

Transnationalisation and Knowledge

The Ubiquity of Translation and the Crisis it Faces

*International Conference of the Research Network "Trans|Wissen"
(Trans|Knowledge) at the University of Trier, Germany
Thursday 12 October to Saturday 14 October 2017*

Cross-border connections and global interdependencies have usually been seen as an opportunity to develop shared repertoires of global or transnational knowledge and a cosmopolitan world view. At the same time, however, frictions, conflicts, and fragmentations within processes of the global and transnational translation of knowledge have increasingly come to the fore. Yet the question of why transnational connectivity does *not* systematically produce shared knowledge has still to be examined. The trans-disciplinary conference "Transnationalisation and knowledge: the ubiquity of translation and the crisis it faces" picks up on this desideratum. It asks how, in what conditions and with what consequences knowledge is produced, negotiated and put at risk during transnationalisation.

Increasing sensitivity to the diversity and conflict between different systems of knowledge, their histories and claims to validity has shifted the focus to the national (or regional, cultural or ethnic) contexts in which knowledge has developed, and raised doubts as to whether knowledge can be transferred to other contexts. In connection with developments in translation studies, the translation of knowledge is no longer seen as simply swapping one signifier for another with an identical meaning. Investigations within literary and cultural studies on the transfer and circulation of literary and other texts, referring to the inseparability of form and content, make a similar point. Translation is thus becoming a ubiquitous phenomenon, while at the same time increasing attention is being paid to conflicts (real and potential) between different knowledge systems, communication problems between actors from different social worlds and failed translations.

In recent years, studies on the transnationalisation of social life (ranging from new forms of migration to the growth of global concerns and political infrastructures, the circulation of regulatory programmes and cross-border social movements) have mainly investigated cross-border practices and the emergence of new transnational social spaces. A critical re-reading of these studies reveals that the “transnationalisation of knowledge” within these spaces can be analysed as translation processes which are beset with conflict and permeated with power. The prefix “trans-” covers up these conflicts rather than revealing them. Instead, power differentials in these translation processes are analysed from a post-colonial point of view, demonstrating that translations are produced, legitimised, constructed and deconstructed in heterogeneous social spheres. The key aspect of this (potentially productive) crisis within translation is that the very possibility of successful translation is formulated as a problem.

The insight into the conflicts between different knowledge systems and the problematic translation between these systems raises important questions about claims to the validity of knowledge: it is in fact another expression of the crisis facing our understanding of knowledge itself. The deconstruction of that understanding now seems to have extended to the theoretical framework which enabled us to contemplate a shared understanding of the world, ourselves and cross-border communication. The concepts of cosmopolitanism (Beck), humanism (Said) or the universe of discourse (Geertz) are based on the idea that we can distinguish between knowledge on one hand and an interest in dominance and submission on the other. They form a narrative which is, however, being called into question by the crisis described here, affecting translation in the context of transnational activities. This is increasingly casting doubt on the potential of translation, seen as the basis for communication and the route to joint achievements in the context of civilisations.

The aim of this transdisciplinary conference is to spark discussion between sociology, pedagogy and literary studies, revealing not only the many layers of this crisis within the translation of knowledge in the context of transnationalisation, but also its various perspectives.

So far, the following have agreed to appear as keynote speakers: Martin Albrow (sociology) and Adrienne Chambon (social work).

This conference will involve several panels and is intended to centre in on the topic of “Transnationalisation and Knowledge”. Potential speakers are invited to submit proposals on four sets of topics (see below). Abstracts should be no more than 500 words in length and may be submitted to info@trans-wissen.de by 31 March 2017.

I. Translating knowledge in, through and between transnational organisations

The translation of knowledge takes place in a variety of different border-crossing contexts, such as development cooperation, multinational corporations, and global social movements. If organisations are understood as conflictual transnational arenas, then the key actors are not only the professionals who work at interfaces between different knowledge systems (e.g. development experts, expatriate managers) but also the organisations themselves. We welcome contributions addressing the following questions:

- Are there specific professional and organisational cultures and identities that shape practices of translation?
- What specific frictions, conflicts, and fragmentations in translating knowledge emerge out of these specific professional cultures and organisational contexts?
- How is the crisis of translation experienced and dealt with in these organisational contexts?

II. Knowledge construction strategies

How can knowledge be constructed, represented, described? In the context of cross-border connections and global interdependencies, the topic "Knowledge construction strategies" is intended to examine the processes which generate knowledge: from strategies used to narrativise and dramatise knowledge to rhetorical means of manipulation and semi-documentary, supposedly objective transnational outlooks on knowledge.

- How is knowledge translated as it is transferred from the theory to the literature and from analysis to description?
- What role is played by media-related and multimode aspects?
- What strategies and methods are used (linguistic, literary, rhetorical) and what processes of exclusion and inclusion come into effect in this process?
- What positions taken by speakers are particularly effective in making and asserting claims to knowledge?

III. The crisis of globalization narratives: cosmopolitanism, diversity, human rights and democracy

Since the 1990s, the discourse on globalisation and transnationalisation has seemed to develop into a new universal world view despite the postmodern announcement of the "end of grand narratives" (Lyotard) of any kind. Globalization, cosmopolitanism, universal human rights, democracy and market economy, and recently diversity, convivialism and sustainability, represent Western

ideas of common global, inclusive narratives providing for worldwide mutual understanding: as a social scientific translational knowledge for the discourse within a global public society.

- Can we still embrace the idea of social scientific knowledge serving as a unifying narrative within a world of crisis, upheaval and competing belief systems?
- Do global narratives exist which allow for a mutual translation of divergent perspectives within the global public and which may serve as a "tertium comparationis" within the universe of discourse (Clifford Geertz)?

IV. Translation, resistance, empowerment: border-crossing as a risky, conflictual and oppressive business

In the transnationalisation of knowledge there are signs of both repressive and subversive mechanisms by which national, cultural and social borders are crossed. Processes of transnational understanding may thus take place, for example, in the form of "intercultural" translation, as strategies for preserving differentiations based on traditional categories (nation, ethnic group, race) – yet when this transnationalisation of knowledge is theoretically and empirically studied as a form of translation, it becomes clear that it does not only involve cultural traditions and identities being reproduced. Instead, every translation also has the potential to subvert meaning and can thus empower actors (or allow them to grasp power). We welcome contributions addressing the following questions:

- Where is the potential for resistance found in knowledge transnationalisation processes, and how is it expressed?
- To what extent does the translation of knowledge allow actors to be empowered or grasp power?
- How can the translation of knowledge be described in transnational contexts (as narration, as a blasphemous negotiation, as an essentialist strategy, etc.) and what methodological outlooks does this relate to?