

Yoko Tawada, "Speech Police and Polyglot Play," For Ernst Jandl, translated by Marjorie Perloff LYRIC 9 (2006), 55-63.

Yoko Tawada was born in Tokyo in 1960 and educated at Waseda University, where she studied Russian literature. In 1979, she took a trip to Germany on the Trans-Siberian railroad and decided to stay, continuing her literary studies at the University of Hamburg. Her first collection of lyric poems was published in Japan in 1987 and in German translation in 1989 by Peter Pörtner as *Nur da wo du bist da ist nichts* ["Only there where you are is there nothing"]. A second collection of lyrics and prose poems *Aber die Mandarinen müssen heute abend noch geraubt werden* ("But the mandarin oranges must be stolen on this very evening"), which appeared in 1997, was written primarily in German.

Of her many prize-winning novels and short story collections, those available in English include *Where Europe Begins* (2002), and the forthcoming *The Naked Eye* (both from New Directions). She has also written plays, *Hörspiele*, librettos, and a brilliant set of lecture-prose poems *Verwandlungen* ("Metamorphoses"), delivered at Tübingen University in 1998. A German-Japanese reading of Tawada's poetry, in collaboration with the pianist-composer Aki Takase called *Diagonale* is available on CD from Konkursbuch [www.konkursbuch.com].

In 1997, Tawada was writer in residence at the Villa Aurora in Pacific Palisades; in 1999, she was the Max Kade Distinguished Visitor and writer in residence at the Foreign Languages and Literatures Section at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She will be featured at a forum at the MLA Convention in Philadelphia in December 2006. She currently resides in Berlin.

The following essay-poem *Sprachpolizei und Spielpolyglotte: Für Ernst Jandl* appeared in the special issue of the journal *Volltext: Zeitung für Literatur* (Nr. 1, 2005), which commemorates the great Austrian experimental poet Ernst Jandl (1925-2000), whose visual and sound poems provide a major model for Tawada's own work. Jandl was in turn strongly influenced by Gertrude Stein and John Cage, writers whose presence thus filters into Tawada's own work by a circuitous route .

The translation below omits a few short sections that cannot be rendered intelligibly in English as well as the many parenthetical references to Jandl's own puns and word play to which Tawada pays homage.

Does the Japanese language have a grammar too, or do people speak without any rules?

How do you mean?

Is there gender? No? Are there plural and singular? No? Is there declension? No? Are there prepositions? No? Definite and indefinite articles? No?

“Is there botany in Japan or do plants grow without rules?”

Are there masculine and feminine words? Are there some words that have wombs in their bodies? Is *der Rock* (skirt) masculine, while *die Hose* (“trousers”) is feminine? Is there a gender when a sentence is being consumed? Is there a particular taste when I place a woman-word on my own tongue? How does a chocolate bar (*eine Tafel Schokolade*) taste as a word? You say you’d like to have a chocolate bar. Do you actually want to have a bar or a chocolate? Which came first, the chocolate or the bar, which hasn’t become chocolate yet? A bar is no cup, no vessel. It is a flat, four-cornered dream that satisfies one’s desire. Things get forced into a box so that they can be counted and controlled. One bar of chocolate is allowed, two might cause tooth decay, three chocolate bars will already be called a sin by some. Nevertheless the appetite knows no end. Most edible things are uncountable: honey, noodles, vegetables. They will be measured with a spoon, a cup, or a scale.

Mehl (“flour”), *Milch* (“milk”) and *Mus* (“mousse”). How much of it do I need? *Mühe* (“effort”), *Mut* (“courage”) and *Müdigkeit* (“tiredness”): how much *Mühe* does one take in order to learn a language? How much *Mut* does one need to abandon a language? How *müde* are you of grammar? How much *Mut* must you have in order to pronounce an invented word?

Words become countable when they are separated in writing. If they existed without spaces, a text would look like a long piece of spaghetti. The enemies of spaghetti dishes have invented the separation of words.

When you want to separate the words *Rad fahren* ("ride a bike"), we are riding through the neighborhood on two bikes. When you prefer to put the two words together, we are riding a tandem. A policeman comes along and says it's against the law to ride a tandem on the new street in the Inner City. Why? We've always used a tandem before. We can't divide our bicycle in half.

On my desk, there is a highway where every word can travel without paying. There, a coffee without a cup or a subordinate clause without a comma can travel freely.

So that you know where a word ends and where the next one begins, you write the words separately. A row of letters that you connect is a word. Even a very long word is a word since its letters are connected. So you must take no word apart. But there are divisible words. When a word is divisible it is no longer a word, but two words. Why, then, does no one speak of a *fusionable* verb or an *unfaithful* preposition instead of a divisible verb? A word is an illusion. A word can be several words, just as a language can be several languages.

