

## **Concepts and Contests in the Translation of Indigenous Poetics in Brazil**

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**Abstract:** This study examines the creative and theoretical engagement of contemporary Brazilian translators with the specificities of the translation of lowland South American Indigenous verbal arts into Portuguese. Amerindian verbal arts, as a field of scholarly interest, have been mobilizing the commitment and expertise of more and more linguists, ethnologists, and translation and literature researchers in the country. As the applicability of concepts such as “literature”, “poetry” and “verbal arts” to Amerindian poetics is questioned by many of them, this article offers a critical review of recurring tensions in scholarly discourse.

**Keywords:** decolonization, poetics, Indigenous, translation, Brazil

**Résumé :**

Cette étude présente l'engagement créatif et théorique des traducteurs brésiliens contemporains avec plus particulièrement la traduction de l'art verbal des autochtones des basses terres d'Amérique du Sud vers le portugais. L'art verbal amérindien, en tant que domaine de recherche universitaire, mobilise de plus en plus l'engagement et l'expertise de linguistes, d'ethnologues, de traductologues et de chercheurs en littérature dans le pays. L'application de concepts tels que ceux de “littérature”, “poésie” et “art verbal” à la poétique autochtone étant largement remise en question par bon nombre d'entre eux, cet article propose un examen critique des tensions récurrentes que l'on retrouve dans les discours savants.

**Mots clés :** décolonisation, poétique, autochtone, traduction, Brésil

**Resumo:** Examina-se o envolvimento criativo e teórico de tradutores brasileiros contemporâneos com as especificidades da tradução das artes verbais ameríndias das terras baixas da América do Sul para o português. As artes verbais ameríndias, como campo de interesse acadêmico, vêm mobilizando a dedicação e a perícia de um número crescente de linguistas, etnólogos e pesquisadores de tradução e literatura no país. Diante do questionamento apresentado por vários desses estudiosos sobre a aplicabilidade de conceitos como “literatura”, “poesia” e “artes verbais” às poéticas ameríndias, este artigo oferece uma revisão crítica das tensões recorrentes no discurso acadêmico.

**Palavras-chave:** descolonização, poética, indígena, tradução, Brasil

**Abstract:** El presente estudio es un análisis de la respuesta teórica y creativa de traductores contemporáneos en Brasil en relación específicamente con la traducción de las artes verbales de los indígenas de los llanos suramericanos al portugués. Como tema de investigación académica, las artes verbales ameríndias en Brasil han movilizado el compromiso y los conocimientos especializados de cada vez más lingüistas, etnólogos, e investigadores del campo de la literatura y la traducción. Teniendo en cuenta los cuestionamientos que se han planteado acerca de la aplicabilidad que puedan tener conceptos tales como “literatura”, “poesía” y “artes verbales” para hacer referencia a la poética amerindia, el artículo brinda un panorama crítico y muestra las tensiones que en torno al tema existen en el discurso académico.

**Palabras clave:** descolonización, poética, indígena, traducción, Brasil

*I wanted something else, and this something else is rephilosophizing words  
with words and not with universals.*  
Barbara Cassin (“Translating the Untranslatable”)

*Twisting the language from time to time, in order to depart from received  
concepts, simultaneously also conserves the concepts in their original  
(linguistically untwisted) form.*  
Marilyn Strathern (“O efeito etnográfico” 19)

## Introduction

This study examines the creative and theoretical commitment of contemporary Brazilian translators to the specificities of the translation of lowland South American Indigenous verbal arts into Portuguese. On this occasion, my aim is neither to give an exhaustive overview of all the work being developed in this field nor to discuss the poetics in depth but to map and elucidate recurring conceptual tensions in scholarly discourse. Let us bear in mind three basic characteristics of these verbal arts. They consist of Indigenous modes and techniques of simultaneously ritualizing and speculating through songs and narratives; they play a pragmatic role in the making of personhood and bodily forms; they are fundamental for cosmopolitical diplomacy, i.e., for mediating communication between human and other-than-human beings. Healing songs, chiefs’ speeches, cosmogonic narratives, shamanic songs and ritual songs are among them. As Marubo healer shamans say, their mythical chants are unending (Cesarino “Oniska” 273); as the Mbyá-Guarani say, the ancient words delivered to them by divinities are indestructible (Jecupé 50).

