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Translating the field

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Abstract

Ethnographers observe and engage the field. They live with, play with, eat with, dance with, feel with, and, increasingly, write or film with their interlocutors. But most of all, they listen and converse. As they enter the lingual ecology of their hosts through a range of practices of communication, ethnographers begin a multi-faceted journey of translation—as do their interlocutors. Translation—of words, tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, musical sounds, images, and a whole array of signifiers—is always an act of interpretation, of translating worlds. Thus, how do we know if, for instance, the Tok Pisin *bodi* corresponds to the modern English *body*? Furthermore, ethnographers and host societies not only translate one word as entity into another and into academic technologies of representation (scholarly writing), they also inevitably translate and transfix concepts, meanings, and classifications. Thus, language is grounded in cultural practices, ontologies, and epistemologies, which, in turn, are politically and life-historically situated. As ethnographers, we depend on our interlocutors' gift of translating their world and knowledge to us, while we respond on the grounds of our own lingual-epistemic-biographical situatedness. Our discussion of translation as a method of inquiry, understanding, and knowledge exchange is based on the view that translation is an inevitable and fundamental

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relational practice. As such it deals with multiple epistemological realms in which anthropologists find themselves before, during, and after fieldwork. We here unpack the significance of the language/s used in our fieldwork in Germany, central Australia, and the East Sepik region in Papua New Guinea, demonstrating through concrete examples the work of ‘turning over’ words and worlds.

KEYWORDS

epistemology, fieldwork methods, Indigenous concepts, semiosphere, translation

tanim ‘turn something, roll something, stir something’.

tanim tok ‘turn talk, translate, interpret’.

[Tok Pisin expressions].

amingkapisan ‘turn over, turn around’

mariaawk amingkapisan ‘translate, interpret’, Lit. ‘turn over talk’, ‘turn around talk’.

[Karawari expressions].

wanmbingasan ‘bend, twist’

anduk wanmbingasan ‘language-translate, language-bend, language-twist’.

[Karawari expressions].

übersetzen Lit. ‘place-over’, ‘ferry across’

[German term].

walkatjura utini Lit. ‘place a visual sign to bring clarity’

[Pitjantjatjara term].



1 | INTRODUCTION

Ethnographic texts are not only the result of ‘writing up’ empirical research, but typically also the work of manifold translations. And yet, the myriad steps of translating what was said, shown, sung, written, and experienced in the field are often hidden. Our aim here is to make visible acts of translation and to show how translation is a method of ethnographic inquiry, understanding, and knowledge exchange. We argue that translation is a fundamental relational practice dealing with multiple epistemological realms in which anthropologists find themselves before, during, and after fieldwork. Adoption, kin, and clan affiliation, and a long-term, often lifelong, immersion of an anthropologist into a specific community are those characteristics that at least in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Aboriginal Australia make translating the field a never-ending relational, collaborative, and deeply personal experience (e.g. Kearney, 2021).

Insofar as ethnographers seek to understand people—their practices, behaviours, arts, beliefs, and so on—from *their* perspective, they need to be able to lingually communicate with their interlocutors, be that through verbal or written exchanges. Put differently, they need to engage in acts of mutual interpretation, while reckoning with the fact that these will only ever be partial and incomplete (de la Cadena, 2015). Such epistemic co-labouring requires that we endeavour to learn the language and often languages of our hosts. This long-term process and intellectual commitment might begin prior to fieldwork in language schools, typically followed by learning from children in the field, or from those with whom we share a common language (e.g., English, Tok Pisin) before there is a realistic possibility of delving into the proper understanding of everyday life and a deep exchange of ideas. Our own lingual realities inform this process of settling into the language of our hosts, which in turn underpins so much of our ethnography. So let us briefly introduce and thus situate ourselves.

