



Translation after 9/11: Mistranslating the Art of War

In the wake of 9/11 translation became a hot issue when the United States realized that it had a dearth of Arabic translators. Suddenly transparent was the extent to which monolingualism, as a strut of unilateralism and monocultural U.S. foreign policy, infuriated the rest of the world. Though monolingual complacency evaporated along with public faith in the translation skills of State Department and intelligence operatives, the psychic and political danger posed by the Anglocentrism of coalition forces was never sufficiently confronted. The “terror” of mistranslation has yet to be fully diagnosed, and the increasing turn to machine translation as a solution does little to assuage fear. Before the Iraq War began, MSNBC reported on October 7, 2002: “If U.S. troops soon storm into Iraq, they’ll be counting on computerized language translators to help with everything from interrogating prisoners to locating chemical weapons caches. Besides converting orders like ‘put your hands up’ into spoken Arabic or Kurdish, [M]ilitary officials hope to enable quick translations of time-sensitive intelligence from some of the world’s most difficult tongues.”¹ Reliance on hand-held MT devices developed by DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) for use “in the field” was especially popular during the Bosnian war. One of the favored programs bore the optimistic name “Diplomat.” But the results proved to be unreliable, and in the worst cases fatally flawed. The stakes of mistranslation are deadly, for in the theater of war a machinic error can easily cause death by “friendly fire” or misguided enemy targets.

As this book’s completion coincided with the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, it became impossible to ignore the relevance of the daily

news to my concerns, and I began compiling a running log of “translation and war” clippings from mainstream sources. Some salient examples included the following (ideally they would be presented in the format of a constantly self-updating disc):

Item: 7/25/03 Neil MacFarquahar in the *New York Times*: “Baghdad, Iraq, July 24—As soon as the photographs of Uday and Qusay Hussein appeared on the television screen tonight, arguments erupted in the Zein Barbershop downtown. Half the men present exulted that their former oppressors were dead, while the others dismissed the images as forgeries because the dictator’s sons were elsewhere when the attack occurred.”

Item: *Asia Times* 11/11/2003: “In terms of linguistic and cultural capacity the US today commands what may be the lowest-quality clandestine service of any great power in history.”

Item: 11/22/03 *New York Times*: Judith Miller “A Battle of Words over War Intelligence.” B9. Edward N. Luttwak (a maverick defense analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies) affirms that: “To be a case officer you have to be a poet. . . . You need to be able to learn Urdu in six months.” Woefully short of language skills, many American intelligence officials, “can’t even ask for a cup of coffee.”

Item: 10/7/2003 *New York Times*: “Fear of Sabotage by Mistranslation at Guantánamo. American interpreters suspected of sabotage. Military investigators review interrogations involving Arabic-language interpreters. There is a fear of an infiltration conspiracy. ‘The worst fear is that it’s all one interrelated network that was inspired by Al Qaeda,’ said a senior Air Force official.”

Item: 10/8/03 *New York Times*: “Roadside Bombs Kill 3 Soldiers and a Translator in Iraq.”

Item: www.thetalentshow.org/archives/000767 citing pages 70–72 of November 2003 report issued by the Joint Inquiry into Intelligence Community Activities before and after the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001, and followed by commentary: Finding: Prior to September 11, The Intelligence Community was not prepared to handle the challenge it faced in translating the volumes of foreign language counterterrorism intelligence it collected. Agencies within the Intelligence Community experienced backlogs in material awaiting translation, a shortage of

language specialists and language-qualified field officers, and a readiness level of only 30% in the most critical terrorism-related languages. The National Security Agency Senior Language Authority explained to the Joint Inquiry that the Language Readiness Index for NSA language personnel working in the counterterrorism campaign languages is currently around 30%. [. . .] The Director of the CIA Language School testified that, given the CIA's language requirements, the CIA Directorate of Operations is not fully prepared to fight a world-wide war on terrorism and at the same time carry out its traditional agent recruitment and intelligence collection mission. She also added that there is no strategic plan in place with regard to linguistic skills at the Agency.

