



## Performing Failure

Tingting Hui

To cite this article: Tingting Hui (2019) Performing Failure, Third Text, 33:2, 235-246, DOI: [10.1080/09528822.2019.1603619](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1603619)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1603619>



© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 25 Apr 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 320



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Performing Failure

## Rethinking the Strategic Value of Translation

Tingting Hui

**Patel** [squatting on the chair] 我们可以通过学习不同的语言来认识不同的文化吗? [one hand pointing at Yuyu Rau] 除了要学习口音和腔调以外, 还有兴趣。

**Yuyu Rau** Hi, I'm Hetain. I'm an artist. And this is Yuyu, who is a dancer I have been working with. I have asked her to translate for me.

**Patel** 更重要的是手势, 特有的习惯和动作。

**Yuyu Rau** If I may, I would like to tell you a little bit about myself and my artwork.

**Patel** 我们可以通过学习不同的语言来认识不同的文化吗?

**Yuyu Rau** I was born and raised near Manchester, in England, but I'm not going to say it in English to you, because I'm trying to avoid any assumptions that might be made from my northern accent.

[laughter from the audience]

**Patel** 除了要学习口音和腔调以外, 还有兴趣。更重要的是手势, 特有的习惯和动作。

**Yuyu Rau** The only problem with masking it with Chinese Mandarin is I can only speak this paragraph, which I have learned by heart when I was visiting in China. So all I can do is keep repeating it in different tones and hope you won't notice.<sup>1</sup>

Two languages and an audience who understand one language but not the other: this is where translation is generally expected. Hetain Patel and Yuyu Rau's stage work *Who am I? Think Again*, delivered at the TED Global conference in Edinburgh in 2013, begins with this familiar scene of translation. We hear Patel speak Mandarin and see him squat on the chair in his kurta pyjamas. All of these elements – his appearance,

1 Hetain Patel, Rau Yuyu, *Who am I? Think Again*, TED Global, Edinburgh, June 2013

clothes, language and posture – appear quite foreign and original to a Western audience, raising, as a consequence, the expectation of translation. Rau plays along with this expectation, fittingly performing the translation in English at intervals. We are convinced that the translation is done for our benefit until the moment when Rau reveals that the artist himself is a native speaker of English. Yet if we nonetheless feel that we have been cheated, it is not without reason: here, all the prerequisites for translation appear to have been met, except that the very act of translation turns out to be linguistically redundant. We have thus been ‘tricked’ into believing that translation is what we need.

There is nothing to prevent us from dismissing the scene as a mere parody of translation. The questions are, however: what if we take it seriously and use it to rethink the relation of the translation to the original? When translation is performed but *not* out of necessity, how shall we re-adjust our frame of interpretation? Since the parodic appropriation of translation is not merely a matter of form – in the sense that Rau translates not the words but the intention of the artist – does it not lead us to the question of whether meaning and style can arise precisely from (and thus *not before, not after*) the act of translation? This article attempts to address these questions by exploring the concept of ‘failure’, which is finely crafted and staged through Patel and Rau’s performance. Just to clarify, by ‘failure’, I do not refer to a piece of translation badly done due to the incompetence of the translator. If the failure of translation is to have any theoretical significance at all, it has to be consciously and strategically performed so as to lay bare the discursive frameworks that play a role in how a translation is produced and received.

This entails, to begin with, rethinking translation in light of *performativity*. The idea that translation amounts to nothing but saying the same thing twice over in different languages has been widely discredited. However, while it is one thing to say that translation is more than a straightforward imitation of the original, it is another to claim that translation is a practice wherein the source text is acted out through the translator and the audience. So what does it mean to perform translation? Sandra Bermann’s article ‘Performing Translation’ (2014), in which she perceives translation as a complex and transformative act that engages with text and performance, may serve as a point of departure. Bermann argues that the terms ‘performative’ and ‘performativity’, which have become consequential in literary and cultural studies because of the writings of J L Austin, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, prove to be central to translation studies as well.<sup>2</sup> Bermann writes:

