

Introductory reflections on self-translation and academic mobility

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Over the last several decades, armed conflicts, oppression, and poverty have forced millions of people into flight from their homes. Meanwhile, the globalized economy has enticed people in various careers to relocate – mostly westward – for work. These contemporary migrational dynamics have prompted Translation Studies to devote new attention to the geographic relocation of human beings as a driving force behind interlinguistic and -cultural transmission of ((self-)translated) texts and traditions, cultural practices, objects, and worldviews (Jung 2002; Polezzi 2006, 2012; Cordingley 2013; Castro, Mainer, and Page 2017; Inghilleri 2017; Nergaard 2021; Segnini and Sulis 2021; Ciribuco and O'Connor 2022; Tashinskiy, Boguna, and Rozmysłowicz 2022; Weber Henking 2023; Gómez and Hansen Esplin 2024). However, throughout the *migrational turn* in Translation Studies, literary output has become paradigmatic of migrant cultural ambassadorship. In comparison studies of migrated self-translating scholars are few and mostly scattered in a number of isolated articles in anthologies or journals. Systematic work is more limited; among the exceptions is Keller and Willer's *Selbstübersetzung als Wissenstransfer* 'Self-translation as knowledge transfer' (2020), which explicitly focuses on self-translating migrant or traveling scholars. Considering the international aspirations that the modern (Western) scientific system has fostered ever since the Early Modern Age, the field must be so rich in material that it is safe to deem this area of research largely unexplored. This holds true not only for historical research but for contemporary cases of self-translating scholars in migration, if we think of the many funding programs in the higher education sector that aim to promote academic mobility, such as the EU-program Erasmus+, or the funding programs set up in recent years for academics in exile, such as the Philipp Schwartz Initiative for researchers at risk launched by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation or institutions such as the Academy in Exile (founded in 2017 as a joint initiative of the Institute for Turkish Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen, the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI) Essen and the Forum Transregionale Studien Berlin). In the US, the Institute

of International Education has helped scholars leave threatening circumstances and immigrate to the US since its founding in 1919. Its best-known success is the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars (1933–1945), which worked together with programs like the Rockefeller Foundation's Refugee Scholar Program to help hundreds of scholars facing Nazi persecution leave Europe with their families. Since 2002, its Scholar Rescue Fund has brought hundreds more scholars from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine to safety.

The transformative dynamics initiated by migrated academics, whose very work of (self-)translation within institutional spaces of knowledge production alter 'traditions of reflection' and contribute to the emergence of new 'thought communities' (Fleck 1979) or to significant transformations of existing 'thought communities', have been rather obscured. Displaced academics who continue their work abroad require a complex process of (self-)translation, not only into a new academic language, but also into a new academic culture that is characterized by a discipline-specific set of questions and inherited (unquestioned) convictions and habits of reflection. However, academic cultures never detach completely from the society in which they are situated. Although the modern scientific system describes itself as a global enterprise (Stichweh 2005), the history of science shows that the conditions for the realization of academic work – even under the conditions of *linguae francae* that have changed over the course of history – remain linked to local structures of the relevant societies: the education system, language practices, politics, political culture, artistic life, religious traditions, and prevailing values. In fact, the examples presented in the contributions to this volume all illustrate that the geographic relocation of academics does not leave the conditions of their participation in the global enterprise of scholarship untouched, but always demands and promotes processes of (self-)translation. An intellectual history of academic migration has thus the complex task of investigating why certain self-translations achieve the influence they do by accounting for cultural, social, linguistic, discursive, disciplinary, and philosophical mechanisms of adaptation, integration, and advancement.

In this special issue we focus mostly on the humanities not only in order to narrow down the field for the sake of a more systematic analysis, but because this field makes an especially interesting case of academic self-translation. Its distinctiveness resides in the fact that specialized humanistic discourses are more permeable to linguistic and socio-cultural 'infiltrations' from the (foreign) outside world surrounding the academic system than those in the natural sciences (Schütz 1953). Such infiltrations can emanate from politics, art, other disciplines, or from the everyday world. This permeability makes it easier to detect the translational traces in humanistic discourse more frequently and more conspicuously than in other disciplines. Furthermore, humanists generally demonstrate an acute aware-

ness of the arbitrariness of signifiers, which leads us to problematize languages themselves both in their object-determining function and in their (intentional and unintentional) connotative effects on the research process. It is thus hardly surprising that it is most often humanists who explicitly problematize the linguistic difficulties inherent in the self-translation process – Hannah Arendt remains perhaps the most iconic example (Jung 2002; Weigel 2012). However, the extant work on scholarship in migration suggests that neither is language the sole problem of (self-)translation into a new academic culture nor is the focus on language (problems) sufficient to illuminate the complex (self-)translation processes that the geographical relocation of academics unleashes. As a matter of fact, the articles in this special issue all demonstrate that the migration situation simultaneously demands and promotes processes of (self-)translation at different levels and hence translation takes place (simultaneously) across different borders: linguistic, (academic) cultural, political, philosophical, historical, disciplinary, discursive, and semiotic.

