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Conceptual debates in IR and the spectre of polysemy. Intralingual challenges and the promise of translation

Torsten Michel

Introduction

As the various contributions in this volume testify, the role, character and importance of translation can be seen across a large and varied number of themes, issues and fields within International Relations (IR). This chapter focusses on the importance of a translational perspective for a particular genre of academic political writing – the conceptual exegesis within IR meta-theory. In this genre, scholars seek to answer the most fundamental questions about the world we study, ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically (Freire 2013, p. 273).

Looking at the publications within this area, past and present, challenges of translation only surface sporadically and very much remain at the margins of IR meta-theory. One reason is that meta-theory has been and continues to be dominated by overwhelmingly English-speaking contributions; the challenges it faces concerning the recognition and inclusion of non-English (or indeed non-Western) perspectives, however, are growing and reminiscent of those faced by the discipline as a whole.¹ Undoubtedly, with the increasing attention being paid to demands to decolonise IR will come further and more pronounced questions about the interlingual, translational challenges to reflect experiences and bodies of thought outside the Western mainstream.

While these interlingual challenges constitute an under-researched area in IR meta-theory in need of more substantive discussions, the focus of this chapter will lie with another translational challenge that has so far received even less attention – *intralingual* translation. Currently, most contributions to IR meta-theory assume a communicative environment that allows for unambiguous and straight-forward exchanges. To some extent this seems justified. After all, meta-theory is a reasonably well-established genre, with a broadly agreed upon subject matter and scholars that mobilise a recognisable set of terminological markers. It

¹ On the growing debate on ‘decolonising IR’ see for instance Jones (2006), Kuru (2016), Çapan (2016), Zondi (2018) and Rosenau (2019). See also the contributions by Kacar, Shangguan and Suzuki in this volume.

appears as if the communication between contributors can, for the most part, flow reasonably unhindered and can mainly, if not exclusively, revolve around the actual substantive debates this genre is concerned with (Davidson 2012, p. 5).

As intuitively convincing as this assumption might be, a closer look at the current debates within IR meta-theory paints a different picture. While the subfield of meta-theory has expanded considerably over the last 20 years or so, debates seem to become increasingly diversified and heterogenous (see, for instance, Wesley 2001, p. 453; Holsti 2001, p. 90; Monteiro and Ruby, 2009, p. 35; Jackson and Nexon, 2013, p. 543). While debates may share a commitment to discussing and developing basic conceptual frameworks, the diversity they display reaches beyond disagreements of substance. Indeed, we have reached a point where the assumption of a ‘shared terminology and purpose’ can be questioned (Kristensen 2015, p.12). The by now apparent polysemy of key terminology and the multivocality of its contributions raise questions regarding the nature of communication within IR meta-theory to the point where the role and nature of *intra*lingual translation should become a central concern.

As we will see, engaging in reflections on the challenges of intra-lingual translation will allow for a radically different understanding of the practice of meta-theorising (and its guiding principles) and also alert us more explicitly to its current shortcomings. As the Introduction to this volume has already established, within such reflections we will focus on a transformative notion of ‘translation’ in the sense that it concerns a conversational encounter between different worlds, rather than just individual texts or even words – an encounter that affects all parties to the conversation (Freeman 2009, p. 436). Such a perspective requires wider reflections on the nature of language and communication, the process of ‘understanding’ and also the principles that guide our encounter with otherness in conversation. Such a transformative translational angle allows for reflections on how to navigate and practice linguistic diversity – a question that seems particularly pertinent given the highly heterogenous field of IR meta-theory.

In order to deliver such a translational perspective this chapter proceeds in three steps. Firstly, it develops the content of a perspective that sees translation as transformation and establishes the particular angle from which it commences. Secondly, it shows how this perspective resonates within IR meta-theory and how current practices fall short of recognising the intra-lingual translational challenges in meta-theoretical practice. Finally, we move to an assessment of the benefits and contributions a translational perspective can bring to our understanding and practice of meta-theorising.

Preliminary reflections on ‘translation’

When questions of translation surface within IR, they often (and unsurprisingly) revolve around the interpretation and meaning of specific texts (or specific parts of texts). Such questions are mainly concerned with a move from a source text (ST) to a target text (TT) (Munday 2012, p. 8) and while they are central, they only constitute one dimension of translational thought. Translation studies has long been expanding beyond these questions by raising wider concerns regarding the ways in which translational practice is related to manners of communication more broadly, what characterises the act of translation and what norms and principles should guide translational practice (Hermans 1996, p. 25; Kearney 2007, p. 154-8; Davidson 2012, p. 2). Within this broader understanding of ‘translation’, one can discern three interconnected dimensions: *linguistic, ontological and ethical* (Kearney 2007, p. 147-50). These three dimensions, while heuristically separable, are deeply intertwined. For our discussion here, it is necessary to show what questions arise in each of them and how they are interlinked.

