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Special Issue Graduate Journal of Social Science:

Interrogating Language Difference and Translation in Social Science Research: Towards a Critical and Interdisciplinary Approach

Language difference and translation are an integral part of social science research. Interrupt your reading of this editorial for a couple of seconds and embark on a cursory mental examination of academic practices, processes and products in the social sciences. It soon becomes clear that forms of language difference and translation are everywhere. Imagine an academic spending an afternoon in a library, reading books by canonical authors, translated from their original language. An ethnographer collecting and producing data in her native language(s) and translating that empirical material into another language[1], in order for the study to be assessed and/or published. A researcher learning a foreign language in preparation for, and during, fieldwork, or trying to hire interpreters for a set of interviews. A group of conference delegates from different countries, discussing a keynote address during the coffee-break. A migrant doctoral student learning the academic writing conventions of the foreign language in which he is writing a thesis, as well as struggling to understand some of the colloquial expressions used by his native-speaking colleagues in the PhD room. Broaden your notion of language difference and translation to include other forms of conversion of meaning from one linguistic register to another, and several more moments of academic practice come to mind. Explaining your research in non-academic language to close friends over dinner or

[1] Often English, as the contemporary *lingua franca* – ie, the vehicular language spoken by people who do not share a native language (Mauranen 2003) - in (profoundly asymmetrical) academic flows of circulation of concepts, theories, texts and people between different institutional, regional and national locations (see, for example, Connell 2007, Griffin and Braidotti 2002).

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to policy-makers at a meeting. Attempting to find the appropriate words with which to describe in an interview transcript the nuances of an interviewee's body language. Trying to re-frame your research in a different disciplinary language, in order to communicate with colleagues working in other disciplines.

Instances of language difference and translation are very present in experiences of social science practice, but almost always conspicuously absent in the books and articles that social scientists read and compose. The authors and participants featured in a text have often spoken, written and thought in more than one language, but that linguistic diversity, as well as the challenges, insights and questions it produces, are rarely represented and problematised in the published narrative about the research process and its relationships. When describing studies conducted across languages, social scientists tend to be "eerily quiet" about the experiences of learning or translating languages (Agar 1996, 150), often "forgetting (or even denying) the mediation of the researcher as translator, ... [and] act[ing] 'as if' our informants spoke the same language as our readers" (Poblete 2009, 632). When language difference and translation is acknowledged, it is usually in descriptive and brief terms – a footnote explains that it was the author who translated a set of quotes, or a short sentence describes how interpreters were used in interviews. Translation and interpretation itself is implicitly presented as a fundamentally technical operation that is relatively straightforward (although not always easy and direct), and its multiple implications in terms of the process of academic knowledge production or of researcher-research participant relationships are not recognised or addressed (Maclean 2007, forthcoming; Temple 2005, and foreword in this issue).

In 2007, while grappling with a range of translation dilemmas as part of our doctoral research in gender studies, we became interested in reflecting critically on the theoretical, analytical, epistemological, political, and ethical implications of issues of language difference and translation in our own work, and also in social science research more broadly. We felt that there was no sustained engagement with this issue at the institutional level, reflecting the absence of discussions of issues of language difference and translation in the literature. We were keen to discuss these issues with other graduate students, but there were very few available spaces – such as conferences or courses – where we could engage in those debates with our peers. This led us to apply for funding from C-SAP (the Higher Education

Academy's Subject Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics[2]) to enable the creation of such a space. C-SAP generously supported our initiative and we were able to launch a year-long programme of discussion sessions for PhD students at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The number of people who expressed an interest in taking part in the programme demonstrated that there were many other students (and staff) who, like us, were struggling with the practicalities of translation in social science research, but who felt that there is much more to translation than its practicalities; many students and staff who, like us, were asking themselves which words would more faithfully translate other words, but who felt that this was just one of the many questions one could ask about translation, and not even the most exciting or productive question of all.

