

Translating Living Beings: Conceptualizing Existential Translation

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Scholars often concur with Jakobson (1963) that translation is a semiotic activity. Whether interlinguistic (between verbal languages), intersemiotic (between systems of signs), biosemiotic (in and between organisms) or ethnographic (representing living beings in discourse), translation is conceived of as an exchange between two or more forms of meaning. Despite the pioneering advancements made by Marais's "philosophy of translation" (2014) and his biosemiotic definition of translation (2016, 2017 & 2018), ethnography remains the most expanded form of translation in that it transforms a collection of actual individual and collective actions, beliefs, symbols and knowledge into anthropological discourse. In this sense, ethnography translates heterogeneous objects of meaning into a (more homogeneous) system of signs.

However, beyond the realm of semiotics—even if only as an end-product and as open ended and almost all-encompassing as Marais seems to present it (2018)—translation can also represent the process of the transformation of living beings through a range of non-semiotic experiences of, for example, immigration, education or spiritual conversion. If translation requires a formal material support (like language in the case of interlinguistic transfer) to be deemed as translation, it can be argued that the observation of this substance in transformation may be the phenomenology of the said transformations. To live the translational experiences of moving from one culture to another, of going through the process of learning some sort of knowledge or of converting from one faith and worldview to another—all these are translations of lifeworlds beyond (or beneath) the realm of semiotics as proposed by Marais (2016, 2017 & 2018).

This paper advocates in favour of a 'philosophy of translation' (Basalamah, 2018) and argues that it should not limit itself by defining the concept of translation only as a semiosical process which "takes something as something else" (Marais, 2016: 179-180). The argument, however, goes further to suggest that the proposed philosophy of translation can also describe processes that are primarily non-semiotic, such as the phenomenological transformations of human beings (we would like to "existential translations") relocated to new environments (immigration), the development of renewed awareness about the world or the realm of ideas (education) or of one's consciousness about new dimensions of reality beyond sensory perceptions (spiritual conversion). Some examples will be provided to illustrate the suggested philosophy of translation through these extended translational phenomena.

References

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