Barbara Czarniawska: At home in translation

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Abstract

Some get lost in translation; Barbara Czarniawska was at home in it. Early in my career, she helped me translate my vague sense that organizational performances were stories into the more precise concept of narratives which, allowed me to connect organizational studies with literary theory. Through her teaching, notably her course *From Field to Desk*, she guided PhD students in translating fieldwork into theoretical insights, balancing methodological rigor with openness. Drawing on Latour and Callon, Czarniawska framed translation as a process of adapting ideas across contexts, for example, shaping practices of urban management. Her work on overflow, a mistranslation of rugby's *cadrage-débordement*, demonstrated how concepts can evolve productively even when repurposed. Her action net theory, a translation of Actor-Network Theory, redefined organizations as dynamic webs of interconnected actions. A polyglot, Czarniawska also translated scholarly and literary texts into Polish, merging academic rigor with personal passion. For her, translation was never merely literal; it was a creative act that makes it possible for ideas to travel, transform, and flourish across boundaries.

1. At home in translation

Some get lost in translations. Barbara Czarniawska was more than at home in them.

Translation 1. I had just started my doctoral thesis when Barbara joined as a professor in the department of business administration at Lund University. I was struggling with the idea that organizational performance is a story that organizations tell about what they have done. At our first meeting Barbara told me: it's not a question of story, it's a question of narrative. That remark translated my concerns from an a-theoretical vernacular to the established language of literature science. By translating what I called "stories" into "narratives", Barbara put me in touch with narratology, the theory of the novel, the aesthetics of reception, and the theory of literature in general. Her remark not only opened my eyes to the technical and contested differences between stories, plots, and narrative. It introduced me to the practice of opening up passages between outside fields and the field of organization studies (Corvellec, 1997). That's what translation is for, bringing together worlds that would otherwise remain separate. And she was particularly good at that.

Translation 2. The Swedish acronym UFIS has long been the rallying sign for doctoral students passing through Barbara's methodological teaching. In literal translation "outside in the field - inside at the desk", it became *From Field to Desk* in English (Czarniawska, 2014) decades later. UFIS taught PhD students how to move from a theoretical question to fieldwork

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and, inversely, from fieldwork to reporting, analysis and theoretical contribution. Barbara introduced students to various methods, including critical incidents technique, interviews, shadowing (Czarniawska, 2007), narrative studies (Czarniawska, 2004a), and how to follow objects and quasi-objects (Czarniawska, 2009). But above all, Barbara explained at UFIS the importance of matching research questions to fieldwork techniques, even as she also recommended approaching the field with as few preconceptions and as much openness and curiosity as possible. UFIS was the practical translation for PhD students of her conception of the fundamental role - in the sense of what establishes the foundation of something - of fieldwork in any theoretical work. Not only did she use UFIS to translate her epistemological conceptions into practical guidance. She also taught the participants how to translate observations into reflections and reflections into questions. In short, she taught doctoral students how to become good translators between fields and texts.

Translation 3. Inspired by the work of Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and Michel Serre, Barbara and Guje Sevón theorized translations as a means of disseminating ideas and therefore managerial practices (2005). Ideas do not travel from organization to organization through diffusion but by translation. These translations involve displacement, invention, and mediation, creating new connections between ideas, people, texts, and objects. Ideas circulate globally by being constantly available for new translations in new contexts. When an idea gains prominence, it is translated into local versions, reinforcing its popularity. This process begins by translating the idea into a tangible form, such as a vision or a symbol, which different organizations adopt and adapt. However, surface adoption is not enough to impulse change; the idea must be integrated into daily practices and become institutionalized, for instance, via budget allocations, task forces, and training programs. The translation process is inherently local. Global ideas need to align with existing patterns to impulse change processes across organizations. And while there may be similarities in how ideas are realized, each translation is unique due to local contingencies, making the consequences of change unpredictable. Barbara used organizational translation to explain how cities develop their management, for example, their choice to install trams or use public procurements to fight bribery (Czarniawska, 2002).

