Translation Matters
https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tma03po

POSITION PAPER: OF DOGS AND BIOTRANSLATION (AND PHLOGISTON)

Kobus Marais*
Department of Linguistics and Language Practice, UFS, Bloemfontein

ABSTRACT: The position paper explores the onto-epistemological assumptions and rhetorical strategies used in ecological debates in the humanities in general and in translation studies in particular. It does so by referring to an example of dog behaviour that was discussed in an online meeting of the Eco-humanities Network. It cautions against anthropomorphism in ecological debates as well as against uncritical anti-science stances. By invoking Popper, the paper argues that ecology arguments should be falsifiable.
KEYWORDS: Biosemiotics; Eco-humanities; Eco-translatology; Falsifiability

1. Introduction

Since Michael Cronin's (2017) foundational book *Eco-translation: Translation and ecology in the age of the Anthropocene*, scholarly interest in matters ecological has grown significantly in translation studies research. It is clear to see that this interest is born out of concern for the environment, as evidenced in what is called either the ecological crisis or the Anthropocene, and a growing critical awareness around human exceptionality. In translation studies, the interest is also focussed inward, in the sense that scholars like Cronin question the role of translation in the emergence of the Anthropocene or, at least, the ecological problems facing humanity. It seems fair to say that the intentions behind the growing ecological interest in translation studies are indeed noble.

As much as I find myself aligned with the intentions of ecological debates in translation studies, I must consider the proverbial problem that the road to hell is paved with noble intentions. The point that I would like to argue here is that noble intentions in themselves do not yet constitute credible scholarly debate.

One of the problems with noble arguments is that they can be based on or make use of faulty logic. It therefore seems to me that current debates in ecology (including eco-humanities and eco-translation) require some clarification as to some of their onto-epistemological underpinnings. I think that a debate about epistemological and ontological assumptions is worthwhile because scholars coming from different points of departure might completely misunderstand one another if they are not able to translate between the varying underlying assumptions. I do not profess to know what the 'right' onto-epistemology would or should be, but I do believe that raising onto-epistemological assumptions concerning the ecological debate in translation studies could be of value for the future of the debate. By way of a response to a particular question about interspecies communication that arose after a meeting of the Eco-Translation Network, I would like to reflect on several assumptions that seem to infuse the debate. Of necessity, I need to generalise somewhat about the various arguments that I pick up because they are too nuanced to treat in detail here. I assume that there will be differences of opinion, but

* jmarais@ufs.ac.za

acknowledging those differences might already be helpful, even if no-one is able to convince anybody else of their point of view.

The question that led to this position paper was raised by Alex South in an e-mail on 3 October 2025, addressed to the Eco-Translation Network members:

> I've just received this delightful description of a communicative exchange between a dog (Idris) and his human carer from Emily Doolittle, my colleague and erstwhile PhD supervisor at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. It made me wonder: how would a (bio)semiotician describe the communicative exchange (in terms of icons, indices, and symbols)?

It should be clear to readers that this communication represents layers of questions. In the first place, there is the suggestion by Emily Doolittle (to which I come below) on the original post that we perhaps do not give more-than-human animals enough credit for their intelligence, and then there is the particular question by Alex South, in the particular context of discussions at a particular meeting of the ETN, about a biosemiotic response to Doolittle's narrative[1]. My response here focuses mainly on South's question but within the context of the particular discussions at the ETN meeting. It only secondarily attends to Doolittle's own suggestion in the original post. Also, my intention is not to ascribe any particular arguments or intentions to either Doolittle's or South's communication. Rather, I use their communication as a springboard towards discussing onto-epistemological issues in eco-translation.

In my interpretation, both South and Doolittle's communication is aimed at determining the extent to which Idris Donut's communicative actions entail evidence of intelligence – and if so, what kind of intelligence. One could further surmise, and I do not ascribe this to either South or Doolittle, that there is interest in intelligence because it can be used in arguments for ecological sensitivity, given the crisis of the Anthropocene. My main point in the paper will be to argue that ecological value should not be reduced to "human-likeness".

