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What is 'translation'?

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abstract

What is 'translation', and how might it help us think differently about knowledge transfer and exchange? The purpose of this paper is to set out, for policy makers and practitioners, the theoretical and conceptual resources translation holds and seems to represent; it begins by recasting research, policy and practice themselves as instances of translation. It explores understandings of translation in literature and linguistics and in the sociology of science and technology, developing them in respect of a brief case study of the seminal women's health text, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. In concluding, it picks up key themes of uncertainty, practice and complexity.

keywords: knowledge transfer; translation; policy; practice; complexity

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What is translation? The term has become widely used among knowledge transfer researchers and practitioners, especially in the fields of health and health care. In a landmark review, Jonathan Lomas began to argue that 'The tasks… may be defined as… to establish and maintain links between researchers and their audience, via the appropriate translation of research findings' (Lomas 1997, p 4). In 2004, the World Health Organization's *World Report on Knowledge for Better Health* suggested that 'One of the key contributions of research to health systems is the translation of knowledge into actions' (WHO 2004, p 33 and p 100). By 2006, special issues of WHO's *Bulletin* as well as the journals *Evaluation and the Health Professions* and the *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions* were dedicated to translation.

But what does 'translation' mean? It may be a new word for an old problem, meaning nothing more than 'transfer'. The rapidly emerging field of 'translational medicine' seems to take translation to mean generally what transfer might have meant, that is the transmission of knowledge and evidence 'from bench to bedside'. As one commentator has observed, '"Translational medicine" as a fashionable term is being increasingly used to describe the wish of biomedical researchers to ultimately help patients' (Wehling 2008, abstract). Semantic uncertainty persists, not least because of the different interests of scientists, clinicians, patients and commercial firms (Littman et al 2007): 'Translational research means different things to different people, but it seems important to almost everyone' (Woolf 2008, p 211).

In related fields, such as public health (Armstrong et al 2006), 'translation' seems to signify dissatisfaction with 'transfer'. It wants to move away from thinking of knowledge transfer as a form of technology transfer or dissemination, rejecting if only by implication its mechanistic assumptions and its model of linear messaging from A to B. But still, *what* does it signify? Why *translation*?

'Translation' indicates a closer attention to the problem of shared meaning and how it might be developed. It seems to represent some new epistemological lubricant, facilitating the dissemination of texts and the application and use of the knowledge and information they contain. Simply, translation might be the key to transfer. And yet, when we stop to think, we are more ambivalent. What is translated often seems somehow inferior, not real or original. Note how readily commentators reach for the idea that things might be 'lost in translation'. Knowing at a distance – made in and mediated by translation - makes for incomplete renditions, blurred images, partial truths.

So what might 'translation' really mean? The purpose of this paper is to set out, for policy makers and practitioners, the theoretical and conceptual resources translation holds and seems to represent. In doing so, it explores understandings of translation in the fields of literature and linguistics and in the sociology of science and technology. It begins by setting out just why this idea of translation should make immediate, intuitive sense in relation to research, policy and practice.[1]

translation in research, policy and practice

research as translation

Research often entails translation from one language to another: where data is collected from more than one ethnic group, for example, or where the language of the researcher is other than that of the research subject. It may draw on a secondary literature or source documents written in different languages, and may be published and disseminated in languages other than the one in which it is first written up.[2]

In a different way, to conduct an interview is to ask for an account of experience and its meanings, but it is also to construct and translate that experience in terms defined at least in part by the researcher. In representing what is said, transcripts then select data, usually excluding significant gesture and eye-contact, for example. Often, certain characteristics of speech-acts (such as hesitations) will be edited out. In turn, the format of the transcript shapes the analytic use the researcher may make of it. The basis of research 'findings', then, is an artefact, a transcript or translation, not an original interaction (Ochs 1979, Barnes, Bloor and Henry 1996, Ross 2009).[3]

