

INTRODUCTION

Translating the object, objects in translation

Theoretical and methodological notes on migration and materiality

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The year 2020 saw the close of a decade that was dominated by migration debates centering around contested borders such as the Mediterranean and the US-Mexico border. The new decade opened with a global pandemic that complicated transnational mobility, social interaction and the relationship between people and objects/spaces. This special issue concentrates on the role of tangible translation in the lives of those for whom translation is a daily reality: migrants, refugees, exiles, and asylum seekers. It explores theoretical and methodological avenues regarding the material dimension of translation with contributors entering into dialogue with a variety of research fields, from postcolonial literature to sociolinguistics, from book history to the ethnography of intercultural communication. At this crucial time of encounter and distance, transformation and uncertainty, the special issue responds to the interest that translation scholars have shown for migration in the past two or three decades, adding an innovative material perspective.

Why ‘tangible translation’?

In 2017, one of the guest editors of this special issue (Ciribuco) commenced fieldwork for a project on language learning and translation in the lives of African asylum seekers in the Italian town of Perugia.¹ Two years of fieldwork brought

1. The project (2017–2021) was called “Language Integration and New Communities in a Multicultural Society (LINCS)”. This special issue was conceived within the context of the project’s final conference “Translating the Neighbourhood. Migration, dialogue and spaces of translation in the 21st century” which took place online on November 2–3, 2020.

the researcher into contact with settings such as refugee reception centers, classrooms, community gardens and cultural centers. While the research did not have a specific material focus at first, the material aspects of everyday translational exchanges were too evident to ignore: okra fruits could become the occasion to discuss the translation of African foodways and food-related terms into Italian (Ciribuco 2021); while the omnipresent smartphone offered asylum seekers the promise of machine translation in the palm of their hands (Ciribuco 2020). At the same time, the other guest editor (O'Connor) was exploring the importance of materiality in religious translations (2021) and the implication between the materiality of media forms and translation practices (2022). It became clear to both editors that the rich methodologies developed for the study of material culture/materiality were an important, but neglected, resource for translation scholars, offering new insights into the pathways of translation, particularly relevant, but not limited to, the context of migration.

Studies on migration have demonstrated the importance of objects in shaping migrant memories, and how they can become symbols of belonging, badges of identity, links in transnational chains, and occasions for creative hybridization (Daniels et al. 2020). The coexistence of people in super-diverse spaces (Vertovec 2007) brings together not only different languages and cultures, but also different objects: from food to clothing, from technology to books, from work tools to musical instruments (Basu and Coleman 2008). Objects are often the only testimonies left after dangerous migrant trajectories have run their course. The passage of asylum seekers across the Mediterranean, for example, has generated a debate on how wreckage and other lost objects may be made to “speak” for the people who lost their lives at sea (Gatta 2016; Mazzara 2019). If and when individuals on the move reach their destination, objects from “home” continue to play a crucial role in catalyzing their memories, nostalgia, and attachment to the culture of their origins. Culinary objects and food items are prime example of this (see for example Ray 2004; Abbots 2011; Sen 2016). Everyday objects that appear mundane in a migrant’s country of origin can act as powerful, immediate links across time and space. Their practical use becomes “inextricably linked with the sense of place, home, and identity” so that “their value transcends the actual day-to-day utility. In time, they become live presences and symbols of a past that endures also because of them” (Bartoloni 2016: 102). Objects found and acquired in the host country, on the other hand, often become tangible proof of improved social status – Burrell (2008), for example, observed how brand-new laptops could be used by Polish immigrants in Britain in the mid-2000s as proof of their newly acquired wealth.

In the special issue, we have asked translation scholars to engage with the complex material and tangible aspects of trajectories of migration. What type of

translational exchanges happen around objects, because of material affordances, or in opposition to material constraints? What impact do they have on migrant trajectories? Inevitably, this means engaging with theories and methodologies of social and cultural inquiry that over the last few decades have considered the role and significance of objects.