2. An example that raises questions

Based on the question posed after the debate, I discuss some onto-epistemological assumptions in bio-semiotic, eco-semiotic and eco-translation thinking below. South's e-mail contained the following interaction between a human[2] and a dog:

> *The dog and the pillow: a fable (as told collaboratively by a dog and a person)*
>
> *Dog: [sitting on one pillow]*
> *Me: [leaning on two pillows]*

[1]I have since had interesting discussions with Emily Doolittle via e-mail and thank her for making this narrative available. I thank both Doolittle and South for permission to use their communications here.

[2]This example was provided by Emily Doolittle and her dog, Idris Donut, and brought to the attention of the Eco-Translation Network by Alex South in the e-mail referred to above. The original posting can be found at: https://www.facebook.com/emilydoolittle/posts/pfbid0PvnSPQDqefAbrWdij5XkGj9LbgssMcQKghySRo4fLB5dTQGhA1BLSB8u1u8ivU5Gl (Accessed: 1 February 2026)

Dog: [barks]
Me: [goes to see if there is anyone at the door]
Door: [no one is there]
Me: [returns to sofa]
Dog: [somehow is now sitting on all three pillows]

Dogs are cleverer than we give them credit for!

The question was: How would a (bio)semiotician describe the communicative exchange (in terms of icons, indices, and symbols)? In particular, I infer, given the discussions in the preceding online ETN meeting, that one might wonder whether this interaction is not an indication of symbol use by the dog because the debate included questions and claims about symbol use and culture in non-human organisms.

3. What is needed to answer the question

The question that the example raises is not firstly about the explanation of the event in terms of Peircean sign categories although I will return to this problem. The example rather presents a much deeper question, relating to what is known in biosemiotics as the 'Clever Hans Phenomenon' (Sebeok and Rosenthal, 1981). This well-documented case refers to a horse, called Hans, at the beginning of the 20th century that, so the owner claimed, could count. The owner would ask bystanders to ask the horse to add two numbers together and then the horse would stomp out the answer with his front foot, without fail stopping at the correct number of stomps. The owner obviously argued that his horse was so clever that he could count. A biosemiotic analysis of the evidence concluded that the horse did not count but sensed on a pre-linguistic and pre-abstract (indeed embodied) way the (embodied) tension/expectations/something else in the audience. One of the points of the debate around Clever Hans is thus the danger of imposing anthropocentric characteristics on more-than-human animals, but Sebeok and Rosenthal also cite several other points that arose out of the debate.

3.1 Intention in non-human organisms

My first point of analysis regarding the example would thus be whether we have evidence of intention in the dog. In fact, the question should perhaps be even more basic: What could count as evidence of intent in the dog? In my current analysis, the story is narrated from a human perspective where one action by the dog is posited as intentional to achieve a particular outcome. From a human perspective, this clearly makes sense, but the problem one faces is deducing intention in the communication of someone from a different species (Von Uexküll, 2010). For instance, one could also consider the possibility that the dog barked for another reason (possibly beyond human hearing capabilities) and merely afterwards grasped the opportunity for lying down on more cushions. One could also consider the possibility that the dog just lay down, and it happened to be on three cushions, which might have no significance for the dog other than lying down (comfortably) but

significance for the owner (I've been tricked). In other words, we are here dealing with an epistemological problem. What can we know about the intentions of members of species other than our own? What are we assuming when we interpret the semiosis of other species? How do we infer intention in any semiotic situation, and, crucially, in semiosis in other species? The issue of intention between members of the same species, i.e. homo sapiens, is contentious, so determining intention between different species could be regarded as even more problematic because it must be done across *Umwelten*. As a guideline, whatever intentions we infer needs to align with our knowledge of the biosemiotic apparatus of the organism, a semiotic conceptualisation and, importantly, ample information about the context in which the interaction played out.

The argument above does not imply that non-human organisms do not have actional and communicative intention. It merely questions the framework within which these are to be assumed and interpreted – from an anthropocentric perspective. Biosemiotics argues that all living organisms are semiotically active and that any organism that semioticises does so with an intention, at the very least to somehow survive or enhance its well-being, but it is not always clear what exactly that intention is. Organisms can deceive, faking an injury to get predators away from little ones, for instance (Kull, 2001). They can posture, as in making themselves look bigger before a fight to avoid the fight. Deception and faking, as Umberto Eco (1979) said, are indicative of semiotic ability. It is only through their semiosic abilities that organisms can deceive, fake or lie. Inert material systems cannot deceive, fake or lie.