In this way, the researcher recasts aspects of his or her problem or topic in new, scientific form: 'All researchers "translate" the experiences of others' (Temple 1997, p 609). Research is invariably conducted in a sort of 'metalanguage' (Hantrais and Ager 1985): the research process can be conceived as one of successive translations (from theoretical formulation to operationalization, transcription, interpretation and dissemination). Theorization is a process of reciprocal back and forth between theory and fact, in which conceptions of each are revised in order that one fit the other (Baldamus 1974).[4] It is a kind of translation: a re-reading, re-use, re-application or re-representation of what we know in new terms (Turner 1980). Referencing, too, is an act of translation, a form of appropriation and incorporation of one text by another (Gilbert 1977).

policy as translation

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[1] Each of the fields covered by the paper is diverse and ill-defined, and there is no intention here to provide a comprehensive account of any them. Sources have been chosen for their relevance: main references are cited in the text, and additional sources listed in footnotes.
[2] For a brief introduction to the technical issues involved in social research in more than one language, see Birbili (2000). For translation issues in survey research and question design in general, see Ervin and Bower (1952) and Deutscher (1968); on translating survey research instruments (in this instance health-related quality of life measures), Bowden and Fox-Rushby (2003). On the use of translators and interpreters, see Temple (1997) and Jentsch (1998).
[3] For an interesting discussion of this problem, see Bourdieu (1999), esp pp 621-626, 'The risks of writing'. The seminal account of scientists' use of writing to record observations is Latour and Woolgar's (1979) *Laboratory Life*.
[4] Baldamus is commenting on Hammond's (1964) classic *Sociologists at Work*.

Now think of policy, of what it is that policy makers do. Policy is made in words, and it moves. The documents in which policy consists take up problems and representations of problems, and claims made for and about them by different sets of advocates. They recast those claims as questions and positions, interpreting and converting them into decisions, programmes and instruments. This process is continuous, as ideas and purposes move between actors and locations and are replicated at different levels of organization.

Bruno Latour (1991) provides an example, using a letter from Louis Pasteur in which he proposes a study of fermentation to the French Minister of Public Education. In attributing interests and goals to various actors, Pasteur attempts to formulate his research as a common denominator of scientific, agricultural, commercial and political interests. In doing so, it operates across a number of registers with incompatible vocabularies, translating between them. This suggests that the task of policy making might be respecified as that of reconciling the different meanings of a given phenomenon held by actors in different social worlds. As Latour puts it elsewhere (1996, p 181): 'Bureaucrats are the Einsteins of society. They make incommensurable frames of reference once again commensurable and translatable'.

Something similar applies to implementation. Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) conceive of implementation not as a process of direction, but of interaction. The implications of any given policy, including many of its potentialities as well as its pitfalls, are only uncovered in practice. Implementation is therefore a process of evolution, mutual adaptation, even exploration: 'When we act to implement a policy, we change it… Implementation will always be evolutionary; it will inevitably reformulate as well as carry out policy' (Majone and Wildavsky 1984, pp 177, 179-180). In this regard, some of the imagery used by Wildavsky and his colleagues is intriguing. Majone and Wildavsky reassure us that 'literal implementation is literally impossible', and that a faithless translation of policy into practice may be as good as a faithful one (1984, p 178). Later, Browne and Wildavsky point to the way in which 'Words on paper, mandated by an executive or administrative order, a statute, or a court ruling are translated into actual operations in a real environment. The process of adaptive translation subjects a policy to the most fundamental evolutionary test, that of its viability within the environment' (Browne and Wildavsky 1984, p 227).

translation in practice

Dvora Yanow (2003, 2004), meanwhile, considers the difficulties of translating what she calls the 'local knowledge' which is gathered at organizational boundaries. Local knowledge is defined as 'the very mundane, yet expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience' (Yanow 2004, p S12); in her example, it consists in what delivery van drivers know about customer needs and wants, as compared to what can be learned from market research. To take a health care analogy, the functioning of the hospital depends as much on what the secretary knows about the way the reception area is used as on what the manager knows about the throughput of patients. Yanow suggests that organizational self-understanding tends to be rational and technical, and often has no way of acknowledging or incorporating what can be learned from practice. Yet the worker at the margin or 'front line' translates continually between these two ways of knowing.

