

Collectivities in translation (studies)

Towards a conceptual framework

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Since the cultural and social turn, translation studies has been interested in the role translation practices play in the construction of the socio-cultural world. In particular, it has been concerned with the effects translation practices have on the formation of all kinds of groups, communities or identities: national cultures, genders, social/political movements, and linguistic minorities, for example, have been examined in different ways as to their translational constructedness. In this introductory article, the authors propose to bring these various research endeavours together under one conceptual umbrella by adopting the notion of ‘collectivities.’ The notion serves as a cover term encompassing different shapes, durations, and sizes of collectivities and as a heuristic device within a coherent framework. The analytical value of such a framework, it is argued, consists in integrating existing and future research by relating individual approaches to each other and comparing them.

Keywords: collectivities, constructivism, functions of translation, cultural turn, social turn

Communication and translation are catalysts for the formation or dissolution of groups and societies. (Vermeer 2008/2009)

1. Collectivities in translation studies

The aim of this special issue of *Translation in Society* is to bring together different research endeavours in translation studies (TS) dealing with similar phenomena and to propose a common conceptual roof under which they can communicate. We suggest the notion of *collectivities* to integrate research interested in the manifold roles translations (practices and theories) play in the construction (formation, maintenance, and dissolution) of groups, communities or identities of different size, stability and duration, ranging from national/ethnic cultures to gen-



ders, political movements, religious gatherings and multilingual dinner parties. The purpose of this introduction is to sketch the background and contours of a framework to study *the translational construction of collectivities*.

Ever since the cultural and social turn, TS has been interested in the role that translation practices and theories play in the construction of the socio-cultural world.¹ Not only are they seen as results of the socio-cultural world – the socio-cultural world is in turn regarded as a *result* of translation practices and theories. Cultures, literatures, languages, nations, religions, and other parts or dimensions of the socio-cultural world are no longer simply presupposed as a *given* reality in which translation occurs. Rather, they are being investigated as effects or functions of translation(s).

Although this approach consolidated with the reception of sociological authors and approaches, especially Bourdieu's praxeology (Simeoni 1998; Gouanvic 2005; Inghilleri 2005), but also the actor-network theory of Latour (Buzelin 2007), and Luhmann's systems theory (Hermans 1999; Tyulenev 2012), it was already driving those early attempts leading to the foundation of TS as a discipline distinct from applied linguistics and ushering in the cultural turn in the 1970s and 1980s. When studying the function(s) of translation in the target culture, Descriptive Translation Studies and polysystem theory focus attention on the question of how translation constructs, changes and affects communities, for instance by analysing its effects on literary canons and genres (Toury 1980; Even-Zohar 1979). Similarly, German functionalism conceives of translation as an action which not only takes place in a particular situation but also *changes* this situation and is thus interested in what translation practices and theories *do* in and with the socio-cultural world (Vermeer 1978).

The switch to what can be called a constructivist and sociological perspective in TS manifests conceptually as a rejection of or break with understandings of translation as a form of *reproduction* and *equivalence* (of semantic meaning) (Dizdar 2006). It is the result of different intertwined intellectual developments in the twentieth century, such as the linguistic turn in philosophy (Rorty 1967) or the emergence of social constructivism in sociology (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and post-positivist positions in the history and sociology of science (Kuhn 1962; Latour and Woolgar 1986), to name but a few. They all contributed to a crisis of representation (Clifford and Marcus 2010) in that they converged in a (radical) questioning of the realist assumption of a pre-given, objective reality that can function as a yardstick for the correspondence of our assertions or thoughts with that reality – and of an Archimedean point of reflection from which to judge that correspondence. The result is a general and radicalised awareness of the contin-

1. 'Translation' includes here the practice of interpreting.

gency of the socio-cultural world, whose existence as an objective and pre-given reality cannot be presupposed. Within TS, the critique of representationalism and methodological nationalism play a crucial role in understanding the discipline's concern for the translational construction of the socio-cultural world (Arrojo 1997; Koskinen 2000; Gipper and Dizdar 2015).

