

## Sex, Tongue, and International Relations

Written by Manuela Lavinás Picq and Caroline Cottet

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MANUELA LAVINAS PICQ AND CAROLINE COTTET, JUN 11 2019

**This is an excerpt from *Sexuality and Translation in World Politics*. Get your free copy here.**

The word 'queer' is not translatable in Spanish, so Ecuadorians say *cuir*, translating queerness into a term of their own (Falconí 2014; Falconí, Castellanos, and Viteri 2013). There are plenty of LGBT politics in Japan, but the Japanese language has no letter 'L'.<sup>[1]</sup> How do LGBT politics function without the L? What are the implications of translating a political movement into a language that does not have the words to say it? The politics of sexuality are radically transformed during the process of translation, be it in Ecuador or Japan. Language allows us to make sense of things, ourselves, and the universe we inhabit. Yet, time and again, our selves are lost, displaced, and reinvented in the process of translation. Gayatri Spivak (1993) concluded that translation is, in every possible sense, necessary but impossible, and Jacques Derrida agreed that what must be translated of that which is translatable can only be untranslatable (2001, 258).

Translation is about crossing borders. The word's etymology means 'to take across'. Sexualities evolve as they cross borders, they change while moving and settling anew. They resonate differently in different surroundings because translation is a process of constructing meaning. Once on the move, the language of sexuality is uncontrollable. Sexual terms, policies and instruments can never be fully controlled by their senders; they are constantly altered in the processes of translation (Berger and Esquerre 2018). Translation is therefore a political act, an act of transgression, subversion, and appropriation.

Some things are untranslatable. The untranslatability of words refers to a space beyond naming, raising the question of what is visible and accessible. It points to the limits of turning life into words, calls for nameless lives beyond genders.<sup>[2]</sup> The untranslatable is that which escapes dictionaries, archives, and official history. It refers to a form of belonging that cannot be named or transferred, only experienced. The official histories of nation-states are translatable; the rebellions of subjugated people against domination are not. Histories of resistance are untranslatable worlds repeatedly left off the map. They are inscribed in intangible forms of being that lie on the other side of Empire (Carcelén-Estrada 2016).

Language tends to cross borders in specific directions, and some languages cross more borders than others. Spivak (1983) argued that subaltern voices cannot speak, that they do not exist and therefore cannot be translated. The subaltern cannot be translated because they cannot even start to come into being. The same is valid for sexualities. If subaltern sexualities cannot speak, they cannot come into being through translation.

Translation is also about betrayal. It is impossible to translate without some degree of epistemological (and ontological) captures of other practices and worlds. This is why the subaltern cannot speak, because their worlds are automatically effaced once translated into English. In a way, the voices in this volume are working to 'betray' the English language with its 'modern', Western LGBT frameworks.

Flows of sexual translation are anything but random. Translation happens usually from dominant to dominated languages, from hegemonic centres to subaltern peripheries – not from the periphery to the core. Translation as a transfer of knowledge is never equal. When we discuss the translation of sexualities, we do not mean translating

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Bengali, Nepali, or Kurdish sexual references into English. Instead, the translation of Western LGBT sexualities onto the rest of the world is usually implied. Translating sexuality in world politics forces us to confront issues of emancipation and colonisation, intervention and sovereignty, in which global narratives are locally embraced and/or resisted. Translating sexualities from the core to the periphery is a political act entangled in power politics, as well as histories of imperialism and foreign intervention. This is what this book focuses on: the entanglements of sex and tongue in international relations.

## Knowing and the Anglosphere

The way we speak shapes the way we think. And the way we speak International Relations (IR) is in English. IR has long been described as an American social science (Hoffman 1977) that is not so international (Wæver 1998), doomed for its US-centrism and knowledge production limited to the Anglosphere.<sup>[3]</sup>

IR scholarship is overwhelmingly written in English for English-speaking audiences. The top three IR journals are located in the US (*International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *International Security*), and US-based authors account for 80% to 100% of articles published in any given year between 1970 and 2005 (Friedrichs and Wæver in Tickner and Wæver 2009). This trend extends beyond IR. Almost 60% of the total literature covered by the Social Sciences Citation Index is authored or co-authored by scholars affiliated with the United States; all of Western Europe accounts for 25%, Latin America 1%, and the entire African continent for less than 1% (Keim 2008 in Tickner 2013). The construction of knowledge in the social sciences is by and large a business of the global North, in academic-refereed journals edited in English. These patterns of knowledge production are embedded in power dynamics that shape intellectual dependency. Scholars in the rest of the world have no option but to use terms defined in (by, and usually for) the Anglosphere. This limits not only the authorship but the substance of the study of the discipline (Bilgin 2016).