The studies collected here also show that these multidimensional processes of (self-)translation leave hardly anything unchanged, not even the translators. Almost all of the articles trace a ‘metamorphosis’ of migrated academics that is not due to the relocation itself, but to the (self-)translational work demanded and promoted by the relocation: Lancelot Hogben (1895–1975) (self-)translatingly circumnavigates the world and – not least driven by the (disillusioning) insights he has gained from his translational experiences – abandons his fervent artificial language ambitions in favor of Global English (**Gordin**); Hassan Hanafi (1935–2021) emerges from his (self-)translations with a new philosophical-linguistic or philosophical (self-)consciousness, in other words, as a new philosopher (**Elsheerif**); Fritz Kuttner (1903–1991) develops into an ambassador of classical Chinese music (not only in the West, but also in China) through interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic (self-)translation processes (**Peng and Bartosch**). Caetano Lopes de Moura (1780–1860) and the Viscount of Santarém (1791–1865) position themselves as scholars above all through their translational work in exile in Paris and (somewhat unwittingly) become key spokesmen for the Portuguese colonial policy (**Maia and Lopes**). Pavin Chachavalpongpun (1971–) has achieved a new voice in his political struggle against the repressive Thai monarchy through his self-translation work, performed in exile (**Phanthaphoommee**). Bosch Gimpera (1891–1974), in his Mexican exile from fascist Spain, arrived at a counternarrative to Spanish imperialism based on his locally acquired insights into Mexico’s indigenous cultures (**Camps**). And finally, Ray Huang (1918–2000) left China for the US at an early point in his career as a historian, but his self-translation of his masterpiece *1587, a Year of No Significance* into Chinese showed an author whose exile had (perhaps unexpectedly) only further sensitized

him to the nuances of the early modern Chinese language (Wang and Sun). The identity-transforming effect of self-translation, which accompanies migration, is a point Hannah Arendt draws out poignantly in her 1943 essay “We Refugees” when describing the perennial migration and assimilation of Jews across the world: “Our identity is changed so frequently that nobody can find out who we actually are.” (Arendt 2008, 270)

It is therefore convincing that the concept of (self-)translation in this volume refers not only to the texts, but also repeatedly to the migrants or translators, insofar as it is through their translational activity that they find a junction in new social structures in the first place and in doing so undergo an academic or personal transformation themselves, which in turn opens up new paths of self-realization for them. Thus, in our view, extending the concept of self-translation to include migrant translators does not commit a metaphorical overreach of the concept of translation. What it reveals is the immanent, existentialist character of (self-)translation, which is rooted in the linguisticity of human life. For, as Hannah Arendt puts it in the introduction to *The Human Condition* (itself a work she translated from English to German):

And whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about. [...] Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves.

(Arendt 1998, 4)

Accordingly, translation proves to be the condition without which there can be no Heideggerian ‘being-with’ (*Mitdasein*),¹ for which migration poses especially bitter conditions. This is why in Hannah Arendt’s descriptions of her own migration situation and that of other (Jewish) refugees, she systematically treats ‘loss of language’ as an existential problem: “We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings.” (264) Even though we emphasized earlier that language does not represent the only problem involved in self-translation into new social or academic structures, against this philosophical background language remains the primordial problem of existence, and makes itself especially conspicuous to refugees.

1. This concept of Martin Heidegger’s is generally left untranslated in English-language philosophy. It refers to humankind’s unquestioned, everyday ‘being-in-the-world’ (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) with others: “The world of Da-sein is a *with-world*. Being-in is *being-with* others. The inner-worldly being-in-itself of others is *Mitda-sein*.” (Heidegger 1996, 112) For a thorough explanation of Heidegger’s concept of *Mitdasein*, see §26 of *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1996).

