

# Other Terms, Other Conditions

## Introduction to the blog series

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Other Terms, Other Conditions: A *NatureCulture* Blog Series

For quite some time now, [strong voices](#) in the social sciences and humanities have been calling for the decolonization of Western science as a dominant mode of knowing. They have been suspicious of the colonial legacies of academic knowledge practices, and especially the ways in which these practices reproduce or maintain patterns of oppression and tend to lose sight of marginalized experiences. Dominant versions of Western science, the argument goes, are inattentive to other modes of articulating and knowing the world. [Decolonization](#), in this broad sense, is a call for intervening in such colonial modes of knowledge production.

The initiative is important and indeed necessary, but—as several [anthropologists](#) and [Science and Technology Studies scholars](#) have pointed out—the devil tends to be in the details. *How* exactly should we decolonize Western science? What practices need to be decentred, provincialized, or reconfigured? Annemarie Mol and John Law’s [On Other Terms: Interfering in Social Science English](#) raises precisely these questions *vis-à-vis* the social sciences. Their original and carefully edited collection brings together empirical cases from across the globe in order to show that 1) there is no single decolonizing recipe to follow, and 2) anti-colonial tactics, in the plural, cannot ever be considered complete. They can, however, open up possibilities and highlight what social scientific inquiry might look like if we pursue it “on other terms”.

*On Other Terms* makes a highly significant [epistemo-political move](#) when it draws our attention to English as a seemingly universal language. By destabilizing central concepts in social theory such as “[nature](#)”, “[race](#)”, “[knowledge](#)” and “[critique](#)”, the edited volume foregrounds the academic reality social theorizing itself helps to produce and reproduce: a [one-world world](#) in which social scientific terms are expected to unambiguously refer to phenomena “out there”, without any cultural and historical contingency. The issue is not simply with English as the international language of science, as Law and Mol emphasize in their [Introduction](#), but with the academic practices that make it hegemonic, treating non-English terms as empirically interesting (perhaps), but theoretically almost always irrelevant. In order to counter this tendency, it is certainly useful to collect a wide range

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of “[untranslatables](#),” but it is equally important to show what theoretical work they actually do, or, in Mol and Law’s words, how they interfere with social science English.

Given the above, *On Other Terms* is neither a dictionary nor a [revised vocabulary of culture and society](#). Rather, it is an open invitation for social scientists who defy the native/non-native speaker dichotomy to explore the theoretical purchase of other terms and, indeed, other modes of theorizing. Our blog series in *NatureCulture* gladly takes up this invitation. Playing with the legal expression “terms and conditions apply” it brings together a handful of other *terms* and considers under what *conditions* they are able to do their theoretical work within and beyond academia. In line with Mol and Law’s emphasis on practices, [Laura Gurney and Eugenia Demuro](#)’s blog post suggests that a productive way to think beyond the langue/parole dichotomy in this undertaking is to attend to specific instances of *linguaging* (a term with a fascinating genealogy in Spanish). One immediate effect of such a move is the explosion of language as a more-or-less coherent system—what we are left with are complex ways in which multiple languaging practices relate to each other. Some seem to reproduce hegemonic patterns while others aim at reworking them from within. Take, for instance, [Jakkrit Sangkhamanee and Casper Bruun Jensen](#)’s study of “mongrel language.” Terms like *curry* are meant to cause confusion and subversion during democratic protests in Thailand; they don’t want to enrich English as an official language but mess with it, at least for a little while, to the authorities’ great annoyance. Then there is *fermentation*: the way in which “imperial languages” infiltrate local languages or contaminate them (and *vice-versa*). [Tereza Stöckelová](#)’s blog post—and her conversation with Robin Cassling, her English language editor highlights this process through the interplay of German, English and Czech terms concerned with the making of dumplings, soups and pickles. Finally, look at [Waymamba Gaykamangu](#)’s complicated collaboration with Yasunori Hayashi and Michaela Spencer in producing an English-language collection of Yolngu Aboriginal terms in northern Australia. By insisting on the importance of pronunciation and the use of bodily movements in *dhäruk*, this collaboration shows how a Western understanding of language can be effectively decentred in a university setting, offering practical ways of “going on together.”

Another effect of an attention-shift from language to languaging practices is the decentring of humans themselves as presumably exceptional actors in the social sciences. A good example of this comes from [Alvise Mattozzi and Laura Lucia Parolin](#)’s piece, which focuses on the Italian term *affidarsi* in order to explore how objects and subjects are being generated through distinct acts of “entrustment”—acts that require some humans to give up their agency in order for action to take place. The important question for Mattozzi and Parolin is not necessarily who or what are being implicated in such acts, but how it is possible to tell good and bad configurations of actors apart? This is a highly political question. In his blog post on stray dogs or *quiltros* in Chile, [Sebastian Ureta](#) uses “roaming-with” as a strategy to articulate a particular human-nonhuman relation, which he calls “companionship without ownership”—a good configuration for politics in the

Anthropocene. By contrast, in their conversation on politics during the Covid pandemic, [Jeannette Pols and Endre Dányi](#) ponder what possibilities may emerge out of bad configurations of humans and nonhumans. Does the Dutch saying “mopping while the tap is open” indicate that hope never dies, not even in desperate times? Or, on the contrary, does it suggest that [politics in desperate times](#) requires modes of engagement that renounce hope altogether? There are no clear conclusions but raising this as a question is already an intervention, both in democratic politics and in social theory. [Gergely Mohácsi](#) extends this argument in his contribution on “living together.” The Japanese term *kyōsei* refers to the fact of symbiotic interdependence on the one hand and the promise of multicultural coexistence on the other. That is, when we try to write about it in English. In Japanese, however, rather than two modes that diverge into different directions, “living together” with other species and doing politics with fellow humans mutually constitute each other in various and sometimes unexpected ways. This becomes all the more important and controversial in the context of putting *kyōsei* back into conversation with the very English ideas and concepts that it has come to stand for—which is to say most of the time when it is a matter of scientific inquiry and discussion.

This brings us back to the question of how to account for the multiple and overlapping ways in which English has been intersecting with a variety of other languages, both in colonial and non-colonial contexts. While many of the authors of this blog series use English in their writings to reach out to specific academic audiences, they and their friends, colleagues and companions in their fields or back at their universities move routinely between other languages, metaphors and concepts. Amid this traffic, terms and conditions keep shaping one another and stretching the boundaries of communication far beyond the monolingual world of English academia, or [even human languages](#).

While it is incontestably a crucial endeavor to decolonize linguistic and academic practices, in the blog series we attempt to extend this into wondering how and where English and other languages coexist when they do not clearly reflect hegemonic relationships, sometimes even resist them, while creating new conditions for social theorizing. If hegemony is indeed but one of the possible modes of living and thinking together along many others, as many of these essays indicate, it may be worth asking what *other relations* may be crafted through these decolonizing efforts. Building on the argument put forward so cogently in the original volume of *On Other Terms*, the texts collected here further illustrate that languaging is more than a matter of mutual understanding. As another, if partly unintended consequence, they also provoke us to keep adjusting our conceptual toolkits to embrace worlds that are not only more-than-one, but also more-than-human.