In their study of organizational change, Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) describe the way in which ideas are 'materialized', or turned into slogans, objects or actions in practice - and then turned again into ideas as they are communicated. Each stage of this process reveals new properties of the idea, object or action, and discards others. This explains why some ideas – such as health promotion, managed competition and evidence-based medicine, for example – find almost world-wide recognition yet mean different things in different contexts. What is specific to Czarniawska and colleagues' conception of translation is that an idea, object or action can only exist in a process of continuing translation (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996).

More profoundly, we might think of translation as being what organizations do. In a classic contribution to organizational sociology, Burns and Stalker (1961) described industrial processes as processes of translation: 'We may in fact regard a manufacturing concern most simply as a device for translating orders for goods, contracts, or user demands in general, into articles or services… The passage of work through a manufacturing concern may be regarded as a linguistic return journey, complementary to the abstracting process by which common sense observation of the physical world is transformed into scientific information, a process which is reflected in the transformation of everyday speech into technical language and mathematical formulae. Manufacture involves a return to the comprehensibility of common usage; this is particularly apparent in industries using advanced scientific techniques, and is particularly difficult' (p 78, p 155, fn). In a similar way, in the health field for instance, we may think of health care organizations as devices for processing, that is translating, illness. But Burns and Stalker's rich metaphor says more than that: they are not only drawing equivalences between linguistic and material production and between science and manufacturing but claiming that, in fact, each is impacted on the other.

We are reminded, then, of the centrality of language in research, policy and practice, both in their own right and in passages between them. The knowledge produced in research, used in policy and applied in practice invariably takes linguistic form, while language is the principal vehicle of its communication. These transitions entail changes in language and sometimes in meaning, too: meaning can be lost in translation but also created by it. But how, when and why? How might studies of translation in literature and linguistics illuminate these movements of language in and between research, policy and practice?

translating language and literature

Our common use of the term translation is something like George Steiner's simple 'the transfer of meaning between languages' (1998, p 287), or 'the action or process of turning from one language into another' (OED, second edition, 1989).[5] Its immediate connotations are now linguistic, but its first use in English is for physical removal from one place to another;[6] it is still used in physics in this way with reference to matter or energy. That is to say that our standard use of the term is already figurative, metaphorical, a carrying over or transfer of meaning from one context to another.[7] As Susan Sontag puts it, 'The fruitful affinities of etymology express a real, if subliminal connection. To translate is still to lead something across a gap, to make something go where it was not' (Sontag 2001, p 340).

Translation theory has been to a large extent normative, concerned with what good translation is or should be (France 2000a). It consists largely in statements and reflections on their craft by practitioners, and their ideas vary according to what is being translated, whether the Bible, poetry, literary prose or a legal document. It is often as much ideology as theory, but remains important in its insistence that translation is anything but simple and mechanical. Translation is beset by uncertainty and contingency, a matter of craft and compromise. As Steiner puts it, 'The craft of the translator is… deeply ambivalent: it is exercised in a radical tension between impulses to facsimile and impulses to appropriate recreation' (Steiner 1998, p 246). Of course, this tension should be resolved in such a way as to preserve the essential symbolic structure ('topology') of both source and receptor language. Steiner writes of 'invariance within transformation' (1998, p 448) and of 'rewrite rules' (1998, p 451). Translation is thus a 'bounded' or 'constrained' innovation.

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[5] Jakobson (1959) distinguished three types or orders of translation: reproducing a statement first in other words in the same language, second in another language and third, in another, non-verbal sign system such as a film. Textbook introductions to translation include Hatim and Mason (1990), Baker (1992) and Bassnett (2002); see also Venuti's very useful reader (Venuti 2000). For an introduction to problems of literary translation, see France (2000). The landmark study of literature in translation is Steiner (1998, and below).

[6] Translation has a particular association with religious and ecclesiastical affairs, referring to the removal of a bishop from one see to another, of holy relics from one place of interment to another, or of a body from earth to heaven.