Considering the distress that exile usually brings, even for highly fortunate refugees, it would be easy to regard self-translation in a migrant context simply as a response to emergency conditions or to regard it as compensatory for loss. As suggested already, (self-)translation has the potential to empower migrant scholars in their new milieu. This potential is not exhausted in achieving communicative access to the new socio-cultural surroundings, but rather includes new, sometimes unprecedented forms and means of intellectual expression. In this sense, the studies collected here illustrate that the inspection of the relocation of academics through the lens of self-translation displays the migrational situation “as a space of potentiality for foregrounding (intellectual) change,” as **Maia and Lopes** put it in their article in this issue. Of course, such a positive take on the potential intellectual value of migration does not negate its grueling costs (in the academic context and beyond). At least as many migrant stories end in bureaucratic and cultural overwhelm, not in intellectual innovation.

In an era of increasing academic mobility, and the related increase in the internationalization of academic institutions, publications, and events, one might get the impression that translation praxes have been superseded by the use of English as a lingua franca. The rise of English as a lingua franca is particularly lamented in the humanities since the humanities are especially attuned to linguistic particularity. In the nineteenth century, before English supplanted rival *linguae francae*, European empires’ balance-of-power model applied to languages. Michael Gordin (the first author whose work appears in this issue) has written eloquently about the need for serious chemists to learn French, German, English, and Russian, perhaps with a smattering of Japanese and Latin (Gordin 2015). Of course, English already played a central role in academia in the nineteenth century. Yet before the outbreak of World War I, German – associated with wealthy Switzerland, the sprawling Habsburg Empire, and rapidly industrializing Prussia – had an edge among the scientific languages. Scholars from around the world traveled to Berlin, Heidelberg, Basel, Vienna, and Habsburg Prague, and learned German in the process. Meanwhile, Swedish researchers obstinately maintained a preference for publishing in Latin. While Japanese was less internationally relevant than the other languages, Japanese scientists did not feel worried about being left out if they published their findings in Japanese. Gordin memorably labels the situation before World War I “Scientific Babel” (Gordin 2015). What came after that is the world we know.

As understandably alarming as the last century of global English is to humanities scholars,² the articles in this special issue invite a close look at the increasing

2. The introduction to Barbara Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Cassin et al. 2014) remains one of the most measured and powerful polemics against global English, particularly

arrival of translation at the heart of the academic system, and not just translation, but *self*-translation, transpiring *before* publication, *before* the conference, right in the midst of the new academic cultures. Within the realm of academic communication, self-translation seems to be the form of translation most widely practiced in this age of mobility and internationalization. This state of affairs poses new methodological challenges for the field of Translation Studies if the field aims to study the phenomenon of self-translation not solely as an object of historical research, but also as the ubiquitous contemporary phenomenon that it evidently is. The question arises as to how to empirically grasp the ‘everyday’ practice of self-translation that enables not only migrating scholars but all non-native English-speaking scholars (i.e., the majority of researchers), to participate in the global endeavor of science.

Whether scholars pen their work in a global lingua franca, like English, or (self-)translate their work into English, ‘international scholarship’ means high-quality work published in English. There is of course a tension in this Anglo-centrism; intellectual life flourishes at the intersection of languages and cultures. Almost every Golden Age can be traced to a period where a wealthy region had porous borders open to foreigners and their ideas: ancient Athens, medieval Baghdad, Renaissance Italy, early modern Andalusia, and the twentieth-century US to name but a few iconic cases of innovative times and places, where high levels of migration and translation led intellectual currents to travel in new and historically influential directions.

In the humanities, it is not just a matter of talent-seeking, nor even solely of the moral imperatives driving inclusiveness initiatives, but rather of the research value achieved through inclusiveness. Humanities research increasingly draws attention to the positionality of human subjects, and in such a climate, researchers’ own identity markers (that is, their socio-economic class, sex, gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, etc.) are seen as shaping their perspectives. It is entirely in keeping with this heightened awareness that thinkers are always influenced by the habits and assumptions that they inherit through their language and culture. Even if they position themselves as heretics from their origins, their background gives them the parameters from which to rebel or to liberate themselves. A self-translation does not have to involve an interlingual translation to perform this cross-cultural work. Polyglot thinkers who navigate cultural differences in their life and work self-translate through their very act of thinking. Translation work is often the source of insights into foreign cultures, and self-translation — performed by bi-cultural subjects — means reflection on the encounter with cul-

standing as it does at the opening of a monument to an encyclopedic project dedicated to the plurality of languages.

