

## Introduction

### Cigdem Esin

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Volume 3, numéro 2, 2013

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw3\\_2ntrp01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw3_2ntrp01)

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#### Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

#### ISSN

1925-0622 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

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#### Citer ce document

Esin, C. (2013). Introduction. *Narrative Works*, 3(2), 49–53.

## **SPECIAL SECTION: NARRATIVES OF TRANSLATION WITHIN RESEARCH PRACTICE**

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Cigdem Esin

*Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London*

*Editors' note:* The papers in this special section were originally conceived in 2012 as presentations for the annual *To Think is to Experiment* seminar series organized by the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London and NOVELLA.<sup>2</sup> The event is designed to “open up spaces in research imagination,” and it “invites presentations from research students in the UK and abroad” (CNR, 2008). The editors of *Narrative Works* arranged for the peer-reviewing of the papers, and are delighted to be able to publish them in their final form. We wish to thank Cigdem Esin for coordinating this special section.

The process and politics of translation within research practice has been a burgeoning niche for arguments about the complexities and dilemmas of working with material in cross-cultural research settings. The relatively recent interest in considering translation as a layer of the research process in the social sciences and humanities has created further questions about the role of translation in meaning-making processes, the visibility of translation in research practice, and the position of translators/researchers within these processes.

Despite its centrality within academic and humanitarian work across cultures, translation, as Mehrez (2012) points out, has been considered as a linguistic instrument for a long time (p. 5). Until recently, there was a tendency among social science researchers to be quiet about their experience of translation when they did research across languages. Even though information about translation is given in research reports, its multiple effects on the construction of knowledge or the relationship between researcher/translator,

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<sup>1</sup>We would like to thank the editors of *Narrative Works* for their support of the publication of this special section.

<sup>2</sup>NOVELLA (Narratives of Varied Everyday Lives and Linked Approaches) is a National Centre for Research Methods node, based at the Institute of Education, London.

participants, and audiences are not fully addressed in these accounts (Temple, 2005), leaving the process of translation inadequately scrutinised. In their introduction to the special issue of the *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, “Lost (and Found) in Translation,” Pereira, Marhia, and Scharff (2009) argue that an unexamined layer of translation in social science research often conceals the challenges, insights, and questions that emerge within research experience.

The question of the necessity of examining translation as a research process is closely linked to arguments on how translation, as a practice, cannot be considered separate from the networks of power and knowledge that create and sustain inequalities by imposing cultural hegemonies on people (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1992). In her argument on reflexivity in cross language research, Temple (2008) argues that a critical approach to the process of translation will be an effective way to question the effects of power and difference on research practice (p. 361).

Systematic, reflexive examination of translation can also be a powerful analytical tool that reveals the complex interplay between cultural and personal resources, which shape meaning-making processes. Particularly in studies of multiple identities, mobile lives, political movements, and agency across languages and cultures, analysing translation as a unit on its own would open up a path towards an in-depth exploration of what is hidden, unheard, silenced, lost, and/or gained in/through translation.

Among other research practices, narrative research is particularly interested in the political and cultural complexities involved in translation of narratives within research: how the processes of translation function not only as a linguistic but also a cultural performance of narrative exchanges. The construction of narratives, including the narrative of research itself, is an important component of narrative analysis. Bakhtin (1981) argues that words do not exist in an impersonal and neutral sense, but rather, they make sense in a dialogue with other people, through negotiations over meanings within specific historical contexts (pp. 293-94). Translation needs to be elaborated as part of the dialogical process within the context of research across languages in which narrative exchanges are made through translation.

Considering translation as part of the narrative dialogue creates a room for researchers to construct a research narrative in which they can put their decisions of translation under scrutiny. Researchers, who work across languages, contribute to the construction of narratives through a lens of translation. This lens is shaped by the multiple positions of researchers and narrators within the languages and cultures in which they constitute narratives. A

systematic examination of translation, therefore, needs to involve openness about the ways in which both narrators and translators relate to language and construct their narratives in translation. This process should also be engaged with questions about the positioning of audiences who co-construct the narratives in a dialogue with narrators and researchers. Researchers are able to shed light onto some of the complex power relations of this dialogical process through an in-depth exploration of translation as negotiation over meaning.

