

Translation, American English and the National Insecurities of Empire¹

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Abstract

This essay inquires into the relationship between translation and empire in the United States. It argues that such a relationship cannot be understood apart from a critical appreciation of the Americanization, which is to say translation, of English from an imperial into a national language that required the re-organization of the nation's linguistic diversity into a hierarchy of languages resulting in the emergence of a monolingual hegemony. However, this American notion of translation as monolingual assimilation was always contested. More recently, we can see its limits in the context of the recent US occupation of Iraq. As an examination of the vexed position of Iraqi translators working for the US military shows, attempts to deploy American notions of translation in war have devolved instead into the circulation of what in fact remains untranslatable and so unassimilable to US imperialist projects.

Translation and Empire

Addressing a gathering of university presidents attending a conference at the State Department on January 5, 2006, then President George W. Bush spoke of the country's dire need for translators to shore up national security. He promised to spend \$114 million to expand the teaching of so-called "critical languages" such as Arabic, Farsi, Chinese, and so forth at the university as well as K-12 levels as part of a new federal program called the National Security Language Initiative. The president then illustrated the importance of learning such languages in the following way:

In order to convince people we care about them, we've got to understand their culture and show them we care about their culture. You know, when somebody comes to me and speaks Texan, I know they appreciate Texas culture. When somebody takes time to figure out how to speak Arabic, it means they're interested in somebody else's culture [...]. We need intelligence officers who when somebody says something in Arabic or Farsi or Urdu, know what they're talking about. (Janofsky 2006)²

Bush's view on the learning of foreign languages, however crudely phrased, reflects certain ideas about translation and empire that have a long history. Since the Spanish conquest and religious conversion of the native peoples of the New World and the Pacific, various projects of translation have enabled as much as they have disabled the spread of Western empires. Spanish missionaries, for example, labored to Christianize native peoples in the Americas and the Pacific by preaching in the local languages while retaining Latin and Castilian as languages of ritual and rule. British philologists codified Indian languages to spread and consolidate imperial power and in a similar vein, French and Belgian missionaries and colonial administrators seized upon Swahili as an instrument for establishing knowledge of and control over Central Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.³

In this essay, I want to focus on the United States to show not so much its similarities with and differences from earlier empires – though such comparisons are implicit throughout – but to delineate the historical specificity of a nationalist idea of translation in the making of an American empire. Can thinking about translation contribute to understanding the history of the US in relation to the spread of its power overseas? In particular, what role does American English as the national language of rule and allegiance have in shaping American ideas about the translation, and by extension, assimilation of foreign languages and their speakers? What are the limits of this American notion of translation as assimilation? At what point does such a connection fail? And what are the consequences of such a failure for thinking about America's imperial presence in the world?

To address these questions, let me return briefly to Bush's remarks above. In referring to his language as "Texan," Bush in fact indexes the centrality of English in mapping America's place in the world. Perhaps said half in jest, his reference to "Texan" as his native idiom, nonetheless, makes it seem as if it is also a kind of alien tongue analogous to Arabic, Farsi and Chinese. Like them, it would call for translation. But if Arabic, Urdu and Chinese are functionally equivalent to Texan, they could also be construed merely as dialectical variations of the universal lingua franca, which no doubt is imagined by Bush to be English. By placing them in a series as if they were all equally foreign, the President reduces their singularity. He evacuates foreign languages of their foreignness. From this perspective, learning one foreign language is no different from learning another in that they are all meant to refer to English. In this way, they come to be assimilated into a linguistic hierarchy, subsumed within the hegemony of an imperial lingua franca. The strangeness of "Arabic," "Farsi," etc., like that of "Texan" can be made to yield to a domesticating power that would render these languages wholly comprehensible to English speakers and available for conveying American meanings and intentions. As supplements to English, so-called "critical languages" are thought to be transparent and transportable instruments for the insinuation and imposition of America's will to power.⁴

The systematic instrumentalization of foreign languages to serve nationalist ends runs far and deep in American thinking. It is evident, for example, in the discourse of the Department of Defense. Recent documents such as the *Defense Language Transformation Roadmap* describe knowledge of foreign languages as "an emerging core competency of our twenty-first century Total Force." The ability to translate is deemed "an essential war fighting skill," part of the "vital force capabilities for mission accomplishment." In this regard, critical languages," or what is sometimes referred to as "Global War on Terrorism languages" can only exist as part of a "critical weapons system." As a "war-fighting skill," translation is thus weaponized for the sake of projecting American power abroad while insuring security at home. Such sentiments circulate as

common sense in official circles regardless of political affiliations. Hence it is not surprising that Senator Daniel Akaka, a liberal Democrat and chair of the oversight committee on Homeland Security should state in a recent Congressional Hearing that “We know that proficiency in other languages is critical to ensuring our national security. The inability of law enforcement officers [and] intelligent officers [...] to intercept information from [foreign] sources [...] presents a threat to their mission and the well-being of our Nation.”⁵

The current pre-occupation with foreign language proficiency has its roots in the Cold War. In 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in response to what it called an “educational emergency.” In the midst of widespread anxieties about the threat posed by Soviet scientific advances such as the launching of the Sputnik satellite, the NDEA provided funding for the development of what Congress referred to as “those skills essential to national defense.” Such skills included knowledge of what even then were already referred to as “critical languages.” These were to be taught in area studies programs newly established in various universities and colleges. From the point of view of the State, the teaching of foreign languages was not about eroding the primacy of English. It was rather the reverse. Programs for the study of “critical languages” tended to be limited to graduate students and a smaller number of undergraduates. They were designed to create area studies experts whose knowledge of other cultures would help to shore up “our way of life” where, naturally, English held unchallenged supremacy.⁶ We might paraphrase the logic of the law this way: By fostering the ability to translate, “we” make use of the foreigner’s language in order to keep their native speakers in their proper place. In learning their language, “we” therefore do not wish to be any less “Americans,” but in fact to be more so. For “we” do not speak a foreign language in order to be like them, that is, to assimilate into the culture of their native speakers. Instead, we do so because “we” want to protect ourselves from them and to insure that they remain safely within our reach whether inside or outside our borders.

