Translational and narrative epistemologies

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PLAN

The narrative ideology of Knowledge Translation
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Narratives of translation

TEXTE

1   Different notions of narrative have long been deployed in a variety of disciplines, from poetics and ethnography to psychology, law, political science, and history. The appeal to narrative was fundamental to structuralism, and closely aligned with the attempt to establish a universal human science on the basis of the study of myth and various types of stories, the assumption being that narratives were cross-culturally translatable. This universalizing trend, however, gradually mutated into what is best understood as part of a broadly interpretive turn, which has dissociated the humanities in particular from realist paradigms and a traditional preoccupation with establishing 'objective truths', in favor of a constructivist, reflective and self-critical understanding of experience—linguistic and otherwise.

2   The appeal to translation in a growing range of disciplines across the humanities and sciences has followed a more complex course, at times in line with the same interpretive turn that explains the growing appeal of narrative, and at others directly in conflict with it.

3   Translation was traditionally viewed entirely as a process of textual transformation; initially as the rendering of a fully articulated text from one language into another and later as a more diffuse process of recasting stretches of text of varying lengths into another language and/or genre or medium, with the boundaries between original and translation being increasingly blurred (Baker, 2014). In European conceptual history, however, translation has been understood to refer to the transfer and replication not only of words, but also of ideas, practices, and objects. Early modern notions of translation thus

encompassed the transfer of both physical bodies and bodies of knowledge and power—like the *translatio* of Saints and the *translatio studii et imperii* (Cheyfitz, 1997, p. 35; Evans, 1998; Wintroub, 2015). This broader view of translation has increasingly found resonance among a growing number of translation scholars, including Błumczynski (2023), Marais and Kull (2016), Song (2023), and Wright (2023), among others.

4   A more general shift towards translation, variably understood, has been evident since at least the turn of the century, as scholars in the human and social sciences have come to focus their attention on processes of mediation that take place when knowledge, practices and values are produced and disseminated across different social and cultural contexts. Across a range of human sciences, translation has emerged as a key theoretical concept used to address epistemic and cultural difference (Gal, 2015; Ødemark & Engebretsen, 2018). In organizational studies, for instance, translation is conceptualized as a process of adapting ideas and models to local contexts (Barros & Rose, 2023, p. 5). Likewise, scholars in international studies have come to conceptualize translation as "an ontological condition of the international" and the act of translation as "a recurrent social and political practice in international relations that relates [...] concepts and contexts, and always involves change" (Capan et al., 2021, p. 2). As part of this shift, scholars in Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Actor Network Theory (ANT), sometimes referred to as the Sociology of Translation, have stressed that translation is not merely a discursive process but a complex material and socio-cultural practice that brings together human and non-human actors. More specifically, translation "evokes successive strategies of interpretation and displacement by which an idea gradually moves into becoming a scientific fact or artefact" (Buzelin, 2005, p. 197). As Borst et al. (2022) explain, translation in French, the language in which Bruno Latour and other key scholars of ANT wrote, "connotes both transformation and displacement", and "this emphasis on transformation and displacement is used to describe how networks of actors are made, and often changed, in the process of knowledge production and utilization" (p. 5). Simply put, translation enrols different kinds of actors in a variety of networks, and society itself is a product of translations that align actors in, and with, networks comprising human and non-

human *actants*.[1] ANT thus resists locating translation within a preformed model of the social, or a certain cultural or political order. Instead, it attempts to trace how societies are produced and sustained by translation (Ødemark and Askheim, 2024). In this sense, it reintroduces the question of materiality and nature at the core of pre-modern notions of *translatio*.[2]

5   Translation has also acquired highly specialized and institutionalized meanings in a range of scientific disciplines (Marais, 2022). In biology, its most common use is as a process that involves "protein synthesis on the ribosome, where a sequence of nucleotides in a messenger RNA (mRNA) is used as a code (i.e., genetic code) for attaching amino acids to the elongating protein polymer in a specific order" (Sharov, 2022, p. 63). In physics, translation is used to denote motion along a line or a curve (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). Translation has also become institutionalized in medicine, where the concept of Knowledge Translation (KT) is a key pillar of the dominant paradigm of Evidence-based Medicine (EBM). While the turn to translation in the humanities could be seen as an index of contemporary epistemological predicaments in a global era, KT is construed in a radically different way; it refers to a set of research activities bound together by the common goal of 'bridging the gap'[3] between science as practiced in laboratories and its clinical application in the social world. In other words, it concerns putting research-based knowledge into practice. KT thus denotes a scientific and (purportedly) non-cultural practice where culture is treated as a 'barrier' to the transmission of scientific knowledge formulated in the laboratory and confirmed by randomized controlled trials. Translational shifts are unwarranted since knowledge is understood to have reached its culmination in the scientific 'source text'. KT accordingly shows no interest in the entanglement of the cultural and biomedical aspects of knowledge and its transfer to different sociocultural contexts. This view of translation and knowledge contrasts sharply with the celebration of difference and the productivity of translation in the humanities and the social sciences.