I, Borut Telban, am a Slovenian, writing in English and Slovenian about Karawari conceptualisation, which was translated and explained in Tok Pisin already in the field (Telban, 1998a, pp. 2–3). But is this really so? With Marisol de la Cadena (2015), I would say no. Rather, what occurs is a co-pairing of translations that go both ways, between hosts and guests. In the field it helps that English has more synonyms and antonyms than Slovenian. It helps when plants and animals have also English names non-existent in Slovenian (only in Latin, which I had learned in primary school). It also helps that Slovenian nouns decline for six cases and three numbers, while adjectives and most pronouns further decline for three genders. The diversity of my lingual thinking helps in averting epistemic reduction, domination, or even closure. How? By facilitating recognition of various epistemologies, grammatical processes, nuances of expression, and flexibility for interpretation.

I, Ute Eickelkamp, am a German living in Australia, writing in English with and about Anangu Pitjantjatjara speakers in central Australia, and in German and English about working-class people in my hometown in the Ruhr Valley. For my interlocutors on both sides of the world and for myself, German and Pitjantjatjara have a cultural and emotional weight that English does not. Not unlike Tok Pisin, it is a medium through which to converse when both parties do not speak the language of their interlocutors. English feels, as I have written elsewhere (Eickelkamp, 2011), like a second skin. Even though there is an excellent cultural dictionary that we both make use of (Goddard, 1992), I am never quite sure if the translation of Pitjantjatjara into English that my Anangu friends and I put forward fits the key. Or if my translation of German into English, especially when it comes to metaphors and tone, resonates with native Anglophone ears in the way intended.

Translation comes with practical decisions that are inherently political. You want to ask yourself, what will you be translating—a recorded interview, a conversation jotted down in your field journal hours later, a video sequence, an audio-recorded story, a song or spell? Which orthography to choose? Where will the documentation be archived? Who will you be translating with and for, how exactly and when? Do you have research funds for language interpreters? Who chooses the persons for those roles? Will you include bilingual texts in your ethnography? If so, what are the social and political implications of distributing widely the language of your hosts? How you might answer such questions positions you in relation to the persons you have worked with and their speech community. Eickelkamp's response to grappling with such fundamental issues was to embark on an Anangu-led collaboration, the making of a bilingual and visual community history book, as the first output of her PhD fieldwork (Eickelkamp, 1999). The making of this book did not happen at the desk alone. Rather, this was a creative process on site, involving several months of audio-recording at people's homes and in the art centre, transcription work with two dedicated Anangu women in my host's guest accommodation, and many hours of interlineal translation under majestic river gumtrees in the warm dry sand of the creek bed. Senior artists chose a younger, exceptionally gifted artist and story keeper to make a collage for the front cover of the book that represented everyone and that reflected the differentiated unity of what was then called the Ernabella Design. While this co-labour was a great way to understand something of the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions underlying the artists' work, it also expressed my commitment to stemming intellectual extractivism, to put Anangu's stakes in ethnographic research first, and to develop a meaningful reciprocity that would take many twists and turn down the track.

So much for preliminary considerations. In what follows, we make three points and offer ethnographic elaborations. First, language learning in the field means engaging dynamic speech communities. These create characteristic sign systems (semiospheres) with ever-emerging codes, and multiple meanings of signifiers (polysemy).¹ The work of translation needs to take this into account, which we demonstrate through several encounters within the speech communities of our fieldwork. We also note that, as ethnographers learn a foreign language, they translate, often silently, their own language into that of their hosts. Second, translation is politically situated and therefore demands a high level of ethical reflexivity. We here pay attention to Indigenous scholars' conceptualisations and their critique of Western concepts in the production of ethnographic knowledge, recognising Indigenous language and knowledge sovereignty as the starting point of our exchanges, rather than the ethnographer's attempt to translate other people's culture (Cooper, 2012; Miyarika Media, 2020). Third, translation is an act of interpretation, of translating worlds (Hanks & Severi, 2015)—and that is a two-way intervention in which the communicative exchange between interlocutor and ethnographer constitutes the reality to be grasped, and is not an original cultural script outside the act of translation (de la Cadena, 2015). To illustrate how world-bearing concepts are 'found' in translation, we offer analytic illustrations from Telban's ethnographic-linguistic work with Ambonwari speakers in PNG. This section is an extended case study addressing the complexity of multi-epistemic translation and therefore occupies slightly more space in the article. Eickelkamp's reflections on work in central Australia and Germany serve to demonstrate that our three main points have a certain general validity in that we have identified these through fieldwork in profoundly different lifeworlds. Across the three sections on speech communities, conceptual translation, and lingual sovereignty, we underscore that translation is an open process and in this regard related to play. We want to make a case for a certain level of playfulness in approaching the work of translating the field, in order to remain alert to the ambiguities and dynamic openness of words and their meanings which we most often encounter in live dialogue with others, and which we regularly end up 'freezing' in print.