. . . Nine soldiers being trained as translators at a military-run language school have been discharged for being gay despite a shortage of linguists for the US war against terror, officials and rights activists said Friday. The nine were discharged from the army's Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California over the course of this year, said Lieutenant Colonel Wayne Shanks, a spokesman for the army's Training and Doctrine Command. They included six who were being trained as Arabic speakers, two in Korean and another in Chinese, he said. All the servicemembers had stellar service records and wanted to continue doing the important jobs they held, but they were fired because of their sexual orientation, said Steve Ralls of the Servicemen's Legal Defense Network.

Item: 12/14/2003 David Lipsky reviewing *I Am a Soldier Too: The Jessica Lynch Story* by Rick Bragg in the *New York Times*: "Some reviewers have questioned whether, without the exploits initially attributed to her, there could be any power in Lynch's narrative. (Though Bragg does not say so, the early error had a simple explanation. According to later news reports, the Army was intercepting Iraqi radio chatter, and overheard that a yellow-haired soldier from Lynch's unit had indeed fought bravely and fallen; that soldier turned out to be a sergeant named Donald Walters. Interpreters confused the Arabic pronouns for he and she, and thought it was Lynch.)"

Item: May 7, 2004, Brian Ross on the death of an Iraqi Baath Party official while imprisoned at Camp White Horse in southern Iraq ("Death in Detention: Marine Reservists Face Charges in Iraqi

Prisoner Death.” ABCNEWS.com): “Lawyers say none of the Marines spoke Arabic, nor were there any translators assigned to the camp.”

As each of the entries reveals, nontranslation, mistranslation, and the disputed translation of evidentiary visual information, have figured center stage throughout the Iraq War and its aftermath. The mythic story of Jessica Lynch’s heroic resistance to her captors, fully exploited by the government and the media, risked fizzling away over a translation error, even as the most precious resource the CIA had in its possession—qualified translators engaged in counterterrorism operations—was squandered because of homophobic military policy. Over and over again, the pugnacious unilateralism of the Bush defense team found an outlet in championing monolingual jingoism, as when Donald Rumsfeld replied to questioning by a German reporter on being left out of the loop in the coordination of government agencies in Iraq with: “I said I don’t know. Isn’t that clear? You don’t understand English?” Rumsfeld’s English-only retort was symptomatic of a linguistic arrogance that flew in the face of American dependency on translators in Iraq, people who laid their bodies on the line as preferred human targets.² Translators in Guantánamo Bay became a different kind of target; as prime suspects in the eyes of the U.S. military, a substantial number were charged as Al Qaeda infiltrators. On the media war front, the “translation” of images became increasingly vexed. Images of the putative corpses of Hussein’s sons, widely disseminated as “proof” of U.S. victory, aroused suspicion of image doctoring and faulty clues on the Iraqi street, as Morelli-like, people scrutinized ears and beards as insecure guarantors of documentary reality. The infamous medical-check video of Saddam Hussein, broadcast all over the world as proof in any language of the dictator’s capture, did not convey the universal message that was hoped for by the administration. Instead, it inspired suspicion of image-manipulation. As John Milner has argued with respect to the rapidly produced paintings, prints, drawings, wood engravings, and photographs of the Franco-Prussian war (by artists such as Meissonier, Degas and Renoir), “realism, reportage, fact, fabrication and propaganda form[ed] a kind of spectrum.”³ No less subject to mistranslation than language, images remain untrustworthy documents of the event.

Mistranslation in the way I have conceived it is a concrete particular of the art of war, crucial to strategy and tactics, part and parcel of the way in which images of bodies are read, and constitutive of *matériel*—in its extended sense as the hard- and software of intelligence. It is also the name of diplomatic breakdown and paranoid misreading. Drawing on Carl von

Clausewitz's ever-serviceable dictum "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means," I would maintain that war is the continuation of extreme mistranslation or disagreement by other means.⁴ War *is*, in other words, a condition of nontranslatability or translation failure at its most violent peak.