[7] The French word is *traduction*. As in other Romance languages, this usage is in turn a misreading of the Latin (Steiner 1998, p 311). Etymologically, translation is close to betrayal, as in the Italian *traduttore traditore.*

Translators' concerns have changed little over centuries of practice. How literal should translation be? Should it be word-for-word, or should it seek to uncover and reproduce the intention of an author and the effect on a reader in some other way? Should a translation conform to the structure and vocabulary of the target language, 'domesticating' the foreign text, or should it retain a sense of foreignness, enriching the target language with new resources? Should translation use estrangement of this kind to draw attention to itself, to its status as a text which has been translated? To what extent is the translator secondary or subservient to an original author, and to what extent is he himself or she herself the author of a new text?

More descriptive theory has sought to identify how translation has been variously understood, and what different kinds of translation have been made in different contexts (Toury 1995). The focus of attention is less on the relationship between translation and source than on the selection and shaping or 'manipulation' (Hermans 1985, 1996, 2000) of the source by local social and political pressures and constraints. What norms are at work in selecting any given text (or part of a text) for translation, and translating it in a certain way? The effect here is to reverse our standard conception of the relationship between an active, original author and a passive translator. If our concern is with translation, then the translator is the principal actor. '(T)he 'other' to which a translated text refers is never simply the source text, even though that is the claim which translations commonly make. It is at best an image of it. Because the image is always slanted, coloured, preformed, overdetermined, but never innocent, we can say that translation constructs or produces or… 'invents' its original' (Hermans 2000, p 14).

translation politics

And this means that it has political implications. For translation, and the transformation it entails, always 'serves a purpose, and therefore an interest' (Hermans 2000, p 15). We might think of it as a kind of incorporation of one language into another: to translate is not merely to 'carry over', but to take over. As one writer puts it, 'From its beginnings the imperialist mission is, in short, one of translation: the translation of the 'other' into the terms of empire… colonization is translation' (Cheyfitz 1991, p 112, p 117; cit France 2000a, p 9). By the same token, however, beginning with translations of the Bible into vernacular languages, translations have often been the vehicle of liberation politics, including those of socialist, anarchist, nationalist and feminist texts, and of oppositional and counter-cultural literature of all kinds.

The politics of translation inhere in its process as well as its substance. This includes the way translation is for the most part ignored or denied (Venuti 1995, 1998). Where it is acknowledged, conventional accounts often convey a hierarchical, sexualized relationship between a text and its translation (Simon 2000). The translator is taken to be mere handmaiden to the author; translation is judged to be either 'faithful' or 'free'; translations are 'bastardized products of interlinguistic transfer' (Simon 2000, p 30). In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, the first legitimate role for women in writing publicly was in translating (and in the same way now, the new specialist occupations in knowledge transfer and exchange are largely feminized). By the same token, recent feminist writing has asserted the agency of the translator, as well as the possibilities of participation between writer and translator. 'Feminist translation implies extending and developing the intention of the original text' (Simon 2000, p 32). The argument is that translating is a 'transferential process', in which the reading subject becomes a writing subject: 'Feminist writing and translation practice come together in framing all writing as rewriting' (Simon 2000, p 33).

This is to suggest, in turn, that translation takes place within discourses in which some kinds of association or translation are legitimated and authorized just as others are excluded or denied. It takes place under what might be described as 'translation regimes': Derrida describes translation as 'regulated transformation', in this sense (McDonald 1988; Hermans 2000). But this is not to say that discourse is wholly determining. Discourse constitutes the frame of reference within which actors make sense of their worlds: as they do so, making translations, a dominant discourse may be reproduced and renewed but also adapted and changed. It is reconstituted in another place in another form, with different implications.

Studies of language and literature tell those concerned with the translation of knowledge or evidence into policy and practice at least three vital things. First, they show that translation is not merely change but conscious change: they identify the work entailed in translation, making it visible and available for reflection. Second, these conscious changes are also conscious choices: translators choose between alternatives, among which some are better and some worse. Thirdly, in so far as they are concerned with getting it right, translators must know what is right, and for whom. They are engaged in a political, and not merely technical process. And finally, they show that what is at issue here is precisely *translation*, not merely interpretation (cf Yanow 1996, 2000). Interpretation connotes understanding, reception, apprehension of meaning, while translation emphasizes the production of a new semantic object. Translation has a more active sense of re-writing, re-production: it may be predicated on interpretation and understanding, but it is also more than that.