Translation as transformation – three core dimensions

The linguistic dimension probably constitutes the most familiar and obvious level of translational practice; it is concerned with the transposition of meaning from one language to another (Malmkjaer 2011, p. 109). Yet, even in this limited dimension, translation is already fraught with problems and challenges of all kinds. The most important debates here revolve around the purpose, and hence the best practice, of translation, e.g. should translations be ‘literal’, ‘free’ or ‘faithful’, should we seek word for word or sense for sense translations (Freeman 2009, p. 433-4; Nelson 2007, p. 362; Kristal 2014, p. 33-4)? Answers to these questions almost inevitably leave the act of translation pending between fidelity and betrayal (Davidson 2012, p. 3). The demands placed on the translator to stay ‘true’ to the ST but at the same time deliver the best translation for the TT create either a bias towards the source language or the target language (Davidson, 2012, p. 4). Equally challenging questions arise when considering the ‘intent’ of the author who composed it and the way in which we may need to take into account the circumstances under which the text was written (Bassnett, 2013, p. 152). Also, with a focus on the receiver, it is far from clear what constitutes central elements of meaning up to the point where scholars debate whether there is actually an enduring essence

to an ST that can be conveyed and maintained or whether the act of translation is interpretive and situational all the way through with the ST shifting its meaning depending when, where and by whom it is translated (Freeman 2009, p. 430; Bassnett 2013, p. 152). Even these preliminary considerations lead to a wide array of challenges and open horizons much beyond the task of reproducing meaning from one (con)text to another. In fact, these ongoing debates very quickly reach the point where wider discussions commence that lead us to the second (ontological) and third (ethical) dimension of translational reflection.

The ontological dimension opens up in response to the manner in which a text emerges as the output of an agent at a particular time intending to convey a meaning to others and raises questions about the more general process of ‘understanding’. How is meaning conveyed generally, in what manner does the author and the reader relate to the text and what constitutes and determines ‘successful’ understanding (Freeman 2009, p. 435)? These questions strike at much deeper debates about the nature and process in which human beings come to relate to each other communicatively. On this level, we widen the scope from the question of particular texts to considerations on how languages (in the broadest sense) intersect and on how communicative encounters unfold (Gadamer 2013, p. 402-7). A conception of ‘understanding’ which is implicit in any translational approach adds a crucial and wide-ranging set of reflections not only about ‘how to translate’ but also on the more fundamental ontological question of ‘what is translation’ (Kharmandar 2015, p. 75-6) and under what conditions can it take place successfully (and what constitutes success)?

Finally, the last and broadest dimension, closely related to these wider ontological debates, is the question of an ethics of translation. Where the linguistic dimension concerns the relation between texts and the ontological dimension explores the nature of understanding between different linguistic environments, this third and final dimension adds considerations on the relation between interlocutors – authors, translators, and receivers (Scott-Baumann 2010, p.71-2). It shifts its attention towards the challenge of alterity inherent in all acts of translation (Nelson 2007, p. 362; Kristal 2014, p. 36-7). It discusses the norms and values guiding the practice of translation and seeks to establish the principles, the rights and obligations, that inform the relation between author, translator and receiver.

What we are left with then is a characterisation of ‘translation’ as a problem field that expands much beyond isolated instances of the transfer of meaning. Instead we have to recognise that linguistic, ontological and ethical questions are deeply intertwined and that ‘translation’ if it is

to be considered to its fullest extent requires reflections across these three dimensions (Garcia 2008, p. 73-4). Given this broader scope of translation, it does not come as a surprise that translational thought quickly expanded into and drew upon broader discussions in linguistics, psychology and philosophy (among others) in its attempts to grapple with and address the implications of translational practices (see, for instance, Munday 2012: 8-26). In order to explore the ramifications of these wider challenges, the remainder of this chapter will draw on one of the most influential philosophical movements that left its mark on translation studies – philosophical hermeneutics. In its very setup, philosophical hermeneutics is concerned with the emergence, transition and transformation of meaning through acts of interpretation within a wider re-conceptualisation of human being (see, for instance, Gadamer 2013, p. 417-23). Its intellectual trajectory from textual interpretation to an ontologisation of interpretation as an existential quality of human life mirrors the move from a technical focus on textual exegeses to wider ontological and ethical questions as they were touched upon above – some might even go so far to say that a philosophy of translation is a natural and maybe even needed addition to or extension of hermeneutic thought (Kharmandar 2015, p. 75; Davidson 2013, p. 69).