Austin’s theory might also help characterize the history of translation studies. To be sure, in the early phases of translation studies, when it struggled for a foothold in the academy, theoretical linguistics was the discipline most often consulted, and brief textual comparisons reigned. But as scholars studied translation more broadly, and included the more contingent and contextual issues affecting the translation process – for example, gender, empire, inequality of languages, orality versus different written scripts – the field shifted its focus from the more formal and abstract strategies of linguistic equivalence toward a study of individual *acts* of translation and what these *did* in particular contexts. That is, if linguists first offered a view of translation in terms of *saying*, the attempt to restate in the receiving language what the source text said (and

2 J L Austin, *How to Do Things with Word: Second Edition (The William James Lectures)* [1962], J O Urmson and Marina Sbisa, eds, Oxford University Press, 1971. J L Austin notices that not every instance of speech can be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity; utterances such as those that deal with the act of promising, apologising, commanding, just to name a few, do not describe the pre-existent state of affairs but rather transforms the reality, felicitously or infelicitously, in relation to the concrete moment of utterance. Grouping such types of speech into the category of ‘performative utterance’ or ‘speech act’, Austin departs from the representational and communicational understanding of language, ascribing to language the power to act upon reality. Later Jacques Derrida, through developing the notion of iterability, responds to Austin’s exclusion of literary texts, arguing that literary language should be understood in terms of the performative. Judith Butler, who states that gender identities are produced through repeated act, further expands the discussion to gender studies. See Sandra Bermann, ‘Performing Translation’, in *A Companion to Translation Studies*, Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter, eds, John Wiley & Sons, West Sussex, 2014.

as accurately as possible), then later translation scholars, interested in the cultural and political *acts* and *effects* of translation, examined the *doing* of translation: the doing of languages and texts; but also the doing of translators, readers, and audiences.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, translation studies have moved beyond the phase of discussing translatability and untranslatability of a source text from the linguistic perspective alone. Issues such as gender and language inequality have asserted themselves as more relevant indexes of accountability, foregrounding translation as a contextual, political and potentially transformative act.<sup>4</sup> Insofar as translation can be constructed as a mode of encounter firmly embedded in the current disproportional distribution of knowledge and power, the relation between translation and the original lies at the heart of translation as performance, whereas the question of how to mobilise this relation becomes crucial to appropriating translation as a strategy. So, how does the idea of the performative emerge and prevail within the discipline of translation studies? In what way shall the translator enact, mobilise and transform the relation between translation and original? Whereas Bermann revisits translation theories through reviewing the conceptual development and migration of the notion ‘performative’ across various disciplines, this article draws upon the writings of Walter Benjamin, Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to advance the understanding of the performativity of translation within the discipline of translation studies. Their theories, in the end, will lead us back to Patel and Rau’s performance. If translation concerns *doing* something as opposed to merely *saying* something, this stage work, as I will argue, shows that failure is constitutive to translation as a practice and that the performance of failure is productive to translation as a strategy.

## The Role of the Translator: Facilitator, Traducer, Failure?

Ever since the prefix ‘*trans-*’ entered the lexicon of gender studies, postcolonial theory and globalisation discourse (*trans-gender*, *transculturalisation*, *transnationalism* – to name just a few), translation, in the same spirit, has become a celebrity concept that restlessly circulates from one discipline to another, from one local context to another. Immanent in the physical and conceptual act of border-crossing between languages, cultures and disciplines, translation conjures up the old craft of grafting, spurring the expectation of newness, while at the same time incarnating an anxiety over the legitimacy of such mobility.

It is, therefore, not by chance that translation is often discussed in relation to transgression. Primarily as a linguistic performance that renders a text from one language to another, translation begins with the original, yet engages with a degree of opacity that obscures the original. Aspiring to capture what is untranslatable, the new form manifested in the alien language seems to echo, and yet, expel the original simultaneously. Among many discussions on the relation between translation and original, Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1923) stands as a signpost. While the prevailing discourse at that moment upheld the original as the ideal, which the translation should

3 Ibid, p 288

4 See Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, eds, *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999

strive to mimic and measure up to, Benjamin, on the one hand, acknowledges that the intention of the translator is different from that of the original writer (one being abstract and derivative, the other concrete and initial), and on the other hand, proposes that translation shall not be taken as an unwanted bastard seeking parentage nor a parasite that imperils the welfare of the original. Precisely because of its derivative nature, Benjamin suggests, the translation could throw light on the original in terms of its translatability or untranslatability, elevating it to a higher linguistic realm while at once making it less complete, yearning for a pure language that reveals itself in translation.<sup>5</sup>