2 | SPEECH COMMUNITIES

Cultures are anything but closed, neatly bounded entities mapped onto geographical areas, and, yet, people do form collective identities and a sense of belonging associated with place, territories, nations, networks, traditions, and values. These rely fundamentally on the possibility of shared meanings and mutual understanding created through language, that is, on speech communities. At the same time, anthropologists have long recognised that human language is both highly dynamic and relational. It functions not only as a means to bind people together, but also to differentiate, underpinned by diverse histories and cosmological explanations of language (e.g., Witherspoon, 1977).

Speech communities are dynamic and complex. Each of the 7000 plus languages spoken in the world is internally differentiated into speech registers, such as children's talk, ritual language, dialects, or sociolects. Their performance creates particular affinities and intersubjective experiences. For example, since the end of hard coal mining in Germany's Ruhr Valley in 2018, former miners congregate as volunteers in mining history associations, not only to promote their industrial heritage into the future, but also to be in the lingual space of familiarity and mutual understanding unique to the language of the underground among men. It includes technical terms related to mining, local working-class idioms some of which are derived from migrant languages, and a rough but affectionate tone typical among working mates. As mining rescue servicemen told Eickelkamp over breakfast at a local mining history association: *'Hier können wir miteinander reden wie unter Tage, das versteht keiner von außen'* (Here, we can talk with each other like we used to underground, it's something an outsider cannot understand).

For First Nations Australians, different speech registers perform important social functions grounded in kin relationships. Moreover, the intersubjectivity of language includes Country, since language and territory form a consubstantial relationship that cannot be altered—even though people move, and are likely the most multi-lingual people in the world (Laycock, 1979, p. 82; Rumsey, 1993). Creative, land-shaping acts by Ancestral beings are instilled in the 100-odd identified languages that exist today into Country, as well as those that have ceased to be spoken (but may be revived). This is one reason why songs about land-shaping Ancestors travelling across different territories switch languages at the moment the song reaches a boundary crossing. For First Nations Australians, then, speech communities extend to the environment and to the Ancestral domain.

Linguists, anthropologists, and archaeologists working in PNG wonder why there are so many vernaculars on the island—around 850 Papuan and Austronesian languages are spoken here (Rumsey, 2019, p. 122). A sensory and emotional explanation could be advanced, which relates to local politics. In PNG there is a general distrust of, and suspicion towards, others (unfamiliar people and spirits, who have different skins and are not in some kind of kin relationship), which pushes small groups of people into constantly modifying and inventing new linguistic expressions, clauses, and themes to strengthen their identity and deceive the others. In such a way they try to make their environment and their social life safe, while at the same time benefit from specific situations, such as, for example, hunting and gathering in a forest known for its dangerous spirits. Within this kind of kin-based ecology, unintelligible language becomes one of the most important strategies for the independence of a group and a way of creating a safe environment, of protecting the families of a particular cluster from potential enemies, both humans and spirits. Thus, in the manner of linguistic registers in PNG (for the Huli forest talk, see Goldman, 1983; for the Kalam pandanus talk, see Pawley, 1992; for the Awiakay mountain talk, see Hoenigman, 2012, 2015), we could say that new vocabularies, lexicons and languages were forming, and are still forming, with the break-up and separation of groups, or when people find themselves endangered in unfamiliar and not kin-based environments.

