

**GEOGRAPHIES, SPATIAL CONCEPTS AND MEDIATING  
IMAGINATIONS: ON JUSTIFICATION OF TRANSLATION  
IN EX-CENTRIC HUMAN GEOGRAPHY**

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**Abstract.** In this paper I examine the consequences of the idea that geography is situated in social contexts. My aim is to determine the rational conditions of using conceptual resources of the central Anglophone tradition in the geographical studies of peripheral societal worlds. The problem of conceptual translation derives from three different but related assumptions: (1) geographies are social theories within other social practices, (2) geographical tradition is plural and its theories are underdetermined by the world events and objects, (3) geography matters to the practices of geographical conceptualisations. Following Donald Davidson's theory of truth I argue that geographical translation is justified in case the different geographical communities in the same causal circumstances can openly share the belief in the truth of conceptual sentences concerning their spatial properties. Due to the lack of common external social events and objects in the communication between different societies, the paper suggests to imagine a list of simple spatial abstractions as a tool for creating common causal situation for central and peripheral geographical communities.

**Keywords:** conceptual translation, human spatiality, imagination, geographical practice, Davidson

## **1. Introduction**

The contemporary scholars of geographical knowledge have proposed to “think of geography as a tradition that evolves like a species over time” (Livingstone 1992:30). The task has been to suspend the idea of “the essential nature of geography”, and replace it by that of “situated messiness” (p. 28). The arguments developed in the article are initiated by David Livingstone's thesis – based on the works of sociologists of scientific knowledge (e.g. Bloor 1976, Barnes and Shapin 1979) – that geography, like any other social practice, is situated in social contexts, and that geographical “texts and contexts are constituted reciprocally” (Livingstone 1992:29, also e.g. Shapin 1998). Unlike his central empirical concern

about historical contexts in which the geographies have been evolving, my concern here is their contemporary societal and cultural contexts that “make a difference to the tradition’s cognitive claims, subjects of scrutiny, and methods deployed” (Livingstone 1995b:28).

The peculiar discursive position of “peripheral” geographers in relation to the Anglophone core has been brought to the fore in several recent editorials (e.g. Minca 2000, Olds 2001, Yeung 2001, Desbiens 2002, Braun 2003, Minca 2003, Timar 2003, Vaiou 2003, Yiftachel 2003) and analytical papers (e.g. Gregson et al. 2003). Similarly to these authors, my argumentation derives from the actual experiences, namely from the problems encountered during the empirical studies of Estonian “provinces”<sup>1</sup> within the theoretical constructions of the central Anglophone geographies. I will elaborate on the argument that the eccentric – or more literally, ex-centric – character of these research practices in relation to the dominating Anglo-American geography should be taken seriously into account. My main intention is to determine the conditions for the proper application of the academic resources from the “international” tradition to the research of peripheral societies such as Estonia. Thus, throughout this paper I am seeking a position that could provide some rational justification to the usual practice of applying theories and concepts of Anglophone geographical tradition to the studies of peripheral social worlds, in the current case – Estonian provinces. In other words, I am concerned with the epistemological aspect of the translation between different geographical discourses – epistemological in the sense that the paper deals with the status of “knowledge and the justification of belief” (see Dancy 1985:1). In this search Donald Davidson’s empirical theory of truth (see Davidson 1990b, 1996, 2001a, 2001b) is used as a pivot for establishing a position from which the translation into ex-centric geography can be rationally defended.

From the social point of view, the arguments presented here derive from the pragmatic considerations, most forcefully propounded during the recent decades by philosopher Richard Rorty (1980, 1989, 1991, 1995). The question of proper (justified) translation has a practical bearing. For example, while considering a reasonable academic communication of empirical findings in regional geography across different regional systems, and more instrumentally in the attempts to compose translation manuals of planning terms used in the countries of European Union – in order to facilitate co-operation and control in EU regional and administrative policy. The “metaphysical activism” (Rorty 1995:300) deployed in the paper, aimed at using the particular truth theory in providing rational account of translation, which is at odds with Rorty’s own project, is motivated by my belief that it could provide us with more equal common ground in the communication between different geographical discourses than Rorty’s communicative liberalism allows us to do. By reversing the ideological impulse in Rorty’s thesis that in pragmatic terms “assessment of truth and assessment of justification are,

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<sup>1</sup> By Estonian “provinces” I mean here particular socially, politically and historically contingent phenomena referred to by the term *maakond*.

when the question is about what I should believe now, the same activity” (ibid:281), I look for the sameness of truth conditions in order to justify translations between central and peripheral geographies.

This article provides only partial treatment of the problem of translation in human geography and concentrates on the explication of the translation of the “truly geographical” in social theories. The examinations of the general disciplinary politics of the Anglophone geography in the following section are exploited to substantiate my claim that it is the spatiality of social worlds<sup>2</sup> that has been the basic and central theme in the Anglophone tradition during the last few decades. Section 3 specifies the problem of translation in ex-centric research practices as the consequence of three interrelated assumptions in geography – (1) geographical theories and concepts are embedded in social life, are used to cope with(in) social worlds and, therefore, are also about these worlds; (2) there are different true ways of conceptualising the world; (3) the social worlds differ and these differences are also important for a geography as a socially embedded disciplinary practice. Section 4 elaborates on Rorty’s distinction between epistemological and hermeneutic discursive practices, and employs Davidson’s empirical theory of truth as an analytic framework providing rational account of translation in the common social situation. Rorty’s own hermeneutic approach, which denies the need for common ground and the theory of truth in explication of translation, is rejected mainly for its political implications. The liberal communication in Rorty’s style tends to empower the central geographical communities, ignore difference and suppress plurality.

Finally, in section 5, the possibility of common social situations for the rational communication between central and peripheral geographies is discussed. The faculty of imagination is evoked as the location of common ground for translations in ex-centric geographical studies. Relying on the outcomes of section 2, and on the distinctions between basic/non-basic and minimal/robust concepts made by Michael P. Lynch (1997, 2001) the tentative list of relevant spatial abstractions related to the most minimal concept of a space – the topological concept – is constructed. Also, the active role of a geographer in translation and the non-total character of any translation are emphasized.

## **2. Anglophone geographical tradition – traditional terms in theoretical contexts**

Despite the renouncement of essentialism in the definitions of geography, it is nevertheless common in the arguments on “human geography today” to concentrate on “the specific differentia of ‘human geography’” (Massey et al. 1999:4). This differentia is most frequently found in the conceptual realm. Hence, geo-

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<sup>2</sup> Another central object of the conceptual translations in human geography as a social science should be, of course, the character of “the social” within the concepts. In social sciences both the space and the society are very basic, vague and abstract concepts that need further specification.

graphy is not just an ordinary species for Livingstone, but it is “a sort of conceptual species” (Livingstone 1990:369). Geographers are expected to share common geographical conceptual apparatus, the practical knowledge of which enables to participate in the tradition as a specific language game (cf. Wittgenstein 1963). Of course the geographical vocabulary and the related conceptualisations have changed over the time, due to the various social circumstances and creative aspirations of the geographers, i.e. of those who already are socialized as geographers (see Livingstone 1992).

The examination of the recent volumes on the Anglophone geographical project reveal that it is the term “space” that is most persistently present in the lists of key geographical vocabulary (see e.g. Gregory 1994, Agnew, et al. 1996, Soja 1996, Sack 1997, Doel 1999, Massey et al 1999, Mitchell 2000, Whatmore 2002). In many cases the authors who promote conceptual plurality and “messiness” within geography move on in their texts and explicitly favour space/spatiality as the best way to express the conceptual differentia of human geography (Gregory 1994:xi, Sack 1997:25, Soja 1996:1). In other cases, the centrality of the concept of space in human geography is taken for granted (e.g. Doel 1999, Massey et al. 1999, Mitchell 2000, May and Thrift 2001).