During the academic year 2007/08, ten doctoral students from six different departments at LSE met monthly to discuss the existing academic literature on translation, share dilemmas and strategies of dealing with language difference in their projects, and, above all, make the impacts and implications of translation visible and questionable. We explored the politics of language difference, framing translation as a set of processes, practices and relationships which are shaped by, and which shape, dynamics of power and hegemony, both in the fieldwork context itself and in the subsequent analysis (and re-signification) of data, as well as in structures of academic life. We interrogated the epistemological and ethical dimensions of research and representation across languages, focusing for example on researchers' accountability and authority vis-à-vis research participants and academic communities. Our collective examination of these issues offered such a rich and useful space for thinking through the research process and relationships, and left so many questions unanswered (despite the fact that we spent many hours working together), that we decided to take these discussions forward and open them to others. And that is how this special issue of the *Graduate Journal of Social Science* was born.

The special issue draws on existing debates across social science disciplines which have attempted to disrupt the dominant framing of issues of language difference and translation as methodological footnotes, and have demonstrated that an ongoing, reflexive and nuanced

[2] For more information, see www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk

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engagement with these issues can provide crucial analytical insight, both about our objects of study, and the practices of knowledge production and dissemination that we are involved in. In the foreword to this issue, Bogusia Temple provides an overview of this literature, written (partly autobiographically) from her unique and insightful perspective as a leading expert in these debates. The special issue aims to contribute to this exciting and growing body of work by bringing together ten texts (articles, research notes and book/article reviews) which are very different (in terms of theoretical approach, methodological framework or object of study) but all share a commitment to interrogating language difference and translation in social science research from a critical and interdisciplinary perspective. These texts are critical because they all refuse to cast language difference and translation issues as a 'hiccup' to overcome, or as a 'problem' to be 'solved', and prefer to engage with them as a valuable starting point for the production of knowledge about theories and concepts, as well as about the social practices and relations that we study. This special issue's perspective is also interdisciplinary because it brings together, and goes beyond, authors' disciplinary positions, in order to address a broad range of manifestations and implications of language difference and translation in social research.

The interrogation of language difference and translation presented here is guided by three key concerns, which are dealt with, and taken forward, by all the authors included in this special issue in ways that make distinctive, innovative and important contributions to existing debates. As editors, we wanted to produce a special issue which would a) draw attention not just to what is *lost*, but also what can be *found* in translation; b) question the scope of the concept of translation in order to enable a focus on processes of translation that tend not to be visible or theorised as such; and c) engage with language difference and translation as an ethical and political issue with a significant impact on research relationships before, during and after fieldwork.

Language difference and translation are often framed in social science literature in terms of loss, disappearance and lack. It is frequently claimed that nuance gets lost in interpretation; translation cannot capture the richness, context, depth of words or expressions; meaning and symbolism is amputated when converted to another linguistic code. Those of us who have had to translate as part of our research have probably experienced the frustration of not quite

being able to find the words in another language that will allow us to capture everything that we read in the original text and that we worry might be lost in the target language. However, the editors and contributors to this special issue wanted to disrupt this familiar framing of the act of translation by showing that a lot of insight can be *found,* and a lot of knowledge can be produced, through explicit and critical reflection on the challenges and incommensurabilities of language difference. The potential of a framing of these issues as productive and generative (rather than just amputating) of knowledge is compellingly demonstrated in the pieces by Alison Stern Perez and Yishai Tobin, Annabel Tremlett and Liza Tripp.

In their article on "The Difficulties of Translation from Israeli Hebrew to American English", Alison Stern Perez and Yishai Tobin openly discuss the challenges of working in different languages. Focusing on interviews with Israeli bus drivers who experienced terror attacks, Stern Perez and Tobin highlight the importance of a reflexive engagement with several linguistic features of the interviews. Their close analysis of interview extracts reveals socio-psychological implications of the use of pronouns in Hebrew which would get lost in a *verbatim* translation into English. The authors also examine a range of communicative strategies, such as the use of English words in Hebrew interviews, to demonstrate how an analysis of language difference can provide an enhanced understanding of power relations in the research process. Through these case studies, they attempt to make visible what can be gained and found from a fine-grained engagement with interview transcripts and their careful translation into English. The article shows that there are crucial analytical insights that do not easily translate into English and which "force" the researcher to use a range of devices to make those discursive nuances visible in a language that does not have space for them.

