

# Translating Others

## Volume 1



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Theo Hermans

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Both in their sheer breadth and in the detail of their coverage the essays in *Translating Others I & II* challenge hegemonic thinking on the subject of translation. Engaging throughout with issues of representation in a postmodern and postcolonial world, *Translating Others* investigates the complex processes of projection, recognition, displacement and 'othering' effected not only by translation practices but also by translation studies as developed in the West. At the same time, the volumes document the increasing awareness that the world is peopled by others who also translate, often in ways radically different from and hitherto largely ignored by the modes of translating conceptualized in Western discourses.

The languages covered in individual contributions include Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Hindi, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Rajasthani, Somali, Swahili, Tamil, Tibetan and Turkish, as well as the Europhone literatures of Africa, the tongues of medieval Europe, and some major languages of Egypt's five-thousand-year history.

While some of the theoretical reflections address contemporary issues, including research, globalization, ethics and self-reflexivity, others deal with historical concepts in various parts of the world and with the relation between translation theory and practice. Neighbouring disciplines invoked include anthropology, semiotics, museum and folklore studies, librarianship and the history of writing systems.

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# Meanings of Translation in Cultural Anthropology

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**Abstract:** *Translation between cultures can be considered a central practice and aim of cultural anthropology. But are the meanings of cultural translation confined to 'cultural understanding'? A hermeneutic position seems to imply a commitment to a traditional 'single-sited' anthropology and does not correspond to the challenges of globalization. A 'multi-sited,' transnational anthropology is developing an alternative type of translation.*

*Following a brief account of the different meanings of translation in the history of cultural anthropology, my essay locates the emergence of a postcolonial challenge to this new anthropological translation concept in an epistemological break: the crisis of representation and the questioning of a unilateral Western translation authority. Translation of and between cultures is no longer the central concept, but culture itself is now being conceptualized as a process of translation. As a result, translation can be defined as a dynamic term of cultural encounter, as a negotiation of differences as well as a difficult process of transformation. In this respect, the novels of Salman Rushdie are eye-openers for a new metaphor of migration as translation, which renders translation into a medium of displacement and hybrid self-translation. The category of translation thus offers for anthropology not only an important alternative to dichotomous concepts like 'the clash of civilizations', but it is also a seismographic indicator for a changing anthropology under the conditions of a globalization of cultures.*

"It is reported that when Pepsi-Cola entered the soft drinks market in Thailand, it keyed its advertising campaign to its well-known American slogan, 'Come alive, you're in the Pepsi generation'. The company only later traced its slow initial sales to the problematical Thai translation of that slogan: 'Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead'. The incident is a graphic reminder that translation across languages is translation across cultures. It is the act of translation as a commitment to cultural understanding that is at the heart of the discipline of anthropology."  
([www.yale.edu/anthropology/about](http://www.yale.edu/anthropology/about))

These sentences on the Yale anthropology department's website (2003) introduce the promotion of its anthropology programme. The website uses the embarrassing mistranslation of an advertizing slogan to place 'translation across cultures' at the

heart of the anthropological discipline. Yet in its substance, this quotation actually says very little about the meanings of translation in anthropology. Even more surprisingly, the translation example is drawn from the context of globally networked consumption, and not from the traditional anthropology of located area studies, a sphere surely much closer to a hermeneutics of cultural understanding. Nevertheless, that traditional anthropology is what is being evoked by the allusion to “translation as a commitment to cultural understanding”. The reference also uncritically carries with it the whole, problematic history of the translation of other cultures through the interpretive power of Western anthropology. This relapse into a simple, harmony-based notion of translation is peculiar, especially since the current conditions of globalization, with their transnational connections and hybrid creolizations, throw down quite other translational challenges – challenges that require not so much ‘cultural understanding’ as strategies of cultural encounter or the negotiation of differences.

Is this to say that Yale’s anthropology department is not at the forefront of reflection on translation in cultural anthropology? Certainly, it does not seem to be pursuing an active, agency-oriented reinterpretation or a local appropriation of global phenomena. It does not place translation within the field of tension of cultural differences, yet it is precisely those differences, of course, that trigger critical counter-movements to the dominant, marketing-oriented translational strategies or – as in the case of Pepsi Cola – prompt translational resistance to a seamless local assimilation of global goods. Through its contradictory positioning of translation, the Yale introduction thus casts its own conception of anthropology into doubt: while that conception exemplifies global opening, its reductionist view of translation is also a closing down. It is a view of translation that looks unlikely to manage the leap to a ‘multi-sited’, transnational anthropology of the world system (Marcus 1995). On the contrary, reverting to the tradition of a ‘single-sited’ anthropology can only mean that the illusion of cultural understanding is perpetuated. In this essay I hope to show that, in fact, cultural understanding is only one of the many meanings or ‘commitments’ of translation in cultural anthropology – and not even the one that’s most relevant to present-day conditions.