Language, place, and social process are therefore intertwined. They constitute a heterogeneous intersubjective field of communication and signification—a semiosphere—that ethnographers engage by way of active participation. Translation begins here.

2.1 | Heterogeneity of the semiosphere

Verbal, visual, and practical signs constitute a semiotic space with transforming boundaries and ever-emerging codes. This is what cultural theorist Yuri Lotman (2001) calls the ‘semiosphere’, a dynamic, heterogeneous space that makes language—its consistency and ongoing change—possible. Working within a field of cultural meanings requires recognition of its inner heterogeneity and changing delimitations, which makes translation far more complex than converting words and sentences from one language into the equivalent terms of another. The lingual practices of Karawari speakers at Ambonwari are a case in point. The intricacies of Ambonwari life continue to be expressed more distinctively, precisely, and intimately in the local vernacular (referred to as *anduk kwanggiak* ‘long language’) than in Tok Pisin (referred to as *anduk pambiak* ‘short language’ in Karawari) or English (Telban, 2014, p. 262). Through Bible translation from English into Tok Pisin, Christianity in Papua New Guinea introduced new concepts that also entered the Karawari language, causing its semantic horizon to expand. However, albeit interventionist, this process of translation did not replace local ontological and epistemological characteristics. While the colonial lingua franca Tok Pisin, crucial for communication between people from different linguistic areas, including expatriates, continuously provides the ground for translation to be pervasive and systematically neologistic (Hanks & Severi, 2015, p. 9), the idiosyncratic connotations of local expressions shared by speakers are only slowly expanded and modified.

2.2 | Polysemy

Anangu Pitjantjatjara speakers translated the New Testament (first written down by scribes in Aramaic) over decades and then the Old Testament (originally written in Hebrew) from the King James Bible, as well as modernised Bible texts into their language. For many Anangu, the Ancestral Law of the Dreaming co-exists with Christianity; they form the two grand narratives in Anangu lives and are generically referred to as *tjukurpa mantatja* (‘story of the land’) and *tjukurpa ilkaritja* (‘story of heaven’). Translating the one into the other has brought many challenges, for instance, when unknown vowels and animals are encountered, such as ‘donkey’, which was solved by Indigenising the English term to ‘*tangkiyi*’. Another key concept that had no semantic equivalent in Pitjantjatjara is ‘creation’:

In interviews about the idea of “nature”, people used the term *paluntja*, “the made”, to refer to “increase” rituals performed in order to make things grow, and which now also means creation according to Genesis 1 and 2. Both registers imply human responsibilities of “looking after” the land, as if God had decreed the traditional task for the Anangu. (Eickelkamp, 2018, p. 50.)

In this case, the translation for the Pitjantjatjara Bible entailed the production of multiple meanings or polysemy, and the interpretation of verbal signs by nonverbal sign systems. This is



what linguist Roman Jakobson (1959) called 'transmutation'. It is, of course, not confined to religious works but rather is a feature of the general relationality and openness of language. For instance, the anthropologist Jadran Mimica (personal communication) shared about his linguistic work with the Angan-speaking Yagwoia people in east Papua New Guinea that language-specific terms have become widespread across neighbouring languages and attain new meanings through text messaging on mobile phones. Moreover, transmutation in the form of creative multi-media literacy may be explicitly tied to assertions of knowledge sovereignty.

3 | INDIGENOUS CONCEPTS IN THE INTERCULTURAL SPHERE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC TEXTS

In this section, we turn to Indigenous interventions from Oceania into the making of ethnographic knowledge, texts, and cultural concepts. These Indigenous interventions arise not only from anthropology but also from other academic fields, where Indigenous scholars explore different ways of knowing in ongoing processes of decolonisation and dehegemonisation (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001). We provide examples of how the relationship between multiple epistemological frameworks is addressed by some Māori and Australian Aboriginal scholars, as well as by those outside academia, and how these frameworks relate to the translation of worlds in highly politicised contexts.

