

Chapter 2

From Diglossia to Multilingualism in Global South Research: Reflections from Guinea

Clovis Bergère

1. Introduction

Yáng Shuáng-zǐ¹'s award-winning² *Taiwan Travelogue* is a historical fiction novel presenting itself as the latest translation of a supposedly long-lost but rediscovered travel memoir by the (fictional) Japanese novelist Aoyama Chizuko. Written and first published in Mandarin in 2020, later translated in Japanese (2023) and English (2024), *Taiwan Travelogue* is set in Taiwan in 1938 during Japanese occupation. It follows Aoyama-sensei as she travels — or perhaps more accurately eats her way³ — through Taiwan over the course of a year, sent to the island by the colonial Japanese government on a lecture tour to present

1 Yáng Shuáng-zǐ (杨双子 in simplified Chinese; 楊双子 in traditional Chinese; Yáng Shuāngzǐ in pinyin) which means “twins” is the shared pen name for twin Taiwanese sisters and authors Yang Jo-tzu and Yang Jo-hui who created the pen name to collaborate on historical fiction combining Jo-tzu's interest in literature and Jo-hui's interest in history and translation. When Jo-hui passed away to cancer in 2019, Jo-tzu continued writing under the pen name Yáng Shuáng-zǐ in her sister's memory.

2 As of August 2026, the novel has won the Golden Tripod Award (2020); Best Translation Award [for the Japanese translation] (2024); the National Book Award for Translated Literature [for the English translation] (2024), and was short-listed for the International Booker Prize (2026).

3 Food is a major theme in the book, with each chapter named after a dish (ex: Kue-Tsí/ Roasted Seeds; Muā-Inn-Thng/ Jute Soup; Tang-Kue-Tê/ Winter Melon Tea; etc....).

her acclaimed book, adapted into a film, *A Record of Youth*. The book centers on Aoyama's relationship with Ms. Wáng Chiēn-hò (Ōng Tshian-hóh in Taiwanese, Ō Chizuru in Japanese), her interpreter, whom she nicknames Chi-chan. A deeply layered novel — a “meta historical fiction” as described by Lin King, the translator for the English version⁴ — *Taiwan Travelogue*, under the guise of a light-hearted memoirized travelogue, asks deep questions about the (im)possibilities of love and friendship across colonial lines, while centering both food and translation as meta-narratives to carry forward the charmingly ambivalent and restrained love story at the heart of the novel. In order to disguise itself as a work of translation rather than fiction, *Taiwan Travelogue* is book-ended by an “introduction” by a fictional academic Hiyoshi Sagako who claims to be in possession of the original Japanese copy of the 1977 translation of *Taiwan Travelogue* as well as four afterwords: one claiming to be from Aoyama's (fictional) daughter and three from (equally fictional) translators and editors to the supposed 1977, 1990, and 2020 editions of the book, this latest one penned by Yáng Shuáng-zǐ herself, masquerading as the translator rather than the actual author of the novel. Further blurring the line between reality and fiction, the English edition also includes a note by Lin King, the novel's real-life translator. In it, she reflects on the fact that for the (real) translation from Mandarin into English, she had to rely on Miura Yūko's earlier (also real) Japanese translation of the novel, noting somewhat tongue-in-cheek that:

Surely Aoyama and Chi-chan would be tickled by this: a Taiwanese translator, while bringing the book to the ultimate colonial language of English, has struggled to determine how the Japanese colonial

4 See: <https://www.litromagazine.com/art-technology/yang-shuang-zi-lin-king-taiwan-travelogue-interview/>

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government would have pronounced Taiwanese terms and therefore consulted the Japanese translation of a Taiwanese novel that claims to be a Taiwanese translation of a Japanese novel. *Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!* (Yáng 2024, 293)

For many of us working in the Global South, where multilingualism tends to be the norm,⁵ research often feels akin to what King describes above. In my research on youth and media in Guinea, West Africa, for instance, I find myself conducting fieldwork and interviews primarily in French, the colonial language, while navigating everyday spaces where Pular is dominant, interacting in that language when I am in Labé. Yet, Guinea is a multilingual context and regardless of whether one is speaking primarily in French or Pular, words in Susu or Maninka are commonly used. Maninka is, in fact, one of the most widely spoken languages in Guinea, a country with thirty-two official languages including French and thirty-one “national languages,” such as Pular, Maninka, Susu, Guerzé, Toma, Kissi, amongst many others. Consequently, in my work, I often find myself asking my Pular-speaking friends for the meanings of Maninka or Susu words, languages I do not speak. What is more, while French was introduced to Guinea under France’s colonial occupation, it has since been appropriated by local populations, who changed it, often as a way to “write against” or decenter the colonial and thus historically “hypercentral language to engage it within its African becoming” (Diagne 2022, 81). As a result, I often find myself translating Guinean French into French, or more often, English, the language in which I tend to write, another hypercentral