The Anglosphere therefore shapes the way we make sense of world politics. The fact that most IR knowledge is limited to English means that all forms of knowing the world in other tongues are almost automatically excluded. To echo Robert Cox's take on theory, IR theory is made by the Anglosphere, from the Anglosphere, for the Anglosphere. This inevitably silences our ways of knowing non-English sexualities.

This book resonates with a growing discontent among IR scholars. More and more scholars are exploring how to do IR differently, expanding disciplinary boundaries to include other ways of being in the world. Critics contest the pervasive ethnocentrism of theories that trace their genealogies to Hobbes and Locke but never to Nehru or Quijano (Blaney and Tickner 2017a). They accuse the discipline of being provincial and complicit in relations of domination, of not being all that worldly and trapped in the prison of colonial modernity. Scholars engage with questions of difference, non-Western thought, and ontological challenges to broaden the theoretical horizon of the discipline beyond its single-reality doctrine (Acharya 2014; Blaney and Tickner 2017b; Shilliam 2011). While there is a vibrant literature on queer international relations, attention to issues of translation is still marginal and epistemic dominance all too prevalent to learn from alternative worlds (Weber 2016; Rao 2018). This edited volume seeks to fill that gap, engaging frontally the challenge of translating global sexualities.

## Traveling Terminologies

A book on sexualities requires a note on terminology. The global sexuality framework is largely associated with LGBT politics, an acronym that refers to L(esbian) G(ay) B(isexual), T(ransgender). This short code can be expanded to various degrees, assembling a host of sympathetic allies up to the umbrella acronym of 'LGBTTIQQ2SA' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, Two-spirited and Allies'). The most common umbrella term is 'LGBT', although it has reductionist problems. As editors, we embrace and engage with all non-conforming sexualities, named and unnamed, and leave it up to the contributing authors to determine language in their own terms. Our intent is to recognise the fluidity and diversity of lived experiences, their untranslatability, and to reflect on the implications of translating sexuality politics across borders.

We recognise inherent tensions between the fixed codification of LGBT acronyms and the intrinsic fluidity of

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queerness. While LGBT politics categorise sexualities in the positivist terms designed to advocate for legal rights, queer approaches open an excess of possibilities to resignify sexualities, even the monolithic LGBT categorisation. The queer is inherently transgressive, challenging the determinism of LGBT identity politics, and may be a privileged space for translanguaging.

Sexual vocabularies evolve among linguistic frames, gaining new meaning and changing interlocutors as they adjust to the context. Leap and Boellstorff (2004) explore the articulations of same-sex desire, what they call 'gay language', in the face of globalisation across cultures. If there are sexual cultures, they say, there must be sexual languages (Leap and Boellstorff 2004, 12). The book pays special attention to English, but contests the notion that cultural contexts influenced by global forces necessarily become more like the West. Instead, they describe the ways in which people renegotiate forms of gay language into different conditions, reworking global same-sex dialects into the local.

Every border is a reminder that sexual languages do not travel well, neither across space nor time. With all its intrinsic fluidity, for instance, 'queer' is a word that only exists in English. It is a word doomed to travel fixated in its English form. Latin Americans went *cuir*, making it speak to their own local realities in an experience of *trastocar*, letting words act as territories and become sites for theory.<sup>[4]</sup> These border crossings raise epistemological challenges that become political ones. How can we achieve international understandings of sexualities that are enclosed within a politically situated language? Is English the *lingua franca* of sexuality? Is the term 'queer' trapped in a neocolonial matrix? (Falconí 2013). The dialogue with other languages is vital, yet sexuality politics are embedded in global sexuality frameworks that are lost in translation.

Complexities range from epistemological issues about the value of assigning fixed labels, such as gender or sexual orientation, to the fact that LGBT categories are neither universally recognised, as many cultures do not subscribe to these Western identity-based concepts, nor do they capture the full range of sexual diversity. Translation can be the opportunity to undo a global term for local appropriation, both reversing established knowledge and defining new ways of belonging beyond the state-defined terms.

