

# Translation zone

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“Translation zone” refers to an area of intense interaction across languages. The dimensions and nature of that area can vary considerably: it might cover a large geographical expanse such as multilingual empires like the Russian, Habsburg or Ottoman empires or multilingual nations like India; it can be applied to specific border transactions, like those of the US-Mexican border; and it can refer to the micro-spaces of multilingual cities (Related terms: translation space, translation area, border zone, borderlands). While the idea of the translation zone has also been used with broad heuristic and polemical intent to push for the extension of the borders of literary studies (*The Translation Zone*, Apter 2006), the term is used most productively to characterize spaces defined by a relentless to-and-fro of language, by an acute consciousness of translational relationships, and by the kinds of polymorphous translation practices characteristic of multilingual milieus.

The term developed through analogy with Mary Louise Pratt’s influential “contact zone”, which has been in wide use since its introduction in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). Pratt defined “contact zones” as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination-like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (4). Translation is logically one of the major activities in the contact zone, and Pratt developed this connection in a later article, “The Traffic in Meaning: Translation, Contagion, Infiltration” (2002). The idea of the “contact zone” was integrated into much subsequent writing on borderlands, transculturation and migration<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, and on forms of hybridity<sup>\*\*</sup>, métissage and créolité.

Emily Apter’s *The Translation Zone* (2006), while exploring practices of hybridity and creolization, remains attentive to Pratt’s emphasis on the centrality of conflict in the study of cultural contact. Her study is a wide-ranging attempt to reshape Translation Studies by broadening the field to include issues such as the politics of translation in media, technology, pragmatic real-world issues like intelligence-gathering and the embattled status of Minority languages<sup>\*\*</sup>. She uses zone to imagine a “broad intellectual topography that is neither the property of a single nation nor an amorphous condition associated with postnationalism, but rather a zone of critical engagement that connects the “I” and the “n” of transLation and transNation (Apter 2006: 5).

A similar desire to reframe and broaden the study of translation practices is evidenced in the title given to the Translation Studies journal *Translation Spaces* edited by Deborah Folaron and Gregory Shreve, and in its editorial statement: “The journal envisions translation as a complex set of socio-cultural spaces where people and populations encounter one another to share knowledges, beliefs and values”. These global spaces of encounter are defined as virtual (the spaces of the web), physical (the spaces of the cosmopolitan city) and cross-disciplinary. The journal seeks to integrate new areas of study, from communications to entertainment, government, law, information and economy.

“Zone” responds to the need to situate translation activity within clearly delimited geographies which are not framed by the nation. Initiatives to use mapping as a way of tracking the unpredictable travels of translation have been especially effective in the work of Franco Moretti, who in *The Atlas of the European Novel* (1998) proposes to study the evolution of literary forms as they travel from place to place. But this idea of translation moving through space is not the same as the translation zone: the premise that all translation takes place in spaces- and is both conditioned by space and is able to promote or provoke changes in the perception and the use of spaces.

Some examples of the translation zones as they have been explored in Translation Studies include multilingual empires. Brian James Baer’s *Literary Translation in Eastern Europe and Russia* (2011), an edited volume on literary translation in Eastern Europe and Russia which refers to this part of the world as a “distinctive translation zone” where the persistence of large multilingual empires produced a polyglot readership, and where successive regimes introduced translation as a way of correcting previous regimes of truth. Michaela Wolf’s *Die vielsprachige Seele Kakaniens. Übersetzen und Dolmetschen in der Habsburgermonarchie 1848 bis 1918* (2011) similarly exploits the idea of the translation zone for the Habsburg empire. India has been called a “translation area” (Viswanatha & Simon 1999: 163) and recognized as the site of a complex system of intersecting translation processes. (Kothari, 2006). Similarly, in *Translation and Identity in the Americas* (2008) Edwin Gentzler considers the Americas as a translation zone, looking at the role that language contact has played in the shaping of the various American identities, from Brazil to Quebec. The border areas of multilingual cities have also been referred to as translation zones. Thus Michael Cronin: “Thinking about the city as a translation zone in the context of globalization helps scholars to reflect on how cities currently function as spaces of translation, how they have functioned in this way in the past and how they might evolve in the future. Construing the global city as translation zone offers in conceptual terms a “third way” between on the one hand an idea of the city as the co-existence of linguistic solitudes and on the other, the “melting pot” paradigm of assimilation to dominant host languages” (see *Globalization and translation\**). Cronin lists some of the places where one might locate this zone: Public space in migrant societies, says Michael Cronin, is translation space, and this includes