Hermeneutics and Translation

A central concern of hermeneutics lies with the ontological significance of language and the ways in which language and understanding are related (see, for instance, Gadamer 2013, p. 403-7; Ricoeur 2006). In the broadest sense the movement of philosophical hermeneutics foregrounds the always already historical situatedness in which all communicative encounters take place. Every act of meaning creation and exchange is not only dependent on language (in the widest sense) but also commences from an always already situated perspective. In Gadamer's (2013, p. 407) words: 'The linguisticity of understanding is the concretion of historically effected consciousness'. Consequently, meanings do not exist independent of but are created, exchanged and altered in the act of communication (Freeman 2009, p. 437; Warnke 2003, p. 4). From a hermeneutic perspective, the exchange of meanings 'takes place against a background of context that conditions [them], and this background can include any number of implicit or hidden presuppositions, [and] prejudices' (Davidson 2013: 62). Understanding then is not an isolated process occurring within an individual but emerges in and through conversation (Gadamer 2013, p. 403). This crucial conversational element in pursuit of understanding already provides a direct link to the role and nature of translation as an existential component of human interaction; translation is a crucial element of understanding as it provides

the movement that can lead to an understanding of the other in conversation. This holds both across languages but, crucially, also within a language (Kearney 2007, p. 152). Hermeneutics acknowledges the contextual multiplicity of meanings (i.e. the polysemous nature of our vocabularies) and seeks to develop a position that situates and explores this polysemy as a central element of our existence. Rather than seeking to overcome the plurality and malleability of meanings in pursuit of a homogeneously fixed set of referents, hermeneutics provides an ontological position in which the emergence and interplay of these meanings form the core characteristic of human existence (Kearney, 2007, p. 153). In doing so, hermeneutics widens the scope of translation to considerations of communicative understanding within a given language by recognising that while within a language the signifiers may be the same, what they signify is not given de-ontologically. (Kristal 2014, p. 38; Venn 2006, p. 83). Even within a language, conversations are therefore not unambiguous exchanges of given meanings but rather present translational exchanges in which ‘what is meant’ by the interlocutors emerges only through their conversational exchange.

This polysemy of words adds a source of ambiguity to our linguistic encounters (Scott-Baumann 2010, p. 75). This ambiguity is not perceived as an ‘external’ problem stemming from a lack of clarity (and therefore something that could be ‘fixed’) but rather emerges as an ineradicable characteristic of human existence. In other words, while the multiplicity of meanings in our communicative encounters may be widely recognised, hermeneutics conceives of polysemy as an inevitable, and ineradicable component of communicative encounters. Consequently, against this background, hermeneutics considers the act and process of interpretation as a crucial element of understanding to the point where interpretation is ontologised as an existential and not just a situational feature of human existence – in other words, we always relate interpretively to the world around us, encountering ‘an unbounded multitude of possible interpretations’ (Kharmandar 2015, p. 77; see also Hinman 1980, p. 526). The response to such a conception of the intrinsically interpretive process of understanding does not consist in attempts to ‘fix meanings’ and reduce or overcome polysemy but rather requires forms of translation as we seek to negotiate meanings in conversation (Gadamer 2013, p. 403; Davidson 2013, p. 64). Gadamer (2013, p. 402) recognises this explicitly when he says: ‘Thus every translation is at the same time an interpretation. We can even say that the translation is the culmination of the interpretation that the translator has made of the words given him’.² The translational act that emerges here ‘is a communicative process in which

² The same is true for Ricoeur (see Scott-Baumann 2010, p. 74; Ricoeur 2006).

actors inhabiting different social worlds (i) enter into relations with each other and (ii) begin to recast or reconstruct themselves, their interests and their worlds' (Freeman 2009, p. 436; see also Kristal 2014, p. 31). Within such a conception '[t]he task of hermeneutics, then, is to bridge the distance that is opened up between the differences between the world of the reader and the world of the author through the world of the text' (Davidson 2013, p. 63).

Inevitably, this ontologisation of the process of understanding also carries ethical considerations regarding the relationship between self and other (Kearney 2007, p. 153); after all, conversational encounters often happen between interlocutors that differ (often widely) in their resources and social capital. At this point questions arise as to who is allowed to take part in conversations and whose voice is registered and 'audible' (Scott-Baumann, 2010, p. 81). The power differential between interlocutors raises the need for ethical reflection on how conversational encounters should be conducted and what rules and norms govern these encounters (Venn 2006, p. 82).

In these hermeneutic core concerns, we can see already very similar themes as outlined above. The act of interpretation in hermeneutics concerning the appropriation of meaning (linguistic dimensions), the description of interpretation as an ontological feature of human existence (ontological dimension) and the concerns regarding the relation between self and other (ethical dimension), all speak to the set of challenges and problems facing the practice of translation.

