

Piotr Blumczynski. *Experiencing Translationality: Material and Metaphorical Journeys*. New York, Routledge, 2023, 210 p.

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[See table of contents](#)

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Piotr Blumczynski. *Experiencing Translationality: Material and Metaphorical Journeys.* New York, Routledge, 2023, 210 p.

With his latest monograph, Blumczynski adds his voice to those chipping away at the conventional wisdom in translation studies that interlingual translation constitutes “translation proper.” He does this to prepare the way for a phenomenology of translational experience that includes both matter and metaphor.

Blumczynski announces his agenda for this ground-breaking work on the very first page. He wants to argue for a translation studies that does *not* “largely ignore [...] or gloss [...] over the greater, more profound entanglements of matter and meaning, space and time, past and future” (p. 1). With this sentence, he situates his work not only within the debate about an expanded conceptualization of translation but within the highly relevant interdisciplinary debates about new materiality (Barad, 2007) and ecology (Cronin, 2017). Concerning the first argument on an expanded conceptualization of translation, Blumczynski signals that he is not first and foremost interested in studying translations (products or processes) or translators; rather he is interested in studying translationality, i.e., he has a phenomenological take on translation. Hence, he sets about the task of a semiotic approach to translation, namely, the experience of negotiating and constructing meanings (p. 2). Concerning the second argument on materiality, he aligns his work with the “material turn” arguing that “we need to accept that linguistic and textual ‘translations’ are metaphorically modelled on material translations, whatever they might be” (p. 3). He thus turns Jakobson’s notion of translation on its head. Linguistic translation is not translation proper. Rather, Blumczynski argues, linguistic translation is a metaphorical derivation from translation proper, the movement of bodies!

In the first chapter, entitled “What does translation do?,” Blumczynski conceptualizes his views on translation in dialogue with a number of scholars from different fields. While his aim is to provide a phenomenology of translation, that is, how translation is experienced, this experience is, for Blumczynski, not an idealist endeavor. He argues for a materialist and realist approach when conceptualizing translation, citing new materialist thinkers like Karen Barad. In a translation studies dominated by idealist epistemology, this is indeed a breath of fresh air. By engaging with the conceptual work of several translation scholars and philosophers, Blumczynski

paints a picture of a field with a bias towards language/text and idea, which he hopes to amend to include body and matter next to language/text and idea (pp. 21-25). He aligns himself with a semiotic conceptualization of translation, and helpfully suggests that Marais' (2019) deductive approach needs to be supplemented by an inductive approach, which he intends to supply in the book. The core concepts (pp. 37-44) in Blumczynski's conceptualization are therefore the way in which matter and culture are entangled, an argument he bases on John Deely's (2001, 2009) insightful work on this issue as well as on Barad's agential realism (2007). Both Deely and Barad take the phenomenon, i.e., reality as experienced, as their point of departure, arguing that neither reality nor the experience enjoys privilege. Rather, the phenomenon is the weaving together of matter and idea (Deely, 2009) or the entanglement of observer and observed (Barad, 2007). Blumczynski closes the chapter with a brief, sensitive reflection on his positionality in time, space, and language.

Blumczynski's insistence on a translation studies that deals with both matter and mind is aligned with recent work in the field that he acknowledges in the chapter. His are, however, not the last words on this topic, and it is to be hoped that this chapter will stimulate much more debate. It should raise philosophical questions (epistemological and ontological ones, at the very least) about materiality and the humanities, as well as methodological questions such as how to study materiality in a humanities setting, and what it would contribute if we did. Methodologically, using the etymology of a word might be helpful as well as obfuscating. As much as Blumczynski raises a new debate based on the Oxford Dictionary's mapping of the semantic domain of the entry "translation" (p. 4), questions in the history of the metaphorization of the word remain. Concerning the data Blumczynski gives us from about 300 CE, a coherent argument would require the etymological history of the word from before that time. To be blunt, how do we know that the use of translation in 300 CE was not already a metaphorization, to refer not to a material transfer, i.e., bringing or moving, but to the spiritual process (read semiotic process) of creating relics or moving the clergy? When did the metaphorization start? The chapter should further raise issues around new materiality and its role in current debates about ecology. Lastly, it should raise further debate about how exactly matter-energy can mean something, and how meaning can change matter-energy. For instance, what does Blumczynski mean when he says that "[i]deas