The so-called war on terror and the enhanced impact of translation on the way it is waged still awaits theorization, but as critics attempt to think through the role of translation as a weapon of war, they will undoubtedly defer, as have so many war theorists before them, to Clausewitz's classic 1832 treatise *Vom Kriege*, a combination bible and grammar of the art of war. Oskar Von Neumann, Anatol Rapoport, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Virilio, Manuel de Landa all took a pass through von Clausewitz even if only to stand him on his head. Rapoport, for example, criticized the way in which neo-realist Clausewitzians applied the indifferent moral calculus of game theory to military strategy, while Foucault inverted the famous Clausewitzian formula in arguing that "politics is a continuation of war by other means" (a principal theme of his 1976 Collège de France lectures, published under the English title *Society Must Be Defended*).⁵ What interests me most about Clausewitz's theory is the way in which it formalized the art of war, casting it as a network or closed circuit that could be systematically modeled according to evolving phases of modernity.

In the second chapter of *Vom Kriege* Clausewitz traced the art of war to the coordination of combat during medieval sieges. As the conduct of war became gradually more systematic and self-conscious, there was a call for the explicit codification of rules and maxims. Material factors initially prevailed: superiority of numbers, the concept of the base (founded on the hypotenuse of length of armies to width of provision and communication center), and the idea of "interior lines." Von Clausewitz recomputed these features superadding emotional elements: courage, hostility, envy, generosity, pride, humility, fierceness, tenderness. These components of a military code of honor, when combined with the laws of strategy and tactics, gave rise to an eighteenth-century art of war defined along aesthetic lines, with emphasis on drills, formations, and the elegant and perfectly obedient execution of orders. War continued to be waged according to this model during the French Revolution, but with a substantive difference: the new class of soldier-patriot battled the enemy in the name of universal principles. Building cynically on the inspiration to fight "for France," Napoleon expended soldiers prodigally, using mass armies to annihilate rather than outmaneuver the enemy, and teaching the old Europe that "the universal currency of politics is power, and power resides in the ability to wreak physical destruction" (OW 21). In the estimation of many, Napoleon's abrogation of the funda-

mental rules of civilized warfare produced the great epistemic shift theorized by von Clausewitz: the passage from discrete standardized codes (typical of eighteenth-century warfare) to war as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which principles of morale, intuition, and nationalist purpose were fully activated. The Prussian invention of a citizens army, guided by von Clausewitz's "translation" of Napoleonic performatives into a philosophy of war, is arguably what secured Prussia's triumph over Napoleon in 1815, and its victory in the Franco-Prussian war.

In their eagerness to define modern war over and against eighteenth-century characterizations of it as a chess game or balletic choreography, von Clausewitz and his neo-realist followers seem to have underestimated the survival of *ancien régime* formalism in the nineteenth-century art of diplomacy. Diplomacy, along with the discursive approach to war analysis on which it historically relied, was considered by the neo-realists to be overly dependent on the Kantian view of war as the expression of psychological forces. This "soft" model compared unfavorably with "hard" rational-choice models that concentrated on power optimums, cost-benefit motive, and the maximization of military technology. In a bid to move beyond the hard-soft opposition, sociologist Philip Smith proposed a Durkheimian theory of war as social ritual and cultural *parole*.⁶ Treating the language of diplomacy as "social fact," Smith gave a cultural assignation to the "inter-subjective basis for agreement and dissent," exploring the cultural grounding of diplomatic rhetoric, propaganda, and media coverage (PS 109). Instead of relying on a "popular understanding of the popular understanding of events," he interpreted the rituals of cultural mistranslation that lead to war as, "a festival of rationality, a celebration of modernity, and a rite of democracy." Patriotism, jingoistic rhetoric, and the like are for Smith part of the "civil religion" of culture, constitutive of its normative accounting system, culturally "rational" even when a nation's interests are not obviously served by going to war. Using a rational-choice approach to the cultural politics of war, Smith oddly enough returns us to old-fashioned diplomatic history with a renewed charge to take seriously the role of language—and by extension, the role of mistranslation—in fomenting preconditions for war.

