

# Against Translation: An Inquiry into the Poetics of Opposition and Renewal

*Kelly Washbourne*

*Kent State University*

*United States of America*

## *Abstract*

The taking of a critical stance toward particular translations has a long history in translation criticism, but the position *against translation* itself has been studied only piecemeal and without an eye to the commonalities and divergencies in the various stances that motivate it or to its divergent nomenclature. “Resistance to translation” is often evoked as a talisman of a text’s untranslatability (e.g., Apter 2013), but it can denote a translatorial *opposition*: refusing to translate or else translating subversively. The stance against translation may be born of various resistances: feminist, indigenist, postcolonial, or anthropological. To Robinson’s (1996) *translation as taboo* (owing to the ontological and theological status of the source), we can add aesthetic objections registered by those against translation. Non-translation, as a wholesale policy or a philosophy, is sometimes absolute. I briefly catalog some forms of anti-translation poetics: pseudotranslation, displacement, accentedness, untranslation, *intradução*, detranslation, counter-translation, distranslation, dystranslation, hypertranslation, mistranslation, transcreation, translational, non-translation, partial translation and half-translation, literary machine translation, rhizomatic translation, and transtranslation. Critical linguistic-ideological stances and subversions of translation proper, these projects or platforms are meant to produce or champion everything from censure or opacity, to reinscription (“counter-translation”) or greater clarity of the source.

**Keywords**

non-translation, anti-translation, resistance, displacement, accentedness

## **1. Introduction: Against Translation**

In the current context of *translatophilia* (“fetishisation of translation in hypercorrection of its perceived marginalisation,” Lee 2022, 543), this work starts with *translatophobia* (Lee 2020), seeking to expand on the theoretical scope of translation and non-translation.<sup>1</sup> Authors have been known to oppose particular renderings of their work (e.g., Vladimir Nabokov, Milan Kundera, and Maryse Condé); at times they have gone so far as to come out against translation *in principle*. Glynn (2021, 1–2) notes that such oppositionality occurs in microcases in three basic forms: “‘ideological,’ such as when the target language is that of an oppressive colonial power; ‘economic,’ when the contractual terms are not advantageous; or ‘poetological,’ if the intended translation does not conform to their expectations of how the text should read.” Cronin couches the idea in terms of resistance:

We are familiar with the figure of loss, infidelity and treason. Less current [...] is the figure of *resistance*. By resistance, we mean the desire of an individual or group not to translate a language or be translated into another language. The act of translation is consciously or unconsciously resisted. The motivations for this resistance vary, but two dominant forms are what we might call *aesthetic translation resistance* and *political translation resistance*. [...] This aesthetic resistance to translation is [...] directed at a re-ordering of the senses to quicken and intensify the experience of the foreign reality. Political translation resistance is an unwillingness to translate or be translated as a means of protecting an identity that is perceived to be under threat from another language group. (Cronin 1998, 39–40, cited in Brissett 2003, 118–119, emphasis in original)

One example of the aesthetic is found in Peter Brook and Ted Hughes’ *Orghast* (unpublished, but documented by Smith 1972), an experimental performance in an invented language derived from Middle Persian Avestan and ancient Greek. Relying on sound symbolism or non-rational music of speech, its dispensing with rational semantic associations and