Cultural translation is a concept with competing definitions coming from two broad fields, anthropology/ethnography and cultural/postcolonial studies. In anthropology, it usually refers to the act of describing for members of one cultural community how members of another interpret the world and their place in it. In cultural studies, it usually refers to the different forms of negotiation that people engage in when they are displaced from one cultural community into another, or it refers to the displacement itself. In both cases, scholars have typically explained the term’s use by pointing out that “translation” derives from the Latin *translatus*, the past participle of *transferre*, meaning “to carry across.” (Scholars who cite non-Latin etymologies are exceedingly rare.) What is “carried across,” however, varies by field. For anthropologists, foreign cultures are “carried across” to domestic readers in textual form, as described in articles and books, while for cultural studies scholars, what is “carried across” is not so much culture as it is the people who leave their place of origin and enter a new locale, bearing their culture with them.

**Anthropology**

Perhaps the best-known essay on cultural translation is Talal Asad’s “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Cultural Anthropology.” Asad notes that since the 1950s, “the translation of cultures” ... has become an almost banal description of the distinctive task of social anthropology,” and he cites Godfrey Lienhardt as the author of “one of the earliest—certainly one of the most subtle—examples of the use of this notion of translation” (1986: 141–142). Lienhardt explained in a 1953 lecture that the “problem of describing to others how members of a remote tribe think [appears] largely as one of translation, of making the coherence primitive thought has in the languages it really lives in, as clear as possible in our own” (1954: 97). A couple of years later, Ernest Gellner described the anthropologist’s task in similar terms: “The situation, facing a social anthropologist who wishes to interpret a concept, assertion or doctrine in an alien culture, is basically simple. He is, say, faced with an assertion $S$ in the local language. He has at his disposal the large or infinite set of possible sentences in his own language. His task is to locate the nearest equivalent or equivalents of $S$ in his own language” (1970: 24).

Although these accounts appear similar, they differ with respect to the object of translation. For Lienhardt, what was transformed was anthropological culture itself, or the system of beliefs and customs that structured how members of a cultural community interpreted the world. For Gellner, it was a “concept, assertion or doctrine” as seen within the context of a given anthropological culture, but not the culture itself. The distinction is important. Lienhardt’s idea of rewriting anthropological culture is paradoxical because of the way it collapses the distinction between objects and the context that makes them meaningful. If “cultural translation” refers to an attempt to translate an entire system of beliefs and customs—that is, the context itself—then that distinction is lost.

Gellner and other like-minded anthropologists provided one solution to this paradox by taking a “concept, assertion or doctrine” as the object of translation, rather than the system of beliefs itself. Since the 1980s, anthropologists have taken a different tack by arguing that the object/context paradox is symptomatic of the imbalance of power on which cultural anthropology has historically been premised. For instance, Tim Ingold writes that although anthropologists strive to overcome the forces of ethnocentrism, “the project of ... using observation and reason to transcend the limited horizons of species and culture, is none other than the [Western] project of modernity.” Anthropologists, by his account, reduce the culture they seek to discover to an object, which they then interpret against what appears as “universal reason” but is really the horizon of Western modernity in disguise (1993: 217–223). Such critiques have prompted anthropologists to become more reflexive, for instance by advocating approaches that “test the tolerance of [their] own language for assuming unaccustomed forms” as a way to subvert their own authority (Asad 1986: 157). Where cultural translation is concerned, they have come to emphasize its transformative effect on anthropologists themselves: “To produce cultural
translation is not a question of replacing text with text ... but of co-creating text, of producing a written version of a lived reality, and it is in this sense that it can be powerfully transformative for those who take part” (Jordan 2002: 98).

Cultural studies

In cultural studies, “translation” tends to refer to processes of displacement, much as in mathematics, for instance, where “translation” refers to the repetition of a geometric shape without alteration at a new set of coordinates. The term’s use in this sense is more recent than in anthropology, having been popularized by postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha in the 1990s. These scholars were interested in the potential of cultural translation to destabilize or otherwise challenge received notions of “foreign” and “familiar,” especially in contemporary Western society, where narratives of national identity are based on artificially clear distinctions between the West and its former colonies. They saw cultural translation as a tool, at least potentially, to challenge oppressive or restrictive social norms. As Tomislav Longinovic writes, “The impossibility of absolute sameness in translation opens a horizon for a new performance of cultural identity as a process of dynamic exchange between semiotic registers motivated by non-hierarchical openness and movements of meaning and identity” (2002: 7–8).

