

Economy of Babel: The Problem of Minimalist Translation in the Intellectual Discourse of Noam Chomsky and Jacques Derrida.

By Manuel Yang

Abstract

In 1995 Noam Chomsky's *The Minimalist Program* proposed a radical overhaul of certain theoretical developments in his theory of generative grammar, advancing the "economy of representation" and the "economy of derivation" as two of the most potentially fruitful areas of future research. Ten years earlier Jacques Derrida, whose *Of Grammatology* Chomsky has characterized as an "appalling" "pathetic misreading," wrote an essay on translation entitled "Des Tours de Babel," which indicated the perennial problem of "translation" inherent in every act of writing in light of his rereading of the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel. A practicing translator, who is often torn between conflicting impulses to be faithful to the literal meaning of the original text and to "naturalize" the original into the translated language by way of paraphrase, recognizes that both Chomsky and Derrida's approaches offer something of value metaphorically – if not pragmatically – for the act of translation, the necessity to make semantic, even historical and philosophical, connections where there are none to be found apparently. After the two thinkers, we may call this theoretical orientation the "economy of Babel."

Now you can say that I've grown bitter but of this you may be sure
The rich have got their channels in the bedrooms of the poor
And there's a mighty judgment coming, but I may be wrong...

Yeah my friends are gone and my hair is grey
I ache in the places where I used to play
And I'm crazy for love but I'm not coming on
I'm just paying my rent every day
Oh in the tower of song

--Leonard Cohen, "Tower of Song"

As a working bilingual translator (to and from English and Japanese), I constantly confront the perennial dilemma every translator must face in trying to recapture the meaning of the original text in a different language: the degree to which one errs on the side of literalist loyalty or on the side of necessarily paraphrased, "natural" language-use. The novelist Haruki Murakami, who has made various translations of modern American fiction, once spoke on this contrary polarity of translation in terms of his two major American translators and his own attitude as a translator:

...speaking for myself as a translator, I tend to be a literal translator, close to Mr. Rubin. I think Birnbaum's translation is interesting, but I don't think I'd do it that way. My method is to do it verbatim. Otherwise there is no reason for me to translate. If I wanted to create something on my own, I'd write something on my own from the outset. Of course, this is why selecting a text that you can respect firmly is indispensable (*Hon-yaku yawa* 20).

Partly the reason for tending toward the literalist or the paraphrasing approach is decidedly personal, reflecting in many ways the personal literary and linguistic sensibility of the translator as much as the author he or she is translating.

My field of translation is largely scholarly and intellectual – although this is applicable to my translation of poetry as well – and initially I was so rigidly “literalist” in my translation, including even the very order of words, that my English rendition was often as incomprehensible, that is, literally “Babelian,” as the original Japanese would have been for English readers. However, I was weaned quickly out of this habit, with not a little help from the first reader of my manuscript (translation of Japanese thinker Takaaki Yoshimoto's *Karl Marx*), the social historian Peter Linebaugh. He circled gently in red ink passage after passage whose meanings entirely eluded him. Through my second, third, multiple revisions that followed, I was forced to strike a dialectical balance – as much as my limited ability allowed – between literalism and paraphrase, even though to this day I still have not completely shaken off an adulterous, secret loyalty to the “literal truth” of the original language.

Readers familiar with the work of Jacques Derrida may guess correctly where I am going with all this. One of the major targets of Derrida's deconstruction was language, to endlessly problematize (as opposed to “deny,” as his critics falsely accused) the “presence” of irreducible, permanent truth in it, arguing among other things in *Of Grammatology* that the traditionally assumed priority of speech over writing is greatly misconstrued on a metaphysical assumption of “presence” shot through from Plato to Rousseau. Furthermore, Derrida cautioned against all kinds of closures – semantic, linguistic, philosophical, political – which would have us believe that we have come to the end of building the last theoretical system (i.e., the completion of “Babel”), or even entertain such a possibility, which, in my case, means the achievement of a definitive translation that, in Leonard Cohen's words, “time will not decay” and be a perfect-pitched mirror-image of the original. Put another way, this was a caution against Western modernity's too ready faith in progress and its hubris about having transcended the materiality of collective or social “original sin” (e.g., of primary accumulation) – issued very self-consciously

as an immanent critique from within the discursive tradition of Western philosophy itself (whatever we may think of Derrida's work, his deconstruction was built paradoxically on the language and concepts of the tradition which it critiqued fundamentally and to which it belonged securely at the same time – a gesture that, in a nutshell, captures the spirit of deconstruction as much as such “capture” is possible). It should be no surprise then that Derrida was attracted to the Biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel, which he used in 1985 to discuss the very act of translation.

