

# What's in a word? Problematizing translation between languages

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*An increasing number of geographers conduct research in foreign languages. Since the representation of research still largely takes place in English, we are inevitably confronted with the challenge of translation. All too often, however, translation is treated as a fait accompli and conceptual black box without problematizing the very act of translation as both political and highly subjective. In this paper I argue that critical translation must grapple not only with the semantic issues of translation but especially with the institutionalization of a naturalized meaning hegemony. This involves teasing out the political exclusions of translation as well as addressing the agency of the translating geographer. By way of practical examples I suggest paths to achieve such a critical treatment of translation.*

**Key words:** translation, language, hegemony, critical research, field research

## Introduction

For an ever-growing number of geographers, it is becoming increasingly common to work in foreign language contexts. For the majority of English-speaking geographers this usually means conducting research in a foreign language, while most of the publishing still takes place in English. Conversely, geographers whose native language is not English often have privileged linguistic access to foreign language settings, but are faced with the daunting task of publishing their research in English (see Minca 2000; Paasi 2005 for an overview of this extensive debate and Desbiens and Ruddick 2006; Rodríguez-Pose 2006 for the most recent contributions). Finally, there is the still small but increasing number of geographers who both conduct research *and* publish in different foreign languages, turning academic work into a constant juggling between three or more languages and, concomitantly, between cultures.

In each of these cases we are confronted with the challenge of translation from one language into another. Somewhat surprisingly, however, translation

as an essential everyday problem of multi-lingual geographical research has received little attention to date. The most explicit exploration of this theme is a terse article by Fiona Smith (1996) in this journal, dating back more than ten years. In it she considers issues of representation *qua* translation and possibilities of constructing hybrid spaces of research between languages as a means of displacing and decentring 'the researcher's assumption that their own language is clear in its meaning' (Smith 1996, 163). More recent contributions have alerted us to 'be attendant to the translations, heterogeneity and hybridity of concepts across and within languages' (Sidaway *et al.* 2004, 1046) and to address 'aspects of linguistic inclusion and exclusion' (Helms *et al.* 2005, 246) in translation. In their guest editorial, Caroline Desbiens and Sue Ruddick (2006) draw our attention to the situatedness of languages and the way they are structured and, in turn, structure concepts and experiences making it difficult to translate them from one language into another.

However, in the majority of cases where translation from one language into another is involved, the

translation act is still treated as a *fait accompli*. Rarely is the need to address translation as both a highly complex and a highly political enterprise acknowledged in publications that present translated textual material. Beyond the semantic and cross-cultural issues involved in more conventional accounts of translation, all too often translation is rendered a process with objective outcomes in which the translating geographer performs the role of a neutral relay. However, if we are to take seriously the problems of representation and speaking for/with others (e.g. Alcott 1990/1991; Crang 1992), we are called on to problematize translation as a political act (Spivak 1993; Temple 2005). In ignoring the politics of translation, we de-politicize the antagonisms and struggles for meaning that take place in a foreign language. Increased attention to the political implications of translation also spells out the case for broaching the translating geographer as an active agent who moulds the production of meaning.

My aim in this paper is to break the silence that surrounds translation and take a step towards achieving a more critical stance vis-à-vis translation. Most importantly, this involves problematizing translation as a political and subjective act. My concern here is less with technical deficiencies of translation which might arise due to insufficient proficiency in languages and lead to 'incorrect' or mis-translation. Without doubt, this is a field where there is ample room for improvement (cf. Esposito 2001). In this paper I would like to go beyond Sidaway *et al.* (2004) in considering not only the polyvalency of concepts in different languages but also the hegemonizing and de-politicizing effects of conventional translation. Unlike Smith (1996), I keep with the traditional notion of translation as constituting a transference of meaning from a source language into a target language. The case studies I draw on are from a variety of foreign language contexts, predominantly reflecting my own research interest in the post-socialist world.

