

University of Groningen

## Gavagai? The International Politics of Translation

Herborth, Benjamin

*Published in:*  
The Politics of Translation in International Relations

*DOI:*  
[10.1007/978-3-030-56886-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56886-3_2)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Herborth, B. (2021). Gavagai? The International Politics of Translation. In Z. G. Capan, F. dos Reis, & M. Grasten (Eds.), *The Politics of Translation in International Relations* (pp. 23-41). (Palgrave Studies in International Relations ). Palgrave MacMillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56886-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56886-3_2)

**Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

**Take-down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*



# Gavagai? The International Politics of Translation

*Benjamin Herborth*

## INTRODUCTION

To theorise ‘translation’, in International Relations (IR) or elsewhere, is to problematise it. To problematise the concept of translation becomes fruitful partly because one may find it inherently interesting and productive for a variety of other theoretical pursuits, and partly because it takes, at least implicitly, issue with a position which renders translation unproblematic. This is to say that problematising translation is always a dialogical, and never a monological affair. We render translation problematic because we take issue with the consequences of rendering translation unproblematic. Who, then, makes translation unproblematic, and what are the consequences?

The chapter seeks to unpack these questions in four steps. In a first step, I briefly review how translation is made unproblematic in contexts as diverse as the literature on international norms, actor-network theory, and, more broadly, in a generalised attitude toward social research

---

B. Herborth (✉)

Department of International Relations and International Organization,  
University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [b.a.herborth@rug.nl](mailto:b.a.herborth@rug.nl)

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature  
Switzerland AG 2021

Z. G. Capan et al. (eds.), *The Politics of Translation in International  
Relations*, Palgrave Studies in International Relations,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56886-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56886-3_2)

commonly dubbed ‘positivism’. In a second step, I discuss in some detail Willard Van Orman Quine’s influential take on the indeterminacy of translation—not in order to assert a somehow foundational status for what is to follow, but rather in order to highlight how it effectively disrupts routinised attempts to render translation unproblematic. A third step discusses these attempts in the broader horizon of a quest for certainty, a longing for knowledge to stand on a firm and solid ground, which contrasts sharply with the reflexive interplay of social relations of translation. In a fourth and concluding step, I discuss the politics of both translation and untranslatability in terms of its inextricably international dimension.

### MAKING TRANSLATION UNPROBLEMATIC

A standard answer to the first question—who renders translation unproblematic?—would be: *positivism*. Positivism has come to serve as a generic umbrella concept helpfully, if sweepingly, denoting folks that take stuff for granted. While stakes in the critique of positivism are rightfully high, and probably higher than those overly fascinated with recent turns to method, practice or anything really that comes with a comforting ring of concreteness would care to admit, sweeping generalisations are unlikely to get us (i.e. problematisers of translation) very far in terms of conceptual clarification. An initial attempt to unpack the notion of positivism is likely to quickly arrive at ways in which meaning is taken to be stable, reference is taken to be unequivocal and unambiguous, and translation, by implication, a merely technical exercise the challenges of which can be safely reduced to ‘getting it right’.<sup>1</sup> This may serve as an initial answer to the second question—what are the consequences of rendering translation unproblematic? In a nutshell, rendering translation unproblematic serves to simultaneously render unproblematic that which is to be translated. In the positivist gaze, the object of translation becomes both natural and devoid of resistance to smooth circulation. *Translation as transfer*, to make use of the distinction helpfully introduced in the introductory chapter to this volume (Capan et al. 2021), writes the politics out of translation. We can, thus, only ever trade in communicative commodities that are transferable without friction.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. the critique of trivialisation in Heinz von Foerster (2007) and second-order cybernetics.

Hence, the discussion of positivism in this context is not a purely methodological or metatheoretical one. It is, on the contrary, a short-cut to zoom in on the implicit understandings of politics at stake in various conceptualisations of translation. The burgeoning debate on norms in IR is a case in point. Mobilising norms as ‘ideational factors’ capable of better accounting for international outcomes than ‘material factors’ such as power and interest, the early contributions to the norms debate started with an a priori juxtaposition of norms on one side and power on the other (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Risse et al. 1999). Deviating from earlier attempts to situate norms in the broader context of legal, social, and political theory (Kratochwil 1989; Onuf 1989), the norms literature thus bought into the explanatory routines of a variable-centred approach to social research. Such a variable-centred approach to social research, however, is predicated on the possibility of establishing a clear and unequivocal link between theoretically derived hypotheses and empirical observation. This is to say that the referential relation between word and object must be taken as unproblematic. One norm must yield a clear expectation of a particular behavioural outcome, which can then be observed as compliance.