Thus, it is evident that the Anglophone tradition has a quite influential tendency to claim that spatiality of the social worlds is today the central topic of human geography. Therefore it also insists that the concepts of space and spatiality are somehow basic to geographical theories. The concepts expressing the geographical differentia in academia and in everyday life are assumed to have spatial connotations. Yet, there is also a more analytic line of reasoning, which gives some explanation to the privileging of the “space” over other geographical concepts. We may argue that space is functioning well as the central concept in geography due to its vagueness (see Lynch 2001:61, cf. Varzi 2001) in comparison with other geographical concepts related to it. As geography becomes a more plural discourse, the best conceptual device for expressing its coherence is probably the concept, which is the least constraining and can resist “the plethora of contrasting and even contradictory qualities ...associated with [it]” (Couclelis and Gale 1986:1). Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (2000:1) note in the introduction to the recent theoretical volume on geographical space – that “[s]pace .. is an all-purpose nostrum to be applied whenever things look sticky. It is an invocation which suggests that the writer is right on without her having to give too much away. It is flexibility as explanation...”

I think that this is exactly the role played best by the concept of space in the contemporary geographical discourse. The space is the emptiest concept in geography – in a sense that it specifies the ontology of the social world less than any other geographical concept – and that makes it most suitable for being the basic concept without the risk of exterminating the conceptual plurality of the discipline, which nevertheless strives towards some terminological and conceptual integrity (see Shields 1997). And although the “explications of the term are necessary”, I believe that there is hardly any need to “distinguish legitimate from confused

uses” (Sayer 1985:51) outside the particular theory or research project (but see e.g. Sack 1997, Rose 1999, Massey et al. 1999). I would rather support Crang and Thrift’s (2000:1) position that “[t]he problem is not so much that space means very different things – what concepts do not – but that it is used with such abandon that its meanings run into each other before they have been properly interrogated”.

The fact that space is not a purely geographical term but also a cultural category widely used within different societal worlds as well as in many other disciplines such as mathematics, philosophy, physics, astronomy, visual arts, architecture, cinema, theatre, etc is another source of confusion. The question “what kind of space in human geography?” (cf. Simonsen 1996) should have an answer that makes a meaningful distinction, but would not threaten the existing plurality within the tradition. The solution I prefer was offered two decades ago by Neil Smith, whose concern was “with geographical space which we can take in its most general sense as the space of human activity” (Smith 1984:66). Yet, I assume it is more instructive to call such spaces “human spaces”, where “human” takes its place in the phrase in the same sense as in human geography.<sup>3</sup> It does not necessarily refer to a single human being and its idiosyncratic experienced space, but to the presence, or conspicuous absence, of human agents in the conceptualisations of space and other spatial concepts. And, of course, it has specific human scale.

Thus, the partial minimal concept of human space<sup>4</sup> I use in this paper is the following: “human space is a space that is relevant to humans as social actors”. The drawback of this definition is that it only excludes some non-human-geographic spaces, but tells us nothing about the meaning of the concept of a space, which could distinguish it from other minimal concepts as empty as a space itself. The question how to conceptualise this spatial character in the concepts of human geography, remains. I will return to this problem in section 5.

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<sup>3</sup> The main reason to avoid the use of the term of geographical space is, for me, its strong connotations with the Euclidean 2-dimensional geometric space of the Earth surface. Thus, the term tends to constrain the spatial imaginations that could be taken as geographical in disciplinary sense. In that sense, I agree with Wolfgang Zierhofer that “the way space is most often conceived in contemporary human geography ... cannot serve as a [or the only] point of reference for geographical inquiry” (Zierhofer 2002:1370). Yet, I hope that the term “space” could refer to much more plural spatial ontologies than it is traditionally imagined in human geography. The most forceful support for post-Euclidean spatial thinking in contemporary human geography is provided in the works of so-called actor network theory scholars, who use the more general topological understanding of a space and discuss the intertwinement of geometrical spatiality with other types of spaces – with network, fluid and fire spaces (see e.g. Mol and Law 1994, Murdoch 1998, Law 2002, Callon and Law 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Michael P. Lynch (2001:68) distinguishes between minimal and robust concepts. The latter one “is a concept whose ordinary use consists of a commitment to some particular ontological view”, and the former one, invoked here, “is a concept whose ordinary use floats free of metaphysical questions”.

### 3. The problem of translation

To start with, allow me once again to remind you of the situation where I believe I am together with other ex-centric researchers. On the one hand, I have to, due to the academic hegemonic standards and also due to the relative theoretical poverty of my national “geographical school”, communicate within the “central” Anglophone geographical tradition (see also Paasi 2005).

On the other hand, as an empirical human geographer, I have to work for and with indigenous people like myself (see e.g. Tierney 2000, Nagar 2002), who have their own geographical concepts and conceptions about the worlds they live in. Thus, what I have here on my disposal is conceptually plural “international geographical tradition”, less plural and largely parasitic<sup>5</sup> Estonian academic geography practiced at universities, which suffers from the scarcity of its own theoretical and rhetorical resources. In addition, I have a multitude of non-disciplinary discourses operating within the cultural worlds and studied by ex-centric researchers. I argue that communication between the members of such diverse discourses could not be taken for granted but should be a subject of an analysis. The question is, how to make a passage between these differences (see Callon 1980) – in other words, how to give rational explanation for the use of academic theories of the centre in the studies of peripheral societies. Thus, what we need is a certain theory of translation.

Before discussing the theory itself, let me first accentuate the problem in greater detail. The theoretical problem is the consequence of three related assumptions, all of which are in accordance with ontological and epistemological positions within the central academic geography. Firstly, human geographers inside the tradition are used to think of their discipline as a social science, where theories are not about the inherent nature of humans and their transcendental spatial world, but have a bearing on the particular reality they are dealing with. In other words, the realist conception of theory and practice has been prevalent in human geography in general and in empirical research in particular for several decades (see e.g. Sayer 1985, Paasi 1986, Mäki and Oinas 2004, Sayer 2004).

Derek Gregory generalizes the point by stating that all social theories are embedded in social life and used “to make social life intelligible” (Gregory 1993:274). Thus, there cannot be any significant difference between the disciplinary and non-disciplinary theories in this respect – both are somewhat related to their social worlds, in order to prove useful. It is also true that these

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<sup>5</sup> According to French meta-philosopher Michel Serres, “parasitism is one of the most basic survival strategies adopted across the living world. ... The essence of such parasitism is taking without giving. It is an asymmetrical, one-way relationship” (see Brown 2002:15–16). I think the notion describes quite well my practices as an Estonian geographer in relation to Anglophone geography. No attempt is made to contribute the “world body” of geographical thought (cf. Akiwowo 1999:119) nor is there any substantial hope that Estonian geography could emerge as one of “the sources of theoretical knowledge” (Slater 1999:79), provided it is trying to theorize its own society and not just theorizing back the reflections of the Anglophone centre in Estonia.

geographies themselves are the integral parts of (making) the social realities they are about (see Massey et al. 1999:21, Paasi 1986:117, cf. also Quine 1963:61). Therefore in a particular societal world – for example, in UK or in Estonia, – academic and non-academic geographies exist in the context of each other.