To paraphrase suggestions from a Māori educational framework, a fieldworker needs to learn to balance between different knowledge systems, navigating between different epistemologies and endlessly translating between them. Translation as ethnographic method involves becoming not only a bi- or multi-lingual fieldworker but a person who is consciously and simultaneously 'bi- or multi-epistemic or operational in two or more ways of knowing' (Andreotti et al., 2011, p. 46–47).

Making worlds intelligible does not happen in a politically neutral space. Indeed, that very enlightenment project has been challenged. The multi-media collective, Miyarrka Media, based in the Yolŋu community of Gapuwiyak in Australia's far north, has created an online and print production, *Phone & Spear* (Miyarrka Media, 2020; Miyarrka Media & Deger, 2019), that sets out the locally situated, but more widely conceived possibility of a new (*yuta*) anthropology. Facing up to life in the digital age, Miyarrka Media commits to a decolonial politics of reconciliation that prioritises 'bringing different worlds into relationship'—rather than revealing one world to another, as anthropological tradition has it. The late Paul Gurumuruwuy foregrounded the significance of feeling in order to connect, from both sides. As he puts it on the project website: 'Sharing feeling from inside us and giving them to you. So you can feel, and you can know.' Ethnographers are thus to ask themselves: How can the emotional tissue of intercultural work not get lost in translation? And further, how then might we rethink the translation of worlds ethically as a form of engagement, or, as de la Cadena (2015) proposes, as partial connection that lives on in print?

A first step in crafting an intercultural text is to consider who it is written for: What is the intended audience? In whose idiom and knowledge regimes are we placing our texts? As Andreotti et al. (2011, p. 44) underscore:

[S]cholars and educators working with indigenous ways of knowing are called to translate these into the dominant language, logic and technologies [alphabetic writing; digital scripts], in ways that are intelligible and coherent (and, very often acceptable or palatable) to readers and interpreters in the dominant culture

(explanation added).



This need not be so. Not finding a terminological equivalent, Māori and Indigenous studies scholar Garrick Cooper (2012) used the oral tradition of two Ancestral heroes to translate the mainstream expectation of ‘educational achievement’ for Māori students. Proposing as cultural translation the moral and emotional message of the story that the two heroes embody, he made a claim of oral tradition as true knowledge that does not need further translation and interpretation. Such ‘hyperrealism’ has also been employed as a tactic against lingual and epistemic domination in Australian intercultural work, as reflected in the concept of ‘storying’ as a research method (e.g., Phillips & Bunda, 2018), or in dialogical co-interpretations of concepts. For example, in their exchange about the ongoing creation of a contemporary Warlpiri ceremony, *Milpirri*, First Nations Warlpiri scholar Steven Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick and non-Indigenous anthropologist Jennifer L. Biddle chose to offer a co-authored essay and a keyword discussion of Warlpiri words. This is intended as a formal device of ‘merging literacies in an ongoing attempt to disrupt—and shift elsewhere—the authority of English alphabetic literacy’ (Patrick & Biddle, 2018, p. 27). As Patrick and Biddle (2018, p. 27) further explain in their introductory paragraph:

It is meant as a critical and creative intervention into an otherwise deeply inequitable exchange. Jampijinpa and I were after a new way of talking and writing between us about *Milpirri*, one that began with Warlpiri terms and Warlpiri framings in Warlpiri writing, to avoid at least some of the worst aspects of the inevitable “dumbing-down” of translation, which invariably sees Indigenous concepts abbreviated and/or glossed problematically ...

The complexity of meanings and the temporal reach of making *Milpirri*—its contemporaneity and continuity with Warlpiri ontological framings—requires creative acts of translation and presentation, in print or otherwise. Such work is not confined to the translation of the field for a scholarly audience, but a vibrant epistemic practice and political activism outside the academy (see, for instance, the discussion of *new mana* by Tomlinson & Tengan, 2016).

