Some Theoretical Remarks

Crossing Gaps of Indeterminacy

Richard Rottenburg

From Representation to Translation

The business of ethnography can be considered to be about the translatability of narratives on the meaning of life and the world from one cultural frame of reference to another. As a practice of representation, ethnography is forced to have, or at least to assume, a universal yardstick that can be used as a third and independent token. Various forms of realism (naive, ironic, polyphonic) suggesting an independent referent are the usual (and unavoidable) rhetorical forms applied for this purpose. As a practice of representing difference, ethnography is forced to treat all frames of reference symmetrically. The distinction between right and wrong beliefs would undermine the very business of ethnography as a genre of difference. Various forms of relativism denying the availability of an independent referent are the common rhetorical forms utilized to this end.

However, without at least a preliminary distinction between valid and invalid statements, the attempt to produce representations plausible in two or more frames of reference, representations of otherwise would remain futile. Ethnography is born out of the paradoxical relation between, on the one hand, treating all frames of reference symmetrically, and on the other hand, requiring a metacode to cross over the differences (Crapanzano 1992).

The classical solution to this paradox was offered by cultural relativism. It was simple, elegant, and for quite some time convincing, as long as it could rely on four basic assumptions: Firstly, it was presupposed, any human statement only makes sense within a given frame of reference or culture. Secondly, all cultural frames were taken to be equal in terms of their potentials to legitimize statements. Thirdly and consequently, some statements that appeared reasonable within one, sounded unreasonable within the other cultural frame. Some cultural differences hence reached the level of incompatibility. As the main task of ethnography related to this challenge, a fourth assumption was offered as solution to the dead end of incompatibility: ethnography itself was excluded from this paradoxical condition.

Ethnographic representations were thus assumed to be independent of any cultural frame of reference. As scientific statements they were considered to have universal validity. During most of the last century, anthropology worked with serenity and success on the basis of these four assumptions by restricting cultural relativism to semantic, normative, and aesthetic relativism.

Sometime around the beginning of the 1980s this tranquillity seemed lost—at least for some notable anthropologists. While this is not the place to debate the actual beginning and the intricate history of this turn toward epistemic and ontological relativism (it can, for instance, be dated back to Protagoras), I must revisit its core assumption. Once the difference between science and culture became problematized and blurred (for instance, after Thomas Kuhn 1976 [1962]), ethnographic representations found themselves uncomfortably situated in one line with those sociocultural representations re-represented by ethnography (Geertz 2000 on Kuhn). Ethnographers subsequently ran into enormous difficulties by representing other people as sitting within their caves watching their shadows while they—the ethnographers—sovereignly pretended to move up and down in bright daylight outside all caves, including the cave they originally must have come from.

It is a common misunderstanding—or strategic distortion, particularly widespread in hermeneutic Germany—to subsume the loss of tranquillity mentioned above and the subsequent "crises of representation" of the 1980s under the older quarrel about the relation between empiricism and interpretivism. Working under the assumption that social reality is constructed by those one studies is simply something other than working under the assumption that the (social) sciences are a major force in this construction work.

Ever since anthropological analysis was applied to anthropology itself, we have had a new, virulent, and sometimes acrimonious debate on the consequences to be drawn out of the reflexive turn. The various and diverse positions taken up in this controversy can be arranged in three camps, or rather voices (if only for the purpose of clarifying my argument): a first position rejects the assumption that science is culture and continues along the established paths of epistemic universalism. Interpretive anthropology of the hermeneutic tradition sometimes speaks in this voice, together with less reflexive empiricist orientations. The bolder empiricist protagonists of this position are called "naive objectivists," "positivists," "realists," and so forth by their opponents, who look down at them as somewhat simple.

On the other hand, these opponents maintain that no representations
whatevers are possible without being dependent on a particular frame of reference. They shift the attention from the issues of external reference to issues of internal reference and their performative effects. Their move is thus to abandon the difference between political representation (which always constitutes power and those represented) and ideational representation, including their own scientific representations (Callon 1986). Protagonists of this position are known under various labels, of which “antibjectivist” is perhaps the most neutral and encompassing. Their opponents look down on them as “literati” who suffer from some kind of “philosophical angst” that is considered to be grounded in their cultural frame of reference and less in the nature of representation. Postmodernism is exposed as the ideology that is finally responsible for this deplorable state of mind (Gellner 1995).