Accordingly, when translation enters the picture as translation of global, international norms to local contexts, little room can be left for interpretive ambiguity (cf. Jackson 2006, pp. 19–24). This is why Matthias Hofferberth and Christian Weber (2015) have argued that the norms debate is ‘lost in translation’. They hold that ‘crucial constructivist insights—that norms are negotiated constantly in social interaction and that they cannot be separated from the meanings actors attach to them—has been lost in the attempt to translate broader sociotheoretical claims into neopositivist research designs that would, supposedly, enable constructivists to challenge the established approaches’ (Hofferberth and Weber 2015, p. 76). The result is a deterministic culturalism, which sits uneasily with the ambition to theorise social change against the stifling and static frameworks of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Cultural dopes do not effect social transformation, they are only affected by it—which in turn presupposes that the direction of social transformation is always already known.<sup>2</sup> Internal critiques of the norm debate have

<sup>2</sup>The term ‘cultural dope’ is Harold Garfinkel’s (see Garfinkel 1984).

pointed to the fundamentally contested nature of norms (Wiener 2008) or, more recently, sought to democratise translation by allowing for adaptive feedback-loops (Zimmermann 2017). The fundamental coordinates of the norm debate, however, remain centred around a conception of both translation and reference as unproblematic.

Perhaps the most prominent alternative account of translation comes from actor-network theory (ANT), which offers a distinct and different theoretical grounding. The core reference is, routinely, Michel Callon's now-classical article on scallops—or rather on how scientists try to make their knowledge of scallops in St Brieuc Bay practically useful. Callon (1984, p. 196) explicitly frames this as a 'new approach to the study of power'. He specifically traces how a group of marine biologists involved in a controversy over the conservation of scallops attempts to 'impose themselves and their definition of the situation on others' (*ibid.*). Specifically, Callon (1984) identifies four steps of translation:

- (a) problematisation: the researchers sought to become indispensable to other actors in the drama by defining the nature and the problems of the latter and then suggesting that these would be resolved if the actors negotiated the 'obligatory passage point' of the researchers' programme of investigation;
- (b) intersement: a series of processes by which the researchers sought to lock the other actors into the roles that had been proposed for them in that programme;
- (c) enrolment: a set of strategies in which the researchers sought to define and interrelate the various roles they had allocated to others;
- (d) mobilisation: a set of methods used by the researchers to ensure that supposed spokesmen for various relevant collectivities were properly able to represent those collectivities and not betrayed by the latter. (p. 196)

Callon's re-articulation of translation in terms of a distinct attempt to study power by tracing actors breaks with the presumption of unilinear development. Interestingly and unusually, he develops his account of translation not through a success story. It is precisely the failure of the marine biologists which allows him to conceptualise translation sociologically as an open-ended process. If distilled into an analytical framework (as gleaned here from Callon's abstract) and hailed as the core concept of actor-network theory (Latour 2005), however, the new sociology of

translation runs the risk of confronting an old problem of autology, i.e. it runs into trouble when applied onto itself. There seems to be little concern with the translation of translation (less so in Callon, but rather in the canonised version of his account, see, e.g., Best and Walter 2013). Isolating these four steps may make perfect sense for the purpose of Callon's study of the scallops of St Brieuc Bay. Abstracting from this particular context and rendering them into a sociological model of translation applicable to a wide and diverse range of phenomena, however, would seem to require precisely such a translation of translation. Absent such conceptual efforts, actor-network theory runs the risk of practicing precisely the flat empiricism that Quine (1969, 2013) seeks to problematise. If this may seem like a very unlikely critique of actor-network theory, consider a distinction between empiricist contextualisation ('this is how it works in this particular instance') and the question of how to conceptualise contexts/orders in their different spatial, temporal, social delineations (e.g. Renn 2006). This is precisely where Latour's and Callon's commitment to ontological flatness prevents them from understanding translation as constitutive of boundary-drawing mechanisms. In the words of Till Jansen (2017):

Because it is the network that constitutes actors and agency, the different ontologies that may have been there at the beginning, are step by step replaced with the ontology of the network. A new, all-dominant ontology arises that consumes the previous plurality of ontologies—which Latour freely admits when he states that ANT could also be called actor-rhizome ontology: there is only the ontology of the actor-network. Actors can be subtracted or added to this ontology by the actor-network distributing agency. But they cannot have their ontology, their way of relating to the world. (p. 201f)

Hence, the two perhaps most common conceptualisations of translation in IR fall short when it comes to articulating translation as transformation, i.e. as imbricated in an ongoing and open-ended process of social transformation. From such an angle, a reflexive account of translation would need to start from an acknowledgment of fundamental difference—in terms of language, contexts or social registers among which translation *can be* problematic. This is where Quine's influential account of radical translation, and in particular his insistence on the indeterminacy of translation, comes in.