4 | ENGAGING WORLDS, TRANSLATING CONCEPTS

We stated at the outset that ethnographic knowledge is produced on the basis of interpersonal relationships through collaborative, two-way translation, not just of words but of concepts that more often than not have ontological weight. However, beyond the search for conceptual equivalents, it is an open empirical question what our interlocutors understand a concept to be—including that of ‘translation’, as our epigraph indicates. The following unravels this problematic of conceptual translatability in Borut Telban’s fieldwork among Karawari-speakers.

In Karawari, there is no generic term, no common notion of an all-encompassing concept for an unspecified thing or object. A single material thing or a group of things that do something, or are used for the same kind of activity, must be some-thing (*kangginging*) and are named accordingly. Such a thing is animated either by its own spirit or by the spirit of its caretaker/owner/user, both spirits, of course, existing only in and through connection and interaction with other entities. The first group includes the sun, moon, creeks, land, people, birds, fish, plants, stones, and all kinds of spirits (large canoes, outboard motors, slit-drums, carved spirit-crocodiles, etc.), as well as the statue of Mother Mary, the statue of St Michael the Archangel, and even various kinds of prayer devices, such as Corona Beads of Divine Mercy, the Rosary of St Michael the Archangel, and the Rosary of St Philomena. The second group consists of artefacts such as small canoes, paddles, fish



traps, baskets, mats, and spears and also includes foreign objects such as new technologies. Thus, a mobile phone can be called ‘something for getting talk’, *mariawk awur kangginging*, ‘something for listening to talk’, *mariawk andri kangginging*, or ‘something for talking’, *mariawkusir kangginging*. A named being (first group) follows its own *kay*, way of doing things, and relates to other beings, while a named thing (second group) becomes part of the *kay*, way of doing things, of its caretaker/owner/user. In the latter case, a being and the named thing, which is perceived as an extension of the being, become one by directing an activity in a certain way. To act in a certain way (*kay*) is to be in a certain way (*kay*-). Thus, if a thing is not something, it is nothing, *kambra* (Telban, 1997, p. 315; Telban, 1998a, pp. 162–163, 168; Telban, 1998b, p. 58), while a concept is bound to its thingness. Language here captures the connection of acting, being, and knowing, that is, ontological and epistemic realities. How do ethnographers translate such worlding of words?

4.1 | Body, *bodi*, skin

Let us consider this problematic through another term, that of the body (*bodi* in Tok Pisin).² It seems that an independent and distinct concept of a body, that would belong to a semantic system of coherent forms and shapes, is not ubiquitous in Melanesian cultures and languages (Leenhardt, 1979, p. 164; Telban, 1998a, pp. 41–42; Telban, 1998b, p. 62–63). In Ambonwari, instead of making reference to the body, people refer to the whole named being, that is, to a male human (*yarmasinan*), a female human (*yarmasinma*), a male pig (*imbian*), a female pig (*imbiyayma*), a male bush spirit (*saki*), a female bush spirit (*sakima*), and so on. However, several dictionaries of local vernacular languages in PNG have included the term body, which is usually identical with the term skin (and often with bark, shell, peel, and husk).³ One could say that the term was polysemous from the beginning. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Telban, 1998a, 1998b), among the Ambonwari, who speak Karawari (a Papuan, that is, non-Austronesian language), the concept of a body (of a living being or a carving) with discrete boundaries and a defined shape did not exist and was simply never thought of, at least not before missionisation and the introduction of Tok Pisin.⁴