Seeing translation as a transformative force that reconfigures the original retrospectively, Benjamin transplants – although implicitly – the notion of the performative into translation studies, which has greatly impacted the field regarding its scope and method, opening it up to domains other than theoretical linguistics. ‘The task consists in finding in the language into which the work is being translated the intention on the basis of which, in the translation, the echo of the original will be struck’, writes Benjamin.<sup>6</sup> In general, to echo means to repeat and reverberate; it is to hear the same sound twice in varying intensities and durations. However, if, by the word ‘echo’ Benjamin maintains the notion that that translation and original are closely related, it does not demand that translation needs to be equivalent to the original text. Diffused, disconnected, and with longer duration, the echo exhibits a hint of strangeness that was hidden and unobserved in the original sound. Likewise, the translator, as Benjamin envisions, is an exemplary figure who, through the act of translation, facilitates the conditions under which the echo of the original text can return and resound in a foreign language, whose linguistic existence becomes strangely manifest, conscious and augmented.

Yet there seems to be a limit to the ‘redeeming’ power of the translator as a facilitator. According to Judith Butler at least, the misfire of the translation is rather of a constitutive kind. ‘In fact, it is unclear whether translations can ever be other than “bad” or, at least, have some badness in them’, writes Butler in ‘Betrayal’s Felicity’ (2004), ‘since the original has to be crossed, if not partially mutilated, with the emergence of the translation itself’.<sup>7</sup> Butler in this essay observes that in translation there is a conflicting tendency that forbids the translation to return to the original, which, accordingly, cannot be expected to be realised through the translator alone, even if the translator is proficient. If the Benjaminian translator resembles very much a mediator, a pacifier, Butler envisions the translator to be a constructive pessimist, a professional ‘traducer’.<sup>8</sup> Deriving this idea from the translation practice and theoretical reflection of Barbara Johnson – perhaps the ideal figure of translator as ‘traducer’ in her mind – Butler argues that the antithesis of prohibition and transgression, which seems to lead translation to a ‘scandalous’ practice, is in fact the translator’s felicity, in the sense that, as Butler cites Johnson, ‘only translation can betray without necessarily instating the polarity from which it deviates’.<sup>9</sup>

If translation is inevitably a matter of divergence and resistance after brief moments of resonance with the original, how does one ‘traduce’ in a professional way as a translator? Could the act of betrayal be carefully and creatively crafted, as in what we do with art? On being asked to reflect on her experience of being a translator, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks of nothing but failure:

5 See Walter Benjamin, *One-way Street and Other Writings*, J A Underwood, trans, Penguin Books, London, 2009

6 *Ibid*, p 38

7 Judith Butler, ‘Betrayal’s Felicity’, *Diacritics*, vol 34, no 1, 2004, p 82

8 Butler’s deconstructive reading is very much influenced by Paul de Man and Barbara Johnson. In a lecture at Cornell University entitled “‘Conclusions’ on Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”” [1983], de Man says that the translator is by definition the one who fails. Translation, de Man comments, ‘which seems to be due to the fact that they are secondary in relation to the original, reveals an essential failure, an essential disarticulation which was already there in the original’. Barbara Johnson, in a similar vein, argues in her book *Mother Tongues* (2003) that the unity of the content and language in the original is an illusion, whose very separation becomes productively visible in translation. See Paul de Man, “‘Conclusions’ on Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator””, *Yale French Studies* 97, 2000, pp 10–35; and Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues: Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003.

9 *Ibid*, p 83

Now I feel as I did when I took my first written exam for my driver's license in 1967. How can these questions be answered as they are posed, I worried. I provide philosophically unassailable answers. I failed the exam. In other words, I had failed in the task of (low-level) epistemic translation, from the subject of the Iowa Department of Motor Vehicles to a young academic reading Derrida. I am failing again to translate from the subject of a colleague interested in me as a translator and my stereotype of myself, unavailable to me as 'translator'.<sup>10</sup>