From this brief historical sketch, we can glean the rough outlines of the State's interest in foreign languages – interests which, I hasten to add, did not always coincide with those of individual area studies scholars. To begin with, a nationalist imperative linked to an imperial project not surprisingly has governed the programmatic teaching of foreign languages. Translation can be useful to the extent that it responds to this imperative. It is possible then to begin to see an American notion of translation, at least as it is articulated from above and ratified, though unevenly, from below. Such a notion turns on at least four assumptions. First, there is the belief that language as such is merely an instrument of communication subservient to human control. It is thus considered to be no more than a malleable media for conveying human ideas and intentions, as if ideas and intentions could exist outside their material constitution in writing and speech. Second, that languages are inherently unequal in their ability to communicate, and as such, they can be arranged into a hierarchy, for example, “critical” over “less critical” languages, depending on their utility and reach. In the US context, American English as I mentioned earlier (and which I will return to later) has been deemed exceptionally suited above all other languages for conveying all things exceptionally American to the citizens of the country and to the rest of the world. Third, that given the exceptional qualities of American English as a kind of universal lingua franca, all other languages ought to be reducible to its terms and thereby assimilable into the national linguistic hierarchy. And fourth, that this process of reduction is precisely the task of translation. In times of emergency, translation is pressed to mobilize foreign languages as parts of a “complex weapons system” with which to secure America's borders even as it globalizes the nation's influence.

The US state thus sees the relative value of foreign languages in relation to their usefulness in the defense of the nation. Their translation is meant to inoculate American citizens from foreign threats. Through translation, foreign languages furnish the tools with which to understand and domesticate what is alien and unfamiliar. In this way, they are charged with the job of keeping

America at home in the world. In the official, and arguably popular imaginary, the foreign can only be recognized when it is subordinate to the domestic. It follows that the apprehension of alien tongues can only amount to their conversion into appendages of a common national speech, English.

Americanizing English

The relationship between the task of translation and the privileged place of English in the United States has a complex history. From its beginnings, the United States had always been a polyglot country.⁷ While the majority of European settlers were English speaking, there had always been sizeable communities of non-Anglophones. By the late eighteenth century, over one fourth of the white population spoke a language other than English. In Pennsylvania alone, there were sufficiently large numbers of German speakers that Benjamin Franklin thought of publishing his first newspaper in that language, the *Philadelphische Zeitung* (1732) and another founding father, Benjamin Rush, even put forth the idea of establishing German-language colleges. Additionally, Dutch and French were spoken in various parts of the early Republic and so, too, were hundreds of Native American languages both in and outside the Union. There is also ample evidence to show that enslaved Africans in resisting their abject condition, continued to speak their native languages well into the nineteenth century, or in the case of Muslim Africans, knew Arabic, even as Americanized Africans developed a creolized version of English.⁸ Continental expansion by way of purchase and war throughout the nineteenth century incorporated large numbers of non-Anglophone groups into the Union, such as French and Spanish speakers in the Northeast, South and Southwest, while the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848 was interpreted to mean that Mexicans who had chosen to stay in the newly annexed areas of the California and New Mexico territories retained the right to use Spanish in the public sphere. In the wake of the wars of 1898, the colonization of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, of Hawai'i and Guam and other islands in the Pacific, and of the Philippines in Southeast Asia where as many as eighty languages are

spoken along with Spanish added to the linguistic complexity of the United States. In addition, waves of immigration from East, South and Southeast Asia, Eastern and Southern Europe, Scandinavia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East through the last two hundred and fifty years have further intensified the nation's linguistic mix. Indeed, one can wander around large metropolitan areas like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago or Seattle today without having to hear or speak English. As the Canadian scholar Marc Shell once remarked, "if ever there were a polyglot place on the globe, other than Babel's spire, the US is it."⁹

It is important to note, however, that this history of linguistic diversity has unfolded alongside a history of insisting that the United States has always been, was meant to be, and must forever remain a monolingual nation. John Jay for example writes in the *Federalist Papers*, "Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people, a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion."¹⁰ Conceived as Anglophone by Divine dispensation, "America" is understood here to be a unitary formation, where language, religion and kinship are seamlessly woven into each other. Still, in the aftermath of the American Revolution, the fact remained that "English" was the language of the British colonizer. It could not become the language of the new Republic without first being transformed, or better yet, translated, into a distinctly American idiom. Post-colonial figures such as John Adams, Noah Webster and Benjamin Franklin felt that British English bore all the hallmarks of the decadence of its native speakers. Unlike the English of Milton, Locke and Shakespeare, Americans thought that British English of the 1780s was in a state of serious decline. "Taste is corrupted by luxury," Webster intoned, "utility is a forgotten pleasure; genius is buried in dissipation or prostituted to exalt and to damn contending factions [...]" (Webster 1789, 178) For post-colonial Americans then, there was a pressing need to "improve and perfect" English, to remake it into something wholly American. At stake was nothing less than the very survival and progress of the nation.

John Adams, for example, wrote optimistically about the prospects of this new American language. It would be destined to become, like Latin, “the language of the world,” furnishing “universal connection and correspondence with all nations.” (Cited in Crawford 1992, 26-27, 32.) Once Americanized, English would serve as the medium for imparting the exemplary nature of the nation abroad. It would also serve as the means for cultivating a democratic citizenry. According to Adams, the “refinement” and “improvement” of the English language was essential in a democracy where “eloquence will become the instrument for recommending men to their fellow-men, and the principle means of advancement through various ranks and offices.” (Ibid.) In a society where aristocratic filiations no longer mattered, “eloquence,” or a certain facility with the national language would be an important way of making and re-making reputations and delineating social distinctions.