We may very well characterize 1985 as the year of the political Babel, whose confused tongues in the ideological idioms of the Second Cold War translated in various forms of terrorism, from the CIA-funded attempted assassination of the Shi'a Muslim cleric Muhammad Husayn Fadl-Allah which took the form of a car bomb that killed more than eighty-one people in Lebanon, Israeli air force attack on PLO headquarter in Tunis, and rightwing Christian Identity follower David Lewis Rice's murderous mutilation of the Seattle civil rights lawyer Charles Goldmark and his family, which was motivated by Rice's delusion that Goldmark was a Communist and a Jew who represented “Soviet atheism” that must be defeated for the sake of “American Christianity.” Ironically, it was also the year in which Mikhail Gorbachev took effective control of the Soviet Communist Party as its General Secretary and proceeded to pursue reform policies that, without resort to such methods of Babelian terror, contributed most crucially to the eventual dissolution of the Soviet state. This was the historical context in which Derrida was writing, Derrida who was a thinker particularly alert to and critical of state and individual terrorism in part because of his experience as a secular Algerian Jew growing up under the Vichy regime and who would dedicate his meditation on the various spirits of Karl Marx eight years later to the memory of South African political leader Chris Hani, “popular hero of the resistance against Apartheid” and “**a communist** as such, a **communist** as **communist**, whom a Polish emigrant and his accomplices...put to death” (*Specters* xvi).

At such a historical moment, when the Babelian vocabulary of the Second Cold War and its application in the United States and the Middle East – where the Babel narrative originated – translated into the violence of state and individual terrorism, Derrida said of the Genesis story in “Des Tours de Babel”: “This story recounts, among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity *as impossibility*” (“Des Tours” 250). Part of this impossibility derives from the

desire to control multiple meanings and ambiguities *necessarily* inherent in language, to say nothing of various ideologies and communities, under the monolithic tower of singular meaning. We see how foolish and confused such an assumption is, given that even the latest translation of Homer, Dante, or Dostoyevsky that is named “definitive” becomes soon dated, if not obsolete, in need of a new translation, another Babelian linguistic reconstruction, more in tune with the historically changing language into which the original text is transferred in necessarily imperfect fashion. What Derrida notes as “necessity *as* impossibility” points, therefore, to the historical contingency of the “irreducible multiplicity of idioms” that it is the task of translation to parse and recapture in as definitive a fashion as possible in a different tongue, with the full awareness that this is impossible. More broadly speaking, his insight also applies to the socioeconomic, cultural systems that comprise such idioms, even as they define these systems variously.

I hope the reader will not misread my point here to mean that language somehow holds a hegemonic status in determining social systems of culture and economy, that I am endorsing the epistemological priority of linguistics and semiotics over sociology, economics, and cultural studies. My point is that the assignment of such priorities to any particular human activity or discipline is confused from the outset, a Babelian project doomed to failure. Karl Marx understood this point far more lucidly than latter-day Marxists who reduced virtually every cultural phenomenon to the workings of the economic base:

From the start the “spirit” is afflicted with the curse of being “burdened” with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men. Where there exists a relationship, it exists for me: the animal does not enter into “relations” with anything, it does not enter into any relation at all. For the animal, its relation to others does not exist as a relation. Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all (*German Ideology* 49).

