



For a Critical Practice of Translation in Geography

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[Translated by Fiona Nelson]

Why did we not write this text in English? One of us works in France and in Germany, the other works in Brazil, and this special volume appears in an international journal of geography. English is now considered *the* international (academic) language of choice, the lingua franca of our time, a medium that allows us to communicate with colleagues from all over the world, to engage in scholarly exchange and look beyond national borders.² But our common language is German. We met within the German university system and all of our collaborative work to



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² For more on the discussion on English (not) representing a criterion for the internationality of scholarly journals see Gutiérrez und Lopez-Nieva, 2001.

date has been undertaken through German (not least due to the fact that we both master this language better than English). As a result it is easier, and more enjoyable, for us to publish in German. We are, however, aware that English language articles are accessible to a greater number of academics and that publishing in English is often a requirement for those seeking an academic post. Therefore, we decided to let our German text be translated into English.³

The fact that we automatically ask ourselves before almost every publication if we should not publish in English is, in our view, an indication of the Anglophonic hegemony in the field of geography, an issue that is at the heart of this special volume. Many geographers, Anglophone as well as non-Anglophone, have already begun examining the dominance of the English language and what consequences this can have, including the disadvantages for those who do not have good English as well as the academic recognition and accolades missed out on by failing to publish in English. Some of the dangers highlighted by researchers in this regard include the risk of a standardisation of the content of academic studies by English language journals and a homogenisation of interpretive contexts and academic methods under the influence of the Anglo-American academic system (see for example Desbiens and Ruddick, 2006; Paasi, 2005; Milhaud, 2005; Simonsen, 2004 and Minca, 2000). Other works go beyond a critique of this phenomenon, addressing the potential (and limits) of efforts to counter this hegemony (e.g. Kitchin, 2005; Aalbers 2004; Garcia-Ramon, 2003; Gregson et al., 2003).

There are also a number of studies which accept the premise of an English language dominance but which are highly critical of the manner in which the debates on the Anglophone hegemony are carried out. Some question whether the Anglophone hegemony is a bad thing per se (Rodríguez-Pose, 2006), while others focus on the fact that the debates are generally led from European and elitist points of view (Best, 2009) and that in essence the issue is not a hegemony of the Anglophone but instead a hegemony of the West (Timár, 2004).

The aim of this special volume is to revive these debates, some of which date back to the early 1990s, in an attempt to steer the discussion in a productive direction and foster further progress. While a common language is necessary to communicate on an international level, it is also true that linguistic hegemonies inevitably result in asymmetric power dynamics. With this in mind, this special volume, which focuses on publishing and translations of texts, is dedicated to

³ This text is a translation of the article “Für eine kritische Übersetzungspraxis in der Geographie”. It was prepared by Fiona Nelson LL.M (nelson@uni-potsdam.de). The English text is not intended to be a strict translation – an idea explored in greater depth in the piece – of the original German text but as a stand-alone version of the editorial for English speaking readers. A debt of gratitude is owed to the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin for financing this translation. The German text has also been translated into French. All versions of the text will be published in the same themed issue by *ACME*.

examining the extent to which a critical practice of translation can respond to and counter these hegemonic patterns.

The current hegemony of English

The English language's current role as the international language of academia can be traced back, among other factors, to the wake of World War II, when shifting geopolitical power dynamics saw English develop into *the* international language generally and gradually take up position as the main language of global affairs. The processes of formal and informal decolonisation, the end of World War II, the conflict between East and West, the fall of the Eastern bloc and the resultant political and economic dominance of the USA on a global level all contributed significantly to this development (see Milhaud, 2005; Timár, 2004). The parallel path of the language becoming the international language for the study of geography is adeptly traced by Anglo-American geographer Chauncy D. Harris (2002) in his contribution "English as International Language in Geography" examining the example set by the congress of the International Geographical Union (IGU). Between 1960 and 2000, English and French were the only official languages of presentation permitted at the congress, with French losing ground over time to the creeping dominance of English. Indeed it is hardly surprising that from the first IGU Congress in Antwerp in 1871 up to the Second World War, it was the central European colonial languages – and thus those languages representative of European modernity – that were used to communicate at the congress (on this see also Sidaway 2008; Johnston and Sidaway 2004).⁴ The question as to which languages were more or less prominent often depended on the venue of a given Congress (Harris, 2002, 675 et seq.).