Smith, in my view, proposes a semiological anthropology of diplomacy at the expense of psychoanalysis (dismissed as too reductive). I think it makes more sense to keep the psychoanalytic dimension of diplomacy in play, not so much because nations behave like individual human subjects (driven by common motivations and desires), but because diplomacy is the expression "by other means" of weaponized language and misfired signs. If war is a language of force, and diplomacy its cipher, then a psychoanalytic

rational-choice theory of ballistic speech-acts could prove useful in dissecting historic cases of failed diplomacy.

In this context, the recent failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and the subsequent questioning of the “dossier” prepared by Tony Blair and used by George Bush to justify the invasion, was appropriately compared to that earlier and celebrated fabrication by Bismarck that led to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. Thus the *Daily Telegraph* reported a remark by the Labour MP Peter Tapsell to the effect that “Tony Blair’s Iraq dossier was the most false publication in diplomacy since Bismarck falsified the ‘Ems Telegram.’”⁷ This tallies with a World Socialist Web site account of a meeting between George Bush and the German chancellor Gerhard Schröder in which the same analogy was drawn (occasioned by the story of how the ice was broken at their meeting by a “joke” Bush made when he referred to the pen that Schröder’s translator had accidentally dropped in his lap, as “an attack with weapons of mass destruction”).⁸

Given its renewed circulation in the press, the details of the Ems affair warrant rehearsal. In June of 1870, Spain and Prussia hatched a plan to put Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmarinen on the Spanish throne, vacant after Queen Isabella II’s abdication in the wake of the revolution of 1868. Leopold was a good choice from the Prussian point of view. Linked by blood to the Prussian king Wilhelm I, he would strengthen the hand of the German house in its bid to become an imperial European power. As a Catholic, with ties to the Murats and Beauharnais, he was in theory acceptable to the French. But this was not how the French saw the matter. Deeming the Hohenzollern candidacy an outrageous affront to their national honor and an illegitimate endeavor to upset the balance of power in Europe, the French cried foul, insisting that Wilhelm withdraw his support of the initiative on pain of war. The kaiser did not want war. Vacationing in the spa town of Ems (near Coblenz), the king arranged to meet with the ambassador of France, Vincent Benedetti, to inform him that his cousin’s decision to renounce his claim to the Spanish throne would meet with his approval. In principle, the matter should have ended there, but the French sought further reparation. Goaded by the jingoistic Duc de Gramont, they insisted that the king meet again with Benedetti in order to extend a royal apology along with guarantees that no future claims would ever be made to the Spanish succession. Benedetti apparently stalked Wilhelm in the gardens of Ems, seeking an interview. At this provocation the king took umbrage and refused to meet with him. However, he indicated through the intermediary of his councillor of the legation, Heinrich Abeken, that he nonetheless intended

to honor his commitment to the withdrawal of Leopold's candidacy. Abeken relayed this official position to the prime minister, Prince Otto von Bismarck in what came to be known as the Ems Dispatch. Wilhelm's text read

I rejected this demand somewhat sternly as it is neither right nor possible to undertake engagements of this kind [for ever and ever]. . . .

[The king, on the advice of one of his ministers] decided in view of the above-mentioned demands not to receive Count Benedetti any more, but to have him informed by an adjutant that His Majesty had now received from [Leopold] confirmation of the news which Benedetti had already had from Paris and had nothing further to say to the ambassador.⁹