Recent insights into the translation of these texts saw a greater number of poets, ethnologists, linguists, literature scholars and translation theorists and practitioners in Brazil become increasingly interested in the particularities of Indigenous poetics. Some of the main features of this emerging shift, so to speak, have been: a more sensitive ear to the shaping of parallelism, repetition and reiteration, as well as to the citational embedding that frequently structures the enunciative schema of Amazonian songs; a more clear perception of the significant Indigenous reliance on paratactic imagery; and, even more decisively, a more clear perception of the inextricable relation between speculative thinking and shamanic poetics.

More frequently than not, academics engaging in the field differ in terms of theoretical background, research agendas and expectations and hold varying conceptions of semantic fidelity to the source texts. What seems to be arising as a point of convergence among these various theorists, though, is the perception that the study of Amerindian verbal arts can be specific to neither linguistics nor anthropology, to neither literature nor translation studies. Yet it is both desirable and necessary for it to draw from all of these fields.

## A Systematic Negligence

In his 1993 seminal book *Textos e tribos* (“Texts and tribes”), independent scholar Antônio Risério denounced the fact that “Amerindian and African texts could not

influence on our [Brazilian] literary poetry simply because they remain unknown today”, and that “the marginalization of indigenous and afroblack texts reflects, on literate spheres, the subordinate status of these cultures in the Brazilian mindset” (16). Ten years later, Bruna Franchetto, a leading force in linguistics and anthropology in Brazil, would still lament the virtual absence—with the exception of her study of Kuikuro songs and narrative—of writings dedicated to Amerindian poetics in the country (“As artes da palavra” 11). A former student of Franchetto, Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino, now a professor of anthropology at the University of São Paulo, wrote an article for *Folha de S. Paulo*—one of Brazil’s most widely read daily newspapers—in which he protested about a “systematic negligence” in Brazilian educational paradigms: the over-focusing on the Euro-American canon to the detriment of Amerindian poetry (6).

At the present day, on the other hand, thanks to many years of persistent efforts by Franchetto, Cesarino, Josely Vianna Baptista, Betty Mindlin, Rosângela de Tugny and Douglas Diegues, to highlight but a few, the rendering of Amerindian verbal arts into Portuguese has been expanding horizons and gathering more attention among academics, translators, publishing houses, and readers. Antônio Risério, Lúcia Sá, Sérgio Medeiros, Cláudia Neiva de Matos, Sérgio Cohn and Álvaro Faleiros have provided articles, essays and retranslations that have been helping to shape discussions in the field. The contributions of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro appear as a virtually ubiquitous inspiration for critical writings associated with an increased interest in the translation of Amerindian poetics in Brazil. Readers of his doctoral dissertation, adapted into a book named *Araweté: Os Deuses Canibais* in 1986 (of which an English translation, *From the Enemy’s Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*, was published in 1992), will recall that he already placed great importance on translating single-word concepts and shamanic songs very carefully, recognizing his limitations and difficulties.

### **Indigenous Peoples *in* Brazil**

From this moment, it should be clear that talking about Indigenous peoples *in* Brazil, rather than *from* or *of* Brazil, is based on a refusal to subsume their ontological, intellectual and creative autonomy—as well as their multiple belongings—into the straightjacket of a nation-state framework. As summarized by Renato Sztutman in his introduction to a collection of interviews with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “despite living or being located in Brazil, these populations live in their own way and situate Brazil according to their own reflections and experience” (17). In other words, as Viveiros de Castro clarifies in one of the interviews, there is a difference between *contingently* being Brazilian and *necessarily* being Brazilian (60).

