the franchise to locutions and expressions routinely excluded from philosophy’s standard editions.

As an example of how one “philosophizes in languages,” Apter referred to Etienne Balibar’s entry (in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*) of the pairing “Agency’/‘Instance:”<sup>12</sup>

Balibar mentions that the English translation of Jacques Lacan’s famous essay “L’instance de la lettre” of 1957 was “The Agency of the Letter” in the first translation by Alan Sheridan and then Bruce Fink comes on in 2002 with “The Instance of the Letter.” In German you would come up with “Instanz” and the way in which “instantiating,” positioning the self in relation to objects, and “Gestell” play a role here. These huge differences in meaning prompt a reflexive exercise that gets to the heart of what agency is or does in relation to language. They prompt us to query how actions get embodied in verbs, or where the agency lies in performative speech acts. How is the agency of “I do” in the marriage vow distributed across language and speaking subject or listening subjects? I think too of Lacan in seminar 20 (*Encore*) where he analyzes the phrase: “Pierre bat Paul.” In the French tradition, “Pierre and Paul” are paired in the grammar books, going back to the eighteenth century. The phrase “Peter hits Paul” appears often as an example of what counts as “active,” in the verb, of what isolates a minimal, condensed expression of human agency. This points in turn to the fascinating issue of how will, action, activism, and violence are languaged – psychoanalytically, philosophically, and politically. Will is revealed to be tethered to force, and to the causation of harm, or the commission of physical violence.

12 Balibar, Étienne, “Agency’/‘instance” in Cassin, Apter et al. 2014, pp. 22–23.

Sexual violence and the question of will are worked over, as I mentioned, in Lacan's *Encore*. "Ce n'est pas pour rien que Pierre bat Paul ..." ["It's no accident that Pierre beats Paul"] writes Lacan in a section on Jakobson in which he locates causative desire in the formalism of grammar: "wherein jouissance finds its cause, its last cause, which is formal – isn't it something like grammar that commands it?" Lacan then lets loose a chain of associations connecting the violence of the sex act, the question of who wills what in the embrace of the couple, the susceptibility of French grammar's masculine gender to homosexualization, and his own infamous proposition that "there is no sexual relation."<sup>13</sup>

### Transposing, Transplanting, Transforming

Working with untranslatables draws major attention to the epistemic dimensions of a thinking in between languages. A closer look at the verb "to translate" and its own translations may characterize this praxis further. Apter noted that the Greek "hermēneúein" and "metapherein," Latin "traducere,"<sup>14</sup> and German "übersetzen" are all "freighted with associations of transport, passage and transmission."<sup>15</sup> This is also what the entry "To Translate" in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* suggests. Among other notions, it mentions Martin Heidegger's understanding of translation as the act of "über-setzen," which in German also means to pass over from one shore to another.<sup>16</sup> As in Breillat's film, this passage is not merely an act of transport, but also of change. For Heidegger this comes through in the "apparently literal, and hence faithful, translation" of central terms of Western philosophy (such as "being," "thing," or "subject") from Greek to Latin, which results in their "rootlessness."<sup>17</sup> Since translation "takes over the Greek words without the corresponding and equiprimordial experience of what they say," it is

13 Lacan, Jacques, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink, New York / London 1999, p. 25.

14 Meaning "to lead across." It is this meaning, which was also the source for the French adaptation "traduire," from which the more general sense of translating derives as a "passing from one language to another." See Auvray-Assayas, Clara, Bernier, Christian, Cassin, Barbara, Paul, André, and Rosier-Catach, Irène, "To Translate," in Cassin, Apter et al. 2014, pp. 1139–1155, here p. 1139.

15 Apter 2013, p. 235.

16 Auvray-Assayas, Bernier et al. 2014, p. 1150. Heidegger works with this double meaning of "über-setzen" especially in "Anaximander's Saying" implying that translating means "to trans-late ourselves ... to the place from which what is said in the saying comes." Heidegger, Martin, "Anaximander's Saying," trans. Julian Young, Kenneth Haynes, in Heidegger, Martin, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. Julian Young, Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge, UK / New York 2002, pp. 242–284, here p. 255.