Here Spivak evokes the notion of failure to express the dilemmas that a translator faces. Indeed, while pointing to the impossibility of staying 'faithful' and close enough to the original, the notion of failure resembles a much humbler and no less performative gesture when compared to that of betrayal. By translating her identity as a translator into repeated and doomed acts of failure, Spivak pays homage to the original as the promise of meaning that remains alluring and forbidding, transparent and enigmatic. In response to the question as to whether she believes in 'fidelity to the original', Spivak says, 'Yes, yes, not because it's possible, but because one must try. About "Breast Giver", Mahasweta has said a number of times that she feels she is reading her own Bengali. And I won't teach anything if I can't strain toward that fidelity.'<sup>11</sup> Yes, Spivak tries to reach out to that fidelity, but fails in a way as it is fated. However, if we believe that Spivak draws on failure to play out a tone of inferiority and to excuse herself as a translator, we forget the fact that she is not (only) the one who fails, but the one who *decides to fail*. By embracing and performing failure, the translator makes it possible to approach the original both as a point of reference and a point of departure, and to approximate the original maximally without erasing emerging differences.

'I think all reading is translation,' emphasises Spivak, 'that mistake or errancy is part of the game of reading'.<sup>12</sup> Foregrounding the translator as an *agent* of failure and errancy, Spivak explains further, in another article, entitled 'The Politics of Translation', that the kind of failure that she talks about does not concern misfortune or incapability. It is done in the name of love, which is not initiated from a position of judgement. Spivak writes: 'Although every act of reading or communication is a bit of this risky fraying which scrambles together somehow, our stake in agency keeps the fraying down to a minimum except in the communication and reading of and in love.'<sup>13</sup> For the translator, likewise, to fray means to stop playing safe, to become dangerously close to the overwhelming unfolding of translatability and untranslatability of the source text. Willingly suspending distance and aloofness, the translator approaches the text as a lover who, as Spivak says, 'earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other – before memory – in the closest places of the self'.<sup>14</sup> If love, according to Spivak, is what makes transgression less aggressive, it is through the performance of errancy and mistake in the name of love that intimacy and distance, original and translation, can be staged side by side without being accused of betrayal.

## Staging Translation: Performing Failure

Doesn't translation itself – one might think – already suggest this possibility of being *like* the other without *becoming* the other?

10 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Questioned on Translation: Adrift', *Public Culture*, vol 13, no 1, 2001, p 13

11 *Ibid*, p 14

12 *Ibid*

13 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge Classics, New York and London, 2009, p 202

14 *Ibid*, p 202

Spivak, at least, says explicitly that ‘one of the ways to get around the confines of one’s “identity” as one produces expository prose is to work at someone else’s title, as one works with a language that belongs to many others. This, after all, is one of the seductions of translating.’<sup>15</sup> Here, for Spivak, translation functions like the Freudian ‘dream’ or ‘screen memory’<sup>16</sup>: Under the guise of the other, it represents and mediates the incongruity of the self without endangering its imagined integrity. While such a claim may hold when translation is approached as a linguistic performance, it becomes problematic when expanded to translated lives. For those who find themselves in between languages and cultures, translation cannot be a free play of the self in the name of the other, since it entails the disruption of referentiality and the (con)fusion of self and other. Indeed, if assimilation and self-betrayal are inevitable, one might very well settle down upon the border, embracing the state of unremitting self-translation as an existential and poetic possibility. Eva Hoffman calls it ‘translation therapy’ in her book *Lost in Translation*: ‘I keep going back and forth over the rifts, not to heal them but to see that I – one person, first-person singular – have been on both sides.’<sup>17</sup> However, before celebrating this ongoing ‘therapy’ unconditionally, one might want to consider how not to be called a schizophrenic. To quote Hoffman again: ‘In order to translate a language, or a text, without changing its meaning, one would have to transport its audience as well.’<sup>18</sup> Hoffman suggests that translation and self-translation are not only about *translation into the other*, but also about *translation of the other*. The question is not to translate or not, but how to translate in a tangible way the complexity and ambiguity of self and other.

Therefore, I propose, it is not enough to rely on the idea of translation alone to put original and translation on an equal footing and to get around the quandary of self and other. To appropriate translation as a manoeuvre for intervention, one has to grapple with two fundamental questions: who is ‘impersonating’ whom by the aid of translation; and how it is deployed to transport the audience. The former question concerns the political dimension of translation that tends to be downplayed, whereas the latter guarantees that the strategic purpose of translation is conveyed clearly and emphatically.