translating science and technology

What has become known as the 'sociology of translation' or 'actor-network theory' (ANT) is concerned primarily with the process of scientific and technological change and innovation, and with the interaction between people and things which this entails. Individuals and technologies are treated as a single unit of analysis (an actor-network), and translation refers to the way in which such entities are formed.[8]

The sociology of translation 'takes the semiotic insight, that of the relationality of entities, the notion that they are produced in relations, and applies this ruthlessly to all materials – and not simply to those that are linguistic' (Law 1999, p 4). What is meant by 'translation' is the work of bringing two (or more) things into relation with one another (Law 1999). And what is significant about this process is the way in which a new relationship (or 'actor-network') changes the properties or characteristics of those things or people party to it. Such relationships are not essential or given: they have to be made and maintained, or 'performed' (Law 1999).

In a widely cited paper (Callon 1986), Michel Callon sets out a series of stages or 'moments' in the process of translation. His empirical material is drawn from a research study of the revitalisation of scallop fishing in Brittany, France, using cultivation techniques learned in Japan. Drawing on concepts of problematization, *interessement*, enrolment and mobilization, Callon describes how a network of relationships (an actor-network) is constituted by the establishment of 'equivalences', representations which amount to translations. 'The scallops are transformed into larvae, the larvae into numbers, the numbers into tables and curves which represent easily transportable, reproducible, and diffusable sheets of paper… The scallops have been displaced. They have been transported into the conference room through a series of transformations' (Callon 1986, pp 217-218).

Callon suggests that to translate is 'to express in one's own language what others say and want, why they act in the way they do and how they associate with each other: it is to establish oneself as a spokesman' (Callon 1986, p 223). But this is not an expression of authority: in fact, and in keeping with its origins in microsociology, ANT tends to construe translation as collaborative performance. '(A) concern with translation focuses on the process of *mutual* definition and inscription' (Callon 1991, p 143, emphasis added). Similarly, 'Enrolment is the process through which actors explore the differences and peculiarities of the wishes, demands and interests of other actors involved, in order to bring into being a set of shared values and practices' (Doorewaard and van Bijsterveld 2001, p 62). Translation, by this account, is a communicative process in which actors inhabiting different social worlds (i) enter into relations with each other, and (ii) begin to recast or reconstruct themselves, their interests and their worlds.

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[8] For an accessible introduction to ANT, see Law (1997). Its principal exponents, apart from Law, are the French sociologists Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, who take their inspiration from the work of the French philosopher Michel Serres, notably Serres (1974), and from classical ethnomethodology.

boundary objects

Much of the time, of course, a number of different actors are trying to conduct and complete such translations all at once. Noting that translation is invariably multilateral, 'n-way' as they put it and not one-way, Star and Griesemer (1989) develop a concept of the 'boundary object'. Boundary objects are 'objects which both inhabit several intersecting social worlds *and* satisfy the informational requirements of each. They are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. They may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds' (Star and Griesemer 1989, p 393; italics in original).

Further, 'each social world has partial jurisdiction over the object's resources, and mismatches caused by the overlap become problems for negotiation' (p 412). It is important that 'the protocols are not simply the imposition of one world's vision on the rest; if they are, they are sure to fail. Rather, boundary objects act as anchors or bridges' (Star and Griesemer 1989, p 414) (note that boundary objects *cross* boundaries: they bridge and connect different worlds). Boundary objects, then, must be 'internally heterogeneous', 'simultaneously concrete and abstract, specific and general, conventionalized and customized' (Star and Griesemer 1989, p 408). Such objects include *repositories* (databases, that is sets of objects or resources which different users draw on in different ways); *ideal types* which, precisely because they are abstractions, are applicable in different circumstances; objects which have *coincident boundaries*, such as maps; *standard forms*, which essentially transport a common frame of reference to different circumstances.

In this way, the sociology of translation has come to focus on the intermediary, a concept taken (or perhaps translated) from economics. An intermediary is 'anything passing between actors which defines the relationship between them' (Callon 1991, p 134), including documents or texts, technical artefacts and instruments, human beings, money. What is important about an intermediary is that it serves to define not only a relationship, but also in effect the identity and interests of the partners to it: 'actors define one another by means of the intermediaries which they put into circulation' (Callon, 1991, p 140).