17 Heidegger, Martin, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in Heidegger 2002, pp. 1–65, here p. 6.

thus a “translation [Übersetzen] of Greek experience into a different [Roman] mode of thinking.”<sup>18</sup> The dictionary traces this perspective on translation to Friedrich Schlegel, among others. In a fragment dated 1798/99, Schlegel advances the argument that translation “is either a *transplantation* [Verpflanzung], or a *metamorphosis* [Verwandlung], or both.”<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that Schlegel understands translation as a “poetic” practice and assigns it to both arts and science.<sup>20</sup> Like Heidegger, his reflection casts translation as an appropriative gesture. But rather than adopt this possessive, appropriative model, the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* emphasizes linguistic displacement, where instead of the target language owning the original, it learns to live in a different milieu, a different culture.<sup>21</sup>

### Translation, A Relational Nonrelation

What remains an open question when looking at these different views of how languages move into and over each other concerns the prime mover itself; what puts them in motion in the first place. As Apter remarked at the outset with respect to Breillat’s *Brève Traversée* translation – the fact that this couple communicates across languages becomes a kind of cover for what is essentially an *impossible relation*. In the course of our conversation something she called the “relational nonrelation” emerged as an important issue: “seen through the lens of untranslatability, translation is a relational nonrelation. If we follow Jean-Luc Nancy, a relation is a *rapport*, a reportability.”

To get a clearer picture of what this implies, it is worth taking a small detour into Nancy’s reset of Lacan’s infamous proposition: “*il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*,” “there is no sexual relationship” or “relation.”<sup>22</sup>

To say that there is no relation is then to state what is proper to relation: in order to be, it must not be a third thing between two. Rather, it must open the *between* as such: it must open the *between two* by means of which there are two. But what is between two is not either one of the two: it is the void ...<sup>23</sup>

18 Heidegger 2002, p. 6.

19 Like Heidegger, he also refers to the Romans and considers them “the first translators.” Schlegel, Friedrich, “Philosophische Fragmente,” trans. André Lefevre, in Lefevre, *Translating Literature: The German Tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig*, Amsterdam 1977, p. 61–62, here p. 61. The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* translates “*Verwandlung*” as “transformation.” See Auvray-Assayas, Bernier et al. 2014, p. 1150.

20 See Schlegel 1977, p. 61.

21 Auvray-Assayas, Bernier et al. 2014, p. 1150.

22 Lacan’s text is considered by many to be untranslatable and even unreadable French. The cited translation understands itself as a tool. Lacan, Jacques, “L’Étourdit,” trans. Cormack Gallagher, in *THE LETTER: Irish Journal for Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Issue 41 (Summer 2009), pp. 31–80, here p. 46. See also translator’s note, p. 1. In the translation of Nancy’s text, Lacan’s quote ends with “relation.” See Nancy 2013, p. 1.

23 Nancy, Jean-Luc, “The ‘There Is’ of Sexual Relation [L’‘Il y a’ Du Rapport Sexuel],” in *Corpus II: Writings On Sexuality*, trans. Anne O’Byrne, Fordham 2013, pp. 1–22, here p. 8.

The “without-relation of relation” is “its paradoxical reality”<sup>24</sup> in the sense that it is not possible for a nonrelation to exist: “the negation of a relation is still a relation.”<sup>25</sup> A relation is not substantial, but what happens in the in-between is related to actions and movements that are inherent to “*relation* and *rapport*,” which “come from verbs designating the act of carrying, transporting,”<sup>26</sup> – similar to the verb “to translate.”

Nancy’s reading of Lacan’s sentence is more of a gloss than a full revisionist interpretation. But with every approach to “*rapport*” he makes the idea of relation increasingly strange. He not only deconstructs the term but also denaturalizes it, turning it into an untranslatable. This requires and inspires a prismatic reading, which Emily Apter continues with Luce Irigaray:

*Apter Rapport* is a report, a reporting or a reportability. It means a view from over there that is not over here. Irigaray uses the term “*rapport à*” to parry the force of the transitive and reroute the circuitry of agency (one person acting on or directly addressing another). It is going somewhere around. It is a mode of indirection and it helps us to define the space of the nonrelation and of nonmeaning that is always there as part of an informal communication or process of relating to.