I will focus here on a paradigm shift and its preconditions: the move from the anthropological critique of representation towards a more comprehensive cultural critique. That is, a change from the questioning of translational authority – which still depends on a bipolar notion of translation – towards a more dynamic, multi-layered and subversive understanding of ‘culture as translation’. In other words, I am interested in an epistemological rupture which seems to be crucial for the reorientation of cultural anthropology and its opening up to a critical study of globalization. We might adapt the well-known question asked by Clifford Geertz, “What happens to *verstehen* when *empfinden* disappears?” (Geertz 1983: 56) – in other words, what happens to the anthropological ideal of empathetic understanding, ‘from the native’s point of view’, once we have abandoned the notion of a close, transcultural identification with the people studied? “What happens to *verstehen* when *empfinden* disappears?” Well, what happens to translation when cultural understanding disappears?

Even looking at the background to the recent ‘global turn’ in anthropology (Inda and Rosaldo 2002), it is clearly misleading to narrow translation down to ‘cultural understanding’. If cultural anthropology embodies knowledge of translation of and

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between cultures (without necessarily having reflected on the fact), that is certainly not simply a matter of 'cultural understanding'. Instead, we know that a major problem for translation in cultural anthropology is the way the languages and, even more importantly, the ways of thinking of other cultures – especially those outside Europe – have to be 'translated' into the languages, the categories and the conceptual world of a Western audience. The difficulty also arises from the fact that oral discourses and actions are transported into a fixed, written form – as James Clifford has put it, ethnographic "writing includes, minimally, a translation of experience into textual form" (1988: 25).

Added to that, anthropology, as a science of cultural comparison, works with comparative terms and analytic concepts such as kinship, ritual, power, social conflict, hierarchy, religion and many more. The problem is that the translation of other cultures may be further distorted by describing indigenous conceptualizations within a Western conceptual system. And on yet another level, anthropological translation must itself be viewed as a specific cultural practice, bound up with specific discursive and epistemological environments such as colonialism and orientalism. Translating cultures is closely intermeshed with power relations, and thus in most cases with relationships of cultural inequality (see Tymoczko and Gentzler 2002; Niranjana 1992).

Considering this extremely broad horizon, it was only a very first step when, from the 1920s onwards, American cultural anthropology began to carry out empirical studies and translations of other languages, especially Native American languages (Werner and Campbell 1973: 398). This is also the case with Malinowski's "translation of whole contexts" (1966: 11ff.). Faced with the problem of translating magic, Malinowski responded by calling for a far greater contextualization of cultural meanings – in terms both of moral or aesthetic values and of specific situational contexts, the functions of words, activities, interests and speech acts. From the 1950s on, this notion of a comprehensive translation of cultures took up an increasingly central position in British social anthropology (see Asad 1986). It is no coincidence that the 1971 *festschrift* for Edward Evans-Pritchard is entitled *The Translation of Culture* (Beidelman 1971). This 'translational turn' was set in motion by Evans-Pritchard's paradigmatic translation dilemma: the Nuer claim that "a twin is a bird" (1957: 131ff.). How can this be translated into European languages and their incompatible notions of rationality? The issue prompted a debate on the epistemological foundations of translation in anthropology, and on the intelligibility and translatability of other ways of thinking in general. It is a debate that questions the assumption of an objective, language-independent reality and implicitly criticizes universalist criteria of rationality (see Winch 1964).

These examples should be enough to indicate that anthropological translation extends far beyond just 'cultural understanding' (for more historical and contemporary examples concerning the role of translation in anthropology see Bachmann-Medick 2004); instead, it directs critical attention to the cultural universalization of Western standards of rationality, objectivity and logic. From there, it is not a very large step to call into question the dominance of European translational authority. Arising from the critique of representation in what has become known as the 'writing culture' debate since the 1980s (see Clifford and Marcus 1986), the move has also opened up

translation studies and cultural theory to the factor of power and interpretive authority.

