

Translation Studies beyond the Postcolony

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Edited by

Kobus Marais and Ilse Feinauer

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To all the African thinkers who did so before us

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
<i>Kobus Marais and Ilse Feinauer</i>	
Part One: Africa	
Chapter One.....	8
We have never been un(der)developed: Translation and the Biosemiotic Foundation of Being in the Global South <i>Kobus Marais</i>	
Chapter Two	33
The Discourse (and Silence) on Literary Translation into Swahili during British Rule: Translation as Deconsecration <i>Serena Talento</i>	
Chapter Three	73
Cold War Translation in the East African Context: Reception and Responses <i>Alamin Mazrui</i>	
Chapter Four.....	94
Multilingual Shakespeare: A South African Reflects on Translation and Performance in Germany <i>Chris Thurman</i>	
Chapter Five	130
Nollywood Stands Up: Mapping Nigeria’s Audiovisual Sector <i>Adrián Fuentes-Luque</i>	
Chapter Six	154
Bible Translation in Postcolony Africa: Reclaiming Humanness through Bible Translation Performance <i>Jacobus A. Naudé, Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé and Tshokolo J. Makutoane</i>	
Part One: Africa.....	210
Respondent: <i>Paul Bandia</i>	

Part Two: The Global South

Chapter Seven.....	220
Translating Silence: Applying Intersemiotic Translation to Interdisciplinary Systems <i>Caroline Mangerel</i>	
Chapter Eight.....	242
<i>Things Fall Apart</i> as Published in Brazil: Searching for a Mouth with which to Tell the Story <i>Amarílis Anchieta and Fernanda Alencar Pereira</i>	
Chapter Nine.....	262
<i>Le Monde diplomatique</i> in Latin America: Translating the Dream of a Different World <i>Tania Hernandez</i>	
Chapter Ten	280
Translation and the Ethos of a Postcolony: Three Case Studies <i>Maria Tymoczko</i>	

Part Three: The Global North

Chapter Eleven	314
Beyond the Postcolonial Reading: The Challenges of Translating Current Sub-Saharan Literature <i>Chloé Signès</i>	
Chapter Twelve	334
Fractalisation: The Human Condition as a Translational Condition <i>Holger Siever</i>	
Part Three: The Global North.....	358
Respondent: <i>Reine Meylaerts</i>	
Notes on Contributors.....	364
Author Index.....	370
Subject Index	377

INTRODUCTION

KOBUS MARAIS AND ILSE FEINAUER

Despite the fact that Africa houses at least 1300 languages, that most if not all African countries have populations that are fluent in more than one language and that translation is thus an everyday phenomenon in both the formal and informal economy, the field of translation studies in Africa is small, relative to other continents. The limited number of monographs, journal articles, conferences and summer schools as well as the non-existence in many countries of translator organisations attest to this assessment. At tertiary level, most of the energy is put into training translators/interpreters, and relatively little is done at the level of research into translation studies phenomena. When one pages through dictionaries, bibliographies and readers, this trend is reinforced.

The Summer School for Translation Studies in Africa, in collaboration with IATIS, hosted a two-day regional workshop at the University of Zambia in August 2014 to focus on translation in the postcolony—and beyond the postcolony. At this workshop, where Paul Bandia read a keynote paper, a growing realisation in thinking about the postcolonial condition emerged, namely, that one cannot think about the postcolony as a result of the empire only. In this realisation, the idea is growing that, these days, the postcolony should also be thought of as a space and a time that has to deal with its own historical and material conditions (including but not limited to the influences of the empire) such as AIDS, child soldiers and corruption.

The questions that drive this book initiated on African soil where African translation studies scholars were debating translation studies in Africa (obviously not in isolation from the rest of the world). With this focus, the collection set out to ask the following questions: Is (postcolonial) translation studies key/critical in (addressing) issues of the postcolony? Should one retain the notion of postcolonial translation studies, and if so, why? Should one reconsider or adapt the assumptions and methodologies of postcolonial translation studies to the new understanding of the postcolony as explained above to question the effectiveness of postcolonial translation studies in Africa to address issues

of the postcolony? Deliberations also included putting the postcolony in historical perspective and taking a critical look at the failures of postcolonial approaches to translation studies and the question: Should we move beyond or away from postcolonial studies, and if so, why and how?

Another question one could ask of postcolonial studies is whether it is not embroiled in power analyses and the building of utopias such as “If we could only...” arguments without due consideration to the material reality of life. In translation studies, this relates to the question why, for example, in a continent where up to 60% of economic activity takes place in the informal economy, most of the work in translation studies still focuses on the formal economy, eschewing the particular material conditions under which translation happens. It further raises questions concerning theorising translation studies from a (bio)semiotic perspective and investigating the implications of such a conceptualisation for a “postcolonial” translation studies.

Africa, however, is not alone in contending with these issues. What is commonly known as the “Global South” shares many of the questions/issues of/in Africa. What is more, work on globalisation and immigration tells us that the “Global North” may also have to deal with the postcolony. A book which dialogically problematises and synthesises these issues should contribute to the global debate in translation studies.

Against this conceptualisation, we invited scholars from all over the world to submit chapters for the book. Not all of the questions were addressed, but some were addressed in more detail than we expected.