In the remainder of this article, I will make a close reading of Patel and Rau’s stage work *Who am I? Think Again* to see how the artists use and play with the notion of failure to address simultaneously the political problematic and the strategic value of translation. I emphasise that these two aspects are not staged in a parallel fashion; instead, they constantly and uncannily turn against one other through the staging of failure, exposing translation as an inconsistent and almost impossible practice. Throughout their performance, all the parties involved in the practice of translation are more or less ‘corrupted’: not only do the original and the translation appear dubious and unreliable, but also the audience becomes unwittingly collusive. Indeed, translation has to fail so as to open itself to the critical engagement of the audience; it has to undo its transparency so that it will not only mirror the images of self and other, but also reflect how distorted these images appear to be.

15 Ibid, pp 200–201

16 See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume 3, Hogarth Press, London, 1899, pp 301–322

17 Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A life in a New Language*, Penguin Books, New York, 1989, p 273

18 Ibid, p 273

## Dubious Original

This stage work is performed by Hetain Patel, a conceptual artist based in London, and his ‘translator’ Yuyu Rau. Noticeably, Patel and Rau’s narratives decisively formulate the role of Rau as a translator. It is mentioned twice during the performance. The first is in the opening, as Rau ‘translates’ Patel’s words, saying ‘Hi, I’m Hetain. I’m an artist. And this is Yuyu, who is a dancer I have been working with. I have asked her to translate for me.’ The second time is when Patel says: ‘So this imitation business does come with risk. It doesn’t always go as you plan it, even with a talented translator [Rau].’ However, it is unjust to say that Rau is merely a translator, because her ‘translation’ does not correspond to Patel’s words on the semantic level. In fact, Rau’s role in the performance lies in between that of a translator and an artist. Since the audience and the artist Patel do speak the same language, Rau’s practice of translation is apparently not ‘meant for readers who do not understand the original’,<sup>19</sup> but is structurally incorporated and consciously manipulated as a crucial element of the artwork. Not only does her translation often lead the performance in an unexpected direction, but it also allows for engagement in various forms of representation – story-telling, acting, dancing – all of which exceed the ‘proper’ definition of translation.

In a similar vein, the boundary between translation and artwork is blurred. Even when Patel claims his ‘ownership’ of the artwork, affirming directly that ‘this is my art; I strive for authenticity’, it could not prevent the notion of art from slippage. If Patel’s linkage of art with authenticity resonates with the traditional view of art as an original articulation, which precludes translation from the outset, it seems unlikely to situate and make sense of Rau’s translation in relation to Patel’s so-called ‘art’: should Rau’s translation be seen as part of this performance? Or is it merely a translation of this artwork? When translation transgresses within the domain of art, as we can see from this performance, it is not just the legitimacy of such transgression that becomes problematic; rather, the conventional criteria of originality and authenticity, which are often attributed to art alone, are called into question.

Besides the ideas of art and artwork, the authenticity of the source language is another aspect of the original that this performance renders dysfunctional. Addressing an audience whose majority is composed of English speakers, Patel starts with speaking Mandarin, while Rau does the translation for him in between the pauses. At first glimpse, there seems to be nothing special or dubious regarding this scene of translation. Patel speaks Mandarin fluently in various tones, while looking at the audience confidently and assertively; his hands move emphatically, which confirms and completes his utterance in a visual register. Above all, Patel’s appearance suggests that he might be someone who needs a translator, since his ‘exotic’ face and costume do not readily state Englishness but are more likely to evoke the image of India. All of these are staged to raise the expectation of translation. However, as Rau reveals Patel’s intention of passing off as a non-native speaker of English, explaining that ‘I [Patel] was born and raised near Manchester in England, but I’m not going to say it in English to you. I’m trying to avoid any assumptions that might be made from my northern accent,’ the absurdity and redundancy of the act of translation rises to the surface.