Like any conflict, however, this one too is based on an assumption common to both positions: both assume that only one of them can possibly be right. Either ethnography is a scientific practice that represents social realities and that can be subjected to tests of verification and falsification, or ethnography is, inescapably, a genre of fiction that creates rather than represents foreign worlds. In this version, the value and validity of ethnographic stories comes from their power of cultural critique and from the defamiliarization of their own frame of reference (Marcus and Fischer 1986).

The first voice maintains that everything is decided by facts that can be collected out there in reality. The second voice counters that everything is decided by the frames of reference and methods that are necessary in the first place in order to create the facts that otherwise have no existence. The obvious response to this is: How can you know that this is the case if not by referring to some facts? Even though these facts might be situated on a different level, you still need to take them as facts! Or even worse: How do you expect anybody to listen to your story if it proclaims little else than self-referentiality?

A third position, developed over the past several years, becomes discernible here. Its main justification can be interpreted as a pragmatic escape from the aporia caused by the confrontation of the first two camps. The third voice proposes to bypass the trouble by refuting the underlying assumption about the elementary distinction between reality and representation, between world and words. Instead of struggling for a perfect correspondence between representation and reality, and instead of assuming that in the end representations can be held against reality in order to verify their correspondence, it suggests starting in the middle. The middle, as the space-in-between, is considered as the realm of representational practices that aim at the production of the two poles: the world and its representations, the original and the copy. In this perspective, reality as represented reality is not the beginning but the result of these practices (Latour 1995 [1991]; Pinch 1985).

In order to emphasize this shift from reality as starting point to reality as outcome, the practices of re-presentation are understood as acts of mediation or translation arranged in chains and nets. Conceiving representational practices as acts of translation draws attention to the unavoidable gaps that exist between each two consecutive representations in a chain of re-re-re—representation. These gaps are crossed over by translations, the point being that the strength and durability of translations is not entirely grounded in the source or target representation, nor in any external referent. Translation is thus considered a practice sui generis that cannot be reduced completely to what is translated. The responsibility for the act of translation cannot be delegated entirely to what is translated. To some degree it remains an act of creation—creating the right links—and it is precisely because of this that correspondence theories of representation have to render invisible their own translations (Robinson 1996).

The paradox of translation can be constituted to be analogous to the paradox of decision-making. If a situation would be entirely clear and under control and if the effects of an intervention into this situation would be fully predictable, one would not speak of making decisions. One would rather say that the obvious and unavoidable was done. The precondition for making a decision at all is in fact a certain amount of indeterminacy and thus of unpredictability. However, public self-representation of decision-making pretends that no risks were implied. The gap of indeterminacy is carefully glossed over (Luhmann 1991). Our decisions are good because they are based on an objective analysis—that is all one ever hears about decisions of public interest.

Perhaps the most famous paradox of the same type is the pure gift. The oxymoron “gift exchange” contains this paradox in a beautifully clear form. Exchanging gifts means that the issues of indebtedness and reciprocity are realized and hence the gift is no longer a pure gift, since it asks for a countergift. In fact it is sufficient to name something or even to think of something as a gift for abolishing its gift character (Derrida 1993 [1991]). In analogy, to think of something as a translation usually means to shift it to the level of a different practice—namely, of copying an original with the aim of maximum fidelity. Again, the gap of indeterminacy is glossed over.

The business of ethnography—to translate complex semantic narratives from one cultural frame to another—appears in a different light if viewed against
this background of a general theory of translation. According to the argument I am putting forward in this paper, the characteristics and peculiarities of ethnographic translation have been misconceived so often because they were not interpreted against this background (Gellner 1974; Asad 1993 [1986]). In order to pursue this argument further, I will now distinguish between two regimes of translation: scientific and mimetic.