Subsequently, even in this exceedingly brief characterisation of hermeneutics, intralingual translation emerges as a key point of consideration due to above noted polysemy of terms even within a single language, especially since '[i]n addition to the multiple surface meanings of words, their polysemy is compounded by the fact that they can also have hidden connotations or idiomatic sense which are difficult to detect on the surface' (Davidson 2013, p. 62). This ambiguity accumulates to the level of sentences and whole texts as 'sequences of sentences and plots [...] are open to multiple possible interpretations and thus can open the texts as a whole to multiple possible meanings' (Davidson 2013, p. 62). Here arises an intralingual challenge which makes translation a part of communication even within a shared language.

'One might ordinarily believe that, between the speakers of a single language, the work of translation is not needed. It should be possible for speakers to communicate their thoughts and wishes effectively and unambiguously, simply because they share a common language. But, there is a difference between the ideal of a perfect language, in which each word would only have a single meaning, and the reality of actual languages in which each word can adopt multiple meanings. The plurivocity of language gives rise to the need for translation within a single linguistic community, even in the everyday interactions between people who use the same language' (Davidson 2012, p. 5)

As a consequence, seamless communication between interlocutors in the same language cannot be taken for granted. We may share large parts of the vocabulary, the grammar and syntax but this alone does not guarantee that meaning is shared unambiguously or understanding secured easily. In cases where we engage with others in an even more distanced manner (e.g. through written texts), the challenge of understanding increases further – the conversation between the interlocutors is here not only mediated through the text but the text itself represents a translational challenge in the sense that ‘the hermeneutical encounter with the text is not analogous with a personified. Thou but is rather a process in which the linguistic disclosure of the text opens worlds of meaning before the reader (DiCenso 1990, p. 115).

The multivocality of IR meta-theory

Bringing such a translational perspective to IR meta-theory, has a number of benefits relating to all three dimensions developed above. As we will see, while the linguistic dimension (and in particular the polysemy of terms) does play a role in current meta-theoretical debates, the wider challenges of intralingual translation are in need of a more sustained and thorough reflection.

Linguistically, contributions to IR meta-theory are most often conceived of as operating with an established terminology which allows intellectual exchanges to concentrate on substance without too much thought about hindrances to effective communication and mutual understanding. This is not to say that conceptual debates remain completely oblivious to translational challenges. Certainly, we find contributions that acknowledge the hurdles of the polysemy of specific terms and seek to incorporate reflections of competing meanings into their substantive contributions. Yet, the often central search for a unified conceptual framework leads many contributors to strive for a minimisation (and ideally elimination) of polysemy and its effects in pursuit of a conceptual toolset that is as general and universal in scope as possible. In practical terms, however, this goal to establish a widely shared and linguistically secured meta-theoretical approach for IR seems to become more and more unobtainable. While we have seen a marked increase in contributions and a widening and deepening of discussions concerning the key meta-theoretical commitments for IR, the field is more diverse and heterogenous than ever before. Attempts to overcome this diversity continue to be frustrated; as a result, some question the very purpose of meta-theorising and argue for its disbandment (for varying levels of criticism see for instance Halliday 1995, p.745; Wallace 1996, p. 315-6; Barkin 2010 or Sil and Katzenstein, 2010). Others still see it as a vital part of conceptual

thought in IR but ask for further rigour and refinement of the meaning of its core terms. Neither path seems particularly promising – the first since abandoning meta-theorising does not absolve IR from meta-theoretical considerations (Reus-Smit 2013, p. 590) and the second because there is no indication that pursuing a path aiming for a linguistically and substantially unified position can be successful.

Instead it may be time to consider meta-theorising as an ongoing conversation based on a multiplicity of meanings of its core terms and think through the consequences. Doing so will place the polysemy of its terminology at the centre and asks us to develop a position beyond abandonment and definitional closure. Conceiving meta-theorising as a translational challenge can provide one avenue to develop such a position. Before we provide a sketch of how such a translational practice impacts on our understanding of meta-theorising, it is worthwhile to have a brief look at how IR meta-theory has so far dealt with the challenge of polysemy.

While IR meta-theory has recognised the challenge of polysemy to a certain degree, the manner in which polysemy has been addressed, however, also shows that a wider awareness of and reflection on its consequences is mostly absent. We will briefly look at three of the most common or influential ways in which polysemy is addressed before moving to an assessment of the contribution a translational perspective can make in alleviating existing shortcomings.