5 On this point, Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s work on translation, including the introduction of *De Langue à langue: L’hospitalité de la traduction* (Diagne 2022) is illuminating, including his distinction between (colonial) diglossia, which tends towards monolingualism and true multilingualism that creates relations of equality between languages, both oral and written.

colonial language. As a French scholar whose undergraduate and graduate studies were in the United Kingdom and the United States, I draw largely – but not exclusively – on Anglophone scholarship, which I enjoy putting into conversation with scholarship in French, another layer to this moving across languages typical of much Global South scholarship. *Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!*

In this brief note on translating as a part of research, I draw on my recent encounter with Yáng Shuáng-zǐ's *Taiwan Travelogue* as well as the writings of Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Édouard Glissant to reflect on my experience conducting fieldwork over the past thirty years in Guinea, and more specifically in Labé⁶ and Conakry,⁷ two very different linguistic contexts. This chapter is organized around three points: 1) translating requires moving across contexts shaped by various power asymmetries, including colonial violence. As such, it is difficult and cannot be approached naïvely or as a purely technical exercise; 2) at the heart of translation is an encounter that should be shaped by hospitality rather than domination. This has practical implications for how we might approach the task from a multilingualist rather than diglossic perspective; 3) working across languages forces us to reconsider the form of our writing in addition to its content. This could involve embracing the richness of what Édouard Glissant called “lieux-communs” [“commonplaces” in English]: footnotes, afterwords, notes, forewords, and other “minor” writing genres that often become recentered in the work of translating. Ultimately, I argue with Diagne,

6 Labé is Guinea's fourth largest city in terms of population with 2025 estimates at around 250,000. The cultural and administrative capital of the Fouta Djallon region, it is the second largest city in the country after the capital Conakry in terms of economic importance.

7 Conakry is the capital and largest city of Guinea, with a population of around 3,407,000 according to the 2025 census. A port city, it serves as the economic, financial and cultural centre of Guinea.

Glissant, and Yáng that translating is a necessarily uncomfortable and chaotic, yet at times joyous affair.

2. Moving Across Languages

From an etymological perspective, the English verb *to translate* combines the Latin preposition *trans-* meaning “across, beyond, or through” and the word *lātus*, “to bring over, to carry.”⁸ Mobility, and the movement across two spaces, contexts, or times, is therefore central to the English word’s origin. A similar idea is expressed by the French verb *traduire* [to translate], formed by the same preposition *trans-* and the Latin word *duco*, “to pull, to drive, to lead.”⁹ Although *to translate* and *traduire* have similar Latin roots, their emphasis is slightly different: one places the onus on the effort that is required to carry across, the other draws our attention to the direction of the movement. The Pular verb *firugol*¹⁰ [to translate] is closely associated with the notions of meaning and interpretation. The conjugated form *ko firi* can be translated into English as “it means.” In the Fouta Djallon region of Guinea, where Labé, the site of my fieldwork, is located, *firugol* is also used to designate a ceremony during which attendees interpret the Quran, a practice that carries significant prestige (Diallo 2015, 272). The Pular verb brings the act of translating into the realm of interpretation and evokes its connections to religious life and the sacred. Together, *to translate*, *traduire*, and *firugol* draw attention to a few important elements of translation as an activity: it requires effort and work (*to translate*), it involves movement across and between distinct linguistic worlds (*traduire*), and it has ethical implications

8 See: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/translate>

9 See: <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/academie8/traduire>

10 In the French transliteration, it is sometimes written as *firougol*.

(*firugol*). This is important because, as Diagne reminds us, to conceive of translation as a movement between distinct realms or worlds, and thus, as an action that creates a relation between these two worlds, does not mean that translating necessarily leads to a positive outcome or better understanding between these worlds. In fact, once two or more languages are brought together through the act of translation, various power dynamics and asymmetries appear. In many Global South contexts shaped by the colonial encounter and its violence, translation has been central to the imposition of the colonial order and its domination. In such contexts, are different kinds of transactions and movements between languages that have been organized according to colonial hierarchies possible? Are relations characterized by equality, equivalence, and reciprocity possible across (post-)colonial lines? This is the question at the heart of *Taiwan Travelogue*, and, here, Yáng's historical novel offers a stark yet salutary reminder: Good intentions are never enough, and worse, they can be violently detrimental. As Ms. Wáng, Aoyama's Taiwanese interpreter, explains to her employer, in a pivotal scene when she finally confronts the discomfort she feels around Aoyama-san and decides to ask that they "maintain a strictly professional relationship" (Yáng 2024, 229):