Scientific Translation

The scientific translation regime of ethnography follows the model of the natural sciences. While Radcliffe-Brown was probably the last anthropologist who explicitly and emphatically propagated this position in a strong version, it is nowadays implicit and self-evident in all ethnographic writing, at least in a soft version.

Original experiences and observations in the field are mentally divided in parts that are supposed to be elementary enough to be acceptable as facts that carry their own evidence independent of sociocultural frames. These elementary parts are treated as originals of which one tries to make exact copies in the form of statements and perhaps photographs. A great deal of taking field notes is just about this analytical work: producing a thin and exact—that is, a decontextualized and consequently meaningless—description of what actually goes on.

In the next steps of ethnographic work, the mobile field notes—being copies in lieu of the immobile originals, which cannot be transferred to the ethnographer’s desk—are reassembled in a way to make sense for readers who do not have firsthand experience. The idea is that the first thin or flat description can be produced before it is made thick or deep by recontextualization—that is, by adding cultural meaning in the following steps of ethnographic work.

The question now is this: from where does this cultural meaning come, during the later stages of ethnographic work, when it was eliminated during the early stages in order to produce the thin description?

The scientific translation regime offers the following answer: at the lowest end of a chain of several acts of translation, one has reality out there as it exists independent of being observed or not observed, represented or not represented. In the case of ethnography this reality can be acts of behavior, objects and artifacts of all kinds, and speech acts. At the highest end of the translation chain one has a statement objectively representing the reality at the other end. The many links of the chain consist of distinct acts of translation that are methodologically guided.

Anybody interested in verifying the validity of the final description could follow the whole chain back to its lowest end and thus—in principle—grasp reality out there.

Borrowing from Latour (1996a, b), one can visualize the movement of a message from its initial context “out there” on the periphery of the scientific and anthropological world through a succession of transfers as it moves through a sequence of contexts. At last, the message, or some translation of it, “arrives” in a recognizably final form, with its original meaning presumably intact, despite its successive translations and recontextualizations.

According to the scientific translation regime, the cultural meaning of a hermeneutic unit (a pattern of cooperation, a ritual act, an artistic expression, etc.) has to emanate from the elementary parts collected during fieldwork, transferred as immutable mobiles through the translation chain, as through a telephone line, and reassembled at the ethnographer’s desk. Relying on this understanding of the translation process is nothing less than glossing over the gaps of indeterminacy given within each joint of the chain (visualized by the question marks in diagram 1). The glossing device is methodology, which pretends that the crossover is safe in the sense that the message is not transformed but simply transferred. The impression is created that facts can travel without being distorted. While this in itself is a problem (Latour 1996a), what happens when this approach is applied to meaning (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996)?

The ethnographer at her desk is privileged over those who live with the cultural meaning that she tries to reconstruct because she is in the singular position to command an overview. From her distant point of view she can discern patterns
that remain unobserved for those at the grass roots who are entangled in those patterns and never manage to see much more than unconnected bits and pieces.

To some degree the scientific translation regime seems to be stating the obvious. Institutionalized cultural patterns operate behind the backs of those who adhere to these patterns. And nobody can seriously pretend that ethnographic work could do without this basic assumption. Or, as Marx put it in his "18th Brumaire": "People make their own history, but not under circumstances of their own choosing." The major ambition of all social sciences is directed toward deciphering some order within these circumstances. It is within this endeavor that the scientific translation regime of ethnography encounters two problems. The first problem is related to the issue of rationality raised when people make their own history. The second problem is related to the connection of part and whole or figure and ground in the realm of cultural meaning.

The unresolved rationality problem becomes apparent when the scientific translation regime is confronted with statements and patterns of thought that do not make sense within the frame of reference at the upper end of the chain. Statements like "twins are birds," "this cucumber is an ox," "he is a witch," "she was hit by an ancestral spirit," "this stone makes rain," and so forth become denunciated when processed by the scientific translation regime. While the regime pretends to keep on or even to rehabilitate the rationality of these statements, it can do so only by shifting it onto a different level—namely, the level of "society," which is not the level at which the believers argue. Society, as those circumstances mentioned by Marx, is, so to speak, always behind their backs and never at their disposition.