Early American concerns with the transformation of English echoed in some ways long standing European attempts at reforming vernacular languages in the wake of the hegemony of Latin. As early as the momentous year of 1492, for example, the Spanish humanist, Antonio de Nebrija in the preface of his grammar of the Castilian language wrote that “language is the perfect instrument of empire.” Looking back at Antiquity, Nebrija concluded that “language was always the companion of empire; therefore, it follows that together they begin, grow, and flourish and together they fall.” Securing Castilian hegemony in the Iberian Peninsula and spreading it overseas would thus require the codification of the Castilian language. (Nebrija 1926)

In eighteenth century England, political, commercial and imperial expansion led to calls for linguistic reform with the view of establishing a “systematized doctrine of correctness.” (Howe 2004, 15) Various attempts were made to standardize spelling and punctuation along with the codification of grammar in order to lend to English the uniformity necessary for governing all spheres of life.

In part, this search for linguistic regularity grew out of a widespread anxiety among English writers that their language had been on the decline from the standards of Latin and earlier English writing. Jonathan Swift complained in 1712 that “From the civil war to this present time I am apt to doubt whether the corruptions in our language have not at least equaled the refinements to it.” And John Dryden remarked that the inadequacies of English in his time forced him to first think in Latin as way of arriving at the proper English expression. John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* warned that one of the dangers to forging contracts was the “doubtful and uncertain use of Words, or (which is the same) indetermined Ideas, which they are made to stand for.” Thus, the need to “purify” English and guard against its “degeneration” from arbitrary foreign borrowings and idiomatic “barbarisms” was inseparable from securing the social contract on the basis of a commonly understood language of consent. So did Samuel Johnson regard his task in writing his dictionary as one of “refin[ing] our language to grammatical purity [and] clear[ing] it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations.” The “purification” of English would allow the English themselves to “ascertain” and “perfect” its use. Such would lead, Joseph Priestly wrote, to the spread of “their powers and influence abroad, and their arts, sciences and liberty at home [...]”¹¹ These projects of linguistic reform tied to the imperatives of both domestic order and imperial expansion clearly influenced American post-colonials such as Noah Webster in their efforts to, as he saw it, “redeem” English from the “degradations” of empire. (Webster 1862, xiii.)

For Noah Webster, the Revolution that overthrew British imperial authority should also continue with the overthrow of its linguistic standards. “As an independent nation,” he wrote in 1789, “our honor requires us to have a system of our own, in language as well as in government. Great Britain whose children we are, and whose language we speak, should no longer be our standard, for the taste of her writers is already corrupted and her language on the decline [...]” (Webster 1789, 21) Ridding “ourselves” of a corrupt state necessitated purifying its “corrupt” speech. Hence, while “we”

have abandoned the mother, we can retain the mother tongue only if it can be reformed and turned into “our” national language. The emergence of this revitalized American English, Webster speculated, would prove to be momentous. In the face of its inevitable advance “all other languages [spoken in the country] will waste away – and within a century and a half, North America will be peopled with hundreds of millions of men all speaking the same language [...]. The consequence of this uniformity [of language] will be an intimacy of social intercourse hitherto unknown, and a boundless diffusion of knowledge.” (Ibid. See also Webster 1862, xiii.)

Webster thus envisions the national language to be poised between overcoming its origins in the “corrupt” language of empire while laying the foundation for a kind of new empire over all other languages in the Republic. Once established, this “common tongue” promised to subsume linguistic differences into what Webster calls a “uniformity.” At the same time, and for the same reason, American English would foster an “intimacy of social intercourse hitherto unknown.” Its telecommunicative force, that is, its capacity to bring distances up close, would conjure a perfect union. But it would be one where poly-lingual realities would have to give way to a monolingual hegemony.

In his attempts to wean English from its British origins, Webster not surprisingly laid great stress in reforming by simplifying spelling in order to standardize a distinctly American pronunciation. His spellers and his dictionary (after meeting with initial resistance and ridicule) came to be widely used in schools and by the American public. Addressing the readers of his *Dictionary* as “my fellow citizens,” Webster viewed his linguistic work to be part of “the common treasure of patriotic exertions.” The United States emerges here as the rejection of a certain Europe, one “grown old in folly, corruption and tyranny [...] where literature is declining and human nature debased.” By developing a “purity of language,” this “infant Empire,” as Webster calls it, would come to “promote virtue and patriotism.” (Webster 1862, xiv; Webster 1968, 14-15.) In a similar vein, he was also concerned with correcting what he

regarded as the “barbarisms” and “gross violations” that local idioms committed against English as evident in the “vicious pronunciation which had prevailed extensively among the common people of this country.” (Webster 1862, xi) He urged Americans to “unite in destroying provincial and local distinctions, in resisting the stream of corruptions that is ever flowing from ignorance and pride, and in establishing one uniform standard of elegant pronunciation [...]” It is in the interest of protecting the language from “disfigurement” that Webster put forth his orthographic reforms in what would become his remarkably popular spelling book.¹² “Nothing but the establishment of schools and some uniformity in the use of books can annihilate differences in speaking and preserve the purity of the American tongue,” Webster wrote. (1789, 19)

Like Adams’ interest in the popular acquisition of eloquence, Webster’s fixation on elocution and “a sameness in pronunciation” grew out of a larger political concern: that the that local variants of English would inevitably, no matter how small “excite ridicule – [for] a habit of laughing at the singularities of strangers is followed by disrespect; and without respect, friendship is a name, and social intercourse a mere ceremony [...]. Small causes such as a nickname or a vulgar tone in speaking have actually created a dissocial spirit between the inhabitants of a different state.” Left to themselves, linguistic differences would proliferate and inflame “pride and prejudice,” leading Webster to worry that without “uniformity” in speech, “our political harmony” would be at serious risk. (1789, 20)

It is possible to see in Webster’s linguistic reforms a practice of translation working *within* the same language, or what some scholars have called intra-lingual translation.¹³ We can think, for example, of such locutions as “in other words,” “put differently,” “that is to say,” “for example,” etc. as speech acts that indicate the working of translation within the same language. In Webster, intra-lingual translation is two-fold. The translation of the more mannered British speech into the more straightforward American idiom occurs alongside the attempt to contain or “annihilate,” as Webster puts it,

dialectical variants of American English. The national language thus emerges from a kind of double translation. On the one hand, the original language is altered, its spellings “simplified” and “purified.” On the other hand, what Webster referred to as the “shameful mutilations” wrought by local idioms are corrected and superseded. (1789, 103-122) American English as the language of “political harmony” and democratic civility requires as its condition of possibility the violent reworking of differences into sameness. The original in all its “corrupt,” which is to say stylistic profusion, is to be sublated, while local variants, which is to say all other competing translations, are to be suppressed. Out of this prescribed supersession and suppression, a “uniformity” of speech is thought to arise, one that would underwrite the national security of the Republic. Translation within the same language thereby brings about the promise of a lingua franca connecting citizens across geographical and social divides, allowing them mobility and advancement. But it also requires the “annihilation” of differences, effecting the systematic annexation of the mother tongue and her wayward children into the governing home of a single national speech.