Scholars differ in their accounts of the form that such a performance takes. Longinovic, for example, considers it from the perspective of people occupying a minority position. Specifically, he examines how “legal and illegal immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers as well as itinerant academics” negotiate their way through their new environment and adapt their identity as a result of being the “other” of the community they have entered (2002: 6–7). In contrast, Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny consider cultural translation from the perspective of people occupying positions of power, examining how figures of authority either enforce or challenge restrictive ideas of national identity. They cite a poem by Bertolt Brecht about a man applying for U.S. citizenship. The judge administering the citizenship test realizes that the man is answering “1492” to every question because he does not speak English. The judge then asks when Columbus discovered America, at which point the man’s answer is correct. Buden and Nowotny argue that the judge posed the correct question to a wrong answer, which leads them to ask, “is ‘democracy’ simply a wrong answer still waiting for a correct question? The search for this question, and nothing else, is cultural translation” (2009: 207). For them, the negotiation of cultural translation implicates not only people like the itinerants considered by Longinovic but also the members of the community into which they enter. Cultural translation, in their view, involves acts of hospitality and cannot be separated from the ethical dimension of people’s encounter with cultural “others.” Because of this necessary ethical dimension, cultural translation holds the potential to bring about positive social change.

Critics of this notion of cultural translation find fault with it in at least three ways. First, they find it abstrusely theoretical: “the theoreticism of the commentary preempts any close textual analysis,” according to Lawrence Venuti (2003: 244). Second, they argue that such abstraction encourages sloppy thinking: theorists fail to “break ‘cultural translation’ down in terms of appropriate distinctions [like the one between translations as products and translating as a process],” according to Anthony Pym (2010: 7). (It should be noted that Pym’s critique is directed at Buden and Nowotny in particular.) Finally, they worry that scholars have been seduced by what appears to be the utopian potential of cultural translation and that, as a result, they will abandon the study of literary translation: “[I]f literary translation is allowed to wither away in the age of cultural translation, we shall sooner than later end up with a wholly translated, monolingual, monocultural, monolithic world,” according to Harish Trivedi (2007: 286).

Cultural translation outside of anthropology and cultural studies

In spite (or perhaps because) of the decades-long history of the term “cultural translation,” its definition is still actively contested. In 2009 and 2010, the journal *Translation Studies* published a forum on the topic, consisting of Buden and Nowotny’s (2009) “introduction to the problem” and a series of responses. The division between anthropology/ethnography and cultural/postcolonial studies was clear, although a number of respondents did try to bridge the gap.
Perhaps the most important contribution of the Translation Studies forum was, in fact, the attempt to find points where competing notions of cultural translation are complementary. As debates about cultural translation continue, one productive approach will be to examine socially and historically situated circumstances where the types of negotiation described by both anthropologists and cultural studies scholars have taken place.

In this respect, scholars from outside these fields have insights to offer. Communication scholars, for example, have examined how journalists explain how immigrants and other newcomers experience the community to which their readers, listeners, and viewers belong. In other words, they have described journalists’ efforts to engage in cultural translation in the anthropological sense, as a form of explanation. At the same time, sociologists have examined how immigrants and other newcomers negotiate their way through the communities they have joined. In other words, they investigate cultural translation as a function of displacement. In this way, the competing definitions are also complementary: in this example, both the communication scholar and the sociologist are interested in the dynamic relationships between cultural communities in which the distinction between “foreign” and “familiar” is increasingly blurred. Such work has the potential to provide insight into a broader set of questions of interest to translation studies scholars, such as what happens when notions of “translation” are expanded beyond linguistic re-expression. However, this type of synthetic analysis is still in its infancy, although it appears to be a promising path of inquiry.

References

Further essential reading
Translation Studies forum on cultural translation, vols. 2(2) in 2009 and 3(1) and 3(3) in 2010.