This discourse on the relationship between cultural translation and representation of the Other (Bachmann-Medick 1997) deserves a brief mention here, since it offers important basic principles for contemporary concerns around cultural globalization with its world-wide circulation of symbols and images – and, of course, also *confrontations* of symbols and images. Thus, as part of the linguistic and rhetorical turn in ethnology and in the ‘writing culture’ debate, translation was no longer considered merely under the category of ‘faithfulness’ to an ‘original’. Instead, it took on the value of a medium through which specific representational conventions and a specific authority in cultural mediation establish themselves. Ethnographic descriptions are themselves interpreting translations with the status of independent texts – texts that make use of rhetorical strategies, tropes, metaphors and so on. Here, the category of translation gains a new emphasis, inasmuch as anthropological practice itself can be understood as a creative process of translation that synthesizes, and thus virtually ‘invents’, unified cultural entities (Sperber 1993). As a result, cultural translation is to a large extent cultural construction.

The insight has prompted what has often been called a ‘crisis of representation’ – a crisis that also opens up new analytical perspectives. On the one hand, criticizing the rhetoric of representation brings us to the phenomenon of a ‘translation without an original’. This is something that arises when signs and symbols take on a life of their own in the global circulation of representations, so that translation now appears as just a representation of representations. On the other hand, this kind of focus also presents the opportunity to reflect on the limitations of a holistic understanding of culture, and to work towards replacing a territorially defined notion of culture with a more dynamic version. A new, transnational ethnography is clearly characterized by what Gísli Pálsson (1993) calls a “going beyond boundaries”. It cannot help raising questions about power relationships and cultural hierarchies, thus shifting our interest to the “politics of translating (Third World) cultures” (Dingwaney 1995: 3).

At this crucial moment of epistemological rupture, the idea of ‘cultural understanding’ as translation’s central commitment will have begun to seem far too harmonious. Firstly, that is because of the inevitable – and I think often productive – misunderstanding between cultures, where we need to ask much more insistently about the role of translation in resolving such situations. It is not cultural translation’s success but its failures that offer the greater and more interesting challenge for cultural anthropology – which applies to the Pepsi case as well, by the way. Secondly, ‘translation as cultural understanding’ has to be radically questioned in view of the repression of minority cultures and marginalized languages, and of the asymmetries and one-sidedness of ethnography’s claim to translate in a culturally understanding way.

A postcolonial anthropology can no longer do without a politicisation of the metaphor of cultural translation. Its epistemological doubts are embedded in the fact that translation usually takes place between unequal societies. Even a critically distanced translation is subject to the inequality of languages, that is, to the global hierarchy between orality and literacy and the power gap between languages of the First and the Third World. To do justice to this state of affairs in a global, post-national world, only

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a polyphony of translation would be enough. Here, attention is turning more and more to the forms of cultural resistance to transnational translating and being-translated, forms that are located in culturally specific practices and regional resistances. To quote Homi Bhabha: “Any transnational cultural study must ‘translate’, each time locally and specifically, what decentres and subverts this transnational globality” (1994: 241).

Influenced by postcolonial theory, today’s anthropology, too, has learned to use new concepts and new notions of translation as a way of engaging not only with the globalized world of relations of consumption, but also with ‘entangled histories’ (Shalini Randeria) between cultures. An ethnography of cultural encounter might, for example, investigate how Western concepts, ideas of society, or even models of practice are translated into the modernization and transformation process of non-European cultures. An example would be Shingo Shimada’s exploration of the translation-intensive process of national identity construction in Japanese society (Shimada 2000). In cases like these, translation becomes an entrance ticket – often a more than dubious one – into global culture. However, cultural negotiation may come into play from quite other directions, such as the recent opening up of cultural anthropology to indigenous reception – to a critical back-translation of ethnographic texts by the indigenous people themselves. This is occurring on the basis of a discourse *with* the indigenous population, not a discourse *about* them (Gottowik 1998).

