Translation Matters,
https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tmid202604

QUESTIONS OF TRANSLATION, HIERARCHY AND LIFE

Hedwig Fraunhofer[•]
Georgia College and State University

In his paper, Kobus Marais encourages translation scholars to clarify their own onto-epistemological positions. Without such clarification, Marais argues, "scholars coming from different points of departure might completely misunderstand one another if they are not able to translate between the varying underlying assumptions" (2026, p.1).

Participants' variety of intellectual backgrounds has clearly enriched the discussions of the transdisciplinary Eco-Translation Network initiated by Michael Cronin and Şebnem Susam-Saraeva, to which Kobus and I both belong. While I offer my response here to Kobus' position paper from an onto-epistemological position different from his, I do so with great respect for his work and in the interest of the clarification called for by the author himself.

For scholars trained in Eurowestern contexts that have long claimed hegemonic universality, Marais' reminder might be especially helpful: Not only do all sorts or texts (written or other) come from different cultural, geographical, historical, disciplinary—and yes, onto-epistemological— contexts, but the same is also true for the scholars who translate these texts. Marais calls for a translation not only between texts but also between the ontologies or epistemologies that define translators' approaches to texts or inform theoretical discussions about translation.

A second main point that Marais makes in his paper, defining his own position, is that the "ecological value [of more-than-human beings] should not be reduced to 'human-likeness" (2026, p. 2). Again, many scholars, in the field of translation studies and beyond, can probably agree on this point; any other estimation would be nothing short of anthropocentric. Humans are not the only species that matters, as any posthumanist approach to ethics will easily posit.

While posthumanists such as myself may define any phenomena in the cosmos as part of life, as part of the agential energy that enmeshes us all, however, Marais draws a categorical distinction between life forms capable of semiosis on the one hand, and "[i]nert material systems" (2026, p. 4) on the other hand, which he defines as lifeless or dead.

His essay focuses on the part of the cosmos that he does not define as inert. Concerning the lifeforms that actively engage in semiosis, Marais is interested in "how these semiotic and intentional abilities play out in different species" (2026, p. 4). His argument that such abilities depend on specific, divergent physical and sensory apparatuses is again easily convincing. More controversially, however, Marais also brings up the question of whether there is a hierarchy of

• hedwig.fraunhofer@gcsu.edu

semiotic abilities and thus again of ethical value of different species. Does the attempt to counter an assumption of human exceptionalism lead us to a flat ontology? Marais' answer is no; a flat ontology is not possible, given what we know of evolution (2026, pp. 4-5).

In Marais' interpretation of evolution, earlier, simpler lifeforms only have what he calls "value" because they ultimately lead to "more complex physical and biological forms" (Marais, 2026, p. 5). Marais suggests building "an ecologically based ethics" on this assumption that the "base [is] valuable as a prerequisite for the whole" (Marais, 2026, p. 5, paraphrasing Atã and Queiroz, 2025, pp. 47-48). In other words, earlier, simpler life forms do not have value in themselves. He then adds: "The mere fact that we require ethical conduct from humans but not from other living organisms might already be a giveaway" (Marais, 2026, p. 5). While he seemingly leaves the answer to his own question about hierarchy open, in his reasoning this human-issued requirement of ethical conduct applied exclusively to humans nevertheless proves the superiority of humans over other lifeforms, whose behavior cannot be expected to be ethical. There goes a flat ontology indeed.

In response to Marais, one could of course argue that any species requires certain behaviors of its own members, and only of its own members. The fact that humans do not impose behavior rules on other species arguably does not demonstrate exceptional human behavior or human ethical superiority over other species. The lack of any such requirement applied to other species, in tandem with strict requirements for members of the species themselves, can just as easily be found in other-than-human species. One could argue that what we are looking at here is humans behaving like other species of the natural world.

Marais realizes his own reliance on the concept of hierarchy, asking: "How do we deal with the humanities' discomfort with hierarchies?" (Marais, 2026, p. 5) He clearly finds such discomfort misplaced, however, and points to biology as a field that can provide evidence for hierarchies (Marais, 2026, p. 5). In spite of his earlier statements denying value to earlier life forms for their own sake, he now argues that the hierarchy evidenced in evolution is not a hierarchy of value but a "historical hierarchy" of the sequential emergence of life forms (Marais, 2026, p. 5). Referencing Sharov and Tonneson (2021, n.p. given), he proposes a "historical" hierarchy that entails "mutual interdependence and entanglement between hierarchical levels," positing that this hierarchy is not a hierarchy of value.