Significantly, Marx here treats language not as an activity belonging to the realm of “spirit” (“superstructure” in his later, temporary formulation) but to that of “matter” (“base”), given that there is nothing more material than “agitated layers of air, sounds” that constitute language. Moreover, he conceives language as a “burden” – or a Babelian curse if you will – that afflicts “spirit” or consciousness, a notion that calls immediately to mind the very real material limitation Marx saw in the “translation” of a revolutionary idea into actual practice when he experienced

this “impossibility as necessity” at first hand a year earlier in the defeat of the 1844 Revolution, out of whose political fallout he derived the famous lesson in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” Takaaki Yoshimoto pointed out that Marx’s formulation of “base-superstructure” (whose vulgar Marxist interpretation Yoshimoto criticized radically in his theories of the state and literary language) was a product of the aging Marx, whose increasing physical infirmities contributed “materially” to his assigning a greater role in historical determination to the imperviously fixed base than to the more rapidly changing but unstable superstructure. No doubt, Marx’s experiences of defeat and deracination, from the 1844 Revolution to his family’s impoverished exiled life in Soho and the premature death of his children, had also “burdened” and “afflicted” his own consciousness in forcing him to acquire a realistic sense of history’s “impossibility as necessity.”

Despite the delineation of language as a material affliction, there is no question Marx means to argue that language is a unique property found among human beings, that it is a primary characteristic distinguishing human beings from animals. Noam Chomsky’s acknowledged list of intellectual antecedents for his theory of generative grammar, from Descartes and the Port Royale School to Wilhelm von Humboldt and Pānini, does not include Marx. But his running premise of language-use – as opposed to “communication” in the general sense, which is found of course throughout the animal kingdom – as an exclusive human attribute is not that far removed from Marx’s contention in *The German Ideology*, though Marx’s stress is on the social, historical dimension of this linguistic attribute, not as a component of human cognitive structure as is in Chomsky’s case.

Ten years after Derrida’s “Des Tours de Babel,” Chomsky published a significant restructuring of his linguistic theory in *The Minimalist Program*, which argued for streamlining generative grammar by trimming some of its major theoretical branches – such as the long-canonical distinctions between surface and deep structures (S- and D-structures), with their respectively corresponding logical form (LF) and phonetic form (PF) – that seemed to have accrued some unwieldy, Babelian baggage:

I think we can also perceive at least the outlines of certain still more general principles, which we might think of as “guidelines,” in the sense that they are too vaguely formulated to merit the term “principles of UG [Universal Grammar].” Some

of these guidelines have a kind of “least effort” flavor to them, in the sense that they legislate against “superfluous elements” in representations and derivations. Thus, the notion of “Full Interpretation” (FI) requires that representations be minimal in a certain sense (*Minimalist Program* 130).

In observing this historical context of 1995, as compared to 1985, we cannot help but notice the impact the fall of the Soviet Babel had on the selectively liberalized global economy, which has in turn affected grievously the state of political “representation” and ideological “derivation” among a huge swath of the global population – imposed, we should note, with none of the “minimalist” tentativeness and modesty that characterize Chomsky’s “program” concerning language. For this was the year that saw the United States under the Clinton administration provide the bailout of Mexico’s peso crisis (in many ways a foreshadowing of what was to boomerang almost fifteen years later in the United States, with the collapse of the financial, real estate markets and auto industry, followed rapidly by governmental bailouts), the founding of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to supplant the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the dramatic dissolution of Britain’s venerable Barings Bank on account of a single trader Nick Leeson’s illegal speculation on the floor of the Singapore International Monetary Exchange, and the expansion of the European Union – all essential components in the building of a new economic Babel that has been given the name of an oxymoronic “neoliberalism.” For there was nothing “new” in market liberalization in economic history, and the political values of classical liberalism stood critically against dogmatic application of the free market; as Adam Smith, the classical political economist who is the purported “founding father” of neoliberalism, wrote of capitalist engineering of law – whose contemporary manifestations are GATT and WTO – and the morally deleterious effect of admiring wealth: “The proposal of any new law or regulation of commerce which comes from this order [capitalists] ought always be listened to with great precaution, and ought never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention. It comes from an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed” (*Wealth of Nations* 278; book I, chap. XI); the “disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise, or, at least neglect persons of poor and mean conditions, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal

cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” (*Theory of Moral Sentiments* 52; part I, chap. III).