The path of appropriation: The agent-structure debate

The first common strategy for responding to polysemy is driven by the aim to minimise or redirect its main problems by means of appropriation. In these cases, the interlocutors focus on attempts to settle meaning in a monosemous manner by substantively positing a specific framework and set of meanings that form the basis for judging alternative conceptions, i.e. their engagement with competing frameworks is limited to reading them through their own set of assumptions and dismissing them as inconsistent or ‘meaningless’.

A classic example of this strategy is the exchange between Colin Wight and Roxanne Doty regarding the agent-structure debate. In a series of articles (Doty 1997; Wight 1999; Doty 1999; Wight 2000) both authors engage in a direct exchange on what defines this debate and how best to grasp and respond to the conceptual challenges it poses. They seemingly address the same problem and rely on the same vocabulary to frame what is at stake.

Underneath this surface, however, it becomes clear quite quickly that despite using the same terminology, both authors establish fundamentally different horizons of meaning. The central notion of ‘ontology’, for instance, signifies fundamentally divergent meanings in Wight and

Doty and subsequently completely different understandings emerge as to the character of the agent-structure debate. In Wight's conceptualisation the debate rests on a *dualistic substance ontology* whereas for Doty it dissolves into a question of indeterminate practices characteristic of a *monist ontology* (Wight 2003, p. 707; Doty 1997, p. 376-8). These differences continue throughout the exchange, in the notions of 'practice', 'agents', 'structures' and so on. What we are in fact seeing here is the development of two completely separate conceptual frameworks, relying on diverging meanings of core terms to the extent that they establish different systems of signification despite both writing in the same language. The result is two fundamentally diverging conceptions of the agent-structure debate, each presenting a different world or horizon which informs their understanding of the key elements of this debate. This is as such neither surprising nor negative as the individual terms in question and the debate as a whole has always been characterised by polysemy, i.e. the inherent multiplicity of meanings which shape the manner in which this debate can be apprehended. The subsequent engagement between these two authors, however, presents an archetypical example of the failure to recognise the concomitant translational challenge. Their engagement is dominated by movements of appropriation in which the horizon of meanings of one author is read through and subsumed under the meanings of the respective other. This appropriation excludes the possibility (and willingness) to engage with the other and instead characterises a move to read the other through the limits of one's own horizon of meaning and take any contradictions as prove of the inferiority of the other's position.

The outcome of such a lack of engagement is inevitable: we see a simple reiteration of positions, the dismissal of the respective other as incoherent and finally an irreconcilable stalemate at which point further attempts of engagement are abandoned. The strategy of reductive appropriation in conceptual debates is bound to fail in producing meaningful exchanges as '[t]he movement of appropriation, taken alone, would appear to suggest that the reader would become master of all meaning and thus would take from the text whatever he or she wants to get from it' (Davidson, 2013, p. 63). Attempts to master meaning in such a manner not only disregard the inevitable polysemy of the key terms under consideration but also foreclose any deeper grasp of aims, objectives, and understanding of the 'world' of the other. As Ricoeur (1981, p. 94) puts it: 'To understand is not to project oneself into the text but to expose oneself to it; it is to receive a self enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds which interpretation unfolds'. What is left after such engagements is an archipelago of

disconnected and isolated islands of meaning with no strategy of meaningful exchange between them beyond the reiteration of already taken position.

Acknowledgement without understanding: Debating 'ontology' in IR

While a strategy of appropriation exemplifies a common failure to grasp the translational challenges (and opportunities) of polysemy, it has not been the only way in which debates in IR meta-theory have approached polysemy and its consequences. The second manner in which conceptual debates in IR meta-theory have sought to approach the heterogeneous meanings of its core terminology is to actually put them at the centre of deliberation. One such example was the extended debate about the role and nature of 'ontology' that rose to prominence during the first decade of the 21st century. Through a number of publications (see, for instance, Wight 2006; Jackson 2008; Chernoff 2009; Arfi 2012; Michel 2009 and 2012; Weber, 2012; Herboth, 2012; Kessler 2012; Wight, 2012), conference panels and fora, the exchange between authors of different conceptual persuasion recognised the vagaries and polysemy of the notion of 'ontology' and its consequences for the study of international politics.

While IR meta-theory in this respect has demonstrated some awareness of translational challenges and the consequences of polysemy (or at least its presence) for its debates, reflections on its consequences both for how the practice of meta-theory is affected and what they mean for the manner in which scholars should engage with each other remain absent. Deliberations on the polysemy of individual terms inevitably fall short of any wider reflection on the ontological and ethical questions it gives rise to. They remain on the level of specific concepts and the limited forays into translation that were undertaken as part of these exchanges do not exceed the instrumental aim of supporting particular meanings of the concept in question. Despite the more explicit awareness of the polysemy of core terminology, this strategy ends up in a very similar position to attempts at appropriation. In the end, the conceptual debate about 'ontology' did not move beyond the recognition of competing meanings and their consequences for the study of IR. It has not provided any insights into the ramifications for the way conceptual debates must be conducted, how effective communication between competing positions should be structured and which norms and principles should guide the engagement between diverging meanings and frameworks. The outcome is merely an agreement to disagree without any positive formulation of how to proceed productively or assess the reasons for and consequences of the resulting conceptual impasse.