tural (political, linguistic, and philosophical) difference. The precise, impassioned visions these self-translators bring to their languages of origin calls to mind the insight attributed to Parmenides in Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*: "[It makes no difference where] I shall begin: for I shall return there once again later." (Laks and Most 2016, 36–37).³

The contributions to this special issue

The dynamics of cultural and linguistic positioning are most strikingly visible when translators relocate to places where they must work in a different language and especially when they try to position their work in a new cultural and linguistic framework. The seven articles presented in this volume do just that: they chronicle the journeys of professional thinkers across languages and cultures. In all cases, a degree of influence was achieved, and in all cases fascinating transformations occurred in the process of (self-)translation. Most of these migrations took place during the twentieth century (one is nineteenth century; one, twenty-first). The rise of fascism prompted a majority of the European scholars discussed to relocate, but not all of the migrant scholars discussed in the volume fled Europe: two began their lives in Asia, one in Africa, and one in the New World. In keeping with the sexist restrictions of the age, all protagonists are men. Yet they represent a wide range in terms of the roles they played in the various systems they worked in. We also see that the centrality of English as a lingua franca in the sciences defines what it means to appear as a self on an international stage in the twentieth century. The only two pieces where English does not come into play deal with translation to or from French — perhaps the second highest status language on the global stage, arguably to be gradually replaced by Mandarin.

Five of the contributions to this special issue deal with the work of practising translators whose migration experiences altered their approach to language as such while reshaping their careers in the process. **Michael D. Gordin's** contribution deals with a figure whose own self-translation story is on the pulse of twentieth-century language politics. In "Lancelot Hogben's Hybrid Tongues: From Interglossa to Global English," Gordin builds on the field-defining arguments he made in *Scientific Babel* (2015) to situate Hogben's evolving perspective on the unification of scientific language(s). Hogben, a zoologist by training, lived a highly itinerant life and became increasingly concerned with problems of international peace and solidarity — especially from a linguistic perspective. After

3. In the original: " ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ | - ξυνὸν δέ μοί ἐστιν, ὅππόθεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἴξομαι αὐθις."

translating a book on genetics from Swedish, he began working tirelessly on the constructed language ‘Interglossa’, a language primarily lexified by English but mimicking Chinese analytic grammar. By the end of his life, however, he accepted the inevitability of global English. His (geographic and psychological) distance from his mother tongue allowed him to see it less as an imperial imposition and more as a valuable tool for international science.

As with Hogben, Fritz Kuttner travels as an itinerant scholar, translates as part of his academic work, and arrives at new conclusions about his academic purpose, which show a profound sensitivity to his new cultural and linguistic context. “The Jewish German-American Musicologist Fritz A. Kuttner and China: Dimensions of Self-translation in Migration” by **Bei Peng and David Bartosch** narrates the life of Fritz Kuttner, who arrived in Shanghai a refugee from Nazism and eventually dedicated his career to the promotion of the understanding of Chinese tonality and music history. In his work as comparative musicologist, he is primarily concerned with an intercultural intersemiotic translation, in which the merits of East Asian tonal systems became audible to Western listeners. His insights also reflected the life experience of a bicultural scholar; accordingly, Peng and Bartosch’s study of self-translation often forefronts biography: in a migratory life story, a scholar’s intercultural sense of self is often the most significant translation project. In the authors’ own words: “Are we not, so to speak, constantly translating ourselves into existence, constantly readjusting and reorienting ourselves against the background of our communicative past?”

Garda Elsherif outlines a case of cultural back translation and highlights how complex the reckoning can be between culture of origin and culture of academic training in “Scholarly Authors as Self-translators: Tracing Hasan Hanafi’s Philosophical Back-and-Forth Translations.” Hasan Hanafi developed into a philosopher under the influence of Parisian phenomenology during its heyday (1956–1966). He would not be content, however, simply to philosophize on the dominant questions of the nature of consciousness or authenticity that preoccupied Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. Instead, Hanafi brought phenomenological methods to the analysis of traditional Muslim theological positions. Most interestingly, he made his intervention on the level of language through the translation and integration of phenomenological terms into his Arabic-language work. Self-translation, in Hanafi’s case, is deeply embedded into the work of explicating and thinking through philosophical concepts in two languages (French and Arabic) and traditions: twentieth-century phenomenology and classical Islamic philosophy.