Furthermore, the publication of this collection of articles coincides with the 10-year anniversary of Maria Tymoczko’s (2006) influential article “Reconceptualising Western translation theory: Integrating non-Western thought about translation”. The project that she put on the agenda 10 years ago still needs work, much work, on the African continent. The international relevance of this collection lies in the fact that it engages the agenda set out in Tymoczko’s work and, perhaps, move beyond it.

Tymoczko (2006) lists six biases in Western translation theory, namely:

- Translators are seen a necessary factor in interlingual communication.
- Translation involves written texts.
- The primary text types with which translators work are seen to have been defined and categorised.
- Translation is seen as an individual activity.

- Professional translation is seen as the only model worth striving for.
- Culture in the current global world is, all of a sudden, seen as being hybrid.
- The object of translation studies is seen to have been adequately identified.

Firstly, translation studies suffers from a bias¹ towards the formal economy. Not only is the tendency to study phenomena from the formal economy, such as economic translation, legal translation, medical translation or literary translation, but one would also find arguments that translation by non-professionals is not regarded as translation, thus excluding non-professional subtitling from the field of translation studies. This bias means that, in the Global North, about 30% of the world's economic activities are excluded from the gaze of translation studies scholars, and in the Global South, anything between 60% and 80% of the economic activities are excluded.

Secondly, translation studies suffers from a bias towards high culture. Translating Shakespeare, literary translation and the translation of philosophy or academic texts still occupy a large part of translation studies. This means that forms of popular culture and informal culture are excluded from the purview of translation studies scholars.

Thirdly, translation studies suffers from a bias towards language. By taking the popular use of the word translation (interlingual translation) as its definition, translation studies limits itself to studying linguistic phenomena and symbolic meaning. This means that the whole range of indexical and iconic semiosis is excluded from the perspective of translation studies.

Translation studies scholars from the Global South could counter these biases by what could be called “additive alternatives”, meaning that the alternatives are not meant at replacing existing biases but at correcting them. Firstly, by doing comparative translation studies work, translation studies scholars from the Global South could give effect to the full implications of spatial and temporal relativity. In addition, comparative work could enhance a dialogic undercurrent in translation studies, bringing different traditions to talking and listening to one another.

Secondly, translation studies scholars in the Global South should take seriously the particularity of the space-time constraints under which they

¹ By bias, we mean a tendency towards the particular facet identified. We do not quantify this bias in any way but rather postulate it to further a particular argument.

live. Whether one calls this a developmental perspective or a Global South perspective or something else, if Global South scholars operate on the assumption that time and space matter and look for the constraints caused by their particular time and space, they might find the unique features of translational activity in their environment which they could contribute to the global debate.

Lastly, translation studies scholars in the Global South could expand their notion of translation to semiotics rather than language (see also Tymoczko 2016). Semiotics will allow them to study pre- and post-modern phenomena, will allow them to include body and nature in the study of translation and will allow them to deal with multimodality/mediality as it is caused by modern technological advances. By studying the translation of all kinds of meaning, not only interlinguistic meaning, translation studies scholars from the Global South could be able to suggest alternatives to approaches and patterns of thinking in the Global North that have met with a dead end.

Translation studies scholars from the Global South will not be able to change the world, or even the Global South. The activist impact of academics, we think, is overrated. The human condition is too serious to be solved by new methods of and approaches to research. Rather, we, as translation studies scholars of the world, do what is at hand. We contribute what we can on the basis of what we understand now. It may be beneficial or it may not be. Whichever, we need to engage ethically because the way in which one wages a war contains in it the germ of the kind of peace one will reap.

The chapters in this volume contribute to the agenda set out above in various ways, some of them more in line with our own views and some different from our views.

Marais asserts that this link between the translation of signs—not only language—and development is so strong that development is a process rooted in the translation of systems of meaning into further systems of meaning.

Introducing the term “deconsecration” to refer to a process the reverse of that proposed by Casanova, Talento illustrates how translation can act as deconsecrative force, tearing down a language from a position it has formerly occupied and destroying symbolic and literary capital.

Probing the migration of two translations from Tanzania to neighbouring Kenya, where the local population employed them as protest against local exploiters, Mazrui looks at the local recontextualization of the texts leading to a shift in their meaning and message.

Thurman addresses issues like the controversial blackfacing in German productions as well as idiomatic and figurative racial slurs in Shakespeare. In this article, he demonstrates the complexities of inter-semiotic translation by focusing on cultural-political translation in translating for performance on stage.

Fuentes-Luque's chapter not only focuses on cultural phenomena in the informal economy, but he also focuses on non-linguistic phenomena, namely, movies.

With reference to the greater interactive character of performance translations and features such as division of the text among different groups, Naudé, Miller-Naudé and Makutoane illustrate that participation plays a major role in religious communication, thus enhancing the acceptance of vernacular translations of the Bible.

In her article on silences in translation, Caroline Mangerel points out how much political power is exercised by non-translation. Like Holger Siever later, she also points to the need for translation across disciplinary boundaries because of increasing specialisation.

Anchieta and Alencan Pereira's article reflects something of the material particularity of the use of language, namely the fact that African novels are situated in a particular time and space by means of the multilinguality of the texts.