Annabel Tremlett's "Claims of 'knowing' in ethnography: realising anti-essentialism through a critical reflection on language acquisition in fieldwork" begins with a critical examination of the 'fieldwork mystique' that has shrouded the issue of language learning for ethnographers. It attempts to counter the tendency to overlook this issue by describing and analysing the author's own process of learning Hungarian before and during fieldwork, and by exploring how language acquisition is related to broader questions about the production of ethnographic authority. Tremlett's argument is that reflection on the experiences of learning a foreign language can both illuminate the social and cultural context in/about which research

claims are made, and generate insight about the role of anti-essentialist theorisation in empirical research. Her dexterous and engaging analysis of extracts from her fieldwork journal and monthly reports to her supervisors helps to construct an extremely vivid and compelling account of the challenges of language acquisition, and of the usefulness of those challenges as tools with which to produce knowledge and to question the knowledge that one produces.

Liza Tripp's review of Michael Cronin's most recent book *Translation Goes to the Movies* (2009) provides an overview of Cronin's analysis of representations of translation in film (from 1930s *Westerns* to contemporary Hollywood and alternative cinema), and discusses how the changing role of translation and translators on the big screen may be seen to reflect contemporary trends of globalisation. The piece begins with a quote from Cronin's opening mission statement: "[t]his book is about the visibility of translators. More properly it is about how translation becomes visible when we know how to look. And one of the places where we have often neglected to look is a medium primarily concerned with visibility, cinematography" (2009, x). Through her eye-opening review of Cronin's book, Tripp contributes to this process of making visible a range of instances of translation that often go unnoticed, shows us where to look for (and find) acts of translation on and off screen, and vividly illustrates how an attention to processes of translation can produce relevant and new insight about the films we watch and the (more or less real) worlds they represent.

Another concern of this special issue was to interrogate and re-mould the scope of the concepts of language difference and translation, in order to examine their limits, apply them to less familiar objects and ask new questions about them. The aim was to take the concept of translation beyond its usual confinement to the linguistic and explore its value as an analytical tool in research. This is the challenge taken up and forward, with particularly striking results, in the texts by Angeliki Alvanoudi, Simon Hutta and Nora Koller.

Angeliki Alvanoudi's "Travelling between languages and disciplines: linguistic and interdisciplinary translation practices in Women's/Gender Studies" broadens common perceptions of translation by conceptualising it as a process of travelling between languages *and* disciplines. Exploring issues of translation within the interdisciplinary field of

women's/gender studies, Alvanoudi provides a range of fascinating examples and case studies that illustrate the need for a reflexive engagement with language difference. In her discussion of translation as moving between different languages, Alvanoudi traces how social contexts are reflected (and reproduced) in language use, and argues that this social context of words needs to be acknowledged when we translate. Moving away from translation as a process of travelling between two (or several) languages, Alvanoudi demonstrates how academic concepts, and more specifically the notion of 'performativity', have been developed and used in various disciplines, in a process which she argues can also be interrogated as a form of translation. By broadening our understanding of translation practices, and foregrounding issues of politics and power, Alvanoudi's article makes a strong case for a wider understanding of what constitutes translation in women's/gender studies, and beyond.

In "Translation in excess: engaging semiotics and the untranslatable", Simon Hutta sets out to explore the potential of translation as a methodological resource in social research. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of 'semiotic translation', Hutta seeks to expand the concept of translation beyond its limited association with nation-bound languages, without evacuating the specificities of its conceptual power. In this framework, translation is concerned with movements between, and the transformation of, expressive scenarios, or formations of signs which may be vocal, textual, pictorial, bodily, atmospheric, but are certainly not limited to the linguistic. He uses the example of the multiple, overlapping regimes of expression through which the 'gay kiss' is semiotically framed in his fieldwork with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) research participants in Brazil, to illustrate the analytical potential of both an attentiveness to such 'translation moves' between heterogeneous fieldwork sites and discourses, and an engagement with the affective dynamics which are at once the precondition for semiotic translation, and simultaneously exceed its possibilities and represent its 'untranslatable excess'. Hutta begins his excursion into the potentialities of translation by metaphorically foregrounding the ways in which it may be entangled in projects of violent appropriation. He is interested, by contrast, in capturing the powers of translation for an alternative kind of project, in the possibilities it suggests for ethical and responsible/response-able ways of engaging with otherness and difference in research encounters.

