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## LA IMPORTANCIA DE LAS TRADUCCIONES EPISTEMOLÓGICAS EN EL SUR GLOBAL THE IMPORTANCE OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL TRANSLATIONS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH LAURA EFRON

ES | EN

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### Abstract

Over the centuries, the West imposed and sustained a dominant definition of knowledge which asserted that Western knowledge is the only legitimate knowledge that was taught as part of the process of “civilisation”, imposed in the colonies. After centuries of independence, Latin American societies and post-colonial realities and ideas promoted the open debate of this historical epistemological domination and enabled the circulation of other ideas coming from the peripheric world. In the Latin American context, these attempts to re-position knowledge that was formerly marginalised from the mainstream are very important and are still taking place, as the dominating universals were not completely destroyed yet. Based on a theoretical review, the aim of this article is to underline the importance of epistemological translations as they enable a horizontal dialogue among different systems of knowledge, and also promote the production of new ideas from the margins. More importantly, based on a literature review, this article introduces the idea of translation as a tool that promotes the democratisation of knowledge from the margins and shares Zapatista’s case to reflect on that.

**Keywords:** Knowledge, Epistemology, Translation, Ecology of knowledges, Global South

### 1 Introduction: On knowledge as a concept and not a universal truth<sup>1</sup>

The question of knowledge has been historically addressed in societies all over the world, for centuries. Nevertheless, it was the European conception of knowledge that managed to produce and impose a universal and universalising idea, powerful enough to show itself as sufficiently homogeneous and consistent to discredit

all other possibilities arising from alternative perspectives, epistemologies, and cosmologies (Quijano, 2000; Sousa Santos, 2007). This process of theoretical and epistemological domination took place alongside the history of European expansion and colonisation of the other continents and the consolidation of the capitalist system; and managed to gain its dominant position as universal from the 15th century onwards (Mudimbe, 1989; Sousa Santos, 2007). The process of epistemological domination relied, not only on the imposition of specific ways of explaining and understanding the world, but also the rejection of other alternative ways of doing it. Making European knowledge the acceptable standard, also implied that knowledge was produced in Europe and spread, from there, throughout the rest of the world. Knowledge was organised hierarchically, based on the metropole's knowledge definitions. Thus, European ideas were understood as a theory while ideas produced in the colonial territories (or later on in underdeveloped countries) were defined as data (Hountondji, 1997; Connell, 2007, p. 106).

In Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2007, p. 19) words, this process of territorial and epistemological domination implied not only the genocide of local populations (as was the case of indigenous people in Latin America over the colonial period) but also an epistemicide. Local cosmologies, ideas, and ways of understanding the world, and living in it, were destroyed by colonial domination. As a result of centuries of epistemological oppression, when these territories finally gained their political independence, they continued to perpetuate the system of colonial domination of knowledge. Newly independent local governments tended to embrace European knowledge as the only true knowledge in an attempt to develop their local realities into civilised and developed societies (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 33).

The newly independent Latin American nation-states imposed, over their first century, Spanish language and catholicism nationwide and embraced the ideas of progress and civilisation coming from the North (Mignolo, 2000). While this domination has been contested over the years, many countries still continue to reproduce the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000). As Aníbal Quijano (2000) explains, since the colonisation of the Americas, a new system of domination and exploitation was widely imposed. Based on racial/ethnic classifications, the newly capitalist Western world defined not only the international division of labour but also ways of behaving, being, and thinking. The instauration of racism as the hegemonic way of redefining the world implied in itself the rejection of non-Western cosmologies and epistemologies. While independence enabled local societies to build newly independent nation-states, the impact of colonial racism continued to affect the way in which local societies saw themselves, behaved, and thought about their futures and national projects. In other words, independence did not imply a real liberation or decolonisation of the minds, bodies, social and economic structures. During colonial times knowledge was not seen as something that could circulate, mix, exchange and change depending on contact with disparate societies. Knowledge was something to be transferred from the metropolises and adopted within the colonial territories. And, if any knowledge was being produced locally, it would only be recognised as such if it reproduced the epistemological norms coming from the North. This definition of knowledge did not really change after independence.

