

Translational and Narrative Epistemologies

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PhD workshop with Professor Charles Briggs organised by the [Bodies in Translation Research Project](#)

Participants in this workshop are invited to reflect on the growing use of *translation* and *narrative* in a range of scholarly domains as tropes and lenses through which scholars in a variety of disciplines have attempted to reflect on their respective objects of enquiry, and on the interrelations between different kinds of knowledge.

Different notions of *narrative* have long been deployed in a variety of disciplines, from poetics and ethnography to psychology, law, political science and history. The appeal to narrative was fundamental to structuralism, and closely aligned with the attempt to establish a universal, positive human science on the basis of the study of myth and narrative, on the assumption that narratives were cross-culturally translatable. This universalizing trend, however, gradually mutated into what is best understood as part of a broadly 'interpretive turn', which has dissociated the humanities in particular from realist paradigms and a traditional preoccupation with establishing 'objective truths', in favour of a constructivist, reflective and self-critical understanding of experience, linguistic and otherwise.

The appeal to *translation* in a growing range of humanistic and scientific disciplines has followed a more complex course, at times in line with the same 'interpretive turn' that explains the growing appeal of narrative, and at others directly in conflict with it. Thus, for example, while the turn to translation in the humanities could be seen as an index of contemporary epistemological predicaments and the almost obligatory requirement to cross disciplinary and cultural boundaries, medical translation is of a different nature. Here, so-called knowledge translation refers to a set of research activities that are bound together by the common goal of bridging the gap between science in laboratories and clinical application, harking back to the traditional, restricted understanding of translation as meaning transfer.

Across a range of human sciences, then, *translation* has emerged as a key theoretical concept that is deployed to deal with epistemic and cultural difference. Medical knowledge translation, in contrast, denotes a scientific and purportedly *non-cultural* practice that defines the social and cultural as a 'barrier' to the transmission of true and valid knowledge. The materializing of 'translation' in medicine thus contrasts with the attention accorded by the humanities to epistemic and cultural difference, and to the productivity of texts and translational chains. Translation, moreover, is also a key concept in Actor Network Theory and Science and Technology Studies, which have asserted that the productivity of translation is the very condition for knowledge. By following 'science in action', researchers in these fields hope that the material, ideational and practical means by which 'truths' move from locally produced experimental phenomena to those that can putatively command universal assent can be identified. While debates about cross-cultural understanding and

the (in)commensurability of knowledge claims from different times and places have long been labelled as inquiries into cultural translation, Actor Network Theory has often denounced the concept of 'culture' as a Eurocentric instrument of mistranslation. This instrument, according to ANT, reproduces the asymmetrical opposition between the unified logos of science and the notion of a plurality of cultures that offers divergent representations of the universal nature accessed by Western science. Critiques of translation also enter into decolonial approaches, including Talal Asad's classic essay 'The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology'.

Such diverse expansions of the concept of *translation* have underscored the fact that translation is never simply a discursive process: it is a complex material and cultural process, even when the objects transported are words

The organizers of this workshop seek contributions that engage productively and critically with these related turns to narrative and translation, which are evident across many disciplines.