From a biosemiotic perspective, therefore, all living organisms are granted semiotic ability and hence some kind of intentionality. The debates are not about whether but how these semiotic and intentional abilities play out in different species.

3.2 Differing biosemiotic affordances and hierarchies

Aligning our interpretations with the biosemiotic apparatus of the organism also means that semiosis in more-than-human organisms can be described in terms of their different affordances as based on observed patterns. Hoffmeyer and Stjernfelt's (2016) paper on the great chain of semiosis provides a fine-grained analysis of biological evidence for semiosis at different levels of evolution. Their point is that the biological organs with which organisms have been endowed allow them different semiosic affordances. For instance, if the only sense organs that you have are related to light, it means that sound and touch and smell and taste will pass you by, and you will only be able to semioticise in terms of light and variations of light.

Humanities scholars rightly ask questions about the hierarchical views that appear in biological and biosemiotic discussions such as that of Hoffmeyer and Stjernfelt, suggesting a flat ontology as an alternative. It seems like a noble appeal to 'elevate' all organisms to the same level of semiosis, but I think it is a point that needs much more argumentation. In my understanding, flat ontologies are used in ecological/ecocritical debates as a strategy to erase human exceptionalism and to argue that all organisms have (the same) value. The question, however, is whether it is possible at all to have a flat ontology, given biological

evidence on evolution. The question is further whether it is necessary to do so, seeing that hierarchical biological accounts are not accounts of value but historical accounts. Earlier emergent phases do not become obsolete in this account but are constitutive of and a prerequisite for later emergent phases. A further question is whether it is good scholarship to propose a flat ontology, and I argue below that this debate has not yet been settled. The mere fact that we require ethical conduct from humans but not from other living organisms might already be a giveaway.

To return to the possibility of a flat ontology, evolution suggests that it just so happened that more complex physical and biological forms emerged from simpler ones (Atã and Queiroz, 2025; Rescher, 1998). At some point, the universe consisted of hydrogen only, if my understanding of physics is correct. Complex elements like heavy metals or noble gases only emerged when it became physically possible for them to emerge. Equally, life did not start off with mammals, but with single cells without a nucleus and membrane (prokaryotes), from which emerged single cells with a nucleus and membrane and other organelles (eukaryotes), from which emerged multicellular organisms without central nervous systems, from which emerged multicellular organisms with central nervous systems, from which emerged multicellular organisms with reflexive central nervous systems. Without the former, it was impossible for the latter to emerge (Kauffman, 2019). Forms of life seem to be entangled with one another, which means that one form cannot be said to be more important or more valuable, either biologically or ecologically, than another. This would be what Atã and Queiroz (2025, pp. 47-8) describe as hierarchical emergence where the base and the whole exist simultaneously, making the base valuable as a prerequisite for the whole. This argument could be used to build an ecologically based ethics.

The question is still: How do we deal with the humanities' discomfort with hierarchies? In my understanding, this discomfort arises from a justifiable scepticism about the way in which biology has been used in the humanities and social sciences, notably in but not limited to eugenics and gender issues. This history justifiably makes humanities scholars wary of imposing biological categories onto ethical categories, but I do not think that the debate with biology can be avoided, and I do not think that humanities scholars can unilaterally impose a value judgement on the notion of hierarchies. I rather suggest that we should perhaps firstly allow our ideas about it to be co-shaped by evidence from biology. Otherwise, we are solipsistically talking to ourselves and imposing our views on biology. This could mean that we do not need to discount the notion of hierarchy but rather interpret it differently. In line with points made above, the argument would then be that sequential, i.e. historical, emergence does not imply a value hierarchy. The hierarchy is a historical hierarchy, not a value hierarchy. When you talk about hierarchy, you do not necessarily deny the mutual interdependence or entanglement between hierarchical levels (Sharov and Tønneson, 2021). For example, single cell organisms are not disposable because they came first and are, compared to elephants, pretty simple organisms. Rather, they are crucially important because without single cells an elephant would not exist. Through an

argument of mutual interdependency, one could maintain the notion of hierarchy but fill it with a different interpretation. Alternatively, one could consider the term heterarchy, which refers to multiple levels without a judgement as to their ranking or importance. I have tried to use this term (Marais, 2025), but I am not sure that I am comfortable with it because it does deny the biological fact of evolution, of more complex forms emerging from simple forms.