This way of understanding knowledge production and circulation was studied by historian Georges Basalla, who developed a theory on how Western Science spread into the peripheric territories (Basalla, 1967). His theory has been recognised as a valid explanation of the history of knowledge circulation. Basalla's diffusionist model of knowledge transfer is composed of three stages that explain how European science arrived at the colonial territories and was adopted by the locals (Basalla, 1967). While the aim of the author is to track how European knowledge expanded historically, until it became universal knowledge, his approach (although historical) is not critical of the idea of European knowledge itself. From his perspective, there is no intention to reflect on the idea of European knowledge and its inner contradictions, nor on the exchanges and dialogues that existed historically between that type of knowledge and others coming from other regions. His perspective reaffirms the idea of Western knowledge as homogeneous and consolidated. And at the same time, it reinforces the invisibilisation of the existence of other knowledges.

Basalla's (1967) explanation contributed to the understanding of how European ideas infiltrated local realities since modern times. He pays particular attention to the development of European science in the colonial territories. Basalla's (1967) explanation of the rise of European science reproduced the coloniality of power and knowledge: reinforced the power of the epistemological and cosmological European domination that remained after the political independence of the colonial territories. Hence, while there was a genuine concern about the history of ideas and knowledge, there was no discussion over the meaning of the concepts. His explanation counts with several theoretical and epistemological problems that have only been addressed in the last thirty decades, by intellectuals and academics around the world. Subaltern studies in India, post-colonial studies in Africa and de-colonial studies in Latin America questioned and contested the colonial domination of identities, subjects and subjectivities, ideas, language, beliefs and knowledge from different approaches. These are all in dialogue with each other to some extent, because while their conceptual frameworks may differ, their aims and concerns share historical backgrounds of oppression.

During the last thirty years, this well-consolidated idea and belief has been questioned and deconstructed, not only by academics and intellectuals but also by alternative political projects such as new constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, the struggle against agro-toxics, and the question over land in many Latin American countries (Satgar, 2018). Local knowledge began to have a much more powerful influence in the development of new policies based on local realities, local cosmologies, and local experiences. Something similar can be said regarding the intellectual and academic space. During the last thirty years, the idea of European knowledge as universal (and objective true) began to be disputed by local theories that give expression to local beliefs, acknowledge backgrounds and seek to recover and revalue local realities, knowledge and epistemologies.

There have been many attempts to redefine the idea of knowledge, as a means of disputing the dominance of the European concept. Some authors have chosen to emphasise alternative concepts, such as that of indigenous knowledge or knowledge from the borders. Others re-define the main concept of knowledge itself. Intellectuals and academics are disrupting the “naturalness” of the dominant epistemology. They share a deep concern over the issue of how to express the complexities of what is being discussed and, in that process, how not to fall into the trap of the dominant discourse. In other words, defining the concept of knowledge is political.

## **2 Re-defining knowledge: The concepts of knowledge from borders, Indigenous knowledge, and the ecology of knowledges**

Questioning the concept of knowledge so that it could be re-defined and decolonised required the development of new reflections and explanations that could give voice to ideas that had been rejected and repressed over centuries. This questioning took place in two different ways. One was through the local development of new and alternative policies that put into practice alternative definitions of citizenship, democracy, well-being, and the recognition of the self. The other took the form of academic, intellectual discussions and disputes over alternative ways of producing alternative knowledge. In other words, there were two movements taking place at the same time. These two approaches are interconnected and in constant dialogue as knowledge is a way to understand the world that surrounds us and informs how we act/behaviour in it. There have been (and are) many debates on how to redefine knowledge. Two significant alternative concepts arose from the academic and intellectual sphere (viz. the idea of knowledge from the borders and indigenous knowledge). The general concern was (and is) how to decolonise the mind, the thoughts, and ultimately the self.