Needless to say, a language's hegemony in academia cannot be explained solely by reference to its geopolitical status. It is, however, significant that this link is a crucial one and that the position of an international language can change with a shift in global power dynamics. Considering the growing debate from the 1990s onwards on the collapse of the bipolar (or indeed unipolar) world order, on the birth of a multipolar system, BRIC states, shifts in the centre-periphery model, on fragmented development and *glocalisation* and on postmodernity, postdevelopment and postcolonial criticism, it seems almost obvious that there are parallel debates on the problems attached to the hegemony of English in academia as well as pleas for greater language diversity in research.

In joining this debate we do not wish to demonise the English language as some kind of hegemonic monster; instead we understand the language as hegemonic in the sense of poststructuralist and discourse theory (Laclau und Mouffe, 1985). English is not forced upon us in any authoritarian way, nor can it be

⁴ French, English, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish were all used as official languages of the congress (Harris, 2002, 675 et seq.). Dutch – another important European colonial language – is notable by its absence from this list.

fixed as the dominant academic language for all time. Its hegemony arises instead from the fact that we have accepted English as the most important language of exchange in global affairs generally as well as the in the sphere of international research. While the English language's position is strong and relatively settled, it can never be guaranteed and could be undermined by geopolitical, economic or cultural events or shifts; it could face challenges from other contenders and eventually be replaced by a new system. Taking this theoretical understanding of a hegemonic academic language as our basis, we call for a critical approach to the language and the asymmetrical power dynamics it (re)produces in academia and ask to what extent the critical practice of translation can contribute to such a critique.

The Power of Translation

From the perspective of translation theory, translations cannot be seen as representing pure transferrals of meaning. The products of translation are instead hybrid texts, born of the inevitable shifts in meaning involved in the translation process. This idea is based on the assumption that the original text, the translator and the translated text are all embedded in their own specific and unique circumstances (Toury, 1982). Aside from the grammatical and lexical constraints of languages, the major decisive factors of this *embeddedness* on a general level include the cultural and ideological systems of representation, the purpose, aim and strategy of the translation as well as the insight, knowledge, standards and ability of the translator and possibly also the unique traditions of translation culture in the target language. Further factors at play in the academic sphere include the applicable rules on academic discourse along with the aims and purposes of research and teaching and any financial parameters. An additional major factor on an international level is what Kirsten Simonsen describes as “the political economy of international publishing” (Simonsen 2004, 525). Translation thus relates not only to the language within a narrow, linguistic paradigm; in academia it also touches upon all aspects of academic culture, including the selection of topics and fields, as well as the specific methods of exploration, presentation and contextualization of academic results (see Gregson et al., 2003, 6). While this framework – encompassing the original text, the translator and the translated text – is subject to constant changes, not least due to the steps involved in the process of translation (Iser, 1994), the view of ‘the others’, ‘the other language’ and ‘the other academic culture’ always remains anchored to one’s ‘own’ context (Frow, 1995). For this reason a *translation* in the sense of a *transfer* to that ‘other’ is not possible; the best that can ever be hoped for is an intermediate product. This opens up new breathing space for representation and meaning, a space which offers a burst of productivity and which builds a bridge between one’s ‘own’ and the ‘other’. This intermediateness also, however, brings with it a destructive element, since a *translation* as such can never fully succeed; it will inevitably result in a change to the original (Venuti, 2003; for a summary see also Ribeiro, 2004 and Hussein de Araújo, 2011, 116 et seq.).

What significance does this ambivalent role – as bridge builder but also as destroyer – have for an understanding of translation as a critical practice? And what are the results of its interplay with hegemonic languages in academia? At first glance, the elements of bridge building and destruction could mean that the practice of translation is a powerful force; a power that is manifested predominantly in the steps involved in translation, the choice of what to translate, the source and target languages and how the translation is carried out (Husseini, 2009; Tymoczko and Gentzler, 2002). This applies to translations of major works but also to the day-to-day practice of translation by researchers reading, listening, speaking, and publishing in a language other than their native tongue. Our thesis is that this power can on the one hand act as an antidote, as it were, and help to highlight, destabilize and perhaps in some way dismantle the asymmetrical power dynamics produced by hegemonic languages in international academia. This can help forge space for alternative languages, content, methods of interpretation and scholarly practices. On the other hand this power exerted by translation also brings with it a risk of stabilising the hegemonic language of academia and could, if applied without due caution, trigger a range of undesirable consequences.