Arguments such as those discussed above seemingly do not take evolution into account and as such are barely different from those of religious fundamentalists who refuse to accept the evidence about evolution, just for another reason. I therefore suggest another way of solving the problem, namely that we need to explain what we mean by complex and simple, i.e., hierarchy, indicating that these are descriptive terms in terms of biological affordances, not value judgments of any kind.

3.3 So, did Idris Donut use symbols?

The quick answer, given the arguments above, is that without much more contextual information, I am unable to pronounce on the dog's intentions. However, for the sake of the debate, let us assumes as correct one of the implications of the narrative observation, namely that the dog intentionally misled its companion. Before I attempt the analysis, let me also say that biosemiotics generally agrees that living organisms are semiotically well adapted and more so than mechanical approaches to biology would allow for (Henning and Scarfe, 2013).

How would one then analyse that interpretation in terms of the Peircean categories of signs? First, let us just get our definition of the categories right. Peirce categorised signs in terms of the relationships between the three aspects of a sign, namely the representamen (sign vehicle, what is commonly known as a 'sign' in English), object (the thing/idea referred to) and interpretant (the interpretation or idea/action created in the interpreter). This led him to distinguish a typology of ten types of signs (which he later expanded into many more types, but which are not relevant here; see Merrell, 2000, pp. 131-141 for a more detailed explanation of the ten categories). The terms 'icon', 'index' and 'symbol' thus indicate only three out of a possible ten types of signs, which I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Marais, 2019, pp. 97-100). Icon, index and symbol are terms that refer specifically to the relationship between a representamen and an object, or rather the kind of logic that determines the relationship. It answers the question: In what way or by what logic does a representamen stands for its object? A representamen that stands for its object by virtue of them having the same characteristics is an icon. Put simpler, a representamen that resembles its object is an icon, for example, a photo. A representamen that is in a real relationship to its object, i.e., contiguous to or caused by its object, is called an index. So, the footprint of a lion in mud had to be caused by a lion, hence the footprint is an index of the lion. Alternatively, if I point to someone, that someone must be there/present for the index to work. Pointing to someone who is not present will not identify/index them. Lastly, a representamen that stands for its object by virtue of a law, usually an association of

general ideas, is called a symbol. The word 'rose', as famously quipped by Shakespeare, stands for its object by means of a convention, based on a consensus in a speaker community. If the name changes, the object will not change and will still smell as sweet.

As indicated above, I assume that the unspoken question behind the example is whether this dog's behaviour, as suggested by the owner, is not indicative of symbolic sign use. One of the problems in this kind of analysis is that one should not confuse 'learning' with symbol use because all signs need to be learned. If the assumed interpretation is correct, it is clear from the example that the dog has acquired knowledge about a causal relationship. Learning, however, does not amount to symbol use because it is not only symbols that have to be learned (e.g., language). Icons and indexes also must be learned. A baby lion needs to learn that shape A stands for a prey and shape B stands for a predator (iconic signs) or that smell C indexes a prey and smell D a predator. So, if the owner's interpretation is correct, it is clear evidence that the dog does not act on instinct, mechanically or deterministically but on semiosis, having learned that certain behaviour has certain consequences and being able to manipulate that knowledge to its advantage (Kull, 2001). Sebeok in fact argued that the term 'instinct' should be used sparingly in animal behaviour. So, the dog seems to have learned some relationships of cause and effect.

