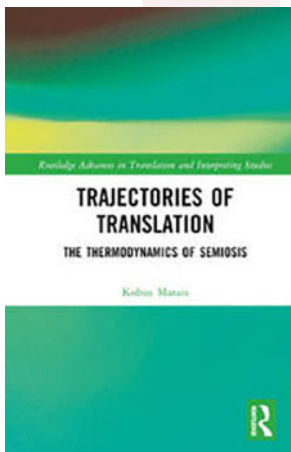


Matter, energy, and identity in Translation Studies

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Kobus Marais

Trajectories of Translation: The Thermodynamics of Semiosis.

Routledge, London, and New York, 2023, 170 pages, Hardback £ 108.00,
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Writing a review on the thermodynamics of semiosis in the context of translation is a challenge and a pleasure, considering the innovative character of such an endeavor. Indeed, despite its daunting title, the book *Trajectories of Translation: The Thermodynamics of Semiosis*, introduces an accessible body of knowledge regarding the nature of meaning and its constitution through sign and sign-system action (semiosis) in the context of translation.

How can semiosis be understood as a product of the Second Law of thermodynamics in the first place? Drawing on my research on the matter, I first surmised, quite correctly, as I later confirmed, that the author wanted to make a case regarding the role of physics in the construction of a type of meaning-making that emerges from the very substrate of materiality to become an asset of biological systems such as ourselves. My first hunch, which I attribute to the predictive character of the human brain, took me through a universe rarely explored either in semiotics and translation studies where uncertainty reduction, through prediction and corroboration, operates as the best means to reduce *entropy*; that is, the collapse of organisms because of the dissolution of their boundary defining them as symbolic natural entities/objects. It has to be said,

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however, that Professor Marais does not necessarily adhere to specific terminology associated with, for example, the notion of the predictive brain (Clark 2013) or Bayesian inference, which he dubs as trajectory: “Trajectory 1.0 constrains Trajectory 1.1 in such a way that the child is likely to respond emotionally to an emotional greeting, but it does not determine that this will happen, and it does not specify to which extent it will happen” (Marais 2024: 84). Yet, the child-agent must reconcile previous knowledge with incoming information by defining how much a prediction error may emerge and ultimately create novel knowledge.

That said, the book explores just that: the complex relationship between matter-energy and ideational systems, advocating for their simultaneous study to enhance comprehension of meaning, meaning-making, and their material substratum. This holistic approach sheds light on social-cultural realities by accommodating local nuances alongside comparative generalizations. In this sense, concepts like *constraint* and *trajectory* emerge as valuable tools to connect matter-energy and ideas, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of emergence instead of *reductionism*. This is a crucial point since, as those conversant with the history of the philosophy of biology may corroborate, entities and objects in biology have been categorized either as manifestations of fundamental properties, aligning with metaphysical reductionism, or as complex constructions of relationships requiring more nuanced descriptions reflecting metaphysical non-reductionism. This dichotomy becomes the first conceptual hurdle of the book.

Expanding on this argument, one could argue that assigning ontological status to objects, whether through reduction to fundamental properties or scalar descriptions, introduces a risk of *epistemic blindness*. This blindness arises from a systematic adherence to conventions, leading to a linear and uniform approach to explaining, predicting, and intervening in natural phenomena. This is precisely one of the points expressed in various ways in Professor Marais’s book, namely that the idea of translation as passing content from one realm of experience to another is a significant conceptual error.

Indeed, this linear approach encounters limitations when confronted with the inherent unpredictability and complexity of natural phenomena. *Surprise*, indicating the failure or potential failure of explanation, prediction, or intervention, challenges the notion that linear and uniform approaches to the conceptualization of biological entities are universally applicable (Elliott-Graves 2023: 3).

Recognizing the need for propositions in biology to surpass conventional, linear approaches suggests that these propositions should not merely conform to specific sets of relations in positing objects in the world. In this sense, the book manages to extend beyond conventional boundaries in the philosophy of biology by drawing connections to conversational analysis and gesture studies, thereby providing a versatile framework applicable to any social-cultural interaction mediated by the body-as-sign.

Through the lens of constraint, the author illustrates how children navigate the influence of care workers and abstract ideas. This aptly showcases that constraints operate not only in matter-energy interactions but also in the participants' memories, influenced by cultural or psychological motivations.