6   These diverse expansions of the concept of translation have underscored the fact that translation is never simply a discursive process: it is a complex material and cultural process, even when the objects transported are words. At the same time, these expansions have

highlighted the continued influence of realist paradigms on the way translation is understood and practiced in some disciplinary contexts. The emergence of various translational epistemologies further illustrates how taken-for-granted values of scientific endeavor—such as objectivity and universality—may be productively "replaced by problematization, agonism, and contradiction in the genealogical method" (Rimke, 2010, p. 251), in part by problematizing the concept of translation itself in scientific and scholarly practices, and between different forms of knowledge and epistemic cultures.

7   In what follows, we outline a brief genealogy of the nexus between narrative, translation, and knowledge in two approaches to translation, drawn from different disciplinary contexts. We offer these schematic genealogies merely as examples of how we might approach the interdependence of narrative and translation, and their impact on the kind of knowledge that is produced and validated in different disciplines and contexts.

The narrative ideology of Knowledge Translation

8   Given that the concept of translation and the crossings of epistemic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries have become increasingly important in the human sciences, we might regard Knowledge Translation as forming part of a new translational paradigm. The turn to translation in medicine, however, is of a different kind, aimed at preserving the identity of the scientific message rather than celebrating epistemic or cultural difference. [4]

9   So-called translational research first emerged in the biomedical field in the 1990s, where it was explicitly presented as a solution to the challenge of slow and insufficient uptake of research discoveries in everyday clinical practice. It was thus conceived as a possible solution to both a temporal and a quantitative problem: the flow from science to practice was too slow, and the volume of knowledge transported too small. Accordingly, translational research set out to solve two aspects of the (in)efficiency of biomedical research: firstly, the temporal dilemma, the time lag between science and everyday practice in the clinic; and secondly, the quantitative dilemma concerning

the volume of new medical knowledge that is turned into practice in the healthcare system (Mankoff et al., 2004).

10   In KT, translation—if it is to be felicitous—is non-productive; it should neither add to nor detract from the evidence and findings produced by basic research and randomized control trials. On the contrary, the purpose of translation in KT is to preserve and implement the original, scientific content in new socio-cultural contexts, resulting in rational governance and practical healthcare in various regions across the globe. There is a set of persistent cultural models of knowledge, its creation, communication, and transmission at work here. Following Steiner (1975), we could say that this manner of patterning knowledge and translation constitutes a topological constant that "remain[s] invariant when that figure [translation] is bent out of shape" (p. 448–49). KT distributes value and translational directionality in ways that resemble ancient literary and philosophical ideologies of translation: the original is the source of value, and its admired qualities should be kept intact in every process of translation and/or transmission. The ideology behind this topology presupposes that it is possible to separate the production of knowledge from its transfer; the scientific content to be translated is construed as being *outside* the process of translation. Knowledge, moreover, is assumed to have reached its culmination in the secluded space of the laboratory or the more mobile seclusions of randomized controlled trials (testing the effect, transferability, reproducibility, and relevance of knowledge). And it is the *findings* that should be transported to, and implemented in, situations of practical care. Hence, the all-important task for KT as a combined scientific and social instrument is to reduce the gap between theory and practice by making medical practice knowledge based. We see this clearly in the definition of KT provided by the World Health Organization (2012):

> Knowledge translation (KT) has emerged as a paradigm to address many of the challenges and start closing the 'know-do' gap. KT is defined as "The synthesis, exchange, and application of knowledge by relevant stakeholders to accelerate the benefits of global and local innovation in strengthening health systems and improving people's health".

11   The space that KT is supposed to bridge is the one between science and social practice, and the objective is to close the 'know-do gap', that is, a distance figured as an epistemological space between theory and practice. While interlingual translation crosses a boundary between languages, KT thus aims to cross the space between biomedical science and practical healthcare. Ideally, there should be an equivalence of some sort between the message produced by science (theory) and its application in practice. In other words, the objective of KT as a form of translation is to bridge the gap between knowing and doing, and thus reduce the distance between these poles by transporting knowledge, in a linear way, from one place to another (Engebretsen et al., 2017).

