

REVISITING THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION:  
TRANSLATION, NATION AND GENDER

PONOVNO PROMIŠLJANJE POLITIKE PREVOĐENJA:  
PREVOĐENJE, NACIJA I ROD



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## Editorial Introduction

Rada Iveković, Aleksandar Pavlović and Sanja Bojanić

### REVISITING THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION: TRANSLATION, NATION AND GENDER

#### ABSTRACT

This thematic issue, *Revisiting the Politics of Translation: Translation, Nation and Gender*, explores translation as both practice and political concept. Translation is not a neutral transfer of meaning, but a field where power relations—between languages, nations, genders, and identities—are continuously negotiated. The contributions examine translation's ambivalent role in reinforcing or challenging violence, nationalism, and coloniality, as well as its transformative potential in feminist, decolonial, and global South contexts. Articles address topics such as meaning-change and "woke" discourse, counter-translation and hegemony, the regime of modern translation, feminist struggles, policy and decolonial perspectives, psychoanalysis in the South, translation as counter-violence, and cultural appropriation. Collectively, these essays underline translation's capacity to destabilize binaries, open spaces of reciprocity, and act as a form of counter-politics. By situating translation within contemporary conflicts, crises, and social movements, the issue rethinks its role as a practice of negotiation at the intersection of language, politics, and culture.

#### KEYWORDS

Keywords: politics of translation, counter-translation, language, culture, nation, gender

Far from being a straightforward process, translation as a practice and method invites a complex analysis of gender, class, race, or national and other hierarchies' relations and intersection. It is the opportunity for transformation, for becoming other (*devenir autre*, Deleuze and Guattari [1980]), although the political quality of that *devenir* is never guaranteed.

While the relation of translation to language and literature has been formative for translation studies as a discipline since the late 1950s, the last decades saw its expansion to the issues of culture, post-colonialism, politics, gender etc. For example, in the field of politics, the perspective of translation has increasingly been used to also question the national boundaries and conventional understandings of war and belonging and the role language plays in conceptualising politics (e.g. Shindo 2019, De Jong 2022, Footitt 2012, Footitt and Kelly 2018; Baker 2006).



Moreover, some influential contemporary works question the common assumptions about language, nation, race and gender, and provide valuable insights into the relationship between language and (West/Euro-centric) politics.<sup>1</sup> Christina Schäffner in her “Politics and Translation”, from the influential 2007 *A Companion to Translation*, claims that “all translations are ideological” (Schäffner 2005: 149) arguing with Neubert that they ‘form a complex bond bracketing the political reality and its symbolic representation’. But, they are “ideological” only in the sense in which any “text” can be seen as ideological. In Iveković’s 2019 *Politiques de la traduction* - more grounded in (French) theory - this politics of translation is articulated also as a way of opening Europe to her necessary decolonisation in principle possible in her language(s), and of accepting the diversity which is needed for her preservation and future. And it does not apply only to Europe, but to any political entity or culture. Emily Apter, on her part, uses Benjamin’s concept of untranslatability to argue that the very concept of World literature was somewhat Anglocentric and homogenized (Apter 2013).

The triangle “language-translation-nation-politics” and “Europe” (geopolitical location), or, for that matter, potentially any has been on many an author’s mind in these times of the world’s painful and violent political reconfiguration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Etienne Balibar writes on the topic:

We can suspect that the definition of the conflict of hegemonies - as, more explicitly, in Gramsci, the idea of “national-popular will” - presupposes a *given* historical, territorial and cultural framework, therefore both predetermined and destined to remain unchanged in the analysis and for the political strategy, which includes in particular a *common language* for discursive “formations” and “identities”. [...] For [Régis Debray, for example], the absence of a *common European language* is an insurmountable obstacle to the development of a European democracy (which is not an “ethnicist” argument since the common language is first and foremost the instrument of popular communication, not limited to more or less polyglot elites). For her part, Judith Butler [...] spoke of a *referential background* which must be historically “sedimented”. The question is, therefore, whether such a framework is extensible, and under what conditions? [...] Has the construction of Europe produced a material interdependence of peoples that is sufficiently irreversible [...]? Can we, *by analogy* with a space and a national formation, assume that the hegemonic conflict *takes place* within a largely virtual “postnational” (or supranational) space between antithetical policies? We can clearly see that these questions in reality only shift the problem, because from Laclau’s point of view, rightly, the conflict is about the functioning, the use and the very definition of *real institutions* and “power” that they materialize. (Balibar 2022: 60-61)

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1 Apter (2006 and 2013); Bermann and Wood’s (2005) edited collection *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*; Sherry Simon’s seminal *Gender in Translation* (1996); a number of works produced by Tymoczko (2014); Castro and Ergun (2017) *Feminist Translation Studies*; and most recently *The Routledge Handbook on Translation, Feminism, and Gender* (Von Flotow and Hala 2020); Translation/Transnation series also provided valuable works etc. and there are journals such as *Encounters in Translation* and *Philosophy of Translation*.