### **2.1 Knowledge from the borders**

Knowledge from the borders is a concept that has been developed among decolonial intellectuals and scholars. Particularly, it was Walter Dignolo (2007, 2011) who reflected on how societies produce knowledge that belongs to them and represents them in a context of coloniality of power. How do people open up their ways of seeing, experiencing, understanding and explaining the world? From his perspective, the epistemic and paradigmatic changes can only take place from inside the system of oppression. In his opinion, a system of knowledge cannot be replaced by changing only its content or perspective, it also needs to change the terms that define and structure the content. So, while societies are immersed in a colonial epistemic system, the battle is not about changing the ideas or discourses but changing the whole system and opening the opportunity for other epistemic systems to coexist. Border thinking is, for Dignolo (2007, 2011), the most effective weapon for breaking down the epistemic oppressive system. It is not about replacing the dominating system with a new one. It is about destroying the notion of any universal system of thoughts.

Thus, border thinking implies accepting the fact that we are immersed in a universalised system of ideas; and that rejecting it does not directly translate into destroying it, as that rejection can all too easily reproduce the structures of oppression. Rather, border thinking implies questioning the structure of the epistemic system and opening the space for a pluri-versal world where different cosmologies and epistemologies can be in dialogue and coexist. As abstract as this proposal may seem, it does question the definition of knowledge and it underlines the importance of rethinking the way in which ideas position themselves and relate to each other. From Dignolo’s perspective, there is no need to define the concept of knowledge because by doing so we would be delimiting (once again) what can be thought and how to think (Dignolo, 2007, 2011). His proposal works as a manifesto that positions the debate in the right place. Nevertheless, in a more practical way, this manifesto does not share suggestions on how to further develop border thinking. While that is in fact part of his own point of view: there is no one single way to do so; the manifesto leaves many questions unanswered and in the context of epistemic disputes, there is a need for a clearer explanation with clearer positionalities.

### **2.2 Indigenous knowledge**

Another significant attempt to question the concept of knowledge and the colonality of power came from scholars and intellectuals who adopted the idea of indigenous knowledge as a strategy for disputing the legacies of colonial systems of thought. Indigenous knowledge is a concept adopted among scholars and intellectuals in an attempt to protect local knowledge that is being threatened by capitalist relationships, exploitation of land, plants, people, etc. By defining local knowledges as indigenous they also aim to question the epistemic system of oppression and exploitation, which rejects local ideas as invalid while using them to produce goods that are sold in the global market. These scholars describe indigenous knowledge as traditional norms, values, and cosmologies that organise the way people live and understand their world (Dei, Hall, and Rosenberg, 2000). Consequently, their concept of indigenous knowledge makes domination explicit. Furthermore, it disputes the idea of one universal knowledge by acknowledging other knowledges. Nevertheless, defining local, alternative knowledges as indigenous, is also a way of limiting and restraining what can be considered part of it.

Indigenous knowledge stands in opposition to Eurocentric knowledge. Thus, it defines itself as a counterpart of another knowledge. It is not independent and it does not promote border thinking. It also romanticises the idea of traditional knowledges as pure and historically rooted in a specific territory. It does not acknowledge diversities that exist between knowledges nor their dynamic links and dialogues. This definition does not question the terms of the epistemic system but only its content. Thus, it reproduces deep dynamics of defining and categorising inherited from the colonial epistemology. The concept of indigenous knowledge is theoretical and comes from the intellectual and academic world. Local societies do not need to label their knowledge as indigenous. Their knowledge is knowledge. It is neither traditional, nor indigenous, but simply knowledge. Defining knowledge as indigenous implies that it is either being viewed from an essentialist understanding (as a pure and ancestral knowledge that seems precious in present times), or from an ethnocentric understanding, (as an attempt to recognise other epistemologies while still defining them from a specific academic point of view). If indigenous societies do not refer to themselves as indigenous or call their knowledge indigenous knowledge, then this idea also expresses the hierarchical relationship between researchers and those societies being researched by them. It expresses a relation of power in which academic knowledge seems to have the right to define and name knowledge that does not belong to its epistemic sphere.

