



## The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective

Andrea Pagni

To cite this article: Andrea Pagni (2015): The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective, Translation Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14781700.2015.1067639](https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2015.1067639)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2015.1067639>



Published online: 12 Sep 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 37



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective**, edited by Doris Bachmann-Medick, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2014, 271 pp., €89.95/US\$126/£67.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-11-033380-0

The initial impetus for this volume with 13 contributions came from a conference organized by the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture at the University of Giessen. The play on words (transnational/translational) in its title underscores the book's central issues. Its starting point is an uneasiness about the dominance of the Anglo-American model of cultural studies, which has "not been able to break out of its monolingual mode" (p. 2), meaning that "a transnational study of culture can never be developed beyond being an Anglo-American expansionist project" (p. 3). In this volume, transnationalization also counteracts monolingualism. Yet "transnational" is not "multilingual" per se, although the aim here is to "break open the monolingual system of cultural studies as a whole" (p. 3) and "'provincialize' Anglo-American cultural studies in particular" (p. 4.). The authors accordingly present the "transnational study of culture" as an alternative, a viable way out of the paradox. They are interested in not only overcoming national perspectives, but also allowing a multi-local production of theory (p. 9). In fact, multi-local attempts already exist, but do not enter the dominant monolingual discourse unless translated into English.

In her introduction, Bachmann-Medick deals with questions of knowledge production and distribution, knowledge legitimation and institutionalization, and the production of multidirectional flows of theories. Once more, the question arises whether multilingualism and translation should be implemented, and in what way a "universalizing perspective" could overcome the legitimized and institutionalized hegemony of English as a *Wissenschaftssprache*. A "translational perspective" is suggested in order to focus on "the transcultural uses and the practical working conditions of the translation of concepts" (p. 15). What is at stake is translation as not a service rendered to the "original", but a form of negotiation, appropriation and transformation. These operations are analysed in various chapters, which offer concrete examples. Ansgar Nünning, for instance, systematizes the transnational study of culture, comparing and contrasting cultural studies with German *Kulturwissenschaften*. He reflects upon travelling concepts and translation as ways of fostering more authentic transnational approaches to the study of culture. But just changing the terminology will not result in the development of a multidirectional and multilingual mediation of knowledge. Truly multilingual networks with symmetrically operating users are impossible as long as translation remains a unidirectional process into English and the English-speaking humanities and social sciences research community remains unwilling to invest time and energy in learning other languages.

The six subsequent contributions deal with "conceptualizations and histories". Dipesh Chakrabarty presents his own postcolonial writing as the "enactment of a process of translation/displacement of European categories" (p. 67) to show how key categories of

modernity are placed and transformed in non-European, non-Western contexts, making use of an enlarged concept of translation focusing on “displacement of both persons and categories” (p. 55). Arguing for the perception of “the indeterminacy of people(s) and language(s)”, Jon Solomon takes a biopolitical stance to critique nation states’ complicity with the project of anthropological classification, and situates translation in this area of tension as “the name for a great number of institutionalized asymmetries hiding behind a façade of Symmetry” (p. 75). Following Sakai, he considers translation as a social practice that reveals the essential indeterminacy in the constitution of subjectivity at both individual and collective levels, while clearly rejecting translation as mediation, smoothing points of discontinuity between different linguistic communities on the basis of “the principles of normalized state-language serving a homogeneous sphere of exchange” (p. 76). Andreas Langenohl draws on literary and sociological theory by Sakai, Bhatti and Latour, who see translation as a place of encounter. He discusses “translation” as a travelling concept while asking how translatable it is, postulating that “context and culture can be regarded as effects of translation, understood as acts of address, insofar as they are used by the agents themselves to make sense of the encounter” (p. 109). Bachmann-Medick traces the emergence and development of “hybridity” since the nineteenth century, showing how “processes of translation can become eye-openers for the different receptions and transformations of the model of hybridity in various knowledge traditions and intellectual cultures” (pp. 127f.). She then urges an examination of “travelling concepts not through the model of hybridization, but ... the model of translation” (p. 129), seeing translation as “a crucial practice for connecting (universalizing) concepts back to historical life-worlds and ‘local histories’ ” (p. 130). Matthias Middell’s chapter deals with cultural transfer or *Kulturtransfer/transfert culturel* as a concept that gained prominence in German and French debates, whereas Christina Lutter discusses an example from early Christianity in Western and Central Europe to emphasize that cultural translations are not restricted to modernity (pp. 160ff.). She argues against stretching the metaphor of translation beyond the limits of the source material, and for awareness of the fact that “literal, semiotic and cultural translations are always specific to their historical contexts and mostly operate in ambivalent ways” (p. 165).