On the post-Cold-War international political front, the U.S.-led NATO bombing of Serbia in the Balkan, whose nationalist and ethnic fragmentation may have been that decade’s most potent and tragic symbol of Babelian confusion, alongside of the Rwandan genocide, indicated that this neoliberal dispensation was going to be ruled monolithically under uncontested U.S. military power. Chomsky himself has written some of the most incisively critical analysis of these political and economic trends in books he had published during this decade, from *Detering Democracy* (1992), *Year 501* (1993), and *World Order, Old and New* (1994) – arguably three of the most far-reaching and significant texts in his entire career as an American dissident – to *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo* (1999) and *Profits over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (1999). This was the moment at which Chomsky was calling effectively for disposing the S- and D-structures in generative grammar in *The Minimalist Program*.

Analogously speaking, Chomsky’s S-structure is comparable to Marx’s superstructure while D-structure parallels the base, for the apparent S-structure in syntax is a direct product of the linguistic transformations undergone in the D-structure just as the ideological and cultural expressions are supposed to be a direct product of economic transformations undergone at the base. Furthermore, this minimalist reworking involves two domains of “economy,” namely that of representation and of derivation. As Neil Smith noted, “Chomsky’s economy principles are unambiguously matters of competence, in that they pertain to representations and derivations internal to the language faculty and exclude relations beyond the interfaces... With the demise of [D-structure and S-structure], they now pertain to the stages in the construction of representations at LF and PF, and crucially do not go beyond these two systems of interpretation or production” (Smith 117-118). Similarly, in the last hundred and fifty years since Marx scribbled the provisional formulation of the “base-superstructure” in his preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859 a radical overhauling of both superstructure and base as a heuristic model of analyzing historical determination has occurred in the more undogmatic, open Marxist tradition, including the libertarian one that exerted a direct influence on Chomsky’s political ideas (e.g., the council communist tradition as represented by Karl Korsch, Anton Pannakoek, and Paul Mattick, including the journal *Living Marxism* which Chomsky read avidly in his youth). This latter tradition would include Antonio Gramsci’s recasting of the question of

hegemonic and countervailing ideology in strategic terms of war of position and maneuver, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's pessimistically hued analysis of the "culture industry," C.L.R. James' unfinished treatise on American civilization, Guy Debord's elegantly compressed theses on the media-driven consumer capitalist spectacle, various cultural and historical interrogations of the b-s model administered by British Marxists (Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Raymond Williams' *Marxism and Culture*, and E.P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*), and Harry Cleaver's autonomist Marxist reconceptualization of Marx's labor theory of value as a politically strategic theory of class struggle.

Not least of all, taking the term "minimalism" beyond its disciplinary enclosure of linguistics into the commons of broader intellectual discourse, we may find similar minimalist aspirations in both Marx and Chomsky. When Chomsky states that the "minimalist program" is defined by "two related questions: (1) what are the general conditions that the human language faculty should be expected to satisfy? and (2) to what extent is the language faculty determined by these conditions, without special structure that lies beyond them?" (*Minimalist Program 2*), this is something, with slightly modified phrasing, which can also sum up Marx's own research project, namely "what are the general conditions that historical capitalism should be expected to satisfy (that is, distinguish it from all other economic systems)?" and "to what extent is historical capitalism determined by these conditions, without special structure that lies beyond them?" The latter question involves Marx's attempt to understand capitalism immanently on its own terms and explicit refusal (as opposed to many "Marxists") to build a theoretical "Babel" – be it a utopian socialist program, one-dimensionally celebratory or condemning analysis of Victorian capitalism, or attempts to reify and graft his insights beyond the limited province of economic analysis (in contrast to Engels, who coined the term "historical materialism" and had no hesitation in loosely, and often erroneously, adapting Marx's ideas to the various natural sciences of his day).