Balibar's past "complementary" but steady work on translation-and-language as a political operator and stake has informed the chapters of some of our authors.

Meanwhile, as a praxis of theory or political activism, translation may have to deal with violence when aiming at changes in society or the state. However, as Rada Iveković writes, while "translation... understood in the political sense of the politics of translation, can help in deactivating violence" (Iveković 2019: 175), she also warns that "language and translations can be instruments of peace but also carriers of violence". The examples of the Balkans in the 1990s and Ukraine or Gaza today – some of which are being scrutinized in this issue – amply illustrate this point. What appears as material for translation politics today is the permanence of ubiquitous wars.

Violence and war can thus also be seen as forms of translation, as translation remains undefined in itself. As far as Europe is concerned (but the same pattern appears elsewhere, too), the field of a most striking crisis in translation has recently been not only the current war in Ukraine and between Israel and the Palestinians (or supposedly, only on Hamas, and not the whole population according to Israeli assertion, Israel having crossed the line) but, above all, the previous systemic rejection of refugees and migrants (except for Ukrainians, so far). Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp writes: "[T]he so-called 'refugee crisis' calls for re-founding the 'civilisational' bases of Europe's general and constituent policy on other foundations than the defence of former colonial territories in a new imperial division and a succession of 'emergencies'" (Caloz-Tschopp 2019). Verónica Gago shows how the political space of struggles has spilt across borders and political issues through the green tide of feminist activism in Argentina prior to Javier Milei, and elsewhere, starting from the struggle for the right to abortion rendered political by the mass movement: "The reticence (and incapacity) of many people to discuss abortion in political terms [...] demonstrates the political centrality of abortion. [...] Whenever abortion is spoken about, it is also labour that is being spoken about." (Gago 2020b) The demand translated women's concerns into universal questions, but also by enlarging them, old labour concepts (such as 'strike') thanks to a feminist approach. The recent feminist tide in Latin America and its theorization have been impressive, but so has the general backlash.

Linking gender and nation as well as any kind of identitarianism in fragmented societies is, thereby, another necessary feature of translation studies. The vocabulary of nation and nationality is directly derived from obstetrics and the capacity of birth-giving of some human, further contributing to gender stereotypes. All language of inequality is embedded in accepted basic gender discrimination, as the oldest and most consensual dogma of patriarchy and coloniality. Naoki Sakai has been critically analysing the building of the modern colonial Japanese nation, which relies on cultural, gender, and ethnic politics to inculcate *foundational* national and gender inequality through a politics of transnational relations as cultural translational transactions. Our conceptual apparatus ordaining knowledge is isomorphic with our social organisation and

hierarchies. The double front of gender is apparent. The universalisation of a nationalist paradigm is only its narcissistic over-inflation and provincialisation. Everything else is rendered illegitimate and erased from a mainstream consensus. It then becomes “useless history”. Social and state inertia tend to include women as subordinate and to exclude or marginalize categories of “outsiders”. There is an infinite variety of such patterns and the capacity of coloniality-patriarchy-capitalism, as a complex (Federici 2004), to adapt and keep going, also with the help of nationalism, ethnicism, religion etc. Basically, translation appears as the possibility of negotiating a fine balance beyond dichotomies and binary logics, of which gender is a “primary pattern”.

The first reducing and deceptive binary that appears with translation is that of the “source language” and the “target language”. The politics of translation needs to overcome this mirror-image in which there is no depth, because through translation we accept contexts and cultures through “texts” and imaginaries, and this importing or this appropriation of elements of the other language or culture are but the inevitable functioning of the latter. There is no language deprived of (an)other language(s) or translation, no culture without other cultures, they necessarily permeate each other and are reciprocally incomplete (Boaventura de Sousa Santos [2014, 2018]). As Iveković has it: “Translation - on its own or by itself – does not ensure anything. First and foremost, to judge the quality of a translation, what is needed is a purpose in assessing it (what do we mean to obtain through translation), which means that a politics of translation and a cultural politics is at work”.