Latour, again, provides a case study of the development of the Kodak camera, insisting that 'What we observe is *a group of variable geometry entering into a relationship with an object of variable geometry*. Both get transformed. We observe a process of translation – not one of reception, rejection, resistance, or acceptance' (Latour 1991, p 116; italics in original). All the actors involved in the production and use of the new camera, including the technology itself, 'co-evolve'. 'The unity of an innovation is not given by something which would remain constant over time, but by the moving translation of what we call… a *quasi-object*' (Latour 1991, p 117; italics in original).

The sociology of translation set out to extend the range of ways in which 'translation' might be understood. It provides a series of insights for students and practitioners of knowledge translation. The first is to point out that not only is communication not linear, but in the strictest sense it is not dialogical either. In science, in policy and in the workplace, communications and the translations they entail are typically multilateral. This has important implications for the way we think of what is being communicated or translated. STS's second move is to show that it is not only texts but objects which serve as vehicles or instruments of translation. Thirdly, it suggests that a translation is a social (or perhaps socio-technical) construction. Meaning is not prior to translation, but is constructed and reconstructed in the process of communication. And finally, we should think of translation as not only constructing and communicating meaning but, in doing so, as defining and redefining the relationships between parties to that communication. The production of a new document or artefact serves to reconstruct the identities and interests of social actors in relation both to the new text or object and to each other. All of this makes of translation a complex, creative process in which form and function, intention and outcome are not given, but emergent.

The next section develops some of the ideas of the last two in respect of a specific example.

Our Bodies, Ourselves

Our Bodies, Ourselves (Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1973) was the first commercial publication of what had been a series of papers produced by a women's health discussion group in Boston, Massachusetts. Since then, the text has evolved through several editions and multiple translations into other languages. The first major revision, *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves* was produced in 1984 and went online in 1996; a second revision, *Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century* came out in 1998 and *Our Bodies, Ourselves: a new edition for a new era* in 2005. A series of parallel projects includes *Ourselves and Our Children* (1978), *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives* (1980), *Ourselves Growing Older* (1987) and *Sacrificing Our Selves for Love* (1996). The book was first translated into Italian in 1974, and versions in many other languages have appeared since.[9]

Our Bodies, Ourselves is renowned for its signal and significant message, and for its success. But it is also distinguished by its authorial position, which is material both to what it says and how it has been read and received. The mark of this is in the translations which have been made of it. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is no longer a unique text, but an idea which frames an open and evolving system of cross-national communication (Davis 2002). Its authorial position is 'dialogic and provisional' (Shapiro nd).

The original and all subsequent versions have been collectively authored, such that a distinction between the making of the text and the formation or making of the group is difficult to draw. A group of women had begun to meet to discuss women's health in Boston in 1969, incorporating as the Boston Women's Health Book Collective in 1972 (Pincus 2002). 'In the beginning we called ourselves "the doctors group"... the process of talking was as crucial as the facts themselves... (T)hat is reflected in the changing titles of... the book - from *Women and Their Bodies*, to *Women and our Bodies* to, finally, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*' (BWHBC 1973, preface). In this way, the production of the text changed and consolidated the identity of the group. The group was a function or product of the writing process to the same extent that the book was the product of a group process.

The authorial identity behind *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is collective, but not always specific. The first person plural 'we' is used with a shifting referent, which is sometimes all women in the US, sometimes those who collaborated in producing a specific portion of text. The process of translation and adaptation then complicates (enriches) the authorial identity even further. In their introduction to the first British edition in 1978, Phillips and Rakusen write that 'We decided to continue using the pronoun 'we' throughout but, as the Boston women explain their preface, this does not mean that we all agree with everything that has been written. 'We', therefore… refers to the collective experience of all the women who have worked on this book' (Phillips and Rakusen 1978, p 10).