In this article, I am primarily concerned with English as the language for the representation of foreign language research and thus as the target language of translation. The choice of English reflects its status as the de facto *lingua franca* in the academic community and its high international visibility. Without doubt, analogous arguments can be made and corresponding examples can be found for translation into languages other than English. Being a product of translation itself, this paper is invariably shaped by my own position as a male

early-career geographer who has been based and socialized for most of his academic life in Germany. As such, my concern with translation arises from the personal, everyday involvement in translation between different languages both as a product and as a producer.

### Translation and the search for equivalence

Translation in the classic sense is the replacement of text in a source language by text in a target language *equivalent* in meaning. The term 'equivalent' constitutes the bone of contention in this definition of translation, for it is well-nigh impossible to achieve full equivalence of meaning in translation. Different languages structure the world in different ways and translations constantly suffer from not being able to convey the richness of connotations, especially as they are associated with certain key words, or 'god words' (Shurmer-Smith and Hannam 1994), in other languages. Temple and Young (2004) quote Phillips, who describes the strive for equivalence as an intractable problem, since

almost any utterance in any language carries with it a set of assumptions, feelings, and values that the speaker may or may not be aware of but that the field worker, as an outsider, usually is not. (Phillips 1960, 291)

The transfer of cultural meanings, embedded in linguistic expressions, from one language to another constitutes one of the most challenging tasks of translation. For this reason, translation as the transference of meaning can always only be partial and never total (Catford 1965).

The problem of equivalence is most pressing when the meaning of a word in the source language is much richer than it can be conveyed by the corresponding word in the target language. The Russian words *derzhava*, *vlast'* and *sila* all translate as 'power' in English. This coalescence of many words into one in the process of translation inevitably erases meaning differences which existed in Russian. If we believe in the ideal of equivalence in translation, the rendering of any of those Russian words as 'power' in English necessarily begs further clarification. *Vlast'*, for example, implicates authority, rule and usually refers to state or territorial power (Ermakov *et al.* 2004). In modern usage, *vlast'* has a variety of meanings: in the singular it refers to a form of governance and the ability to assert one's political will, whereas in the plural it may refer to the people endowed with *vlast'* (Sklyarevskaya 2001, 139ff.). A

look into the etymology of the word clarifies the territorial connection: in ancient Russian it denoted 'territory'. Similar words in other Slavic languages mean 'fatherland' (Czech), or 'property' (Slovenian). *Vlast'* therefore denotes the fusion of political power, state and territory and originates in the conception that, in order to exist, a state must assert power over territory. *Sila* on the other hand refers to power as a policing force, as military strength. A sentence like 'Russia must assert its power in the great game of international politics' carries completely different connotations whether it is phrased as 'Russia must assert its *sila*' or as 'Russia must assert its *vlast'*'.

*Derzhava*, finally, transports yet another meaning of power which is distinct but not unrelated to *sila* and *vlast'*. It denotes the state as a power, foregrounding the aspects of strength, assertiveness and cultural uniqueness. *Derzhava* is an approving qualifier, often referring to *sila*-full states, and frequently applied to Russia as an ideal of Russian statehood. It reflects a primacy given to state interests in civil society and thus the preference of a strong, paternalistic state (Allensworth 1998; Graham 2000). The status of Russia as a *derzhava*, and not merely as a state-power, is woven as some kind of mythical leitmotif into Russian self-conception. As a title of honour it is associated not only with Russian military strength but also with cultural, musical or literary achievements. The idea of *derzhavnost'* in Russia, i.e. the idea of 'great-poweriness' and the view that Russia ought to play an important role in world affairs (Kolstø 2004), can be traced back to myths of Russia as the Third Rome originating in the early sixteenth century, which identify the Russian empire as cultural and political successor to Rome in the world (Sidorov 2006). Talk about Russia as a *derzhava* has been rekindled under Putin, whose politics is widely regarded as geared towards restoring Russia's status as a *derzhava* (Tsygankov 2005).