I want to hypothesize that the Americanization, which is to say, translation, of English into a national language popularized by Webster in his spelling books and dictionary, served as an important model for dealing with foreign languages in the years to come. In the following section, I argue that the early post-colonial history of vernacularizing English offered a way to assimilate non-Anglophone languages into a linguistic hierarchy, thereby containing polylingualism within the borders of national monolingualism.

The Babel of Monolingualism

In the wake of Noah Webster’s reforms, it is not difficult to detect in both liberal and conservative writers a recurring insistence on the unassailable link between American English and American nationality conceived as synonymous with American democracy. One is seen to be inconceivable without the other. A common

language ruling over all others is held to be the prerequisite for achieving a common life steeped in an egalitarian ethos. Non-Anglophones have long been expected by the nation and by the state – at least since the later nineteenth and twentieth century – to exchange their mother tongues for the national language in order to become full citizens. (Heath 1992) Equality under the law implied – though it did not legally mandate – the inequality of languages. Non-English speakers marked as foreigners are expected to publicly set aside their first language in acknowledgement of the ever-present demand to speak the lingua franca. The priority of the latter lay in the fact that it is the language of laws and rights. In this regard, it is useful to note that American English has never been declared the official language of the United States, though a number of states have written such a provision into their own constitution.¹⁴ Rather, its hegemony is based precisely on the fact that it seemed to arise as a handmaiden of democracy, the lingua franca with which to claim equal protection under the law. Viewed as *the* obligatory common language, English is thus invested with an uncommon power that no other idiom has been able to match.

The systematic privileging of American English not surprisingly sustains a pattern of marginalizing the mother tongues of native peoples and non-Anglophone immigrants alike. At the best of times and places, such marginalization might give rise to a liberal tolerance for bilingualism, whereby the first language is seen as a way of bridging the speaker's transition to English. Within the context of this liberal view, the retention of the mother tongue is a means with which to soften the shocks of assimilation. Rather than an alternative, the native language is regarded like any other foreign language: as an instrument for consolidating the dominant place of English.¹⁵ In times of crisis and war, however, the marginalization of non-Anglophone languages tend to give rise to urgent calls for either the rapid assimilation or expulsion of their speakers. For instance, we read in the annual report of the federal commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1887 a great animosity towards native languages commonly held by whites. In the interest of crushing Indian resistance and producing among them a "sameness of sentiment and

thought,” the commissioner urged that “their barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted.” It was only through English that Native Americans, rendered irredeemably foreign in the eyes of white settlers, could be converted into real Americans, “acquir[ing] a knowledge of the Constitution and their rights and duties there under.” For unlike Indian languages which were regarded as “utterly useless,” English was seen as “the language of the greatest and most powerful, enterprising nationality beneath the sun (sic) [...] which approaches nearer than any other nationality to the perfect protection of its people [...]”¹⁶ In the name of maintaining this “perfect protection,” translation would not only substitute the first for a second language, but obliterate the former and presumably the very cultures that it sustained.

In a similar vein, Theodore Roosevelt wrote in 1917 about the danger of harboring immigrants who, by virtue of speaking a foreign language were most likely “paying allegiance to a foreign power.” Riding the wave of anti-immigrant hysteria directed particularly at German speakers that swept the country amidst the First World War, Roosevelt explicitly links the question of language to national security: “We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language [...]. It would be not merely a misfortune but a crime to perpetuate differences of language in this country.” For Roosevelt, the “crime” of allowing linguistic diversity to prosper would result in opening up the country to foreign agents who in their comings and goings would transform America into a “huge polyglot boarding-house.” Doing so would subvert the very idea of America as a “crucible [that] must melt all who are cast in it [...] into one American mould.” As “children of the crucible,” Americans were the products of “the melting pot of life in this free land,” where “all the men and women of all nations who come hither emerge as Americans and nothing else [...]. Any force which attempts to retard that assimilative process is a force hostile to the highest interest of the country [...]”¹⁷ English of course would be the measure and means of assimilation. Being “American and nothing else [...]” meant speaking English and nothing else. Roosevelt thus situates the monolingual citizen on the side of

national identity and security. But in doing so, he also places him or her in relation to the menacing presence of his or her shadowy other: the polyglot foreigner whose uncertain allegiance and rootless existence make it into a dangerous enemy.

In the context of this militant monolingualism, we sense how the work of translation was geared to go in only one direction: towards the transformation of the foreign into an aspect of the domestic, and thus of the plurality of native tongues into the imperious singularity of a national one. The imperative of assimilation underlay the substitution of languages so that translation was ordered towards not only the subordination of the original but to its outright abandonment. But there is something more. Roosevelt and those who follow in his wake – for example, the “100% American” nativists of the early twentieth century, the advocates of the Official English constitutional amendment of the 1980s, the proponents of English Only laws in the 1990s, all the way up to a broad range of Americans today who, anxious about “terrorists” and “immigrants,” and often conflating the two, indignantly ask why they should have to be told by phone answering services and ATM machines to “press ‘1’ for English” and “*oprima dos por Espanol*”¹⁸ – all of them in their mania for monolingualism see translation as a kind of labor that only non-Anglophones should have to do. Since it is “they” who must assimilate, it is therefore “they,” not “us,” who must translate their native tongues into English. The reverse would be unthinkable. For as citizens of this country, aren’t we already fully assimilated? Haven’t we already successfully forgotten our polylingual origins? As such, aren’t we entitled to think that we have arrived at a condition of complete monolingualism?