19 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of the Translator’, in *One-way Street and Other Writings*, op cit, p 29



This moment of revelation discloses the inconsistencies that one might have vaguely sensed but readily dismissed. Members of the audience with some familiarity with Mandarin or very attentive listeners might well have noticed that Patel's Mandarin sounds repetitive, although his changing tones do add some 'artificial' variations to the utterances. At the same time, Rau, presented as a translator, is actually known as a dancer trained in ballet, contemporary and Chinese classical dance. Rau's Asian look seems to justify the assumption that she speaks Mandarin; yet her 'suspicious' English accent makes one wonder how qualified she is as a translator. These oddities, I propose, are precisely the keys to rethinking Rau as a translator of failure, who disrupts the rules and conventions of translation so as to make the politics of translation perceptible. It is because the practice of translation is not motivated in a linguistic sense that it serves to shed light on the violence of the everyday practice of translating from someone's appearance and accent into his or her linguistic origin and background. Patel impersonates a Mandarin speaker so as to avoid being 'literally' translated according to his northern English accent. Especially because his Indian guise seems incompatible with his native English accent, his ethnicity seems to stand in the way of claiming a righteous 'ownership' of his speech. Patel has to find someone to translate for him, because his language, which is in tension with his look, is not able to ascend to the status of the original.

However, although the act of passing off in a foreign language seems to be an efficient way to protect one from being stereotyped, it is not without risk. Patel recalls a scenario in which he learnt a Mandarin phrase and asked an artist to hear him out. This is what happened, according to Patel:

I spoke the phrase, and then he laughed and told me, 'Oh yeah, that's great, only it kind of sounds like a woman.'

I said, 'What?'

He said, 'Yeah, you learned from a woman?'

I said, 'Yes. So?'

He then explained [that] the tonal differences between male and female voices are very different and distinct, and that I had learned it very well, but in a woman's voice.

In his performance, Patel attempts to hide his non-native English look in another language; yet this time it is his gendered body that appears non-native to his impersonating voice. Ironically, Patel is no less vulnerable in a foreign language – which he initially embraces as a mask and a shelter – than in his mother tongue, although these two languages act on him in completely different ways. In English, Patel is exposed to the hyper-awareness of the 'betrayal' of his face; whereas in Mandarin Patel is easily taken as a clown, a queer or a daredevil. If originality, in the cases of language, ethnicity and gender, is associated with *nativeness*, Patel demonstrates that the idea of the 'perfect' native is impossible: one is inevitably and often unknowingly foreign in one way or another.

## Misfired Translation

Patel and Rau's performance greatly 'troubles' the idea of an 'authentic' original, since no stable points of origin, reference and interpretation

can be held neatly in place. What is equally called into question is the logic of linearity, which seems quite self-evident in translation. As Benjamin explains: ‘The translation comes after the original, of course, and in the case of important works, which never find their chosen translator at the time of their coming into being, it of course denotes the stage of the original’s continued existence [*Fortleben*].’<sup>20</sup> The linearity, therefore, guarantees that the translation derives from the original, prolonging its survival in another language. Patel and Rau’s performance, on the contrary, disrupts the ‘proper’ order between translation and original, facilitating an encounter of the two that does not result from, and in, a unilateral valorisation.

As I have mentioned, Patel and Rau’s performance appears to subscribe to the perceived temporal dimension of translation, in the sense that Patel’s Mandarin comes first and Rau’s English translation follows. However, from the very beginning, Rau does anything but translate Patel’s utterances *word for word*. Whereas Patel’s Mandarin is generally considered as the original, since it comes first, it is rather the translation of Rau that seems to be closer and more faithful to what the artist means to say. When the performance begins, Patel repeats a sentence in Mandarin, which reads: ‘We can learn about different cultures by learning different languages. Besides accent and intonation, it is also important to feel motivated. What matters more is [to imitate and adopt] body language, habits and gestures.’ His words certainly do not match the translation that is going on. Yet, they stand as a concise summary of what he is *doing* at that moment – that is, to become a Mandarin speaker by adopting certain tones, accents and gestures. What Patel says here, on the other hand, points to the meta-level of language learning, which – because it is untranslated – is beyond the comprehensibility of the audience, who do not speak Mandarin. Does he aim to imply that such meta-level reflection and sensitivity regarding language is more accessible to multilinguals? Apparently this message and the lack of correspondence between Patel and his translator are only immediately accessible to a select group of people, to those who speak both English and Mandarin. This selective process could be read as a meta-message of Patel’s words.