An inseparable pair is still separable; otherwise it's not a pair. A word waits secretly to be taken apart. Not only when the line ends, but when, for example, one remembers a certain woman. If someone thinks of Monica, a Monica jumps out of his *Mundharmonica* ("mouth-harmonica"), and the word

is divided in two: *Mundhar* (mouth-hair) and *Monica*. But what is a mouth-hair? A hair that grows in the mouth?

To reunite the divided pair and to divide the indivisible one are neither the jobs of a linguist nor of a therapist.

I step lightly *over* the law just as one steps over a stone.

When you want to translate a difficult sentence, you turn it over with a boat. Then a river is formed between languages.

I break through grammar, the rod of the speech police. I break through the battle line and find my enemies there. But how do they look? I have to invent them first. *I find sie* ("they") *er* ("he"). I don't understand *sie* ("you"). *Ich stehe sie nicht ver* ("I stand you not under"). *Ich spreche sie nicht an* ("I don't address you"). *Ich anspreche sie* ("I attract you").¹

What is separated and what must stay together is decreed by particular decrees. "Rules must exist," declare, not the policemen but your friends. This is a rule of the game, you must obey it; otherwise we won't play with you." Your democratic friends sell you coercion as the rule of the game.

If you have a short tongue and say the word *Spielregel* ("rule of the game") very fast, it sounds like *Spiegel* ("mirror").

To be true to the rule: that is a must.

A *Mus* ("mousse") is no *Muß* ("must"). Grammatically, a mousse is a sweet substance, uncountable.

Lettristically, however, it is countable: M plus U plus S: there are three letters.

What you can count, you can also transpose: *Ums, Sum, Usm, Smu, Msu*.

The letters are ready to be shuffled. They are dice on a card table.

A divisible verb must be divided.

A name must begin with a capital letter.

The last letter of a sentence must be followed by a period. That is a must. . . .

What happens when one begins a name with a small letter? What happens if one writes "Anna" with two small a's and two small n's? Then Anna becomes a small as Alice in Wonderland.

Some think the length of a word can be measured by the number of its letters. *Leben* ("life") has five letters, whereas *Krankenversicherung* ("health insurance") has nineteen. But a written word does not have the same length as a spoken one. The "sch" in *schreiben* ("write") are three letters but just a hiss in the mouth, and this hiss takes no longer than the "s" of *studieren* ("study"). Even so, it seems as if the time available for studying is shorter than that for writing. How can you make a course of study exactly as long as the act of writing? It does no good to study any longer. You try to prolong your studies by writing the word *studieren* with the letters "sch." By means of studying one gains the ability to falsify something. Everything that's new initially appears false. And friends laugh at you without noticing that they are thus becoming the speech police.

Much about language is mysterious. Everything can be called into question, and yet there is no doubt that *elephant* is a noun. That is a riddle (*Rätzel*) with a long trunk (*Rüssel*). There are many adjectives that end with *ant*, for

example "significant," "reluctant," "elegant," or "arrogant." Still everyone knows that an elephant can never be an adjective.

Die Wortart ("a part of speech") is *eine Art* (a kind), but it doesn't help *Kunst* ("art"). The part of speech, rather, helps to stabilize the hierarchy of individual words. The noun is the host and the verb is the hostess. The prepositions and articles are tenants; alone, they can't create a literary work. Or can they? (Jandl: "wanderung"). It is unlikely that an article can seem as important as a noun. Or can it?

The parts of speech are personal identity cards on which racial markers are recorded. Naturally, a verb can become a noun or an adjective a verb. But in every case the history of the move will be documented and recorded.

Freelance words are called particles. They can be successful, beloved, and famous, but they have no fixed position in a sentence. In comics, *pst* or *hopp* ("quick"!) are placed in a dialogue bubble, whereas *zzz* or *bang* are placed in the air. They represent a form and manner of movement, but they can never become adverbs. Perhaps, because it is too obvious that they imitate noises. In general, language has to pretend that it has long ago abolished the gesture of imitation. Onomatopoeia in language is regarded as something primitive. It is a reminder of the archaic form of language, and at the same time it promotes the feeling that anyone could invent a new word.

The border police divides particles into three groups: illegal immigrants, minors, and sound poetry.

Sound poetry (*Die Lautpoesie*) can become very loud (*laut*), yet to many ears it is impossible to listen to. Politicians on the Left say it is ideologically too indirect. politicians on the Right say it is degenerate.