## QUINE ON THE INDETERMINACY OF TRANSLATION

The assumption to be criticised here, namely that translation could be unproblematic, operates on the implicit trust that the relation between words and objects can be thought of in analogy to an imaginary museum of all things in which the only challenge remaining is to find the correct nametags for each exhibit. The example is taken from analytical philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine, who capitalises on the rhetorical effect of the thought experiment (invoking absurdity), and discards it as the ‘myth of the museum’ (Quine 1969). Should IR scholars bother to care about such intricacies of theoretical philosophy, is there any value-added to be extracted?<sup>3</sup> Quine is interesting to me here not because of an allegedly foundational role of theoretical philosophy in relation to social research. He seems interesting to me rather in that his discussion of translation, in particular, can serve to demonstrate that once we turn to the alleged foundations of a social science that prides itself on its solid foundations, core concepts such as meaning, reference, representation begin to look shakier than both proponents, and critics of ‘positivism’ in contemporary social science appear to presume. Hence, the discussion of Quine will lead back, very briefly, to Carl Hempel’s notion of covering laws, inspiring the quest for empirical regularity as the ultimate goal of inquiry (Hempel 1942).

In *Word and Object*, dedicated to positivist-in-chief Rudolf Carnap, Quine (2013) introduces the problem of translation as follows:

manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another. In countless places they will diverge in giving, as their respective translations of a sentence of the one language, sentences of the other language which stand to each other in no plausible sort of equivalence however loose. The firmer the direct links of a sentence with non-verbal stimulation, of course, the less drastically its translations can diverge from one another from manual to manual. (p. 27)

Quine is quick to reject a simple and obvious line of argument here, namely that translation becomes progressively more difficult as levels of

<sup>3</sup>The somewhat notorious language of ‘value-added’ itself encounters a curious problem of translation: the German *Mebrwert* translates as both value-added and surplus value. In English-language debates of the mysterious value-added the latter connotation is lost—and with it the connotation of dispossession.

abstractness and complexity increase, and moves to an example that is meant to elucidate the indeterminacy of translation even under the most unfavourable conditions. This is more than just a display of nuts-and-bolts research ethics—going for the hard case. By zooming in on examples in which statements correspond immediately to what appears to appear in front of our eyes, Quine also engages with the notorious protocol sentences of logical positivism, critical rationalism and the ensuing disputes.<sup>4</sup> Haunted by the linguistic turn it has helped to bring about, custodians of Science took refuge in deictic gestures—the ability to point at stuff and name it. It is precisely at this level that Quine’s discussion of ‘radical translation’ seeks to make an intervention.

Quine thus introduces another thought experiment. How would a field linguist, trying to acquire an understanding of a ‘native’ language he is unfamiliar with, go about this task? To Quine, translation is radical to the extent that we are dealing with the ‘language of a hitherto untouched people’ (Quine 2013, p. 25).<sup>5</sup> Quine thus imagines a linguist’s interaction with a local informant who would, in an effort to overcome the language barrier, point at things and name them. ‘A rabbit scurries by, the native says “Gavagai” and the linguist notes down the sentence “Rabbit” (or “Lo, a rabbit”) as tentative translation, subject to testing in further cases’ (Quine 2013, p. 25). But testing is difficult. Even if we had an understanding of certain utterances referring to, say ‘rabbit’, ‘animal’, ‘white’, ‘dinner’ or ‘dangerous’, not knowing though which is which, it would be impossible to determine the exact meaning of ‘Gavagai’. Thus, the hypothetical linguist is left with repetition, trial and error. Pointing to another rabbit, saying ‘Gavagai’, observing reactions of assent or dissent and moving on from there. Quine further complicates things, though, making gestures of assent or dissent just as problematic, as the linguist could not possibly know words for ‘yes’ and ‘no’, and accompanying gestures, too, are subject to cultural variation. Considering that such hurdles may be overcome and clear signals of assent and dissent are established, it would

<sup>4</sup>The debate famously ends with Popper admitting that observation without theory is impossible. Empirical social science, however, unimpressed, simply preferred to move on. In principle, there is nothing wrong with such an attitude, philosophy of science as an attempt to legislate research seems ill-fated in any case. It’s strangely ironical, though, if precisely those who insist on the capital ‘s’ in science disconnect from broader scholarly debates on science (see Kessler 2012).