One must realize that this has immediate implications for complicating the circumscription of Amerindian verbal arts to Brazilian literature. While this is not the occasion to discuss this point at length, this turns out to be particularly problematic depending on to what extent we are willing to challenge our conceptual frameworks. In any case, this perception of contingency motivates a twofold departure: first, from paternalistically approaching Indigenous songs and narratives in the service of a viable Brazilian literary identity; second, from seeing them as “yet another element” subserviently contributing to Brazil’s supposedly unproblematic miscegenation.

## Beyond (and Back to) Literature

Even more fundamentally, another question that should be carefully looked at is the use of the term “literature” itself to refer to Amerindian verbal arts in Brazil. Let us consider how Neiva de Matos, following Paul Zumthor, asserts her preference for the term “verbal art” to refer to Amerindian poetics—given its “democratic scope”, the fact that “it admits artistic uses of both oral and written language, without favoring the second” (“Escritas indígenas” 44)—or for the term “poetry”—“an art of human language” (45), “a fact of the ritualization of language” (46). Indeed, as Neiva de Matos explains, Zumthor’s studies of medieval poetics expressed his view of the term “literature” as a “historically-bound concept, of limited relevance in space and time” (45). Zumthor objected to it because its etymology was associated with the written mode; hence, it would be unsuitable for making reference to oral poetry. This boundedness, for Neiva de Matos, historically links literature to “elitist ideologies” (“Literatura e educação” 104).

In contrast, some see more pros than cons in using the term “literature” in reference to Amerindian verbal arts. Lucia Sá argues that there are harmful effects brought by the exclusion of native texts from the category of “literature”, since she maintains that “forest literatures” should be perceived as more than “ethnographic material”, “raw material” or, in a particularly derogative way, as “myth” (xix). Resonating with Sá’s critique of a “tradition that tends to see Indigenous texts as unworked raw material that only becomes manufactured in the hands of non-Indigenous intellectuals” (93), Neiva de Matos says that the translation of Amerindian songs needs to do much more than provide resources for anthropological or ethnomusicological studies (“A tradução de cantos indígenas” 178). However, for the previously mentioned reasons, she remains critical of the use of the term “literature” in this sense.

Marília Librandi-Rocha, in her discussion of the Guarani-Kaiowá letter, takes a different approach and advocates including Indigenous texts “at the heart of literature written in Brazil” (173) as a way to do proper justice to the Guarani call for land rights (168). She emphasizes that “the right to literature should be a sheltering discursive territory” (169) and contribute to the protection of human rights. She goes on to align herself with Luiz Costa Lima’s conception of literature as a “‘heterogeneous’ discursive field including what he refers to as ‘hybrid forms’”: “out of fictionality, literature encompasses works that, having lost their original disposition, find shelter elsewhere, i.e., change their role while still engaging in their own interest” (Librandi-Rocha 168). In contrast, Marco Natali’s article “Beyond the Right to Literature” calls for the right to not be literature, criticizing the “inevitability” of the concept of literature and the way it incorporates non-European discursive practices. He concludes by eloquently asking, “[W]hat would happen if, in a hypothetical scenario, on the very limits of the literary, literature did not coincide with justice?” (191).

What happens with the idea of “literature” does not seem to be entirely different from the productive dissent motivated by the notion of “aesthetics”, which was approached in an interesting way in the “Is Aesthetics a Cross-Cultural Category?” debate, organized in 1993 by The Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT) at the University of Manchester. In favour of the motion were Howard Morphy, who

highlighted the effect of sensory stimulation on human perception, and Jeremy Coote, who talked about Yoruba ideas of beauty and grace to justify the cross-cultural applicability of aesthetic categories. Against the motion were Joanna Overing, for whom aesthetics is the judgment of beauty and can't be applied to non-Western societies, and Peter Gow, for whom Westerners have a distinctive aesthetic discourse that presupposes making aesthetic judgements and comparisons. I believe debating the applicability of "literature" to non-Western verbal arts in an analogous manner could help elucidate and broaden our understanding of each of the discursive regimes concerned.