Representationalism interprets the practice of translation in terms of equivalence: translation as the transfer of meaning from language A to language B. If the meaning of the target text is identical to the meaning of the source text, it is equivalent and the translation is successful. The target text can then be said to represent its source. Such a concept of translation presupposes a socio-cultural world as a given reality insofar as equivalence between two texts or utterances (in different languages) can only be conceived of if there is an identical and thus language-independent world (or an object or event therein) to which they both refer and which makes the judgement 'equivalent' possible in the first place.

The methodological nationalism implicit in traditional concepts of translation is related to their roots in representationalism. If the latter presupposed the existence of a given socio-cultural world as a neutral reference point for establishing equivalence between texts or utterances in different languages, the former is implied in the 'between' of the 'different' languages. By thinking of translation as a process happening between languages, these languages are imagined as discrete units which are internally homogenous and externally bounded against other languages. In the context of Western modernity, the borders between these languages become congruent with cultural and national borders. The concept of translation as transfer and representation of meaning across linguistic borders of communication establishes an international world order as a naturally given socio-cultural reality (Sakai 2008, 2018). In this framework, this reality precedes any translation practices occurring 'in' it. Translation can only be thought of as a reaction to or solution of communication problems arising from the primordial differentiation of the socio-cultural world into bounded nation states that each have their own culture and language. Never can it be thought of as a motor or catalyst of differentiation processes carving up the socio-cultural world into nation states with their respective languages and cultures between which translation supposedly takes place (Dizdar 2021).

The questioning of both representationalism and methodological nationalism resulted in a new vocabulary in TS. The reproductive notions of transfer and representation of meaning across languages and cultures have largely been replaced with productive or constructive notions of the *making*, *transformation*, *negotiation*, *challenging*, and *contestation* of meaning, languages, literatures, and cultures through translation. The discipline's interest in the role of translation practices

and theories in the construction of the socio-cultural world goes hand in hand with the transformation of its basic vocabulary.

One important way in which this interest has manifested itself is in the examination of the role translation plays in the construction of different communities, groups or identities. Certainly, national/ethnic cultures and their making through translation have received the most attention in TS across a variety of perspectives and historical contexts, such as colonialism and imperialism, nation-building processes, multi-ethnic states, and super-diverse global cities, to name but a few (Brisset and Davey 1989; Niranjana 1992; Venuti 1995; Cronin 1996; Tymoczko 1999; Kothari 2007; Sturge 2007; Simon 2012; Dizdar, Gipper and Schreiber 2015). A predominant issue, which particularly lends itself to perspectives interested in power relations, has been the selectivity of translation – translations can always only represent a fraction of the totality of a specific culture's texts – and its effect on the construction of the image of the cultural Other and, concomitantly, of the Self (Flynn, Leerssen and van Doorslaer 2016). On an abstract level, the demonstration of the translational construction of national/ethnic cultures also plays a part in the criticism of essentialist notions of identity. Lately, in the analysis of translation policies and language ideologies, the question of power relations has increasingly been reframed as an issue of inclusion and exclusion (Meylaerts 2011; Rozmysłowicz 2021; Pacheco Aguilar in this issue).

Gender is another important category in the analysis of the role that translation plays in the construction of the socio-cultural world. Research on this topic has also foregrounded issues of power and inequality. Along with analyses of how thinking about translation takes place in gendered metaphors, a considerable number of publications discuss gender by referring to different levels of analysis. One level concerns the position of agents involved in translation processes. How were women included/excluded in the circulation of (literary and academic) texts? What role did female translators play in history? Gender can also be a focus in textual analyses of translation strategies and gendered language use. On another level, the translation of gender categories themselves across linguistic and cultural boundaries is also being investigated, linking this branch of research to work on translation in the context of colonialism and asymmetrical power relations (Chamberlain 1988; von Flotow 1997, 2009; Simon 1996; Harvey 1998; von Flotow and Scott 2016; Castro and Ergun 2017). More recently, the category of gender has been expanded to include non-binary or queer identities. This expansion has been accompanied by the incorporation of an intersectional viewpoint, for example relating gender to race, and ethnicity, and to a convergence of TS and Transgender Studies (Gramling and Dutta 2016; Domínguez Ruvalcaba 2016; Epstein and Gillett 2017; Baer and Kaindl 2018; Robinson 2019; Baer 2020).

