

The personal is interpersonal is political: Modelling translation and conflict

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The wars of the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s meant that many – too many – of its citizens (Bosnians, Croats, Serbs and others) had stories that they felt needed telling. The wars have now petered out in stalemates or partitions that satisfy some people, but leave many embittered or in exile – on the wrong side of a new ethnic border, or in communities scattered across the wider world. This too has led to stories. Stories of memory, but also of how communal life in the region might be reshaped (in either sense: newly shaped, or shaped back as of old).

Some of these stories tell of conflict – personal tales of war or exile. But many also engage in conflict, to oppose other stories – narrating late-socialist Yugoslavia as ethnic harmony versus narrating it as suppressed ethnic hatred, for example.

As a literary translator and ad-hoc interpreter from Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian into English, I have helped transmit stories of conflict from the region. But in choosing which stories to transmit, I have also willingly or unwittingly taken sides in the conflict of stories.

As a translation-studies researcher, I have tried to make sense of how I and others transmit such stories. In this talk, I describe a framework of translation action that has helped me make sense, and can be used to research translation and conflict in general. It borrows, broadly if shallowly, from a range of social and translation theories. Its two central elements are subject and network. Seeing people as subjects shows that who we are (translators or interpreters, publishers or service providers, researchers or commentators) is an interplay between inner and outer – between how we think and feel as individuals, and how we act in and interact with our outside world. Subjects link to other subjects in complex, multiple networks of acting and interacting. These networks are what intertwine the political (“our land belongs to all its peoples, not just to one”) with the interpersonal (“you want me to co-translate your book”) with the personal (“this is why I’m translating, and why I’m translating like this”).