### **2.3 Ecology of knowledges and translation**

The way to democratise knowledge is to accept the fact that there are many knowledges, that they are diverse, and that they cannot and should not be defined based on their relationship with other knowledges. Knowledges are situated, partial and incomplete (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 31). This understanding derives from the fact that knowledges are produced in particular contexts, reflect on particular issues and look for answers to particular concerns. For this reason, no specific knowledge can really be universal or answer disparate universal questions. The only way to break the colonality of power is by replacing "the monoculture of scientific knowledge" with an "ecology of knowledges" that understands the need for diverse knowledges to coexist and interact with each other as the way to produce a fairer world (Sousa Santos, 2003). European knowledge is in fact a particular knowledge that succeeded in imposing itself as the existing universal standard based on political and economic domination and control. So, while local struggles aim for more democratic and equal political and economic conditions, there is also a need for democratising knowledge.

Following this idea, the main question that arises is how to do it? How does society democratise knowledge and build an ecology of knowledges. Historically, the first attempts to recognise other knowledges relied on approaching them through the concept of multiculturalism and relativism. The problem with both concepts was (and still is) their positionality. Both concepts implicitly accepted the belief in universal knowledge. That is to say, from a Western perspective, there was an interest in trying to understand others and their ways of living and thinking. Nevertheless, that did not mean opening the reflection on how different knowledges coexist. At the same time, these two concepts were avoiding the political dispute over knowledge by accepting the existence of different cultures (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010, p. 55).

One way to accept, promote and create an ecology of knowledges is by translation. Acknowledging the need for translation means recognising the fact that there is more than one way of seeing, understanding, and naming what surrounds us. It means accepting the fact that cosmologies and epistemologies are different, partial, and incomplete, and because of that they cannot be expressed, explained, and developed from a "universal" point of view. This having been said, the act of translation then becomes a way in which different worlds can recognise each other and dialogue (Bachman-Medick, 2009). But as with any other act of translation, this understanding also has to deal with the impossibility of full translation; it has to acknowledge the silences, barriers, and abysses that will appear during that process. Instead of attempting to solve the difference, to eliminate the unintelligible by replacing concepts, this impossibility must be accepted and

respected. This enables the coexistence and dialogue between different epistemologies. It is also the way in which it becomes possible to construct an ecology of knowledges.

### **3 On translation, coloniality and knowledge(s)**

Translation is an attempt to make different worlds understandable but is also, in itself, an instance of knowledge production. Translation is understood as an instance that can overcome the coloniality of power by promoting border thinking and recognising and respecting the diversity of knowledges existing in the world. Translation, as Boaventura Sousa Santos (2003, 2007, 2012, and 2014) explains, can be a strategy that promotes the construction of an Ecology of knowledges. But from the viewpoint of this article, it can also promote the production of new knowledges from the borders. Translation has the double power of being a tool for domination and, at the same time, enabling border thinking. As contradictory as this may sound, these two possibilities are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. Walter Mignolo and Freya Schiwy (2007) explain the complexities of translation as an important epistemological tool by analysing the colonial encounter in the Americas. It was at that time when translation began to be functional for colonisation. The act of translating was an important tool in the process of colonisation and epistemological domination from the 16th century onwards. From the authors' perspective, during colonial times and with the development of the anthropological discipline, translation was used not only as a way to control societies but also to force transculturation (Mignolo and Schiwy, 2007, pp. 8-10).

Translation was one of the elements that helped construct the modern-colonial world and the coloniality of power. Although translations had been taking place for centuries (from Arabic to Greek to Arabic, for example), it was only in the 16th century that it became a tool that contributed to the establishment of hierarchical dichotomies (Mignolo and Schiwy, 2007, p. 8). Prior to the 16th century, different worlds were able to coexist, even during times of conquest and expansion. This changed in the 16th century as the colonisation of the American continent implied a violent imposition of a political and economic system over local societies but also of language, behaviours, and religion. In the colonisation context, translation and transculturation were unidirectional and hierarchical and helped to build and reproduce the colonial difference (Mignolo and Schiwy, 2007, pp. 7-9).