12   This view of knowledge and communication is profoundly influenced by the metanarratives that underpin modernity—narratives that celebrate the rise of reason and the rational subject (Ødemark, 2023). Even newer approaches to KT which draw on Actor Network Theory (Borst et al, 2022) seem to be informed by a master narrative of enlightenment and modernity: the assumption is that translation moves from a position characterized as epistemic *plenitude* to one characterized by epistemic *lack*, rather than between (often competing) epistemic cultures where both facts and values are regularly contested (Ødemark, 2023).

Translation, epistemology, and narrative in Actor Network Theory

13   In contrast to KT, translation is construed as productive in Actor Network Theory and understood broadly as "all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force" (Callon and Latour, 1981, p. 279). The French lexicon and Science and Technology Studies converge around the idea that translation, science, and all kinds of knowledge practices inevitably involve transformation and displacement (Ødemark and Askheim, 2024). If the expanded usage of translation in STS is warranted by the semantics of French, it is also

in line with its usage in anthropology and the history and philosophy of science. After Kuhn's tremendously influential *Structures of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962), questions concerning rationality and the (in)commensurability of knowledge from different places and times, cultures and scientific paradigms have become increasingly associated with translation (Hanks and Severi, 2014, p. 6; Tambiah, 1990). ANT's understanding of translation is fully in line with its broader construal in these fields as encompassing more than linguistic transformation, but it is critical of holistic and totalizing concepts such as culture, which often accompany such redefinitions.

14   ANT was conceived as an alternative to the dominant textual models and cultural turns in the humanities in the latter part of the twentieth century. It rejected methods of research that used abstract categories like culture and society as analytical vantage points, arguing that such concepts tended to take attention away from the observation of actual, empirical relations—specifically, actors and the networks they engage in. The explanatory power of general categories was questioned as analytically and empirically void, and their deployment was thought to subsume the objects of investigation under broad and general terminology that masked empirical relations and networks behind abstract concepts. Studies that relied on such categories were said to reproduce the premise of the inquiry rather than produce new knowledge. Specifically, the phenomena under consideration were treated as aspects or instances of social science categories such as society, culture and modernity that defined them at the outset as instances of a certain culture or a particular political system. ANT scholars argued that such macro categories should be avoided unless they formed part of the actors' own construal of the situation, in which case they should be treated as emic concepts and constitute part of the empirical data to be studied. The notion of translation had a central role in this dismantling of sociological totalities and cultural holisms (Tsing, 2010). Translation was understood as the process of enrolling different kinds of actors in various networks, and society as a product of translations that align actors in, and with, networks comprising human and non-human actants.

15   ANT radicalized the so-called Strong Programme of David Bloor and the Edinburgh School in Science and Technology studies, outlined

most clearly in Bloor (1991), by adding the generalized principle of symmetry to the idea of a symmetry of explanation. Bloor (1991) had claimed that the sociologist should be impartial in relation to truth and falsehood, and rationality and irrationality (p. 7). The sociologist should not examine "one side of a scientific dispute while leaving the other side unexamined because it seems right or obvious"; symmetry demands that all beliefs be given "the same general kinds of sociological explanation regardless of how the knowledge is evaluated" (Bloor, 2001, p. 592) given that both true and false beliefs have to be socially processed to be categorized as true or false, irrespective of their status in the material world.

16   Expanding upon this foundation, ANT goes further by insisting that nature and culture, human and non-human actors should also be addressed symmetrically, with the same explanatory protocols. This obligation constituted what became known as the generalized principle of symmetry. Callon (1986) offers a good example of the application of this principle in his seminal work, "Some elements of a sociology of translation", when he insists that scallops and scientists should be dealt with using the same language of description and explanation. Interestingly, this approach to symmetry draws on and extends categories from structuralist narratology, where the term *actant* features prominently. Actants are the deep structural roles in the story, such as hero, helper, and villain—conceived in relation to the hero's project and perspective. Importantly, actants can only be identified teleologically, at the end of the tale, when we can assess the true impact of the other characters and narrative forces on the protagonist's project. Actor Network Theory is thus infused with a kind of narrativity, a plot, as a precondition for the type of analyses it undertakes.