It does not suffice to write of the Ambonwari understanding of ‘body’ as ‘skin’. As the ethnographer translates the local vernacular ‘*arim*’ into the English ‘skin’, they entail complex cultural perceptions of ‘skin’ that require elucidation. To illustrate, the perception of the world is very much reflected in people’s ways of doing things and located on *arim*. According to an Ambonwari proverb, ‘skin has eyes and ears’ (Telban, 1998a; Vávrová, 2014). For example, brothers and sisters say to each other: *Arim amanam minam, arim minam amanam* (my skin is his/her skin, his/herhis/her skin is my skin), an explicit assertion that materiality is a relational process. *Arim*, skin, has always been what people touched and saw, and what they adorned for ceremonies and dances, what they carved at initiation, and what they tattooed. It is the skin that still needs to be made (by rubbing leaves) in the first days after the birth of a child. Those who care for a newborn must make its skin according to its lineage, clan, and village to distinguish it from others. It is the skin that has to be changed on certain occasions and for certain purposes, as is evident from myths and dreams. It is the skin that trembles when a being experiences fear or cold, and it is the skin on which illness, shame, fatigue, and laziness ‘climb’ (Telban, 2004). It is the reddish, dark or light skin that is spoken of when looking at newborn babies, or noticed when strangers come from afar, along with their strange way of doing things (*kay*). It is the skin (bark) that is chewed with the betel nut, and it is the skin (shell) that is removed from the fruit. The clothing is called *apikarim*, put-into-the-skin, or *aring*, hide, skin pulled off the body (also mosquito basket, once used to protect against mosquitoes when sleeping). Catholic charismatics say that religious



trembling and shaking can also be felt on the skin. In the absence of the European concept of a body, the Ambonwari use *kay* (way of doing things, custom, ritual, life, habit) and *arim* (skin) to denote someone's visual, active, behavioural state, and 'it may be said that "body" has meaning for Ambonwari people only through the external appearance of skin and the way it is observed to act' (Telban, 1998b, p. 62).⁵ The Ambonwari today use the Tok Pisin term *bodi* (body)—in addition to referring to the communion bread as the 'body of Christ'—primarily to designate a dead body, a corpse,⁶ which in the local vernacular is called *kambra arim*, 'empty skin' or 'nothing skin' (skin without spirit or life-force, lifeless skin), a term also used to designate an old, abandoned carving. We could say that the concept of 'body', which was throughout millennia—as a corpse—central to the many elaborate mourning and burial practices around the world, was at least in the New Guinea context neither associated with Western naturalism (see Descola, 2013) nor embedded in the (Western and Eastern) historicity of anatomy, physiology, and the medical sciences in general.

As a code, language cannot be separated from cultural practices, even though many Euro-Americans, including missionaries, believe that a word-to-word translation (e.g., of the Bible) might actually remain faithful to the original expression or text (Schieffelin, 2007, p. 144; Vilaça, 2016). It seems that 'body' in English does not go back to the same kind of historical perceptual-conceptual categorisation (Enfield, 2015, p. 208) as *bodi* in Tok Pisin, and *arim*, skin, in Karawari. One concept is based on a kind of objectified and generalised individual body used in opposition to the mind, the other is based on specific relational activity (*kay*). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that my interlocutors, in searching for the appropriate translation of the English term 'word' (*tok* in Tok Pisin, derived from the English word 'talk'), concluded that the only appropriate term would be *wi*, 'name,' which, in a much less abstract and more concrete way, encompasses both proper names (names of particular persons, places, spirits, etc.) and generic names ('names' for particular beings and things). Unsurprisingly, 'calling names' (which can be a dangerous activity in disputes or when evoking spirits) and 'enquiring about names' (e.g., of foreign people and places) are important relational features among the Karawari (Telban, 2014, pp. 264, 275–276). This is because names, through the activity of naming (a specific *kay*, way of doing things), actually disclose and materialise named beings and things and recreate their intergenerational relationships.⁷ As this elaboration on naming makes clear, the nexus of conceptual work and cultural practice can make translation into a kind of interlocutor. Through engaged communication between different life-worlds, it enables the gradual clarification of local concepts and critical reflection on one's own in the ongoing process of decolonising ways of doing and thinking.

5 | CONCLUSION

Translation, we have sought to demonstrate, is an inevitable and fundamental relational practice of ethnographic field research. It merits careful attention as a method of investigation that works towards understanding through connectedness—shared feelings, actions, and insights that necessarily will remain incomplete. Implied is not only the work towards mutual understanding through translating one language into another, but also an engagement with multiple epistemological realms in which anthropologists and anthropological linguists find themselves before, during, and after fieldwork. Thus, translation as ethnographic method would mean a perpetual moving between, and engagement with, different epistemological spaces that are created, perpetuated, and transformed by our hosts. Centrally associated with representation—of selves, others, speech communities, and their knowledge—translation also means navigating a geo-political terrain,

including through publications. A first step towards a relational politics of translating the field, we suggest, is to make visible concrete practices of ‘turning over’ words and worlds.