Shapiro (nd) describes the process of translation of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* for a Latin American readership, which resulted in the publication of *Nuestros Cuerpos, Neustras Vidas* in 2000. By the early 1990s, it was recognized that the first (1976) Spanish translation had become dated, and a new direct translation of the 1992 (American) English edition was made. Different chapters were then rewritten by 20 women's health groups in 11 countries from North, South and Central America and the Caribbean. Redrafts were then edited in Boston, supported by an experienced medical translator. At this stage, changes made for the new 1998 US edition were also incorporated.

[9] For more on the book, go to: http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/. For a scholarly account of its origin, evolution and impact through its many translations, see Davis (2002, 2007).

The production of *Nuestros Cuerpos, Neustras Vidas* entailed framing the work differently, changing the order and conception of sections and chapters, rewriting introductions and providing an essentially new structure for the book. Substantive changes to several chapters, like the one on abortion, made them more appropriate to different socio-economic and political conditions. New resource materials were included. Notably, the book's title and cover are changed, their core terms recast, the English 'selves' becoming Spanish 'lives'.

This is the more significant because the Spanish translation itself becomes a source for new versions of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The principal source for the Bulgarian edition, for example, seems to have been a backtranslation into English of the Spanish *Nuestros Cuerpos, Neustras Vidas*. Translations beget translations; in this case, what translators would term the target text is reconstructed as a source. However, it seems difficult to think of these translations being conducted either in series or in parallel; rather, translations accumulate into a body of knowledge, a way of thinking and a form of expression characteristic of a set of texts and fully or definitively realized in no single one of them. Its source or centre is increasingly elusive, obscured. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is reproduced, reconstructed, rewritten as it is translated.

Ordinarily, the work of translation is often hidden, treated as a technical aspect of the production of a book, much like typesetting (Venuti 1995). Here, however, it is open, deliberate, visible, informed by a political ethic taken from Freire's participatory education: 'Participatory education emphasizes a dialogic, relational process between teacher and learner. However, the adaptation process which resulted in NCNV felt much more like the textual representation of a web of relationships and the creation of a virtual community' (Shapiro 1999, p 12).

In this way, successive translations of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* form a complex system, in which its meaning is emergent, continually reproduced. The translation can be said to be *constructive*, in so far as it reinvents the object which it translates; *constitutive* to the extent that it creates communities of writers and readers, and *contingent*, to the degree that it is determined by its intelligibility and usefulness to the reader in her context for whom it is made.

what translation is

So what is translation? How useful is this idea of translation? Where does it lead us? Let it be said straight away that translation can be made to do too much work as well as too little. Some of the difficulty in the literature reviewed here is that the concept is too stretched, that the idea of translation is itself translated too far beyond its useful meaning (Newman 2006). What is known as the 'sociology of translation' has moved a long way from its original semiotic prompt, losing its linguistic inspiration and application and thereby some of its purchase and coherence, too (Law 1999).

Nevertheless, much that is of value remains. What is central to both theoretical and applied discussions of translation (above) is the acknowledgement of uncertainty, the centrality of practice, and the recognition of complexity. These have a common root, which might be described as the problem of reference. We communicate by means of signs (words and pictures, sounds and images), that is by choosing or making representations of what we mean. But the relationship between the sign and what it signifies is neither determined nor mechanical: what things mean or represent is a matter of convention (a social construct) and it is invariably inexact. Understanding may come to be shared, but it cannot be identical. This fundamental epistemological uncertainty, this requirement that every utterance be accompanied by some hermeneutic move on the part of the reader or listener, is a source of innovation and creativity as well as error and failure. Translation makes this uncertainty explicit.

It follows that the translator's first task may be to identify not (or not only) the knowledge which is to be translated, but the uncertainty which surrounds it. As Bogusia Temple has argued (Temple 1997, 2005), translation demands explicit methodological attention. We should treat it as a problem of representation, with all the political and ethical questions that entails. Translation decisions should be revealed for what they are, by making them open, explicit and subject to debate (Temple 2005).