A more critical argument for the present discussion derives from the semiotic understanding that the societal worlds or cultures itself *are* the processes of translation and that translation is taking place between various discourses and various forms of discourses within the cultural worlds (see Torop 2000, 2002). Also, it is a routine procedure for more institutionalised societal discourses – like arts or science, for example – to interpret different conceptualisations according to their inner semiotic rules. These discourses take on and promote certain conceptual constructs and neglect others. Disciplinary geography is certainly one of such active discourses within society. Its distinctive geographical concepts, which provide the identity to the practice and to the respective collective, are produced using other concepts and conceptions operating within a particular culture.

If we accept Hilary Putnam's idea (1981) that while translating we turn conceptions (beliefs about how the social world is) held in social theories into concepts (meanings), we can see academic human geography as a genre of translation. The geographical tradition is fascinated by its specific concepts partly because that is what it does in relation to daily life – it translates everyday conceptions into geographical concepts. Consequently, there are many geographical concepts formulated more or less clearly within academic theories, which are the results of the translation from central everyday discourse/practice to central academic discourse/practice. The same “total translation” (Torop 2002) in geographical conceptualisation takes place in peripheries as well.

Yet, not all is translated; translation means also betrayal (see Law 1994, Latour 1999, Brown 2002). When translating, disciplinary geography tends to emphasize on differences from those aspects that are taken for granted and leave the similarities unnoticed. Davidson writes in relation to the social theory of interpretation:

*“...the shared truths are too many and dull to bear mentioning. What we want to talk about is what's new, surprising, or disputed”* (Davidson 2001a:153).

Despite that, these dull similarities are constitutive to the meaning of concepts. Unless we could imagine a human geographer whose theoretical ideas about us and others are not disturbed by our common-sense beliefs, we should accept that the common societal background knowledge conditions the meaning of every theoretical concept on the societal world one is living in, as its more or less acknowledged source and limit – its “river base” (Wittgenstein 1963, 1980).

Secondly, it is admitted, although predominantly in theory (e.g. Harvey 1973, Lefebvre 1991, Simonsen 1996, Crang and Thrift 2000), and only recently in empirical geographical research (but see Morehouse 1996, Koskela 2000, also Mol and Law 1994, de Laet 2000, Mol and Law 2001), that there is no one and only correct way of spatial conceptualisation. There are many different sets of geographical concepts (i.e. theories) which we may use for talking and writing about “the same” social entities and actions. The publications in numerous geographical

journals provide quite clear evidences that the Anglophone tradition is indeed characterized by plurality of theories, approaches and concepts (cf. Livingstone 1995a, McEwan 1998). Thus, even in case we are quite sure about certain facts of life, we nevertheless may disagree on categories, which are exploited to arrange these facts. In other words, the idea (of pluralism) that “there can be more than one true story of the world” (Lynch 2001:1), is fully legitimised and practiced within the contemporary human geography.

Thirdly, it has also been widely argued inside the geographical tradition that “geography matters” (Massey 1984, Massey et al. 1999), in the sense that social reality is not all the same and its variations over the societies or sub-societies are important for human practices. This principle is obviously also valid for the practices of geographical theorization and conceptualisation. There is no universal way of seeing world geographically, but instead there are many differently fractured conceptual schemes and sub-schemes.<sup>6</sup> Some of the differences in geographical and any other type of conceptualisation come from the differences in and between the worlds where one lives. Thus, when explaining cultural differences in epistemologies, Sandra Harding (1998, 2001) points out the differences in the natural worlds. Harding’s ideas on multiculturalism and science (2001) bring our assumptions in concert:

*“...different cultures occupy different location in natures’ heterogeneous order. They must ask questions about it in order to survive. Different cultures will ask different questions even in the “same” environment. ...different cultures will develop different patterns of systematic knowledge and systematic ignorance about their environments. ...cultures bring distinctive metaphors, models and narratives of nature and inquiry to their knowledge-collection projects” (ibid:50).*

It is obvious that the social worlds are at least as different as the natural ones.

The existence of substantial differences between spatial conceptualisations insists that translation – “creating convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different” (Callon 1980:211, in Brown 2002:6) – should be constitutive for the specific ex-centric geographical practice. Without determining these homologies in the spatial concepts the central theories can make very little use of studies of peripheral societies.

An additional point is that these three assumptions have – when intertwining and forming the general problem of translation in ex-centric human geography – quite different consequences for central and peripheral geographers. The theories and concepts developed and exploited by a central researcher exist for him/her in at least some coherence with the whole societal body of knowledge. In other words, the cultural translations already partake in the academic theories. For an

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<sup>6</sup> This is in no way a new topic in modern geography. David Harvey admitted already three decades ago: “Concepts of space ...vary from one cultural context to another, and within broad cultural configurations smaller sub-groups may develop a particular conceptual apparatus with respect to space geared to the particular role which they perform in society” (Harvey 1969:194).



ex-centric geographer the general problem of conceptual translation derives from the institutional fact that he/she is compelled to use – and in fact uses in a routine fashion – the central theories and concepts within the researches of non-central worlds, without knowing the meaning of the concepts that come from the societal background knowledge. In this respect, the concepts of the central theory are deficient in periphery. In Wittgensteinian terms an ex-centric geographer is short of training, which makes words properly connected to the world (Bloor 1983:28) and could therefore only rely on translations of these words.

That is exactly the case when a researcher like myself investigates Estonian provinces and their non-disciplinary everyday geographies and does so with the help of the resources of Anglophone disciplinary geography. These geographies do not share many of the common-sense beliefs about the world – if not for any other reason then at least because they share neither the same natural nor societal world (see Harding 2001:50). The conceptual properties of this missing general societal knowledge in the concepts of the central Anglophone tradition should be seriously considered in the ex-centric research practices. Therefore, implicit beliefs about the social worlds should be made public in order to make communication over cultural borders more justified.

#### 4. Epistemological translations and hermeneutic communication

In the previous two sections the centrality of the concept of space in the geographical theories was brought forward and the problem of translation between central academic and peripheral non-academic geographical theories was articulated. In this section I intend to exploit the distinction between epistemological and hermeneutical discursive practices made by Richard Rorty (1980), in order to clarify the whereabouts of translation and communication in ex-centric research. The discussion concentrates on two points of interest: (a) to what extent these positions share the assumptions leading to the problem of translation; (b) to what extent they help to justify the practice of empirical research of the peripheral social realities using theories of the central tradition, and with what consequences. According to Rorty the differences between epistemology and hermeneutics basically lie in the following

*“...epistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable. Hermeneutics is largely a struggle against this assumption. ... The dominating notion of epistemology is that to be rational, to be fully human, to do what we ought, we need to be able to find agreement with other human beings. To construct an epistemology is to find the maximum amount of common ground with others.*

*For hermeneutics, to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology – from thinking that there is a special set of terms into which all contributions to the conversation should be put - and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own” (Rorty 1980:316–318).*

Thus, epistemology seeks for some firm ground for translation in order to make it rational and justifiable. This common ground has been found in immanent categories of human mind in Cartesian and Kantian idealist philosophies, or in empirical world, in empiricism and positivism. Against the first it could be argued that they work on too general level, where the problem of the translation of spatial concepts ceases to exist as long as the universal category of (3-dimensional Euclidean) space is inherently given to every human. The specification they can provide for spatial concepts is too general and rigid for the use in empirical research. Against the second line of thought it could be argued that it assumes the same objective world, which is divided in “natural” way to objects and events, and one-to-one relations between concepts and the world. In that case no notice is taken of the initial assumptions that societal worlds differ, pluralism is most likely the case and that geography matters. In short, both kinds of classical foundationalisms tend to suppress the possibility of significant plurality of (spatial) concepts (see Lynch 1997:411).