Like Fuentes-Luque, Hernandez chooses not to focus on literary work, but she rather exposes patterns of translation in the newspaper industry. Her article points to the importance of translation in the flow of information which shapes societies.

In her article, Tymoczko uses translation to show how difficult it is to construct a new society. Using translation data from three "Western" contexts, she shows how translation influences the ethos of an emerging society, a process that is painful, slow and messy.

Chloe Signès points out that postcolonial translation studies needs to rethink its epistemological basis. In particular, it should consider moving beyond considering the impact of the colony to considering the impact of various current social forces.

Lastly, Holger Siever deals with globalisation and hypermodernization, in which translations are needed between spheres of society in order for people from these different spheres to understand one another.

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PART I
AFRICA

CHAPTER ONE

WE HAVE NEVER BEEN UN(DER)DEVELOPED: TRANSLATION AND THE BIOSEMIOTIC FOUNDATION OF BEING IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

KOBUS MARAIS

1. Introduction

In his chapter on sentience, Terrence Deacon quotes a scene from a science-fiction book by Terry Bisson in which two aliens are investigating humans after picking up a radio broadcast from earth. In their discussion about the human beings that they have discovered, they have the following dialogue:

“They’re meat all the way through.”

“No brain?”

“Oh, there is a brain all right. It’s just that the brain is made out of meat!”

“So ... what does the thinking?”

“You’re not understanding, are you? The brain does the thinking, the meat.”

“Thinking meat! You’re asking me to believe in thinking meat!”

“Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you getting the picture?”

“Omigod. You’re serious then. They’re made out of meat.” (Deacon 2013, 498–99)

Henry Schwarz, in the introduction to an edited volume on postcolonialism, deals with the history of colonization on our planet and then closes his overview of history and scholarship with the following disclaimer:

One must be cautious however, as are the exemplary scholars named above, in invoking such seemingly ancient antagonisms lest we fall back into naturalistic excuses such as ‘human nature’ for explaining violence against others. As in all responsible scholarship, one must vigilantly contextualize and historicize the sources of conflict so that the world history does not appear as one long succession of colonizing regimes. (Schwarz 2005, 5)

These two quotes represent one of the major problems facing current scholarship on the problem of what it means to be human. The first quote considers the human meat and finds it hard to believe that this meat is able to think. The second quote considers the human spirit and finds it hard to believe that this is the spirit of meat. In other words, the two quotes represent two sides of the Cartesian schism.

The scholarly relevance of the first view is a growing movement I detect in biology, and in biosemiotics as a particular effort in this direction, to bridge the Cartesian schism between body and mind by providing an explanation of how it came to be that “meat can think” (Barbieri 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Favareau 2007; Henning and Scarfe 2013; Hoffmeyer 2003, 2008; Hoffmeyer and Emmeche 1991; Kauffman 1995, 2000, 2008, 2013; Kull 2007; Kull and Torop 2003). As scholars like Merrell (1998) argue, the Cartesian schism has influenced a variety of aspects of Western thinking, leading to a number of persistent binaries such as mind and matter and nature and culture. The effects of this schism can further be seen in the strong divisions between natural sciences and the humanities, the former dealing with matter and the latter with mind.

The works referred to above, mostly from biosemiotics, represent a movement by scholars from the natural sciences to explain the thinking capacity of meat in its animal form (including human animals) without violating the laws of physics and without assuming some supernatural addition to matter.

The relevance of the second perspective is a similar reciprocating movement that I detect in the humanities (Deacon 2013, 2014; Deely 2007; Gorlee 1994; Korning-Zethsen 2007; Kress 2010; Marais 2014; Marais and Kull 2016; Merrell 1998a, 2000, 2003; Petrilli 2003; Wheeler 2006). Here I attempt to join this debate from the humanities side of the Cartesian divide, i.e. to include considerations about the meatiness of thinking and the implications thereof for translation studies. In a postmodern climate of thought, one of the larger intellectual projects would be to continue to rethink the Cartesian divide. While scholars in the humanities know a lot about thinking, I claim, following Merrell (1998, 2000, 2003), that we have not sufficiently theorised the meatiness of

thinking, the materiality of being human. Though Marxist thought and forms of embodied-cognition studies, among others, are dealing with the materiality of human existence, it remains on the agenda of the humanities to reciprocate the move by biologists in order to work out the implications of new developments in their thought and to see where and how we can meet them. I have to make it clear that I am not going the route of cognitive science, rather following Merrell (1998, 96) and Deacon (2014) in maintaining that cognitive science should be embedded in a conceptualization of semiotics.

