



Exploring the Translatability of Emotions: Cross-Cultural and Transdisciplinary Encounters

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BOOK REVIEW

Exploring the Translatability of Emotions: Cross-Cultural and Transdisciplinary Encounters, edited by Susan Petrilli & Meng Ji, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 409 pp., €135.19 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-030-917470; €106.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-3-030-91748-7

Published in honour and on the eightieth birthday of language and semiotician philosopher, Augusto Ponzio, lifetime mentor and collaborator of editor Susan Petrilli, *Exploring the Translatability of Emotions: Cross-Cultural and Transdisciplinary Encounters* deals with a question which is far from unprecedented: can emotions be translated? While the topic may not be new, the contributions collected here, from a range of leading figures and authorities in semiotics and translation studies, bring to the fore new theoretical and methodological perspectives.

The translation of emotions has become a research interest in translation studies at least since the 1960s, when the concept of dynamic equivalence was introduced and applied by Eugene Nida (1964). For decades, however, in contrast to the growing interest in (neuro) cognitive aspects and in computational modelling of human translation processes, a broader and more exhaustive overview on the relation between emotional intelligence and translation has remained largely overlooked. Only in recent years have translation scholars become increasingly concerned with the role of emotions in the interlingual translation process and how they impact on translation and interpreting performance (Hubscher-Davidson 2018, 2022; Hubscher-Davidson and Lehr 2021, 2023; Koskinen 2020).

Now, Susan Petrilli and Meng Ji have combined their semiotic, philosophical, and translation expertise to edit an interdisciplinary collection that provides a wide-ranging overview on the connections between translation and emotions. The new volume seeks to deepen our understanding of the translatability of human emotions by offering unique contributions in semiotics, philosophy, logic, linguistics, psychology, communication sciences, anthropology, and neurosciences. Expanding translation studies to a semiotic base and overcoming a conceptualisation of translation that is limited to verbal language and professional circles, Petrilli and Ji's book collects a series of essays that together foster development in translation studies through a dialogic framework which evidences the interconnectedness of the sciences.

Petrilli opens the book with a solid introduction to the main objectives, outline, and foci of the project. There are two key objectives: first, to emphasise that, in the reality of live communication, most signs, words, and utterances are not free of emotion; and second, to argue that, from a semiotic perspective, translation involves emotions at all levels. In *Exploring the Translatability of Emotions* translation is viewed not so much as an interlingual endeavour as a process intrinsic to the sign itself and to the relation among signs, verbal and non-verbal. The special focus is on translation understood in a broader, semiotic sense, which also implies conceptualising translation as a method in the quest for understanding (Petrilli 2003, 2015; Marais 2019; Meylaerts and Marais 2023). A similar perspective informs Petrilli and Ji's companion publication (2022), a co-edited collection devoted to the phenomenon of intersemiosis, where emotions in translation are investigated beyond the glottocentric realm and the disciplinary boundaries of translation studies. As Petrilli argues in her introduction to that volume, 'Emotions are translatable, even the most private, because they are experienced

through signs [...]. Emotions highlight the intersemiotic and cultural dimension of human signs' (Petrilli 2022, 4).

With such premises, *Exploring the Translatability of Emotions* is structured into four parts. The essays in the first part, 'On the Translatability of Emotions', consider, from a range of different paradigms, the processes through which translation recreates new ways of interpreting emotions. Petrilli and Ponzio's opening paper provides a foundational discussion which, from a Peircean perspective, challenges stereotypes and bias concerning the private character of emotions. According to the authors, emotions transcend the world of the I, and shared, public, and relational issues can be perceived and communicated on the basis of translation-interpretation processes. This position, in my view, strongly counterbalances the still widespread belief that emotions should be viewed as 'internal' rather than 'external' (e.g. cultural, sociological, ideological, etc.) factors in human experience. Winfried Noth's essay extends the question of emotion translatability to the study of verbal and mental signs. Also drawing on Peirce, Noth defines emotions as 'thought-signs that have feelings as an essential ingredient' (98) and, in the same vein as Petrilli (2022, 4–5), conceives the translation of emotion as an intersemiotic process insofar as all mental signs may be communicated in the form of verbal or non-verbal signs. Clearly, we are very far from a conceptualisation of translation that is limited to interlingual processes. Lucia Santaella's contribution enters the theoretical and conceptual meanders of what we call 'feeling', 'affect', 'affection', 'commotion', and 'emotion', sewing together the theorisations of emotions by Baruch Spinoza, Charles Peirce, and Mario Perniola. Its main merit, I believe, is that Santaella proposes a careful conceptual scrutiny of 'feeling' in its diverse nuances and intertwined variations, contributing a clarifying taxonomy. Jacques Fontanille also provides his own definitions of 'affect' and 'emotion' (139). In accord with Noth, though adopting a Greimasian rather than a Peircean perspective, he claims that the passage from affect to emotion is a process of intersemiotic translation. Noteworthy, although lacking a thorough demonstration (perhaps for reasons of space), is Fontanille's thought-provoking critique of psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman's (2011) two types of behavioural processes: System 1 (fast, irrational and based in cognitive biases) and System 2 (slow, rational and based on projecting and calculating). In Fontanille's view, Kahneman's inventory is an over-simplifying binarism, which erroneously considers the time taken to choose as the measure of the complexity of the path to be accomplished. On the contrary, practical behaviour always involves emotions, including a phase of subjectification and appropriation, without which taking action remains unanalysable (155).