De-centring of the hegemonic language of academia as a key reference point for translation

When it comes to the selection of works for translation and in particular the chosen translation direction, it is clear that a one-sided practice of translation limited to translation into and from the hegemonic international language of academia will tend to bolster that language's hegemony as opposed to countering it. This tendency can be seen in the international practice of translation of key works by prominent geographers. An example is provided by the works of Anglo-American geographer David Harvey and the Brazilian geographer Milton Santos, two scholars who have made a very significant contribution to critical geography and who have both been awarded the *Prix International de Géographie Vautrin Lud*⁵. While many works by David Harvey have been translated from English into German, none of Milton Santos' books have appeared in German translation.

Looking beyond the translation of major works it becomes clear that this one-sided translation trend is also evident – and perhaps even more pronounced – in the practice of publication by researchers. A glance at the publication lists of German or French geographers is enough to recognise that English is by far the most common source language for translated works. In the 'ideal scenario' these contributions would appear in distinguished and highly 'ranked' English journals and thus be beneficial to their careers (on this see also Münch, 2011).

⁵ The *Prix International de Géographie Vautrin Lud* is the highest international accolade in the field of geography. It was awarded for the first time in 1991.

A critical practice of translation would aim to counter this one-sided directionality in translation with a de-centring of English as the main reference point for translation, would advocate more variety in translation direction and would forge new space for multilingual dialogue and exchange as ‘cross-cultural collaborative writing’ (Gregson et al., 2003, 13). Such efforts have already been made at some international conferences, as for example at the last meetings of the *International Conference for Critical Geography* (ICCG), where multilingualism was explicitly encouraged, whole sessions were held in languages other than English and recourse was had to simultaneous and ad-hoc interpretation (on this see also Desbiens und Ruddick, 2006, 5). Even if these efforts could only be organized on a relatively small scale and the English language contributions remained by far the most dominant, the move did at least convey the willingness of all participants to take a creative approach to multilingualism. In this regard, conferences that forge space for engaging with, using and appreciating the various contexts as well as multilingualism represent an important starting point.

These kinds of spaces for engagement offered by conferences also help to spark a process of cross-cultural collaborative writing which promotes joint publication in various languages and different academic cultures as well as mutual translation of selected works. In this context we call for increased use of international journals, which support a range of publication languages and thus help counter the bias toward translating solely from or into the hegemonic language of academia (there are already a number of journals doing this in the field of geography which are well regarded internationally and subject to peer-review procedures – on this see also Garcia-Ramon, 2003). In terms of the translation of major works by prominent geographers, a critical translation practice would demand a more diverse selection as well as an element of reflection on this choice and a variety of translation directions – but bearing in mind that the market for the translation of academic texts is often subject to a range of rules, constraints and conditions from publishers and other institutions which individuals researchers can only influence to a limited degree. One opportunity that does, however, present itself is the process of reviewing key texts in ‘other’ languages and academic cultures in order to draw attention to these and thus create interest and demand (see for example Desbiens, 2002).

Critical reflection on translations and their effects

Aside from the choice of texts to be translated and the source and target languages, the power of translation is manifested in particular in the effects it produces. Perhaps the most significant of these is the effect of naturalisation, allowing the translation to appear to be an original work and thoroughly glossing over the fact that the product of the translation is something different, something both hybrid and new. To present such a translation is to lend the original author a voice that is not theirs. This can lead to far-reaching problems, particularly when taken together with some of the other effects of the translation process. “A

translated book,” says Austrian author Thomas Bernhard, “is a corpse that has been hit by a bus and mangled beyond all recognition. Translation is terrible kind of service” (Bernhard, 1986, 563).⁶ Such “mangling” can often be found in academic texts with theoretical terms and concepts that are laden with assumed implications and which, when translated, have other theoretical connotations and lose clarity and precision. This can occur with so-called untranslatable terms such as *Weltanschauung* or *Schadenfreude*, or scholarly texts with an aesthetic that get lost in translation.

Writing about this phenomenon, translation scholar Lawrence Venuti draws a distinction between “domestication” and “foreignisation” (Venuti, 2008 und 2003). Domestication refers to the effect that occurs when terms, expressions, text passages or even the style itself is fully adapted to suit the system of the target language and academic culture, regardless of the extent of the shifts in meaning and “mangling” involved in this kind of assimilating translation. This approach can risk glossing over or negating important nuances. Foreignisation describes the opposite effect. When for instance the styles are not adapted to suit or certain terms or sentences are left in the original language, the ‘otherness’ or indeed the ‘strangeness’ of the original text along with the way of thinking and the academic culture is emphasized. These and other effects (such as euphemisms and dysphemisms or complications and simplifications) are, according to our understanding of translation, unavoidable since translation inevitably involves shifts in meaning that will trigger certain effects. The crucial question, therefore, is how these effects are handled. This consideration is two-fold; on the one hand it involves a strategic application of the effects as part of the translation process while on the other hand it forms part of a wider reflection or critical examination of translations – regardless of whether these effects are applied strategically or occur unintendedly – which aims to unveil and analyse these effects (in the field of geography see here in particular Filep, 2009; Husseini, 2009; Müller, 2007).