Central to all these variations on the theme of translation is the insight into the multi-layeredness and overlapping of different cultures, affiliations and identities. This forces us to expand the notion of culture beyond holistic restrictions: hence ‘culture as translation’. The formulation alone indicates how, in cultural anthropology, the category of translation is becoming increasingly metaphorical. But I would like to argue that this is precisely what gives it such political momentum. Ever more doubt seems to be cast on the long-lived anthropological idea of culture as a complete and unified entity, responsible for securing tradition and identity. Especially in the light of postcolonial and global configurations, culture is coming to be understood as a hybrid field of translation processes. It is not just that cultures are translatable – an idea that managed to survive for a very long time with the help of cultural semiotics. Rather, cultures constitute themselves *in* translation and *as* translation. That is to say, they should be viewed as the components or results of translation processes. In this sense Homi Bhabha notes that culture is “both transnational and translational” (1992: 438). For a transnational cultural anthropology, cultural translation can thus act as an anti-essentialist and anti-holistic metaphor that aims to uncover counter-discourses, discursive forms and resistant actions *within* a culture, heterogeneous discursive spaces within a society. This translatedness of cultures, often referred to as ‘hybridity’, shifts the notion of culture towards a dynamic concept of culture as a practice of negotiating cultural differences, and of cultural overlap, syncretism and creolization.

These are the new key terms of contemporary, postcolonially informed cultural theory. They help conceptually to process oscillating relationships in a kind of ‘third space’ (“by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves”, Bhabha 1994: 39), themselves only emerging through the experience of multiple cultural affiliation and layered – if not broken – identity. In view of all this, cultural anthropology should be taking up a more

concrete translational task, which I would like to outline in three points.

Firstly, by tailoring the category of translation to the global conditions associated with the world order, migration and the networking of consumption – what Arjun Appadurai calls “global ethnoscares” and “the transnational cultural flows” (1991: 192) – cultural anthropology can address itself to global symbolic worlds, to a circulation of meanings and products that has long ceased to be territorially anchored.

Secondly, this new approach directs attention to translation as a form of existential action and a life practice which becomes effective especially in contexts of migration. I refer here to translations not just of slogans, but of people, in the sense of an insight by Salman Rushdie: “Having been borne across the world, we are translated men” (1991: 17) – ‘rendered’, or pulled to and fro, between one culture and another. But translation as a characteristic of pivotal life situations has nowadays become even more complex: translation becomes ‘displacement’.

The work of Arjun Appadurai has shown how the global circulation of goods, images and slogans – and, especially, of people and identities – has led to a new conception of anthropology. It is a conception that relates to the new world-wide relationships of communication, and the transnational networks and imagined communities whose formation is fostered by communication technologies. But Appadurai’s concept of “transnational imagination” also hints at the possible translation of anthropological research into literary texts and vice versa: “Like the myths of small-scale society, as rendered in the anthropological classics of the past, contemporary literary fantasies tell us something about displacement, disorientation, and agency in the contemporary world” (1991: 202). This kind of translation between disciplines and genres has not received enough attention within cultural anthropology – and yet it is clear how much anthropology’s endeavour can be enriched by postcolonial novels like Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999). Novels like these are eye-openers on the way translation is experienced by its subjects as a quite existential process. Rushdie’s novel traces the translation career of the Indian rock singers Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara. Both leave India and emigrate via Britain to America. Their migration becomes an act of translation, which the novel describes like a ritual sequence, full of liminal spaces for action, transitional stages and disconcertment. Here, translation occurs literally by “passing through the membrane” (ibid.: 253) of air resistance during the flight from Bombay to the States – a telling image of translation as a resistance-laden, transformatory act.

This brings into play a cultural anthropology of translation that’s currently being spearheaded by literature. In Rushdie’s novels, at least, the process of translation’s metaphorization is elaborated with seismographic subtlety – in particular by the radical use of the earthquake metaphor to portray the intercultural translation experience of migrants. No talk of “cultural understanding” here – instead, it is shock, displacement and transformation. In this, “our migrant century”, says Rushdie, we have entered “a transit zone: the condition of transformation” (ibid.: 461). Such ambivalent metamorphoses via displacement are embodied in the protagonist Ormus, who lives “in – or rather with – two worlds at once” (ibid.: 347). They go far beyond cultural transfer, breaking apart the very bipolarity of the traditional concept of translation. This has enormous consequences for cultural politics. For when “the windows to the other