After all, why is it worth resorting to "literature" not as an exclusively Western institution but as a cross-cultural category? Could it strategically help to promote the empowerment of Indigenous peoples in Brazil? Could it be merely for the sake of conciseness or for lack of a better term? These questions need to reverberate even more powerfully and generate discussions in Brazilian scholarly discourse dealing with Amerindian texts. Regardless of how well-meaning the motivation is, assumptions have to be made very explicit to avoid oversimplification and neutralization of difference. Readers have to be conscious that there is a dimension of literature that "delivers" otherness through "sameness". As David Palumbo-Liu says in *The Deliverance of Others*, literature makes available a deliverance of others through discourses of "sameness", commonality and commensurateness, determining to what extent "excessive, disruptive, disturbing" radical otherness is acceptable (2).

### **Equivocity and Untranslatability**

In the backdrop of these developments in the translation of Amerindian verbal arts in Brazil sits a greater willingness and commitment to controlling the vocabulary used in Euro-American languages to describe Indigenous ontological regimes and the modes of expression they articulate. This shift is intimately related to a process of terminology revision—which I refer to as the translation turn in lowland South American ethnology—that gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s. This means that the significant developments of ethnographic work in the South American lowlands during those decades—in particular, in the study of kinship—triggered reflections about how the notions of "social structure" and "descent", based on ethnographies of Africa linked to Radcliffe-Brownian British functionalism, were not appropriate for talking about Indigenous Amazonian groups.

To put it otherwise, ethnologists realized that it would be inappropriate to translate the modes of living of South American Indigenous groups by the same terms used to translate the modes of living of African Indigenous groups. Such concerns led to the publication of the 1979 article "A construção da pessoa nas sociedades indígenas brasileiras" ("The construction of the person in Brazilian Indigenous societies"), in which Anthony Seeger, Roberto DaMatta and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro uphold the importance of "developing the positive aspect of South America's non-normality" —in other words, of developing concepts that approach South American materials in their own terms, avoiding African, Mediterranean or Melanesian models (7).

This long-term search of a more self-conscious and self-reflexive lexicon in studies of Indigenous peoples in Brazil laid the groundwork for the development of two

interrelated notions: Amerindian perspectivism and translation as controlled equivocation. First, the much-talked about concept of Amerindian perspectivism, an attempt to translate Amerindian modes of being into an academic vocabulary that was proposed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Tânia Stolze Lima in the 1990s. According to Amerindian perspectivism, non-human beings see their body and behaviour in the form of human culture. For instance, what humans see as blood is manioc beer to jaguars; what humans see as muddy water holes are ceremonial houses to tapirs (Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis” 478). This condition allows them to see humans as (i.e., *in the position of*) non-humans. The ace in the hole here, though, is that Amerindian words we translate as “human” actually “do not denote humanity as a natural species” but rather “the social condition of personhood” (476).

Second, Viveiros de Castro put forth the theory of translation as controlled equivocation in his 2004 article “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation”. For him, despite the seeming prompt translatability between one’s language and that of others, there is a difference concealed within equivocal homonyms that exist in different languages—one’s conceptual framework always presents distinct meanings for distinct ontologies. One of Viveiros de Castro’s most remarkable axioms sums it up in an illuminating manner: “the Other of the Other is always other” (“Perspectival Anthropology” 12). At the same time, what makes the translation between two discourses possible—what grounds the relationship that the translator attempts to establish between them—is precisely the fact that these discourses are not saying the same thing.

The realization that equivocity exists in any act (and on both sides) of translation underlies Barbara Cassin’s perception of untranslatable words (the “intraduisibles”) as “symptoms of the difference between languages” (23). For Cassin (see Walkowitz), words such as the Russian *Правда* (*pravda*, “truth”, “justice”) and the French *vérité* (“truth”, “exactitude”) are equivocal (“équivoques”). Translating these equivocal conceals that the *Правда* of the others is always other and that the *vérité* of the others is always other. They philosophize differently, just as *mind*, *Geist*, *esprit*, *πνεῦμα* (*pneuma*), *spiritus* and *प्राण* (*prana*) do, for instance. Yet, what the untranslatability in these words shows is that they never stop being translated.