From both sides of the Cartesian divide, complexity thinking (for an overview of complexity theory, see Marais 2014) is used to provide a conceptual space for thinking about these matters (Deacon 2013; Kauffman 1995; Merrell 1998b, 2000, 2003; Morin 2008). Underlying the conceptual effort in this chapter is a philosophy or meta-theory of complexity. I have made the argument elsewhere that, given a philosophy of complexity and given a Peircean understanding of translation, translation studies is in the unique position to argue for translation as one of the missing links in thinking about the Cartesian divide (Marais 2014). Linking my thought to the likes of Latour (2007), Searle (1995, 1998), Sawyer (2005) and others, I have argued that social reality emerges from the semiotic interactions between human beings (Marais 2014; Marais and Kull 2016). I also used Olivier de Sardan's (2005) anthropological views on development, which he conceptualises as the very emerging of social forms by way of meaning-making actions. Whereas most of the scholars upon whom I base my work have argued that society emerges from linguistic interactions (Sawyer 2005), I am expanding symbolic interactionism by arguing that society emerges from semiotic interactions between human organisms.¹ In Peirce's conceptualisation, these interactions all constitute translations, i.e. the process of creating interpretants (Gorlee 1994; Marais and Kull 2016; Merrell 2003; Peirce 1994), which means that translation can be studied as the process underlying the emergence of the social or cultural. My conceptualisation follows the Peircean conceptualisation of semiosis,² where language is just one of the modes of semiosis, not all of it (Deacon 2014, 97; see Merrell 1998, 2000, 2003 for lengthy and detailed discussions about how much more than language is entailed in semiosis).

Thus, in this chapter, I explore aspects of a theory of translation that entails intersemiotic translation in its broadest conceptualisation (Aguar and Queiros 2013) and its implications for the emergence of society, i.e. a

¹ Biosemiotic theory includes all living organisms in the study of semiotics, and I agree with it. However, this chapter focuses on human semiotics.

² The term "semiosis" is used when referring to the semiotic process or action.

semiotics-sociology of translation (Latour 2007). The particular questions that I address here are as follows: Can we have a translation studies that explains translation on a continuum ranging from the biological to the social without recourse to some form of dualism? Can we have a translation studies that explains the whole range of translational actions, not only translational phenomena linked to language and not only translational phenomena linked to biases in particular cultures? Perhaps, in its most basic form, the question is: Can we have a translation studies that explain how any and all translation contributes to the emergence of social reality without the Cartesian split between nature and culture?

Therefore, I take as my point of departure the argument made by philosophers, theoretical biologists and biosemioticians that human nature is inextricably, paradoxically both meat and mind. I argue that semiotics and biosemiotics provide us with conceptual tools not only to accept this dictum but also to study it empirically. In particular, I argue that translation, conceptualised by Charles Peirce as the process of creating interpretants, creates the conceptual space to study the emergence of mind, and therefore the social/cultural, from matter.

In previous work, I linked translation to development but found that my conceptual underpinning for this effort was somewhat thin. By linking translation and development by means of a biosemiotics framework, it is possible to achieve a richer, postmodern³ conceptualisation for the emergence of the social and the cultural, i.e. development (Olivier de Sardan 2005). This work in translation and development links up with the current interest in the sociology of translation⁴ and the agency of translators in society. As can be seen from the above, this framework is inter-, multi- or even transdisciplinary. Far from a full conceptualisation of the matter at hand, I here attempt to provide some basic markers of a broad meta-theoretical, somewhat philosophical, interdisciplinary framework as a starting point for considering the broadest possible range of translations where translation is a semiotic rather than a linguistic phenomenon.

I am thus trying to explore what would happen if we did factor in human nature as one of a number of possible explanations for why society is the way it is, without falling back into eugenics. How can we free the humanities from the implications of the Cartesian schism, explaining human nature? I am trying to cooperate with theoretical biologists and

³ In the sense that Deely (2007) uses the word.

⁴ In translation studies, “sociology of translation” refers to sociological aspects of the phenomenon of translation (Wolf 2009, 2011, 2012). In sociology, “sociology of translation” refers to a sociology that is characterized by processes of translation (Siever 2016).

biosemioticians in conceptualising the erasure of the Cartesian schism. I am probably questioning some of the most basic tenets of Western thought on what it means to be human. I am probably also trying to develop an ecological way of thinking about the role of translation in the emergence of human existence in all of its facets. I am definitely suggesting that translation studies would benefit from expanding its interest beyond translation proper (Jakobson 2004; Korning-Zethsen 2007).

2. Translation: The process underlying semiosis

Roman Jakobson conceptualised translation on the basis of semiotic theory.⁵ Following Peirce, Jakobson (1980, 10) bases his argument that all interpretation is translation on the continuous and infinite nature of the semiotic process. Jakobson (2004, 39) claims that "... the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign", especially a sign "in which it is more fully developed". On the basis of this conceptualisation, he distinguishes three types of translation. The first he calls intralingual translation, or rewording, and by that he means "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language" (Jakobson 2004, 139). The second category is interlingual translation, or translation proper, which refers to "... an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other sign" (Jakobson 2004, 139). The third category is intersemiotic translation, which is "... an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (Jakobson 2004, 139).

For Jakobson and Peirce, semiosis is a process of creating meaning by means of creating an interpretant, i.e. interpretation. The interpretant, Peirce (1994, 1.339) argues, can and usually does become a representamen itself, leading to yet another interpretant, *ad infinitum*. The point is that every interpretant develops the previous interpretant further (Merrell 1997, 11), specifying it or giving more information about it. It is in this sense that semiosis is a never-ending process, entailing the ability always to create new interpretants. This means that a final interpretant is either a theoretical or a pragmatic matter (De Waal 2013).