In Chapter 5, Professor Marais delves into translation processes within the context of the MBTI and its aim to popularize Jung, encompassing scholarly work, application, critical appraisals, layperson interpretation, and representation in popular culture in South Africa. Questions arise about the distinctions between application and critical processes, as well as the origins of problematic aspects in the *Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI) trajectory. According to Professor Marais, the data reveals the complex interplay of material, economic, psychological, political, intellectual, social, and religious trajectories in semiotic trajectory emergence, which ultimately points to the need for nuanced research methods that transcend the reduction of social phenomena to *habitus* and field (Marais 2026: 119). Additionally, the author suggests that there is a constraining effect of ideas on concepts and matter-energy, a reflection that prompts contemplation on the concept of 'downward causation' in scholarly discourse.

In my opinion, the chapter's strength lies in its stated skepticism regarding progress and the refusal to engage in an undue idealization of translators as a caste of intelligent workers:

The translation process is a process of creating interpretants from previous interpretants. This is always done against the background of a context, which means in a context of power, interests, competition for scarce resources, et cetera. (Marais 2023: 110)

Chapter 6 highlights the prevalence of translational processes in both lingual and non-lingual material, while acknowledging the nuanced differences in their execution. The chapter introduces questions about mapping non-lingual semiotic systems onto one another, addressing the challenge of comparing systems lacking the same level of pattern or structure as language:

Translation studies, in the way I conceptualize it, is not about the music or the photo but about an inter- or transdisciplinary interest in the relationship between the two, about an interest in how music becomes visual in a photograph. (Marais 2023: 126)

Here, Professor Marais emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary work involving experts in color, sound, smell, taste, and touch to provide insights for mapping these semiotic systems. This appeal to interdisciplinary collaboration correctly interprets current

trends in cognitive sciences that see the phenomenon of mind as a radically embodied reconstruction of reality that defines perception as an instance of representation.

In the context of translation studies, the author challenges binary perspectives, suggesting alternative options that include a strong comparative element to make students aware of contextual foundations. Thus, the importance of resemiotizing Western textbooks in an African context is emphasized, as it requires students to reinterpret the relevance of literature across different contexts.

The discussion extends to decolonization in translation studies, portraying it as a retranslation process whereby semiotic agents rework incipient signs of precolonial and colonizing society-cultures into subsequent signs of a new South African society-culture. Professor Marais contends that decolonization involves retranslating, reinterpreting, and resemiotizing experiences of being human, thereby acknowledging the complexity and hybridity of subsequent signs woven from multiple texts and experiences.

Although the integration of semiotics into translation studies is increasingly accepted, since “translation is not always limited to verbal languages” (Munday, Ramos Pinto & Blakeley 2022: 9), the introduction of a project that casts the semiotic net wider to capture the role of biological, predictive types of cognition in human meaning-making, is a significant turn in the conceptualization of a type of translation that reconciles mind and matter. Central to this is the need to understand the workings of translation as events occurring on paths, following the unexpected trajectories of intention and goal through (responsive and responsible) embodied experiences. As in art, exchange replaces (content) translation:

Individuation of the self occurs through ‘intercorporeal interdependence,’ separating the viewer from ‘other(nes)s’ and recognizing difference through experiences ‘embodied and materially located’ in spaces opened to the imagination necessary for transformation. (Devine 2023: 73)

The book leaves readers with crucial questions: How can non-lingual semiotic systems be effectively mapped onto one another, considering their lack of pattern and structure akin to language? How can translation studies navigate the challenges of colonial legacies and decolonize curricula effectively? What interdisciplinary approaches are needed to bridge the gaps in mapping different semiotic systems?

This pivotal inquiry positions semiotics at the forefront, reclaiming for the field the crucial recognition it deserves as a discipline capable of providing more nuanced responses regarding the role and scope of translation than previously acknowledged. The idea of sign-system hybridization during semiosis is by far more effective than that of “adaptive social, political, economic and educational systems,” allowing

them to “respond to disturbances and pressures from outside and, thus, to cope with stress and contingency” (Hermans 2023: 100). It also does away with the misleading idea of a Eurocentric “disciplinary territory” misleadingly construed as “a ghost-like presence to haunt us out of enclosures and rigidities” (Ferreira Duarte, Assis Rosa & Seruya 2006: 4).

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