17   For Callon, narratology is a helpful model because it widens the range of possible characters and actors to non-humans. He cites the entry on actant in Greimas' *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, where the work of Vladimir Propp is used to argue that "the concept of actant has the advantage of replacing, especially in *literary semiotics*, the term character, as well as that of 'dramatis persona'" (Greimas and Courtés, 1982, p. 5). Actants are not only human beings but also animals, objects, and concepts, and the analytical symmetry between human and non-human actors is a

fundamental principle in ANT. However, as already noted, the narrative agency of non-human actors and the concept of symmetry were already established in Propp's studies on folktales. In this sense, narratology did not require the addition of a principle of generalized symmetry since non-human and more-than-human actors were both already recognized as driving forces in the plots of folktales.

18   Interestingly, this subset of ANT terminology was developed with reference to what the narratologist Claude Bremond had called a "layer of autonomous significance that can be isolated from the whole of the message: the *story [le récit]*" (as translated and cited in Prince, 2014, p. 23; emphasis in original). This autonomous layer is the *fabula* —that part of the narrative least attached to, and dependent upon, the materiality of the text. Its structure

> is independent of the techniques that support it. It can be transposed from one to another without losing anything of its essential properties: the subject of a tale can serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be brought to stage or screen, one can recount a movie to those who have not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them it is a story that we follow; and it can be the same story. The *narrated* [le *raconté*] has its distinctive significant elements, its *racontants*: these are not words, images, or gestures but the events, situations, and behaviors signified by words, by images, by gestures. (Bremond, as cited in Prince, 2014, p. 23–24; emphasis in original)

19   Bremond thus identifies a "layer of autonomous significance", that could supposedly be translated between different semiotic systems and material signifiers, because narrative and myth did not depend upon the materiality of the signifier to the same extent as poetry. The belief that narratives were more translatable than poetry, due to the latter's dependency on the material aspect of the signifier, was commonplace in structuralist poetics. Lévi-Strauss (1955), for instance, declared that the Italian saying about translation and treason applied to poetry but not to myth:

> Myth is the part of language where the formula *traduttore, tradittore* reaches its lowest truth-value. From that point of view, it should be put in the whole gamut of linguistic expressions at the end opposite

> to that of poetry, in spite of all the claims which have been made to prove the contrary. Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions; whereas the mythical value of the myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation. Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader throughout the world. (p. 430)

20   As a special kind of narrative, myth can survive translation because, arguing along similar lines to Bremond, the substance of myth "does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story which it tells" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, p. 430).

21   In more recent anthropology, ethnolinguistics, and performance studies, by contrast, scholars have stressed that the *fabula*—Bremond's and Lévi-Strauss's 'layer of autonomous significance'—is always in a dialectic relationship to the event within which the narration is produced and performed, the living context of storytelling (Bauman, 1986). But ANT scholars chose to return to the analytical concepts and language devised to study the signified and the *fabula*. They mobilized concepts such as actant to analyze the most abstract part of narrative—the narrative signified, abstracted from the signifier. They drew on the same language that was devised to study the ideal part of the sign, the part used to construct a material semiotics and a symmetrical relating of human and non-human agents. This arguably leaves ANT ill-equipped to deal with the productivity of text and narrative (Bauman & Briggs, 2003).

Narratives of translation

22   Philosophers have often used stories of radical mistranslation to highlight the incommensurability between languages and cultures (Malmkjær, 2002). These stories stage situations of so-called radical translation where there is no prior cultural contact between groups, and therefore no instruments of translation (dictionaries, grammars, interpreters) available. According to Hacking (1981), they involve a *malostension*,[5] as when an expression of the first language is erroneously taken by speakers of the second language to refer to a natural kind. A famous example is the story of Captain Cook's crew, who took *kangaroo* to be the name of an animal. It was later

discovered that "when the aborigines said 'kangaroo' they were not in fact naming the animal, but replying to their questioners, 'What did you say?'" (Hacking, 1981, p. 174). Hacking demonstrated that this and other tales of radical mistranslation were false, that they were philosophical fables without historical reference, thus debunking anecdotes that had attained the status of what Baker refers to as disciplinary or conceptual narratives (Baker, 2019, p. 39ff.).

