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# I-LanD Journal

Identity, Language and Diversity

Chief Editors: Giuditta Caliendo & Maria Cristina Nisco

## Translating and Interpreting Linguistic and Cultural Differences in a Migrant Era

Eleonora Federici, María del Rosario Martín Ruano, María del Carmen África Vidal Claramonte (Eds)



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Translating and Interpreting Linguistic and Cultural Differences  
in a Migrant Era

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# Migration and Translation: Changing Concepts, Critical Approaches. An Interview with Doris Bachmann-Medick

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## Introduction

Migration and translation are two major issues of contemporary life and are recurrent themes in theoretical and critical thought across many disciplines. Language practices in migratory times go beyond the level of linguistic and communicative activity and make us aware of the power of language, translation, mutual understanding and social/political/cultural practices. In order to better understand the challenges and potentials facing us as interpreters, translators or scholars in Translation Studies we need to move beyond our disciplinary borders and open the discipline up to new perspectives and methodologies. Starting from these premises we believe that Doris Bachmann-Medick's work on migration and translation is central for a critical rethinking of the role of translation, translators, interpreters and cultural mediators in a period of massive migrations towards Western Europe. The interview proposes a new approach for studying, researching and working with linguistic/cultural translation in an era of transnational movements and displacements.

**Eleonora Federici:** The role of translation and interpreting is crucial in the mediation of discourses and in the evolution of literary/linguistic/cultural representations of differences in various sociocultural contexts. How can your concept of 'framing migration', presented in your volume *Migration: Changing Concepts, Critical Approaches*, be helpful in understanding the role of translators in an era characterised by widespread transnational migrations?

**Doris Bachmann-Medick:** In contemporary migration societies, it is not only important to examine the empirical conditions and



circumstances of migration processes, but also the frames, regimes and concepts that underlie and shape the different discourses on migration. We need a critical reflection of such frames in order to reveal and understand the hidden conceptions and unconscious pre-assumptions of migration that are not immediately visible. Frames shape the discourses, but also the self-images of migrants, their social relations, beliefs, loyalties, anxieties and hopes. Moreover, frameworks also influence the study of migration in terms of its own (hidden) theoretical concepts – just think of the paradigmatic shift from a ‘methodological nationalism’ to a ‘methodological transnationalism’ that has recently taken place in migration research.

However, an increasing awareness of the ‘framing’ of migration also offers the chance to develop critical analytical standpoints in dealing with actual migration processes. Such critical analytical lenses can be focused on unspoken pre-conceptions, stereotypical images and narratives, collective memories and prejudices that define the attitudes towards migrants and the maintenance of border regimes. They can draw attention to exclusions as well as inclusions and their power relations.

Framing migration always goes along with applications of power. This is apparent in the role of the translators themselves. As far as their role is concerned, this cannot be described as that of a neutral mediation. It always has to be asked which unconscious or explicitly normative schemata each translator follows in interpreting and translating. Can he or she break through these schemata by using other frames as a basis, by, for instance, developing a critical awareness of the social and cultural contexts of his or her respective translations – e.g. by explicitly referring to power inequalities where they become an issue or by making people aware of their practices of ‘othering’, their ethnic prejudices or even racist assumptions? By assuming this role, the translator can contribute to the avoidance of easy ethnic generalisations – i.e. to the presupposition of groups as homogeneous – and thus avoid mere advocacy or representation of migrants, promoting instead their empowerment and diverse self-articulation in a more actor-oriented way.

**Eleonora Federici:** In your work you have described translation as a new analytical tool for better understanding the complex issues of migratory waves. Is it possible to connect a theoretical/academic debate on translation to social/political practices and if so, how?