As I have argued elsewhere (Marais and Kull 2016), Jakobson's view leaves translation studies scholars with a problem. The way in which he conceptualises intersemiotic translation is limited to the interpretation of "verbal signs" by means of "nonverbal sign systems". He does not

⁵ Eco (2001), for one, does not agree with his conceptualisation, but see my refutation of Eco (Marais and Kull 2016).

comment on whether the opposite is also possible, that is, whether one can translate “nonverbal sign systems” into “verbal signs”, which is actually what Peirce’s conceptualisation allows for. Jakobson’s linguistic and perhaps anthropocentric bias causes him to ignore intersemiotic translations between non-verbal semiotic systems, which biosemioticians, among others, claim do exist (Hoffmeyer 2008; see also Gorlee 1994; Kress 2010). Jakobson thus opens up the possibility of intersemiotic translation, but he does not follow the logical implications of his argument to its conclusion. Rather, he limits his conceptualisation to forms of translation that are related to the meaning of “translation” in the ordinary sense of the word, i.e. interlinguistic translation.

If one reads what Peirce says about translation, on which Jakobson based his argument, it is clear that Peirce does not limit translation to verbal semiotic systems (Gorlee 1994, 26–27, 31). However, Peirce’s conceptualisation also raises some questions. Most of his references to translation take the form of the following quote:

conception of a “meaning,” which is, in its primary acceptance, the translation of a sign into another system of signs (Peirce 1994, 4.127)

From one point of view, translation and interpretation⁶ could be seen to be the same thing, which means that the creation of meaning (interpretation) “is” translation. So the question is: Was Peirce not aware of the problem he was creating by equating interpretation and translation, or did he have something else in mind? I argue that Peirce’s work provides evidence that he did not try to equate translation and interpretation. Consider the following quote from Peirce:

Transuasion (suggesting **translation, transaction, transfusion, transcendental**, etc.) is mediation, or the modification of firstness and secondness by thirdness, taken apart from the secondness and firstness; or, is being in creating Obsistence. (Peirce 1994, 2.89)

Here, Peirce discusses semiosis, the way in which signs work or in which meaning is created, namely sign-action. The outcome of this process is thirdness, or an interpretant or series of interpretants or interpretation. The process through which this takes place is translation, i.e. the translation of interpretants into interpretants. It is not verbal meaning that is translated,

⁶ In Peircean terms, interpretation refers to the formation of interpretants, not to oral translation as is usual in current translation studies.

but firstness⁷ and secondness that are translated by thirdness or into thirdness. This quote clarifies two matters. Firstly, translation entails much more than interlingual translation (Gorlee 1994; Merrell 2000). In fact, it should include all forms of biosemiotic translation. Secondly, translation denotes the semiotic process of turning interpretants into more interpretants. Translation is essentially a process, a linking-creating process, a meaning-creating process. In this conceptualisation, translation is the semiotic process that leads to interpretation as an outcome of the process.

Thus, for the link between translation and development⁸ to be clarified, I am expanding Peirce's framework into a complex emergent conceptualisation of semiosis with a focus on process and organisation (Deacon 2013; Merrell 1997, 2003). I propose to explicate his notion of semiosis by conceptualising semiosis from a complex dynamic systems perspective (Marais and Kull 2016) in the same vein as Merrell (1997, 2003) has suggested. This means that the study of semiosis should include not only the logical relationships between representamen, object and interpretant but also a focus on the historical-material processes of semiosis, the relationship-processes between semiotic phenomena in real time and space, the way in which semiosis entails a process that creates and develops meaning (Robinson 2011). In particular, the study of semiosis should also focus on signs of firstness and secondness, as Merrell (2003) convincingly argues.

The logical implication of this view is that development also entails semiotic development, i.e. the development of one interpretant into

⁷ For readers unfamiliar with the Peircean categories of thought, see De Waal (2013) and Merrell (2000). In short, the categories are as follows (Merrell 2000, 21):

1. Firstness: what there is such as it is, without reference to or interrelation with anything else (i.e., a quality, sensation, sentiment, or in other words, the mere possibility of some consciousness of something).
2. Secondness: what there is such as it is, in interrelation with something else, but without relation to any third entity (i.e., it can include the consciousness of the self-conscious self of something other than itself).
3. Thirdness: what there is such as it is, insofar as it is capable of bringing a second entity into interrelation with a first one (i.e. by way of mediation of the categories of Firstness and Secondness).

⁸ Development is a highly fuzzy and contested notion, referring to many things and representing many different perspectives. For an overview, see (Brett 2009; Coetzee et al. 2001; Haynes 2008; Rabbani 2011). In particular, Olivier de Sardan (2005) uses the term "development" to refer to all human responses or adaptation to their environment, a position I strongly support later in the chapter. Also see Marais (2014).

another interpretant. For this view, Olivier de Sardan's (2005) work as well as the wide-ranging work of Latour (2007) provide ample evidence. Suffice it to point out here that development is a process based on the translation of systems of meaning into further systems of meaning, irrespective of the nature of those systems, for example, economic, political, cultural or legal.⁹ It is also a process in which human beings respond to a particular time-space environment by constructing meaningful responses. Humans and groups of humans are inevitably drawn by time and space to interpret their environment by constructing cultural, social, material interpretants. They are then drawn to respond to those interpretants by translating them into more developed interpretants. In this conceptualisation, development does not have the connotation of better or more advanced. Rather, it has the qualification of providing greater understanding, being more meaningful, a response that is more apt, allowing organisms to flourish (Merrell 1998). Given this conceptualisation, one is free not only to ask of development interpretants how they compare with other interpretants but whether they are meaningful, given the particular spatial-temporal constellation of the context in which they occur. Because development is always normative and ethical, one also asks whether this particular interpretant allows the organisms to flourish. Because fallibilism is inherent in human interpretants, one would always need further translations, searching for interpretants under which humanity can flourish even more. What is a crucial implication of this view, however, is that development is a meaning-constructing movement.