The specter of relational nonrelation leaps out in an interview that the political journalist Andrew Marr conducted with Noam Chomsky in 1996. Marr tries to contradict Chomsky’s skepticism towards journalism. Chomsky alleges that most “trained” journalists fall into the trap of believing that they are part of a crusading profession that stands up to power but Marr fires back: “How can you know that I am self-censoring?” Chomsky responds: “I am sure you believe everything you say but what I am saying is if you believe something different, you would not be sitting where you are sitting.”<sup>27</sup>

*Apter* For me this is a beautiful case of a kind of untranslatability that emerges through embodied positionality. (They are sitting very close to each other.) And at the same time, at least for Chomsky, their relation is one of pure nonrelationality and mutual exclusion. It is a relationality that is only defined dialogically and relationally as the irreducible that forms the relation. How can you know what I am saying when the very fact that you are occupying the place you are in precludes being able to understand where I’m coming from. This situation between Chomsky and Marr speaks to the mutual cancellation facts of translation. Not just the voids and impasses that im-

24 Nancy 2013, p. 8.

25 Nancy 2013, p. 6.

26 Nancy 2013, p. 6.

27 BBC, *The Big Idea*, “Noam Chomsky on Propaganda – Interview with Andrew Marr,” February 1996, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjENnyQupow> (last access: December 2, 2019), TC: 00:11:03.

pede exchange, but the fact of position: such that you cannot know what is on that other side of that language. This dialogue also illustrates how noncommunication is exacerbated by false belief. Within the bounds of intersubjective relation, you can only believe you know, you never actually know. For me, Chomsky's "from where I am sitting" physically embodies the epistemic limit and the spatial articulation of relational voids in subject relations. There is no translational transindividual! There is the absolute singularity of "where I am sitting," which is intractable, untranslatable. Chomsky basically says to Marr that sheer power difference prevails over identity.

Apter has taken the notion of untranslatable difference to heart in her conception of comparative literature. It animates her critique of world literature,<sup>28</sup> which in its more recent institutional guises valorizes market-friendly translation and -ready comparison, ignoring the power dynamics of dominant languages and culture industries. A number of questions were raised during our conversation at diffrakt at this point: Which languages and works of literature are considered worth translating? What is considered a "minor" and a "major" language? How does language politics play when the EU claims that "it speaks your language,"<sup>29</sup> when it in fact authorizes speaking only in nationally recognized tongues? Why does the United States bill itself as a monolingual country when it is anything but? How do we decolonize English (or Globish)?

### Rediscovering Babble through Machines

The question of untranslatability was then extended to digital and machine languages that have become an integral part of political and social structures, hailed not only as facilitators of communication among humans but also between humans and machines. The relations between natural language and machine languages (AI, algorithms, the techniques of deep learning) has, in Emily Apter's view, blurred "the distinctions between natural language and code."<sup>30</sup>

Apter Substituting an algorithmic baseline for a philological one, machine translation has consequences for how we work in the comparative humanities, how we think about plurilingualism or define language in the philosophy of language: N. Katherine Hayles speaks of our relation to a "cognitive non-conscious" (another term for the "intelligence" of machines). She is referring to problem-solving that is "unthought" in the

28 See Apter 2013.

29 See exhibition announcement *The EU Speaks Your Language*, Brussels, September 19–October 12, 2018, sixtieth anniversary of the entry into force of Regulation 1/1958, which determined the languages to be used by the EU institutions. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/eu-speaks-your-language> (last access: December 2, 2019).

30 Apter, "Theorizing in Untranslatables," HKW 2019.

human sense. We might say that one way to construe the untranslatable is, similarly as a gathering term for machinic translation that is unthought.

Machine translation also draws attention to the increasing complexity of defining what a unit of translatability is. When digital typeface softens the distinction between alphabetic letter and stroke, pixel, and point, when alphanumeric characters introduce computational units into translational alphabets, how does this transform the field of translation studies?