Objects and languages

A variety of approaches are possible in the analysis of the cultural significance of objects. Many scholars, drawing on approaches proposed by Appadurai, view objects as symbols or signs that reveal or signify underlying beliefs (Appadurai 1986). It is also argued that the values embedded in and transmitted by an object can provide insights into the cultures and societies that produced and used the objects (Berger 2009). In this scenario, objects can be seen to be “telling the stories” of different types of linguistic and cultural translation. This “reading” of objects in the context of their changing situations seeks to elicit the cultural encoding that takes place in the object. However, since the late 1990s, there has been a move away from the view that language/objects encode meaning to the view that language/objects are “agentive in the discursive co-construction of meaning” (Burkette 2016: 318). Material culture studies now often encourages analysis that does not simply consider an object as providing aesthetic embellishment or symbolic significance; rather, it highlights object-based agency. Termed the “new materialism,” this approach argues that material things have a range of capacities that go beyond the human sense of knowing and that things must be considered in themselves, and not always positioned in relation to their impact on human concerns (Hazard 2013: 64). Scholars propose that things wield an agency that can shape human practice and culture (Fowler and Harris 2015) and attempt to tease out the implications of binding objects in a dialectic with humans. In analyzing objects and in assembling the social, Latour has been influential in encouraging that attention be paid to how objects relate to other objects, humans and animals; how they gain meaning through proximity, and how they interact with their environment (Latour 1996, 2005).

A growing field in material culture studies has addressed the interaction between objects and the senses. Sensory engagement through touch, taste, smell, sound, and sight have opened new ways of understanding the human/object nexus and its importance. The growth in food studies attests to this interest, and the inclusion of two articles about food translation in this special issue is indicative of these developments. The concern with sensory interactions furthermore intertwines with studies of affect and emotion thus expanding our understanding

of human experiences with material objects. Sensory interaction with materiality can also be a catalyst for linguistic process as humans come up with words and discourses to define the objects and environments they come into contact with – words and discourses that crucially may not be the same in different contexts.

Extensive investigations into the relation between language and objects have come in recent times from the fields of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. Several linguists have focused in the last decade on the importance of the material context in the interactions of multilingual individuals. Studies on “linguistic landscapes”, which look at the interplay of signs in different languages as tangible proof of the activities of their speakers in a given locale, have flourished (see Landry and Bourhis 1997; Gorter 2013). Many scholars now convincingly assert the need to consider language, objects, and spaces together as a “semiotic assemblage” (Pennycook 2017; Canagarajah 2018; Kusters 2021). Furthermore, emerging methodologies in the study of multilingual interaction consider “the role of e.g. speech, signs, mouthings, gestures, images, smells, and *objects* in interactions; studying how these different resources make meaning in specific constellations” (Kusters 2021:184, our emphasis). These methodologies enable a finer understanding of spaces inhabited by people and objects from around the world – such as corner shops in diverse metropolitan areas (Zhu, Otsuji, and Pennycook 2017; Karrebæk 2017). Researchers may also look at personal collections of objects to gain a better understanding of how their owners’ linguistic repertoires have evolved (Ros i Solé 2020).

Translating the object

With respect to the flourishing of linguistic research that considers the relevance of materiality for linguistic exchanges, the material aspect of translation is comparatively less developed. The “cultural” (Bhabha 1994; Bassnett and Lefevere 1998) and “social” (Wolf 2011) turns in translation and interpreting studies have, however, paved the way for an evolution of the discipline that considers the relevance of translation as part of the social fabric of nations, cities, and other locales – and therefore, for a study of translation in material contexts. Over the last decade, a significant number of translation/interpreting scholars have responded to such developments in the discipline by taking a spatial approach to the study of translation, demonstrating that translation and interpreting practices (or the absence thereof) have a key impact on the everyday workings of multilingual cities (Cronin and Simon 2014; Simon 2012, 2019; Meylaerts and Gonne 2014) and nations (Gentzler 2008; Wolf 2015). Looking at places that have a history of translation means listening to the echoes of “overlapping stories” about places, and

to “experience competing versions of history,” in which each language presents a different perspective on the meaning of the place (Simon 2019: 1). By examining translation *in situ*, some researchers have also adopted an ecological understanding, which looks at the transfer of meaning between individuals, non-human beings, and the surrounding environment (Cronin 2017, 2019; Marais 2019).

The connection between material culture and translation is a recent development in the discipline; but translations have always been impacted by the media in which they appeared, and this connection becomes even more crucial in today’s interconnected world (O’Connor 2019, 2022). Littau’s publications in *Translation Studies* (2011; 2016) called for greater attention to materiality and translation, underlining the importance of tools as well as the media of communication in translation. Subsequent to these publications, others have taken up the call to explore materiality as a constituent factor in translation processes and outcomes. Translation and interpreting can be seen as dependent on a variety of material affordances and physical stimuli: even the most “disembodied” forms of machine translation or long-distance interpreting rely, to a certain extent, on the familiar weight of a smartphone in one’s hands or a set of headphones over one’s ears.