## About this issue

By bringing together 11 articles written by 12 authors from North and South America, Europe and Asia – eight of which are included in this volume and three others appearing subsequently in this journal, the thematic issue “Revisiting the Politics of Translation: Translation, Nation and Gender” examines the universal language and politics of translation outlined above from globally plural perspectives. Its contributors explore the imaginary of translation as the only “universal” language, yet keeping in mind, at the same time, the multiplicity and inequality of languages, the possible tricks played by an a priori adoption of hegemony or any unquestioned concept of the universal on the representation we may have of translation and, above all, recognising the inherent link between translation and its underlying geographical, national and ideological roots. Paradoxically, whatever we may theorise about translation – comes *a posteriori*.

Sanja Bojanić’s “Meaning-changing as a Form of Translation: a ‘Woke’ Case” examines translation as a dynamic process that reshapes meaning and negotiates power, positioning it as a politically active practice that challenges or reinforces societal narratives. Aligning with scholars like Rada Iveković and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, she explores translation’s capacity to sustain or subvert dominant power structures, emphasizing its transformative potential

within cultural and social frameworks. Meaning-changing operations in the case of “woke”, initially tied to social justice, evolve as this notion is co-opted and reinterpreted across ideological spectrums. She argues that such shifts reflect a change in linguistic meaning and broader power negotiations, where language acts as both a reflection of and a battleground for social values.

In her article “Post-hegemonic Conservative Counter-translation” Rada Iveković argues that negotiated state sovereignty and hegemony seem to partly dissolve within a now accomplished globalisation. In political movements of a larger and international scope, hegemony may still be attempted among states and languages, although this may now turn to war through sheer force. Locally, state hegemony is not tolerated anymore (but hegemony of the market continues), as the Ukrainian war seems to indicate. But hegemony, hierarchy and divisions are operative within any state and in split societies. The latter have the tendency to (re)constitute binaries, keeping wars latent. There is, of course, immediately the counterpart: re-establishing a former hegemony with domination among states fails and becomes just hard domination (and destruction) when there is no other option left. All of this requires much political translation, some of which, concerning the preceding unwritten translation contract, Iveković calls counter-translation. It strives to change codes. In language, it boils down to the hegemonic language, which is also the national language, and to language wars. The national language claims to be the mother tongue. But language and language (de)nomination needs to break free from the obstetric vocabulary of the nation.

Naoki Sakai’s contribution “The International World: the Modern Regime of Translation” focuses on the individuality of language. How can language be individuated, grasped as an indivisible unity, and compared with other languages that are also assumed to be individual unities? The author attempts a historical investigation concerning the individuality of language on the one hand and the formation of the modern individual world in which individuated languages are juxtaposed to one another. The translation is the instance in which languages are originally figured out as individuals; hence, he investigates how a new way of managing translation, the modern regime of translation, was introduced.

Valeria Graziano and Françoise Vergès focus primarily on the relation between translation, understood in the wide sense, with feminism and activism. Graziano’s “Deciphering Harm: Naming the Issue in Italian Healthcare Struggles During the ‘60 and ‘70” presents how struggles for healthcare within the workers’ movements in Italy in the ‘60s and ‘70s generated a range of radical imaginaries in which struggles for wellbeing, environmental concerns, critiques of automation and anti-work politics intertwined. To make their tacit knowledge explicit and find a common language to discuss health in all its complexity, workers, activists, trade unionists, and medical professionals develop a number of strategies for converting lived somatic experiences into collective political narratives. She outlines three examples of Italian struggles that offer us an array of organizing and storytelling techniques that are still relevant for

the contemporary context. In conclusion, she considers some of the profound differences that nonetheless demarcate the period in question from the present, speculating on the traction of “political translation” for contemporary anti-work and ecofeminist struggles.

Vergès’ “Finding the Right Translation for ‘Peace’ in a Land of War” takes feminism further in order to present “an antiracist decolonial feminist politics of protection”. In other words, she argues how discourses about war and peace, and their implementations, have been deployed to justify a protection that rests on criminalization, incarceration, military interventions, creation of armed militia, legitimation of police violence, militarization of public space, and surveillance.