Uniform translations of *vlast'*, *sila* and *derzhava* as 'power' normalize and neutralize the historical, cultural and social connotations that resonate with each of these terms. A problematization of the different notions of power present in the Russian language would have added much to an otherwise remarkable series of articles on Russian geopolitics and the opinion of ordinary people (O'Loughlin *et al.* 2004a 2004b 2005; O'Loughlin and Talbot 2005). It would have been illuminating to know that the Russian expressions 'power ministries' and 'balance of powers' (O'Loughlin *et al.* 2004b, 314) derive from *sila* and whether the expression 'center

of power' (O'Loughlin *et al.* 2004b, 291) refers to *sila* or to *vlast'*. Similarly, the term 'alliance of "civilized powers"' (O'Loughlin *et al.* 2004b, 287) transports more meaning than the translation would have us suspect. One challenge of translation therefore consists in adequately grasping the complexity of meaning in the source language and trying to transfer it to the target language. According to the principle of equivalence, the researcher must strive for meaning accuracy in the choice of terms in the target language.

### Translation and the search for the political

Up to this point, my discussion of equivalence in translation has implicitly assumed that there is a way of rendering better translations, translations that are truer to some transcendental, original meaning. Sherry Simon (1996, 138) maintains, however, that 'the process of meaning transfer has less to do with *finding* the cultural inscription of a term rather than with reconstructing its value'. Even meticulous attention to meaning equivalence cannot guard against the premature closure effected through translation which establishes artificial objectivities that present the translated text as containing certain objective 'findings' rather than as a contingent representation (Temple 2005).

Beyond the strive for equivalence, researchers engaged in translation must acknowledge that translated language is not simply a neutral medium of communication but inextricably bound up with politics. Through the inevitable collapse of meaning differences, translation assumes a political quality. It becomes political by re-articulating meaning in the target language and instituting this meaning as valid vis-à-vis other possible meanings, thus eliding the fundamental polyvalency of expressions in the source language. Since this substitution mostly happens without problematizing it, conventional translation is also deeply de-politicizing: it glosses over the political act of exclusion involved in every kind of translation. Much in the sense of James Ferguson's (1990) *The Anti-Politics Machine* uncritical translation naturalizes the translated text in the target language as an objectivity which came into being in the course of a seemingly unpolitical act. However, this act only seems unpolitical for the silent assertion of hegemony of the white male translator that undergirds it.

Consider the following excerpt of a translated speech by Communist Party leader Gennadiy

Zyuganov in the campaign for the 1996 presidential elections in Russia and his use of spatial semantics.

*Fatherland [Otechestvo]* is language, culture, and distinctiveness. Today we are deprived of the right to know our own history. Read our textbooks on history and literature – you'll see that the main things on which the Russian consciousness is based have been expunged. The best examples of culture are expunged from there. There is no longer any Pushkin, Dostoevsky, or Tolstoy; no Sholokhov, no Nekrasov. No Soviet history, no patriotism, not even the word *Motherland [Rodina]* (Central Electoral Commission 1996; emphases and text in brackets added)

In order not to create confusion, the translators of this speech have used different words in English for the respective Russian words *otechestvo* and *rodina* which would both translate as fatherland (or, alternatively, homeland or motherland). However, while for English speakers fatherland, motherland or homeland are largely interchangeable and a-political concepts, for Russian speakers *otechestvo* and *rodina* are imbued with rather different senses of place which also transport political overtones.

The passage from Zyuganov's speech provides an excellent illustration. Zyuganov uses *Otechestvo* and *Rodina* in the capitalized form in which they are substitutes for Russia as a nation. Whereas lower case *otechestvo* predominantly finds application in solemn, official contexts, often relating to the greatness, distinctiveness and achievements of Russia, *rodina* tends to be a more low-key expression of the emotion of longing and belonging (Blickle 1999; Sandomirskaya 2001). It contains the root *rod*, which means family or kin and of which words like *roditeli* (parents) or *rodstvenniki* (relatives) are derived. Upon returning to his family in his home village, a man would say he is returning to his *rodina*, not to his *otechestvo*. The national anthem of the Soviet Union on the other hand does not speak of *rodina* but of *otechestvo*.

