

BOOK REVIEW

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF TRANSLATION

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Translating Worlds: The Epistemological Space of Translation, Carlo Severi and William F. Hanks (eds.) Chicago: Hau Books, 2015, 324 pp, \$25.00, ISBN 978-0-9861325-1-3 (hardback).¹

Translation lies at the core of anthropology because it is fundamental to social life. This book, edited by Carlo Severi and William F. Hanks, does not focus on the metaphorical idea of anthropology as translation but on the proposal that translation is a social and cultural practice that anthropologists need to take seriously by producing ethnographies about it. This volume comprises an introduction by the editors and ten chapters by prominent anthropologists and one historian. Due to the epistemological and ethnographic complexity of each chapter, this review focuses on select chapters that highlight the main themes of the work as a whole.

The book demonstrates that translation is not solely the domain of specialists but is an essential part of everyday social life. This argument is explored through historical and contemporary colonial examples, examining the interactions between different worlds. Severi and Hanks define “worlds” as “oriented contexts for the apprehension of reality” (p. 10). Therefore, the editors propose that anthropology should study the “epistemological space of translation”, which encompasses the various stages and strategies needed to convey meaning across different worlds. This approach aligns with the objectives of the EPISTRAN project², which, as Karen Bennett (2024, p. 2) describes, “investigates the semiotic processes (verbal and nonverbal) involved in the transfer of information between different ‘epistemic systems’”.

The editors also stress that translation extends beyond language, encompassing the complex exchanges between worlds of cultural premises, values, and theories, and the use of nonlinguistic features such as gestures, rituals, images, or objects. The chapter by Emmanuel de Vienne and Carlos Fausto exemplifies this brilliantly. The authors examine the performative aspects associated with a short-lived case of prophetism led by a Kalapalo man in the Upper Xingu, Brazil, as an instance of ‘translating acts’ between Christian and Indigenous rituals and cosmologies, which originated new grand healing performances that quickly propagated in the region. Some of the rituals were registered by two Kuikuro

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¹ Also available at: <https://haubooks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Carlo-Severi-William-Hanks-eds-Translating-Worlds-The-Epistemological-Space-of-Translation.pdf>

² Available at: <https://www.epistran.org/>

filmmakers, allowing the anthropologists to meticulously study these innovations. The novel concept of 'translating acts' implies three ideas: translation encompasses actions whose form, context, and expressive force are more important than their referential meaning; the efficiency of the translation is determined by the cognitive abduction of the people involved, with actions being more relevant than words for assessing its success; translation is an iterative process of transcreation before eventually achieving a consensual stabilization. Rituals thus become experimental arenas for communication, especially when mediating radical alterity, which leads the authors to conclude that translation in these contexts is less about creating a lingua franca and more about generating new ritual forms.

At this juncture, translators might question how closely their work aligns with the translations performed by anthropologists and their interlocutors. Despite the editors' intention to foster dialogue between translation studies and anthropology, the chapters are predominantly written by anthropologists who reference a limited number of authors from translation studies. One challenge to this dialogue, as John Leavitt notes in his chapter, is that unlike commercial translators who must produce a usable text in the target language, anthropologists focus on contextualizing meaning, often creating "monsters", i.e., texts with neologisms and other strategies that distort and bend the reception language. Nevertheless, Leavitt acknowledges that the history of translation in both fields has oscillated between betraying the source and the target languages, as encapsulated in the adage *traduttore traditore*.

Bruce Mannheim's chapter builds on this conceptualization by trying to rescue W. V. O. Quine's proposal of 'radical translation', through a richer ethnographic, linguistic, and cognitive framework. Quine illustrated this idea with a parable about a linguist encountering an individual from an unfamiliar culture in a forest. With no bilingual dictionary or interpreter available, the interlocutor points to a passing rabbit and says '*gavagai*'. The linguist infers this to mean 'rabbit', but Quine cautioned that '*gavagai*' could also signify 'animal', 'rabbit flies', 'it runs', or even 'undetached rabbit parts', because the conceptualization of 'rabbit' as a bounded whole is, according to Quine, implicit to some languages but not necessarily universal. Hence, Quine demonstrates that multiple, equally valid translations can arise from the same set of observations and that translation is a complex interpretive process influenced by various factors, including the translator's own language and conceptual framework.

Mannheim updates Quine's concept of radical translation through Silverstein's idea of 'transduction', which he borrowed from physics. For example, a hydroelectric generator in a dam transforms one type of energy (the gravitational movement of water) into another kind of energy (electricity). Thus, in the broad realm of translation, transduction means that the contextual meaning is foregrounded (i.e., energy) and this is glossed in order to have the most appropriate effect in the target language. What must be carried through, even if in a different form, is the energy, i.e., the indexical meaningfulness of the source language. This is different from describing the meaning and context of use of a word as this would simply be an exercise of characterization. Mannheim illustrates this with Quechua, which

encompasses distinct registers. Most denotational translations from Quechua to Spanish are based on an elite register shaped lexically, morphologically, phonologically, and conceptually by Spanish influence. For instance, the Quechua verb *puriy* is often rendered in dictionaries as ‘to travel’, reflecting this elite register and world. In other registers that are more common in rural areas, the same word can signify very different things and is used in rather diverse contexts, which cannot be translated by using denotational substitution, as they were not influenced in the same way by Spanish. Consequently, each translation needs to be a transduction (or, less interestingly in most cases, a description) because it implies that the ethnographer has to make significant assertions about the indexical meaningfulness of the word in that specific context.