Since Hoffman's (1998) problematisation of translated lives in *Lost in Translation*, the number of research conducted by bilingual (or multilingual) researchers with a critical approach to the layer of translation has been rising. Most of these researchers apply innovative and reflexive methods using a transversal approach to the study of translation, which acknowledges that there are multiple ways of constructing and reading data as well as translating it. Translation and its effects on the networks of power and knowledge within cross-cultural research contexts are addressed in these studies, which are inevitably cross-disciplinary. As Mehrez (2012) insightfully argues, translation as a process opens up a space for the researchers/translators, in which they can simultaneously question and cross the disciplinary boundaries, and be empowered by the same movement between these boundaries so as to develop a critical approach to conducting research across languages and cultures (p.6).

The articles in this section draw on the papers presented in the annual graduate conference, *To Think is To Experiment*, organised by the Centre for Narrative Research and NOVELLA in Spring 2012. The aim of the event was to contribute to the growing body of cross-cultural research in which translation is critically addressed as part of the process, by bringing together researchers who wanted to exchange their narratives, questions, and the strategies they used in their research experience to tackle the question of translation. When we sent out the call for papers, which would address the complexities of translation within research, we received responses from graduate researchers in a number of academic disciplines. The event was attended by participants who spoke 27 languages among themselves. English was the language of communication on the day.

The four articles in this section reflect upon the authors' experience of translation, and the effects of translating research material in different phases of their data collection and analysis. The authors put these experiences under scrutiny from a critical, reflexive perspective. They discuss the details of their dialogue with research participants, with themselves as bilingual researchers, and with the audiences of their cross-cultural research in their articles. The reflexive-analytical voice of the authors guides the readers into

simultaneously challenging an intuitive process of translation, which is a unique experience shaped by the personal, academic, and disciplinary histories and positioning of each author.

Mastoureh Fathi's article draws on her complex exchanges over meanings with the participants of her research, in which she interviewed Iranian women doctors living in the UK. Drawing on the notions of dialogue and situated biography, Fathi argues that translation should be considered as a discursive space in which new meanings are constituted.

Emma Brannlund, Tanya Kovacic and Aura Lounasmaa's triologue on the effects of translating cross-cultural narratives provides the reader with a nuanced argument on power relations that shape the decisions related to translation in different stages of research. The three authors elaborate on the challenges that they had to deal with while referring to translation as a continuous process in the construction of narratives. The idea of building up their arguments within a triologue in their article responds to the arguments on research as a dialogical context, which enables the readers to know more about the layers of knowledge production.

Réka Plugor explores the challenges of transition and translation within/between languages as a researcher in her article, which is based on her research that explores university students' higher education pathways and transitions to work in England and in Romania. Plugor's research narrative about the translation-related decisions she made in the process sheds light on the effects of these decisions on the reshaping of the research material and exchanges.

Natalie Honein's reflexive narrative on her experience of interviewing her grandmother Nadia<sup>3</sup> in Beirut critically examines her own multiple positions as a researcher/translator and family member. Honein's carefully detailed narrative explores the tensions and contradictions that she needed to tackle while uncovering and translating a painful part of her family's history. While unpacking some of her interview moments, Honein draws the readers' attention to what remains untranslatable between languages and cultures.

New studies that question translation as a process, as a method, and as a political practice emerge in response to the social and political shifts in research context. The methodological approaches to conducting research in translation and how to examine it as a layer are varied. The articles in this section are products of the authors' endeavour to construct reflexive, critical narratives of

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<sup>3</sup> Sadly, Natalie Honein's grandmother Nadia passed away while her article was still under revision. Honein decided to include the picture of Nadia in the article as a tribute to the life and memory of her grandmother.

translation so as to examine the microphysics of power relations within processes of research, and raise further questions for both researchers and readers.

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**Cigdem Esin, PhD**, is Senior Lecturer in Psychosocial Studies at the School of Law and Social Sciences at the University of East London, and Research Fellow of the Centre for Narrative Research. Her research interests are in interactions between individual stories and grand socio-cultural narratives within historically specific contexts. She has listened to and analysed narratives of mostly women in various research projects on gender, employment, women's movements and organisations, sexual health of young people and sexuality. Her recent research explored how sexual narratives of educated young women and their mothers were interconnected with macro narratives of gender and sexuality in Turkey. Currently, she interviews academic immigrants in London for her research project that focuses on the political shifts in the immigration narratives of international academics. She also conducts art workshops with young people in East London for another research project, which explores the possibilities that visual methods create for research on the link between identity and location.