Workshop Report

Translation in World Politics

Duisburg, 8–9 October 2015

Workshop hosted by:
Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21)
To foster Research Unit 1’s interdisciplinary work on the foundations of cooperation, fellow Alejandro Esguerra, together with Tobias Berger from Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale held a workshop on ‘Translation in World Politics’ at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research on 8–9 October 2015. In line with the Research Unit’s agenda on micro-processes in negotiation settings and institutions, the workshop mapped out the concept of translation thoroughly and tried to make the concept travel from Science and Technology Studies (STS) and cultural anthropology to international relations (IR). ‘At its most basic definition, the concept of translation entails both the transportation and transformations of knowledge, norms, materialities and so forth. Be it expertise for policy making, the transfer of international norms and institutions, or the trajectory of powerful concepts, all these practices entail the crossing of boundaries, rationalities or cultures that oftentimes require the modification of the object in question to resonate within a new context,’ Esguerra and Berger explained in their concept note that was circulated beforehand. This approach promised interesting insights into interaction and its context in situations when cooperation is practically negotiated. It also addresses questions on what happens to original cooperative agreements after the negotiators leave the negotiation table and translate them into their specific contexts. ‘Through the lens of translation, movement never comes without often unexpected, sometimes hidden modification. A translational perspective is highly suspicious about assumption of stability and continuity when objects migrate between worlds,’ Berger and Esguerra stress in their concept note.

Initial topics and questions

The workshop started off with an introduction by the organisers, who stated three effects of translational processes. Firstly, translation produces difference, i.e. objects change when they travel between contexts. Hence, translation always means imitation and differentiation at the same time. Secondly, translation produces new relations, i.e. it reconfigures relationships between parties around an object that is translated between them. This can also be a chance for cooperation. And thirdly, translation involves the exercise of power, i.e. the translator that establishes herself as a spokesperson that choses what and how to translate while she acts as a representative of others.

The various panels showed a great diversity of disciplinary backgrounds and approaches towards the concept of translation. Scholars tried, for instance, to bring together translation with discourse analysis to ask questions about power
relations and the idea of ‘non-translation’. Voices raised by marginalised people are often not found in outcome documents of international negotiations and can therefore be called non-translated. This pattern was picked up again when scholars turned to the topic of development cooperation. It was criticized that instead of translating local realities into global standards, development practitioners follow a logic of justification to higher authorities and thereby often exclude local opinions. This was also called a case of non-translation, as the logic of development cooperation prevents practitioners (who are supposed to act as boundary-crossers) to ‘learn the language’ of the locals.

Half-time intervention and conceptual difficulties

Around half-time throughout the program, an impressive intervention was made by sociologist of science and film maker Tahani Nadim, who presented a film that was shot and displayed in the Berlin ‘Museum für Naturkunde’ and dealt with different objects that are all related to dust, but ‘translated’ and valued very differently from different angles. It left the workshop participants with new food for thought for the next sessions.

It became clear that more conceptual clearance is needed and differences should be made between definitions of discourse, interpretation and translation. The difficulty also lies in the fact that the concept of translation itself travelled from different disciplines such as STS or cultural studies. The interdisciplinarity of the workshop participants added another layer: the concept of translation was often translated against their own disciplinary background and thereby constantly changed its subjective meaning during the discussion. As a solution to this, it was suggested to stop asking what translation is, and rather concentrate on what translation does. It became more and more clear that translation happens in a relational world and concepts of activity and practice can help to approach it.

Take-away points

At the end of the workshop three take-away points could be identified by the workshop organisers:

1. Participants stressed that one may differentiate two kinds of translation. These two kinds can be called translation 1 and translation 2 (see Callon et al 2009). Scholars working with the notion of translation 1 are mostly concerned with the travel and diffusion of institutions. They are interested how and why institutions, knowledge or other objects of world politics travel
from one context (be it a country or any other spatial entity) to another: Who and what makes institutions move, what happens when they arrive and settle, how do they change through this movement, and what are the effects (see Clarke et al. 2015)? The translational hypothesis is that we will expect change rather than mere continuity; translation in this account is always both imitation and differentiation at the same time (Barry 2013, 415), and yet, to qualify as a translation, a ‘fine line of continuity’ needs to be maintained (Berger 2014). This raises the methodological question of how to grasp change and continuity when objects of (world) politics move through space. In short, scholars working with the notion of translation 1 can be labeled as the ‘movers’. In contrast, scholars working with the notion of translation 2 are oftentimes more concerned with the ways in which a new institution is constructed or made. What is meant by translation in this account is ‘the work by bringing two (or more) things into relation with on another’ (Freeman 2009, 435). Acts of translation contribute to the emergence of new relations or networks that bring together objects that have not been connected before, or reconfigure the relationship between parties around an object. Translation 2, in this sense is a concept of negotiation that serves to understand how actors engage in practices of translation to establish new objects of (world) politics. In short, scholars working with the notion of translation 2 can be labeled as the ‘makers’.

2. Translation research shows ‘politics in Action’: Much of the literature on translation originated in micro-sociology with an interest in the actions and interactions at the micro-level. Translation research oftentimes reconstructs the step by step process of objects of world politics moving through space. Through this focus scholars of translation examine both how objects are translated as well as what gets lost in translational practices.

3. This means two things: First, a translational perspective is sensitive to the materiality (artefacts, documents, communication devices) through which translation becomes possible. Second, a translation perspective helps to understand the ways in which world politics is constructed: it examines how ideas, knowledge but also weapons and technical devices become mobile and settle in other parts of the world.

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