More than merely denoting a notion of descent, *rodina* expresses an emotional bond between the people and the land (Zhdanova 2004 2005). As such, it comes close to the German term *Heimat*, which was addressed as a symbol of German identification by Guntram Herb (2004). Herb contends that *Heimat* cannot be translated into English as 'home'. It is a politicized term with a wider range of connotations (153). Drawing on a monograph by Boa and Palfreyman (2000), he conceptualizes *Heimat* as representing a deep-seated emotional

attachment to the area of descent which caters for the psychological need for security, identity and belonging through territorial bonding. We may surmise that it is not by coincidence that *Rodina* and *Otechestvo* were chosen as the names of two political parties in Russia. In this case, uncritical translation does not capture the array of politicized meanings that are associated with *rodina* and *otechestvo* and ignores the ideological significances underlying the two expressions.

When this kind of uncritical translation becomes institutionally consolidated, it acquires a dynamic in its own right, reproducing itself in a way which is usually completely uncoupled from its original source. It then turns into a discourse which constitutes the objects it speaks of and draws its authority from established social practice. Discourses as naturalized translations exercise political power through the silences they inevitably produce by defining the limits of the speakable. In academia, postmodern epistemology is a fascinating example of discourses which originate in translations, usually of French social theorists, but since then have entered into a completely autonomous circle of re-citation and reproduction, often with only faint relations to the original texts (see Müller 2006).

In addition to the search for meaning equivalence in translation as it has been discussed in the previous section, the translating geographer is also drawn into the politics of translation. In order to achieve a translation mindful of its political and hegemonizing effects, researchers must tease out the political element in their translations. The aim of critical translations in this sense would not be to fashion 'better' translations through achieving a higher degree of equivalence but rather to destabilize and denaturalize the hegemony of the translated text. At this point the discussion of the politics of translation links up with questions of representation and the agency of the researcher.

### Towards critical translation: practical suggestions

In the account of her ethnographic research in northern Pakistan, Kathryn Besio (2003) reports being asked by a local woman, Fatima, for the English translation of the Balti word 'shilang'. Besio immediately replies that the word Fatima is looking for is 'shit' but then frets whether 'dung' would have been more 'appropriate'. In the representation of research there is obviously a difference whether the

women of Askole in northern Pakistan are represented as gathering *shilang*, shit or dung. Dung is a rather sanitized, technical term which establishes some objective distance between the observer and the observed, whereas shit conveys a more colloquial note and might therefore be considered a register closer to the intended meaning. *Shilang* finally may seem the choice which affects the intended meaning least by keeping the original term. Whatever the term used in the representation of the research, translation is involved in any case: from 'field'-*shilang* to 'represented'-dung, 'represented'-shit and 'represented'-*shilang*. Ultimately, there is no neutral method of translation. Translation is not merely representation or reproduction – it creates something new and unique.

However, the view of translation as being inevitably 'flawed' and distorting is politically dis-empowering (Smith 1996, 163). Instead of striving for an unattainable 'correct' translation, translation must seek to confront premature closure by bolstering up the undecidability and indeterminacy of critical translation (Müller 2005). The conceptualization of the translation act as a *fait accompli* in most research masks translation as a seemingly neutral exercise which merely needs to be managed. Had Kathryn Besio left out her prologue and written of dung straight away without ever introducing the untranslated expression, we would never have known the complexity of meaning that dung as *shilang* is associated with, we would never have realized the fallacy of our academic language. In order to address this fallacy, Temple and Young (2004) argue strongly in favour of making the translation act visible to the reader so as to avoid an all-too-easy categorization and familiarity. Translation as a meaning-fixating, meaning-excluding and thus as a political process and the translating geographer as its active agent must be explicitly problematized if critical translation is to be achieved.