You are noble, considerate, and kind, Aoyama-san—you are willing to go above and beyond on my behalf. But it is precisely *because* you would never let me sleep in the servant's room, *because* you are outraged when somebody looks down on me for my status, that I have no idea how to make you understand. How do I explain myself so that I don't seem like an unreasonable child who covets your equal treatment yet paradoxically defies your kindness? The truth is that I am the same as Tân-san. The truth is that gentle Aoyama-san never once asked me, "Do you want this protection?" (Yáng 2024, 229)

The point is reiterated a few pages later when Yáng, through the voice of the other interpreter in the story, Mishima, notes:

There is nothing in the world more difficult to refuse than self-righteous goodwill. (Yáng 2024, 247)

The Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant, a key thinker on translation, once noted that “[...] *there is no writing innocently*, and that what we say and how we say it is *all* in the form of what we write” (Glissant 2006, 71). The French *traduire*, which also means — *ko firi* — *to bring to justice*, is perhaps more accurate then. *Firugol* or *to translate* does indeed require ethical positioning. This is also the argument made by Diagne in the introduction to *De langue à langue: L’hospitalité de la traduction* (Diagne 2022) when he presents an optimistic vision of what translation can do and its potential to “create a relation of equivalence, of reciprocity between identities, to make them appear together [comparaître¹¹ in French] on an equal footing, so that from language to language we can speak and understand each other”¹² (Diagne 2022, 14). Yet, as he rightly notes: “Optimism is not naivety” (Diagne 2022, 14). Where to begin?

3. Translation and Hospitality

Translating creates a relation between two languages, sometimes more. At its heart is an encounter between two — or more — languages

11 Diagne in the French original plays on the double meaning of *comparaître* which means both *to appear together* but also *to appear in front of the court, to be brought to justice*.

12 The translation from French is mine.

that are in some sense foreign to each other, or at a minimum distinct. Encounters between strangers have historically been characterized by a wide spectrum of relations ranging from domination, annexation, cooptation, or annihilation, to collaboration, comprehension, or fusion, amongst others. This is why, when Diagne notes that colonialism tends towards monolingualism, it is not that colonial power lives in isolation and does not engage with strangers. Rather, colonial power, by nature expansionist, needs to move beyond the confines of the colonial language. As Diagne notes, “colonization needs translators” (Diagne 2022, 60). But colonial authority approaches encounters with other languages from a position of domination, whether through assimilation, annexation, or erasure. Colonial power can only imagine its language as superior, creating a situation of linguistic encounter known as diglossia (Casanova 2015, 129), which can be defined as a “situation of bilingualism in which one of the languages is considered as inferior and, thus, accorded cultural capital of lesser value,” to quote Diagne (2022, 16). To move from a diglossic relation towards one of bilingualism, Diagne, along with Glissant, and to an extent, Yáng, invites us to foreground hospitality as a key value of translation and counter to domination, annexation, annihilation, or erasure.¹³ Tellingly, in *Pullo*¹⁴ or *Fula* culture, including that of the *Fulbe* Fouta in Guinea’s Fouta Djallon, much of social life and particularly how one should relate to others and behave in public is regulated by what is often described somewhat approximately as a moral code known as

13 Diagne’s 2022 book *De langue à langue* includes the epitaph « Pour comprendre l’autre, il ne faut pas l’annexer mais devenir son hôte » [to understand the other, we must not annex her/him but rather her/ his guest], a quote by Louis Massignon, a French Catholic scholar of Islam, widely considered as a pioneer of Catholic-Muslim mutual understanding.

14 *Pullo* is the Pular word corresponding to *Fula* in English or *Peul* in French. It is the singular form, whereas *Fulbe* is the plural, meaning *Fula* people or *Peuls*.