The last five contributions deal with different “knowledge systems and discursive fields”. Responding to his specific brief to write about Eastern European study of culture, Boris Buden wonders in whose eyes this region appears as a general cultural concept and what may be the so-called native informant’s role, expected since 1989 to provide indigenous knowledge about the post-communist East as a space of belated modernity. Buden’s critical and provocative opposition of West and East recalls the oppositions between centre and periphery, the West and the Rest, etc., which have been articulated since the 1960s by “rest-intellectuals” on the periphery: “The East is determined by its cultural particularity, which arises only in relation to knowledge that is supposed to be universal: the study of culture on its way to inter- or transnationalisation” (p. 174). Pointing to two failed strategies in the “struggle against Western hegemony” – recognition as a process of inclusion and cultural translation, and over-identification – Buden concludes that there is no such thing as an Eastern European study of culture but only a struggle fought in the name of emancipation, suggesting that “it is only in bringing together knowledge and social cause that [the study of culture] will be able to hold its ground in this struggle” (pp. 179f.). Christa Knellwolf King offers an overview of

Australian cultural studies, while Rainer Winter compares cultural studies and *Kulturwissenschaften* in a contribution that seems to address German readers specifically. Thomas Weber compares French and German Arte channels, asking about television's potential to facilitate cross-border communication. He looks at different national viewing habits, national clichés of the advertising industry and institutional problems arising from the fact that France has a central government, and Germany a federal one. Weber concludes that “images are produced and marketed globally, but they are organized and commented upon nationally” (p. 228). Finally, Birgit Mersmann compares Mitchell's visual turn and Boehm's iconic turn. She contextualizes these within the scope of their specific traditions and analyses both projects' divergences and convergences, arguing that Mitchell has a political and social agenda concerned with popular culture and engaging political discourse, while Boehm pursues philosophical and system-oriented image studies as a legacy of cultural philosophy, anthropology and cultural criticism. In Mersmann's view, “it is art history alone ... that has found new ways to expand and transform itself into transnational cultural studies” (p. 258).

The fact that all contributions are published in English and therefore many had to be translated from German shows how tricky it is for the humanities and social sciences to seek an audience in a monolingual space controlled by the anglophone research community. The volume was conceived as an intervention in the debate concerning “the transnational study of culture” as an umbrella under which cultural studies as well as *Kulturwissenschaften* would be mutually enriched and evolve. One could ask to what extent this English-language volume will encourage a transnational study of culture in a multilingual translational perspective since, as Karen Bennett (2007) convincingly observes, academic monolingualism erases the particularities of discourses in other languages and silences alternative forms of construing knowledge. While it is a legitimate goal to intervene in a debate dominated by English, and address the readers actively engaged in it, this nonetheless underscores the asymmetry of the actors involved and the profound paradox of the situation.<sup>1</sup>

## Note

1. The first draft of this review was trilingual: I conceived it in Spanish, my mother tongue, wrote it in German, my first foreign language, and translated it into English, my third one. I am very grateful to Madeleine Stratford, a friend, literary translator and professor at the Université du Québec en Outaouais for having reworked some sentences. The review was finally proofread by the editors of *Translation Studies*.

## Reference

- Bennett, Karen. 2007. “Epistemicide! The Tale of a Predatory Discourse.” In “Translation and Ideology: Encounters and Clashes”, edited by Sonia Cunico and Jeremy Munday, 151–169. Special issue, *Translator* 13 (2).

Andrea Pagni  
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg  
 [andrea.pagni@fau.de](mailto:andrea.pagni@fau.de)

© 2015 Andrea Pagni  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2015.1067639>

### Note on contributor

Andrea Pagni is full professor in Latin American literature and culture at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany. She has edited *América Latina, espacio de traducciones* (2004) and co-edited with P. Willson and G. Payàs *Traductores y traducciones en la historia cultural de América Latina* (2011). Her publications include many articles concerning the history of literary translation in Latin America. She is a founding member of ALAETI (Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios de Traducción e Interpretación).