Part Two, 'Speaking Emotions Listening to the Body and to Others', contains three papers dealing with the notions of interconnectivity and dialogue from a variety of interdisciplinary angles. In the first essay, dialogical relationships are cultural and biological. Examining the foundations of emotions, Alphonso Lingis defines emotions as nominal kind categories that exist because members of a culture agree that they share certain features. From this perspective, 'the words with which we identify and express our emotions to others also arouse and shape those emotions' (170). Lingis also recalls that there are emotions connected to kinaesthetic, glandular, neurological, and biochemical body states, while others arise in contact with the material features of reality. In the second essay, Elize Bisanz identifies dialogical relationships between emotions and cultural processes. She deals with emotions as cultural artefacts and connects Peirce's conceptualisation with Damasio's (2018), underlining the role of the body and, in turn, the role of feeling and sensing, in the development of cognitive processes. For Bisanz, Peirce's proposition that emotions are involved in 'Pure Play', that is, mental activity which opens us up to reflection, amusement, and creativity, suggests that emotions are intimately linked with cognition. Her contribution is therefore a forceful challenge to traditional models of human sense-making. In the third essay, translation and dialogue are viewed

as hermeneutical tools used to enter another world and achieve a better understanding of that world's functioning, processes, and values. Wayne Cristaudo's paper convincingly argues that, according to modern 'idea-ism', the 'imagination', namely, the stuff of emotional association, is subject to what is thought of as rational and emancipatory 'understanding'. His own argument, on the contrary, is driven by the idea that the primary value of philosophy is in assisting with the organisation of perceptions and insights preserved in language, culture, and tradition.

The third part, 'Becoming Conscious of Emotions and Social Conditioning', turns our attention to non-verbal aspects related to three social phenomena: self-regard, politeness/impoliteness, and the expression of emotions through body language. Vincent Colapietro's essay is grounded on Peirce's approach to social emotions. Colapietro conceptualises human emotions as spontaneous translations of dramatic situations into somatic impulses – as judgements expressed not verbally but viscerally, capable of generating an infinite series of interpretants. With a fascinating image, the author speaks of 'an ongoing process of mutual translation, one wherein the world translates itself into us and we translate parts of the world into both other parts of itself and parts of ourselves' (234). Frank Nuessel's chapter focuses on how language is used to show good manners to others (politeness) or, vice versa, to demean another individual (impoliteness). Nuessel illustrates different types of non-verbal communication used to express and arouse emotions, such as kinesics (bodily movements to convey a word), paralanguage (vocal signifiers other than words), and proxemics (spatial distance between speaker and hearer). Richard Lanigan's essay also concentrates on visual semiotics as signs of affection. Besides proxemics and kinesics, he devotes attention to haptics (touching) and, echoing Nuessel, vocalics (paralanguage). By comparing rules in the United States (which he defines as an Egocentric culture) and in China (which he defines a Sociocentric culture) for when, where, and how an individual decides to move from social distance to personal distance, Lanigan observes that the ability to perceive emotions is always the basis for communication that allows cultural exchange. All three essays agree in conceptualising translation beyond the interlingual paradigm.

The book's final part, 'Expressing Emotions Between Mass-Medial and Rhetorical Figures', includes three outstanding papers emphasising the importance of translating emotions in interdisciplinary ways. At the crossroads between semiotics, visual studies, and media studies, Marcel Danesi's chapter presents emojis as pictorial signs employed to replace or complement textual writing in informal digital communication. From this perspective, emojis recreate the social protocols of face-to-face interaction, and, translating them into words requires a kind of mental blend between verbality and visibility (332). Transmediality is also the focus of Peeter Torop, who emphasises that in today's digital era natural language has ceased to be monomodal and the movement between modes, registers, and media reconceptualises translation as a hybrid flow embracing the fuzziness of media borders (see also Petrilli and Ji 2022: Parts III and V). Torop observes that emotional competence should be regarded as an essential part of translation competence. Referring to Hubscher-Davidson's pioneering research, he argues that there exist three kinds of emotional knowhow: perceiving emotions (in oneself and others), regulating emotions for decision-making, and expressing emotions to others (347, 361). Finally, Douglas Robinson's chapter (developed in Robinson 2023) applies, in great detail and quite innovatively, behavioural economics to the rhetoric of translation. Besides recalling Kahneman (as does Fontanille in Part One), Robinson draws on Thaler and Sustein (2009), distinguishing between Econ Translators, imaginary subjects who deny emotions and limit themselves to the reproduction of the source's rhetorical devices in the target language, and Human Translators, real people who interact rhetorically with source author and target reader by projecting emotions onto them. In Robinson's view, translation studies should be seen as

a Human discipline, concerned with translators as social actors who make decisions and defend them passionately.

In all its interdisciplinarity, variety and complexity, *Exploring the Translatability of Emotions* provides a valuable source of inspiring reflections for translation scholars and other humanities researchers alike. The book's daringly experimental, holistic approach to the translatability of emotions investigates not only ways in which emotions can be associated with and influence translation, but also explores links between emotions and both society and culture. Such wide-ranging endeavours makes it, in my opinion, a salient contribution to studying translation beyond the verbocentric dimension and beyond translation studies (Marais 2023), exploring translational aspects in different non-linguistic ways. Time will tell whether the one simple question – can emotions be translated? – that has paved the way to such a pluralistic investigation, will continue to inspire new directions of enquiry.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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