### On Translating Sexual Politics Across Time

The terms LGBT, homosexual, gay, lesbian or queer have now become part of day-to-day language across the core-periphery divide. Not just in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom: these words and their variations can be found in China, Brazil, Spain, Russia, and Sudan. In Mandarin Chinese, for example, the most commonly used word for lesbian nowadays is 拉拉 (pronounced 'lā lā') which is directly derived from the English term. In visual representations, the rainbow colours are all over Chinese LGBT groups, both online and offline. This influence is relatively recent. Rich historical elements form a 3,000 year-long timeline of various same-sex sexualities and affinities, with a panoply of different social and political meanings, in (what now corresponds to) Chinese culture. Yet the direct and indirect presence of English language and culture around gender and sexual identities, which arrived in Chinese cities in the late nineteenth century and has fuelled activist organising since the 1990s (especially in Beijing and Shanghai), has had an influence that is now hugely visible.<sup>[5]</sup> This relationship between the two cultures and languages is anything but linear, and the consequences of this relationship are manifold.

This historical development is not unique to China. Sexuality and the politics linked to sexuality have become increasingly global since the turn of the twenty-first century, as has been argued by Dennis Altman (2001). The contemporary promotion of these words and their usage on a global scale has primarily grown out of the Anglosphere and more specifically the Anglo-American context, sometimes vaguely termed *Western*. That the English language has been influencing, or rather dominating, other languages around the world is of course not limited to sexuality or gender. While it is the case in popular culture and scholarship, it is also evident in politics and economy. English has long been the language of power, and it dis/em/powers the way we speak/think/do gender and sexuality around the world.

All this matters beyond words. The language used in the present reflects a certain reality of the past and defines the possibilities of the future. On a personal level, gender and sexuality are components of the very core of how people

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define and understand themselves. The words people choose to express themselves carry a lot of meaning and connotations, depending on the contexts in which they are used and received. In South Africa, for instance, there are people who go by the name *sangoma*. *Sangomas* are traditional healers who are women with dominant male ancestral spirits, and who choose women lovers. Can they be labelled 'transgendered', 'lesbian', or even 'bisexual'? These terms would erode the complexity of *sangomas*, and the interconnection between their sexuality, gender, and spirituality. In many spaces, ideas and identities around sexuality didn't exist in the same ways as those included under the LGBTQ umbrella, and so the merging of cultures leads to a variety of outcomes, as portrayed in this edited collection.

On national and transnational levels, the language around sexuality has had legal, political and economic repercussions. Most visibly, Pride celebrations in June each year, and national debates around same-sex relationships and marital status have global resonances. In less obvious manners, the recent Anglophone connotation of LGBTQ culture has been used as a basis for many state leaders to actively oppose same-sex relationships, despite the existence of various practices all over the world long before colonialism. This was the case with Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, who, at several occasions during his time in power, called homosexuality 'un-African' and a 'white disease'. Yahya Jammeh of The Gambia and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda are also examples (Evaristo 2014; Bosia 2014). In contrast, there are many instances where the LGBTQ movement has enabled the rallying of people under a common banner, for the promotion and defence of individual rights. This was the specific reason for its creation at the Stonewall Riots in the first place. It has enabled the inclusion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in the United Nations definition of a refugee since 1999 – thus making it explicitly possible to apply for and be granted asylum on that basis (Miles 2010, 5). Conversely, it also limits, in an Anglocentric manner, the categories of sexuality which are accepted as the alternatives to heterosexuality. So the consequences are complex, and the experiences uneven.

Emancipation or oppression? What if emancipation reproduces other forms of subjugation? The contributions in this volume reveal how processes of translation are entangled in layers of self-determination. Which experiences are translated with which words? From where? By whom? The chapters tackle the problem of sexual liberation to show how global narratives assert the existence of diverse sexualities but also impose external arrangements.

## Notes

[1] Ioana Fotache, this book.

[2] Cai Wilkinson, this book.

[3] Anglosphere is a collective term for English-speaking nations that are rooted in British culture and history.

[4] Trastocar as an act, brings the Spanish prefix for reverse (*tras-*) in reaction with the image of *tocar* (touch) that can refer to affect, as in the act of impacting and changing through different levels of affection (Picq and Viteri 2016).

[5] A rich research on the history of male same-sex practices in China has been carried out and published by historian and linguist Bret Hinsch (1992). On more recent developments since the 1990s, Yujie Guo who is a local activist, central to the movement, has written on this topic for E-IR (2015).

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