Eine Laute ("a lute") is not *ein lautes* (*loud*) instrument. Black tea is often red, whereas green tea is brown. Compared to the homeless onomatopoeic words, adjectives without means have an easier life. Still, they suffer from discrimination. They get underrated because many believe that adjectives are just decorative.

The opposite of big is small. Because there are *Großstädte* ("cities"), one may be sure that a *Kleinstadt* ("town") is really small. If someone has become a *Großvater* ("grandfather"), he knows he's no longer a small father.

The opposite of *kurzweilig* ("entertaining") is *langweilig* ("boring"). Therefore one is afraid of interesting things that make life seem shorter. Better to live a *langweiliges* ("boring") life than a short one. . . .

You are obedient, for at first you couldn't speak at all, but only listen. You like to listen, when someone tells you something. You listen attentively to the questions that are put to you. But meanwhile you give the impression that you are not hearing at all. You have already been misheard by the police numerous times. "Are you even hearing us?" asks an irritated policeman. "Yes, I hear you," you answer and write the word "hear" in your notebook. You can see hearing when it is written down. But one wonders why written hearing doesn't have an ear. "What are you writing there?" "I'm writing hearing." "You're kidding! One can't write hearing." "Yes, one can write the word 'hearing'." One can always write *Hören* ("to hear") "höher" ("higher"). Can always *höher hören*.

Whoever is chic can also be red. Whoever is clumsy can also be industrious. Whoever is tired can also be big. Adjectives promise us unlimited possibilities for the simultaneity of different traits. Can words become boundless when they are imprisoned in the casing of the letters? Boundlessness doesn't take a large quantity. Since, for example, it is forbidden to use the word *nur* ("only") twice in a single sentence, can one break open the limit by repeating the word?

What happens when one repeats the word "only" eighty-four times, without putting in a noun or a verb? Picture a text that has forty-two lines. Every line consists of two "only"s which sit in the middle of the page like a zipper and divide it in two. (Jandl, "nur nur") What do you see when you open the zipper?

Only only (*nur*) can mean only. Only is unique. Only is special. Only is an insult for that person who wants to be more or to have more. Having more is of no use but we don't want to have only only. It doesn't want to develop, but to repeat itself. For a new form comes from repetition. No form comes into being without repetition.

A protestant grammar has every repetition that transforms the text into a litany. Repetition distracts and tempts the reader to become a rocking cradle.

A word is repeated. The first time one thinks of its meaning. The second time, the word is estranged and the letters come to the fore. The third time the alphabet no longer looks familiar. The fourth time, one asks oneself how a reader can stand this noise in the first place. The fifth time one asks oneself: what is a reader anyway who calls himself "I"?

A sentence is power. A word is a riddle. A letter is a traveler. It can leave the sentence. In its place comes another. A G is replaced by a P, so God becomes pod. . . .

The letters aren't just insolent, they are also redundant. Some of them have no reason to exist.

There are some who do very little work, for example, "c" in current German. Actually, one could let go the fellow worker C. For the ridiculously little work C does, his colleagues Z and K could take over. What right does Herr C have to occupy the third place in the alphabet? The study of bees shows that there is always a percentage of worker bees that don't work. Distance these and a new group of non-worker bees is formed. Evidently it is necessary that some members of the group remain lazy so as to let the others work industriously. If one always got rid of the lazy ones, sooner or later there would be no worker bees. One should never fire anyone who seems useless. So we retain the worker C.

F and V are both busy, but one could get rid of one of them. What V can do, so can F. The word *ferstehen* ("understand") looks, at first glance, incomprehensible when it is spelled with an "f." But read it out loud and it is no longer *ferwechselbar* ("confusing"). A *Visch* can taste just as good or swim just as well when it is spelled with a V. The world wouldn't collapse if one replaced all the "f"s with "v"s (Jandl: *feilchen vür efa*). The first woman of mankind according to Christian teaching must then write her name otherwise. But Efa with "f" will receive a *Feilchen* ("violet") with "f" naturally, and suddenly one is seized by a strong desire to mix up all the letters so as to give back to the playground paradise its poetic radiance.

¹ Here Tawada is playing on the confusing use of the pronoun "sie," which is, in lower case, the third person plural nominative and accusative, and in upper case ("Sie"), the second person singular accusative used in formal address. Again, the verb *ansprechen* ("to address") is divided to mean "I address you" (*Ich spreche sie an*). The undivided verb is not used in the first-person singular so that *Ich anspreche sie* is grammatically incorrect. Tawada is referring to the usage *Ich bin ansprechend*: "I am attractive" (i.e., someone to be noticed, addressed). *Ich anspreche sie* would thus mean "I attract you."