The question, however, remains, was the dog's bark a symbolic sign? In my view, this is not an easy question to answer. I do know, however, that we cannot answer it by positing it – as is being done in many of the discussions on ecology. We must provide evidence (as far as possible) or a coherent and logical argument (as far as possible) about it – and then we hope that discussing these will point out the fallacies and weak spots, which we can then work on (as far as possible). If we assume that the dog did operate on the level of 'if A then B', we clearly must agree that the dog has learned and that the dog has inferred a causal relationship between its behaviour and the owner's behaviour. From biosemiotics, we know that dogs can argue 'if A then B', so that is not the problem. The problem is whether, in this particular case, we can prover, beyond a reasonable doubt as it were, that the 'if A then B' is what happened – and the answer to this question is not clear to me.

A detailed analysis of the narrative in terms of Peircean signs would go as follows. The dog had the intention of laying on more than one pillow. The dog, operating on a learned pattern of behaviour that its bark makes the companion go to the door, communicated via an index to the companion (this bark indexes (points to) someone at the door). The owner interpreted it as such and went to the door. The dog used this opportunity, which in this interpretation is created by its false index, to lie down comfortably on three cushions, which was its goal from the start. The companion returned and realised that they had been hoodwinked. The sign used by the dog was an index based on a learned relationship between a bark and the companion's response.

If I must categorise the dog's sign use as a whole, and I have checked this with a biosemiotician, who is also a professor of biology[3], I identify it as a dicent indexical legisign.

[3]I thank Kalevi Kull for his clarifying engagement, but I take full responsibility for the argument.

In Peircean terms, this would be the highest, or cognitively most complex, form of sign just before symbols. A dicent indexical legisign, I quote from Merrell (2000, p. 139), is "… a type of sign, each instantiation of which supplies information in terms of the effect of its object on it and the manner in which that object is apart from it (commonplace expressions such as 'Hi!', 'You doin' all right?', 'Bless you' or a hand extended to open a door for someone or to shake another hand as a salutation)". To break it down, it is a legisign ('legi' refers to law) because it is based on some kind of generality (if A, then B), which obviously had to be learned. It is an indexical legisign because it is related to its object not through a generality or habit but through pointing or being caused by the object, the barking pointing to someone at the front door. It is a dicent indexical legisign because it confirms the existence of its object, functioning like a proposition or statement rather than a simple quality or a rule of inference. The bark, if it were not intended as misleading, would be making a real claim about someone at the door. Another example of a dicent indexical legisign is a weathervane. Similarly to the dog barking, the weathervane operates a convention (legisign) that its shows direction. The vane is an index because its direction is caused by the wind, and it is a dicent sign because it states a fact, e.g., the wind is blowing north.

This analysis would mean that the dog could indeed have tricked its companion, based on learning real patterns of behaviour, but that we cannot be sure about its intention. It would at the same time mean that the dog did not use symbols as part of their cognition that formed the trickery. In terms of the bigger debate, it seems to suggest that dogs use more complicated semiosis than most biologists (not including biosemioticians) would allow for, but less complicated semiosis than what most humanities/cultural studies/translation studies scholars would wish them to.

To conclude, Emily Doolittle's suggestions of her interaction with the dog is possible, and I have explained it in Peircean terms above. However, with the little information I have, it is not possible to say for sure that it is the correct interpretation. Even with more information, the problem of proving intent in the dog remains, which makes me hesitant to make categorical claims about the semiotic process. Obviously, it is difficult to determine the correct interpretation, as Umberto Eco has noted way back in the 1990s, but one can at least conclude that the interpretation was not necessarily wrong. The final conclusion would probably be something like "If the owner's interpretation was correct, the sign used by the dog was a dicent indexical legisign, but with current information we cannot decide whether the interpretation was indeed correct". If organisms can use dicent indexical legisigns, they obviously function at quite a high semiotic level – way beyond instinct but not yet at the level of symbols.