<sup>5</sup>Evidently a sitting duck for more critical takes on encounters such as Doty (1996) or Sajed (2013).



still be unclear what the speaker of the unknown language is assenting to. Is it the observation of a rabbit, or the fact that someone else went off chasing a giraffe (Quine's example) or simply an utterance testifying to the impression that this is all really awkward (my example)?

Quine draws a hard and fast line between what he calls 'stimulus'—that which prompts the utterance 'Gavagai'—and an actual rabbit (or any other object that may serve as an external point of reference for the word). Departing from the behaviourism his choice of language may indicate, stimulus to Quine simply refers to an understanding of the conditions under which 'Gavagai' becomes an appropriate thing to say. Beyond the confines of the thought experiment, 'Gavagai' thus becomes a crucial example in Quine's broader discussion of the indeterminacy of translation. As we do not know the language to which 'Gavagai' belongs, there is a multiplicity of possible translations into any known language. This is what Quine (1969, p. 38) refers to as the 'inscrutability of references'.

However, the example also serves to demonstrate more generally that not only reference (between word and object) is inscrutable. Sentences, too, always allow for a multiplicity of equally valid translations with potentially different meaning. If indeterminacy were only problematic at the level of the reference of individual and isolated expressions to some object, a quick and easy fix could be available by situating such expressions in the context of an established semantic framework. 'Mars' may possibly refer to the fourth planet in our solar system, the Roman god of war and a chocolate bar. This is unlikely to create much confusion (outside the confines of theoretical philosophy), though, because each of these possible uses of 'Mars' will take place in the context of a sentence which makes unequivocally clear what it is that we are referring to. Hence, it is important for Quine to insist that entire sentences, too, are subject to radical indeterminacy. This is what Quine calls 'holophrastic indeterminacy'. The indeterminacy ensuing from all this is 'radical' in that

rival systems of analytical hypotheses can conform to all speech dispositions within each of the languages concerned and yet dictate, in countless cases, utterly disparate translations; not mere mutual paraphrases, but translations each of which would be excluded by the other system of translation. Two such translations might even be patently contrary in truth value, provided there is no stimulation that would encourage assent to either. (Quine 2013, p. 66)

Even if we acknowledge the inscrutability of references and holophrastic indeterminacy, however, it could be possible to resolve the general problem of indeterminacy by means of introducing a higher-order language which serves as a *tertium comparationis*, an external benchmark adjudicating among alternative reference options and thus conveniently getting rid of the problem of indeterminacy by climbing up a ladder of abstraction.<sup>6</sup> This, too, is discarded by Quine. His arguments regarding the indeterminacy of translation and the inscrutability of reference are directed precisely against logical empiricism (and specifically against the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths). They prepare the ground for his fundamental critique of empiricism, which discards the possibility of adjudicating among alternative theoretical accounts by means of empirical observation and reference to an externally given object.

Quine thus leaves us with a paradoxical twist. Formulated firmly from within the tradition of analytical philosophy (and in critical continuation of Carnap's work), he contributes to a tradition identifying philosophy with a quest for certainty, while at the same time radically undermining it. From the point of view of this particular tradition, securing stable foundations for a view of (social) science rooted in empirical observations of an externally given world and equipped with stable conceptual frameworks had long seemed to be beyond question. Questioning just that is what affords Quine's discussion of the indeterminacy of translation its classical status. This is why Hilary Putnam can, somewhat ironically, refer to Quine's work on radical translation in 1974 as being 'discussed in journal article after journal article and [...] the topic of at least fifty percent of graduate student conversation nowadays' (Putnam 1974, p. 25). Quips aside, Putnam (1974, p. 28) does acknowledge Quine's argument as 'what may well be the most fascinating and the most discussed philosophical argument since Kant's Transcendental Deduction of the Categories'. Somewhat ironically, thus, one of the most thorough refutations of core assumptions of a view of social research as a Science which is predicated on adjudicating among competing truth claims by means of clear and unequivocal reference to an externally given reality comes out of the very debates which can credibly command competence and authority in the scientific discussion of Science. In order to begin to sort this out, it may

<sup>6</sup>In Carnap, this is precisely the function of the distinction between object languages and a (logically pristine) metalanguage (see Carnap 1996).

help to zoom in on what is presupposed in the insistence on the scientific character (narrowly conceived) of social research: the quest for certainty.