Indeed, because it is brought about by a process of translation – of repressing one’s first language in favor of a second – monolingual citizenship is assumed to be a kind of achievement rather than a limitation. Among other things, this achievement brings with it a certain freedom, which is nothing less than the emancipation from the labor of translation. It is not surprising then that the recurrent of signs of linguistic difference are experienced by

those who think of themselves as assimilated, or perhaps on their way to being so, either as an occasion for racially tinged humor, or as a kind of “cultural assault.” In either case, evidence of an enduring polylingualism appear to English-only speakers as an unsettling return of what should have been repressed. The sight of Chinese or Hindi writing on billboards or the sound of Tagalog or Russian can only infringe on the latter’s freedom from translation and the enjoyment that accrues to monolingual entitlement.

The popular appeal of American English from this perspective lies precisely in its capacity to grant American citizens the powerful illusion of freedom not only from their origins. Monolingualism as the successful substitution of one’s first language for a second also affords the semblance of release from the demands of repressing one language in favor of another. Only those still dwelling in “polyglot boarding houses” of the nation are expected to toil in the fields and factories of translation. By contrast, fluency in English as the privileged proof of full citizenship – certainly in a cultural though not necessarily in a legal sense – means simply this: no further translation is necessary. The end of translation, assimilation, thus marks an end to translation. It is the cure to the curse of linguistic difference bedeviling humans since Babel’s destruction.

Or is it?

The historical wishfulness for and of monolingual citizenship grows in part out of the remarkable tenacity of the myth of America as exceptional and exemplary in its capacity to melt differences into sameness.¹⁹ This exceptionalist faith with its Christian genealogy arguably lies at the basis of American nationalism. It is worth noting, however, that the fable of the melting pot is often accompanied by its opposite image, the fragmentation and confusion of Babel. To cite just one example, the historian Arthur Schlesinger in response to the post-civil rights emergence of multicultural and multi-lingual polities wrote: “The national ideal had once been *e pluribus unum*. Are we now to belittle *unum* and

glorify *pluribus*? Will the center not hold? Or will the melting pot yield to the Tower of Babel?" (Cited in Shell 1993, 104) The linguist and one-time senator from California, S.I. Hayakawa used to put it more bluntly in his campaign mailers for a constitutional amendment to make English the official language: "Melting pot, yes. Tower of Babel, no." (Cited in Crawford 1992, 100) "Babel" here is another version of Roosevelt's "polyglot boarding-house," a country besieged by Webster's "dissocial spirit." It is the dystopic counterpoint to the monolingual melting pot where the confusion of tongues augurs national collapse.

It is perhaps worth recalling the story of Babel in the Book of Genesis. Coming after the Great Flood, it relates the fate of the descendents of yet another Noah who sought to build a Tower that would reach up to the heavens. It is instructive to note in this regard that the word "babel" has two meanings: one, the more common from the Hebrew *balal* means "to confuse." But the other, seen in the word's Akkadian root "*babilu*," means "gateway of God." "Babel" thus harbors two mutually opposed meanings: a state of confusion and a passage to unification. The very word encapsulates the allegory of exile from the state of perfect unity between words and things, between signs and their referents, thereby making translation into an unending task. Men's attempts to build a tower that would have led to the heavens was a way of saying that they did not need a messiah, or what in the New Testament would be pronounced as the Word of God; rather, that they themselves could save themselves since they already spoke one language. Seeking to punish their hubris, God decides to "confound their language" and scatter them about the face of the earth. Folk retellings and pictorial depictions of this story show the Tower itself laid to waste by God's wrath.²⁰

In the American invocations of Babel, its double meaning is usually forgotten. Only its divine dispersion into a state of linguistic confusion is recalled, not its linguistic unity prior to God's punishment. It is the fallen Babel with its wild profusion of languages that is made to stand in stark contrast to the idealized

linguistic order of the United States. As Babel redeemed, the US is precisely where *unum* comes to rule over *pluribus*. Yet, the structural proximity of “Babel” to “America” suggests that the latter does not simply negate the former but in fact retraces its fate. “Babel” is the specter that haunts American English. It informs, in the strong sense of that word, the hierarchy of languages on which monolingual citizenship rests. For as we saw, the hegemony of English is an *effect* of translation, both intra-lingual, within English, and inter-lingual, between English and other languages. In this way, national monolingualism is itself divided, requiring even as it disavows the labor of translation. The universality of the lingua franca is thus radically contingent on the endurance and mutation of regional dialects and creole speech: Spanglish, and Taglish, Hawai’ian pidgin, black English, and rural and regional dialects of all sorts to name only a few. Similarly, American monolingualism is never quite free from the polylingualism of its non-Anglophone citizenry: native peoples of the continent and the islands, first generation immigrants from all over the world, Spanish speakers from Puerto Rico and Latin America spread out across the country, and so on. Demanding recognition and participation in the public sphere, some push for bilingual education and others for multi-lingual ballots. Many continue to inhabit mediascapes, from print to TV to radio, in their native languages, and expect to press something other than “1” for English on the phone or the ATM machine. We can see then how “America” is less the New World repudiation of “Babel” as it is its uncanny double. For Babel is not the catastrophic downfall of the city upon the hill, but in fact its condition of possibility. How so?

Recall that the allegory of Babel connotes the state of unregulated linguistic difference. To dwell in this state requires the constant labor of translation – constant insofar as no single act of translation can ever exhaust, much less reduce, the singularity of any particular language. “Babel” therefore reveals not only the necessity of translation but also its limits. The persistence of difference means that there is something about languages that resists assimilation and therefore translation into a single linguistic hierarchy, into a single

Tower, as it were, much less into Twin Towers. It is possible, for example, to translate Tagalog or Spanish poetry into English (or vice versa), but not without losing the rhythmic elements and myriad references of the original. To compensate for this loss, the translator must provide explanatory notes, thereby introducing an excess that was not there in the original. Subtracting while adding, translations always come up short even as they exceed the original. Thus the impossibility of definitive translations, given that there is no perfect equivalence of one language with another. Rather, there are only the uneven and imperfect approximations. In this way, each language remains to a significant degree untranslatable even as it calls out for more translation. It is as if in translating your Arabic into my Texan, and my Texan into your Arabic, we find ourselves mutually mis-translating, then trying again, only to add to our earlier mis-translations. And since my Texan and your Arabic are incommensurable, neither of them can be annexed to a single lingua franca. Instead, what we come to understand is that there is something that resists our understanding. What we end up translating is the sense that something in our speech remains untranslatable and yet remains the basis for any future translations.