Awareness for the political effects of translation must first reside with the translating geographer before it can be passed on to the audience. Here we can take Gayatri Spivak literally when she writes that 'if you are interested in talking about the other, and/or in making a claim to be the other, it is crucial to learn other languages' (1993, 192). Everyone who has gone through the nitty-gritty of learning foreign languages can attest to the fact that the personal investment in terms of time and effort is considerable (cf. Gade 2001; Veeck 2001; Watson 2004). Although learning a foreign language is far

from guaranteeing automatic membership of an authentic community or privileged access to its experiences, it is the *condicio sine qua non* for discussing the establishment of meaning hegemony associated with translation.

The naturalizing effects of translation are exacerbated if the textual material one is drawing on is not in the original language but has been translated by somebody else and the researcher does not have a command of the original language. In his analysis of the articulation of differential identities in Russian foreign policy, Christopher Hopf (2005, 241f.) reports a case where the political usage of different words in Russian is homogenized in the English translation. When addressing the people of Russia and Europe, Vladimir Putin employs the term *narody*, whereas when talking about the people of Russia and the United States he uses *liudi*. Both words translate as 'people' in English, but while *narody* implies kinship or blood ties, *liudi* simply refers to a collection of unrelated people. Through deliberate semantics Putin here issues a subtle political declaration of closeness and distance which is depoliticized in an uncritical translation. Back translation can be employed as a technique with which to check whether the original meaning has been captured well enough in the target language to allow a translation back into the source language which yields the original text (Edwards 1998).

The politics of translation largely eludes researchers who have to rely on translated material only and spells out the need for profound training in the respective research language. Even if they are reasonably proficient in the field language, translating geographers are still left with the fundamental problem of how to problematize translation vis-à-vis the audience. Following Temple and Young (2004), one avenue would lead via a visual setting-apart and deliberate alienation of the target language by keeping source language expressions as markers of difference in the target language text. In translation studies this technique is called *holus-bolus*. Frequently, it is only when we are faced with the 'untranslatability' of a certain expression that we resort to *holus-bolus* as a technique of translation. However, it can also serve as an instrument to problematize the fixation of meaning through translation and draw attention to the contingency of meaning. As Smith points out, '[t]he slippages and overlaps in meaning which are apparent when the foreign language de-naturalizes key concepts can produce new understandings of the research' (1996, 164). As

a rule, the awareness for the contingency of meaning in translation seems to reside more with non-native speakers of the target language. In a contribution in this journal, Helms *et al.* (2005, 244), for example, reflect on the political and interpretative implications of alternative translations of the German word *Sicherheit* as English 'security' or 'safety'. By situating the expression from the source language in its social and cultural context and explicating its genealogy, the critical translating geographer can generate awareness for the polyvalency of meaning.

Holus-bolus translation vitiates the all-too-easy identification of expressions in the target language with pre-formed concepts and resists premature categorization (Temple 1997). The meaning of *Heimat* is thus not deciphered as 'home', but, for example, as 'foreign – specifically German – feeling of longing for and belonging to a place, emotional bond to one's place of origin, somewhat comparable to the English notion of "home"'. As holus-bolus translation makes necessary an explication of the meaning ascription by the translating geographer, it circumvents the tacit imposition of meaning typical of conventional translation and foregrounds the authorial component in translation.

Writing on Russian geopolitical discourses, Mark Bassin and Konstantin Aksenov (2006) and Pål Kolstø (2004) make extensive use of holus-bolus translation of concepts from the Russian language, such as *derzhava* or *derzhavnost'*. In so doing, they disrupt the easy one-to-one replacement of words in conventional translation. At the same time, they achieve a significantly higher degree of transparency of the translation process by explicitly identifying it as such and offer speakers of the source language the opportunity to critically assess the authors' translation against one's own interpretations. Thus, the discussion of translation problems can both serve as a validity check for interpretations (Temple and Young 2004, 168) and as an instrument of denaturalizing the target language (Smith 1996).