More promising ideas for my argumentation are proposed in analytic philosophy. The authors whose conceptions I discuss here, namely Willard Van Orman Quine and Donald Davidson, still operate with the idea of commensurability as a necessary condition for the rational communication - just as empiricists or transcendental philosophers do. The difference is that their versions of epistemology are much more confined to the scientific enterprise as such.

Quine calls his version “naturalized epistemology”. He declares that “a foundation for scientific certainty” could be found only in “scientific method itself” (Quine 1990:19, cf. Davidson 2001b:193-194). In a similar vein, Davidson defends the position, which abandons “the search for a basis for knowledge outside the scope of our beliefs” as “a source of justification” (Davidson 1990a:123). Davidson argues that “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief” (ibid; see also Rorty 1980:174). According to this “coherence theory of justification” rationality in communication is associated with the agreement on beliefs.

*“If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything” (Davidson 2001a:137).*

Yet, there could be situations where we are not able to determine communicatively whether we share our beliefs about the world or not. Quine denotes it as the situation of radical translation (Quine 1990:37, see Quine 1960, 1963). Based on analysis he suggests that a translator is forced – due to his empathy and the attitude of charity – to impose his/her own ontology and language on “the native”, and he or she does so not only in the situations of incommensurable “conceptual schemes”. The translator necessarily assumes that the native’s beliefs and ways of thinking (logic) are the same as his, until there are no contradictive evidence (Quine 1990:48, see Davidson 1990a, 129–130). To solve these problematic cases in radical translation Quine saves the need for “the background theory with its own primitively

adopted and ultimately inscrutable ontology” (Quine 1969:50–51, cited in Rorty 1980:196). According to Quine “in the last instance court our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body” (Quine 1963:41).

Davidson accepts the general holistic line about knowledge proposed by Quine, and argues that charity is not an option in interpretation and translation, but its condition (Davidson 2001a:197). The main difference between Quine’s and Davidson’s holisms lies in the characterization of the relation between knowledge and the world. Davidson rejects the idea that “sensory stimulations” can “be considered to be the evidence or a source of justification, for the stimulated beliefs”. Instead, these should be considered as a part of causal chain between the world and the knowledge about it (Davidson 1990a:131, cf. Quine 1963). Thus, according to Davidson we should

*“...give up the idea that meaning or knowledge is grounded on something that counts as an ultimate source of evidence. No doubt meaning and knowledge depend on experience, and experience, ultimately on sensation. But this is the ‘depend’ on causality, not of evidence or justification”* (Davidson 1990a:127).

In order to clarify the conditions of rational communication and translation of the meaning of the concepts in ex-centric geography, I follow here Davidson’s suggestion that “to take truth as basic and to extract an account of translation” from it (Davidson 2001a:134). The “essential relations among the concepts of meaning, truth and belief” (Davidson 1990b:135), central to Davidson’s theory of truth, give a framework for examining how conceptualisation, causation and justification are dependent on each other in the scientific enterprises. His attempt is fully in line with the concerns of ex-centric human geography as a social science with a realist touch, because as Quine says “science has its double dependence upon language and experience” (Quine 1963:42), and both Quine and Davidson agree that it is “truth” that “relates a language to the world” (Davidson 2001b:179, see Quine 1990:80–81).

Davidson does not assume that we could define truth any better than Alfred Tarski did in his formal “disquotational” account of truth (Davidson 1990c, 1996, see Tarski 1944). Instead of the new and better definition, he wants to give “an empirical theory about the truth conditions of every sentence in some corpus of sentences” (Davidson 1990c:309). For that purpose Davidson introduces an “externalist” approach to the interpretation of utterances. His theory takes the form of an analysis of sentential utterances in the context of social circumstances. The principal requirement for his truth theory is “that the evidence for the theory [should] be in principle publicly accessible” (Davidson 1990c, 314). The notion of utterance has a function to indicate that “the theory supplies truth conditions” for an intentional action, which necessarily has “its agent and its time”, and in fact the whole communicative situation (Davidson 1990c:309–310).

Davidson deliberates that even if the interpreter is not able to understand what the other means by an utterance or what he believes to be the case in the world – like in the situation of radical translation – s/he can still perceive that the speaker

has a certain non-individuating attitude “towards an object or the event the interpreter perceives”, attitudes like “holding a sentence true at time” or “preferring that one sentence rather than another be true”, etc (Davidson 2001b:210–211). The argument goes on that these attitudes of a speaker are caused by the events and actions in the world, and “true” communication begins when the causes for a speaker and for an interpreter converge. An interpreter “interprets sentences held true according to the events and objects in the outside world that cause the sentence to be held true” (Davidson 1990a:131–132). In a common social situation, an interpreter can simultaneously grasp the attitude of others towards the truthfulness of an utterance and also towards what determines the truth of an utterance in the external world.

Thus, a publicly available evidence and a common ground, which can justify the use of one translation of utterance and not the other, is provided by the intentional attitudes of communicators towards the relations between how the world is and what the utterance says. The meaning of an utterance, which is the object of conceptual translation, is determined, on the other hand, by the events and objects in the world which cause an utterance to be held true (Davidson 1990a:132, 1990b:326). The translation of meanings depends, then, on determining the truth conditions of utterances in communication via affective attitudes concerning the beliefs about how the world is, i.e. about its truth. The translation makes sense if we correlate utterances believed to be true in the same causal circumstances, because only then the utterances could have the same meaning for the communicators. If we see the translation as a relation, where utterances are adequately correlated according to their meanings, we must know under what conditions it is believed to be true or false in order to translate it properly:

*“...your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects”* (Davidson 1990a:132).

It seems that the most critical point in Davidson’s theory is that his argument relies on the assumption of common “distal stimuli” (Davidson 1990c, 321) and common causal situation, where truth of “occasion utterances” could be shared (Davidson 1990a, 132). In an ex-centric situation we are in trouble finding these. The central Anglophone geographies and the academic periphery like Estonia certainly do not share common physical and social environment. The poverty of common distal stimulation means that Davidson’s suggestion – deriving from the holistic understanding of knowledge he shares with Quine – that we should interpret those sentences which are not occasional “by their conditioning to occasion sentences” (Davidson 1990a, 132) does not help us much. The problem is in the incompatibility of these occasional sentences in an ex-centric social situation.

Limitless charity<sup>7</sup> across the cultural borders – to “count [others] right in most matters” (Davidson 2001a:197) – is not an option either. The problem is exactly

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<sup>7</sup> The limits of acceptable “degree of charity” vary according to the degree of ex-centricity. For example, in the case of Estonian and Anglophone discourses there is no problem in imposing

that peripheral worlds are most often interpreted as if they were central, by imposing central concepts to “native” social realities without bothering much about differences (cf. Yiftachel 2003). An uninhibited charity works at the global level in one-way direction, and most probably assists the central project of making other societies to the third ones in their theoretical imaginations (see Slater 1993:421). It tends to suppress “analytically” any meaningful plurality. Even if it is believed to be a sign of wishing to understand the other (cf. Davidson 2001a 197), it does it with a price not acceptable for “native people” like Estonians.

How to reconcile Davidson’s theory and an ex-centric situation will be discussed in the next section. Let us now return to our second option in Rorty’s dilemma, the option that is preferred also by Rorty himself. What is the use of Rorty’s hermeneutics to the ex-centric geography without epistemology? Rorty’s point is quite clear: “there is no ‘philosophical point’ to be made about translation... ..explanatory power is where we find it” (Rorty 1980:209). Rorty rejects the need for the theory of truth – as it is conceived by Davidson – for proper communications and translation (ibid:286–287). For him, all we need is conversation going on between (the) people(s).