This Babel of on-going translation amid what remains untranslatable is the “other” that is set against “America.” Imagined as an egalitarian community based on a unifying language that as Webster wrote, “lays to waste” other idioms, America is usually conceived as the overcoming of Babel. As the “melting pot,” it is that which, as we saw, was ordained to put an end to translation and the untranslatability of all originals. But this idealized vision of America requires that there be a Babel to vanquish and overcome, again and again. For without the specter of the untamed profusion of tongues, the New World myth of a monolingual America would make no ideological sense. At the same time, the very nature of Babel guarantees that there will never be such a thing as a perfectly monolingual country. To put it another way, Babel simultaneously makes and unmakes America as myth *and* as the reality that requires such a myth in order to make sense of itself in the world. To translate this further would strain the very limits of translation, but

let me try: there is America only if there is Babel. But this also means that there can be no America when there is Babel.

Nowhere is this strange intimacy and impossible possibility of Babel and America more apparent in recent years than in the US occupation of the country of Iraq where the very site of the biblical Babel lies, or Babylon as it more commonly referred to, along the Euphrates River near present-day Baghdad. It is there where the allegory of Babel is literalized even as the metaphorical towers of American exceptionalism are re-erected. In US-occupied Iraq, as I hope to show, translation is dislodged and dislocated from its subservience to assimilation. Rather than render language suppliant to the will of its speakers, translation in this modern day American Babel confounds both the identity and intentions of its users. Yielding neither a stable social nor linguistic order, translation instead brings about the on-going suspension of both. In the confused conditions of military occupation, the work of translation, as we shall see, is constantly arriving at its limits, overtaken by the return of that which remains untranslatable. How does this happen?

Untranslatability and War

Since the beginning of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq, a number of news accounts have appeared about the role, at once indispensable and troubling, of Arabic-speaking translators in the occupation. I want to set aside for the moment the role of American and Arab American translators and instead concentrate on Iraqi nationals serving as translators for the US military, though I suspect that my remarks about the latter will have some implications for understanding the role of the former.²¹

Translators are also called interpreters, which is why among the US soldiers they are popularly referred to as “terps.” Unlike the Americans they work for, interpreters are forced to hide their identities. They often cover their faces with ski masks and sun glasses as they venture outside the military bases and adopt American pseudonyms such as “Eric” or “Sally” so as to protect

themselves from being singled out for insurgent attacks. At the same time, their identity within the US military remains unsettled and unsettling inasmuch as their presence generates both relief and suspicion among soldiers. Some interpreters earn the military's trust and gratitude and a handful of the Iraqi nationals are granted asylum to move to the US. The small numbers who manage to acquire visas do so usually through the personal intercession of the particular American soldier they worked for rather than through any systematic US policy to resettle them. Once relocated in the US, they come to depend on the kindness of the soldier who brought them while often avoiding other Iraqis for fear of suffering reprisals.²² Aliens in their new surroundings, they continue to be alienated from their own countrymen. Other translators who are killed, especially among the very small number of women, are treated with tender regard, often memorialized by US soldiers as "one of us."²³

Still, doubts linger amid reports of some interpreters sending information to the insurgents. As one US soldier puts it, "These guys (i.e., interpreters) have guts to do what they do. And we'd be nowhere without them. We'd be lost. But you always have this fear that they might be leaking op-sec (operational security) stuff. You want to trust them but you're still reserved."²⁴ Given the inability of most American soldiers to speak Arabic, interpreters, as one report puts it, provide the "public face of the occupation."²⁵ Essential in conducting military operations, they nonetheless are thought to threaten them by leaking information. They mediate the vast gulf that separates American soldiers from the Iraqi people, often defusing conflict by being able to decipher, for example, documents that to Americans may look like plans for smuggling weapons but turn out to be in fact no more than sewing patterns.²⁶ Without them, soldiers "were as good as deaf and dumb on the battlefield," as one Marine told a Senate hearing.²⁷ Yet, despite their essential function in fighting insurgents, they are also feared as potential insurgents themselves. Moving between English and Arabic, translators allow largely monolingual Americans to communicate with Iraqis and for this reason are integrated into the ranks, given uniforms and salaries. But their loyalty is always suspect. Interpreters are the only ones

searched within the base, especially after every meal, forbidden to carry cell phones and cameras, send e-mail, play video games, and as of this writing, even swim in the pool.²⁸ They are subjected to incessant racial insults – “raghead,” “jihad,” “camel jockey” among others – at the same time that they are forced to go out of base with neither weapons nor armor to protect themselves.²⁹ Just by being who they are, translators thus find themselves stirring interest and sending out messages beyond what they had originally intended. Without meaning to, they generate meanings outside of their control. In this way, they come across as alien presences that seem to defy assimilation even as they are deemed indispensable to the assimilation of aliens. They are “foreign in a domestic sense,” as much as they are domestic in a sense that remains enduringly foreign.³⁰

It is precisely because they are of such great value to the US forces that translators are targeted by insurgents and reviled by most Iraqis. They are accused of being mercenaries, collaborating with the US to kill other Iraqis so that they face constant threats of being kidnapped and killed themselves. One Iraqi interpreter with the pseudonym “Roger” says, “If you look at our situation, it’s really risky and kind of horrible. Outside the wire, everybody looks at us like we are back-stabbers, like we betrayed our country and our religion, and then inside the wire they look at us like we might be terrorists.”³¹ Interpreters thus come to literalize that old adage: “traduttore – traditore,” at times with tragic results. Stranded between languages and societies, translators are also exiled from both. Neither native nor foreign, they are both at the same time. Their uncanny identity triggers recurring crisis among all sides. It is as if their capacity for mediation endows them with a power to disturb and destabilize far out of proportion to their socially ascribed and officially sanctioned positions. But it is a power that also constitutes their profound vulnerability.