Since then, translation and interpretation that was based on one specific epistemic system defined that system as the only legitimate one from which all interpretations and understandings of the world were made. This process of language, epistemological and cosmological domination implied the imposition of concepts and ideas that were not enough to give voice, define, signify and translate other worlds into the Western World. From the colonial point of view, other realities and societies were adjusted to the dominant system of ideas, which did not enable a dialogue with those other worlds or the acceptance of the limits of translation. Monolithic discourses were produced, creating homogeneous images of the metropolises and also of the colonies, where there were no contradictions, disputes, or silences in the way these worlds were defined (Said, 1978). This dynamic of domination spread all over the colonial experiences and can also be seen in neoliberal contexts of oppression (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Mignolo and Schiwy, 2007, p. 10).

Translation has been a powerful tool in the process of epistemological domination, but it also was and can still be used as a powerful tool for decolonising knowledge and promoting the creation of an Ecology of knowledges. In colonial contexts, local societies were able to use translations not only as a tool that would promote their acceptance by the colonial society but also as a tool for epistemological resistance. From the academic point of view, recognising this capacity is dependent on the researcher adopting a postcolonial perspective. In other words, as mentioned earlier on, local societies have been disputing colonial epistemologies from the time they were first colonised. Nevertheless, researchers have only been able to understand this and draw attention to it more recently. For example, in the case of the Latin American Spanish colonisation, the first attempts to raise this question, took place during the 1950s, when historians, anthropologists, and philologists began to study how Spanish translation of local knowledges was, in essence, a Spanish construct and representation of local realities rather than a representation of the local realities themselves.

Authors like Miguel Leon Portilla (1959), Nathan Wachtel (1971), and Tzvetan Todorov (1982) established the basis for the analysis and reflection on the voices that had been silenced by colonisation and translation and on how to recover them. There was a counter-history to the representation of the others by the colonial rulers that appear, not only in local languages but also in the usage of Spanish by the colonial subjects. As the founders of a new historiographical approach to the history of the American continent's colonisation and colonial times, these researchers' contributions underlined the need for a study of local representations and processes of translations. While this perspective has enriched the analysis of the impact of the colonial world in local societies (and showed how inaccurate the Spanish definitions and translations of indigenous realities were), it did not question the epistemological effects of colonial impact. It was only in the 1980s, with the

contribution of postcolonial studies, that researchers began to analyse the epistemological aspect of translation in the American colonial world.

Since Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the historiographical approach to translation and representation in colonial (and postcolonial) contexts has taken a turn and begun to look at translation and representation as a process that is, in itself, essential to an ideological construction of the colonial world. Postcolonial studies have contributed to the broadening of perspectives on translations and representations. Since then, reflections on the concept and process of translation have been held, not only among translation studies specialists but also among other Humanities experts. Opening the discussion over what translation means from the perspective of other disciplines promoted richer understandings and discussions that had a significant impact on the theories of knowledge, epistemologies, and coloniality.

#### **4 The importance of epistemological translation**

Translation as a cultural process needs to be understood from a wider perspective that not only includes the idea of culture but also different epistemological and holistic approaches to the world. This means that, in fact, any situation of translation is political and can not solely be seen as a bridge between different cultures. There are differences that go beyond that of language, traditions, and ideas; differences that the process of translation alone can not convey, in their entirety, to other worlds. There is, therefore, a need to reflect on the process of translation itself, allowing for alternative methods and conceptual strategies, beyond those historically imposed as universals. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) analysed this categorical domination and proposed alternative ways to promote translations that are not mediated by Eurocentric conceptual frameworks. Chakrabarty shows how new approaches to translations require a historical contextualisation of those categories that had been understood as universal in the processes of translation. These include (among others), the concept of democracy, human dignity, and equality. In other words, the author questions the need to mediate any translation with Eurocentric categories and proposes a re-conceptualisation of the process of translation in which two different worlds can communicate with each other without the mediation of those Eurocentric categories.