Nora Koller's book review of Sherry Simon's *Translating Montreal* (2006) shares this commitment to thinking outside the (language) box and conceptualising translation as a process that is more than just, or not necessarily, linguistic. Sherry Simon's work attempts to build bridges between geography and language/translation studies, through an examination of the relationship between Montreal's geographical division and its linguistic boundaries. In her discussion of Simon's book, Koller examines what it might mean to engage with space as a source text of translation, charting the rich analytical terrains opened by such an engagement. Her nuanced reflection on the implications of a spatial framing of language and translation builds its own stimulating bridges, when Koller draws on Simon's (and Sara Ahmed's) work to offer a broader reflection on the effects of one's (spatial, linguistic, analytical) orientation towards the world.

Last but not least, we wanted to place fieldwork settings, and researcher/research participant interactions, centre stage in our discussion of translation, in an attempt to engage reflexively with the complex ways in which issues of language difference are implicated in the negotiation of power relationships and inequalities in social science research, at the micro and macro levels. These political and ethical dimensions of language difference and translation are insightfully explored in the contributions by Lisa Ficklin and Briony Jones, Suzette Martin-Johnson, and Yevgeniya Traps.

Lisa Ficklin and Briony Jones' "Deciphering 'Voice' from 'Words': Interpreting Translation Practices in the Field" elegantly captures the multiple and intersecting epistemological, political and ethical dimensions of working with interpreters in qualitative empirical data collection. This article draws on the extensive critical and feminist methodological literatures which posit all knowledge as situated, perspectival and immanent to relations of power, and therefore highlight the importance of reflexivity in the research process. Based on their experiences of conducting fieldwork with interpreters in politically sensitive contexts in Nicaragua and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ficklin and Jones argue emphatically that the figure of the interpreter must not be eclipsed from this reflexive matrix. They illustrate how the interpreters they worked with enabled and offered up for analysis certain 'voices', narratives and meanings, while filtering out, marginalising and silencing others, with formative epistemological, political and ethical implications for the research. The contingencies of this

process depended in unpredictable ways on the interpreters' own positionalities within the complex web of research relationships, including not only identifications along lines of gender, class and ethnicity, for instance, but such imperceptible factors as political affiliation, level of education, personal history and experience and perceptions of what counts as relevant research data or what constitutes a genuine grievance. Accordingly, Ficklin and Jones propose, it is incumbent upon the researcher to acknowledge, constantly negotiate, interrogate, and make visible the impact of the interpreter on the research – a process which can enrich the analysis, such that researchers reduce interpretation to a neutral, technical practice at their own peril.

"Translating a troubled return" by Suzette Martin-Johnson offers a set of thought-provoking research notes drawn from the author's comparative study with deportees in the Dominican Republic and Jamaica. The author focuses on instances of planned and unplanned language difference encountered in data collection and analysis, and examines how these are shaped by broader relations of power - especially class inequalities, social divisions based on race and ethnicity, and intra-/international forms of political, cultural and linguistic hegemony. Her multi-faceted discussion of the political context and connotations of words provides a powerful reminder of the need to engage with language not just as a means of communication, but also as a key agent in the regulation of individuals' and communities' access to rights and resources. The incisive questions that Martin-Johnson raises about the forms of language difference which emerged in her project provide an inspiring illustration of how one might engage with translation in ethically and politically sensitive ways.

The epistemological and ethical implications of representation across languages are also placed at the centre of the agenda in Yevgeniya Traps' "Representing the Translator: Making Sense of Translation in Cross-Language Qualitative Research". Her piece is a captivating review of four articles published between 2004 and 2009 by Bogusia Temple, a leading voice in debates on language difference and translation in social science research, and the author of the foreword to this special issue. Traps' piece invites us to consider "the complexities wrought by moving among languages, by the exigencies of translation" from the perspective of the politics of representation which such movements constitute, and are constituted by. Her

short text is an elegant and persuasive overview of the important ethical questions one needs to task when attempting to represent others in languages that they have not used.

As a whole, this special issue is a vivid example of how turning the analytical gaze onto those aspects of the research process which are often taken for granted, can yield extremely powerful results. Whether you read the special issue from start to finish, dip into different pieces according to your own research interests, or engage closely with one or two articles, we hope that these texts address your existing concerns about language difference and translation. Above all, we hope that they produce many new questions about what is lost, and what can be found, in translation.

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