Of course, such analogies have their limits, for Marx's b-s model was intended originally for analyzing the universal structure of historical capitalism while Chomsky's B/S-structures were established for the purpose of analyzing the universal structure of human language. And when Chomsky speaks of "economy" in *The Minimalist Program*, he is obviously not talking about "economy" in the same sense that Marx is. We may remark, however, that this may be precisely the crux of the problem as concerns the Babel of meaning. For, by almost intuitive

contextual understanding, how are we able to hold this semantic aporia of the word “Babel” in our mind, distinguish the meaning of “economy” in Chomsky and Marx’s respective uses, and shift from one sense of “minimalism” to another, in truncating the overgrowth of “B/S-structures” from the specifically universal grammar of linguistics to undoing the economically reductive implications found in the “b-s model” of capitalism? In other words, how do we find the means of linking persuasively and theoretically – that is, “translate,” understood broadly – the conditions of linguistic competence and the conditions of socioeconomic structure in relation to a coherent notion of human nature or, as Marx put it, in the context of “natural history”?

After Voltaire, Derrida comments that “Babel” denotes not only a common noun meaning “confusion” in the double sense of “confusion of tongues” and “state of confusion in which the architects find themselves with the structure interrupted” but also a proper name for a city of God, “name of God as name of father.”

The city would bear the name of God the father and of the father that is called confusion. God, the God, would have marked with his patronym a communal space, that city where understanding is no longer possible. And understanding is no longer possible when there are only proper names, and understanding is no longer possible when there are no longer proper names... This is also the origin of tongues, of the multiplicity of idioms, of what in other words are usually called mother tongues. For this entire history deploys filiations, generations and genealogies: all Semitic. Before the deconstruction of Babel, the great Semitic family was establishing its empire, which it wanted to be universal, and its tongue, which it also attempts to impose on the universe. The moment of this project immediately precedes the deconstruction of the tower (“Des Tours” 245-246).

In a sense “minimalism” constitutes a form of “deconstruction of Babel” as well, for the “moment of this project [of universal grammar] precedes the deconstruction of the tower.” In other words, all theoretical towers, be it of Chomskyan linguistics or Marxism, which – despite the founder’s resistance against giving it a patrimonial proper name – bears the name of its respective fathers, must sooner or later undergo minimalist reconstruction whose more expansive term is “deconstruction.”

Nowhere is this demonstrated more explicitly than in the field of translation. S-structure and D-structure are translated in Japanese as respectively *hyōsō-kōzō* and *shinsō-kōzō* while base and superstructure are rendered as *kabu-kōzō* and *jōbu-kōzō*. *Kōzō* means “structure,” as in *kōzō-shugi* (“structuralism”), and, if we translate the Japanese “base” and “superstructure” back into English, they become “lower-part structure” and “upper-part structure.” Although “base” has

been sometimes rendered as *kitei* or *kibu*, which is more proximate to the English meaning of base, “superstructure” has consistently remained *jōbu-kōzō* (I shall leave aside here the question of how both English and Japanese translations have altered in their own way something of the original German sense of *Basis* and *Überbau*). Were we to give a literalist translation of “superstructure,” we would have to invent a new term, *chō-kōzō* (*chō* meaning “super” as in “superman” [*chōjin*] and “trans-cendence” [*chōetsu*]), which would most likely invite the reader’s confusion into thinking that it means something like “transcendental structure.” Similar issues revolve around *hyōsō-kōzō* and *shinsō-kōzō*, for *hyōsō* does not mean “surface” (that would be *hyōmen*) but “surface-layer” and *shinsō* not simply “deep” (*fukai*) but “deep-layer.” The term *sō* (“layer”) has very much a geological connotation, referring to the different chronological layers beneath the earth (which, in the Western intellectual context, became the historical basis for the later rigidified notion of historical stages, assumed for example by such thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment as Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith). In addition, *shinsō* is also a term used for “deep” in “deep seawater” and “depth” in “depth psychology.”

In reply to his Japanese colleague regarding the question of how to translate the word “deconstruction,” Derrida answered:

Among other things I wished to translate and adapt to my own ends the Heideggerian word *Destruktion* or *Abbau*. Each signified in this context an operation bearing on the structure or traditional architecture of the fundamental concepts of ontology or of Western metaphysics. But in French “destruction” too obviously implied an annihilation or a negative reduction much closer perhaps to Nietzschean “demolition” than to the Heideggerian interpretation or to the type of reading that I proposed (“Letter to a Japanese Friend” 1).