The decolonial drive also informs Noemi Lendvai-Bainton’s and Paul Stubbs’ “Revisiting Making Policy Move: Towards a Decolonial Politics of Translation”. The authors here refer to the co-authored book *Making Policy Move* (Clarke, Bainton, Lendvai and Stubbs 2015) as an attempt to apply insights from theories of translation and assemblage to the field of policy studies. The mantra “when policy moves it is always translated” was based as much as, if not more, on postcolonial and decolonial theories as it was on the ‘interpretive turn’ in policy studies and on the idiosyncrasies of Actor Network Theory, as well as the work of Deleuze and Guattari. By revisiting the book in this paper, the authors suggest that the conceptual, empirical, moral-ethical and political implications of taking colonialism and racism seriously were underdeveloped, and go further to outline some of the ways this could be remedied in future work. In particular, they emphasize the importance of a politics of translation for understanding coalescing crises, the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism, and the collapse of democracy and associated rise of techno-politics; accordingly, they situate reconstituted racialised hierarchies, patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies, and forms of class oppression within policy assemblages co-constituted through colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Nivedita Menon’s article “Translation as a Mode of Self-making: Psychoanalysis from the Global South” explores translation as a mode of self-making across the multiple contexts in which we live. As she argues, focusing on location in the global South introduces the dimension of power and universalistic, hegemonic conceptions of the self that collide with other notions. In particular, she looks at psychoanalysis located in the global South as having challenged such conceptions from the lifetime of Freud onwards.

Saša Hrnjez’s contribution “Translation’s Counter-violence” deals with the relationship between translation and violence by taking up the concept of *de-violence* as found in Rada Iveković’s work. The basis of the argument is the thesis that violence is not simply opposed to non-violence, since both are interdependent. To discuss this, he returns to Walter Benjamin in a joint reading of his reflections on translatability and violence. The guiding question reads as follows: do we need a critique of violence to produce an appropriate (political) concept of translation? If translation is not simply a non-violent communication, shall we then conceive it as a sort of counter-violence against a

monolingual closure of meaning? By addressing these problems, he attempts to outline the concept of “de-translation” as a form of systematic violence that obstructs or annihilates openness to the foreign. The task of translators today would thus be to engage in the politics of translation that counteracts the violence of systemic de-translation.

Two other articles – to appear subsequently in the following issues of this journal – are also written from the perspective of the Global South and explicitly or implicitly relate translation and language to colonialism. Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ “Learned Ignorance: The Gold Method of Intercultural Translation” also conceives intercultural translation from the perspective of the epistemologies of the south as an alternative to the Western-centric cultural universe. From this perspective, intercultural translation (which, in this book, Iveković and some others refer to as political translation) is an artisanship of practices guided by two key ideas: learned ignorance and the ecology of knowledge. The former, inspired by the fifteenth-century philosopher Nicholas of Cusa, is an epistemic and ethical stance or disposition to assume ignorance, namely, to cultivate the consciousness of not knowing. The latter concept views every language as a memory bank of knowledge, information, and experiences of the community that created it, containing the best and most detailed knowledge of the ecology and language environment of the area where it was produced.

Manuel Rebón, on the other hand, in “Translation and Community. The Essay as a Community of Meaning” deals primarily with the essay as a non-homogenizing genre. Faced with the idea of the essay as a self in recognition with the *we*, the search for a *community of meaning and a sense of community*, essay writing opposed its heuristic power where cultural meaning vanished, not where the homogenizing power of community values is affirmed. This dilemma was addressed in the Argentine case through various questions that shaped a period of intense reading and investigation. It produced a generation of writings that considered the question of community and the way it could be founded through the thinking exercise *between* explanatory rationality and the opacities that everyday experiences evoked through diverse readings, sometimes convergent but undoubtedly singular in their enunciative positions. In the criticism of the sustained specialization of discourse, of the fetishization of the specific conversion of theoretical languages into codes and spectacularizing the hermeneutic function of the task of writing, the vindication of the essay form was located as a discursive mode and reflection procedure constitutive of intellectual practice that refers to understanding the possibilities of the questioning word of a type of writing perceived as empty of semantic density and historical reminiscences.

Last, but not the least, Nadežda Čačinović in her “Found in Translation. The Problem of Cultural Appropriation” proposes using insights from “a politics of translation” to deal with the current problem of cultural appropriation. Should we condemn cultural appropriation? Hybridity is used as an argument against essentialism and fixed identity, so she asks where the step is too far, and what remains inadmissible? This question must remain open not only with

the author, but also in principle when dealing with translation: there are no a priori rules, or we would be in totalitarianism.

Thus, taken altogether, the articles in this thematic issue in a way form a full circle, opening with Bojanić's and Iveković's discussion on translation and language and its relation to violence, hegemony, colonialism and the West, then travel globally through issues of feminism, global South and decolonialism, to return to questions of violence and the possibility of translation and language to act as counter-violence. In addition, most contributions take a global and transdisciplinary perspective, as authors come from different parts of the world and the issues are discussed beyond the confines of limited disciplines. Thereby, their essays address precisely the tension between universality (beyond the nation-state centred worldview) and particularity (nationhood), and how the idea of translation, as well as translation practices more broadly, are rooted in specific geographical locations, national imaginaries, and specific nation-centred ideologies.