The material framework for translations provides a mode of analysis for mediations, intersections and combinations while also accommodating the sensorial engagements that happen with objects. Affective meaning, performative actions, rituals, collective practices can all be explored through the material prism. It is therefore important to consider the object together with its related entanglements, understanding that its meaning does not reside in the object alone but also derives from its circulation, use, haptic engagement, and affective connections (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). In addition, tangibility brings into focus relations and intersections, a questioning of the input of those who contribute to the creation, circulation and use of an object.

Methodologies developed by sociology, anthropology, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics to investigate the material world may fruitfully enter into dialogue with the themes and scope of translation and interpreting studies. On the one hand, this theoretical and methodological encounter can refine our understanding of the practice of translation and interpreting. If translation entails a sort of movement of words and concepts from one (physical and/or ideal) space to another, looking at materiality can enable a multi-layered conceptualization of the processes and cultural significance unleashed by this movement. Attention to tangible translation can thus help translation scholars better grasp the totality of translation and its relationality. On the other hand, the inclusion of themes and questions from translation and interpreting research into this type of inquiry can provide scholars in different fields with evolving perspectives on the relation

between language and the material world: not just in terms of the role of (non)professional translators and interpreters in shaping the material world, but also in exploring how the engagement with the material often implies a form of translation.

Tangible translation

If the emotional, cultural, and personal importance of objects in the migratory experience is undeniable, looking at it from a translational point of view means looking at the various ways in which the significance of a “thing” is expanded and transformed to encompass the movement of meaning across different landscapes. Objects can emphasize translation’s role as a force impacting the worlds that migrants and refugees inhabit. The works collected in this special issue explore some of these operations across a variety of contexts, working toward a tentative taxonomy of tangible translations. In presenting the articles collected in this special issue, we also propose a preliminary version of this taxonomy, and the different roles that objects may have in translation exchanges: as tools for translation, catalysts of translation, and products of translation.

In the first instance, multiple objects constitute the tools of translation. From dictionaries to smartphones, from quills and parchment to microphones, a variety of objects have made translation and interpretation possible throughout history. They are being used daily by professional translators and interpreters, or by lay persons who find themselves facing the task of translation. Their tangible presence makes translation possible and may influence translation choices. Furthermore their absence or unavailability can hinder translation, showing the tangible effect of economic and technological divides on the practice of translation and interpreting.

In the context of migration, scholars have noted how smartphones (and the machine translation applications that may be available through them) enable translation and help migrants or refugees negotiate the conditions of hospitality (in Inghilleri 2017’s terms), making translation and communication possible; as Cronin and Littau remind us, without tools, translation does not exist (Cronin 2003; Littau 2016). The material affordances of translation are a compelling issue for the field of translation studies as it seeks to understand not just the interaction between “carrier” and translation practice, but also the interaction between humans and objects, such as translation devices. The importance of translation devices for migrants is especially significant (Mandair 2019; Baynham and Lee 2019), and a growing number of studies underlines the importance of the smartphone as a machine translation device for asylum seekers (Kaufmann 2018;

Vollmer 2018; Ciribuco 2020). In her article in this special issue, Piccoli examines the use of physical objects to enable machine translation in a medical setting. By analyzing interactions between doctors, patients, and machines in a medical context, as the different actors try to make sense of illness across various languages, Piccoli highlights the role of translation in the “semiotic assemblages” of today. With the rise of free, portable and quick Machine Translation tools, some would argue that translation has become increasingly disembodied. However, as Piccoli demonstrates, MT devices play their role in a variety of physical, tangible environments – which in turn has an effect on the outcome of the interaction.

Investigating interpreter-mediated lectures in a South African university (a context characterized by multilingualism and rural-to-urban migration), Brewis’ article looks at the tools that make interpreting possible and their effect on the end users of the interpreting. The analysis of the technology that makes an interpreted lecture possible draws attention to the role of humans in the communicative event, the effect that interpreting tools have on the students’ learning process, their self-perception, and their affective response.

A second type of object, perhaps less immediate to capture, includes those that can act as catalysts for translation. This category includes objects that are not normally associated with translation, such as clothes, foods, and other artifacts. These might have been unmarked everyday objects in the migrants’ countries of origin, but they can become catalysts for translation in the host community, due to those features that make them unfamiliar in the new context. They pose translational challenges to migrants and refugees who find themselves presenting and explaining these objects to a target audience of local communities who may not have heard or seen these objects before (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015; Otsuji and Pennycook 2021). Migrants are therefore tasked with coming up with translation strategies that will represent these objects in the language of the host country, and in terms that will be acceptable to their new interlocutors. The goal of these translations is to find purpose and legitimacy for those objects in the new context – which may have a serious impact on the migrants’ self-representation. A good example of this process has been captured by Todorova in this issue, as she explores the discussions and narratives that emerge when refugees in Hong Kong participate in cooking events organized by local charities. Translating their home recipes into English or Cantonese provides refugees with the opportunity to influence their self-representation and discuss their culture with the host communities; but it also presents them with challenges linked to the different availability of specific ingredients in Hong Kong and in their home countries.