When the telegram reached Bismarck, he happened to be dining with General Helmuth von Moltke, Prussia's paramount military officer. Their discussion focused on the state of the French army, weakened by aging troops, a lack of distinguished commanding officers, a disastrous expedition in Mexico, and the diversion of resources in Africa. Concerned to preempt a French plan for military reform, Bismarck and von Moltke decided the time was ripe to move against France. To guarantee a bellicose response, Bismarck "edited" the Ems telegram, turning its phrases so as to give greater offense. "His Majesty the King," Bismarck's version read, "thereupon refused to receive the Ambassador again and had the latter informed by the adjutant of the day that His Majesty had no further communication to make to the Ambassador." The effect was exactly what Bismarck had predicted when he noted that the dispatch would be "like a red rag to the Gallic bull." Although the changes may not seem hugely significant when examined up close, their import was great, for Bismarck implied that instead of just canceling a meeting, the king intended to cut off all further negotiations. Losing no time, Bismarck sent the telegram to the major European embassies and German newspapers. Here, one might note, the story of the dispatch reveals the increasingly determinative impact of information relay on the course of modern warfare. (The Zimmerman telegram, arguably the decisive factor in prompting the United States to enter World War I qualifies, perhaps, as the most flagrant case of all.) Clearly, as far as the Ems Dispatch is concerned, damage was done by its "straight to the media" path. The full text—a German translation of Bismarck's communiqué, which I believe was originally sent in French in accord with diplomatic custom—appeared that very night as a supplement of the *Nord Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* and was distributed free of charge in Berlin. When the French translation of the German

translation appeared in the Parisian press, the reaction was one of hysteria. Not only had Bismarck “edited” the document to aggravate the affront to French pride, but the French translation of the German text contained a mistranslation of the word *adjutant*. It may be no great exaggeration to say that the entire Franco-Prussian war hinged on this single term. *Adjutant* in German signifies “aide de camp,” and whichever paper translated the telegram from German to French simply transferred the same word to the French text. Unfortunately, the French term *adjutant* refers to a “warrant officer,” or sergeant-major. The level of insult was profound, for it appeared that Wilhelm was treating the French ambassador with disrespect, sending an emissary of lowly rank to communicate his message rather than his ennobled aide de camp Prince Radziwell. Formal diplomatic reticence was thus “translated,” with the help of the perfidious Bismarck, into an outrageous breach of protocol. Despite the upper hand gained by the peace party in Paris at just this moment, the Ems Dispatch was treated as direct provocation by the Prussians to Napoleon III, and cries could be heard everywhere of “La Guerre! A bas Bismarck! Au Rhin!” The momentum for war was impossible to curb even after the edited and unedited texts of the telegram had been compared and it was determined that France had obtained its most important concession. Thiers, joining Gambetta, Arago, and Jules Favre in opposing war argued plaintively: “Do you want all Europe to say that although the substance of the quarrel was settled, you have decided to pour out torrents of blood over a mere matter of form?” The answer was a resounding affirmative from the center and right; Guyot-Montpayroux retorted: “Prussia has forgotten the France of Jena and we must remind her,” while Emile Ollivier made an unfortunate remark that he would never live down; that he would accept responsibility for war with “un coeur léger” hastily qualified as: “I mean a heart not weighed down with remorse, a confident heart.”¹⁰

Viewed against the larger backdrop of two countries jockeying to become the continental superpower most challenging to Britain, the affair of the Ems Dispatch shows the outbreak of war turning on an act of mistranslation. In this particular case, it appears to have been the nontranslation of a word, what one often calls in the language business a *faux ami* (wherein a common word or root conveys a false synonym), that propelled the country to the brink. Had they checked the German word for warrant officer—*Feldwebel*—the French, one might speculate, could perhaps have avoided ensnarement in Bismarck’s trap. And yet, even if one concurs with the historians in interpreting the Ems Dispatch as more a symptom than an outright cause of war, the whole affair points to the impossibility of dialogue consti-

tutive of the “truth” of Franco-Prussian relations. As Jacques Lacan put it succinctly to the partisans of May 1968: “Il n’y a pas de dialogue, le dialogue est une duperie.” [“There is no dialogue, dialogue is a sham”] Anticipating his more famous utterance: “Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel,” [“There is no sexual relation”] Lacan invokes a politics of nonrelation, in which monologues are arraigned side by side around a traumatic gap.¹¹