In the case of social or political movements, translation has been demonstrated to participate in their formation through its capacity to make concerns of these movements visible beyond linguistic boundaries, enabling international solidarity with certain groups or communities and connections with movements elsewhere (Tymoczko 2000; Baker 2013, 2016; Doerr 2021).

Translators themselves are not only analysed as a group or collective in the context of social or political movements, however. Today, due to the affordances of digital communication technologies and social media platforms, all kinds of (typically intrinsically) motivated translator communities and collaborations can emerge and be examined. For instance, research on fansubbing or fan translation focuses on translators jointly translating certain films or novels for the community of fans they themselves are a part of. Other research focuses on international networks of volunteer translators providing multilingual support for linguistic minorities or on volunteer translation in crisis situations such as the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 (Rogl 2017; Wang and Zhang 2017; Cordingley and Manning 2017; Jiménez-Crespo 2017; Alfer and Zwischenberger 2020). However, research on translatorial groups or communities has not focused solely on contemporary settings. In fact, it had its beginnings in translation history (Salama-Carr 1990; Pym 1994; Richter 2021). This research demonstrates that the translational construction of the socio-cultural world can also be observed in the formation of *translatorial* groups, communities or collectives – which function in relation to other collectivities, such as fan communities or linguistic minorities.

For instance, the deaf community has gained an increasing amount of general attention in research on sign-language interpreting in recent years (Young, Oram and Napier 2020). The paper by Nadja Grbić in this special issue clearly demonstrates why this topic deserves more attention, as it highlights the mutual dependence and co-construction of these two groups. Furthermore, translating *machines* are beginning to be recognised as proper agents of translation, pointing to anthropocentrism and ontological boundary work in TS (Rozmysłowicz 2020). And it is not only large and enduring communities or groups such as nations, ethnicities or genders that are being investigated for their translational construct- edness. Translation scholars are also looking into smaller and more fleeting and dynamic associations such as multilingual religious gatherings, non-professional translation in social housing projects or volunteer translators helping out refugees at train stations (Hokkanen 2012; Flynn and van Doorslaer 2016).²

Set against the background of these new developments in the discipline, this special issue proposes to bring different strands together under one conceptual

2. The example concerning train stations refers to an on-going research project of the editors on translation practices as catalysts for human differentiation in the context of forced migration.

roof in order to relate its results to each other, enable comparisons and, in the long run, develop a general theoretical framework for the roles translation plays in the emergence, development and the dissolution of communities, and in the construction of categories of belonging. Existing research provides insights into *particular* groups, communities, and identities and *particular types* of groups, communities, and identities. But in order to be able to conceptualise the translational construction of the socio-cultural world more broadly we need to be able to compare between the forms in which translation participates in their construction in each case: Can the translational construction of national cultures be conceived of in the same way as the translational construction of scientific communities? Does translation function differently in the spontaneous emergence of groups, such as at multilingual dinner parties, and in the formation and maintenance of large-scale transnational organisations, such as the European Union? How do size, duration, and membership conditions of a certain collective affect the way translation functions? What significance do different media and forms of communication such as orality, writing, digital technologies, etc., have in this context?

By introducing the heuristic concept of *collectivity*, we suggest subsuming the aforementioned different associations of human (and non-human) beings as comparable collectivities whose formation, but also maintenance and dissolution, can be studied within the same framework. With this framework, we aim to contribute to the consolidation of a new research focus and to conceptually strengthen the intradisciplinary ties between individual studies with a common research interest.