are not *really* objects. Meanings do not *really* travel. Communication is not *really* transfer” (p. 26, emphasis in the original)? If ideas are material, as he seems to be implying in the general argument of the chapter, why are they not “really” objects? This is clearly not an easy problem to solve, which is why this chapter should stimulate major debate.

In Chapter 2, Blumczynski presents an historical argument about the translation of the clergy, starting from the early Christian church and moving on to the COVID19-pandemic. The earliest case he presents, that of the Council of Nicea, allows him to make a strong argument that linguistic relativity also implies conceptual relativity. He demonstrates how the initial tentative formulations regarding the essence of Jesus were mediated by a multilingual and hence multiconceptual sensitivity, which later gave way to orthodoxy as Latin became the dominant language of the church. Through a rich description of the translation practices through the ages, Blumczynski is able to argue that, even when regarded as a very literal movement from one space to another, translation is fraught with social and political interests and values. His data also show evidence of knowledge translation. He argues that, in the history of the church, churches came to be seen less as “communities of faith” and more as “sites of jurisdiction,” which means that the term “church” itself was translated in keeping with the governance practice of the time (p. 61). From this history, Blumczynski offers a first conceptualization of what he deems translationality to be: “an experience of connecting, through material, sensory mediation, with another reality across time and space” (p. 82).

In the next chapter, Blumczynski deals with the translation of (religious) relics. He provides an historical overview of translational practices from about 300 CE to the 21st century. From this ample set of data, he concludes that relic translation always entails some “elevation” (p. 88), i.e., that the end position of a translation process is always more illustrious than the starting position. These translations were always explained as part of God’s providence (p. 90), but he provides ample evidence of political maneuvering, criminality, and violence that accompanied them. He also finds evidence in his data that translation always deals with partiality (p. 101). On p. 100, he asks a crucial question, namely “Why were some relics of St Nicholas *translated* to Bari in 1087, but merely *brought* to Venice in 1101?” [emphasis in the original]. This question goes to the heart

of conceptualizing translation, which is part of Blumczynski's goal here, and relates to the questions concerning the etymology raised in the previous paragraph. How does one distinguish a translation from a bringing? In a following section, he deals with some of the requirements for an authentic relic translation: the translated relic needs to have been a declared a saint, their remains deserve to be prized and the remains should be proven to have belonged to the saint (p. 105). The question, however, remains: How does that apply to other types of translation?

At this point, Blumczynski's argument could be considered somewhat problematic. He may very well be correct in interpreting relic translation – for example turning bones into relics (see the conclusion on pp. 141-143) – as a process of semiotic work (which always includes material work). However, when he writes about modern examples, his emphasis on experience, with which I agree in principle, leads him to ignore intent or agency, which has to be factored in when studying living organisms. Furthermore, when he writes about the death in a plane crash in Russia of a Polish president, he reports that the return of the president was described in the media as “repatriation,” “return to the country” or “flight back home.” He suggests, however, that “*translation* would have been a more adequate term” (p. 136) [emphasis in the original]. The first concern with this argument is that he is ascribing a value to an event that the participants in the event did not ascribe themselves, or at least, he does not provide evidence of it being described as a translation – while maintaining a phenomenological approach. In other words, he labels their experience from the outside. Another concern is that he applies a term, translation, used in a particular context with particular rules (the three criteria described on p. 105), to a situation that bears superficial resemblance to a translation process, without any of the three criteria being met. In order to explore what “translation” means, a more precise conceptualization is needed. What are the similarities and differences between the translation and the transport of a relic, and what do they tell us about the use of the term “translation”?