Governing polysemy: Jackson's meta-theoretical pluralism

Beyond these two rather limited attempts to address polysemy, Patrick Jackson's *The Conduct of Inquiry* (2016) provided a contribution that actually has pushed the awareness and reflection on the consequences of polysemy to the point where its accumulating effects in establishing wider systems of meaning amounting to diverging worlds have been recognised.

Responding to the ever more diverse landscape of meta-theoretical scholarship in IR, Jackson offers not only a typology of existing approaches but also suggest that attempts to establish a single meta-theoretical framework for conducting IR research is misplaced.

Rather than pursuing a definitional quest to settle meaning uniformly, Jackson proposes a form of pluralism in which competing sets of conceptual meanings coexist (Jackson 2016, p. 35-41), up to the level where they form coherent independent frameworks (one might say 'worlds' – Jackson 2016, p. 38; Michel 2013). In his account this polysemy is a perennial feature of meta-theoretical debates and therefore here to stay. In this respect, Jackson's contribution provides a crucial step to raising questions that touch upon the ontological and ethical dimensions sketched above.

As progressive as this contribution may seem, however, its suggested mode of 'conversational governance' replicates the problems of neglecting polysemy for two reasons. First, in terms of delineation of his realm of meta-theorising, Jackson establishes a notion of science to bound meta-theoretical activity (Jackson 2016, p. 22-5). Secondly, within the pluralist realm he established, Jackson seeks to develop a vocabulary to enable communication about and between the diverging conceptual positions (Jackson 2016, p. 211). Both moves to a large extent reverse the initial acceptance of the consequences of polysemy as they suggest the desirability and possibility of developing linguistic resources that can bound and linguistically homogenise the plurality of meta-theory and the polysemy of its terminology.

In particular, the terminology he proposes to hold across the different approaches (e.g. mind-world monism; mind world dualism etc) has the purpose of allowing for a homogenous description of diverging positions and as such constitute a form of meta-language which seeks to unite the polysemy that the proposed meta-theoretical pluralism exhibits (Michel 2013, p. 283-4). Equally, the provision of a notion of 'science to provide a boundary condition under which the diverging positions can be subsumed and which allows for a clear demarcation of what is 'inside' meta-theory and what remains 'outside' presents a move to unify his pluralism under a monosemous meaning of science (Jackson, 2016, p. 22-5). Both instances demonstrate

that while polysemy is accepted on the level of conceptual development, eventually Jackson tries to overcome its effects to allow participants across conceptual divides to communicate effectively and unambiguously. Of course, such an attempt is itself bound to fail, for the very same reasons that ground Jackson's move towards a pluralist understanding of meta-theory. His notion of wagers (p. 35-41) serves as the common denominator here. Invoking it to show that basic conceptual assumptions in meta-theorising lie beyond cognitive proof and/or logical necessity, demonstrates the substantive uncertainties inherent in key terms of meta-theoretical practice. What he fails to realise at this point, however, is that this uncertainty is not just a substantive one but also a linguistic one, an uncertainty that pervades, as we have seen above, language in general. As a consequence, Jackson's attempt to unify the plurality of substantive wagers through the introduction of a linguistically monosemous vocabulary are bound to fail. His notions of 'science', 'mind', 'world' and so on are as linguistically insecure and polysemous as the substantive wagers that ground his meta-theoretical pluralism. This attempted move towards a monosemous meta-language in which different meta-theoretical frameworks can converse in an unhindered manner in many ways reverses the achievements of his pluralism as it simply displaces the problem of polysemy to a higher level.

As these brief examples show, IR meta-theory has engaged in various ways with the challenge of polysemy – so far, however, these strategies have not resolved the conceptual tensions or offered a path to more fruitful encounters between diverging positions.

The promise of a translational perspective for IR meta-theory

A hermeneutical perspective on translation, when taken seriously, allows for a more reflective basis for the consideration of the challenges of polysemy and the related processes of understanding within the encounters with alterity. Crucially, from the outset it forgoes the quest for universal foundations in any pursuit of understanding, the idea that there is or can be a singular perspective from which understanding can or must occur. The commitment to a plurality of meanings, languages and therefore worlds can help address the deeply challenging ethical dimension of alterity in translation, of the rights of the other, the translator and their readers that have often been obfuscated by emphasising the seemingly innocent and technical act of transposing meaning from one context to another. A hermeneutic perspective not only recognises a translational dimension even in conversations in the same language, but also stresses the vagaries of modes of understanding and the concomitant ethical challenges of

alterity which can bring into the open the dynamics of power operative in conceptual debates. As the three brief examples above show, we see that current responses to this polysemy and the challenges it entails are wanting. While there seems to be some progress in terms of active acknowledgement and reflection, we are still missing a comprehensive appraisal of the consequences of polysemy for IR meta-theorising.