The most famous example is of course Evans-Pritchard's witchcraft analysis (Evans-Pritchard 1929 [1937]). While the Azande believe in witches because there are witches, the readers of Evans-Pritchard's analysis are made to believe that the larger sociocultural frame of the Azande produces those witches. If the readers are prepared to step into the Azande frame—and the book invites them to do so—they also begin to see witches as Evans-Pritchard began seeing witches while among the Azande.

According to David Bloor's persuasive observation (1971 [1976]), the price for this rehabilitation is a new denunciation that turns out to be more severe than the first one contesting Azande logic. The readers and the ethnographic author "understand" the Azande thought style only by assuming that their own mental operation is a form of pure rationality free of institutional interferences. The basis for this deconstructive criticism of the scientific translation regime is the opposite assumption. According to this postulate all operations, including opera-

tions by the scientific regime, are dependent on cultural frames of reference—or, in other words, on institutional setups, exactly as the Azande witchcraft belief was. That is to say: Evans-Pritchard's ethnography does not describe but creates Azande witchcraft beliefs in exactly the same way in which the Azande frame of reference creates witches that are then taken to be real.

Now the problem with this symmetrical approach is that, in the end, it too confirms what it pretends to challenge. In order to give an account of some state of affairs one has to make the claim that one's own account is valid. Otherwise it would be pointless to give the account in the first place. The only difference between Evans-Pritchard's account of Azande witchcraft and any deconstructive account of Evans-Pritchard's ethnography is the level at which the external referent of the account is situated. In the first case the external referent is given by instances of witchcraft practices and emic comments on those practices. In the second case the external referent is given by statements within a text written by Evans-Pritchard. Obviously, this is no difference in principle. Both accounts pretend to relate to something outside themselves and thus operate on the basis of external reference.

This observation, in fact, should come as no surprise. Any account given of any state of affairs lives from making invisible its own internal reference (Ashmore 1979). One cannot present a narrative that claims validity and at the same time invalidates the narrative itself by drawing attention to the fact that this very validity depends on a series of assumptions that all could as well be different—if one would only choose another frame of reference (Pinch 1988). This basic rule thus also applies to all those accounts deconstructing ethnographic narratives by focusing on the problems of internal reference within these ethnographic narratives. In the vocabulary of this paper, acts of translation have to be turned rhetorically into acts of or representations of external referents in order to appear acceptable.

If that is the case, the deconstructive approach does not seem to solve the initial problem of how to account for something as being culturally different without denouncing it at the same time. If ethnographic representations are ineluctably enunciative and denunciative at the same time, so the deconstructive argument goes, one should better "write against culture" (Abu-Lughod 1991). Avoiding the above-mentioned aporia caused by the illusionary dichotomy between reality and representation and focusing instead on the realm in the middle—where both sides of the dichotomy are produced by acts of translation—seems to boil down to some sort of iconoclasm.

It goes without saying that this is no real solution to the initial problem.
Deconstruction is not there to replace construction but only to improve it or to cut down its pretensions to size by reflexivity. The oscillating move between belief and skepticism is a kind of code-switching one has to live with since there is no metacode available. In order to work out the eventual gain to be achieved by operating beyond correspondence theory with the translation approach, one has to come back to those gaps between each two consecutive joints in a translation chain (pointed out by question marks—see diagram 1). These gaps are due to the degree of artifice needed to join each successive translation of a message to the next context. That, at the same time, means to come back to the problem of part and whole, of figure and ground.