4. Making arguments and phlogiston

Now, the arguments above are obviously based on their own set of assumptions and those can obviously be challenged like any other scholarly argument. Claiming that the dog likely used X semiosis but not Y semiosis is not a pronouncement or a doctrine or an assumption. It is the outcome of a complex argument built on various assumptions, biological knowledge

and semiotic knowledge. Anybody would obviously be free to propose alternative assumptions, which might lead to alternative conclusions. Anybody would also be free to propose an alternative argument, or an alternative interpretation of the biological and semiotic arguments presented above. What should not happen, though, is a mere critical stance towards scholarship – the 'how do we know' questions that occur frequently in ecology debates in the humanities. If there are humanities scholars who think that it is a good thing to argue that animals and humans are the same, semiotically speaking, they need to provide an argument with biological and semiotic arguments for this. They cannot just ask: How do we know that a dog is not actually using symbols or how do we know that dogs do not have culture? What is needed is to provide some kind of acceptable conceptualisation of symbols or culture and then provide evidence of behaviour or thought patterns that fulfil the criteria of symbolic semiosis or culture.

This is where my reference to phlogiston comes in. I have read a story many years ago about the phlogiston argument. I cannot now recall the source, so I offer it here as an urban legend. The story pertains to early scientific evidence, based on observations through the first telescope, that the moon is not a perfect sphere but has craters on its surface. This was problematic because scholastic scholarship was based on the argument that all heavenly bodies were perfect spheres. In an attempt to salvage both the new observation and the old assumptions, someone suggested that the moon was indeed a perfect sphere because it was surrounded by a perfectly spherical layer of phlogiston. Phlogiston, the mediating scholar pointed out, is invisible, which is why the moon looks like it has an uneven surface, but in fact, it is perfectly spherical. The problem with this argument, epistemological speaking, is that it cannot be disproven, or as Popper ([1935] [1959] 2005) argued, it cannot be falsified. In my view, quite a few of the arguments that humanities scholars make about animals and humans or the ecology and biology in general are phlogiston arguments. My suggestion for a constructive humanities response to knowledge in the biological fields would be to present arguments that take seriously our biology colleagues as scholars, that do not start off from an anti-science assumption and that provide evidence and arguments that are indeed falsifiable.

The next point then is to try to indicate the prolegomena for a constructive and critical ecosemiotic debate. The first point of departure should be, to my mind, to maintain difference and similarity in a complexity epistemology. In most arguments that scholars make (from all fields), they emphasize either difference or similarity. For instance, in certain circles in scholarship, humans are seen as different from animals – to different degrees, obviously. In critical humanities eco-scholarship, humans and animals are predominantly seen as similar – to different degrees, obviously. In my view, the outcomes of these kind of reductionistic debates will always be unsatisfactory. In contrast, a complexity approach posits as a basic assumption in any kind of argumentation that both difference and similarity should be given equal weight in constructing arguments. We must find a way to talk about similarities between humans and other living organisms without reducing either to the other. And we must find a way to talk about differences between humans and other living

organisms without othering the Other into non-existence. When we think about similarity, we need to understand that onto-epistemologically, similarity is based in difference, and when we talk about difference, we need to understand that onto-epistemologically, difference is based in similarity. Both are required for existence and for knowing. If we privilege one of these principles, our answers will be reductionistic. In my view, a solid ecosemiotic onto-epistemology should be one that is able to list both the similarities and differences between all kinds of things that we study – and form an interpretation of the things we study based on both similarities and differences. At this point, I am working on proposing such an onto-epistemology, but it is still a long way in the making. This is only one of the assumptions that I would like to see going into it. For arguments along these lines, see Bogost (2012), Jansen van Vuuren (2025) and Marais (2025), among many others.

Moving even further, unless we include difference in our debates, we run the serious risk of anthropomorphizing other living organisms, reducing their Otherness in the zeal of protecting them. If there are no differences between us and other organisms, the implication is that we are like them and they are like us – and they are valuable because they are like us, having feelings and language and culture and what not. I again acknowledge the noble intentions by arguments for similarity, but they do not help us value non-human organisms and even inert matter for what 'they are'. We only value them because we have, so we think, proven that they are like us or more like us than we think. This is inherently still an anthropomorphic argument. We need to find an onto-epistemology that values both inert and living matter no matter how different they are from us - like we have argued in translation studies to value cultures and language no matter how different they are from ours.