### THE QUEST FOR REGULARITY AS QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

Consider to this end Carl Hempel's discussion of the covering law model (Hempel 1942). The covering law model not only puts a premium on the quest for empirical regularities—constant conjunctions—as that which is to be explained, it also espouses so strong a version of the unity of science proposition that the thorny question of the scientific nature of the unity of science proposition is effectively rendered unproblematic. Hempel (1942, p. 35) contends that 'general laws have quite analogous functions in history and in the natural sciences, that they form an indispensable instrument of historical research, and that they even constitute the common basis of various procedures which are often considered as characteristic of the social in contradistinction to the natural sciences'. What then, to Hempel, is a general law? 'By a general law, we shall here understand a statement of universal conditional form which is capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed by suitable empirical findings' (ibid.). Hempel goes on to discuss the implications of the notion of law, in particular the presumption that the 'relevant evidence' is readily available. As he considers that to be 'irrelevant for our purpose, we shall frequently use the term "hypothesis of universal form" or briefly "universal hypothesis" instead of "general law", and state the condition of satisfactory confirmation separately, if necessary' (ibid.). General laws are thus introduced as particular types of statements, their universal form being purely linguistic, and the question of if and how they refer to the world is deferred (Kessler 2012). And, if Quine does get it right, there is simply no way of ever catching it up to a clear point of externally validating reference. It has to be postponed indefinitely—a proto-Derridean punchline interestingly disruptive of the paradigmatic order of things. Gavagai, indeed.

There would, then, be a simple answer to the initial question of how the problem of translation can be rendered unproblematic: by excluding the world from our considerations and by shifting the quest for certainty from a problem of reference to a problem of internal logical consistency. Such a counter-intuitive solution, radically counter-intuitive in particular for conventionally scientific accounts of social research, however, presupposes in turn a starting point of absolute doubt seeking absolute certainty. Pragmatically (in the pragmatist sense), it is precisely this type of absolute,

Cartesian doubt which gives rise to the quest for certainty. It fetishizes the question of correspondence with an externally given ground at the expense of correspondence to a concrete problem that we are confronted with. This is, incidentally, why Dewey's (1960) *Quest for Certainty* comes with the subtitle *A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (cf. Herborth 2012).

It becomes apparent, then, that a conceptualisation of translation in terms of the unproblematic transfer of stable meaning not only misses out on some of the more mind-boggling intricacies of philosophy of science and language. It is rooted precisely in a series of dichotomies traditionally constitutive of Western thought: not only knowledge and action but also theory and praxis, subject and object, knowing and the known. *Translation as transfer*, presupposing reference to be unproblematic and indeed scrutable, is thus a Western invention not just in the sense of its intellectual place of origin. It is, moreover, firmly rooted in a series of metaphysical presumptions curiously surviving the decline of metaphysics by ingratiating themselves as common sense. This complicates any attempt to critically confront the transfer model of translation. Clearly, it would be too easy and somewhat self-refuting to simply discard it as a misfit for a more complex social world we seek to study. What precisely could such a misfit entail once the common-sensical option of reference to a given object has become problematic? How can dissatisfaction with *translation as transfer* be articulated if it can no longer be discarded on account of its insufficiency in *referring to* a more complex and multi-faceted social reality? Again, Dewey (1960) helps us to raise the stakes by unpacking the quest for certainty as a metaphysical project of logical absolutism which seeks to provide a stable ground by means of externalisation. The stable ground *precedes* or *underlies* any specific problem we may encounter. It can never be at stake, because then it could be contested. By implication, the invocation of a ground of absolute certainty stands in the way of imagining even the possibility of translation as transformation. *Translation as transformation* is predicated precisely on an intellectual sea-change that does away with absolute foundations and embraces the possibilities of becoming and change.

There is, however, an implicit danger in any such move to embrace the latter—becoming and change. It may be tempting to juxtapose it, as a positive other, to the stifling image of stable meaning neutrally transferred from one site to the next, thus repeating a gesture already familiar from the literature on international norms. The important point here is not to

give in to the temptation of embracing the possibility of transformation in such a way that it comes at the expense of analysing the way in which social relations of translation figure as social relations of power. The challenge is, rather, to express both the rendering unproblematic of translation and its transformative potential in terms of contingent social forces. This is to say that alternative renditions of translation as problematic or unproblematic, as transformative or imbricated in the maintenance of the status quo, confront us with the question of the politics of translation and its societal embedding. In a final step, I will zoom in on the international nature of both.

### POLITICISING TRANSLATION

Quine's discussion of the indeterminacy of translation has served as an unconventional inroad into the concept of translation as an explicit focus of analysis in the study of international politics. To begin with, it has offered counter-intuitive support for a critique of positivism. It has done so, specifically, with regard to the positivist presumption of an unproblematic transfer of meaning and an unequivocal relation between word and object. Even from within the centre of analytical philosophy, an understanding of *translation as transfer* can thus be called into question. Insistence on a mode of reasoning and inquiry which revolves around the unity of science proposition and a view of empirical testing that presupposes translation and reference as unproblematic, appears problematic even from the point of view of the intellectual tradition which such a project typically invokes as a foundation for its quest for certainty. How and why then, does such a mode of inquiry continue to thrive? The old answer from Frankfurt, pointing to the intimate links between instrumental rationality and positivist science, might be worth reconsidering here. At the very least, it may help to pose the problem of translation as an explicitly political one. It may do so without having to presuppose an external, strongly normative understanding of politics, by shifting our focus to the politics implicit in moves to make translation either problematic or unproblematic (cf. Herborth 2017).