Despite the epistemological diversity evident in the book, Severi and Hanks are critical of two important strands in recent anthropology debates because they consider them antagonistic to their endeavour. First, they rebuke the universalism of cognitive sciences, which states that concepts exist prior and independently from language. If this were the case, they argue, then translation would be a mere interlingual substitution of pre-existing mental representations. Provocatively, Severi flips the argument in his individual chapter. Drawing on examples from the Amazon, he argues that ethnographies on translation not only demonstrate the invalidity of classical conceptions of how human cognition works but can actually help us understand the dynamics and structure of cognition and how it operates in different cultural contexts.

The editors also criticize the ontological turn in anthropology. It is not possible to explain here all the complexities of this rather diverse approach. Severi and Hanks mention in their introduction the two most famous authors in this area: Descola and Viveiros de Castro. The former is primarily recognized for his work in what some have termed ‘ontological cartography’, in which he identifies four distinct ontologies or worlds (animism, totemism, analogism, and naturalism) that represent different ways of establishing connections between humans and nonhumans. Viveiros de Castro is more well known for his proposal of Amerindian perspectivism, which can be considered a substrand of Descola’s animism. According to that ethnographic theory, like other animistic contexts, the cosmos for the Indigenous peoples of the Lowlands of South America is inhabited by humans and nonhumans with agency. However, in this case, both humans and certain nonhumans share the same human-like subjectivity, which they perceive through different referents. Typically, humans see humans as humans, animals as animals, and spirits (if seen) as spirits, while nonhumans like predatory animals and spirits view humans as prey animals, and prey animals see humans as either spirits or predators. Finally, both humans and nonhumans perceive themselves as humans with human attributes, such as feathers or fur being seen as human decorations and their food as human food (e.g., for jaguars, blood is manioc beer). Viveiros de Castro argues that the real danger in this context lies in making uncontrolled equivocal translations – attempting to equate different representations to a common referent, which happens when, for instance, a human mistakes blood for manioc beer, thus losing his human personhood and becoming a jaguar.

Therefore, the anthropologist must strive to develop controlled equivocations that make explicit that one representation can have two referents (the referent of manioc beer for humans is manioc beer but for the jaguar is blood).

Like many authors before them, Severi and Hanks criticize these proposals for the risk of creating reified, bounded, and incommensurate worlds, which would make translation impossible. They highlight the importance of the grey zones, particularly in relation to extensive ethnographic evidence on the history of colonialism in the Americas. This data shows the blending, grading, and switching between systems and the emergence of new types.

Intriguingly, one of the solutions to this conundrum presented by this book is the revival of the American philosophical school of pragmatism. This school of thought has also been used by the ontological turn in recent years to understand not the worlds (or ontologies), but the processes of worlding and of entanglement between worlds. American pragmatism asserts that ideas must be tested through experience and action, and that the value of a concept lies in its usefulness and ability to solve real-world problems. Therefore, a pragmatic turn in anthropology, as a necessary complement to the ontological turn, means recognizing the interaction between ontologies through pragmatic encounters that transcend ontological boundaries and are proven effective within specific spatial and temporal frameworks (as demonstrated for translation by de Vienne and Fausto in their chapter or by the idea of transduction invoked by Mannheim). Therefore, it seems that the main criticisms of Severi and Hanks lie in an oversimplification of the ontological turn and in their more emphatic focus on the grey areas of encounters between worlds.

Nevertheless, Anne-Christine Taylor's chapter is an important contribution to understand the relevance of the ontological turn in certain contexts. Based on her fieldwork with the Achuar in Peru, she analyses shamanic healing processes as a form of translation based on 'resonating juxtaposition'. During the healing process, the shamans communicate with the powerful Other, both in his kin spirits and the White's foreign languages, but their utterances are never direct quotations, except maybe when they are humming or singing. This means that shamans are "nontranslating translators" (p. 141). Taylor contends that this aligns with Amazonian shamanism as theorized by Viveiros de Castro through the lens of Amerindian perspectivism. Shamans are individuals capable of traveling between various perspectives or points of view (humans, spirits, animals, White people, etc.). However, their goal is never to strictly translate between different perspectives, which is dangerous because they could inadvertently lose their human personhood, but, as Viveiros de Castro suggests, to create controlled equivocations between different points of view. Hence, "resonating juxtaposition" is "a paradoxical mode of translation that aims at maintaining rather than suppressing the difference between the 'texts' involved" (p. 119).

In sum, this book illustrates that translation encompasses diverse forms, including instances of non-translation. In this respect, the volume could benefit from insights by authors such as Roy Wagner and Tim Ingold, who have also influenced the ontological turn

by highlighting the importance of creativity and invention in pragmatic encounters. After all, if translation is essential for social life, both are only possible, as the case studies in this publication demonstrate, through a constant iterative creative play inherent to human ingenuity. Therefore, this book is also an invitation for anthropologists to share more frequently the approaches employed in the 'epistemological space of translation', both by the individuals encountered during their fieldwork and those performed by the anthropologists themselves.

REFERENCES

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