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Pulaaku.¹⁵ Amongst other things, *Pulaaku* emphasizes hospitality as a key Fula value, and invites specific practices when encountering a stranger, a relation of hospitality that is specific to strangers and distinct from how one should welcome a close family member, for instance. As Riesman explains in *Freedom in Fulani Social Life* (Riesman 1974), in Fula villages:

When a stranger appears at your door, the first thing you must do after the greetings is offer him (*sic*) something to drink and, possibly, to eat. If he (*sic*) accepts, the most polite thing for the host to do is to leave him (*sic*) in the hut, with the door closed, and wait until the guest reopens it. For a stranger, it is more polite to accept what the host offers rather than refuse it. A refusal suggests either greater familiarity or that one has come only to talk business and wants to get down to it immediately. (Riesman 1974, 184)

What does this have to do with translation? If translation is a practice of encounter between foreign languages, then perhaps *Pulaaku*'s injunction to act in specific ways in the presence of strangers can offer us some insights. While offering drink and food to visiting strangers is common to many, if not most, cultures around the world, the injunction to leave the stranger alone with the food while the host waits outside is more specific to Fula culture and the *Pulaaku*. It allows the stranger to engage with the gift on their own terms, giving them time to do so without immediately stating their needs, feelings, and reactions (Riesman 1974, 184). Riesman recounts the great discomfort people felt when he received strangers incorrectly while conducting ethnographic research amongst Fulbe villagers in Mali, committing such errors as “waiting

15 For a detailed discussion of *Pulaaku*, see Paul Riesman's now classic ethnographic study of Fula culture, *Freedom in Fulani Social Life* (1974).

until someone asked for a drink instead of offering it immediately” or “giving a calabash of water to someone outside instead of inviting him (*sic*) to have it inside where he would not have to undergo the shame of being seen in the act of satisfying a need” (Riesman 1974, 184). In some ways, colonial translation works in a similar way, taking non-colonial languages and words outside of their contexts and consuming them on the host’s terms rather than the guest’s or stranger’s (Diagne 2022, 55). The metaphor may be a little overplayed, but I do think that relations of hospitality when understood as part of long-standing “moral codes” such as *Pulaaku* can helpfully inform practices of translation in academic research. In my own work, I have tried as much as possible to keep the original text in its original language rather than always succumb to the injunction to bring say Pular or Susu words into French or English, colonial languages that also serve as academic ones, thereby reinforcing their “hypercentrality” (Diagne 2022, 16). This leaves nonspeakers time to engage with these terms “inside,” encountering them on their own terms, rather than “outside,” where they have been transformed by the presence of the other language. For instance, in a chapter that draws on recent activist practices by young people in Guinea, I build on recent theories in Anglophone scholarship that have proposed the term “choreography” as a useful heuristic to make sense of digital organizing and activist practices (Gerbaudo 2012). To untether the concept of “choreographing” from its Greek origin, I propose the term *dundunba*, a word of Mande origin, found in both Maninka and Susu, that is related to *dundun*, a large drum that, together with the *djembe*, is central to Mande ensembles in West Africa, as a useful heuristic to make sense of digital organizing and youth activism. Whereas the term *choreography* is directly associated with the Greek genealogy of dance which separates dancers and choreographers, stage and audience, *dundunba* is instead what Sheron Wray describes as a “cultural

polyseme” designating a “social occasion, [...] the word simultaneously describes the name of the dance, the music, and the event” (Wray 2017, 64). *Dundunba* as a concept for making sense of youth digital activism then shed lights on different aspects of organizing practices, blurring the lines between events, texts, and movements. In my writing, I have chosen to keep the term in its original language rather than translate it into French or English — itself an act of translation. Here again, Yáng’s *Taiwan Travelogue* provides an interesting example of translating in ways that create relations of hospitality rather than as a technical exercise. In the novel, presenting itself as a work of translation, the reader encounters words as existing across several linguistic worlds in 1938 Taiwan, then under Japanese occupation.¹⁶ The names of foods, for instance, are offered to the readers in both their Taiwanese Hokkien and Japanese spellings. In the (fictional) introduction and footnotes, readers are introduced to Chinese characters, Taiwanese Hokkien, and Japanese terms. Although widely seen as derogatory, the colonial and now-obsolete Japanese term *Shina* to designate China is retained throughout the book, with a short explanatory footnote from King, the (real-life) English translator of the novel, to let readers experience colonialism and its manifestation in language more directly. This is also the approach that we have encouraged at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South, under our cross-cutting research theme “Epistemologies and Genealogies of the Global South.” In a forthcoming edited volume on *Southern Digitalities* (2026), which tries to reimagine what happens to our theories of the digital once we center on the digital’s manifestations in the Global South, contributors draw on terms in Arabic, Chinese, or Vietnamese to theorize digitality from these contexts. The terms are again first offered in the original language and script to invite readers

16 Taiwan became an annexed territory of the Japanese Empire in 1895 and remained under Japanese control until 1945.

into these linguistic worlds rather than bring these worlds to English.