Given the plurality of meanings and the expressions of whole conceptual systems they give rise to, the current form of debate and scholarship makes a number of mistakes. As a result, in many cases polysemy and the resulting cacophony of mutually exclusive frameworks has given rise to a strong number of criticisms regarding the value of conducting meta-theoretical scholarship as such (Halliday, 1995, p. 745; Wallace, 1996, p. 315-6; Barkin, 2010 or Sil and Katzenstein, 2010). Indeed, while we see an increasing proliferation of meta-theoretical positions, the gaps and disagreements between meta-theoretical approaches seem to be widening.

If we take the brief reflections on the inevitable polysemy of terms and the so far neglected need for intralingual translation into account, however, this seemingly deteriorating development does not come as a surprise. In fact, it suggests that the plurality of positions is not due to a failure of meta-theorising as such but rather the inevitable result of the polysemous nature of language and the misplaced belief that the plurality of meanings can be overcome in conceptual debates. What a translational angle alerts us to is that this ambiguity of meaning is ingrained in all linguistic encounters whether they are everyday occurrences or highly specialised academic exchanges; and it even occurs within a given language and not ‘just’ in cases where meaning crosses language boundaries (Davidson 2012, p. 5).

This basic insight, however, affords us the opportunity to fundamentally re-think the nature, character and dynamic of conceptual debates in general and IR meta-theorising in particular. A thorough consideration of all three dimensions sketched above transforms the very way in which meta-theorising can (and should be practiced). Linguistically, it foregrounds polysemy as an inevitable part of conceptual debates and highlights the need for a translational approach to engage in conceptual reasoning. Rather than seeking to eradicate the spectre of ambiguity and assume the possibility of settling meaning monosemously, conceptual debates must give due consideration to ambiguities of meaning and strive for a manner of engagement that treats diverging accounts as alternate horizons of meaning. Doing so will lead to a more sustained effort to recognise not only the alterity of meaning but also helps to ask wider questions of how this alterity is to be set in relation to our own horizons.

Ontologically, this linguistic dimension is accompanied by an explicit recognition that the process of understanding is deeply conversational and hence translational (Gadamer 2013, p. 403). The negotiation of conceptual frameworks in debate is first of all a conversational encounter rather than an isolated exercise of reason. Gadamer in particular is helpful in illuminating the existentially interpretative character of linguistic encounters. What we try to understand, i.e. which questions we seek to answer, is intimately connected to the ways in which we interpret our own existence and our place within the environment in which we act and think. Hermeneutics at its very basis highlights this ontological significance of language in creating horizons of meaning. As Gadamer's famous notion of the 'fusion of horizons' suggests, our way of relating to the world is negotiated in encounters with others. Crucially, '[t]he fusion of horizons rejects the assertion of authority from the interpreter's tradition. This ethos is that both dialogue partners are open to the other's truth-claim but, at the same time, they are willing to confront it and to be confronted by it. [...] This process is never static and uncritical but productive and transformational' (Gill 2015: 19). Gadamer's insistence on the notion of a *fusion* of horizons is central as the risk of pursuing the 'formation of one horizon, is that forming one horizon can underplay the tension between divergent perspectives, beliefs, cultural contexts and historical traditions that shape our interpretation of the subject matter we seek to understand. In fact, ... residing in such tension are the conditions for understanding' (Gill 2015, p. 17; see also Venn, 2006, p. 82).

The consequences of such an interpretive notion of understanding fundamentally change the nature and character of meta-theorising. Rather than being an exercise aiming at delivering a single comprehensive framework, meta-theorising becomes the location of ongoing conversations and translations between particular, ontologically grounded systems of signification. While much of current meta-theoretical thought may find these conceptual vagaries and partial perspectives troubling, their acceptance in fact would render meta-theorising attuned to the particularities of lived experience. Rather than continuing to try divorcing conceptual debates from particularity in pursuit of some form of universal conceptual framework, meta-theorising not only needs to recognise the futility of such an endeavour but, more positively, embrace this plurality as an opportunity to understand the multitude of intersecting worlds we are aiming to navigate.