23   Scholars now argue that the bounded entities presupposed by the 'classical' formulation of the problem of cultural translation were themselves already constituted by previous empirical acts of translation that calibrated and reified both types of culture (oral vs. literate) and geographical and mental boundaries between cultures (Bauman & Briggs, 2003; Moyn & Sartori, 2013, p. 9). Postcolonial work on translation and go-betweens in the history of science has also stressed that "cross-cultural interaction itself was a constitutive condition for the very possibility of sustained European presence in new and unfamiliar spaces" because Europeans "were epistemologically dependent upon indigenous populations in order to accede to the knowledges and practices of the cultures they initially interacted with and progressively colonized" (Raj, 2023, p. 2). Translation is thus understood to have been instrumental in establishing boundaries that were later seen as impermeable when people started telling stories about how languages, cultures, East, and West, were incommensurable.

24   The various contributions to the first two issues of *Encounters* problematize the questions raised here further, in different but complementary ways. They present state-of-the-art research and theorizing on the intersection of translation and narrative analysis, in very different contexts and across multiple cultures and regions of the world. It is our hope that the two issues will together provide a robust foundation on which to build the transdisciplinary, independent space that *Encounters in translation* has been founded to provide—a space that can serve as a meeting point for colleagues interested in resisting the compartmentalization of knowledge in academic and disciplinary silos, and the corporate structures that support them.

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NOTES

1 An actant, according to Latour (1996), "can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action" (p. 373).

2 In terms of materiality, it is important to acknowledge the pioneering work of Karin Littau (2016), who draws attention to a complementary material dimension of translation when she reminds us that "the translator is part of a material, medial and technologized ecology that shapes every aspect of mind" (p. 85).

3 On the obfuscating and naïve aspects of the 'bridge' metaphor in translation, and the role of narrative analysis in exposing the underlying violence it masks, see Baker (2005, p. 9).

4 KT has been particularly important in medicine, but it has also played an important role in other forms of science-based policy, such as climate change governance (Machen, 2018).

5 The misidentification of the object or objects referred to by a name.

RÉSUMÉS

English

This maiden issue of *Encounters in translation* is the first of two special issues on translational and narrative epistemologies. Contributors to both special issues were invited to reflect on the growing use of *translation* and *narrative* in a range of scholarly domains as tropes and lenses through which scholars in a variety of disciplines have attempted to reflect on their respective objects of enquiry, and on the interrelations between different kinds of knowledge. We attempt to situate the contributions to both issues within the broader context of the interdisciplinary study of narrative and translation. The broader discussion of these two key concepts is complemented by a brief account of the use of translation in two domains: Science and Technology Studies (focusing on Actor Network Theory) and medicine (focusing on the concept of Knowledge Translation).

Français

Le numéro inaugural de la revue *Encounters in translation* est le premier volet d'un double dossier thématique consacré aux épistémologies traductionnelles et narratives. Les auteur.es de ces deux dossiers ont été invité.es à réfléchir sur l'utilisation croissante de la *traduction* et du *récit* dans plusieurs domaines scientifiques en tant que tropes et prismes à travers

lesquels les chercheur.es de diverses disciplines réfléchissent à leur objet d'étude respectif et aux interrelations entre les différents types de connaissances. Nous tentons de situer les contributions à ces deux questions dans le contexte plus large de l'étude interdisciplinaire des récits et de la traduction. Les débats à propos de ces deux concepts clés sont complétés par un bref compte-rendu de l'utilisation de la traduction dans deux domaines : les études des sciences et des techniques (axées sur la théorie de l'acteur-réseau) et la médecine (axée sur le concept de *Knowledge Translation* ou application des connaissances).

فارسی

این نخستین شماره «رویارویی در ترجمه» یکی از دو ویژهنامه در مورد معرفتشناسیهای ترجمهای و روایی است. از دستاندرکاران هر دو ویژهنامه دعوت شد تا در مورد کاربرد روبهرشد ترجمه و روایت در طیف وسیعی از حوزههای پژوهشی تأمل کنند: کاربرد ترجمه همچون استعاره یا دریچهای که محققان در رشتههای مختلف از طریق آن در مورد موضوعات مربوط به تحقیق خود و در مورد روابط متقابل میان انواع مختلف دانش تأمل میکنند. میکوشیم مطالب هر دو ویژهنامه را در چارچوب وسیعتر مطالعات میانرشتهای روایت و ترجمه قرار دهیم. بحث گسترده تر این دو مفهوم کلیدی را شرح مختصری از کاربرد ترجمه در دو حوزه تکمیل میکند: مطالعات علم و فناوری (با تمرکز بر نظریهی شبکه بازیگر) و پزشکی (با تمرکز بر مفهوم ترجمهی دانش).

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Keywords

translation, narrative, knowledge, Actor Network Theory, Knowledge Translation

Mots-clés

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کلمات کلیدی

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