4. Footnotes and Other Lieux-communs/ Common-Places

In a brief note introducing an interview he conducted with *Taiwan Travelogue* author Yáng and the novel's English translator King, editor-in-chief of literary magazine *Litro*, Erik Akoto remarks:

The footnotes, afterwords, false editorial apparatus and real translator's note keep reminding the reader that language is never neutral. A place can be renamed. A meal can carry history. A romance can hide hierarchy. A footnote can be both joke and wound.¹⁷ (Akoto 2026)

And indeed, in *Taiwan Travelogue*, a novel disguised as a translation, these often-overlooked textual elements, typically viewed as add-ons or minor information placeholders to support the centerpiece text, become part and parcel of the novel itself. The footnotes, (fictitious) introduction, and afterwords are invited in by Yáng, and in the Japanese and English translations, by the novel's (real-life) translators, Miura Yūko and Lin King respectively, to participate in the main text itself, and occupy a central part of the story. We find this approach echoes in the work of Glissant. In *Poétique de la Relation*¹⁸ (Glissant 1990), for instance, the book ends with a section entitled in French "Notes en

17 See: <https://www.litromagazine.com/art-technology/yang-shuang-zi-lin-king-taiwan-travelogue-interview/>

18 Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation*, published in French in 1990, is the third volume in a group of texts by Glissant collectively known as *Poétique*. *Poétique de la Relation* was translated into English by Betsy Wing in 1997 under the title *Poetics of Relation*, published by University of Michigan Press.

Lieux Communs,” translated in English as “Notes in Common Places.” These notes are provided in addition to the footnotes that accompany the main text and are even organized by chapter and include numbered references, as is common practice for foot- or end- notes. What distinguishes these *Notes en Lieux Communs* is that they tend to be quite long, and many include paragraphs and present arguments to accompany, complement, or reflect on the arguments of the core text. They represent an original and imaginative use of endnotes that illustrates Glissant’s “archipelagic” rather than “systematic” or “systematizing” thought.¹⁹ As researchers working across multiple languages, we tend to make greater use of footnotes, endnotes, notes, and other textual genres often dismissed as minor, technical, purely informational, and thus, “neutral.” Looking back at my own work, it is clear that many of the words translated across French, Pular, Susu, Maninka, or English are often accompanied by a brief footnote or endnote, explaining who and how these were translated, or providing some notes on the word’s etymology, connotations, or cultural resonance. What authors such as Yáng or Glissant have done in their embrace of both what Glissant calls the “art of translation” and of endnotes, footnotes, afterwords, or introductions, is to consider these easily overlooked elements of texts as texts in their own right. It is in such practices of writing, never neutral, that imbalances between languages can be addressed, at least temporarily, moving away from the dangers of diglossia towards multilingualism.

5. Conclusion

19 For a detailed discussion of Glissant’s archipelagic and its relation to universalizing discourses, see Mohamed Lamine Rhimi’s « Les « lieux-communs » de la pensée archipélique et la problématique de l’universel chez Édouard Glissant » (2023).

In conclusion, I would like to share a quote from Diagne's Book *De langue à langue. L'hospitalité de la traduction* (Diagne 2022), which illustrates the work at hand:

The Rwandan philosopher Alexis Kagame wrote that in his Kinyarwanda language the cogito of Descartes is untranslatable: in this language, you cannot say, "I think therefore I am," he is clearly just referring to the fact that this absolute use of the verb "to be" in the expression "I am" to mean "I exist" is characteristic of certain languages that use the copula, of which Kinyarwanda is not one. But, if we do not focus on the effort of translating word to word, Descartes's *Discourse on Method* along with the cogito can perfectly well be translated into Kinyarwanda as into any language – unless, that is, we believe in the essential incompleteness of certain languages as compared to others, a point that I have already mentioned. It is true, however, that this will necessarily involve mobilizing the resources of the language in a way that will teach us something about the cogito, about what its wording owes to the fact that it is in Latin or French, and also about the way in which Kinyarwanda inclines us to think. But this is what happens in any translation. Transferring meanings from one language to another is a form of decentering that can teach us many lessons. And to understand the benefits of translation, to think from language to language, you have to remember Goethe's saying that a person who knows only one language does not actually know anything about even that one. (Diagne 2022, 66)

Glissant, Yáng, and Diagne invite us to consider that this work of "decentering," which Diagne describes here, might require reimagining how we construct a text, including where we write and what we consider

to be minor or central. But most importantly, together, they remind us that the work of translating is an uncomfortable, yet also often joyous affair.

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Chapter 2. From Diglossia to Multilingualism in Global South Research: Reflections from Guinea

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