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Theorizing untranslatability: Temporalities and ambivalence in colonial literature of Taiwan and Korea

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Abstract

This paper theorizes and historicizes the ideas of modern language and translation and challenges the imperialist and nationalistic mode of worlding with the notion of 'untranslatability' that is embedded in the linguistic and cultural practices of colonial Taiwan and Korea. I redefine the notion of translation as a bordering system – the knowledge-production of boundaries, discrimination, and classification – that simultaneously creates the translatable and the untranslatable (i.e. the equivalence and incommensurability) in asymmetrical power relations. With this, I discuss how this ambivalence is embodied in the experiences of colonial writers Wu Yung-fu and Pak T'aewŏn and their novellas 'Head and Body' (1933) and 'A Day in the life of Kubo the Novelist' (1934). I illustrate two characteristics of the ambivalent untranslatability embedded in their novellas: the linguistic untranslatability and the experience of 'unhomeness'. The linguistic untranslatability and unhomeness, I argue, result in the colonized's dislocation in homogeneous time-space relationships, resulting to the incompleteness of the modernization project through colonialism. At the same time untranslatability offers a site to explore the transnational space that crosses linguistic boundaries, and to caution against the legacy of colonialism.

Keywords

[colonial ambivalence](#), [colonial modernity](#), [regime of translation](#), [Taiwan and Korean literature](#), [untranslatability](#)

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