These and many other stories about interpreters give us a sense that within the context of the US Occupation of Iraq, translation works only too well. That is, it produces effects and

relations that are difficult if not impossible to curb. Faced with the translator, both Americans and Iraqis are gripped with the radical uncertainty about the interpreter's loyalty and identity. Translators come across as simultaneously faithful and unfaithful, or more precisely, faithful to their task by being unfaithful to their origins. Rather than promote understanding and hospitality, the work of translation seems to spawn misgivings and misrecognition. In dealing with an interpreter, one is addressed in one's own language – Arabic or English – by an other who also has access to an idiom and culture alien because unavailable to one. Faced with the need to depend on such an other, one responds with ever intensifying suspicions. Such suspicions are repeatedly manifested in racial insults, often escalating into violence and in some cases, murder, thereby stoking even more suspicions. Iraqis see in the translator one of their own used against them, a double agent who bears their native language now loaded like a weapon with alien demands. For the majority of US soldiers whose English only cut them off from rather than connect them with Iraqis, the indispensability of interpreters is also the source of the latter's duplicity, making them potential insurgents. From all sides, "terps" appear as enemies disguised as friends whose linguistic virtuosity masks their real selves and their true intentions.

The task of the translator is thus mired in a series of intractable and irresolvable contradictions. It begins with the fact that translation itself is a highly volatile act. As the displacement, replacement, transfer and transformation of the original into another language, translation is incapable of fixing meanings across languages. Rather, as with the story of Babel, it consists precisely in the proliferation and confusion of possible meanings and therefore in the impossibility of arriving at a single one. For this reason, it repeatedly brings into crisis the locus of address, the interpretation of signs, the agency of mediation, and the ethics of speech. Hence is it impossible for imperialists as well as those who are opposed to them to fully control much less recuperate its workings. The treachery and treason inherent in translation in a time of war are the insistent counter-points to the American notion of translation as

monolingual assimilation with its promise of democratic communication and the just exchange of meanings. In the body of the interpreter, translation reaches its limits. As we've seen, "terps" as the uncanny doubles of US soldiers and Iraqi insurgents, are productive neither of meaning nor domination, but only the circulation of what remains untranslatable. It would seem then that in the war on terror, translation is at permanent war with itself.

Translation *at* war and *as* war: how do we understand this? I want to conclude with a brief response to this question. If translation is like war, is it possible that war is also like translation? It is possible I think if we consider that the time of war is like the movement of translation. There is a sense that both lead not to the privileging of order and meaning but to emergence of what I've been calling the untranslatable. "Wartime" spreads what Nietzsche called in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war, "an all consuming fever" that creates a crisis in historical thinking. So much of the way we think about history, certainly in the Westernized parts of our planet since the Enlightenment, is predicated on a notion of time as the succession of events leading towards increasingly more progressive ends. Wartime decimates that mode of thinking. Instead, it creates mass disorientation at odds with the temporal rhythms of progress and civilization. In this way, wartime is what Sam Weber refers to as "pure movement." It is a "whirlwind [...] that sweeps everything up in its path and yet goes nowhere. As a movement, the whirlwind of war marks time, as it were, inscribing it in a destructive circularity that is both centripetal and centrifugal, wrenching things and people out of their accustomed places, displacing them and with them, all [sense] of place as well [...]. Wartime thus wrecks havoc with traditional conceptions of space and time and with the order they make possible." (Weber 1997, 92.)

It is precisely the disordering effect of war on our notions of space and time that brings it in association with translation that, as we saw, scatters meaning, displaces origins, and exposes the radical undecidability of references, names and addressees. Put differently, translation in wartime intensifies the experience of untranslatability

and thus defies the demands of imperial assimilation. It is arguably this stark exposure of translation's limits that we see, for example, in the uncanny body of the Iraqi interpreter. Such a body, now ineradicably part of our own national-imperial body politic, generates the sense of severe disorientation, sending back to us a Babel-like scattering of discourses and opinions about the war. Just as civilizational time engenders the permanent possibility of wartime, the time that is out of joint and out of whack, so the time of translation is haunted by untranslatability, the feverish circulation of misrecognition and uncertainty from which we can find neither safety nor security, national or otherwise.

Notes

1. First published in *Social Text*, 101, December 2009.
I am grateful to a number of friends and colleagues who helped me think through and revise this paper: Kathleen Woodward who first invited me to give this as a talk at the Simpson Humanities Center at the University of Washington; Ben Anderson; Paul Bandia; Jonathan Beller; Brent Hayes Edwards; Leo Garcia; Susan Gillman; Michael Meeker; Mary Louise Pratt; Lulu Reyes; Danilyn Rutherford; and Jim Siegel.
2. For more details on the National Security Language Initiative, see <http://exchanges.state.gov/NSLI/>;
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/58733.htm>;
<http://www.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2006/01/01052006.html>. It is unclear, however, as to how much of the funding for this program has actually been released as of the date of this writing. I am grateful to Mary Pratt for referring me to this story on Bush's language initiative.
3. For the Spanish empire, see for example MacCormack 1991 and Rafael 1993. For the British empire, see Cohn 1987; and for Central Africa, see Fabian 1986.
4. The logocentrism that frames this American notion of translation predicated on the re-organization of foreign languages into a hierarchical relationship to American speech is comparable to that of

sixteenth century Spanish missionary ideas about translation that regarded all languages as gifts from God. They were thus available for the conversion of their native speakers, a process that among other things entailed the translation of native speech into vessels for carrying and conveying Christ, the Word of God. All words at all times and all places were then mere derivatives of the Divine lingua franca. For an extended discussion of this Spanish history of colonial translation, see Rafael 1993, especially chapter 1.