The Japanese translator thus came up with a neologism *datsu-kōchiku* for “deconstruction.” *Kōchiku* means “construction” – very much in keeping with the architectural sense in Derrida’s original word – while *datsu* is a suffix that means “out of” as in *dasshutsu* (“escape”) or *datsu-sara* (leave a corporate job to set up business on one’s own). Perhaps the closest English equivalent of *datsu* is the suffix “ex” in “ex”-odus or “ex”-planation. Needless to say, *datsu-kōchiku* is hardly an equivalent of “deconstruction” but an approximation that, in the long run, may help deconstruct the original word in its original spirit as it becomes, against Derrida’s intent, canonized into the vocabulary of Western philosophy or, as it has already happened, assimilated into popular idiom.

Of course, discussion of “original sense” becomes always problematic when talking about “deconstruction,” which like Zen – in Derrida’s words – is “neither an analysis nor a critique,” “not a method,” “not even act or an operation” but “deconstructs itself.” For even “deconstruction” is not “original” to Derrida but, as he states above, an attempt “to translate and adapt to my own ends the Heideggerian word *Destruktion* or *Abbau*.” Hence “Babel” is a stand-in for “deconstruction” as well, or, to put it another way, within the “act/non-action” (*wei/wu-wei* in the self-deconstructing Taoist dialectic) of translation resides the seed of its destruction as well as regeneration.

Now I am quite aware that such comments as these, shifting and turning as they do around a slender leaf of a Biblical trope used by a particular French thinker in the mid-1980s against the backdrop of a theoretical program endorsed by an American linguist in the mid-1990s, will have to endure the latter’s passing comment on the former:

So take Derrida, one of the grand old men. I thought I ought to at least be able to understand his *Grammatology*, so tried to read it. I could make out some of it, for example, the critical analysis of classical texts that I knew very well and had written about years before. I found the scholarship appalling, based on pathetic misreading; and the argument, such as it was, failed to come close to the kinds of standards I’ve been familiar with since virtually childhood. Well, maybe I missed something: could be, but suspicions remain, as noted. Again, sorry to make unsupported comments, but I was asked, and therefore am answering (“Chomsky on Postmodernism”).

What Chomsky has missed is the “truism” – to use one of his favorite terms of dismissal – that almost all philosophies and literatures (and Derrida’s work straddles both, as we can see in works like *Glas* and *Postcards*) are based on some kind of “misreading,” albeit imaginative, rigorous in its own terms, and sometimes in violation of the procedures of Cartesian rationalism to which he adheres. In fact, as, for instance, Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* and Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have shown, Cartesian rationalism and Enlightenment also contain a destructive and genocidal logic whose historical consequences include witch-hunting, European extermination of indigenous populations, and fascism; of course, to point out such elementary facts does not mean we dismiss countervailing values that, in their better moments, these intellectual expressions have represented, being nothing more than a particular culture’s articulation of what people practice every day without having to resort to them or knowing anything about them (in short, “truisms”). Perhaps what is “missing” in Chomsky’s passing reading of Derrida is that he is applying an inappropriate set of standards in interpreting

the man's work, which induces this "Babelian" incomprehension or dismissal. Just as Chomsky finds Beethoven's Late Quartet and modern classical music of Berg and Schoenberg aesthetically pleasurable, one can find similar pleasure in perusing Derrida's text (for example, his *Specters of Marx* has always struck me as being, among other things, one of the most elegiac prose-poems about a radical intellectual tradition in the post-Communist neoliberal world).