Mimetic Translation

The analytical procedure of the scientific translation regime has, as mentioned above, a problem: to explain from where it takes the cultural meaning of the ethnographic end product. The thin descriptions fabricated at the beginning of the ethnographic work deliberately exclude cultural meaning by decontextualization. The elementary parts in which the fieldwork experience is split in order to have immutable mobiles do not contain in themselves their meanings. And reassembling the elementary parts on the ethnographers' desks to form a complete picture necessarily generates meanings different from the local ones—as just explained with the help of Azande witchcraft. It would, nevertheless, be unrealistic if not ridiculous to stand up here and deny ethnography as it is practiced, written, and read any competence to convey emic meanings. It rather seems that on the backstage of ethnographic work something additional to scientific translation is going on.

According to my argument, this additional and mostly hidden work operates by what I would like to call the mimetic translation regime. The basic figure of this regime is not to analyze (i.e., to divide wholes into constitutive elementary parts) but, to the contrary, to convey the emic meaning in one go, so to speak. One might imagine that the meaning/message, rather than translating relatively unscathed across contexts, transforms into a series of messages in each new context (see diagram 2), each connected to the prior one and capturing the initial meaning in a Gestalt-like fashion, but without subjugation to a reductionist, analytic translation process (again, see Latour 1996a, b).

An expression from context 1 is remade, reconstructed, or refigured in context 2, and so forth from one context to the next. The success of mimetic translation as a philological and aesthetic operation is based on finding analogies: expressions, mental pictures, or narratives that convey meanings in context 2 similar to those encountered in context 1.

Once again: Dividing—as under the scientific translation regime—an original expression of context 1 into its elementary parts till one gets to denotative statements that can be transferred as immutable mobiles within the chain does not result in a statement that would make sense in context 2. Just as linguistic word-to-word translations of single sentences regularly miss the meaning, also part-to-part or sense-to-sense translations of hermeneutic units usually do not make sense without a translation of the whole (the ground or the context), which is something else than the addition of the parts (or the figures).

Juridical hermeneutics is one locus classicus for this argument: the "spirit of a law" can never be found in any of the paragraphs of that law, and not even in the assemblage of all its paragraphs. It always has to be read between the lines of the law and is thus always disputable. Religious hermeneutics is the other locus classicus. Any attempt to account for the meaning of a revelation at the upper end of the translation chain by splitting it into constituent parts and tracing those parts back to the historical moment and event of revelation at the lower end of the chain results in harsh disappointment. The historical documents on Jesus cannot possibly stand for what his mediators made him to become during the centuries.

According to the argument I am presenting here, ethnography unavoidably operates with both regimes of translation. Ethnographic translators who pretend to be full-hearted mimetic translators cannot avoid the scientific regime, since they would otherwise have no ground at all on which to present their ethnography. Ethnographic translators who pretend to be hard-core scientific translators
cannot avoid using mimetic translation, since otherwise their texts would simply be incomprehensible or void of meaning. Yet most of them are not aware of the amount of mimetic translation they have just accomplished. As a result, their translations are not fully accountable to validation.

This is because they replace the question marks within the joints of the translation (see diagram 1) chain with “methodology,” while in fact they are at the same time guided by something else that evades the type of methodology appealed to. This “something else” is the Weberian *pneuma* (“spirit”) of the other context (ground) they have experienced during fieldwork. Scientific translation tries to exclude this dimension as occultism and thereby produces its own form of obscurantism.

The act of stating this under postcolonial circumstances might seem to raise irritation and resistance among the readers who would otherwise follow my criticism of the scientific translation regime. However, I argue, this holds only at first sight. The point is rather the other way round. The official high aspiration by the scientific translation regime to entirely exclude the pneumatic dimension from its procedures unavoidably generates a “hidden transcript.” Ethnographers are guided by what they experienced as pneuma—or, more mundanely, as way of life—but they believe they have to deny this illegal influence on their translation work in order to defend its objectivity. The end result of this is a picture of alterity that claims objectivity in the sense of scientific methodology. According to my argument, this is the point that deserves criticism, and not the assumption about pneumatic differences between ways of life. The issues of heteronomy, heterogeneity, and polyphony can be accommodated easily within an approach that allows for pneuma and hence for influence on the ethnographic observer.