**Doris Bachmann-Medick:** In the course of the so-called translational turn, the category of translation was introduced beyond its applications in the field of Translation Studies into the Humanities and Social Sciences. This led to a broadening in the understanding of the term. In this process, however, translation has been all too easily overstretched into a mere metaphor. In critical response to such mere metaphorical uses, in which the conceptual contours of the term have become blurred, translation has been elaborated into a fundamental category of analysis: in this way all social and cultural phenomena that are



characterised by shifts, context changes, mediations, dealings with gaps, but also by coping with ruptures and distortions, may be investigated as forms of translation. However, this methodological advancement has by no means been confined to the field of research and academic discourse. It is pressed and driven by developments in the social problem areas themselves: above all by the increased significance, urgency, indeed, of translation procedures in globalised societies – in view of growing conflicts between cultures and religions, in view of the challenges presented by the frequency of context changes due to worldwide migration, by refugee movements and their transnational asynchronies and displacements, as well as the complexities of their management through translation efforts. In contrast to any literary and language-related translation, translation in these contexts cannot be bound to an original text. Rather, it comes to embody a broad cultural and social practice, a cultural technique or *modus operandi* (Robert Young) in world society. Both dimensions, the development of a scientific-theoretical category of analysis and the social practice, are necessarily interrelated. How this comes to expression in the social sites themselves only becomes clear when one looks at such sites on a small scale, as it were, through a translational and at the same time micro-sociological lens, as through a microscope. Here one encounters hitherto barely perceived processes of transmission, stages of interaction mediated by cultural brokers, but also their frequent misunderstandings and refractions, which however can be reassessed as containing their own productive potential. In this sense, the theoretical debate on translation can first of all focus on the ways in which crucial social phenomena and circumstances in the world of today are specifically re-conceived as translation processes, so that they can be thought of and dealt with as produced and changeable.

**Eleonora Federici:** How can we connect theories and practices of translation to social practices? How can we, as scholars and academics, help to create a stronger connection between academia and society around the many issues connected to migratory flows?

**Doris Bachmann-Medick:** A stronger connection, even linkage, between academia and society in the field of migration could, perhaps, emerge from new developments in the social arenas of action themselves. I am not talking here about the recent intensification and escalation of another refugee drama on the borders of Europe (in February and March 2020), which makes it seem almost cynical to point to the potential of more reflective translation practices for the social processes themselves. Here, the very endeavour of translation reaches its own limits at the barbed wire, at the border fences and the despair of refugees stranded there. Instead I would like to address some positive engagements in successful translation projects with migrants. For example, in the context of the enduring refugee situation in Germany we see some revealing projects of participation. In the so-called *Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point* project, migrants have



become actively involved in joint museum, exhibition and theatre projects, for example by training refugees (especially Iraqis and Syrians) as museum guides. What is achieved in these projects is that these refugees guide other refugees in their Arabic native language through Berlin museums (e.g. in museums of Islamic art). They bring them into an active exchange of shared or different cultural experiences – embracing common stories as central moments of memory work – with the help of migration pedagogy. What is initiated here amounts not least to a stimulating link between academic insights and migrant-related museum practices: I am thinking here of the important academic findings about the historical existence of contact zones and cultural entanglements through common stories and histories, about transnational cross-fertilisations and hybrid overlaps and the always already translated representation of cultures or cultural artefacts that are exhibited in museums. These historical insights can be directly translated into contemporary experiences, and they can be realised in concrete terms through active participation. In this way, third spaces of collaboration are created in a direct and object-related way. Here, the talk of translation spaces as innovative interstices for a ‘negotiation of differences’ is put into practice.

**Eleonora Federici:** In your volume you defined migrants as agents of translation but to what extent is the agency of migrants visible in the social and cultural context they migrate to? Which models of action are possible in these circumstances, and is translation a tool for agency?

**Doris Bachmann-Medick:** A particularly important approach that currently brings together Translation Studies and Migration Studies is that of ‘political translation’. With this emphasis, the German-Danish sociologist and field worker Nicole Doerr has introduced translation as a tool for agency. What does this mean? We need empirical case studies and fieldwork experience in order to discover possible points of intervention for the translator or interpreter in the social process; and to be able to recognise more specifically to what extent the assertiveness of migrants is hindered and in what ways it could be strengthened and made more visible through the work of translators themselves. One possible model that has already proven itself in practice would be – as I indicated – the model of political translation. It is based on insights gained from the conflictual discourses between migrants, marginalised social groups, institutions, NGOs and dominant decision-makers. But it can also be used as a critical tool in the sphere of local urban politics and its blockages. Here, reflective and engaged translators can contribute to the empowerment of migrants and their access to housing, health care and education. This model can be used to show how translation addresses power inequalities, but also how migrants and asylum seekers themselves develop civic translation capacities. In her inspiring book *Political Translation: How Social Movement Democracies Survive*, Nicole Doerr describes the intervening, third position of translators, how it can become effective not least in migration contexts – by uncovering prejudices, by critical translations