Nonetheless, the specific localisation or currency of some contributions should not lead us to overlook the integral component of this issue that engages more with the philosophical tradition on translation. For instance, Re-bón brings together the heterogeneity of philosophical, aesthetic and political motives, sometimes inherent and sometimes tangential to what is generically called "the problem of the community" as a key to read the present. The lack of a reflective space that considers how political language inhabits the community and perceives its dissociation from political practice and its own history as a practice, plots the construction of a common sense empathetic to the new forms of postmodern subjectivity, and therefore accentuates the idea of giving this deeply political question an aesthetic cut, since it implicates sensibility, the self, and the "myth of individuality". De Sousa Santos exploits the concept of "learned ignorance" as an alternative to the Epistemologies of the South (his own longstanding topic, and the title of one of his books) as an alternative to Western domination. In his view, intercultural translation is a methodology for defusing northern/western domination and its epistemology. In discussing the relation between translation and violence, Hrnjez engages at length with Walter Benjamin's work. In effect, most chapters engage with exemplary theoretical notions, conceptual developments and philosophical discourse, drawing on geographically and intellectually diverse thinking traditions, including non-Western and non-hegemonic ones.

The multidisciplinary character of this thematic issue is exemplified by the range of topics, including translation and politics, feminism and gender, nationalism, activism, intercultural translation, and cultural appropriation, as well as translation and activism. Essentially, experts from the global East and West, North and South have abandoned here the presupposition of any *definitive* knowledge. While the mother tongue/national language supported by the academy and the state would never be seen as a dialect by the latter (although kin languages are, in the mainstream), contributors to this publication seek *translational*, transitory solutions within plural and diverse knowledge,

offering merely temporary and therefore illuminating proposals. This is also suggested in the concept of reciprocally incomplete knowledge (Boaventura de Sousa Santos), which becomes eye-opening here for appreciating consecutive understandings. Languages, too, are reciprocally incomplete and complementary (Iveković).

Between a language and a neighbouring one, there can be infinite nuances, some named, others not. But national academies and states regularly construct their variant of a language as the source and model (thus limiting both language and knowledge), of which other versions are despicably called dialects and often repressed. Linguistically speaking, there is no difference between a language and a dialect. So, translation can infuse and defuse violence, and this is why its politics is politically essential. Taken altogether, contributions in this issue provide timely discussions on the burning ideological, political and theoretical questions: the delineation of languages, borders and identity formation in the current political conflicts, crises and wars; the possibility of translation in providing a vision of a truly transnational world, push translation into transforming the language(s) of decolonialization, use translation to explore the power relations seen from the perspective of the global South, expose the misuse of translation as a mode of violence in politics or in violent conflicts.

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Rada Iveković, Aleksandar Pavlović and Sanja Bojanić

## Ponovno promišljanje politike prevođenja: Prevođenje, nacija i rod

### Apstrakt

Tematski broj *Ponovno promišljanje politike prevođenja: Prevođenje, nacija i rod* istražuje prevođenje kao praksu i politički koncept. Prevođenje nije neutralan prenos značenja, već polje u kojem se stalno pregovaraju odnosi moći između jezika, nacija, rodova i identiteta. Prilozi analiziraju ambivalentnu ulogu prevođenja u učvršćivanju ili osporavanju nasilja, nacionalizma i kolonijalnosti, kao i njegov transformativni potencijal u feminističkim, dekolonijalnim i kontekstima globalnog Juga. Tekstovi obrađuju teme kao što su promena značenja i diskurs "woke", kontraprevođenje i hegemonija, režim modernog prevođenja, feminističke borbe, politike i dekolonijalne perspektive, psihoanaliza na Jugu, prevođenje kao kontranasilje i kulturna aproprijacija. Zajedno, ovi radovi naglašavaju sposobnost prevođenja da destabilizuje binarne opozicije, otvara prostore reciprociteta i deluje kao oblik kontrapolitike. Smeštajući prevođenje u savremene sukobe, krize i društvene pokrete, broj preispituje njegovu ulogu kao prakse pregovaranja na raskršću jezika, politike i kulture.

Ključne reči: politika prevođenja, kontraprevođenje, jezik, kultura, nacija, rod

