

Book Review: *Interpreting, Communication and Animal Welfare: An Ecosemiotic Analysis of Interspecies Translation*, by Xany Jansen van Vuuren, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter Mouton, 2025, 210pp. \$161.64, ISBN 978-3-11-100889-9.

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Emerging from a South African research context and grounded in ethnographic engagement with equine welfare outreach, Xany Jansen van Vuuren's *Interpreting, Communication and Animal Welfare* is an ambitious, original work, weaving together three apparently disparate domains: translation studies, animal welfare, and ecosemiotics. From the very beginning, the book challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries and critiques the view of translation as a purely anthropocentric and logocentric (language-centered) practice. Translation is here approached as an inclusive process that structures all communicative life, extending its conceptual reach to include communication between species and offering a post-anthropocentric vision of communication that is at once theoretical, ethical, and practical.

At the heart of each discussion presented in this book is a sustained interrogation of the animal-human binary. Eco-activists, in fact, often use "non-human" to refer to animals and "human animal" to refer to humans, in order to challenge human superiority and the perceived separation between humans and other species. Yet van Vuuren's decision to retain the terms "animals" and "humans" purposefully and conceptually foregrounds a refusal to linguistically dissolve difference, treating that difference as the very condition that makes translation both meaningful and necessary. To this end, translation is not a practice of erasing difference, but rather an ethical procedure to negotiate and maintain difference. In doing so, van Vuuren demonstrates that species-specific perceptual worlds, *Umwelten* in Jakob von Uexküll's sense, are not barriers to understanding but generative spaces in which meaning must be continually translated. The "disconnect" between human and animal *Umwelten* is thus reframed as both the cause of welfare breakdowns and an opportunity for critical engagement. Translation becomes not an optional metaphor but an ecological and ethical imperative.

Uexküll's concept of *Umwelt*, the theoretical pivot of the book, is adapted, conceptualizing the ecological space of animal-welfare outreach as a confluence of multiple *Umwelten*. In doing so, it offers a model in which translation is a real-time, embodied, and triadic process of semiosis rather than a bi-directional linguistic transfer. Drawing on Peirce's triadic model of semiosis, where interpretant, sign, and object form a dynamic relationship, van Vuuren positions translation within

the interactions of living systems. Translation becomes not merely linguistic exchange but a fundamental process through which living beings create meaning. The welfare encounter between human and horse thus becomes a site of semiotic negotiation in which distinct perceptual worlds converge, sometimes imperfectly yet always meaningfully.

What gives weight to such theoretical claims is the book's empirical grounding. Drawing on fieldwork at *Blind Love Association*, a South African equine-welfare organization, van Vuuren analyses outreach events where veterinarians, volunteers, and horse owners work together in situations of linguistic and cultural plurality. Afrikaans, English, and Sesotho circulate alongside the bodily and tactile signs of interspecies interaction. Within these polyglot ecologies, translation is revealed as an embedded social practice, one in which everyone is involved, not just those trained to do it. In the absence of formal briefs or institutional structures, interactions succeed through embodied attunement, shared ethical purpose, and responsiveness to the semiotic cues of the horses themselves. These observations, which extend well beyond human linguistic exchange, lend empirical force to van Vuuren's argument that translation is a fundamental, organic skill for navigating difference.

Yet the most compelling theoretical move in the book is perhaps the synthesis between translation studies and ecosemiotics. The book adopts Maran and Kull's definition of ecosemiotics as "a view on ecosystems as communicative systems" (Maran and Kull, 2014: 41), and positions the discipline as the most suited to mediate between different sign systems in nature-culture relations. Ecosemiotics and translation, van Vuuren argues, are both concerned with mediation, relationality, and the ethics of understanding across difference. Considering the making of meaning across boundaries the central function of translation, the study further engages with the ecological premise that life itself is made possible through communicative exchanges. This alignment reframes translation as synonymous with *semiosis*, the action of signs that underlies all living systems. In advancing this perception, van Vuuren builds on Kobus Marais's biosemiotic conception of translation as a process that "underlies all semiotic processes equally" (Marais 2019:52), and Michael Cronin's (2017) notion of *eco-translation*, which demands recognition of cross-species agency. Yet, unlike biosemiotics and eco-translation that could become too abstract, van Vuuren's argument remains empirically grounded. Her conceptual elaboration, anchored in case studies, proposes a methodological extension of biosemiotic and eco-translation theories. Temple Grandin's framing of animal perception for industrial design, a guide dog translating visual information for its handler, or a blind horse interpreting its partner's perceptual experience are all the strongest examples to demonstrate translation as a multispecies process that takes place continuously across species and is important for cooperation and survival.