Whereas people consider the experience of learning to speak a foreign language as a process of *translating* one’s mother tongue and one’s existence into that language, the mechanism of translation is not always perceivable and audible to every listener. Only when the interlocutors share a similar linguistic background and trajectory can the listener easily ‘diagnose’ which words the speaker is wrestling with, and can thus understand him or her even if the speaker is not as precise as the language allows one to be. To come back to the performance, for those people who do not speak Mandarin, the thought-provoking nature of Patel’s performance becomes only perceptible through Rau’s translation. This process resonates with what Barbara Johnson calls ‘back formation’, which, according to Butler, happens at a moment of contact between the original and the translation, through which the ‘prior medium is put into question, and what appears as prior is constituted there, as the prior... by the after, by virtue of what comes after’.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas the disruption of linearity is crucial to undoing the tendency of valorising the original through translation, it is rather through Rau’s ‘failed’ role as a translator that the definition of translation is thoroughly

20 Ibid, p 31

21 Butler, ‘Betrayal’s Felicity’,  
op cit, p 83

rethought in relation to imitation and failure. Translation, suggests Patel and Rau's performance, is less about imitation than the failure of imitation. 'Contrary to what we might usually assume, imitating someone can reveal something unique', Patel says. 'Every time I fail to become more like my father, I become more like myself. Every time I fail to become Bruce Lee, I become more authentically me.' Failure, for Patel, gestures towards the redoubled expression of intimacy and distance: one cannot fail if one does not try to imitate in the first place; yet one cannot become oneself if one does not fail.

If Rau, being a dancer and an accented speaker of the target language, has failed by definition the role of the translator, she, precisely through acting out the failure of embracing this role, establishes translation as a contested terrain where prohibition and transgression are continuously revealed and reconciled. Within the performance, three moments stand out. The first moment gestures towards an attempted *takeover*, an interruption of the assumed power dynamics: when Patel is about to sit down, Rau jostles him away and sits on the chair herself, claiming assertively, and not without arrogance, that 'my artwork is about identity and language, challenging common assumptions based on how we look or where we come from – gender, race, class'. The second moment demonstrates *intervention*: as Patel puts on his Indian accent, saying, 'actually, I don't know why I am even talking like this. My dad doesn't even have an Indian accent anymore', Rau moves her hands in a circle, signalling Patel to move on at a faster speed. The third moment speaks to us of *curiosity and suspicion*: while Patel is telling us of his frustration at not being able to speak Chinese, Rau keeps scrutinising him, inquisitively and closely, poking his face tentatively with her finger. If Rau's translation has challenged Patel's role as an 'authentic' original by disclosing the fact that what seems an exotic and inaccessible language is no less foreign to the artist than it is to the audience, it is through the unfolding of these moments that Rau the translator directly transgresses the rigid boundary between art and translation, and becomes Rau the artist, who is able to question the norm and to be questioned, to intervene into a situation and to be intervened upon.

## Collusive Audience

In so far as Rau visibly 'transgresses' the demarcated boundary between translator and artist, the practice of translation has gained the dimension of what I call 'translating the translation'. In his reading of Benjamin's text 'The Task of the Translator', Paul de Man observes:

That the original was not purely canonical is clear from the fact that it demands translation; it cannot be definitive since it can be translated. But you cannot, says Benjamin, translate the translation; once you have a translation you cannot translate it any more. You can translate only an original.<sup>22</sup>

22 Paul de Man, "Conclusions" on Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator", *op cit*, p 22

Translation, as de Man explains, issues its own words of prohibition. The translated text shall not be exposed to further acts of translation.

Although it does happen that a text being translated is not based on its original version but on the version whose language the translator is familiar with, such translation is still considered to be derived from the original instead of the other translation.<sup>23</sup> In the performance, however, because Patel's northern English accent – which often leads the artist to being subjected to certain social stereotypes – cannot ascend to the self-evident position of the original, it is through Rau's translation of the Mandarin version of this anxiety that the authenticity and originality of the original (Patel's northern English accent) becomes validated and defended. With these redoubled acts of translation – from English to Mandarin and to English again – this artwork stages the detour of translation. Through revealing the traces of the act of translation itself, Rau, as a translator, forces the practice of translation in the opposite direction, having it at once give in to and resist the original. These contradictory movements, moreover, speak directly to the violence of the 'literal' translation of Patel's ethnicity and social status from his accent. Because he cannot *not* speak – since muteness is an easy way of surrendering – Patel has to turn the paradox of speaking into the questioning of speakability through deploying the scene of translation.