(and thus making public) of gender-race-class differences as well as by concrete interventions in discursive settings and by thus strengthening the self-articulation, justice and inclusion of migrants: “I analyze *political translation*, distinct from linguistic translation, as a disruptive and communicative practice developed by activists and grassroots community organizers to address the inequities that hinder democratic deliberation, and to entreat powerful groups to work more inclusively with disempowered ones” (Doerr 2018: 3).

**Eleonora Federici:** You describe translation in migration contexts not as a single practice but as a broader translational field suggesting Actor-Network Theory as a basis for the development of this idea. Can you suggest approaches to take in order to consider migrants as real agents of intellectual transformation and social change within the European context?

**Doris Bachmann-Medick:** Migration is not a process that is controlled by individual actors alone. Rather, migrants are integrated into a broader relational field, into networks and alliances, and indeed also into a translational network with non-human factors such as climate change, war, refugee camps, boats, but also with communication media and objects such as smartphones (to keep connected with their home country and their families), with surveillance and security tools. But still – beyond the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and its concept of limitless translatability by associations and interrelations of human and non-human entities – borders and disruptions continue to be vitally important here, especially border fences erected to deter migrants. Thus, we might take ANT as a stimulus, but we still need to gain more insight into the political steering of translational encounters that goes beyond mere ‘translation associations’, whether it refers to control, power sharing or even civil society action in solidarity. What can be learned from ANT, however, is that translation does not refer to any language of origin, but to the language of practice – and that includes technological tools, transmission media, objects of belonging and memory.

To come back to the second part of your question: when can migrants become independent actors who trigger social transformations? Privileged migrants such as artists, writers and academics will find it easier to do so – just think of philologist Erich Auerbach, who in the early 1930s had to emigrate from Nazi Germany to Istanbul where he helped initiate the transformation of an entire society (Turkish Westernisation). He practised a form of translation (of Western humanism) that did not refer to distant or past contexts. Instead, it opened up future contexts and, in this case, set an entire society in motion – towards new idioms and new cultural values. My colleague, the sociologist Andreas Langenohl has spoken, in this sense, of a future-oriented capacity of translation to generate new social contexts. In the case of contemporary migration societies, this notion could refer to migrants that urge a rethinking of social self-understanding. Their impulses could disrupt a familiar and hitherto uncontested traditional understanding of locality; they could lay open in a more



unsparing light the conditions, the blockages, but also the chances of living together under the banner of greater diversity in certain places. By their presence alone they could contribute to a critical examination of ingrained traditional cultural and ethical assumptions, including racist or other discriminative attitudes.

Migrants thus embody a permanent translational challenge for changing the host country's language, its drawing of borders and its unconscious normative beliefs. They shed light on diverse pre-translations, which are not always immediately visible, but which are effective in the living conditions of migrants. I mean the non-linear, back-and-forth translations between multiple spheres of cross-cultural belonging and memory, set in motion in this way. Migration thus proves to be a constant challenge for the self-understanding of a nation state as a supposedly homogenous container of traditions.

**Eleonora Federici:** How can we introduce issues around migration into Translation Studies/Interpreting Studies courses? Is it possible to train professional translators to juggle the difficult tasks connected with the integration of migrants? Are we able to teach the necessary competences for translating migrants' experiences and for helping them integrate into the new social context?

**Doris Bachmann-Medick:** I teach in a Cultural Studies Institute, not in the discipline of Translation Studies. Therefore, I would like to give you just one example: a practical possibility could be to develop digital translation tools together with migrants, e.g. apps for language learning. As a Translation Studies scholar, however, one can only give impulses and ideas, otherwise there would be the danger that top-down teaching would be practised instead of bottom-up integrative efforts.

**Eleonora Federici:** Over the last few years the term 'translation' has acquired a strong metaphorical meaning connected to migration, as Salman Rushdie once affirmed "we are all translated beings" (1991). To what extent has this approach changed our view on translation practices? Can this specific metaphorical use of the notion of translation be useful in this era of migratory flows?