Another major contribution of the book lies in its discussion of intersemiotic translation. Van Vuuren liberates this concept from its usual confinement to human art forms, as seen in the works of Campbell and Vidal (2019; 2024a; 2024b); Simon (2023); Rizzo (2017); Baynham and Lee (2019); Bal and Morra (2007); Vidal Claramonte (2022; 2025; 2026), and extends it to interspecies contexts where language often yields to more immediate iconic and indexical signs. Horses, she

shows, communicate primarily through tactile, gestural, and bodily indices. Realizing such semiotic modality is vital to the basis of a more ethical way of human-animal interaction. Here, the author's ecosemiotic framework engages in contextualizing abstract theoretical work with perceptual and physiological realities. The detailed semiotic inventory of the horse's *Umwelt*, its panoramic visual field, acute auditory sensitivity, and reliance on tactile cues, serves not merely as zoological description but as an exposition of how species-specific sensory worlds shape and constrain interspecies translation. For instance, the discussion of blinkers becomes a critique of human cultural practices that materially delimit animal perception; by partially blinding horses, such that horses can become manageable, humans are constraining the horse's *Umwelt* and agency, literally and symbolically.

The methodological originality of van Vuuren lies in what she refers to as *semiotic mapping*, which presents a three-part process of narrative description, Peircean triadic modelling, and integrative analysis to visualize the fluid processes of interspecies translation. Semiotic maps present the complex and, in a sense, invisible dynamics of semiosis, through modelling instances of live interaction between welfare workers and horses. These maps are derived from rich photographic and observational materials and constitute one of the book's most distinctive scholarly contributions. By structuring *unlimited semiosis*, the maps necessarily simplify, yet they remain essential for understanding how meaning operates across ecological networks.

The book's discussion of *affordances* and *constraints* is equally convincing as the two poles around which semiosis works. Van Vuuren's multi-scalar analysis, following macro-level socioeconomic forces, meso-level organizational structures, and micro-level embodied interactions, demonstrates how translation mediates the relationship between structural conditions and local acts of communication. These constraints regulate welfare-related interactions between workers, animals, and members of the community. Translation, in this ecology, becomes the process that channels possibilities for action into specific meanings. The treatment of branding and ear-clipping as intersemiotic translations of ownership exemplifies this argument elegantly: social agreements are inscribed on the animal body, converting physical markings into semiotic statements about property, identity, and vulnerability.

The book's core achievement lies in its conceptualization of translation as a multispecies, ecological practice. In expanding the concept of translator to include veterinarians, welfare workers, horse owners, and even the horses themselves, van Vuuren dismantles the anthropocentric hierarchies that have long structured both translation studies and animal welfare. Translation emerges here as distributed agency, a collaborative act of world-making, where all beings, human and more-than-human, function as sign users and meaning makers. This reconceptualization opens up translation studies not only to different sites and methods of translation but also brings new ethical urgency to it. In an age of ecological crisis and interspecies entanglement, van Vuuren offers a model for the ways in which translation theory might engage with the more-than-human world. Having said that, the density of semiotic and Peircean terminology may be difficult for animal-welfare practitioners, or anyone without such a background. Moreover, a posthumanist

critique of the book would question the very imperative of translation. The book is predicated on the assumption that the “disconnect” of human from animal *Umwelten* is something that needs to be fixed by translation. But what if this disconnect is a form of boundary that should, in many respects, be respected? What if the relentless drive to translate, to make the animal’s experience knowable and legible within a human framework, is itself an act of epistemological violence, a form of semiotic colonization?

Interpreting, Communication and Animal Welfare is therefore more than an interdisciplinary experiment; it is a re-imagination of what it means to interpret, to translate, and to communicate across the boundaries of species and systems. It needs to be read by scholars of translation studies interested in posthuman and ecological turns, by semioticians exploring bio- and ecosemiotic frameworks, and by welfare practitioners open to rethinking communication with animals as a mutual, interpretive process. The book successfully achieves its stated aims, redefining the nature of translation through the lens of ecosemiotics and providing a contextually sensitive framework for ethical practice in animal welfare. Van Vuuren’s project exemplifies Cronin’s (2017) call to “think through some of the assumptions we make about translation and how they may need to be radically re-thought on a planet that, from a human standpoint, is entering the most critical phase of its existence” (3). And beyond scholarly ambition, van Vuuren and her book challenge us to recognize that meaning is never ours alone, that translation itself can be an invitation to listen, respond, and co-exist.

Disclosure

The author(s) used generative AI tools solely for grammar and language checking. Efforts were made to ensure that the structure of sentences and the style of writing were entirely preserved by the author(s).

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