

Interactive comment on “More than just translation: challenges and opportunities in intercultural and multilingual research” by L. G. Crane et al.

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The core of the paper is a set of three research narratives which question in turn the process of translation; positionality; and the specificities of locally or nationally embedded concepts which are somewhat resistant to linguistic and practical travel. These are three suitable and intriguing examples of the complexities of social research, and I will comment on them more specifically later. These narratives are well-placed in the current geographical debates about language (hegemony) and academic practice.

The paper does not intend to give a definite response to how precisely the ‘unpacking and unravelling the complexities of intercultural and multilingual research settings’

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ought to be done. This is, as the authors state, quite rightly a task to be sceptical of. Yet, I would like to encourage the authors to address more explicitly how research is more than translation and to provide a stronger structure built around their insights into the additionalities. Yes, research is often complex and full of assumptions; these have been subject to attempts to make them more reflexive while also questioning the ability for all-knowing transparency. Language and translation is one aspect of this. To me, an intriguing and promising contribution of this paper lies in a fuller development of the authors’ claim that ‘operating in multilingual contexts involves moments of friction and hesitation’ (p. 52, p. 68). These moments surface throughout when the different authors reflect on, e.g., the space afforded by a translator and the ability to question particular meanings or, again, when the foreign language attributes throws open different ‘others’ embodied by the researcher. Here, the discoveries that in many ways were made out of the necessity of linguistic limitations forced as well as afforded the researchers with such moments to reflect on what was happening, to reflect (however appropriate) on the ongoing research (relationship). The authors are careful not to reify the fixed translation from one language to another, by, e.g., drawing on F Smith’s (1996) hybrid spaces or later drawing on Nast (1994).

Such careful attention to language is however not reciprocated with respect to culture. Instead, there seems to be a rather monolithic understanding of culture at play in section 1, e.g., when talked about ‘taking ideas from culture to culture’ (p. 56), or in heading 4 ‘Making ideas travel from culture to culture’. Similarly, I wonder about the relationship between culture and language, e.g., in the claim that researcher ‘must develop a deep understanding for both the cultures and the languages in which they are operating.’ I would have liked to see a brief exploration of (a) the practical – in doing – side of language/meaning making as one aspect of culture. Extending the nuanced discussion from sections 2 and 3 right throughout the paper would be useful to avoid an implicit assumption that one language = one culture.

Section 2 offers useful and insightful pointers on the importance of translation and

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the exploration of meaning-making it necessitates. Such processes of trying to explore meanings and competing meanings of course are part of every research project – would this need to be made clear? I also wondered what the problems were with assigning the translator with such power over definitions; again, this is part of research analysis but may warrant some more explicit thoughts in terms of that role of gatekeeping?

Of the various arguments and insights presented, I felt that section 4 required some rethinking. One concerns the above equation of homogenic culture = one language. Another would be through a significant set of human geography literature on policy transfer (I am notably thinking of Jamie Peck and Kevin Ward's work): the authors make the argument that because concepts are linguistically closely connected with national culture, they do not travel – behutsame Stadterneuerung is the example given. Yet: public policy is full of policy transfers from one context to another – so policy is seen as very mobile (if we think e.g. of workfare, the creative class, zero tolerance policing). The body of work that is emerging around such transfer explores in detail the changes, negotiations and modifications concepts undertake by being transplanted – often with little care of the 'context' from which they arise. Similarly, we would find as many examples of how academic theories, notably French post-structuralism, or New Urban Politics or regime theory travel – and do so in very particular ways well beyond any 'simple translation' as the authors mention in relation to regime theory. To understand the reasons behind these, we need to consider more than the language in which these are enframed. This is something the authors mention but to my mind, there is still a privileging of language over power struggles, the political context and maybe even something as simple as academic working environments taking place in the section. Going back to sender-receiver 'miscommunication' is too simplistic in this context. Similarly, if we understand language as practical and part of social practice and experience, the acknowledgement that people with an 'international background' (p. 66) have greater insights is very unsurprising. It would be good if the authors could explore this in more detail – e.g. by referring back to the earlier section on

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positionality: how such frictions can actually be used to communicate concepts in a way that facilitates learning.

This is an insightful paper able to make a good and important addition to the theme issue as well as the wider debate. In order to do this successfully, I would encourage the authors to strengthen their key argument about how it is 'more than translation' in the opening section, throughout the narratives and in conclusion; there are several examples included throughout which deserve more explication on how the 'unpacking' is to be achieved and how 'frictions and hesitations' are taking place.

There are a few minor points

- writing style and narrative voice: the authors announce in introduction that the accounts are written by each of the three; nonetheless, I was initially surprised by the change of narrative voice in para 1, p. 57; are there other ways to introduce the individual accounts? - p. 53, l27f check meaning of quote 'to make oneself understand and understand others' – to me the more obvious expression would be 'to make oneself understood [by others]' - p. 56, l6, delete second 'that'

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