This makes the translator a legislator, of a particular kind. Drawing on both literary and legal theory, James Boyd White (1990) thinks of justice itself as a process of translation: 'The central activity of law is the reading of texts – cases, statutes, regulations – and their imperfect reproduction and arrangement, in compositions of our making, in contexts to some degree distinct from those in which they were made. It is in fact a kind of translation, and this knowledge should shape both the way we engage in it ourselves and the way we judge the productions of others' (White 1990, p 241). He asks us to think of what the lawyer does in conversations with her client, developing a story or argument which makes sense both in his or her terms and those of the law, and which consists in 'necessarily imperfect translations' (ibid, pp 260-261). Neither the client's story nor the law can be perfectly rendered; justice consists in some new and appropriate fusion of the two.

Similarly, a common theme of all discussions of translation is that it belongs to the world of *practice*. For translation is a science of adequacy: it works according to equivalence, not deduction; it entails writing and thinking in terms of function not cause. Its epistemology is rooted in pragmatics, not logic. It takes place on the ground, as practitioners (including researchers and policy makers) talk and write about new ways of doing things. George Steiner denies the very possibility of a 'theory of translation', in essence because it depends on some intuitive, creative (artistic) act which is simply inaccessible to intellectual deconstruction and abstraction. 'At best we have narratives of translational *praxis*' (1998, p viii; italics in original).

But if there is a role for theory here, then it might be to make of translation a reflexive, conscious and critical practice. Goethe did this, identifying three modes of translation, successive and apparently progressing from lower to higher forms.[10] The first is one in which translation is passive or reactive, is undertaken half-consciously and is concerned only with the immediate substance of information. The second is more active, in which the foreign source is reconstructed in domestic form. The third is creative, seeking to define and occupy a new third space between source and object. The implication is that translation should move from the unconscious and automatic to the conscious and deliberate, from crude appropriation to reflective innovation.

A third effect of thinking in terms of translation has to do with the essential pluralism of processes of communication within and between domains of research, policy and practice. In combination with the problem of reference (above), it takes thinking about translation to a higher order of *complexity*. Simply, translation is often iterative and multilateral, multivocal not univocal: translation is 'n-way' (Star and Griesemer 1989, above), not one-way. What is described as translation is often the result of multiple iterations by multiple actors, eroding the distinction between source and target. If each actor takes another as a point of reference, there are no points of reference. Each actor or site (usually more than two) becomes a source (resource) for the other: understanding is reconstituted and reciprocated as it is communicated. The sense of 'source' or 'origin' is simply a translation we have failed to reconstruct. What we think of as research or policy or practice is an emergent property of complex and continuing communicative relationships.

translation as a boundary practice

It may be that we cannot know what translation is, what happens at the moment of connecting one word to another, or word to object, or an idea to its application. We know about circumstances, conditions, processes and effects, but not about translation itself. This is for two possible reasons: it is either because translation is indeed in some way unknowable, or simply because it has no essence or centre, because there is no 'translation itself'.

For now, talk of 'translation' in research, policy and practice appears to refer something beyond 'transfer'. It expresses a sense of doing something other or more than merely telling,

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[10] In addenda to the *West-Östlicher Divan* (1819); see Steiner (1998, pp 270ff).

of communicative and perhaps creative exchange rather than dissemination, though it mostly stops short of some of the further implications of constructivism and complexity (Leischow et al 2008).

Translation is something like a boundary object. It is not an object, of course, but a practice and vocabulary within which the nature of research, policy and practice and the relationship between them is being rethought. It is the means by which an array of actors, including international organizations both public and private, governments, sponsors, researchers, policy makers and practitioners have come to communicate about a problem even in the absence of any fully shared conception of it. These debates about translation are themselves instances of it.

It is in keeping with the spirit of this discussion to conclude not by saying what translation means, but by asking what it might mean. It does not mean that we simply have to tell our story again in different words and assume that what we meant will happen. There is and can be no agreement as to what the right new words would be, or even whether they should be words rather than technological instruments, administrative forms or pieces of software. There is and never will be for knowledge transfer a dictionary of the kind we might use (and even then with caution) in translating English to Spanish. The idea of 'translation' is a prompt to reflexivity, an invitation to negotiation, to ask why we mean what we do and whether and in what terms that could or should possibly mean anything to anybody else. What sorts of representations and associations will have to be nurtured into being for anything like the change we want to take place? And how will we react to misrepresentations, accidental associations and unforeseen outcomes? How will we make sense of – or translate - them?

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