Translation 4. Barbara helped popularize the idea of overflow in organization studies. She looked at overflow as a metaphor coming from fluid mechanics. She found that frames cannot contain things, so overflows are inevitable. Except that Michel Callon who introduced the notion had not been inspired by fluid mechanics, but by rugby. The term 'overflow' is a poor translation of the practice known in French as *cadrage-débordement*, which is called side-stepping on English speaking pitches. Framing is when attackers choose to engage in a duel with defenders by 'framing' opponents (*le cadrage*). But then, attackers suddenly change direction to get around defenders and overtake them (*le débordement*). It is an essential tactical strategy that requires physical strength, technical skill, and quick awareness. Barbara was not familiar with the technique of *cadrage-débordement*, but it does not matter. Her work on overflows (Czarniawska & Löfgren, 2014, 2019; Löfgren & Czarniawska, 2012) remains unique in its identification of a key contemporary societal trait, evident from labor life to the arts, science, politics, and the media. It is also a pathbreaking critique of the ideals and illusions surrounding control. This mistranslation proves that translation can be highly productive even when landing far from the source language. However, one might wonder how her research on overflow would have been if she had departed from rugby instead of fluid

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mechanics. Could she have written a witty piece on the skillful ways in which an attacker can deceive the opponent's defense, establishing her as a rugby theorist?

Translation 5. Probably the best example of Barbara's use of translation for theoretical developments is the notion of action net (Czarniawska, 2004b, 2010) that she coined to explain the birth and persistence of organisations. An action net depicts organizations as interconnected actions. It is the organizing process of connecting actions, with organizing seen as an ongoing process of becoming rather than a static state. Organizations are continually evolving entities where activities are meshed together in more or less stable ways. Action nets can adapt to or challenge existing institutional orders, demonstrating both a capacity for resilience and innovation. Not all connections between actions become stable, and the theory of action nets invites inquiring about how the dynamic of organizing builds stable relationships. By inviting to focus on how actions are interconnected within a context, action nets provide a practical framework for studying organizational dynamics and change. Not only does action net stresses that organizing is a matter of building relationships among people, things, words, and concepts through actions of non-linguistic translations (Lindberg & Czarniawska, 2006). The notion of action net is itself a translation of Michel Calon's sociology of translation (1986) and Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (2005) into the field of organisational and management studies. Translating translation theory for a new field is a fine example of *mise en abyme* (literally "placed into abyss"), the play-in-play technique in heraldry of placing a copy of an image within itself to suggest an abyss infinitely recurring sequence.

Translation 6. A polyglot, Barbara wrote in Polish, English, Swedish and Italian. She also read French. She could therefore either translate or supervise the translation of her work from any one of these languages into another. But she was also herself a translator into Polish of classic research texts in English (Guilford & Czarniawska, 1995; Weick & Czarniawska, 2016), and of detective novels written in Swedish (Bodstrom & Czarniawska, 2012) and Italian (Battistelli & Czarniawska, 2010, 2011). She translated texts that she really liked and wanted to make available in Polish. However, I suspect that her activity as translator also had to do with the pleasure to write in her mother tongue. Although she had such an ease with all her languages, when she described what it is like to write in a foreign language, she said it is like holding a 5 meter long soft pen: you make much efforts with your hand, she said, but you hardly know what you write. I guess translating into Polish made her feel safer about what she wrote.

Barbara Czarniawska has shown that translation is creative and diverse. It is more than just the mechanics of DeepL, which I used to go from the text that I composed in French to the English that I submitted for publication. At home in translation, she demonstrated that translation is about moving from one world to another and is therefore an enabler of curiosity and the creative travels of ideas.

Keywords

Barbara Czarniawska; Translation; Supervision; Research method; Action nets; Overflows

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