Walter D. Mignolo and Freya Schiwy's analysis (2007) is in dialogue with this proposal but focuses on the coloniality of power that is expressed in translations and its epistemological effects. They understand translation as an epistemological instance that has been historically defined by coloniality but can and ought to be redefined as part of the decolonisation process. The case of the Zapatista movement and its double translation process is an example that demonstrates the role translation can play in the epistemological decolonisation process in the Global South. It promotes border thinking and creates an ecology of knowledges. In the Mexican neoliberal context of the mid-1990s, the Zapatistas developed a subaltern theory and performance of translation in resistance to the coloniality of power and global capitalist relationships. Their translation praxis is not merely from one language to another one, it is richer and much more complex: involving epistemological and cosmological dialogues between different worlds. Marxism, feminism, Spanish and English concepts, and cosmologies (such as the concept of democracy, human dignity, and equality) are translated and trans-cultured into the Amerindian cosmology and vice versa (Mignolo and Schiwy, 2007, p. 11).

The Zapatistas use translation in many different ways. There are translations taking place between the four regional languages spoken by members of the movement (Tojobal, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Chol). There are also translations taking place between local languages and Spanish, but these translations are done in a specific way, whereby the local cosmologies transcend the linguistic boundaries and express themselves by altering the Spanish syntax (Mignolo and Schiwy, 2007, pp. 15-16). At the same time, when translating from Spanish to local languages, there is a process of reinterpretation of the language in a way that is able to adjust to local cosmologies. Sub-commandant Marcos (of the Zapatista movement) explains that translation is not only between languages but also between cosmologies (Mignolo and Schiwy, 2007, p. 16). The Zapatista movement found a way to make communication possible between the Marxist-Leninist guerrilla forces and the local communities in Chiapas. Instead of using and reaffirming the hierarchical Eurocentric system that prioritised the Marxist theory over local realities when thinking of the revolution and its strategies, the Zapatistas changed the balance of power and insisted that the organisation listen to local leaders and learn from them.

Local communities' knowledges were embraced by the Marxist-Leninist leaders of the movement. They understood that the only way to make a meaningful revolution was by displacing themselves from the centre of knowledge production and opening an honest dialogue between the diverse cosmologies involved in the construction of the Zapatistas' movement. It is worth noting that one of the outcomes arising from this experience was the truth that none of the knowledges involved in these dialogues is understood or seen as pure, isolated, or dominant. Knowledges are open spaces of dialogue and exchange that promote alternative

ways of thinking. This requires languages and translations to become flexible. The interconnections between cosmologies and knowledges can only occur if the process of translation is seen as an instance of knowledge production in itself. It is impossible to produce a completely literal translation of language, beliefs, cosmologies, etc. Thus, the Zapatista movement found a powerful, innovative alternative: namely, using language and translation as a way to interconnect different worlds in new ways. Implementing this method ultimately results in the production of new knowledges. This is a perfect example of knowledge democratisation and knowledge production from the borders.

## 5 Conclusions

The aim of this article was to reflect on the concepts of knowledge, translation and knowledge production from a Global South perspective, based on a literature review. Defining knowledge is in itself a political dispute that has been taking place over centuries and has impacted the building and development of independent Latin American nation-states. De-constructing those hegemonic definitions of knowledge (based on Western epistemological domination) that are still entangled in local political agendas requires not only reflecting on concepts but also listening to local communities, their histories, practices, experiences, beliefs, and needs. In this sense, underlying the importance of the process of translation as a way of promoting the Ecology of knowledges may encourage new dialogues and ways of understanding the diversity that coexists in our societies and has a real impact on local political agendas. Translation could promote more democratic links between the different epistemologies that tend to be diminished by the hegemonic Western one.

The Zapatista's case introduces an example in which border thinking appears as a space for epistemic production and resistance to the neoliberal way of thinking. In this space, languages are transformed and interconnected as a way to express the dialogues between cosmologies and knowledges. In other words, it demonstrates that it is possible to create an ecology of knowledges and epistemic decolonisation. Translation, thus, is an instance of knowledge production and a possible alternative to coloniality of power. It is also an opportunity for Southern knowledges to engage in dialogue and produce new knowledges from the borders. This definition of translation aims to open a space for reflections on how to decolonise knowledge and its history. There is still much work to be done in the Latin American context, not only among researchers and intellectuals but also in the actual ground where indigenous communities and afro-descendants are still being marginalised and oppressed. Our duty as researchers, though, is to open spaces of reflections that could have an epistemological and political impact in the Global South and particularly in the agendas of Latin American countries.

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