

Call for Papers, *Cahiers de littérature orale* 104 (2008)

The twists and turns of translation

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This issue invites anthropologists, linguists, ethnomusicologists, and specialists of oral literature to reflect on their practices of translation. It starts from the observation that the contingencies of translation, though integral to the research process, are rarely made visible in published works.

Anthropologists, for example, like to portray themselves in an unfavorable light: at a loss, incompetent, slightly ridiculous. Yet if there is one subject of laughter that rarely lasts beyond the first few pages, it is their linguistic competence. Although many ethnographers get off to a bad start, the rapid pace at which they master the language later leaves no room for doubt. At first ridiculed, they turn into seasoned speakers—much like Malinowski—, attuned to the subtlest nuances of the words they hear. Many of these words, duly noted, are added to the body of research material; others, among the most striking and intriguing, will be treated as full-fledged objects of inquiry (songs, poems, tales, proverbs, ritual speeches, epics, etc.).

However, transcribing and translating utterances—especially when they belong to the wider realm of the verbal arts—is a complex endeavor that does not rely solely on the hard-won skills of researchers. Utterances, texts, or songs retain a certain opacity; revealing their meaning only partially, they resist interpretation. The process of their translation, far from straightforward, involves a multitude of actors, misunderstandings, errors and detours (Fabian 1995, Caton 2005). To engage in translation thus means plunging directly into a story full of twists and turns. And these trajectories of translation, with their underlying mechanisms and their own temporalities, are what this issue sets out to describe and analyze.

Much attention has rightly been given to the invaluable assistance provided by those often referred to as “key informants,” of whom Ogotëmmeli (Griaule 1975), Muchona (Turner 1967), and Bito Kassi (Metcalf 2001) are outstanding examples. Intercaptors and travelling companions, who acted as intermediaries for anthropologists much as they had for explorers or colonial administrators (Lawrence et al. 2006; Van den Avenne 2017), these research partners are, in some cases, recognized as true co-authors (Boas & Hunt 1902, Goody & Gandah 1980; Albaka & Casajus 1992; Humphrey & Onon 1996; Colley & Sanogo 2023). This dyadic relationship, while leaving an undeniable imprint, nonetheless obscures a complex web of relationships and circumstances. The texts, or “tissues of words” (Barber 2007: 33), which researchers focus on, are often full of ellipses, allusions, echoes, paraphrases, and quotations. They contain many references to other discourses and exist in connection with, in response to, or in support of words spoken or written elsewhere and at other times (Bakhtin 1986, Barber 2007). Their content and form are highly sensitive to the situation of enunciation and the interactions in which interlocutors are engaged as they speak, fall silent, and then speak again (Jakobson 1953, Bornand & Leguy 2013, Goody 2014).

Transcription, an essential step in the research process, is in itself a delicate process of “entextualization” (Mason 2025). We know how difficult it is to transcribe such oral material into written form. Franz Boas already expressed concern about this difficulty (Joseph &

Kalinowski 2022); Bronislaw Malinowski likewise deplored it (2022 [1935]: 262–263). How does one render the intonation, timbre, changes in rhythm, or gestures of a speaker—especially when said speaker, under various influences, adapts the words and their prosody (Finnegan 2007)? As such, transcription often involves the assistance of several people and constitutes an initial, collaborative step in the transposition of meaning (Vigouroux 2007). Under layers of notes taken and crossed out, the ethnographer uncovers traces of disagreements, revisions, and successive interpretations.

Threading one's way through this verbal material therefore entails actively engaging with numerous interlocutors (Basso 2016; Riverti 2024). Sometimes, one simply follows those who lead the way to others who “will know.” Along the way, people reformulate, comment, and contextualize. Further on, an informant places in the researcher's hands a book, a diary, or a newspaper article; elsewhere, someone plays a recording or directs the researcher to an entry in an old dictionary, an unexpected etymology. Each time, the identity of these anonymous “someones” remains to be determined: local intellectuals, outsiders, passionate individuals, and so on. Their own intentions (including political ones), their assumptions about the ethnographer's aims, the conditions that make mutual trust possible, and the pitfalls of mistrust, still need to be clarified. The means they mobilize to redirect the course of translation need to be better understood. What thus emerges is an unfolding choreography of encounters—arranged or accidental, fleeting or recurrent, in the midst of action or in the aftermath of fieldwork. For the story of translation weaves together different temporalities. It develops in conversations with members of the diaspora and in informal exchanges in laboratory corridors. Translation also involves dialogues at a distance between researchers. For translating means positioning oneself within a field of knowledge while aiming at a particular readership. At this stage decisions are made concerning standards of presentation, the preference for a single version or multiple variants, and fidelity to literal wording or literary expression.

Here, the political dimension is never far away. On the one hand, nineteenth and twentieth centuries collections, anthologies, and archival materials are today under renewed scrutiny. Attention is being focused on colonial-era dispossession, raising questions of appropriation and the “theft of voices” (Albers and Devevey 2024). The fate of these texts through successive re-editions, transformations (Déléage 2016), and artistic uses is also drawing close scrutiny. On the other hand, debates on restitution and collaboration with the communities involved are linked to the opportunities offered by multimedia technologies for recovering, at least in part, the interactivity and intertextuality lost in the linearity of written text (Glowczewski 2008; Rappoport 2009; Foley 2012).

Translations of oral material are therefore the outcome of a social process. Always dialogical (Feld 1987; Tedlock & Mannheim 1995), they emerge from a “chorus of voices” (Sato-Rossberg 2012) traces of which remain more or less visible in the translated texts. Among the questions this issue seeks to address, then, are those concerning the ways voices, temporalities, and situated circumstances become entangled in the process of translation. A further question is how the linguistic, stylistic, or performative specificities of the materials under study shape particular trajectories of translation. Attention will also be given to the relationship between the course of a translation and the development of a broader scholarly project: what kinds of translations do researchers working on oral traditions produce in relation to the fields and analytical currents in which they participate? In what ways have their engagements with

translation contributed to transforming their disciplines? Finally, what becomes of these translations when they are reappropriated—with or without the active participation of the researcher—by artists or the communities concerned?

Spoken words are at times intriguing. The trajectory of their translation often follows a twisted path and involves numerous actors. Countless vicissitudes are possible along the way. This issue of the *Cahiers de littérature orale* invites its contributors to relate these trajectories.

[Text translated from French with the kind assistance of Kathie Birat]

Submission guidelines

Alongside full-length articles (maximum 50,000 characters), the journal offers contributors the opportunity to publish shorter texts in the “document” section (10,000–12,000 characters). For this issue, the document section may be used to present a critical commentary on a translation (published or unpublished), an archaeology of the process written by one or several contributors.

Article and document proposals should be submitted in text form only. However, we also encourage the use of audio and/or video materials, as well as photographs or drawings.

Articles may be written in French or English. Proposals (including a title, an abstract of 2,000 to 3,500 characters maximum and bibliographical references) should be sent to laurent.legrain@univ-tlse2.fr and kmorand@parisnanterre.fr before **15 October 2026**.

Authors will be notified regarding their proposals by the end of October 2026.

Once the proposal is accepted, **articles must be submitted by 15 May 2027**. They will undergo double-blind peer review in accordance with the journal's usual procedure. Texts must comply with the standards established by Presses de l'Inalco. The details of the guidelines for contributors, the recommendations regarding inclusive writing, and the journal's code of ethics are available on the *Cahiers de littérature orale* under the ‘Note for contributors’ section: <https://journals.openedition.org/clo/851>

The issue is scheduled for publication in 2028 (No. 104).

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