This brings us back to questions about how to go about conceptualizing a field of study. Is Blumczynski's analysis of the Oxford Dictionary's definitions of translation enough, and if it is, do we then look for cases that fit the dictionary definition? So Blumczynski leaves us with the question: When is an experience translational? It seems that he has moved the question “When is something a

translation” to a different category, i.e., experience, but the question about how to recognize a translation when you see or experience one, is left hanging. His discussion in this chapter also raises interesting questions about the relationship between words, experiences, events, interpretations, and so forth. Why is the word “translation” used for things as seemingly disparate as the movement of live or dead bodies, turning a text in one language into a text in another language, turning music into poetry, or any of the other definitions that the Oxford provides? Also, if you can prove that certain conditions hold for, say, relic translation, do they have any bearing on, say, interlingual translation – unless you are able to specify the commonalities, e.g., semiotic work? So, as much as his data contribute significantly to increasing our understanding of translationality, it obscures some of the points on which we need clarity, which will hopefully stimulate further debate and clarity on the matter.

In chapter four, Blumczynski provides some fascinating evidence from popular culture, in particular that of guitars and guitar music, in his search of translational experience. There is rich evidence from a variety of sources about the links between religious and secular relics and how the secular taps into religious experience for several purposes. Here, Blumczynski acknowledges running into some problems with this semasiological approach to build a conceptualization of translation inductively (p. 144). To be clear, neither semasiology nor inductive reasoning is a bad choice for doing what he wants to do. The concern is that, like all choices, both of his choices pose problems, which merit further consideration. The first is, yet again, the issue of identification. If something is not called a translation, as he concedes about several things on p. 144, how would you know to recognize it as part of a translational experience when using a semasiological approach? In order to get around that, Blumczynski suggests that we “first need to internalize a certain kind of psychosomatic sensitivity” (*ibid.*). This seems like an elitist or at least exclusionist criterion, but it also leads to a second problem. When Blumczynski argues that experiencing translationality is “that peculiar feeling of transcendence and awareness of coming into close contact with ‘the real thing’” (*ibid.*), it raises the question: Is translationality the issue here, or is it an issue of experience? In other words, is any experience of awe a translational experience? Are all experiences translational, and if so, how? In fact, Blumczynski apparently raises two points in his argument, not just one. He has identified a particular semiotic practice, the translation

of the clergy and relics, and he is able to demonstrate that the kind of semiotic work that goes into the translation of the clergy and relics goes similarly, while not identically, into the reliquification of guitars in popular culture. This is a convincing argument: only certain experiences are translational. However, his data also seem to be suggesting another type of translation, where indeed every experience is translational. In every experience, the materiality of the experience, the cognition of the experience, and the memories that are engaged in the process are translated into the new experience. Translation is that semiotic activity by which living organisms weave matter and mind into experience (Deely, 2009). If this is what he intends, it would be an equally good argument, but it would need to be formulated differently. Rather than saying that all experience is translational, he could say that all experience has a translational aspect to it. By doing so, translationality is not reduced to experience or vice versa.

Blumczynski closes the book with an overview of his arguments, but then he goes one step further to relate translation experiences from his own life. In my view, these narratives demonstrate the complexity of translationality and provide a very strong motivation for Blumczynski to do away with the notion of “translation proper.” This is the main thrust of his argument, and a convincing one at that. We experience translation in the fullness of our seven senses (five external and two internal), and not one of these experiences is more authentically translational than any of the others.

Blumczynski contributes significantly to a growing body of work on a philosophy of translation, in this case a phenomenological conceptualization. His work questions the continued use of the term “translation proper” for interlingual translation, although more historical research on the etymology of the word “translation” is required. This book cements a materialist approach in translation studies, and it encourages much more work to be done to rethink the materiality of culture and semiosis.

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