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ARGUMENTS FROM DESIRE, DOGS ASIDE

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Introduction

In a recent position paper, Kobus Marais (2026) warns against the nebulous consequences of virtuous intentions. He argues that concern for the environment is a driver of eco-translation research, and asserts that this is not a problem *per se*, but that ethical commitment to the value of non-human entities can at times hamper "credible scholarly debate" (Marais, 2026, p. 1). The argument was prompted by a discussion of an interaction (perhaps) between a human and a dog. We humans, on the whole, love dogs. They form part of our societies, and it is only natural that we like to imagine extensive mutual intelligibility, including symbolic communication. Yet, we must take care not to posit the existence of a shared semiotic space solely on the grounds of our capacity for projection. According to Marais, we should aim to demonstrate rather than declare where and how signification within and between species takes place.

When reading Marais' contribution, I found myself nodding along, grateful that someone has taken the effort to spell out questions of interspecies communication which are exciting to ponder upon but onerous to commit to paper. Yet I placed question marks which have now become exclamation marks, and feel compelled to raise a couple of points, which I hope can productively further the discussion. The first point relates to the balance between difference and similarity in our descriptions of and approaches to non-human entities. The second point, which I believe central, regards the scientific criterion of falsifiability and if we should seek to apply it. The third point stresses the difference between classification and connection in our ecological imaginaries.

1. Difference and similarity

I think the dog may have thrown us off the scent. In the anecdote grounding Marais' position paper, a dog is seated on pillows on a sofa. The dog has a name – Idris Donut – and knows humans. It is, in simple terms, a beloved pet, recognized as an individual. Marais (2026, p. 10) argues that, in pursuit of eco-translation, we should not lose track of "differences between us and other organisms." This is a reasonable statement, but perhaps too much shaped by the organism that prompted this particular debate: *canis familiaris*, our closest companion. We could have started elsewhere, and ended up somewhere different.

Take for instance nematodes, also known as roundworms. They are the most abundant animals on earth. They practically envelop the whole planet. Individually however, they are quite small, and thus invisible to the naked human eye. Some nematode species pursue

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parasitic lifestyles, with potentially grave consequences for plant and animal health, while others benefit their hosts, as when nematodes constrain bacterial growth in insect burrows (Kiontke & Fitch, 2013). Such complex living arrangements require a degree of interspecies communication, and while it would be overbold to equate this semiotic exigency with a postulate of consciousness or intention on the part of individual nematodes, a tinge of tentative recognition might be helpful here. We cannot see these creatures, feel no sympathy for them, and know very little about them. Research on this organism is often focused on agri-economic harm (Nicol et al., 2011). If our view of their existence is clouded, it will hardly be because of a perception biased towards similitude. Unlike dogs, a large proportion of lifeforms goes entirely unrecognized, and one can argue that a shift in visibility is required before we can develop scholarly debate on a proper footing. Like Marais (2026, p. 9), I believe that we ideally give "equal weight" to difference and similarity in how we describe and approach non-human entities. I do not think, however, that we intuitively possess the ecological coordination to know where to situate this balance, and so it is pardonable to err on the side of commonality. What though, if we err too egregiously?

2. Falsifiability's panacea trap

Discussions of communication with, and between, non-human entities can easily feel silly. There are echoes of superficial spirituality, childlike naivety, and delirious animism in eco-translation research. Furthermore, there is a feeling of insurmountable multitude and alterity. We have not even figured out text yet, so what are we to do with all the wonders of multispecies worldmaking? I feel this pressure strongly when applying concepts from translation studies beyond the paths well-trodden, and look at times for stability in the natural sciences, whose mechanisms of knowledge production tend to inspire a degree of trust. In this manner, I agree with Marais that a semiotic argument is strongest when it does not violate our biological knowledge. I do not think, however, that we should strive towards falsifiability in our scholarly reasoning.

Popper's classic work on *The logic of scientific discovery* ([1935] [1959] 2002) argues that scientific knowledge is most efficiently increased by means of deduction: present a generally applicable hypothesis, and present it in such a way that we can imagine an observation that renders it false. So we could say: *all animal bodies are symmetrical*, and this would be a falsifiable claim. It only takes one empirical observation to sharpen our knowledge base on the basis of this hunch. We could also say: *all animal communication has a symbolic component*. Whether this hypothesis is deemed falsifiable depends on further assumptions. Symbols and their interactions are conventional, and one can never rule out that something means something to someone, particularly "across *Umwelten*" (Marais, 2026, p. 4). The logic of falsifiability depends upon the relative stability and transparency of a particular communication system that is productive of logical propositions. It is not, therefore, something that can help adjudicate fundamental claims *about* communication, meaning, or the realm of representation at large. Popper (2002, p. 18) writes, in a good footnote, that falsifiability "draws a line inside meaningful language, not around it." Not all good scholarship

must mimic principles applied in the natural sciences and, even there, not without contestation. Falsifiability is not the panacea it sometimes purports to be, and a sound argument can take many shapes. The test for eco-translation will not ultimately reside in the establishment of testable hypotheses, but in our capacity to carve out a rhetoric that chimes with the biorhetorics we entangle with (Kull, 2001). We can trust, in this regard, our own rigour to negotiate a reasonable position, a process we are engaged in as we write this round table.

3. In view of the wildflowers

As I write, wildflowers sway in the flowerpot attached to my balcony. They are not all that wild, just sold as seeds as such. I enjoy the sight of them. We humans praise flowers for their elegance, and exchange them as gifts. We share the love of flowers with a host of pollinators such as bees, flies, and moths. To attract such insects in order to more efficiently reproduce, flowers can rely on a range of visual and olfactory signals, some of which are deemed deceptive. They might mimic, for instance, the scent and shape of an insect's desired mate to invite pollination, but without bestowing upon visitors sweet reward. The fact we recognize that species can be duped or misinformed in interactions with other species, implies that many such instances evade our attention, and as I stare at my wildflowers, I cannot help but wonder: what is the reward I am duped into not receiving? Further thought, a bit later: I must either believe that I am somehow fooled by the flower into tending to it, or I must allow for the possibility that the bumblebee on my balcony, in its hovering, is no more fooled than me, but rather enjoying itself. Do we share a sense of ecological jouissance, the bumblebee and I? Preposterous, perhaps, but now swaying together: the plant, the insect, and the man.

This anecdote, at the risk of being silly, I present to make a simple point: the scholarly tendency towards classification should not obscure the circumstance of connection. Like Marais, I deplore the kneejerk equation of hierarchy with injustice, and think it is important that we understand how organisms differ from each other in evolutionary history, capacity and complexity (2026, p. 5). Yet the point to me is not that we somehow move on from "older philosophies about the nobility of nature" into more dispassionate domains of enquiry (Marais, 2026, p. 10). Rather, we should ask ourselves why these thoughts of nobility form and fade, or how they emerge and subside.

Conclusion

Translation studies traces the movement of meaning, and the effects and perceptions this movement produces. What separates good scholarship from drivel, in this regard, is not whether enquiry is driven by particular concerns or presuppositions, but rather whether those concerns can be reflected upon within the composition they establish. Eco-translation, indeed, should be able to think its own organic desire to communicate beyond.

References

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