“A Place of Their Own: Intellectuals, Exiles, and the Production of Knowledge through Translation” by **Rita Bueno Maia and Alexandra Lopes** focuses on two figures: Caetano Lopes de Moura (Bahia, 1780 – Paris, 1860), a Brazilian physi-

cian who lived in Portugal during the Civil War (1828–1834), and Manuel Francisco de Barros e Sousa da Mesquita Leitão e Carvalhosa, the Second Viscount of Santarém (Lisbon, 1791 – Paris, 1856). They migrated in opposite directions through the Portuguese imperial presence in Brazil, but both translated to and from French for an audience interested in the history and circumstances of Portuguese imperialism. While both developed collaborative and intellectually efficacious networks in their respective geographic contexts, their knowledge production more or less directly served Portugal's goals of imperial settlement in Brazil and expansion of its colonial footprint into Africa. The experience of uprootedness propelled these men deeper into their roles as imperial cultural mediators.

In “(Self-)translation and Migration: The Political Exile of Spanish Scientists and Scholars after the Civil War,” **Assumpta Camps** follows several Spanish scholars' flight from fascism into the New World. In most of the cases she discusses, Spanish scholars found their long-term refuge in Mexico, despite the fact that they expected to live out only a short reprieve there from the fascist regime in Spain. For some of the exiles, minor language differences between the Mexican and Spanish languages became the starting point for reflections on the linguistic and cultural legacy of Spanish imperialism. However, the centrifugal pull of the academic system in the US meant that for scholars such as Bosch Gimpera, Camps' primary example, the US was indeed the first stop in exile, and the English language a lifelong influence on their careers and their self-positioning in the academic language sphere. In Camps' words: “The term ‘self-translation’ is used here in a broad sense [...] it does not refer (only) to the version of a given text in another language, produced by the same author, but to the need to express, explain, and ‘translate’ oneself into another language and culture.”

Two of the contributions deal with cases where an author penned an influential work in English, which virtuosically demonstrated their knowledge of their East Asian nation of exile, after which they transformed that work into an even more precise comment on their culture of origin – by self-translating their masterpiece into their native language. **Binhua Wang and Yifeng Sun's** article “The Creation of New Academic Knowledge Spaces through the Repatriated Self-translation of Foreign-language Texts: The Case of Migrant Historian Ray Huang” traces the limits of different national academic cultures. An established social scientist in exile from his home country of China writes a book in English and later translates the selfsame book into his own first language. In discussing Ray Huang's self-translation work, Wang and Sun propose that Huang performs a kind of textless back-translation when he created a far more precise Chinese text than the already well-received English original – and thereby outfitted the work for its phenomenal popularity among Chinese historians. Despite the differences in academic cultures,

Huang used his exile in the US to develop such a precise gaze on Chinese history that his fellow Chinese could not fail to see the conceptual achievement of his Chinese-language historiography.

Among the seven pieces in this volume, the most direct political confrontation between exiled scholar and his home government is that of the political scientist Pavin Chachavalpongpun, protagonist of **Narongdej Phanthaphoommee's** "Self-translation by an Academic in Exile: A Political Remonstrance to the Authoritarian Regime." Chachavalpongpun remains in exile from his native Thailand and currently works as a professor at Kyoto University in Japan. The article concerns a book he first wrote in English, in which he declares his outspoken opposition to the censorship laws following Thailand's twelfth successful military coup in 2014. He self-translated *A Plastic Nation* into Thai, and this article demonstrates the ways in which the Thai translation took on new dimensions of irony and subversion. Empowered by the safe distance of exile, he was able to mimic the regime's own rhetoric and criticize its censorship tactics by means of parody. This article provides a very clear case of the rhetorical power of interlinguistic self-translation performed in exile.

These seven contributions highlight the value of the concept of self-translation as a topic in translation history. Interlinguistic self-translation often means translating a text written in a foreign language (usually English) into the author's first language. The articles collected here show that stories around even such literal acts of self-translation reflect complex negotiations of (inter)cultural identity, and that these negotiations often result in self-translations in less obvious senses: reworkings of ideas for foreign audiences, rethinking imported ideas in light of foreign experiences of inspiration or solidarity, and of course the discovery of new ideas when rethinking one's ideas in a new language. In this sense, the historical impact of self-translation does not necessarily derive from the authority that authors wield when rewriting their texts in another language. Instead, self-translations can become historically significant because the self-translators rework their own ideas in the interstices of national scholarly audiences — whether or not they self-translate in the sense of rewriting a text in a new language. In an era where migration becomes an ever more integral reality in our lifeworlds, origins become points of departure, which do not define the parameters of scholarly life, but often inform the translators' moves — in ways that only become ascertainable after the fact.

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