**Doris Bachmann-Medick:** As I said before, we should strive to abandon the metaphorical use of the term translation and instead arrive at a more precise and empirically grounded 'operative' model of translation. But even then, Rushdie's figurative expression that we are all translated beings is still valuable. It simply demolishes the notion of any pure origins of individual existences, whether these are literary works or cultures or even migrant biographies. However, we should not merely claim that everything is always already translated, but rather show how this is the case in concrete terms. Thus, in her book *Born Translated* (2015), Rebecca Walkowitz has shown translation as a principal ingredient in any current literary production and circulation. She uses the example of contemporary literatures





that have always been written with translation in mind, with regard to their internal multilingualism and transnational horizon. As far as cultures are concerned, their being in translation refers to how mixed they have always been, how they are infused by foreign influences from the outset. As far as migrants are concerned, their 'multiple origins' should be named precisely, the multiple affiliations that make up a hybrid life in the sense of a translated existence. But here one should not underestimate the fact that – despite seemingly boundless migrant mobility – affiliations, memories and references to traditions of the home countries always remain effective and continue to shape the emotional balance of migrants. They should be acknowledged and valued, rather than allowed to disappear in a placeless cosmopolitanism.

In another sense, however, the notion of 'translated beings' also clearly indicates the downside of existences being translated: migrants are also passive objects of alienating translations, of definitions and categorisations by others. Whether migrants are labelled as refugees, as economic migrants, as temporary labour migrants, as climate change migrants or even as potential terrorist threats, makes a difference. In this context, a key institutional objective cannot be overlooked: the official translation of migrants into citizens. This whole bureaucratic process is always accompanied by the fact that migrants are subject to (state) control in their agency, their scope of movement and their freedom of choice. In contrast to these constraints autonomous forms of translating and self-translating should be encouraged: translational capacities for managing the precarious passages and ruptures between the disparate cultural spheres.

**Eleonora Federici:** One aspect of the concept of self-translation is the migrants' effort to translate themselves into another context in a continuous struggle between assimilation and alienation. Migrants' texts can be a particularly useful instrument for better understanding their exile experience. How can we teach translators the necessary competences to translate these writings? Which competences do literary translators need today in order to translate migrants' voices?

**Doris Bachmann-Medick:** If one approaches this question with a view to literary translation, it is clear that literary translation is always also cultural translation. Translators need competencies relating to cultural contextualisation. This has become a commonplace, but it can certainly be specified: above all, translators should try not to translate under universalising assumptions; they should be aware of the impact of culture-specific epistemologies – for example, with regard to the concept of the person. This is not the same in Indian novels and in European novels, where a humanistic tradition of the self-perfecting individual prevails. In order to achieve such competences in cultural contextualisation, it would be helpful to include ethnographic elements in the training of translators. It would certainly be helpful to engage in the acquisition of pertinent ethnological knowledge when dealing with migration reports and migrating texts. Another competence of



translators should be an ability to uncover the (mostly unconscious) frames of migration, the power of perceptual images and narratives, the creeping effects of open or unconscious racism, the role of stereotyping, etc.

But don't we also have too narrow a definition of professional translators? In migration contexts there is a whole network of translators at work: translators in refugee camps and in court procedures and also the media in general deserve to be mentioned as translators of migrants' experiences. There is also, of course, the regime of bureaucratic-institutional classifications and its purveyors. Ultimately, we all are called upon as citizens to act as translators of migration in this broad sense in our everyday encounters – in our necessary efforts to translate reciprocally, aiming to achieve a coexistence of often very different ways of life.

If one approaches this question with a view to the migrants themselves who are coping with their existential experiences through writing, one recognises on the one hand the complex challenges of self-translation, but on the other the self-reflective potential of (literary) representation. A telling example is the memoir *Lost in Translation* (2008) by the Jewish journalist Eva Hoffman, who described her migration process from Poland to Canada and America in 1959 as a biographical rupture, which ran the risk of producing 'cultural schizophrenia'. Having to live in a permanent field of tension between two different cultural frames of reference she confessed: "I have to translate myself", in order to gradually become familiar with the "subcutaneous beliefs" and unspoken "common agreements" of a foreign society (2008: 211).

