Panel 4: The Avant Garde and the Internationalization of Literary Language (Oct. 13: 10:30 a.m. - 12:20 p.m.)

Michael Tangeman, Denison University
“Takahashi Gen’ichirō’s Literary Dialect: Renaming Literature”
Abstract: This paper explores the iconoclastic approach of avant-garde author Takahashi Gen’ichirō (b. 1951) to prose literary narrative, in particular his individualistic use of his own literary language (his literary dialect, so to speak) to deconstruct the novel. Saussurean linguistics note the arbitrary nature of language as a system, of the linguistic sign in and of itself, and of the significance ascribed to the linguistic sign. Takahashi seeks to capitalize on this arbitrary nature by deconstructing literary narrative, in both form and content, through repeated reference to the importance of names, and the process of naming, in his work. The name becomes both the target of his deconstruction and the means by which he urges the reader to reevaluate the shibboleth of literary prose. In Takahashi’s oeuvre, names are by turn nonsensical (cats named after household appliances in Elegant, Sentimental Japanese Baseball), powerful (personal names with the ability to kill those to whom they are assigned in Goodbye, Gangsters), or incomprehensible (a complex “baseball sign” the meaning of which is beyond anyone’s ken in John Lennon Versus the Martians). For all of the seeming absurdity in Takahashi’s work, his objective, based on his own essays, is to re-imagine what literature can be.

Takushi Odagiri, Stanford University
“Universalism and Contextualism: Mizumura Minae’s When Japanese Language Perishes (2008)”
Abstract: In a recent book titled Nihongo ga horobiru toki (When Japanese language perishes: 2008), Mizumura Minae defines a “universal language” (fuhengo) as a (national) language that has the universality any other (local or national) languages do not have in the same time-period. English is the universal language of the contemporary world by this definition, with all other languages such as French, Japanese, Chinese being “local languages.” This universality of a fuhengo and the linguistic asymmetry arising from it are, according to Mizumura, often unnoticeable to language users of that particular universal language (e.g., native speakers of English). Despite her apparent attacks on the alleged universality of English, Mizumura aspires to assimilate its universality in her writing styles. This ambivalent stance to the universal language constitutes an underlying moral of Mizumura’s literary oeuvre, in particular her second novel Shishōsetsu from left to right and her third novel Honkaku shōsetsu. In this presentation, I discuss the problems of the universal language and the structure of a writing subject in Mizumura’s texts, with reference to the theory of allegory by Paul de Man and the film theory by Christian Metz.

Eri Koshikawa, Tsukuba University
“Wordplay in Tawada’s Texts from a Transregional Perspective”
Abstract: Yoko Tawada is a contemporary Japanese-German bilingual author. In my paper, I want to analyze how she uses “wordplay” in her texts, from a transregional perspective. Play of words can be considered as a trademark of Tawada’s writing. They can be classified into sub-categories like “pun,” “compound words” and even “idioms”. Different uses of connotations are at the center of Tawada’s wordplay, which is connected to her bilingual experience in a foreign country. She often uses wordplay to defamiliarize her readers and make them aware of their own use and understanding of language. This wordplay is not only an important factor of her writing, but poses also intricate problems to translations of her work. How can wordplay be translated, when it adheres to one particular language? Sometimes Tawada herself writes a text in a German and a Japanese version. This can be shown, for example, in “Opium fuer Ovid” and 『変身のためのオピウム』 which she also wrote in both languages. In my paper I want to discuss how Tawada uses wordplay in order to show differences in the creation of meaning in various languages, how to transport meaning and words from one language to another (from the German alphabet to Japanese characters), and how to create new meaning in this process of transfer.

Andreas Regelsberger, Western Michigan University
“Language and politics in the dramas of Okada Toshiki”
Abstract: Okada Toshiki is the playwright and director of the theatre company “Chefilsch”, that was founded 1997 in Yokohama. With plays such as Five Days in March, Free Time or Hot Pepper, Airconditioner, The Farewell Speech he was invited to other Asian countries, the United States and many countries in Europe. As a voice of the so called “lost generation” Okada addresses political and social issues and makes recourses to Bertolt Brecht and his concept of “concrete art” (Konkrete Kunst). In my paper I want to discuss the correlation between his remarkable use of the body on stage, his employment of “super real Japanese” and his socio-political issues.