5. United States, "Lost in Translation: A Review of the Federal Government's Efforts to Develop a Foreign Language Strategy," Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2007, pp.2; 40. See also United States, Department of Defense, *Defense Language Transformation Roadmap*, January, 2005 available at <http://www.defense.gov/news/Mar2005/d20050330roadmap.pdf>
6. For the text of the National Defense Education Act, see the appendix in Clowse 1981 (162-165). See also Bigelow and Legters 1964. For critical examinations of area studies in the wake of the Cold War, see Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002, and Rafael 1994.
7. See Shell 1993; Lepore 2002, 27-29; Dodd 1993; Heath 1992; Sagarin and Kelly 1985; Fishman 1966.
8. See Gomez 1998, 170-184; Lepore 2002, 120-121; Dillard 1973.
9. Shell 1993, 105. The contemporary hegemony of English notwithstanding, the persistence of linguistic diversity in the United States remains impressive. See for example the Modern Language Association Language Map, http://www.mla.org/map_main.
10. In Hamilton *et al* 1966, 6.
11. For an insightful discussion of eighteenth century projects for reforming English, see Howe 2004, 13-27. The quotations above are taken from these pages.
12. Webster 1968, 6-7. First published in 1783, Webster's blue-backed spellers sold close to ten million copies by 1823 and was the most commonly used book for teaching American children how to read clear

up the latter nineteenth century. Frederick Douglass credits Webster's spellers with helping him to gain fluency in the national language. Indeed, sales of the books experienced one of its most dramatic spikes shortly after the Civil War when freedmen sought it out in order to acquire the literacy that had been forbidden to them as slaves. See Lepore 2002, 6, 125-126.

13. See, for example, Derrida 1997 and 2001. See also Emad 1993. Indeed, much of Heidegger's writings exemplify the inescapable task of translating within the same language. For a brilliant ethnographic study of the poetics and politics of intra-lingual translation in the context of Javanese, see Siegel 1986.
14. For the texts of various "official English" amendments to state constitutions, see "State Official Language Statutes and Constitutional Amendments," in Crawford 1992, 132-35.
15. Sagarin and Kelly 1992, 42; Solarz 1992; "The English Plus Alternative," in Crawford 1992, 151-53; "Native American Language Act," in Crawford 1992, 155-57. Indeed, the Native American Language Act of 1990 which provides official encouragement, though not funding, for the learning and preservation of Native languages, including Hawai'ian, designates these languages as "foreign," so that studying them allows students to fulfill credits towards the satisfaction of a foreign language requirement.
16. Atkins 1887, v. II, 18-19. For the vicissitudes of Indian language policies under the US government, Reyhner 1992.
17. Roosevelt 1926, 35, 45-46. I also cite the shorter version that appears in Crawford 1992, 84-85. See also "The Children of the Crucible," *Outlook*, September 19, 1917, 80.
18. See for example Lizze 2007, 48. For accounts of nativist insistence on English as a touchstone of assimilation, see Higham 1955, Kellor 1916.
19. For a genealogy of American "exceptionalism," see Rogers 1998. See also Elliott 2006, 184-218.

20. Samuel Weber has discussed in detail the complications of the word “Babel” in Weber 2005. For an important explication of Babel, see Derrida 2002.
21. See for example the case of Captain James Yee, who had converted to Islam and, fluent in Arabic, was assigned to serve as a chaplain to detainees in Guantanamo. In 2003, he was arrested on charges of espionage, though he was convicted of much lesser charges a few years later. Yee’s example is discussed in Mary Louise Pratt’s remarkably insightful essay, “Harm’s Way: Language and the Contemporary Arts of War” (Pratt 2009).
22. Deborah Amos, “Iraqi Interpreters Grateful for US Troops’ Support,” *National Public Radio*, October 17, 2007; Joseph B. Frazier, “Oregon Guardsman Returns the Favor for his Iraqi Interpreter,” *Associated Press*, in *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, December 24, 2007; Michael Breen, “The Debt We Owe Iraqi Interpreters,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 8, 2008.
23. John Koopman, “Interpreter’s Death Rattles Troops,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 1, 2004; Moni Basu, “Iraqi Interpreters Risk their Lives to aid GI’s,” *Cox News Services*, November 2, 2005; Howard LaFranci, “Remembering Allan: A tribute to Jim Carroll’s Interpreter,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, 2006; .
24. Charles Levinson, “Iraq’s ‘Terps’ Face Suspicions on Both Sides,” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 17, 2006, also available at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0417/p01s01-woiq.html>; Nick Wadhams, “Iraqi Interpreters Face Death Threats from Countrymen, Alienation from U.S. Troops,” *Associated Press*, January 23, 2006.
25. Levinson, “Iraq’s ‘Terps’ Face Suspicions on Both Sides.” See also Ann Scott Tyson, “Always in Hiding, an Iraqi Interpreter’s Anguished Life,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 15, 2004.
26. John M. Glionna and Ashraf Khalil, “‘Combat Linguists’ Battle on Two Fronts,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 5, 2005; Matthew D. LaPlante, “Speaking the Language; A Vital Skill; Interpreters in high demand in Iraq,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, October 13, 2005; C. Mark Brinkley, “Translators’ Fears Disrupt Vital Lines of Communication,” *Army Times*, December 8, 2004

27. Amos, "Iraqi Interpreters Grateful for US Troops' Support"
28. Ibid.
29. David Washburn, "Dangerous Work of Contractors in Iraq," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Nov. 22, 2006.
30. The term "foreign [to the United States] in a domestic sense" comes of course from the concurring opinion of Supreme Court Justice Edward Douglas White describing the "unincorporated territories" held by the United States in the wake of the wars of 1898 – the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam – in *Downes v. Bidwell*, one in a series of decisions collectively known as the Insular Cases of 1901. See Burnett and Marshall 2001, especially 1-17. For a sustained inquiry into this notion of foreignness that at once conjures and troubles the domestic, see Kaplan 2002. My own attempt to specify foreignness as the recurrence of untranslatability amid the imperative to translate can be found in Rafael 2005.
31. Levinson, "Iraq's 'Terps' Face Suspicions on Both Sides."

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