On the phonetic level, corresponding effects can be observed in the automated transcript of our conversation at *diffrakt*, which was prepared by software based on what is known as natural language processing. When Emily Apter speaks, for example, about Balibar's take on "agency," proper names and non-English titles are interpreted by approximating sounds, turning "Lacan's" or "L'instance de la lettre" into the new word "Flocons" or the phrase "a sale of land stones," while her speech gets reorganized by punctuation that only loosely follows its rhythm:

Flocons famous a sale of land stones to the next quarter of 1957 was in English agency of the letter in his first, translation by Helen Sheridan and then, Bruce pink comes on in 2002 with the instance of the letter and of course all of you with the German nurse thinking and Stomps and the way in which in Spanish aging and ordinances and, positioning yourself in relation to objects and Gaston has all of these.<sup>31</sup>

A convenient reaction to the errors of applications that rely on deep neural networks (like correction tools ["smart composing"] in word processing software, "predictive writing," or machine translation), is to point to their very real limits. These programs are modelled after notions of human intelligence that, according to Apter, produces an anthropocentric fallacy at the heart of machine learning: "it attributes humanoid characteristics to speech ... which in the end makes it impossible to really listen to what the machine is saying."<sup>32</sup>

31 The transcript was generated on the Auphonic platform using the Google Cloud Speech API. Since this transcript turned out to be experimental, another transcription was done by an unknown human worker from a transcription service. In the end, most parts had to be retranscribed because of many unclear details and a lack of meaningful punctuation, perhaps also due to the quality of the recording.

32 See also Emily Apter's contribution to Nina Katchadourian's album *Talking Popcorn's Last Words* (track 12), released March 18, 2019, <https://ninakatchadourian.bandcamp.com/album/talking-popcorns-last-words> (last access: December 3, 2019).



Nina Katchadourian, *Talking Popcorn's Last Words*, 2019

Self-immolated popcorn machine, black pedestal with last words in vinyl lettering, painted wood circle, ambient soundtrack in room with track listing and audio player, dimensions variable  
Courtesy of the artist, Catharine Clark Gallery, and Pace Gallery

She makes this last observation apropos of artist Nina Katchadourian's *Talking Popcorn* (2001/2008), a sound sculpture that decoded the pops of a popcorn machine into Morse code signals and generated speech from them. When the machine accidentally self-immolated during an exhibition in 2008, the built-in computer preserved the machine's "last words." These were written in alphabetic text on a plinth on which the burned out machine would then be displayed. Katchadourian asked different scholars and writers, among them Emily Apter, to interpret the words. The first phrase on the pedestal reads: "QOCRETETI NEIIHF HEMTLEERA CE SA CFII FAUSE." Apter asks: "FAUSE, shouldn't that be a word?"<sup>33</sup> For her, the artwork is "recovering the space of babble, i.e., language in its pre-edible form, and it allows us to listen to it." *Talking Popcorn's* "last words," moreover, raise further questions regarding the relation between humans and machines, and the place from which we look at them:

Apter What gender is *Talking Popcorn*? Why did it break down? Did it recover after going into rehab because it was built again, what is its relationship with the artist? Are they co-creating something? What kinds of relationality are being staged in this piece? And then there is the larger question about the relationship of the human subject to machine talk, and by extension, to nonsense, gibberish, and gobbledygook.

It is perhaps the gobbledygook that we ought to listen to in order to avoid common pitfalls inherent in the language we use when speaking about computers, entangling vocabulary from very diverse fields, as Apter highlighted during her talk at the HKW:

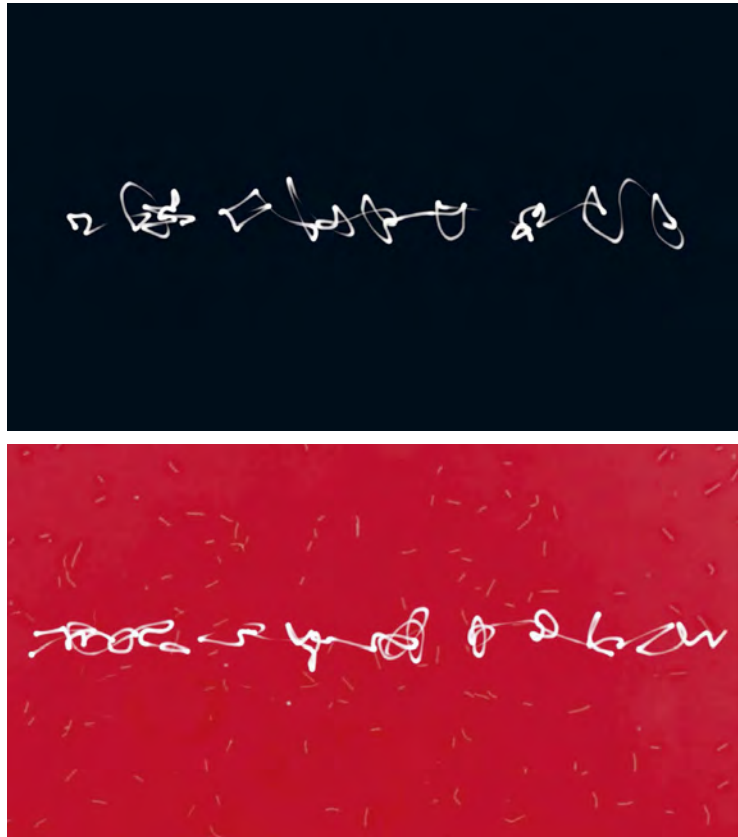
Machine *learning*, artificial *intelligence*, smart technologies, deep neural networks. All these metaphors from Turing to Kurzweil to Dreyfus indicate an indifference to the pathetic fallacy that arises with the assignment of cognitive function to machine processing. ... Machinic intelligence, I'm suggesting, is a translation into the language of human understanding of programming automatized algorithmic work, clustering, outputting, and pattern recognition. The point here is that AI has no other mode of representing how it thinks.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, new kinds of machinic expression are co-facilitated by artists working with them. This is also true for the musician composer Tomomi Adachi, who teaches an AI named tomomibot to mimic his style of improvisation in order to become his all-too-human and all-too-machinic co-performer.<sup>35</sup>

33 Apter 2019. See also the artist's website: <http://www.ninakatchadourian.com/language/translation/talkingpopcorn.php> (last access: December 3, 2019).

34 Apter, "Theorizing in Untranslatables," HKW 2019.

Apter I think what both Katchadourian's and Adachi's work show really well is that language is not something purely abstract or metaphorical. It is material, right? It is raw material, built up through a web of contingencies, labor conditions, modes of relationality, and nonrelation. There is an adage that language is simply a dialect surrounded by an army, defined by the various power structures that organize phonetic values and visual graphemes into something called a language that becomes marked by an ethnos or a sovereign nation. But AI and machine translation denaturalize the social construction of language, putting us back in touch with prelanguage, and making us aware of the distributions of its units according to given power relations.



Jenna Sutela, *nimia cetii*, 2018, video still

- 35 For an audio example see Adachi, Tomomi, Dzialocha, Andreas, and Lussana, Marcello, *Voices from AI in Experimental Improvisation*, Prix Ars Electronica 2019: Honorable Mention, <https://calls.ars.electronica.art/prix2019/prixwinner/33994/> (last access: December 3, 2019).

With Apter, I would like to consider languages co-created by artists and machines as a potential source of untranslatables that confronts us in a new way with the radicality of untranslatability. Different from untranslatables in philosophy, the tomomibot and *Talking Popcorn* do not expose us to that which does not translate in discourse, but to the experience of that exposition: the moment of not understanding, alienation, stuttering, radical uncertainty, and doubt, and this, in turn, is core to doing philosophy. One crucial aspect of that experience is the confrontation with machines speaking in tongues, using vocabulary that we cannot look up in any dictionary. As a new kind of *glossolalia*, machinic speech “preserves only the envelope of semantic intention.”<sup>36</sup>

Another excellent speaker of such prelanguage is *nimiia cétii*, a neural-network-aided co-creation of the artist Jenna Sutela and the bacterium *bacillus subtilis*. *Nimiia cétii* can be perceived by humans as a typeface that is based on the raw movements of the bacteria and as a voice speaking in tongues of Martian language. The voice is produced by a neural network trained on Sutela’s voice that matches what it sees in the bacteria’s movements with its mimicking of Martian language.<sup>37</sup> In this way, Sutela tries to connect with the “non-human condition of machines” (which she considers “aliens of our creation”) as well as with other-than-human forms of life and their intelligences that already live with(in) us, e.g., in the case of microbes that are part of the gut-brain-connection.<sup>38</sup> And she shows how the co-created languages of machines and nonhumans contribute to new ways of reflecting on how we relate to language *tout court*.