The idea to propose and develop such a framework was triggered by our work at the Collaborative Research Centre “Studies in Human Differentiation” at the University of Mainz (Germany) where we interact with colleagues from a variety of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, history, linguistics, cultural studies, media studies and social psychology. The core concept of the research centre, ‘human differentiation,’ refers to the ubiquitous and familiar phenomenon that human beings continuously categorize themselves and each other according to all sorts of criteria: nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, achievement, sexual orientation, attractiveness, but also dietary habits and clothing style. Three analytical features of this concept are of particular relevance for TS: First, there is an abstraction from particular practices of differentiation (such as: categorization according to gender or nationality or race) and subsumption under the general concept of human differentiation. Second, it treats social affiliations and belongings as *outcomes* of practices of human differentiation, as something that is *done* – or *undone*. And third, it treats the socio-cultural relevance and function of any one category of differentiation as an empirically open question, instead of being presupposed from the outset (Hirschauer 2017, 2021; Dizdar et al. 2021).

These features provide our notion of collectivity with an analytical profile. Abstracting from particular forms of collectivities such as groups, communities or identities enables comparisons and empirical investigations into their socio-cultural relevance and functions. Moreover, they inoculate against what Rogers Brubaker (2004) has called “groupism” – that is: “the tendency to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis (and basic constituents of the social world)” (2) instead of thinking in terms of “groupness” as a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable (11). In this sense, speaking of collectivities not only abstracts from particular collectives and refrains from treating them as pre-given entities in the socio-cultural world. It also contains a conceptually articulated awareness of the various *degrees* and *modes* of collectivity that a collective can assume. In other words, there are varying ways of being part of or belonging to a collective. Being a member of a religious community might entail quite a different form of engagement and intensity of affiliation than, say, being a member of an organisation of volunteer translators or a guest at a dinner party. This feature of collectivity is important for TS because it helps take into account the different ‘workings’ of different types of collectivities when analysing the constructive or formative role of translation.

As we have already indicated, we understand collectivity to be a *heuristic* conceptual device, and, as such, we do not offer a fully spelled out theoretical framework. Rather, we understand this special issue to be a “serve” (like in tennis) to be returned and carried on. A good springboard for such an undertaking lies not only in the research already carried out by translation scholars on the translational construction of different collectivities, but also in an overarching conceptual development which has resulted from the cultural and social turn: The image of translation has increasingly been redrawn as a practice *creating* differences instead of overcoming them (as the often-criticised bridge-building metaphor for translation suggests). It appears in different formulations such as translation as bordering (Sakai 2008), translation as border-drawing (Dizdar 2019), the dark side of translation (Italiano 2020) or translation as exclusion (Rozmysłowicz 2021). Such attempts at reconceptualisation can also be understood as offering dissociative – instead of (purely) associative – concepts of translation, usually with a strong emphasis on the political dimension of translation practices (and theories) (Rozmysłowicz 2021). This development is an important reference point because it provides a footing from which the constructive effects of translation in the formation of collectivities can be analysed. This is because collectivities are always based on a distinction between individual elements which belong to them and those who do not. They only exist in distinction from other collectivities. Analysing their construction from the point of view of TS thus requires a conceptual framework which accounts for this feature and is able to shed light on *how*

translation actually participates in that process. The individual contributions to this special issue demonstrate that it is worthwhile to bring research together that analyses the translational construction (formation, maintenance, dissolution) of different collectivities.

2. Collectivities in translation: The contributions

Elisabet Carbó-Catalan's paper on "Literary Translation: Between Intellectual Cooperation and Cultural Diplomacy: The *Ibero-American Collection* (1930–1940)" is a compelling demonstration of the complexities involved in the translational construction of collectivities. By examining the translation activities and policies of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation with a focus on a specific translation project – the *Ibero-American Collection* (a 12-volume collection of Latin American "classics" published in French translation) – she not only makes us aware of the multiplicity of agents that can be involved in the translational construction of collectivities (organisations, professions, politicians, intellectuals), but also of its relationality and its multidirectional dynamics. Particularly noteworthy is her observation of a shift in the type of collectivity at play. According to Carbó-Catalan, because the *Ibero-American Collection* sold more copies in Latin America than in France, it (unintentionally) functioned as a means of increasing the self-esteem of Latin American intellectuals, who perceived themselves as recognised in the eyes of Paris and an international intellectual community. However, because of the intergovernmental structure of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, this cultural and literary collectivity was reframed as that of national and regional collectivities. This case clearly highlights the need to think about the constructive role of translation in relational terms and to treat the types of collectivities involved in particular contexts as open empirical questions.