The ongoing conversation is also the main communicative objective of the article. The aim is to make a conversational suggestion to peripheral and central geographers, which derives from the feeling that communication between different geographical communities does not work well enough for normal geography. I share this feeling with the geopolitical critics in the geographical academy (e.g. Slater 1992, 1993, 1997, Yiftachel 2003) that the dissimilarities in the conceptualisations are often ignored in the empirical research and in their reports. The rationality in these studies is achieved only due to the avoidance of communication either in a fieldwork or in the international geographical forums (e.g. in journals and conferences) – everyone is willing to talk and publish, but quite few are interested in listening and reading differences (cf. also Minca 2003:161).

In the context of academic and cultural *Realpolitik* it seems to me that the cultural communes are too unequal in terms of size, intellectual resources, money, centrality, etc., for a liberal communication in Rorty’s style. Peripheral geographers could not expect very much willingness “to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor” (see Rorty 1980:318) from the centre, if not for any other reason than because even the centre has its intellectual limits. It would be extremely hard for a central geographer to communicate with all these indigenous geographies and still pay some attention to their differences, because there is a multitude of them around the centre. Liberalism is not only the question of willingness, but also of social competence and capacity.

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true/false logic to each other, or evaluating the others’ attitudes, like “holding sentences true”, which is so important to Davidson’s theory, but in some other cases where peripheral societies practice much more “fuzzy thinking” (see Kosko 1993) compared with Western logical dualism it may not work. For the problems in the use of the concept of truth in different societies, see e.g. Bergin 2001, Scharfstein 2001.

Alternative to a communication, which tries to find some more neutral common ground for a rational translation, is – for a peripheral geographer – to be a subaltern in the international academia. The studies treating scientific practice as the liberal Machiavellian enterprise demonstrate that the success in science is most of all the result of an ability to associate the largest number of allies – humans, nonhumans, materials, etc. – with scientific arguments (see Latour 1987, 1999). It is obvious that theories and concepts related to Anglophone societies and their background knowledge have much more allies than indigenous concepts of small peripheries. The intellectual, economic, etc. resources of my own culture are too microscopic to avoid the assimilation of Estonian concepts when relying only on the willingness of Anglophone geographers to speak my own language.

Thus, the epistemological solution for the translation – a search to find the maximum amount of common ground with others – is politically more advantageous from the peripheral point of view.

## **5. Translation, imagination and a list of spatial abstractions**

In this section I am bringing together the main points of previous sections – the centrality of the concept of space in geographies, the problem of translation and political advantage of epistemological solution to the problem of a peripheral geographer – in order to suggest a positive program for the translation of geographical concepts in social theories. First, the character of common situation needed for the determination of the sameness of meanings is reconsidered. Second, the use of the most abstract topological concept of space is explicated, and exemplified in the form of tentative list of spatial abstractions. Third, the additional requirements for a rational and successful translation in practice are discussed.

### *5.1. From common objects and events to common imaginations*

The provisional acceptance of Davidson's theory has put me as an ex-centric geographer into quite an inconvenient position. It appears that what makes the communication and translation possible are the common distal stimuli due to external objects and events (Davidson 1990c:325). And these stimuli are supposed to cause the communicators to hold a sentence true or false so that their respective attitudes are publicly available, and work as the reciprocal evidences of justification of translation. Therefore, due to the scarcity of common external stimuli in the ex-centric situation, we are in great difficulties in finding the common ground on which to decide whether a communication between Estonian and Anglophone geographies is rational and justified or not. In addition, it is clear that many geographical phenomena have too complex properties for regarding them purely in terms of distal stimuli and occasion sentences. Their identity is determined not (only) by their extensions (Lynch 2001:40, see also Quine 1960:51–53, 1990:71–73). It is quite difficult to imagine, for example, something purely extensional that could make anyone assent to a putative occasion sentence such as "This is

Tartumaa province”. Therefore, in order to use Davidson’s theory of truth in explicating an epistemological solution to the problem of translation we need to re-consider the nature of common causation in our ex-centric account.

If we cannot find common causation in perception, we should appeal to another universal human faculty – imagination. We all have an ability to imagine how it all *could be*.<sup>8</sup> Davidson’s account of metaphor (see Davidson 2001a) provides some crucial insights to the conceptualisation of imaginations as common stimuli in translation. According to Davidson, metaphors lack cognitive contents and meanings. In a similar way, the imaginations are treated here as having no meanings derived from the external world, nor are they conditioned by meaningful sentences in any theoretical manner. According to Davidson’s theory the imaginations are meaningless, and as long as they operate in the mode of “could be”, they lack truth conditions. Moreover, in Rorty’s interpretation Davidson’s view on metaphors parallels the use of metaphors with the role of external stimuli in his theory of truth, meaning and belief – these both “stimulate one’s interlocutor’s sense organs – hoping thereby to cause assent to a sentence” (Rorty 1991:169). Thus, in the same way as the world of external objects makes occasion sentences to be held true or false according to the causation by perceived distal stimuli, the metaphors and imaginations could make theoretical sentences to be held true or false according to the respective stimuli.

The main distinction between Davidsonian understanding of metaphors and imaginations in translation is that while metaphors are treated as anomalous stimuli, which role in science and elsewhere is “to participate in ‘creative endeavour’” (Rorty 1991:168, also Davidson 2001a:245), the imaginations do not necessarily have that property. I suggest that the concept of imaginations should be understood broader, compared to that of metaphor.<sup>9</sup> Imaginations could be used both for emancipatory pedagogical projects of Anglophone critical geographies (willing to make their own and peripheral social worlds better, or at least make them different), and also more modest ones aiming at establishing some common ground in communication without much change in the world. In fact, in translation

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<sup>8</sup> As for Cornelius Castoriadis and Nigel Thrift, “[t]he imagining of which I am speaking is not an image of. It is the unceasing and essentially undetermined (social historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be question of something. What we call ‘reality’ and ‘rationality’ are its works” (Castoriadis 1987:3, in Thrift 1996:229).

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that Davidson himself renounces, when discussing in an interview the problems concerning differences among people, the idea to make a “leap of the imagination of some sort” as “a dangerous idea” (Kent and Davidson 1993). Instead he proposes to do “our best to accommodate somebody else’s view of the world” when “calling on ourselves to discover the common ground on which we can make whatever sense we can make of one another” (ibid.). Despite that I believe that the use of imaginations is not so dangerous at all in communication, if not for any other reason then because the way I use the concept of imagination is not very different from the understanding of metaphor launched by Davidson himself. My ethno- and ex-centric point is that for a peripheral geographer it is quite dangerous to wait until some Anglophone philosopher would do his/her best to accommodate our view to his/her necessarily ethnocentric and often imperial culture (see also Gregory 1991:19).

we are interested in those imaginations that cause as little revisions to our theories as possible (cf. Rorty 1991:167).

The imagination I am referring to is not a transcendental one, but it can be easily located as the imagination of a particular translator. In an ex-centric situation, it is an ex-centric researcher who is our best and indispensable causal intermediary, an angelic messenger between the peripheral and central social theories (see Serres and Latour 1995:65). To create a common social situation of causation, required in Davidson's theory, the translator's imaginations must be externalised. The situation is made common by translators' imaginative utterances within both the peripheral and central discursive formations. As the linguistic expressions of the same particular imagination of how objects and events could be in the world or how these could be conceptualised, the imaginative utterances in two languages are equivalent *in relation to* the imagination of a translator. Thus, we may say that these equivalent imaginative utterances cause theoretical sentences to be held true or false under the same causal circumstances.