From this point of view, it could be argued that the competencies of translators could be further profiled by dealing with precisely those texts by migrants that provide microscopic information about the individual translation steps of gradually growing into another society. From this approach, the fears, pains, traumas and translation therapies (Hoffman 2008) can be read – not least the 'pre-translations', as I would call them. By this I mean a specific attention to the wide-ranging translation paths as they are already set in the run-up to migration beforehand (through prejudices, expectations, trauma experiences, etc.). But can individual traumas occurring along these paths be translated at all? Perhaps here an examination of concrete situations, such as psychotherapeutic scenarios, could provide more insights than mere texts. In such action scenarios, too, it is translators/interpreters who can play the important role of a third party between migrants and psychotherapists, as Mascha Dabić has described in her 2017 novel *Reibungsverluste* [Losses through friction].

But is it really mainly texts, migrant's writings and storytelling that embody and challenge translation? What about other important migrant forms of expression – art, theatre, music, objects of memory? In any case, here one finds strong material and visual alternatives to mere expression through words. Moira Inghilleri (2019) has recently spoken of carrying objects across sign systems in this sense. After all, not only the contents of experiences are transmitted, but visibility and testimony are generated via objects, performativity and materiality.



**Eleonora Federici:** You talk about a pragmatic detour of translation for asylum seekers envisioning translation as a goal oriented social practice for self-empowerment. Can you explain to us how the use of a third idiom can be strategic to achieve this?

**Doris Bachmann-Medick:** Translation as a tool for self-empowerment – this is certainly a noble goal for a translation perspective that suggests an optimistic view of social conviviality. But the reality looks different: aggressive acts of violence against migrants run counter to any act of translation. And yet, a translational approach in the field of migration policy is not obsolete. It can work towards critically exposing the dominant dichotomous framework such as we versus others, friend and foe, etc. and replacing it with a different framing of overlaps and third spaces. The category of translation can be quite effective in this context, if it does not purport to act as a bridge-builder in a harmonising way, but rather addresses conflicts, fears, misunderstandings, power inequalities, racist assumptions; if it takes them seriously, but works towards conflict negotiation and transformation: translation thus brings conflict and consensus-building together, the one does not work without the other.

However, it seems necessary to me to strengthen a different understanding of translation here: of a translation which is not limited to a bipolarity or linearity between original and translation, but is to be thought of as a multipolar process in which the reference to a third, common point of reference is decisive. Translation – not only in migration contexts – often takes place in a detour via such a third idiom. This can be used strategically to draw attention to the precarious lives of migrants, without passports, without rights, without housing, without work. It is also used to gain recognition. NGOs or civil society groups, for example, which operate as advocates for migrants often provide a specific translation service. They translate the situation of migrants by referring to a more general or even universal third idiom: to human rights. Such ‘strategic universalism’ can also be used by migrants themselves, who do not have enough agency for resolute self-translation. For them, translation often means taking a detour through addressing general or even universal norms (third idioms) of humanity, dignity, constitutionally guaranteed equality of all human beings and human rights – in order to make their political and social claims heard and to make it possible to enforce them: appeals to recognition, legal security, housing, work, social benefits and other self-evident achievements of civil society. Sociologist Martin Fuchs has shown how this translation strategy can be successfully realised. He examined the example of the Dalit, the untouchables in India. These poor castes refer to the religious language of Buddhism as a general ‘frame of reference’ or ‘third idiom’ in order to draw attention to their marginalisation and to force recognition by appealing to this general normative authority: they “undertake what can be called a ‘translation’ of their claims and concerns into a new or ‘third idiom’ [...]” (Fuchs 2009: 30-31).

To come back to the starting point of this interview: such detours show that translation can also be re-evaluated as a practice of re-



writing into a new framework. Beyond homogenised nation-specific languages, a much broader horizon of cross-border language dimensions opens up here. Such discourses that cut across contexts are always activated in migration contexts: languages of representation such as religion or literature, languages of technology and, not least, languages of ethics and human rights come to the fore and act as problem solvers in a conflict-ridden world.

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