Exposing the *duperie* of diplomatic dialogue, the Ems Dispatch, one could say, fulfilled a burgeoning French paranoia vis-à-vis the Prussians that shaped all of fin-de-siècle culture. Internal betrayal or treason was suspected as a way of blocking national self-criticism. Zola identified this attitude with the posture of denial in *La Débâcle* when Private Weiss is censored by his commanding officer after describing why Germany is a serious force to be reckoned with: “Then there was the system of compulsory military service, bringing an entire nation to its feet, bearing arms, trained and disciplined . . . and then there was this army’s intelligence and strong generalissimo who seemed set to reinvent the art of battle.” First reprimanded for demoralizing the troops, Weiss’s clear-sighted view of the Prussian threat is greeted by a fellow soldier (a mercenary and veteran of the Algerian campaign) with incredulity: “What line are you spinning us there? What’s all that rubbish meant to mean? . . . ‘Beaten? France beaten? I’d like to see those Prussian swine try and beat us lot.’”¹² After the defeat, the delusional complex only worsens. As Freud noted in a paper addressed to Fliess in 1895, “The ‘*grande nation*’ cannot face the idea that it can be defeated in war. *Ergo* it was not defeated; the victory does not count. It provides an example of mass paranoia and invents the delusion of betrayal.”¹³ One could argue that from the Ems Dispatch to the infamous *bordereau* used to convict Dreyfus, a line could be drawn connecting diplomatic *duperie* to cultural paranoia. Mis-translation in the art of diplomacy thus comes to signal an intractable non-translatability between nations, a condition of catastrophic *blocage* that inspires paranoid projection and the moral calculus of the zero-sum game (in which whatever benefits one side is assumed to hurt the other).

Baron von Clausewitz was the quintessential theorist of the zero-sum game in the art of war, and it is no accident that postwar game theorists of nuclear deterrence relied on his work. And one could say that Clausewitzian principles are in full bloom in the contemporary notion of “war all around” in which the state of not-war is proved to be the exception. Diplomacy and the psychoanalytic reading of national desire in this new theater of war may seem increasingly irrelevant. And yet, as Freud knew well, exclusively realist, rationalist, and normalizing accounts of war foreclose a critical understanding of catastrophist causality and the operative force of diplo-

matic “black holes” in the psychic life of nations. In his late text “Warum Krieg?” Freud essentially shifted the paradigm from a Clausewitzian “vom” Krieg to a Freudian “warum.” And what this transit from *vom* to *warum* ultimately entailed was the move from an ethically neutral philosophy of war—one based on converting Napoleonic performatives into a metaphysics of strategy and tactics—to a psychoanalysis of war, conceived as a failed “abreaction” of repression. When, in “Why War?” Freud asked Einstein, “Why do you and I and so many other people rebel so violently against war? Why do we not accept it as another of the many calamities of life? After all, it seems to be quite a natural thing, to have a good biological basis and in practice to be scarcely avoidable,” he seemed to have been taking direct aim at the Clausewitzian position, which accepts war as the logical extension of politics, as integral to a naturalized status quo. By posing the question “Warum krieg?” Freud questioned blind adherence to a law of intellect that represses instinct, overrides the self-preservative erotic drive to life, and misrecognizes the destructive persistence of the death instinct (SE 22 213–14). In hindsight, Freud’s psychoanalytic attention to war’s “reason” takes us not in the direction of a utopian politics that could be realized through the practice of expert diplomacy or “good” translation. Accepting mistranslation as a given, Freud opened the door to a pragmatist politics of *mésentente*—a rationality of disagreement model in Jacques Rancière’s terms, or what Jonathan Schell (in *The Unconquerable World*) calls “civil non-cooperation.” The aporia of nontranslatability would thus be factored into rethinking the art of war.¹⁴

Abstract though it may seem, the idea of war as a codified language, “translatable” according to fixed rules or laws, is hardly immaterial, for as we may ascertain just by scanning the newspapers after 9/11, there is no clean split between the theory of war and its consequences on the ground. As the “enemy” in the so-called war against terror increasingly diffuses its base of operations, and as battle zones remove themselves to Internet networks and the arena of electronic diplomacy, war as such is increasingly defined as a translation war: its formal strategy determined by the ability to translate intelligence, its stated objectives increasingly subject to mistranslation, and its diplomatic *duperie* as a Great Game ever more crucial to the probability of global extinction or the prospect of global peace.