In her paper "The Institutionalisation of Sign-Language Interpreting in Austria and its Impact on the Construction of the Deaf World: A Social Worlds Perspective," Nadja Grbić makes a particularly intriguing case for the need to look at collectivities as relational and processual entities. By reconstructing the history of institutionalisation and professionalisation of sign-language interpreting in Austria in relation to the social world of deaf people, it becomes clear that the analysis of the role that translation practices play in the formation of collectivities has to take into account the possibility of multiple and mutually dependent collectivities. What is most striking, however, is that the process of institutionalisation and professionalisation of sign-language interpreting not only leads to the emergence of a professional collectivity of sign-language interpreters, but that this process entails

recategorisations of deaf people: Over the course of this process, beginning during the Habsburg monarchy, their social status transformed from disabled people to be pitied and controlled, to victims of society to whom solidarity is owed, to a linguistic minority and clients. This demonstrates that translation is not only involved in the formation and maintenance of collectivities but also in naming and thereby qualifying and defining a collectivity.

In her paper “The Formation of Translation Collectivities in Italian Queer Feminist Activist Scenarios. The Case of Onna Pas,” **Michela Baldo** provides us with an intriguing account of the role translation practices can play in the emergence of a political movement. By analysing the formation of the queer transfeminist collective *Onna Pas* as the result of translating the work of lesbian feminist writer Monique Wittig, she makes a compelling case for the relevance of the phenomenon and concept of affect. According to Baldo, in the case of *Onna Pas*, affect played an important role in binding together the transfeminist and translational collectivity. Her observation that affect also manifests in stressing the importance of translating together in the same time and place, and in undertaking translation decisions collectively, is of particular relevance, as it points towards the aspects of temporality and spatiality in the translational construction of collectivities. The affect-oriented perspective proposed by Baldo, however, not only promises to refine our tools for distinguishing between different degrees of affectual ‘density’ in collectivities (i.e., intensity of identification), but also to take into account translational collectivities as unpredictable outcomes of encounter.

Julie Boéri’s paper on “Inter-Organisational Conflict in the Participatory Web: (Re)Narrating Interpreting and (Re)Imagining the Community” makes another strong case for treating the identities of collectivities as an open question. Based on a socio-narrative approach, Boéri analyses two collectivities of interpreters (Babels and AIIC) and their use of communication technologies in the construction of their respective collectivity and their competition over imaginaries of the profession and its place in society. By not limiting herself to one single collectivity of interpreters (AIIC or Babels), she brings interesting differences to the fore. Although Babels and AIIC can be said to represent the same type of collectivity – a collectivity made up of interpreters – they differ greatly in their “nature”: professional-occupational group vs. activist-volunteer network. This difference is not only noteworthy because it refers to different modes of inclusion and exclusion in each organisation, but also because it highlights how the competition over social, professional and political imaginaries reflects the competition between politics and the economy over the image of society.

In her paper “Translation and the Experience of Exclusion: The Emergence of an Interpreters’ Network During the Covid-19 Pandemic,” **Raquel Pacheco Aguilar** carves out the existential relevance of translation practices for linguistic




minorities. By zooming in on the formation of a collectivity of volunteer interpreters during the Covid-19 pandemic in Madrid, she demonstrates how a monolingual language ideology led to an exclusion of members of migrant communities with low Spanish proficiency. Speakers of non-European mobile minority languages such as Bengali, Wolof, and Darija were excluded from health communication because (professional) interpreting services were lacking. The formation of a collectivity of volunteer translators to help remedy this situation testifies to the fact that translation and interpreting practices fulfil vital societal functions by securing the inclusion of marginalised collectivities. At the same time, it refers to the increasing awareness of the inclusionary and exclusionary relevance of translation in the society. Pacheco Aguilar's contribution frames collectivities and their participation in society as being dependent on translation practices, policies and ideologies and raised the question of what role TS can and should play in this regard.

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