Marais, in sum, is advocating for a distinction between life and 'lifeless' phenomena, and— in the 'life' category— for a hierarchy of historical life forms based on the complexity of organisms. At the same time, he is aware of humanities scholars' suspicions concerning both of these claims and wants to find ways to keep those concepts alive while redefining them in a way that assuages such disagreements. He states that he aims to "maintain the notion of hierarchy but fill it with a different interpretation" (Marais, 2026, p. 6): "Complex" and "simple" are, according to Marais, descriptive terms rather than value judgments (2026, p. 6).

So far, so good. But what is one to make of Marais' claim then, repeated again just a few lines earlier, that simple organisms are "crucially important because without single cells an elephant would not exist" (2026, p. 5). Here the elephant's life clearly seems more valuable than the lives of single cells for their own sake. In other words, one cannot avoid concluding that the discussion is ultimately about value after all.

For Marais, such value ultimately seems to be based on the ability of life forms to use symbols. He analyzes the example of a dog's interactions with his human to grant that other-than-human organisms can "obviously function at quite a *high* semiotic level—way beyond instinct but not yet at the level of symbols" (Marais, 2026, p. 8; my emphasis). The use of symbols is reserved for humans; semiotically, humans and animals are not the same, Marais points out (2026, p. 9). A categorical difference seems to be sliding firmly in place here, between humans and animals, based on the ability to engage in symbolic semiosis, or lack thereof (Marais, 2026, p. 9).

There is a point where Marais' defensiveness about the feared unpopularity of his own positions in posthumanist circles turns to unnecessarily inflammatory terms. He accuses of reductionism, anthropomorphism and an unethical lack of responsibility those humanities scholars who do not draw a categorical division between life and inert materiality. (As a new materialist scholar, I posit for instance that there is no materiality that is not agential and active.) Marais argues that scholars like me conflate differences into sameness ("we deny other living organisms their Otherness, their specificity of being", Marais, 2026, p. 10), a statement that I (predictably) find overdrawn. In the end, however, Marais argues that "[w]e 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" (Marais, 2026, p. 10). Here I can agree again.

In the end, Marais' insistence on 'otherness' risks keeping the modern gap between nature and culture problematically intact (see for instance, "*Nature is no more noble than culture"*, Marais, 2026, p. 11). The dividing line in Marais' system appears to be based on humans' use of symbolic language. Symbolic language is the result of increasing levels of abstraction that the human world has engaged in for millennia (see von Braun; also Abram, 1997, as referenced by Servigne et al., 2021, p. 92). This abstraction, accelerated by the cosmology of what the French anthropologist Philippe Descola (2024) has named Eurowestern 'naturalism', has isolated modern humans from the more-than-human world and from other humans who are at home in non-European cosmologies. This alienation from a more immersive, more-than-human world has led our planet into great ecological peril.

If we take the concept and practice of eco-translation seriously, we need to pivot away from a focus on abstract, symbolic language as the privileged, 'high' standard and start thinking about the kind of translations that take place in the form of intimate, bodily relationships in the more-than-human world and in human-and other-than-human, multispecies communities. As

Carmen África Vidal Claramonte writes, this kind of embodied, sensuous translation "does not cancel divergence, but rather admits the possibility of many worlds" (2025, p. 34).

REFERENCES

Abram, D. (1997) *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York: Vintage Books.

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

Braun, C. von (2012) *Der Preis des Geldes: Eine Kulturgeschichte*. Berlin: Aufbau.

Descola, P. (2024). *The composition of worlds: Interviews with Pierre Charbonnier.* Translated by N. Vinsonneau and J. Magidoff. Cambridge UK: Polity.

Marais, K. (2026) 'Position paper: Of dogs and biotranslation (and phlogiston)', *Translation Matters*, DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/21844585/tma03po.

Servigne, P., Stevens, R. and G. Chapelle (2021) *Another end of the world is possible: Living the collapse (and not merely surviving it)*. Translated by G. Samuel. Cambridge UK: polity.

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

Vidal Claramonte, C. A (2025) *Translating indigenous knowledges: Toward a sensuous translation*. London and New York: Routledge.

About the author: Hedwig Fraunhofer is a Professor of French and German at Georgia College & State University (U.S.). Her interests include literature, posthumanist philosophy, translation theory, and eco-pedagogy. Her work has appeared in ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment; Philosophy Today; and KronoScope, among other venues, and in edited collections.