Paper Title: Writing and Translation from the ‘Poetic Ravine’: the Case of Yoko Tawada

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Abstract
In the contemporary era of globalisation and transnational flows of people, culture and literature, many of us speak and write as travellers, without stable ties to a particular place, identity or even language. As a bilingual author in Japanese and German, this theme of the fluidity and uncertainty of language and identity is central to Yoko Tawada’s writing. Her creative and postmodern linguistic style derives from her existence in this ‘third space’, which she reaches by stepping ‘outside the mother tongue’ and descending into the ‘poetic ravine’ between languages. As her English translator, Margaret Mitsutani says, this is very much like the position of the translator who is always caught between two languages. Tawada’s works have themselves been translated into several languages, and this paper discusses the issues and challenges when translating Tawada’s Japanese works into English, referring to examples from existing translations.

In particular, Tawada employs extensive techniques of defamiliarisation to highlight the instability and flexibility of language, such as wordplay and novel extensions of metaphorical expressions. Yet, the methods by which such effects can be achieved in Japanese are seldom transferrable into English. Despite this, translators of Tawada must feel empowered by Tawada’s own perspectives on writing and translation to be discussed in this paper; namely, that creative
writing and creative translation is only possible when one resides within the constantly shifting border zone between languages, exploring linguistic possibilities and welcoming mutual interaction. In other words, translators are entrusted with the task of transforming the target language through translation just as Tawada does to the source language through literary creation.