Davidson's theory suggests that the truth conditions of a sentence assign a meaning to it. In case of the truth by imagination, it is a meaning deriving from particular imagination that can be commonly shared. The existence of the same causal situation gives us also possibility to find some public evidence for the justification of translations. In terms of externalist approach we need double triangulation (cf. Davidson 1990c:325) in ex-centric situation where a translator mediates a common imaginative situation. It is the translator's task to utter the same imagination both in the centre and in the periphery. For the successful translation of theoretical sentences their truthfulness in relation to the imagination should be believed and that belief towards uttered theoretical sentences should be evident for all communicators – both in the centre and in the periphery.

Thus, the ex-centric account of causation posits that social theories can be satisfied by an external world and by an imagination. We may call it the principle of epistemological symmetry. It reconciles imaginative and perceptualist positions, relegating, at least functionally, both respective worlds to causal sphere in relation to translation. The trick is to find coherent theories within this double conditioning of truth and meaning. In fact, we also have the third conditioning – theoretical sentences are also conditioned by the other sentences of a theory.

### *5.2. Geographical imaginations and a list of spatial abstractions*

An important point in this complex situation is the quality of imagination. The imagination must suit our purposes. As I attempted to demonstrate in section 2, in the geographical tradition the concept of space has been most central and basic. Therefore, a geographer should first and foremost be interested in spatial imaginations. In Quine's terms, the task of spatial imagination is to dig into the centre of the theoretical field (cf. Quine 1963) and reach outwards towards more specific imaginative sentences about spatiality, where utterances could be related meaningfully to the theoretical sentences of a theory and in the end to the occasion sentences. The only epistemological requirement is that we should reach the point



where truth conditions of assent and dissent are obvious both to a translator and to a central or peripheral communicative partner.

I propose that the imagination should take the form of abstract open sentences. If we are interested in the conceptual centres of theories there is no need to state first how very different and specific geographical phenomena could be. Instead, we should start from imagining how certain types or classes of spatial phenomena could be. The use of abstractions well suits my overall pragmatic considerations. John Dewey has written a long time ago,

*“...abstraction is indispensable if one experience is to be applicable in other experiences. Every concrete experience in its totality is unique; it is itself, non-reducible. Taken in its full concreteness, it yields no instruction, it throws no light. What is called abstraction means that some phase of it is selected for the sake of the aid it gives in grasping something else. Taken by itself, it is a mangled fragment, a poor substitute for the living whole from which it is extracted. But viewed teleologically or practically, it represents the only way which one experience can be made of any value for another... Looked at functionally, not structurally and statically, abstraction means that something has been released from one experienced for transfer to another”* (Dewey 1950:124–125).

Thus, the aim of abstractions is to facilitate communication between different discursive communities and enable “a fast circulation from one repertoire to another” (Latour 1988:35, in Bingham and Thrift 2000:286). It is a positive and unavoidable human capacity (cf. Gregory 1996).

According to these instructions it is practical at first to imagine space/spatiality in its most abstract qualities. The geographical tradition offers us little help here, because it says very little, or very different things, about the space as such. On this account we may find it reasonable to turn to the other disciplines which are more used to abstract and logical use of language. As did Helen Couclelis and Nathan Gale, when they proposed

*“...to go back to the most general mathematical definition of space available, such as that given by Alexandroff (1961:9): “...a common conception of space ...amounts to considering one or more systems of objects – points, lines, etc. – together with systems of axioms describing the relations between these objects”*“ (Couclelis and Gale 1986:4–5).<sup>10</sup>

Hence, in this paper – and in my translations as an ex-centric human geographer – the most general and abstract imagination of space is the space as a set of members (objects) and relations between them. This and the specific human character of the

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<sup>10</sup> The proposal of Couclelis and Gale foreshadows the more recent invasion of topological imagery – related to activities of ANT school – on spatiality to social sciences in general (Latour 1987, Mol and Law 1994, Law and Hassard 1999, Law 2002) and in human geography in particular (Murdoch and Marsden 1995, Murdoch 1998, Callon and Law 2004). For recent discussion of the importance of mathematical metaphors in social science see e.g. da Costa Marques 2004.

space in human geography – sums up to a minimal concept of a space, where the sets of members and relations should have human scale and the relevance for the humans and their collectives. Apparently, it is a too general imagination to have discriminative capacities needed in actual geographical translations of social theories. Therefore, the abstract imagination of spatiality must be significantly extended.

Two requirements must be met in the process. Firstly, the more specific abstract imaginations should be logically related to this most abstract imagination, in order to secure rational commensurability in terms of spatial imaginations. The task is to imagine the properties that the members and relations of a space could have. Secondly, due to pragmatic considerations these imaginations should have high probability that the theoretical/conceptual sentences would be held true in case of both theories in translation. Therefore, the obvious choice is to turn to the geographical and social theories for the inspiration. Yet, it does not mean that a spatial imagination could and should have a closed nature. Even most meaningless or pointless things – in social sense – could be imagined about spatiality, about the properties of its members and relations. The criterion of their selection is pragmatic – their usefulness in translation. We should be interested in imaginations, which can assist creating conceptual hypotheses to be tested in communication (cf. Quine 1960:68–78). At least two strategies are available for translation. First, a translator may work with individuated imaginations and rely extensively on his/her pre-understanding of both theories. Second, a translator may first make a list of relevant abstract imaginations for his/her translations and then pick the appropriate imaginations from this list. For an introductory presentation the second option is more appropriate, because, in fact, what differentiates the first and the second possibility is the degree of explicitness.

The closest distinction to our general topological imagination is the differentiation of spatiality according to the relatedness of members and the relations as such. In extreme cases we can imagine spaces where only members (*substantial space*) or only relations (*formal or structural space*) are defined and/or practiced. In these extreme instances the supplementary elements (members or relations) of a space are treated indiscriminately. The possibility in-between is that both the members and relations are specified (*integral space*). The members and relations could be imagined as independent from each other (*absolute space*) or dependent. That dependence could be either that the relations' character determines the members' character *or vice versa* (*relative space*), or that the relations' character determines the members' character and vice versa (*relational space*).

In a more specific level, we could imagine sets in which the relations of the members of a space are dispersed *randomly*, forming *clusters*, or *concentrating* them; in which relations can be seen as performing points, lines, planes, x-dimensional expanses, networks, etc.; in which relations form *hierarchies* or *hetrarchies* of members or abolish any such overarching orders and form *anarchies*; in which relations either quantify members (*metric spaces*) or qualify them (*identity spaces*). The relations between members of space could be measured in relation to earth surface (*territorial space*) or not measured (*func-*

*tional space*). We could also envisage the spaces in which relations separate certain members from other members (*striated or bounded spaces*) and the spaces in which such separation does not take place (*smooth or unbounded spaces*).

To extend the list, we can imagine the differentiation of spaces in temporal dimension: where members are or are being related (*spaces of present*), were related (*spaces of past*), will be related (*spaces of future*), will have been related (*spaces of becoming*), have been related (*historical spaces*), had been related (*memorial spaces*), etc. It is also possible to imagine spatial differences as a *reciprocal* or *unilateral* character of relations; spaces where only one kind of relation (*unifold spaces*) or many kinds of relations (*manifold spaces*) occur, where relations relate members only at present (*momentary space*), always (*continuous space*), or sometimes (*recurrent space*).