In order for social and political research to move beyond an understanding of translation as transfer, we also need to move beyond Quine. A discussion of what, following John Dewey, I have referred to as the quest for certainty has served to raise the stakes. *Translation as transfer* is predicated on a series of dichotomies—subject/object, ontology/epistemology,

knowing and the known—constitutive of a long and powerful tradition of Western thought. To the extent that analytical philosophy and Vienna Circle logical empiricism were invested in ousting metaphysics from philosophy, they can be mobilised in the critique of a positivist approach to social and political research, as the latter still holds on to such dichotomies in pursuit of a quest for certainty by scientific authorisation. Conversely, *translation as transformation* confronts us with the reflexive challenge of situating knowledge production in a multiplicity of social contexts from which a multiplicity of world-making references become possible. Such multiplicity confronts us not only, as Quine shows, as a theoretical possibility. It also confronts us as a condition of politics—which falls squarely into a blind spot of analytical philosophy.

The discussion of translation has thus at least implicitly leant support to an interpretive approach to social and political research. It has done so by inviting us to focus on connotative relations and communicative connectivities (internal to the process of communication) rather than denotative content—a shift typically associated with more recent theoretical developments in both IR and the philosophy of science. In the tradition of analytical philosophy, Quine had developed his scathing criticism of unproblematic accounts of reference and the word-object relation by means of examples he himself made up. Side-stepping language-in-use not only allowed Quine to remain oblivious of the plausibility of his imagined encounter, it also kept at maximum distance any consideration for the unequal power relations underlying his scenario. Instead of abstract analytical models in which translation can appear to be in principle problematic, we would thus need to situate translation in its specific social, historical and political context. It is from such an angle that Ian Hacking (2002) begins to doubt that a radical mistranslation in Quine’s sense ever did occur. Hacking (2002) reviews a number of intuitively plausible examples of radical mistranslation, such as the following:

On their voyage of discovery to Australia, a group of Captain Cook’s sailors captured a young kangaroo and brought the strange creature back on board their ship. No one knew what it was, so some men were sent ashore to ask the natives. When the sailors returned they told their mates, “It’s a kangaroo.” Many years later it was discovered that when the aborigines said “kangaroo” they were not in fact naming the animal, but replying to their questions, “What did you say?” (p. 152)

The anecdote is as effective as it is factually incorrect, even though it has been in circulation and Hacking admits to initially believing it himself. What follows? More precisely, what can we learn from Quine's abstract delineation of the indeterminacy of translation if in everyday language translation and commensurability are, more often than not, unproblematic and finding an actual instance of radical mistranslation is near impossible? Hacking proceeds to contrast Quine's analytical account of the indeterminacy of translation with more historically oriented alternatives such as the idea of incommensurability articulated with varying degrees of radicality by Kuhn and Feyerabend, but ultimately rejects both. Quine, he suggests, erroneously holds on to the 'idea of truth-preserving matching of sentences'. What is more, incommensurability is not an everyday experience. 'There is perfect commensurability, and not indeterminacy of translation in those boring domains of "observations" that we share with all people as people. Where we as people have branched off from others as a people, we find new interests, and a looseness of fit between their and our commonplaces. Translation of truths is irrelevant. Communication of ways to think is what matters' (Hacking 2002, p. 171f).

But where is the politics in such communication? I think that Hacking is correct in pointing to the near-absolute improbability of the type of radical mistranslation that Quine has in mind. I also think that Hacking is correct in pointing out that commensurability rather than incommensurability seems to characterise everyday language use. And yet, I contend that Quine remains instructive, not as a prompter of historical or sociological studies of translation, but as a reminder that there are, in principle, strong reasons to find successful communication highly unlikely. It is from the point of view of such a deliberate move to make translation problematic that more historically and sociologically attuned accounts of translation can come into view without having to sacrifice, to think with Quine against Quine, the political element of indeterminacy. From such an angle, it is precisely the indeterminacy of translation which foregrounds the need to overcome identity thinking (see Fuchs 2009) in favour of theories of difference. Only then does placing difference before identity not lead to an identitarian reductionism, which places a multiplicity of reified collectivities next to one another only to celebrate that as the hallmark of difference.