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Now to my third point. These issues open up another perspective on a changed cultural anthropology, in that the reorientation of anthropological translation is closely associated with an epistemological rupture. I refer to the break with the dominant principle of dichotomy in perceptions of the Other – a principle that took shape within the history of colonialism and its complicity with the emergence of modern anthropology. To see that this principle still holds today, we need only look at the prognoses of a 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1996) and the associated bipolarity and dichotomy of the USA's world-order ideologies, further reinforced by the events of September 11th, 2001. I would just mention here the trend, currently predominant in the United States, towards an imperial translation where all forms of violence, and of opposition prepared to contemplate violence, are translated as 'terrorism'.<sup>1</sup> This kind of hegemonic translation practice is part of the challenge faced by cultural anthropology. In line with its understanding of 'hybrid' cultural configurations and interconnections, anthropology can pit its insights on the multi-polar character of cultural translation against the fossilized dichotomy of 'us' and the enemies, of the good and the evil; it can use concrete analyses to uncover the cultural ascriptions that underlie this Manichean construction. That includes making greater use of the state of being 'in-between' as a special source of anthropological knowledge. It opens up wider spaces for a reciprocity in translation processes, by paying attention to relationships between translations and to back-translation – or 'writing back' (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989) – and, especially, by alerting us to the ambivalent acts of self-translation that permeate the life-world practices of migration.

This is a kind of perspective that cannot be generated by the Yale example I quoted at the start. It addressed only a one-dimensional axis of translation – an approach still in thrall to the credo of bipolarity. If the Yale website had drawn on the example of Rushdie rather than Pepsi, it would not have reduced the project of cultural translation to a marketing-oriented strategy of cultural adaptation that, in the end, amounts to nothing other than a homogenization, a 'McDonaldization', of the world. Rather, it would have been able to expand the translational project to both analyse and promote active, conflict-conscious cultural self-translation. The 'commitment of translation' would then be something akin to cultural negotiation or cultural transformation.

I would like to close by summarizing and looking forward. The recent, more conceptually oriented positions of anthropological translation may seem utopian if we weigh up their chances of being realized in the light of the world system and today's hegemonized global politics. But the accusation of utopianism applies even more if we cling to the old model of cultural translation as 'cultural understanding'. So, once again: What happens to translation in anthropology when cultural understanding disappears?

<sup>1</sup> See Draper's contribution to the 2002 Duke University colloquium on 'Problems of Translation: Violence as Language within Global Capital'. Here, an anti-imperial or fragmented mode of translation is developed against the dominant imperial mode of translation "used by the state and major media to translate geopolitical events into an American framework" (Draper 2002).

The category of translation offers a profoundly sensitive indicator of anthropology's own transformation into an anthropology of global relations. Translation serves more and more to generate relations; less and less to essentialize and 'close off' cultures and cultural differences by means of understanding: The function of translation

is enhanced since it is no longer practiced in the primary, dualistic 'them – us' frame of conventional ethnography but requires considerably more nuancing and shading as the practice of translation connects the several sites that the research explores along unexpected and even dissonant fractures of social location (Marcus 1995: 100).

Translation is now becoming a concept of relationship and movement, in a way that takes palpable, spatial shape in Rushdie's metaphor of the migrant as 'traveller between worlds'. Here, Rushdie is illustrating a notion of translation as travel – or travel as translation – to which James Clifford gave theoretical form in his original 1997 study *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. This re-conception is yet another product of the new paths of enquiry opened up by cultural anthropology's increasingly dynamic view of culture. It's a view that privileges cultural contacts and border crossings by 'people in transit' above the investigation and understanding of sealed-off, unified cultural entities. Here, the moment of articulation I discussed earlier in this article, between representation (or construction) and cultural critique, becomes especially productive. James Clifford locates his own work "on the border between an anthropology in crisis and an emerging transnational cultural studies" (ibid.: 8). It is precisely here that a fruitful 'intermediate space' seems to emerge, hand in hand with a new understanding of – even a paradigm shift in – translation: the traditional hermeneutic claim is being replaced by a pragmatic attention to cultural networks and entanglements. Cultural translation is bound to appear within the horizon of what Emily Apter calls a "translational transnationalism" (2001: 5).

Yet one fundamental question remains: what is there, in the end, "at the heart of the discipline of anthropology"? Presumably no longer the "act of translation as commitment to cultural understanding"; perhaps instead – so George Marcus – "the work of comparative translation and tracing among sites, which I suggested were basic to the methodology of multi-sited ethnography" (1995: 111). Or might there be even further-reaching, pragmatic acts of translation as cultural encounters in intercultural contact zones, as cultural critique and as a concrete management of cultural differences that is ready to accept conflict?

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