“[e]verything, from small local theatres presenting translations of plays from different migrant languages to new voice recognition and speech synthesis technology producing discreet translations in wireless environments to systematic client education for community interpreting to translation workshops as part of diversity management courses in the workplace” (Cronin 2006:68). Such sites can also include pockets of print and media spheres, and programs in university institutions.

This premise has been explored in recent work on the city (Simon 2006, 2012) which examines languages interactions in the micro-contexts of cities and neighbourhoods. Each city shapes its own specific patterns of circulation. The cultural meanings of these transactions emerge through the ongoing conversations and narratives, the aesthetic traditions and collective imaginaries of the city, its symbolic sites, its spaces of communion and conflict. The interplay of languages within the city contributes to its distinctive feel, its particular sensibility, to the ways in which knowledge of the city is formed and reiterated. All cities have their translation zones, some which are part of the popular mythology of the city (Saint-Lawrence boulevard in Montreal, the historic line of demarcation between the French and English parts of the city, at one time the heart of the immigrant neighbourhood), others on the margins of public life (the train stations of European cities where migrants meet). At certain historical moments, some cities are especially significant as translation zones. These can be colonial cities (Calcutta, Rabat), or historically divided cities (Barcelona, Montreal), or what Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer call “nodal cities”: the cities of Central Europe like Vilnius, Riga, Czernowitz, Danzig, Bucharest, Timisoara, Plovdiv, Trieste, Budapest and which all reflect the special character of multilingual cities in a time of competing nationalisms. These “relays of literary modernization and pluralization” (Cornis-Pope & Neubauer 2006:9), participate in a plurality of language traditions and histories in some ways prefiguring the multifaceted and decentred Western city of immigration. (Cornis-Pope & Neubauer 2006: 11).

The intense transactions of the translation zone put pressure on the idea that the transfer of ideas occurs between a “foreign” source text and a “local” target readership. In the spaces of borderlands or nodal cities, members of diverse cultures are neighbours and share a single territory. This means that the frames of language exchange must be recast to respond to more subtle understandings of the relation between language, territory and identity. As Reine Meylaerts asks: what happens when translations take place among communities that share geographical and cultural references? How do the competition and animosities that inevitably flourish in multilingual geopolitical contexts shape translation? (Meylaerts 2004:309) Languages that share the same terrain rarely participate in a peaceful and egalitarian conversation: their separate and competing institutions are wary of one another, aggressive in their need for self-protection. Movement across languages is marked by the special intensity that comes from shared references and a shared history and so translation carries with it

a social force. Cultures of mediation are immersed in the social and political forces which regulate the relations among languages. Translation can be seen to express two kinds of social interaction: *distancing* (translation as the expression of the gulfs which separate languages and cultures, and *furthering* (translation as the vehicle of esthetic interactions and blendings) (Simon 2012: 13–19). Distancing is what happens when translations serve to underscore the differences that prevail among cultures and languages, even when the gap may be the small distances of urban space. Distancing occurs when authors are treated as representatives of their origins, of their national or religious traditions, when translation is undertaken for ideological reasons, either in a mood of antagonism, of generosity or simply of politeness. Furthering, by contrast, involves what Edith Grossman calls the “revivifying and expansive effect” of translation, one language infusing another “with influences, alterations and combinations that would not have been possible without the presence of translated foreign literary styles and perceptions, the material significance and heft of literature that lies outside the territory of the purely monolingual” (16). The border zones of plurilingual cities are privileged sites for furthering, whether these practices be inspired by the experimental crossovers of *chicano* literature in the United States or the deviant translations of Montreal’s contact zones (Simon 2006).

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