A possible interpretation of my argument as claiming pan-semioticism requires a short comment here. My argument here and in the following sections claims, on the basis of the strong link between Peirce's semiotics and his phenomenology, that all human action, including development, entails a semiotic aspect.¹⁰ The wording is crucial here. I do not claim that all action is semiosis. I argue that all human action, including all and any mental actions that humans take, entails a semiotic *aspect*. Action is not all semiosis, but all action has a semiotic aspect, just as all action has aspects

⁹ Note that Roland Barthes (1986) has argued in the 1960s and 1970s already that social and cultural systems are also semiotic systems (see also Gorlee 1994, 33–37).

¹⁰ For views on semiosis in non-human animals, see Favareau (2007) for a detailed bibliography. Also see Sebeok (2001) and Von Uexkull (1940).

of time or space. As phenomena of the human experience, it cannot be different.¹¹

3. Biosemiotics: Expanding meaning

Although my view of semiosis makes it possible to conceptualise the development of meaning and meaningful systems in human society or culture, I need a second step to overcome the Cartesian schism, an aim I set out in the introduction. This step entails expanding semiosis to include biosemiosis. This move is necessary to present a unified explanation of the development of meaning by living organisms, of which *homo sapiens* forms part.

I take my lead from Peirce (1994, 1.409), who views semiosis as one of the habits that living organisms have taken. All living organisms need to interact with their environment and need to interpret information from the environment in terms of their own existence. Kauffman (2008) calls it the distinction between “yum” and “yuck”, which is basic to the survival of all organisms. John Deely (2007) refers to this basic interpretation that all organisms have to make whenever they perceive something, namely approach, avoid or ignore. This interaction with the environment on the basis of interpreting information thus entails semiosis (Cobley 2010, 3–4). Semiosis refers to the ability of all living organisms to take any phenomenon (representamen) as standing for or in the place of any other phenomenon (object), leading to (further) meaning (interpretant). This is the basic semiotic ability that distinguishes living systems from non-living matter (Favareau 2007; Hoffmeyer 2008; Kull 2007; Sebeok and Danesi 2000). It is also sometimes called the lower semiotic threshold. If one takes the various aspects of this conceptualisation, they refer to the following:

- “to take”, in whichever way, e.g. through highly developed sensory awareness such as consciousness or through rudimentary sensory awareness (without consciousness)
- “something”, whatever it may be, including all things possible and impossible that can be distinguishable, i.e. the proverbial difference that makes a difference

¹¹ For a detailed discussion about Peircean phenomenology, see De Waal (2001; 2013). For a detailed discussion about semiosis as the link between reality and mind, see Deely (2007) and also Cobley (2010).

- “as” anything that a living being takes it for, from the survivalist yum or yuck, the quite tangible iconic and indexical to the fantastic symbolic
- “something else”, whatever the “else” may be, namely the interpretant which can be as simple as yum or yuck or as complex as a god or a worldview or a culture.

The ability to function semiosically allows organisms to form a response to their environment, taking into account the needs of the organism as a whole. As this ability evolved, it allowed more than mere unmediated responses. It allowed organisms to transcend the confinements of space and time by being able to interpret things in reality as signs of things that are absent (Deacon 2013). With the semiotic ability, organisms can interpret things from other spaces or from other times, both past and future, as signs relevant to their existence. Thus entered the absential, i.e. meaning, intentions, aboutness, into the fray of organism life.

The emergence of biosemiotic ability thus entails one of the explanations of the absential in organism life. Developing Deacon’s (2013) fascinating work in this field further is a job for another day. Suffice it to say that the evolution of the organism’s ability to deal with more than the “immediate” by means of the “mediate” to some extent frees its existence from the constraints of space and time, allowing it better options for survival. In fact, my argument is that, in humans, this ability has evolved so far that they tend to think that they have severed the link with time and space and body altogether, giving birth to all kinds of radical constructivist ideas (see also Merrell 1998, 2003). Post-Cartesian thinking should maintain the semiotic paradox, namely that meaning entails constructing a response to an environment, an “Other”, as a Second (Merrell 1998). At the very least, meaning has a spatial-temporal substrate in the human brain, and even the most fanciful flights of the imagination relate somehow to the coordinates of time and space. In Deely’s (2007, 13) words, semiosis and biosemiosis assist scholarship in their efforts to “transcend the oppositions of nature to culture, inner to outer, *ens reale* (being independent of mind) to *ens rationis* (being dependent on mind)”. The way in which biosemiotics based on Peircean thought allows one to conceptualise both mind and matter in paradoxical fashion makes it possible to conceptualise all possible translation phenomena.