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Endnotes

¹ The visual representation of sounds through special signs is a complex field within the process of translation. We here note that, in our writings, we use: scharfes S (ß) in German; special signs (n and t) in Pitjantjatjara; special signs (t) and (ŋ) in Yolngu; special sign (i) in Karawari. The phoneme /i/, heard as a vowel in ‘sir’, is the most commonly used symbol in the languages of the Sepik region of PNG (Foley, 1991, pp. 2, 46). It is used both as a vowel /i/ and as an epenthetic sound [i] in the separation of consonant clusters. There are also other special signs in the text such as ö in können, ç in Vilaça, and á in Vávrová, which are good examples of linguistic specificities in particular national-cultural environments, but which we believe are familiar to most readers.

² In Online Etymology Dictionary it is written that the term body comes from: ‘Old English *bodig* ‘trunk of a man or beast, physical structure of a human or animal; material frame, material existence of a human; main or principal part of anything’, related to Old High German *botah*, but otherwise of unknown origin. It does not exist elsewhere in Germanic, and the word has died out in German (replaced by *Leib*, originally ‘life,’ and *Körper*, from Latin).’

³ In PNG, for example, *maba* among the Kwoma (Bowden, 1997, pp. 109, 268, 303); *vovo* -(la) (la-) among the Austronesian Lakalai (Chowning & Goodenough, 2016, pp. 241, 258, 373); *wak* among the Kalam (Pawley & Bulmer, 2011, pp. 588–589, 674, 774). It has been argued that in Austronesian Proto-Oceanic languages, where there is no generic term for the body, the terms for skin actually also refer to the ‘complete skin’ and metonymically to the whole body (Eves, 1998, p. 26; Osmond & Ross, 2016, p. 78).

⁴ In an analysis of Quine’s ontological relativity, Foley (1997, p. 239) writes that English speakers, in line with their commitment to ‘bodies,’ give priority to the shape and form of a thing denoted by a particular name. In contrast, Yucatec Maya speakers focus on the substance or material composition of the same thing. In other words, where the English see form, the Yucatec see materiality (see also Lucy, 1992, 1997, p. 298; Hill & Mannheim, 1992, p. 392).

⁵ There are certain similarities with Amerindian life-worlds as discussed by Viveiros de Castro, where ‘societies ... inscribe efficacious meanings onto the skin ...’ while ‘body’ does not refer to a distinctive substance or fixed shape but rather to ‘an assemblage of affects or ways of being’ (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, pp. 478, 482; Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 143).

⁶ Such a use of the Tok Pisin term *bodi* is a good example of the famous statement that ‘the meaning of a word is its use in the language’ (Wittgenstein, 1991 [1953], p. 20; see also Rumsey, 2021). Wittgenstein continues, ‘And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*’ (p. 21, italics in original). In the context of Sepik societies, however, the meaning of a particular name, *wi* (Telban, 1998a, pp. 83–84; Telban, 2014, p. 276), would encompass the living and the dead, humans and spirits (and their deeds, relationships, and things they use), all of whom share the same name and, especially on certain occasions, may be fused into a single, intergenerational entity.

⁷ Throughout the Sepik region of PNG (e.g. Bateson, 1956; Harrison, 1990; Moutu, 2013; Telban, 1998a; Wassmann, 1991), names owned by territorial groups such as clans situate people in a relational connection—including identification—not only with human and non-human consociates but also with predecessors and successors. This relational connection extends well beyond ordinary human genealogies, kinship, and alliances. It includes land, animals, plants,

mountains, rivers, and spirits, all of which place people in the Sepik in a specific kind of intergenerational relationship, including their ethnographers, once they are given local names and adopted into a particular territorial group.

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