Allowing influence—or, to use a stronger term, allowing to be captured and to surrender to alterity—is the point where mimetic translation comes in. Evidently, thus, the problem with mimetic translation is its accountability. A mimetic relation is always in between two sides, its point being exactly to transgress a subject-object relation by allowing heteronomous subjectivities. If the act of translation can be fully justified neither by those parts of the ethnographic transfer that are verifiable nor in fact by the source context as a whole, since mimesis is in between, how can one be sure to do the right thing without ending up in fiction—that is, in a construction dependent exclusively on the target context?

A full-scale methodology of mimetic translation subscribing to the standards of empiricism seems impossible, and would contradict my own definition of translation as a crossing over of the unavoidable gaps between the joints of the chain without the usual safety devices. However, the option to make invisible this gap of indeterminacy, as more positivist representationists do, appears more treacherous than to admit this weakness. The best one can do under this condition is to be as specific as possible about how the gap is actually crossed over.

For this purpose diagram 3 will be helpful. It visualizes the relation between mimetic and scientific translation. We start with line one and move horizontally from field 1 to field 2. This means, for instance, to record a conversation somewhere in the remote world at some point in time on a tape and to play the tape now in this room. By this exact repetition one achieves high fidelity between original and copy. In most cases the understanding will be lost to a greater part, though. At worst, what we receive is unstructured noise. Hence the overall result is infidelity.

![Diagram 3](image)

The move from field 1 to field 2 stands for the scientific translation regime in ethnography. A hermeneutic unit from field 1 is reduced to an assembly of elementary denotative statements that can be transferred to field 2 and later verified by going back to field 1 to check their correspondence. In most cases of complex semantic narratives the overall result is infidelity, since the meanings the narratives had in field 1 are lost in field 2. One thus easily falls down in field 4.

Moving vertically within column 1 from field 1 to field 3 means compromising with the ideal of correspondence. The identity of an expression of field 1 is preserved by *making a difference* in field 3. The basic operation of this move is to call mimetic translation. Pursuing this line—as stressed above—does not offer a guarantee for not ending up in field 4 and producing a forgery of what was meant in field 1. The hardest test of falsification to which this move can be submitted is an inversion of the usual procedure of testing correspondence as in the move from 1 to 2. Here, in the move from 1 to 3, the crucial question is: does the result have a defamiliarizing effect on the implicit presuppositions of the target context of translation? If this effect is achieved the ethnographic translation is very likely to have made a valid point and thus not to have landed in field 4.
If it would be generally acceded and accepted that ethnographic translation is always and unavoidably an exercise of balancing between scientific and mimetic translation (or, in diagram 3, between the two steps from 1 to 2, and from 1 to 3), then both could be performed on the front stage. As a result of this, both steps could be made more accountable. The rhetoric of scientific ethnographic translation would lose its chance to offer itself as objective representation, and the rhetoric of mimetic translation would be liberated from its aura of an occult art and perhaps also from the charge of “othering” (Taussig 1993).

References Cited


Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction xi Tullio Maranhão

1 Double Translation: Transculturation and the Colonial Difference
   3 Walter D. Mignolo and Freya Schiwy

2 Crossing Gaps of Indeterminacy: Some Theoretical Remarks
   30 Richard Rottenburg

3 The Metaphoricity of Translation: Text, Context, and Fidelity in American Jurisprudence
   44 Vincent Crapanzano

4 The Politics of Translation and the Anthropological Nation of the Ethnography of South America
   64 Tullio Maranhão

5 Translating "Self-Cultivation"
   85 Ellen B. Basso

6 The Patience of a Koranic School: Waiting for Light in the Jungle
   102 Mark Minzelle

7 Linguist and Anthropologist as Translators
   115 Volker Heeschen

8 Trance and Translation in the Zar Cult of Ethiopia
   135 Antonio Luigi Palmisano
Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge financial support from the Institute for Ethnology of the University of Leipzig, as well as from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. We would like to recognize Maren Rössler and Johannes Ries, students at the University of Leipzig, for their unflinching efforts in the organization of the conference. We would like to express our deepest appreciation to Leland Searles for careful editing and for helping with the project in Tullio's untimely absence.