In striving for a critical practice of translation this involves first reflecting thoroughly on one’s own translations, those undertaken in the course of everyday research and publication, keeping in mind the power dynamics in which they are entwined, on the contexts of translation, on one’s own translation strategy as well as the resultant effects. Depending on the scope and format of the publication it may also involve writing about and being candid about these considerations. In this regard we call for more room for this kind of reflection as well as for more openness, not only towards languages other than the hegemonic, but also towards other styles and formats offered by other academic cultures. A critical practice of translation also involves seeing translated works not as an original but as a translation, a work that was created in a specific context, one that is entwined in

⁶ English version by the translator. The German text reads: “Ein übersetztes Buch ist eine Leiche, die von einem Autobus bis zur Unkenntlichkeit verstümmelt worden ist. Übersetzen ist eine fürchterliche Art des Dienens”.

specific power dynamics and is always accompanied by certain shifts in meaning and effects such as domestication or foreignisation. As a consequence this will also entail increasingly treating translation in itself as an object of research. This special volume hopes to make a contribution to this process.

Translation between English, French and German speaking geographies

The question arises here as to why this volume seeks to examine translation as a critical practice and a potential response to the hegemonic language of academia while taking English, French and German geographies as an example. After all, neither French nor German are particularly marginalized in the international sphere. While it is not possible to definitively define their status, one thing is certain: under the dichotomous models that attempt to ‘map’ the languages of academia on a global level – the centre v. the periphery (Mendizàbal i Riera, 1999), Western world v. Eastern Europe (Timár, 2004) or the Occident v. the Orient (Bhatti, 1997) – French and German cannot be attributed to the periphery, nor are they part of the East or the Orient. Indeed the opposite is true. Both French and German can be considered to be international languages of academia, and as colonial and imperial languages they are laden with at least as many unsavoury historical connotations as English. By banning and repressing local and regional languages in their colonies, especially in educational institutions and in the public sectors, the colonial powers (Britain and France in particular) repeatedly enforced the supremacy of their own language and the marginalisation of the ‘other’ (see for example Bochmann, 2011; Steinbach, 2009). Germany’s time as a colonial power was relatively short, with the result that German plays only a minor role as a colonial language. A similar approach to the politics of language was however applied within Imperial Germany. It was also employed under the heading of *Sprachpflege* (‘language cultivation’), mainly as part of the German strategy of expansion during the time of National Socialism (see for example Simon, 1989).

Up until at least the Second World War, French and German were considered as rivalling English for the position as the major language of international academia. Even today, French and German both have their place within geography, at least at some international conferences and in a range of international journals (on this see also Sidaway 2008; Johnston and Sidaway 2004). Depending on the point of view, they could be seen as ‘provinces’ with regard to English, as suggested by Houssay-Holzschuch and Milhaud (2013). This denotes languages that are markedly subordinate but are still highly regarded and that qualify as international languages competing with English in certain subject areas and contexts. This is distinctly more applicable to French than to German (on this see Mendizàbal i Riera, 1999). It is possible, therefore, to argue that the ‘French geography’ – and not, notably, the British or the Anglo-American geographies – represents *the* central reference point for many local, regional and national academic contexts. This is evident not only in Francophone states but also in countries such as Brazil, where France played an important role in the

establishment of the university system and where the French influence is often still a lot more tangible in many universities than the Anglo-American. This is further evidenced by the relatively high number of works by French geographers that have appeared in Portuguese – the works of Paul Claval, Yves Lacoste, Pierre George and others – as well as by the Brazilian textbooks and introductory works on the history of the discipline of geography in Brazil, in which great prominence is given to ‘the French school’ (Moraes 2000a, 2000b und 2003; Moreira, 2008).

In light of the above, it is easy to understand why critical voices on the perception of English as the hegemonic language of academia predominantly find fault with an European elite that sees itself as transnational, multilingual, hybrid and anti-hegemonic (see e.g. Best, 2009). Irrespective of whether this charge is justified or not, we think that this ‘European elite problem’ can also be applied in a positive and productive way.