The third category, products of translation, includes for example translated books, magazines, and videos, which carry meanings not only across linguistic barriers but also across material ones. Covering long distances, being transported

or smuggled across physical borders, and arriving into distant homes and archives, these products represent the tangible outcomes of intellectual journeys, enabling the translated text to reach its target audience for as long as it endures in its material form. Belle's article in this issue considers how religious translations associated with communities of German-speaking refugees in mid-seventeenth-century Britain represent tangible traces of the activities of seventeenth-century networks connecting German-speaking exiles, English translators, and their many intermediaries. The examination of displacement and exile in the seventeenth century is facilitated by a materially-informed analysis of the translated products of this human and cultural movement.

In addition, any object whose meaning has changed can be considered a product of translation. In passing from one setting to another, the composition, purpose and function of an object may change, to adapt to new needs and possibly appeal to the host community. In this context, articles explore what is lost and what is gained in the process and whether objects retain their capacity to *signify* the place they come from. This aspect of translation is also present in Todorova's article where a discussion about cookbooks, produced as a result of food events, shows the presence of literal translation, substitution and adaptation, but also demonstrates how the recipe itself has changed, adapting to the availability of ingredients and ultimately assuming new meaning as a form of integration.

A final additional category can be termed narrated objects – these are objects that feature in works of fiction and that, in the context of migration and translation, acquire symbolic currency. In the fictional narratives, these objects appear as tools, catalysts, or products of translation, which advance the narratives and contribute to the development of migrant characters. The presence of objects as important narrative devices in fictional representations of migration highlights their significance, their developing symbolism and cultural embedding. This category is explored in the article by Karas who traces the role and significance of material diasporic objects in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*. As Karas discusses in relation to two types of material objects in the novel, interlingual processes, such as translation, code switching, loan words, or the intentional absence of translation, reflect and promote the gradual and tumultuous cultural translation experienced by the protagonist. These processes have a definite material dimension, symbolized by the protagonist's mother's diaries and by the Indian food on sale in her shop. Their materiality demonstrates various facets of cultural translation: taking an activist position *vis à vis* the hegemonic language and culture; proliferating one's home culture and voicing it proudly; and wielding agency through diverse moves such as establishing a cross-ethnic community. Chianese's article in this issue similarly explores the ways in which typical Italian objects can become catalysts of translation in memoirs by translingual Italian authors writing

in English: their presence in Italian or English in different versions of the texts become signs of an Italian identity that is discussed or repressed.

Conclusion: Narrating the object

As Simon and Polezzi highlight in their conversation in this special issue, objects and artifacts can serve as an important testimony of the journeys of those who migrate. However, in order for them to make sense, they need to be narrated and interpreted for a wider audience – translated, if you will. Starting with an object belonging to a Holocaust survivor, the conversation explores how this tangible trace of translation is part of a broader communicative act, and how encounters with objects are mediated through multiple processes of translation. It also brings into the discussion the crucial elements of the interaction between translation and affect and how objects and narratives can be considered traces of both. Considering objects of varying dimension and form, both Polezzi and Simon explore how these articulate co-presence, memory and affect, arriving at the suggestive conclusion that translation can materialize memory.

Migrant objects point towards a different time and space, bringing conversations into the future or into the past. The works contained in this special issue represent an encouragement for scholars in translation and interpreting to incorporate this awareness in their work, and to explore the methodological avenues that are opened in this way. Even as more scholars take up the study of materiality in translation and interpreting, we are aware that this will entail working with an ever-evolving concept of tangible translation. Many of the researchers in the special issue found their work and research impacted by the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic. The environments of translation and interaction were similarly impacted, with social distancing and constrained mobility reducing the opportunities for people to casually *happen* to be and talk together. This has already caused a rift between pre- and post-2020 experiences of translation, making it more difficult for some to research interactions that were previously taken for granted. Translation and interpreting will change as the material landscape where culture operates changes; we hope that the work of this diverse group of authors will serve as a theoretical and methodological reminder of the tangibility of this evolving material context.

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