In addition, I think it is crucial to realise that, if we continue to argue that there are ethically or epistemologically no differences between more-than-human organisms and humans (and that we should be regarded predominantly in terms of our similarities), we deny other living organisms their Otherness, their specificity of being. In a justifiable effort to overcome the overemphasis on otherness that have been a dominant view, we are now positing an anthropocentric view based on similarity that erases any difference. This is as harmful as ethnocentric views in cultural and translation studies. One example for respecting otherness is the senses that more-than-human organisms possess (or more broadly, their Umwelten) but that humans do not have or are not aware of. Denying more-than-human organisms their specificity is, in my view, as unethical as arguing against differences and for similarities (or other reductionist views). The fact that Clever Hans was able to interpret the body language (or bodily non-verbal communication in biosemiotic terms) of his owner or crowd, which was almost invisible to other humans, is a good example of this. Denying this 'otherness' is ethically irresponsible. The same goes for the dog example: anthropocentrically saying that the dog 'tricked' the human runs the risk of disregarding (amongst others) dogs' far superior hearing abilities (which range from hearing higher frequencies, to having more sound receptors), to (possibly the case in this instance) hearing sounds far away - and reacting to them.

A last point would be that reverting to older philosophies about the nobility of nature is not helping the eco-translation debate. Nature is no more noble than culture. Nature also entails a daily struggle for survival and much of it depends on killing for survival. Nature also is harsh, unforgiving and vicious, in many cases (Dalton, 2025). On the surface, most scholars in the eco-translation network would agree with this argument, but I find that many arguments de facto hark back to a romantic view of nature. Again, we should not only value things that are 'noble' or 'romantic', but even things that are harsh, unforgiving and vicious – that is, if we are seriously about our ethical responsibility to Otherness.

REFERENCES

Atã, P. and Queiroz, J. (2025) *Mind as an external sign: A semiotic externalist philosophy of cognitive science.* Cham: Springer Nature.

Bogost, I. (2012) *Alien phenomenology or what it's like to be a thing.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Cronin, M. (2017) *Eco-translation: Translation and ecology in the age of the Anthropocene.* New York: Routledge.

Dalton, D. M. (2025) *Reality is evil* [online]. Available at: https://aeon.co/essays/philosophers-must-reckon-with-the-meaning-of-thermodynamics (Accessed date: 15 October 2025)

Eco, U. (1979) *A theory of semiotics.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Henning, B. and Scarfe, A. (2013) *Beyond mechanism: Putting life back into biology.* Plymouth: Lexington Books.

Hoffmeyer, J. and Stjernfelt, F. (2016) The great chain of semiosis: Investigating the steps in the evolution of semiotic competence. *Biosemiotics, 9*, pp. 7-29.

Jansen van Vuuren, X. (2025) *Interpreting, communication and animal welfare: An ecosemiotic analysis of interspecies translation.* Dordrecht: De Gruyter Mouton.

Kauffman, S. A. (2019) *A world beyond physics: The emergence and evolution of life.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kull, K. (2001) A note on biorhetorics. *Sign Systems Studies,* 29(2), pp. 693-704.

Marais, K. (2019) *A (bio)semiotic theory of translation: The emergence of social-cultural reality.* New York: Routledge.

Marais, K. (2025) Exploring an ecology of translation. *TTR,* XXXVIII(1), pp. 271-293.

Merrell, F. (2000) *Signs, science, self-subsuming art(ifacts).* Dresden: Thelem.

Popper, K. ([1935] [1959] 2005) *The logic of scientific discovery.* Translated by K. Popper. New York: Routledge.

Rescher, N. (1998) *Complexity: A philosophical overview.* New York: Transaction Publishers.

Sebeok, T. A. and Rosenthal, R. (eds.) (1981) *The Clever Hans phenomenon: Communication with horses, whales, apes, and people.* New York: The New York Academy of Sciences.

Sharov, A. and Tønneson, M. (2021) *Semiotic agency: Science beyond mechanism.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Von Uexküll, J. (2010) *A foray into the worlds of animals and humans: With a theory of meaning.* Translated by J. D. O'Neil. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

About the author: Kobus Marais is professor of Translation Studies at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. He has published three monographs, namely *Translation theory and development studies: A complexity theory approach* (2014), *A (bio)semiotic theory of translation: The emergence of social-cultural reality* (2018) and *Trajectories of translation: The thermodynamics of semiosis* (2023).