The differences in imagination of the members' properties could result in important differences in spatiality as well. For example, we can imagine conceptualisations of spatiality where there is only one member (*monomial space*) or many members (*multiple space*); where members have *material* or *virtual* existence; where members are of the same (*pure or monoid space*) or different kind in any conceptualised sense (*hybrid space*). Furthermore, on the more humanized level we could also make distinctions according to the humans' general dispositions towards the defined space, the other members and relations. There could be spaces, where members take their particular spatiality for granted (*natural space*), acknowledge it in action (*real space*), or make it up for the action (*ideal space*).

Thus, it is possible to formulate a list of open abstract sentences about the different possibilities of spatiality. The list maps the imaginative environment and its locations where we – an ex-centric translator and his/her communication partners – could be commonly situated. Similar to physical environment, we can hold some theoretical sentences (conceptualisation) true and understand what they mean, because of our common location in imaginative plane. It is up to communicators where they stay in this imaginative plane, but like in the world of externals, it is also impossible to be everywhere. And, similarly to the field of external events and objects, a certain amount of human intentions and agency is involved in the formation of situation here too. It is worth noting that the similar abstract imaginations concerning “the social” in the concepts – sociological imaginations – are possible and also necessary for more comprehensive translations in human geography.

### 5.3. *The theory and practice of translation*

All the abstract possibilities listed above have been invoked in various geographies, social topologies and geometries. Many more could, and indeed have been specified.<sup>11</sup> In the case of conceptual translation we are interested in those

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<sup>11</sup> The two most conspicuous original “typologies” of spatiality in recent decades have been Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad of lived, perceived and conceived spaces and the distinction made between four main topologies in ANT and its successor projects between – Euclidean regional, network functional, fluid functional and fire space (e.g. Law 2002).

imaginations that can be linguistically externalised into two *theoretical* discursive formations that are translated in the form of meaningful utterances. It is obvious that for every theoretical sentence telling how the world is, uttered or heard by a translator during the communication, there is always its imaginative counterpart telling how the world could be in principle. Does this mean that we do not have the problem of translation at all and everything is perfectly clear? The answer is negative, because although nearly every sentence-like imagination can be uttered (with the help of a dictionary) as a theoretical (or occasion) sentence both in the centre and in the periphery, not every theoretical utterance makes sense within the context of respective social theories. The world of imaginations necessarily includes all the linguistic constructs, but only in non-meaningful modality. But it also does not mean that meaningful translation relying on the imagination of a translator is impossible. We do not have here “Davidsonian dilemma”, because we do not have a radical situation but merely an ex-centric one, where the “understanding is a matter of degree” indeed (see Lynch 1997:423, cf. also Davidson 2001b:219).

I find that the ideas presented by Michael P. Lynch (1997, 2001) might be helpful in clarifying the conditions of such translation. Deriving from philosophies of later Ludwig Wittgenstein and Peter Strawson, Lynch posits “the Neo-Kantian model” of conceptual schemes. According to that, translation is possible when we “share the same basic concepts” (Lynch 1997:419). By “basic” he means nothing more than “in a particular historical context, certain concepts of mine will be foundational – that is, widely presupposed by my other concepts” (ibid). In case we allow the plurality of conceptual schemes or social theories, the possibility of comparing socially relevant meanings is explained by the sameness of “basic” concepts. And in the same fashion the existence of the problem of translation between different cultures with different geographical theories is explained by the differences in related non-basic concepts.

When defending the idea of meaningful (translatable) difference between conceptual schemes and hence (metaphysical) pluralism, Lynch also distinguishes between minimal and robust concepts. By minimal concept he means “a way of thinking about something that is neutral with regard to issues about its ontological nature”. A robust concept, in contrast, is “concept whose ordinary use consists of a commitment to some particular ontological view” (Lynch 2001:69). Minimal and robust distinction is relative; some concepts are more minimal in relation to other more robust concepts. That “dialectics” between the shared minimal concepts that “can be enriched or extended in incompatible directions” (ibid:70) and the product of this extension in the form of robust concepts save for the pluralist some common ground for communication between different conceptual schemes.

Along with his/her parasitic proclivities, an ex-centric geographer is also interested in meaningful communication with(in) the central tradition. As we saw in section 2, the tradition suggests that today the concept of a space has central position in the Anglophone geographical tradition. That is why I started my abstract geographical imaginations from the most general concept of a space. Due

to the fact that space is a vague concept and “there are actual disagreement over its application” (Lynch 2001:61), we may assume to share only a very minimal concept of a space in the geographical translations between the central tradition and the peripheral discourse/practices studied by an ex-centric geographer. The success of communication between an ex-centric translator and his/her communicative partner depends on two things – the definition is understood and no premature falsification takes place due to other theoretical sentences. I believe that the sentence “space is a set of members (objects) and relations between them” is comprehensible both in English and in Estonian; both within the central geographical academia and within peripheral communities. Its very minimal content should defer falsification due to the vague use of the term.

In fact, the minimal definition of space provides a particular minimal ontology, which I expect to be in all of those geographical theories I am going to translate. If I am not able to find “a set of members and relations” in a theory, then it is not geographical in terms of my imagination. We may take the definition as a necessary conceptual hypothesis, which could be falsified “hermeneutically” in Rorty’s sense – in actual failure of communication, if it prevents someone from saying something about what he or she believes to be geographical. What is needed in ex-centric communication is the acceptance of the idea that human space can be understood in a minimal way – as a set of members and relations relevant to human practices – and that spatiality is yet multifarious.

The minimal definition of space that I gave above “[almost] neutral with regard to issues about its ontological nature” (Lynch 2001:68), should facilitate geographical communication between central and peripheral communities in terms of commensurability. Yet, it is clear that this is a very general ground indeed. Although it allows imagination to flow it can specify almost nothing within theories. The commensurability is rescued, I hope, by the fact that in my list of imaginations that specifies the topological concept of a space I rely on other basic concepts in a minimal sense and also because the minimal imagination of space allowed me to do so. I appealed to basic concepts like set, member, relation, identity, quantity, dependence, etc., as coherently related to the concept of a space. The presupposition is that peripheral and central communities can share and actually share these concepts if these are taken minimally (cf. Lynch 2001:94). If these considerations are accepted, the general empirical question in translation is simple: are the sets of spatial distinctions – made by using basic minimal concepts - identical, similar or very different for two social theories compared?

However, lot of practical activities are required from a translator before we can detect plain attitude of holding theoretical sentence true caused by the same abstract imaginations in the common imaginative world. The existence of suitable abstractions is not self-sufficient for the translation (cf. Gregory 1996:79) and “some work still remains to be done” (Barnett 1996: 81) before successful translation is achieved. Social theories are not made of minimal concepts but of robust ones – “they are committed to some particular ontological view” (Lynch 2001:68), to the view of that theory. And they are about particular social worlds – at the end

of the day the theoretical sentences should be related to occasion sentences about the events and objects in the social world. Therefore, a translator must associate minimal concepts with robust ones, and make open sentences into closed ones. Furthermore, as I noted in section 3, theories, especially everyday social theories, are incomplete in terms of concepts. The centre of the field of knowledge is conceptually hazy.

Let me now recall the holist understanding of science/theory presented by Quine in his *Two dogmas of empiricism* (1963:20–46), and later endorsed by Davidson (e.g. 1990b). For Quine, science is like a field of knowledge, where the margins are related to the world through experience and observation sentences. The other, more theoretical sentences are lying in “inner circles” and are under-determined by these observation sentences. An important argument for our considerations here is the interconnectedness of sentences within theory that holism posits. Quine’s famous statement says,

*“Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Conversely, ...no statement is immune to revision”* (Quine 1963:43).