Viewing meta-theorising as an ongoing conversation between different conceptual 'worlds' does not contain some lofty ideal of guaranteed mutual understanding. In fact, Gadamer is quite adamant to point out that coming to an understanding is an uncertain process and by no means can we assume some harmonious end point to be reached. Gadamer repeatedly acknowledged

that it is a fallacy to believe that ‘it is always possible – this is the pride of our reason – whenever a disagreement arises, that one can blaze a path to agreement in understanding through talking to each other’ (Gadamer 2006, p. 17). After all, ‘conversation remains outside the control of the participants; none of them can direct it, nor does anyone know how it will come out. (Walhof 2005, p. 160; Gadamer 2013, p. 401). The openness in conversation Gadamer champions must not be misunderstood to mean ‘disregarding oneself, nor assimilating the other’ (Gill, 2015, p. 18). What it does demand though is ‘allowing the questions of otherness to become one’s own and putting one’s own prejudices at risk. When both dialogue partners do so with regard to the object of dialogue, it becomes a shared inquiry, and the other becomes our co-investigator/co-interpreter’ (Gill 2015, p. 16).

The notion of understanding that emerges here stands in radical contrast to the totalising attempts to establish a single, homogenous meta-theoretical framework for IR. For a translational perspective that takes the situatedness of conceptual thought and the polysemy of our vocabulary seriously ‘understanding is continuous and necessarily incomplete. It ... dismisses dialogue as balancing differences in opinions or perspectives, or as assimilating the other into our own. Instead, [it] focusses on the openness of dialogical understanding and its to-and-fro nature’ (Gill 2015, p. 14; see also Schwandt 1999, p. 455 and Venn 2006, p. 84). It means that ‘[t]o understand dialogically is to be able to contextualise meaning, re-configure our horizon and to integrate otherness into our understanding. This process creates a unity in which difference is appreciated, not rejected’ (Gill 2015, p. 18; see also Regan 2012, p. 295). A discipline that has historically struggled (and continues to do so) to actively acknowledge alternative ways of being and knowing (especially outside its mainly Western horizon) may be well advised to endorse such openness to partiality rather than perpetuating closure under the guise of seemingly neutral and abstract conceptual deliberations.

Finally, accepting that ambiguity and the situatedness of all conceptual thought as part and parcel of meta-theoretical debates in IR also means a more thorough consideration of the ethical dimension of linguistic encounters in two respects. A continued pursuit of establishing a universal meta-theoretical framework based around monosemous terminology is necessarily a “violent” endeavour in the sense that it is bound to silence lived experiences of those outside its realm of meaning. Aligning meta-theoretical practice with the plurality of lived experience necessitates abandoning pretensions of creating a singular conceptual framework for the study of IR. At the same time, such an embrace of plurality opens horizons for research that can finally take seriously the lived experience of those hitherto most often excluded. Rather than

following a path of appropriation in which we seek to subsume conceptual otherness by forcing it into the straightjacket of our own meanings, a translational perspective offers opportunities for understanding in which different horizons encounter each other and fuse in acts of transformational conversation. Ethically, such encounters demand taking alterity seriously and allowing the lived experiences of others to encounter our own. Within such a translation perspective ‘understanding’ the world(s) around us becomes a matter of understanding each other. An ongoing process of understanding in conversation does not presuppose harmony – disagreements will continue, and mutual understanding will continue to elude us in various instances. These continued disagreements, however, should not be seen as failures but rather as the constant reminder of the changing environment we are trying to understand. Contrary to its critics, the continued contestations about meta-theoretical matters are not a sign of futility but rather offer the opportunity, and indeed necessity, to critically interrogate our own and others’ assumptions.

What emerges here is a fundamental re-reading of meta-theoretical practice, deeply steeped in translational processes in the sense that meta-theoretical debates are conceived of encounters of texts the polysemous nature of which requires both translation and interpretation. Meta-theory as an ongoing conversation ‘should move from the unconscious and automatic to the conscious and deliberate, from crude appropriation to reflective innovation’ (Freeman 2009, p. 441). In such a view, our conceptual encounters are places of contestation in ongoing conversations that seek to open its participants to the horizons of their respective others. Rather than seeking closure and conceptual certainty, a translational perspective foregrounds the openness towards lived experience and the need for continuous contestations of meaning in our pursuit of understanding. Consequently, the seemingly cacophonous plurality of positions in current IR meta-theory is an asset rather than a liability; it may present the first glimpse of IR moving outwards and accommodating alterity rather than looking inwards and strive for an elusive sameness. Of course, this can only be a very cautious optimism given the long way IR as a whole has to go. Yet, a translational perspective may prove transformational in more than one sense if we recognise both the challenges and opportunities that the plurality of lived experiences, voices and meanings affords us in the study of an ever-changing and increasingly complex environment.

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