Thus, with the addition of a biosemiotics perspective, I now consider the way in which meaning develops in living organisms through translation, focusing on, but not limiting myself to, human beings.

4. The development of meaning: Translating interpretants

In this section, I draw together the ideas on translation and biosemiotics made above and work out some implications for thinking about development. Though translation studies has been involved in thinking about developmental contexts by means of its links with postcolonial and cultural studies and, more recently, the interests in agency, sociology and power, it has not yet conceptualised its thinking in terms of thinking in the field of development studies. Similarly, development studies has, with one or two exceptions, not conceptualised its thinking in terms of translation studies (Lewis and Mosse 2006).

One of the points of debate in development studies is the high failure rate of development efforts of all kinds. Each new turn in development studies claims to have found the missing link which the previous approaches have missed. A point that is made time and time again in the context of development failure is that development efforts are often more about the development specialists who want to get something done than about the people who “need development” (Westoby and Dowling 2013, 55–56), i.e. it is more about applying technical know-how than (also) facilitating the creation of meaning. My argument in this section is that the semiotic response theory of development that I am putting forward can assist with this problem in a number of ways. Firstly, it provides scholars of development with a descriptive approach whereby to describe and understand development practices rather than tools for doing development or norms for what societies should look like. Secondly, with the philosophy of complex adaptive systems underlying the semiotic response theory of development, it will become clear that it is part of the reductionist fallacy and the Cartesian schism to think that semiotic systems as complex as development contexts can be managed to success. Thirdly, it provides a framework for translation studies scholars to study all kinds of translational actions that contribute to the emergence of society. Finally, it conceptualises development as (also) a meaning-making endeavour, a meaning-making response to a particular space-time.

In what follows, I provide a brief introduction to current thinking in development studies. I then briefly discuss Olivier de Sardan’s development anthropology and Nussbaum’s capabilities approach to development as a link to my thinking before attempting to explore the implications of the biosemiotic response theory for development.

Development studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that arose at the end of World War II.¹² While development or progress has been a topic of thinking since the Ancient Greeks, development studies is a phenomenon with its own history, aims and conceptualisations (Rist 2002). It developed in the wake of the fall of Empire and the decolonisation of the middle of the 20th century, looking for alternative relationships between the former colonial states and the new, independent states. Broadly speaking, it operates as an interdiscipline between economics, political science and sociology. Historically, the field of study moved through three broad phases. Firstly, the structuralist-functionalist phase between 1945 and 1970 operated on the basis that, if the correct structures like democracy and a free market were in place, development would follow naturally. Secondly, between 1970 and 1990, market liberalism dominated with countries from the Global South expected to follow market control strictly. Thirdly, since the 1990s, a neoliberal approach coupled with massive criticism against the development project as such, mainly from deconstructionists, were dominant. Currently, thinking is permeated with a variety of complexity thinking which tries to balance the market with some state control and input from civil society (Brett 2009).

The thinking espoused in the previous paragraph all pertains to macro-level theories. Korten (1990) actually argued convincingly that development takes place not only at the macro level but at four levels or, in his terms, generations: providing direct help, e.g. food, to people in a moment of crisis; building capacity for people to solve their own problems, e.g. training; efforts to change local, national and global institutions and policies; and mobilizing people's movements around the world. Thus, one of the shifts in thinking about development has been to community development, a people-centred approach or what is sometimes called a "bottom-up" or "grassroots" approach.

In particular, Olivier de Sardan (2005, 15) suggests a comparative approach to development in which development is conceptualised as an adaptive response to a particular context. In his view, social change occurs pervasively, and all societies have to respond to it. He argues that all societies, not only postcolonial or un(der)developed ones, have to develop in response to social change. Olivier de Sardan (2005, 69) thus puts forward a localised approach to development in which he emphasises the meaning-making nature of development without theorising it semiotically. Instead, he (Olivier de Sardan 2005, 91) theorises it hermeneutically, i.e.

¹² See Section A in Coetzee et al. (2001) for conceptual and historical perspectives on development thinking.

as interpretation, creating meaning. His work of opening up development studies to the interests of meaning and understanding is invaluable, and much of what I wish to do builds on his initiative.

Nussbaum's human capabilities approach has become influential as a people-centred approach to development. She argues that economic and political measurements at the macro level, e.g. GDP or whether there is a democratic government in a country, do not necessarily say anything about what it means to be human in a particular country (Nussbaum 2011; Nussbaum and Sen 1993). One example is that a high GDP could hide a wide gap between rich and poor by focusing on the average income per capita. She thus argues that development should be aimed at creating opportunities for human beings to develop their potential, whatever that may be. To this end, she presents a list of capabilities that she claims have some general relevance all over the world and could thus be negotiated in every development situation to decide on a focus (Nussbaum 2011). While I agree that her theory entails a major step forward, it leaves out semiosis in general and language in particular as a crucial factor in development. Also, it is driven by a particular set of goals, rather than being open-ended as a complex adaptive process inherently is.