This strategic use of translation can be read together with a term that Spivak borrows from Jacques Derrida. In the 'Translator's Preface' to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Spivak writes:

My predicament is an analogue for a certain philosophical exigency that drives Derrida to writing 'sous rature', which I translate as 'under erasure'. This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)<sup>24</sup>

Writing 'under erasure', according to Spivak, is a strategy of writing that confronts writability itself. Instead of simply wishing the problem away or idealising a power-free space where actions and changes are thought to ensue, it sketches out a performative gesture that seeks for ways of communicating, translating and transforming. In order to use 'the only available language while not subscribing to its premises', Spivak notes that one could stage at the same time what one attempts (and is forced) to write and the condition of such writing.<sup>25</sup> Especially, it is the display of the intentional deletion that gives writing the possibility to write against its own limits and conditions.

While such a reading is more or less applicable in the case of Patel and Rau's translation performance, it must also be noted that the necessity of translation derives not from the ontological unsayability that forces Derrida to write 'under erasure', but rather from the violence of the 'literal' translation that serves to enclose Patel in silence. Rau's translation, therefore, retranslates his 'silenced' northern English accent into a critical encounter with the social practice of linguistic stereotyping. In other words, if Patel and Rau's performance has put translation under erasure, it is for the ethical and critical engagement of the audience that it ultimately demands it. Exposed to a maelstrom of the inconsistencies of translation, the audience is invited to laugh, to go astray, to linger and ponder: what has prevented Patel from addressing the audience

23 One such example is *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera, which was first translated into Chinese in 1987 by Han Shaogong based on the English translation. In 2002 and 2003, the book was retranslated from French – in which the book was originally written – into Chinese by Xu Jun.

24 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', *Of Grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1997, p xiv

25 *Ibid*, p xviii

directly? Who is the fool being caught and betrayed in translation? Whose innocent and unconscious practice of translation has silenced Patel's claim to his mother tongue? Hearing Rau's 'translation' – 'I [Patel] was born and raised near Manchester in England, but I'm not going to say it in English to you. I'm trying to avoid any assumptions that might be made from my northern accent', the audience laughs hard. Indeed, the laughter does more than communicating the message 'I understand your humour': the laughter binds the audience, whose members once surrendered to their judgemental ears. It is through the laughter that the audience recognise one another as accomplices in the act of 'literal' translation in an auditory fashion. If the accent and the laughter have very often engaged with one another metonymically (remember how often one laughs at the other's accent), it is through the misfire of translation that the laughter is able to be translated backwards. Suddenly it is not the accent of the other that is laughable, but the 'accented' ears that become embarrassingly absurd.

In her essay 'Betrayal's Felicity', Butler has observed several ways that translation operates in Barbara Johnson's writings, one of which is to 'work the felicities of the arbitrariness of language, and so sidestep a pathos that might bind one to an elusive original'.<sup>26</sup> Patel and Rau's performance can be read in a similar way: it enables the journeying of the speaker across various languages, whose linguistic origin and profile is no longer seen to be written authentically on his or her face. Indeed, what Patel and Rau aim to facilitate is the arbitrariness of *languages*. Here it concerns not the relation between the signifier and the signified, but the power dynamics of languages. Their performance shows that although the fact that a person speaks a certain language seems to be arbitrary, the interpretation of such a combination is not at all arbitrary.

In Patel and Rau's performance, the desire to not be translated according to one's accent and ethnicity is articulated through the practice of translation; the longing for authenticity is expressed and achieved through the very act of imitation and failure; and the quest for the past and origin is occasioned by the translation of a translation – as Patel says: 'it's only recently that I've started to understand that I didn't learn to sit like this [squat] through being Indian. I learned this from Spiderman.' If Patel and Rau's performance is very much about performing translation, it is the performance of failure that puts translation under erasure, pulling it in different directions, having it 'meet the original at the site of resistance'.<sup>27</sup> Their performance indicates that if failure is ever able to communicate or do anything, it is the enactment of a desire to not follow the script, a desire to create a scene where the original and the translation engage with one another in a complementary yet jarring fashion. In a way, translation has to fail so as to become self-reflexive. It is from the failure of tracing back to a fixed point of origin that the possibility emerges of exposing the politics of translation and further appropriating it strategically.

26 Butler, 'Betrayal's Felicity',  
op cit, p 82

27 Ibid, p 84