Although Davidson rejects the epistemic concept of truth and prefers to talk about *interpretation* of theoretical sentence according to its relations with other theoretical and occasion sentences (Davidson 1990c:322), the negative point I am interested in here remains the same. There is nothing in Davidson’s theory of truth and interpretation that forbids adding to social theories those sentences, which do not require changing the truth conditions of other sentences. If these sentences are interpretatively related to the other sentences within each theory we may probably use them as analytic tools in translation.

There is a practical need to express more theoretical utterances about spatiality within discursive communities, because people are not very conceptual in respect to their social spatiality. Quite often people have more beliefs (conceptions) about social spatiality than meaningful sentences (concepts) they are able or willing to utter in their discourse/practice. Thus, the critical point in geographical translations is to make spatial utterances said in all social theories, not only in academic geographical ones. I propose to begin with the basic and minimal concept of space and determine the particular sets, members and relations that are specified in the theories and can, thus, close the abstract open sentence of minimal spatiality. In other words, we should describe robust geographical concepts of social theories with the help of minimal concepts that are shared by both theoretical communities.

Yet, as we assumed, the cultural competence of an ex-centric translator is limited. It is not up to a translator to say which theoretical sentences can be said within the theory and which not – he/she can only imagine how it could be. The more he/she knows about the particular theory/practice the deeper he/she can probably dig without being wrong. But in principle, all he/she can do is to make conceptual hypotheses about theories according to his/her own spatial imaginations. In practice, translation is communication, and communication is essentially social. Communicative partners both in the centre and in the peripheral worlds are

asked by an ex-centric translator to participate in the translation by positing common conceptual hypotheses, which are like invitations to commensurable communication. His/her communicative partners must accept these hypotheses on the ground of coherence with the sentences of original theories. If a translator wishes to correlate two theories he must be equally right in the centre and in the periphery. Thus, an ex-centric geographer necessarily appeals to the cultural knowledge of those communities in which he/she is interested, but does it in terms of his/her own imaginations.

The ultimate task of a translator is to push communicators up to the point where we have imaginative sentences relying on basic minimal concepts and saying how things could be spatially – *S (could be) F* – and theoretical/conceptual sentences accepted by the members of theoretical community saying how things are – *S (is/will be, etc.) F*. As we can see, it is quite easy to give an account of satisfaction of theoretical sentences by imagination. In fact, it is much easier than that of occasion sentences by perception, because externalised imaginations and theoretical sentences both rely on linguistic resources. It can be done by simple substitution of grammatical constructs, substitution that most of human adults probably understand.<sup>12</sup>

The main objects of geographical translations are the social theories. Most often the social spatiality of a theory has a complex character and a translator must work with many conceptual hypotheses. The practical assumption is that the spatiality of a theory should be understood holistically. Only after the overall spatiality of the social theories that are translated is determined, an ex-centric geographer and his/her communicative partners can detect the role of particular words in explicating the spatiality of theory.

On the other hand, it is clear that the imaginations of a translator and respective conceptual hypotheses cannot specify the spatiality of theories in a total manner. At their best, they serve his/her practical needs as an ex-centric geographer. The adequate number of conceptual hypotheses should be specified separately in every particular translation, depending on the aim of a research and on the character of the theories. Sometimes it is also possible to correlate two theories for a research practice, which have some differences in imagination and conceptualisation of social spatiality, but only providing these differences are made explicit along with their consequences to the research.

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<sup>12</sup> As Rorty notices – when comparing a platypus as external event and a metaphor as external event – “[t]he only important difference is that the platypus does not itself come to express a literal truth, whereas the very same string of words which once formed a metaphorical utterance may, if the metaphor dies into literalness, come to convey such a truth” (Rorty 1991:167). Likewise, imaginations die into meaningful sentences while integrated into a theory, but still retain their obvious relations with the world of imaginations.

## 6. Conclusions

It is a routine practice nowadays to use the theories of central Anglophone tradition in the studies of peripheral societal worlds. The task of the paper was to examine how such practice in knowledge production can be rationally grounded. The epistemological solution endorsed here was not aimed to show that the use of central theoretical resources is impossible or wrong, but to clarify the conditions of doing this. It was suggested – following disciplinary politics in geography, epistemological holism of Davidson and basic/non-basic and minimal/robust distinctions of concepts by Lynch – that geographical theories can be made at least partially commensurable. To achieve commensurability in an ex-centric situation, I appealed to a universal human faculty – to imagination. Consequently, the proper translation was seen as demanding the imagination of abstract open sentences of spatiality, which rely on basic and minimal concepts shared across theoretical communities.

Although the idea of imagining an abstract ground of spatial properties for justifying conceptual translations between geographies may seem like a “grand scheme” applicable everywhere, my objective throughout the article has been to save the contingent character of every particular translation in relation to research practices. It was argued that an imaginative common ground is necessarily located as the imagination of a particular ex-centric geographer as an inter-societal translator. The translator operates as a causal intermediary in translation, when he/she externalises the same conceptual hypotheses in the communications with central geographers and peripheral “geographers”. The externalisation of imaginations works as a tool in translation that helps to create common causal situation in the imaginative world. Every imagined list or hypothesis is – in Rorty’s terms – locally epistemological for a translator and his/her ex-centric communication, but “hermeneutic” in the larger cultural context – others could reject it as an improper rational ground for the translation in communication across different cultural worlds.

It should also be mentioned that differences between two non-radically dissimilar conceptual schemes are not erased by a translation, because even if the translator “might herself fully understand certain concepts, she will be unable completely to convey that understanding to me unless I also begin to share that scheme, learn that language, experience that world-view” (Lynch 1997:424). Translation does not make the societal differences non-existent and its aim is not “a broad cross cultural consensus” but “a process of respectful and critical dialogue” (Slater 2002:272); it is a local practice performed by researchers as translators. It also means that ethnocentrism in theory and research can be cross-bordered only in particular acts of translations, not as the result of general critical explorations (cf. Slater 1992). Abstract imagination and translation of conceptual understandings does not replace geographical research. It is only a precarious starting point for communication between an ex-centric geographer and his/her research partners. Its task is to make communication more disciplined. Yet,



translation is never pure, and while something is translated it is also transformed (Brown 2002:7).

The more political conclusion from these epistemological considerations is that by using theoretical resources of the tradition in terms of local production of knowledge, we as ex-centric geographers do not provide empirical examples to central theories, as critical thinkers in the “core” might think. Or at least, we should not do that. When we are aimed at particular knowledge of Estonian provinces, for example, central theories or any other foreign theory could only function as the examples of possible conceptualisations, which can be used in producing our peripheral knowledge, in case translation succeeds. Thus understood, peripheral knowledge does not constitute an example for the central, but vice versa. And it is both the question of conceptual adequacy and political choice what realities we want to perform in the periphery with the help of these usurped central conceptual resources (cf. Law and Urry 2002).

Also, as long as it is quite difficult to conceive the world without power relations and domination, the task of peripheral researchers remains to seek incessantly for their own possibilities of discursive exploitation, in order to secure a more equal dialogue. If an Anglophone centre wants to overcome its colonial and imperial proclivities, it should accept that it might be exploited by the peripheries too. The basis for these tactics is the aggressive conviction that there may be different geographical understandings without any imperative of eventual synthesis. The real challenge is to secure differences in geographical understanding between national and other geographies, and yet be able to have a meaningful dialogue (see also Minca 2000).

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