Furthermore, development studies could benefit from a semiotic conceptualisation for at least two reasons. Firstly, a semiotic conceptualisation will provide development studies with a descriptive tool that will be valuable in efforts better to understand what development entails. Approaches such as the human capabilities approach are highly normative in that they set values that need to be achieved. It cannot be denied that development is a value-laden endeavour, and I would not want to change that. What I would suggest, however, is to broaden the thinking with a descriptive approach that will help with understanding a problem that we do not understand well (yet). Secondly, in a semiotic approach to development, considering development as a clash of "universes of the mind", to quote Lotman (1990, 2005), will allow one better to understand and guide the process itself, not as some goal to be strived for but as responding to the environment into which we are born by creating our own meaning to the best of our ability. I think the point is that nobody knows what the end-result of development will be. It is an open-ended process. Thus, goal-oriented development studies run the risk of closing down the openness of an essentially open, non-linear, complex semiotic process before it has even started.

Westoby and Dowling (2013) take an important step in the direction of conceptualising development in terms of meaning-making when they base their approach to community development in dialogue. With this move,

they not only invite language into the debate but, more basically, they situate development at the level of intersubjectivity, to which I return later. This truly postmodern approach, in the sense that Deely (2007) defines it, does not aim at an outcome and, from this perspective, cannot fail. This is an important point. Development has been conceptualised normatively since its inception, and thus it is no wonder that it failed. Being human cannot be a failure. Responding to an environment into which you were born can probably be regarded as more effective or less effective, but can it be said to have failed? You can only fail if you do not reach a pre-set goal. For humanity, there is no such goal, which is why I chose the title (borrowing from Latour (1993)): “We have never been un(der)developed”. Being human, being a semiotic being, means responding in a creative way by constructing meaningful responses. These are the implications of the continuous nature of semiosis. In fact, Olivier de Sardan has emphasised this basic point: Development is a meaning-making response to an Other, a point that I work out semiotically in what follows.

Whether conceptualised at macro or micro levels, whether thought of as an economic, political or human-centred endeavour, whether a technical or a hermeneutical or a dialogical activity, development entails a biosemiotic aspect. Development presupposes biosemiotic interactions between human beings (Sawyer 2005) which, given the argument above, presupposes translation. Once again, I am not claiming that development is biosemiosis or translation. I am claiming that development entails a biosemiotic and thus a translational aspect, or that it presupposes biosemiotics and translational interaction.

Following from the above, I now draw a few outlines of a semiotic response theory of development, in which translation entails the semiotic process as argued in the first section. My argument runs as follows: Living organisms arrive in a pre-existing world. For their survival, they need to respond to this world in an appropriate way. If not, they will not flourish, at best, or they will not survive, at worst (Cobley 2010, 3–4). Except for the physical and biological responses, living organisms have to respond to their environment semiotically. In other words, they have to respond to their environment by “interpreting” stimuli from the environment as information about something. In Kaufmann’s terms, they need to decide whether something is “yum” or “yuck”, and in Deely’s terms, they need to decide whether to avoid, approach or ignore. For simple organisms, this process is also simple and could be called something like “proto-semiosis” because there is no consciousness in the sense that there is with humans. However, it still is a “proto-decision” based on semiosis because it can go wrong. Interpreting “yum” instead of “yuck” can be fatal.

This very basic semiotic response becomes much more complex in higher life forms. In plants, it takes a different form, in non-human animals, yet another form, and in human animals, yet another form. All life forms, however, share this ability and task. The important point that flows from this discussion is that all organisms are, temporally speaking, secondary to their environment. This means that they must respond to that environment. I am well aware that the notion of response will not sit well with many scholars because the Western paradigm of thought (even translation studies) have been emphasising human agency and mastery over the environment through constructivist thinking. It is indeed my intention to deconstruct this way of thinking by arguing that organisms are, first and foremost, responding to an environment in order to maintain their existence.

The implication of this point is that the relationship to the environment should be a factor in development thinking and practice. Deely (2007) argues convincingly that relationality is at the heart of life. No living organism exists without real relationships with other organisms or the environment. The environment in which any development action takes place has been shaped by a particular space and time, which needs to be factored into thinking about the action. This means that a semiotic response theory takes a stance against cultural reductionism in which development (or postcolony in most cases) is seen as a contestation of ideas with little attention to the material conditions in which the contestation takes place and which makes possible the contestation itself.

The second point is that development, conceptualised in terms of semiotic responses, is thoroughly political and ethical. It is such because the Other is factored into the definition of response. As indicated in the previous paragraph, one of the problems that humanity has not yet able been to solve is that of relationality—in particular, relations with the Other. Deely (2007) argues that one reason for this is the solipsistic bias in modernist philosophy. His argument is that, because of the Cartesian schism, intersubjective intentionality between humans and their environment has been rejected. Thus, what I can know is inside of my head, the prisoner of arbitrary linguistic symbols. My knowledge is something that I, as an agent, construct irrespective of an environment. In fact, I am not able to know that environment, nor am I able to know the human Other. The implication is solipsism: I am contained inside the activities of my mind. By means of a semiotic conceptualisation, Deely shows the way in which we would be able to say that intentional existence, i.e. living, entails relationships and cannot be thought of apart from relationships, which are suprasubjective. To use Deely's example, a frog