Untranslatable, after all, is by no means what cannot be translated. Quite the opposite: It is precisely what “on ne cesse pas de traduire” (Walkowitz). Also, as Walkowitz points out so well, saying that “something cannot be translated” could reflect a series of different assumptions: that it is difficult to translate; that it will never be translated; that its translation will never be perfect. The big issue, as she puts it, is then how to “translate in a way that registers the incomplete nature of the process of the translation”. In other words, how to control equivocation.

## Slowing Down Language

In addition, as far as the translation of Amerindian poetics is concerned, linguistic investigation proper is of tremendous importance. With the steady decline of missionary linguistics, the interest of many native communities in preserving their language and the appearance of more well-trained linguists in Brazil, as Denny Moore shows, the late 1990s and early 2000s have brought significant improvements in the description,

documentation and analysis of Amazonian languages (31).

Transcriptions and translations have been benefiting from developments in sound capture, audiovisual documentation and digitization of data. Professors and researchers at linguistic programs in Rio de Janeiro (both at the Federal University and at Museu Nacional), Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi (Belém), the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) and the University of Brasília, to name but a few, have been making an enormous contribution to the documentation of endangered languages in Brazil. Also, two major international programs, DoBeS - Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen, from Germany, and the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP), at SOAS, University of London, have been sponsoring important language documentation projects in the country. Still, a lot of work remains to be done. It is commonly said that 170 to 180 Indigenous languages are still spoken in Brazil, but many of them risk being silenced; their disappearance accelerates with the loss of lands, the interruption of intergenerational transmission, the death of native speakers, among other reasons.

One does not have to adhere to any particular theoretical perspective to acknowledge that the contribution of serious and rigorous linguistic studies is fundamental for translators of verbal arts to offer richer and more careful and nuanced translations. As Patience Epps and Andrés Salanova argue, “a fine-grained understanding of ritual speech and other discourse practices must take into account the linguistic features that make them special” (44). In most cases, translators have not yet started to explore the broad span of poetic potentialities that accurate, in-depth descriptions of grammatical features related to, for instance, evidentiality, ergativity, noun classifiers and count/mass distinction in Amazonian languages can provide them with. More attention should also be devoted to suprasegmental features, such as intonation, duration or voice modulation, in Indigenous verbal arts translations, with prosody being a fertile ground for translators to imagine creative correlations between Indigenous songs and narratives and their translations in terms of musicality, rhythm and texture.

These are not mere technicalities. Just as anthropologists and literature scholars have been collaborating to gain deeper insight into Amerindian poetics, so linguists, poetry-translation scholars and poetry translators should consult with each other on a regular basis. My hope is that the immense variety and richness in Amazonian languages can inspire and encourage fellow researchers in these various fields, as well as translation practitioners, to transform the way we experience and present Indigenous verbal arts.

Of course, as Critical Applied Linguistics reminds us, linguistics has long served the “interests and politics of missionaries and colonial administrators” (Makoni 136), and it certainly runs the risk of reinforcing power asymmetries through its practices. But this is not always necessarily the case today. It can also be a locus of resistance, empowerment, creativity and positive change. This can be achieved by disinventing and reconstituting the very notion of language (Makoni and Pennycook 112). Also, Indigenous peoples and their allies can mobilize linguistics *against* coloniality. Think of Indigenous linguists like Mutuá Mehinaku, for instance, who are interested in studying and documenting their languages for the best interest of their communities (Franchetto, “Línguas indígenas” 43).

Nowadays, we are even in the position of mobilizing linguistics *against* linguistics: in other words, of meta-methodologically turning it against its colonial legacy in a way that allows for a deep look into questions of power, dominance, privilege and ideological and religious bias in language and translation. As we do our homework of recording, transcribing, describing, analyzing and translating Amazonian languages, songs and narratives, we can always think of ways to “twist”, in Marilyn Strathern’s sense (19), the Euro-American concepts to which one frequently resorts to when approaching the study of languages. I see this as another way, following Walkowitz’s elegant suggestion, of “slowing down language”: slowing down language and amplifying the infinite *Überleben* of untranslatable, endlessly translatable, unending, indestructible words.

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