As an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin, I had the occasion to attend a public talk given by John Searle, who had criticized Derrida's work against which Derrida gave his own set of responses in *Limited, Inc.* Searle was introduced as a great linguistic philosopher who was willing to spend, if needs be, "all night" with us in discussing philosophy (we of course did not take this "literally" but as a reflection of his intellectual generosity). To be honest, I found his exposition on how linguistic meaning is determined by the speaker's intention rather simplistic, if not trite. Chomsky himself has pointed out effectively the fallacy of this position:

Despite Searle's qualms, all of this [Chomsky's point that "meaningful use of language 'need not involve communication or even the attempt to communicate'"] seems to me commonplace and obvious. I can be using language in the strictest sense with no intention of communicating... Take some concrete examples. As a graduate student, I spent two years writing a lengthy manuscript, assuming through that it would never be published or read by anyone... Once a year, along with many others, I write a letter to the Bureau of Internal Revenue explaining, with as much eloquence as I can muster, why I am not paying part of my income tax. I mean what I say in explaining this. I do not, however, have the intention of communicating to the reader, or getting him to believe or do something, for the simple reason that I know perfectly well that the "reader" (probably some computer) couldn't care less. What my statements in the letter mean, what I mean – in one sense – in making these statements, is not explicable in terms of what I mean, what I intend, in writing the letter, namely to express support for people undertaking resistance to the criminal violence of the state in more meaningful ways. Once, I had the curious experience of making a speech against the Vietnam war to a group of soldiers who were advancing in full combat gear, rifles in hand, to clear the area where I was speaking. I meant what I said – my statements had their strict and literal meaning – but this had little to do with my intentions at that moment. (*Reflections* 61-62)

Thus Chomsky concludes that "Searle's revision [of H. Paul Grice's intention theory of meaning]" "fails to capture the intended notion of meaning; as a factual claim, it is false," extending this conclusion to "all other attempts that I know of to explain 'meaning' in terms of 'speaker's intention in communicating'" (64). Searle managed to validate this very point in person when he opened the floor hastily for the Q & A discussion, at which point I could not help

but ask him politely, having read the exchange between him and Derrida, if he had any further reflection on the French philosopher's work. What I received from Searle was an exasperated shaking of the head and a condescendingly curt reply (as the rest of the audience seemed to murmur in disbelief that my question was entirely inappropriate, a verbal equivalent of mooning the great, celebrated professor in public): "I can't believe you asked that. Read my article on this, which my publisher thinks is valuable and wants to put it into a collection..." If we follow Searle's assumption about the innate congruence between intentionality and meaning, then what he was "communicating" – regardless of his intention – was contempt of the subject and self-satisfaction at what he had written, to say nothing of the inability to understand my question or, rather, to listen properly (I had stated that I read his article and was asking for a further reflection), disproving his argument at a single stroke: much of everyday communications consist of precisely such "miscommunications", i.e., Babelian slippages, and any linguistic theory of meaning that does not take into account this dimension of meaning – namely that "intention" cannot be defined in any objectively meaningful sense given for example the central role of affect in communication, that "consequence" in communication determines meaning as much as, if not more than, intention, etc. – acquires immediately the mantle of idealist falsehood. As Louis Mackey noted in his letter to *The New York Review of Books* over Searle's review of Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction*: "Searle's inability (or unwillingness) to read fairly is only one of his bad habits."

One adequate resolution to this problem may be not so much a "resolution" in the intellectual but in a cautionary, moral sense: to not treat one's interlocutor with condescension or contempt, whether he or she be a celebrated philosopher or a formally uneducated ditch digger. The impossibly consistent adherence to this "truism" that we fail to practice in our weaker moments is perhaps the only means that could "resolve" one of the central dilemmas at the heart of the Babelian economy. Thus, just as I readily concur with Chomsky's general evaluation of postmodernism, I must also say that about his own – in my estimation, far more valuable – works in linguistics or, for that matter, Einstein's theory of relativity or Shakespeare's plays; none of these products of human imagination and intellectual activity does anything on their own to alleviate the sufferings of our multitudinous fellow human beings, who have as much right to life and pursuit of creative self-realization as the rest of the us in the privileged sectors of the capitalist world. But we still read and think about language, wrestle with the metaphor of Babel,

or make perhaps inane, perhaps intriguing analogies about our intellectual traditions, for the same reason that so many who have died unnecessarily, unjustly, and continue to do so, despite their hardships and short-lived frail existences, still show innate curiosity about the world, scientifically, poetically, philosophically, historically, or otherwise – a point Chomsky understands readily in his account of translators in North Vietnam during his visit in 1970, published originally in *The New York Review of Books*:

The students generally read English, but having little familiarity with the spoken language, were not able to follow a technical lecture. The translators, though excellent in general discussion, had considerable difficulty as the material became more technical and complex. One tried for about an hour, and then, apologetically, asked to be relieved. A second translator also made a noble effort, but the problems were severe. When they floundered, an older man in the audience intervened, and corrected mistakes or explained obscure points. It was obvious that he had followed everything very well and understood the material I was trying to present. Finally he took over completely, and translated for several hours without a break...He was the Minister of Higher education of North Vietnam, Ta Quang Buu, a mathematician of note who had, in fact, sent me a reprint of mathematical linguistics several years ago that I could not read, since it was in Vietnamese, but that astonished me by its familiarity – in the midst of the air war – with current technical material...I think there are few countries where the Minister of Higher Education could have taken over the task of translating an advanced technical lecture of this sort, or would have been willing to do so; and I was also impressed by the easy familiarity of relations within the group, the quality of the debate and discussion, as we proceeded (*At War* 219-220).

Even the Babelian effect of an imperialist war is shown here unable to destroy the possibility of translation when the conditions of empathetic exchange were present (while the corollary also stands: without such conditions, even an exchange between those who speak and understand the same language results in miscommunication and, worse, physical conflict or fatalities, as even the most cursory history of sectarianism, tribalism, and domestic violence attests). Hence, although we may disagree over the particular value of Chomsky, Derrida, and Marx's respective work, it would be nothing short of hubris to assume that a singular notion (be it "Cartesian rationalism," "dialectic," or "deconstruction" standing as the metaphorical *Des Tours de Babel*) is the only standard with which we should measure works of philosophy or intellectual activity, that "theory" is a word to be used solely in scientific or economic or literary explanation, and that those of us who happen to enjoy reading Chomsky, Marx, or Derrida must be suffering ipso facto from dogmatism, obscurantism, or academic "cult of personality."

For in my own work of translation – no less than in the works of activist commitment that so many selflessly pursue, often out of moral necessity, and to which Chomsky himself has dedicated indefatigably a substantial portion of his time and analytical intelligence – I must confess that I find both Chomsky’s linguistic work and Derrida’s disquisition on translation of no practical value whatsoever. However, in reflecting on Derrida’s treatment of the Babel narrative as a tacit allegory for both translation and deconstruction (which, as noted, is in fact a form of translation) in relation to Chomsky’s minimalist program as an analogy for intellectual transformation undergone in the Marxist conception of base-superstructure, I do gain a metaphorical vantage point in reexamining my own assumptions about what goes on in the process of translation, highlighting for example the irresolvable but necessary tension between literalism and paraphrase. Again, I should stress that there is no practical or useful function to such a reexamination and I cannot justify it on any other ground that I find it inherently interesting. After Yoshimoto’s aesthetic theory of literary value, I would argue that this is perhaps because, unlike the domain of “economy” whether in Marx or Chomsky’s sense, the value of art or philosophy lies precisely in its absence of value, that is, its uselessness, or, to put it another way, its irreducibility to the “practical” value of helping accumulate capital, endorse a particular political ideology, or further scientific understanding.

This anti-economic value, in short, may very well be what defines the “economy of Babel.” After all, one of the most rationally plausible interpretations of the original Biblical passage about Babel – “They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth’” (*The New International Bible*, Genesis 11.3-4) – is to read it as an ancient Israelite critique of imperial economic “progress.” In short, the technological development and the class division of labor arising from such a development (“They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar”), in establishing a new, homogenously defined urban empire (“let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves”) are doomed to falter and fail eventually. Given the shore of ecological and nuclear catastrophe to which our modern-day Babel of blind industrial developments and unchecked state powers continue to bring us, the “economy of Babel” thus does not then involve simply the question of linguistic translation but the material, ideological “translation” of humanity as a whole.

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