The import of theoretical reflection on translation would then precisely be a twofold cautionary note, which stays clear of both the surface difference of reified identities on the one hand and the temptation of glossing over any type of difference by means of presupposing an always-already

integrated social whole at a higher level of aggregation. It is precisely such a tendency to prematurely embrace the global and the world that is at the centre of Emily Apter's thorough critique of world literature (2013). Moving beyond the confines of literary theory, Apter speaks more broadly to theorisation of the whole as one. 'I do harbor serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded "differences" that have been niche-marketed as commercialized identities' (Apter 2013, p. 2).

From such an angle, it becomes possible to identify a quite fundamental theoretical problem and to sharply distinguish two different ways of addressing it. The fundamental problem pertains to the question of how differently structured social topoi relate to one another (Renn 2006; Jansen 2017). This is to say that the focus shifts to the question of how the production of social order can be conceptualised in terms of encounters in a world of difference rather than integrated rule-following in a world of pre-established harmony. Contrary to a long and powerful tradition in sociological theories of differentiation (see Buzan and Albert 2010), such encounters in a world of difference, too, need not follow a pre-established pattern. Differentiation theory, in a nutshell, can be read as an exercise in social administration, having on offer a distinct and firmly established category for anything and everything we may be confronted with. Retaining a family resemblance with the notion of *translation as transfer* discussed above and in the introduction, we could refer to such an approach as *differentiation as administration*. This contrasts sharply with a view that foregrounds translation as an entry point into the different ways in which difference can be encountered. To the extent that the relation between difference and encounter is characterised by indeterminacy and contingency and yet is mediated in ways that can be reconstructed *ex post facto* as meaningfully motivated, it can be traced and reconstructed as a performative effect of power relations. It is, thus, precisely on account of the indeterminacy of translating between different social registers and contextures that translation comes to the fore as a political category. Retaining a family resemblance with the notion of translation as transformation discussed above and in the introduction we can refer to such an approach as *differentiation as politics*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>A methodological upshot of this would be to discard stifling distinctions between a fixed micro-level and a fixed macro-level and instead trace how what we commonly refer to as



## CONCLUSION: THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS OF TRANSLATION

The concept of translation thus becomes—theoretically and politically—interesting precisely because we introduced it as unlikely and problematic.<sup>8</sup> It is precisely the deliberate effort to denaturalise and to defamiliarise translation that sheds light on its critical and transformative potential. At the same time, reading translation as politics is not to embrace without reservation, let alone to celebrate such a transformative potential. The initial setup of this chapter, problematising translation in dialogue with (even if also in opposition to) those who seek to render it unproblematic, would after all be self-defeating if, at the end of a discussion highlighting the inscrutability of reference, we concluded with an all-too-well-ordered distinction between ‘problematisers’ who refer to the right thing and ‘unproblematisers’ who simply don’t. Instead, the literally powerful tendencies to render translation unproblematic can themselves be read as an instantiation of the politics of translation itself. To say that translation in a strong theoretical sense exhibits transformative characteristics, in other words, is not to say that we must tie ourselves in conventionally empiricist fashion to the expectation of observing the proper kind and the proper amount of transformation in the world out there. It is to say, rather, that any potential instance of translation exhibits the potential of social transformation. An analytic of translation incapable of pinpointing how and when such transformation does not occur would forfeit any critical bite.

As social theorist Joachim Renn (2006) has noted, social relations of translation manifest themselves across different social registers. They may pertain to a particular form of life where the differentiation between expectation and manifestation, between potentiality and actuality, allows

macro-level transformation is expressed in and traceable through a meticulous analysis of *particular* manifestations (e.g. Costa López 2020).

<sup>8</sup>This holds also for a different, similarly influential approach to theorizing translation. In *The Task of the Translator/Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, Walter Benjamin, working through the experience of his own translations of Baudelaire, develops his account of the impossibility of translation as transfer in contradistinction to what he straightforwardly denounces as bad translation. It is the hallmark of a bad translation that it focuses on the translation of the message, of the propositional account. It translates what something is about, but fails to touch upon what is at stake. Almost echoing Adorno’s later critique of identifying thought, Benjamin is concerned with poor translations cutting of what is particular at the expense of what is general, transferable, and easily communicable. A poor translation is thus the ‘imprecise transmission of inessential content’ (Benjamin 1991, p. 2).

for a reflexive form of self-translation. They may pertain to encounters between different forms of life and different social registers in the form of translating fundamental incommensurability into specific incommensurabilities, which allow for communication to move on. And, finally, they may refer to the relation between implicit and explicit knowledge and self-understanding, for instance in the encounter between explicitly codified social expectations on the one hand and routinised and habitualised conduct on the other. Across these various dimensions, Renn insists, a *tertium comparationis* cannot be externally presupposed. The reference points of translation, relation and comparison are rather actively produced in the process of translation itself. To theorise translation in terms of encounters in a world of difference does not presuppose difference as ready-made and waiting for translation. It rather allows us to trace the ways in which differences, boundaries and delineations are continuously produced, reproduced and transformed.