It is unsurprising that the harshest criticism of the hegemony of the English language comes from Anglophone academics themselves as well as from researchers whose mother tongue is a European language (often one with its own extensive linguistic community). That is because theirs are the voices that are not silenced by the hegemony; these scholars have the power and opportunity to be heard within the hegemonic system. One manifestation of this, of course, is the fact that all the contributors to this volume are part of or at least have access to this system.

This volume is based on the lectures and resultant discussions of the panel “Babel-crisis – Critique through translation?”, that we organized together with Jörg Mose and Philippe Kersting at the ICCG in Frankfurt am Main (16 – 20 August 2011). While the call for contributions was explicitly open to submissions in all languages – i.e. without any restrictions – and was issued in a wide range of languages (including in Chinese [Mandarin] and in Catalan), the abstracts submitted were limited solely to issues of translation between English, French and German geographies. This is clearly not a coincidence but instead a contingent limitation that reflects, at least to some degree, the primacy of these three languages in academia.

As it turned out, this focus on English, French and German proved to be fruitful, as geographers have a remarkably extensive wealth of experience in translation practice between these three languages. As well as that, the three have very different styles of academic thinking (see the contributions by *Hannah* and *Schlottmann* as well as by *Hancock*), which in itself presents some very fundamental questions of translation practice. Even the hegemony of the English language seems to play a somewhat different role in the German sphere than it does in the French academic context. While this hegemony is often demonized in the French system (see the contribution by *Hancock*), in a German context it seems to be taken for granted to a greater degree. This framework allowed deeper discussion on various topics and problem areas to an extent that would not have been possible

had there been a greater variety of languages and academic contexts. At the same time we acknowledge the fact that we speak from positions of (relative) privilege, and that questions of language, multilingualism, hegemony and translation would take a very different form in the context of other academic cultures and languages that are much more marginalized on an international level. With this in mind, we see this analysis of critique through translation – one that is based on English, French and German speaking geographies – as a first step in a broader project which should in the long term be in a position to provide a platform for voices from the ‘peripheries’. An additional challenge for future research is to also take simultaneous interpreting, listening, reading and speaking in languages different than the native tongue into consideration, because in these cases the possibilities and limitations with respect to a critical practice of translations may be very different from those of written translations.

This themed issue

The sometimes problematic dual role of translators is the focus of *Claire Hancock*'s piece “*Traduttore traditore*, the translator as traitor”. Using the example of French speaking geography and its relationship to the Anglophone hegemony, the author takes a critical approach to this dual role, building on her own experiences as a geographer who translates. She goes on to show the extent to which geography research is embedded not only in social and political contexts, but also what consequences this has for translation work and how this helps to determine the geopolitics of geography.

The following article “Zentrale Orte – Übersetzung als ‚Normalisierung‘ einer fehlerhaften Theorie” by *Karl Kegler* makes translation itself a subject of critical research. Taking as its starting point deficiencies in the Christaller theory, its central role in national socialist spatial planning and the resultant low regard in which it was held in post-war Germany, *Kegler* shows the repercussions for the reception of the central place theory in Germany that were brought about through translation into English and subsequent acceptance in the international sphere. Once it had made its way through the Anglophone and international geographies it was then possible for geographers in Germany to obscure the model's deficiencies in content and overlook its use in spatial planning during the Third Reich. The model thus became increasingly important in Germany and ultimately became a fixed feature of official urban development planning and was enshrined in the statutory provisions of (West) Germany.

Matthew Hannah and *Antje Schlottmann* turn their attention to the challenges to and the opening up of Anglophone academia through translation. In their article “Fragen des Stils / Questions of style” they build their argument on the work of Ludwik Fleck (Fleck 1980 [1935]), looking at translation as a transfer of contents between various scholarly styles of linguistics and of thought. Using this as their theoretical foundation they analyse two publications – one in German and one in English – on the theme of Landscape/*Landschaft* and use these examples to

uncover some central elements of the German and Anglophone academic style of thought. Drawing on Derrida's concept of hospitality (2000), they show how knowledge and recognition of other styles pave the way for the development of respectful forms of exchange which, in turn, create new and hybrid portals for questions of geography. *Hannah* and *Schlottmann* conclude by setting out a number of aspects of German speaking geography which would enjoy greater hospitality in the hegemonic system of Anglophone geography. These elements, they argue, would serve to enrich the Anglophone system and contribute to the provincialisation of English.

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