Being explicit about the role of the translator constitutes another central step towards establishing the indeterminacy of critical translation. The target text does not encapsulate an objective equivalence but rather a contingent interpretation and situated practice of knowledge production (Rose 1997). It is a reflection of the 'intellectual autobiography' (Stanley 1990) of the translator and as such deeply subjective. In the act of translation, the translating geographer inscribes her/his imperial self into the translation (Dodson 2005; Spivak 1993). Thus, in

the translation act the text in the source language is effectively rewritten by the translator. In the work of the translator,

gray areas between languages – the borderlines – begin to appear. Traces, marks of dissipated meaning, once again become visible – neither intact nor objectified – but still somehow living on, surviving. (Gentzler 2001, 165; cf. also Derrida 1985)

The open discussion of translation as a political act facilitates the re-appearance of the invisible translator, the *éminence grise* and black box in a large part of foreign language research.

In her representation of research on post-socialist transformation in eastern Germany, Kathrin Hörschelmann (2002) first positions herself in relation to her research text, before she proceeds to present the translated extracts of interviews with German-speaking interview partners. Hörschelmann introduces herself as having been sympathetic to the prevailing political dogmas when growing up in the German Democratic Republic and describes her feelings of shock and violation when faced with the demise of the socialist regime. Framed in this kind of intellectual autobiographical sketch we, as readers, can see the translating geographer emerge from underneath the cloak of invisibility. This preparation allows us to read her translations in a different light and we may begin to understand why she decides to leave expressions such as *die Wende* in the source language and frequently opts to supplement English translations with their German counterparts in cases where the German terms are inherently politicized.

## Conclusion

In the representation of foreign language research, the act of translation needs to be put back onto the agenda of critical researchers. Only by explicitly problematizing translation not only as the search for equivalence but also as a political articulation can we hope to uncover the hegemonic fixations that are associated with translation. The problematization of translation requires us to grapple with the polyvalency of any translation instead of uncritically instituting the sanitizing hegemony of the target language. The act of translation needs to be identified as such to render it conceptually open for critical evaluation. It is especially in the wake of the increasing diffusion of poststructuralist epistemology that we should be attuned to the political effects of translation. The concept of floating signifiers, which

result from the radical disconnection of signifiers from the signified, points to the openness of words to the ascription of meaning in the process of translation.

The take on translation presented in this paper challenges us to re-think our criteria for distinguishing between 'good' translations and 'mis-translations'. Good translations are critical translations that recognize the impossibility of meaning equivalence and conceptualize translation as the process 'where meaning hops into the spacy emptiness between two named historical languages' (Spivak 1993, 180). Critical translations make the reader trip over the text, make the reader pause. A poststructuralist take on translation does not render the traditional concern with equivalence in translation completely obsolete, though. Instead, the impossibility of achieving equivalence all the more spells out the case for critical translation understood as awareness vis-à-vis the naturalizing effects of translation and sensitivity towards meaning differences.

In this article I have suggested practical approaches to achieving critical translation. Holus-bolus translation keeps words in the source language as a visual marker of indeterminacy and helps denaturalize the target language in translation. It facilitates the problematization of the fixation of meaning and helps bring the political element of translation to the fore. This political element tends to elude us when only working with textual material which has not been translated by the researcher. Drawing on already translated material masks the antagonisms and struggles to articulate key signifiers in the source language. The recognition of translation as a subjectivity also calls for bringing the translator in, who has all too often been marginalized and treated as a mere relay of meaning. All of these aspects are, of course, inevitably predicated on the language proficiency of the translating geographer. Finally, in the practical exercise of critical translation for representing our research, it is equally true what Luiza Bialasiewicz and Claudio Minca have claimed metaphorically for translation as a geopolitical paradigm for Europe:

Translation is therefore always a conscious ethical-political choice; a model of political action that not only presumes a respect for diversity but also an element of (not only linguistic) hospitality. Choosing the model of translation means accepting imperfection, accepting incompleteness, all the while striving for the best translation possible; it means an attention, an openness to the Other with whom we seek

communication. It means respect of *all* the Others in the process of translation. (Bialasiewicz and Minca 2005, 370)

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