This is to say that a political reading of translation, which remains wary of identitarian reductionism, finds itself confronted with a multiplicity of forms of borders, boundaries and limits (Walker 1993). And that, in turn, is to say that if we think of the international not in static terms of relations between pre-constituted and reified political entities, but in terms of the production, reproduction and transformation of social boundaries in a world of difference, the politics of translation is by default international.

## REFERENCES

- Apter, E. (2013). *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso.
- Benjamin, W. (1991). Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers. In *Gesammelte Werke* (Vol. IV 1, pp. 9–21). Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Best, J., & Walters, W. (2013). Translating the Sociology of Translation. *International Political Sociology*, 7(3), 345–349.
- Buzan, B., & Albert, M. (2010). Differentiation: A Sociological Approach to International Relations Theory. *European Journal of International Relations*, 16(3), 315–337.
- Callon, M. (1984). Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. *The Sociological Review*, 32(1 suppl), 196–233.
- Capan, Z. G., dos Reis, F., & Grasten, M. (2021). The Politics of Translation in International Relations. In Z. G. Capan, F. dos Reis, & M. Grasten (Eds.), *The Politics of Translation in International Relations* (pp. 1–19). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Carnap, R. (1996). The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language. In S. Sarkar (Ed.), *Logical Empiricism at its Peak: Schlick, Carnap and Neurath* (pp. 10–32). New York and London: Garland Publishing.
- Costa Lopez, J. (2020). Translating More than Words. Language and the End of the Holy Roman Empire. In M. J. Caraccioli, E. Wigen, J. Costa Lopez, A. Cheney, & J. Subotic, Forum: Interlingual Relations: Approaches, Conflicts, and Lessons in the Translation Of Global Politics. *International Studies Review*, forthcoming, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa019>.
- Dewey, J. (1960). *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action*. New York: Putnam.
- Doty, R. L. (1996). *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International Norm Dynamics and Political Change. *International Organization*, 52(4), 887–917.
- Fuchs, M. (2009). Reaching Out; Or, Nobody Exists in One Context Only: Society as Translation. *Translation Studies*, 2(1), 21–40.
- Garfinkel, H. (1984). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hacking, I. (2002). *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hempel, C. G. (1942). The Function of General Laws in History. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 39(2), 35–48.
- Herborth, B. (2012). Theorising Theorising: Critical Realism and the Quest for Certainty. *Review of International Studies*, 38(1), 235–251.
- Herborth, B. (2017). Rekonstruktive Forschungslogik in den Internationalen Beziehungen. In F. Sauer & C. Masala (Eds.), *Handbuch Internationale Beziehungen* (2nd ed., pp. 597–618). Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Hofferberth, M., & Weber, C. (2015). Lost in Translation: A Critique of Constructivist Norm Research. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 18(1), 75–103.
- Jackson, P. T. (2006). *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Jansen, T. (2017). Beyond ANT: Towards an ‘Infra-language’ of Reflexivity. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 20(2), 199–215.
- Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Kessler, O. (2012). On Logic, Intersubjectivity, and Meaning: Is Reality an Assumption We Just Don’t Need? *Review of International Studies*, 38(1), 253–265.
- Kratochwil, F. (1989). *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Onuf, N. (1989). *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Putnam, H. (1974). The Refutation of Conventionalism. *Noûs*, 8(1), 25–40.
- Quine, W. V. O. (1969). Ontological Relativity. In *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (pp. 26–68). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Quine, W. V. O. (2013). *Word and Object*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Renn, J. (2006). *Übersetzungsverhältnisse. Perspektiven einer pragmatistischen Gesellschaftstheorie*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft.
- Risse, T., Ropp, S. C., & Sikkink, K. (Eds.). (1999). *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sajed, A. (2013). *Postcolonial Encounters in International Relations: The Politics of Transgression in the Maghreb*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- von Foerster, H. (2007). *Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition*. New York: Springer.
- Walker, R. B. J. (1993). *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiener, A. (2008). *The Invisible Constitution of Politics: Contested Norms and International Encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zimmermann, L. (2017). *Global Norms with a Local Face: Rule-of-Law Promotion and Norm-Translation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.