What all three of these artistic works have in common is that they acknowledge the creative potential of alienating humans from “natural” language. In this case, machines are not merely being used as “perfect others” or to serve human needs of pragmatic translation.<sup>39</sup> They do not just confront us with *Unverständlichkeit* – incomprehensibility – but also reveal that languages are subject to culture, to cultures conditioned by humans and nonhumans. In this respect these works hint at the limits of human interpretation and direct

36 As Apter sums up Daniel Heller-Roazen’s definition of glossolalia. See Apter 2013, p. 33.

37 The latter has its source in glossolalia by Hélène Smith, a medium and late nineteenth-century muse of surrealist automatic writing. The information on the artwork given here is based on an exchange with the artist. See also Sutela, Jenna, “Nimia Vibié Log” in Goodman, Steve, Heys, Tobi, and Ikoniadou, Eleni (eds.): *AUDINT – Unsound: Undead*, London, Cambridge, MA 2019, pp. 231–235.

38 Mackinnon-Little, Guy, “In Conversation with Jenna Sutela,” in *Tank Magazine*, Spring 2019, pp. 296–297.

39 One example is thus Google Translate. Speaking from a media-ecological perspective, Bernard Stiegler has remarked that even though it is efficient, it is “destroying languages” since it passes over exceptions and narrows the potential for faults, which are the condition of the “evolution” of language. See *SON[|]A #285*: Bernard Stiegler, April 8, 2019, <https://rwm.macba.cat/en/sonia/sonia-285-bernard-stiegler> (last access: December 3, 2019).

us back to that position of singularity – “from where I am sitting” – that defines a phenomenal limit of translatability. Apter’s work suggests untranslatability as one strategy for dealing with that situation. She provides precise angles from which one can look at translational relations, between humans and machines but also with respect to cultural difference and dialectal mediation: regionality, creoles, economies, power structures. We become more attuned to how speakers and listeners find themselves looking for ways to relate to the uttering and stuttering of the tomomibot, the riddles of *Talking Popcorn*’s last words, or nimiia cétii’s “glosso-poesy.” At a moment where machine translation has become a nearly seamless act, a kind of GPS tracking system of equivalence, these artistic machine languages seductively dare us to get “re-lost in translation.” They also make aware of human-machine interaction as a very complicated form of relational translation, to which to the known, the partially known, and the unknown contribute. From a hermeneutic point of view, the resulting babble may seem like nonsense. But considered as the raw material of language *en formation*, it murmurs: “Let’s talk.”

Hanna Magauer

### **Situierte Formen: Kunst, Sprache und die Frage nach ihren Eigenlogiken**

#### **Situated Forms: Thoughts on Arts, Language and their Intrinsic Logics**

Bilder aus Archiven, die übereinandergelegt und ineinander verschoben werden; Textfragmente, die – scheinbar kollidierend – zueinander in Bezug gesetzt werden; Fotos, die malerisch interpretiert werden; Begriffe, die je nach Sprache und Kontext neue Bedeutungen an sich binden; Bilder, die affizieren und agitieren, deren Übertragung ins Künstlerische Konflikte auslöst oder verschleiert, die symbolhaft und plakativ Aussagen treffen, die sich verstricken in diskursive Wirren. Zahlreiche der in diesem Band behandelten und versammelten künstlerischen Werke arbeiten mit Übersetzungen, Übertragungen, kommunikativen Strategien, durch die sie Sozialitäten und Relationalitäten verhandeln. Sie finden und erfinden Formen, mittels derer sie neue Bezüge schaffen oder bestehende aufdecken.

Solchen Bezüglichkeiten zum Trotz wurde die Form in kunstwissenschaftlichen Debatten häufig als ein dem Politischen entgegengesetztes Element behandelt: Auf der einen Seite wurden durch Formen geschaffene Relationen wie Bild- oder Stilzitate oft kunstimmanent diskutiert, als einer